Review of: Kristin Briney, Data Management for Researchers. Organize, maintain and share your data for research success (Exeter, UK: Pelagic Publishing, paperback edition, 2015)

Researchers (particularly those in the University sector) have a lot of demands placed upon them. The process of actually doing research has changed over the last few decades and one of the latest changes is an expectation that researchers actively manage the research data they use and create as part of their work.

Many, if not all, researchers will have always managed data. However, the standards to which that data was managed would have varied across disciplines, departments, and individuals. Increasingly, researchers working in Universities have to show that they are managing data efficiently and effectively. In addition, many institutions, publishers, and funders expect that data created or used is now made available to other researchers in as open a manner as possible.

Briney begins the book with an outline of landscape and explains that data management is an international theme with the term itself growing up in the mid-2000s (p.2). She also goes on to add that there is no one definition for what research data actually consists of, nor indeed, as to whether the word itself is plural or singular. Both the OECD and US Office of Management and Budget use the word “factual” to describe data. Briney herself uses a broad definition for this book: “data is anything you perform analysis upon.” (pp. 4-6). None of these definitions are entirely satisfactory: What about information which is created but not analysed? Does it not become data until it is analysed? The OECD and OMB definitions seem to discount physical objects as being data: Are a mouse or geological samples “factual”?

These brief questions highlight what a difficult task Briney has set herself in this book. If no one can actually define what data is, how can you possibly write a book on managing data? Briney attempts this by splitting her book up into chapters which follow the data lifecycle. The chapters are headed: “The data problem”, “The data lifecycle”, “Planning for data management”, “Documentation”, “Organization”, “Improving data analysis”, Managing sensitive data”, “Storage and backups”, “Long-term storage and preservation”, “sharing data”, and “Data reuse and restarting the data lifecycle”.

Each chapter is a standalone segment which researchers could read to get an understanding of that topic. In addition, each chapter is helpfully broken down into sub-sections which again aid reading of specific issues and solutions. Finally, there is a chapter summary which is clearly labelled and highlights the key points from the chapter.

The book is clear to read and well-presented and written and provides an excellent introduction to data management for researchers. However, it is not without its faults.

Briney makes it clear throughout the book that she comes from a research background (Physical Chemistry). Indeed, the fact that this is written by someone who has felt frustrations and inefficiencies due to bad data management practices is a strength of the book. However, Briney’s Chemistry background is obvious throughout the book. She seems to use the terms “Researcher”, “Research Scientist”

and “Scientist” interchangeably. This reviewer, who has a Humanities background, could identify with the first term but not the latter two.

In addition, in the documentation chapter Briney devotes nearly 8 pages (pp.36-44) to a description of lab books and Electronic lab notebooks. This is only relevant for a sub-set of researchers. There is no equivalent section for those researchers who don’t use lab books. For example, how should a researcher document notes taken from books, ethnographic research, or archives. It is a difficult balance to strike, but this reviewer felt that in some places the background of the writer got in the way of providing generic advice for all researchers and thus limited the usefulness of the text as a whole.

What Briney does do well is to emphasise how complicated the environment can be for today’s researcher. Funders, publishers, and Universities increasingly have policies on data management and very few of these entirely align with each other. In addition, much research is now international in nature. Briney focusses mainly on the US and EU in her text but even within this context the myriad of policies and legislation is hard to grasp.

Briney has written a useful primer on data management for researchers which provides practical advice throughout on managing data. It is easy to read and clearly structured. It is not without its faults but these just demonstrate how difficult it is to provide generic advice in a comparatively short book (170 pages of text).

This reviewer read the paperback edition of the book which is reasonably priced at £24.99 (although a price below £20 would perhaps provide a larger readership). The hardback price of £49.99 would seem to this reviewer to be a little steep.

Gareth Cole
Loughborough University