push speech advocating political violence underground, and, more generally, have a 'chilling' effect on freedom of speech in Australia. In addition, the legislation alters the procedure to be observed in prosecuting anti-terrorism offences. Williams and Lynch discuss these changes, which relate to the Attorney-General's power to prevent the disclosure of information in criminal proceedings where he or she deems that disclosure would be prejudicial to national security. They also give case studies of three recent trials for anti-terrorism offences.

In the final chapter, Williams and Lynch provide an overall conclusion regarding the merits of the new legislation, presumably based on the criticisms made of it throughout the book. This conclusion is, in short, that while we need anti-terrorism laws, the current laws 'suffer from serious problems'. There is a lack of balance between the security aims fulfilled by the legislation, and the fundamental human rights that it abridges. For this reason, as Williams and Lynch note, a number of parliamentary committees have recommended the repeal or amendment of many of the laws, including the sedition laws and the offence of associating with a member of a terrorist organisation. The process by which the new anti-terrorism laws have been enacted also leaves much to be desired. Too frequently, laws have been rushed through Parliament after each new international terrorist attack without a proper opportunity to consider the merits of the particular laws enacted.

This is an important and well-written book. It is intelligently structured, and the style, while not elegant, is generally readable. If it has a shortfall, then it lies in the lack of analysis of the arguments in favour of the new anti-terrorism laws. For while the stated aim of the book is merely to describe the new laws, much of it is in fact an evaluation, though often not a very thorough evaluation, of these laws. The reader is sometimes left pondering, well, *what* price security? To what extent do the consequentialist benefits resulting from the Australian government's increased ability to prevent future terrorist attacks due to, for example, the control and PDO regime outweigh this regime's infringement of civil liberties?

On balance, though, this is a very good book, and the concerns that it does raise about the new anti-terrorism legislation are legitimate and deeply disturbing. In the words of Sir Robert Menzies, as quoted by Williams and Lynch, 'the greatest tragedy that could overcome a country would be for it to fight a war in defence of liberty and to lose its liberty in the process'.

Reviewed by Greg Roebuck

The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information

by Richard A Lanham

The University of Chicago Press
Chicago, 2006
326pp, US$29
ISBN 0226468828

'Any publicity is good publicity': the cliché can be used to summarise both the content and style of Richard Lanham's book, *The Economics of Attention*. It embodies Lanham's argument that style has grown to dominate substance, so that the real base of the economy is now attention rather than goods. It is also typical of the author's energetic and casual prose, throughout which are scattered familiar slogans and buzzwords. Whilst an engaging book, the argument fails to convincingly establish the validity of the new 'economy' claimed by the title.

Lanham's concept of 'economics of attention' involves redefining what he identifies as the classic economic problem—the distribution of scarce resources. He asserts that 'information economics' is a misnomer, as the Western world drowns in information, rather than suffers from its scarcity. Lanham posits that in an economy which is overloaded with information, the scarce resource is not a physical but an intangible one—attention.

The critical skill in such an economy is the ability to 'oscillate' between 'stuff' (physical resources, goods and services) and 'fluff' (style, art, publicity). The term 'oscillatio' is intended to refer to a

Autumn_Policy_07-1.indd 56 9/03/2007 11:08:24 AM

mental 'toggling' between giving attention to substance, then to style, then to substance and so on. The collaboration of style and substance through constant oscillation is, Lanham argues, the key to productivity. Thus oscillating attention is the means of distributing scarce resources in the new economy.

As professor emeritus of English at the University of California, Los Angeles, Lanham has a specialty in, and obvious love of, the study of rhetoric. Lanham admits to a lack of any formal economics training, a fact that is evident throughout the book, particularly where he attempts rigorous economic analysis. The breadth of the subject also lures Lanham to over-estimate the adequacy of his own understanding of economic theory, resulting in occasional theoretical oversights. Despite its weakness in technical economics, the book has considerable merit as an examination of modern communication management. It seems more accurate to characterise it as an extension of Lanham's *The Electronic Word*, a discussion of the arts and letters in the digital age, rather than a translation of his earlier ideas into an economic framework.

The book has a fluid structure, with chapters largely comprising a series of essays and lectures, as opposed to progressing a focused argument. 'Background conversations', addenda to each of the loosely related chapters, provide a sense of continuity, and consolidate gaps in the main argument. The conversations are the most valuable element of the book, placing the points Lanham makes in the main text in a context of academic literature. The conversations also outline references to relevant sources and defend the argument against conflicting views.

Lanham's writing in the chapters tends to verge into streams of consciousness, as if the author is indulging in an enjoyable romp through familiar territory without granting too much attention to structure. Aptly, for a book about style, Lanham has evidently given considerable thought to the writing style, which is chatty and casual, obviously intended to appeal to the lay reader. Unfortunately, at times, this informality becomes somewhat trite: 'In our journey through the perilous road of life, no shield is more serviceable than a good crap detector.' While this approach can be entertaining, it also has the potential to grate, particularly for a more sensitive Australian audience.

The central thesis of the book is presented as a matrix indicating the various spectra across which the oscillation between style and substance takes place. It is in this chapter that Lanham makes some of his most interesting assertions, but it is difficult to gain any explanatory insights from the matrix in its totality. Lanham discusses how it is possible to look 'through' a signal, such as a word, to its content or meaning; but that substance can also be derived from looking 'at' a word that is presented in a meaningful way—the word 'table' written in the form of a table, for instance.

Oscillation of the mind between the two modes of looking at the signal allows the derivation of two layers of meaning from one signal, essentially a concentration of content. Lanham uses this concept to justify his argument for the use of digital expression, where animation, sound and imagery can be used to render communication more efficient. This is where the value of this book lies from the perspective of communication methods, but whether this truly implies an 'economics of attention' is questionable.

Lanham's analysis of motive is another compelling aspect of the matrix, with 'game', 'purpose' and 'play' making up points on the 'motive' spectrum. He suggests that games providing avenues for human ambition, and the pure enjoyment of play, are important mechanisms for creating new ways of achieving purpose. Purpose, meanwhile, is itself a driver of both game and play, stimulating a productive cycle in the oscillation between all three modes of human endeavour.

This perhaps approaches an economic argument utilising incentive and game theory, yet it has little to do with 'attention'. Lanham suggests that economics of attention is about how choices of attention are made, and thus about human motive—this is what he hopes to achieve in his matrix analysis. The constituent parts, while interesting in themselves, unfortunately fail to combine to form a convincing thesis.

The remainder of the book fits into one of two categories. The chapters before Lanham presents his matrix analysis provide background, introducing many of the concepts and ideas used to construct the style/substance matrix. Much of this background forms an argument for greater use of the digital medium in communication. The author's case

Autumn_Policy_07-1.indd 57 9/03/2007 11:08:24 AM

for the utility of digital expression is thorough and has significant merit. In seizing the power of images as well as words, it is likely that mechanisms such as 'kinetic text' have the potential to convey meaning more effectively, and restore a sense of 'stuff' to the 'fluff' of communication.

Lanham overestimates the flexibility of such modes of expression, however, failing to acknowledge limitations such as lack of uniformity, restricted accessibility and larger space requirements. It is telling that the website Lanham directs readers to, in order to see animations of certain figures that are featured in the book, is in the form that the author repeatedly criticises—static reproduction of text with no added value beyond the motion of the figures.

In contrast to the early substantive chapters, those following the matrix exposition largely consolidate the thesis and allow the author to indulge in venting some strong opinions. An instance of the latter is the chapter addressing the inadequacies of university bureaucracy. Ostensibly, Lanham proposes to engage in an 'audit of virtuality' on mainstream public tertiary institutions. He purports that such audits are universally applicable, consisting of a consideration of how efficiently an entity participates in the 'attention economy'. However, Lanham's example of an audit of universities descends into a tirade against the institutional bureaucracy, and the limitations of the traditional approach to tertiary education.

While online university courses and their digital communication methods provide the contrasting case to challenge many of the assumptions of this traditional framework, many of the points made are far broader and go to the heart of the university system—online or off. Despite the tenuous link to the topic of his book, this chapter was particularly satisfying, with a structured, convincing argument. Lanham probably overestimates the potential for online courses to solve the problems raised, but his criticisms are valid.

One of the most compelling critiques is of the assumption in many universities that the faculty should be employed full-time in the sequestered environment of a learning institution and that the administration exists to protect the faculty from the real world. This attitude is deeply frustrating for any student wanting to learn from a passionate and realistic teacher who conducts their work professionally and gives insight into the practical implications of the high-level theory they are struggling to grasp.

That one of the most stimulating elements of the book is this chapter criticising university bureaucracy is telling of the book as a whole—entertaining and interesting, but not necessarily connected to other parts of the book or the thesis overall. This is most likely explicable by Lanham's evident preference for discursive rhetoric over analytical economics. Credit must be given for having the bravery to tackle economics in this manner, but the strength of the book is its argument for more effective communication utilising digital techniques, not the case it makes for a new 'attention economy'. This is a book that follows its own thesis, gaining attention for some intriguing ideas by presenting them in a novel context—a triumph of style over substance.

Reviewed by Nikki Macor

The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the road to 9/11

by Lawrence Wright

Allen Lane
London, 2006
480pp, £20
ISBN 9780713999730

Lawrence Wright's background is a unique mix of journalism, academia and screenwriting. He was one of the co-writers of the movie *The Siege* and he draws on this eclectic background to produce an engaging, well researched and analytical book. *The Looming Tower* weaves two stories into the one book. The first is a definitive work on the origins, development, motivations and theology of Al Qaeda, and the second is an analysis of the failings of US intelligence with a distinct focus on personality and institutional conflicts. Wright's contribution is the most informative and significant in the Al Qaeda analysis.

Wright immediately establishes the framework for his analysis of Al Qaeda and the incompatibility of its goals and theology with modernity in citing the thoughts of Sayyid Qutb. Qutb was the American-educated Egyptian who became the role model for the ideological father of Al Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Despite having the benefit of an American education, 'he intended to show that Islam and modernity were completely incompatible.' The story of Qutb, a man educated but fearful of the impact of Western education, westernised but radicalised, quiet in public but privately hostile to American women, is disturbingly similar to the profiles of many of

Autumn_Policy_07-1.indd 58 9/03/2007 11:08:25 AM