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The view from interlibrary loan services

Catalyst for a better research process

Information sharing is the essence of both scholarly communication and librarianship. It is also what interlibrary loan (ILL) specialists know, and do, best. When ILL transactions are successful—which they are, thousands of times a day, millions of times a year—they place valuable and needed information directly in the hands of busy researchers, informing their scholarship, and saving them time and expense. Moreover, in addition to helping scholars access materials that are not available locally, ILL practitioners' knowledge about why ILL is successful and how it is limited puts us in an excellent position to contribute key insights about how information needs can best be addressed by future developments in scholarly communication.

The scholarly communication system is an immense web of interdependent networks of distribution and consumption, all based on a constantly evolving spectrum of political, economic, and social issues influencing how individual scholars access and use a given resource. All academic librarians participate in scholarly communication by facilitating access to the rich collections that librarians have spent generations building, cataloging, and maintaining.

However, even the most colossal and inspiring of cathedrals of learning cannot hold all of the information researchers need. The sheer volume of information and formats in existence, and continually being

created, is simply too immense. At the same time, academic globalization and information technology now enable researchers to discover useful information that is located in libraries, archives, and other repositories around the world.

Despite the impressive digitization efforts of HathiTrust and Google Books, and online collections made accessible by the Digital Public Library of America and the Internet Archive, copyright laws limit online access to most 20th-century print materials. So libraries remain the best way to access a great deal of print material, as well as digital information otherwise only available behind prohibitively expensive publisher pay walls.

ILL is one of the networks that contribute valuable services to library-based scholarly communication efforts. ILL librarians facilitate both the delivery and the discovery of information resources. When people request materials that are readily available, either in our libraries, online through library databases or open access

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journals, we show them how to retrieve the information, thus providing bibliographic instruction and publicizing library resources and open access efforts. To help busy patrons, some ILL departments even scan locally owned print material for them. We decipher incomplete or incorrect citations. We report inaccuracies in library catalogs and journal lists to be corrected. We directly contact archives, museums, organizations, and even authors. We encourage the use of special collections, whether through loan arrangements, copies, or digitization requests. We can recommend or initiate purchases from commercial document suppliers, booksellers, and publishers.

The ILL community, like any community of scholars, works together to share ideas and innovations through professional organizations, such as Rethinking Resource Sharing Initiative and ALA's Reference and User Services Association Sharing and Transforming Access to Resources Section (RUSA STARS).¹ Highly developed ILL networks and consortia, such as OCLC, lead the way for a variety of cooperative library initiatives that form a core part of the infrastructure of the scholarly communication system. Efficiencies in technology and cooperative arrangements have made ILL increasingly cost-effective, faster, more efficient, and more reliable for researchers.

It is interesting, given all this, that ILL is mentioned only in passing in the library literature on scholarly communication, if at all. Perhaps this is because librarians would rather invest in building their own library collections and services, or because they harbor an unconscious desire to maintain the historical conceit that local libraries can completely meet their researchers' needs. However, even users of the largest research libraries use ILL, and even the smallest libraries participate in lending needed information. Its impact is evident in the sheer number of transactions, be they routine or unique, involving all manner of intrigue, detective work, problem-solving, creativity, hunches, translated e-mails

and currencies, negotiations, and earned trust. Anecdotally, we see its value in the thanks we regularly receive and on author acknowledgement pages.

The bottom line is that if ILL disappeared tomorrow, a great deal of research would become more difficult, time-consuming, and costly. Some might not be undertaken at all simply because of the lack of access to sought-after information.

Limitations of ILL

Lest this read merely as a "humble brag," despite all our hard work and all our success, ILL librarians are acutely aware of limits to information sharing and find them as frustrating as scholars do. In order to share information and empower learning and scholarly conversations, we must overcome a variety of barriers. Long-standing challenges include costs, copyright restrictions, time, and space. Newer issues include reduced library spending on print material, restrictive licensing terms, digital rights management (DRM) barriers to e-book sharing, publisher embargoes on new e-journal content, author embargoes on PhD dissertations, and high publisher pricing models for per-article e-journal access.

A scholarly association's support of embargoes on dissertations to protect the interests of new PhDs or a publisher's decision to use DRM to maintain profits may be understandable, given the contexts from which they arose. However, lengthy embargoes and restrictions on information sharing are also debatable, and result in unfilled ILL requests. Thus, we see how decisions in other areas of the scholarly communication system affect the library mission to meet patrons' information needs.

Although ILL is a central component of the information-sharing ethos and mission of libraries, transactions can be expensive, especially when technology and consortial arrangements are not in place. ILL requires significant resources in terms of staff time, processing and copyright fees, packaging and delivery, and for automated systems,

which can be simply more than some libraries can afford. Without appropriate support, ILL can be frustratingly slow. Less active, isolated ILL departments can become entrenched in outdated policies and procedures. This is why some information seekers turn to their colleagues when they need information, rather than libraries and ILL.

On the other side of the spectrum, ILL can become so embedded in a researcher's life that it is taken for granted. Some librarians encourage the view that what we do is magic, making the process seamless and never discussing its costs or complexities. So much of our work takes place behind the scenes that many patrons, and even other librarians and library and university administrators, do not recognize what is required to fill each ILL request.

Moreover, even when ILL is well run, supported, and used, it cannot solve all information access issues. Sometimes, no library owns or licenses certain information. Or library holdings may not be discoverable or correctly represented. Some materials are too new to have been purchased or processed by any library. Some are too valuable, old, rare, or fragile to lend, or even to copy. Embargoes of recent e-journal issues, high per-article costs from publisher websites that are not designed to work with ILL ordering processes, and the cancellation of print subscriptions may cause recent content to be unavailable through ILL. Copyright and licensing laws may preclude digitization, electronic transmission, or physical copying. For print material, policies stemming from concerns of loss, damage, and local user needs remain. Filling international ILL requests, for all these reasons, is even more problematic.

These limits, combined with trends in the library and information world, such as open access publishing, institutional repositories, digitization, and shared print repositories, may make some wonder whether ILL services are even necessary. However, it must be noted that even if

scholarly communication comes to rely less on library collections and ILL, librarians—ILL specialists included—will still be needed as educators about, managers of, facilitators to, and even producers of online and print information. It must also be reiterated that for now, in order to meet information needs of researchers, ILL services—as well as the library collections they circulate—need adequate support and funding.

Informing the future

Globalization, technological innovations, digital information, financial realities, the changing needs of modern society, and the rethinking of higher education as a whole are driving the evolution of scholarly communication in the 21st century. Such trends will continue to shape how librarians and ILL services meet scholarly information needs. While some of this may seem inevitable, by identifying what makes librarians unwilling or unable to fulfill certain ILL requests, we can see how more information access barriers might be overcome.

It is ILL librarians' unique vantage point and experience with why certain information is inaccessible that gives us an expert and trustworthy voice in many current debates. We see researcher needs for the collection and preservation of both the scholarly and the cultural records, in print and digital forms, by libraries or other nonprofit educational institutions with long-term views, rather than by technology companies. We share a philosophy of information access with the open access movement. We are against embargoes by publishers or authors. We are for privacy. We are against DRM restrictions. We are for copyright reform and licensing language that permit lending of information that libraries pay for.

In our efforts to share information, ILL librarians should lobby for active membership in shared print repositories, advise their practices, and encourage shared collections and circulation systems. We

should also be flexible and adaptable with regard to our roles within our institutions and within the scholarly communication system as a whole. We should also engage authors in discussions about moral and legal rights to share one's own work, and urge all stakeholders—authors, readers, legislators, publishers, and other librarians—to support scholarly communication and information sharing.

There are many examples of efforts to improve information sharing that librarians are actively involved in, such as the university presses that become part of libraries (e.g., University of Michigan, Purdue, Indiana), various knowledge bases of library license information (e.g., the Article License Availability Service from the IDS Project),² shared print repositories (e.g., RECAP and WEST),³ the testing of e-book lending (e.g., Occam's Reader),⁴ and shared collections (e.g., Center for Research Libraries). Librarians should also get involved with new lobbying efforts such as the Authors Alliance⁵ and the development of library provisions in international copyright agreements, such as updates to the Berne Convention. Much important work is ongoing and many new initiatives have only just begun.

An affordable and sustainable scholarly communication system—one that successfully serves current and future needs for knowledge creation, sharing, and use—is likely to continue to include both traditional and enhanced ILL services. To support the continued use of libraries and sharing of information, librarians should be willing to pay reasonable borrowing fees to each other, rather than rely on other, more costly providers who are less concerned with library values.

In the future, access to information could also be augmented through direct or library-mediated per-use royalties to authors or publishers, or through pay-per-view of information from publishers on a low-cost, per-use basis through established library networks. Librarians, whatever we do and however we do it, must continue

to facilitate access to information rather than act merely as gatekeepers or intermediaries.

Of course, many crucial questions with respect to information sharing remain concerning technology access, cost, information quality, preservation, and privacy. Librarians are practical and recognize that perfection is impossible, yet the devil does lie precisely in the details. Nonetheless, the dream of the universal library—and the existence of questions, and answers that lead to more questions and more answers—is what motivates librarians and scholars alike.

Whatever details you envision, the goal, from the point of view of scholars as well as ILL librarians, remains a system that makes the information that contributes to these questions and answers more accessible to all.

Notes

1. Rethinking Resource Sharing Initiative: <http://rethinkingresourcesharing.org/>. ALA's Reference and User Services Association Sharing and Transforming Access to Resources Section: www.ala.org/rusa/sections/stars.
2. IDS Project's ALIAS: <http://idsproject.org/Tools/ALIAS.aspx>.
3. RECAP: <http://recap.princeton.edu/>; WEST: www.cdlib.org/services/west/.
4. Occam's Reader: <http://occamsreader.org/>.
5. Authors Alliance: www.authorsalliance.org/. *ZZ*

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