Book Review


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Semantic Digital Libraries presents the possibilities of applying semantic and social networks to digital libraries, as well as an overview of the current state of the art. Written by and for practitioners of Semantic Web and digital library technologies, this is a well-organized collection of papers on a subject not treated in any other book.

While the editors state that the articles “can be read in any order,” the five sections are arranged in a logical order that moves from a general understanding of semantic and digital library technologies to current and future applications of semantic digital libraries. The essays are rarely bogged down by technical jargon; instead, the authors provide practical examples of each concept. Remarkably, the book has a uniform tone and style despite having 24 contributors.

The first part is an Introduction to Digital Libraries and Semantic Web. Dagobert Soergel’s essay on Digital Libraries and Knowledge Organization Systems (KOS) is one of the most well written in the collection. He simultaneously discusses current limitations of digital libraries and his vision of their possibilities. His detailed explanation of entity-relationship (E-R) representation provides the foundation for later discussions of metadata and semantic relationships.

Parts II and III explore the application of semantics and social networking to digital libraries. “Architecture of Semantic Digital Libraries” stands out for its explanation of the organization and functionality of this next step in digital libraries. By dividing their structure into several layers and exploring them separately, Kruk et al. make a highly complex concept approachable for those without extensive background in database organization.
The remaining sections explore current semantic digital libraries and their future potential. Kruk’s essay on his own project, “JeromeDL: The Social Semantic Digital Library,” demonstrates a synthesis of the concepts presented in the book’s first three parts. His digital library model combines bibliographic metadata (e.g., MARC21, Dublin Core) with semantic relationships and social networking (e.g., social tagging, blogging) in a faceted user interface.

The only chapter that suffers from overly technical writing is “Hyperbooks.” Falquet et al. devote several pages to equations for path distance and content similarity without sufficient analysis of the equations in a practical example. As someone with experience mostly in reference services, this section was nearly incomprehensible. They present a table with similarity values between concepts in two hyperbooks without explaining the significance of the different numbers.

Overall, this book succeeds where it explains the possibilities of applying semantics to digital libraries. This is a technology in its infancy, and it is exciting to hear reports from the software developers themselves. The book suffers when the authors discuss user evaluation and fail to explain statistical analyses. This book is highly recommended for research libraries that serve information scientists, and practitioners of digital library technology.