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R. R. Bowker has been the U.S. ISBN Agency since 1968 and the Australian ISBN Agency (through its Thorpe-Bowker division) since 2002. An ISBN Agency is responsible for the overall administration of the ISBN system within its registration group. These responsibilities are:

- to issue notification of the assignment of an ISBN
- to create and maintain registers of ISBNS and ISBN metadata
- to make ISBN and associated metadata available to other registration agencies and to users of the ISBN system
- to promote, educate, and train others in the use of the ISBN

As a member of the International ISBN Agency, Bowker has been involved in discussions about ISBN-13 since the late 1990’s. The first official planning session on expanding the ISBN took place in mid 2000, and continued until the final draft was approved in the spring of 2004.

Bowker-specific preparations began in early 2004. Obviously, this involved technical changes to the many internal and external systems, but also involved the education of publishers in the U.S. and Australia as part of its ISBN Agency responsibilities.


Of all the questions the ISBN Agency receives about the ISBN-13, these two are the most common:


A: No. As described elsewhere in this issue, the ISBN-13 will not only have the 978 prefix preceding the ISBN, but the check digit of the ISBN-10 will be dropped and a new algorithm will be applied to calculate a new check digit.

Q: Will I be assigned the same publisher prefixes for ISBN-13 as I have for ISBN-10?

A: No. Regional ISBN Agencies (like Bowker) receive their ISBN publisher prefix allocation ranges from the international ISBN Agency. There is no way to predict that the agencies will receive the same prefix range allocations as in the past.

In April 2005, subscribers to Bowker’s online (BIP) products will see the ISBN-13 on search results and full display pages. These products will also support searches using either the ISBN-10 or -13. Also at this time, Bowker will offer ISBN-13 conversion services for booksellers and libraries.

The good news is that the EAN/UCC has committed to providing future three digit prefixes for the ISBN, so there is no immediate threat of running out, at least not in our lifetime!


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The Cataloging in Publication Division at the Library of Congress received a query from a major publishing house requesting permission to add ISBNs in the new 13-digit format to the Library of Congress Cataloging-In-Publication (CIP) data. While informal discussions concern-