FOSTER, Allen and RAFFERTY, Pauline (eds). *Innovations in information retrieval: Perspectives for theory and practice*. London: Facet Publishing. 2011.

224 pages. ISBN 978 1 85604 697 8. £44.95

This book explores a whole range of approaches to information retrieval. As a user, both interested in and currently researching the efficiency and accuracy of 'discovery' tools, I came seeking to learn about the current state of the information retrieval (IR) art. I actually got more than I bargained for, being jolted out of my rather narrow field of interest ('expert' or 'domain specialist' search) to consider the likes of collaborative tagging to aid social navigation.

It is sometimes easy to look at IR in a rather clinical fashion and consider only the quickest and cleanest way of finding information exactly matched to needs whereas, some users are seeking other people, with similar interests, on the basis that they will be connected to the same resources or will have used the same tags to categorize them.

It should be said that I did not read this book in the order in which the chapters are presented. One of the good things about each chapter being self-contained is that you can dip in and out according to preference. Paradoxically, arguments that most captured my interest turned up in chapters I thought I would be least interesting!

A slight disappointment is that the book contains a good deal of reportable research that's yet to lead to practical conclusion. For example, it would be wonderful to have an intertextual linking method for fiction, enabling the non-expert user to see other books that are related to the one they've just read – via subject matter or action, course of events or social relations, setting, place or time or even emotional experience – but there isn't. It seems too difficult a problem to solve elegantly and too complex for information professionals to implement without enormous injection of time and effort.

Tempting as it is to do a chapter-by-chapter breakdown, I've restricted myself to highlighting just three:

Classification Revisited – having been in the library world for many years, I thought I understood classification but this chapter provides a learned treatise both on the methods in common use and on some that are not common but nevertheless ingenious and ought to be more widely used. It does not shy away from stating the inherent limitations of any classification system and also considers the application of classification theory to finding digital materials in information space.

Assessing Web Search Engines – most Google or Yahoo! users have no notion of mean average precision, recall and F-measures and no patience to scroll past the second page of results. So, given the prolific use of Google in academia, it is a little disturbing to learn that a) hit count estimates, for the same search, fluctuate markedly over time and b) web pages known to exist and known to be relevant to the query are sometimes 'forgotten' and absent from the search results.

Modern commercial web search engines are highly complex systems with vast social and commercial significance. What happens under the surface is not

known and the user base has no control over the search, indexing, relevance ranking and reporting algorithms they employ. What is to be done?

Digital information interaction as semantic navigation – if you are interested in how to improve the efficiency of user navigation through information space, so that they find meaningful routes more easily and alight on relevant materials more quickly and if you consider that leaving a trail for others to follow might be valuable, you will find the unpacking of this chapter title very rewarding. There are clear implications for the way information environments should be designed.

Iain R Dunbar
General Manager, UK Operations
LAC Group

idunbar@lac-group.com