

ILL in the United Kingdom: How it Works, When it Works, and When it Doesn't

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One of the benefits of working as an exchange librarian at the University of Edinburgh Library during 1981-82 was an opportunity to experience on a first-hand basis the often-praised interlibrary loan system in the U.K. Much has been written about the British Library Lending Division which is the focal point of ILL in the U.K. Although BLLD has many features which could be incorporated into network, local, state and regional ILL systems in the U.S., it is unlikely that an exact equivalent of BLLD could be successfully replicated in the U.S. The following article is a description of how BLLD works, on features of the system that work well, that do not work well, and that may or may not be adaptable to ILL in the U.S.

The BLLD

The history, development, and organization of BLLD has been well documented. Perhaps the best article is one by its Director General, Maurice Line.¹ Another well-documented fact is American interest in developing a high use model such as BLLD. Only recently in a leading journal was there a plea to “. . . abandon ‘multi-type networks’ and create an appropriate approximation of the British Lending Library Division.”² In an attempt to reduce the effects of inflation on collection development, dwindling materials budgets, and the increased demands of readers, library administrators are talking a great deal about resource sharing. Unfortunately, it seems that everyone expects to share everyone else's resources; no one

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wants to buy them! Thus, a high use, dedicated lending collection such as BLLD's seems very attractive. An important point to remember, however, is that BLLD is heavily subsidized by the taxpayers. It does not require complex mathematical gymnastics to clearly see that the income from both U.K. loans and international loans does not begin to cover the gross expenditure of BLLD in 1980-81: L 9,297,000 (excluding accommodation).³

Another fact, often alluded to, but seldom stated in concrete terms, is that each ILL request made by a U.K. library to BLLD or another U.K. library must be done on a standard form purchased from BLLD at L 1.75 each. Thus, establishing and maintaining a dedicated lending collection does not mean "free loans." It could mean better service as a result of greater efficiency resulting from standardization, limited cataloging, etc. To make a system such as BLLD work in the U.S., Americans would have to become accustomed to paying the piper, directly and indirectly, as with BLLD. Currently in the U.S. there appears to be little support for either. Citizens are not beating a path to their legislators' doors to demand greater access to the information sources available. There is only bombast, rhetoric, and the hard work of a few. Large lending libraries in the U.K. are able to offset these costs somewhat by a voucher scheme that provides payment to lending libraries that is reminiscent of the quaint - and dying - U.S. practice of passing around tatty, dog-eared postage stamps! Nevertheless, the BLLD voucher system is simple and works. Each library purchases a supply of standard BLLD forms at the rate of L 1.75 each. A lending library returns a portion of the form to BLLD and is reimbursed monetarily for its loans. A borrowing library can return a portion of the form to BLLD for its "unfilled requests" and be reimbursed in kind with "fresh" forms. Such a system clearly makes lending more appealing to all sizes of libraries. It also provides a standard charge for loans throughout the U.K. Moreover, libraries lending outside U.K. can be reimbursed by BLLD for requests filed on IFLA ILL forms. A payment scheme such as this seems to be in the realm of possibility on a state-wide basis. Nationally, it appears to be an ideal that a pragmatist cannot see occurring. Hopefully, the emerging ILL network in Indiana will be able to go a step beyond a system of exchanging forms and maintain such records in machine-readable form, preferably on-line.

Edinburgh University and BLLD

The collection, or stock, of BLLD is comprehensive. Fifty-eight percent of Edinburgh University Library's requests are filled from BLLD stock. EUL, like most U.K. libraries, uses BLLD as a source of first resort. In addition to monographs and serials in all languages, BLLD has a large collection of U.S. theses. Like CRL,

foreign theses are purchased upon demand. Conference proceedings and report literature are also a strength. If BLLD does not have the item in stock, an ILL or photocopy application may be made abroad on behalf of the U.K. library.

Edinburgh University Library, like most other U.K. libraries, pays for ILL requests from the book budget. The library sees its role as supporting the research needs of the academic community, and if it does not own the item, it is obligated to attempt to borrow it. Unfortunately, ILL tends to be restricted to faculty and graduate students, so that this admirable philosophy applies only to the elite. Public libraries tend to be more liberal despite the fact that in proportion to the clientele they serve, their funding is significantly less than that of academic libraries.

It is doubtful that one, central, dedicated lending collection could satisfy the demand in a country the size of the U.S., especially on a "first resort" basis. It is unlikely that even a few could do it. Assuming, however, that the economic, legal, political, and geographical barriers within the U.S. could be overcome, it would still require a willingness to share the cost of maintaining and servicing dedicated lending collections. Thus, it seems essential that there would have to be a greater recognition that the holy of holies, the "materials budget" be used for financing ILL, as Herb White recently pointed out.⁴

Other consortia and resource sharing groups do exist in the U.K. The National Library of Scotland has a lending services division. The Scottish Libraries Cooperative Automation Project - a sort of Scottish OCLC - may soon be making noises of an ILL network once its on-line system is going well. In England there are a number of regional networks. These groups, along with BLLD, have actively been involved in research and implementation of various transport schemes. Such schemes, of course, work most efficiently in heavily populated areas. Sixteen "back-up" or resource libraries have special arrangements to allow BLLD to refer requests to them. Libraries with strong retrospective and highly specialized collections are included. Apparently whatever the financial arrangements are that exist with BLLD's back-up libraries, they are a good enough incentive to guarantee quality service. During the 1981-82 session EUL received nothing but the best service from these libraries. "Speed of supply and goodwill are closely linked to cost recovery," as H. Vervliet points out. He goes on to say, "Cost recovery is the missing link that will upgrade the quality of ILL."⁵ Indiana librarians involved in planning an ILL network would do well to bear this in mind. Administrators, moreover, should see that the recovery of costs actually reach the ILL unit! One might expect a large organization such as BLLD to preside over ILL in U.K. in a dominating manner. That does not seem to be the case. Staff at BLLD always project a most

cooperative and helpful attitude which seems to be a projection of the organization's image as a whole. Their image is in stark contrast to the British Library Reference Division.

Efficiency in BLLD

BLLD receives about 3 million requests per year, and efficiency has been its hallmark. An investigation into turnaround time indicated that well over 80% of the requests received were dealt with in under two days; a request resulting in a loan or photocopy from stock was processed in 1.5 days.⁶ Minimal verification is needed before submitting a request. An accurate title, author's last name, and publication date are the essentials. For current trade books an immediate request is often filled with only a title. The collection is shelved alphabetically by title and initial searches are made at the shelves, not the catalog of holdings. This kind of arrangement is possible in a dedicated lending collection. At libraries like Indiana University at least two hours per day are spent looking up shelfmarks and locations. Requests can be sent to BLLD via telex or through standard terminals via ARTTel (Automated Request Transmission by Telephone).

BLLD not only provides loans, photocopies, and ILL referral services; it is also a national referral center for incoming international requests, filling from its own stock or referring to other U.K. libraries. BLLD welcomes such requests since it derives significant revenue from abroad, one of its chief customers being CRL in the U.S. BLLD publishes numerous catalogs, indexes, journals, and newsletters. It does MEDLARS searches. An R & D unit each year makes significant contributions to ILL as well as to internal BLLD operations. BLLD is unquestionably the international leader in the area of interlibrary loan.

In an excellent review of the British Library, its history and its activities, B.C. Bloomfield states that the success of BLLD has been based on (1) a good standard of bibliographic control, (2) a developed library system, (3) a knowledgeable, literate and demanding readership, (4) good communications, (5) one dominant language, (6) a small, socially unified country in which to operate.⁷ He goes on to say that countries slow to imitate BLLD are right to do so if they are lacking the factors above. The U.S. is working toward a standard of bibliographic control in its usual fragmented way. The U. S. does not have a developed library system; it has many developed and undeveloped ones. The U.S. is anything but a small, socially unified country, and the level and demands of its readership vary tremendously. Good communications and one dominant language it does have. On a smaller scale, however, Indiana does seem to have to a large extent all of the factors above. While I would not advocate a dedicated lending library for Indiana, I do think that a voucher

scheme similar to BLLD's that would reimburse all lending libraries has merit. I would also advocate use of the sacrosanct "materials budget" as the proper source for financing ILL borrowing as Herb White suggests.⁸ The BLLD "back-up" arrangement with Indiana libraries holding specialized collections such as the scientific and medical libraries has merit in Indiana. No librarian or administrator ever expects ILL to be profitable or even self-sufficient; yet, we must get beyond our present barter system if resource sharing is to ever approach reality.

ILL in the U.S.

On a national level it is unlikely that any operation resembling BLLD is a possibility. The commitment appears to be in the direction of decentralization. Perhaps a more reasonable comparison for the U.S. would be with the Federal Republic of Germany, where various libraries have agreed to specialize. It, however, is "planned decentralization", whereas the U.S. has "unplanned decentralization." The U.S. does not really have an interlibrary loan system; it has procedures, protocol, and utilities.⁹ Resource sharing nationally will likely be forced to take a back seat to bibliographic control over the next few years. If any kind of planned resource sharing does emerge nationally, hopefully, it will not be by type (i.e. ARL libraries, medical libraries, public libraries), but by region. Medical libraries should be able to borrow popular titles from public libraries and public libraries should be able to get a photocopy from a medical journal. ARL libraries should share their research collections. This is what resource sharing is about. It should not be an excuse to cut the book budget.

Notes

¹ Line, Maurice B. "Organization Profile:3. The British Library Lending Division." *Journal of Information Science*, Vol. 2, 1980, 173-182.

² Ballard, Tom. "Public Library Networking: Neat, Plausible, Wrong." *Library Journal*, 107, No. 7, April 1, 1982, 683.

³ The British Library Lending Division, *Facts & Figures*, April 1981.

⁴ White, Herb. "Who Pays for "Peripheral" Services, and What are They Anyway?" *American Libraries*, January 1982, 40.

⁵ Vervliet, H.D.L. "Speaking for a Cinderella: Unplanned Decentralized Interlending." *Interlending Review*, 9, No. 4, 129.

⁶ "Speed of Service Improved." *British Library News*, No. 67, August 1981, 1.

⁷ Bloomfield, B.C. "Progress in Documentation, the BL, 1973-80." *Journal of Documentation*, 37, No. 3, September 1981, 115.

⁸ White, *Ibid.*, 40.

⁹ Line, Maurice B. "National Interlending Systems: Existing Systems and Possible Models." *Interlending Review*, 7, No. 2, 1979, 42.