

On a clear day you can inter-lend forever: the UK inter-lending scene

This article details the challenges faced by today's UK-based inter-lending services in terms of fiscal pressures, technological change and changing patron expectations. It examines how recent refurbishment at the British Library has led to an increase in community inter-lending, against a background of a general reduction of the reliance on inter-library loan services. It also considers the perception of the value of inter-lending services by senior management, alongside the impact that online availability of materials has had. It then considers the issues around rights management and licence restrictions for inter-lending imposed by many publishers and suppliers. Finally, it considers the steps for change that inter-lending services need to embrace to meet these challenges.

Introduction

Inter-lending or inter-library loan (ILL) is the time-honoured practice of obtaining or supplying books and reprints for patrons from around the world. For decades, the UK has had a thriving and highly active ILL community. Thanks to union catalogues such as COPAC, as well as the long-established British Library (BL) ILL service, it is easier than ever for services to locate items. However, like many other aspects of libraries, inter-lending services currently face challenges. This article aims to provide a snapshot of the UK inter-lending scene as it was in 2011.

Throughout this article, 'inter-lending' is used to refer to both the practice of obtaining print and electronic reprints and to the traditional loaning of whole books and monograph volumes.

Background

There is no denying that ILL levels are perceived to be in somewhat of a decline in the UK¹. Even the British Library has noted that they have not been immune to this drop over the past ten years². The majority of inter-lending services have noted a drop in patron requests; this is not a new trend but an ongoing one. Anecdotal evidence points towards an increased availability of e-books, e-journals and open access resources as being instrumental in this decline.

In terms of efficiency cut-backs, many inter-lenders report that they are seen as a soft target by service managers with the perception that their removal will have little impact on the library service. Especially in the public library sector, this has resulted in a reduction in workforce and in some cases a merging with other library sections. The loss through early retirement or redundancy of key experienced inter-lending staff has also hit the sector hard in recent years. Inter-lending is by its nature a specialized role requiring an awareness of a myriad of library resources globally, fathoming community rules of thumb and legal obligations. Staff replacement with less experienced personnel has also impacted on the stability and sustainability of many services and highlighted a need for specific inter-lending training.



GARETH J JOHNSON
Document Supply and
Repository Manager
David Wilson Library
University of Leicester

"... many inter-lenders report that they are seen as a soft target by service managers with the perception that their removal will have little impact on the library service."

87 The reduction or loss of an inter-lending service is in many respects a false economy. Through the collaborative inter-lending schemes run by the British Library, CONARLS³ and local organizations, there is a strong cost recovery possible for those services as items loaned are paid for. One of the key roles in this respect that the BL continues to fulfil is the 'banker' function for the various national inter-lending schemes. In addition, reductions in acquisitions budgets mean an increase in the need to have an inter-lending service on hand to fill the stock gaps for patrons.

Many, but not all, inter-lending services, especially those of public libraries, operate a charge for all patron requests, often introduced as a control mechanism to eliminate frivolous requests. Public libraries for the most part charge lower fees than those at educational establishments. Today, many services are re-examining this approach, with a mind to enabling greater cost recovery; although few charge the full service costs. However, introducing or increasing any fee element creates a barrier for some patrons and subsequently further reduces ILL request levels.

British Library changes and service levels

The past year has seen issues with the British Library's normally excellent service levels. Refurbishments to their Document Supply Centre⁴ have increased overall turnaround time and in some cases denied ILL supply. Inter-lending services during this period have striven to maintain their normal service levels by increasing the amount of stock obtained from other libraries, providing a reciprocal boost in cost recovery. The BL has prioritized the availability of more heavily demanded stock items, although it is apparent that some materials will remain unavailable until mid-2012. However, this issue is now declining as the refurbishment ends and normal stock availability returns.

The British Library is not immune to budget cuts, which has necessitated a strategic ambition to 'do more with less'. Potential cuts to their acquisitions will likely mean inter-lenders looking increasingly towards the wider library community to satisfy requests. However, with some libraries down-scaling their inter-lending services, it means there may well be a potential difficulty in obtaining some niche materials. In particular, rare or small press items related to family history and local studies are often only held by regional public libraries, and thus being unable to obtain these resources will reduce other inter-lenders' success rates.

In recent months, the BL has introduced a new ILL management system (BLDSS)⁵. While a commendable development, as most organizations already operate an in-house ILL management system, the full benefits from its introduction are not yet apparent.

Finally, other publishers and suppliers now have a keen eye on the inter-lending supply market. While more competition may help drive ILL costs down, inter-lending within the various regional consortia like Library and Information East Midlands (LIEM)⁶ and North West Libraries Interlending Partnership (NWLIP)⁷ may often remain the most cost-effective way to maintain levels of supply.

Organizational challenges

Inter-lending is a value-added service and often receives a deep level of sustained satisfaction from patrons, so should therefore be one that is attractive for library services to offer. However, there are many inter-lending service heads who report that their senior management do not view their services in that way. It is at times like this that inter-lenders turn to the community and to national and regional organizations for support.

Key in the UK inter-lending community is the long-established Forum for Inter-lending and Document Delivery (FIL)⁸. An independent institutional membership organization, it draws its constituents from any organization where inter-lending takes place, although largely from education and public library services. Employees of member organizations benefit from discounted training, access to newsletter, discussion list and experience-sharing events. Given the level of specialism needed to operate successfully and the dearth of other suitable training, FIL is the *de facto* primary source for the professional development of inter-lending staff.

88 It also provides a range of information resources, services and case studies demonstrating the value added to organizations through an effective inter-lending service presence.

FIL also has a role in responding to national- and international-level developments, providing a community representative voice. As it has representatives in liaison from the BL, CONARLS and IFLA, it also provides a key point of contact for stakeholders wishing to engage with the UK inter-lenders.

The e-environment

Inter-lending services work in an environment where instantaneous access to resources is no longer merely advantageous⁹. This is not solely limited to readers based within institutions, but also those in the public and specialist sectors. At the same time as libraries shift their collections and holdings increasingly over to electronic, this introduces a level of complexity in the ability of individual libraries to inter-lend from stock. Alongside this is a customer base, especially in education, where immediacy of access to information is the expected norm. Unless inter-lenders can make effective use of the digital delivery routes, this immediate access will not be achieved, in particular where restrictive licences of e-books preclude ILL. This situation is a frustration shared by library and patrons alike.

For many years, inter-lending services have been able to obtain secure electronic delivery (SED) of chapters or articles (delivered through the medium of e-mail from the BL). This is a major patron satisfier in terms of speed and ease of access, and recent changes to the digital rights management (DRM) system used by the BL (FileOpen) have made this even less technologically problematic. However, for some patrons, any level of DRM is seen as restrictive and does cause issues for inter-lending staff in supporting them.

For a long time, a physical signature on a copyright declaration form had been required from patrons before they could be supplied with an extract or article. Since relatively recent changes in legislation, it has been legally permissible for an electronic signature to be accepted in its place¹⁰. However, this remains technically challenging as most library management systems (LMS) do not have an electronic signatures facility, and while many are under development, they are not yet ubiquitous. There is also a certain nervousness on the part of some senior managers about going down this route, and this may account for the slowness of its introduction nationwide. Nevertheless, for inter-lenders and patrons alike, the introduction of digital signatures is seen as a major step forward in enhancing workflows and service efficiencies.

“ ... for inter-lenders and patrons alike, the introduction of digital signatures is seen as a major step forward in enhancing workflows and service efficiencies.”

Some libraries have begun supplying ILLs to other libraries in a digital format. Generally, items are supplied DRM free, with the proviso that they are printed upon receipt and subsequently deleted in order to comply with publisher licences. Not all items held by a library can be supplied in this way, and the myriad of licences for acquisition of both print and electronic stock are not standardized in any way. Additionally, many e-journal and e-book licences are also unclear as to the ease with which these can be supplied in print to other libraries.

Many libraries lack the ILL staff resource to identify which elements of their stock they can supply electronically, nor is there a union catalogue of inter-lending rights to refer to. While libraries operate an ERM (electronic rights management) system or spreadsheet of licences with regard to supply, this is not a standard community approach. This has led to some frustration over those libraries unwilling to supply from stock for whatever reason. COPAC notably often does not detail when an item is available in print or electronic format. This issue can add additional work in terms of locating an appropriate supplying library. Many inter-lenders are also frustrated within their own services by the acquisition of bundles of e-journals or e-books without any consideration to the inter-lending clauses in the licence agreement. Thus serials librarians are advised to consult their inter-lending staff before going ahead with these acquisitions. Beyond this, the demand for patrons to access SEDs on m-devices (mobile devices) can also be a cause of frustration, as some of these devices are not able to open objects locked with DRM. It can be seen that this is a problem that will only increase, and it is hoped that DRM software will become more flexible over time.

89 Publishers are as notoriously protective of relaxing the sharing arrangements for their acquired IP as authors seem unwilling, for the most part, to challenge established publishing paradigms. For patrons denied access or services expected to pay a higher charge as a result, this can be an understandable dissatisfier. While effecting change in the market is not an easy task, lobbying from research funders and government may help to change the status quo, but this is not an issue of which the general public seems to be aware. As a result, to date little real traction with DRM or licence term changes has come about.

The recent Hargreaves review¹¹ had many positive suggestions that could help enable the sharing of materials were it to be taken forward into legislation. However, given that the focus of the review was on developing business, it remains unclear just how much benefit inter-lending services and libraries will gain.

“Publishers are as notoriously protective of relaxing the sharing arrangements for their acquired IP as authors seem unwilling ... to challenge established publishing paradigms.”

ETHOS, e-theses and open access

In the past, where libraries did not hold a particular unique international work, like a thesis, it would have taken weeks to obtain via ILL, and this was a key role for many inter-lending services. It led in part to the IFLA voucher scheme¹² which made it possible to complete lending transactions without exchange rate worries. While inter-lending continues internationally today, there is increasing emphasis on supply from open access online resources.

On top of individual institutions making theses and other research outputs openly accessible online, there are also major schemes like the ETHOS¹³ service aggregating these together. Over and above the institutional repositories, there are the great subject repositories like arXiv¹⁴ or RePEc¹⁵, as well as sites like the Internet Archive¹⁶ and Google Books¹⁷; each containing vast swathes of freely available text. Many customers are unaware of these treasure troves, and the role of many inter-lending staff is slowly evolving to be more analogous to that of a specialized reference librarian, guiding patrons to these sources and highlighting the ease with which so much information can be obtained.

There is also an issue for some patrons over the versions available as open access objects. Many e-theses have sections redacted for rights-related reasons and few publishers allow the open availability of the published versions of articles¹⁸. Version recognition among many end users is low, and this means there remains a need for inter-lending staff to understand the essential difference between the commonly available open access versions of publications.

Inter-lending staff do make use of these resources in order to supply. However, an increasingly savvy customer base in the education sector means that in many cases the specialized role of the inter-lenders as an intermediary between the user and the resource may be reduced. The customer benefits, but for inter-lenders it means a rethinking of their role, a need for up-skilling and a potential diminution of ILL request levels.

Conclusions

It can be seen that the future for UK inter-lending services may be a rocky one, beset by challenges such as restrictive loaning legislation and increased online availability. While inter-lending is a valued service, it does need to continue to evolve, which means up-skilling for staff members and changes to workflows; doing nothing or more of the same is not a viable option. For many inter-lenders there may be some aspects of their services that no longer offer a sufficient benefit to their organization, and could be phased out. At the same time, inter-lending managers need to be prepared to fight their service's corner against a diminishing budget with metrics as well as impassioned pleas. Only through demonstrating where the service is delivering the benefit to patrons will it be seen in a favourable light by senior managers. This is an area where the wider community can provide invaluable support.

“... doing nothing or more of the same is not a viable option.”

90 Traditional inter-lending may be a diminishing role in some libraries, but for adaptable staff experienced in locating, retrieving and exchanging works from around the world in digital and physical format, the future is more rose-tinted. Heads of service and key financial stakeholders must continue to believe that their investment in the service offers a sufficient return on their investment. Astute is the inter-lending chief who continues to diversify his/her portfolio and services, carefully considering how they can be best positioned to fit into an organization's strategic and operational service environment at every twist and turn.

The focus of this paper has been on the current UK practitioner environment for inter-lenders. However, ILL does not exist in a country-shaped isolation bubble and many of the challenges and opportunities faced by British inter-lending staff are the same as those encountered by our international colleagues¹⁹. It is perhaps only through embracing the best of these developments that we UK inter-lenders can continue to evolve our services to meet an uncertain future.

A basic tenet that is as true today as it has always been is that no single library can contain everything. Even the major deposit libraries of the world have holes in their collections. It is the inter-lenders' duty to help plug those gaps for their patrons in whatever way they can, delivering physical or electronic text, or guidance to online resources.

References

1. Johnson, G J, No Fate But What We Make: Current trends and challenges in the UK document supply community, *Interlending & Document Supply*, 39(3), 127–133.
2. Growing Knowledge: The British Library's Strategy 2011 – 2015: <http://www.bl.uk/aboutus/stratpolprog/strategy1115/strategy1115.pdf> (accessed 22 December 2011).
3. CONARLS – Inter-library Loans: http://combinedregions.com/Inter-Library_Loans (accessed 22 December 2011).
4. British Library - Delays and disruptions to services: <http://www.bl.uk/notices/deliverydelays.html> (accessed 22 December 2011).
5. British Library Document Supply Service (BLDSS): <http://www.bl.uk/bldss> (accessed 22 December 2011).
6. Library & information East Midlands (LIEM) Inte-lending: http://www.liem.org.uk/Inte-lending_Information/About_Inte-lending (accessed 22 December 2011).
7. North West Libraries Interlending Partnership (NWLIP): <http://www.lancashire.gov.uk/nwinterlending/> (accessed 22 December 2011).
8. Forum for Interlending and Information Delivery (FIL): <http://www.forumforinterlending.org.uk/> (accessed 21 December 2011).
9. Johnson, G J, ref. 1.
10. Tittley, G, Electronic signatures for copyright in the UK: a solution to the holy grail of document delivery, *Interlending and Document Supply*, 35(1), 15–20.
11. Hargreaves, I, *Digital Opportunity: a review of intellectual property and growth*. 2011, London, Intellectual Property Office: <http://www.ipso.gov.uk/ipreview.htm> (accessed 22 December 2011).
12. IFLA Voucher Scheme: <http://www.ifla.org/en/voucher-scheme/> (accessed 21 December 2011).
13. British Library ETHOS: <http://ethos.bl.uk/> (accessed 21 December 2011).
14. arXiv.org e-Print archive: <http://arxiv.org> (accessed 21 December 2011).
15. RePEc: Research Papers in Economics: <http://repec.org> (accessed 21 December 2011).
16. Internet Archive Free Books – Ebook and Texts Archive: <http://www.archive.org/details/texts> (accessed 21 December 2011).
17. Google Books: <http://books.google.com/> (accessed 21 December 2011).
18. SHERPA RoMEO: Publishers allowing the deposition of their published version/PDF in Institutional Repositories: <http://www.sherpa.ac.uk/romeo/PDFandIR.php> (accessed 21 December 2011).
19. Interlending & Document Supply Conference abstracts <http://www.ilds2011.org/index.php?show=papers> (accessed 13 January 2012).

Article © Gareth J Johnson

Gareth J Johnson, Document Supply and Repository Manager
David Wilson Library, University of Leciester, UK and Chair, Forum for Inter-lending and Document Supply (FIL)
E-mail: gjj6@le.ac.uk

To cite this article:

Johnson, G J, On a clear day you can inter-lend forever: the UK inter-lending scene, *Insights*, 2012, 25(1), 86–91,
doi: 10.1629/2048-7754.25.1.86

To link to this article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1629/2048-7754.25.1.86>