

The Numbers game

The International Standard Book Number (ISBN) system—and its precursor—turned 50 this year. Created by W H Smith, the 13-digit numbers would transform the trade. **Roger Tagholm** charts its development

When the Japanese military were sending messages to each other during the Second World War, they were undoubtedly unaware that they were helping to develop the International Standard Book Number system (ISBN), the system that would become a bedrock of the global book industry, and which celebrated its 50th anniversary in Frankfurt with a reception hosted by EDItEUR, the international standards body, last night (13th October).

Those wartime messages were intercepted and decoded at Bletchley Park by Gordon Foster, a young statistician who had been recruited by MI6 while a Maths student at Queen's University, Belfast. He honed his numeric skills cracking these codes. "He had to go through lots of numbers," his daughter, Sophie, recalls, which sounds like a good description of working with ISBNs. He would later put these numeric skills to good use when W H Smith (WHS) approached him in 1965 to write a report on how a standard numbering system for books would work.

The book industry was a very different place back then. It was chaotic. Stella Griffiths, executive director of the International ISBN Agency, explains: "To order or sell a book even as late as the 1960s was undoubtedly a 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 making clear 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, multiple pieces of information had to be quoted and verified to make sure the bookseller received the right edition."

In 1965 WHS announced its plan to move to a new, computerised warehouse in Swindon, and its systems director, Peter Bagnall, wrote to the Publishers Association urging it to develop a standard numbering system for books. He also

contacted Foster, who was working as chair of computational methods at the London School of Economics, for his expert opinion. Foster wrote a report that led to the creation of a nine-digit standard book number, which included a final check digit that would validate the rest of the number to avoid transcription errors. The new Standard Book Numbering (SBN) system went live in the UK from late 1967.

WHO'S THE DADDY?

It was suggested that a list of new books and new editions with their corresponding SBNs was needed. Since *The Bookseller* was already publishing weekly and monthly lists of new titles, its publisher David Whitaker enthusiastically embraced the idea of simply adding the new SBN numbers—hence his description today as "the father of the ISBN".

To help spread the word and promote understanding of the early system, a User's Manual was produced by Whitaker's. Griffiths notes: "This was initially sent free to all known UK publishers, but was later made available for a small fee, around 25p. Nevertheless, some publishers requested a discount." Plus ça change.

Over the next few years, other countries saw the effectiveness of the system and in 1970 International was added to the SBN, and the ISBN was born. It was now a 10-digit number, eventually becoming 13 digits in 2007 to boost capacity. Today, ISBNs are in regular use in more than 200 countries, with 150 national and regional agencies allocating ISBNs to publishers.

But, as ever, it wasn't as smooth or as simple as all that. Macmillan originally refused to adopt SBNs until it was contacted by one Gerry de Knop, then head of supplies at the Greater London Council. He wrote: "You are our largest educational account. We are computerising our warehouse procedures. We will of course go on buying selected items from you. As we will have to apply numbers ourselves, we will expect a very substantial discount for the manual handling of those books we continue to buy from you."

Griffiths says: "This rather bottom line approach certainly seemed to do the trick—Macmillan numbered the whole of their backlist over the weekend after receiving Gerry's letter. As a result, they were the first publishers to use SBNs." ●

QUIZ MATCH THE ISBN

Do you know your Penguins from your Picadors? Test your knowledge of the 50-year-old ISBN by matching the publisher to its prefix.

Answers can be found on Bent's Notes (p35).

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- 0-263
- 0-500
- 0-14
- 0-415
- 0-521
- 0-00
- 0-671
- 0-374
- 0-19
- 0-262
- 0-330