Book review: An Introduction to Online Searching by Tze-Chung Li, Greenwood Press, 1985

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In addition to a broad coverage of telecommunication transmission and equipment technologies, the book addresses such things as telecommunications concepts and applicable standards, all with a slant toward library and information science. The author also includes a healthy portion of sage advice about the more practical issues of telecommunications equipment, service planning and procurement in libraries, including information regarding specific products, services, vendors and suppliers. The book is well thought-out and logically organized. It contains glossaries of telecommunications acronyms and terms and a recommended reading list, which are important for a book intended for a primarily non-telecommunications audience.

Timeliness and accuracy are of the utmost importance in a book of this type. The author has done a good job of presenting current information in an area where technological advancement and regulatory and industry change are occurring at an unprecedented pace and in an environment where manuscripts are often outdated while they are still being typed. The accuracy of the material reflects sound research by the author, and is compromised only by rapid progress within the field, and perhaps its approach to the subject. The book tends to focus on the major and more important aspects, while passing by many minor details. This approach runs the risk of leaving an unintended false impression with the reader.

If the book has a weakness, it is that the predominantly technical focus may not give the many important regulatory, industry structure, and possibly organizational issues their fair due. The reader might expect such coverage in a general treatment of telecommunications for management, although some of these issues are mentioned. The author’s treatment of “telecommunications software” addresses such topics as tape loading of MARC records, terminal-to-computer interfaces for local library systems, and computer-to-computer interfaces between local library systems. These topics are interesting and appropriate material for a library and information science audience, but not what someone active in the field of telecommunications would expect to find under the heading of “telecommunications software”. The generalist approach of the book is both a strength and a weakness. The reader looking for specific solutions to specific telecommunications problems will probably be left unsatisfied. The book is not a comprehensive “how-to-do-it” treatise.

The book should be “required reading” for librarians and library and information systems managers. It is also an excellent “launching pad” for more detailed reading on the specific needs and interests of the reader. A good job by the author.

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What knowledge must be conveyed in teaching online searching? This is a complex question, but one that must be confronted by those of us teaching courses on the topic. Three types of knowledge seem to be required: (1) a conceptual and intellectual framework for information retrieval, which includes a knowledge of database structure and content, vocabulary control, Boolean logic, command structures, and a basic knowledge of the industry; (2) practical skills, including knowledge of hardware (terminals and microcomputers), command language implementation, and search strategy construction; and (3) current information on systems and databases.

Because few of us have adequate skills to teach all of these components without assistance, we must rely on published resources for our students. Textbooks are usually the primary source for the conceptual knowledge required, as they are long enough to develop ideas fully, making the links between principles and practice. Textbooks should provide the *why*, while vendor-produced material provides the *how* of online searching. In addition, texts are sources for the less transient practical information. The cost of a textbook can be justified by its relative timelessness.

Most of the practical skills and current data required for teaching online searching are best obtained from non-textbook sources, including trade journals, conference proceedings, and vendor-produced publications. Not only do these materials provide useful instructional content, their use forces the student to become familiar with the tools of the profession.

Although this reviewer has assumed that *An Introduction to Online Searching* is intended as a textbook, based on the title and coverage, the book’s goals are never clearly stated. The
preface states only that “This book intends to familiarize readers with online searching, stressing bibliographic basics.” We are never told whether the intended reader is one already skilled in searching, who seeks a reference handbook or whether the intended reader is the library-school student of online searching. A library audience is assumed, as the book includes chapters on “Managing the Online Searching Service” and “Reference Service and Online Searching.”

The book has two parts: Part One is an introduction to online searching, covering reference sources, controlled and free-text searching, databases and producers, database vendors and the two chapters on managing a searching service. Part two has a chapter on basic procedures of online searching, followed by chapters on each of DIALOG, SDC ORBIT, and BRS. The remaining chapters in Part Two include those on alternative systems (CompuServe, The Source, Dow Jones), microcomputer searching and downloading, and standardization of searching diversities (a comparison of searching features).

An Introduction to Online Searching is not successful in its stated goal of “introducing the reader to online searching,” due to a lack of a well-defined audience. As a textbook, it assumes too much prior knowledge and is insufficiently explanatory. Important concepts such as Boolean logic are inadequately discussed (it receives only one and a half pages). Inconsistencies will confuse the naive reader. For example, “database” is defined in Chapter 1 as including bibliographic data only (“databanks” contain other materials), but Chapter 4 discuss non-bibliographic databases and Chapter 5 discusses thesaurus databases. The author relies heavily on quotes from other sources, rather than developing ideas and making the links between principles and practice.

As a result, it reads more like a literature review than like a text. But the book includes too much practical detail to qualify as a scholarly literature review and too much basic information to be a handbook.

Perhaps the greatest weakness of the book is its inclusion of large amounts of current data, including pricing data on databases and vendors, reproductions of pages of vendor manuals, and numerous references to specific page numbers in manuals. Many of these data are already out of date and others soon will be. Such information can never be used without verification from current sources, making it more of a liability than an asset in teaching. A related concern is the number of specific errors in the text, including misspelled authors’ names and incorrect dates in bibliographies, which makes one question whether the other data were well proofed.

To the book’s credit, it contains material not commonly included in online searching texts, such as review of other texts and materials available, coverage of “non-traditional” information services, and a discussion of the use of microcomputers for searching. These sections will be useful for both classroom and reference use.

An Introduction to Online Searching is not recommended as a textbook, although it may be of some value to the practicing online searcher as a reference source. In any case, get it quickly and don’t expect it to be of much archival value.

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Case studies are an interesting way to approach a subject and are especially appropriate for the study of the use of microcomputers in libraries. Let us examine this book with these objectives in mind:

**Purpose:** This publication fills a need for case studies of microcomputer usage in libraries.

The respondents were very honest in their responses not only lauding the contribution of microcomputers, but also noting shortcomings in librarian’s approaches to using them.

**Audience:** The book is geared mainly toward American and Canadian academic, public and special libraries, although some school libraries are included. This book has a place in university, college, public, special libraries and resource centers for school librarians.

**Organization:** The compiler produced an extremely readable book considering that responses came from all over the USA and Canada. Following an introduction and summary of results, the case studies are listed in alphabetical order by the library’s name.

**Arrangement:** This book is arranged in four parts: Introduction, Summary of Results, Profiles of Library Microcomputer Projects, and Appendix.

The book is the result of a survey conducted by Knowledge Industry Publications in 1984. Out of 220 questionnaires, of which 64 were appropriate, 35 cases were reported in detail.