

SERIALS CATALOGUING ON THE INTERNATIONAL SCENE: THE INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER (ISSN) NETWORK

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Many readers will be very familiar with ISSN and the role they play in identifying serials, but perhaps less is known about the origins of the numbers and of how the ISSN Network is steered and governed. The author was recently elected to the ISSN Governing Board, and describes the world of ISSN and the changes being planned with regard to electronic serials and digital material.

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What is in a number? In the case of the International Standard Serial Number (ISSN), quite a lot. As readers will know, the ISSN uniquely identifies a serial, facilitates data exchange and bibliographic control, and is increasingly important as a reference source for the World-Wide Web (of which more later).

But have you ever wondered where these useful little numbers come from? I certainly had, until a fateful morning (now more years ago than I like to recall) when I began work in the UK ISSN Centre, which is an integral part of the British Library's cataloguing operations. National ISSN Centres are usually based at the country's national library or national bibliographic agency. There I began learning about the mysteries of ISSN, not to mention serials. I also began attending the UK Serials Group, right from the very first meeting. We were rather a small, select bunch in those days, and I was even fortunate enough to survive the late night parties, which were so nostalgically recalled by John Merriman in his recent profile of Derek Law (in the March 2000 issue)!

In my new job in the UK ISSN Centre, I began to research serials and assign ISSNs. Each assignment of a number is thoroughly investigated and researched. New titles must have documentary evidence about their proposed publication from the publisher. Existing titles may have an ISSN that needs validating and submitting to the central ISSN register, which is maintained by the ISSN International Centre in Paris (these unvalidated ISSNs arise from the initiatives used to kick-start the system in the early 1970s). The numbers were distributed to national centres on printouts, which came from Paris, and it was vital to double (or triple) check that a newly assigned number was crossed off the printout. This must have worked, because in all the time I was involved, I cannot recall a case where there was an assignment of

duplicate numbers. There are some cases where serial titles appear to have duplicate assignments but, in my experience, these generally arise from the very early mass assignment initiatives mentioned above.

At that time, of course, I was a comparatively junior "ISSN assigner". My boss, in contrast, used to regularly disappear to places like Paris and Washington, announcing that he would be attending one or another ISSN meeting. Phrases such as "general assembly" and "governing board" floated by us ordinary workers. Somewhere, we knew that there were very senior people discussing serials policy and rules, but in those days it seemed to make little difference to our day to day working lives.

Now imagine the years rushing by and the scene changing to Paris. Earlier this year, at the beginning of May, when it seemed that several lifetimes had passed since those early ISSN and UKSG days, I found myself entering the Unesco building in Paris as the UK representative at this year's meeting of the ISSN General Assembly. Changes at the British Library had brought me back to a role in serials work. What really went on in those mysterious (though not smoke-filled, as Unesco is a smoke-free zone) ISSN meetings? I soon began to find out, as in the course of a hectic few days of meetings, I was not only confirmed as the UK representative to the General Assembly, but also elected to represent the UK on the ISSN Governing Board, along with nine other colleagues, including representatives from Argentina, Tunisia, Denmark, Germany, the United States, and Croatia.

The General Assembly is the meeting for representatives of the ISSN Network to discuss common concerns, and takes place every two years. The Governing Board is a smaller body, which meets annually, and steers the work of the ISSN International Centre in Paris and the ISSN Network as a whole. It assesses and validates budgets, and oversees strategic and operational plans. As such, it checks that the network is carrying out the approved plans, and that the International Centre is managing the network in an effective manner, to ensure the continued development and utility of the ISSN and ISSN catalogue records. The network now includes centres in over 60 countries around the world, and it draws its funding from membership

subscriptions and from significant additional contributions made by Unesco and the French government.

A regular feature of the meetings is the in-depth discussion on serials and bibliographic matters, chaired by the Director of the International Centre, Madame Francoise Pelle. This time Mme. Pelle led discussions on the future of the ISSN as an international standard, and we considered an action plan for dealing with the challenges of digital and electronic material, covering aspects such as:

- **scope**
- **coverage**
- **identification**
- **maintenance.**

It may be helpful to look at these in turn and set out briefly the proposals agreed at the meeting for advancing the role of ISSN as the significant bibliographic identifier for serials in the electronic environment.

Scope

We agreed to broaden the scope of the definitions of ISSN and serials, as accepted by the ISSN Network. This is in line with efforts towards meeting the digital challenge taking place elsewhere in the serials universe, and chimed in with decisions taken in January 2000 by the Working Group engaged in revising the International Standard Bibliographic Description for Serials, ISBD(S). It will advance the harmonisation of serials standards in a significant way.

The new definition of ISSN reads as follows:

Each ISSN is a unique identifier for a specific continuing resource. ISSNs are applicable to most continuing resources, whether past, present, or to be produced in the foreseeable future, whatever the medium of production. Continuing resources are issued over time with no predetermined conclusion. ISSNs are assigned to the entire population of serials and most integrating resources.

It was also agreed:

- **to expand the definition of serials** to encompass not only traditional serials and loose-leaf services but also new material of a continuing nature, such as databases and Web sites, which need different handling from conventional serials

- **to recognise a new category of material, to be known as integrating resources:** these are added to or changed by the addition of updates, which do not remain separate but are integrated into the resource as a whole.

Taken together, these decisions represent a further significant advance in the harmonisation efforts of the ISSN, ISBD(S) and Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR) constituencies.

Coverage

The International Centre (IC) reported that coverage is in need of improvement from the point of view of electronic serials. The IC put forward initiatives to improve and extend still further the coverage of this material.

Identification

An increasing part of the ISSN activity at the IC is devoted to the questions raised by the identification and numbering of electronic publications. IC staff members are involved in DOI, INDECS, NISO and other related discussions. It is intended that ISSNs will be a reliable identifier in the electronic world, with ISSNs assigned quickly and providing links to relevant, and, where necessary, multiple URLs. Accordingly, the IC has developed a browser plug-in which allows the ISSN to be entered in the browser address box as an alternative to the URL, providing a reliable identification and access tool.

Maintenance

This is being tackled by the ISSN network as follows:

- the resolver system ensures effective mapping between a given ISSN and one or several URLs
- the URL watcher controls the status of all URLs in the ISSN-URL mapping file
- broken or redirected URLs are stored for resolution.

Benefits

This action plan for dealing with electronic and digital material is needed in order for the ISSN Network to meet the digital challenge. There is quite a mountain to climb, but all concerned are determined to tackle the climb, and to marshal scarce resources to the best possible effect. The IC will be finding some limited extra resources to assist the digital effort, helped by subscriptions from members and from the French government.

Overall, the participation in the international bibliographic control of serials, and in shaping and deciding future bibliographic standards, continues to be impressive value for money. The UK's election to the ISSN Governing Board will provide the opportunity to contribute to shaping the strategy for the harmonisation of bibliographic standards, and co-ordination of the international serials community.

If there are readers who would like to comment, I would be pleased to receive comments or queries, and full contact details are given on the first page of the article.