

EDITORIAL

In the Right Place at the Right Time— With the Right Ideas: A Conversation with Jerome Yavarkovsky

Ellysa Cahoy and Jerome Yavarkovsky

portal: Libraries and the Academy continues the celebration of our 25th anniversary through oral history interviews with long-standing Editorial Board members and past Editors. In this 25th anniversary editorial, Editor Ellysa Stern Cahoy interviews Jerome Yavarkovsky, University Librarian Emeritus at Boston College and current *portal* Editorial Board member.

Introduction

Ellysa:

portal's longest-standing Editorial Board member (2000-present!), Jerome Yavarkovsky, enjoyed a career in academic libraries that spanned and explored a wide range of technological developments and innovations. Beginning in the 1960s, Jerome's career was shaped by the dawn of the computer age, a period of intense transformation and contention in libraries. In our interview, he noted the challenges of introducing and integrating computer technologies, which disrupted established practices and required significant adaptation by library staff. Despite the resistance, Jerome maintained empathy for those navigating the changes, crediting this understanding as critical to his success as an administrator.

Jerome's encompasses a transformative era in librarianship, marked by innovation, resilience, and a commitment to advancing the field. Throughout his recollections, Jerome's passion for librarianship, mentorship, and advancing scholarly communication was evident, underscoring his enduring impact on the field. It was a delight to talk with Jerome via Zoom about his beginnings, and his legacy as an academic librarian, an administrator, and a *portal* Editorial Board member. The interview that follows captures Jerome's many contributions to the profession, highlighting his innovation,

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his forward-thinking approach to technology, and his lasting impact on the field of academic librarianship. He is a gift to our profession and to the *portal* Editorial Board.

Career Beginnings

Jerome initially studied mechanical engineering at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) and management at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)'s Sloan School of Management, preparing for his work in a family business centered on manufacturing food containers. While at RPI, he took elective courses in literature, and at MIT, he focused on marketing, manufacturing, and organizational psychology. Jerome found his elective courses in literature and marketing particularly engaging.

Jerome's MIT Management Master's thesis explored the impact of discount houses on the book industry. The stores, which sold bestsellers and Bibles at lower prices, competed with neighborhood bookstores. He wanted to explore the impact these retail outlets had on the publishing market and concluded that poorly managed independent bookstores were more vulnerable to failure than well-run ones. Jerome's study signified that there was still room for resilient and innovative independent booksellers, while also foreshadowing the rise of large bookselling chains like Barnes & Noble in the years to come.

Initial Professional Work

Jerome:

On graduation in 1962, I determined that my abiding interest was in books and printing, graphic arts and media. I wanted to work in publishing. That industry didn't understand or appreciate my background and suggested college book sales—a college traveler position, or accounting, so I took an administrative training position at Bell Laboratories where I discovered that their library and other industrial libraries, in chemical, pharmaceutical, aerospace fields, were beginning to do interesting things with computers. It wasn't possible for me to transfer to the library at Bell Labs, so I left to become a programmer analyst at the JC Penney Company.

Ellysa:

JC Penney was at the time a national leader in developing innovative in-house computer applications. While there, Jerome worked on groundbreaking projects using IBM mainframes with very minimal memory (12K!), including developing a nationwide payroll system for JC Penney employees. This system calculated union dues, taxes, deductions, and other withholdings for employees across 50 states, defying IBM's claim that such work was impossible with the available punch card and magnetic tape technology.

Jerome:

My work at JC Penney was very satisfying, but my ambition was to work in the varied environments that a consulting firm could offer, so I joined the Auerbach Corporation, a very early computing and management consulting firm based in Philadelphia. They were starting an office in New York City, that was fortuitously located on 41st Street and Madison Avenue, a block or so from The New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue.



Moving into Libraries and Academia

While working at Auerbach, Jerome learned about the Library of Congress's pioneering efforts in machine-readable cataloging and the growing use of computers in library systems.

Jerome:

That year, Auerbach won a major contract at Columbia University to study University-wide administrative uses of computers. My area of assignment was The Columbia University Libraries. Columbia was among the handful of large libraries building computer applications for circulation, acquisitions, reserve readings, literature indexing, faculty alert communications, with grants from NASA and the National Endowment for the Humanities. They had partnered with Harvard and Yale on an early grant funded medical indexing system called CoHaYa Med. When the Auerbach Columbia study ended, and I had worked with the administrative and systems staff of the Libraries, I asked if any positions might be available. A few months later, I began as Head of the Programming Section of the Libraries Systems Office and enrolled in the Columbia Library School.

Ellysa:

Pursuing his MSLS at Columbia, while simultaneously working on library systems, Jerome became deeply involved in library operations and administration. Following his graduation from library school, he was tasked with implementing a major organizational study at Columbia conducted by Booz, Allen, and Hamilton, focused on administrative restructuring of large academic library systems. This reorganization study fundamentally changed the vocabulary of academic library services, introducing terms like "Access Services" to replace "Circulation" and emphasizing user-focused departments, such as research services.¹

Post Graduation – Moving into Administrative Roles

Jerome noted that at this time (early 1970s), many research library leaders had no background or formal training in management or leadership. Jerome, with his academic and professional background in management, was promoted from his role as Head of the Systems Office to Assistant Director for Planning at Columbia, overseeing the Booz, Allen, and Hamilton study's implementation, as well as the library's budget and systems development. Jerome noted that his rapid rise to the position of assistant director of one of the largest libraries in America just two years after earning his graduate MSLS degree was a result of being in the right place at the right time, with the right skills.

Jerome:

After eleven years as Assistant Director for Planning at Columbia, I became Dean of Libraries at Adelphi University, and two years later, Director of the New York State Library, a division of the State Education Department, doing for New York what the Library of Congress does for the nation. The State Library is (a hybrid government, academic, public library) the library of the legislature, the courts and the executive, but it also serves the academic, public and school libraries of New York.

**Ellysa:**

At the New York State Library, Jerome tackled challenges including consolidating five separate reference desks into one centralized service, which required retraining specialized librarians to handle general reference queries. He secured a grant from the New York CSEA (Civil Services Employees Association) union representing the librarians, to fund a semester-long, credit bearing course taught by library and information science faculty of the University at Albany. This library school program equipped the State Library's specialized medical, law, humanities, social sciences and genealogy librarians with the confidence and broader reference skills to serve clients in all disciplines effectively.

In the mid-1990s, Jerome became the University Librarian at Boston College, drawn by its ambitious growth and transformation into a national research university. He described the Boston College academic environment as one of higher purpose, noting the Jesuit emphasis on values, student formation, and a sense of calling, which resonated with his own perception of librarianship as a vocation. He was in the position for thirteen years and retired in 2008. Reflecting on his time at Boston College, Jerome described it as a highlight of his career. The university's emphasis on values and ethics aligned closely with his own personal mindset, making it an especially meaningful chapter in his professional journey.

Publishing and Editorial Work**Jerome:**

My first published work was a joint paper in 1973 with two colleagues at Columbia. It described a computer-based system for creating and managing collection development statements, presented at the American Society for Information Science Annual Meeting, and published in their proceedings. I was a junior participant in that, but the experience was valuable and the exposure exhilarating.²

Ellysa:

His first solo publication, a book chapter, detailed the Booz Allen reorganization study he directed at Columbia, and his subsequent works often grew from conference presentations.³ Jerome's later publications explored the intersection of information technology and libraries, envisioning possibilities that eventually became standardized and expected in today's networked environment.⁴

Jerome:

I was invited to join the editorial board of the new publication *portal* by (then-Editor) Sue Martin, shortly after it was created. I had known Sue for many years, from her days in the systems department of the Harvard University Libraries, and mine at Columbia, and through the American Library Association. I was not part of the planning for *portal* but rather was called to join the board based on her encouragement and the prospectus for the journal.

**Ellysa:**

Jerome's involvement with *portal* and other editorial boards allowed him to stay connected to the evolving field of librarianship, although he noted the rapid pace of change in cataloging and library technologies. Throughout his retirement, Jerome has remained active as a reviewer for *portal* and other journals. The shift to virtual meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic allowed him to re-engage more directly with the *portal* editorial board. As a reviewer, Jerome emphasized the importance of articles that are clear, impactful, and that contribute to improving library services. He viewed his work on the *portal* Board and as a reviewer as part of a larger effort to enhance library management and ultimately benefit public service.

Jerome:

As an author I was impelled to present work I believed would be important to the improvement of library management and ultimately library service. My formal education and then my work experience in library systems design gave me a comprehensive perspective on library operations and the interconnection of all the elements that contribute to the library's work and public service. In my own writing and in my reviewing, I try to imagine the outcome of the article and its impact. Will the article contribute to improving service or operations, and therefore will it be worth reading? An overarching consideration as I write and review is the readability of the article. Is it clear, well written? Is the methodology sound?

Ellysa:

Over his more than 20 years with the journal, Jerome has mentored authors and supported and advocated for works that tackled significant topics, such as the development of instructional design and institutional barriers faced by female academic librarians. He reflected on a technical article about the fragility of web-based evidence, emphasizing the importance of addressing the ephemerality of online sources to ensure the preservation of knowledge.⁵ Jerome also valued theoretical pieces, including a forthcoming 2025 *portal* article on virtues, which resonated with his experiences at Boston College—a place deeply committed to student identity formation and morality, and a 2019 *portal* article on library neutrality, which he found “historically and philosophically compelling.”⁶

Jerome:

portal is special and unique in that its goal is to take account of the context of the library's services—the college or university setting, the teaching and research environment. Also important is the stated goal of mentoring authors—new to academic librarianship or new to the profession—encouraging authors to share their insights and experience and helping them frame their work and make it available for others to learn from.



New Directions for Library Publishing and Scholarly Communications

Discussing broader challenges in academic librarianship, Jerome highlighted the issues and opportunities surrounding the genesis and evolution of the concept of scholarly communication:

Jerome:

Monopolistic serials pricing and bundling led to the open access movement, and to recognition of academic publishing—faculty publishing as the system of scholarly communication, a concept introduced especially by Warren J. (Jim) Haas, then-Director of Libraries at Columbia, and then-Director of the Council on Library Resources (CLIR), with whom I worked. Broadening the concept (of scholarly communication) that way fuses the isolated scholar and learned society and library into a powerful network of knowledge creators and puts it on the same footing as the publishers who before then controlled the dissemination of research and new knowledge. It brought recognition to the knowledge enterprise in which university researchers and scholars contributed their work for free to publications that then sold the work back to the universities' libraries at exorbitant prices, with the added burden on the libraries to preserve the work and make it accessible.

Ellysa:

This paradigm shift empowered universities and libraries to challenge the dominance of commercial publishers and advocate for more equitable access to knowledge.⁷ Jerome recalled how budgetary constraints in the 1960s led learned societies to relinquish control of their journals to commercial publishers, which in turn monopolized academic publishing and inflated prices. Libraries, faced with shrinking budgets for monographs, began experimenting with publishing as a way to reclaim control and promote accessibility.

Looking to the future, Jerome discussed the further evolution of a digital print hybrid in scholarly publishing.

Jerome:

Is there a role for richer use of digital capabilities—so much of contemporary publishing uses image and sound—to supplement print? Will these additional media find employment in traditional scholarly publishing?

Ellysa:

While acknowledging the increasing use of image and sound in contemporary publications, Jerome noted that traditional academic journals have yet to fully embrace these capabilities. He mentioned that *portal* attempted early on to integrate multimedia, such as videos, with its articles, but noted challenges in effectively linking this content to the journal's digital presence. This, he suggested, underscores the need for thoughtful integration of dynamic content in academic publishing.



Moving Forward – Advice to Authors and Reviewers

Jerome drew upon his decades of experience as an administrator, a reviewer, and a *portal* Editorial Board member, and offered his guidance to prospective authors and reviewers:

To authors:

“Identify your audience. Know who it is you are writing for. Understand why your work would be valuable to them. Be mindful of the criteria applied in reviewing the piece you want to write, and satisfy them to the degree you can. Anticipate what the publication will be looking for.”

To editorial boards and reviewers:

“Look for reasons the articles you review would be valuable to the journal audience. Identify work or projects underway that might soon be ready for publication. Conferences and conference proceedings might be a source of prospective publications. Scout conference announcements for possible future articles. Find out what areas are currently being pursued by academic library associations. Talk to ARL, ALA, CNI, CLIR, others, see what they are up to that holds promise for future publication or status reporting.”

Concluding our interview, Jerome recalled a formative childhood memory that planted the seed for his career in libraries. During a visit to a synagogue with his father, he encountered a collection of crumbling books from the late 19th century. Though not particularly old by historical standards, his father’s reverence for them left a lasting impression on Jerome, inspiring him to pursue a career initially focused on rare books. This memory, Jerome noted, felt like a full-circle moment, connecting his origins to his lifelong dedication to libraries and the preservation of knowledge.

Thank you, Jerome, for your over two decades of service to portal as an Editorial Board member and reviewer!

Notes

1. Columbia University Libraries, *The Administrative Organization of the Libraries of Columbia University: A Detailed Description* (Columbia University Libraries, 1975).
2. Jerome Yavarkovsky, E. Mount, and H. Kordish, “
3. Jerome Yavarkovsky, “
4. Jerome Yavarkovsky, “The New York State Library: A Vision for Networked Services,” *Journal of Library Administration* 19, no. 3–4 (March 15, 1994): 133–46, https://doi.org/10.1300/J111v19n03_09; Jerome Yavarkovsky, “A University-Based Electronic Publishing Network,” *EDUCOM Review* 25, no. 3 (1990): 14–20.
5. Sarah Potvin, Tina Budzise-Weaver, and Kathy Christie Anders, “Delicate Links: Ephemerality in Web-Based Evidence in Electronic Theses and Dissertations,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 24, no. 3 (2024): 519–52, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/pla.2024.a931770>.
6. John Wenzler, “Neutrality and Its Discontents: An Essay on the Ethics of Librarianship,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 19, no. 1 (2019): 55–78, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/pla.2019.0004>.
7. National Enquiry into Scholarly Communication and American Council of Learned Societies, *Scholarly Communication: The Report of the National Enquiry* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

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