



Profile

Kate Wittenberg

Kate Wittenberg is currently the Managing Director of Portico, the service which provides digital preservation to more than 700 libraries around the world. She was appointed in September 2011, following successful positions at Ithaka S&R and Columbia University Press. Kate took over the reins from Eileen Fenton, who had led Portico since its founding in 2002.

In the press statement announcing her appointment, it was said that Kate Wittenberg 'brings a deep understanding of issues at the intersection of digital technologies, academic libraries, and scholarly publishing to Portico ...', noting that her 'innovative work with libraries and publishers helped to develop resources, products, and services that enabled these communities to grow as vibrant digital organizations while remaining true to their core missions'. High praise indeed, and a very good reason for *Insights* to turn the spotlight on her.

Kate spent most of her career at Columbia, where she was the Editor-in-Chief of Columbia University Press until 1999, before going on to found and direct EPIC (Electronic Publishing Initiative at Columbia). EPIC was a pioneering initiative in digital publishing, and a model publishing partnership for libraries, presses and academic IT departments. With such an illustrious career, your Editor was keen to find out about Kate's career journey. She began by saying that while her work has encompassed a number of different organizations and roles, "it feels as though it has followed a very natural trajectory that in many ways mirrors the evolution of the broader scholarly communications environment".

" ... it feels as though [my work] has followed a very natural trajectory that in many ways mirrors the evolution of the broader scholarly communications environment."

She continued, "Like many of us who were deeply invested in the world of books, I began by working in publishing. I was tremendously fortunate to have the opportunity to work

at Oxford University Press, where I was exposed to some of the world's greatest authors, editors, and other publishing professionals". Kate moved to Columbia University Press in 1984 as the history/politics editor, and then took on the role of Editor-in-Chief in 1990. "This was at a time when the university presses were beginning to face the challenges of responding to digital technology developments that, as we now know, transformed the publishing landscape." It was while in this role that she began developing plans for a born-digital publication to disseminate working papers in international relations, the result of which was the launch in 1997 of *Columbia International Affairs Online*, with support from the Andrew W Mellon Foundation.

When Kate and colleagues founded EPIC, they were breaking new ground. Kate recalls, "at that time we were working in a space that was still sparsely populated: there was JSTOR, Project MUSE, the National Academies Press' work in digital publishing, as well as several other noteworthy experiments. But for the most part, it was still a wide open field, and we were all creating new models and figuring things out as we went along". In an early example of collaborative working, she notes that "I benefitted tremendously from my colleagues who were running these other projects, as we all shared our experiences, mistakes and successes in a collaborative spirit. One of the things that I value most about working in the field of scholarly communications is the generosity of the community: publishers, librarians, IT professionals and scholars who are willing to share their experiences and lessons learned in a way that helps everyone innovate".

"... we were all creating new models and figuring things out as we went along."

It was not always plain sailing, and occasionally things did not go as planned. Kate responded positively, saying, "By its very nature the process of innovation and experimentation inevitably means that things don't always work out as one expects. That's the whole point of doing this sort of work. I don't consider these kinds of unplanned outcomes low points, but rather opportunities to learn things that benefit the next phase of work. While it can be disconcerting when a project does not turn out as was planned, I believe it is important that we all understand and embrace the value of failure and unexpected outcomes. If we do not do so it will be difficult to engage with the changing landscape in productive ways".

Looking back at these times, Kate recollects that "... of course, the start-up mentality that reigned during those days also had to respond to the realities involved in running businesses, and the need for organizational structure, efficient production systems, stable and scalable technology, and financial sustainability. Here again, it was valuable to be able to share early models and experiences with colleagues as we discovered what failed and what worked. One of the lessons from this period was that collaborations and partnerships, while sometimes complicated to initiate and manage, can be tremendously valuable in terms of leveraging expertise and infrastructure." It is clear that working with others is a real highlight of her career, and Kate went on to say that "... as someone who comes out of publishing, one of the highlights throughout my work has been the opportunity to collaborate closely with the librarians and IT professionals who have been at the forefront of innovation in the digital arena. Over the years I have frequently drawn on the lessons learned from these colleagues, particularly in thinking about how to organize content, respond to users' needs, manage costs, and plan for sustainability". This experience proved to be a learning opportunity for Kate herself, and she recalled, "During this period I came to appreciate that the spectrum of scholarly communications stretches from the scholar's initial research through analysis, writing, editing, publishing, and preservation of the resulting work. Scholars have needs at each phase of this process, and it is important that as supporting players we respond by bringing all of our relevant skills and experience to this work. In many ways my role at Portico brings me full circle in this process, as we are focused here on making sure that the scholarly output from this spectrum of activities is available in a usable format for the very long term".

"... I believe it is important that we all understand and embrace the value of failure and unexpected outcomes."

233 And so, Kate finds herself now as Managing Director of Portico, a role in which she acknowledges that she has “benefitted greatly from the work of my predecessor, Eileen Fenton, who developed Portico from a start-up into a successful and robust operation with broad support from the library and publishing communities. I know from my own experience that this process of building something from the ground up is fraught with challenges, and I have tremendous respect for the people who effectively navigated that phase of Portico’s development”. Looking forward, she notes that “at this point, my colleagues and I need to make certain that Portico remains both efficient and innovative as it moves forward. Scholars are using new forms of digital content such as dynamic data and multimedia that require different approaches to preservation. We need to figure out how to handle this challenge while still addressing the need to preserve an ever-growing body of published digital content in the form of books, journals and primary source collections”. She went on to say that “the need to increase the efficiency and capacity of existing operations while engaging in the research necessary to address new preservation needs is the challenge that will be occupying much of our attention and energy in the next phase of Portico’s development”.

“I continue to be amazed and humbled by the knowledge, creativity, intensity, and commitment that the best scholars and information professionals bring to their work.”

It is clear that Kate has a real passion for her work. Your Editor asked her what exactly it is about the work that motivates her. She replied, “The things that excite me about this field are the same as when I started working in scholarly publishing: scholars and colleagues. I continue to be amazed and humbled by the knowledge, creativity, intensity, and commitment that the best scholars and information professionals bring to their work. It is an honor to have the opportunity to help scholars shape, present, disseminate, and preserve their research and to learn from my colleagues who are breaking new ground in scholarly communication”. She added that the challenges involved in supporting scholars in a rapidly changing digital environment make this work “even more interesting than it was in the past”.

Having referred to ‘the past’, your Editor prompted Kate for her thoughts on possible future directions for digital scholarship. She said enthusiastically, “To me, the most exciting thing about the use of digital technology is that it will enable truly interdisciplinary and collaborative scholarship that has not been possible previously. Scholars are able to ask new questions and find new answers as a result of working in the digital environment. Some of the most interesting topics that scholars are exploring in their work involve collaboration across several intersecting fields using data, tools and platforms that are available because of advances in digital technology. The question is who will help these scholars develop, disseminate, sustain and preserve this innovative work? How are we as a community going to make sure we have the right people and organizations in place to provide this support?”

Obviously warming to her topic, she continued, “As scholars envision the possibilities presented by a digital research and publishing environment, I believe it is incumbent on their colleagues in the libraries, IT, and academic publishing to develop an equally creative vision of their role in this process of innovation. As we move forward, librarians, editors and IT professionals will share equally in considering critical questions involved in creating and managing digital scholarship: must an argument necessarily be presented in linear form? Can one present an ‘authorial voice’ while allowing a user to enter a work from multiple points? Are images, video and data supplementary illustrations of points made in the text, or can they now become central organizing structures of a work? Is there value in being able to identify and preserve the relationship between research data and scholarly publications? ... These kinds of questions, which have up until now been theoretical in most discussions, become tangible and urgent when scholars begin to explore fully the potential of the digital environment”.

But, Kate noted, this is not an environment where the academic community can work in isolation. “Faculty will increasingly need support in developing their research agendas, using new technologies, curating and preserving the text and data from their research, and shaping the narratives and multimedia elements of their projects as they move through the

234 research, writing and publishing process. As a community of information professionals we will need to think innovatively about our roles in order to be ready to fill the needs of scholars in this new environment."

Clearly, Kate has busy times ahead of her, so, wondered your Editor, how does she manage to relax? "I am very fortunate to be involved with work that is tremendously engaging and interesting, and as a result, the lines between what I consider work and leisure tend to blur. There is so much to read and think about in order to keep up with the field that it takes up a good deal of energy both in and out of the office. However, I do enjoy taking breaks to spend time with my family." But, she noted, " This fall [autumn] for the first time both my son and daughter are away at college, so things at home are much less hectic than usual. Now my husband and I have only our toy poodle, Shadow, around the house. Fortunately, he is quite gifted, and we are spending time helping him get involved in more extracurricular activities so his college applications will be as strong as possible when he too decides to move on."

On this lighthearted note, your Editor thanked Kate for her time and allowed her to head back to work.



Kate and Shadow, her toy poodle, relax at home