

Profile

Alicia Wise



“Do you beam journals to Jupiter?”

“How much access is there for extra-terrestrials, anyway?”

Alicia is currently the Director of Universal Access at Elsevier, and it fell to your Editor to start by finding out exactly what that means. Unsurprisingly, it is not a question that is new to Alicia. “At first, the Universal Access bit of my job title can perplex people a little. I’ve been asked questions like ‘Do you beam journals to Jupiter?’ and ‘How much access is there for extra-terrestrials, anyway?’ It’s actually a really inspiring concept. Elsevier has a vision for working with others to ensure access to high-quality information is available to anyone, anywhere, anytime. That’s the vision for universal access.”

Gaining access to unusual resources is a concept that we will come back to later!

Despite her esteemed position, Alicia admits to being a ‘home body’ who enjoys nothing more than “schlepping around at home with my husband, Ian, and two lively/lovely sons (Thom, who is eight and Alex, who is three)”. One of her first jobs was at the Placement Center in the University of Washington, helping newly qualified teachers get their first professional positions, but since then (and despite being surrounded by talented, sensible career advisors) Alicia says “I must not have paid enough attention as I’ve pretty much just followed my nose and sense of curiosity”.

In spite of her initial lack of direction, Alicia has had an amazingly varied career in the information community and so we asked her whether she thinks the different sectors still have things to learn from each other. “Absolutely and that’s one of the real strengths of UKSG – it helps bring us together so that we can continue learning from one another. Publishers have tremendous analytic capabilities, and a flair for developing sustainable businesses. Both skill sets are precious, but I think often under-appreciated and undervalued by many librarians. Librarians have a tremendous flair for connecting with readers, and insight into changing user behaviors.”

At the age of 11, it was a fondness for reading Nancy Drew mystery stories that made Alicia decide to become an archaeologist. A great opportunity to skip high school and start university early meant she was able to start learning about archaeology, resulting in a degree in Anthropology (Archaeology is a sub-discipline of Anthropology in the US). This in turn led to a PhD at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, and, while writing that up, she applied for a six-month student visa to work in the UK at the University of Bradford archaeology department. “I became very attached to both the UK and to my now-husband during that time, and never went back.”

It was following this initial position that Alicia first became really engaged by data and information

management. “My first proper archaeology job was at the University of York. Julian Richards in the archaeology department had just received a grant from JISC to set up the Archaeology Data Service (ADS), and I was its first member of staff. In that role I was lucky to learn about so much more than archaeology – for example about digital preservation, negotiation, forming partnerships with other organizations, and a little bit about publishing.”

“This may sound boring – or shocking ...” said Alicia when asked about the memorable moments in her career so far “... but many of the high points have involved licensing. There’s no better way to cement a partnership and build trust than to gather stakeholders around the table and develop a shared understanding out of misunderstanding and suspicion. Highlights have all been about that. At the ADS I can remember the absolute joy of reaching agreement with the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland.”

From the ADS, it was onwards again to take up the position of Collections Manager for JISC, taking on responsibility for collection policy and negotiations with a very wide range of organizations. Alicia remembers that “the very, very toughest publisher I encountered in that role was ... wait for it! ... the Ordnance Survey, which at that time had a revenue generating imperative from the Treasury and little interest in widening access to their digital mapping products”, though she went on to say (with reference, perhaps, to the role she now holds) “Yes, I did also find Elsevier rather difficult to interact with in the late 1990s and am really impressed with how much it has changed in the last ten years.”

A promotion to Head of Development within JISC led, eventually, to Alicia’s next move to become Chief Executive of the Publishers Licensing Society (PLS), the collective management organization for copyright that works with nearly 3,000 publishers in the UK. “In my previous role copyright had seemed a near-constant barrier, and I was curious to understand why it was so important to rightsholders. I learned that it is the fundamental cornerstone for authors, artists, publishers and any others who need or want to make a living through their creativity. There is still so much misunderstanding about copyright – as law it is quite elegant and flexible, and in practice it is still too reliant on 20th-century workflows and processes.” At the PLS she remembers fondly working with

rightsholders and colleagues at the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and in universities to agree a free licence for the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (RAE).

In her final year at the PLS, before moving to Elsevier, the Board agreed to second her part-time to the Publishers Association, where she led on digital publishing initiatives and online anti-piracy services. And so, coming full circle, we return to Alicia’s current role as Director of Universal Access at Elsevier, which she describes as being ‘really cool’. “I work with a small team and together we are responsible for Elsevier’s access strategy and policies, and with identifying and closing access gaps.” The work is global, and really varied. “Ninety-three percent of academic researchers are happy with their access levels, but we are experimenting with ways to broaden access for members of the public and for people employed by small- and medium-sized enterprises. We are also partnering with a range of funding bodies and research institutions to understand their access objectives and to find ways of delivering these in sustainable ways. This might include sponsorship of articles or titles so that they can be made available free at the point of use, or through agreements to enable systematic manuscript posting in ways that are sustainable for the underlying journals, or through developing new services such as SciVal Showcase which enables the showcasing of an organization’s research articles.” Alicia is obviously very fired up by her work, and went on: “We also work on technological access challenges, and are keenly interested in expanded access for people with disabilities and in facilitating text mining and also the integration of data sets and research articles. The Universal Access team has recently been given a lead role in co-ordinating Elsevier’s digital preservation and information philanthropy activities”. Alicia has good experiences of working with organizations such as RNIB and Dyslexia Action to really improve access for readers with disabilities, which, she admits, was one of the huge attractions of joining the team at Elsevier.

When asked about whether there have been any low points in her career so far, Alicia replied: “In all great reads, there are chapters of tension and despair. The thing is to persevere, work with others, and get through these to enjoy the happy ending” but, philosophically, conceded that “the really worst parts have been all of my own making. I can get frustrated and impatient by resistance to

change – especially if it is really needed. And I can be in such a hurry to move forward that I forget to slow down and spend time to encourage and enable people to come with me”.

I did say we would return to Alicia’s ability to gain access to strange materials ... so here it is!

“... I recently helped a friend of a friend who needed some fresh gelada baboon poo ...”

“I’m a huge fan of social networking and love the sometimes wacky connections that can be made that way. Via Facebook I recently helped a friend of a friend who needed some fresh gelada baboon poo for a scientific experiment.” She did, however, go on to qualify this bizarre request. “My husband is a molecular biologist, and we have a friend who works at the London Zoo, and he knows this guy who works with wild baboon troops, and ... you get the picture. Terrific stuff, social networking!”

While on the subject of technological change, your Editor took the opportunity to ask Alicia how she sees the recent cuts to funding for both further and higher education in the UK impacting on scholarly publishing. “There are structural shifts at a global scale with the emergence of China, India, Brazil, etc., that are having a tremendous impact on us all ... It’s essential for us all to be strategic thinkers, and to position our organizations to survive the current difficulties and emerge able to move forward quickly and with confidence. Collaboration is always a good strategy in my book, but particularly during tough times. High-quality content remains essential to underpin academic research, and it needs to be really efficient for academics to locate and use. It also needs to be sustainable for all involved in providing that information. Publishers incur significant costs to publish quality scientific information, and library budgets aren’t keeping pace with the growth in scholarly outputs.”

“Publishers incur significant costs to publish quality scientific information, and library budgets aren’t keeping pace with the growth in scholarly outputs.”

And, conveniently, that brought us on to the interesting question of how Alicia sees the library/publishing relationship changing over the next five to ten years. “Well, I think it has improved over the last decade, but I still couldn’t describe it as ideal.”

She did, though, qualify this by saying that this was broad over-generalization. “There are many individual librarians and publishers who get on very well indeed, and this is an area in which UKSG has made a particularly powerful contribution.” Alicia is concerned that “the broad relationship is still too often too polarized, and there seems a constant risk that it may unfortunately get worse before it gets better”.

But she does see hope for both parties. “I believe librarians could be in a stronger position to positively influence publishers by treating us as partners rather than ‘vendors’ or as obstacles to be done away with. I believe publishers could be in a stronger position to positively influence librarians by engaging as constructive, willing partners and by being a bit more open about all the innovative issues we are working on with some acceptance from all that not all experiments will be successful. It’s a complex time when everything is changing, and changing quickly at that, and having some space to learn and develop is really important.”

“It is possible for us all to engage positively and constructively on issues of shared interest, expanding access in sustainable ways, and incorporating open access models into our portfolios of sustainable business models. What would help is more attention and time spent on developing shared visions, a shared understanding of the challenges that each stakeholder will have to overcome to realize these, and a shared roadmap of how these can be overcome.” She pointed to the recent report by CEPA and Mark Ware entitled *Heading for the*

Younger son Alex helping to keep Alicia on her toes



open road: costs and benefits of transitions in scholarly communications (<http://www.rin.ac.uk/news/press/heading-open-road-costs-and-benefits-transitions-scholarly-communications>), which, despite a few concerns, she sees as “a positive example: a piece of substantive research commissioned by a range of organizations representing different stakeholders ... [which] gives us all a chance to draw a line under past discussions and to make a fresh start”.

And, talking of fresh starts, we asked Alicia what she does outside work when she needs a clean break. “We do lots of gardening and walking,

and live with two cats, four chickens (each of whom is a little personality on Facebook, of course) [STOP PRESS: two chickens now, thanks to a wily fox], one fish and a pond full of assorted frogs/tadpoles. We play board games – not as often as we used to as both Ian and I are really busy with work right now – but recent favorites include Pandemic and The aMAZEing Labyrinth. We are just a bit geeky and while we haven’t got a TV we spend lots of time on DS, iPad, laptops, and the Wii. It’s a little difficult to remember life before 3G devices! “ With that, we finished the interview and allowed Alicia to head off in defence of her chickens!