
The Penguin Atlas of Media and Information is a fun book to read, in the same sort of way that surfing the Web is fun; there are lots of tidbits of information, the pages are lively and colourful, and the content is eminently skimmable. Therein lies the caveat, of course, as researchers looking for particular information are likely to be frustrated by the lack of consistency and depth.

There are 35 “pages” here (each comprising a two-page spread, more or less), covering such topics as “Newspaper Circulation,” “The Silver Screen,” “Media Moguls,” and “Internet Regulation.” Each “page” consists of a brief blurb of overview text and two or more graphic representations of national variations in the management, distribution, and consumption of media. The graphics are the fun part; they are graphs, iconic charts (with, for instance, bigger and smaller videotape icons representing video sales), colour-coded maps, and those now-familiar maps in which countries are drawn to the size of whatever index is being reported: so a great blue blob on the left side of one spread indicates the United States’ 43% share of world advertising expenditure and the fact that this represents more than $300 per person, while the thin green fringe along its upper edge shows Canada’s 1.9% (and only $100-$199 per person). At least, that’s what I think it means—the maps’ legends are sometimes scant. But that’s part of the fun: puzzling over these garish images to extract the tidbits of information that one can later drop on one’s colleagues over coffee.

The book also features a more sober gazetteer section, with simple tables indicating a variety of demographic and media statistics on a country-by-country basis. This is a re-presenting of much of the information in the graphic layouts, but viewing it as tables adds little value; the numbers are reported more clearly, but for comparison one is left with those countries that happen to fall together alphabetically. In fact, the gazetteer section makes the Atlas of Media and Information’s weaknesses all the more obvious: if one really wanted to gather statistics or comparisons of countries’ respective media characteristics, the Web would probably be a better avenue. The information would more likely be up-to-date, one could pick and choose among sources, and the inevitable bits of tangential information (why, for instance, do DVD sales seem to vastly outpace CD sales in the Middle East?) would be available, as they aren’t in the Atlas.

Who is this book for, then? It seems to be fairly well targeted to high-school or undergraduate students, as it presents a wealth of predigested information suitable for use in term papers and reports. In this sense, the Atlas is a perhaps a better source than the Web for the sort of guerilla research that undergraduates like to do. Ideally, perusal of this book would be accompanied by some discussion of media literacy and statistics. Who has chosen and packaged these bits of information, for instance? The Atlas has, like the fish in Finding Nemo, an Australian perspective that ends up sounding entirely American. The three authors are social scientists from Australian universities, though one wouldn’t necessarily notice this from reading the Atlas. Instead, apart from an entire spread devoted to Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation, the Atlas comes across as an American product. Canada gets short shrift in a few places: our news media regulation is listed as “mild” in comparison to the U.S.A.’s (and Australia’s) “liberal” rating (from the U.S.-based Freedom House organization, which, interestingly, rated Canada equal to the U.S.A. in press freedom in 2003). But perhaps the Atlas merely reports reality here; the world of media and information is an American world, and the release of Gladiator is surely a reasonable way to measure box
office success and market penetration. If you’re interested in a more detailed picture, then use the Web.

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