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ISSN: It's Still Some Number!

by Regina Reynolds (Library of Congress) <rrey@loc.gov>

At it approaches its twenty-fifth year, the ISSN, the "social security number of the serials world," is in wider demand and used in more ways than ever. Far from being made obsolete by the upsurge in electronic serials and the popularity of the World Wide Web, the International Standard Serial Number now graces more than 400 electronic serials. And, a Web search on the letters "ISSN" using the AltaVista search engine resulted in over 40,000 matching entries, from journals, newsletters, articles, and citations on the Web which have included an ISSN. Among its many other applications, the ISSN is used in barcodes, abstracting and indexing citations, and document delivery systems. Further out on the horizon, the ISSN has been proposed as a component of the URN, the developing Universal Resource Name standard for identifying Internet resources.

The International Standard Serial Number, (ISO 3297 and NISO Z39.9) actually began as the SSN, a U.S. standard. The U.S. standard was developed in 1970 by Subcommittee 20 of the American National Standards Institute's Z39 Committee, now known as the National Information Standards Organization (NISO). Also in 1970, the International Standards Organization's Technical Committee 46 (ISO T/C 46) recommended that the SSN become an international standard. The **R.R. Bowker Company** was selected to begin ISSN implementation by numbering the entries in its Serials Bibliography file in 1971. In 1972, the **National Serials Data Project** (now the NSDP, the National Serials Data Program) was established as a collaboration of the three National Libraries: The **Library of Congress**, The **National Library of Medicine**, and The **National Agricultural Library**. In 1974,

NSDP became part of the Library of Congress's Serial Record Division, where it remains today.

The ISSN consists of eight digits plus the prefix "ISSN." It is always written with its prefix and a hyphen between two groups of four digits each. According to the international standard, "ISSN" denotes both the singular and plural forms. And, even though it's "smart" to have an ISSN, NSDP's former head, **Julia Blixrud**, used to like to startle audiences by calling the ISSN "just a dumb number." By that she meant that unlike the ISBN which has identifiable country and publisher prefixes, the numbers in the ISSN carry no inherent meaning. The only "intelligence" in the ISSN is that the last digit is a check digit calculated on a base 11. The check digit allows for checking a number to detect transcription errors. The use of base 11 for the check digit results in some ISSN ending in an "X", which is always written as a capital letter. On a few occasions NSDP staff have helped give meaning of sort to the ISSN, as when a numerologist asked for an auspicious number and staff allowed her to choose her own, or when an ISSN cataloger was able to use an ISSN whose last four digits matched the end of the Byzantine empire for an appropriate publication.

NSDP is the U.S. center of the **ISSN Network**, which consists of over 60 ISSN centers worldwide. NSDP is responsible for ISSN assignments to serials published in the United States. Two little-known exceptions to NSDP's jurisdiction over U.S. imprints are that NSDP may not assign ISSN to publications of international bodies, such as the United Nations, nor to publications of certain multi-national publishers, often those with headquarters outside the U.S. The ISSN International Centre assigns ISSN to international publications and responsibility for the titles of multinational publishers is divided among the centers located in the countries in which the multinationals have offices.

The **ISSN International Centre**, the coordinating centre of the ISSN Network, is located in Paris. The International Centre is responsible for allocating ISSN blocks, maintaining and distributing the ISSN database of over 700,000 records, coordinating network policy and practices, establishing and training new centers, and assigning ISSN to international titles and titles which are published in countries without ISSN centers. Most ISSN centers are located in national libraries or national centers for science and technology. The principal product of the ISSN Network is the **ISSN Register**, the database of ISSN and associated records. The Register is distributed on tape (by negotiated license), on a

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You May Have More Than You Think: Journal Holdings At the Article Level

by C. Michael Phillips <phillipsm@cofc.edu> and
James Williams <williamsj@cofc.edu> (College of Charleston)

Many electronic journal indexes now provide the means to search for articles in specific journals. **SilverPlatter**, **FirstSearch** and **IAC** all offer indexes with search software that has this capability. This type of software has several practical applications. An important one is profiling an index against a journal collection. Compared to the method of just identifying which journal titles in a collection are covered by an index and figuring their sum as a percentage of the total number of all journal titles covered by that index, profiling an index's coverage of that collection at the article level should reveal a more detailed, if not more accurate, picture.

At the **Robert Scott Small Library** of the **College of Charleston**, that was the experience with **SilverPlatter's** *PsycLit*. Of the 1,352 journal titles listed in *Psychological Abstract's* 1995 coverage list, the Robert Scott Small Library houses 271 or 20% of the title count. However, a count at the article level yields a different result. Of the 685,436 articles cited on **SilverPlatter's** two *PsycLit* article discs, '74-'89 and '90-'95 (Figure supplied by **APA**, 4/30/96), 199,714 appear in these 271 journals. Hence, at the article level, 199,714/685,436 or up to 29% of all the cited articles on these two discs could be in the Robert Scott Small Library.

This set of 199,714 articles has some interesting statistical characteristics. Five titles produced article counts at five times the mean of 737. They are *Psychological Reports* at 10,358, *Perceptual and Motor Skills* at 9,966, *American Journal of Psychiatry* at 7,800, *Social Psychology* at 4,597 and *Animal Behavior* at 3,880. This set also has a standard deviation of 1156, a figure much greater than the mean. In our case, this explains why the title count method is not the most accurate way to describe *PsycLit's* coverage of the library's collection.

Of course, approaching the maximum of 29% requires more complete holdings for each journal title. However, this maximum may be an important factor to consider when evaluating or re-evaluating an index for purchase. On a smaller scale, this ability to count articles by journal title has other applications. Just knowing how many articles from a journal are cited in an index could influence the process of selecting new journal titles and adding back issues.

Here at the Robert Scott Small Library, we plan to make our file of 271 *PsycLit* journals available to patrons as a loadable search from a pull-down menu in the **SilverPlatter** software. Hopefully, combining any search with this subset of 199,714 article citations will emphasize the library's collection and mitigate potential patron frustration resulting from not having so many of the journals or articles cited in the index. In the final analysis, however, the overall flexibility of an electronic index's search software may prove to be just as important as its coverage of the collection. We'll keep you posted. 🐜

Profiles Encouraged:

**Regina Romano Reynolds, Head,
National Serials Data Program,
Library of Congress (rrey@loc.gov)**

Early on: I was born in Norristown, Pa, a northern suburb of Philadelphia, because my hometown, Ambler, was too small for its own hospital.

Background: I'm first-generation Italian on both sides.

Education: 8 years parochial school; 4 years Catholic girls' high school; 4 years, University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio (B.A. English, French); 1 year, University of Michigan (A.M.L.S.).

And then: First job: (before an intended grad school sojourn to pursue further study in English) technical librarian for a small electronics research & development firm outside Philadelphia. This was in 1969. One of the topics for which I was asked to do a literature search was "modems," a term I'd never heard before and didn't hear again until the 1980's!

There's more: I met my husband when he came into the library to do some research, and, one week after our honeymoon we were both laid off when the company was taken over by Magnavox. Eventually I got a job as a "junior cataloger" at Penn State. I put my husband through a B.A. at Penn State, through a year at Villanova law school while I worked as Assistant Archivist for the Insurance Company of North America, and through an M.A. and M.L.S. at the University of Michigan. Finally, all my library work paid off when I was offered a scholarship towards my own M.L.S., which I received in 1976.

And even more: Linda Bartley, former head of NSDP, recruited me right out of library school to work at NSDP where I have remained ever since, moving from cataloger, to assistant head, to head in 1992. Obviously, I enjoy working with the publishing and information communities which NSDP serves!

Family: A 13-year old daughter, Elizabeth (Liz to her innumerable phone callers) and a keyboard-hopping cat, Pandora.

Pastimes: Trying to make the perfect loaf of crusty, Italian bread; writing poetry and dreaming of getting it published; ethnic cooking (my latest undertaking was a dish from *Like Water For Chocolate*); greeting card design, and editing a family history written by my late mother and her sister.

Pet peeves: Computer printers (every one I touch seems in urgent need of an exorcism); vacuum cleaners (and the recurring need to use them); TV channel surfing; airports.

Favorite accomplishments: A near-perfect loaf of bread made during the first of this winter's blizzards; being characterized as "always right" by my daughter in a 1992 Mother's Day booklet and as 'pretty neat' by some of her friends; being mellow enough to know the two preceding phenomena may never happen again; being told by a publisher whom I convinced to not change a serial title that I could have convinced him to change his own name; getting one of the highest ratings at the 1992 NASIG for a presentation on a dull subject like ANSI/NISO Z39.1.

Things I like to read: Victorian novels (Eliot, Hardy); poetry (e.e. Cummings, John Donne, Andrew Marvel, Emily Dickinson); nonfiction about science; and, for escape, novels by the likes of Charles McCarry, Nelson DeMille, James Carroll, and many others.

Best piece of advice: This was passed on to me by my mother: "Don't be afraid to open your mouth." To that I will add, "Love what you do."

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quarterly CD-ROM (ISSN Compact), and on a soon-to-be-discontinued microfiche, the ISSN Register. Detailed information about obtaining the database is available from the ISSN International Centre's home page (discussed below) or by email to issn.org. The U.S. portion of the database is available via OCLC, and via LC's MARC tape distribution service. ISSN also appear in the records in *New Serial Titles*.

One of the ISSN International Centre's recent efforts has been the establishment of a home page on the World Wide Web: <http://www.issn.org>. This page includes basic information about the ISSN; a list of ISSN centers, their directors and addresses; statistics about the number of ISSN registered from different ISSN centers and in different languages; and information about ISSN products, including ISSN Compact. Also included are links to other ISSN centers on the World Wide Web or having Internet-accessible sites. NSDP is also constructing a page on the World Wide Web which should be available by the time this article appears. The URL is <http://lweb.loc.gov/issn>. NSDP's page includes the text of NSDP's printed "ISSN is For Serials" brochure, a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) list, special instructions about obtaining an ISSN for electronic serials, presentation guidelines for serial publishers, and ISSN application forms. One of the application forms is an interactive form for use with online serials. NSDP's home page also includes links to the ISSN International Centre's home page and to related resources for serial publishers.

NSDP staff are looking forward to publishers' use of the interactive application form because the form is linked to a conversion program which will enable a cataloger to convert the data supplied by the publisher into a preliminary catalog record, ready for editing and the addition of an ISSN and specialized data by the cataloger. Initially, the interactive form will only be used for electronic publications since such publications can most easily accommodate the requirement that the form be accompanied by a representation of the publication or an electronic address.

NSDP assigns between 6,000 and 7,000 new ISSN a year. This number includes between 3,000 and 4,000 prepublication ISSN, assigned before the first issue of a serial appears. Not all new ISSN are assigned to new serials. Some are assigned to older serials and many to changed titles. Since the ISSN is linked to a publications' title (actually a unique title called the key title) when the title changes, a new ISSN must be assigned. New ISSN assignments are also required for serials which begin publishing in a different physical format, such as a print serial which adds an online edition, since separate ISSN are assigned to each physical format in which a serial appears. Thus, a serial issued in print, CD-ROM and online editions will have three separate ISSN. An exception to this practice is made for microform reproductions by a secondary publisher. Such reproductions carry the same ISSN as the original.

Subscription agents, document delivery

services, library check-in systems, and catalogs and databases of serials all make use of the ISSN for unique numerical identification, quick database searching, and differentiating among same or similar titles. Likewise, the U.S. Postal Service uses the ISSN as a control number for certain publications mailed at second-class rates. However, contrary to the belief (or maybe the wish) of some publishers, having an ISSN does not confer any automatic entitlement to a special postal rate. The publication must still meet all normal USPS requirements. Even so, NSDP's collaboration with the U.S. Postal Service, a collaboration which began in 1978, has proved highly instrumental in publicizing the ISSN and in ensuring its printing on a large percentage of U.S. serials.

Another area in which the ISSN has played a prominent role is in barcodes for serial publications. Although NSDP does not issue barcodes per se, the ISSN is the identifying element in several barcodes including the SISAC bar symbol, a code increasingly used by the library and information community. The SISAC bar code symbol is based on NISO standard Z39.56, *Serial Item and Contribution Identifier*, which is currently undergoing revision to enable it to serve an even broader range of needs. The SICI standard encompasses not only issue level identification but article level identification as well, thus making the ISSN a critical component in document delivery.

As noted earlier, the ISSN continues to be a key identifier for serials, even in the electronic environment. The ISSN, along with the ISBN and other standard identifiers, has been proposed as a component of the URN (Uniform Resource Name) in various IETF (Internet Engineering Task Force) drafts. And, the ISSN has become an indispensable linking mechanism in online library catalogs by serving as the link between abstracting and indexing citations mounted online and the library's bibliographic and holdings records for the publication cited by the abstracting or indexing service.

Despite its successes, the U.S. ISSN program faces many challenges. Along with other government agencies, the Library of Congress has been experiencing reduced budgets and reduced staff. The National Serials Data Program, which at times has been staffed by nine professional catalogers, now operates with four permanent catalogers and one cataloger on a temporary appointment. It is hoped that increased use of technology and a future reorganization in the Serial Record Division will enable the program to continue to provide a high level of service to the U.S. publishing and information communities. Even as NSDP struggles to cope with budget and staffing challenges, the serials environment in which it has thrived for so many years is changing to the point where it is becoming increasingly difficult to determine whether some publications are serials or not, and thus eligible to receive ISSN. The ISSN Network relies on the library community's definition of "serial" which requires that a publication be issued in successive parts. That definition is being called into question by online "magazines" and "jour-

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defend materials that you don't agree with. The FCPL selection policy says the collection should include both. I agree, but not all libraries will. It is imperative that all of us think carefully about these issues. Each library system should think carefully about these issues, and should have policies in place to deal with people who do not agree with what they carry.

•• Non-biased and responsive selection.

One of the perennial questions in collection development is when selection becomes self-censorship, and I think it's important to talk about because self-censorship can be tempting when selection policies and selections are questioned. Selection can also become censorship if what we like plays a part in what we select.

The process of non-biased selection is a difficult one, and is open to abuse by library selectors if we aren't constantly aware that what we like has nothing to do with what is appropriate to select. As much as possible we need to use agreed-upon objective criteria to select materials for our libraries. That's another way of saying that we select materials based on our institution's goals, its selection policy, and responsiveness to our users.

A local Fairfax County newspaper, responding to excerpts from some FCPL materials that had been taken out of context, encouraged library staff to use "plain-vanilla common sense" when selecting, or deciding not to select, materials for the public library. When does plain-vanilla common sense become self-censorship? Selection is always a difficult balancing act, especially when you don't have enough money, and constantly have to make choices between what to buy and what not to buy. To me, being a selector is like being a high-wire performer. You can't become careless or complacent. You need to constantly balance pressures from one direction with pressures from all the other directions. Or you'll fall, and won't reach your goal — inclusiveness and objectivity. But I also think that you need pressures

from all directions — because if you lean too far in one direction or another, you'll also fall. And fail.

How can you avoid what happened in Fairfax County? I don't think you can. But you can be prepared for it, and plan for how to handle it. Libraries are uniquely vulnerable because a person who's looking for something offensive can generally find it. If we're doing our jobs, the collections contain, and I quote again from the FCPL selection policy, "... materials which offend, shock, or bore one reader but are considered pleasing, meaningful, or significant by another." It's pretty easy to take one book and take pictures and text out of context and make a case for protecting children from ideas and information they're not ready for, for controlling what children have access to, and therefore controlling what goes into a collection. But this is a democracy. Everyone has a right to an opinion, and public institutions should represent multiple viewpoints. We will continue to be a democracy as long as all of us participate in the process. In Fairfax County, people who disagree with Ms. Gounoud — like Valerie Eastwood and John Clark of Northern Virginia Citizens Against Censorship and their supporters — are active and have invested enormous energy in this debate. As have Karen Jo Gounoud and supporters of Family Friendly Libraries. That's what democracies are all about. And why public libraries are part of this debate.

The past four years have not been easy — all involved parties have spent a great deal of time and energy on the issue of collections and policies relating to collection access. But these issues have inevitably led to questioning why public libraries exist, and who we serve. These issues are real, and our assumptions about them should not be taken for granted. Time spent dealing with them, and reviewing policies related to fundamental principles, and how we interact with and respond to our constituents, is never wasted. If public libraries are to be responsive, which I believe we have to be to survive, we need to listen to all of our constituents, and the collection needs to respond to a wide variety of interests and perspectives. By the same token — a few constituents should not dictate what is available to all.

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supply the correct item. Libraries can benefit from expressing their requirements to vendors unambiguously and completely. It is false economy for libraries to shortchange pre-order searching and verification in the hope that the vendor will do it. The quality of orders libraries send to vendors ultimately affects costs.

Across the industry, cost savings and benefits of speed and accuracy can be achieved from increasing accuracy in the use of ISBNs. The ISBN system seems to be here to stay. During the first 25 years of use, ISBNs were assigned to an estimated seven to eight million titles worldwide and uses were found for the number beyond those envisioned by the system's creators.¹⁵ There is every reason to believe that use will continue to expand. Libraries, vendors and publishers all have a contribution to make towards its increased success.

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nals" which often consist simply of sites on the World Wide Web to which new information or articles are added. Are these serials, books, or something else entirely? And, how many ISSN does a publisher need — or want

— for a given title in various formats? What constitutes a "reproduction" in the online environment?

These are just some of the challenges that NSDP staff face every day, but fortunately, for the most part, we find such challenges exciting rather than daunting. When publishers call us to ask about ISSN for a kind of

FOOTNOTES

¹International ISBN Agency, *Publishers' International ISBN Directory*, 22nd ed. 1995/96 (Munchen; New Providence: K. G. Saur; Berlin: International ISBN Agency; New Providence: R. R. Bowker, 1995), ix.

²Ibid.

³*The ISBN System Users' Manual* (Berlin: International ISBN Agency, 1986), 11-12.

⁴Ibid., 14.

⁵Koltay, Emery, "Standard Book Numbering." In *The Bowker Annual* (New York: R. R. Bowker, 1969), 72.

⁶Bowers, Richard A., "ISBN: A Marketing Infrastructure for Publishers." *CD-ROM Professional* (May 1993): 100.

⁷"BISAC E-Mail Orders." *Harrassowitz Newsletter* (Feb. 1996): 5.

⁸Barwick, Margaret, "Survey on the Use of ISBNs in Libraries." *ISBN Review* (1994): 35-46.

⁹Scumson, John, "Numerical Analysis: Paying the Authors." In *ISBNs in Book Ordering and Control: It's All Done by Numbers* together with *The Use and Misuse of ISBNs*. (London: MARC Users' Group, 1986), 6.

¹⁰Eaglen, Audrey B., "The ISBN: A Good Tool Sorely Misused." *Collection Building* (1989): 74.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.: 75-76.

¹⁴"The Use and Misuse of ISBNs: The Report of the MARC Users' Group." In *ISBNs in Book Ordering and Control: It's All Done by Numbers together with The Use and Misuse of ISBNs*. (London: MARC Users' Group, 1986), 47.

¹⁵"Twenty-five Years Playing the ISBN Numbers Game." *Library Association Record* (Dec. 1991): 821.