June 2013

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EC: We have a new division within the company with just this function, to glean deeper analytics on usage, but direct contact with reference library staff tells us that Reference Universe is used when someone wants to delve deeply into a topic, or cross outside the comfort zone of their own disciplines. The challenge today for many libraries is to encourage the use of library resources at all, rather than what’s out on the open Web. We’ve found Reference Universe is most heavily used where those institutions still put a premium on instruction and training, rather than “one box solutions” which tend to either overwhelm with results.

Reference Universe is designed for exploring new paths of research, new areas of discovery and understanding about a topic. It’s about really squeezing all out of your specialized reference works. When you know what goes into publishing these works to begin with, and what libraries do to carefully craft their own collections — you realized how Reference Universe unlocks the data in unique way.

ATG: If you had a crystal ball what do you think it would tell you about the future of reference publishing, the use of research databases, and of course, libraries?

EC: Quality reference publishing is very expensive, and it’s clear that some of the existing reference publishers are cutting back because it is so expensive. That said, it seems clear that the future of the information industry will not be about discrete databases per se.

Let me indulge a bit of my philosophy studies from years past. One might say information may become more a matter of epistemology than technology. Content is everywhere: the understanding of it is not.

Researchers need to be encouraged to grasp the meaning surrounding the content. That meaning is always a mechanism for a rich, multi-dimensional understanding. It is a new way of seeing, because it involves letting go of previously held opinions for new ones, that is if, and only if, the old ones have been put to the test and found wanting. They used to call that “getting an education.”

Ultimately I see Paratext in the understanding business. The word “Paratext” itself means any and all elements that point one back to the primary source. So, we want to continually improve our resource to move people to the original meaning, and back out again, for deeper understanding.

ATG: What does that mean in concrete terms for future plans and initiatives at Paratext? Are there new products on the drawing board or planned expansions of existing products?

EC: We’re fortunate to still be a privately held company. It gives us the space to look a bit further down the road, and roll things out when they’re ready. All Paratext products are vertical search applications which drill down into a genre or document-type, using human indexing models rather than computer-based string search to unlock materials otherwise missed, and to give richer context to a topic. If you perform a search on the term “Fraud” in any discovery system, you might get back 800,000 hits. Perform the same search for articles in specialized introductory works in Reference Universe and you might get back perhaps 75 hits. At the outset of research, for both novice as well as experienced researchers, less is often more.

There’s little point in sending users into the “deep end of the pool” (not my phrase, but I like it) of journals or dense monographs until they have their bearings, intellectually, on the main themes, topics, etc. That’s why a library has MRWs, to help researchers get their bearings, and that is what Reference Universe permits in a more comprehensive way.

ATG: Running a company like Paratext must keep you jumping. What do you do to relax? Are there any activities that you particularly enjoy? Aside from visiting Charleston, what would be your idea of the perfect vacation to help recharge your batteries?

EC: My golf game is something I enjoy (and endure) when I can; I’m a fairly respectable chef and I began oil painting about ten years ago. However, all of this takes a back seat to the time I spend with our 2-year old daughter Caroline, the first for my wife Samantha and me. Spending quiet or silly time with her is the antidote. As more experienced parents will surely understand, that kind of time gets me “out of my mind” and encourages me to be more present. If I can’t recharge during that time, I’m not sure any hobby will help.

As for vacations, Italy is my first choice. The quote I remember, though I’m not certain of its source, is that “Italy is a dream that keeps returning for the rest of your life.” I can’t improve on that description.

ATG: Eric thanks for taking time out of your busy schedule to talk to us. We really appreciate it.

EC: It’s been my pleasure, thank you.