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Tom Sanville in Conversation

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Abstract

Kathy Perry, Director of VIVA (The Virtual Library of Virginia), discusses with Tom Sanville, on the occasion of his retirement in December, 2014, his noted career serving libraries. This includes Sanville’s entrée into the library world through industry, the beginnings of ICOLC, its operations and accomplishments, the ICOLC “grilles,” the world of electronic content licensing, and more.

Keywords: Lyrasis; ICOLC; Consortium of Consortia; history of collaboration; ICOLC grilles;

Introduction

Tom Sanville retired from LYRASIS as the Senior Director of Licensing and Strategic Partnerships as of December 2014, but those of us in the library consortia community have known him in many other roles, particularly as Executive Director of OhioLINK (1992-2010) and as the recognized leader of the Consortium of Consortia which was later named the International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC).

While it may be hard for many folks to remember what it was like in 1996, I think it’s important to think about the early days of library consortia development. As has been said many times and by many people (Weber¹, Alexander², Perry³), library consortia have existed for more than 100 years. But the tremendous growth in statewide consortia interested in licensing electronic resources for their members came about largely in the 1990’s, fueled in equal parts by OhioLINK’s example of obtaining additional state money for libraries and the context of the dramatically increasing journal prices. The logic of collaborating in order to achieve reduced prices became evident, but it was all new territory for everyone. As Tom says below, “ICOLC coalesced so quickly because the need was so clear.”

I’ve known Tom since the first meeting of what was then called the Consortium of Consortia in February of 1997. Since that time, I’ve had the pleasure and privilege of attending all 25 of the North American ICOLC meetings to date as well as several of the European ICOLC meetings, so I’ve seen Tom’s work with consortia over the years. While he has been the recognized leader of ICOLC, it is significant to note that he has no official title; ICOLC has never had any officers, any dues, any bylaws, or indeed, any organization. Further, Tom received no additional compensation for all of his considerable work in organizing the ICOLC conferences, working with vendors, developing and analyzing ICOLC member surveys, convening additional consortia meetings at ALA and Charleston, and much more.

His retirement provides us with a moment to pause and reflect on his many contributions so I was delighted to be asked to provide an article commemorating Tom’s achievements. But, I’m pretty lazy, so rather than write an article, I chose to approach this with a simple Question and Answer interview which took place in November and December of 2014.

Conversation with Tom Sanville

Perry: You have a Masters of Business Administration and came to OhioLINK from a market-
ing background at OCLC and other companies. How has your background helped (or hindered) your work with library consortia, first at OCLC, OhioLINK, and then with LYRASIS?

Sanville: From the beginning I came into the library field at a consortium level. From the beginning, my orientation and approach to libraries was shaped by an appreciation of the power of cooperation. Before libraries I worked seven years in the soft drink industry, first with The Coca-Cola Company and then a major Midwest bottler. Through this experience I was familiar with tiered distribution systems (like OCLC and its regional networks) and also in creating cooperative programs among independent organizations with common interests. So I got good cat herding experience. By and large, I think that experience provided many lessons that helped me fit into the library landscape once I began to understand the culture and services.

From the soft drink industry I also developed my bias for “more is better.” In that industry you are always trying to increase the volume of purchases. That never happens without bringing the unit price for the purchaser down, way down. I think for libraries to be successful they need to provide more consumable information to their patrons whose appetites and needs for information have grown exponentially. That capability does not happen without the unit cost of information dropping dramatically from traditional levels. This goal—to reduce the unit cost of information and drive up the ability to provide more, much more information to patrons—has been my singular yardstick for success in all that I have tried to do during my career with libraries. Consortia always seemed to me to be the best vehicle to make this goal a reality.

Also, my orientation to number crunching and financial analysis was a big asset. No matter the objective, the numbers always have to make sense in support of your objective. The ability to make these understood by the libraries, if not the publishers, and be an integral part of any decision being considered has been a plus.

Perry: Although I was among the 56 intrepid librarians at the first meeting (of what was then called The Consortium of Consortia in St. Louis, in February 1997), I was not part of the original planning for it. How did the Consortium of Consortia (COC), later to be known as the International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC), come into being?

Sanville: After too many changes in laptops and software, not to mention jobs, I lost my earliest email folders from the pre-COC days. But thankfully Bill Potter wisely has saved his old emails as text files and so I can thank him for very recently supplying to me copies of the very earliest pre-COC emails that provide the key history.

The spark for ICOLC started at a spring 1995 CNI meeting Birds of a Feather table for library consortia. Lou Parker from the University of North Carolina System proposed idea for the table and possibly the vague concept of ICOLC. A very small number were around that table and I can’t even tell you who they all were but Evan Reader from the California State University, was one. But from that small group began the discussions of our common issues in the new activity of group electronic content licensing. Without Lou Parker and the spark from that meeting ICOLC might not have taken form so soon.

The ICOLC email list was in existence by late December 1995 with Evan Reader, Cal State Universities, Alan Charnes, CARL, Jim Corey, FCLA; Bill DeJohn, MINITEX,; Lou Parker, U of N Carolina System; Bill Potter, Georgia university and college libraries (to become Galileo); and me. By the first of January 1996 I had added Barbara McFadden, CIC and Michele Newberry, FCLA.
I sent the first email to these six folks on two topics - Academic Press licensing exchange/collaboration and meeting at the upcoming 1996 mid-winter ALA in San Antonio. In part I said about Academic Press...“We believe there are changes necessary to their offer that will suit our common needs. If key consortia can agree on these it is more likely AP will agree to make the modifications.” Sound familiar? And an example of how far we have come, one of the issues we all needed to address- “AP must agree to IP checking as the means of authorizing users so as to avoid having to provide thousands of users passwords and IDs.”

By the time we got to San Antonio the group had expanded still further. From a meeting summary I sent afterwards: “Groups represented: Illinois, Cal State, CIC, Yale (for an emerging NE research libraries group), FCLA, CARL Alliance, Solinet, OhioLINK.” And the extent of our pre-ALA planning: “Let’s meet at the registration lobby of the Marriott RiverCenter (NOT Marriott Riverwalk) at 12:30 on Sunday and go from there to wherever is convenient. Be scouting out the joint.”

And in that early email exchange we can credit Evan Reader, Cal State, with our first group name, the COC, and the expression of what became the ICOLC. It stuck to the wall. He wrote, “I would hope that, through our efforts, we would be able to soon form a discussion group (a consortium of consortia, if you will) to examine this and other issues.”

Through 1996 the email list and slowly the COC just grew organically, from one person to the next. By the 1996 summer ALA it was almost too big a group to just find a table.

I don’t recall exactly when we decided to plan the first COC meeting but had to be in the 2nd half of 1996 as by late 1996 we were taking registrations for the February 1997 first meeting. I don’t have any recollection of having to debate the question. The group had grown very fast because the need was so great to address the rapidly developing arena of electronic licensing and what we saw as the widely variant and mostly ineffective practices of the major publishers.

We can be thankful that George Rickerson, then of the University of Missouri System as Director, Office of Library Systems, volunteered to host the meeting. With no road map, no budget and no track record for attendance it was admirable that he pulled this off. And the rest is history.

Perry: That first meeting of the COC was intense, to say the least—there were 12 “grille sessions,” one after the other over 2 1/2 days. I remember being taken by bus from the hotel to the University of Missouri, St. Louis with little chance to escape. It was my first introduction to your workaholic habits. What are your memories of that first meeting and how have the ICOLC meetings changed since then?

Sanville: It is a testament to the “no-brainer” idea of ICOLC that we had 56 attendees from 30 consortia at this first meeting. This included three consortia from Canada and a representative from the United Kingdom. We were already gathering a global community.

Attendees, or rather survivors, of the first meeting will recall the forced march of 2 and one half days of grilles; grille for 75 minutes – 15 minute break – grille for 75 minutes – 15 minute break – and on and on it went. We did 12 grilles in those 2 and one half days in hard chairs and no tables. From the start we recognized the value of the publishers’ time and that we needed to stay on schedule, no matter what. They would make the trip for just a 75 minute presentation and grilling, and it was not likely to be pleasant. So why not at least be on-time. I don’t think we immediately called them “grilles” but it soon became clear, that is what they were.
I remember folks grousing about the long hours, hard chairs, and somewhat Spartan arrangements by meeting standards. I suppose I have to take some responsibility for the work, work, work ethos of those early meetings in particular. The objective was to cram in as much quality work time as possible in the several days we met. And do it on-time and on the cheap. I wanted to get the most out of our limited time because there was so much to do.

Four out of the first five meetings were held in full service conference centers so we were effectively sequestered together the entire time. Easy to schedule long work days. As we branched out to more locations, we realized this would not be a practical approach, and some regular attendees cried “uncle.” So we now hold the North American meetings in standard hotel settings. And maybe we have shaved a little time off the daily schedule, but not much. We still run on-time, no matter what.

The two biggest changes over time: first, we no longer grille vendors as we used to, mostly because we don’t need to. In the early days, the issues were so fundamental and the proposals of the publishers so inadequate that it was very easy to get riled up. Now, with the fundamentals well established, the issues do not have that same compelling nature and unified strong reaction from the community. This is something the community should think about. There are still key issues and the community must be willing to focus and push. Second, we grille less and examine and talk about common issues more. Below is a chart (Figure 1) of our Grille history to illustrate this.

As we settled in as a community we found more and more topics to discuss. Many of these have remained as regular topics, core to our missions, though evolving over time. Other topics creep in over time. Here are two tables of meeting discussion topics that are ten years apart (Figures 2 and 3). How similar and yet also how different. While new topics are inevitable, even old topics take on new flavors. And keep in mind, over the years it’s hardly the same faces. For the 25 North American meetings we have had 732 different attendees. Of these, 363 have only attended one meeting. 620 have attended 5 or fewer.

Perry: ICOLC is an amazing organization (although we know that “organization” may not be the right word for group that does not have by-laws, membership dues, elected officials, staff, or anything really remotely resembling an organization). Nevertheless, the ICOLC meetings have always been the most important meetings I attend each year, both for the information gained and the valuable international network of friends and colleagues. You have served as the de facto organizer of all of the North American ICOLC Conferences and have been on the Planning Committees for the European meetings as well. What kept you going and what is your advice to the ICOLC members for future meetings?

Sanville: As Walter White says at the end of Breaking Bad, “I did it for me.” I join with many of our colleagues who regularly attend who say it’s because it makes their job easier, and that it improves and enriches the job they do. I always leave an ICOLC meeting somewhat depressed having said to myself many times during each meeting, “How come I didn’t think of that.” But I also feel enriched and could go home all the smarter for it.

Can’t explain why I’ve kept going as a lead organizer. Just too much fun I guess. It has been an extraordinarily rewarding professional experience to see the meetings grow, expand to Europe, and then continue with such quality, utility, and vigor. Not to mention the great friendships, both professional and personal, that have developed.
Figure 1.

Figure 2.
Figure 3.

From the start we said ICOLC would meet only as long as it made a difference to the consortia attendees. So my only advice is, if does make a difference or can make even more of a difference, each person has to step up and own how that difference is sustained and maximized. Don’t expect someone else to do it. There is a relatively small core of regulars at any one point in time who have provided the ongoing thread and glue around which the community is sustained. Be part of that thread and glue.

Perry: What do you count among ICOLC’s biggest accomplishments?

Sanville: As the U.S. Army says, “Be all that you can be.” At the broadest level, I hope ICOLC has enabled consortia to do this. From the many letters and emails I’ve received since announcing my retirement, this appears to be the case. Colleagues realized they could be more influential change agents than they realized. And do it most effectively as a group.

I think those early chaotic years of electronic licensing were very effective for ICOLC. Our statements and grilles, and the more empowered attitude with which each consortium conducted its negotiations in the trenches, resulted in a huge collective accomplishment for the benefit of libraries.

Personally, I also am proud that we have continued to attract a wider community of consortia around the globe. But keep in mind we are still primarily a group focused on academic library and consortia issues. That may be very good thing. There is a huge frontier of other libraries
and consortia that we only tangentially touch. Would it be a good or bad thing to broaden our community? I’ve never worried too much about this on the assumption that if it makes sense it will happen organically if and when there is value in doing so.

**Perry:** We’ve “grilled” many vendors over the years, some multiple times. What changes have you seen in the world of the vendors and what has made the most difference with the vendors?

**Sanville:** It’s hard to convey now how inexperienced the publishers and we were in setting up electronic licenses, and multi-library ones to boot, and how this translated to proposals by publishers for absurd limitations on access and use and unrealistic prices. They were extraordinarily cautious and protective of their traditional print models while we were trying to transform the entire landscape. It’s also hard to convey the pushback required to make our points and progress. We did not win any Miss Congeniality awards. And many in our own community were a bit startled by the direct and often confrontational approach some of us took. But as a result the fundamentals of a workable, functional, even if imperfect, marketplace for electronic content licensing were put in place rather quickly.

Consortia are few in number and vendors did, and still do, work directly with many more libraries. But because the value and economics of the content that did and does flow through consortia is so large, we have had a disproportionate impact on market practices relative to our small numbers. That we were able to communicate with one another and develop practices along common lines, promote these to the marketplace through our statements, call vendors on the grille carpet if needed, and align our member libraries to support us on their behalf, has made all the difference.

But vendors are still vendors and their basic motivations remain the same. We are all now well down the path in the practices of electronic content licensing so the necessary evolutions that need to continue do not strike us as viscerally as those back in the late 1990’s or early 2000’s. But we continue to see the expansion of available content and vendors’ natural desires to expand their business. One might say vendors are more creative in trying to enable library purchases but the pie is not growing very much even as prices rise and there are more quality products to consider. And I’m still amazed when I see terms in vendor-proposed agreements that have not been part of model licenses for years. Seems the old adage is true—the more things change, the more they remain the same.

**Perry:** If you could get vendors to change just one thing, what would it be?

**Sanville:** This is the fantasy world question right? I’d like them to take much more risk to help create a healthier, long-term information system that, maybe, they can thrive in but whose prime function is to serve well societal needs. But the deck is stacked against such a perspective. The corporate requirements to serve the short-term and maintain the status-quo or most often conservatively control change and thus risk are just too great. So they at best incrementally give way. This simply forces solutions to be found through other mechanisms. It may be too dramatic to say they are sowing the seeds of their own demise but there are plenty of industries where the major players now are entirely different than those in the past who could not make a major leap forward.

**Perry:** If you could get library consortia directors to change just one thing, what would it be?

**Sanville:** It’s the old saying, life is journey, not a destination. Consortia have never arrived. Certainly libraries have never arrived. ICOLC coalesced so quickly because the need was so clear.
Now, having won a lot of battles and moved to a higher plateau, that singular flash point isn’t there. Like libraries, consortia have largely treated symptoms and not causes of fundamental economic issues we face. We have not won any wars. Of course some of these issues are owned by the publishers, scholarly communities, and the administrations to whom libraries and consortia are subject.

Nonetheless, and maybe because we don’t own all the issues, I’d like to see the consortia directors strive to define how the consortia can maximize their contribution to resolving the long term issues and not be satisfied with thinking and working within our own boxes. A stronger collective commitment to resolution of the fundamental issues in concert with the non-library owners would be a healthy evolutionary change that will keep ICOLC vibrant. And of course, as a start, the very singular one thing, just say “no” more often.

Perry: You’ve been involved with some ambitious Open Access (OA) projects, such as The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, SCOAP³, and Knowledge Unlatched, from the early days. How do you see that going and what are your hopes for the future of Open Access?

Sanville: Open Access seems to be an example of hope over experience. It strikes me as conceptually a much healthier information eco-system than what we have now. The devil seems to be in the details of migrating our current eco-system to this new one. Thus, my basic attitude about OA is nothing ventured, nothing learned or gained. In the context of how things are today it is easy to dismiss many OA projects. But to determine how to move forward and arrive at and go beyond the tipping points may require many attempts. So I’m hopeful for OA, but it will take a more enlightened and broader and long-term commitment to it beyond just libraries.

Perry: What are your plans for the future? Anything related to libraries and consortia?

Sanville: Nope—the extent of my plan is a short-term 4-month transition gig with LY-RASIS. This will carry me through the planning and execution of the April Albany ICOLC meeting. Other than that I will first de-compress and de-program from 40 years of setting expectations and accomplishments of my daily life around work. Then redefine what I want these to mean for the future. I think I can only do these three things experientially, not in advance. Not sure if that redefinition includes libraries and consortia. But I hope it includes the wonderful people I’ve known in libraries and consortia these many years.

Conclusion

I hope this article has provided some insight into the tremendous impact Tom has had during his career. Whether they know it or not, librarians in all types of libraries all over the world have benefitted from Tom’s work with ICOLC. So, on behalf of the librarians everywhere, I’ll say it here: Thanks, Tom!

Endnotes

