

On the Dublin Core front

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On the Road Again: A Conversation with Jill Emery

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“Nothing can substitute for the knowledge and experience of a good librarian.” -- Harold Evans

ABSTRACT

This article features an interview with Jill Emery, Director of the Electronic Resources Program at the University of Houston. Ms. Emery discusses her career, the potential impact of the open access movement, and the nuances of licensing electronic resources.

KEYWORDS

Jill Emery ; open access ; licensing ; electronic resource ; e-resources

One of the thrills of writing this column is that I often get the privilege of interviewing people for whom I have great admiration. Jill Emery, Director of the Electronic Resources Program at the University of Houston, is an esteemed member of this group. Jill’s thoughtfulness, leadership, and deep commitment to the profession are sterling qualities that contributed to her selection as one of *Library Journal’s* 2004 “Movers & Shakers” (“Digital Girl,” 2004). Her numerous publications and presentations, not to mention rigorous participation in the “Liblicense” listserv, make her name a familiar one, yet I hope the piece that follows gives readers a more meaningful perspective on an engaging librarian whose relatively brief ten-year professional career is marked by impressive accomplishments and even greater promise.

NM: You earned your undergraduate degree from Texas A&M, your MLIS from the University of Texas at Austin, and your professional positions have all been at academic institutions within the Lone Star State. I take it you’re a native Texan.

JE: There’s a refrigerator magnet you can buy in Texas that reads, “I wasn’t born here, but got here as soon as I could.” Actually, I’m an Air Force brat. I was born in Tucson, AZ, but for various reasons my parents decided to settle in Texas. I’ve lived in Texas since I was ten years old. Deciding to go to school in Texas was more of an economic advantage than anything else. While at Texas A&M, I started working at the library and became a state employee at the age of 19. At this point, I’m vested in the state employee system, which has certain advantages.

NM: What prompted you to become a librarian?

JE: Perhaps you've heard this someplace before: Getting my library degree was an interim step between college and whatever came next. I'm still waiting to see what comes next. I started working in libraries at the age of nine when as a member of the nerdy kids at my elementary school I spent half of one class period "helping" out in the library. When you're indoctrinated that young, there is no escape. I believe some refer to this condition as fate.

NM: If you weren't a librarian, in what profession would you be engaged?

JE: Lately, I've been thinking that being a kept woman wouldn't be such a bad thing. If you know of any way to facilitate this goal, suggestions are appreciated.

NM: You're presently the Director of the Electronic Resources Program at the University of Houston. Although there's no doubt much diversity in your job, describe a typical workday.

JE: You obviously haven't read my chapter in *Jump Start Your Career in Library & Information Science* edited by Priscilla Shontz as I affirm that there are no typical days anymore. That statement aside, email is a huge part of my day and the rest is meetings. Here's an hour-by-hour synopsis of what an observer would see today:



Jill sporting her favorite leopard print fez

8 AM: I arrive at work, log into my computer, glance at the phone for messages, sigh at the paperwork on my desk, and move some of it to a new stack arrangement for the day. You can tell my mood by how deep the piles on the desk are and in what geometric pattern. I check my email and calendar for the day, and make mental notes of meetings to attend or forget about.

9AM: I work on something tangible, like figuring out why we're only getting a few months' access to journal X from publisher Y. I send three emails about this matter: one to the serials librarian so she can ask the subscription agent; one to the publisher to see why they think it's happening; and one to the subject librarian to explain that it may take a while to resolve.

10AM: I attend the morning meeting of the User Services Assessment Task Force, which sounds interesting and like fun at this point.

11AM: I come back to my office and check my email, looking for a reply on the journal problem.

11:30 AM: I go to lunch with two colleagues from technical services and come up with alternatives to celebrating Constitution Day. We decide on creating Day of the Dead coffins that feature the Founding Fathers, and a means by which students can interactively turn the Founders in their graves.

12:30 PM: I head back to email. I receive three or four messages from vendors/publishers trying to sell the library something or meet to sell the library something; announcements of price increases or platform changes; and solicitations to train staff on various products. I forward the messages to appropriate subject librarians.

1 PM: I review any of the contracts sitting on my desk and make marginal notes, strike-outs as needed, or decide they're fine as written. I type the Texas addendums, print them out, and fax to the appropriate vendor contact. I sign necessary riders and fax these also. I review electronic requests submitted by subject librarians, add them to spreadsheets for review by the collection management committee, and track down any missing bits of information like pricing, etc.

2 PM: This is my phone hour. There's at least one conference call to be had a week either for consortium business, vendor/publisher stuff, or professional organization matters.

3 PM: I face the paperwork on my desk and try to dispense with it. I bring in folders and are able to file some things; some things get mailed to other parts of the library; some get re-arranged yet again. I tackle professional committee work, such as writing reports or documents, reviewing appointments and calendars, and making sure information has been submitted properly.

4 PM: I finish my workday with outstanding professional presentation needs that almost always begin with a review of various blogs, both library-related and otherwise. I peruse various music web sites and listen to someone inspirational such as Nick Cave, Joe Strummer, P J Harvey, Brit Pop, or Grime, depending on my mood. I find clip-art for the presentation -- a wise man once told me that all presentations must begin with clip art, and I have to say this technique has not failed me yet.

NM: You're a prolific author and presenter. What do you attribute to this scholarly productivity?

JE: Wow, prolific, really? I'm blushing. Actually, it is vanity. People ask me to write something or present something and I think yeah, I can talk about that or I can write about that and so I do. There was also a continuing appointment (tenure-esque) process I underwent years ago that helped me to stay focused in this manner. Part of my motivation is that I have opinions on things and am not afraid to share them. I'm sometimes embarrassed by what I say, but never, ever afraid to say it. It's a curse and a blessing really. When writing an article I always try to incorporate some sort of musical lyric into the title, heading, or text somewhere just to see if anyone really reads these things. I've been getting really obvious with this convention lately though and should go back to being a bit more obscure. I try to tie in what I'm writing to something in popular culture in some way, usually tying in a couple of things that I'm reading at the same time. It's all really a game for me to see what I can get away with and still come across as knowledgeable on a subject.

NM: I read and very much enjoyed your recent publication, "Is Our Best Good Enough? Educating End-Users About Licensing Terms" (*Journal of Librarian Administration* 42:3/4 (2005)). In that article, you argue that digital resources, the use of which is governed by contract law rather than copyright law, requires libraries to take a more active approach to informing users of permissible and illegal uses of these materials. I agree with your position, but it's difficult to push important licensing terms to patrons, and even more difficult to entice patrons to read these terms. Do you think electronic resource management systems might offer help to libraries in this regard?

JE: Electronic resource management systems let librarians and libraries off the hook in this regard. We can say the information was there and posted to the user population much like we do with those copyright signs over the photocopiers. Does that mean we've fulfilled our

responsibilities in regards to educating users about copyright laws? That's a bit hedgy. Let's face it, copyright laws aren't something our user population really wants to be educated about, however it's something all librarians feel guilty about. Electronic resource management systems help alleviate some of this guilt. It is a best effort at allowing us a single place to collectively gather administrative metadata. Truth be told, I'm ambivalent about electronic resource management systems. They serve a worthwhile purpose for a library internally, but I'm not sure they help the majority of end-users with much of anything in their search for information.

NM: But there are other systems, such as a library's acquisitions module, that don't serve the information-seeking needs of students, yet help libraries operate.

JE: We need to answer this question: What do we truly need to know about license agreements? For this, ERMs may be overkill. There's not a lot of payoff for users. What I need from an ERM is standardized metadata that can be migrated to other systems. The effort currently underway by the DLF ERMI group to map licenses into standardized language will be really helpful for libraries.

NM: Will a day come when libraries and content providers are able to agree on standard license terms -- the so-called model license -- and if so, what conditions will cause this to happen?

JE: Do we really honestly want this? Do we really want one interface and one way of doing things? Where's the variety or fun in that? With a few really oddball situations that continue to exist primarily with business resources that were never intended or designed for mass consumption, most licenses are pretty standard these days. They all seem to cover the things I need them to. Since I find myself signing more riders than actual licenses because of renewals or additions to content or the purchasing of back-files, standardized licensing is much less of an issue than it once was. In actual fact, libraries are the ones that have become non-standard. In one consortium that this institution belongs to, there is something like five different state addendums that have to be added to the consortia licenses. Some of the addendums are incredibly detailed and are basically licenses in themselves. In our attempts to secure our own licensing terms, we may become our own worse enemy. One thing I like to muse about is whether libraries will ask other libraries to sign licenses to use their institutional repositories. Now there will be some fun!

NM: A few libraries are pushing out to publishers an institutional license for electronic resources they want to purchase. Do you think this approach is strategic, or one that could undermine the license standardization efforts that seem to be bringing publishers and libraries closer together?

JE: It's a good idea, especially for companies you haven't worked with before. There are companies not accustomed to working with libraries in this way. I wouldn't do it every time you negotiate a license, especially with big companies. Some of the existing publisher licenses are great. You need to understand the benefits of distributing an institutional license to a vendor. It should be a selective process.

NM: Are the hopes of open access as a means of wresting power from publishers a realistic expectation for the library community?

JE: Information does not want to free; information is a commodity. Not with the current models of open access, no. The current models are subscriptions that just aren't called

subscriptions. Will there be a model that will change the entire scholarly communication landscape? Probably, but it isn't around yet and I cannot, for the life of me, fathom what it would be. Here are the tenets that require ubiquitous adoption of anything new:

1. Intuitive to use by all users (those publishing/those reading).
2. It doesn't require a huge shift in the way current organizational structures work, but rather minor adjustments (in this case tenure structures).
3. There is some type of understanding and/or trust in the entity that creates this new thing.

NM: You've just begun your term as Chair of the ALA/ALCTS Serials Section. What are some of the goals you hope to achieve during the Emery administration?

JE: Status quo. I am powerless beneath the bureaucracy of the American Library Association and do not pretend otherwise.

NM: During your off time, what do you enjoy doing?

JE: Right now, I'm reading a lot of Japanese mystery novels in translation. I get into these paths of reading and keep at it until I've exhausted myself of either the subject or run out of good writers to read. I watch loads of television and movies at home and knit copious amounts of scarves for presents for people. There's an Art Space here in Houston where I volunteer to do whatever they need during their exhibit openings and performance art shows. The artists are always amused that there's this librarian in their midst who doesn't really do anything artistic other than serve as a barmaid when they need me to do so. I am always excited to see live music shows and try to go to at least two or three a month. Due to my travel schedule this summer this wasn't accomplished, but I'm getting back into it. My preference is for local/smaller bands and venues that most people wouldn't know about -- not to be a music snob or obscure or anything, but rather because I tend not to like huge crowds of people and being forty feet away from the band. I'm rather naturally curious as well, so I travel lots, even if it's driving to some small town just outside of Houston and wandering about to see what's there. For instance, I've been to most of the museums in Beaumont, Texas. When they start the rebuilding of the Gulf Coast, I'd like to pull together a volunteer group to work with Habitat for Humanity to go in and help with the reconstruction.

NM: What are the next professional challenges for you, and where do you see yourself 10 years from now?

JE: As they say down here in Houston, I'll just keep on keeping on.

REFERENCES

"Digital Girl" (2004). *Library Journal*, v. 129, no. 5, p. 49.