



in 1948, when shannon wrote his first paper, communications theory was in a state of chaos. at the time, there were no widely accepted standards of reliability in the telecommunications industry; in fact, there was no widely accepted standard for whether a transmission was successful. shannons paper put information theory on a firm mathematical foundation; it also laid out principles that would help to determine whether a communication system was reliable, and what it needed to be reliable. the most important of these principles was that a message transmitted across an ideal channel could only be reliably decoded if it was not intentionally encrypted. in the late 1940s, such a system was technically impossible. cryptography was based on an ad hoc set of techniques and assumptions that had been developed over centuries and were not well understood. but with shannons paper, there was a new way to begin to understand what was going on. in the course of his research, shannons intuition developed into a practical and surprisingly robust theory that set the standard for reliable transmission of information. this theory was now firmly rooted in mathematics and in information theory. but as gallager learned, shannons intuition wasnt enough to overcome the obstacles that prevented it from being used in practice. information theory is the underlying structure of the modern electronic world. it is the reason for the internet, and the basis for the ability of computers to perform so many of the things we use them for. i cant think of anything that has had more significant impact on the world, forney says.

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shannons equation gave information theory a mathematical foundation, but it also opened up the possibility of applying the theory to vastly different areas. as well see in the next section, his equations can also be applied to the area of computer networks. this resulted in a new discipline, communications theory, that looks at how information is transferred between a sender and a receiver. communications theory has led to a detailed study of how computer networks fail, and how they can be improved. shannons equations and his subsequent work in the area of information theory changed the lives of mathematicians, engineers, and scientists in countless ways. but the greatest impact came in the field of communication. weve all experienced the overwhelming power of information theory. for example, as i type this, i can choose among many possible words to describe the experience ive had today. in the past, i might have chosen one of those words, but now i can choose between several. similarly, the radio station im listening to can choose among several programs, to which the radio station plays, or which commercials it airs. shannon was posted to the british research laboratory at white sands, new mexico, where he was exposed to communications theory. shannons biographer steven j. popek says he also began studying dna in earnest at that time. shannon was promoted to the rank of captain in the british army in october 1945, and in march 1946 was transferred to the united states, where he was assigned to fort monmouth, new jersey. there, he joined the faculty of the research laboratory of electronics in march 1947. his duties were to study communications theory and apply it to the design of military equipment, with an emphasis on the mathematics of coding and decoding. 5ec8ef588b

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