EPISODE #188

The Hidden Politics of ISO Country and Currency Codes

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EPISODE SYNOPSIS

Have you ever wondered why the United States is "US" in one database and "USA" in another? In this episode of My Weird Prompts, Herman and Corn peel back the curtain on ISO 3166 and ISO 4217—the invisible standards that govern how every country and currency is identified in the global digital economy. They explore the fascinating tension between technical logic and messy international politics, explaining why the ISO tethers its decisions to the United Nations to avoid diplomatic firestorms. Using the recent recognition of Somaliland and the shifting landscape of Zimbabwean currency as case studies, the hosts illustrate how these codes are much more than just shorthand; they are digital assertions of sovereignty. Whether it's the "exceptionally reserved" status of the EU or the "X" codes used for gold and silver, this discussion highlights the Herculean task of maintaining a universal language for global trade. Join Herman and Corn as they explain how these "high priests of consensus" manage the data decades that keep our banking, shipping, and internet systems from falling into chaos.

DANIEL'S PROMPT

> **Daniel**
>
> How does the process of defining, maintaining, and updating ISO standards for country codes and currency identifiers work, especially when political considerations are involved in identifying countries?

TRANSCRIPT

Corn

Hey everyone, welcome back to My Weird Prompts. I am Corn, and I am sitting here in our living room in Jerusalem with my brother, the man who probably has the I-S-O three thousand one hundred sixty-six country codes memorized in alphabetical order.

Herman

Herman Poppleberry at your service, and for the record Corn, I only have the alpha-two codes memorized. The alpha-three codes are a bit more of a weekend project. But you are right, this is exactly the kind of thing that gets me excited. Our housemate Daniel sent us a really interesting audio prompt today. He has been doing some work with financial data and impact investing, and he ran into that classic nightmare of messy data. You know the one where one person writes U-S, another writes U-S-D, another writes United States, and suddenly your database thinks you are dealing with four different planets.

Corn

It is the bane of any data scientist's existence. But Daniel's question goes way beyond just the annoyance of cleaning a spreadsheet. He is asking about the machinery behind these standards. Specifically, how does the International Organization for Standardization, or I-S-O, decide who gets a code and who doesn't? And more importantly, how do they handle the political landmines when a new country or a disputed territory enters the conversation?

Herman

It is a fascinating intersection of cold, hard technical logic and extremely messy global politics. We often think of standards as these objective, scientific truths, like the length of a meter or the weight of a kilogram. But country codes and currency identifiers are deeply tied to sovereignty, recognition, and international law. When you assign a two-letter code to a place, you are essentially giving it a digital identity that the entire world's banking, shipping, and internet systems rely on.

Corn

Right, and that is not a neutral act. So, Herman, let's start with the basics. When we talk about country codes, we are usually talking about I-S-O three thousand one hundred sixty-six. Can you break down how that standard is actually structured? Because it is not just one list, right?

Herman

Exactly. I-S-O three thousand one hundred sixty-six is actually divided into three parts. Part one is the most famous one, which covers the names of countries and their subdivisions. This is where you get your two-letter codes, like I-L for Israel or U-S for the United States. Those are called alpha-two codes. Then you have the alpha-three codes, which are three letters, like I-S-R or U-S-A. And finally, there are numeric codes, which are useful for systems that don't handle Latin characters well.

Corn

And part two and three?

Herman

Part two covers the subdivisions of those countries. Think of state codes like U-S dash C-A for California. Part three is actually for formerly used country names. So if a country changes its name or ceases to exist, like the Soviet Union or Czechoslovakia, the code moves to part three so that historical data can still be processed correctly.

Corn

Okay, so that is the "what." But let's get to the "how" that Daniel was asking about. Who actually sits in a room and decides that a new country gets a code? Is there an I-S-O secret society meeting in a hollowed-out volcano in Switzerland?

Herman

Not quite a volcano, though they are based in Geneva. The crucial thing to understand is that I-S-O doesn't actually decide who is a country. They are a standards body, not a political one. To avoid getting bogged down in endless diplomatic wars, they tether themselves to the United Nations. Specifically, the I-S-O three thousand one hundred sixty-six Maintenance Agency, or the M-A, follows the lead of the United Nations.

Corn

So if the U-N says you are a country, I-S-O gives you a code?

Herman

Essentially, yes. They look at the United Nations Terminology Bulletin on Country Names or the country and region codes used for statistical purposes by the United Nations Statistics Division. If a new state is admitted to the U-N, they get a code almost immediately. But here is where it gets tricky, and this gets to Daniel's point about political considerations. What about places that are not full U-N members?

Corn

Right, and this is incredibly timely. Just two weeks ago, on December twenty-sixth, twenty twenty-five, Israel became the first country to officially recognize Somaliland as a sovereign state. We just saw the Israeli Foreign Minister, Gideon Sa'ar, visiting Hargeisa. Now, Somaliland has been functioning as a state for over thirty years, but they don't have a U-N seat. Does Israel's recognition mean they finally get an I-S-O code?

Herman

That is the million-dollar question, and the answer is: not yet. Because the I-S-O M-A is tethered to the U-N's list, a single country's recognition—even a high-profile one like Israel's—doesn't trigger an automatic code. The U-N still considers Somaliland part of Somalia. Until the U-N Secretariat updates its terminology bulletin or the Statistics Division changes its stance, Somaliland remains in a digital limbo.

Corn

That feels like a very delicate balancing act. You are providing the technical utility while trying to maintain political neutrality, or at least, following the specific flavor of neutrality that the U-N provides. But what about the "exceptionally reserved" codes? I remember seeing E-U on some lists.

Herman

That is a perfect example. The European Union is not a country, but it has a massive presence in international trade. So the code E-U is exceptionally reserved. It isn't part of the main list of countries, but it is set aside so that no one else can use it, and it can be used in specific contexts like the Eurozone's financial reporting. The same goes for codes like U-K. Technically, the I-S-O code for the United Kingdom is G-B, for Great Britain and Northern Ireland. But U-K is exceptionally reserved because so many people kept using it anyway that they had to make sure it didn't get assigned to some future country named, I don't know, Upper Kazakhstan.

Corn

I love that. Even in the world of high-level international standards, sometimes you just have to give in to the fact that everyone is using the wrong acronym. But let's pivot to currencies for a second, because that is what Daniel was specifically dealing with in his financial data. That is I-S-O four thousand two hundred seventeen, right?

Herman

Correct. I-S-O four thousand two hundred seventeen is the standard for currency codes. And there is a very neat logic to how these are formed, which most people don't realize. In most cases, the three-letter currency code is just the two-letter country code from I-S-O three thousand one hundred sixty-six plus the first letter of the currency name. So, the United States is U-S, the currency is the Dollar, so you get U-S-D. Japan is J-P, the currency is the Yen, so you get J-P-Y.

Corn

Wait, so what about the Euro? E-U-R? If E-U isn't a country code in the main list, how does that work?

Herman

The Euro is the exception that proves the rule. Since it is a multi-national currency, they used that exceptionally reserved E-U code we just talked about and added the R from Euro. But there are even weirder ones. Think about gold or silver. If you are a bank and you are holding physical gold, you need a code for that in your system.

Corn

Oh, I've seen these. They start with an X, right?

Herman

Exactly. The letter X is reserved for currencies that are not tied to a specific country. So gold is X-A-U. The A-U is from the chemical symbol for gold, Aurum. Silver is X-A-G. And then you have X-T-S, which is reserved for testing. If you are a developer building a new payment system and you don't want to accidentally send a billion real dollars to a test account, you use X-T-S.

Corn

That is such a practical detail. It reminds me of how we talked about private I-P address ranges in episode two hundred eighty-six. It is a sandbox within the standard. But let's go back to the maintenance aspect. How often do these lists actually change? It feels like countries don't just pop up every day.

Herman

You would be surprised. It is more frequent than you think, but it is not just about new countries. It is about name changes. Recently, the country formerly known as Turkey officially requested that the international community use the name Türkiye. That required an update to the I-S-O standard. Or look at what happened when South Sudan became independent in twenty eleven. They had to be added to I-S-O three thousand one hundred sixty-six with the code S-S, and then the currency standard had to be updated to include the South Sudanese Pound, which is S-S-P.

Corn

And what happens to the old codes? Like when the Netherlands Antilles was dissolved in twenty ten. Does the code just vanish?

Herman

No, that would break every legacy database on earth. This is where part three of the standard comes in. The code A-N for the Netherlands Antilles was deleted from the active list and moved to the "formerly used" list. It is essentially retired, like a jersey number in sports. It won't be reassigned to a new country for at least fifty years to prevent confusion in historical records.

Corn

That fifty-year rule is interesting. It shows they are thinking in terms of "data decades." But I want to push on the political side again. Daniel mentioned Somaliland. If Israel recognizes Somaliland and starts trading with them using a specific currency, but the U-N doesn't recognize them, we are in a stalemate, right? The I-S-O won't give them a code, but businesses might need one. What do people do in that situation?

Herman

That is where we see the "user-assigned" codes. Both I-S-O three thousand one hundred sixty-six and four thousand two hundred seventeen have ranges of codes that are intentionally left blank for private use. In the country codes, these are the ranges starting with double A, then Q-M to Q-Z, X-A to X-Z, and Z-Z.

Corn

So a company could internally decide that X-S-L stands for Somaliland?

Herman

Exactly. Or a group of regional banks could agree on a private code to facilitate trade. But the problem is that these aren't universal. If Bank A uses X-S-L for Somaliland and Bank B uses it for "Secret Location," you have a data collision. This is why the official I-S-O code is so powerful. It is the only way to ensure that everyone in the world is speaking the same language. Without it, you are back to Daniel's problem of "is it U-S or U-S-D or United States," but on a global, catastrophic scale.

Corn

It is almost like the I-S-O is the high priest of global consensus. They don't create the reality, but they are the ones who officially record it so that the machines can understand it. But what about when a currency fails? Like the Zimbabwean dollar. How does the standard reflect a currency that is essentially worthless?

Herman

The standard doesn't care about the value, only the existence. But Zimbabwe is actually the perfect case study for maintenance. In April twenty twenty-four, they introduced a new gold-backed currency called the Zimbabwe Gold, or ZiG. The I-S-O Maintenance Agency issued it the new code Z-W-G. This replaced the old Z-W-L. If you look at the history, they've gone from Z-W-D to Z-W-N to Z-W-R to Z-W-L and now Z-W-G. Each time, the M-A issues a new code so that financial systems can distinguish between the "old" money and the "new" money.

Corn

That must be a nightmare for accountants. "Wait, was this debt in Z-W-R or Z-W-G?" But it really highlights why specificity matters. If you just kept the code the same, you could never do historical comparisons. You would be comparing apples to... well, apples that have been through a woodchipper.

Herman

That is a great analogy. And it actually brings up a point about who runs the currency side. While the country codes are managed directly by an I-S-O committee, the currency codes in I-S-O four thousand two hundred seventeen are actually managed by a "Maintenance Agency" on behalf of I-S-O. For many years, that has been S-I-X Interbank Clearing, based in Switzerland.

Corn

Wait, so a private company manages the world's currency codes?

Herman

It is a non-profit organization that operates the Swiss interbank clearing system. They have the technical expertise to handle the rapid changes that financial markets require. It is a very pragmatic arrangement. They work with central banks and the International Monetary Fund to make sure that whenever a new currency is launched or an old one is retired, the rest of the world knows within days.

Corn

This whole system feels so robust, yet so fragile because it relies on everyone agreeing to follow the rules. But I'm thinking about the digital future. We are in early twenty twenty-six now. Central Bank Digital Currencies, or C-B-D-Cs, are becoming a real thing. How does the I-S-O handle a digital version of the Yuan or the Dollar?

Herman

That is the million-dollar question. Currently, most central banks want their digital currency to be seen as the same legal tender as their physical currency. So the digital Euro is still E-U-R. However, there is a lot of discussion in the I-S-O technical committees about whether we need new identifiers for the specific "flavor" of the money. If a digital currency has different settlement rules or technical limitations, a database might need to know that.

Corn

And what about things that aren't central bank controlled? I'm not just talking about Bitcoin, but things like carbon credits. If I'm trading carbon credits globally, I need a standardized way to identify them, right?

Herman

Funny you should mention that. There is actually a standard for that too, I-S-O twenty-four thousand one hundred sixty-five, which deals with Digital Token Identifiers, or D-T-Is. It was just updated in twenty twenty-five to include non-fungible tokens and to separate the token identifier from the ledger identifier. It provides a unique nine-character alphanumeric code for crypto assets. It is I-S-O's attempt to bring the same level of boring, reliable order to the wild west of crypto that they brought to shipping containers and country codes.

Corn

"Boring, reliable order." That should be the I-S-O's unofficial motto. But Herman, let's talk about the actual process of an update. If I'm a developer and I want the latest list of country codes, where do I go? Is there an A-P-I? Or do I have to buy a P-D-F for three hundred dollars?

Herman

This is a point of contention in the standards world. Traditionally, I-S-O makes a lot of its money selling the documentation for standards. But for something as fundamental as country codes, they realized that if they charged too much, people would just use pirated or outdated lists, which defeats the purpose of a standard. So, while the full technical documentation might cost money, the actual lists of codes are generally available through the I-S-O Online Browsing Platform.

Corn

But even then, as Daniel found out, it's not always easy to integrate. If you are building a system today, you can't just hardcode a list of two hundred forty-nine countries and call it a day. You have to assume that list will change.

Herman

Exactly. And that is the biggest takeaway for anyone working with this data. Never assume the map is static. In the last few years, we have seen Swaziland change to Eswatini. Now, they requested a code change to E-Z, but the I-S-O M-A actually kept the code as S-Z to maintain stability. If you had manually changed it to E-Z in your database because you saw the name change, you would have broken your connection to every other I-S-O compliant system.

Corn

So what is the best practice? Do you just sync with the I-S-O database every night?

Herman

For most people, that is overkill. But you should use a library or a service that tracks these changes. Most modern programming languages have packages that are maintained by the community to follow the I-S-O standards. The real danger is when you start making up your own codes. I've seen companies use "U-K" for United Kingdom in their internal database, then they try to merge that with a shipping provider that uses "G-B," and suddenly half their packages are lost in a digital void.

Corn

It is the "not invented here" syndrome but for geography. It is so tempting to just say, "Oh, I'll just use these two letters," but you are creating a ticking bomb for the person who has to maintain that system five years from now.

Herman

And it's not just about the letters. The numeric codes are actually the most stable. If a country changes its name, the numeric code usually stays the same unless the borders change significantly. So for deep database architecture, numeric codes are often the "source of truth," while the letters are just the "display name" for us humans.

Corn

That is a great tip. So, if you are building for the long haul, think in numbers, even if you show the letters to the users. But Herman, I want to circle back to the political nuance one more time. We talked about Somaliland and Taiwan. What about cases where a country is recognized by some but not all? Like Palestine?

Herman

Palestine is a fascinating case in the I-S-O world. They have the alpha-two code P-S and the alpha-three code P-S-E. They were added to the standard in the late nineties after the Oslo Accords, following the U-N's recognition of the Palestinian Authority as a "non-member observer state." This is a perfect example of how the I-S-O uses the U-N as its shield. Because the U-N gave them a specific status, I-S-O could assign a code without "taking a side" in the way a single country might.

Corn

It's like the I-S-O is saying, "Don't look at us, we're just following the U-N's seating chart." But that seating chart has real-world consequences. If you have an I-S-O code, you can get a Top-Level Domain on the internet. You can have a dot P-S or a dot T-W.

Herman

Exactly. The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, or I-C-A-N-N, which manages the D-N-S system, almost exclusively uses the I-S-O three thousand one hundred sixty-six list to decide which countries get a two-letter country code top-level domain. No I-S-O code, no dot-something for your country. This is one of the reasons why unrecognized states fight so hard for an I-S-O code. It is a prerequisite for a digital flag.

Corn

That is a huge second-order effect. It's not just about a spreadsheet in a bank; it's about your entire identity on the internet. If Somaliland can't get an I-S-O code, they can't have a dot S-L or whatever they might want. They are forced to live under someone else's digital domain.

Herman

And that brings up the issue of "digital dependency." If you are a territory that is not fully recognized, you are often forced to use the infrastructure of the country you are trying to separate from, or you use a generic top-level domain like dot com or dot org. But those don't give you the same "official" feel as a country code domain.

Corn

It's amazing how much power is packed into two little letters. We've talked about the "what" and the "how," but I'm curious about the "who." Who are the people on this Maintenance Agency? Is it a group of geographers? Diplomats? Computer scientists?

Herman

It's a mix. The I-S-O three thousand one hundred sixty-six Maintenance Agency consists of representatives from ten organizations. Five are national standards bodies, like A-N-S-I from the United States or D-I-N from Germany. The other five are major international organizations: the U-N, the International Telecommunication Union, the Universal Postal Union, the International Civil Aviation Organization, and the Internet Society.

Corn

That is a heavy-hitting lineup. You've got the people who handle the mail, the people who handle the planes, and the people who handle the internet.

Herman

Because those are the three groups that absolutely cannot afford to have a mix-up about where a country is or what it's called. If the Postal Union thinks a code means one thing and the Aviation Organization thinks it means another, planes land in the wrong place and mail gets lost. The I-S-O standard is the glue that holds all those different global systems together.

Corn

It's the ultimate "boring" technology that makes the exciting stuff possible. You can't have global travel or global trade without a shared understanding of the map. So, Herman, if you had to give Daniel one piece of advice for his financial data project, based on everything we've discussed, what would it be?

Herman

I would say, respect the retired codes. Daniel was talking about "cleaning" data. A lot of times, people see an old code like A-N for the Netherlands Antilles and they think, "Oh, that's an error, let me change it to the modern code." But if that financial instrument was issued in two thousand eight, it *was* issued in the Netherlands Antilles. If you change the code, you are actually changing the historical fact. You have to build your systems to understand that the world of two thousand eight had a different map than the world of twenty twenty-six.

Corn

That is a profound point. Data cleaning isn't just about making everything look the same; it's about making sure the data accurately reflects the reality of the time it was recorded. You are not just a data cleaner; you are a digital historian.

Herman

I like that. "Herman Poppleberry, Digital Historian." It has a nice ring to it.

Corn

We might have to update your business cards. But before we wrap up, I want to touch on one more thing. We've been talking about countries and currencies as these distinct things. But what about the cases where they overlap in weird ways? Like the U-S Dollar being the official currency in countries other than the U-S.

Herman

Right, like Ecuador or El Salvador. This is where the I-S-O four thousand two hundred seventeen standard is very clear. It doesn't say "one country, one currency." It lists which currencies are legal tender in which territories. So if you look up Ecuador in the I-S-O currency list, it will tell you that the currency is U-S-D. The standard is descriptive, not prescriptive. It doesn't say Ecuador *should* use the dollar; it says they *do* use the dollar.

Corn

That descriptive nature is probably what keeps the I-S-O out of even more trouble. They are just reporters. "We are just reporting that these people are using this money." It's a very Swiss way of looking at the world.

Herman

Very neutral, very precise. And speaking of precision, I should mention that there are also codes for "No Currency." If you are looking at a territory that doesn't have a functional economy or uses a barter system, there is a code for that: triple X.

Corn

Wait, really? The code for no currency is triple X?

Herman

Yes. It is used in I-S-O four thousand two hundred seventeen to signify that no currency is involved in a transaction. It's another one of those "X" codes for non-country entities. It's actually quite common in certain types of international shipping or customs forms where the value isn't denominated in money.

Corn

I'm never going to look at a customs form the same way again. "Triple X... oh, they're just bartering for these goats."

Herman

Exactly. Or it's a non-commercial sample. But it just goes to show that the people who design these standards try to think of every single edge case. They have a code for gold, they have a code for testing, they have a code for no money at all, and they have a code for the Euro even though the Euro doesn't have a single country.

Corn

It's a masterpiece of administrative architecture. It's not flashy, but it's the reason you can swipe your credit card in a different country and have it work in milliseconds. The bank in Jerusalem knows exactly what a U-S-D is, and the bank in New York knows exactly what an I-L-S is, because they both read the same I-S-O four thousand two hundred seventeen update from S-I-X Interbank Clearing.

Herman

It's the silent language of the global economy. And honestly, the more I learn about it, the more I appreciate the people who sit in those rooms in Geneva and debate whether a semicolon should be a comma. They are the ones preventing the world from devolving into a giant pile of "U-S versus U-S-D" spreadsheets.

Corn

Well, I think we have sufficiently geeked out on I-S-O standards for one day. Daniel, I hope that helps you with your financial data cleaning. Just remember: use the numeric codes for the database, respect the retired codes for the history, and never, ever try to make up your own two-letter acronym for a country unless you want to spend the rest of your life fixing data collisions.

Herman

Wise words, Corn. And hey, if any of our listeners have ever run into a particularly weird I-S-O code or had a "data nightmare" of their own, we want to hear about it. Go to myweirdprompts.com and use the contact form to tell us your story. Or better yet, send us an audio prompt like Daniel did. We love diving into these rabbit holes.

Corn

And if you are enjoying the show, please take a second to leave us a review on Spotify or wherever you listen to podcasts. It really helps the show reach more people who share our weird curiosity about the world's hidden systems.

Herman

It really does. We've seen a lot of new listeners lately, and it's all thanks to those reviews. So, thank you.

Corn

Alright, that's it for episode two hundred eighty-eight. I'm Corn.

Herman

And I'm Herman Poppleberry.

Corn

Thanks for listening to My Weird Prompts. We'll see you next week, where we might just talk about something even more obscure than country codes.

Herman

Is that even possible?

Corn

Oh, you know it is. Bye everyone!

Herman

Bye!