The cycles of interlending

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Abstract

Examines the interlending scene in the UK over the last 80 years and looks forward to what the future might hold. The decentralised beginnings of interlending in the 1920s and 1930s are contrasted with the move to centralisation which attended the formation of the National Library for Science and Technology in the 1960s. The recent demise in the UK of the centralised system is described and analysed. Outlines the British Library's role in the emerging distributed electronic environment for document supply, and concludes with personal reflections on the current changes to the document supply landscape in the UK.

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Introduction

Many of you will know that I am leaving the British Library as part of its major restructuring, and in this paper I would like to take the opportunity to look back over the interlending scene in the UK and forward to what the future might hold. Needless to say, these are personal observations rather than statements of official British Library policy.

Outline

I start my paper by looking at the beginnings of interlending in the UK. Informal, decentralised arrangements evolved into a sophisticated formal distributed system over a period of some 30 years.

The second part of the paper is about that extraordinary British institution – the National Library for Science and Technology, which, with its successors, transformed the UK interlending system into one of the most centralised in the world. However, I don't want to perpetuate the myth, which still emerges on occasion, that the UK had an exclusively centralised interlending system at any stage in its history.

Third, I turn to the downfall of the centralised system in the UK. For the benefit of the many international delegates at the conference, I want to explain just what has been happening in the UK over the last couple of years before looking at the reasons behind the change.

Finally, I end with a view of the future and some personal thoughts on the lessons learned from the way the various players in the UK library scene have reacted to the tumultuous changes in the information industry.

The decentralised beginnings of interlending in the UK

Interlending in the UK began in an informal way in the aftermath of the First World War. This was a time of great expansion in learning and saw the formation of the Central Library

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for Students as a way of tackling the shortage of material available to adult learners. Its collections were issued to evening classes across the country, filling a gap which could not be provided by the public library system. From the Central Library of Students grew the National Central Library at the beginning of the 1930s. The same period also saw the growth of regional co-operation in the public library system and the birth of the regional library bureaux, which have continued in their various ways until recently – a topic to which I will return to later. Once interlending moved beyond the informal enquiry between individual libraries in need of a book, the union catalogue became the key tool. These formidable constructions became the backbone of the UK interlending system for over a generation and to this day the remnants of the national union catalogue remain in a catalogue hall at Boston Spa on their three-inch by five-inch cards. There they are in regular use to help with the trickiest of interlending requests for older material. Union catalogues were endeavours of some considerable complexity and ingenuity. They required each major library to create extra copies of their own catalogue records, which were then amalgamated in each regional catalogue and also forwarded on to the national catalogue held at the National Central Library. While the regional catalogues were mainly the product of the public library system, the national catalogue also contained copies of catalogue records from major university and other special libraries. The catalogues were fine as long as all those involved remembered to report their acquisitions accurately and to record all changes and withdrawals, but the clerical effort was immense and backlogs were commonplace. Their other major drawback was that they could not record whether an item was actually available for interloan at a particular time. This gave rise to the rota. A request for a particular title had to be sent to the appropriate union catalogue for checking, where it was annotated with a rota of libraries which were believed to hold the item. The request would then make its way round each of the libraries on the rota until the item was supplied or perhaps until it returned to the originating library, still unfulfilled. Then there was always the possibility of sending the request on to another union catalogue where the process would be repeated. While it was laborious and slow, the system worked for the majority of requests at a time when expectations were lower. Readers would regard with awe the arrival of a book in their local branch library which had come from another library in a distant part of the country. They were quite prepared to tolerate the weeks or months the process took.

The era of centralised interlending

I have reflected on this decentralised period, which I hasten to add was one I only witnessed first-hand in its final period of decline in the early 1970s, because I think it is important to remember just how far we have progressed in the last few decades. But now I move on to the 1960s and the development of centralised interlending in the UK. In fact the seeds for this were sown as early as the Second World War, which gave an enormous boost to the research effort in science and technology. Much of the material requested through the interlending system of the 1930s and 1940s had been books in the humanities and some of the material could only be read in the local library rather than taken away for "home reading". However, in the sciences and technologies the journal article was already an important part of the literature. National union catalogues covered journals poorly (another topic to which we will return before I finish) and few libraries were prepared to lend them, but researchers needed access to them in their workplaces and laboratories. One library which recognised this need was the Science Museum Library in London, which developed an interlending service for scientists. It became so well used that the on-site readers of the library started to complain that the stock was not on the shelves when they needed it. This led the librarian there, one Donald Urquhart, to put pressure on the government's Department of Scientific and Industrial Research to fund a dedicated Library Lending Unit. It was initially based in London, but moved to Boston Spa in Yorkshire to become the National Lending Library for Science and Technology in 1961.

The key difference from the earlier union catalogue arrangements was that a large central stock of material was held and the request could be supplied without the delays inherent in the rota system. However, it is

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doubtful that the NLL, as it became known informally, would have been quite so successful if this had been its only new feature. After all, its founding required the injection of new government money and a continuing commitment to finance its operations – a rarity for libraries in many countries and the main reason why the centralised approach has not been replicated more widely across the globe. Urquhart's other innovations included arranging material in alphabetical order, thus avoiding the need for cataloguing, and an evangelical approach to urging libraries to send requests to Boston Spa without doing extensive checking. Even though the service was priced from the beginning (the initial price covered just the cost of postage), libraries flocked to the NLL and UK R&D received a major boost in terms of rapid access to its information. The 1960s also saw the introduction of photocopying, a laborious and expensive process at first, but one which allowed for huge improvements in the availability of material at the time when it was required and gave the researcher a permanent record (or at least semi-permanent, given the fading properties of the early copies), to which they could refer and which they could annotate.

The 1970s were the period when government attention turned to the nature of the national library in the UK. The Dainton Report looked at the success of the NLL and noted how the National Central Library had begun to develop along similar lines by augmenting its union catalogues with centralised collections of humanities and social science monographs. Dainton recommended that the two institutions be combined to form the Lending Division of the new British Library. In the summer of 1973 the two very different cultures of NCL and NLL came together at Boston Spa and centralised provision of interlending moved into its heyday. For the next 25 years something approaching three-quarters of the total interlibrary loan traffic in the UK was supplied from Boston Spa and international traffic burgeoned to cover well over 100 different countries.

The seeds of change

So what happened during the 1990s which means that the interlending landscape is in turmoil at the beginning of the new century? To understand this properly it is best to go back to the 1970s, when centralised provision eclipsed the union catalogue. The growth in titles published and the growth in demand – particularly from the economically significant R&D community – led to the old system collapsing under its own weight. Urquhart was scathing about the shortcomings of the union catalogue system and its failure to keep on top of changes in library holdings. He had little time for the library profession's insistence on creating over-elaborate systems, when all readers needed was the right book or article quickly and cheaply. He was lucky to have political clout on his side. The fact that there was a government department dedicated to scientific and industrial research was in itself significant. There was growing concern in the UK that the West was not keeping abreast of science in Eastern Europe – sparked off particularly by the launch of the Sputnik satellite in 1957. The willingness of government to fund centrally an operation which benefited all types of libraries, and the willingness of those libraries to use it in rapidly increasing quantities, were crucial to sustaining its development. Slowly, as political doctrine hardened and everything was costed and charged out, customers, as they became known, started to re-evaluate whether they could get what they wanted more cheaply elsewhere. The 1980s and the early 1990s were the heyday of Conservative government-inspired suspicion of public sector monopoly and there was a certain ideological edge to some of the explorations of alternative interlibrary loan provision. This was also a period when the importance of scientific R&D had slipped down the political agenda – the days of the white-hot heat of the technological revolution of the Harold Wilson government were long gone. Thus it is important to note the political and economic dimensions which both influenced the birth of the centralised approach and, as the tide turned, led to its decline.

The document supply revolution

Important as these economic and political factors might be, they were insufficient on their own to cause the revolution that is now occurring. The key ingredient was, of course, the burgeoning of computing and telecommunications. Computers had already

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begun to have an impact on libraries in the 1970s, with the introduction of automated catalogues and the early beginnings of online information retrieval. Indeed there was an attempt in the 1970s to harness the power of computers to create a UK library database system – perhaps best seen as a UK response to OCLC, which of course started off as a shared cataloguing system and only rather later moved into facilitating interlending. However, lack of standardisation, expensive computer power and insufficient political will to create another UK national infrastructure, when the main interlending structure was obviously flourishing, meant that the UKLDS was stillborn. Technology moves on and now we have the computing power, the connectivity and the standards necessary to create successful automated union catalogues. There are plenty of examples of these around the world and the UK has recently seen the production of a substantial feasibility study, which may herald another attempt to create an automated national union catalogue. However, enthusiasm for the concept is muted in some quarters, with the possible exception of creating a national catalogue for serials.

Even these changes resulting from the convergence of computing and telecommunications pale into insignificance when compared with the impact the electronic revolution has had on the publication itself. While the electronic book is still in its messy "early adopter" phase and is unlikely to take off until electronic paper has developed to become a viable alternative to the traditional medium, virtually every other form of serious written communication has been revolutionised. Nearly all the established significant research journals are now available in electronic form as well as in print and publishers are pushing as fast as they dare to wean us all off print completely. In addition the number of electronic-only journals is growing rapidly and the added value features that only this medium can provide, e.g. audio and video clips, three-dimensional models etc., are slowly beginning to be appreciated. Beyond this the huge mass of conference papers and pre-prints has moved more or less completely to the electronic environment and the battle lines are being drawn between the traditional publishers and the self-archivers to determine who will ultimately have control of the published literature.

Recent developments in the UK

I promised to let Conference delegates know what has been happening in the UK of late. For the first time in 40 years there has been a sustained decline in demand for the document supply services from Boston Spa. The decline has been entirely from within the UK and for the present international demand continues to increase. Over the past two years UK demand has been declining by around 10 per cent per annum. Initially the decline was most marked in the academic sector, although more recently it has spread to the corporate sector. The reason for the decline is not hard to discern. It is a consequence of university and other large libraries reaching agreements directly with the largest publishers. These provide electronic access to the entire current output of each publisher (and increasing amounts of back material). While each of these libraries may only have subscribed to a third or less of each publisher's titles in hard copy, and relied on the BL's document supply centre for the rest, they are now entering into multi-year deals, which provide electronic access to all that publisher's output for a relatively modest increase on the cost of the print subscriptions previously paid. Needless to say, library users are loving it now that they have unlimited access from their desktops to the key journals and they can be freed from interacting with the library at all. So we can expect these arrangements to continue, but they are not without their problems. The UK academic community is now very aware of this. Having been at the forefront of developments with the Pilot Site Licence Initiative at the end of the last decade and the National Electronic Site Licence Initiative (NESLI) for the last two years, they have encountered difficulties in developing a sustainable migration path and NESLI has been temporarily extended to cover 2002. Problems with the new approach are manifold. First, the additional cost of the site licences is coming out of a diminishing acquisition budget. While the major publishers will be safe, the titles published by their smaller brethren may be less secure. Second, the issue of enduring access to the electronic version is slowing progress on the complete switch-over from print. No one has yet reached a satisfactory solution which addresses the technical and the economic concerns and many players are circling round

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the issue, toying with which bits of it they should own.

So what is the British Library doing about the decline of its interlending services, as it moves centre stage? First, it is engaging to an unprecedented extent in consultation with its various stakeholder groups. A successful joint BL/higher education task force has spawned several significant studies and led to the creation of a new high level research libraries strategy group, which covers the academic community and the national libraries of the UK. The BL's co-operation and partnership programme has led an increasingly close dialogue with the public library community in the UK and in particular with the regional library organisations. These are now transforming themselves, to varying degrees, into new strategic bodies covering the needs of libraries, museums and archives. They are based on the geographic boundaries of the UK government's new regions, which may, one day, lead to the development of devolution for the English regions alongside that recently introduced into Scotland and into Wales. Along the way there have been casualties, the most notable having been the demise of LASER as we know it, and its transformation into a charitable foundation to fund research and development in interlibrary co-operation. LASER, which covered London and the South East of England, was by far the largest and most innovative of the library regional bodies and it will be instructive to watch how its legacy, in terms of its automated interlending system VISCOUNT, and its interlibrary loan transport system, fare when they are set free to stand on their own.

The British Library has also just completed the most far-reaching consultation exercise it has ever undertaken, on its *New Strategic Directions* document. This consultation exercise looked at overall strategy, collection development, document supply and the provision of patents. The separate section on document supply demonstrates the importance the new Library management attaches to resolving the future of the Library's document supply services. While they are its major revenue earner, a decline in demand makes achievement of cost recovery more difficult. The library conducted an extensive internal investigation into this area in advance of writing the strategic review consultation document. At the heart of this is the question of whether the Library should attempt to provide a document supply service from electronic journals. It has been doing so to a limited extent for many years, but reaching agreement with publishers on appropriate terms has not been straightforward and the costs of the infrastructure are significant. Should the BL simply accept that publishers can provide this service directly to libraries and researchers, and that it no longer needs to offer such a service? In addition are the legacy collections at Boston Spa an important asset for the future of UK's interlending, or can new distributed approaches using systems such as COPAC forge the way ahead? COPAC is the union catalogue of the major university collections of the UK, and it overcomes many of the shortcomings of the earlier generations of union catalogues outlined earlier in this paper. It is based on automated feeds from each of the members' integrated library systems and includes an increasing number of real-time links to circulation data, so that users know whether an item is on the shelf and available for loan at the time of their enquiry. One of the studies commissioned by the BL/HE taskforce examined whether the printed collections at Boston Spa should in some way be jointly owned and managed by the libraries who use them and perhaps integrated into the distributed approach which is re-emerging. Other studies commissioned by the taskforce looked at the concept of the Distributed National Collection and there is a real keenness to explore whether the BL and other libraries can co-operate on a meaningful scale in acquiring, preserving and providing access to material. Whether in a new age this approach can succeed where it has failed in the past, because each library has at some stage had to put the needs of its own readers ahead of a broader clientele, remains to be seen. However, there is no doubt that the Distributed National Electronic Resource (DNER) will play a key role in meeting the needs of the UK academic community and the very far-sighted thinking that is going into the planning of its infrastructure suggests that it will make a significant impact on document supply. In essence what we will see emerge is a Web gateway, which will enable users to explore the information landscape, both electronic and hard copy, discover material which may be of relevance to their enquiry

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and, if available electronically, provide immediate access to abstracts and full-text from the most appropriate source. Where material is only available in paper form it will enable users to locate a copy and place a request for a loan or a copy to be made and supplied direct to the user.

Before we can finally discern which way the document supply system will develop in the UK we need to take a look at the issue of copyright. The new European directive on reprographic rights comes into force next year and publishers are already shaping up to restrict library privilege under which document supply has operated, at least in the public sector. If publishers succeed in ensuring that all electronic copying is licensed on their terms, it will probably restrict the volume of activity because of the cost implications. It will also give an additional boost to the Open Archive Initiative and other similar ventures which seek a radical solution, through encouraging authors to make their work freely available to all over the Web, alongside publishing via conventional channels.

Thus the recent BL study has had to take into account a complex background. It has developed a series of rigorously tested economic models, and has concluded that the appropriate role for the BL at present is to continue to develop its document supply services. This requires investment in systems to make them smarter to use and cheaper to operate and the continuation of its attempts to provide as much of its copying from electronic sources as possible. At the same time the library will participate in the various projects, which will see the development of a distributed system in the UK over the next few years. It is still too early to predict the exact role the library will play in this new distributed environment. It may simply be a facilitator which operates systems, probably integrated into the Distributed National Electronic Resource, pointing to other sources with which the user will have to contract to arrange supply of the material requested. Or, on the other hand, it may be operating a fully integrated system, perhaps with private investment, which will allow a true "one-stop shop" of the sort about which librarians have often dreamed. The response to the recent strategic directions document shows that there is still strong support for some form of centralised provision of document supply services in the UK, and there is little doubt that the BL will continue to be regarded as a key player well into the new century.

Some concluding observations

Finally, I promised some personal reflections on the current changes to the document supply landscape in the UK.

One irony of the present situation is that those who were most vociferous about the disadvantages of a powerful, centralised government backed document supply service have by their own actions made it more likely than not that this service will erode, only to be replaced by services dominated by profit-seeking publishers who are way more powerful and far less accountable to readers. Clearly, the academic sector has woken up to this threat in the UK and is now making strenuous representations to the Office of Fair Trading about the overbearing influence of the major scientific publishers, particularly in the context of recent merger proposals.

Another factor is that market forces will always allow the survival of the main stream. It is relatively easy to "cherry pick" the easy to handle requests and divert them elsewhere but some overlook the impact this has on the viability of the centralised system, which is left with lower volumes and higher proportions of more difficult to handle requests. Will some of those who seek the development of alternative sources rue the day that their actions lead to a narrowing of choice, diversity and availability for everyone?

Until recently, there have been mixed views on the role which a document supply service should play within the British Library. Is it a vital service or a distraction from a national library's core purpose of collection, preservation and access? However, there is now a widespread acceptance that in the electronic world the differences between on-site access in reading rooms and remote access will become increasingly blurred. The government has made it clear that its priorities are about broadening access and this rightly gives a clear lead for the new management of the Library.

In situations like the present there is always a temptation to throw the baby out with the

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bathwater (for overseas delegates not familiar with this very English idiom – the good together with the bad from the past). However, I am hopeful that, with libraries and information higher on the political agenda than for many years, the future will see improved services. My sincere wish is that these will be accessible to all across the different library sectors and that the British Library resists the temptation to withdraw into being a support service for the academic sector. I believe that the new era of dialogue and collaboration with all stakeholders augurs well for the future.

For our many international colleagues here, I hope that this paper has been instructive in illustrating the revolution of the cycle from distributed to centralised and back to distributed again. I also hope that there is something in the paper which you can apply to help make sense of what is happening in your country in the turbulent times in which we are all living.