

Book Reviews

The Information Environment: A Reader.

Selected and introduced by Geraldene Walker. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1992. 336 p. \$38.50 (ISBN 0-8161-1946-5). LC 91-39347.

Two of the most overworked words in the English language are combined in the title of this book, but there is no better way of expressing what it is about: "the interdisciplinary field of information science in its human (rather than theoretical) dimensions." The concept, as well as the words themselves, appeared as early as 1976 in John McHale's excellent book, *The Changing Information Environment*. Geraldene Walker, compiler of this new collection, explains that it originated as a selection of readings for students at the School of Information Science and Policy at the State University of New York at Albany, and is intended "to fill the gap between the now dated library-oriented texts and the newer information science texts that tend to concentrate on the theoretical aspects of the field." All of the twenty-two articles in the collection were previously published elsewhere, mostly in library or information science periodicals. The earliest selection ("As We May Think," by Vannevar Bush) dates from 1945; the most recent ("Information Technology and Libraries: Toward the Year 2000," by Susan K. Martin) was written in 1989.

The collection is divided into eight chapters: 1) Information and the Nature of Information Science, 2) The Transformation of Society, 3) Technology and Information Work, 4) Information Supply, 5) Information Use, 6) Information and the Individual, 7) Information and Public Policy, and 8) Information Ethics. The editor provides brief introductions to integrate the diverse articles within each chapter. Helpful lists of additional readings follow the articles themselves.

Rather than attempt to summarize and evaluate each of the selections, this review will treat *The Information Environment* as a whole, on its own terms as a textbook. A monograph is always more unified and comprehensive in its treatment of a subject than a collection of readings. The potential advantage of collections is that they can provide more specialized treatments of particular topics, variety of style and opinion, liveliness, and readability.

The Information Environment is scrupulously unbiased in that it presents different points of view. But it lacks other kinds of variety. The editor and many of the contributors write in a pedestrian style (interestingly, the two authors with the most verve, Vannevar Bush and Lester Asheim, are from an older generation). It is asking a lot of students to absorb a series of worthy but dry treatises on topics like the economics of the telecommunications industry and transborder data flow. Where are the voices of the prophets (Marshall McLuhan, Daniel Bell) and the curmudgeons (Theodore Roszak, Neil Postman) of the "postindustrial society," "information age," and "technopoly"? Where, for that matter, are the multicultural, international, and interdisciplinary voices? Where are the linguists, political scientists, sociologists, psychologists, educators, and writers?

Because it is drawn mainly from the library and information science literature, this collection serves as a mirror of our profession's assumptions and preoccupations concerning the information environment. The emphasis is almost entirely on electronic information. The information environment is seen as a product of developments in computing and telecommunications that have revolutionized the speed and quantity of information

storage, processing, retrieval, and transmission. Other prominent themes are the information economy (information as a new resource replacing capital and labor), the dangers of information control, and the commercialization of information. These claims and cautions have a very real basis in fact. But the worried, harried, and even apocalyptic undercurrents in these articles seem out of proportion. Perhaps we have unwittingly come to take our own vantage point at the center of the information whirlwind for the center of the world itself.

A generic typology of articles emerges from the collection. First, there are straightforward historical surveys, such as A. J. Meadows's solid chronicle of information science theory. Then there are short- or long-term forecasts which attempt to extend the historical survey into the future. A good example is F. Wilfrid Lancaster's 1978 article, "Whither Libraries or, With Libraries" which predicted paperless information exchange. Many of the pieces, like Anne W. Branscombe's "Who Owns Creativity? Property Rights in the Information Age," are concerned with problem definition. Of those that express the author's opinions or values, most are critical of the consequences of the information revolution. The overall impression, almost certainly unintended, is that humanistic values and technology are in conflict. Only the articles on ethics are both personal and positive in tone.

Many of the articles adopt either the dualistic or the therapeutic approach. The dualistic approach presents a topic in terms of opposing interests (freedom of information versus privacy, intellectual property versus dissemination, etc.) which must somehow be adjudicated. The therapeutic approach sees social phenomena (inequality in access to information, information overload, job loss through automation) as problems, for which cures must be found. Both approaches leave the reader with a list of conflicts, implying that solutions are imminent. Scholarship that looks toward the future in this way dates rather quickly.

Although this collection is far from perfect, library school faculty may wish to use it as a text, or as a starting point for course readings of their own design. Every academic librarian ought to be familiar with the issues covered in this book, but they might be better off compiling their own "ideal" anthology.—*Jean Alexander, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.*

Knowledge, Power, and the Congress. Ed. by William H. Robinson, and Clay H. Wellborn. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, 1991. (ISBN 0-87187-632-9); paper (ISBN 0-87187-631-0).

Nothing is so commonplace among librarians and information professionals as the belief that we live in an information age. Nor is anything so unchallenged among many of us as the claim that knowledge is power. Yet we seldom test our assertions. We rarely pit them against the stubborn realities beyond the walls of academia. In this book, *Knowledge, Power, and the Congress*, a collection of papers presented at a symposium sponsored by the Council of Scholars of the Library of Congress, we have an opportunity to examine some of the profession's shibboleths. This book explores the interplay between understanding and the manipulation of resources and considers the practical worth of our era's proliferation of data.

The testing ground for these assertions about information and knowledge is the United States Congress. Representing a variety of disciplines and a host of perspectives, the authors of these papers allow us to see firsthand how Congress—arguably the most powerful legislative body in the world—attempts to make decisions with what are arguably the most extensive sources of information in the world. The editors of the collection, William H. Robinson, deputy director of Congressional Research Service, and Clay H. Wellborn, also with the Service as a policy research manager, draw together an impressive array of specialists—historians and sociologists, economists and political theorists, journalists and work-a-day politicians—to participate in a spirited debate. The contribu-