Book Review


Donna Harman has done a great service in producing the short but fact packed volume. 107pp. As she notes at several points in the book, evaluation has played a major role in information retrieval research and development. Given this importance, it is curious that it is no less than 30 years since the last text on the topic; the seminal collection edited by Karen Sparck Jones [1].

In this slim volume, Harman takes us from the birth of retrieval evaluation in the early 1960s with the pioneering work of Cyril Cleverdon in the UK and Gerard Salton in the USA through to the latest work largely based around the series of TREC research and its European offshoot, CLEF. Given the volume of research which has been undertaken since Cranfield, the book does not attempt to review in detail even the major research projects. Rather it concentrates on what the late Jean Tague Sutcliffe referred to as the pragmatics of information retrieval evaluation [2,3], paying particular attention to issues in evaluation methodology and the development of a more complex range of measures of retrieval performance than simply recall and precision which held sway from the Cranfield era. I was particularly pleased to see due recognition given to the important part played in IR evaluation by my former colleague, Mike Keen.

The volume brings home just how far information retrieval has travelled from the days of Cranfield when retrieval was totally manual using essentially card-based systems through to a Google-dominated era where significant proportions of the world’s population search regularly. It also documents effectively the increased complexity of undertaking realistic and meaningful evaluation in the Web-based world.

The book demonstrates convincingly just how complex is the retrieval process. Whilst there will be many such as myself who have long concluded that the crucial components in the retrieval process are searcher behaviour and language, it cannot be gainsaid that this volume documents important developments in the use of system-centred evaluation in seeking to improve information retrieval. The text, together with 204 items in the bibliography, provides a sourcebook for all contemplating participation in the exciting world of information retrieval evaluation. It can be read and consulted with profit by all interested in information retrieval.

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 References