

## HAZARDS OF REPORT NUMBERS

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### 0 Introduction

One of the important forms of grey literature is technical reports which are also called shadow literature due to their semi-published or semi-formal nature. The most important and probably the unique characteristic of reports is their alphanumeric report numbers. These numbers have been extensively used for identification, arrangement and retrieval of technical reports.

### 1 What does a report number mean ?

Report series code number or simply report number is an alphanumeric designation allotted to report by the issuing agency. Report number is supposed to be unique. Report code is that portion of report number which designates the issuing or controlling agency. The accession or handling number and contract or grant or project number are often deemed to be report numbers for the purpose of identifying and handling reports but they are handicaps in many respects.

A report number has three or four components depending on standard or convention adapted. The first component or group is made of upper case letters or an abbreviation or an acronym which represents the name of the issuing agency and at times its subordinate body also. Another group is also made of upper case letters or acronym to represent particular series of reports. The third one normally represents year of publication through last two digits of year. The last group represent sequential number of the report in that series (e.g. NASA/TMX=82-0012). Suitable connecting symbols are used in between groups.

### 2 How did numbering originate ?

It is but natural that report numbering was started by OSRD, the famous organisation established during World War II for handling reports. It used to assign simple numerical series for identifying its reports. Most of the later agencies followed the suit of OSRD and tried to achieve bibliographic control of reports through numbering system. The system was slowly accepted by originators as well as users and today, report number has become principal feature of reports.

### 3 Merits of report numbers

Owing to their simplicity, brevity and mnemonic value, report numbers have gained popularity as security codes, filing designators and bibliographic references. Physical and bibliographic identification, access, control and organisation are very much aided by these 'pseudo call numbers' of reports. Report number is not only an example of a suitable substitute for source classification but also remains as a challenge to book classification schemes in its popularity. It also serves as an example where universally accepted practice of subject arrangement and browsing of documents are sacrificed for ease of handling as report numbers rarely represent subject. Thus, even today most of the technical reports in many libraries escape rigorous ritual called classification.

### 4 Problems of report numbers

Most of the problems of report numbers are rooted in excessive practice of their flexible merits. There is no uniformity in what basically a report code should represent. Many times, report numbers are made to represent issuing or contracting or distributing agency and/or its subordinate agency, individual author, subject, form, date of issue, security code, short title, etc. of the report depending on whims and fancies of issuing agencies. The uncontrolled proliferation of report numbering schemes, mainly due to increased number of reports, lack of enforcement of standards and control measures, mushrooming of report handling agencies and their announcement bulletins have made the report numbers complicated and unintelligible. Further, ambiguous presentation of report numbers is quite common. Inconsistent way of permuting the components of report numbers and connecting symbols such as hyphen, colon and dot can be found in many reports. Those who have treated connecting symbols as sacred tools of classification will have to be consoled while taking a look at how connecting symbols are treated in report numbers. Most of the connecting symbols of report numbers play no role in filing order. It would be amusing and interesting if some one takes up a detailed comparison of report numbers with classification numbers of any scheme. However, there are some clear similarities between report numbers and book numbers. Another unwanted similarity of report numbers and class numbers is that when report numbers are changed, instructions are issued (though very rarely) for renumbering all reports issued earlier. Change of name of issuing agency, decision to add or modify series and connecting symbols result in inconsistent report numbers.

Another equally strong hazard is use of multiple numbers to identify a single report. This multiplicity of numbers due to multiple sponsorship as well as additional numbers in the form of con-

tract number, grant number, accession number, etc., make the situation worst. It is very commonly seen that most of the reports carry three or four report numbers. Many reports contain some numbers printed and others hand-written, often incomplete and illegible. An example of a single report bearing seven different numbers is quoted in Dictionary of Report Series Code. This dictionary had 13,000 codes in its first edition (1962) and the number became almost double i.e. 21,600 in second edition (1973). To quote from the introduction of this dictionary,<sup>1</sup>

Hundreds of agencies were involved in (report number) assignment and use; thousands of different codes in different forms sprang up. There was no way to control them. There was, and is, no way to assess their reliability. Some codes are well-known and indicate the source of the reports, while others mean nothing. Yet all have been used indiscriminately for reference and control.

Successive handling agencies dealing with reports either modify the existing number or add new ones contributing to the complications.

The problems of bibliographic control of technical reports is very much aggravated by multiplicity of report numbers including contract numbers and accession numbers. Further, agencies such as NTIS insist on quoting their accession numbers while ordering reports for 'quick supply' while users continue to quote original report number such as NASA numbers. A library is likely to land up with multiple copies of the same report at exorbitant cost unless provision is made in card index and order trays for access through all types of numbers used for a report. Thus even the accession numbers, distributing codes and contract or grant numbers which not only occupy lot of space in bibliographic tools but also of least use outside the originating agencies have attained the stature of report series code numbers. Filing reports by report accession numbers is disastrous except where reports are exclusively received from one or two agencies. The advantages of report accession numbers is offset by need to create cross references as explained above, and resultant irritating and bulky catalogs and order trays. In addition, accession numbers added by less popular agencies who neither have comprehensive coverage nor announcement bulletins can be hazardous.

Often report numbers are quite lengthy. One can see many reports bearing numbers with 20 or more characters. Report numbers are further proliferated by abundance of errors in texts and announcement bulletins. Again, Dictionary of Report Series Codes shows how AFOSR reports in a single GRA & I issue are listed in seven different ways.

Lastly, report codes do have plenty of synonyms. IR stands for eleven different meanings. NAL stands for both National Aero-

naval Laboratory of India and National Aerospace Laboratory of Japan. These are only few of many examples.

## 5 Conclusion

We have seen some of the hazards of report numbers. However, they are not without solutions. Like ISBN, report numbers have to be tackled basically at the level of issuing agencies. In fact, efforts to standardise report numbers dates back to September 1974 when a conference on the bibliographic control of government, scientific and technical reports was held in Library of Congress. At present, there are guidelines and standards for preparation, production and numbering of reports from COSATI (PB 780600), BSI (BS 4811 : 1972), ANSI (ANSI-Z 39, 17-1971 ; ANSI-Z 39-23-1974), IEEE (IEEE Std. 268-1971) and ISI (IS 1080-Part I-1976). But there is no strict enforcement of standards. In addition, Libraries are greatly aided by standard tools such as Dictionary of Reports Series Codes of SLA and Directory of Engineering Document, Services of GED. Apparently, standardisation of report numbers is made partly simple as many report issuing agencies, especially those who issue more reports, roughly conform to one or the other standard. For reports from other agencies, a library has to maintain an authority list. However, assigning unambiguous, permanent, complete, concise and unique report number in a consistent way to each and every report is yet to be achieved.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS USED

AFOSR—Air Force Office of Scientific Research, (USA)  
 ANSI—American National Standards Institution  
 BSI—British Standards Institution  
 GED—Global Engineering Documentation Services Inc. (USA)  
 GRA & I—Government Reports Announcements and Indexes (USA)  
 IEEE—Institution for Electrical & Electronics Engineers, (USA)  
 ISBN—International Standard Book Number  
 ISI—Indian Standards Institution  
 NASA—National Aeronautics and Space Administration (USA)  
 NTIS—National Technical Information Services (USA)  
 OSRD—Office of Scientific Research and Development (USA)  
 SLA—Special Libraries Association (USA)

## References

- 1 Lois E God-frey and Helen F Redman ed. Dictionary of Report Series Codes. 2 ed. New York, SLA, 1973 page. 4.
- 2 Idem. page. 4.

### **About the Author**

Dr. M. S. Sridhar is a post graduate in Mathematics and Business Management and a Doctorate in Library and Information Science. He is in the profession for last 36 years. Since 1978, he is heading the Library and Documentation Division of ISRO Satellite Centre, Bangalore. Earlier he has worked in the libraries of National Aeronautical Laboratory (Bangalore), Indian Institute of Management (Bangalore) and University of Mysore. Dr. Sridhar has published 4 books, 83 research articles, 22 conferences papers, written 19 course materials for BLIS and MLIS, made over 25 seminar presentations and contributed 5 chapters to books.



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