“We Like To Be Nice To People”

LT: What is the idea behind Mendeley?
Henning: When Jan and I started writing our PhDs, we wondered why there wasn’t a more convenient way of managing and sharing our collection of research papers. Similarly, we found it hard to know who else was working on similar research questions as we did. These were the problems that we had in mind when we founded Mendeley. So Mendeley is actually two things: Mendeley Desktop and Mendeley Web. Mendeley Desktop is a free academic software (available for Windows, Mac and Linux) to manage and share research papers. Mendeley Web lets you back up your research papers online, shows you research trends in your academic discipline, and connects you to like-minded researchers.

Academia is your target. Moreover, Mendeley is offered free of charge. Why did you focus only on the academic world? Why for free?
Henning: We focused on academia first because that’s where we came from – we simply wanted to create a tool that would make our lives as researchers easier. Free, because we like to be nice to people! Yet, as we’ve stated on our FAQ, we’ll have to start earning money at some point. What is free stays free, but we’ll introduce additional “premium” features in the future – for example, more detailed statistics or more fine-grained literature recommendations, which will only be available against a subscription fee.

Could you pinpoint the main features of the software you offer? Would you say that Mendeley is more than a reference-management tool?
Henning: Yes, definitely. While the standard reference management functionality and “cite-while-you-write” integration in Microsoft Word or LaTeX is available in the software you offer, Mendeley is more than a reference-management tool.

In a century when information flows at very high speed, do you think that Web 2.0 technology is an important tool to help academics find the right networks to stay attuned to changing trends?
Henning: Yes, because more and more information is becoming easily available, so semantic and collaborative filtering can help you narrow it down. I believe that in the medium term, once we achieve the necessary scale, this is going to be the most interesting application of Mendeley: helping you discover, in real-time, what the currently “hottest” papers, topics or trends in your discipline are.

Mendeley might also change the way that reputation in science is measured. Instead of citation-based metrics, which have come under increasing criticism due to their methodological problems, science could shift to usage-based metrics such as how pervasive an article is, i.e. how many people have read it. Did they only skim through it, or did they read it thoroughly, possibly more than once? How did they rate the article’s quality, and which tags did they apply to it? There are many interesting ways to use this data to improve science – I’m currently writing an invited contribution to an MIT Press book about reputation markets in science.

The automatic metadata extraction: When you drop your PDFs into Mendeley Desktop, it will automatically extract the full-text – it will then be indexed so you can ‘search as you type’ across all your research papers. Mendeley Desktop then tries to guess the correct metadata from the full-text, and if it is wrong, you can edit it or leave it. Mendeley Desktop then tries to guess the correct metadata from the full-text, and if it is wrong, you can edit it or leave it.

The collaboration aspect: Once you have set up your paper library in Mendeley Desktop, you can share and collaboratively anno-
tate research papers with your colleagues. Thus, when you’re working on a paper together, instead of mailing back and forth references and PDFs, you can keep your libraries automatically synchronized with Mendeley Desktop. That’s also a great feature for labs or research groups who want to maintain a common literature database.

The online back-up/multi-machine support: With simple drag and drop, you can back up your entire research paper library for online access in Mendeley Web. Also, this means that you can install Mendeley Desktop on multiple computers and easily synchronize your PDF library across them via your Mendeley Online Library.

Are you eagerly anticipating any future development to the software?

Henning: To be honest, I’m in a state of perpetual excitement about the future and impatience (sometimes bordering on frustration) about the present – because you always know how much better the software is going to be very, very soon. Of course, you can never catch up to that “very, very soon” because there are always new plans.

In particular, I’m thrilled about the upcoming improved integration with LaTeX and the plugin for Open Office Writer that we have planned. Besides that, we’ll improve the metadata extraction and make external databases (such as PubMed or arXiv) searchable from within Mendeley Desktop. We’ll also have a ‘browser bookmarklet’ (like CiteULike’s or Connotea’s) for saving metadata to your Mendeley Online Library – and the interface of the online library will be improved to resemble the desktop interface. Not to mention the improved statistics on Mendeley Web, or the recommendation engine in the near future...

How do you differ from other Web 2.0 platforms such as Connotea, by Nature Group, and CiteULike, sponsored by Springer?

Henning: CiteULike and Connotea are web-based social bookmarking services. That means you can capture metadata from web pages with the help of a ‘bookmarklet’ and add them to a web account. However, there is no desktop integration and no connection to the huge PDF research libraries that most scholars already have on their computer.

Mendeley’s starting point is the PDF library that you already have – it helps you turn your PDFs into a searchable database and enables you to share them, back them up, or cite them in Microsoft Word or LaTeX. Additionally, it’s a research network where you can discover other scholars with similar research interests.

Do you think that Web 3.0 technology will improve the way people interact on the Web?

Henning: If you’re referring to the semantic Web, I believe it will. For example, look at Last.fm. By aggregating the music...
listening habits and semantic tags of its 20
million users, they have managed to create
the largest ontological classification of mu-
ic in the world. Thanks to that (and their
recommendation engine), it has become in-
credibly easy to find songs and artists simi-
lar to the ones you already know and like.
We’d love to achieve the same for research
papers.

Although all of the Mendeley founders (Victor Henning, Stefan Glänzer, Paul Föck-
ler, and Jan Reichelt) are German, your com-
pany’s headquarters are in London. Why
choose the UK and not Germany?

Henning: We knew from the start that
we wanted to launch Mendeley as an Eng-
lish-language software and website, since
English is the lingua franca of research. Paul
was already based in London when we start-
ed (he had worked as a freelance web-de-
veloper, among other things working on a
movie recommendation engine for the Brit-
ish Film Council), and Stefan was here, too
—he had been the first investor and Execu-
tive Chairman of London-based Last.fm for
the past few years.

Moreover, when you’re based in Lon-
don, you have access to world-class univer-
sities all around you (Cambridge, Oxford,
Imperial, King’s College, UCL, LSE etc.),
and London is also the centre of venture
capital in Europe. Plus, we had the chance
to rent our first office in Covent Garden
from Michael Palin. Which Monty Python
fan could resist that temptation?

Did you start up the company with
your own money or did you apply for pub-
lc funds?

Henning: Jan, Paul and I started devel-
oping the prototype with our own savings.
After about half a year, in June 2007, we
approached Stefan (who had just sold Last.fm
to CBS at the time). He became the first in-
vestor and joined as a co-founder, and also
brought us in touch with the former found-
ing engineers of Skype. They are now run-
ing an investment fund which had previ-
ously invested in Versita (www.versita.com),
an academic publishing company, and they
saw the potential for Mendeley to help re-
searchers work more effectively – so they
also joined us as advisors and investors. Fi-
-nally, a number of US and UK professors in-
vested a bit of money, too.

Do all of the founders come from univer-
sity backgrounds or is there anybody from
industry?

Henning: Our background is very aca-
demic. Both Jan and I are still finishing our
PhDs, at the University of Cologne and the
Bauhaus-University of Weimar, respectively.
Out of the founding team, I’m the one who’s
still the most active in research with con-
ference presentations, journal submissions,
etc. Stefan has been working in the internet
industry for the past few years, but he also
holds a PhD in Finance and is a guest lec-
turer at the WHU, a business school near Koblenz. Paul
has a background in Computer
Science and is think-
ing about going back into
academia to pursue a PhD later on. One
of our eight software developers also has
a PhD in Computational Science, and most
of the others are active in the Open Source
community.

Do you promote research and develop-
ment (R&D) in your company? If so, how do
you invest in it? Do you co-operate with re-
search institutions and other companies?

Henning: Yes, R&D is an
important part of develop-
ing Mendeley, because we’re
tackling problems such as
automatic metadata extrac-
tion, document fingerprint-
ing, fuzzy metadata match-
ing, author entity resolution
and recommendation engines. It’s sim-
ply a part of our engineers’ job to work on
these problems. We have been co-
operating with chairs at Cambridge Universi-
ty (UK) and the Bauhaus-University of We-
imar (Germany) to work on some of these
tasks.

Do you also invest in university students
by offering them internships and trainee-
ships?

Henning: Sure – we’re always looking
for enthusiastic people to help us out, not
only in the field of computer science. For
example, we’ve been thinking about creat-
ing part-time positions for PhD students in
the natural sciences to help us better under-
stand the needs of that community. If any
of the readers are interested in helping us
out, they should just drop me a line: victor.
henning@mendeley.com

Do you have any tips for other scientists
who would like to turn their ideas into a busi-
ness?

Henning: Since this is only my sec-
ond start-up (while studying at the WHU
Koblenz, I co-founded the Korova café-bar)
and we’re just in the beginning, you should
probably take my advice with a grain of salt.
I’d say, as with any other start-up, the team
is just as important as a solid idea. A bad
team can mess up the best idea in the world.
Ideally, you need at least two people – one
should know the technical (or scientific)
side really well, and one should be able to
take care of the business side, because fund-
raising and management is trickier than you’d
think.

“The team is just as important as a solid idea.
A bad team can mess up the best idea in the world.”

In our case, Jan and I had been friends
since business school and had done projects
together – and even though we fight some-
times, we know that we’ll get along again
half an hour later. Paul and I had also done
projects together at the Bauhaus-Universi-
ty. As a team, we complement each other’s
skills and interests really well, so there was
no conflict about how to divide the respon-
sibilities.

Is there any advice you can give to young
researchers?

Henning: I’m only 28 and haven’t fin-
ished my PhD yet. Keeping that in mind,
I’ll just talk about what I think helped me
the most – and that was choosing a very
good thesis advisor (Prof. Thorsten Hen-
ning-Thurau, Bauhaus-University of Weimar,
Germany). I couldn’t have been luckier
in that regard. It never was a hierarchical
relationship; instead, he has always encour-
aged me to criticise his ideas when we were
collaborating on a research project. He has
taught me an incredible amount about sci-
extific methodology and writing, he gave
me complete freedom to teach classes at the
Bauhaus-University, and, when we’ve been
publishing papers or presenting our work to
others, he always made sure that I got cred-
ity for the work I had done.

My advice would be: try to find an advi-
sor who’s willing to invest time into teach-
ing you, who’s focused on the merits of ar-
guments instead of hierarchies, and who’s
willing to put his own time when you need it. These
tings determine the fun you’ll have while
writing your PhD.

INTERVIEW: Giuliana Deflorio