Making Public Administrators More Efficient with Integrated Systems: A Reference Guide from the ASTRA ESPRIT Project 831 *by P. Hardy, E. Pesce and A. Weisner*
(Elsevier Science Publishers, Amsterdam, 1991), pp. viii + 293, $132.00, ISBN 0-444-89021-1.

This book is an output of one of those grand-scale, cross-country projects funded by the Commission of the European Communities. The ASTRA ESPRIT Project was a four year project in office automation which aimed at the development of an integrated advanced office system prototype for public administration in Europe. It set out to build on common automation problems and technological endeavours and to promote common standards. Partners in the project were based in Italy, France, Denmark, West Germany and Greece.

The Foreword states that this book is aimed at managers, practitioners in the information technology areas of public administration, experts and systems designers interested in office systems and students interested in office systems development. Most of the text is taken from documents generated by the contributors to the ASTRA Project.

The secret of success in using this book is to keep concentrating on the subtitle and to recognise it as a reference guide. It is not a book to read cover-to-cover because, if you do, you will alternate between disbelief at some of the eccentric and non-colloquial uses of the English language missed or ignored in copy editing (especially in Part I) and desperation at the repetitions (e.g., pp. 27, 79 both use the same paragraphs in discussion of processing of documents). In the absence of an index, the most sensible way to proceed is probably to go straight to the Document Directory (p. 283) and scan what is essentially an expanded table of contents to get the feel for the structure and coverage of the Guide.

Part I introduces the basic ideas of Office Integrated Systems (OIS), and provides models of office functions based on an identification of activities across a range of different environments in Europe. It also covers user-need analysis in terms of the functions attended to in offices. Part II is the strongest part of the book. The language makes the ideas accessible even to those of us who are not into cryptic crosswords, and it moves the reader through the range of steps and complex tasks to be completed in introducing OIS. It covers questions of strategic planning, building of consensus, allocation of resources, as well as the more technical aspects of project specifications and OIS design.

The implementation of OIS is covered by Part III and covers areas such as system architecture and technical components. It also has a useful guide for potential tenderers as it lists the European Community Commission decisions and directives covering these matters. User support is dealt with and the Guide provides some introductory ideas on preparation of questionnaires to be used for assessing the level of end-user support to be provided.

The Appendices cover definitions. In fact, the reader of this Guide will be ankle-deep in definitions, but for the sake of sanity is advised not to look for the conceptual relationships across the lists included throughout the text. Forms, questionnaires and procedures used in the Project are included. There are recommendations on ergonomics and references are listed but with the level of bibliographic detail given, if I were a betting woman, I would not stake too much on my chances of tracing more than 70 per cent of them.

The fact that the book is a reference guide notwithstanding, the origin of the text in separately produced reports from the ASTRA Project shows. The

quality of the material and presentation between the parts is variable, and in Part I, in particular, there is an unevenness in quality of presentation of ideas. There are frameworks galore for the text, but how these link together conceptually is very hard to grasp. For example, the major office functions are described as registering, supervising and case working and there are very detailed definitions given for these. How these relate to the schema used later in the text or discussing needs and problems is difficult to untangle. Needs and problems are described as being case processing, archiving, registration, property supervising, authorising, managing and security. To begin with, one might have expected needs and problems to come first in a book introducing OIS, but leaving that aside, in light of the reference function of the book, the meshing of ideas within some overall approach or framework is not evident.

Another problem which occurs, especially in Part I, is that empirical data, presumably all of it from the ASTRA Project, are used in a sloppy way. A distribution chart (p. 23) shows what appears to be a comparison of the amount of time managers and secretaries spend on office activities. How the data for the comparison were generated is not mentioned, and in the absence of adequate labels, one is forced to the conclusion that while secretaries spend 20 per cent of their time on administrative work, managers spend no time at all on such tasks. One is left wondering, and with a whetted appetite for the original ASTRA documents by such teasers. But then, maybe that was the idea.

Turning to the coverage of the book it has to be said that it shares, with the vast majority of books on information system design, a weakness in the discussion of human factors. Certainly this Guide gives directions on the analysis of activities and documents in the office environment as a necessary element in the design of systems, but it makes two assumptions which are difficult to sustain. The first is that computer-based systems should, in essence, automate processes that are currently carried out manually in offices or that they should, at least, co-ordinate existing activities. This book does not deal with the question of what office activities are really for, or whether they are all necessary in an automated future. Lack of this kind of questioning has led, for example, to elaborate automated library catalogues which are simply electronic versions of old card catalogues. Some fundamental analysis of how people use catalogues, and what they need from them before automated library catalogue systems were designed would have undoubtedly led many librarians down a different path, for example, to keyword index listings of titles and subjects of materials held.

The second assumption of this book from the ASTRA Project is that when people describe what they would like a system to do, they will use the system which provides those facilities. In a scene repeated in very many organisations, hopes of increased productivity in a major law firm in Sydney which recently invested $15 million in systems for its solicitors and partners were dashed by the discovery that nothing like 100 per cent of the people who said they wanted the system installed, used it. And those who did use it did not use it in the way expected. Systems designers still have a long way to go in grasping the complexity of human information behaviour, and alas ASTRA appears not to have addressed this gap in any significant way.

Despite the shortcomings of the Guide which appear to be a function of a naive expectation that sections of several separate technical reports can be prepared to tease out the meaning of some very puzzling sentences. In terms of the coverage of the field of OIS, the Reference Guide is comprehensive, and could provide a good security blanket for those moving through the process

of implementing systems. Organisations such as the new Union Research Centre on Office Technology (URCOT) which will give advice on the design, selection and implementation of office technologies in Australia will find this book provides a gateway to large scale research projects on office automation in Europe.

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Continuum: An Australian Journal of the Media, The Media of Publishing, Volume 4, Number 1, 1990 *edited by Albert Moran*
(Communication Studies, Murdoch University), pp. 228, subscription $25.00, ISSN 1030-4312.

Continuum has adopted the editorial strategy of commissioning guest editors to develop an issue around a specific area of the media. Previous issues have dealt with topics such as 'Film, TV and the Popular', 'Asian Cinema' and 'Space, Meaning, Politics'. This awkwardly titled issue is edited by Albert Moran, senior lecturer in the Division of Humanities at Griffith University.

In their preface, general editors Tom O'Regan and Brian Shoesmith introduce the subject as 'the medium of publishing' which somehow sounds better. They explain that the editor had put this issue together to enliven and help direct research into the publishing, marketing and selling of print in Australia.

> The reader will find here little on the coffee table book, the cook book, 'how to' books including computing books. There is nothing on 'the desk-top publishing' revolution and the new 'concept bookshops' like Fremantle's and Paddington's New Edition. There is nothing on the turnover strategies, street orientations and market positioning of book chains. Also untouched in these pages is the book created from the film (why is the literary imagination in these days incapable of addressing this 'copying' in reverse?) — and the phenomenon of small and ephemeral publications (p. 5).

So what will the reader find? Of the 224 pages, 108 are devoted to book publishing, the remainder to three articles on pay-TV and broadcasting regulation, and reviews and correspondence on policy, theory and film. The 'non-publishing' articles are interesting and timely in the current debate and appropriate to *An Australian Journal of the Media,* but their inclusion in this issue seems to indicate a paucity of interest by contributors, or readers, in researching and discussing publishing as part of the media. (The next issue finds 14 articles all related to television). And as part of the section headed Publishing, Denis Cryle elaborates a theme from his history of the press in colonial Queensland suggesting that the developing ownership of newspapers by investment companies in the 19th century did not seem to prevent a healthy variety of editorial opinion and direction.

In his introduction to the journal, Moran writes that the present issue examines the Australian print industry — most particularly book publishing — and the remaining seven contributions are related to that. Moran goes on to say though that:

> Although some articles explore questions of authorship, text, genre, discourse and historical development, these articules would not be at home in the more conservative literary journals *Southerly* and *Australian Literary Studies.* For the articles in this issue engage with those elements typically excluded from literary analysis such as