Book Review: Hearst, Search User Interfaces

Marti A. Hearst: Search User Interfaces, Cambridge University Press, Nov 2009, 404pp. Price £33.00 (hardback only) and free online.

Firstly, my apologies to the author and eLucidate for taking so long to create this review, in part due to the need to do it justice, but also due to those times when I put the book down in another 'wow' moment and went off to take a look at some aspect of our own search interfaces that I realised needed attention.

I confess that before reading this book I had not heard Hearst's name, but a quick search of the literature in this area clearly shows her to be central to this field (and my lack of knowledge of the field in not having heard her name). Dr. Marti Hearst is a Professor in the School of Information at the University of California, Berkeley and was previously a member of the research staff at the highly respected Xerox PARC. Reading between the lines of the book, I hope you will see a person dedicated to her work and undoubtedly world class in her field. Even if this were not the first book in this field, it would be hard to find something more definitive in the area. Hearst masterfully weaves together academic work across time and from around the world, and is clearly on the ball in terms of current developments. She sets her own work humbly, but in its rightful place in the history of search user interfaces.

The structure of the book itself is a testament to her ideas and principles of design. From the outset we find a clearly written contents page followed by a book overview that neatly encapsulates the book's content, setting each chapter in context. Hearst also provides advice on her intended audiences. It's easy to navigate the book and it can be read cover to cover, or dipped into for knowledge and insight in a particular area. Throughout, she draws widely from the literature, and uses clear examples.

Hearst begins the book by introducing some general ideas and practices surrounding interface design. Chapter two is a natural follow-on from user-centred design, as it tackles evaluation of search interfaces. The information seeking process is the subject of the third chapter where Hearst looks at models of the process. The next three chapters cover the information seeking cycle, with a look at query specification, the presentation of search results and query reformulation. Hearst then looks at interfaces that support the information seeking process in chapter seven. The important topic of integrating navigation with search is highlighted in chapter eight, with the emergence of personalization in search the topic for chapter nine. Two chapters on aspects of Information visualization then follow, and the book is capped off with a discussion of emerging trends in search interfaces.

I fall firmly into the category of her second intended audience, the practitioner, so what value did I derive from the book? Firstly, this is not a dry academic book, it's alive! The work really drew me in, and at one point I found myself wondering what it would be like to work with Hearst. Reading the book I experienced an information parallel to the Californian Gold Rush, dashing out of the information mine with another nugget of knowledge to apply. I'm at a loss to find anything to 'criticize' with this book. The nature of the material makes it a dense read, but that's the complexity of the field rather than Hearst's lucid style. One thing which would augment the book would be some associated teaching resources which would help to make the best of this work as a practitioner. In this fast moving field, I'm looking forward to seeing a second edition.

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