

An impression of the 2008 NFAIS Annual Conference and 50th Anniversary Gala, February 24–26, Philadelphia, PA

David Weinberger, Fellow at the Harvard Berkman Center for Internet and Society, started the opening key-note session with the provocative statement that the ‘era of authority is over’ in *Beyond Authority*. “Many of our basic assumptions about how ideas and information ought to be organized spring from limitations on the physical, that simply don’t apply in the digital, connected world. As we unlearn the old lessons and invent new principles of organization, the nature and role of authority is itself changing. While we will always need authenticated information, it is assuming a new role in our culture, thus altering the institutions and businesses that provide it. As with any important cultural transformation, the new role may seem dangerous or even silly, but the change is nonetheless both profound and liberating”, David Weinberger argued “that the authority of knowledge is becoming social, politicized, fallible, and more truly reflective of human needs and human nature”. The new authority of content is:

- multiple,
- contextual,
- specific,
- inclusive,
- organized (together) on the fly (post coordinated, rather than indexed in advance),
- social,
- imperfect,
- scalable.

The value of this new authority is in the combination of the assigned metadata, assigned on-the-fly. **Lee Rainie**, Founding Director, The Pew Internet and American Life Project, discussed in his presentation, *Communication and Information Behavior in the New Information Order*, that digital technologies have changed people’s relationship to information and their relationship with each other. The Sunday afternoon session with the title *The Emerging Culture of the New Information Order*, saw two different ways of covering this topic of communicating and sharing information. **Chris Willis**, Vice President, Social Media, Footnote.com, spoke about *The Awesome Power of Participation and How to Harness It*. Can a balance between accuracy, authority and chaos be found? He gave examples, pitfalls and strategies to help us tap into the “wisdom of the crowds”. **Bryan Alexander**, Director Research, National Institute for Technology and Liberal Education, in *Academia and/or Web 2.0* noted that students – old and young – have embraced and inhabited a Web 2.0 social world, often quite separate from the classroom

and library experience. Information providers and librarians have to cope with this fact-of-life via access to a spectrum of technologies with which to provide state-of-the-art tools for information discovery. Web 2.0 features such as RSS feeds, blogs, wikis, and podcasts; participation in virtual communities; use of geo-spatial and visualization software, etc. Only then will their products and services meet the expectations of today's techno-savvy information seekers.

Users no longer want a lot of information in response to their queries – they are seeking knowledge. They want relevant answers; they want tools to help them understand those answers; and in seeking those answers they want the ultimate search experience.

John Crupi, Chief Technology Officer, JackBe Corporation, *Making Web 2.0 Meaningful and Achievable in the Enterprise*, asked if the consumer side of the Web has spoiled us in the enterprise? With today's web focusing on user-generated content, social networking and building communities, how we communicate and collaborate in today's enterprise continues to evolve. **Dr. Aaron Brown**, Program Director, Content Discovery, IBM Information Management Software, surprised me (and many others) with a presentation about what we now call "vertical search" in the library IT world, with his presentation *Text Analytics Gets Real: Mining Content for Profit and Insight*. He stated, that "Text analytics technologies burst upon the scene several years ago with the promise of revolutionizing unstructured information management. Yet despite initial enthusiasm, they've struggled to gain widespread traction outside of narrow niches. The time has come, however, for text analytics to get real. Over the past two years the market has started to shift, with text analytics gaining new prominence as a key tool for competitive differentiation and risk management used by market-leading organizations worldwide in industries such as insurance, publishing, manufacturing, healthcare, and more. The driver behind this shift is that analytics has evolved from an extraction technology to a mining technology, leveraging metaphors of search and navigation to empower everyday business users with the ability to mine deep insight out of mountains of unstructured content – helping organizations drive profit, reduce compliance risk, and differentiate their own information services offerings. We are approaching a watershed moment for text analytics, and in this talk I'll outline the trends and implications of this new era of analytics, highlight the technology innovations behind it, and describe examples where leading organizations have set the bar for others in their industries to follow".

Dr. Ben Shneiderman, Professor, Computer Science and Founding Director of the Human-Computer Interaction Laboratory, University of Maryland, presented *The Future of Information Discovery*. Effective search strategies for Web sites and databases have raised user expectations, but there are still great opportunities in supporting exploratory search that leads to productive discoveries. Collaborative searching techniques combined with social networking have the potential to harness collective intelligence so that domain experts and novices can make important discoveries. Designers of creativity support tools are applying advanced visualizations in innovative ways to provide overviews with tools that enable systematic yet flexible exploration. The best is yet to come.

Randy Marcinko, President and CEO, Groxis sees a great future for visualizing search results in *Visualizing Search Results from Multiple Databases*. The presentation of search results is still almost exclusively a list, sometimes ranked by parameters such as relevance or date. Knowing that most end-users rarely surf beyond the first or second screen, a very small percentage of search results are ever seen or even considered by the end-user. Visualization, textually or graphically, is a viable solution to this problem, offering the end-user greater power to select those results that are most useful. Visualization also gives the content creator greater assurance that their work will be given a fair chance to be viewed. When searching on federated sources, it is even more important to put control of what is

seen in the hands of the end-user. The concept of visualization as an alternative to keyword search were raised.

Susan Dumais, Senior Researcher, Microsoft Research, spoke on *Search and Context*. Today most search systems treat queries in isolation, without regard to searchers previous queries and interactions. Context is a key to improving search by understanding searchers interests, the rich interrelationships among objects, and the larger task environments in which information needs arise. Understanding and incorporating these contextual variables into search algorithms and interfaces will dramatically change the information landscape in the next decade. Demos of systems that support rich metadata and tagging (Phlat) and personalization (PSearch) were shown.

Free information on the Web, open access publishing, and the advertising revenue models initiated by the major Web search engines have changed the perceived value of content. Metered access is no longer the sole option for information seekers and their choice of resources is driven by the value proposition – accessing content that is “good enough” at a reasonable price. Issues such as the current market perception of the value of information and how content providers are working to enhance the value of the products and services that they offer were raised by **Kate Wittenberg**, Director, Electronic Publishing Initiative, Columbia University, in her presentation *Partnerships and Collaboration: The New Culture for Content Creation*. “We can frown on what younger users do with technology as “entertainment”. Or we can think creatively about how to develop new publishing models that reflect the environment in which we find ourselves and places for our new users, like a “café library branch”. Here are some characteristics of her hypothetical cafe library branch:

- provides access to information,
- has some computers available,
- provides help finding things (if asked),
- provides access to content (magazines, newspapers, some books strewn about),
- is a community gathering place,
- holds some special events,
- has reservable group study space,

answering reference questions via SMS while being away.

She mentioned the “Librarian With a Latte” program from University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. With a laptop and a wireless connection, he sets aside time to sit at a table at a popular Ann Arbor coffee shop and invites students to drop by for help. Dozens of students showed up for one of his recent sessions. “Going to where students are seems to be a theme in social-networking discussions, and they mean virtually”, he says. “It’s equally important to go where they are physically”. The coffee-shop sessions help establish relationships with students that become online interactions later.

Caspar de Bono, B2B Managing Director at the Financial Times (FT), explained that the FT has developed a new business model built on

- the ability to price according to demand¹ and
- the ability to replicate content at no additional cost.

Pricing according to demand

¹A model similar to as he was told “a soft drink vending in Sweden that prices according to the ambient temperature, i.e. the price of your soft drink changes according to how hot it is that day.

- the first 10 articles are free, after that point the user is asked to register (providing useful demographic information for our advertisers),
- after 30 articles the user is invited to subscribe.

Only organisations having a direct deal with the FT have access to its content. This can be directly via the FT or via – at present – 12 news aggregators, which are licensed to provide unlimited access to FT content for organizations with a direct agreement.

These wise words concluded this well organized conference and gala, a fine event with a diverse programme full of good speakers and nearly 300 delegates.

Appendix: About NFAIS

Vision statement

The National Federation of Advanced Information Services (NFAIS) seeks to be recognized globally as the premier membership organization for groups that aggregate, organize and facilitate access to information.

NFAIS represents an international cross-section of technology, publishing and information providers. It is a partnership of government, nonprofit and commercial organizations – all sharing a common mission of improved access to, and use of, information.

NFAIS members' services successfully merge human intellectual processes and judgment with the strength of technological solutions. The primary activities undertaken by member organizations are aggregating, organizing and facilitating access to information.

Assisting users in creating knowledge from published information is the key focus and purpose of every NFAIS member. Some of the hallmarks that distinguish the products and services provided by NFAIS members from other information providers include: content management; precision search and retrieval; enriched indexing; depth and scope of content; and automated electronic access. Whether provided by profit seeking companies, government agencies, or nonprofit entities, these products and services are crucial to professionals in the academic, corporate, government, and library communities who need quick, reliable and easy access to the sometimes overwhelming amount of information available in both print and digital formats.

NFAIS members offer diverse information products and services to the following markets, whose total purchasing power has been valued as high as \$20 billion (USD): business & finance, education, engineering, legal, library, medical & pharmaceutical and scientific research.

Products and services provided by NFAIS members are often the most important interface between the user seeking either specific or general information on a chosen topic and the sources of information relevant to that topic. This sector of the publishing industry is integral to productivity in a diverse number of fields of study and research – thus contributing positively to the national and global economies, as well as to the goals of social, scientific and political progress.

Regardless of their size or their profit motive, NFAIS members have moved aggressively in the delivery and integration of their products and services through new technologies. Web-based resources, wireless devices, online services, digital archives, CD-ROMs are just some of the many delivery and communication channels employed by NFAIS members organizations to reach customers and offer solutions to their information needs.

NFAIS members have successively made the transition from traditional, and often niche, information publishers to global, digital information providers. They strive to continue providing the highest value of service and the most efficient tools available to enhance the productivity of information professionals.

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