Legal Information Management, 25 (2025), pp. 135–139
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doi:10.1017/S1472669625100959

The Interview: Mark Engsberg

Abstract: The International Association of Law Libraries (IALL) champions the profession all around the globe, supporting and encouraging the development of policy and promoting free access to legal information. LIM talked to its current President, **Mark Engsberg**, to find out more about the organisation; ask for his views on AI and other salient issues; and to discover how this one-time US Army lawyer went on to find his true vocation as a legal information professional.
Keywords: information professionals; law librarians; leadership; International Association of Law Libraries (IALL)



Mark Engsberg taking time out at the International Association of Law Libraries Conference in Oslo in 2024

When Mark Engsberg was a child, growing up in a small rural community in Missouri, he said to his parents one evening over dinner: "I want to be exchanged." Once they got over the shock of this declaration, he explained that what he really wanted was to be an exchange student, like those from other countries that he would meet at his high school. It was an early indication that Mark had a very international outlook.

Indeed, he did go on to spend some time in Australia as an exchange student, which he describes as "life changing", before he decided on a career as a lawyer. But the wanderlust was still strong. "When I became a lawyer, I wanted to travel, and so I joined the US Army," Mark says. "You complete law school, and then you must pass a bar exam and become a member of the bar. And then there are papers to sign and commitments to make. I knew that I could request a post abroad. And that's what I did."

After Mark had finished his army law training, he was posted to Baumholder in Germany, where he practised law for three years. "My wife, Rebecca, and I lived in Germany," Mark says. "But after the first Gulf War, we decided that we had had enough of army life, and we wanted to go to graduate school. I had always wanted to do graduate work in English literature, and this was our chance. We had no mortgage, no kids, we were young, and determined. So, both of us decided to go into massive debt and go to graduate school. We attended the University of Illinois at Urbana Champagne, and I completed a PhD in English, British literature of the 18th Century. Rebecca pursued degrees in communications. But our family also started happening about this time, and there was a need to support them."

This meant a return to work, but it also resulted in what turned out to be a very fulfilling career change. "I'm licensed to practise law in the state of Idaho, but we did not want to move to Idaho. I didn't really want to practise law anyway," Mark says. "At the time that I completed my PhD, there was one job in the entire United States in my specialist field, and so I would be competing with every graduate from every college and university cranking out PhDs in British literature. The University of Illinois still has the number one library programme in the United States,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1472669625100959 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and Rebecca had already started in that programme, and so after completing my English PhD, I also started in the Masters of Library and Information Science programme there. But I did something really stupid: I gave myself just one calendar year to complete it. During that year, Rebecca and I both worked in the University library system as graduate assistants, we both were taking a full load of classes, and we had two babies at home under the age of three. It was an insane year!

"When I had finished my library degree, I ended up with a job at the Yale law library. And I realised immediately that I had found where I was supposed to be. I just loved the work. I had practised law, I had taught, and I had been a scholar. Nothing was ever quite right, but librarianship pulled it all together, and the profession really valued all of the other work that I had done, too. Everything made sense."

BIG PICTURE PERSON

That was in 2000, so Mark has been working in law librarianship for a quarter of a century now, most of this time in an administrative position. "I'm the library director at the law school at Emory University [Atlanta, Georgia], and I really do love the job," Mark says of the work he has been doing since 2008. "And what I really like is seeing my team succeed, and especially newer librarians. I like seeing them find their feet in the profession, seeing the light bulb go on. Because I remember that experience my first year or so as a new law librarian, and it was like: 'Oh, this is great, I love this'. I also love that connectivity in law librarianship, and that's a big part of what is so attractive to me about IALL [International Association of Law Libraries], this worldwide connectivity among legal information professionals. It's so great. It's the coolest people doing the coolest jobs all over the world."

As mentioned, Mark's 'cool' job now is as an administrator, rather than a librarian, and this is something he was set on from quite early in his career. "It isn't for everyone," Mark says. "A lot of people think that they have to want to be a library director, but you don't. And some of the smartest, most interesting people I know are those who figured that out for themselves, and they are now a true expert in some type of librarianship. That was never going to be me. I'm a big picture guy. And I particularly like creating an environment where people succeed. Giving them the tools that they need to do their great work, that's what I think I'm good at."

There's no bigger picture than the whole world, of course, and the international aspect to Mark's work, and through it his first connection with IALL, first came about when he was still at Yale. "I was hired as a General Reference Librarian. About my second year at Yale, the Foreign Comparative and International Law Reference Librarian took a position elsewhere, and my boss came and said: 'How would you like to be our new FCIL Librarian?' I jumped at the chance, so, I moved offices within the library and started in that position. Then, maybe a year or two after, the role of editor for the International Journal of Legal Information (IJLI) became open."

The IJLI is the official journal for IALL, of which Mark is now President, a post that surely suits his long-held global outlook. But what exactly is IALL? "It is a worldwide, cooperative, nonprofit which supports and encourages the development of national and international legal information policy and promotes free access to legal information on a worldwide basis through policy statements, scholarships, and conferences," Mark says. "That's quoting from IALL's mission statement, but I can't describe it any better than that.

"I love IALL," Mark adds. "I've spent most of my career in IALL. One of the things that I like about it is that really interesting people from all over the world are involved. I like meeting them and getting to know them. I like getting to know our sponsors on a different basis rather than that testy adversarial mess we sometimes have. If there's a human relationship at the other end of it, I think we're more likely to come to some sort of an agreement or get help when we need help. I have found that to be true over the years, and I think that that works in all aspects of life and also among governments. It's that getting to know people as a human being and learning about them. I'm certain that this outlook has carried through from my childhood experience as an exchange student."

ROLE CALL

Mark remained editor of the IJLI for an impressive 18 years, then in 2022 he became President of IALL, but this was never really part of any grand plan, he says. "I didn't really set out to be an officer or even an active member of the board. I mean, I've been on the board for all of these years, but in an *ex officio* capacity. I had had a few friends encouraging me to run for an office, but I was happy being editor and I had it in my head that I would stick it out to 20 years, and then I would stop.

"But there was a bit of a leadership vacuum, and they were having difficulty. We have elections every three years, and we have a nominations committee that seeks people to run for office. You can put yourself forward, of course, but largely, they seek people to run for office. So, I stood for election and here I am, three years later."

Mark is now at the start of his second and final three-year term as President – the post is limited to two terms. For someone with a law librarian background and a global outlook it's perhaps the ideal position, but it's not without its challenges. And one of the biggest of these is trying to make the organisation truly global.

"One of the challenges is figuring out ways to attract and retain members, especially new members, getting people to join us in an era where budgets are declining and support for professional development and professional conference travel is restricted," Mark says. "This is especially true in the developing world, the Global South. We have good representation from Australia and New Zealand, and one or two members from South Africa

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1472669625100959 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Mark with bursary winner Suzanna Louzada from Brazil. One of his aims as President is to increase IALL membership in the Global South

and India. But we really would like to have more membership from Latin America, from parts of Asia, and other parts of Africa. We used to have representation from more Eastern European countries, and that has gone away over the years. So that's a challenge for us as an international global organisation; we're still very western."

It is especially difficult to recruit board members, Mark says: "To get people to participate and to serve on the board can be difficult, as they are required to attend the conferences. And for somebody to spend, say, $3000 to travel around the world for an IALL conference, it could be half or more of their annual income, for some of these countries. But we're trying to figure out other ways to have outreach, to try to put on more webinars and that sort of thing for our members, where you don't have to be physically present."

The above is not just an issue for those from poorer countries, of course. "We have two major board meetings at conferences," Mark says. "That's where we really do our work. So, getting people from libraries or organisations that don't have the funds to serve, wherever they are in the world, is a challenge. You've got to have somebody with a boss that is willing to give them the time off to engage with IALL as a board member, even if they're willing to self-fund their own travel, at certain times of the year."

Growing the membership generally is a priority for Mark in his second term, as it was in his first. But in that first term there was also the task of getting IALL back on track just as the world was emerging from the pandemic. "I became President in 2022, and so we were just coming out of Covid at the time, and there were some things that we needed to get sorted. We used to have our conferences planned several years in advance, and we had been unable to do that during Covid, and so confirming future conference venues was a priority of mine. I am pleased and proud that we have our conferences planned through 2028. I'm particularly excited that our venue will be Cambridge in '26.

"We've also updated the website and added much more content to it. We have created and published on the website our DEI statement [Diversity, Equality and Inclusion]. That's a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1472669625100959 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Cambridge is to be the location for the IALL Conference in 2026

very good thing. And we've recently updated the constitution. A big part of that was streamlining elections and trying to make things more transparent. We have also expanded rights for our members. We have a number of membership categories, and not all of those member categories had the rights they deserved. Specifically, our Life members and Honorary members. For example, they didn't have the right to vote in our elections. So, we made some changes like that. I am so pleased with our new constitution."

ARTIFICIAL HORIZON

Another big deal right now, for the broader legal information profession and indeed the world at large, is AI, and like everyone else Mark is keeping an eye on developments. "We're still in the middle of it, so it's hard to provide an analysis of the impact," he says. "I think we don't quite know yet, although I do think we know enough to understand that it will mean profound changes for our profession. All of the legal professions, I think, will be significantly impacted by this. It's already making changes in automating tasks. There's been progress, we call it, in enhancing legal research. And there has been some impact on the user experience of people who are using databases and this sort of thing. I don't think it's nearly as clear a change at this point as, say, machine-readable catalogue records were back in the day. That was a huge game-changer in our profession, of course. But AI is very different to that.

"In terms of problems with AI, I believe there are things to get over, like bias within the algorithms," Mark adds. "And, here in the US, there are all kinds of copyright issues for large language models. There are huge lawsuits right now by authors and publishers saying: 'we did not authorise you to scan our material and then use this later on'. So, we're going to see some conflicts involving copyright. I think another challenge is the need to maintain human expertise, and to keep that there."

AI is both a possible problem and a probable opportunity for everyone in the legal information sector across the globe, so it's important that organisations like IALL and BIALL work together, on this and other issues, and Mark is keen to further the relationship between the two bodies.

"First of all, I think we should go to each other's conferences. I went to BIALL for the first time this year in Birmingham. I thought it was wonderful. I had a marvellous time, and I learned a lot, there was a lot of really good content. And I think that IALL has something to offer as well to BIALL members. I also think that in the education space, there are some opportunities for us to collaborate, such as perhaps having some small groups work together to present a webinar that we make available as a member benefit. A webinar is much less expensive than attending a conference in person. I don't think that they're analogues for each other, it is not the same thing, but I do think it is something good to add. It's an extra, and I think it's a useful

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1472669625100959 Published online by Cambridge University Press

tool that we're not really making the most use of. And it's with things like that that, I think, that there's space for us to work together.

"IALL has worked with IFLA [International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions] in a similar way. And I think that there's space for us all to work together, CALL [Canadian Association of Law Libraries] and the New Zealand group [New Zealand Law Librarians' Association, NZLLA] and the Australians [Australian Law Librarians Association, ALLA], I think we can all work together in pairs or threes and do more of that kind of thing. I believe there's a lot of potential there."

ALL INCLUSIVE

One thing the sister organisations in the legal information sector might work on together is the drive for greater diversity, something that has become very controversial in recent times in Mark's home country. "DEI is, for some strange reason, actually viewed as a problem right now for our government. But in IALL's board meetings, we are always talking about how we need more diversity," Mark says. "We need more diversity in the membership. We need more diversity on the board. And for us, we mean that expansively. It's not just racial diversity, it is geographic diversity and gender diversity and all kinds of diversity at large.

"I think this is a problem in our profession as well. In the United States, librarianship in general and law librarianship in particular, it is overwhelmingly dominated by women. There are far fewer men that join the profession. And then, I'm probably representative of this, there's a disproportionate number of men in leadership positions. Of those men who are in the profession, many of them are leading the profession.

"I think, here in the States, one of the things that our profession is doing is confronting the pushback from government, and we are actively advocating for DEI. In this regard, I think that we're getting it right. Of course, some jurisdictions are doing better than others, and there's not one response to it that is working everywhere. In general, I believe we are moving from a period of awareness to one that is more of action, which is good. And I think part of that is spurred on by the Trump administration's overt efforts to quash DEI."

Despite the many problems the profession faces in the US and elsewhere, Mark is still optimistic about its future, although as to where he sees it going it is little surprise that those two pesky vowels, A and I, make a further appearance. "It is revolving and evolving around AI," he says. "Information, organisation, and retrieval are still key, still fundamental to what we do. But I believe our focus will move more and more towards things like knowledge management, process improvement, and supply and support, especially if you work in a law firm. And I think that if we do it right, we'll eventually be seen as guides in navigating these new technologies for the people that we work for."

As to whether there will still be information professionals called 'law librarians' in the future he is not so sure. "It's hard to say. I would be sorry, on the one hand, to lose the term 'librarian', and on the other hand, I don't think it really matters a great deal," Mark says. "A lot of graduate programmes in library and information science in the United States have changed their names, they have eliminated 'library' and we have the 'School of Information Management', or the 'School of Information', or whatever. So I suppose I have mixed feelings about it. It's like: is this a hill to die on? Is this something we really need to go to bat for? Or is it the work itself that's more important?"

Whatever its members might be called, Mark is confident that IALL itself has a future. "I couldn't do this if I wasn't an optimist," he says. "I still think IALL will be around, still doing what it does in the future. I think that we will have a growing membership, hopefully from more countries than ever before. I really, really would like to see us grow our membership, particularly from, as I mentioned before, the Global South, while retaining all of that great stuff that we get from western democracies.

"I would also like to see more librarians look at IALL as a place where they can find value, even if their work isn't specifically in the foreign, comparative and international space. I think there's a home here for any librarian, even if they work in a small law firm in rural – fill in the blank state or country – because the world is more and more, interconnected, despite efforts to slow it down or push back, and law is more and more global and interconnected. Having people build relationships with others, doing similar work across the globe, will only help them in their work.

"We're a professional association. We have a strong education mandate, but we're not a library and information school. And we're not here specifically to train librarians to do their work. We're here to provide additional training in certain areas, in certain jurisdictions, and to provide opportunities for our members to build a network of strong connections with others in the field and with vendors, too. I think that that is useful no matter where you work within the legal information profession."

And for those about to enter this profession, Mark has a very useful piece of advice. "Learn everything you can about AI. Become an expert in it and you will have employment for life."

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