

International Serials Data System



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Introduction

Introducing the International Serials Data System (ISDS) to a group of professionals involved in serial publications may seem a rather

redundant task, especially if one assumes that, to all concerned, ISDS means ISSN.

For this reason the present paper only contains limited background information and prefers to focus on the most noteworthy trends of the system and its recent developments in connection with its spreading use within the profession.

Those interested in further information should refer to the general issues listed in the bibliography. The ISDS International Centre will of course also answer all further enquiries.

Background and structure of ISDS

The International Serials Data System (ISDS) is the inter-governmental organization in charge of the ISSN system. Twenty years ago, with the development both of the concept of Universal Bibliographic Control and of new automation technologies, the necessity for international numbering systems emerged and led to the necessary standardization work that in the field of serials resulted in the ISO Standard 3297 : International Standard Serial Numbering. Parallel to the development of the standard itself, the need for a structure in charge of maintaining the system (unicity of numbers, international

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cooperation, common rules for registration...) became evident. It resulted in the present two-level structure of ISDS.

The International Centre created under the auspices of Unesco and France as host country was established in the early 70s to promote the system, help in creating National Centres, coordinate the work of the different partners and make the information thus created universally available. The National Centres created at the initiative of the different member states are established in order to promote the wide and appropriate usage of ISSN in the different countries and to register the serial publications issued in their national territories.

The general policy is established by the General Assembly of members in coordination with technical policy, mostly determined by the meetings of Directors of ISDS Centres.

The network consists of 52 operational Centres (among which the International Centre that acts as a registration centre for publications issued by international organizations or in countries that do not have a National Centre). The list of Centres is given as Figure 1.

The Register now contains more than 600,000 ISSN and the related registration records. The growth of the database is noteworthy. After almost 15 years of existence, in 1985, it contained 250,000 ISSN. The figure has doubled in the following 5 years. At the end of 1990, there were 500,000 ISSN. And it needed only

Figure One

Centres	Number of records January 1992
Algeria	241
Argentina	3 047
Australia	23 811
Belgium	8 966
Brazil	4 321
Bulgaria	368
Canada	67 729
Chile	978
People's Republic of China	2 429
Colombia	663
Czechoslovakia	2 714
Germany	35 806
Denmark	11 773
Egypt	222
Finland	11 395
France	104 800
The Gambia	26
Ghana	94
Greece	736
Hungary	11 350
India	3 257
Indonesia	2 474
International Centre	23 130
Ireland	2 081
Israel	2 365
Italy	7 672
Japan	19 515

List of ISDS Centres

Centres	Number of records January 1992
Jamaica	93
Republic of Korea	455
Malaysia	1 657
Morocco	732
Mexico	1 688
The Netherlands	11 165
New Zealand	6 332
Nigeria	2 311
Norway	4 539
Philippines	1 518
Poland	4 869
Portugal	1 675
Romania	937
Senegal	90
Singapore	2 014
Spain	7 901
Sweden	12 033
Tanzania	340
Thailand	1 205
Tunisia	262
Turkey	492
Uruguay	697
United Kingdom	33 157
United States of America	113 101
Venezuela	420
Yugoslavia	4 484

another 18 months, to reach 600,000 ISSN assigned worldwide. These figures clearly illustrate the spreading use of ISSN. If one remembers that the number of National Centres has not doubled in the same period but regularly grown at a more limited pace and, more significant, that the new National Centres are established in countries with limited publishing activity (compared to the older Centres), the quick growth of the number of ISSN assigned means not so much that more titles are produced (it may only be relatively true in the past five years) but more interesting to us, that more ISSN

are requested, i.e. publishers, union catalogues, subscription agencies, abstracting services ask for registration of publications more systematically than when the system started.

Uses of ISSN

What are these spreading uses of ISSN? The need for a unique identifier was clearly felt when the system was established. The fields of application of international standard numbers (books, sound recordings, printed music, technical reports...) show the general level of awareness as to their many advantages.

This approach now has a growing number of applications. To start with, ISSN may have been regarded as mainly a bibliographic tool in library and documentation areas. Over the past 20 years, the number of manual and most of all automated systems that need to rely on a unique identifier has increased. If the abstracting and indexing services have immediately taken advantage of the system, national bibliographic agencies, legal deposit structures have felt the need in a less immediate way. With the realistic view that resources are scarce and duplication of efforts needless, bibliographic agencies have started distributing records, union catalogues have allowed for collections in common and helped develop interlibrary loan and in these examples, ISSN as a unique key to the data has proved its usefulness.

The development of automation and telecommunications have made it even more necessary to rely on a unique code of few digits. The trade during the same period and in a similar way automated its procedures and started considering the use of ISSN. A few examples can be given: barcodes (EAN, SISAC...) based on ISSN, electronic data interchange of orders or claims where the ISSN identifies the title requested, identification for postal reduced rates because if there is an ISSN, it is a serial etc... Real progress would be made if, as a consequence of all the above examples, systematic coverage of the information chain could be achieved. The above list is already a convincing achievement. One may dream of a perfect bibliographic world where the publisher would request an ISSN before starting a publication, would print it from the first issue, the title could be found in the ISDS Register as soon as it is published, where it could be used by libraries ordering the title or checking-in the issues, by wholesalers, retail outlets, subscription agencies to enhance their commercial procedures, where legal deposit, bibliographies, union catalogues,

interlibrary loan, retribution of copyright agencies would greatly be facilitated.

Though we are still far from this idealistic chain, more and more partners use ISSN and what is even more satisfactory, partners in all parts of the chain. If the trade does not take advantage of it, ISSN will not be printed on publications and libraries and documentation centres will not find them easily for their own purposes. Equally, if it is printed by the publisher on the publication, libraries and documentation centres miss a helpful opportunity if they do not use it.

Working procedures and developments

ISSN is applicable to all serial publications, past, present or to be published in the near future, which allows for registration of dead serials or for pre-publication assignment in addition to assignment to current serials.

The most noteworthy aspect of ISSN if compared with other numbering systems, is the assignment of this code to the item itself, with no relation with the producer. It is an important aspect that carries many advantages for the users and also weighs heavily on the ISDS structure itself.

The choice of identification of the publication is due to the very nature of serial publications. Contrary to other areas such as books or sound recordings, the publishers of serials are almost as numerous as the titles themselves. With a few exceptions worldwide, giving a publisher's prefix would have been equivalent to registering each publication. One digit to number the publications of a given producer would have been in most cases more than was really needed.

In addition to the above, a serial publication in itself has a lasting existence. Changes may occur in other aspects (place of publication, publisher...) but the serial will remain the same. Equally, changes in titles, splitting, merging, related titles are significant data that would not be so easily

traced if there was not a comprehensive Register.

The positive results of this choice are as follows:

- all serial publications are identified in a single database with a worldwide coverage
- ISSN can be assigned on request. The request can come from any user needing unique identification of the publication, even though the publisher is not aware or willing to use it.
- even if an ISSN is not printed on the piece, once it is assigned and validated for inclusion in the ISDS Register, it is available and can be used without ambiguity.

The above advantages are not always well known and should be better utilised. The pressure on the system is proportional to its advantages:

- the ISDS centres cannot delegate registration, need to have a permanent direct access to the publications and need to answer users' requests quickly.
- the data need to be available fast and to be accessible in an easy way which means a constant effort to keep up with new technologies that can improve both registration and retrieval of data.
- the maintenance of common rules for decentralized registration and the centralized checking procedures, processing and redistribution of the Register imply on-going developments and a strong structure, putting financial pressure in proportion as the system grows.

To face these challenges, ISDS recently developed new working tools and adapted its strategies.

Registration

From its creation, ISDS has been a computer based system and exchange of data on magnetic tapes was encouraged. It

has meant possibilities of exchange with different national systems. It has also meant, more recently, adapting to wider use of microcomputers, more particularly in the countries where local investment is limited and where the number of records to be maintained does not justify the installation of a larger mainframe system. ISDS has developed, with the support of IFLA, a microcomputer based system for serials control called OSIRIS (= Online Serials Information, Registration, Inquiry System) that is now operational in several centres and improves the ready availability of data produced.

In a parallel way, the International Centre computer system needs to be regularly upgraded.

Access to the data

Conscious that the available new technologies and the continuous growth of the database did not allow for maintaining the Register on microfiche, ISDS transferred its Register onto CD-ROM. "ISSN Compact" started its quarterly publication at the beginning of 1992 and gives a more efficient access to a richness of data that could hardly be exploited on microfiche.

Financial aspects

The question is now how to finance a system that costs increasingly more in direct ratio to its spreading use, i.e. its success and efficiency, when public funds that traditionally supported it tend rather to diminish. ISDS has to find new partnership, with users who benefit from it, on contractual policies that would not be detrimental to the availability of the information itself.

Conclusion

The scope and length of this paper does not allow a systematic description of the System. (Detailed information will be found

elsewhere as to:

- the records, structure and content
- the other ISDS products, among which the List of serial title word abbreviations, i.e. the application list of ISO Standard 4, for which ISDS is also the registration authority
- the important activities dedicated to standardization: ISDS being a truly international partnership, it is a good forum to evaluate needs and suggest solutions, in the fields of language codes, country codes, data exchange... and of course any issues relating to serials at national and international levels.
- the working relationship with union catalogues, barcoding systems, electronic data interchange....

It seemed more important here to try and analyze the general approach chosen to handle the issue of Serial numbering. If this paper provides a better knowledge of the solutions offered and a greater awareness of how to take advantage of them, it answers its purpose.

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