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Library Resource Sharing in the Early Age of Google

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Given that no library can afford to purchase, house, and preserve every information source that its patrons might need, information resource sharing, in the form of interlibrary loan (ILL) and document delivery (DD), has become a core library service. Of course, information sharing is an activity that librarians must balance with other equally essential responsibilities, such as preservation concerns, cost considerations, and the maintenance of circulating collections for local patrons. Still, despite the inevitable tensions inherent in these somewhat contradictory functions, libraries and library organizations, such as OCLC, RLG, and ALA, have long reigned as the dominant players in this important arena. In fact, OCLC alone fills an ILL request every four seconds (OCLC).

Now, however, libraries find themselves facing new and increased competition from a variety of web-based information services. Although only Google is rich enough even to attempt to compete with libraries on all fronts, other relevant ventures include Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com (which sell books and other materials), Ingenta and CISTI (which deliver articles), MSN and Yahoo (which provide content and search services), and Netflix (which rents DVDs) and Bookswim.com (which uses a Netflix model to rent books).

The question facing librarians today is whether such services represent a threat to library resource sharing or a new opportunity for librarians to help patrons overcome the constraints of distance and access information and materials. Historically, a variety of technologies—e.g., manuscript catalogs, union lists, railroads, mail services, telephones, microfilm, teletype machines, fax machines, and computers—have each made the discovery and delivery of information for library

patrons more reliable, affordable, and thus possible. In particular, advances in computer technology are what first led to the modern era of ILL in the 1970s, when OCLC established its online database of library holdings and began to facilitate online requesting of interlibrary loans. Next, the personal computer revolution of the 1980s and the development of the web in the 1990s combined to make online searching increasingly easy and popular (Straw, 2003). Additionally, during this period, increased speed and storage capacity of computers helped librarians manage and address the information explosion, skyrocketing materials costs, storage needs, and preservation issues.

Although many ILL departments at that time began to employ new technologies—such as management software systems and email—to help meet patron needs, library resource sharing remained a labor-intensive, expensive, and complex service that could not do all that either library administrators or patrons wanted from it (Dannelly, 1995). By the turn of the 21st century, web search engines had become the next technological innovation for librarians to harness. Even more importantly for library resource sharing, in the last few years, some of these—particularly Google, but also online booksellers, like Amazon, and document suppliers, like Ingenta—have developed to the point where they may soon present a viable alternative to library-based ILL. Such web-based information services may enjoy a real advantage over libraries as current and future generations grow up using computers as their primary information resources.

The ambitions of some of these services are as great as their pockets are deep. The stated mission of Google, for example, is not only “to organize the immense amount of information available on the web” but, even more broadly, “to organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful.” This suggests that libraries—including resource sharing in and among libraries—and Google are actually engaged in the same project. While there are many search engines available today, Google has become a dominant force in the information world because it has the money, ambition, and agility to offer more full-text information and a variety of other services.

Of course, there is a difference between the hype about Google and the reality, but both of these now affect library resource sharing. In many people’s minds, “Google” and “the web” are synonymous, and some believe that Google’s book digitization project will soon be a universal library online; meanwhile, others believe that Google will sooner be litigated out of existence. The more realistic point of view, of course, is that neither Google nor libraries can provide universal access to all information. For instance, there will always be rare materials that can neither be digitized by Google nor circulated by libraries.

By promoting access to both the vast proliferation of online information and library holdings, online information aggregators and search engines are already revolutionizing the expectations of library patrons, the daily work of ILL staff members, and the future possibilities of information sharing. This revolution is

evident in a consideration of current trends in library resource sharing compiled by Mary Jackson, the Resource Sharing Specialist for the Association for Research Libraries: most of the trends she names have some connection to the rise of Google and its competitors. These include evolving user expectations (for quick and simple access to fast, free, personalized, electronic information), increasing demand for both mediated ILL/DD and user-initiated services, increased access to electronic resources, more complicated copyright and licensing decisions, implementation of online portals, enhancements to online catalogs, blurring of collection and access activities, development of ILL technical standards, and globalization (Jackson, 2004). In a follow-up article, Jackson notes that some of these trends contribute to a rise in ILL requests at the same time other trends lead to fewer transactions, and she finds that there are now more alternative models of resource sharing, as well as increased automation and a stronger customer focus (2005).

What remains is to understand more thoroughly the impact of web-based information services on these trends in library resource sharing. To this end, the following discussion will consider the related but distinct points of view of individual patrons, librarians, and society. This discussion will help librarians—ILL librarians and others—prepare to fulfill their mission of providing information for patrons, whether Google (or any other web-based information service) succeeds or fails.

The Patron Perspective

Interlibrary loan, in its current incarnation, is undeniably a valuable service for library patrons, but it is not now, nor has it ever been, an ideal one. Resource limitations, local needs, and preservation concerns often necessitate library-centric policies and procedures. These in turn limit lending and borrowing options, which aggravate patrons whose expectations for libraries are increasingly shaped by the often immediate, free access to online material that web-based information services provide.

More specifically, patrons want to see the full text of the item, no matter how old it is, how rare it is, or where in the world it is located. They do not want a limit on how many items they can request, and they want to get materials quickly and for little or no cost (beyond tuition or taxes, that is). Also, they want to be able to take loans home, renew them from home, and receive reminders before items become overdue. Furthermore, they want to return items to their nearest library—not necessarily the library they made their request from—or by mail. Relatedly, they want to access materials online or have materials sent to them so they do not have to go to a library to pick them up. Nevertheless, despite wanting to do so much online, away from their libraries, they still want to be able to talk to a library staff member about their requests, problems, and questions.

As librarians know, library resources are often of higher quality than tools that are freely available online, and no online service provides access to all information. However, many web-based information services provide people with “good enough”

information and simple interfaces that empower users to find what they need themselves. Therefore, patrons need to become aware of the limitations and drawbacks of both library and free online resources, and decide for themselves how to make the best use of both.

After formulating a research question, patrons seeking information need to find citations to relevant sources. This can now be done through Google services, such as [Google Book Search](#) and [Google Scholar](#), or through other web services, such as library catalogs, [Open WorldCat](#), [WorldCat.org](#), open access materials, and subscription databases.

Once useful citations have been found, patrons need to access the full text of the materials quickly, easily, and inexpensively—either online, in a nearby library, from a bookstore, or through ILL. If someone searches Google Scholar or Google Book Search, for instance, he or she may find that the full text is immediately accessible online. Even if the full text is not freely available, the searcher may be able to access the full text through [Google Scholar's Library Links feature](#), which works with OpenURL link resolvers such as [SFX](#) to guide searchers from Google Scholar's results to the full-text resources to which their libraries subscribe. OpenURL link resolvers can also be set to work in Open WorldCat and other databases so that patrons can see whether the full text of an item is available online, through library databases, from ILL, or from another source.

In this information-gathering or access stage of research, ILL is the last choice for many patrons because it can be slow, rule-bound, and cumbersome. This is changing, however, as policies, technology, delivery services, and expectations are evolving. In addition, although both libraries and the Internet can help identify items in the long tail of information, for now, ILL is still the only option for accessing many items. Therefore, since ILL departments still serve a need, they should promote their services and ensure that they are well used by providing quick and easy access to them through web-accessible links, user-initiated requesting, library portals, and one-step authentication.

One way to do this is through [OCLC/FirstSearch's Direct Request](#), a feature that allows patrons to make user-initiated, unmediated requests for returnable items from WorldCat, rather than on a separate ILL webpage. Once librarians set up custom holdings and routing rules, these requests can be immediately and automatically processed, or librarians can choose to review them first. In the future, with authentication, this system may also work through Open WorldCat and WorldCat.org, making it even easier for patrons to request what they need from anywhere, at anytime.

However, for items that are not included in WorldCat, including articles, patrons do still need to make requests through their ILL departments. Although some ILL departments do still use paper forms, many now offer online forms and accept email requests. Familiarity with clear, simple sites, such as Google, has increased

patron comfort with and use of such services. Expectations for “googleization” do not mean that librarians should oversimplify their offerings or omit important resources and helpful explanations, but they can and should develop short online forms and clear webpages that allow users to access their requests and accounts quickly.

Once ILL requests are placed and filled, materials are delivered to patrons. Traditionally, patrons would come to their library to pick items up. Today, however, many ILL departments use technologies—such as fax, email, online links, Docline, and Ariel or Odyssey software—that allow patrons to receive articles or other copied items simply by logging in to their ILL or email accounts. In fact, the use of custom holdings on OCLC allows ILL departments to create lending strings and to request articles only, or first, from lenders who transmit articles this way.

Now that patrons can receive articles online—either directly through web-based information services, through online library journal subscriptions, or from ILL—there is also a call for library staff members to scan articles from journals they own and post them online (Yang, 2005). At this point, few libraries can afford this type of labor-intensive “document delivery” service, but as the expectation and demand for it grows, more librarians may see it as a service that they can and should provide so that their collections continue to be valued and used.

As for book requests or loans, although access to the full text of books can be convenient, print is still widely considered more portable and comfortable for reading long works. Thus, until inexpensive, readable, on-demand publishing technology is developed, patrons will probably continue to want the option of requesting books through ILL.

Easy access to online booksellers and DVD rentals creates further issues for ILL book requests. Now that people have become accustomed to fast delivery to their front doors—although, of course, they are paying for the convenience as well as the item—they also expect quicker and more convenient service from ILL departments. Currently, however, ILL requests still take time to process on both the borrowing and lending sides, particularly because many libraries cannot afford to take full advantage of the latest automation and the quickest delivery methods.

Of course, another way for libraries to improve turnaround time is to mail loans directly to patrons. Some libraries have begun to do this for distance education students, but most librarians remain hesitant because they want to be certain that patrons get items and are aware of their responsibility to return them promptly. Now that delivery services can trace packages, however, mailed loans might become more common, if not standard practice.

Among the citations and information that patrons are discovering through web-based information services are resources from all over the world. Globalization is also making such information increasingly important to many kinds of research. There are even online translation services, such as [Google Translate](#), which, although imperfect,

might encourage patrons to consult items in languages in which they are not fluent. Therefore, many patrons now want and expect to be able to borrow materials from libraries in other countries. However, patrons also need to be aware that a lot of international information is not yet represented online, that the cost of borrowing items from other countries can be prohibitive, and that many lending libraries will not yet send material overseas.

While library patrons who use ILL may have their share of frustrations, especially when comparing their library and online experiences, one aspect of library resource sharing that many continue to appreciate is the ability to contact ILL staff members for help. Companies like Google, on the other hand, often focus on providing a quality product and working with paying advertisers, rather than on educating users about their services. In recognition of their need for librarian support in this area, Google has set up a site for librarians, Google [Librarian Central](#). Perhaps, in addition to quality control and indexing guidance, customer service and support is an area in which web-based information services can learn from and collaborate with librarians in the future, as both continue to connect people with information.

The Library Perspective

One of the foremost roles and purposes of librarians is to be honest brokers of information, unbiased toward or against any particular service, whether library-based or not. Librarians in ILL departments have long been aware of patron preferences for resource sharing, but technical and financial constraints and responsibilities to lending libraries and posterity limit their ability to meet all patron needs and expectations.

Now that web-based information services like Google are providing instructive examples of what people want, as well as the technology to help librarians offer more high-quality information and services, librarians can make various positive changes. For instance, because of an increased awareness of online information, people may request more obscure items from more ILL departments, which will encourage more libraries to get involved in resource sharing. In addition, ILL librarians can now regularly use web search engines themselves as one-stop verification tools for checking incomplete or incorrect citations, decoding journal title abbreviations, and finding contact information for authors, libraries, and associations.

In order to supply patrons with all of the materials they identify on the web, librarians can work with new partners, such as international libraries and commercial document suppliers. Of course, libraries that request items from around the world should also lend their own items abroad, use express mail services, and become involved with international associations, such as the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA). Additionally, libraries can work with commercial suppliers more than they have in the past. If an article or a book is available for purchase online, at a cost comparable to an ILL transaction, librarians may be willing to pay for it and either add it to their collections or let patrons keep it (Campbell, 2006).

Patrons do not want to know how ILL departments, libraries, or web-based information services make all of this work. They do not care whether the information comes from the web, a library database, their library, or another library. They just want free, easy access to as much information as possible, and they want to request it all from one place. So, librarians are now providing portals and setting up OpenURL link resolvers that allow patrons easy access to both library and web-based services. They are responding to web-based competitors by using Direct Request and adding simple search boxes to all-purpose ILL forms.

Also, through online portals, libraries can continue to provide the valuable function of facilitating payments for ILL items, including lender charges and publisher copyright fees. Many ILL departments already have experience with patron loads and LDAP authentication because of the need to allow access to only their own patrons. Once patrons are verified, however, payments through online services such as [PayPal](#) or [Google Checkout](#) are possible. For now, one popular way for librarians to manage lending charges is [OCLC's IFM feature](#), and most copyright fees can be paid through the [Copyright Clearance Center](#).

In the future, if all payments can be made in one integrated online system, ILL staff members might also be able to take credit card information and automatically charge patrons for overdue and recalled items. Of course, before doing so, librarians should carefully consider whether it would generate enormous bills for patrons and become more of a headache and public relations challenge than a benefit for otherwise positively perceived ILL departments. They might even consider whether overdue fines are necessary at all, or whether patrons could be allowed to keep items as long as they need them, as is the case with Netflix.

Another growing concern for librarians in this evolving environment—as well as for patrons who are aware of it—is confidentiality. Although Google, for instance, may use IP addresses and personal information only to help customize search results, search and identifying data are now also available for other, potentially less desirable, purposes. Of course, library records are vulnerable as well, but libraries and ILL departments can actively protect patron privacy by removing names from requests whenever possible and by fighting for the right to keep patron information confidential. Perhaps in the future, after patrons log in through a library portal, their identifying IP addresses can even be hidden so that they can search anonymously.

As essential as ILL still is today, changes in patrons' demands are already resulting in changes in ILL work. In fact, the role of ILL departments is evolving so much that in time they may even merge with other library services, such as acquisitions, circulation, access services, reference, preservation, or bibliographic instruction. For instance, if digitization becomes the norm, then ILL departments may become responsible for scanning material as it is requested. This, in turn, might give them the expertise to digitize unique local holdings, which would involve them in preservation, as well as further aspects of copyright, as they would continue to advocate for fair use privileges for patrons. Alternatively, if document delivery of

local holdings for patrons becomes more popular and more material in general is digitized, then ILL departments may become on-demand publishing centers for local patrons.

Since it is often easier, quicker, and more cost-effective for libraries to purchase books online once they are requested, rather than to borrow them through ILL or to buy them ahead of time, ILL librarians can also participate in collection development and acquisitions decisions. ILL specialists are also in a good position to participate actively in reference and information literacy efforts. ILL staff members can also help patrons find appropriate alternative resources, such as information that is freely available online or from library databases, so that they do not need to order as much through ILL. Finally, library resource sharing can also become a circulation function if libraries form consortial arrangements whereby patrons request items through shared circulation systems instead of through traditional ILL arrangements. Such systems are accessible through online library catalogs and are often less expensive and faster than traditional ILL—conveniences that benefit for both patrons and librarians.

The Societal Perspective

By preserving the written record and offering public access to it, libraries have long contributed to the progress of civilization. Certainly, information sharing is a public good that is useful, perhaps even essential, for human survival and success, and ILL still serves as a necessary access point to the world of information beyond the Internet and local library collections. In order to remain relevant and vibrant in the future, however, libraries and library services must develop in light of, and in relation to, contemporary social ideals and issues beyond the scope of individual patrons or contemporary libraries. And, as always, librarians must also consider their role in and responsibility to society and posterity.

Although the Internet can be a democratizing force, it is severely limited by the extent to which all people can—or cannot—afford computers and connections. Therefore, libraries can and should continue to play a role in facilitating access for patrons who might otherwise become disenfranchised information have-nots. Just as the retention and redevelopment of local rather than worldwide food chains are being touted as a practical solution for improving the health of people and the environment, there is wisdom in maintaining and developing sustainable core and specialized local library collections and services, including no-fee ILL services. In this way, all individuals can access the information they need to survive, flourish, and participate fully in society.

Another contemporary debate involves whether Google, or any for-profit company, can or will provide the same services, in the same spirit, as non-profit libraries now do. Since no one has a monopoly on knowledge, and too much centralized control is dangerous, the idea of any one company having a monopoly on information is a suspect and potentially dangerous one. One clear risk of letting

market forces determine information access is the potential for copyright and anti-trust litigation that might curtail the efforts of Google or any of its current or future competitors. Google may go out of business someday, or its leaders or managers may decide to drop their book project if it does not prove cost-effective. The competitive nature of business also supports corporate secrecy, which is inimical to the free flow and use of information. For instance, Google may succeed and agree to pay copyright fees for its digital archive, which might leave competitors unable to compete, innovate, and improve online access to information (Toobin, 2007). There is also the possibility that companies will be pressured to permit or support censorship, as has happened in China. Finally, businesses that pursue short-term profits may not focus adequately on long-term preservation issues. It is precisely for these reasons that libraries have long been entrusted to provide access to and preservation of information and must continue to advocate for the information needs of society at large, both now and in the future.

Conclusion

Although libraries have long shared materials on a case-by-case basis, ILL has been an institutionalized library service for only about a century, and ILL as we know it has only existed for a few decades. Therefore, we cannot know whether web-based information services such as Google are merely the next transformative, if disruptive, technologies for ILL departments to incorporate, or whether they represent a complete paradigm shift for the future of information resource sharing. This may be why the vision of the [Rethinking Resource Sharing Initiative](#)—a group of librarians and vendors working to consider this subject from a broad perspective—does not even mention any particular resource-sharing process or technology in their vision statement. Instead, their goal is to: [“Create a new global service framework that allows individuals to obtain what they want based on factors such as cost, time, format, and delivery. This framework will encompass promoting and exposing library services in a variety of environments.”](#)

The only certainty is that now that web-based information services are established and successful players in the information world, library resource sharing will continue to develop in response to their proven popularity, whether ILL librarians choose to view them as assets, partners, or competitors. Fortunately, librarians, as honest information brokers, have a code of ethics, a strong tradition, and a balanced long-term perspective from which to consider all new developments in the fields of information science, technology, education, and scholarly communication. It is this outlook that will enable librarians to embrace, use, critique, and help shape these services, even as they remain open to other technologies that will also help them realize their mission of connecting people with information.

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