ISQ

INFORMATION STANDARDS QUARTERLY

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NISO
How the information world
CONNECTS

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[QUESTION & ANSWER]

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This is the first in a **new column** series highlighting how NISO standards are used. Many standards are hidden "under the covers" of products or built into infrastructure or services, so that the end user is unaware the standard even exists. Some standards have been around so long they are taken for granted and don't get much press. Through this series, we hope to bring to your attention some of those lesser known or forgotten standards and spotlight their value to our community.

STANDARD SPOTLIGHT:

ANSI/NISO Z39.7: Information Services and Use: Metrics & statistics for libraries and information providers — Data Dictionary

Z39.7 is the only NISO standard available as an online data dictionary and is the first NISO standard to be continuously maintained and updated. As a member of the standing committee for Z39.7, I am admittedly very familiar with the data dictionary. What has not been clear to me is the reach of this online standard beyond the standing committee and the library research community.

In an effort to hear from practicing librarians, I sent out an e-mail request to librarians from different types of libraries in Massachusetts. In my e-mail I reminded them that the data collected on the state and national levels, primarily through the state and federal agencies, is based on the definitions in the NISO data dictionary—something I suspect many of them didn't know.

Q   Because I knew that most librarians were familiar with the data available at the state and national level, the first question I asked was: **How do you use the library data that is available at the state and national levels?**

I received responses from 46 librarians in the space of three days. The preponderance of the e-mails came from public library directors. I did, however, receive comments from school and academic librarians as well. As is apparent from these selected responses below, the data collected based on the data dictionary is heavily used by libraries for planning and for budget preparations and justification.

➡ To compare our library with others of our size; to support requests for additional funding; to answer questions posed by town fathers and mothers.

➡ Most recently, I used the data supplied by Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners for salary comparisons for our unions' (we have two) negotiations. Also, for the last year or so, we have been working on a Planning and Design [construction] grant and have used various comparisons (populations, services, cost per capita etc.) as part of our projections.

➡ I routinely benchmark the operations and services of my library against others on a) the Cape, b) of similar size in the state, and c) occasionally in other New England states. Metrics I've recently looked at include staffing levels in similarly sized buildings, staffing levels in public libraries in similarly sized communities, staffing in communities without a town center; salary levels for various functions in libraries in our geographic locale and in other regions in towns of similar size; funding levels, again locally and in similarly sized communities in Massachusetts; and lastly levels of services. I've used this information to provide

Z39.7 — *noun*
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backup for funding and staffing requests and for my own information while preparing the annual budget.

➡ Tracking historical trends as an aid to policy formulation, evaluating service provision, benchmarking, report preparation.

➡ Strategic planning: looking at longitudinal trends and peer comparisons; use as statistical evidence in defense of municipal budget.

➡ I regularly use the data in the budget process. In 2007, we had a successful override that included a significant increase for the library; 3 new full-time positions and a $50,000 increase in the materials line. In the years prior to the override, I regularly offered comparisons to other libraries, usually from south shore communities.

➡ The Massachusetts Commonwealth Consortium of Libraries in Public Higher Education Institutions puts this data into a spreadsheet so the 15 Massachusetts community colleges can benchmark with other community colleges with similar FTE and programs. I also used it when we picked colleges around the country for collection comparison for using the OCLC Collection Analysis service.

➡ Peruse it to see what funding levels other school libraries are receiving.

➡ I have used it to argue for school budgets and staffing, to work on building programs and grant proposals for school and public libraries and to demonstrate the effect school libraries have on education.

➡ I have found the data helpful with personnel issues. By looking at libraries with similar children's circulation and programming, I was able to recommend a more appropriate salary range for our Youth Services Director. The same held true for other positions. The ability to use your data to determine workloads has been helpful in recommending the addition of staff positions. Most importantly, I have found that by examining the size of collections, numbers of programs etc., I have looked inwardly to determine whether or not our library is providing proper service to the community. It has helped us to be a better library for our patrons.

➡ We use the stats for leverage.

➡ I use the data from the MBLC [Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners] reports to justify my budget to the finance committee, board of selectmen and town administrator. I also put the information in my annual town report, especially the number of people who come to the library in a year and the amount of materials checked out. I have also used the data to justify to my board that we needed another part-time employee and more computers in the adult area of the library.

➡ Our reference librarian told me she has used the holdings and population stats for choosing databases.

➡ Primarily for comparative information on salaries. I would like to see data on academic librarians with faculty status – what are the requirements of faculty status, obligations, benefits of faculty status.

➡ I use this data to develop multi-year usage and spending patterns for my Board and my town administration. I use it to compare my organization with others in the same population group or socio-economic group as my community. This is useful for justifying services, costs, and expenditures. It is also useful for long range planning.

➡ I create comparison charts with other local libraries' figures that I use when dealing with municipal authorities. I find they help to justify our financial requests, showing that we run a fiscally tight ship, raise more revenue on our own, and request less from the Town than most of our neighbors.

➡ I also use them at staff meetings, to compliment staff on the high quality of the services they provide, to thank them for increasing their efforts each year, and to let them know that the efficacy of their efforts is made known to Library Trustees, municipal authorities, and the public, and that they should be proud of the superb public service that they offer.

➡ …to share with politicians who don't have a clue as to how much and often public libraries are utilized.

➡ As you know, Finance Committees always love the "bang for the buck" concept. I always take it a step further talking about the collection, circulation, ILL stats. In addition, programs and attendance are important to share. I also use this information during the Long Range Plan process and my yearly review.

➡ IMLS has used the Public Libraries Survey (PLS) primarily to construct trends in public library usage and funding. IMLS has also used the State Library Agencies Survey (StLA) to study how the operations and priorities of state library agencies have evolved over time. Recently, the Federal Communications Commission asked the Research and Statistics division of IMLS to provide information on libraries and one-stop employment service centers in high unemployment areas as a part of the background research they conducted for the national broadband plan. We used the PLS in conjunction with data from the Department of Labor to conduct this analysis.

[Q] The next question I asked was: **Does it surprise you to discover that there is a national standard/definition that supports the data collected from libraries in the United States?**

As you may expect the answers were divided between those for whom the standard was not a surprise and those for whom it was. There were however, only a few librarians who had used the online data dictionary. Among the many short responses were the following interesting replies:

➡ It initially surprised some of us that there was such a well-established infrastructure for the standardization of library statistics. The Public Library Service has only been around for about 20 years, so some of the newer researchers didn't necessarily expect library statistics to be such a well-entrenched part of NISO.

➡ Although I didn't know that there's a national standard, I'm not surprised to learn that there is one. I looked at the dictionary and read through the section on keyword definitions. I thought the entries were concise and to the point and will keep it in mind for future "Let's build a new library!" presentations.

➡ Yes. (I'm a little embarrassed that it hadn't occurred to me that it would exist.)

➡ Not at all. I worked for the federal government for 13 (challenging and enjoyable, by the way) years, and I would have been more surprised had there not been a national standard.

➡ I didn't remember this until I went to look at the Foreword in the link you offered. Then I remembered attending a Massachusetts Library Association workshop two years ago that was concerned with how the NISO/ANSI work would turn out in the case of technical services and cataloging.

[Q] **I then asked if they would visit the online Data Dictionary and submit their impressions.**

Aside from the comments about structure and some maintenance issues, I was most interested to see what responses that this test of the online standard would elicit. In other words, would the librarians use the Dictionary? I discovered that librarians are quite interested in pointing out problems, but there are those who are now pleased to have another resource to consult.

➡ I did go ahead and bookmark the site on Delicious and then Tweeted about it, in the hope of stimulating conversation and perhaps site maintenance.

➡ I'm impressed! I've used ANSI/NISO standards many times over the past 40 years and this looks to me to be a very good job.

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➡ I'm glad this exists (standardization is good) and might even use it as a tool sometime in the future; particularly in evaluating/comparing services in different facilities and systems.

➡ I think the information could be useful for validating the need for services, material purchases, membership in consortia, etc.

The Z939.7 Data Dictionary is a tool that can be used by practicing librarians, library school students, and professionals in the field who are involved in research. As one librarian pointed out, "No, it did not surprise me in the least that there are national standards for data collection. Isn't that what librarians do best?"

The Z39.7 Standing Committee is responsible for the continuous maintenance of the Data Dictionary and actively solicits input and comments from the community. An online comment form appears directly on the dictionary's webpages so that comments can be linked to the section being viewed. The Standing Committee meets twice a year at the ALA midwinter and annual conferences to review and evaluate all the comments and change proposals received between meetings. All submitters are notified of the decision regarding their suggestion and the Dictionary is updated with approved changes.

I encourage you to visit the Data Dictionary site and send feedback to the committee about how we can improve the standard. | QA | doi: 10.3789/isqv22n1.201006

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Z39.7 Data Dictionary
www.niso.org/dictionary

About Z39.7 continuous maintenance
www.niso.org/dictionary/maintenance/

MBLC Library Statistics
mblc.state.ma.us/advisory/statistics/

RELEVANT LINKS