Book Review: Web Metrics for Library and Information Professionals

David Stuart
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Reviewed by Dr Martin De Saulles

David Stuart's "Web Metrics for Library and Information Professionals" is an authoritative overview of the origins of and evolution of web metrics with a focus on their relevance to the information profession. The author's background as an academic researcher at King's College London means he approaches the subject more from a research perspective than from a practitioner's one. This results in a book particularly relevant to an academic audience although practitioners wishing to know more about the technicalities of web metrics will find much of value here.

As a lecturer in digital marketing who teaches across a range of computing and LIS courses, I found the book's first several chapters especially useful. Stuart describes the connections between bibliometrics and web analytics and shows that librarians have had measurement as a key part of their job for many years. In Chapter 2 he outlines the evolution of metrics as used by the library profession and the origins of web metrics. He makes the point that web analytics have their origins in marketing, making it more applied than bibliometrics, which often have a more abstract heritage. However, he shows that some marketing tools such as Google Trends are also useful for academic researchers because of the breadth of the data they provide access to. The discussion on relational and evaluative metrics may appear a little academic to some readers but it provides a useful foundation for understanding web metrics and how they differ in what they are measuring and how their outputs might be used.

Chapter 3 goes straight into the nuts and bolts of the web and its underlying architecture as well as the basics of how search engines work. These are important things for any information professional to understand and something I try to get across to my students. Knowing why a URL looks the way it does and what is going on in the background of a Google search is essential before the finer points of analytics can be understood.

In Chapter 4 Stuart moves on to ways we can measure activity on the web and provides a basic but useful overview of the most popular web tracking software, Google Analytics (GA). Importantly, he acknowledges that many librarians will not have access to this type of data as they will be dependent on the content management systems set up by their IT department. However, by understanding the value that software such as GA can provide it may help LIS professionals make the case to have it installed on their web pages. The focus of this chapter is on services providing external measures of web activity such as Alexa and Google Trends. These provide a more macro view of the web by aggregating data on user activity. This data is interesting to the researcher but of less value to the

librarian wanting to know whether their website is achieving satisfactory levels of activity. However, the author does point to other books that focus on internal web metrics.

Social media is the focus of Chapter 5 and considers the ways to measure activity across different platforms as well as some of their limitations. Some useful Twitter tools are discussed which allow users to evaluate how effective different accounts are in terms of their engagement with followers.

Chapter 6 explores the subject of network analysis and ways to track and measure a variety of online relationships. While this may not have too many practical applications for most librarians it is an interesting chapter for anyone who is new to relational network analysis. As social networks become more embedded in our personal and work lives this will be an increasingly important area to understand.

The rest of the book looks at data formats as they are used in web environments and how these are being used to move us closer to the semantic web where machines can understand both structured and, to some extent, unstructured data. This is the direction search engines and other web services are heading with the ambition to provide answers to users rather than just links to millions of web pages.

Overall, this is a very interesting book that covers a range of technical areas. For anyone interested in bibliometrics who wants to better understand how the web presents both challenges and opportunities to the information science community then this is a great introduction. The author is clearly knowledgeable about metrics and makes some useful connections between the applied and research worlds. Any information professional or student wanting a considered overview of some of the key metrics for providing information services in a digital world would be advised to read it.