

The ISBN System (and Why Every Library Professional Should Know About It)

-- Nick Woods¹

In the 21st century, publishing is a worldwide business. Even small publishers and authors that self-publish their own books can distribute their publications across the world much more easily. Consequently, it becomes vital to have a robust, reliable, unambiguous identifier in place. The publishing industry needs to be able to easily identify the correct version of every book in order to buy, sell, stock and distribute that book across the globe. ISBN is the identifier that fulfils that function.

ISBN stands for International Standard Book Number (ISBN). It is a product identifier used across the world and across the supply chain, including in libraries. It was the first globally unique product identifier of its kind. Any publication can receive an ISBN as long as it is text-based, available to the general public through the supply chain, and monographic (which is to say that it is a one-off publication, as opposed to a serial. Serials, such as a newspaper or journal, instead receive the International Standard Serial Number, or ISSN).

The administration of the ISBN is hierarchical. The International ISBN Agency is the registration authority for the ISBN system worldwide, but assignments to publishers in different countries are undertaken by national ISBN agencies across the world. In Nepal, the ISBN agency is run by Tribhuvan University, which is one of 151 such national or regional ISBN agencies. The ISBN system is now 50 years old, and the Nepal ISBN Agency has been operating for over 20 years.

Of course, in today's publishing landscape many books are not printed at all, but are released in one of the various electronic formats available. ISBN is just as suitable for identifying electronic publications. Indeed, for a publication that is released in multiple formats it might be the case that several ISBNs are issued for the same title: one ISBN for the paperback version, one for the hardback, one for the pdf ebook, another for the EPUB ebook, and so on.

ISBN has retained its value throughout many years of turbulence and change in publishing. It is supported by the industry in which it operates – including libraries – and is recognised as an International Standard (ISO 2108) by ISO (the International Organization for Standardization). The ISBN standard was originally created, and subsequently revised, by a working group of experts from different countries. This process helps to build consensus about the rules surrounding ISBN and its assignment. The current edition of the ISBN standard is the fifth edition, released in 2017.

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Originally, the publisher is the entity that applies for ISBN. However, since an ISBN, once assigned, remains associated with the book in perpetuity, the ISBN is used throughout the life of the book. A publisher benefits from using ISBN by increasing a book's visibility and maximising its sales potential.

ISBNs can be encoded into an EAN-13 bar code. In doing so, books with ISBNs can be quickly checked into stock in bookshops, processed efficiently at the till point and the sales data captured. This is thanks to an agreement with GS1, which is the global organisation responsible for product identification systems such as bar coding.

However, the benefits of ISBN are much wider and ISBN can of course be of great assistance in the library sector. ISBN can be considered of vital importance to library information management. Firstly, assigning a number replaces the handling of long bibliographic descriptive records, saving time and staff costs and reducing copying errors. Librarians can use ISBN to clearly and unambiguously differentiate between various editions of the same book, and between books with similar titles and themes. Using ISBN ensures that libraries and customers get the version of the book that they seek. In addition, the permanent nature of the ISBN is especially important for the library sector. A book may eventually go out of print and cease to be available in book shops. However, it is likely that libraries will continue to handle copies of these books. And libraries can be sure that the ISBN remains the correct identifier for the book even in this scenario.

For organisations responsible for collecting and processing legal deposit copies of publications, which are usually national libraries, ISBN performs an additional function. ISBN is the identifier often used to record the publications for which legal deposit copies have been received and which, therefore, are outstanding.

Furthermore, the national lending right in some countries is based on the ISBN. Where this applies, ISBN can be used to ensure that authors, illustrators and other contributors receive the appropriate payment commensurate with the amount their books are lent out by public libraries.

In summary, every library professional is encouraged to learn the basics of the ISBN system since, given how widely it is used as a product identifier. Indeed, in my experience as a library user in the United Kingdom, library users are very grateful if I am able to provide the ISBN of the book I seek! The strength of the link between ISBN and the library sector is illustrated by the fact that the International Federation of Library Associations & Institutions (IFLA) holds an ex-officio position on the Board of the International ISBN Agency.

For more information on the ISBN system, please visit the website of the International ISBN Agency at www.isbn-international.org. The website includes links to the ISBN Users' Manual. Information on GS1 and barcoding can be found at www.gs1.org, while further information on ISO can be found at www.iso.org.