



Connecting & Cementing Communities in the Information Ecosystem: An Interview with Jason Kucsma

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This issue's interview is with Jason Kucsma, the new executive director of the Metropolitan New York Library Council (METRO). Jason's appointment was announced at the METRO Annual Meeting on October 17, 2011. In November, I sent him some questions by e-mail and he kindly responded. Our correspondence, slightly edited, appears in full, below.

Where did you grow up?

I was born and raised on the east side suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio. After graduating from high school, I moved to northwestern Ohio where I spent most of the next thirteen years.

Can you tell us about your educational background?

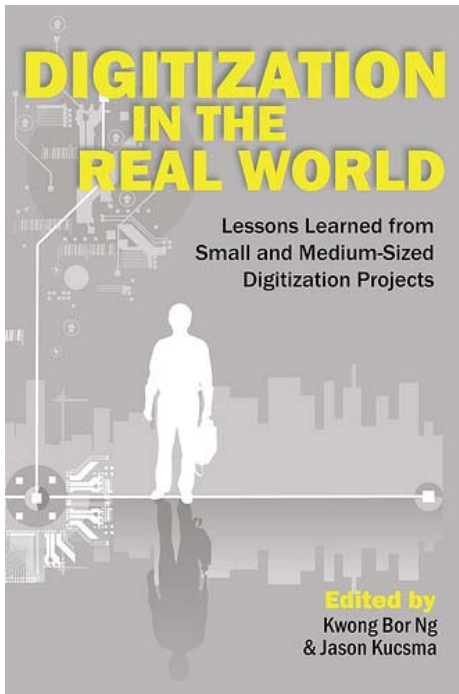
I went to Bowling Green State University [BGSU] for my undergraduate degree (in communication) and first master's degree in American Culture Studies. I wrote my thesis on zines (independent/underground press) and the role they play in raising consciousness around race, class, and gender issues for people from communities of privilege. As someone from an upper-middle-class family, where I wasn't really exposed to those issues, it was an opportunity for me to work out some ideas I had about progressive politics.

How did you first become interested in libraries and cultural heritage?

While I was working on my master's at BGSU, I had the opportunity to work with great librarians at both the Brown Popular Culture Library and the Music and Sound Recording Archives. At the time, I was teaching undergraduates, working on my thesis, organizing an annual conference for independent media makers (still going strong in Detroit: Allied Media Conference), and working on launching a nationally distributed progressive politics, culture, and arts magazine. Still, I knew from my time working in those libraries that I'd like to return to that environment one day. Fast forward seven years or so, and my girlfriend at the time (now my wife) and I started talking about going back to school for our MLS degrees. We moved to Tucson and started the program at the University of Arizona's School of Information Resources and Library Science around the same time I was working with my partners to shutter our magazine's doors after publishing thirty-eight issues over seven years.

In your career, you've previously focused on publishing, including your work as founder of Clamor Magazine. Did your previous experience in publishing inform your later work with libraries?

Absolutely! I got involved in independent media because it was a way to amplify underrepresented voices or issues in a mainstream media format. I see my work as a librarian or information professional along the same lines — a socially



Top: Jason Kucsma addresses the audience at the METRO Annual Meeting at the Fashion Institute of Technology's Katie Murphy Amphitheatre, October 17, 2011. Available online: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/metronyc/6261145485/in/photostream>. Photograph courtesy of Metropolitan New York Library Council.

Bottom: *Digitization in the Real World*. Edited by Kwong Bor Ng and Jason Kucsma. Image courtesy of Metropolitan New York Library Council.

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responsible occupation for someone interested in upholding one of the most important pillars of democracy: access to information. I see a direct connection between my former life in publishing and the work I'm doing now — especially with regards to creating opportunities for community-building around key issues facing librarians and archivists.

How did you become involved with co-editing Digitization in the Real World? What was your experience of working on it?

We had been working closely with Professor K. B. Ng (QueensCollegeGSLIS) to deliver hands-on technology and digital-services classes at METRO. He came to us with the idea of publishing case studies from recipients of METRO's digitization grants, and asked if I wanted to edit it with him. In subsequent conversations, we realized that there was a lack of stories from the long-tail of digitization projects: mainly the experiences of small- and medium-sized digitization projects going on in countless libraries, archives, museums, and cultural-heritage institutions throughout the country. So we expanded the scope of the project and received hundreds of chapter proposals. We also decided to self-publish, so we had more control over the pricing and distribution of the book. In doing so, we were able to spend the better part of a year posting one chapter/case study a week on our site (<http://bit.ly/ditrwblog>) for anyone to download for free. The book has been out a couple years now, but I still think there are valuable lessons in those case studies.

Based on your experience with digitization, how do you see it fitting in with the strategic plans of libraries and archives?

There's this misconception that we're pretty close to reaching the point where everything will be available for free online. Anyone who works in libraries and archives knows that we're still a long way from that, and supporting that long-tail of digitization is more critical than ever. The richness of collections — in New York City alone — that are only avail-

able by visiting the holding libraries and archives is amazing. At the same time, funding for these sorts of digitization projects is still hard to come by; maybe because funding agencies also assume we've captured everything worth capturing by now. We've still got a lot of work to do, and I'm hoping we can support that work even more than we already have at METRO over the last five-plus years of providing digitization grants to our members.

During your tenure as METRO's Emerging Technologies Manager, what were your greatest challenges in dealing with member organizations and their adoption of new technologies?

One of the biggest challenges is providing useful services to an extremely diverse membership. We have over 250 institutional members, from some of the world's most prominent research libraries to some of the smallest mission-driven libraries. It makes it difficult, as a small organization ourselves, to program services and resources for such a varied community, but it's a challenge I've really enjoyed over the last four years.

You have played a leading role in creating METRO's new website, which offers opportunities for member institutions to connect with METRO online. Can you describe the creation of the new website and expanding upon interactive opportunities? Were there benchmarks that you looked to?

Like many smaller organizations, our website had served an important purpose for years, but it had also outgrown its platform, and technology tools and resources had advanced so much since the older site was launched. We were tasked with bringing a number of distributed services (online registration, job listings, blogs, calendars, and our member-management system) under one roof. We spent about six months working with East Coast Catalyst (<http://www.eastcoastcatalyst.com/>) to articulate a digital strategy for the organization. Once we had that internal understanding in hand, we were able to talk with various platform devel-

opers to find the right fit for METRO. We ultimately decided to work with a company in Houston called Schipul, because they had extensive experience creating a member-management system and website platform called Tendenci. The entire development and migration process probably took less than six months, which I think is pretty remarkable, given the amount of content we had put into the existing site in the previous six to ten years. Still, it's worth noting that web development and user-experience improvements are ongoing. Our new site has been live for only one year, and we're already upgrading our system and doing some additional usability testing to improve users' experiences.

While at METRO, you have managed METRO's Digitization Grant Program. What elements do you believe comprise a successful application and lead to a flourishing project?

It's interesting, because we've seen the applications improve considerably over the last five years. When the program started, our members were still learning their way around metadata schemas, digital conversion standards, and workflows, so grant reviewers were particularly focused on making sure the proposals adhered to accepted best practices. Now we're seeing very polished applications that display a high level of comfort and familiarity with the digital collection-building process. It allows us to focus on supporting collections that we think are going to be the most useful to the communities they are built to serve.

I'm consistently pleased with the quality work that all of our grantees are doing with these projects. A truly great digitization project is one that builds community investment in the collection and takes on a life of its own after it is created. A recent grant funded collaboration between Queens College and Queens Public Library, called the QueensMemoryProject (<http://queensmemory.org/>), is a good example. They focused on oral histories from Flushing and have been digitizing archival resources related to those oral his-

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stories to create something that the community and community leaders are truly invested in. They also worked with Story Corps—the very popular oral history program—for their project launch, and extended their reach through that partnership. So what began as a pilot project has now grown into a digital collection program. That is the ultimate goal.

What advice can you offer libraries and archives that want to engage in advocacy for their institutions?

Advocacy is something we need to be doing every day, but I think we need a better term for it. We're all doing very important work within our own institutions, and I think outside recognition and appreciation for that work can be an organic byproduct of having strong relationships with the communities we serve. One must be proactive in building connections with other organizations doing similar work—and even relationships with not-so-usual suspects. Reactive advocacy has its place—especially when we're consistently faced with funding shortfalls—but it can feel a little demoralizing to always be fighting for existence. Instead, I think it's critical to have a strong outreach strategy that underscores that our work in the community is irreplaceable and essential. Building alliances between institutions and individuals gives us a network we can leverage during difficult times and an amplifier for the work we're

doing during flush times.

In October, you were named the executive director of METRO. First off, congratulations! As executive director, what are your institutional priorities?

Thank you! The organization had a long and thorough search to replace my predecessor, Dottie Hiebing. The response to the news of my appointment has been overwhelmingly positive, and I'm really looking forward to the future of METRO.

In the almost four years I've been here, I've learned a lot about what an important role METRO and other organizations like ART play in anticipating and meeting the needs of our member community. METRO and the other eight New York 3Rs councils were created to promote collaboration and realize efficiencies for our members that were difficult for them to do individually. I can't speak to specific projects or initiatives we're working on at this time, but I'm working with METRO members and staff to identify ways we can strengthen the community and provide new opportunities for collaboration, shared learning, and growth for our entire community—while also growing our membership base. One of my primary goals for METRO in the coming years—and this is something we addressed at our annual meeting—is to further cement our members' statuses as essential components of this

larger information creation-curation-consumption ecosystem. Our members bring incredible expertise and rich collections of resources to a larger environment of digital information creation and consumption, and I'm looking forward to building strong and direct connections between our traditional library and archive community and the communities of knowledge-management professionals, entrepreneurs, journalists, artists, and the like who share similar challenges and opportunities. We can learn as much from these other communities as they can learn from us.

Where do you envision METRO in five years?

That's a hard question to answer. Given the head-spinning pace at which technology is changing how we—as individuals and institutions—create, curate, and consume information, it feels impossible to predict where we'll be in five years. Suffice to say, that I would like METRO to further establish itself as the connector between some of the world's leading institutions in information management, discovery, and access.

The Metropolitan Archivist is always in search of interview leads. If you have suggestions for future interviews, please contact our Interviews Editor Ellen Mehling.

REACHING OUT

Second Annual K-12 Archives Education Institute

by Barbara Gombach
ART Member

Background and Context

Every field has its hot topics. These days, the development of common core standards in mathematics and English/language arts is one of the hottest in education reform. This development, more than 25 years in the making, deserves its own story. (Interested readers can follow the excellent coverage in *Education Week*, www.edweek.org.) Thanks to a partnership between ART, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), and the Association of Teachers of Social Studies/United Federation of Teachers, archivists have entered this arena.

And just in time. The matter of how school districts will organize teacher professional development to implement the standards and the related assessments now being developed is red hot, as is the daunting task of preparing high quality curriculum guides and materials teachers will need when the standards are phased in across the country.

Led by ART's Outreach Committee, the partners held this year's K-12 Archives