

unwise to pay too much, but it's worse to pay too little" is misguided, being based on the idea that price is some way related to the quality of the service. Ruskin's advice may be more appropriate for buying a craftsman's labour. If you pay a craftsman too little he may starve, but I think it unlikely that Factiva, with a turnover of \$281m in 2005, will go under if you negotiate too hard with them. In light of Megan Roberts' article on major information providers in the January 2007 issue of eLucidate<sup>2</sup>, I think a case could be made for information providers being asked to do considerably more for the money they are paid.

More useful would be the commonplace advice that there are only two types of negotiation – those where you are going to deal with the other party again (such as licensing digital resources), and those where you are not (such as buying a house). If your negotiation is of the former type, it is not helpful to negotiate so hard that the other party feels the transaction was unfair.

Michael Upshall

## Book Review: Ambient Findability

Peter Morville. Farnham: O'Reilly Press 2005.

Peter Morville is a librarian, and follows the usual librarians' line that there is Google and that there are librarians, and people use the former when they should be using the latter. If only people asked the specialists, they would be better informed, etc. etc. So far, so good; but Morville then continues with an anecdote about how he cured his back pain, after going to the doctor and being given lots of pills, which didn't cure the backache, by then finding a solution on the Internet via Google – a solution he chose, Morville admits, without any evidence to justify it. Comments the author: "Believe it or not, this is the new face of healthcare. As access to medical information grows, it's increasingly in our best interests to find our own answers". I agree wholeheartedly with most of that sentence, but I part company with the last bit. What I can state unreservedly instead is: "As access to medical information grows, we can become better informed about what is in our best interests.". That small shift, from knowing the choices to finding our own answers, is a huge conceptual leap. It may be one small step for a man, but it's expecting an awful lot from Google.

So is Morville's latest book worth reading? Certainly, given that Morville was co-author of one of the best-known books on information from the 1990s<sup>3</sup>. There is one big idea in the book, that of Mooer's Law. Calvin Mooer in 1960 stated: "An information retrieval system will tend not to be used whenever it is more painful and troublesome for a customer to have information than for him to not have it." The repercussions of that hypothesis are enough to warrant a book on how to find things, and Morville is entirely justified to make Mooer's Law the centrepiece of his book – the "Law" (I don't know if it has ever been validated by experiment) is sufficient to justify, for example, the current craze for search engine optimization, because your information can't be used if your users cannot find it.

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<sup>2</sup> Lexis Nexis on Trial: a report on findings. *eLucidate*, vol 4 issue 1, January 2007, pp 3-8.

<sup>3</sup> Morville and Rosenberg (1998): *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web*

In addition, the book contains useful pointers on how to structure content and how information retrieval can be made more effective: how people make worse decisions when they have too much information, for example, and how human reasoning can be described as “bounded irrationality”.

I agree, therefore, with the book’s basic premise. I can accept that in an Internet-based environment, the easy to find can triumph over the correct – “when push comes to shove, access trumps literacy”. But what about the author’s back pain? Surely that is an example of access trumping solid knowledge? Am I the only one to find worrying Morville’s statement that “The Web lets us find our own way. We choose our links and our leaders. We decide where to go, what to believe, and who to follow.” I would love to believe that the anthropomorphic Web is like a reliable uncle, infinitely well-informed, always ready to help, and unthreatening. But I suspect the truth is rather different: the Web cannot be trusted, and more often than not the easier it is to find an answer, the more that answer should be suspected. I don’t think Morville suspects the Web sufficiently.

The book could have benefited from a more thorough copy-edit and, astonishingly for a book about information, *Ambient Findability* could benefit from better signposting of information. Cryptic chapter titles give no indication of what is being discussed, and even the space allotted immediately after the table of contents to describe what each chapter is about frequently leaves you guessing what is going to be covered. References to people include annoying repeated descriptions – we know Herbert Simon is a Nobel Laureate, because the author has already told us; in fact, he tells us each time Simon’s name is mentioned.

Finally, the author weakens his case fundamentally when he jumbles his nuggets of information theory with a loose, future-addicted writing style that I thought had gone out of fashion in the dotcom era. As early as page two, we are introduced to the latest gadget in the Morville household, a handheld device that is described as “this sexy ... personal lending library”. I know sexy, Mr Morville, and a Treo (whatever that might be) is not it, even if it has many gigabytes of memory.

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