Book Review: GLUT - Mastering Information through the Ages

Martin White enjoys a random walk through a historical survey of humanity’s quest to classify and categorise information.

I am fascinated by the way in which successive generations have tried to cope with a contemporary information explosion. This is not just a 21st Century phenomenon, and as this book shows, it pre-dates manuscripts, let alone printed books. Consider for a moment the problems that the Victorian engineers faced in managing vast collections of engineering drawings. Such was my fascination that the moment I saw this book was available for review I instantly emailed the Editor to offer my services.

Alex Wright is the Director of User Experience and Product Research at The New York Times, and holds both a degree in English and American Literature and an M.Sc. in Library and Information Science. This book could only have been written by someone with a background in literature as well as information science because it is the history of some of humanity's attempts to classify and categorise the sum of human knowledge. The author states in his introduction that in the book he traverses topics such as cultural anthropology, mythology, monasticism, scientific method, Victorian librarianship and the early history of computers that are rarely brought together in the same volume. That is an understatement.

Among the topics covered in the book are the Canon Tables from the Lindisfarne Gospel, Diderot’s Encyclopedia, the Systema Naturae developed by Carolus Linnaeus, the classification schemes devised by Cutter, Dewey and Wilkins, and the fascinating story of Paul Otlet who wrote about the concept of hyperlinking long before Vannevar Bush and Ted Nelson. The index has entries for John Milton, Martin Luther, Thomas Aquinas and a substantial entry for the erosion of authority in the Roman Catholic Church. These observations are of more use than describing the book by the chapter headings since they include 'A Steam Engine of the Mind', and 'The Astral Power Station'!

This is a book that makes you wonder at the creativity and imagination of those people from all disciplines who have tried to put edges and structures around the corpus of human knowledge. All of us struggle with this every day with the limited collection of our own resources. The number of times I have re-ordered the works on my own bookshelves at home is testament to this; having read GLUT I am encouraged to return and find further ways of doing so.

I doubt that this work would ever be a set text for a "Cat and Class" module in a library school, but on the other hand all students should be invited to read it to gain an important sense of the history of our profession and the need for our skills, and to show that solving the problems of information glut lie in the intellect and not in computer software.

Although well written this is not an easy book to read as the author moves so swiftly from one topic to another that there is no time to catch breath or perspective. Wright breathes life into what to many might seem a redundant skill in the age of Google. My only regret is that the work of Yahoo and the Open Directory Project is not covered in more detail as this is a very interesting example (and there are others) of attempts to harness computing to categorisation and classification. That said, this book has been a constant companion on many train journeys over the last couple of weeks. I am sure that you will find this book a stimulating and enjoyable read, and almost certainly you will learn something new or gain a new perspective on a topic with which you are already familiar.

One final thought: I have no idea in which section any bookshop would place copies of this work. It defies classification!

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The digital age has begun to dissolve information hierarchies in favor of a democratic system of networks, embodied most obviously in the Internet. But what will such a leveling produce? On his way to our bit-borne and unilluminated glut of knowledge, Wright pauses, of course, at Gutenberg and the little-known reproduction techniques preceding him (people punched tiny holes in manuscripts to speed their replication); the standardization of typefaces ("Roman type became the equivalent of ASCII type today") and the violence that followed the spread of literacy in Renaissance Europe.