

Book Review

F.W. Horton Jr. and D. Lewis, eds., *Great Information Disasters*. London: Aslib 1991. 218 pp. ISBN 0 85142 255 1.

The idea was excellent; to assist the promotion and development of information services in industry and elsewhere, get a collection of essays describing notable examples where a lack of information, or a failure to assimilate information properly, led to “human misery, political misfortune and business failure”. All the more interesting if some of the examples of erroneous decision making in business, instead of for ever being hidden away for reasons of commercial sensitivity or sheer embarrassment about the whole business, get written about in a full and frank manner.

What a pity, therefore, that this book missed its opportunity, and its likely target audience, the decision makers with purse strings who decide how much funding librarians and information units are to receive. It is a real curate’s egg collection of essays, and the bottom line is the book fails to convince that lack of information does cause disasters.

The editors obtained 12 essays from a variety of people in Europe and the USA; some of the authors are heavyweight and eminent figures; others less well known. Each one takes a particular historical incident (or, in one case, an imaginary one) and examines it in regard to the information provision or lack of it. The topics covered varied widely, although the Stock market crash of 1987 is covered, in different ways, by two of the authors. Because of the considerable differences in style and content of these twelve chapters, it is worth looking at them in turn.

Professor Georges Anderla examines the argument that the US economy was suffering from a collapse of productivity in the 1970s. He finds that careful analysis of the facts disproves the contention, then widely held; however, it is not clear from Anderla’s article whether the belief that US productivity was declining led to any significant errors in US science policy, R&D policy or in other areas. So, no question the facts were misinterpreted; but it is not clear this caused any real long term damage.

Eric Boehm looks at Hitler’s decision to invade USSR in 1941. Although well researched and well written, the central thesis Boehm is trying to prove—that Hitler ignored the reliable and accurate information he had at his fingertips and instead relied on dogma and prejudice in making his decision—remains unproven. Indeed, all the evidence that Boehm provides shows that the Germans (like many others) totally underestimated the strength of USSR, and that the real failure was one of lack of information, not ignoring the information to hand.

If Boehm wanted to argue the case for historical disaster being caused by an unwillingness to listen to accurate information, he had it begging to be noticed—Stalin’s failure in 1941 to listen to the accurate warnings of his own experts, his secret agents and British advice that Germany was about to attack the USSR. This is the classic example of refusing to listen to good information because of ideological blindness. An essay that fails to prove its case.

Christopher Burns gives a lucid and interesting account of the Three Mile Island disaster, and notes here that the problems arose from too much information flowing about, and also from persistent ignoring of certain readings because those instruments were “known” to be unreliable. The essay concludes with some recommendations based on the implications of his findings. This is one of the best essays in the book, curiously subtitled with a 1985 Aspen Systems copyright notice, implying it has appeared elsewhere previously. A pity, as it could have been updated with more recent research, say comparisons with the Chernobyl incident.

Tony Cawkell’s review of the Tacoma Bridge Disaster is a lucid description of bridge building principles and the reasons for earlier bridge disasters, and was unexpectedly (I am not an engineer) full of lessons for other situations. The major lesson is, where data are available clearly showing the current state of the art, not to take leaps into the unknown. The essay could have benefited from conclusions, as it rather unexpectedly stopped in mid air (rather like the bridges it was describing).

Richard Diener describes in detail the destruction of the Yir Yoront Aboriginal tribe in Australia through their disastrous interaction with traders who sold them implements which had previously been the sole preserve of the senior members of the tribe. Although Diener tries to make out this is an information disaster, it is difficult to see the relevance of this historic episode to the issues the book is trying to address.

J. Kist examines the battle of Arnhem. It is unfortunately marred by lack of research (there is a certain irony that Kist cites no previous publications in his essay), a glib style and an anti-British bias. Typical is the claim that “it has been described” how an American called Lee realised the Germans were at Arnhem in strength, but no one would believe him; in fact, it was the British Major General Urquhart to whom this unfortunate incident happened; likewise he refers to the “unbelievable tardiness” of British troops during the operation, a view that is not supported by historians. All this is a shame, because Kist’s basic thesis, that there was a breakdown of information flows, a failure to use such information as was available, and generals believing what they wanted to believe rather than the truth, is correct and has lessons for us today.

R. Lytle’s article, entitled “The PPS Information System Development Disaster in the Early 1980s”, is, unless I have totally missed the point, a not very well written piece of fiction and is not appropriate for a collection of essays such as this. If it is a true story, and there really is a University called “Public University” and there really are makes of PC called “Orange” and “Blue”, my apologies to the author. Maybe it is based on a true story, but names have been

changed to protect the innocent. Even if this were the case, it is difficult to judge the use of the essay because I do not know how much the facts have been altered.

Bob Norton and Simon Gotts cover two events that happened within hours of each other—the 1987 stock market crash and the 1987 great storm in Southern England. The article is well written, and draws contrasting conclusions about weather forecasting systems and the new technology used in financial information systems. Parallels are drawn between both events and conclusions are drawn. An excellent essay.

Hamilton Price, in the longest article in the book, looks at a particular campaign towards the end of the American Civil War. The essay is entitled “The Pinnacle of Deception”, but the author fails to prove his thesis, that the use of deception caused significant Confederate successes in 1864. The article is meandering and not easy to read. The author disproves his own thesis with his conclusion that “Grant was not deceived and large units were not diverted”. As the author concedes, too, the Confederacy collapsed a few months later anyway. Once again, a much better example was staring in the author’s face—the classic case in the American Civil War was Lee’s 1862 campaign in which he used his cavalry with devastating effect to both act as intelligence for him and to prevent a much larger Union army finding out his own dispositions. This case really did change the course of the war, by prolonging it (otherwise the Union may well have won in 1862). Price’s essay ends with one of the strangest sentences I have ever read.

The next essay, by Gerald Sophar, is a rather bitter tale about how a particular proposed US Dept of Agriculture information programme was halted before it could get going. Unfortunately, Sophar provides no clinching evidence that cancelling the programme has been damaging, and it is difficult to draw conclusions about this essay without seeing the counter arguments about why the programme was closed down. Not all expenditure on information services is wise expenditure, after all.

The next article, by the eminent Robert S. Taylor, is a short introduction to an article that follows by Gordon Gaskill about the Hungarian revolution of 1956. It is not clear whether the Gaskill article has appeared before, but I suspect it has. It is well written, even gripping, about how the Hungarians tried to alert the United Nations of what was happening in their country, but how the U.N., its attention on Suez, failed to take notice. There is no question that there was a failure of information flow, and a failure to appreciate information on the part of the U.N. However, I doubt, even if the U.N. *had* taken notice, that it would or could have done anything, as the Soviet Union would have vetoed any significant actions. I suppose the message from this essay ought to be that there is no point in having all the information at your fingertips if you are not in a position to act upon it, but that is not the conclusion drawn by Taylor; instead he concentrates on the information flow problems within the U.N.

The final article, by John Weitzel and Donald Marchand, is a detailed analysis of the stock market crash of 1987 from a US perspective. It is well

written, and assumes some understanding of how financial information systems work. The essay ends with some conclusions and stresses the need for technical, procedural and regulatory infrastructures to be fully integrated for the modern financial information system to work effectively and without too many problems.

All told, then, a curious mixture of the well written and the poorly written, the well argued and the badly argued, the well researched and the badly researched, of fact and fiction. A great pity that not one author examined *the* classic case of disinformation—the successful deception by the allies as the time and place of D Day; a pity, too, that there were not any directly business related essays; a re-telling of the Ford Edsel case would have been interesting, and there must be cases of recent successful takeover bids (or successful resistance to one) which involved information or lack of it; a pity that the story of thalidomide and the role of information services, which is still relevant today was not recounted; an update of John Martyn's classic work on the cost to British industry through duplicated research because of lack of efficient information services would have been appropriate, too. The book can be recommended for general background reading; but for its avowed purpose—to persuade top management of the need for information services, I suggest that the editors prepare a revised version, retaining the best of the this book but adding to it a more convincing collection of essays from other authors.

Charles Oppenheim, Reuters Ltd., with comments from Walter Oppenheim, Epping Forest College, on the Boehm, Kist and Price essays.