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ATG Interviews Martha Kyrillidou, Senior Director, Statistics and Service Quality Programs, Association of Research Libraries

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Senior Director, Statistics and Service Quality Programs, Association of Research Libraries

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ATG: In 1994, when you entered your role at the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), what were the biggest challenges you faced, and who or what helped you meet them?

MK: At that time, I considered it to be that I was coming from an academic environment, where I was among many experts, to an association environment, where I was the sole expert. But having strong relations with people across the profession, in a broad geographic area, makes up for what you may not find across the office of a relatively small organization of approximately 30 people, like **ARL**. We are a small group of very dedicated colleagues, which strengthens our ability to be in touch with our member library colleagues. It is these strong relationships that make for our collective success. In hindsight, it was raising and meeting the expectations of the top leaders of the major research libraries **ARL** represents — a formidable challenge, yet one that kept me on my toes and helped me grow. **ARL** is a leadership organization, and opportunities for interacting with good mentors are numerous: **Bill Crowe** and **Duane Webster** were definitely formative influences in my career and coached me very effectively during those early years.

ATG: What brought you to ARL?

MK: ARL was hiring for a program officer to manage the "statistics and measurement" program in 1994, and as one of my mentors said to me, "This job has your name written on it." I had a degree in evaluation and measurement from the education field, but I was passionate about practicing in the library field; the **ARL** job combined the best of both worlds. It was **Kendon Stubbs** who forwarded my name through the appropriate channels, which is a great honor for me. **Kendon's** influence regarding data-based decision making in libraries is significant.

ATG: What do you consider your biggest accomplishment at ARL?

MK: My biggest accomplishment is my contribution towards shifting the focus of library assessment from input and output measures to a focus on the user — a focus on articulating and capturing the value libraries deliver, from a user perspective. I am not alone in this endeavor; I am not wise enough to have done that by myself. We have a vibrant community that comes together every two years to attend the **Library Assessment Conference**, and we are excited to have our next event Oct. 29-31, 2012, in Charlottesville, VA (please encourage people to register at *www.libraryassessment. org*)! For those who will miss the conference, you can reserve time in your calendars for August 2014 in Seattle.

ATG: What are your top three priorities at ARL?

MK: Members, members, members — 126 of them, by the way. **ARL** represents 126 research libraries and their institutions. These libraries are represented in **ARL** by the library director.

ATG: Based on the work you did at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and Kent State University, how is that prior experience helping you in your current work?

MK: Both institutions gave me well-grounded research skills, while at a very practical level, had me apply them in a variety of consulting R&D projects, academic research, and teaching engagements. They were wonderful laboratories for my young, inquisitive mind.

ATG: From your vantage point, what has changed over the last 20 years in the industry? What has stayed the same?

MK: The speed of change has changed — clearly the Internet, computing power, and communication technologies have affected our work. Twenty years ago, we would not be able to process and collect data from more than 200,000 library users on an annual basis, across hundreds of libraries, the way we are doing it today with the **LibQUAL+** protocol. Clearly, no matter how technologically neutral we may desire to be in our values, technological advances are shaping them and us in new, exciting, and possibly, dramatic, ways.

ATG: On your LinkedIn profile, under "Summary," you list "collaborating and acting — always 'falling forward'" as one way you build the case for libraries' value and contributions to research, teaching, and learning. What do you mean?

MK: I guess this is another way of saying what **Edison** said when asked how he felt for failing a thousand times in making the light bulb. He is said to have stated, "I have not failed. I have succeeded in finding a thousand ways that do not work." Failing forward is the ability to learn a lesson from every turn of life, to do this with resilience, agility, and speed. For that matter, the more you fail, the more you are also likely to succeed, as each "failure" puts you a step forward.

ATG: According to your ARL profile, your dissertation is "the most heavily downloaded dissertation at the IDEALS institutional repository." Why do you think that is?

MK: For a couple of reasons: it is on a popular, widespread topic — **LibQUAL+** — that has defined how libraries measure library service quality. But it was also deposited at the **University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC)** institutional repository during the first year of its operation. So, the likelihood of its being as successful in downloads would probably be smaller if the institutional repository had started earlier. I am actually curious to see how long this type of first lasts. Usage is a conditional success (i.e., heavily downloaded items are heavily used for a variety of circumstances that may have come together to place an information object at the right time, at the right place, at the right hands). I don't want to discount its importance because I truly think it is a very powerful indicator of value and impact. But it is important to think through what high usage really means. We will need to understand the answer to this question at deeper and deeper levels in the coming years.

ATG: To the ATG readers who are afraid of statistics, measurements, and anything to do with numbers, what resources do you recommend to help ease their fears and teach them about your world?

MK: For fun resources for anything to do with numbers, I would say try **The Math Forum at Drexel University**. It has something for everyone — from your toddler, to your grandparents, and all variations in between (*http://mathforum.org/*). And in the search box, search "fun." Statistics is nothing more than the poetry of numbers. As a French philosopher put it, it is a way of making reasonable inferences and reaching conclusions, given the evidence you have in your hands. How likely is it that there is

a relationship? How likely is it that these results are replicable? Are they important? And in what ways? These judgments are not infallible or irreversible. People interpret the same numbers differently, depending on context (i.e., time and place). Measurement is about having an external yardstick to understand the extent and magnitude. Just before this interview, I was reading in *The Chronicle* about the fact that "the official international system of units of measurement is based on seven independent base quantities: time, length, mass, electric current, temperature, luminous intensity, and amount of substance," and it discussed a debate on what is the right way to calibrate a kilogram. It would be interesting to have an inventory of all units of measurement for all attributes that are of interest to all people.

ATG: Since libraries started using LibQUAL+, what are the overall benefits you are seeing?

MK: **LibQUAL+** has helped shift the focus of assessment in libraries to the user. It coincided with a strong desire to establish a culture of assessment and to articulate, measure, and capture the service quality of the library as a user-focused organization.

ATG: Have LibQUAL+'s definitions of effectiveness and quality evolved in response to changing priorities within the library?

MK: Yes, **LibQUAL+** has demonstrated the ability to capture library service quality, as articulated by users, and evolved in a number of ways over the years. For example, with the **LibQUAL+** data, we have captured the shift in the thinking of users from an environment where resources and access were conceived as separate concepts (e.g., "Information Access" and "Personal Control") to an environment where access and content merged into what we termed "Information Control." Also, over the years, we have introduced variations of the protocol, like **LibQUAL+ Lite**, and the emerging approach of the **LibQUAL+ Triads**. The secret of the success of the **LibQUAL+** model is this exquisite balance between enduring and emerging values, and I want to attribute this delicate balance to the amazing work of **Fred Heath**, **University of Texas**, and **Colleen Cook**, **McGill University**, in the development of the protocol when they were both still at **Texas A&M University**. **Fred Heath** is the "George Washington" of **LibQUAL+**. **LibQUAL+** offers a picture of your horizon as reflected in three key dimensions of library service quality: the way employees serve their users ("Affect of Service"); the provision of access to resources ("Information Control"); and the physical environment of the library ("Library as Place"). The concept of library service quality as crystallized in these three dimensions reflects enduring values, rather than short-term priorities. We

also have often recaptured certain concepts in different ways over the years — in more recent years, we are talking about discovery, yet this is basically "Information Control" from a user perspective. Back to the survey structure… changing priorities of effectiveness in **LibQUAL+** are captured with optional questions that are embedded in the standardized protocol and by the comments provided by users, among other things. The amount of comments we have collected over the years is staggering. More than 40 percent of respondents provide comments, and we have data for a couple of million library users over the last decade. The value derived from these remarks library users provide through the **LibQUAL+** survey is remarkable.

ATG: How has the increased industry focus on usage statistics impacted LibQUAL+? Are there lines of questioning in the LibQUAL+ survey that have been developed to account for the growing influence of statistics in library holdings decisions?

MK: The "Information Control" dimension is capturing whether users perceive that the library is providing what they want, when and where they want it. We also have general use questions in the **LibQUAL+** protocol. Yet, **LibQUAL+** is an attitudinal survey, not a behavioral count, like usage statistics. Usage statistics are based on the assumption that what is used is of value — **LibQUAL+** inserts psychological perception into the equation. Of course, you would hope that what most people perceive to be valuable is, indeed, a close reflection of value derived through usage, to some extent, yet we know that there are other confounding factors in the mix. At **ARL**, we also have another protocol that we have trademarked: **MINES for Libraries (Measuring the Impact of Networked Electronic Services)** that attempts to capture the value of resources in direct relation to usage. **MINES for Libraries** is based on work done by **Brinley Franklin, University of Connecticut**, and **Terry Plum, Simmons College**. Usage statistics are useful and probably most useful at different levels of analysis beyond the library. We are seeing, for example, that they are becoming increasingly more useful at the author or article level. Maybe we can supplement this level of usage statistic with a tool that would measure "AuthorQUAL" or "ArticleQUAL" someday and link usage counts to perceptions of quality of different authors and articles.

ATG: During this economic crisis, how is the data ARL provides to its members helping them in daily decision making?

MK: Clearly, one of the reasons I worry about momentum is because of the economic crisis. **ARL** provides annual statistics, where we capture trends in expenditures. Libraries have been able to use these data to demonstrate what they need to do to remain competitive with peer institutions and gain some of the lost ground, in many cases. They often use these data to make needed justifica-

tions for salary increases for highly-qualified professionals. They are using data (i.e., from **LibQUAL+**) to move forward with badly needed renovations, even during tough times. They are using **ClimateQUAL+** data to improve the internal climate for justice and diversity toward a healthier organizational climate. And they are using data (i.e., from **MINES for Libraries**) to demonstrate the increased value they deliver with the availability of electronic resources.

ATG: How do you perceive publishers' and vendors' reactions to the rise of the analytics-driven library? In what ways have you seen them act as partners with library in this analytics-driven landscape?

MK: I think publishers and vendors are seeing a lot of opportunity in being able to use this information to increase the value of their products. They also see some underlying threats, of course. Ultimately, risk and reward may be two sides of the same coin, and as long as you keep "failing forward," the industry is moving in the right direction. What worries me most is not that we are not changing and working as we should; it is, rather, the issue of momentum and the pace of change. I am not sure we are moving fast enough toward increasing the value we deliver to the end users. Through efforts like **COUNTER**, we jointly work on developing codes of best practice for sharing usage data, and as the environment evolves, we work together to anticipate future needs in this area.

ATG: In the academic institution, what is the future role you see the librarian playing? And libraries?

MK: The librarian is a trusted partner in the research, teaching, and learning process. Some librarians are more co-researchers, co-authors, and co-teachers than others. I believe we will see this collaborative role become stronger in the future. Libraries will continue to preserve information for posterity — we need institutions to preserve the human record so that we build knowledge and achieve progress in some, more or less, cumulative fashion.

ATG: And for fun, what are you currently reading? What's the most influential book you've read?

MK: "**The Joy Luck Club**" is on my bedside stand these days. For anyone interested in immigration issues and touched by different cultures, it is a wonderful, sensitive, and engaging read. I will not venture to mention the most influential book — too many out there — but, in the recent past, I did enjoy reading a book that is a good fit for concluding this interview: "**Super Crunchers: Why Thinking-by-Numbers is the New Way to Be Smart,**" by **Ian Ayres**. It is a fun book! 🌲