YouTube Knows Who You Are
Interview with Tim Devenport, ISNI

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KENNEALLY: Spotify, Apple Music, Pandora – as streaming music services continue to take market share away from physical product and even downloads, these names are recognized as leading players in the future of the recording industry, yet another online platform towers over them all.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. The world's largest music streaming platform is also a search engine and a video platform – YouTube. According to numerous estimates, the Alphabet-owned company, which Google acquired in 2006, holds a 25% share of the streaming music market. Musicians and recording companies earn $1 billion annually in song royalties from YouTube views. YouTube maintains that 99.5% on the music on the service is matched to rights-holders by its content ID software or removed from the service. Among billions of uploaded files, however, the ongoing and even monumental challenge is to identify performers and songwriters, to reconcile data, and ensure attribution.

Early in 2018, YouTube announced it would become a registration agency for the International Standard Name Identifier, ISNI, the ISO-certified global standard , in their distribution. YouTube is the first ISNI registration agency in the music space, and Tim Devenport is executive director of the ISNI International Agency. He joins me today from his office in Oxford, England. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Tim.

DEVENPORT: Thank you for having me on, Chris. It's a pleasure to speak with you.

KENNEALLY: We are looking forward to speaking with you, really, because you have described this as a transformative moment in this music streaming space, and I would like you to explain to me why. This is obviously a challenge that is one people listening to us can well imagine, as there's more than one Chris Kenneally. I know that for sure. There's more than one Tim Devenport. The struggle is to disambiguate all of us, to identify each one of us in some kind of unique way so that should we have a video or a song on YouTube, we can be identified properly.

DEVENPORT: That's exactly the challenge, Chris. ISNI has been working away at this scene for a number of years now in other spaces, but just recently we've moved into the music sector, as you've mentioned, with this new partnership with YouTube. And we think that we can both bring something to this party. We can bring ISNI's skills in terms of disambiguation and setting up persistent identifiers, and certainly the business case is there for YouTube to actually add this to the other mechanisms that it uses to correctly attribute information, and particularly musical rights and so on, to its performers and artists.

KENNEALLY: Indeed. ISNI is increasingly a critical component in the World Wide Web and in all kinds of applications that help libraries and archives and other services understand who's in their catalog and how to share that information with others.

DEVENPORT: Indeed so, yeah. That's been the foundational work on the ISNI system. Probably first took off with input from folks both in the rights management community, but also very much in the library space, where researchers, catalogers, and so on across the world were describing the same individuals, the same personalities, sometimes the same personas or pseudonyms, and it was quite critical in that space to actually make sure that everybody was speaking about the same persons to avoid a kind of Tower of Babel situation.

KENNEALLY: Indeed. In the negotiations you undertook there at ISNI with YouTube, what was it like working with them? They really are monumental as a music streaming service, although I don't know how many listeners really recognize that. We're more familiar with thinking of Spotify or Apple in that space.

DEVENPORT: Yeah, of course YouTube is a really massive player. We've found them a big friendly giant thus far, anyway. I have to say that. It's been an interesting kind of challenge and an opportunity from our side, from an ISNI side, as well, in the sense that we're stepping very much into a kind of sector of the information space which is somewhat new to us.

So that even though some of the challenges are quite generic, quite often the vocabulary might be different – for example, one of the ways in which we actually try to pin down a particular identity is by associating it with published material. Now, in the book world, that very frequently concerns linking up an author with an ISBN, an International Standard Book Number. Whereas quite immediately when we move into the music space, something like an International Standard Recording Code, the ISRC, might be a more appropriate vehicle for actually making sure that we're talking about the right Lady Gaga or the right David Bowie.

KENNEALLY: Indeed. So the partnership with YouTube makes them a registration agency. Tell us more about what that means in practice. Who are some other registration agencies that you work with?

DEVENPORT: Yeah, indeed. A registration agency is really the primary gatekeeper to the ISNI system. We have two lines of screening on the information that we actually accept. In the case of YouTube, they are obviously a very big player and very knowledgeable within the music space, and so they're bringing that information and their background knowledge to bear as a first filter on the information that they're supplying. And then behind that, the information that they contribute is then fed into the ISNI system, where we carry out all sorts of weird and wonderful pattern matching, fuzzy matching, and these kinds of things to try to achieve a certain level of confidence that we are actually talking about the right individual before we assign an identifier to that individual.

Players that you may be familiar with in other spaces include, for instance, national libraries. Two are particularly active – the British Library, located in London, England, and the Bibliotheque Nationale, located in Paris in France, have both been very early adopters and big supporters of the ISNI project as we've made our way to this point. Obviously, they're acting in a different kind of space. Their focus thus far has been on books and manuscripts and theses and so on rather than musical entities. Although it's interesting to learn that both of them are actually moving into a project now whereby they're actually using ISNIs to identify contributors to sound archives, as well.

KENNEALLY: For a musician or a music producer who is interested in making certain that their works are identified properly, how do they acquire an ISNI number? Is it something that happens automatically when they upload a video to YouTube, or do you know what the process will be?

DEVENPORT: I think that's going to be the process that YouTube will be following in future, although they will be screening and actually encouraging within their supply chain, if you'd like to call it that, of performers or composers who are actually lodging content on a YouTube channel – they will be encouraged either to declare their ISNI if they already believe that they have one, and it'll then be checked and verified. Or if they've not got one, then YouTube will be undertaking to apply for an ISNI to be assigned to that particular individual as part of the process of putting their content up on the channel.

Usual disclaimer – there are other registration agencies out there, and there are other means to doing the same sort of thing. A small number of musicians have already started registering their own ISNIs via one of our other registration agencies, an organization in the States called Numerical Gurus. Again, it has the same status as YouTube, but operates in slightly a different way. They actually have a walk-up service whereby an artist can declare various information about themselves, and then Numerical Gurus undertakes to actually do the various background checking and assign the ISNI to that individual.

KENNEALLY: We are speaking today with Tim Devenport regarding the partnership that ISNI, the International Standard Name Identifier organization, has entered into with YouTube that will help identify music artists, composers, and performers who put their works on the YouTube platform.

Some numbers I see, Tim, are that there are over 10 million ISNIs assigned to date. We know that there are billions of videos on YouTube, and something like 25% of them are music-related. So there's a lot of work to be done ahead.

DEVENPORT: There's a lot of work to be done, yeah, whether you consider it from the viewpoint of a kind of technical challenge or the intellectual work that goes into this. Obviously, a lot of the heavy lifting has to be done in a programmatic way, because otherwise with the volumes of this kind of material, it would outstrip any human resources that we could bring directly to bear on examining each different identity that was presented. We've got to make sure that we've got some fairly hefty boxes in place in terms of IT scaling and so on.

But just to give some ideas of metrics, you mentioned that already we have something in excess of 10 million ISNIs already assigned to persons and individuals within the database. It could well be, we believe, that just the YouTube partnership may result in that figure going up by perhaps 3-5 million over the next couple of years. And we have other possible members waiting in the wings who want to join in on this, as well.

KENNEALLY: Here in the United States, each individual to work or otherwise be identified needs a Social Security number. The other good reason for having a Social Security number is that when you retire, you can receive Social Security benefits, as presumably, not only the attribution piece of this, but the – I was going to say retribution – the compensation piece of this that's critical.

DEVENPORT: It certainly is. It's a critical element in driving adoption from parties like YouTube and others who wish to join in on this. I have to say for our listeners that

sadly we can't offer pensions from the ISNI scheme at the moment. We only wish we could. (laughter) But more seriously, yes, it is a very important piece in terms of actually making sure that the attribution chain is as correct as it can be and as fair as it can be.

KENNEALLY: And with streaming services, with digital services, that's a greater challenge than it ever would have been with physical product, I imagine.

DEVENPORT: I believe so. I believe so. Because in some senses, the ways in which the content is consumed is much more informal, shall we say, than actually turning up at a regular outlet and paying your $5 or your $10 or whatever it might be for a book or for a CD or something like this. The combination of that with the scale on which these operations are functioning makes it quite a challenge. Quite a challenge.

KENNEALLY: We have been speaking today on Beyond the Book with 459137837, otherwise known as Tim Devenport, the executive director of the ISNI International Agency, about the new announcement regarding the partnership with ISNI and YouTube. Tim Devenport, thanks so much for joining us on Beyond the Book.

DEVENPORT: It's been a pleasure. Thank you so much for inviting me on, Chris.

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Beyond the Book co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Join us again soon on Beyond the Book.

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