

INTERNATIONAL ISBN AGENCY

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REPORT OF THE INTERNATIONAL ISBN AGENCY

The International ISBN Agency, located in the Berlin State Library, Germany, has been working with two staff positions, not counting the director who also has other duties.

Membership has grown slowly - latest members are the United Arab Emirates and North Korea. This brings the country count up to 164.

Regular publications are the ISBN Newsletter (annually) and Publishers International ISBN Directory; the latter is also available on CD-ROM, and it contained 739,487 publishers. A new edition is now (May 2003) almost ready for publication.

The ISBN website has become a major information tool:

isbn-international.org.

Progress reports of group agencies are mounted on the website, and in order to allow more transparency, a standard format has been introduced.

The latest ISBN Panel Meeting took place in Berlin, in October 2002 and was attended by 55 participants from 36 countries. The minutes are given in ISBN Newsletter (also available on the website).

The revised ISBN User's Manual is also mounted on the website and is well used.

The size and the staff fluctuation in ISBN work internationally make it more and more important to focus attention on training. Recent experiences in South Asia have shown that this is turning into major task.

ISBN was present at the IFLA General Conference in Glasgow, a Latin American Regional ISBN Meeting in Bogotá, the Frankfurt Book Fair and the Delhi Book Fair. Close cooperation is maintained with the ISSN International Centre.

The major challenge is the revision of ISO 2108; this task is undertaken by an ISO TC 46 SC 9 Working group under the chairmanship of Michael Healy, Nielsen Book Data, UK. Several working meetings in 2002 and 2003 resulted in a committee draft which are currently up for ballot. The group continued its work during the ISO/ TC 46/SC9 meeting in Rome, May 19-23.

Some of the new features of the revised standard as drafted are a 13-digit ISBN (the traditional ten digits plus the EAN/Bookland prefix) and a governance and funding scheme for the ISBN system. So far ISBN was free of charge for the agencies; this cannot continue, unfortunately, with 164 member countries; only solid funding will enable the registration agency to fulfil its duties in a satisfactory way. Contributions will entail stronger active participation in the administration of the system. A draft for a new governance is currently being worked out.

The deadline for the introduction of the revised standard was postponed to the beginning of 2007, after Doug Minnett (Canada) ran a sophisticated check over some major

databases in relation to the assigned ranges of ISBN prefixes; it turned out that while there are some bottlenecks in ISBN contingent availability, there should be no major problem in the provision of ISBN till that date.

An issue not yet discussed by the Working Group is the practical transition process from ten to thirteen digits ISBN. This again will be a major challenge as many ISBN assignments are historical, i.e. the publications are out of print but available in libraries, and the numbers are listed in catalogues, bibliographies and databases. IFLA made a statement on the issue recommended a solution which would not require any conversion of existing ISBN. A convenient solution might be to continue with the current contingents as is – the technical equipment of publishers, booksellers and distributors is geared to it anyhow. When it becomes necessary to use a new contingent, this would be used in the 13 digit form only (prefix: 979) in order to avoid confusion with the previous set of numbers. If this procedure would be adopted a smooth transition could be guaranteed which would not put too much pressure on ISBN users worldwide.

A benefit of the speedy work of the working group is that there is no danger of actually running out of numbers – and that means there is no longer any excuse to neglect electronic (monographic) publications when it comes to unique identification. There will be plenty of ISBN to cover them, even if the rules stipulate that all the different formats should receive separate ISBN.

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