Marilyn Deegan and Simon Tanner have written an excellent overview of the state of affairs in digital libraries. Ms. Deegan is the digital resource director of the Refugee Studies Center (<http://www.qeh.ox.ac.uk/rsp/>) at the University of Oxford and has contributed to the establishment of Oxford's digital library program (<http://www.odl.ox.ac.uk/>). She also brings to bear expertise in the field of humanities computing as editor of the Journal of the Association for Literary and Linguistic Computing. Mr. Tanner is Senior Consultant for the Higher Education Digitisation Service at the University of Hertfordshire and has worked both in corporate libraries and as a technology consultant in the UK and other EC countries.

For the novice in the field of digital libraries — the student or new practitioner — it would be hard to find a better introductory text than this. In a mere 250 pages it manages to address digitization program requirements, digital collection development, funding and economic issues, metadata, protocols and standards, portals and personalization, digital preservation, and the evolving role of library professionals in an information and technology environment where the ground rules seem permanently under construction.

For the non-technical library administrator, or librarian whose expertise is in a domain other than technology, the authors offer authoritative, high-level summaries of key issues, a review of relevant professional literature, an excellent bibliography, and a welcome glossary of the acronyms, concepts, standards and miscellaneous buzzwords that are now the price of entry to most library professional meetings and conferences. (For those of us outside Europe, it's good to be reminded once again that UKOLN oughtn't be spelled with an umlaut, that the lovely acronym SEPIA has already been claimed — for "Safeguarding European Photographic Images for Access" — and that old puzzler NACSIS-ELS of course means "Electronic Library Service of the Japanese National Center for Science Information.")

The authors generally attempt a balanced approach to the controversial issues lurking in the material, reviewing the points others have made in the literature and occasionally offering their own views. It's
perhaps more a measure of the inherent uncertainty of the field than simple authorial tact that their
careful answer to difficult questions often amounts to 'all of the above.' In the inevitable discussion of
'what is a digital library' — a question by the way that is largely irrelevant to the great task of creating
and managing digital resources and, along with poor Vannevar Bush, should perhaps be left to rest for
a while — the authors suggest that the "hybrid" library will be the most likely model and remind us
that libraries have long been hybrid in nature, with different print formats, multimedia, etc. In the
discussion of metadata and interoperability, the authors do come down nobly on the side of standards
and standardization, but also declare: "Humanity thrives and progresses by adaptation [my emphasis]
of rules, not by following them slavishly, but having no rules at all leads to anarchy and chaos" (p.
134).

As to the future role of librarians, the authors suggest that "users will require librarians to become
expert facilitators, resource providers, fundraisers, creators and distributors focused upon meeting their
specific community needs, and providing the expertise to guide users through the ever burgeoning
mass of electronic resources" (p. 213). Probably true, certainly daunting. (Many of us sigh for the
writer who can enumerate the the roles, tasks, protocols, initiatives and initialisms that we
won't need to worry about any more and can leave in the dustbin of library history. A best seller probably, but
quite short.)

In the useful chapter on preservation, the authors have interestingly chosen to report the debates
stemming from Nicholson Baker's resounding j'accuse published in a July 2000 New Yorker article, in
which Baker claimed that librarians have misled the world for 50 years about the stability and
longevity of paper publications so we could have license to microfilm newspapers and books and then
discard the originals. Readers craving to know who was right or wrong in at least the basic facts of the
case (e.g., was the all-important three-fold test just throwing dust in our eyes?) will be disappointed to
see only weak, if probably just, quotes from Baker's critics saying "there are never any easy answers"
and the like. Presenting newspapers digitally, the authors aver, is preferable to presenting them on
microfilm, but they avoid going out on any limbs about the value of retaining original copies into the
digital future.

Although the authors have succeeded in focusing on issues, concept and principles that will have a
reasonably long shelf-life, much of the discussion and context presented here will age rapidly. In just
the few months since the book's publication, for example, significant new standards initiatives have
begun to affect many institutions' project planning and implementation strategies. (For example, in the
U.S., the Digital Library Federation's Metadata Encoding and Transmission Standard, or METS; see
<http://www.loc.gov/standards/mets/>.) Even more importantly, the viability of firms like Questia,
NetLibrary, ebrary and XanEdu — described in the chapter on economic factors as "serious
competition to the modern library" — has been called dramatically into question and not solely
because of the "dot.com bust." The economics of digital publishing and access to information will
likely take a very long time to settle down, and the conceptual framework of digital library planning
and implementation will continue to evolve rapidly.

From one perspective, Digital Futures itself provides an excellent argument for a digital approach to
knowledge creation and presentation, by counterexample. If the authors and publisher (the British
Library Association) had managed to distribute this text electronically it might have been possible over
time to keep the content current in the details and to revise the concepts and principles sections as
needed. Further, the guide would have been able to include URLs to all the relevant protocols, papers
and organizational sites, etc., rather than relegating them to the traditional end-of-book bibliography.
This strategy almost certainly would have broadened the audience for the publication, particularly to actual practitioners in the field of digital libraries, who usually need to move quickly from overview to substance. Of course this would also presuppose that the publisher had a viable economic model to support this kind of electronic publication, which — as noted above — appears to be a more distant likelihood than we might have thought a year ago, creating for the present a vicious circle around the publishing status quo.

As it is, those already working on creating and managing digital libraries will need to look elsewhere for in-depth information, technology analyses and details of best practices. For all other librarians, library administrators and university provosts, *Digital Futures* should be required reading.