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THE ISSN REVIEW GROUP: PROVIDING BIBLIOGRAPHIC EXPERTISE ON CONTINUING RESOURCES WORLDWIDE

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Abstract

The ISSN is an identification system intended to reliably identify serials and other on-going resources worldwide. ISSN assignment is ensured by a Network of 89 national centres, coordinated by the ISSN International Centre. National Centres are also in charge of producing the bibliographic records describing the resources, records which are ingested in the ISSN Register. To that end, they follow the rules expressed in the ISSN Manual, which depends on one hand on the ISSN Standard (ISO 3297) and on the other hand on the ISBD. As the characteristics and boundaries of continuing resources are constantly evolving, especially on a digital form, the maintenance and the evolution of the Manual is a critical task. It is ensured by the ISSN Review Group, composed of experts from various National Centres. This group also provides support and advices to all National Centres. Finally, the ISSN RG aims to be involved in the evolution of the main bibliographic models, cataloguing codes (ISBD and RDA) or formats, at national and international levels, and to promote there the recognition of the unique characteristics of continuing resources.

Key words: ISSN, ISSN Review Group, ISO 3297, ISBD, ISSN Manual, National Centres, Serials

The ISSN Review Group within the ISSN Network

The ISSN: a trusted identifier for continuing resources

For more than forty years, publishers, librarians, researchers, and all other stakeholders of the serials supply chain, have been using the ISSN as a trusted identifier to sell, buy and discover continuing resources, and to get their bibliographic description or their content. The International Standard Serial Number, or ISO 3297, is indeed the unique reference and internationally agreed identifier for bibliographic resources whose publication has no predetermined conclusion. Even though, as its own name indicates, it was originally designed for “serials”, the ISSN now covers a wide range of resources, on every medium: print and online periodicals, monographic series, newspapers, but also websites, databases and even blogs, provided they propose a significant editorial content.

All ISSN identifiers follow the same pattern: two groups of four digits, separated by a hyphen, the last digit being a control number. It is an opaque identifier – the term “dumb” identifier is even sometimes used – in the sense that it has no meaning by itself. Therefore, the strength of the ISSN, its reliability,

does not come from the number itself, but from the way it is issued and governed. First, ISSN assignment principles and rules are based on an international standard, ISO 3297, which has undergone five revisions since its first publication in 1975, and whose sixth revision is under way. Second, each ISSN is attached to a bibliographic record, which is created as part as the number assignment process. All ISSN records are ingested in the ISSN Register, a database currently holding more than two million records.

A Manual for the Network

The records are produced, for their respective countries, by eighty-nine National Centres, which are hosted in National Libraries, Research Institutions or Book Chambers. These 89 National Centres form together the ISSN Network, coordinated by the ISSN International Centre, an intergovernmental organization located in Paris, France. This worldwide and distributed production of ISSN records is the third main strength of the ISSN system.

While the scope and principles of ISSN assignment are stated in the ISO ISSN Standard, the instructions to create the data elements describing the identified continuing resources, are stated in the ISSN Manual¹. This Manual, currently avail-

¹ Accessible at : <http://www.issn.org/understanding-the-issn/assignment-rules/issn-manual/>.

able in four languages (English, French, Russian and Spanish), is based on the ISBD². It provides additional interpretations of the standard itself, e.g. on assignment inclusion and exclusion rules for websites and blogs. It precisely states how to create the “Key-title”, attached to the ISSN, which is based on the title proper of the resource and may be made unique (in the ISSN Register) by the addition of one or several qualifiers. It also gives detailed explanations on how to describe relationships between resources (continuations, merges, splits, other language or other medium versions, etc.) and how to identify title changes between continuing resources (allowing the cataloguer to distinguish between major changes, which deserve the creation of a new record, and minor changes). Finally, it indicates how to produce all other mandatory or optional data elements of the ISSN records: for example, publication information, classification, description of issuing bodies... It provides examples of records in MARC21 as well in UNIMARC.

A group of experts

Roles and objectives of the ISSN Review Group

Continuing resources are complex documents, whose characteristics and boundaries are in perpetual evolution. The expanded possibilities of digital edition, the creativity of publishers, the new practices and requirements of researchers, are generating innovative kinds of publication. There is a need to closely monitor these modifications and to adapt the ISSN Manual in consequence. This was one of the original and primary goals of the ISSN Review Group, set up in 2012. It is composed of bibliographic experts from different countries: currently, experts from ISSN National Centres of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Canada, France, Germany, Poland, Slovakia, Sudan, the UK, and the USA. It is chaired by the Head of Data, Network and Standards Department of the ISSN International Centre. Decisions of the ISSN Review Group are reached by consensus; it holds regular remote meetings and at least one in-person meeting per year, at the occasion of the major events of the ISSN Network: the General Assembly of the ISSN Network, every second year, and the meeting of Directors of ISSN Centres, every year.

The evolution of the ISSN Manual is not the only role of the ISSN Review Group. It is also in charge of analysing the tricky bibliographic questions sent by National Centres, which are facing cases not taken into account by cataloguing codes – examining and answering these questions provides, in turn, ideas for ISSN Manual updates.

Updating the ISSN Manual

As a matter of fact, ISSN Review Group members have generally a “bottom-up” knowledge of continuing resources: as they are in charge of a team of librarians dealing with new, or even not yet published, material, they are able to quickly identify issues arising from the emergence of new kinds of publications. They are experiencing for example the fact that the frontiers between an online “serial” and an online “on-going integrating resource” are blurring. When the archives of an online journal are made available under the form of a database, while the current articles are still published as issues, in which category should the resource be included?

Cataloguing codes are sometimes falling short when it comes to the description of new types of documents. Scholarly blogs are now recognized as a legitimate source of scientific content; their audience in the research sphere is evaluated by “alt-metrics”, and they are often preserved in web archives maintained by national or academic libraries. However, a cataloguer could hardly find any instructions on how to record the “publisher” of a blog: is it the hosting platform? The individual author? Or the organization (e.g. a University) in which the author or the group of authors is working³? When there is no consensus in the library community, the ISSN Review Group provides to its Network some “Supplementary Guidelines”, which are intended to complete the Manual, waiting for a future revision.

Finally, modifications and updates to the ISSN Manual are requested through the evolution of other codes, especially RDA. Out of the 89 National Centres, around a dozen have adopted RDA (fully or partially) as their main cataloguing code; several others are in the process of adoption. There are however some discrepancies between RDA and the ISBD, on which the ISSN Manual is based. In its April 2016 meeting, the ISSN Review Group reaffirmed its will to stay aligned with the ISBD, the

² The International Standard Bibliographic Description, or ISBD, is an IFLA standard providing rules and instructions to catalogue all kind of published resources. Its 2011 edition is available at: https://www.ifla.org/files/assets/cataloguing/isbd/isbd-cons_20110321.pdf.

³ Note that in that case, the Supplementary Guideline issued by the ISSN Review Group states the cataloguer should “consider as the “publisher”, the entity intellectually in charge of the resource. In case of scholarly blogs, it is often the issuing body. It may also be an individual author”. The Supplementary Guideline are not distributed outside of the ISSN Network.

only content standard freely accessible and maintained by IFLA. However, there is also a requirement to be compatible with RDA, in order to allow the National Centres using RDA to ingest their data in the ISSN Register, without cataloguing the resource twice. Whenever an incompatibility between the two sets of rules is identified, an exception is added in the ISSN Manual.

Promote the recognition of continuing resources requirements

Consequently, another original goal of the ISSN Review Group members is to liaise with other bibliographic groups or communities and to be involved in international standardisation groups. The ISSN International Centre has an official liaison with FRBR Review Group and the ISBD Review Group (both groups depend on IFLA). The ISSN International Centre has also signed a protocol with the RDA Steering Committee in order “to support the maintenance and development of functional interoperability between data created using the RDA and ISSN instructions and element sets”⁴. Another example would be fact that the head of the US ISSN Centre is involved in CONSER⁵ and in the MARC Advisory Board⁶. In these groups, the members of ISSN RG are seeking to promote the recognition of the specific needs of serials and other continuing resources, highlighting the characteristics that may not be taken into account by the evolutions of bibliographic standards.

Moreover, the ISSN Review Group may also collectively issue documents related to bibliographic standards. It has notably produced an answer to the IFLA Library Reference Model (or IFLA-LRM⁷), as part of the LRM worldwide review process. Its comments were not only related to the modelling of continuing resources. As a matter of fact, the ISSN RG is also an expert group for the description of digital documents, as ISSN National Centres, compared to many other cataloguing organizations, have a very strong focus on electronic publications. In 2016, more than 40% of ISSNs were assigned to online resources⁸. The comments were taken into account

by the LRM Consolidation Editorial Committee and influenced the subsequent version of LRM.

A continuing involvement in bibliographic description

The ISSN Review Group is eager to follow and support the evolution of standards, at every level of bibliographic description: data models, cataloguing codes, formats. Its members are already active in working groups dedicated to the evolution of RDA, or to the revision of the ISBD. They are also closely following the evolutions of potential successors to MARC, such as Bibframe. Several members of the ISSN RG take part in the ISO working group dedicated to the revision of the ISSN standard itself, which was set up in 2016. In that group, they collaborate with other members of the serials supply chain: publishers, discovery service providers, etc.

Indeed, the goal of the ISSN Review Group is not only to seek and promote consistency between the ISSN Manual and the various library standards, but also, more globally, to ensure that the way ISSN are assigned and ISSN records are produced still fits with the needs of all ISSN users. In short, it strives to ensure that the ISSN identifier will continue to play a central role in the serial publishing ecosystem.

⁴ See <http://rda-jsc.org/sites/all/files/6JSC-Chair-22.pdf> and <http://www.rda-jsc.org/sites/all/files/RSC-Chair-13.pdf>.

⁵ The “Cooperative Online Serials Program” depends on the US Program for Cooperative Cataloguing, coordinated by the Library of Congress. See <http://www.loc.gov/aba/pcc/conser/>.

⁶ The MARC Advisory Committee (MAC) advises the MARC Steering Group concerning changes to the MARC 21 formats. See <https://www.loc.gov/marc/mac/advisory.html>.

⁷ The IFLA LRM is a high-level conceptual reference model developed within an entity-relationship modelling framework. It is the consolidation of the separately developed IFLA conceptual models: FRBR, FRAD, FRASAD. See <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/11412>.

⁸ See *ISSN International Centre Activity Report for 2016*, p. 5, http://www.issn.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/ISSN_RAPPORT_ACTIVITE_2016_GB.pdf.

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CONSER - Cooperative Online Serials Program <http://www.loc.gov/aba/pcc/conser/>

MARC Advisory Committee : Network Development and MARC Standards Office <https://www.loc.gov/marc/mac/advisory.html>

IFLA Library Reference Model (LRM) <https://www.ifla.org/publications/node/11412>

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ISSN REVIEW GROUP: PRUŽANJE BIBLIOGRAFSKE STRUČNOSTI O KONTINUIRANIM IZVORIMA ŠIROM SVIJETA

Sažetak

ISSN je identifikacioni sistem namijenjen da pouzdano identificira serijske publikacije i druge tekuće izvore širom svijeta. ISSN dodjela je obezbijedena Mrežom od 89 nacionalnih centara koje koordinira ISSN Međunarodni centar. Nacionalni centri su također odgovorni za kreiranje bibliografskih zapisa, opisujući izvore koji su uneseni u ISSN registar. Do ovog dijela, Centri prate pravila koja su iznesena u ISSN priručniku, koja u jednu ruku zavise od ISSN standarda (ISO 3297), dok u drugu, zavise od ISBD-a. Kako se karakteristike i ograničenja kontinuiranih izvora stalno razvijaju, posebno u digitalnoj formi, održavanje i razvoj Priručnika je ključni zadatak. Njega osigurava ISSN pregledna grupa (ISSN Review group), sačinjena od eksperata iz raznih ISSN Nacionalnih centara. Ova grupa takođe pruža podršku i savjete svim Nacionalnim centrima.

Na kraju, ISSN RG ima za cilj da bude uključena u razvoj glavnih bibliografskih modela, kataloških opisa (ISBD i RDA) ili formata na nacionalnim i međunarodnim nivoima, te da tamo promoviše prepoznavanje jedinstvenih obilježja kontinuiranih izvora.

Ključne riječi : ISSN, ISSN Review Group, ISO 3297, ISBD, ISSN priručnik, Nacionalni centri, serijske publikacije