

Book Review

Hugh E. Look, ed., *An Introduction to Electronic Publishing: a Snapshot of the Early 1980s*. Oxford: Learned Information (Europe), 1983. xiv + 200p. 4 fig. £8.00. Softbound. ISBN 0 904933 41 5.

Learned Information has carved a niche in publishing about new information-handling technology over the past few years—since 1977 with *Online Review*, and since 1981 with the monthly *Monitor* and the quarterly *Electronic Publishing Review*. This book is an amalgam of previously published articles taken mostly from the incisive pages of *Monitor*. As such there is an inevitable out-of-date feeling to some sections, and editing necessarily has been with a light pen. Nevertheless, some updating was possible—especially as the original articles were in machine-readable form. Errors and inconsistencies are relatively few, but when they occur are irritating. For example, the statement on the first page of the introduction that computer telecommunications/videotex has the longest history and as a service carries the most information is followed on the next page by the correct statement that online information retrieval is the longest established. The book is divided into chapters covering: online retrieval, videotex, telecommunications, technology today (1982 vintage), technology tomorrow, three company profiles, and directions for the future. Finally, there is a glossary of 208 terms.

Turning to a more detailed examination of the contents, the first chapter provides an overview which gives useful historical treatment of the development of online interactive retrieval followed by a very brief discussion of the ingredients that is little more than a glossary, although not included *per se* in the final glossary.

The second chapter is much meatier, with useful commentary on BRS, Dialog, ESA-IRS and SDC. Other host/vendor services are mentioned briefly. Interesting comments are made on the ingredients needed to run a successful online business and the need for critical mass. Guidelines are given for database producers to consider when selecting a vendor/host or whether to mount the file(s) on one's own computer. The section on the world's major databases and databanks was written in November 1981, but is still useful in providing definitions, subject coverage directories, ownership, pricing mechanisms and some statistics. A thought-provoking definition of publishing (“decentralized, unplanned exploitation of apparent market opportunities”) and commentary on the subject matter of the 1981 proposals to the CEC are included. The section on the monetary value of the online industry uses tortuous arguments because of the lack of published figures and the problem of comparing like with like. Even so, the arguments used

have largely stood the test of time three years later. The next section discusses the European scene with no attempt at serious updating, with IRL still described as being British, although it was sold to an American organization before the original article was published, and with the ADONIS project written off, although as of February 1984 work is still continuing. The final section provides the results of a survey in mid-1981 of European users and their online activities.

The chapter on videotex starts with a well-structured discussion of the key issues and has particularly valuable comments on market and commercial aspects. The rival systems Prestel, Antiope and Telidon are described and their distinctive features are outlined. The section describing developments in America is a clear account of the testing and move towards standardization that will permit inter-connection with European systems. The section describing design work on a teletext and a videotex trial is useful in that the underlying principles are not given sufficient consideration in many products. The final section discusses the convergence of videotex and "conventional" information retrieval services.

Telecommunications are dealt with from a non-technical viewpoint, with discussions of regulation, social responsibility, privacy and satellite communication. It is regrettable that more was not given, as it is a topic deserving more attention in the electronic publishing scene.

Technology today (March–June 1982) deals with the structure of a machine-readable database, and is interesting in considering the importance of field structures (i.e. breakdown into the finest element that would ever need to be searched and retrieved) and the elements of file design. The section finishes with consideration of the structure used in creating full-text files. The second section of the chapter considers information retrieval software, including performance factors, and has a description of ten major software systems. The section on the future of software systems regrettably has no mention of the many systems available now for use by owners of microcomputers. Finally, there is a section on computer graphics which will enable image handling in information systems either in a hybrid form mixed with coded text or in complete digitized form. This section is slightly too technical in that some prior familiarity with the subject terminology is assumed.

Technology tomorrow begins with a two-page discussion of parallel processing as an alternative to expensive inverted-file structures, and is followed by a (still) excellent account of expert systems and their significance. The section on local area networks might better have been included in the previous chapter. Videodisc technology usefully could be longer than the five pages allowed, but at least the distinction is clearly made between the (so often confused) analogue mode aimed at the consumer market and the digital optical disc for professional applications. The final section gives a (1981) view of document delivery systems, a field that has exploded since the time of writing.

Three company profiles are given to illustrate a "conventional" information retrieval service (Data-Star), a videotex service (The Source) and a factual databank (Reuters).

The final chapter looks at future directions, beginning with a discussion of the

publisher's role and problems in electronic publishing. Again, this could have been usefully expanded and updated. The other section in the chapter deals with near-term trends in the United States viewed from societal, commercial, government and political aspects. The growing role of videotex for services aimed at a much larger group of information consumers than hitherto is discussed, and the emergence of new consortia and joint ventures predicted.

Despite various criticisms in this review, the book meets the claim of being a useful collection of individual articles, and is an example of a publisher's repackaged product. It is hoped that the techniques available for electronic publishing (merging of glossaries, computer-aided index generation, etc.) might be applied to any future edition.

In summary, good value for money and suitable for introducing readers to the many facets of the subject, and a helpful *aide-mémoire* for those already working in the field.

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