

Assessment of Scholarly Books: Academic Publishing Through the ISBN Lens¹

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Introduction. In some countries, research assessment regulations mandate ISBN codes for books; so only books and chapters in books with ISBNs are defined as scholarly outputs (Basili & Lanzillo, 2018; Williams, Basso, Galleron, & Lippiello, 2018). Although the ISBN has become a key identifier for published books worldwide, on its own, it is just a code, meaningless without linked metadata.

The bibliometric community seeks all encompassing sources for bibliographic information for books (Halevi, Nicolas, & Bar-Ilan, 2016; Torres-Salinas & Moed, 2009) as well as book metrics (White et al., 2009; Zhu, Yan, Peroni, & Che, 2020). Meanwhile, some researchers have proposed to create new indicators because the ISBN code seems insufficiently rigorous (Zuccala, Breum, Bruun, & Wunsch, 2018; Zuccala & Cornacchia, 2016) to track publishers' identities.

In the previous investigation into publishers' rankings in the metrics-based assessment systems, we proposed that book outputs should be assessed at the level of individual books rather than evaluating them based on general information about their publisher (Dagienė, 2020). We suggest assessing two core roles expected from book publishers—*gatekeeping (or quality control) and dissemination*. For this, publishers need to be transparent about the services they provide for each book, and assessors need reliable information about such delivered services.

In this ongoing research, we investigate what services provided by publishers are currently available to reveal at the level of individual books. Mainly, we are going to use the book ISBNs and metadata already presented in various sources along with the ISBNs to identify different stages of publishing that add value to academic books. The services as quality control/peer-review, publishing on behalf of institutions, editions, translations, dissemination, and other publishing-related activities.

Research design. In this empirical study, we (1) investigate the standards and regulations related to ISBNs of books, (2) examine the bibliographical data available for book outputs in various sources, and (3) test data sources for metadata gathering. *For the standards and regulations on output submissions*, we chose the ISBN Users' Manual (2017), and the UK regulations and data on Research Excellence Framework (REF). Thus, *to better understand academic publishing practices in terms of the services which publishers offer to book authors*, we chose the records of book-related outputs submitted for the UK's REF because this system approaches peer review assessment of every book output. We use the freely available data on outcomes provided to REF2014 since we find that top publishers in numerous rankings worldwide are the most submitted publishers in REF2014 (Tanner, 2016). The in-depth analysis of bibliography and metadata gathered from various sources using the ISBNs of REF2014 books allows us to identify services delivered by publishers (and their imprints). To do this, we *examine the relevant data sources* (e.g. WorldCat, the Global Registry of Publishers (GRP), and others) for collecting metadata using book ISBNs to identify services provided by publishers.

Subtleties of the academic publishing world. Our initial findings disclose various services provided by publishers: gatekeeping (peer-review), copyediting and formats (printed, digital, and other), editions, translations, and distributions, among others. However, there is a need to name and define these services. Then publishers should be transparent and make the

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data on the services they have provided for every book easily accessible through channels suitable for both publishers and the academic community.

Books and their publishers in the ISBN world. The ISBN Manual already defines the publisher as an ISBN registrant, and it indicates processes that currently take place in book publishing so that the academic community could adapt some definitions for research assessment needs. Moreover, the International ISBN Agency has created the Global Register of Publishers, which is used to recognise publishers, their imprints, status (active or inactive), and business contacts. However, there is room for improvements to facilitate collecting these and other data about books and publishers' activities or services.

Discussion and conclusions. Our initial findings indicate that there are various publishing services provided for book outputs; even one book could be peer-reviewed, issued, distributed, edited, or translated by different independent publishers (or non-publishing companies).

Findings warn that the research assessment regulations and the ISBN Users' Manual (2017) define similar terms differently. The differences between perceptions and actual practices usually lead to inconsistencies. Thus, there is a need for clear definitions for publishing services such as those listed above to avoid unforeseen consequences caused by misunderstandings.

Cooperation between the International ISBN Agency, the academic community (policymakers, librarians, and academics), and developers of technologically advanced systems (to help collect and process data) is needed to establish norms, prepare practice recommendations, and initiate relevant developments.

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