

Electronic Data Interchange in the Information Industry

The Work of BEDIS

Steve Hobbs

On 15th October 1986 a one day seminar sponsored by the British National Bibliography Research Fund was held in London. Entitled 'Electronic Transmission Standards for the Book World: Avoiding an Electronic Babel', the 'Babel Conference' (as it became known) drew its audience from booksellers, librarians, systems suppliers, publishers, and independent consultants. For some time concern had been growing in the information industry about the lack of common and acceptable standards governing electronic data interchange (EDI) between libraries, suppliers and publishers. In the light of this, and as the move to paperless trading gathered pace, the conference aimed to highlight the then present position, to stimulate discussion, and to define what action might be taken.

The conference concluded in its report, amongst other things:

1. Many areas of commerce unrelated to the book world were already successfully practising EDI using fixed length TRADACOMS type formats.
2. Resolution of the problems involved with common format standards were urgently required, and would involve the co-operation of all sectors of the book world.
3. The MARC Users Group felt that the issue of standards should continue to be pressed within the UK. This group therefore expressed itself ready to take discussions further, with a view to resolving at least some of the problems described at the conference.

In early 1987 the MARC Users Group responded by setting up BEDIS (The Book Trade Electronic Data Interchange Standards Committee). In recognition of the fact that EDI knows no boundaries in the information industry, but

Steve Hobbs is Product Development Co-ordinator, BLCMP (Library Services) Ltd, and a BEDIS Working Party member.

frequently crosses frontiers from one sector of the industry to another, the membership of BEDIS was drawn from public and academic libraries, library suppliers, booksellers, publishers, service suppliers, systems suppliers, and the Article Numbering Association.

Faced with widespread use of a number of existing standards, including UKMARC, TRADACOMS, BISAC, and Teleordering, BEDIS drew up its terms of reference and subsequently formed four Working Parties.

Working Party 1 investigated the case for and against publishers adopting a standard for holding a description of its products in electronic form, and whether that standard should be MARC based.

Working Party 2 considered the case for suppliers who held bibliographic information on computers, doing so in a format compatible with UKMARC.

Working Party 3 was charged with establishing the various messages, and their contents, between libraries and suppliers, and to decide whether an existing format could accommodate all necessary information. Any such format should be independent of transmission methods (e.g. TRADANET or Teleordering).

Working Party 4 studied the suitability of TRADACOMS for transmission of orders and invoices between publishers and suppliers.

Recommendations of the Working Parties were published in a Discussion Paper in April 1988, which was circulated widely throughout the UK information industry. For "sound practical reasons" BEDIS sub-divided data into two categories: bibliographic and commercial. As MARC is the most widely used standard for storage and transmission of bibliographic data in the UK it was recommended that it should be adopted, throughout the book trade, as the standard for holding information on books. In addition, although it was not seen necessary for publishers to hold bibliographic information in MARC format, such information should be

capable of being transmitted in UKMARC compatible format.

Aware of the current widespread use of the TRADACOMS format in the retail industry, including some book suppliers, BEDIS recommended that this format be adopted for transmission of orders, invoices, statements, and chasers. This, however, would necessitate the TRADACOMS format being amended to accommodate all the requirements of the library/supplier/publisher interface. The Article Numbering Association, responsible for TRADACOMS, indicated it was willing to make the necessary changes. To this end the TRADACOMS format would be amended to include the necessary bibliographic element.

In autumn 1988 BEDIS established a close working relationship with BTECC (The Book Trade Electronic Communication Committee, a body set up in March 1988 under the auspices of the Booksellers Association, Publishers Association, and the Library Association), and commenced a further programme of work, in

order to complete its brief. The Working Parties were restructured and have started to meet. In particular BEDIS will ensure that any existing PA/BA standards which may be applicable will be examined, and that possible future adoption of Edifact international standards currently being developed by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, is not ruled out.

It is hoped to discuss the implications of the BEDIS recommendations upon the work already done by the ALPSP/PA International Working Party on Magnetic Media Transfer of Journal Subscriptions, who have already implemented agreed standards for EDI between publishers and subscription agents. BEDIS is aware of the work already done, a member of the ALPSP/PA's Working Party also being a BEDIS member. In view of this it is hoped that the two groups will continue to work for compatible standards throughout the information industry.

The final BEDIS report will be distributed in early September 1989, in time for the next 'Babel' Conference, to be held in October 1989.