



E-Books and ISBNs: requirements for separate identification of different e-book versions

ISBN background

Since its creation in the late 1960s the purpose of the ISBN has been to facilitate the supply chain and enable new business models. In the digital environment, it has become less clear how the supply chain will develop and, because of that, how the ISBN will be used as a facilitator.

One of the principles of ISBN has been that it identifies a unique product (e.g. edition of a book). This has facilitated discovery and acquisitions and enabled e-commerce, aggregation of product information and sales data reporting. The ISBN standard, ISO 2108, has always required that different product forms of a publication, where these are made separately available, be assigned separate ISBNs.

When the standard was revised in 2005, there was considerable discussion about the appropriate level of granularity for electronic publications. It was agreed that the same rules that had been applied to printed books should also apply to e-books and the current edition of ISO 2108, the ISBN standard, therefore reads:

“Each different format of an electronic publication (e.g. ‘.lit’, ‘.pdf’, ‘.html’, ‘.pdb’) that is published and made separately available shall be given a separate ISBN.”

Although this seemed a sensible level of granularity at the time, it now seems that this level is insufficiently fine for some libraries, booksellers, jobbers/wholesalers and too fine for some publishers. Most retailers, libraries and their suppliers want to be able to separately identify versions from specific platforms and devices, whereas some publishers are only assigning a single generic ISBN to all e-book versions of a title .

The problem

In the traditional printed book supply chains, books were assigned ISBNs “at birth” and the same product with the same identifier progressed through the supply chain from printer to distributor to wholesaler to retailer or library.

The e-book supply chains are different. Publishers often produce a single generic file (typically .epub or .pdf) which is sent to an aggregator or service provider for conversion into different formats (standard or platform-specific), addition of proprietary DRM etc. These files are then made available from a number of different sources (publisher’s website, library or trade e-book platform, jobber/wholesaler, retailer). The result is a number of different versions of the e-book, many of them with unique characteristics and functionality, which retailers, libraries (and suppliers to both) need to be able to identify, preferably with a standard identifier, for the purposes of discovery and/or e-commerce.

However, some publishers do not wish to undertake the burden of assigning ISBNs and creating and maintaining metadata for each of these versions. A survey of participants during a recent BISG webcast on the subject of e-book identification noted that the major obstacles to publishers assigning separate ISBNs to each e-book version were “metadata bloat” and “current workflow” practice. It would appear that these are largely systems issues with technical solutions that are already offered by some vendors.

Although most publishers wish to keep tight control of their publications, other publishers have argued that they only publish one generic format (e.g. .epub) and assign an ISBN to that, and that any other formats or platform-specific versions provided by third party intermediaries are not the publishers' responsibility.

A result of this has been a proliferation of non-standard identifiers from channels and other intermediaries reminiscent of the printed book supply chain in the pre-ISBN 1960's. In some cases, quasi-ISBNs have been assigned by intermediaries in an attempt to satisfy the demands of their customers. These quasi-ISBNs have sometimes duplicated legitimately assigned ISBNs, leading to considerable confusion in the market.

The lack of a true product identifier for e-books has created particular problems for the use of e-commerce and bibliographic metadata, where standards expect a unique identifier to differentiate separate products and cannot cope with the ambiguity of a single identifier for multiple products.

Who assigns what identifier?

The International ISBN Agency continues to recommend that publishers should assign ISBNs to each product separately available. (A guiding principle is that a product needs a separate identifier if the supply chain needs to separately identify it). Downstream intermediaries and channels should obtain these ISBNs for their various formats and platforms from the original publisher.

However, following the reluctance of some publishers to assign ISBNs to each format, and demand from intermediaries and their customers to have them, the International ISBN Agency issued a guideline in April 2008 allowing ISBNs to be assigned by e-book resellers, under strict conditions, where publishers will not provide their own ISBNs for this purpose.

This situation is far from ideal and requires metadata to be shared with both the original publisher and the major bibliographic databases, but it does provide a solution for customers who required a unique and valid ISBN for each product where one was not available from the publisher. The guideline stresses that third parties should always attempt to obtain an ISBN from the publisher before assigning their own.

In other cases, intermediaries have used a generic ISBN assigned by the publisher to an epub file and identified the different platforms in metadata through the use of codes for each platform. This solution is similar to the old practice of quoting an ISBN assigned to a hardback but saying in metadata that the product is actually a paperback. It would involve an extra level of processing as ISBNs on their own would not uniquely identify the product.

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The International ISBN Agency is trying to establish requirements and the simple 4-question survey at http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=NL3plUAM9Rw3O_2ft6F9P9FQ_3d_3d is designed to assess both the real needs of users and the ability of publishers to satisfy them. We would be grateful for your response.

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