Against the Grain

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ATG Interviews George Machovec, Executive Director of the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries and Managing Editor of The Charleston Advisor

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Executive Director of the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries and Managing Editor of *The Charleston Advisor*

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

ATG: George you've worked for the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries for nearly 26 years, the last 7 years as the Executive Director. Over that time, how have library consortiums like "The Alliance" changed in the ways they operate and in the services that they provide? What challenges have library consortiums like yours had to overcome?

GM: The one common characteristic among library consortia is that they are all different. The modern consortial movement coalesced in the 1990s and was spurred by the Internet and group licensing of e-resources. Virtually all consortia have as goals reducing costs for their members, sharing expertise, and collaborating in programs and services that may not otherwise be possible. But how this plays out in a regional setting varies greatly. The Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries was incorporated as a non-profit 501c3 in 1981 and currently has 16 member libraries with one library in Wyoming (University of Wyoming) and one public library (Denver Public Library).

The Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries was begun in the early 1970s to promote the purchase of expensive resources such as Gmelin, Beilstein, Sadtler spectra, microform sets and others. These were physical items held at one library but funded by the group with associated resource sharing agreements. By the 1980s the Colorado Alliance developed its own integrated library system since commercial offerings at the time were few and problematic. The product was sold in the 1990s (now part of TLC) and the consortia moved into group licensing and the development of a union catalog (called Prospector which operates on INN-Reach software). In the 2000s, the Colorado Alliance starting a shared digital repository service which it successfully operated for about eight years and the service was eventually returned to the local libraries for continued operation. Another service begun by the Alliance in the early 2000s was the development of Gold Rush which served as an ERMS, link resolver, A-Z service, and content comparison tool. When the Alliance develops services, it will allow other non-members to use them with an added surcharge.

The biggest challenge for our consortium and others like us is maintaining a positive return on investment (ROI) for members. In our case, we are funded by member assessments with some additional funding coming from licensing some of our software. Our programs and services must provide both qualitative and quantitative benefits that meet the needs of our members.

ATG: Speaking specifically of the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries, can you tell us more about what it does? What key benefits do you provide your member libraries? Which of the various services that the consortium provides, are you most proud?

GM: The current Colorado Alliance consortium continues some of its older services but also has developed new programs and services to meet the needs of its members. The Prospector union catalog began in 1999 with eight libraries and has now grown to 50 academic and public libraries and last year about 500,000 items were lent through the system. The e-resource licensing program at the Colorado Alliance now licenses more than 250 products with an annual cost of over \$15 million. This is quite a large number considering that it represents 16 libraries. Different modules of the Gold Rush software suite are used by about 50 libraries around North America with the popular new module of the Library Content Comparison System.

The Alliance Shared Print Trust was begun in 2015 and over 1.1 million items now have long-term retention commitments (until at least 2040), and the number is growing. This program allows libraries to tag in the catalog record which materials they intend to keep for the long-term and then other libraries in the region can weed materials based on those commitments. This program is tied very closely to the union catalog because if a site is weeding based on the holdings of others, then patrons need a way to easily find and request items from all libraries in the region.

To support this program, the Colorado Alliance developed its own Library Content Comparison System inside the Gold Rush framework so that libraries could easily identify uniqueness and overlap of their holdings.

A variety of tools are offered in the system to tailor these comparisons with many ways to export data. We've found the software to be useful for not only the shared print program but also for building programs, collaborative collection development, populating discover layers, and other cool uses.

The Colorado Alliance has also embarked on a linked data program using Bibframe. Conversion software in the Gold Rush framework can convert MARC records into Bibframe 2.0 along with associated RDF triples to support a variety of possible uses.

ATG: We noticed that you recently moved your data center from its current location at the organization's headquarters to the University of Denver. Can you talk about that and what it says about growth and change at "The Alliance"?

GM: The Alliance has operated its own servers since the 1980s. We have looked into cloud hosting on AWS, Microsoft Azure and other similar services but found that with the high number of transactions coupled with the need for a great deal of storage that the costs for hosting at commercial cloud services is still too high. In 2017, the Alliance hired an outside firm to do a security audit and it's one of the most important things we've recently done. In addition, to identifying cybersecurity weaknesses and the need to update various pieces of software, the audit also looked at physical security. Up until this point, our data center was just a room in our commercial office space and the audit identified numerous vulnerabilities.

The University of Denver (DU) allowed us to move our entire hardware infrastructure to locked cabinets in one of their computer rooms which brought a plethora of advantages that were not possible in our earlier space. The consortium was able to take advantage of their excellent air conditioning, UPS (with diesel back-up), greater facility security, access to faster Internet through their Internet 2 connection, etc. DU has been a wonderful partner and they allow staff full access to hardware, networking, and our own firewalls. Finally, the space offers much more growth room for Alliance servers and storage arrays so that if growth is needed, it can easily be done without worrying about limitations extant in our former data center.

ATG: If you were to predict a future for the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries, what would it look like?

GM: I think the future of our consortium, and many others, are built on the past with evolutionary changes to stay relevant. For

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example, although academic libraries are seeing a substantial decline in circulation, shared print programs which are supported through union catalogs and other finding tools bring new importance to the legacy collection which may no longer be housed in a local library. In our own consortium, I foresee that group licensing will continue to grow, collaborative collection development will be enhanced to avoid creating the duplicative purchasing of print, linked data programs will develop and evolve, open educational resources (OER) will be increasingly important, etc.

We have always been big proponents of academic and public library partnerships. Our union catalog, *Prospector*, has 50 libraries with about half being academic and the other half being public libraries. Partnering with public libraries is a huge area of growth for us. Even if a library is not a formal member of the consortium, we allow any library to join any of our initiatives by paying an extra surcharge.

ATG: *George, you also wear another hat as the managing editor of "The Charleston Advisor." For our readers who may not be familiar with the journal, can you tell us about "The Charleston Advisor?" What is its purpose and what is your role as managing editor? How about the nuts and bolts? Can you give us the details like frequency, format, and price?*

GM: *The Charleston Advisor (TCA)* was launched in 1999 and is now in volume 20! It was the brainchild of **Katina Strauch**, and **Becky Lenzini**. Others who also saw the need for an objective review tool for e-resources since libraries were spending more and more on digital resources amplified the concept and *The Advisor* was born. The goal was to only review products that were available on the Web and not products distributed on CD-ROM or DVD which were also popular at that time. The journal is published on a quarterly basis with about a dozen reviews per issue and subscribers have access to both the print and online version which is hosted on **Ingenta**. In addition to formal reviews, *TCA* also interviews important people in the industry, has several regular columns (*Heard on the Net* and *Mobile Apps*), and has an annual set of awards given to new products. The cost has remained at \$295/year since its inception and never gone up. The publisher is **The Charleston Company**. <http://www.charlestonco.com/>

The vision behind this review resource was to have professional librarians provide objective analysis of e-resources in areas such as content, pricing, user interface, competitive products, contract provisions and other areas. It was realized that most libraries don't automatically purchase e-resources but run them through an internal review process and having an external objective review might be helpful in some cases. Obviously libraries use many criteria for selecting products and services, but having a "Consumer Reports" type product for libraries is another tool in the toolbox.

All reviews go through formal peer review, copy editing, and page layout. The non-reviews are published at the discretion of the managing editor or publisher. The journal has also provided an expedited peer review process so that reviews are not too aged by the time they are published. Peer review is done by the editorial board.

ATG: *It strikes us that "The Charleston Advisor" has a fairly wide-open mandate as to what type resources it reviews, ranging from proprietary databases to software applications to current OER resources. Are we on target? Are we missing anything? And who are your main subscribers? Libraries? Individuals?*

GM: *TCA* does have a broad mandate and has reviewed a wide variety of Web-based resources of interest to libraries. Although the focus has been on content-oriented products and packages, the journal has reviewed things such as bibliographic managers, virtual reference tools, portals, and other services used by libraries. The journal has not reviewed things such as integrated library systems, digital repository software and a few other areas where it was felt that the products were so vast and complex that they were out of scope for the normal reviewer.

ATG: *Last year "The Charleston Advisor" teamed up with Choice to produce an in-depth source of reviews called the "ccAdvisor." Can you tell us about that? How did the collaboration come about? What adjustments did you as managing editor of "The Charleston Advisor" have to make to ensure success? What have been the impacts on both "The Charleston Advisor" and Choice?*

GM: *ccAdvisor* (which stands for Choice Charleston Advisor) is a collaboration between *The Charleston Advisor* and **Choice** (the publishing arm of **ACRL**). **Choice** is best known for its book review services and updated its own platform a couple of years ago. The **Choice** group saw that book reviews are now more of interest to end-users and that librarians focused most of their time selecting e-resources, often through a more complex and deliberative process due to the cost. When **Choice** did previously review an e-resource they were very short, about 200 words, using the same format as for monographs. In deciding to provide more in-depth reviews it made sense to work with *TCA* who was already doing the type of reviews of interest to **Choice**, but as a boutique publication, there was room to grow.

Mark Cummings, publisher at **Choice**, met with **Becky Lenzini**, publisher of *TCA*, at a **Charleston Conference** a couple of years ago to look at the opportunities and the collaboration was eventually formed. **Choice** is responsible for the *ccAdvisor* (<http://ccadvisor.org>) platform and marketing while *TCA* is responsible for the editorial process. The existing peer review process and other routines would be expanded but kept in place. A decision was made to update selected historic reviews from *TCA* and to also focus on new products and services. As part of the process, the review template was slightly modified to better meet current needs and some other areas

were more formalized so that reviews could be better added to a structured database.

The advantage of having reviews in the *ccAdvisor* platform is that they can be added and updated at any time and are not dependent on a quarterly publishing schedule. In addition, the number of reviews could be expanded to as many as the pipeline could support. Staff at **Choice** have been invaluable at providing extra capacity including broadening the pool of reviewers.

TCA is still being published but the publishing process is now flipped. Most reviews first go into the *ccAdvisor* and then about a dozen are selected on a quarterly basis to appear in the journal. Recently a package has been offered so that institutions may select both the database and the journal, if they so choose. One other advantage of the *ccAdvisor* is that they have an authoring tool on the back-end so that authors may write or submit their reviews online, although reviews will still be accepted in a Word template if that is the author's preference.

ATG: *Can you tell us about the product itself? What exactly is "ccAdvisor?" Why should libraries subscribe to it? How are customers benefitting from it?*

GM: *ccAdvisor* is basically a review database of hundreds of e-resources of interest to libraries. Each product is described in detail including product description, pricing (some vendors don't disclose specific pricing), content analysis, listing of competitive products, a look at contract provisions, and scoring. Each product receives a score in four areas (content, pricing, user interface, and contract provisions) which are averaged into an overall score.

Libraries and vendors should subscribe to it for many reasons.

- Having a third-party objective review is important for better decision making for purchasing or cancellation
- Many times librarians just want to know about products and services outside of their primary area of focus. *ccAdvisor* provides this
- This is a great source of competitive intelligence for the industry as well as librarians
- The "competitive products" section of each review helps identify other resources that might be an alternative or augment an e-resource

ATG: *Working with Choice to create "ccAdvisor" is major undertaking. What do you think it means for the future of "The Charleston Advisor?" Will it remain as a separate publication? Will it become totally digital, forgoing the print version? What can current subscribers expect from "The Charleston Advisor" in the future?*

GM: The future of *TCA* will be decided by **The Charleston Company**. Certainly, decisions will be made depending on the subscriber base and advertising for both products.

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Interview — Joris Van Rossum
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ties that would make science more transparent, reproducible and recognizable.

ATG: *You've mentioned that blockchain offers a new business model for journal publishing above and beyond the current subscription and OA models. Can you describe what that new model looks like? What are its specific advantages?*

JVR: Currently, making micropayments on the internet is an expensive and cumbersome experience. This means that publishers rely on business models based on advertising revenue, which is challenging, or subscription models that lead to paywalls, which are very unpopular. In academic publishing we additionally have OA (author pays) models, but after a few decades we have to conclude that this model has not been universally adopted as some had predicted. And OA has left us with another set of problems, such as predatory publishing and challenges for authors from developing countries to get published.

Business models based on micropayments using blockchain technology might be an interesting alternative — users pay as they read, which can be considered more fair, transparent and therefore acceptable for everyone compared to current models.

ATG: *We know that you have been involved in a non-profit peer review initiative that utilizes blockchain technology. Can you tell us about it? How does it work? Why is it preferable to the current peer review processes being employed by publishers?*

JVR: The peer review process has several challenges — a lack of recognition for reviewers, the difficulty of finding reviewers by editors, and overall a lack of transparency leading to a decline of trust in the process, to name a few. We believe that these problems can be solved if we better share data on review activities within the research ecosystem.

In response, we co-founded a new initiative that involves collaboration between our team, several publishers (Springer Nature, Cambridge University Press and Taylor & Francis), ORCID and Katalysis, an Amsterdam-based blockchain startup. By sharing data, we can recognize reviewers better, create

better reviewer finding tools using complete review profiles, allow reviewers themselves to indicate their interest and availability, and verify and validate the review process independently.

One of the key challenges when we're talking about storing and sharing information about the review process is of course trust — how to make sure we share information while still complying with the demand on confidentiality and privacy, for example, in the case of single blind and double blind review. It is here, we believe, where the blockchain can help. Using the blockchain, we can build a decentralized datastore of review information, and there is no single owner or gatekeeper that we have to trust enough to have access to the data. Moreover, we can make use of encryption techniques ensuring that confidential information (e.g., reviewer names) remains obfuscated. We are currently building on a proof of concept and are hoping we can share the results at the end of this year.

ATG: *You've mentioned that your blockchain peer review initiative relies on a sophisticated permissions system. Can you clarify? You've also mentioned that good governance is essential. How do you envision that governance? What would its structure look like?*

JVR: An important priority is how to make sure people do not gain access to information they're not entitled to. We do that by not storing the information itself on the blockchain, but instead provide links to the information stored on existing platforms such as ORCID and submission systems. This allows us to harness the tested and trusted permissions systems of these platforms.

Governance is absolutely essential, to make sure there is an agreement on fundamentals such as what data is being stored, who is participating and who has access to what part of the information of the review process. One of the options available to us is to eventually create a (not-for-profit) membership organization that will ensure a representative governance. Here, we're looking at successful initiatives like Crossref for inspiration.

ATG: *How much current adoption of blockchain has there been in the industry? Who are the main players? Can you point to specific examples and initiatives that demon-*

strate how blockchain technology is currently being used?

JVR: Blockchain technology is still in its infancy, but in the last eight months we've seen the launch of numerous initiatives demonstrating the many ways in which blockchain could have a positive impact on research and scholarly communication. To name but a few: *Artifacts.ai*, *scienceroot.com*, and *Project Aiur* are all projects still in early phases, but with really interesting propositions. So it is a case of "watch this space!"

ATG: *We understand that Digital Science wants to expand the adoption of blockchain with grants. What level of funding are we talking about? Who is eligible for these grants? What type projects do you envision funding?*

JVR: Basically anyone is eligible for **Digital Science** blockchain grants, as long as a project is still at an early stage! As for the type of projects that we would consider, **Digital Science** has already provided grants to blockchain projects in data management and peer review. However, we also have an interest in exploring the wider potential application of blockchain in research and scholarly communication. Anyone with ideas they are looking to get funded should get in touch with us via our *Catalyst Grant* programme!

ATG: *Is there something about blockchain technology that we should have asked you but didn't?*

JVR: Between blockchain theory and practice stand factors like legacy, habits, and vested interests. In theory, blockchain could be an ideal technology for research and scholarly communication, but for this potential to be realized many participants within this ecosystem will need to collaborate, including funders and institutions, as well as researchers themselves. **Digital Science** seeks to play an active role in that process! 🌱

Editor's Note: *For those of you attending the Charleston Conference, Mr. Van Rossum will be presenting a Neapolitan session entitled **Blockchain: The Big Picture for Publishing!** It will be held in the Grand Ballroom 3, Gaillard Center on Thursday, November 8, 9:30am-10:15am. — TG & KS*

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ATG: *George, as busy as you are, it must be important to find time to kick back and relax. What do you do in your down time? How do you unwind?*

GM: My leisure time really revolves around the family. I enjoy travel, adventures, reading, stamp collecting, astronomy, walking/hiking, and technology. I am a news junkie and find it very relaxing, even with all of the drama. 🌱

Rumors
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Media and publishing intelligence firm **Simba Information** has released the latest edition of *Open Access Book Publishing 2018-2022*. The report found that despite multiple years of growth at more than 30 percent CAGR (compound annual growth rate), total revenue generated from book processing charges (BPC) remains small, well under 0.5 percent of total book revenue, comparable in size to a single university press

book publisher or a single open access journal publisher. On the "glass half-full" side of the equation, growth by any metric remains strong. Every company, every program and the overall market continue to grow. An important difference between OA books and journals is that the overall market for journals, particularly life sciences, remained stable through OA's development. The current book market is troubled, which will impact OA books' ability to progress as OA journals did. OA books may become "a" response, not "the" solution, to a crisis in social science and

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