Back to the Essentials

Author : Herbert Burkert

Date : March 24, 2017

Michael Buckland, Information and Society (**The MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series**, 2017).

Judging from its title, Professor Michael Buckland's book seems to be yet another introduction into the relationship between information and society. Upon reading it you encounter a well-organized, simply but not simplistically written concise introduction enriched by historical references to what was once called library science and is now more often referred to as (non-mathematical) information science.

As such, it fits well into the MIT Press series that has brought us among others John Palfrey's *Intellectual Property Strategy* or Samuel Greengard's *The Internet of Things*.

Buckland guides us through the various dimensions of information, such as physical characteristics, formal elements, meaning, use, the infrastructure necessary for its use and most of all its cultural dependencies. He uses the passport as an instructive example and introduces the term document to make the various informational perspectives more present. Further chapters deal with organization, naming, description and retrieval techniques for documents and their possible evaluations.

All this brought me back to my own beginnings when, at our research institute in the late 1970s, we were building a metadata system for mainly European publications in the budding discipline of what was then called "Computers and Law." I still think there is no better exercise to enter a new field of knowledge than to develop and systematize descriptors. But it is not nostalgia that makes me introduce Buckland's book here as a thing "we like (lots)."

Buckland's tour through the essentials of information handling—also because of its clear and mind-refreshing language—opens a new perspective on cyberlaw. The book invites us to take a step back from ever-changing technological characteristics, regulatory reactions, and accumulating caselaw and to take a fresh look at what all this is about, at how our societies create, handle, organize, share and restrict information and at how all this should be done considering our constitutional value systems—in short, to look at information law properly and then from there to discuss and evaluate the implications of technological change.

Buckland's remarks on "The Past and the Future" are a good example for this insight. Among other observations he states (P.173) " … there is a shift from individuals deriving benefit from the use of documents to documentary regimes seeking to influence control and benefit from individuals." What he is pointing to here, in highly unobtrusive language, is one of the core issues of cyberlaw—the power shifts in information handling. The book is rich with such windows for a fresh look on what are the fundamentals of cyberlaw, such as his frequent references to the important role of trust systems in communication.

And—last but not least—it should be added—as others have noted before on this series (for example, Nasrine Olson's book review at 18 New Media & Society 680 (2016).): The books of this series are a nice handy size, feel good to the touch, and have typography gentle to the eyes. Also, such things count when we like things—even more now when we look at screens rather more often than on paper pages. But I am getting nostalgic again …

Cite as: Herbert Burkert, *Back to the Essentials*, JOTWELL (March 24, 2017) (reviewing Michael Buckland, Information and Society (**The MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series**, 2017)), https://cyber.jotwell.com/back-to-the-essentials/.