



Todd  
Carpenter

## MESSAGE FROM THE PUBLISHER

# Moving from print to electronic publication: What does it mean to be a publisher in today's environment?

***Information Standards Quarterly (ISQ)* and its previous incarnations have been produced during a period of radical transformations in the world of publishing.**

Having gone from a hand-typed and Ditto-copied newsletter to a four-color magazine and now moving to an open access, digital-only publication, *ISQ* is a microcosm of the changes publishers have dealt with over the past 60 years. While this will be the last print issue of the journal, the publication will continue, as many have, in digital-only form. This transition is nothing new for magazines these days, with many making the leap prior to NISO.

NISO's *Z39 Newsletter* had very humble origins. The first copy, a typed issue, was sent out in the spring of 1957, noting it would be circulated "at infrequent intervals" as a supplement to the regular annual reports of NISO's various subcommittees. It was produced on green paper, which improved the readability of the purple Ditto machine printing process it appears was used. It wasn't until 1966, after NISO (then named the Z39 Committee) established a permanent office, that publication moved to a regular delivery schedule, with issues appearing three times per year. This coincided with more regular support for the committee and a more established infrastructure and procedures around its work, and a subsequent uptick in standards development activity.

As odd as this sounds now, there was a mention in the September 1984 issue of the *Voice of Z39*—the successor to *Z39 Newsletter*—that NISO had purchased its first IBM PC for the office, to organize mailing lists and word processing. You can see the changes in software and advances in desktop publishing tools over this time, as the quality of the output of the *Voice of Z39* shifted from typewriter to dot-matrix printer to laser printer, with the addition of graphic elements in the

last two years. Four years after the PC entered the NISO office, the year before *ISQ* was launched, NISO moved to computer-based desktop publishing to prepare files for the creation of *ISQ*. This was mentioned briefly in the lead article about what *ISQ* would become, penned by the founding editor, Walt Crawford, back in 1989. One can see the transformation over this period with shifts in the typeface and the addition of graphic elements, such as line rules and headlines.

Neither the *Voice of Z39* nor the first 20 years of *ISQ* was anything close in look to the version of the journal that we've been publishing lately. We still have in the office some of the paste-up boards for the production of the print copies of early issues; those became quaint as NISO grew and added tools and processes in the office to improve the look of the journal. The printing industry, too, has changed tremendously since 1989. This has everything to do with the radical transformation that resulted from the computer revolution and the advances in digital printing technology.

Online publishing of *ISQ* using PDF files was an afterthought of the print production process. The original PDF file of the publication was maintained for members behind an access control system on NISO's website that was launched in the mid-1990s, but publication was primarily for print-based distribution. In 2008, NISO moved from a newsletter format to a glossy, four-color, magazine-like publication. This move coincided with the wide availability of print-on-demand technology, making a short-run printing of a colorful 40-page issue economical. Instead of needing to spread the printing costs across thousands of issues, each copy cost a set amount regardless of the number printed, be it 10 or 2,000. While the cost per issue was higher than it might be if a large print run were required and offset printing



processes were used, the gap narrowed between the cost of a glossy, colorful issue and a dull, text-only publication with the addition of a spot-color of red in each of the issues.

To coincide with *ISQ*'s new look, NISO made a PDF edition of each issue freely available on the NISO website. This opened the content to all readers, not just members, when the publication was released open access with free-to-read content in 2011. Online traffic to the website far surpassed the circulation of the print copy, with more than 50,000 downloads of *ISQ* content in the first year. With the support of Norm Mederios and the Haverford College Library, NISO was also able to digitize nearly the entire run of the publication, through its various title changes from the first issue in 1957. Unfortunately, some issues couldn't be located for digitization and remain missing from the online collection. Preservation of *ISQ* through the Portico and LOCKSS systems began in 2007.

Of course, one impetus for these transitions has been cost and NISO's ability to pay for the production of a membership magazine. Publication of *ISQ* has always been subsidized by membership dues, even after it became a freely available publication. Circulation was never high enough to attract print advertising, and few organizations in our community are willing to invest in online-only ads, regardless of the traffic. Some non-member organizations did take print subscriptions, but these subscribers were always modest in number, never accounting for more than 150 copies. While the costs of producing ink on paper have dropped significantly as production methods have changed, the cost of an issue of *ISQ* was never insignificant, especially for a small organization like NISO. Even moving to online-only doesn't fully remove the costs to produce content, however. Print production and distribution are rarely major

Having gone from a hand-typed and Ditto-copied newsletter to a four-color magazine and now moving to an open access, digital-only publication, *ISQ* is a microcosm of the changes publishers have dealt with over the past 60 years.

components of publication costs; for most publishers it hovers in the 15-35 percent range. *ISQ*'s costs matched the experience of most publishers. The majority of costs, be they direct or indirect, comes from managing the publication process. It takes time and resources to produce high quality content. Authors need to be solicited, copy edited, articles and graphics formatted for look and readability, copyright transferred and recorded, and information properly tagged, identified, and archived. Each step requires time and expertise. A move to online-only does remove the printing, binding, and mailing costs, but costs for traditional tasks—the bulk of the fees—will remain. Not every aspect of print production needs to be replicated in a digital environment, to be sure, but a majority of the costs and responsibilities remain, if NISO wants to remain a “traditional publisher.”

This raises the question of what—in the current environment—does it mean to be a publisher? In many web-technologist circles, and particularly in web advertising, anyone with a computer connection and a willingness to share some form of content is described as a “publisher.” But simply hitting “post” on Instagram, “publish” on a WordPress site, or “commit” in a GitHub repository isn't the same as publishing in a traditional sense. If one focuses only on the distribution aspect of publishers, then, yes, posting

CONTINUED »

## MESSAGE FROM THE PUBLISHER

---

things so they are open to the World Wide Web qualifies. However, publishing involves so much more.

In 2014, Kent Anderson updated an article he had posted two years earlier on the Scholarly Kitchen blog entitled, “The 80 Things Publishers Do” (Anderson, 2014). Few of these things have to do with distribution; perhaps 10-15 of them qualify, depending on where one draws the line regarding circulation management. The rest of the tasks Anderson identified relate to the more nettlesome issues around editorial support, rights management, publicity, and general support for the communications process. Publishing quality materials is equal parts art and trade. Editorial cohesiveness and curation are not things that just happen at the end of a creative process. There must be a commitment to the content, its meaning, and the clear articulation of an idea. Additionally, there should be respect for the accessibility, the discovery, the relevant intellectual property issues, and the preservation of the content, which, again, require effort and expertise to be done well.

Several years ago at a conference in which I participated, the organizers provided a coaching opportunity for speakers before they did their talk. Always looking for an opportunity to learn and improve, I signed up, and the coach provided some very direct and useful advice. She asked, “What are you trying to convey and how does each of the elements you are discussing contribute to the understanding of your message?” This point goes to the heart of publishing as much as it relates to public speaking. One can write, take a picture, or compose a song, but the real effort begins not when one picks up the pen, camera, or instrument. It begins after that first draft, with re-writing, editing, and adding new material. Recently, I heard

an interview with Jason King, NPR Music contributor (NPR Staff, 2016), who described the process of creating art as “like painting a 747 with a toothbrush. It takes a lot of detail, a lot of time, a lot of energy, a lot of unseen hours.” Publishers often provide the infrastructure for that project, supporting the author or artist. We tend to gloss over the difficult work that isn’t obvious and we often fail to acknowledge that behind the scenes, supporting efforts bring that work to fruition. Of course, one can attempt to paint that airplane alone, but without the support of the infrastructure and the other contributors, the work might not be accomplished, or wouldn’t be accomplished in the same high-quality way.

Undoubtedly, the democratization of publishing tools for distributing content has been a terrific addition to understanding and for self-improvement. A diverse community of new artists, writers, and musicians can add their voices to the world’s understanding. Barriers to distribution have dropped precipitously and the means to publish is now in the hands of a majority of the population. Part of the mission of NISO must be support of vendors that serve those independent content creators, teaching them how to add traditional publication features to the tools they create in a standardized way so that they can be easily adopted. There remains, though, a role for traditional curation and creation processes. Moving to an online-only platform for *ISQ* will not change NISO’s commitment to quality, nor its commitment to providing our readers with valuable information about technology and information distribution.

## REFERENCES

Anderson, Kent. “The 80 Things Publishers Do.” Oct. 21, 2014.  
<https://scholarlykitchen.sspnet.org/2014/10/21/updated-80-things-publishers-do-2014-edition/>

NPR Staff. Interview with Jason King, NPR Music contributor.  
Aug. 17, 2016.  
<http://www.npr.org/2016/08/17/490349927/zooming-in-on-the-creative-process-one-artist-at-a-time>