

Consolidation in times of changes: ISSN from 1989 to 1998

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Abstract

After the years of creation and implementation of the ISSN system, the network and the International Centre had to face a new stage of development. On a relational level, the sudden death of Rosenbaum had deeply affected all who had taken part in the first age of ISSN. On a strategic level, the Durance report implied to confirm ISSN (which was born from a scientific and technical background and its specific needs) as a universal tool to handle serials of all categories. New partnerships meant covering a wider range of needs; it impacted on the procedures and the quantities to be considered. It was challenging enough. What could not be fully forecast in the Strategic planning of the mid-eighties was the reality of the world around in two very different areas. The state of the world as stemming from post war situation was to be shattered and this was not without consequences in an intergovernmental organization. Paper, the traditional medium of publication was gradually and increasingly rivalled by immaterial support that brought new practices in publishing. In a period when public contributions to the budget were becoming more difficult to obtain, more partners to cooperate with, more needs to be covered, more national centers to reorganize and maintain the database, and a revolution in access to information. It was a wonderful time for imaginative cooperation.

Keywords: ISSN System. Strategic planning. Cooperation.

Consolidação em tempos de mudanças: o ISSN de 1989 a 1998

Resumo

Após os anos de criação e implementação do Sistema ISSN, a rede e o Centro Internacional tiveram que enfrentar uma nova fase de desenvolvimento. Em nível pessoal, a súbita morte de Senhora Rosenbaum afetou profundamente todos que tomaram parte na primeira fase do ISSN. Em nível estratégico, o relatório Durance confirma implicitamente o ISSN (que nasceu a partir de base científica e técnica e de necessidades específicas) como uma ferramenta universal para lidar com numeração seriada em todas as categorias de publicações. Novas parcerias significaram a cobertura de uma nova gama de necessidades; impactou nos procedimentos e nas quantidades a serem considerados. Foi bastante desafiador. O que não pôde ser totalmente previsto no planejamento estratégico de meados dos anos oitenta foi a realidade mundial a sua volta em duas áreas muito diferentes. O mundo mudou em decorrência do pós-guerra, o que trouxe consequências para uma organização intergovernamental. O papel, o meio tradicional de publicação, rivalizou gradualmente e crescentemente com o suporte imaterial, trazendo novas práticas na publicação. Tudo isso em um período com contribuições públicas para o orçamento mais difíceis de se obter, mais parceiros com os quais cooperar, mais necessidades para atender, mais centros nacionais para reorganizar e manter suas bases de dados e uma revolução no acesso à informação. Foi um momento maravilhoso para a cooperação imaginativa.

Palavras-chave: História do ISSN. Planejamento estratégico. Cooperação.

Consolidación en tiempos de cambios: el ISSN de 1989 a 1998

Resumen

Después de los años de creación e implementación del Sistema ISSN, la red y el Centro Internacional tuvieron que enfrentarse a una nueva fase de desarrollo. A nivel personal, la repentina muerte de la Señora Rosenbaum afectó profundamente a todos los que participaron en la primera fase del ISSN. A nivel estratégico, el informe Durance confirma implícitamente el ISSN (que nació de base científica y técnica y de necesidades específicas) como una herramienta universal para hacer frente a la numeración seriada en todas las categorías de publicaciones. Nuevas asociaciones plantearon cubrir una nueva gama de necesidades; afectando a los procedimientos y las cantidades a tratar. Fue bastante desafiador. Lo que no pudo ser totalmente previsto el planeamiento estratégico de mediados de los años 1980 fue la realidad mundial en dos áreas muy distintas. El mundo cambió como resultado de la posguerra y tuvo impacto en una organización intergubernamental. El papel, el medio tradicional de publicación, rivalizaba gradualmente y cada vez más con el soporte inmaterial, trayendo nuevas prácticas en el mundo de las publicaciones. Todo en un periodo en que las contribuciones públicas para el presupuesto eran cada vez más difíciles de obtener, más socios con quienes cooperar, más necesidades que cubrir, nuevos centros nacionales para reorganizar y mantener sus bases de datos y una revolución en el acceso a la información. Fue un momento maravilloso para la cooperación imaginativa.

Palabras clave: *Historia del ISSN. Planeamiento estratégico. Cooperación.*

The ISSN network celebrates its 40th anniversary and there is much to celebrate. Being part of history (a strange feeling and a very proud one as well) I was asked to contribute to this special issue, which I gladly accepted wondering what useful contribution I could make to the general picture. Other articles cover the history, facts and technical questions the network faced in the past forty years. Maybe my contribution can be justified by adding some personal comments to a few highlights.

When I joined the International Centre as a new director, I was expected with a general hope that interim periods were over. The sudden decease of Marie Rosenbaum, who was at the origin of the network, had been a terrible shock. It was followed by interims and transitions that had to come to an end, whatever the dedication of those who had kept the network going during that difficult

period. It was both a challenge, because it was not easy to be up to the expectations, and a facilitating situation, because all were ready to support a new start. The Durance Report and associated strategic planning showed the way to comfort the existing achievements and to prepare new developments and a larger cooperation in the serials community. The general state of the world both in technological and geopolitical areas added to the necessity to permanently move forward.

One recommendation of the Durance Report stressed the need for a better cooperation with ISBN, with which ISSN had much in common and differences as well, with publishers and subscription agencies too. My past position in charge of the databases of the French Publishers and Booksellers Association paved the way to creating formal contacts. I had been a member of

the ISBN Advisory Panel as French representative, had worked with EAN on barcoding and teleordering systems, and was a regular participant to the International Distribution Specialists Meeting in Frankfurt Book Fair where the main issues concerning the future of the book trade were addressed. I became a regular member as director of ISSN, because it seemed relevant to all concerned. This first rapid result gave me time to address less familiar aspects of my responsibilities (did I mention I was not an expert in serials?).

In the total revolution that publication world underwent in those days, it was vital to be part of the flow. If not, ISSN would have soon been considered for printed material only with the great risk of being marginalized when others dealing with electronic publications would have prepared what obviously was the future of serial publications. It certainly seems unreal nowadays that this possibility was envisaged but definitions, formats, cataloguing rules, access and storage, all our working tools had to be reconsidered, not only in ISSN network of course, all branches of the publishing and library communities as well as authors and users had to adjust. Concerning definitions, some wondered if a monograph permanently updated online became a serial. In the early ages of electronic publications, many working procedures were questioned. ISSN was successfully working with union catalogues, abstracting and indexing services, standards offices, library associations. Improving cooperation with publishers and subscription agencies was a necessary step for a general recognition of ISSN as a universal common identifier. Soon new actors appeared, IETF for example that had a very different way of making rapid decisions by

consensus. All partners in the chain using one identifier for serial publications whatever the medium of publication. It introduced a change of perspective. ISSN Centres (International Centre included) were mainly staffed by librarians. Union catalogues, abstracting and indexing services belonged to the same large family. Publishers and subscription agents sometimes had requests of a different style. They would use ISSN because it was efficient and free and answered their needs. If not, some imagined they would run their own system and certainly run it better without all the niceties librarians add to numbering. All in all, there was a general sense that improved cooperation was beneficial but all thought about their own priorities. Fortunately there were lighter moments when some puzzling issues came to discussion in Directors' meetings. A crucial one: could T-shirts¹ sold in bookshops issued monthly with a different poem printed on each month be really numbered as serials? They perfectly matched the standard definition...

The world around us was undergoing unthought-of changes as well. One had a direct impact on the network. Historical changes were on their way concerning the post-war situation as it had been known till then, with Soviet Union and the countries of the Eastern Block. There was a Regional Centre in Moscow, called CMEA, in charge of coordinating the work of several

¹ Editor's note: The issue of assigning ISSN to a t-shirt was raised by ISSN directors because in the 1990's they were considering enlarging the scope of ISSN identification to serial publications on different carriers, and especially online carriers. This t-shirt was published by a US short story magazine called Tee shorts which received an ISSN (1061-2254) and subsequently changed name to The Cotton Quarterly (1063-5084).

countries (training, delivering information and blocks of ISSN, maintaining the regional database and reporting to the International Register). The International Centre in spite of repeated efforts could not obtain information but at least knew that a non-member country had been given a block of ISSN and more generally that the records were not reported to the ISDS Register. Thousands of valid ISSN were not available in the International database. In 1990, taking the opportunity of the IFLA Conference in Stockholm where most countries were represented a meeting was organized thanks to the support of the Swedish representative, Folke Sandgren, and the immense involvement of the Hungarian representative, Judith Szilvássy who never counted her time and efforts in her dedication to ISSN. Hungary worked in direct relation with the IC and also was on the list of the Regional Centre. Being in contact with all participants she could act as a facilitator between the International Centre, the Regional Centre, and related National Centres, including Vietnam which was not a Member country at that time. This meeting was extremely important to clarify positions and prepare future stages of organization, among which the clear decision of the National Centres depending on the Regional one to work in direct line with the International Centre. The following years introduced a totally different international background. The agreement on the Regional Centre could not stand because Soviet Union itself did not exist anymore. The problem of unreported ISSN remained. The All Union Book Chamber that had hosted the Regional Centre was the Book Chamber for Russia. There was a will to find solutions but the way was not so easy to find. Problems were technical, financial

and practical. During the Frankfurt Book Fair, the Russian representative saw me from his end of a corridor. Whoever went to the Book Fair knows how long corridors can be. He was coming towards me waving, with a broad smile all the time, clasped me into his arms obviously pleased to see me and said: *I have plenty of news for you. All bad.* Good will may not be wanting, yet hardships of real life could not be underestimated. Tapes finally traveled from Moscow to Paris via the IFLA conference in Delhi. The tapes were not complete and processing the data was not a total success but at long last a certain amount of unreported ISSN were finally included in the Register. It was a major step forward.

As an intergovernmental organization, the International Centre applies strict rules for membership and creation of National Centres. To be a country recognized by the United Nations had been a stable condition but circumstances were no longer stable. Within a few years USSR disappeared, former parts of the Soviet Union became independent countries, Czechoslovakia split into two different republics, reversely Germany reunited two former different states, Yugoslavia² split into several independent countries. It was a geopolitical turmoil and it was

Editor's note: The ISDS Centre for Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was created in October 1974. Further to the deliquescence of Yugoslavia from 1991 on, ISSN centres were created in the new independent states: Croatia in October 1992, Slovenia in November 1992, Republic of Macedonia in November 1994, Bosnia and Herzegovina in May 1998. Between 1992 and 2006, Serbia and Montenegro formed the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia which signed a new agreement with the ISSN International Center in 1993. In 2006, Serbia and Montenegro parted ways. The ISSN International Centre signed new agreements with the ISSN Centre for Serbia in April 2008 and with the ISSN Centre for Montenegro in July 2008.

also real life of real people. In the different existing National Centres real people tried to continue to assign ISSN and maintain the database in days of complete change in their lives. Sometimes with happy celebrations, sometimes more painfully with no clear view of what was their national territory for some time. These people were not unknown figures seen in the news, they were colleagues we knew from ISSN or ISO or IFLA meetings. And they insisted that *work must go on*. New National Centres were created, records were modified with new country codes, sometimes even new language codes, national databases were merged, national databases were sorted to assign records to new National Centres. Sometimes bibliography is a part of history in the making.

The system was efficient and successful and its very success could become a threat. Coping with a growing number of National Centres, of records in the database and of usages, as well as providing new accesses to the database and developing more external cooperation automatically induced additional costs. In the sixties and seventies of the last century, access to information (especially scientific and technical information for which ISSN was originally designed) had been considered a major political issue to which states were ready to dedicate the necessary funds. In the late eighties the days when ISSN had been imagined and established were past. Funds to set up new projects could at great pains be found but money to run existing systems was becoming scarce. In all the member countries, the period was not more favorable and though the support of France and Unesco was constant, it was not in terms of increasing budgets. Very understandably priority everywhere was

given to national projects with their own funding difficulties. The general support of all member countries was never missing but the contributions could not be increased proportionally to the needs.

One first line of action was an internal reorganization of the International Centre. It was done but could not be so drastic as to threaten the activities. OSIRIS was also a tool for a better quality of the database without additional costs. The second line was developing sales of products or subscriptions to services. The International Centre worked at increasing the subscriptions to the Register on tapes and launched a version of the Register on CD- ROM. And as a possible additional source of income, the issue of charging for the assignment of individual ISSN was raised. Times are probably not very different twenty years later I will not address the general issue of finances any longer except for that crucial point. Numbering of publications is necessary and using a common identifier saves work and expenses for all in the chain. For identification systems, the first difficulty is to convince all partners that this system is the one that will answer their needs, even if some concessions are necessary, that one global system will be better and less costly than several and that it will greatly improve all the procedures. Once this is achieved, no one could imagine to do without the system. Yet if the question of whom should pay for it is raised, each partner will think that the other users benefit more and should be charged. Who will pay? The publisher that prints the ISSN and facilitates management procedures, the subscription agent that markets the title, the library that handles the issues, the union catalogue that establishes an efficient cooperation on identification of the

publication, the abstracting and indexing services that can identify a title and its articles, the final user in a bibliographic search? ISSN had spent much energy to extend its cooperation in all areas. At that time, ISBN and ISSN united their forces to make sure the agreement with EAN on barcoding would continue with a free use of barcodes based on both systems. A position that would have been made difficult to sustain if ISSN or ISBN were not assigned for free. ISSN network could not solve on its own the global issue of public contribution to activities of general use, which was the idea behind national contributions. It was difficult to choose whom to charge for ISSN because it was difficult to identify who would suffer most of the lack of ISSN. Which after all can be seen as a great achievement. Users benefited more and more from a system that gave more and more headaches to maintain with limited means and everyone continued to do one's best to extend usage and create more activities. The world of publications was changing, the access to information was undergoing a revolution. Forty years ago, when the very idea of ISSN emerged, abstracting and indexing services served specialists, it was not envisaged that data could be found if not indexed by professionals, access to online databases was almost a luxury and totally impossible in certain parts of the world. Today anyone can access an inconceivable amount of data from anywhere without knowing what a keyword is. In the mean time we worked hard to make it happen. Finding information is so effortless, seems so natural that users cannot imagine that it is the result of great efforts of a crowd of people busy finding common efficient solutions to reach that aim. In my days with ISSN, in an academic meeting

I was asked to explain what my work consisted in. Someone remarked I sounded very enthusiastic though all I talked about was to his ears extremely austere and he could not see the interest of it. This person made researches, published articles, taught students... all activities that implied bibliographies but he had never wondered how they were made possible. A few years later, some even wondered if librarians were still necessary.

Which leads me to what I personally consider a major aspect of the history of ISSN. The organization of the network had been thought to create a necessary tool that proved more and more useful. Cooperation with ISO, IFLA, CCN, CONSER, NOSP, ISBN, ICSTI, SISAC, etc., maintained it to a high level of efficiency. This result could not have been achieved without the constant wish of all involved that it would work and be successful. In this overview of ten years in ISSN, technology, history, finances played an important part but people involved were the motor of it all. No working place is ever a land of milk and honey and I do not tell a story full of good fairies and bunches of roses. It was hard work most of the time but I sincerely think that the success of ISSN is due to a general commitment towards a common goal. To make a long story short: The General Assembly elected representatives that were seriously committed to the work of the Governing Board and its Bureau was a real active governing body. There was a lot of work going on in order to establish a policy and find the best solutions to run the system, that was added to the members' other responsibilities. It was an important basis for efficiency in between meetings.

When I took my position, the staff at the International Centre had been there since the creation. There was no routine. On the contrary, it was an extreme richness for the network because they were extremely dedicated and competent. Strong personalities did not scorn a clash now and then internally but everyone was in fighting order when necessary. Changes occurred but the dedication and the competence remained.

The Directors met once a year for technical discussions and establishing common working rules. There were countries with extensive databases with implications in millions of records and discrepancy with national practices were

not welcome. There were countries with few assignments and power shortages that made it hard to use a computer. And not once the opinion of any centre was scorned, any objection disregarded. When OSIRIS was ready for distribution, some directors tried to find solution to equip the least endowed Centres.

Governance, staff, common policies, nothing goes without disagreements and difficult moments but the result could not be achieved and ISSN could not celebrate its 40th anniversary, without the strong wish of all participants that it would work. Best wishes to all for the coming forty years and more.