Book Review


A few trends in the development of information technology will shape the future of information access. First, Moore’s Law dictates cheaper and faster information creation, storage, and access; second, more and more friendly interfaces will allow almost everyone to own and easily manipulate advanced technologies; third, due to the previous two trends, user-contributed content will dominate the exponentially growing online space. As a result, the techniques and development of information retrieval (IR) is more important than ever to help users access information wherever and whenever they need.

Information Retrieval: Searching in the 21st Century is co-edited by an academic and a technology leader in the industry. The book is divided into 12 different sections. The first section describes general models of IR and the rest of them focus on specific topics, including evaluation, web information retrieval, multimedia, mobile search, etc. I found the chapter on IR models especially useful. The author provided three types of models: exact match approaches, vector space approaches, and probability approaches. For each type, without going into much detail, several related models with central assumptions and formulas are presented. Readers could delve into more details by checking out those related models in the references provided. Similarly, the other chapters also provide a good overview of related fields; the chapter on mobile search is extremely user-centered and conceptual: the framework is very insightful for developing future mobile applications. Especially valuable are the exercises at the end of each chapter for the readers to gain some hands-on experience with the related topics. All chapters covered basic research streams in this field; however certain newer topics are left out (for example: IR related to social networks and social media). However, they are not the central themes in the field.

Some chapters have formulas to demonstrate the major ideas, but overall they are not very technical; a reader with elementary statistics and algebra skills should have no problems following through. In contrary, the popular IR textbook by Baeza-Yates and Ribeiro-Neto (1999) is catered to Computer Science majors, covers more basic concepts such as precision and recall, is very detailed on the technicality of calculation, and is suitable for their first IR course. This book is more suitable for an Information Science, Library Science or other social science or management majors in their upper undergraduate or graduate levels to get an overview of the whole field, and focus on specific topics if they prefer.

What good is this book for tourism researchers? A few chapters are extremely relevant: the mobile search chapter has case studies in airports and national parks and is very relevant on providing information to tourists on the go; web search is an important part of trip planning so the chapter on web IR will be valuable on understanding how to provide content online and achieve higher ranking in search engines; the chapter discussing context of IR will be valuable in
understanding and providing information in different stages of trip planning and actual visitation; cross-language IR will also be valuable for marketing international tourism. Of course, the overview chapter is a good start to understand the field of IR and how it relates to different parts of marketing and information providence for tourists.

The writing is clear and concise, sometimes even comical: to illustrate the pros and cons of personalization of search results, the authors used an example of a woman serendipitously discovering her husband’s secret by using his laptop. However, this is not a critique; I found it rather amusing and refreshing. Academic writings should not be always rigid and dry.

In general, this is a good overview book covering major streams of research in the IR field, suitable for a less technical and more advanced reader group. It will be a good read for any tourism researchers or graduate students who specialize in the Information Technology field.

References