

From Dickens to Dante

ISBN propels book trade to billions

by Stella Griffiths

An ISO standard since 1970, the International Standard Book Number (ISBN) is one of the most used and successful identifiers worldwide, with billions of ISBNs assigned by more than a million publishers in over 200 countries.

Contained in ISO 2108:2005, *Information and documentation – International Standard Book Number*, ISBN is the essential enabler of book trade systems, facilitating the compilation of product databases, electronic data interchange transactions, and the collection of sales data. Thanks to an agreement between ISBN, GS1 (at the time called EAN International) and the Uniform Code Council (UCC) that allowed ISBN to be encoded into an EAN-13 bar code it also has a critical role in EPos systems.

Even as late as the 1960s, ordering or selling books was a much more confusing and time-consuming process than it is now. There was no commonly accepted approach that publishers could use to identify their publications, and every bookseller had a different way of ordering books. Without an industry-accepted identifier, booksellers had a difficult job clarifying exactly which edition of a book they wanted.

Amid all the different versions of each of the plays of Shakespeare, or of the novels of Dickens, or even of just a single text such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*, multiple pieces of information had to be quoted and verified to make sure that the bookseller received the correct edition. Publishers and distributors were faced with a problem – how to introduce necessary automation into their order processing and inventory control systems so that they could improve efficiency and profitability, and avoid having to identify items one-by-one.

Adapting to changes

In the United Kingdom (UK), a prototype (nine-digit) numbering system that included a final validation character quickly gained acceptance from 1967. Noting this, ISO technical committee ISO/TC 46, *Information and documentation*, established a working group to investigate the feasibility of adapting the UK system for international use.

Following review and approval by the technical committee, ISBN (based on the original UK system, but now a 10-digit identifier) was approved as an International Standard in 1970. The scope and field of application was defined as, “*the use of book numbers so that an international standard book number identifies one title, or edition of a title, from one specific publisher, and is unique to that title or edition.*” (ISO 2108:1972)

It has never been a formal condition that ISBN only be applied to publications made available for sale. In fact, ISBN was

intended to encourage “total numbering”, irrespective of whether the book was free or priced. ISBN assignment should be made to any publication that is available to the public (as opposed to a restricted or private circulation to family, friends or a membership society).

The standard has also always mandated that the ISBN be displayed on both the title leaf and the outside book cover. As a result, ISBN became visible beyond the boundaries of the book industry as one of the most widely known and recognized standards in the world.

In addition, the ISBN has maintained its relevance by adapting to changes in the book market itself. For example, the explosive growth of electronic publishing added to the pressure on supply of ISBNs, as publishers took the opportunity afforded by the Web and e-commerce to sell publications in different ways. In response to the perceived pressure on available numbers, the ISBN standard underwent a fourth revision in 2005, changing the length of the identifier to 13 digits and thereby almost doubling its capacity.

A principal benefit of the 13-digit solution enables the ISBN system to make use of a new “979” EAN prefix which was reserved years ago for the future use of the book trade within the EAN system. This dovetails with a move to the EAN.UCC system in the North American supply chain and aligns the ISBN with other product numbering systems, making trade with non-book retailers much easier.

ISBN is the essential enabler of book trade systems.

In addition to printed books and pamphlets, ISBN is used to identify audio books, e-books, maps and mixed media publications where the main element is text-based. The scope challenge continues as we go more deeply into a brave new digital landscape.

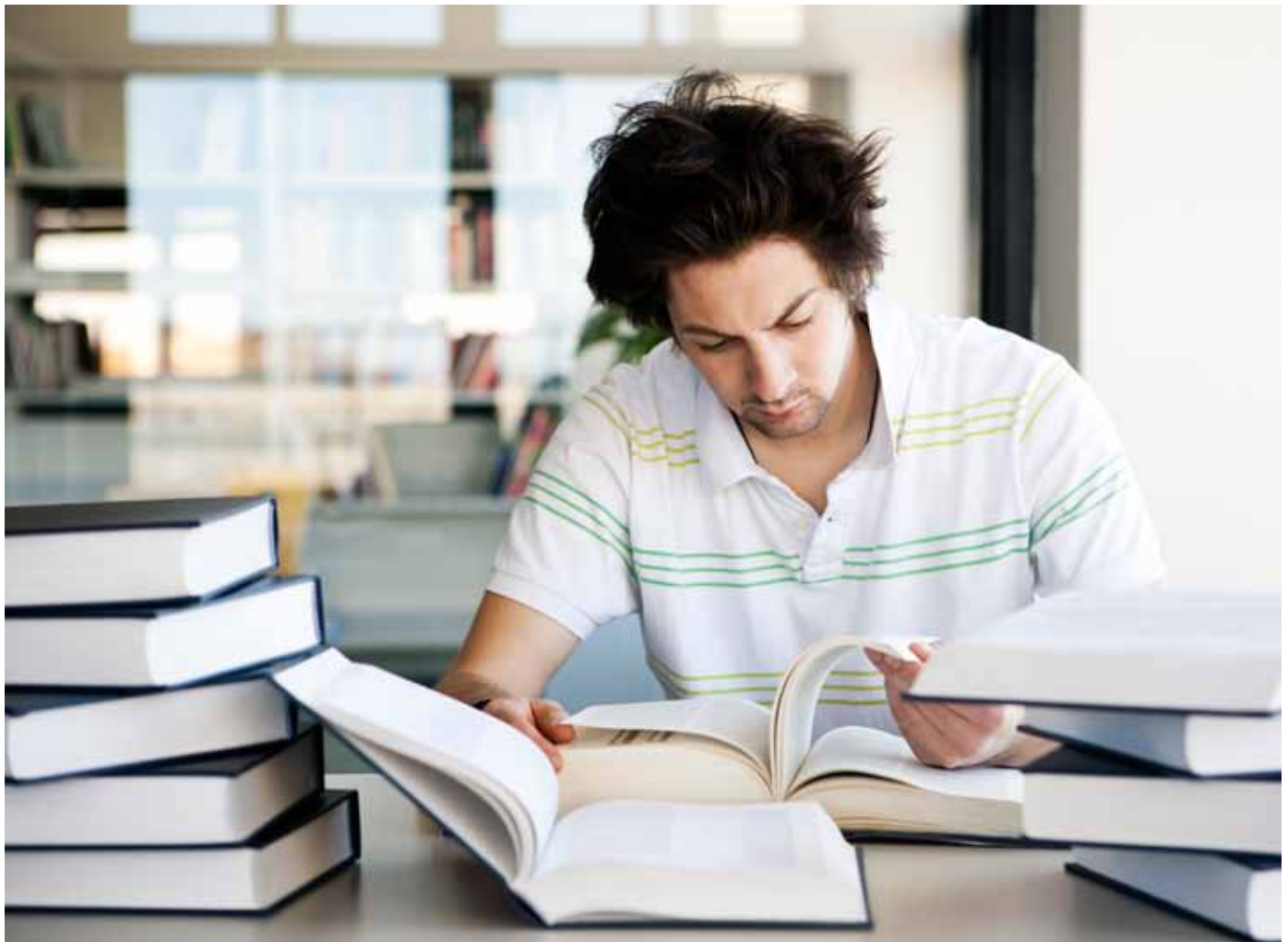
As an identifier for each unique publication, the ISBN provides the fulcrum for detailed information (known as rich product metadata) incorporated into the books in

print databases that are used by wholesalers, retailers and libraries to find and order what their customers and patrons want. The title, author, publisher and date of publication, of course, but also the potential to store price, subject classification and target readership, author biography, reviews, nominations and prizes, number of pages and more.

ONIX for books

Globally, the communications format most widely used to transmit this metadata is ONIX for books, jointly developed by EDItEUR, Book Industry Study Group, New York and Book Industry Communication, London. The ONIX format delivers extensive product information for each ISBN into the supply chain in a standardized electronic form for wholesalers and distributors, larger retailers, data aggregators and affiliate companies. It enables rapid updating of information, whether for internal systems or Internet retail sites.

Based in London, the International ISBN Agency is the registration authority appointed by ISO to coordinate and manage



the ISBN system worldwide, including designing and allocating the group identifiers for local ISBN agencies, which in turn dictate the ISBN prefix ranges that will be available to assign to publishers. It is these local ISBN agencies – generally operating on a national basis in a particular country – that are really at the heart of ISBN’s implementation success.

Local agencies assign ISBN prefixes with the appropriate range of individual ISBNs for each publisher’s anticipated output, collect and maintain registration details for each publisher and also receive information

on each publication that is allocated an ISBN. The ISBN agencies promote the use of ISBN in their countries (including by compiling books in print databases) and are also the source of advice and guidance on ISBN application and implementation for publishers.

As a “mature” ISO standard, ISBN has longevity on its side and has steadily been adopted across the world. More than 160 ISBN agencies serving more than 200 countries and territories have collectively assigned more than one million ISBN prefixes to publishers.

The International ISBN Agency still receives requests from time to time from countries that do not yet have local agencies about how to join the system. For developing countries in particular, ISBN is the leveller that gives publishers access to world markets.

From chaos to order

In the early 1970s, ISBN brought order where there was chaos and proprietary, individual solutions. It has since proven to be an identifier that is easy for publishers to implement and for other partners in the supply chain to understand and interpret quickly, accurately and reliably. Digital publications – whether e-book versions of printed publications or multi-media downloadable apps – are still a relatively small percentage of the overall book market, but are growing fast.

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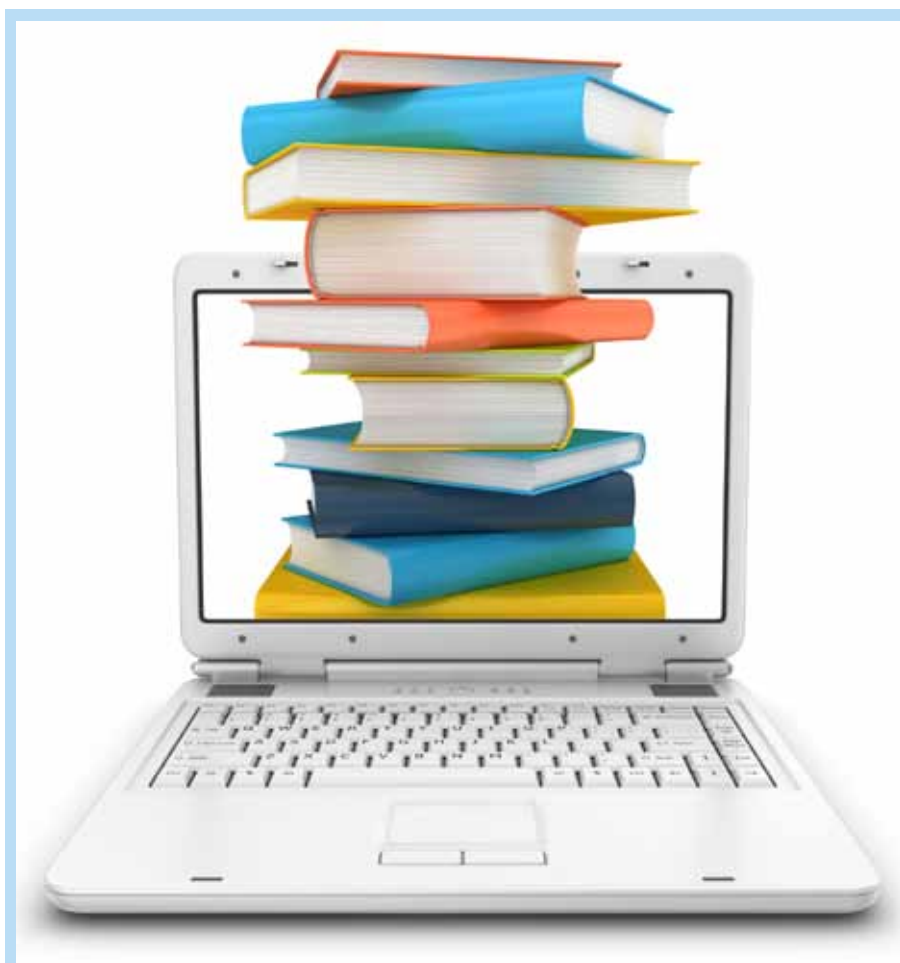
The ISBN system is as capable of identifying each of these different editions as it can denote a hardback from a paperback. For publishers, it is a challenge to remain masters of their own metadata amid the plethora of format and e-reader device opportunities; for ISBN it is to remain as indispensable in the digital paradigm as it has been in the analogue. ■

About the author



Stella Griffiths is Executive Director of the International ISBN Agency. After graduating from the University of Oxford, she has worked in publishing and

International Standards since 1989. She has held senior managerial positions in both the book and serials sectors. While Senior Manager of the United Kingdom’s ISBN Agency, Ms. Griffiths was a lead contributor on ISO/TC 46/SC 9/WG 4 for the revision of the ISBN standard and the transition to the 13-digit ISBN.



Keeping up with the times

An online presence – whether to facilitate the discovery of printed publications or to sell e-books – continues to grow in importance for publishers and retailers alike. The DOI system (ISO 26324, *Information and documentation – Digital object identifier system*) offers a persistent actionable identifier that can be deployed on digital networks.

Some local agencies provide an ISBN-A service (the “actionable ISBN”) whereby an existing ISBN can be expressed in the DOI system.

Users can thereby be directed to a catalogue entry, order the specific publication or even read the book online.