Reflecting: Two Decades of *portal* Editorials and Accomplishments

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As *portal*'s new editor (as of January 2023), I am finding inspiration in reflection as I excavate our journal's rich history to uncover future possibilities. Reading *portal*'s past editorials (published in each issue since the journal's inception in 2001) is a fascinating way to better understand not only *portal*'s successful trajectory over the past two-plus decades, but also the issues and challenges our profession as a whole has faced and largely conquered.

Widely recognized as the father of reflective practice, the philosopher and educator John Dewey wrote, "Reflective thinking is always more or less troublesome because it involves overcoming the inertia that inclines one to accept suggestions at their face value; it involves willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest."[1] A more recent researcher on the power of reflection, Carol Rodgers, defined the act of reflection itself as "a meaning-making process that moves a learner from one experience into the next with deeper understanding of its relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas." She asserts that reflection should happen in interaction with others and that it requires an attitude attuned to personal and professional growth and change.[2] The "mental unrest" and "meaning making" that Dewey and Rodgers describe is at the heart of all academic work. With engaged students, learning is almost always uncomfortable, because it involves internal challenge and personal growth. The act of reflection, a partner in the learning process, is ideally incorporated throughout all phases of a creative, intellectual process, including the production of scholarly work. As I explored two decades of *portal* editorials, I saw multiple instances of reflection and "meaning making"—librarians confronting tough issues in our profession and looking toward creative solutions, as well as the "mental unrest" that comes when one is within a problem and the solution, while ahead, is not yet in sight.

Our journal's first editorial, "Through *portal*," written by inaugural managing editor Gloriana St. Clair, does not mention the "mental unrest" and the coalescing event behind *portal*'s founding—the 1999 purchase of the *Journal of Academic Librarianship*'s publisher by Elsevier, resulting in higher subscription costs and an imperative for LIS

researchers to assume leadership in scholarly publishing.[3] She does, however, identify three core objectives for the nascent publication:

- To offer an affordable alternative to serials that have gone up an average of 9 percent a year while the consumer price index increased only 3.3 percent;
- To provide a more inviting, constructive, and productive environment for authors;
- To model a scholarly communications system as outlined in recent pronouncements from the Association of American Universities (AAU) and the Create Change initiative.[4]

These imperatives persist today. EBSCO's recently released 2022 Serials Price Projection Report indicates that for research and academic libraries, journal prices have increased more than 18 percent over the past four years (2018–2022).[5] Open access research publishing is growing and provides alternatives, but deep challenges remain. St. Clair also discusses her initiation of *portal*'s mentoring program, which was originally designed to provide intensive support from "the moment (authors) decide to engage in research to the moment when they elect to submit the finished product either to *portal* or to some other journal."[6] Individual mentoring was provided by seasoned librarians active in the American Library Association's Library Administration and Management Association Research Committee and the Library Research Round Table.

Executive editor Charles Lowry, also a *portal* founding editor, described the impact of the mentoring program in 2004 as "advanc(ing) a new idea that a manuscript may be raw, but if it contains the core of good research the author deserves more than a rejection. Thus we extend mentoring to help develop good ideas and good research into viable publishable articles."[7] *portal*'s mentoring program flourishes to the present day in the form of our Editorial Board's double-blind peer review of refereed articles. When an article is submitted to *portal* for peer-reviewed consideration, the conversation begins. Each reviewer provides unique and developmental feedback on an article under consideration. It is fascinating and humbling to see the progressive discussion and developmental work between author(s) and reviewers that occurs with each published article. As a past *portal* author, I have been indebted to reviewers for their feedback, as it always resulted in much more well-rounded, thoughtful, and polished piece. As an editor, I now see that without this scholarly conversation between reviewer and author, an article may reflect a more myopic view. The reviewer brings breadth and perspective to the author's work. This is research mentoring in action and is a *portal* strength often mentioned in informal feedback from published authors.

The early 2000s editorials not only document *portal*'s beginnings, they also repeatedly share something that isn't discussed often in our profession today: the anxiety produced by the impact of new information technologies on traditional library services. Cultural commentator Chuck Klosterman has described the 1990s, the decade preceding *portal*'s founding, as "the end of the twentieth century, but also an end to an age when we controlled technology more than technology controlled us."[8] In libraries, the process of automation and bringing information online began in the 1960s, and by the 1990s, the profession had experienced over thirty years of progress coupled with technological angst.[9] In her fall 2001 editorial, "Measuring Relevance," St. Clair summarized the challenge then at hand:

The Web currently competes with libraries as a provider of academic information. Several issues lie between the libraries' response to its mission to provide academic content and assistance and the Web's ability to fulfill that mission:

- Only 7 percent of surface Web content is scholarly,
- Web information is not organized,
- Much scholarly content is only available under licenses,
- Human attention, not information, is the scarce resource, and
- Novice users need assistance in focusing their queries.

If the Web is to become the library, then significant work must be done to resolve the issues above.[10]

In this brief statement, St. Clair summarized multiple thorny issues that persist today, not the least of which is the challenge in helping users understand how to frame focused queries against the growing breadth of the online scholarly information universe. The anxiety over technology and how it would/could/might change every aspect of librarianship pervaded every corner of our profession for several decades—through the early-mid 2000s. During this time, academic librarians were actively confronting, challenging, and building online interfaces, services, and collections that increased libraries' reach, accessibility, and dynamism. Change, however, is messy and scary; only in retrospect can this technological unease and, in the decades that followed, ensuing progress be seen and appreciated.

In his 2002 editorial, "When's this Paradigm Shift Ending?" (a title that itself harkens back to the endless early 2000s discussions and presentations addressing the technological angst in higher education), Charles Lowry asks, "What is our role in the emerging networked information environment? Or more specifically what is our role in knowledge management or content management (to use current terminology)? Answering this question is not the task of any one library, library school, library vendor, consortia, or association, but of the whole community." In response to his own question, Lowry provides several suggestions that, twenty years and a continuing global pandemic later, still have significant resonance, including "help(ing) develop staff to work productively in this environment of changing boundaries; promot(ing) tolerance for ambiguity and willingness to change" and providing tools for library users that bring the library directly into their personal workflow.[11] A year later, Lowry stated of IT and library challenges: "Even though we cannot quite see what a 'library' will look like, I believe the contours are becoming clearer."[12]

In her spring 2001 editorial, "Forty Years, and We're Still Here," executive editor Susan Martin reflected on her personal journey with technology in academic libraries, beginning with punch cards utilized to convert bibliographic information to machine-readable format. She marveled at the limited storage of 1960s computers, with 8 KB of memory as compared to her current PC's storage of over 20 GB. Martin recounts a technological history that is important to remember—the development of "turnkey" systems for circulation and technical services functions, and the emergence of cooperative information system networks, such as OCLC. She ends on a positive and forward-looking note, remarking that, even from her early 2000s viewpoint, "one primary prediction has not come true: Libraries have not become museums, and people do still use them heavily, both on site and by remote access."[13]

As a librarian who entered library school in the same year as the introduction of the first image-based web browser (NCSA Mosaic, in 1993), these reflections on technology are a reminder that what initially seems insurmountable eventually becomes commonplace. Technology (whether in the form of a card catalog or an iPhone) and libraries go hand in hand, and scholarly research exploring the impact and next steps for new innovations are always a critical step in determining the path forward.

In 2008, Sarah Pritchard, a member of *portal*'s founding Editorial Board, was appointed as *portal* editor. In her first editorial, "A Janus Perspective," she shared her take on *portal*'s mission as it moved into the 2010s: "to examine library administration, information technology, and new forms of support for research and teaching, scholarly communication, and information policy, not as internal or technical operations but from the perspective of how these matters ultimately have an impact on the academic enterprise."[14] In a later editorial, "Boundary Crossing in the Age of Turf," Pritchard explored the dynamics of continuing to develop a scholarly journal within an evolving discipline. She noted the "broad, contextualized, and multifunctional scope" of *portal*, and further explained that her aim was to continue to move forward a journal that was "multidisciplinary." Unlike other journals in the field, which focused in a specific area of librarianship such as technology, archives, or information literacy, from the very beginning *portal* has sought to publish widely in order to creatively reframe the issues of the discipline. Pritchard encouraged *portal* authors to publish with collaborators in other disciplines, consult the literature broadly from other complementary fields, and identify research outcomes that are holistic and forward-looking rather than internally focused and purely procedural.[15]

Pritchard's aspirations came to fruition in the years following her editorial. We are seeing an increase in *portal* authors collaboratively publishing with disciplinary faculty members, *portal*'s Editorial Board has further diversified to include a range of expert reviewers covering different areas of expertise, and *portal*'s recent (2022) special issue, "Academic Libraries: Responsive in Crisis," dissected the impact of COVID-19 on a wide swath of academic librarianship, including library contributions toward the JHU Global COVID-19 Dashboard, student digital wellness and privacy literacy, and embedding trauma-informed practice in library instruction.[16]

In past editor Marianne Ryan's first editorial of her tenure, she marked *portal*'s fifteenth anniversary and shared *portal*'s initial core objectives as well, noting that they had common threads of "accessibility, fairness, and integrity." She identified the growth and continued development of the Editorial Board as an area of focus and commended our now recently retired managing editor, Sara Dreyfuss, for her "elite editorial acumen, superb organizational skills, and admirable common sense to the work at hand."[17] Sara, who contributed a number of exceptional editorials of her own throughout her tenure, will be missed, and we wish her the very best in retirement. Marianne's depth of work expanding the Editorial Board, including members from a wide range of backgrounds and areas of interest and expertise, continued successfully throughout her editorial tenure. The October 2020 editorial, collaboratively written by Ryan with the Editorial Board and titled "This Is Not Enough. We Can Do Better," acknowledges the following:

There is systemic, inherent racism in library and information science that fosters and sustains supermajority publishing by white authors.

The library and information science field, in general, suffers from a lack of diversity, particularly in library leadership and administration, and there is a need to support and amplify the voices of younger, diverse scholars in our profession.

Despite considerable efforts at diverse recruitment over the past three years, the *portal* Editorial Board remains predominantly white.[18]

Since 2020, we have made progress in these critical areas, including the recruitment of diverse Editorial Board members who bring a range of backgrounds and views to our journal. We continue to develop the range of our Editorial Board membership. Through our Global Perspectives feature, we have published works by a range of international authors from countries and regions including Afghanistan, Hong Kong, Iraq, New Zealand, Nigeria, Pakistan, Poland, Saudi Arabia, and Ukraine, plus Indigenous Canadian authors. We continue to develop additional mentoring and recruitment practices that amplify the voices of diverse authors in our field, including targeting diverse and novice authors in our 2021 special issue on academic library responses to the pandemic. We revised our author guidelines to indicate that paper authors can use "they" (and variants of "they") as a singular pronoun. At our 2023 Board meetings, we will revisit these imperatives and strategize additional actions moving forward.

This has been a season of change for *portal: Libraries and the Academy*. I am grateful to those who have served on our Editorial Board, and those who are newly joining us. We have a wealth of expert reviewers on the *portal* Board. Working closely with past editor Marianne Ryan and our Board during my recent year as assistant editor, I saw the power of the reviewer's thoughtful feedback in action. With that in mind, I am deeply grateful to our Editorial Board members, including those who recently completed their Editorial Board terms of service. They are expert reviewers with a depth of knowledge in specific areas of focus, who have provided much guidance and support to our authors over the years: Mary Casserly, Diane Dallis-Comentale, Kathleen DeLong, Carol Pitts Diedrichs, Harriet Lightman, Brian Schottlaender, Bill Sleeman, Mark Stover, Scott Vine, and William Walters.

In addition to our departing members, we have some additional Editorial Board changes to share: Editorial Board member Mark Lenker succeeds Rebecca (Becky) Albitz beginning in January 2023 as editor of the Reports from the Field feature. Thanks to Becky for her stellar Reports from the Field work and continued service on the Editorial Board. Carmen Cole joins the Editorial Board as social media co-editor. Carmen will work closely with our current, long-standing social media editor, Steven Bell.

With the April masthead, we also welcome six new Editorial Board members: Andrew Asher, Andrea Baer, Maria Collins, Anne Krakow, Wendy Pothier, and Carlos Rodriguez. And finally, in January 2023, our new Managing Editor, Christine Bucher, joined us. Christine brings a wealth of editorial expertise, including seven years as the managing editor of *Horizons: The Journal of the College Theology*. As managing editor, Christine works closely with the editor, authors, the Editorial Board, and the Johns Hopkins University Press production staff. Welcome, Christine!

In a 2014 editorial, *portal* editor Sarah Pritchard asked, "Do practitioners and scholars of a profession still pause for a few moments and scan the editorials at the fronts of journals?"[19] Nearly a decade later, the print journal of the past is rarely accessed by the user in traditional page-by-page browsing mode. An editorial must now be intentionally sought out, as must the feature articles and peer-reviewed research in each issue. Yet, the editorial persists, a bellwether marking the happenings, issues, and thorny questions confronted by our profession. As your editor, I welcome your comments, your ideas, and your questions. Together, we reflect on past lessons and innovate for the present as *portal* moves toward its twenty-fifth year.

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Notes

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