

International Standard Serial Numbers

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Since this is a journal devoted to serials to be read by those who deal in almost all aspects of serials, I expect that anyone reading this has at least heard of International Standard Serial Numbers (ISSN). Here I hope to provide general background information on ISSN and their uses.

Firstly, what is an ISSN? It is an internationally accepted code which identifies a serial title. It consists of eight digits the last of which is a check digit which is used to ensure whether the number is correctly cited. The check digit may be an X, otherwise the ISSN is fully numeric. It should be printed thus: ISSN 0000-0000. The form of presentation has no particular significance but it is intended to make the ISSN easier to read and to recognise internationally. Unlike the ISBN, the ISSN does not contain a number specific to the publisher; it is purely arbitrary. A number is taken from a computer produced block of ISSN and simply assigned to a title.

ISSN are administered by the International Serials Data System (ISDS) which was conceived in the late 1960s when the UNISIST (Intergovernmental programme for Cooperation in the Field of Scientific and Technological Information) Central Committee recommended to the Director General of UNESCO and the president of the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU) that 'an international registry of scientific periodicals should be established as a basis of a system for the normalization of the citations of the journal literature of science and technology'. The UNISIST/ICSU-AB (Abstracting Board) Working Group on Bibliographic Descriptions acknowledged the need for a mechanism which would establish a world list of journal titles, register title word abbreviations, issue supplementary lists of changes and additions to the world list and issue cumulated revised editions of the master list.

Following this, INSPEC (Information Service for Physics, Electrotechnology and Control) was commissioned to carry out a feasibility study. The

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report from this recommended the establishment of an International Serials Data System and went on to propose a design and supporting network. UNESCO and the French Government signed a provisional agreement to provide funds for the establishment and support of an International Centre for the registration of serials, in Paris. This was established in 1971 and its aim was to introduce and operate an automated system for the registration of serials covering the whole range of recorded knowledge. The International Centre was also given the sole responsibility for the control of the International Standard Serial Number which had been proposed in the meantime by Technical Committee 46 of the International Organisation for Standardisation.

In 1972 the Director General of UNESCO invited member states to establish national ISDS centres. The responsibility for the establishment of a national centre rests with the government of a member state of UNESCO as does the choice of institution to carry out its functions. Certain criteria are laid down however; the centre should have access to all new serials published in its country and it should have access to a large collection of serials. Ideally it should also have the potential to establish co-operative contacts with serial publishers and distributors and with libraries and information services, and it should act as a focal point in national policies and activities concerning serials.

There are now fifty national centres spread throughout the world, the British centre being the UK National Serials Data Centre (UKNSDC) which is part of British Library Bibliographic Services.

A national centre assigns ISSN to the serials published in its own country. ISSN for serials which are published in countries which do not have ISDS centres are assigned by the International Centre, which is also responsible for titles published by international organisations. It also assigns blocks of ISSN to the national centres for their own use.

For the purposes of assigning ISSN the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) definition of a serial is used in order to

determine whether a publication is eligible. ISO3297 defines a serial as:

'A publication, in printed form or not, issued in successive parts usually having numerical or chronological designations and intended to be continued indefinitely. Serials include periodicals, newspapers, annuals, the journals, memoirs, proceedings, transactions, etc. of societies and monographic series.'

The ISSN is assigned to the serial title. Only one number must be assigned to a title and it remains the same for every issue provided the title does not change. Change of publisher, frequency or place of publication does not affect the ISSN, but a change in title means a new number must be assigned. The old number should, however, be used when referring to the old title.

The first ISSN were assigned by RR Bowker Publications so that their extensive file could provide a starting base for the ISDS as a whole. Bowker allocated 66,000 ISSN to the titles listed in the 14th edition of Ulrich's *International Periodicals Directory* and the 2nd edition of *Irregular Serials and Annuals*. They also assigned a further 220,000 ISSN to the 1959-70 cumulation of *New Serial Titles* which Bowker also published. In addition an ISDS base file was constructed out of the 30,000 titles included in *Chemical Abstracts*, *Geological Abstracts*, *INSPEC*, *Biological Abstracts* and *Bulletin Signalétiques*. Now ISSN are only assigned by the ISDS national centres and the International Centre.

ISSN assigned by national centres throughout the world are recorded on the ISDS Register which is updated quarterly. Published by the International Centre it currently lists more than 400,000 serial titles and is available on microfiche or tape. The records on the register are created in accordance with ISDS cataloguing rules and all contain the title of the serial, its ISSN, year of publication of the first issue (and the year of the last issue if appropriate), a code denoting frequency, place of publication and the publisher. Most of the records also include an abbreviation of the title (created in accordance with ISO 4-1984), cover or other title variants and a note of previous, succeeding and related titles where appropriate.

Since its establishment in 1974 UKNSDC has contributed over 26,000 records to the Register. Currently we are assigning more than 2,000 numbers per year (2,368 in 1987). Well over half of these are in response to requests for ISSN from publishers (1,448 in 1987). We also assign numbers to serials which come into the Library through the Copyright Receipt Office and inform

the publishers when we have made such an assignment. We also respond to requests from CCN, the French union catalogue of serial publications, and from NOSP, the Nordic Union Catalogue of Serials, both of which are based on bibliographic records from the ISDS database.

The ISSN was developed because it was felt there was a need for a brief, unique and unambiguous identification code for serial publications. The numbers may be used as control numbers for serial titles in automated housekeeping systems for identifying titles, ordering, checking in and claiming. They may be used to ensure more accurate serials citation by scholars, researchers, abstractors and librarians. They should be particularly helpful when distinguishing between serials with identical titles, of which there are many. However, they can only be useful in this way if publishers print them, and print them correctly, and if people requesting serials take the trouble to quote the ISSN.

ISSN are used in both the SISAC (Serials Industry Systems Advisory Committee) and Biblid codes for identifying articles within serials and in the United States they are used by the Postal Service in the permits which allow publishers to mail serials by second class post.

Also in the U.S. the ISSN is an integral component of the Article Fee Code used to monitor payments to the Copyright Clearance Center Inc. This citation appears on the first page of an article and indicates that, in the United States, the copyright owner has consented to the copying of the article, provided the fee indicated in the code is paid to the Center.

An ISSN can also be used as a basis for a barcode which identifies the serial itself. In December 1983 the ISDS-EAN contract was signed in which the European Article Number Association made available the three digit prefix 977 "for the exclusive use of serial coding with the ISSN system"; 978 is the prefix for ISBN based barcodes. The rest of the number on which the barcode is based consists of the first seven digits of the ISSN, two digits indicating price changes (these are optional and may be shown as 00) and a check digit; thirteen digits in all. A two digit supplementary code may be added to indicate the week or month of issue.

Here in the UK an attempt has been made to encourage periodical publishers to print such barcodes on their titles. In July 1985 the Periodicals Barcoding Association (PBA) formally replaced an all-industry barcoding

working party which had first met in 1980. The PBA consists of representatives from the periodical publishing, printing and distribution industries, with the British Library as an associate member. In 1986 the PBA published "Barcoding for periodicals and magazines: an industry guideline" which describes in detail the ISSN-EAN barcode. This was closely followed by a half-day seminar entitled "Barcoding for Magazines". It was attended by periodical publishers, wholesalers and distributors, and members of the press. Its aim was to explain barcoding and its advantages with a view to encouraging publishers to print them.

So far few British serial publishers have opted to print barcodes; they see little advantage in doing so at this time. However, electronic communication is increasing all the time and periodical distributors are becoming more

interested in barcodes. The system is set up for those who wish to use it.

A popular misconception among people making enquiries about ISSN is that the number confers copyright or legal protection on the title; it does not. Neither does the number have any connection with the legal deposit requirement. Under the Copyright Act of 1911, as amended by the British Library Act of 1972, all publications, including individual issues of serials, must be deposited with the British Library whether they carry an ISSN or not.

And finally, anybody wishing to apply for ISSN or requiring further information about them should write to the UK National Serials Data Centre, The British Library, 2 Sheraton Street, London W1V 4BH.

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