

Well-rested in Seattle – The DAISY consortium visits Microsoft

By Dr. Thomas Kahlisch

A librarian once told me, a visit to the Library of Congress in Washington was the biggest dream of her career. That library (www.loc.gov) is home to the most extensive literary collection in the world.

What does a computer scientist dream of? Perhaps to visit the headquarters of software giant Microsoft? Or maybe even a technical discussion with its founder?

So much for dreams, now on to the facts: in early November of 2004, the DAISY consortium and the *Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation* invited 75 experts from libraries for the blind from all over the world to a conference titled "Global Library for Blind and Other People with Print Disabilities," held at Microsoft's corporate campus in Redmond. Representing MEDIBUS Chairwoman Elke Dittmer, Frank Richter – Head of the IT department at the DZB – and I traveled to Seattle for this extraordinary event in the U.S. Northwest.

Professor Dominique Burger is a scientist at the University of Paris. He is responsible for www.braillet.net – a website currently available in French – where blind users can research and download available books in the DAISY 3 format, choosing to receive them either in Braille (contracted or uncontracted) or as HTML files, depending on their preference. We meet him on the plane. "Seems like we have the same destination", he says jokingly. We are glad to meet him again. He tells us that further development of his internet services has stalled, a key employee has left the project. He left to work for the industry – which, unfortunately, pays more than one can earn in a small university project for specialized user groups. So, Professor Burger is now looking for new and dedicated employees to further develop his service again.

At the airport in Seattle we run into Dutch colleagues with white canes. A friendly lady is waiting for us after the passport and customs check. She guides us to the hotel and explains where we will meet up for a short reception. It's Sunday evening at 6 PM and after the flight I feel as I would on a Monday at 3 AM, just even more tired. At the reception, we meet many familiar DAISY colleagues from all over the world and some nice new people from South Africa. We talk about DAISY and the technical possibilities of protecting books against unauthorized access.

Things really get underway – now well-rested – on Monday, November 8th, at the Microsoft Conference Center. We get there by bus, and are very curious to see what happens next. At 9 AM sharp, everyone is seated in the conference room, waiting in suspense, 75 experts from 22 countries around the world. Will *he* show up, or not?



We are greeted by the head of Microsoft's Accessibility Group. She is delighted to see us all looking so lively after our long journey; and rather than giving a lengthy introduction herself, she wishes to welcome the day's first speaker: Mr. Bill Gates. And then he appears and speaks to us for about 20 minutes. His presentation is very easy to follow. Afterwards we have the opportunity to ask questions—the Americans call this the "Q&A section".

"Mr. Gates, do you think that our XML-based DAISY concept for making books accessible as audiobooks, in Braille, in large print, and in electronic form, could be of interest to user groups other than the blind and visually impaired as well?" His response is measured. He states that Microsoft develops products for the mass market and that its work in the field of accessibility is aimed at improving the usability of these mass market products. He suggests that it makes little sense for DAISY to exist alongside these products; rather, these developments should converge.



On this Monday morning, we are gaining an impression of what the new operating system, Longhorn, is designed to achieve, through a series of presentations. By Fall of 2006, approximately 7,000 Microsoft employees will be working on this new version of Windows.

A feature called "personalized search" is being introduced. It means that the PC user is able to search for and quickly locate information regarding specific topics and contexts. Any user who has ever searched their hard drive for a document – remembering only that it was sent to them by a specific person sometime last spring, yet is simply unable to recall exactly when that was or where they filed it at the time – knows how useful such a feature can be.

Another point of interest was the presentation of a new recognition software capable of processing image data that contains text. For example, it can determine the content of a price tag or product label from a photo, or extract text and the structure of the information contained within the graphics of a PDF document. This development in particular is viewed by the Braille and DAISY experts in attendance as a major technological breakthrough for their work and is eagerly anticipated. It remains to be seen which of the presented solutions will actually reach product maturity and will be incorporated into the new operating system in 2006.

In the afternoon, Microsoft employees and colleagues from the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB), www.cnib.ca, present the results of a joint project. The outcome is a user-friendly online platform where CNIB users can research and order books. The books are then shipped in the usual manner as DAISY books on CD-ROM.



On Tuesday we work in groups. The different topics to be addressed include: cooperation with publishers, international licensing and copyright, the protection of digital books, and the expansion of services offered by libraries for the blind to other public libraries worldwide. The discussion is not only limited to the input of technicians and software experts. Legal issues and questions of international cooperation are also at the forefront. Representatives from IFLA, the UN, and the WBU present their positions regarding the “Global Library for the Blind and Other People with Print Disabilities.” Concerns regarding Third World countries are raised as well.

On Wednesday morning, we summarize the results. The working groups are asked to ensure that these topics will continue to be pursued collaboratively, even after the conference. In a closing session with Microsoft, we present areas of focus that are, from the perspective of the world’s libraries for the blind, useful developments that should be incorporated into the Windows manufacturer’s future products. Since Microsoft plans to continue aligning its entire operating system and their applications with XML support in the future, requests such as the ability to save an Office document in DAISY format or for all publications released by Microsoft Publishing to also be available in DAISY format alongside the printed version, should not be unrealistic dreams.



On Wednesday afternoon, conference participants are in for a special treat. We visit Seattle's new public library, which was only just completed in May 2004. After the extensive tour, I speak with the staff and wistfully mention that there's a website in Germany, www.bibliothekssterben.de, which documents the sad decline of our library culture. In Germany, libraries have no lobby. I marvel at the wonderful new library building, the wide variety of reading rooms for young and old – here, toddlers are even allowed to play in specially designated rooms within the library – and I am fascinated by all the visitors bustling about in the afternoon, clearly enjoying their library. “Well”, the library employee says, “now you know what you'll have to do in Germany, don't you?”

On Thursday, we are on the plane back to Amsterdam. Tired, filled with new impressions, and convinced that we're on the right path with DAISY, we arrive in Berlin on Friday afternoon. It is November 12th, 2004. The DZB is celebrating its 110th anniversary, and the boss wasn't there. But many hardworking hands at the DZB made sure that young people had fun reading. A class visited the staff at work. Blind colleagues from the Braille Production Department read children's books to them and answered many questions from the young literature fans. As you can see, the message from the Seattle Public Library had long since reached the city of Leipzig.

Readers can find more information about the conference in Seattle online on the DAISY homepage: www.daisy.org. Listeners can borrow a recording of the event as a DAISY book from the DZB.