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Group Therapy

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Group Therapy

ISBN, ISSN, ISMN — Why Not an ISVN?

Column Editor: **Rosann Bazirjian** (Florida State University)

Hey y'all out there! Do you have any gripes? Come to your therapist!
Try <rbazirji@mailers.fsu.edu> or FAX 904-644-5170.

GRYPE: Submitted by **Gita Gunatilleke**,
Head of Collection Management,
Victoria University of Wellington,
New Zealand <gita.gunatilleke@vuw.ac.nz>

The question as to why not an ISVN for video recordings has been on my mind for a long time, particularly since I read **Andressen** (1991) celebrating 25 years of ISBNs. Once the brain child of British publishing firms **W. H. Smith**, and **J. Whitaker**, what started off as the SBN has taken international meaning with the ISBN used increasingly worldwide. The scheme of having a standardized numbering system for books has obviously proved workable and useful as it has been followed with similar systems for serials — ISSN, and in more recent years for music in print — ISMN. Therefore, why not an ISVN for video recordings? Is it useful to have such a scheme for video recordings? If yes, how hard is it to formulate and implement?

Video recordings have become not only a popular medium in entertainment, but also a useful one in education, and for both of these reasons, libraries have in recent years had increasing numbers of requests for the purchase of video recordings. However, we have to admit that, particularly for libraries, the acquisition of video recordings is not as easy as that of books or even periodicals. It becomes even more difficult when the libraries are remote from the geographical base of most producers and distributors of videos. Nowadays, when there are not only film titles in video format, but more and more educational and other nonfiction titles as well, one would think there would be more information on these titles, including prices, availability outside country of origin, and the sources of supply.

Many library suppliers of books and periodicals do not agree to supply video recordings. For various reasons, items in this format fall into the "too hard" basket. However, there are several others who do and some of these suppliers in fact tend to specialize in video recordings, i.e., **Facets Multimedia**, **Heffers**, **Movies Unlimited** and **Baker & Taylor**. I say specialize because they go as far as producing catalogs listing the titles of video recordings they can supply. These catalogues contain order numbers specific to that particular company. The **B & T Link** database on CD-ROM contains titles of video recordings which **Baker & Taylor** is able to supply, and

each item has a ten-digit number assigned to it to specifically identify each title and different versions of a title. This number is specific to Baker & Taylor, but it shows that a system of numbering similar to ISBN numbers could be used for identifying video recordings.

The best listing of video recordings which I have found useful is the multi-volume **Bowker's Complete Video Directory**, of which the 1994 edition contains 53,000 special interest titles and 39,000 entertainment and performance titles. This work not only contains lists of producers and distributors and their addresses, but the entries also include, wherever possible, order numbers specific to producers or distributors. The prices of videos vary vastly, from the reasonably standard price for feature films to very expensive for specialized and educational titles. Some producers and distributors believe in a layered pricing scheme which sets reasonably variant prices for different categories of educational institutions. It is somewhat more difficult to estimate (or even guesstimate) the price of a video recording as opposed to a book. The prices of the same title differ vastly from one video producer to another, as indicated by recent example of prices quoted by BBC and PBS for the title "Nomads of the Wind." Therefore, for a variety of reasons, libraries need to find out the price before committing to ordering video recordings.

However, unlike the home video market, not all producers or distributors are geared to marketing their products to libraries. Often our queries are left unanswered or are bounced back and forth to other organizations. This is quite frustrating for libraries situated outside North America as, after several weeks or months of pursuing a query, we are often informed that there are "no rights to supply outside the US or Canada." Considering that the majority of video recordings originate from North America and the UK, it would be most helpful if there is some centralized listing of titles which do not have rights of supply to the rest of the world.

I would like to mention two recent examples of time-consuming searches. The first example was a search for a video recording of a particular production of *A Doll's*

House by Ibsen. We wanted the 1973 production of the play directed by Patrick Garland, with Edith Evans, Clair Bloom, Ralph Richardson and Anthony Hopkins, which we understood was released in video format in 1989. The second search was for the original German language version of *Mephisto*, maybe with subtitles, but not the dubbed version. In both these cases, long and tedious searching of catalogs, databases, and help from known suppliers have not been successful.

There is also the question of distribution rights. Individual producers and distributors of videos are not necessarily into marketing and some do not respond at all. If they do respond, it is often not quickly enough. This means that libraries spend a lot of time chasing up prices and sources for supply for this material.

The lack of any uniformity in the information found in different catalogs is a continuing problem for libraries needing to select video titles for purchase. Bibliographic citations such as LC records can be found for some titles and these often include ISBN numbers, but these instances are few and far between. Why they

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are assigned ISBNs at all is another question. It would be nice if a uniform scheme, involving the assigning of individual numbers similar to ISBNs to video recordings, could be assigned to identify the different editions or productions of plays and films, as well as language details. Perhaps suffixes could be used to code features such as laser discs, availability, and type of audience, i.e., rental, purchase/home, educational institution.

According to **Bradley** (1992), the principal purpose of the ISBN is to make the identification of any book as certain as possible. **Schmidt** (1991), indicating the results of a mini survey noted that vendors used THE ISBN as the important piece of information to fulfill an order. This could still result in discrepancies if the ISBN is not matched with the title and author details. However, when quoted correctly, with the author and title, the identification of the particular book can be almost certain (**Bradley**, 1992). Similarly, if adapted to video recordings, librarians and vendors will both undoubtedly find out that the merits of a systematically devised number for a specific video title would make identification much easier than scanning several different catalogs with different series of numbers.

We might even find more bibliographic records for these items on databases. Optimistically thinking, it might lead to a more broad banded but uniform pricing structure with ranges of prices. Formulation and implementation are undoubtedly going to be complicated and time consuming. However, it is unlikely that it will be more than the total time and effort expended by all of the individual producers of video catalogs put together. In fact, it might surely turn out to be time and effort well spent.

Andressen, Lars. "Twenty-five years playing the ISBN numbers' game." *Library Association Record*, vol. 93 (12) (1991).

Bowker's Complete Video Directory, Providence: R. R. Bowker, 1994.

Bradley, Philip. "Book Numbering: the importance of the ISBN," *The Indexer*, 18 (1) (1992).

Plassard, Marie-France. ISBN and ISMN (international standard music number) meetings, Berlin, 13-15 October 1994, *IFLA Journal*, 21 (1) (1995).

Publishers International ISBN Directory, NY: Saur/Bowker, 1993.

VENDOR RESPONSE:

Submitted by **Carl Mann**,
Senior Vice President of Marketing,
Baker & Taylor Entertainment (BTE):

The recent question regarding the creation and implementation of a universal product identification number for video cassettes is

well made. The answer, at least in part, is at the heart of the video industry and has its roots in the evolution of the product line itself. Why not an ISBN? Perhaps the question is best directed to the **R. R. Bowker Company** since that numbering system is Bowker's (Video) equivalent to their (Book) ISBN. Whether or not an ISBN, why not a standard identifier for video cassettes? Clearly, it would simplify product identification and acquisition.

In the early days of video, few standards existed, and market demand was high as the format exploded in popularity. Of necessity, suppliers and distributors reacted to meet that demand by creating their own numbering systems to facilitate customer service, product ordering and acquisitions. In recent years, the Universal Product Code (UPC) has become increasingly used as a standard identification number. Larger video suppliers are assigning UPC numbers to titles with greater consistency than ever before. Smaller suppliers still bring their products to market (often without assignment of a standard identifier), but those examples are less frequent.

As we move toward greater use of electronic ordering and delivery systems, it seems likely that a single identifier for video cassettes (or for successive video formats such as DVD) will emerge as standard. Conversion of current numbers to a new standard will be expensive and time-consuming as databases for everyone from library to suppliers will need to be cross-referenced and updated, publications changed and even fixture signage reworked.

Until a single standard is established, distributors have no alternative but to use existing product number identifiers to assist customers in product selection and acquisition. Since we have more video titles available than any other single source, **Baker & Taylor** is committed to providing customers with as much information as we possibly can; when an industry-wide product number becomes standard, we'll be prepared with systems and services to support it.

PUBLISHER RESPONSE:

Submitted by **Tracey Armstrong**,
Product Manager — Videolog,
Trade Service Information LTD.

Trade Service Information Ltd (TSI) acts as a link between library and distributor in that it acts to fulfill an information gap. Librarians are required to look through catalogs from many different companies in different formats, thereby making the ordering and purchasing of audio visual products time-consuming.

The strength of our publications is that we pull all of that information together in one volume, providing you with instant access to what's on video. We gather all product and price information on current titles direct from the producers/distributors. We then put all of

the information together in one format giving it a uniform treatment and providing links and cross references for related works. This makes finding information simple and places TSI publications at the heart of library/supplier relations.

A standard numbering scheme for video recordings offers obvious benefits not only in making the identification of a recording as certain as possible, but also in helping to curb costly ordering errors which occur due to the quotation of incorrect catalog or order numbers.

Distributors and producers in the UK video industry all have very different methods of cataloging their products, thereby leaving plenty of room for error and confusion on the user's part. Their order numbers or catalog numbers contain various combinations of letters and numbers with spaces between, which normally include an abbreviation of the name of the company supplying the recording. The nature of current catalog numbers makes it increasingly difficult when the information is conveyed electronically. As most of us know, if you don't provide most computer systems with an exact character match and the right punctuation, it will have difficulty in retrieving the information you want.

To aid identification of video recordings, we at **Videolog** tend to include a short summary of its contents and often scan the video sleeve into our computer products. We also provide additional information on trade prices, the source of supply, order numbers specific to producers/distributors, release dates, EAN numbers (barcodes), the year of production, format, running times, deletion dates ... you name it! All titles are fully indexed and cross referenced. This means that one source can be checked to find anything you need to know about recordings available in the UK, and where to obtain them, making ordering and purchasing decisions less of a chore.

As far as we can tell, this is the best way to identify recordings, but our job would be much easier and much improved through the addition of an ISVN for videos.

However, whether the distributors and production companies would be willing to formulate and use an ISVN scheme instead of their conventional methods is another matter. I am sure they recognize the benefits to both user and supplier already described above, but how important or urgent is the problem to them?

It may be up to an intermediary company such as ourselves to take the bull by the horns or at least to encourage support for such a project. Any help or input would be gratefully received!

(TSI publishes guides to currently available video recordings (**Videolog**), audio books (**Bibliolog**) and also recorded music (**Laserlog**). Published by **Trade Service Information Ltd.** / Cherryholt Road / Stamford / Lincolnshire PE9 2HT / UK) tel.: (0) 1780 64331; fax (0) 1780 482067)