

EDITORIAL

portal at 25: Celebrating our Legacy

Vicki Coleman and Sarah Pritchard

Introduction

When *portal* was launched, I, Vicki Coleman, was in the early stages of my career as a tenure-track academic librarian, holding the rank of assistant professor. I distinctly remember being on a plane en route to a library conference, having the good fortune of sitting next to a veteran librarian who was well-informed about the developing open access movement, which grew as a response to rapidly rising costs of academic journal subscriptions. She inquired about my research activities and then proceeded to encourage me to consider submitting a research article for potential publication to an emerging journal—a new venture called *portal*.

That conversation proved to be a catalyst. It introduced me to a publication that would become a vital force in the landscape of academic librarianship. *portal* was launched during a period of significant transformation within the profession, at the start of the open access and modern scholarly communications movements. As we celebrate 25 years of the journal, we honor its contributions to scholarship and the determined efforts of its editors, reviewers, and authors.

To mark this special occasion, I am pleased to share excerpts from a Zoom interview with Editor Emerita, Sarah Pritchard. Sarah is the University Librarian Emerita, Northwestern University and was *portal* Editor from 2008 to 2014. Her editorial leadership played a significant role in shaping *portal* into one of the leading academic journals in library and information science. During the interview, she reflects on her editorial journey and shares her perspective on important undertakings that helped propel *portal*'s growth and advancement over the years.

Interview

Vicki:

Describe your background and share what sparked your interest in pursuing a career in librarianship.

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Sarah:

Growing up, I moved frequently due to my father's career as an aerospace engineer, exposing me to diverse environments from Boston, to Italy, to California and, eventually, Maryland, where I finished high school and college. A constant throughout these moves was the presence of a vast home library, meticulously managed by my mother. She also volunteered and worked in various libraries, sparking my early fascination with the organization of information – and of course she took me to the public library in every place we lived.

While exploring career options, I first pursued my interest in languages. As I completed the French literature master's program at the University of Wisconsin, I realized I didn't want to teach French or become a scholar of literary criticism. In considering other options, I recalled my long-time fascination with libraries and successfully secured an extension of my financial aid to enter Wisconsin's library science graduate program. I loved it, especially the social activism of many in that community, influenced by the 1960s and 70s anti-war and related social movements. I was fascinated by the idea of librarians collecting protest ephemera and by some PhD students' feminist activism around library pay equity, sex discrimination, and public library services needed to support the changes in women's lives.

Vicki:

Describe your journey into the world of research and publication.

Sarah:

After earning graduate degrees in French literature and library science, I began a 13-year stint at the Library of Congress (LOC), where my interest in academic writing flourished. At the time, librarians were usually encouraged to pursue external professional work, including involvement with the American Library Association (ALA). Regarding research, the LOC supported research projects aligned with our official work assignments, while for other professional topics, we were tasked with ensuring that our projects were clearly our personal work and not a reflection of LOC policy. This freedom inspired me to pursue writing, particularly on early ALA committees addressing women's issues, feminist advocacy, and emerging subjects like interdisciplinary collections and online services and their treatment in libraries.

I took a pragmatic approach to publishing. When an ALA committee project showed promise, I volunteered to write it up. This led to my first few articles, including one based on our work developing criteria for evaluating database coverage of women's studies, a field lacking dedicated databases at the time. Frustrated with inadequate indexing, we created internal reports evaluating existing databases, which then evolved into a published article. My goal was to expand these specific committee projects into broader contributions to the profession.

Because federal librarians at the LOC were not subject to the traditional tenure and promotion requirements of academia, peer review wasn't a factor in my early publishing decisions. I focused on finding suitable journals for my work. I got a lot of things published because I looked for just the right niche.



Vicki:

How did your journey lead to you becoming the editor of *portal*?

Sarah:

I was drawn to a wide range of editorial work and I proactively pursued opportunities to contribute. Through writing, book reviewing, and networking within the American Library Association (ALA), I became known within the profession. This led to service on several editorial boards, ultimately resulting in an invitation to join the *Journal of Academic Librarianship* (JAL) board.

In 1998, the JAL was sold to Elsevier and since librarian relations with that company were extremely contentious at the time, most of the editors did not feel comfortable continuing on the board. A group from the former JAL board started meeting to brainstorm a new, different type of journal that would be more than just a direct competitor to the JAL; Johns Hopkins University Press (JHUP) agreed to host this publication, now named *portal*, and I became one of the founding board members.

Vicki:

As Editor of *portal*, what were your overarching editorial philosophies?

Sarah:

Our initial goals for *portal*, which remained largely unchanged during my time as editor, were threefold: we wanted a journal that published:

- 1) bona fide research with solid methodologies,
- 2) articles that articulated library issues and scholarly communication as integral to higher education, and
- 3) articles that reflected multidisciplinary perspectives, for example librarians co-authoring with academic faculty or experts from other campus units.

At the time, we deliberately chose *not* to publish articles focused on operational details or “how-to” implementations, recognizing their usefulness but considering them outside *portal*’s scope.

We recognized a need for greater support in research and writing for early-career librarians. While some individuals had access to research training or workshops, we felt there was an opportunity to provide more consistent and structured mentoring. Therefore, mentorship became a core principle of *portal*. We offered authors support at various stages; if an article showed potential but wasn’t ready for publication, we offered mentoring to help revise it. We also welcomed authors who had early-stage research ideas and sought guidance on developing them. Unfortunately, after nearly a decade, the mentoring eventually fell by the wayside. It was very labor-intensive on the part of the editors and, sometimes, neither the author nor the mentor followed through. So gradually, with some regret, we discontinued the mentoring program.

Vicki:

Please share more about the early years of *portal*.



Sarah:

In *portal*'s early years, we had named, themed columns overseen by designated editors. We also received submissions addressing professional issues but not suitable as peer-reviewed research articles. To accommodate these pieces, often shorter essays, I created the "Reports from the Field" section, a venue for timely articles discussing emerging trends impacting the library profession. If a submission, while interesting, wasn't appropriate for peer review, we offered the authors the option of publishing it as a column contribution instead.

I also supported early moves toward open access. This was challenging, as we were published by a university press, and open access was a significant concern for publishers reliant on subscription revenue. Technological solutions were very much in flux. At the time, we formed a board committee to explore open access options. Despite the complexities, we established a preprint repository early on, although one editorial board member departed feeling that we were not taking a strong enough position. While open access is now commonplace, *portal*'s efforts began in the early 2000s, and I am pleased to have contributed to this movement.

Additionally, we received many contributions from international authors focused on research exploring the role of academic libraries in tackling challenges in other countries. One difficulty we encountered was that submissions from non-native English speakers frequently required significant editing. At times, it was difficult to determine whether an article was a strong piece obscured by language barriers, or whether it lacked depth altogether. We just couldn't undertake the intensive copy editing necessary if there was uncertainty about the article's acceptance in peer review. Today, there are more services and tools available to assist international authors with refining their writing.

Furthermore, I worked to diversify the editorial board and reviewer pool, recognizing the need for expertise beyond librarianship, for example in information technology or economic modeling, which were relevant to many scholarly communication articles. Throughout this work, the board and I were supported by a series of excellent managing editors who oversaw the article editing and peer review processes. While I appointed the managing editors, they were paid by Johns Hopkins University Press and had full access to JHUP staff and operational support. The substantial nature of that component of journal publishing can't be underestimated!

Vicki:

What advice would you give to prospective authors as well as *portal* editors, and reviewers?

Sarah:

My experience as Editor involved extensive collaboration with the board and managing editor, and the leadership at the JHUP, emphasizing that this was not a solitary role. I prioritized thoughtful communication with authors, whether delivering pre- or post-peer review rejections, always providing clear explanations of our reasoning and, when appropriate, suggestions for alternative publishing venues.

Many submissions came from librarians focusing on topics like student success (for example, library instruction initiatives) or library service reorganizations. However, these articles sometimes lacked crucial insights; they failed to include interviews with faculty



(regarding the educational impact of the library instruction) or follow-up interviews with library users regarding the effectiveness of service redesign. I encourage prospective authors to focus on demonstrating the tangible outcomes and impact of their research.

During my tenure as editor, I was responsible for synthesizing reviewer feedback into a single response for authors. I occasionally encountered harshly worded reviews and urged reviewers to provide feedback with greater tact and constructive specifics. The goal was to maintain the author's confidence and encourage them to improve rather than feel discouraged. One article that we rejected repeatedly, with detailed comments, was later published unrevised in another library science journal and I was surprised that those reviewers had not seen the same flaws as we did.

My time as an academic library dean gave me firsthand experience with the undervaluation of information management in academic research. There was a prevalent misconception about library personnel as simply "stamping out books." As editor of *portal*, a key goal was to integrate library scientists and practitioners into the broader academic conversation.

Vicki:

What stands out as your proudest moment as Editor?

Sarah:

In its initial phase, *portal* faced significant uncertainty regarding its long-term viability. Questions arose about securing sufficient subscriptions through Johns Hopkins University Press and the potential impact of transitioning to open access on the journal's sustainability. I am particularly proud of *portal*'s current success and the subsequent recognition it has garnered from JHUP and the broader library profession. I also enjoyed citing *portal*'s good impact factors when I would get letters from academic promotion review committees.

A noteworthy initiative, established by Editor Charles Lowry shortly before my tenure, was the "Best Article of the Year" award. This annual award, funded by JHUP, involved a formal presentation ceremony with a plaque. While seemingly a minor detail, this award significantly enhanced the journal's visibility and reinforced the publisher's confidence in this venture.

Vicki:

What are some of the activities or hobbies you now enjoy without the constraints of a full-time work schedule?

Sarah:

Not having to worry about when I get up in the morning! After retiring in February 2023 (following a September 2022 job departure and six-month sabbatical), I initially planned to write some professional essays and pursue some consulting or volunteer work. I also had stacks of unread books all over my house! However, health-related issues consumed my first year of retirement with frequent doctor's appointments and medical procedures.

Now recovered, since summer of 2023 I have been president of the Caxton Club, a Chicago book arts and book collectors' club similar to New York's Grolier Club. Though smaller and with some administrative challenges, the Caxton Club is a diverse, century-old organization of book lovers from various backgrounds, including archivists, authors,



binders, librarians, publishers and more. This role has become my primary focus. It has been highly satisfying, as it focuses on the interests of avid readers without necessarily stepping on the toes of my colleagues in the library world. In many ways, it exists as a parallel universe to the world I knew as a librarian. While its operational management is more demanding than I anticipated, the Club's vibrant community and expanded membership are rewarding. The president is an elected position, so I don't know how long I will be in that role, but I will continue to be involved as a member.

Beyond my work with the Caxton Club, I keep up with a lot of library professional literature and some ALA initiatives. Mostly, I enjoy the freedom of flexible mornings, neighborhood walks, occasional lectures on campus and visits to a nearby coffee shop with my husband.

Conclusion

*"The title portal: Libraries and the Academy is intended to be evocative, reflecting the idea that libraries are the central mechanism through which knowledge and learning created in the academy is expressed, and through which students and faculty gain access to it."*¹

Reflecting on this interview with Sarah Pritchard, I feel a sense of full-circle completion. As I mentioned in the introduction, my journey with *portal* began early in my career, when I first learned about the journal as an innovative alternative in scholarly publishing. Now, as an editorial board member for *portal*, it has been an incredible privilege to interview Sarah and gain firsthand insight into the strategies and the philosophical approach she and her team employed to advance *portal*'s mission and shape *portal* into the success that it is today. As Editor, she embodied *portal*'s foundational intent and guided her editorial team in fostering a welcoming and supportive atmosphere for authors, enhancing connections with academia, and establishing the foundation for a pioneering future in open access and scholarly communications.

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Notes

1. Charles B. Lowry, Susan K. Martin, and Gloriana St. Clair, "SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATION: Ivy Anderson, Gail McMillan, & Ann Schaffner, Editors: portal: A New Model for the Digital Future," *ACRL College and Research Libraries News* 62, no. 5 (2001), <https://crln.acrl.org/index.php/crlnews/article/view/19385/22681>.