Book Reviews

e-Economy: Rhetoric or Business Reality?

Leslie Budd and Lisa Harris (Eds)

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This edited book addresses an important aspect of our appreciation of electronic business. Over five years on from the dotcom meltdown, one of the central themes discussed is the apparent mismatch between the rhetoric that characterized the boom period (up to 2000) and the more sober reality that has characterized e-business investment since them. The contributors to this volume explore the meaning of the scepticism currently surrounding electronic business through a number of interesting themes included in chapters on e-Leadership, e-Management, e-Retail, e-Government and e-Business processes. The various chapters (11 in total) all point to a conclusion that sees e-business as important but often not in a way that the hype surrounding it might suggest. The challenge facing business, the editors argue, is to embed the rhetoric of e-business into the everyday reality of business operations (p. 210). This sobering, if unremarkable theme, makes this book appealing. It can be seen as a useful and necessary antidote to those many books on e-business that have adopted a more techno-deterministic perspective.

Leslie Budd is a Reader in Social Enterprise at the Open University Business School, UK and his co-editor, Lisa Harris, is a chartered Marketer and Lecturer in Marketing at Brunel University, UK. In fact there is a strong link to Brunel University in that half the contributors have had a connection with that institution at some stage. There is a strong UK focus in this book but this does not detract from its value to an international audience. The contributors are all well experienced with industry and university backgrounds and the book is structured in a way that targets it towards a high-level undergraduate or postgraduate readership. It certainly is also of relevance to researchers and practitioners of e-business. Each chapter contains a glossary of important terms and throughout there are 'think points and questions', shorter statements that could be used in teaching as discussion or essay topics. The bibliography of each chapter is more than adequate, giving useful links to related literature.

The book has 11 substantive chapters as well as a short three-page conclusion. The first two chapters establish the theoretical perspective adopted that gives coherency to the remaining chapters. The following nine chapters can be seen as case-study-like where different aspects of the e-economy are analysed. In the introduction, Budd and Harris devote attention to definitional aspects of their theme. One of their key problems is the difference between e-Economy, New Economy and Old Economy. They equate Old Economy with the 'economy of reality' and the New Economy is one in which 'transactions take place through digital means using ICT infrastructure' (p. xxi). They note that the e-Economy is a subset of the New Economy. The e-Economy is an economy in which the organization of the production, distribution and consumption of goods and services is entirely through digital means and relies entirely on the delivery capacities of ICT. 'What connects the old economy to the new economy to the e-Economy is innovation and the constant revolutionizing of the conditions of production: Schumpeter's process of "creative destruction"' (p. xxi). For this reviewer, the definitional issues discussed in the introductory chapter were somewhat confusing and raised some epistemological 'loose ends' that were a little unsettling. Despite this, the authors do manage to convince that the definitional problem is one that will not be resolved easily. Their way out of the problem is to look for 'constants', and the one they focus on is Schumpeter's idea of creative destruction.

In Chapter 1, titled 'Death of the New?', Budd deals with one of the universal conundrums of economy and society: where the old ends and the new starts (p. 22). He uses the notion of creative destruction, Schumpeter's explanation of 'how the seeds of germination of entirely new industrial and business processes are sown from the remnants of the old ones' (p. 23), to argue that often the new has many elements of the old in it. As Budd comments, 'The rhetoric of the new economy and the e-Economy and its virtual universe is enticing, but business inhabits a more grounded reality' (p. 23). Budd applies what he calls the 'Gottdiener Test' to the e-Economy. This test asks three questions: where is the theory; where is the evidence; and where are the data? For this reviewer, Budd is a little too eager to arrive at negative answers to the test questions he sets himself. In his desire to show that the rhetoric of the e-Economy has been over-rated, there is insufficient attention given to other relevant theory in this chapter. For example, while Marx, Kondratieff and Drucker are cited here there is no mention of the work of Machlup or Stiglitz and only peripheral reference to Arrow. While Budd succeeds in furthering his argument, he has a tendency to succumb to his own rhetoric. A richer discussion of theory, evidence and data that could have been drawn from the work of information economists such as Machlup, Stiglitz and Arrow would have strengthened this chapter.

Patricia Lewis is the author of Chapter 2, 'Entrepreneurial Chaos, Entrepreneurial Order and the Dotcom Bubble'. This is a particularly revealing chapter because it probes an area of theory, the tension between rhetoric and reality, that is also not fully developed in the introductory chapter. Lewis argues quite convincingly that rhetoric plays a very important social role in changing mindsets and promoting public acceptance of new ways of doing things. In particular she explores the rhetoric of entrepreneurial chaos and order to show that the dotcom phenomenon was something more than the simple suspension of traditional business fundamentals. This chapter alone makes the book worthwhile since it provides a coherent way of appreciating how control is exercised in a market economy through rhetoric.

The remaining chapters, Chapters 3–11, each deal with a particular aspect of the e-Economy. Chapter 3, by Jane Vincent, uses a social shaping of technology approach to examine the shaping of e-Government through mobile-communications. She makes the perfectly valid point that policy makers who are too caught

up in promoting rhetoric over reality will overlook the fact that not just technology, but social behaviours and practices, will have a major impact on whether choice is exploited or expectations remain mismatched. Lefki Papacharalambous explores e-Leadership in Chapter 4. The argument here is that in 'networked' organizations, new approaches will need to be adopted by leaders if they are to translate the rhetoric of e-Business into practical success. While the potential is there, the chapter concludes rather pessimistically with the hint that there remains a large gap between rhetoric and reality. Business leaders will have to be particularly enlightened and need to undergo a 'shift of mind' (metanoia in the ancient Greek language) to bridge this gap. Chapter 5, by Nelarine Cornelius, on 'E-Management and Workforce Diversity' introduces an international dimension by exploring how e-Business affects work organization, especially in call centres. Like the previous chapter, the discussion here points to the reality of e-business practice making working life less desirable for workers through the application of ICT. The globalization of work processes has the potential to undermine workers and strengthen the hand of management. Chapter 6, by Martin Harris, deals with institutional change at the British Library (BL). He observes from the BL case study that the relationship between knowledge and information and their dissemination by digital means is a complex one. He concludes that, at least in the case of the BL, its public sector role will not necessarily be undermined by the spread of global information networks. Rather what is evolving is that 'these institutions are becoming more interconnected to other players in the digital environment and that this interconnectedness has complex, and sometimes highly ambiguous, implications for the production of knowledge in the emergent "network society"' (p. 102).

Simran Grewal's Chapter 7, about the integration of e-Mediated learning into a traditional university, presents a case study of a traditional campus-based university in the UK. This chapter should be mandatory reading for university administrators who believe that all their woes will be solved by an online teaching environment. What Grewal shows is that when e-Mediated learning is mixed with that social dynamics of universities, there is a real prospect that it will act as a double-edged sword. The flexibility and cost-effectiveness often rhetorically associated with e-Mediated learning can give way very easily to the risk of fragmentation and the formation of a more corporate and concrete organization. What arises is a view that e-Mediated learning can play its most effective role as a complement to face-to-face teaching rather than a replacement for it. Anyone teaching in a university that is trying to adopt e-Mediated learning will instantly recognize the embedded origins of the policy inconsistencies and contradictions evident from this case study. This chapter is a really good example of where rhetoric and reality fail to meet.

Chapter 8, by Noah Curthoys, deals with e-Government and its migration from utopian rhetoric to practical realism in the UK and the USA. This chapter provides some useful historical background to the origins of e-Government initiatives and an analysis that shows how, over time, the concept of e-Government has changed. What Curthoys concludes is that there has indeed been a narrowing between the rhetoric and reality of e-Government since the mid-1990s when 'digital government' was the catch-cry. What has evolved is a gradual coming together of expectations and likely outcomes. Over time, in both the UK and USA, the lead agencies promoting e-Government have steadily transferred control to parts of government that have more clout (p. 135). Curthoys believes that e-Government is likely to be the biggest beneficiary of such lowered expectations. Chapter 9, by Charles Dennis and Oliver Richardson, explores paradoxes in e-Retail between suppliers and consumers. Rather than bringing shopping to the home and creating a more equal society as the Web rhetoric suggests, Dennis and Richardson argue that with increasing use of the Web by business, social and economic division are widening. Many disadvantaged in society are now starved of banks, shops and the movement of vital services onto the Web (p. 156).

E-Business processes and competitive advantage is the theme of Chapter 10 by Suzanne Mieczkowska, David Barnes and Matthew Hinton. They argue, drawing on various corporate case studies as vignettes, that while the rhetoric emphasized cost reduction as one of the main attributes of e-Business processes, competitive strategy appears to be based more on a strategy of differentiation. While many organizations are seeking to use the Internet and other ICTs to achieve competitive advantage, organizational and contextual variables can have a major impact on whether an e-Business venture succeeds or fails. While these conclusions are not remarkable, they all point to the need for ongoing academic research into business practice to make sense of why ICT projects often fail.

Finally, Angela Ayios and Lisa Harris address trust in stakeholder relationships in Chapter 11. Once again, call centres are used as the example where the rhetoric of the e-Economy suggests that the technology should permit the durable bases for customer trust to be developed. There is a rather good discussion of forms of trust in this chapter covering calculative trust, knowledge-based trust; and affect-based trust. Unfortunately, call centres often remain little more than 'sweat shops' and the rhetoric is far from reaching the reality, at least in this context.

By way of conclusion, Budd and Harris draw together the differing themes of the book in a rather short three pages. Surprisingly, they introduce here the rather interesting idea of 'technological entropy'. This is explained as 'the overwhelming promise of ICT and its unlimited potential overwhelms judgement because of a tendency to believe that technological innovation of itself will create greater dynamic performance. The result is that the rapid application of technology and a constant desire to update technology leads to a stationary or even declining state because the adaptation costs become too high' (p. 210). This seems to be one of the main negative results from the mismatch of rhetoric and reality in the e-Economy and it is a pity the idea comes, almost as an afterthought, at the end. It certainly could be the theme of another book.

In sum, this is a rather accessible and useful book. Its main value lies in highlighting the business reality that portrays the e-Economy today. The case studies show a complex, evolving world of institutions and practices that often only vaguely reflect the rhetoric that is supposed to herald its emergence. These conclusions will not be surprising to historians of technological change. However, this book brings together a useful 'snapshot' in time of the evolution of the reality of the e-Economy. While this book has its flaws, it would be a valuable addition to reading lists for courses in e-Business, media studies, business studies, politics, economics and other related programmes.

> Richard Joseph Murdoch University Perth, Western Australia

Ending Spam—Bayesian Content Filtering and the Art of Statistical Language Classification

Jonathan A. Zdziarski

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Before you decide that controlling spam is not your problem or that this book sounds rather too technical, consider this: spam now makes up as much as 65% of the world's email traffic and is growing at a rate of 15–20% per year! If you don't receive spam at present, it is likely only a matter of time until you do. Delivering spam and filtering it out consumes huge amounts of Internet bandwidth and processing power, necessitating costly investment in additional infrastructure just to keep the Internet operating at present-day levels of performance. This book is a lively and readable account of where spam came from, the most advanced products on the market to stop spam, and the subtleties of the convoluted and fascinating battle raging between the spammers and the anti-spammers.

Spam's Rising Tide

Spam is perhaps best defined as unwanted email—the vast majority of which comprises unsolicited advertising for everything from medications like Viagra to university degrees. Although there is some disagreement on where the term 'spam' came from, the most popular explanation is that it originated from Monty Python's 'Viking Spam' skit in which the characters try to communicate with each other over the loud chanting of 'spam, spam, spam'.

The first recorded spam message was sent in 1978 over a pre-cursor of what we now know as the Internet, and was an advertisement from Digital Equipment Corporation. Throughout the 1980s spam was rare and comprised mainly chain letters. However, by the early 1990s spam was beginning to take on the form we are familiar with today, that is, mass mailed advertising and various scams intended to make money for the spammer. Given the poor quality and almost random nature of some spam messages, it is easy to forget that the sole goal of professional spammers is to make money by getting a response from those who receive their spam. When a spammer sends millions of emails a day they require only a very low response rate to achieve this goal. In the early 1990s responses to spam were relatively high, as spam was new and users were unsuspecting. However, users quickly became suspicious of any unsolicited email and network administrators began taking the first steps to systematically block spam from reaching users' in-boxes. Unfortunately, these two developments simply resulted in spammers redoubling their efforts to reach unsuspecting users by sending even more spam messages and by beginning to out manoeuvre the efforts of network administrators to block their messages-the spam war had begun.

Spam Wars

Throughout the 1990s the volume of spam being sent over the Internet increased exponentially as the 'spam industry' grew and spammers developed software that churned out vast quantities of spam automatically. Spammers also developed small computer programs or 'spambots' that continually traversed the World Wide Web searching for email addresses which would be compiled into lists and used for sending spam. However, between 1998 and 1999, network administrators scored a series of victories that reduced spam levels by up to 60%. This was achieved by using so-called heuristic spam filters on the computers which process incoming emails. A heuristic filter works by spotting spam-like features in emails, for example the word 'Viagra', and either dumping these emails in spam folders or deleting them entirely. The volume of spam is such that only an automated method is practical, albeit requiring further computing power to achieve. For humans, spotting spam is easy, because we can understand the content of the message and can immediately decide whether or not it is welcome. Computers, however, must be told which features are associated with spam before they can differentiate spam from genuine email. Heuristic filters work by containing lists of such spam-like features, but these lists must be continually updated for the filter to continue to work effectively. In addition, not everyone's idea of spam is the same—requiring a great deal of personalisation of feature lists for different user groups. Maintaining current feature lists for heuristic filters places considerable workload on network administrators, and by the end of 2000 heuristic filters were beginning to fail in their attempt to control spam. By 2001 spam was at a new all-time high level, prompting a search for new anti-spam weapons.

It has been suggested that one of the most effective ways to eliminate spam would be to charge a fraction of a cent for each email sent.¹ Even a tiny charge per email would bankrupt spammers because of the millions of emails that they send. However, the Internet was deliberately constructed as an open, collaborative environment without centralised control, making the policing of such charges difficult. Many techniques devised to control spam exploit the same collaborative nature of the Internet that the spammers themselves have exploited, but none are panaceas. For example, blacklists allow the contact details of known spammers to be shared and used to block all email from such sources. However, to combat this, spammers constantly change their addresses to new ones, not on the blacklist. Whitelists are also commonly used to avoid spam, in which only the email from an approved list of contacts is allowed through the filter into the user's in-box. This approach works well, but doesn't allow the delivery of genuine emails from users unknown to the recipient without the new contact first being added to the whitelist. In addition, spammers can fake the identity of whitelisted contacts in order to send spam through the filter. Another approach is collaborative filtering which allows a user to report a new kind of spam to the filter for their entire user group or company when it is first detected—thus immediately protecting the rest of the group. An intriguing variation on such an approach is called *Project Honey Pot*, in which particular email addresses are deliberately placed on web-pages as bait for spambots.² These addresses are usually hidden in some way so as to render them unreadable by humans-all email sent to such addresses can therefore be considered spam and can be used to instantly inoculate the spam filter for the entire user group.

Statistical Filtering

Perhaps the most promising approach to conquering spam is known as statistical filtering. This involves dismantling all incoming emails into so-called tokens, usually separate words or other meaningful pieces, and rating the 'spamminess' of each token using a database of probabilities indicating how likely it is that the token would appear in a spam email or a non-spam email. Thus, the word Viagra would have a high likelihood of appearing in a spam email—but the probability

wouldn't be 100% as there is a small chance that genuine email could contain this word. The ratings for the individual tokens in each email are then combined to produce a score of how likely it is that the email is spam. If our email containing the word Viagra contained no other spam-related words, and indeed contained a number of words strongly associated with non-spam, then its overall score may indicate that the email was in fact genuine and the statistical filter would pass the email through to the user's in-box. However, if the email also contained words such as 'free' and 'offer' then it would receive a high spam probability score and the filter would dump the email in the user's spam folder. Statistical filters also contain training routines which allow the probabilities in the filter's database to be revised when new tokens begin to be associated with spam or when the filter is corrected by the user, thus automatically maintaining high levels of accurate performance.

Bayesian Poisoning

Statistical filtering works very well, however, spammers have found a number of ways to attack such filters and to get occasional emails through. Statistical filters employ Bayesian probability theory to estimate the likelihood a particular email is spam, hence one of the attacks spammers have developed goes by the colourful name of Bayesian poisoning. Such an attack attempts to covertly re-write the probabilities in the filter's database in order to increase the chance that the spammer's emails will be passed by the filter. Typically the attack begins by the spammer sending out large numbers of apparently empty emails. These emails contain no spamrelated words and so are likely to be passed by the statistical filter. However, the header in such emails, which remains unseen by the recipient, will contain lists of random-letter words. These random-letter words are not really words at all, and so the filter will not have seen them before. Accordingly the filter will enter them into its database of tokens and assign them a neutral spam probability, meaning that their spam status is currently unknown. The spammer then sends out further waves of blank emails containing the same random-letter words. Each time such emails are passed by the statistical filter the random-letter words become more strongly associated with genuine email and so end up with low 'spamminess' ratings. Once the filter has been re-trained or poisoned in this way the spammer is ready to send his actual spam. The spam will contain the usual advertising or scam material, but will also contain many instances of the random-letter words which the filter now associates with genuine email, thus increasing the chance that the spam itself will be passed by the poisoned filter. Luckily such attacks are easily foiled—when first you receive apparently empty emails, or emails containing random or nonsense words, immediately tag them as spam rather than just deleting them. This marks all the random-letter words in the spam filter's database as spam and further attempts to poison the filter with these words will fail.

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Spam Filtration

The process of delivering an email today is considerably more complex than it was just a decade ago. Highly sophisticated spam filters operate around the clock on almost every email server in the world. Although filtering email is a computationally intensive process that occasionally leads to delivery delays and mistakes, the best filters are very accurate. The author of this book claims that one top-of-the-range filter can achieve accuracy levels of up to 99.985% and because of this he

claims that the days of spam may be coming to an end as spammers may simply give up the fight. Whether they do, or whether they simply redouble their efforts yet again is yet to be seen. For example, millions of additional computer users are expected to join the Internet in China over the next few years, opening a new market for spammers—so expect to see more spam in the Chinese extended character set soon. In addition, as bandwidth increases, spam may even begin to include video clips. One thing that is certain is that spam filters will continue to become smarter. Considerable research is underway to allow filters to 'read' email more naturally the way we humans do in order to increase their accuracy. It would be ironic if the lofty goal of developing the first natural language artificial intelligence was achieved through research into the rather more mundane and sordid problem of sorting real email from pornography and scam advertising.

The spam war is a technological arms race, with both sides committing escalating amounts of resource and effort to achieving their goals. As both the spammers and the anti-spammers use more complex and subtle techniques, the fight for control of the world's email in-boxes evolves in ways not dissimilar to the evolutionary arms races in nature.³ It seems likely that like many evolutionary arms races, the spam problem may reach a kind of equilibrium, at which point it may not go away, but will mean that for the majority of computer users the problem will become invisible and they can stop worrying. Until this time, it would pay many to read this authoritative and interesting book.

Notes and References

- 1. E. Dyson, Release 2.0-a Design for Living in the Digital Age, Viking, London, 1997.
- 2. See http://www.projecthoneypot.org.
- 3. K. Kelly, Out of Control-the New Biology of Machines, Fourth Estate, London, 1994.

Craig S. Webster The Compucology Project Christchurch, New Zealand

The Network Society

Darin Barney

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Darin Barney's output since his *Prometheus Wired: The Hope for Democracy in the Age of Network Technology* (published by the University of British Columbia Press in 2000) is quickly establishing him as an authoritative figure on the social and economic effects of contemporary technology. His recently completed *Communication Technology: The Canadian Democratic Audit* (University of British Columbia Press, 2005) investigates 'the articulation of technology, education and citizenship in contemporary practice and discourse' (Interview *Misnomer* 13 February 2003, available at: http://misnomer.dru.ca/2003/02/13/interview_darin_barney.html). Essentially, Barney is concerned with the impact that digital technology makes on citizenship and education. Clearly Barney is strongly influenced by Manuel Castells (who is extensively quoted throughout) as he challenges the excessive claims made for the positive impact of new technologies. In fact, he says that *Prometheus Wired* attempted to provide 'rational scepticism' in the dominant digital technology discourse. That said, it's not entirely clear why Barney wrote this book, as it really summarises the relevant scholarship without introducing any new theoretical or empirical work of his own. Nonetheless, I found it very useful for that very reason and because I know that Barney selects and presents his material with sceptical caution and a concern for human values in societies affected by the deep and unresolved tensions arising from placelessness, disjuncture, and alienation (p. 32).

The five major chapters of the book deal with Network Society, Technology, Economy, Politics, and Identity. Essentially, his thesis maintains the approach developed in *Prometheus Unwired*. In other words, Barney argues that:

the new economy is little more than an acceleration, extension, and deepening of the basic operation, structure and relations of the old capitalist economy, accomplished under the ideological cover of perceived technological imperatives emanating from the development of global digital networks (p. 83).

Clearly, then, Barney does not see the postindustrial, postmodern, or digital age as a radical rupture. As well, underlying his claims is a strong element of economic determinism, a view which needs dusting off after the dangerous silliness of extreme postmodernists made it unfashionable.

Although the book begins a little unconvincingly with a description of the network society (identifying nodes, ties, and flows), it settles into a worthwhile and well-sourced account of economy, politics, and identity. He characterises network society as one where (mostly) digital technologies of networked communication form the basic infrastructure mediating increasing amounts of social, political and economic practices; as well as the reproduction and institutionalisation of networks as the basic unit of human organisation (p. 25). Barney rejects 'crude technological determinism' and acknowledges the political implications of technology (p. 43). Pleasingly, in taking up Ellul's (1964) concerns in The Technological Society, Barney identifies the tendency to increasing instrumental rationality that digital technology induces. Perhaps this could have been further developed by considering the surveillance of the 'audit society' that infects much of contemporary management. Nonetheless, Lessig's nostrum that 'Architecture ... determines what people can and cannot do' is adopted to make the point that explicit values must guide the way that technology is designed, implemented, and used, because such values are implied in any case.

The chapters on the economic and political implications of network society provide sound judgments that should be understood by those governments and educational authorities whose simplistic assumptions about the new technologies fail to take account of fundamental realities. He states explicitly that he wants to dispel the 'ideological fog' (p. 107) that hides the reality of political and economic power. This is especially useful for Canadian (Barney is a Canadian academic) and Australian policy-makers because of the economic and political hegemony of the United States. In the first place, network society is understood as 'a species of capitalism ... [with] a deep continuity, rather than a fundamental rupture, in the economic trajectory of modern Western society' (p. 69), a well-established position taken by Castells and Ronald Deibert, among others. Although neo-liberal government policies have been deregulatory and privatised, they have nonetheless provided the conditions for digital capitalism to flourish (p. 81), a position

adopted by Dan Schiller's *Digital Capitalism* and Robert McChesney. Barney is ambivalent about whether the digital economy is a job-killer or a job-producer. Instead he focuses on the characteristics of employment, in particular the growing chasm between low-skill and high-skill technology users. The growing workplace phenomena of contingent, self-employed, temporally and spatially dislocated workplaces are identified as crucial. The effect is primarily to unburden the firm's responsibilities, he argues. Although there is an attempt to describe the micro-practices of network enterprises, these are best read about elsewhere.

There is a similar scepticism about the democratic claims for the network society. Two factors, related to but not primarily caused by the digital age, have impacted on the range and type of possible governance. National governments, he points out, are increasingly locked into networks of governance (cf. Held and McGrew) that diminish the sovereignty of the state. As well, globalisation has reduced the welfare state (cf. Castells). Rather than making governments more responsive to the citizenry, networks, he says, are more likely to be manipulated by political parties because of their sophistication in public relations and propaganda techniques. Furthermore, the transnational culture industries' oligopoly deeply affect the political consciousness and identity of citizens. It is this 'multiple, simulated, and infinitely revisable' identity (to use Sherry Turkle's words: p. 151) that Barney considers in his penultimate chapter. He strongly challenges the positive interpretation of multiple and fluid identities afforded by the Internet, arguing that it 'produces a realm of hyper-aesthetic, depoliticized solipsism' (p. 154). Such a strong judgement is pleasing to see in this book, which attempts to be—and is very even-handed.

The Network Society is a well-researched book that provides a very useful summary of the scholarship investigating the economic, political, and identity implications of the digital economy. The author clearly is driven by humanistic and what might be called social-democratic concerns (i.e. a political ethic of democracy, equality, and fairness). While even-handed, Barney is prepared to call it as he sees it by making strong and decisive judgements. He is clearly an author from whom we shall hear a lot more.

Bernard McKenna University of Queensland Business School Australia