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ATG Interviews: Mark Cummings, Editor and Publisher, Choice Magazine

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Editor and Publisher, Choice Magazine

by Tom Gilson (Associate Editor, *Against the Grain*) <gilson@cofc.edu>

and Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

ATG: *Mark you've been at the helm of Choice for nearly a year. What has been your most pleasant surprise since you began your tenure? What about a not so pleasant surprise?*

MC: I hope this doesn't sound too Pollyannish, but honestly the biggest surprise of all has been the lack of surprise. It's stressful starting a new position, to be sure, but having a highly competent staff and well-tuned production protocols already in place meant that I could turn my attention to strategic issues almost at the outset, without having to worry overly much about day-to-day operations. And since the longer-term challenges at **Choice** had been the subject of much discussion during the search process, I can't say that these came as much of surprise either. That doesn't mean the challenges are easy, though!

ATG: *What is it like succeeding a legend in the industry like Irv Rockwood?*

MC: Well, Irv and I have spent some time together, and while I can't speak for him, I'm pretty sure that words like *legend* would make him a little uncomfortable. That said, it's difficult to overestimate the contribution Irv has made to **Choice**, particularly in terms of its strategic direction, so stepping into the position was bound to raise questions as to how the initiatives he fathered will be addressed.

Both Irv and I came to **Choice** with strong publishing backgrounds, and if there is one thing you learn in publishing it's that you have to have the flexibility to respond to the market as it actually is, not how you wish it to be. The information environment we confront today is changing so rapidly that our responses will in all likelihood forge some new directions for **Choice**, but I believe that they will represent a continuation of its long-established mission in the broadest sense.

ATG: *What do you think are the top challenges in guiding a traditional, time-honored publication like CHOICE so it not only remains viable, but thrives, in the 21st century?*

MC: From the careful way you framed your question (!), it seems you share our feeling that, at fifty years old, **Choice** is at a crossroads of sorts. The issues that led to its creation back in 1964 are still important, but so much has changed in the way scholarly monographs are created, distributed, discovered, and used that it's time to step back and take a good, long look at how we can best serve our community. We're already moving to broaden the scope of our editorial content with a monthly feature on special collections, guest editorials, increased attention to open-access publications, wider coverage of eBooks and other digital content, and opportunities to engage our audience through our social media

channels. More generally, though, one of the great things about **Choice** is that it is both a journal and an eponymous publishing unit, and I think our capabilities in this latter sense will eventually provide new opportunities for us. Our new marketing site (<http://Choice360.org>) is an attempt to make just this point by giving greater visibility to the range of things we do in addition to our core product.

ATG: *You've had a great deal of experience, especially in reference and educational publishing. How does that experience translate into success in leading a publication that until this point has been a source for reviews of academic books, electronic media, and Internet resources?*

MC: I was trained as a historian and began my publishing career in academic reference, so frankly, leading a publication devoted to the review of scholarly materials does not seem so much a departure from what I did before as you might think. Certainly from an editorial perspective, the structure of the editorial staffs and the editorial and production protocols, both for print and digital products, are very similar. Even more important, reference works and **Choice** share a common quality: fundamentally they are both databases, so the experience I gained dealing with problems of information architecture, metadata, and search and retrieval methodologies in the reference world has been translatable to a large degree to my position at **Choice**. And since virtually my entire career in publishing has centered around creating materials for libraries, I feel very comfortable with library culture and the publishing ecosystem that serves it.

ATG: *Speaking of reviews, with the availability of reader reviews in sources like Amazon how much of a market is there for reviews written by experts like those in Choice?*

MC: If I can say this without sounding obvious, one of the great pleasures of working at **Choice** is knowing that our readership remains capable of appreciating the difference between expert knowledge and public opinion. Peer review is at the heart of the scholarly enterprise, so at least in principle, the market for what we publish is a given. Closer to the ground, however, we are all aware of how the role of the academic librarian, in particular the collection-development function, is being "disintermediated" by, for instance, large content aggregations and patron-driven acquisition, methodologies that call into question the very notion of a "collection." These issues are far more challenging to our mission than anything else.

ATG: *What criteria does Choice use when deciding which academic books, electronic media, and Internet resources to review?*

How do you keep up with all of the products that continually hit the market and select the most relevant?

MC: We receive over 25,000 books a year in our small offices in Middletown, most from university presses and other scholarly publishers, so in one sense the task is not so much how to keep up as it is how to limit ourselves to the 7,000 or so reviews we have the resources to publish annually. Obviously, having a staff of highly capable editors who themselves have subject-area expertise is key to the success of what we do. In fact, the preliminary decision regarding which books to send out to our reviewers is itself a critical part of the review process. And of course, having over 3,000 reviewers in our database means that our chances of finding the right person to write the review are high. Our specific criteria for selecting works for review run to several pages on our Website (<http://www.ala.org/acrl/choice/selectionpolicy>), so I won't rehash them here, but suffice it to say that our selection criteria remain a work in progress and are the subject of ongoing examination and discussion in our offices.

ATG: *Is the trend toward demand-driven acquisitions having any impact on the books Choice chooses to review?*

MC: Not directly, no, but clearly the overall impact of DDA is to diminish the importance of reviews in the collection-development process. Respondents in our focus groups, for instance, remarked that reviews are now often used to check for titles missed in DDA packages or to ensure that important resources are not prematurely taken out of circulation.

ATG: *We understand that a number of university presses are having problems. Has Choice noticed a decrease in the number of university press titles that it receives for review?*

MC: We are privy to the same rumors, and yet we are seeing no direct impact on the number of titles submitted. Over the past five years we have received, on average, 25,500 titles a year (pause here to imagine what our small mailroom looks like at times). Our lowest figure in that period was 24,474, and this year we are on track to surpass the average by almost 5%. Nor have we found that the quality of works submitted for review has diminished. During that same period, and using selection criteria unchanged from earlier years, we reviewed (again on average), 7,123 books a year, with no year deviating more than 1.5% from the average.

ATG: *Scholars are beginning to explore self-publishing. Has Choice ever discussed reviewing self-published works?*

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Choice

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MC: This issue is increasingly on our radar and is part of the ongoing discussion I just mentioned regarding our selection policy. Traditionally, of course, it was easy enough to dismiss vanity press publications, but the channels for self-publication are much more varied now, making self-published works worth a second look. So-called Gold Open Access is a good example of this, as it is now necessary to distinguish legitimate scholarly works available in this fashion from mere vanity publishing. I wish I could tell you we have a hard-and-fast rule for these, but in fact we make such decisions on a case-by-case basis.

ATG: *ACRL/CHOICE launched a Webinar program in spring of 2013. How does that tie in to your mission as a source for reviews? Or are we seeing an expansion of your mission?*

MC: The more we reflect on the role of **Choice** in academic libraries, the more broadly do we conceive our mission. In the most general sense, **Choice** is about *connecting*: connecting librarians with information resources, connecting scholars and students with the information they need to evaluate sources, connecting librarians with scholars and publishers, and so forth. So we see Webinars as very much a continuation of our core mission, albeit in a new form. Our Webinar program enables librarians to hear publishers give their perspectives on issues of interest and to communicate with them directly in a public forum. So *expansion*, yes, but again, consistent with our past.

ATG: *Choice Reviews Online has been totally redesigned with a new interface. What issues were you trying to resolve with the new design? Based on customer response how successful have you been? What issues remain, if any?*

MC: Our overall goal in redesigning *CRO* was to provide enhanced functionality for our users. For instance, we wanted users to be able to create multiple profiles, or “alerts,” to notify them of the publication of monographs in specific subject areas. The ability to provide **COUNTER**-compliant usage reports was another requirement of the new platform. And certainly, we hoped to be able to use the platform to create derivative products easily and quickly.

It would have been too much to hope that the rollout of the new platform would be problem-free, and frankly, we have had our share of customer issues, but a majority of these were associated with the migration from the old platform — specifically around account creation — where we failed to anticipate the scope of the task and fell behind for awhile from a customer-service perspective. And then there were the inevitable problems helping users navigate the new site. Most of these are behind us now, but we had a lot of learning to do about how to communicate with our subscribers in order to get to this point.

PARENT COMPANY: Association of College and Research Libraries, a division of the American Library Association.

OFFICERS: Mary Ellen Davis, Executive Director, **ACRL**.

KEY PRODUCTS AND SERVICES: *Choice Magazine, Choice Reviews Online, Resources for College Libraries.*

CORE MARKETS/CLIENTELE: Academic librarians.

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 24

NUMBER OF JOURNALS PUBLISHED ANNUALLY: 2 journals (*Choice, Choice Reviews Online*), published monthly.

NUMBER OF DATABASES: 1 (*Resources for College Libraries*).

HISTORY AND BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF YOUR COMPANY/PUBLISHING PROGRAM:

Choice: Current Reviews for Academic Libraries is the premier source for reviews of new English-language books and digital resources for academic libraries. Published monthly, *Choice* reviews over 600 monographs and reference titles in each issue — some 7,000 titles annually — covering more than 50 subdisciplines in the humanities, science and technology, and the social and behavioral sciences. Librarians, faculty, and key decision makers rely on *Choice* for collection development and scholarly research.

Choice is a publication of the **Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL)**, a division of the **American Library Association (ALA)**. Founded in 1940, the **ACRL** is a professional association of academic librarians and other interested individuals dedicated to enhancing the ability of academic library and information professionals to serve the information needs of the higher education community.

Choice has been in continuous publication since March 1964 and is now available in three formats: as a physical magazine, on cards, and in database form as *Choice Reviews Online*. 

Remaining issues? Well, users continue to find the alert-creation process cumbersome, and many people want *CRO* to support sorting by LC subject classifiers (as in the older version), and we are working with our partners at **HighWire** to resolve these issues.

ATG: *One of your key responsibilities is to maintain Choice's competitive position in the higher education marketplace and ensure ongoing fiscal sustainability. What are you doing to make that happen? Do you have a particular strategy? Can you elaborate?*

MC: I was very fortunate to inherit from **Irv** a business that was already taking important steps toward ensuring its fiscal sustainability. We have, in addition to subscription and advertising revenue from our core product, a robust revenue stream from content licensing and from *Resources for College Libraries*, which we copublish with **ProQuest**. In terms of strategy, we are certainly looking to augment revenue from these sources, but in addition, we see the need to move beyond the “one size fits all” approach to the market we have taken in the past and to create products and services that address the specific needs of market segments. As I’ve mentioned previously, we’ve spent a

good deal of time in recent months listening to our subscribers, and our hope is that from these conversations we will be able to learn how their needs have changed and how we can best respond to them. It’s still early days, but certainly a willingness to consider providing products and services that go beyond reviews is implicit in this exercise.

ATG: *Over the last year, CHOICE has conducted a number of focus groups including those at the Charleston Conference and at ALA. What were the big takeaways from these sessions? What new initiatives can we expect from what you've learned?*

MC: Oh, I could spend a long time on this one! You will not be surprised to learn that we were the beneficiaries of an incredibly rich response from our participants, and while it’s not practical to list all of the themes we developed in these sessions, what I think I can do is characterize their concerns at the most general level. First of all, and as I mentioned a moment ago, our participants acknowledged that with the many different ways to build collections now available to libraries, reviews no longer have pride of place. This has obvious

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ATG Interviews Skip Prichard

President and CEO, OCLC

by **Tom Gilson** (Associate Editor, *Against the Grain*) <gilson@cofc.edu>

and **Katina Strauch** (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

ATG: *You have been at the helm of OCLC for nearly a year. What is the most surprising thing that you have learned about the organization? Currently, what are its biggest strengths? How about areas where you would like to see improvement?*

SP: Having worked in and around libraries for most of my career, I knew OCLC. Before joining, I had numerous discussions with our Board of Trustees and did extensive reading and research. Even after all of that due diligence, I did not realize how complex the organization is. The cooperative nature and governance structure is unique, and demanding, as are the research and advocacy arms. Then, we drive technology innovation and develop new services. And all of this is done in a global environment.

I'm not sure that 'surprised' is the right word, but I have been struck by the strength of the cooperative spirit at OCLC. I obviously knew OCLC was a nonprofit organization long before I joined, but being on campus and with members and the staff, it has really impressed me even beyond what I had anticipated. There is tremendous energy and enthusiasm among OCLC staff and members who are passionate about libraries, technology and the principles that guide the organization.

With this enthusiasm comes great expectation. Members expect OCLC to be responsive to their needs, and they are committed to helping us succeed. I have seen this during my travels and at meetings and in conferences. The receptions I got at ALA and at IFLA, for example, were wonderful, and different than other receptions I received in my earlier library experiences. Members support us, and they



expect us to strive to fulfill our mission. Our members understand that OCLC is invested in libraries for the long term.

OCLC's greatest strength is our members. When 20,000 libraries around the world come together to share resources, just about anything is possible. The WorldCat database, for example, would not be possible without a strong commitment to cooperation. WorldCat is an incredibly valuable asset for libraries and their users. Other strengths include a passionate staff and a strong foundation — financial, technical and library experience — to build on.

At the same time, we have our work cut out for us. We have to ensure that our programs and services address the most pressing needs of

our member libraries, and we have to strive for operational excellence. Our operations need to be even more member-centric, service-oriented and designed for maximum efficiency.

ATG: *You mentioned in another interview that "listening to our members is my highest priority." What have you been hearing from them?*

SP: I have been on a listening tour that so far has taken me to Bangkok to Singapore to Munich to Leiden to Sheffield, along with many stops in the United States. Libraries want to be sure that our priorities are in line with their needs.

Librarians tell me they are interested in more and better end-user services. They want more and better access to information in a variety of formats, from a variety of devices, where and when they need it and at a price they can afford. They like the research we're doing, and they would like to see more of that research incorporated in more of our services.

Libraries have many needs today. Part of my role at OCLC is to determine priorities for the cooperative — decide what we are going to do and what we aren't going to do. So, listening to the membership continues to be my highest priority.

ATG: *How would you describe the relationship between OCLC and its member libraries? Are there any specific areas where that relationship could be improved?*

SP: The membership is vocal and not shy about letting OCLC know what it expects. OCLC is fortunate to have a strong membership that includes librarians who are willing

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implications for our business. Concomitantly, our respondents made us aware of their growing sense of displacement as a result. One of the most common laments during these sessions was that publishers and aggregators are taking decisionmaking out of the hands of librarians. Other themes included the need to address information literacy issues among students, who more often than not discover information in a disaggregated form, stripped of its context. And of course, curation of open-access content and sources, including concerns about ensuring version integrity, was the subject of repeated comments. We are looking hard at these and other issues, but

again, it's premature to comment on specific initiatives at this point.

ATG: *We know that you must be incredibly busy with your responsibilities at Choice, but everyone needs some down time. What are your favorite activities when you can grab a little time off? Besides Charleston, what are your favorite places to visit and spend time?*

MC: At last, an easy one! We'll keep this short. In the summer I enjoy sailing our little Flying Scot on a local lake. I cook year-round, a tremendous source of relaxation. And my favorite places to visit, other than Charleston, of course, are the canyons of southern Utah. Cellular towers are pretty scarce out that way.

ATG: *Mark, we really appreciate your willingness to talk to ATG and keep our readers informed as to what is going on at*

Choice. And on behalf of those same readers, we also want to thank Choice's Ann Doherty who has contributed the "Collecting to the Core" column to Against the Grain for a number of years.

MC: I know I speak for Anne when I say that our contributions to ATG reflect our commitment to your mission and to the ways in which it dovetails with our own. So thank you for this opportunity to speak with your readers. I look forward to talking with you again as our plans mature. By the way, I'd be remiss if I didn't mention our email address for comments and questions: <TellChoice@ala-choice.org>. The address comes straight to my desk, so don't be shy! 🐾