Malta's ISBN Database and the Benefits of Open Data

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In 2016, the National Book Council, the ISBN agency for Malta, released its ISBN database online. A few months later, the ISBN database was enhanced with an open-data feature that enables users to download the search results in a single file with read and write access. The database includes all the ISBN data of Malta except for some records and data that were lost during the period before 2013 when paper data storage of ISBN records was the common practice. The implementation of an ISBN electronic database now ensures that no data go missing and facilitates the preservation of meta-data. As added value, the open-data system provides access to all of the ISBN records as listed in the database, which means that virtually all of the ISBN data elements

can be downloaded from the database. Researchers, publishers, authors, and booksellers all stand to benefit from this open ISBN data system.

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The International Standard Book Number (ISBN) serves as a unique identifier of a book. As stated in the ISBN Users' Manual, each ISBN ('product identifier used by publishers, booksellers, libraries, internet retailers and other supply chain participants for ordering, listing, sales records and stock control purposes') is made up of five number elements: a prefix element, a registration group element, a registrant

element, a publication element, and a check digit. The registrant element (identifying the publisher or imprint) and the publication element (identifying the title and specific edition of the book and its format)¹ provide all the necessary data relating to a specific book. Each and every ISBN agency is contractually obliged by the International ISBN Association to hold these data for each ISBN it issues. According to current regulations, it is at the discretion of the national agency whether to make the data publicly available. In 2017, the National Book Council provided open-data access to its ISBN database.

According to opendefinition.org (run by the Open Knowledge International and setting out the principles that define 'openness' in relation to data and content), 'Knowledge is open if anyone is free to access, use, modify, and share it—subject, at most, to measures that preserve provenance and openness.'² Open Knowledge International, founded in 2004, is a global non-profit organization that provides technical expertise to entities providing open data. The concept of open data is relatively new. According to Borglund and Engvall (2014), it can be argued that the concept of open data derives from the European Inspire Initiative, which began in 2004. According to Blakemore and Craglia (2006), one of the main concepts and goals behind the EU's drive to make public sector information more available was that more access to data would increasingly bring down trade and economic barriers and provide more tangible economic and social benefits.

In practical terms, turning ISBN data into open data means that the ISBN data and all the information within the data elements are made available not just in read-only database format but also in a read-and-write format.

How does the open-data database work?

The ISBN database lists each book's various data elements (book title, publisher, author or editor, and year of publication). If the book is a hardback, ebook, or audiobook, the format is provided in brackets next to the title; it is not specified if the book is a paperback. The system allows multiple authors, editors, illustrators, and photographers to be included. After a search has been made, the database shows the results, and the option 'Export Results' is provided. This option enables the user to download the search list.

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Searches can be made according to each data element for every category; thus searches can be made, for instance, by year of publication, which would result in the list of all the books published in that particular year. Owing to server space constraints, it is not yet possible for users to download the whole ISBN list (which contains a total of 11 057 entries).³ However, one can download the full ISBN list easily by downloading the search results of every year that a Maltese ISBN was issued. The back-end of the database is based on Microsoft SQL, which is connected to .NET Framework, although other codes and systems can be used.

Use and benefits of open ISBN data

Open ISBN data serve various purposes. For research purposes, open ISBN data provide an excellent tool. Market analysts, literary critics, academics, journalists, students, and the general public have an efficient tool with which to understand the book industry.

Open ISBN data help booksellers save time and money in data gathering and input. Private ISBN agencies such as in the UK and the US sell their ISBN data to fund their operations. Publicly funded ISBN agencies such as in Malta or Sweden provide an open data service. The Argentinian ISBN Agency, run and funded by the Camara Argentina del Libro (an organization comprising publishers, booksellers, and book distributors), also provides an open data service. Providing ISBN data at a fee is disadvantaging for small operators in the market, whereas giants like Amazon have an advantage over other book retailers given the enormous selection of books (and data) available to them compared with booksellers that do not sell as many different titles.

Open ISBN data can also make local book industries more connected to foreign markets. By giving visibility

to more book products, the use of open ISBN data systems may offer strong potential for increased book sales. If local ISBN databases were connected together to form one universal database of ISBN data, one could expect significant changes to the structure of the global book market, such as increased diversification of books from different countries of origin. The databases of ISBN agencies offer an unbiased and non-discriminatory means to examine all book data, and the practice of open data enables greater access, levelling down competition in the data market.

Understandably, private ISBN agencies that receive no public funds will find it very challenging to opt to offer an open ISBN data service. Such a situation may change if the ISBN is conceived to be not just a commercial service, but a public service, in that it provides the general public with the information needed to select and identify book products. Books being the basic tools for the educational, cultural, and intellectual development of a society, the small country of Malta deems it appropriate to subsidize its ISBN agency so as to offer the best possible service. ■

Notes

- 1 <https://www.isbn-international.org/content/isbn-users-manual>
- 2 <https://opendefinition.org/od/2.1/en/>
- 3 Figure recorded in September 2018 and includes all 2017 entries.

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