

ISNI, a global name identifier fit for research beyond borders

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What triggered KBR to become a registration agency for ISNI, the ISO certified International Standard Name Identifier? And why has ISNI quickly revealed itself to be extremely useful for research purposes? In this presentation we will start by explaining how monitoring legal deposit caused KBR to engage in the ISNI community, who contributes worldwide to uniquely identifying contributors to creative works. Next, we will outline how ISNI soon became indispensable in the process of collecting and integrating data on Belgian cultural heritage for three research projects: one called BELTRANS on fifty years of Belgian translations (cf. poster of Sven Lieber et al.), another one called CAMille on the history of journalism in Belgium, and thirdly – a core task of KBR – publishing a Belgian Bibliography and therefore also creating a Belgian name authority file.

At KBR, the trigger to become an ISNI Registration Agency was legal deposit. As specified in a previous article (Van Camp, 2020), gathering a complete overview of publications which are submitted to legal deposit is particularly challenging in Belgium for two reasons. First, Belgian national heritage is located on the crossroads of at least three language communities: 1) Vlaanderen or the Dutch-speaking community, 2) Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles or the French-speaking Community, and 3) the Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft or the German-speaking Community. Secondly, Belgian legal deposit legislation includes not only all printed works published in Belgium – where the Belgian publisher is required to deposit –, but also all printed publications published abroad and written by a Belgian author who is domiciled in Belgium – in that case, the Belgian author is required to deposit. Due to these challenges, KBR has two major needs in order to efficiently monitor legal deposit: we have to gather this dispersed and multilingual info from diverse and often siloed sources, and we also need to track and trace Belgian publications published anywhere in the world or translated in any language. With the aim of swiftly retrieving quality information on Belgian authors and their publications, KBR has started using ISNI, a persistent, language neutral, machine readable bridge identifier for both persons and organisations involved in creative activities.

Very quickly, however, ISNI has also proven to be of key importance for research purposes. A first research project for which we are making great use of ISNI, is BELTRANS, a BRAIN-project in partnership with KU Leuven and UCLouvain that tells the untold story of translation flows between the Dutch and French language communities from Belgium in the period from 1970 to 2020. One of the criteria to delimit the corpus, is the Belgian nationality of certain contributors, namely the author, illustrator, scenarist or publishing director. As Sven Lieber pointed out in his presentation during the conference “Linked Data and International Standards for Cultural Heritage”, ISNI helped him enormously to integrate authority data from diverse sources and to apply the filter of Belgian nationality.

A second research project which benefits from ISNI, is called CAMille. CAMille is based on

a long-term cooperation between KBR and the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) and one of its goals is to develop a database on Belgian journalists and media since 1830. To be as complete as possible, it is once again necessary to collect, link and integrate authority data from various sources. Thanks to ISNI as bridge identifier across multiple countries, languages and domains, we have linked data from the KBR-catalogue with machine readable information from other sources such as the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Koninklijke Bibliotheek of the Netherlands and Wikidata, to complement human readable information from print publications by Pierre Van den Dungen, Jacques Willequet or Ingrid Mayeur.

Thirdly, as national library of Belgium and one of the ten Federal Scientific Institutions (FSI), KBR has a mission to improve access to Belgian cultural and historic heritage. Focusing more specifically on the contemporary collections preserved at KBR, we do so by publishing a Belgian Bibliography since 1875. In the world of the semantic web and in an era when data are increasingly being published and linked online, accurately identifying the persons who created our national heritage as primary entities becomes equally important as describing their works. Thus, ISNI is essential in view of creating trustworthy and interoperable data on persons related to the Belgian Bibliography or even the KBR collections in general.

To conclude, by presenting the affordances of ISNI for research objectives, we hope to stimulate the use of international standards and to inspire researchers in their efforts to find and integrate data on (Belgian) cultural heritage from diverse sources and in different formats, across countries, languages and various creative domains.

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