Book reviews


*Information Ecologies* is both an analysis of information and communications technologies and a guide to action for those who use and are affected by them. Nardi and O’Day, are representatives of that strain of anthropology which has turned its attention from traditional societies to the tribes which inhabit the Internet. Their tool is metaphor and the book begins with a metaphor for technology from the early days of cinema. In Fritz Lang’s film, Metropolis, Rotwang the Inventor creates a robot, sent by the Masters of the city to foment insurrection. Rotwang’s robot, an android copy of Maria, daughter of the poor, acts as an agent provocateur inciting riot in a scheme to replace humans by robot workers. The authors use this excursion into silent film to provide a framework for our concerns and questions about technology. The World Wide Web may be recent but the problem of how to respond to technical change goes back to the invention of the earliest machines. It has been a recurrent theme in literature and film from Frankenstein to Jurassic Park.

Nardi and O’Day seek to resolve Frankenstein’s problem: how to steer a path between the uncritical acceptance of science-based technology on the one hand and its blanket rejection on the other. According to the authors these two common rhetorics on technology paralyse our actions and give us no guide to alternative futures. In order to provide such alternatives, they turn to the perspective in the social study of technology which uses metaphor to reveal its many faces. Three major images are considered: technology as a tool, as a text and as a system. In a brief but rewarding tour of some key thinkers on the social nature of technology, Nardi and O’Day argue that people who see technology as a tool perceive themselves as controlling it, those that see it as a system perceive themselves as caught up in it. Taking a postmodern turn, technology can be seen as a text but this metaphor does not distinguish clearly enough between talk and action. And the authors want to know how our judgement creativity and values can play a role in our use, deployment and response to ICTs.

Moving beyond tools, texts and systems, Nardi and O’Day offer a new metaphor, the information ecology. An information ecology is a system of people, practices, values and technologies in a particular local environment. Like its biological counterpart, an information ecology is diverse complex and constantly evolving. The social and technical aspects of an environment are interrelated and co-evolve. People within an ecology learn, adapt and create. They often use tacit knowledge in an
unobtrusive way and may build bridges across institutional boundaries and translate across disciplines.

*Information Ecologies* addresses many of the same issues that writers using a "community informatics" approach have tackled but the authors argue for the superiority of an ecological over a community perspective. They hold that the ecological metaphor suggests dimensions of diversity in a way which community does not and that an ecology implies a sense of urgency which we need to respond to.

The biological metaphor is part of their plan of engagement with technology. Existing analyses of technical change which identify general trends and over-arching issues prompt people to think globally but leave them to act locally according to Nardi and O’Day. They want us to start from where we find ourselves, to “act locally in a committed and reflective way”. We need to acknowledge technique but our initiatives should be “grounded in local understanding and values”. We should note that the term locally is used here in a non-geographic sense since the Internet engenders electronic not place-based localities. The authors believe that existing sociological and political accounts of technology are often pessimistic and that an anthropological approach can provide inspiration and practical ideas. We need engagement rather than resistance and participation rather than opposition.

In the last section of their proposed methodology, Nardi and O’Day consider the way in which human values are challenged by and renegotiated with technology. Values are central to their thesis since values are involved in the choices which we make about technology. Langdon Winner has demonstrated that technology is not neutral. Nardi and O’Day remind us that people are not neutral either. When Ellul and Postman suggest that technologies such as genetic engineering have undermined traditional human values, Nardi and O’Day disagree. They suggest that we need to apply values in information ecologies and it is here that the ecology of ICTs differs from its biological counterpart. Human beings make conscious and deliberate choices. The marsh grass on the banks of a river estuary does not. Substituting “know why” questions for “know-how” questions, we are given a “practical guide for evolving information ecologies”. We must work from core values, pay attention and ask strategic questions. Quoting Margaret Mead, the authors warn us never to “doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world, it’s the only thing that ever has”. Bill Gates and Rupert Murdoch beware!

The second half of *Information Ecologies* is devoted to a series of case studies of suggested information ecologies. These include corporate libraries, a teaching hospital and the use of on-line activities in an Arizona elementary school. As good anthropologists Nardi and O’Day have been to live with the tribe and adopt an ethnographic approach. I will describe just two of these case studies: libraries as an example of a successful ecology and an audio-visual project in a teaching hospital which led to a dysfunctional ecology.

As readers of this journal will be only too well aware, the rapid diffusion of information technologies has caused some to question the need for librarians and libraries. Nardi and O’Day compare the arrival of IT in libraries with the eruption of
a volcano in a biological ecology. Evolution is disrupted, the landscape is transformed and species face extinction. Some species never make it back; others have to adapt to new roles. If this image seems bleak, librarians should take heart. The authors of Information Ecologies believe that librarians are a “keystone species”. Applying their biological metaphor, they suggest that librarians are essential for the preservation of diversity and that information technologies present more of an opportunity than a threat to the diverse services offered in libraries. Gophers, badgers and rabbits tunnel and churn the soil, aerating it, loosening it and providing a convivial habitat for a plethora of other species. The skills of librarians loosen information, expose it to the air and churn the soil of knowledge.

Keystone species in biology are not immediately apparent to the untrained observer but they are essential for the preservation of other parts of the ecosystem. The ethnographic studies of Nardi and O’Day show that librarians possess skills which are too often overlooked because they are not on display. Indeed, an essential skill is not to be obtrusive and to help information seekers without confusing them with the details of the search. The authors carried out two separate studies in the Hewlett-Packard Library and the Apple Research Library where they observed librarians at work. Their ethnography identifies librarians as “information therapists” who help clients understand their needs, as information strategists who deploy considerable technical expertise and relationship builders who help to adapt and evolve the ecology in which the information seeker, the librarian and technology all play a part. The results of their study suggest to them a variety of ways in which libraries might develop. Some of these ideas, such as the participation of librarians in the development of digital libraries will be familiar; others such as remote information consultancy might be less so.

The success of the library ecology is contrasted with the problem of divergent values surrounding privacy which arose in the surgical environment of a teaching hospital. Here the use of multimedia technologies to monitor neuro-surgical operations outside the confines of the operating theatre led to a breakdown of communication and co-operation. The initiative of neuro-physiologists to deploy a technology which enabled them to do part of their work away from the operating room radically altered an information ecology according Nardi and O’Day. What the physiologists had not foreseen was the concern amongst anaesthetists and nurses about malpractice suits, “big-brother and the breakdown of trust which monitoring provoked. Remote broadcasting outside changed the nature of communication inside the operating theatre. The banter in theatre which provided social cohesion in a stressful situation could be taken out of context when viewed on video. Nardi and O’Day suggest that such problems can be avoided if we learn to ask strategic questions but that the answers to these questions can only come from the participants in the information ecology itself.

Information Ecologies has been received with a degree of critical acclaim in the USA. It is an important book in that it offers a fresh approach to an essential contemporary task: the location of human values in technological change. If this task
is to be successful, we must ask if Nardi and O’Day’s metaphorical approach helps us to accomplish it. The use of metaphor to understand science and technology is not new. Recently, Trevor Pinch and Harry Collins have used the image of the Golem in their influential exploration of science and technology as products of social life. Some philosophers of science would claim that science is essentially a matter of metaphor. However there are other approaches to the social study of technology which adopt a more direct social or political approach. Nardi and O’Day have been influenced by some of these perspectives: Bruno Latour and Langdon Winner are two examples. However, the authors do not mention the work of social constructivists such as Bijker or the social shaping perspective represented by McKenzie and Wajcman. This is a pity since some of these theoretical approaches try to connect global trends with local actions. Nardi and O’Day exhort us to take local action to develop information ecologies. A theory which addresses the role of local interests in the context of global social and economic change might in the end help us achieve this worthy objective more successfully than stretching a biological metaphor beyond its useful limit.

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I suppose that it says something about the digital dialectic that I should be sitting writing this review on a laptop computer in a room in an 18th century manor house on a hilltop in Tuscany, surrounded by woodland and more hills, with the sound of the cicadas interrupted by the occasional crackle from the hard disc. All I lack is a telephone line and an ISP and the absence of television, radio and newspapers would never be felt. (Their absence is not felt in any event, but never mind – we can play the dialectical game.) This, I suppose, is one aspect of the digital dialectic – separate and remote, yet joined to the world, if one wishes to be.

The title of this collection is intriguing, as it is meant to be: but what exactly is the digital dialectic. Dialectic I know from the dialectic of the Socratic method to Hegel and Marx, but digital? How can the dialectic under any definition – transcendental or materialistic – be digital? The answer, of course, is that it cannot: this is not about the digital dialectic but about the dialectics of digital communication systems – but a title like that would probably sell less.

Not that this collection is going to sell like hot cakes. It is a very self-regarding set of essays that comes under the general heading of critical theory. The authors, in general, and the editor in particular, are talking to one another and to those who adopt the same perspective on the nature of communication, the role of the mass media, and the impact of digital communication and information systems on these phenomena. There is (for this community) the customary abuse of the English language, where,
for example, the past participle *unfinished* is transmuted into a noun, *unfinish*, and where terms are taken from the French literary theorists and used with very little in the way of explanation when, upon closer examination, a perfectly acceptable English term, or even an American colloquialism, can be found. So, *drifting or meandering or wandering* are not good enough and we have to have *dérive* to identify the kind of unstructured ‘stroll’ that we may take in drifting from one URL to another in the space of the World Wide Web. Of course, our wanderings may be more purposeful than that and the extent of meandering in which we engage may be determined less by the structure of the digital medium than by more pressing concerns such as deadlines.

Opaqueness of language apart, what do we have here? The curate’s egg, naturally. The essays are divided into four sections: *The real and the ideal*, *The body and the machine*, *The medium and the message*, and *The world and the screen*. In other words, what is addressed are the conflicts and collisions between the worlds and phenomena of cyberspace and the activities and bounded ideas of the ‘real’ world. Or, perhaps, of America, since the rest of the world, culturally speaking, does not get much of a look in.

The essays which I felt had most to say were Michael Heim’s, *The cyberspace dialectic; The condition of virtuality* by literary theorist N. Kathleen Hayles; and an interesting essay by Florian Brody (President of a Los Angeles publishing company), *The medium is the memory.*

Heim explores the dialectic between the *naïve realists*, who ‘... take reality to be that which can be immediately experienced...’ and the *network idealists*, who point to ‘... evolutionary gains for the species and [gloss] over the personal sufferings of individuals.’ Heim moves through a discussion of the dialectic from its Greek origins to a definition as ‘... the conceptual exchange that happens in dialogue’ to explore the notion of ‘ontological shifts’ during which cultural trade-offs take place, as in the trade-off between paper and electronic texts.

Hayles’s discussion of virtuality is based on the definition, ‘Virtuality is the cultural perception that material objects are interpenetrated by information patterns,’ which is a useful definition in that it draws attention to the notion that our perception of the virtual is culturally and not solely personally determined, and that information is a characteristic of materiality, not divorced from it. Her review of Shannon’s information theory is insightful and leads to a comparison of virtuality with postmodernism and of the role of the book in a virtual world. In this latter respect she draws attention to the fact that a number of graphic artists are exploring the role of the codex in presenting the relationships between codes and texts. ‘The overarching message is that the interpenetration of materiality by informational patterns is everywhere around us, even – or especially – in the books, at once virtual and physical, that are being produced in this late age of print.’

Brody’s piece begins (following a quotation from Marcel Proust) with the statement, “Books have been on the way out for most of the twentieth century. Our dreams are no longer located between their covers; first movies, then television and now the computer have offered more involving fantasies.” Which seems a bold claim, given
the increase in book-buying and in book publishing – it seems that many people
do still derive their dreams from books – perhaps continuing, like Proust, to dream
themselves as a book. Between that statement and the end of the essay, there is a
good deal of interesting comment and speculation. However, the final paragraph
begins, “The new book [i.e., the computer] will demand dramatic changes in reading
habits, though I am unsure how willingly we will all switch to the new form.” Ah,
yes – the unwillingness of the rabble to join the revolution. And I suspect that this
revolution is doomed, particularly as Brody himself perceptively points out, what
forms the book is memory – the author’s and our own and, as he says, it will take
a new “memory culture” to emerge, which will “generate its own rules and its own
books.” Let us see – I think we shall have a long wait.

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Fasick, Adele M. Managing Children’s Services in the Public Library. Second

The strength of Managing Children’s Services in the Public Library is the well-
articulated goals and objectives with which it educates. “A successful manager
inspires people to work toward library goals and monitors the progress, so that these
goals can be achieved. Unless a department is well-managed, its personnel and other
resources will not be effectively used to deliver the best possible library service”.
Fasick’s words are true of all public library services. In fact, as technologies continue
to merge, she predicts greater coordination between the children’s department and the
adult services department as a necessary adjustment. Offering valuable and relevant
material and services to communities is after all, part of all public library mission
statements. Nevertheless, the introduction of computers into children’s departments
across North America has brought books to the forefront in the effort of public library
children’s departments to provide services to children because services to children
imply the ability to read. Children need help in choosing books and other materials
and help in learning how they can be used. An adult intermediary is essential in the
learning process of literacy.

The introduction to the second edition of Managing Children’s Services in the
Public Library mentions current trends as likely to have an effect on the direction of
future library services for children – a few of these are a declining birthrate, longer life
expectancy, and the privatization of many public services. Fasick’s book does not deal
with children’s library collections or programming – although she has an excellent
chapter on organizing special events. Rather, her emphasis is integrating children’s
services in the library systems. She advocates ways in which children’s librarians can
manage their services so that the targeted audience is reached. Fasick also advocates
the type of information literacies which undergrid management – management of
staff, perspectives on client groups, the planning of services, evaluation of services, and writing and publicizing policies. Fasick discusses the core of services to children as inseparable from the necessity of evaluation – “the reasons for changes, rather than the changes themselves, need to be studied.”

The subject of Part 1 is planning a program of services, implementing policies, handling security and special events, recruiting staff, defending intellectual freedom, and managing work within the children’s department. Part II accentuates the children’s department as part of the library system and it is here that traditional processes of management, such as working with administrators, preparing budgets and reports, planning facilities, fund raising (cyber-fund-raising, as well) and integrating children’s services into the community are covered. Public relations are the subject of Part III, and this includes working with schools, homeschooling families, and networking with librarians and professional associations. In Chapter 10, Annual Reports in Various Formats, Fasick gives the reader models of how to create this major public record, and examples of graphic art are given which are design rich and far from the restrained, official looking data compilations of ten years ago. The practice of annual report writing is always challenging to the children’s coordinating librarian, but Fasick places just the right amount of emphasis on embedding management functions into the daily operations of the children’s library. She encourages children’s librarians to internalize advocacy of service to children by networking, preparing reviews, writing articles and organizing workshops.

Fasick has produced an updated toolbook for the practice of children’s librarianship. It is a timely and well written, and educators of children’s librarians should not be without it. It has a place on professional librarianship collections in public libraries everywhere.

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Martin Luck provides a comprehensive guide to the successful completion of a task foremost in the minds of many final year students – the dissertation. At first glance, the book appears very similar to a standard research methodology text. However, it does not provide detailed information on how to collect and analyse your data. Instead, Luck sets out to provide a practical guide to the dissertation, within the context of your degree course. By beginning with the benefits you can achieve through doing the project (yes, there are some!), he promotes quite an inspiring outlook and encourages you to read on. All the information and advice included is
presented clearly and concisely, and is easily applicable to your own dissertation and degree discipline.

Luck offers some consolation to those who do not have much opportunity to choose their subject matter, and explains how to make the most of whatever topic you are given. However, this section is perhaps the weakest in that it only provides a different perspective, rather than any advice. Valuable practical hints as to how to go about your research are included. The problems associated with dealing with your supervisor are also addressed along with some suggestions as to what to do if the relationship does start to break down.

Various innovative ideas such as keeping a project diary and an “ideas book” are proposed. Luck then goes on to explain how this will benefit you when writing up the dissertation. The section on writing-up the project offers particularly useful advice on how to get started – a daunting task for many students! Possible assessment criteria are discussed and advice included regarding preparation for perhaps the most daunting part of all – the oral assessment or viva. Luck also shows you how to make the most of your newly acquired skills and knowledge once the project has been completed.

The general approach is lively, informative and easy to read. The guide would indeed provide a useful reference text throughout the production of your dissertation. Although some sections (such as how to use the spell-checker facility on your word processor) did seem a little patronising! I would definitely recommend the book to other students, although convincing them they had time to read it would probably be another matter!

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‘Context’ is a tricky word. We can all agree that the context of issues and actions is important, but quite how to define and understand context is another matter. In terms of information systems and services, context is plainly of importance. It is often associated with meaning, so that we may say that the context of information indicates or reinforces the meaning; perhaps even that the context is the meaning. But again, quite how to define, explain and investigate the context of information is far from obvious.

This problem, which has been understood, if not explicitly elucidated, by practitioners for many years, is now receiving the attention of academic researchers, and this volume is the latest in a number of publications dealing with the issue. It forms
the proceedings of the Second International Conference on 'Research in Information Needs, Seeking and Use in Different Contexts', held in Sheffield in August 1998.

As with any set of conference papers, these are a very mixed bag of 42 papers, divided into 7 sections: keynote papers; theoretical perspectives; the health services context; everyday life; the work environment; organization of information in context; an information services perspective. They range widely, from the general ('discourse: new theoretical framework for examining information behaviour in its social context'; 'information: a critical realist approach') to the particular ('investigation of the information seeking behaviour of medical oncologists in metropolitan Pittsburgh'; 'everyday life information seeking by low income African American households: Wynnewood Healthy Neighbourhood Project'), and from the pragmatic ('what motivates the browser'; 'the information behaviour of senior executives') to the theoretical ('context, power, bodies and information: exploring the entangled contexts of information'; 'when essence becomes function: post-structuralist implications for an ecological theory of organisational classification systems'). The editors have done an excellent job, in rearranging the contributions into helpful categories, and in presenting the very diverse material in a consistent manner.

It will be obvious that there is something for everyone in this collection. I found things of personal interest on topics as diverse as browsing, pyschometrics, the nature of conceptual frameworks, and the information needs of certain kinds of healthcare practitioners. This breadth is both the strength and weakness of this collection of papers, and others like it. Its strength is obvious; it would be difficult for anyone with an interest in any aspect of library/information science and related areas, whether as practitioner, teacher or researcher, to fail to find some insight, perhaps even inspiration, from some of these articles. It should certainly be read by anyone wanting an overview of current thinking about the theoretical perspectives, and investigative approaches, which can be used for the study of information behaviour.

The weakness is simply the lack of focus; even taking the idea of 'context' very broadly, it is hard to say that more than a third of these papers deal directly with the topic, as defined by the title. In these days of information overload, when it is hard enough to keep up with what we must know, let alone what might just be interesting, the result is that this volume will probably be read by academics and recommended to students, but largely ignored by practitioners. And that is a shame.

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This book seeks to provide an introduction to the principles of information retrieval, which have been developed over many decades when applied to text-based systems, for the multi-media environment. It does so for an intended audience of “undergraduate and postgraduate students of information science, electronic publishing, records management and librarianship... and... computer science students and researchers”. This is a tall order! Indeed, I suggest that it is impossible within the compass of the 224 pages of this single text. The consequence of attempting to condense so much material into such a short text is inevitably a lack of depth. Examples include the discussion of probabilistic methods, ranked output and relevance feedback in a single page. A similar length is devoted to expert systems and very slightly more to hypertext whilst retrieval software is dealt with in half a page and database management systems are disposed of in a little over one page. It is difficult to understand why such cursory treatment is given to such a broad range of topics.

Curiously no explicit mention is made of content-based image retrieval systems which are the subject of much current research and interest, though mention is made of one such system, namely IBM’s QBIC. Why this system is briefly outlined rather than some of its competitors such as Excalibur or VIRAGE is not clear.

Having made some critical comments, it should be said that there is much to commend in the book. The writing in its nine chapters is precise and clear. There is an interesting use of diagrams and tables to clarify and exemplify matters discussed in the text. Some of the chapters have concise summaries and interesting exercises with which the reader can test understanding of the material covered and each chapter has a useful list of references and further readings. It is unfortunate that these have not been brought together in a single bibliography at the end of the book.

The book is commendably free of errors though a number have crept in. Organisation of materials on a computer storage device may well affect retrieval, it certainly will not effect it (p. 8). It may be possible to organise information items or their surrogates in a pre-coordinate manner for example by a classification scheme whether on the shelves of a library or in a bibliographic database. It is NOT possible to organise either items or their surrogates in a post-coordinate manner. Though clearly it is possible to organise them so that they can be retrieved by the coordination of search criteria. Bibliographic errors include the wrong title for David Ellis’ book on p. 216 (it is Progress and problems in information retrieval and not New Horizons in Information retrieval), the failure to recognise the second edition of Winship and McNab’s Students’ Guide to the Internet, which was published in 1998, and incorrect initials for Peter Enser in the references on p. 171.

This is most certainly a book to which students should have access via the library. Used with care and guidance, it can provide a useful framework to a very large field. However, I do not see it as a candidate as a sole course text for a course on information retrieval because it rarely provides sufficient detail on any single topic.
Nor do I believe that many students would be prepared to pay £45.00 for just over 200 pages even if I recommended them to so do.

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This volume of the New Review of Information and Library Research is devoted to the papers of a conference on hybrid libraries held in December 1998. The papers include general papers on the theme and papers from specific projects on the concept of the hybrid library and other digital library projects. It is not altogether clear whether all of the papers were presented at the conference or whether that by Brophy & Fisher (on the general concept of the hybrid library and an overview of the projects within the JISC hybrid libraries programme) was written as an introduction to the volume.

Also in the ‘general papers’ category are those by Carr (‘Integrate, co-operate, innovate: an introduction’), which, while informative, is not a particularly stimulating piece; by Priestley (the Conference keynote address), and by Price, who, in a thoughtful piece, covers the issue of extending the idea of ‘collection development’ to the hybrid sphere.

Among the project papers, two papers deal with Hylife, which is exploring the notion of the joint venture in the non-commercial sector; another reports on BUILDER, which is a hybrid library development at the University of Birmingham and which appears to be unique in being restricted to a single university. Surely universities should be funding these kinds of developments themselves? RIDING is a collaborative programme in the Yorkshire and Humberside region, dealing with ‘resource discovery’, while the M25 LINK is a ‘virtual union catalogue of six London academic libraries. CAIRNS is a Z39.50 project for linking Scottish library catalogues and Music Libraries Online, again, is about building a union catalogue for a clutch of musical academies. SEREN is an acronym for its objective of ‘sharing educational resources in an electronic network’ in Wales, and MALIBU is a virtual library of surfing literature – no, it is actually the acronym from MAnaging the hybrid LIbrary for the Benefit of Users – with a focus on the humanities. HEADLINE focuses on economics, finance, business and management and on the presentation of resources to the user in the context of specific academic situations of teaching and research and brings together London School of Economics, the London Business School and the University of Hertfordshire. AGORA is a public/private partnership linking the University of East Anglia, UKOLN, Fretwell-Downing Informatics and CERLIM, which, ‘aims to provide an open, standards based platform for distributed, mixed-media information management as well as a framework for end-user-oriented
services’. The odd one out is a paper on the Impel project, which was a first phase eLib project.

Overall, this is a mixed collection of papers: at this stage of their development the reports are concerned more with scene-setting and the mechanics of the development process and, in this respect, one learns rather less than can be picked up from the relevant web sites. Certainly there is little attention to true research issues, such as, for example, what is the likely effect of these developments on the information user? Perhaps we shall need to wait until the end of the programme for papers that deal with thematic research issues rather than project descriptions – that would make a truly useful volume.

Should you buy this one? Well, it is a useful single volume introduction to the eLib Hybrid Libraries and Clumps programme, and will be of some limited value from that point of view, but for the up-to-date detail go to sites linked to the projects listed above from which you will learn a great deal more, for rather less than the £65.00 asked for 171 pages of text.

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This is a well structured, easy to read introduction to the impact of information on society. It covers key issues in some depth and the style is inviting and simple without being patronising.

The gentle sense of humour of the author is apparent throughout the text and the examples given in each chapter are appropriate and memorable. Each chapter ends with a list of references that are often annotated.

I particularly enjoyed Chapter 3 ‘The quality and reliability of information’ and feel that it should be required reading for anyone who is contemplating undertaking research or is reading a research paper. Many journalists would find the section on bias illuminating.

I am astounded that such a wealth of information comes in such a succinct format. The well structured index is essential as the text invites ‘dipping into’ and the serendipity of browsing. The chapters follow on in a logical and sequential manner but each also stands alone and can be read as an individual piece.

I have thoroughly enjoyed reading this and will recommend it highly to my students.

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Alex Gallimore has drawn upon his experience in developing IT strategies for Manchester library service and within Manchester City Council to provide a clear and pragmatic text. In one hundred and ninety two pages he guides the reader through the process of formulating an IT strategy through to implementation. He performs this task in a highly structured manner (eleven chapters and ninety-six sub-sections) using the minimum of management or technical jargon. He simplifies the process and eschews ‘complicated diagrams and artificial labels’ in favour of ‘straightforward explanation’ (p. 33). The text is exhaustive covering every possible area that could be included within an IT strategy. This is clearly the authoritative voice of an experienced practitioner writing for librarians starting on the journey of developing an IT strategy for the first time. The content of the book has much to recommend it, it is comprehensive, and the author makes a number of important practical and conceptual points.

Despite its obvious benefits, I have three reservations about the book. The first is about the author’s approach to strategic planning, the second is about the guidance he offers to further texts, and the third relates to the style in which the book is written.

I would also take issue with the top down and prescriptive model of strategic planning that the author espouses. While this approach is seen as desirable by senior managers it does not reflect the practice of strategic planning [3]. Indeed, I would argue that it is can be particularly ineffective and restrictive. It has been widely criticised and a number of alternative approaches have been suggested [2]. Other authors have, for example, argued that this approach fails to allow for the emergence of strategic issues through bright sparks innovating at the lower level in the organisation [1]. The importance of harnessing these innovations has been emphasised repeatedly within the literature on IT Strategy.

The inadequacy of the references also detracts from the text. Given the wide ranging nature of the text a detailed bibliography is a prerequisite, enabling the reader to delve more deeply into specific areas and to consider alternative perspectives. Indeed at the end of each chapter he provides a list of references and concludes the book with a list of texts for further reading. Whilst these texts are up to date, there are significant gaps. A striking example of this is the chapter which deals with the IT policies, management, IT skills for library staff, improving management efficiency, budgeting for IT, partnerships, and security. This chapter has only one reference, which does not relate to the content of the chapter!

I felt that the style of the writing was on occasion condescending and too prescriptive, presenting prosaic information in a didactic style as issues of earth-shattering importance. In my experience information professionals no longer need to be instructed that ‘virus-checking software should be running on a network’ or that ‘virus software will need to be kept up to date’! Although the text is put forward as useful reading for LIS students and practitioners, I feel that the author under-estimates both.
In short this book, presents Alex Gallimore’s personal perspective on developing an IT strategy for a library. As such, it represents the voice of an experienced practitioner and presents a great deal of interesting and useful information. From this perspective, it has much to recommend it. If, however, it is taken, as the blurb on the back of the book suggests, as an in-depth text or the latest perspective on the subject, then the reader will be disappointed.

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References