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Introduction to ISNI

ISNI – the International Standard Name Identifier – is the new way of identifying authors. It can reliably prevent the problems caused when two authors have the same name, and helps bring together works by the same creator but in different sectors of the creative arts and media. Like the ISBN, it's an international standard, though it has a very different process for registration and use.

Background

Reliable identification of authors and other contributors is vital for many in-house publishing processes, and is an important element of book marketing ('other books by this author'). Equity, the union for actors, has rules that prevent performers using the same name – some are forced to adopt a 'stage name' to ensure that names are unique across the profession – but there are no such rules for book contributors. Even a mid-size publisher soon discovers that its author names are not unique. Hachette UK has two active authors called Tim Wilson, as well as an employee of the same name. HarperCollins UK has two authors named Richard Holmes – and worse still, both are in fact *Professor* Richard Holmes, both write on similar subjects, are published by the same imprint, were born within a few months of each other, and are difficult to tell apart from metadata alone. There may occasionally be reputational issues involved too, when an author of controversial work shares a name with a more mainstream author.

Furthermore, even a single author may use multiple pen names, and just one name may be presented in multiple ways. Barbara Vine is a pseudonym of Ruth Rendell. Steve Jones, Dr Stephen Jones, Prof. S. Jones shows career progression, 서영은 and Seo Yeong-Eun are the same name in different scripts, and names change frequently by marriage and for other reasons.

In all these cases, a reliable mechanism for *disambiguation* of similarly-named contributors and *collocation* of different names for the same contributor is necessary.

What is an ISNI, and what does it do?

ISNI is an identifier scheme that provides a unique number for each public identity – 0000 0000 8388 8172 identifies all versions of the name of Korean writer Seo Yeong-Eun, and 0000 0001 0968 0282 identifies all versions of Steve Jones the geneticist. The two Richard Holmes can be separated easily, because each one has a distinct ISNI – 0000 0001 2147 5396 or 0000 0001 1768 5542. And each has a URI, in the form <http://isni.org/isni/0000000109136025> (this is the URL for Finnish architect Alvar Aalto). This last example highlights that ISNIs extend beyond the world of books – it can cover musicians, artists, and other creative industries too.

There are (in mid-2014) around 8 million ISNIs already assigned to authors, musicians and other identities, based largely on data provided by national libraries, so there's a good chance that established authors already have an ISNI. But the database is very new. It's possible there are errors, and not all authors yet have their identifier. There is a public search facility at isni.org/search, and this website also allows feedback if you do spot a mistake.

It is critical to understand that an ISNI does not identify the *person*. It identifies a *persona*, the 'public identity' or outward face of the person. So one person may have two or more ISNIs, if for example that person writes under both their own name and a pen name – for example Ruth Rendell (0000 0001 2149 1740) and Barbara Vine (0000 0003 6864 7620). Conversely, multiple authors who share a single pseudonym have just a single ISNI (for that pseudonym). An example of this would be Franklin W. Dixon, a pseudonym shared by a team of writers, 0000 0000 7363 2026. ISNIs can be assigned to fictional characters too – 0000 0003 5932 6542 is Mickey Mouse. And in the future, it is likely they will be used to identify organisations and institutions such as publishers – and possibly also their brand names or imprints (many publishing organisations already have ISNIs, but this isn't at all consistent or comprehensive yet).

ISNIs are 16 digits long – 15 decimal digits, plus a check digit which may be 0–9 or X – and for ease of reading are typically displayed as 4 groups of 4 digits. ISNIs can easily be incorporated into industry-standard ONIX metadata:

```
<Contributor>
  <SequenceNumber>1</SequenceNumber>
  <ContributorRole>A01</ContributorRole>
  <NameIdentifier>
    <NameIDType>16</NameIDType>          <!-- 16 = ISNI -->
    <IDValue>0000000083888172</IDValue>  <!-- note no spaces -->
  </NameIdentifier>
  <PersonNameInverted>서영은</PersonNameInverted>
</Contributor>
```

Even though the name in this instance is written in Korean Hangul script (서영은), it can be reliably linked with records naming Seo Yeong-Eun in Latin, Cyrillic, Arabic, Kanji and so on, simply by matching the ISNI.

How can you get ISNIs registered for your authors?

New ISNIs are being released all the time. There are several million ‘pending’, based on existing library records, and a centralised quality assurance team is working through them (as well as improving the data on ISNIs that are already available). So your ISNI might be registered next week... or next year... or your organisation can become a ‘member’ of ISNI International (info@isni.org) and would then be able to register ISNIs in bulk.

But if you want an ISNI *now*, you should contact an ISNI Registration Agency. There are (in mid-2016) about 10, including for example Ringgold, ISNI-US, the British Library and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF). In contrast to the ISBN system, ISNI registration agencies are not restricted by country, but each agency has an area of focus. Ringgold primarily registers research and teaching institutions, and BNF primarily registers contributors to French culture. ISNI-US is more general, and registers individual authors, musicians, actors and other creative contributors (and is not limited to US contributors).

To register a *single* persona quickly, or at most a small number of identities, contact isni-us.com – the agency will need information that helps distinguish that particular identity, for example dates of birth or death, physical or web addresses, and titles of works by that contributor. This service is chargeable, but turnaround is fast.

For organisations that want to register larger numbers of identities, it may be worthwhile to become a ‘member’ of the ISNI International Agency. Membership (it costs around €1000 per year) provides improved access to the ISNI database and the ability to enrich the data on existing ISNIs. Members can register up to 100 identities via a manual web form. And for an extra fee, members can upload bulk information from their own sources for automatic matching against the existing ISNI database, and get ISNIs registered for those identities not already present. Note that because of the need to ensure uniqueness and check new registrations, it may take some time for the quality team to process the new registrations.

Further information

There’s lots more information available about ISNI via the isni.org website. BIC members can raise questions about ISNI with the BIC Metadata Sub-Committee, and information is available on our website at www.bic.org.uk or from EDItEUR (info@editeur.org), which provides management services to the ISNI Agency.

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