IJIDI: Book Review

Strassheim, J., & Nasu, H., (Eds.). (2018). *Relevance and irrelevance: Theories, factors, and challenges*. Berlin: De Gruyter. ISBN 9783110470185. 306 pp. $126.99 US.

Reviewer: Roberta Montepeloso, Sapienza Università di Roma, Italy
Book Review Editor: Norda A. Bell, York University, Canada

Access to information is one of the most relevant issues of contemporary society. Not only does knowledge potentially impacts the economic growth of countries, but it is also crucial to personal development. The internet and the Open Access movement has the potential to make data available to all, but not everyone is able to gain the same level of knowledge from the internet. There are still barriers to overcome, especially in terms of a digital and cultural divide. The gap between people who can access and manage online information resources, and those who can't, continues to perpetuate inequality, and could potentially give rise to new forms of inequality and exclusion. For this reason, the role of information organizations (such as libraries, archives, museums, and schools) as change agents is crucial. Just as important as information literacy programming, librarians' management of knowledge are examples of actions which strengthen citizens' competencies and allow for digital inclusion. This is just one of the ethical issues related to relevance that are addressed in *Relevance and Irrelevance: Theories, Factors, and Challenges*, released as part of De Gruyter's series *Age of Access? Grundfragen der Informationsgesellschaft*.

This unique collection of original essays provides a fascinating discussion on the notion of "relevance" from different traditions and disciplines. The term "relevance" is a common word often used today, and, according to the Oxford Dictionary, expresses "the quality or state of being closely connected or appropriate" (as Göran Sonesson suggests in his contribution, p. 21). In a nutshell, relevance involves "selectivity" which helps shape our experiences and actions as well as to help us draw the line between information that we need and those we do not want to access (or we cannot access). Relevance and irrelevance are central in disciplines as diverse as philosophy, sociology, information sciences, linguistics, and education. But despite the broad interest raised by this subject, an interdisciplinary book-length treatment of the topic has not been published before. To fill the gap, Jan Strassheim and Hisashi Nasu have gathered research from 15 researchers (emeritus, full, and associate professors; PhD and post-doctoral researchers) from nine countries across North and South America, Asia, and Europe,and representing seven disciplines (philosophy, sociology, psychology, library and information sciences, semiotic, history, and law). The selection of papers is indicative of the variety of work on relevance and irrelevance.

One of the strong points of the book is that it combines theoretical and practical aspects of the subject with a successful mix of theories, case studies, and empirical findings. Examples and anecdotes from daily life (online and offline), as well as tables and illustrations, help

readers to grasp the concepts. The contributions are arranged in three sections: Theories, Factors, and Challenges. Each chapter includes a very useful abstract, and key references for further reading. In the first section, the authors critically discuss theories of relevance/irrelevance, including Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory (RT). In the second, the researchers analyze the implementations of these concepts and their manifestations in actual settings, such as the creation of a virtual profile (the essay by Franciso Yus) or the process of reading (in the work by David N. Rapp and Matthew T. McCrudden). In the third part, "Challenges", chapters elucidate practical, ethical, and political aspects related to relevance and its counterpart, irrelevance. The book's useful preface lays the groundwork with a brief overview of the main approaches to the topic (from the pioneering work of Alfred Schütz to Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory; from the library and information sciences perspectives to linguistics and epistemology). I recommend a first reading of the entire book, one chapter after another, and then a second consultation of specific essays, depending on what the reader is looking for. The preface should not be skipped, but instead, read in continuity with the last essay written by the same author.

Despite what we might expect, aspects of relevancy and irrelevancy are not only limited to academic topics. In our daily life, we often reflect on what is irrelevant/relevant in a given situation. We repeatedly ask questions such as: Which aspect of a seemingly innocuous remark offended this person so much? Furthermore, by communicating with others, we frequently deal with relevance's problem. For example, if we would like to know what time the train leaves, we would formulate a question in a way that would be relevant for the station-master to help find the information requested. Likewise, they would develop an answer according to what they thought would be of relevance to us: if the train departure is scheduled for 4:28 pm, the station-master would not round the time up to 4:30 pm. In normal circumstances, for example, we make the same effort for decoding non-verbal movements. In the absence of, or, in addition to verbal communication, gestures, facial expressions, voice intonation, and mimicry could convey our partner's desires or requests and could facilitate the interpretation of their behavior (e.g., why do they open a book and start reading when we are going to start an argument?).

Who gets to decide what is relevant? Which point of view is accepted? These are questions concerning the social attribution of relevance and are posed by some of the contributors. Even just the management of the unstructured results of an internet search—an ordinary activity taken as an example in several essays—shows on the one hand that finding relevant knowledge has become a more central issue today (cf. p. 162). On the other hand, the in-depth analysis of the interpretation process of these data reveals that it is not only a mind's selecting activity, but a goal-directed process influenced by our expectations, interests, and preferences (as stressed by Strassheim), which seems to be consistent with the corpus of knowledge shared within a community (as argued in Chapter 8).

What happens to what is left out, the "irrelevant"? In contrast to most approaches to the subject of relevancy, this book focuses also on the concept of irrelevancy. For instance, Francesco Yus argues that what is considered as irrelevant is of equal importance to those living in an information society. In this sense, communication within digital environments helps us to understand why some apparently irrelevant acts garner great attention from online users. That is the case of uploaded content (a post, a photo, or a video) that, by remaining unnoticed, could contribute to the so called "fear of missing out" (FOMO) phenomenon. Several of these ir/relevant events have an impact on an individual's self-

concept, but not only in a negative sense. Sometimes, the fact that some things or actions go unnoticed or slip through other's sight could be a chance for a shy person to re-negotiate their personal image online (cf. p. 135).

Another issue that could illustrate the dynamic relationship between relevance and irrelevance is the interesting issue of dog waste left in public spaces. Starting from their observations in some European countries, Ana Horta and Matthias Gross noticed that for several reasons this problem is deemed irrelevant to some. However, dog excrement is a source of pollution and a nuisance to the community. Horta and Gross analyzed the behavior of dog owners; some had embodied the habit of always picking up their dog's waste, while others did it only when they were prompted by the presence of someone else, but then discarded the wrapped poop to the ground when nobody was watching. Thus, not cleaning up after one's own dog's waste can be assumed to be a strategic construction of irrelevance. By examining different strategies in the use of the relevant and the irrelevant, the researchers bring to light practices of creating, hiding, and maintaining conditions of relevance.

Of note to *IJIDI* readers is that the authors also recognize the value of diversity. Putting myself into the reader's shoes, I find the attention to languages and linguistic differences very interesting. Although we all feel intuitively what is relevant for us, in the sense of what guides us in everyday life, it is not always obvious that we have a specific term in our lexicon which defines such a phenomenon. For example, in the French language, the Old French adjective "relevant" has disappeared in favor of "pertinent", whereas in Japanese there are several terms to express the nuances of relevancy, instead of a unique word coextensive with the English noun. Perhaps given the different provenance of the authors, the book pays great attention to the linguistic differences, and this is another remarkable aspect of the book.

Professors, scholars, students, librarians, and all the other readers will notice that the volume encourages the comparison of different cultures and languages, the hybridization of approaches related to the themes, and the mixing of methods. This tome's authors and editors agree that "relevance studies" is a fruitful interdisciplinary field and they eventually invite researchers to continue the debate on this issue. In my opinion, there could be no better conclusion for this book.

Roberta Montepeloso (roberta.montepeloso@uniroma1.it) is a PhD student in Documentation Studies, Linguistics and Literature at the Department of Letters and Modern Cultures, Sapienza Università di Roma, Italy. She studied Philosophy at Università degli Studi di Torino and holds a post-graduate diploma at the Scuola di Specializzazione in Beni Archivistici e Librari (School for Advanced Study in Archival and Library Science, Sapienza Università di Roma). Her research interest is on the social impact of public libraries (methods and procedures for assessing the outcome of library services on groups or individuals).