Making Information a Business: The Voice Behind the Curtain

Text and photo by MARYDEE OJALA

Marjorie M.K. Hlava recounted some of her more interesting professional adventures when she began her Miles Conrad Lecture on Feb. 24 at the NFAIS (National Federation of Advanced Information Services) conference in Philadelphia. Hlava (everyone knows her as Margie) is the president of Access Innovations, Inc. and a veteran of 40-plus years of work in the areas of digitization, knowledge management, categorization, and standards. A profile of Hlava, by Miriam Drake, appeared in the January 2013 issue of Information Today.

Early Days

Hlava described an early digitization project for Chemical Abstracts data that began with the discovery of missing data and then was plagued with an earthquake in Mexico, a hurricane in Jamaica, and a typhoon in the Philippines. The project ended up being completed in China. For another early project in Russia, she discovered the microfilm machines had no batteries. She and her staff carried cash as shoe liners, which was the safest place for the money. Scanning fragile patent documents in the U.S. presented its own set of challenges, as did the work her company did in Italy, digitizing rare Vatican bibles with extensive marginalia. She glossed over the potential perils of a project involving Tamil-printed materials, tantalizing the audience with a passing reference to finding photocomposition keys in a bar.

She drew several lessons from these early adventures that still resonate today. “All projects use classification,” she said, “and classification is never done.” Tracing the rise of classification back thousands of years, she contended that differences in the classification system people grow up with can determine their worldviews and are the basis of political and cultural misunderstandings. Is there a single point of knowledge or multiple ones? Dewey represents the former; Cutter the latter.

What’s to Come

Pointing out that information access is changing, Hlava noted that now everyone is an author. The power of technology has increased logarithmically. With people carrying multiple devices, publishers need to continue supporting all of them. “We haven’t got rid of old technologies,” she said, “we just keep adding new ones.”

Looking ahead, Hlava expects more changes due to applications such as streaming content, interactive books, search analytics, open source, and linked data. Changes in data include voice interfaces, gesture-based computing, geotagging, Big Data, and the blending of online and offline worlds.

The monetary implications are significant. Not only is it more expensive to produce information, but funding models are changing. Publishers are consolidating; open access (OA) initiatives challenge existing business models; and libraries must now drive readers to content.

In a universe of options, we need trusted sources. Hlava thinks production and distribution will shift to the web and that taxonomies will lead innovative search.

Hlava gave the NFAIS audience four absolutes for their data: Tag it. Clean it. Weed it. Curate it. She ended her lecture by proclaiming, “The information explosion has just begun.” With her optimistic view of the future, it seems that Hlava is not finished with her adventurous life.

Thomas Reuters ProView: A Specialized E-Reading Platform

Lawyers and accountants need to be able to use ebooks the same way they use print books: spread them out across a table, view detailed tables of contents, and refer back to specific sections of text. That’s not always possible on consumer e-reading platforms, so Thomson Reuters came up with ProView, now in its eighth release since September 2011.

ProView version 1.8 allows users to label, filter, and search annotations, highlights, and bookmarks; extract PDFs from an ebook to save specific sections for viewing, printing, or emailing; and organize their ProView libraries by title, type, jurisdiction, publisher, subject, or ownership. The most recently opened ebooks are easily accessible so users can switch back and forth between titles.

“Thomson Reuters has a number of different publishers or imprints within its family covering a global footprint. ... It was really important to us that we built [ProView] as a global product from Day 1,” says Dan Bennett, the ProView development team leader. It is currently available for users in more than a dozen countries, with interfaces in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese.

One of the features that sets ProView apart is its automatic updates. “[A] lot of times in the professional space, books update, and there are multiple versions of them. If we need to update tax tables or some other information within that book, we have the capability of pushing our updates to that book,” says Bennett. He notes that this is not a concern for consumer ebooks that aren’t going to change. “[I]f the users make an annotation on the book, they’ve highlighted some text, or they’ve made a note, then it’s really, really important that when the next version of that book comes down those annotations aren’t lost.” Even if a user annotates a part of the text that is removed from an updated version, ProView saves those notes. “That’s probably the biggest reason why we felt that having our own platform was really important, to allow customers that confidence that their annotations will survive as the law changes,” he says.

ProView’s robust indexing is equivalent to thumb indexes in print books that allow users to jump to a specific section of a book. It also has full Boolean and full-text search capabilities, and tables of contents with partial word matching during search. “This is not about linear reading,” says Bennett. The platform is built to mimic a book that “you use on a regular basis, it’s on your desk, and you flick it open to the point where it tells you the facts you need to know.” He says Thomson Reuters “tried to find as many ways to give customers access into a particular section of the book as possible.”

ProView is available for iOS and Android tablets, on Windows and Mac computers, and in web browsers for online-only reading.

= BRANDI SCARDILLI