



Interview with Jason Griffey, Director of Strategic Initiatives, NISO

**For podcast release
Monday, January 20, 2020**

KENNEALLY: The content librarians manage today is no longer measured in bookshelves, but in bytes. Over the last two decades librarians have increasingly come to view their roles and responsibilities in terms of technology. And in the delivery of information, innovation is pre-eminent.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series, I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book.

The US-based National Information Standards Organization is a nonprofit standards organization that develops, maintains, and publishes technical standards related to publishing, bibliographic, and library applications. One year ago, NISO announced plans to merge with the National Federation of Advanced Information Services, also known as NFAIS. In Baltimore, at the end of February, NISO takes up the legacy of NFAIS conferences with a program targeting key players in the information ecosystem. They call the new program NISO Plus.

Jason Griffey is Director of Strategic Initiatives at NISO, and has written extensively on technology and libraries. He was very recently a fellow and affiliate at the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University. He joins me now from Sewanee, Tennessee, the home of the University of the South. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Jason.

GRIFFEY: Hi, Chris, thank you so much for having me.

KENNEALLY: We're looking forward to chatting with you. We're going to get an update from you on this new program, this new conference at the end of February called NISO Plus. But we have an interesting subject to explore with you, which is the role of the library technologist, and I wonder if you can help us understand just how technology plays an increasingly important role in libraries. What is a library technologist up to these days?

GRIFFEY: Yeah, it is an interesting title. It's not one that you always see in the descriptions of library jobs, but it's increasingly a way that a lot of people tend to identify themselves in libraries. A technologist is someone who is a sort of jack of all trades when it comes to things digital. I started using the term as my experience in libraries expanded outward from the small managing a Web presence or managing a particular set of systems to the broader understanding of how



technology interacts with all of the multifaceted parts of a modern library. The reality is nothing – there’s almost literally nothing in a modern library that doesn’t involve technology in some sense.

KENNEALLY: And it’s not just applications that you’re interacting with Jason, but there are individuals, people with various roles that interact with the library. That would be publishers, the researchers, of course, and as well other information industry technologists. How are those interactions managed from the library technologist’s point of view?

GRIFFEY: Yeah, in a modern library, nothing happens in a vacuum. Everything is interconnected. Everything has to talk to everything else, whether that’s your integrated library system, your electronic resource management system, your reference-based – knowledge-based system that you might use for reference interactions. All of these things in a modern library are connected and talking to one another, and that’s actually one of the strongest reasons that I moved over to NISO. I think being part of that standards development that allows for those communications to happen in a seamless way is one of the core underlying challenges in a modern library, reaching out to publishers, reaching out to electronic resource vendors, reaching out to journals, reaching out to all of these varying pieces of the information ecosystem and getting all of that to work together in such a way that at the time of need in a library, a user can get what they want in as – with as little trouble, with as little friction as possible.

That’s what I’ve always been focused on in my career, both inside and outside of libraries is that sort of ease of user experience, what can we do to make that information-seeking process less heinous? And so I think that’s a big part of the job these days.

KENNEALLY: We certainly want to talk to you about NISO’s role as a standards body, but I want to just probe a little bit more to understand, from your perspective, what the most challenges in library technology and information delivery you see here in 2020.

GRIFFEY: Yeah, I think we’re still in a world of fairly fractured resources from the perspective of a library user. There are two sorts of information processes they may go through. They know what they want or they don’t know what they want. Either way they’re going to go into a library and work through with a librarian or with an electronic system to try and sort out the thing they want. But once they know that thing, actually getting it is fairly challenging, still. That process of determining where the library has access, how the library can provide it, all of that that happens on the back end of a library searching system is still fairly fractured. There’s still a multiplicity of ways that a thing might get to someone, access may be restricted, depending upon different levels of access. It’s a really, really



complicated process on the back end. I think that fractured access is still one of the largest challenges, certainly.

There are others. The other big one that I would put up against the fractured access is the challenge of a library protecting the privacy of their patrons and making sure that in the process of getting what it is that that individual needs, that there isn't any personal identifiable information involved in that process and making sure that the privacy of the information-seeking behavior is really kept very close to the vest. That ethical stance is one of the things that makes a library a library and not another type of entity.

KENNEALLY: And it's very helpful to have that way of looking at things. It's very handy to think about the information, in fact the data, and then the access to it. And so I have to ask about standards, and what role do you see for standards in that media environment?

GRIFFEY: Yeah, that's a – I think there are real steps to be taken. There's still a whole lot of work that needs to be done on the back end of data flows to make things work together. I think that there are two big things that interest me, and again, that are on my radar as I'm looking at these days.

One of those is that just basic technical standards that allow things to talk to each other, especially in this day of big data, in this day of just massive amounts of data being collected and shared. The way that those are shared, the descriptive data around them is not always as clear as it needs to be in order for it to be useful across platforms. And so that very basic technical standard – technical standards for machine interoperability is a big challenge.

The other issue that I tend to pay attention to is the recommended practices. It's a level maybe below the technical standards, but the degree to which we can help libraries be aware of how a standard should be implemented, how a dataflow should work, how privacy can be protected, what it is that you look out for when you're implementing a new piece of technology, how do you evaluate whether or not it is privacy protecting. All of those how questions that come with standards development I think sometimes don't get talked about enough. For me, that's an area I've got a lot of interest in. So those are the two things that I tend to keep my eyes on.

KENNEALLY: Give us an idea, then, how you would answer those questions. So as data proliferation leads to these privacy concerns, what is NISO doing to help its members assure the clients, assure the researchers that their own data is safe and protected?



GRIFFEY: Well, we've worked on – we have a wide variety of standards that we work on at NISO. I am actually not expert in a lot of them, my role is slightly different, but I do know that one of the standards body committees and efforts that I'm working towards is what used to be known as the RA21 project – Research Access in the 21st Century project and is now known as seamlessaccess.org. It's an identity standard, an identifier standard for federated identity management and access for publishers, vendors, and other kinds of service providers to provide access to materials to libraries and research units and hospitals and anyone who has the opportunity to partake in those information flows. That is a process that – that particular standard is one that had an enormous amount of effort put into trying to ensure that the application of the standard was one that would respect privacy and respect the personal identifiability of the user. And as we're moving forward, we're pushing that even a little bit farther and are working at the committee level – just getting ready to work at the committee level – on things like contract language that libraries could use in order to take those standards and put them into a form that is an agreement between the vendor and the library to ensure that the standards are being followed in such a way that the privacy is being protected. That's the sort of thing that I'm particularly interested in.

KENNEALLY: These are all points that I expect you will be elaborating on throughout the NISO Plus conference, which comes to Baltimore in February – February 23rd through the 25th. It is a continuation of the NFAIS conferences which went on for almost a half a century, but I expect there'll be some change, as well. So tell us about the continuity and tell us about the change when it comes to NISO Plus.

GRIFFEY: We were very excited. The merger that happened over the summer was a really exciting opportunity for NISO to expand its thinking. NFAIS have always been a really powerful convener, especially around future thinking about the information industry, the information ecosystem very broadly construed. That futurism of NFAIS hadn't been quite as present in NISO, which was much more about the let's practically solve a problem right now. We have problems right now that we should be actively working on, and the marriage of those two ends up being, I think, a really powerful tool, and that's really what we were after when it comes time to roll into NISO Plus.

NISO Plus 2020, as you said, coming up in February 23rd through the 25th, 2020 in Baltimore, Maryland at the Lord Baltimore Hotel. We are expanding enormously the footprint. NFAIS had been historically a single track, one set of speakers throughout a day. This is going to be a two and a half day conference. We have four tracks. We are concentrating on maintaining that NFAIS future's focus in one track. We've got a NISO track where we're focusing more on the now and the practical and the down in the trenches work that is being done right now in libraries and publishers around the information flows.



Then we've got two other tracks, one of which is going to be focused on standards and standards updates. How do you get involved in standards? How do you get – how do we create these things? What is it that's going on at a practical level with these standards. Try to give people a little leg up if they are interested in how this stuff works and if they want to help make these things real, it'll give them a way to do that.

And then the fourth is going to be sets of discussions about all of the issues around modern processes in the information ecosystem, including a set of lightning talks where people can sign up at the moment to talk about a thing that they are most interested in.

The thing that excites me the most about this particular conference, as the person who did a lot of the early planning, is that we really wanted something other than the sage on the stage. We didn't want there to be people sitting in rows staring forward at a screen with people speaking to them. And so we've arranged the conference specifically around the idea of conversation and discussion. Every session, while there are experts, and we've identified experts in all of these particular topics and brought them together to Baltimore and we're going to give them an opportunity to set the stage and give their input on whatever they're particularly interested in, in the topic.

We're then also setting aside a specific section of the schedule just for talking about that particular topic. So if you attend NISO Plus, you'll go, you'll hear someone that is excited about a topic give you the lay of the land and give you what the current state of the world is. And then you'll have an actual opportunity in the audience to talk with them, to talk with each other, to try and solve problems and find next stages to the things that you have in your space. Whether you're a publisher or a library or vendor, whether you're an editor, whether you're product manager, whatever your role is in this ecosystem, you'll have an opportunity to find and interact with people that can help you solve problems that you have right now. That conversation level is something that I am really excited to see come to fruition. I think that's going to be a very different feeling than any other conference that I've attended.

KENNEALLY: Jason Griffey, Director of Strategic Initiatives at NISO. Good luck with the NISO Plus conference, again coming to Baltimore February 23rd through the 25th. And thank you Jason, for speaking with me today on Beyond the Book.

GRIFFEY: Thank you Chris, it's been great to be here.



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