

Why do we do what we do?

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Interlibrary loan and document supply (ILL for short) has come a long way in the last forty years. The volume of traffic has increased exponentially, the models for ILL have changed dramatically and the importance of remote access to documents and users' expectations of achieving this have been transformed out of all recognition. In such a seismic set of changes it is not easy to retain a vision of exactly what we are really about when offering ILL services.

I have chosen the period of forty years as this is roughly how long since I first became involved in ILL, working as a trainee librarian at the (then) National Lending Library for Science & Technology at Boston Spa. At that time the vast majority of requests were dealt with as *loans* and photocopying (by using microfilm and then printing out a hard copy) still accounted for a relatively small number of requests. When I went to study for my post-graduate library qualification in Liverpool I distinctly remember doing a placement in a small borough library on the Wirral and asking about ILL. "Oh, ILL – we usually do that on Wednesday afternoons when the library is closed to the public," was an answer that left me speechless!

I use these two examples merely to demonstrate in practical terms how ILL has changed. Changed but, I would contend, remained the same. So let us go back to some fundamentals rather than getting hooked on the methods we use to achieve ILL. It is worth reminding ourselves that every ILL transaction is part of a worldwide concept of Universal Availability of Publications (UAP). For many years IFLA funded a research programme with this title and its principal objective was

"the widest possible availability of published material (i.e. recorded knowledge issued for public use) to intending users wherever and whenever they need and in a format they require in order to use it."

The Programme also specified that this objective applied regardless of type of carrier of the information, electronic as well as physical formats of material and material that was not necessarily published through conventional channels (grey literature). Remember that the Programme was international in scope so the implications of this objective were far-reaching in terms of their impact on the role of national libraries who had a responsibility, not only to collect material from their national output, but to make it available to anyone worldwide if requested to do so. But the objective is just as valid in a national, regional or local context. If a reader needs access to a publicly-available document then the aim of the exercise is to make that document available to them. This applies whether it is a researcher seeking complex scientific data or a member of the general public who wants to read the latest Dan Brown novel; an historian seeking an obscure 18th.Century sermon or a business manager needing up-to-date information on recent stock market trends.

How we meet this objective is another issue altogether. For a long time there have been four major ways for a library to meet the needs of a reader and it may be useful to look at each of these in turn and see how they continue to be valid and whether they do actually meet the needs of the reader by achieving the essential objective of making available.

Acquisition

Acquisition has always been the first priority of libraries. Often called the "just in case" approach the idea is obviously to actually own as much material as possible that *might* be needed by the clients now or in the future. Whilst this is largely achievable on a national scale through laws on legal deposit, some national libraries and major university libraries tried to

collect virtually everything of any consequence from anywhere in the world. This policy was probably not the best use of resources, even in the palmy days of large budgets but certainly cannot be sustained in today's economic climate. In fact "just in case" is difficult to justify in many contexts. Looking at a different industry altogether, take the village bus service (not many people do!). The bus operates just in case someone wants to use it but lack of passengers soon determines whether it can be justified either on economic or social grounds. Nevertheless acquisition, whether by purchase, donation or even exchange arrangements is still the first line of action for meeting the user's needs.

However, if the acquisitions policy does not cover the user's needs then the next best thing may be to borrow the item.

Lending

Lending is really a temporary form of acquisition. I say this because of the simple physical fact that when Library A lends an item to Library B that item is no longer available in Library A, obviously. But, of course, that means it is not available to the users of Library A and this, in itself can cause problems. We have all experienced the situation where something is lent, only to find that one of our own readers needs it the following day! Somebody's law strikes again! So lending is not ideal but it does provide an invaluable method of meeting the needs of a number of readers. Therefore we should try to have rules on lending to other libraries or users outside our own normal clientèle which are as liberal as possible. It is worth noting that the concept of lending in an electronic environment was dismissed as irrelevant in the development of electronic document delivery but has since become a familiar part as technology has developed timing mechanisms to allow temporary access.

Sometimes it is not possible to lend the item required and, increasingly, interlibrary traffic is not concerned with the physical transfer of documents but rather making available to content of the document. Naturally there are occasions when the document itself is needed where its actual physical format is of primary importance. For example, studying early printed books or maps often requires the student to examine the physical manifestation of the item closely. And so the system copes with this by the supply of copies.

Surrogate copies

The supply of surrogate copies has been called "just in time" to distinguish it from "just in case". Just in time obviously means making something available when it is needed rather than having it ready in case it may be needed. The supply of photocopies of journal articles, chapters from books or other material is the bread-and-butter of ILL in the modern era. This has been made possible by the development of increasingly sophisticated technology which has moved from the rather crude quality of microfilming, through microfiche and photocopying to modern digital scanning. Wearing my other hat as a copyright law specialist, it is worth noting that the idea of libraries being able to make copies was first recognized in law only in the Copyright Act of 1956 when those drafting legislation suddenly realized there was a thing called a photocopy machine! Since then the copying of articles and chapters has become so commonplace that it hardly needs any comment. Large organizations, such as the British Library, can now scan and send digital copies of articles in a few minutes. The time taken from "I need this article – do you subscribe to the journal?" and its negative reply to handing the copy to the reader can be minimal. The task is to manage the process so that bureaucracy does not hinder what technology can achieve to easily.

Access

At one time the term “access” would have meant allowing a reader from Library X to look at/read something in Library Y and there are still agreements between institutions that allow reciprocal access to physical collections. But in the modern world of electronic materials access means something quite different. Obviously readers need increased access to more materials as budgets shrink . Increasingly readers achieve this themselves through use of their own computers and online access to the documents they need, With systems such as Creative Commons and Open Archives vast quantities of material are made available easily and directly to the user without the need for intermediaries. Such systems can often make ILL librarians feel on the edge of redundancy. But there are also the complex issues of electronic journals which are available only through licences issued to individual organizations. Of course these are frequently negotiated by consortia so there is a form of interlibrary supply in these, sometimes needing the ILL staff to mediate but often not.

Access is vital but has serious drawbacks in that it is not in any way the same as acquisition. In the latter model the library actually comes into possession of something: in the case of access nothing is possessed, only a privilege is granted which can be nullified at any time if the terms and conditions of the licence no longer meet the needs of the organization.

Focusing on the user is vital but we also need to be aware that ILL requires a two-way attitude. Yes, we are all keen to expand the pool of material to which our users can have access but that expansion relies on the other side of the equation – the willingness to co-operate from those holding what we need. If ILL is solely about getting what we want then it will not work as there has to be a reciprocal approach. Are we as willing to share what we have as we are to obtain it from others? It is obvious that obtaining from elsewhere requires a knowledge of who has what. The concept of the union catalogue is a very old one and the National Central Library operated one from the early 20th. Century. It relied on many libraries submitting cards which were duly annotated with a location and filed in a union catalogue. Many regional catalogues emerged and these were supported by subject specialization schemes under which each library was allocated a Dewey number and was obliged to acquire all books published in the UK under that classification. Although such systems now seem archaic the basic concept of the union catalogue has been infinitely expanded in the electronic age with major systems, such as OCLC, providing just the information we need. Nor are specialized catalogues outmoded either and they exist for many disciplines ranging from Japanese materials, through 18th. Century books to theological and philosophical periodicals. All of this relies heavily on the willingness to co-operate to achieve the final goal: availability to the user who requires the document.

So there are, and have been for a long time, different ways of meeting the needs of our users. Why have I laboured , what may seem to some of you, self-evident points. Largely because I want to bring home the fact that all of these methods are valid and some of them present exciting new technological ways of achieving our goals. We face all kinds of bureaucratic challenges: copyright regulations become increasingly complex and different rules and charges need to be applied for commercial and non-commercial use of material; the licences provided by the CLA are not easy to unravel and need to be understood to avoid breaking, not only the law, but contractual arrangements; payment mechanisms can be complex, especially when obtaining material from overseas. But, in this mêlée of loans, photocopies, licences, agreements, legal restrictions and inter-institutional arrangements we must never lose sight of the ultimate objective: to meet the needs of the reader. S.R. Ranganathan is often quoted as saying “To every book its reader and to every reader their book” – surely that is our ultimate goal – to marry the two.