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Whither ILL? Wither ILL: The Changing Nature of Resource Sharing for E-Books

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Librarians are justifiably proud of interlibrary loan (ILL); the development of resource sharing is perhaps our greatest collaborative achievement. So it is understandable that we demand that publishers allow ILL rights for e-books – understandable, but questionable. ILL is a wonderful system for moving physical books from one library to another and allows us to extend our collections beyond our campus boundaries. But it is not the best method for getting a digital resource to the user who needs it immediately. When we demand the ability to loan e-books to other libraries, we are confusing the means (ILL) with the end (getting a book to the user who needs it as quickly and cheaply as possible). Instead, we should be demanding that publishers make e-books available to vendors who can manage an easy short-term lease process that will be cheap enough to replace ILL. A short-term lease process allows a library to provide immediate and temporary access to e-book content not in its institutional or consortial collection for a fraction of the list price, obviating the need to borrow that content from another library.

ILL is a relatively efficient system for sharing physical resources, but not the right system at all for delivering e-books. It involves multiple steps, all with costs involved. The process begins when a library patron identifies a book and fills out an ILL request form. That form is received by the ILL department, which identifies owning libraries and then requests that book. Assuming that this is a request for an e-book, the owning library receives the request and checks the Electronic Resource Management system to determine if it has rights to loan that e-book. Depending on the rights involved, the e-book must be downloaded or perhaps even

printed and scanned before being delivered electronically to the borrowing library. In some cases, a license agreement might dictate that access to the e-book be turned off at the owning library while it is provided electronically to the borrowing library. The borrowing library then checks in the e-book and notifies the patron that it is available. This process can take days or weeks, potentially too much time for the patron waiting for it. For physical books, the steps are longer and costlier since the book has to be pulled from the shelf and packed and shipped by the owning library, then packed and shipped back by the borrowing library, and received and reshelfed by the owning library. Even though many of these steps are automated, there is a tremendous amount of time involved in this entire process, with costs that build up all the way through – primarily salary and lost opportunity for staff to be doing something else.

With e-books (and perhaps e-resources generally) we can rethink this entire process. If publishers would make e-books available to vendors and could agree to a reasonable cost for a short-term lease – a cost somewhere below the costs involved in traditional ILL – we could greatly improve efficiency and get the book to the user almost immediately. If, instead of following the lengthy process described above, ILL staff could simply check an e-book database for availability of a given title, lease that title for a brief time, and send the link to that title to a user, the process would be almost immediate. Ideally, this process could even be unmediated; the patron could find the title and immediately gain access, with a bill for the short-term lease coming to the library. In some cases, obviously, there would still be need for traditional ILL – of material availa-



ble only in print or of material for which the user specifically needs a print version – but short-term leasing could, and should, become the primary means of gaining access to material not in the collection.

This short-term lease process would work if (1) titles could be leased for a brief time (a day, a week, or a month); (2) the cost for this service were lower than or equal to the current cost of ILL; and (3) if there were enough titles available. The major e-book vendors (EBL, ebrary, MyiLibrary, and NetLibrary) already offer these services or are considering them seriously. The University of Denver has had great success with short-term leasing from EBL, often at a cost much lower than the cost of borrowing a book through ILL. I assume that pricing is similar for the other vendors. MyiLibrary and OCLC recently announced a partnership to provide a short-term leasing service through OCLC's WorldCat.¹ So, this sort of service is already possible. But there are not enough titles available from any of these vendors to make it a truly effective replacement for traditional ILL. Libraries must work with publishers and vendors to get more titles into the mix – and to make them available from each of the major vendors. This should be appealing to publishers, who will gain a new revenue stream from these short-term leases. And it should be appealing to librarians, who will have a more efficient service for the same or lower cost than traditional ILL. It will be more efficient than ILL and will get the book to the user faster – and that should be our ultimate goal.

Endnotes

¹ "OCLC and Ingram to Offer New Option for Access to E-Books," <http://www.oclc.org/uk/en/news/releases/2011/201116.htm> (Accessed June 17, 2011).

