

## **The Virtual Public Servant: Artificial Intelligence and Frontline Work by Dr Stephen Jeffares**

### **Book Review By Dr Lisa J. Orchard, The University of Wolverhampton**

Confession time: I love my Alexa. Actually, Alexas – I've got four. The cyber-researcher within me knows of the privacy issues and I've watched enough episodes of *Black Mirror* to have a strong paranoia of the unseen costs. Even so, I am willing to accept this unnerving feeling for the convenience of streaming music, cooking timers, and on-demand trivia. The allure intrigues me, and it would appear I am not alone. Jeffares refers to these thoughts as a 'collective fear-fascination'.

I was immediately drawn into Jeffares take on the future to come, or rather, the future that is here. The first chapters set the scene by bringing the reader up to speed with the global technological advancements in AI; from customer service chatbots to a robotic bear. Jeffares has an inviting writing style, using personal observations to relate to the reader before offering a more evaluative understanding through an academic lens. The chapters progress like a jigsaw; working towards a final unveiling of the full picture.

Most of the book is formed through primary research data. Using field notes, interviews, and netnographic methods, the reader is guided through various case studies to help dissect the role of frontline public service staff and understand the fit of technology. This data builds towards the final chapter, where Q methodology is used to gauge viewpoints on the integration of AI technologies. Although Q method is somewhat niche, such methods are described succinctly without detracting from the key focus of the book.

The use of primary data allows the reader to join Jeffares through the research journey. Chapter 7 was a particular favourite of mine, focusing on social media management as a frontline barrier. Using the police as a primary example, the chapter demonstrates how social media accounts are ingrained in the way public services operate, and the expectations of the public in response to these. It made me wonder how the recent example of the 'Colin vs. Cuthbert' cake battle would have played out on social media with a stronger AI presence behind the wheel.

It's worth noting that Jeffares comes from a background of public policy research, and this is clear in the writing. The different disciplinary slant does mean there are instances where cyberpsychological theory could be teased out further, but personally I enjoyed making these connections. The text signposts to other sources in the field, making it an ideal introductory text for understanding the integrative role AI may play within society. This book would suit anyone with a curiosity for AI technology adoption or development. As I finish the book, I am reminded of a quote from the film *Jurassic Park*: "*Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether or not they could, they didn't stop to think if they should*". Jeffares offers us an eye-opening and thought-provoking text that demonstrates that it is far too late to question '*if*' we should. Instead, the book answers the more important question of *how* we should.