The Downside of Resource Sharing

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ABSTRACT

We are, as librarians and information specialists, very concerned with sharing our collections with our clients and with other libraries. Shrinking budgets have brought about a polarization of collections, causing a greater importance and emphasis to be placed on resource sharing. This sharing is normally a two-way street. However, with staff down-sizing and less money for support, some libraries are having to spend as much (or more) time and energy serving “outside” clients as they spend on their own internal users. Where will this end? What steps can be taken now to preserve the good-will of international information sharing?

The title of my paper sounds rather negative, but it is not my intention at all to suggest that resource sharing should be in any way discouraged or minimized - rather, I would like to explore with you the consequences of such resource sharing, in a generalist way, and to discuss methods of minimizing any negative effects such resource sharing may have in our libraries and communities.

IAMS/LIC is an international organization representing an international library community. We have heard presentations this week from delegates from around the world, telling us of their efforts to share and make accessible that resource which is so vital to our very existence - information. Our presence here today is a type of resource sharing, an information and ideas exchange which will benefit each library and information centre when we return home - and, alas, return home we must!

The sharing of information resources takes place in many forms. Union catalogues or union lists represent a bringing together of information from a certain geographic area or perhaps from a common subject expertise base, and can be in card catalogue form, on-line, microform, printed or on compact disc. Published directories of institutions and libraries can list subject resource specifications and may be used to guide the user to material of a given organization. Electronic mail networks can be used to disperse news items, topics of professional interest or requests to individual member libraries. Local area networks, whether they be formal or informal, can be set up to bring together institutions with a similar mandate - access to the local area network may be a formal online configuration or as simple as a library committee which meets to discuss matters of common concern. And last, but not least, conference attendance, article writing in the professional literature and even telephone conversations all represent a type of resource sharing.

What can we do, as librarians, to expand and improve the sharing of the precious resources we have? And, how can we efficiently share our own resources without having a detrimental effect on our on-site service to our own users? As librarians, our goal is to make sure the right information gets to the requestor in need of that information. To me, there is nothing quite as rewarding as the delivery of information to a “needy” requestor. You can have your budget preparation, and your report completions (all essential, I’m sure), but none of it can compare to the challenge of a really tricky reference question.
We must look at the problems with resource sharing, as well as the glories and benefits. Many libraries are at a stage of zero budget growth; some have had no budget increase in over-all dollars for a number of years and still others have experienced budget cut-backs. We have heard presentations this week concerning journal rate increases, book price increases, and we all know how our budgets are shrinking in buying power even if the total budget is the same from year to year. It is a difficult task indeed to improve our services through automation, expansion of resource sharing or implementation of new procedures while our buying power is shrinking! However, as technologies improve, demands on our information resources are increasing. Our scientific staff want their libraries to be modern and efficient, and rely on us to deliver the information they need in a timely manner.

Improvements - come they must! We must improve our in-house capabilities and expand our resource sharing to include other libraries who need our information. Libraries must make sure that their information is included in union catalogues, whether in card form or in machine readable form. Libraries with records in machine readable form should consider producing their information in microform or on machine readable discs to share with other information centres. Databases must be expanded to include more libraries and more detailed information.

If there is a local area network in your immediate area, join it. If there is none, consider forming one - it can start with an informal gathering of local libraries to discuss problems of mutual concern. It can be an adjunct to a library association or club. It is only through discussion and understanding of mutual concerns that progress can be made, and it is only through openness that problems can be tackled and solved. We can discuss resource sharing, but we must also talk about coping with resource sharing. "Advertising" what information is available in our libraries (union catalogues, networks and other methodologies are all forms of advertising) means opening the doors to greater demand - an increase in the number and frequency of requests, an increase in the work-load and pressures on our library staff. We must somehow maintain a delicate balance between fulfilling the information needs of our own users and satisfying the demands made on our collections by external users. Cooperation is a two way street, as we all realize. Few libraries are self-sufficient. However, the demand on some libraries is greater than on others - we must recognize this fact, acknowledge it and cope with the consequences.

The traditional, and continuing, method of resource sharing is the formalized interlibrary lending procedure. When I was preparing this paper, I did some research into the history of interlibrary loan. An interesting question which I had never really considered, because interlibrary loan is such a standard, accepted practice between libraries was "When did interlibrary loan begin?" Apparently the first formal interlibrary loans were made in the Middle Ages between monasteries. One monastery would borrow a scroll or manuscript from another for the purposes of copying - this also led to a type of standardization of bibliographic descriptions to cope with the process and to avoid receiving the wrong scrolls (sound familiar?), since transmission of the scrolls was a lengthy process by courier (not Furlinator, but by mule).

It was in 1916 that interlibrary loan procedures were first formalized in North America by the American Library Association which wrote and published the first interlibrary loan code. Interlibrary loan now is an accepted method of resource sharing, with its own forms and protocols. Interlibrary loan is a good indication of resource sharing traffic. It is one of the procedures in a library represented by statistics, usually broken down by number of items loaned and number of items borrowed. Libraries are experiencing difficulties in both areas because of increased costs, of mailing and shipping and increased costs for packaging materials and forms printing. Increased demands in many instances call for speedier delivery, which increases costs even further for courier or priority post dispatch. Another factor which has raised its ugly head and has increased costs, is the growing trend towards charging for interlibrary loans. Put into operation by many of the larger university libraries to help them recover their costs or to deter external users from accessing their collection, this practice effectively reduces resource sharing. I am completely opposed to charging for interlibrary loans. I think it is used as a deterrent to discourage outside use of a library's collection. I have not seen an analysis yet which justifies this practice in terms of cost recovery, and I consider that charging for interlibrary loans destroys the spirit of cooperation traditionally enjoyed by libraries.
I think that libraries should not charge for interlibrary loans and that libraries should not charge for photocopying either. There are other practices that I think we should avoid. Some of the don'ts:

1. Don't charge for interlibrary loans or for photocopying.
2. Don't send 20 interlibrary loans the same day to the same library (either in one envelope or 20).
3. Don't send a request to a library half-way across the nation even though the library next door has the item but charges for inter-library loans.
4. Don't request everything RUSH or URGENT.
5. Don't put "not verified" on your interlibrary loans.

Now, let's consider what we can rationally do in a practical sense as librarians to help other libraries cope with our inter-library loans. Try to be aware of other libraries' interlibrary loan policies. If the policies are published in a directory, buy it, read it and make sure you and your interlibrary loan staff are familiar with the policies of the lending library. You can be a better borrower if you know what materials are available for loan, how many pages will be photocopied for you and how long the loan period is.

Analyze the interlibrary loan patterns in your library to determine if you are a net lender or net borrower. Determine with whom (in terms of libraries) your traffic is highest. Contact those libraries frequently used, to discuss with them ways to improve the service and ways to help them cope with your demands. If you are borrowing heavily from one library, you may be able to batch your requests to enable them to cope with the workload. (Outgoing interlibrary loan requests used to be, and still are, an indication of gaps in your own collection which should be filled in, but unfortunately this simple solution to the problem is often not a viable option with diminished buying power rampant in our budget situations). If you lend heavily to one or more libraries, discuss with them ways to alleviate your workload. Libraries in the same area may enter into reciprocal lending arrangements whereby the users themselves use the other library, thereby bypassing interlibrary loan entirely. Libraries may be able to share in the hiring of a student or contract person to do photocopying or clerical processing.

Consider lending periodicals more often rather than photocopying articles, especially in a local area where mail delays are minimized. This will save on staff time and costs.

Improve your verification tools in-house. (This is something every library should pay particular attention to, no matter how small your library may be.) Libraries must get tougher and start sending back unverified interlibrary loan requests - such requests are an enormous drain on staff time and patience. Buy the standard verification tools, at least, to enable you to verify citations and verify locations as well.

Use a standardized form of entry or bibliographic description on your interlibrary loan requests for those items not verified or, better still, turn such requests back to the requestor for more specific information.

Librarians are dedicated and enthusiastic about providing information and delivering that information to the requesting source. There is a great sense of pride involved in locating the on-site information, extracting it, organizing and packaging it and, finally, delivering the information in a timely manner. all followed by a great sense of accomplishment. That is what we do and we are proud of our abilities.

As librarians, let us not become mesmerized by new technologies; let us use them to our advantage in a practical, responsible way without losing sight of our main resource to be shared - our knowledge and our people.

NOTES


2King, Geraldine, and Herbert F. Johnson, "Interlibrary Loan (ILL)," Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science 12:196-211. 1974.
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