

Meet the Editor

ONLINE and Off: Marydee Ojala Is Always Searching

by LAUREE PADGETT

When we were talking on the phone about this interview, Marydee Ojala and I were trying to figure out just how long we've



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known each other. In short, it's been a long time, going back to the early 1990s during the heyday of the National Online Meeting. During its reign of many years, that was the only conference produced by Information Today, Inc. (ITI), which was called Learned Information, Inc. at the time. We actually started working together when she became editor of *ONLINE*, but that's jumping ahead of the story.

Before *ONLINE*

Ojala earned her B.A. in English from Brown University and went on to the University of Pittsburgh for an M.L.S. She started her career in the corporate library world at Bank of America in San Francisco. That's where she was working when she started at *ONLINE* in 1987, writing a column called Dollar Sign. Twenty-plus years later, she still pens the column, but now she is *ONLINE*'s editor. After Bank of America, Ojala launched her own company to provide business information to companies of all sizes.

Ojala left for Denmark in 1994 to work as an independent information consultant and online search trainer. When she returned 3 years later, she took the position of editor for *Database*, which is now known as *EContent*. Three years after that, she officially became the editor of *ONLINE*. In addition to her *ONLINE* editing duties, she also writes occasional NewsBreaks for the ITI site and Reports

From the Field articles for *Information Today*. She is also the contributing editor for *EContent* and helps coordinate the *EContent* 100 lists that are published every December.

Tag Line: You're It

Just as with its editor, *ONLINE* has quite a bit of history. Having been with the periodical for so long, Ojala didn't have to look up much to tell us about its history. The first issue of *ONLINE* was published in January 1977 by Online, Inc. "It's always been called *ONLINE*, although the tag line has changed," she says. "The first one was 'The Magazine of Online Information Systems.' Today it's 'Exploring Technology & Resources for Information Professionals.'"

According to Ojala, the issue has always been aimed at information professionals: people who use online systems and sources for serious research purposes. They are the ones who "need to know the practicalities of online research, rather than the hype from vendors," she says. But it's also been written by practitioners, the people who actually use the information products and can assess their value.

For Ojala, the key to *ONLINE*'s staying power is simple. "We strive for non-biased, objective coverage of the events, products, and industry developments that affect information professionals. We know that librarians are called upon to make lots of decisions, some of them about spending money to acquire information products and some of them about search strategies and database choices. We also know they frequently don't have the time to analyze all their options." *ONLINE* articles let librarians make better-informed decisions by providing the evaluations and investigations they don't always have time to make for themselves.

Ojala says *ONLINE* keeps track of industry and professional information about online database systems and the internet. But that's just for starters. *ONLINE* also features columns and sections on internet research, subject-oriented databases, new technologies, information literacy, and book reviews. In addition, there are product reviews, case studies, evaluations, and informed opinions about selecting, using, and managing electronic information products.

Mobility ...

On her list of hot topics, Ojala sees mobile devices as coming into their own. "More information is being tailored for delivery on mobiles than ever before," she says. "The notion that you can access entire libraries and enormous databases via your phone is extraordinarily powerful."

She is a firm believer that all information professionals, not just librarians, need to keep up with the changes in technology that affect how and why they get the answers they do when they enter queries into search boxes. She cites companies such as ProQuest; EBSCO; Gale, a part of Cengage Learning; and The H.W. Wilson Co. as examples of companies in the middle of changing their technology platforms. These changes lead to some important questions: What will this mean to the professional researcher? How will free web searches differ from subscription-based searches?

... And Accountability

"I'm tremendously excited by social networking, semantic search, open access, and whatever the next thing will be," she says. But she also cautions against falling in love with new technology too quickly. Sometimes librarians are ahead of their users/patrons/clients, which is really not a good thing, she says. It's better to look carefully at the real benefits of new technologies and not just concentrate on their shiny newness.

Ojala also keeps an eye on information quality. "Being able to ascertain high-quality information from incorrect, misleading, flawed, and incomplete information should be the selling point to their management and users for *ONLINE* readers," she says.

But now that search engine optimization has become so sophisticated, she acknowledges that it can be difficult to know whether a searcher has received a valid set of results or one that has been manipulated for commercial purposes. These are the kinds of issues addressed not only in *ONLINE* but also in *WebSearch University* in the U.S. and at *Internet Librarian International* (ILI) in the U.K.

Show Stoppers

Her knowledge and skills stretch beyond publishing *ONLINE*. Ojala is involved in the ITI conferences as program planner for both *WebSearch University* and *ILI*, and she helps plan *Buying & Selling eContent* along with Dick Kaser and Michelle Manafy. Often, she finds herself speaking in sessions at *Computers in Libraries* and *Internet Librarian* as well.

Ojala says she has been incredibly impressed with the growing internationalization of the industry and the profession, something she gets to see firsthand at *ILI*. "When I started, it was difficult to find information in languages other than English or sources from countries other



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than the U.S. or the U.K.," she says. "To talk with a librarian in another country, you had to phone them. The internet provides information in almost every language you can imagine, with translation tools as well."

With email, Twitter, Facebook, and discussion lists putting librarians in constant and almost instantaneous communication, she says she's thrilled when she can follow a conference in the Czech Republic, the U.K., or anywhere without leaving home, though she admits that it makes it more difficult to have lunch with the delegates.

Because it's important for her to keep up with industry events and what *ONLINE*'s readers of are thinking, Ojala also attends annual association meetings, particularly the Special Libraries Association and American Library Association conferences. This year, Ojala was part of the ITI blog team at both of them. (Check out the blogs at www.infotodayblog.com.)

And Ojala's audience extends around the world. On the international level, she has been invited to speak at conferences in several countries, including the *INFORUM* conference in the Czech Republic, the *Online Information* conference in London, the *Southern African Online Users Group* in South Africa, various organizations in Denmark, and *NOLUG* in Norway.

Always On (the Front) Line

Ojala loves the fact that information professionals can share their search experiences and solve technical problems with the input of other professionals worldwide. What she finds to be even better is the way researchers in underdeveloped areas can now access the professional literature related to their field and contribute their own scholarly research to that literature. "What a change in just a few years," she says.

And Ojala will undoubtedly be involved in the process, from the pages of *ONLINE* to conference podiums around the world.

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