

Book Review

Mary Feeney, ed., *New methods and techniques for publishers and learned societies*. Leicester, England: Primary Communications Research Centre, University of Leicester, 1985. 288 p. £20. ISBN 0 906083 29 X.

If an item described in a record in my Scimate-controlled data base deserves it, the entry “vG” is placed in a field reserved for the purpose. (Scimate is a microcomputer software package for data-base management.) If, then, the rather broad term “electronic publishing” has been entered in the subject field of fifty records and I search using the phrase “electronic publishing AND vG” I retrieve only those records above some arbitrary level of merit. In other words “vG” cuts down the records retrieved from fifty to, say, six.

After reading this book I awarded it a “vG” without hesitation. It should be of interest to a much wider spectrum of people than is implied by its title. It contains compact chapters covering many of the major facets of information technology, and this makes the omission of an index all the more extraordinary. I found the book so interesting that I compiled a kind of mini-index inside the front cover. Fortunately the many chapters are quite short, so that the table of contents can be used rather like an index.

The section headings are “Printing: origination and editing”, “Printing: production”, “Printing and publishing”, “Electronic publishing”, “Storage and handling of information”, “Distribution and dissemination”, and “Communications and discussion”. The book ends with a useful glossary.

It’s interesting how people react to information technology. The IT salesman is, of course, a bells and whistles positivist. I like the description of him expressed some years ago by an overwhelmed customer: “Vendors are there for one reason and one reason only—they are there to sell. They will sell as much as the floor will bear without collapsing.” Sociologists, on the other hand, are likely to be negative. Thus Kling, examining the effect of computerisation on welfare agencies, found that “automated information systems did little to improve internal efficiency, but improved the agencies’ image of efficient administration to attract funding more easily”.

This book is written mainly by positivists—and there is good reason to be positive about the extraordinary developments that have taken place in this field. The opening chapter, for example, sets out the options for input processes very

well. It discusses, for the benefit of authors, editors, and publishers, such matters as word processing, electronic typewriters, optical character recognition, editorial operations, and so forth, and continues with a very good survey of current printing methods.

However, I find it hard to accept without qualification (with reference to word processing) that “problems caused by incompatibility of equipment can be overcome by using devices such as milking machines and text transfer devices” or that “Text editing programs have the virtue of being thorough, consistent, and systematic”. Somewhere in this book there should have been a phrase something like: “Authors, editors and publishers will find considerable benefits awaiting them at the end of a long, painful, and expensive learning process.”

In spite of having been engaged in research and in the development of electronic devices for many years, I have always found, as a user, that anything to do with IT and telecommunications is a total hassle. Other people will admit to this only occasionally, so I am amused by Barry Mahon’s column in the current issues of *Information World Review*. Barry—a well known figure in the European information establishment—has been trying to transmit his text to his publisher electrically. As far as I know he is still trying—he can’t understand the instructions, and his modem is obviously a disaster. This has also been my universal experience.

Printing technology and print-on-paper production methods are areas which many of us take for granted, but the section about it in this book is highly instructive. It leads in to chapters covering computer-aided printing, electronic journals, and electronic publishing generally. This provides a very useful overview—not too little and not too much—a good example of clear writing free from the usual jargon, acronyms, and abbreviations.

A realistic approach is taken in the chapter about full-text data bases—a topical subject because falling storage costs have recently encouraged providers in several areas beyond that of Law. I recently exchanged letters on the subject of cost effectiveness with Carol Tenopir, who is engaged in assessing these data bases. She tells me that the cost per relevant document retrieved is twice as much as by bibliographic searching.

This book may be a product of academia, but—the soldering iron and the instruction manual syndromes excepted—it provides much good practical advice. The experience of the authors is demonstrated in the concise overview covering online systems and in the section about distribution and dissemination. For example: “A refined mailing list may produce a response of 1–3% ... a return of only 1% can cost the company \$20 to \$25 per order received.” Comments of this kind (which I know to be true) show the importance of marketing considerations, particularly for lower-priced products.

The book concludes with potted reviews of communication technologies which again provide a very good introductory survey. I suspect that I shall be referring to it quite often; others will not be disappointed should they purchase it. At £20 it is a very good buy.

A.E. Cawkell