Interlibrary Loan is Not Dead Yet (In Fact, It Feels Happy and Thinks It Will Go for a Walk)

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Introduction

Interlibrary loan is an important part of library service, particularly in academic libraries. However, there are some librarians that think that interlibrary loan is losing its place in the library, and will soon disappear entirely. They argue that the emerging technologies that have enabled interlibrary loan to flourish will eventually be its undoing; due to several factors that will be discussed, I do not think that this will happen in as short a time frame or as completely as these doomsayers believe.

Interlibrary loan has been vital to libraries for many reasons, and though the times have changed, the need for interlibrary loan has not. Historically, there have been three main explanations for why libraries turn to interlibrary loan. The first is that libraries cannot own every title or creative written work that has ever been created. In the pre-Gutenberg press era, and even for quite some time beyond, it was possible to have a “complete” library, consisting of all or almost all of the books on a given subject. This is no longer a possibility, even though Google Books is trying to make it a reality by attempting to scan and digitally preserve every book in the world (“Google Books,” 2010). There are simply too many different works out there, and they are being created faster than libraries can collect them. This is assuming that they can be collected at all; many are not even published in traditional paper format, and this can complicate their storage and retrieval. While it would seem that electronic access would equate to unlimited space and the digitization of materials would
enable the collection of them all, this apparent solution is a false assumption. Works must still be leased from their copyright holders, and servers are costly and take up space of their own. Libraries cannot physically hold or provide access to every material ever produced, nor can they afford to do so (Hilyer, 2002).

Financial resources, particularly for libraries and particularly in the current economy, are limited. Budgets have been slashed across the nation. Unfortunately, libraries are no longer held in as high esteem as they previously were, and library budgets shoulder a larger proportion of cuts to a university or community budget than other areas. Subscriptions to non-essential journals and other parts of the acquisitions budget are usually some of the first things sacrificed when libraries must curtail spending. And when the libraries are unable to afford the purchase of new items, they often seek help from other libraries to close the resulting gaps in their collections (Hilyer, 2002).

The third reason for retaining interlibrary loan services is that it can be a useful tool for collection development. Especially in academic libraries, reviewing patterns in their patrons’ loan requests can help librarians take note of deficiencies in the collection. If there are a high number of requests for materials on the subject of World War Two, the librarians can use this as evidence to justify the purchase of several titles on the subject. Conversely, if there is only one request for an article or book on a topic like the Peloponnesian Wars, then the librarians can be sure that there is not enough demand to rationalize the purchase of materials on that topic. Or, it could mean that the materials in the collection are sufficient, which would also justify the librarians’ decision to not purchase items related to the subject in question (Livingston & Mays, 2004).

Currently, there are many debates regarding the viability of interlibrary loan. Many people think that because of electronic publishing and the open access movement, as well as rising costs of maintaining interlibrary loan service, interlibrary loan will soon cease to exist. It is doubtful that interlibrary loan will ever disappear entirely, even though financial constraints may make its departure appealing. Interlibrary loan has weathered transitions in information technology from the Medieval Age to the Information Age, and will continue to accommodate those needing information that their own libraries are unable to provide.

**History**

Interlibrary loan service was first documented in the eighth century, though it can be surmised that interlibrary loan as an informal practice existed for a number of years prior. The first libraries to document interlibrary loan were episcopal libraries, often attached to churches or monasteries. Most libraries in Europe during the pre-Renaissance era were of this nature. Even then, information was seen as a valuable tool. The church and monastic libraries exchanged texts to spread the knowledge of Christianity and save the souls of Europe. Commentaries on scripture, council and synod proceedings, sermons, letters written to and by men of the cloth, and other materials were exchanged to
inform and assist the clergy in their holy mission (Condit, 1937).

Interlibrary loan evolved throughout the centuries; secular libraries were established, and the materials exchanged were no longer exclusively religious in nature. Many national libraries were established, such as France’s Bibliothèque Nationale and our own Library of Congress. National libraries were established in almost every European country, and early on these libraries cooperated with one another, as well as with the largest private and religious libraries. As the largest libraries, the national libraries had the most books to lend and served as models to smaller libraries. When the Library of Congress agreed to share materials with the German National Library in 1906, it helped to spur and strengthen the use of interlibrary loan on a large scale (Gilmer, 1994).

Prior to this, most interlibrary loans were done on a very small scale, between libraries that were relatively close to one another. Large-scale loaning was discussed in some library circles, but was not a possibility due to technological and organizational problems. It was difficult and costly to mail books to faraway libraries, as well as very time-consuming. A book would have to be requested by letter, then sent, read and returned in an age where mail service was not as expedient as it is today. Libraries also had to contend with book dealers’ fears that interlibrary loan would undermine their sales. Most importantly, however, there was no universal catalogue; libraries had to send requests to multiple libraries, hoping that one would have what their patron needed (Gilmer, 1994).

This did not prevent the founders of the American Library Association (ALA) from trying to find a way to make interlibrary loan feasible, however. Though interlibrary loan itself was not discussed at the ALA’s first meeting in 1876, the founders were certainly aware of the idea. Many had provided interlibrary loan service at their own libraries on a small and local scale, and recognized the difficulty researchers had in locating suitable materials. The idea of the universal catalogue was discussed, and the idea of interlibrary loan was bandied about for the next twenty-five years. Starting in 1901, the Library of Congress began to collect and disseminate catalogue cards, including the holding library and location (Straw, 2003).

The idea of a universal or union catalogue was not new; in 1627, a man by the name of Gabriel Naude published *Avis pour Dresser une Bibliothèque*. The main premise of the book suggested creating a catalogue of every book, and delineated where each book was held so that those seeking a specific work knew where to direct their request. Europe had at least four of these universal catalogues by 1900 (Gilmer, 1994). Starting in 1901, the Library of Congress began to collect and disseminate catalogue cards, including the holding library and location. Though a valuable tool, this collection of catalogue cards was not put into a union catalogue until 1956, when the *National Union Catalog* (NUC) was released. The Library of Congress also released *A Catalog of Books Represented by LC Printed Cards Issued to July 31,*
1942, as well as supplemental volumes to it. These union catalogues were able to help patrons to locate and librarians to catalogue those monographs published prior to the union catalogues’ release (Gilmer, 1994). However, since the founding of the ALA, many smaller union catalogues had been formed by state or regional consortia. This, along with the information on the catalogue cards that the Library of Congress issued, had an interesting effect (Straw, 2003).

Though the Library of Congress issued cards that made the cataloguing and loaning processes somewhat less painful, it did not become the central lending library. The founders of the ALA envisioned the Library of Congress as the main lending library. They believed that people would make a request to the Library of Congress for a book, or at perhaps to a major university library that was closer to the borrower. History did not unfold as expected; the trend of small-scale loans between local libraries became large-scale by increasing the network of connections from a local level to a regional and national one (Gilmer, 1994).

This was due in part to the catalogue cards that the Library of Congress supplied. Rather than write to the Library of Congress to borrow a specific title, the borrowing libraries wrote to the Library of Congress for a copy of the catalogue card. Upon receiving the card, libraries looked on it to find where the item was held, and then wrote to those libraries requesting permission to borrow the material. This was usually more cost-effective for all parties involved, as the distances between the borrowing and lending libraries were usually smaller than between the borrowing library and the Library of Congress, saving money and time in the shipping portion of the interlibrary loan process. Also, it was noted in retrospect that the Library of Congress would have been unable to handle the exponential increase in interlibrary loans once the phenomenon became more mainstream (Gilmer, 1994).

Other reasons that this style of sharing emerged were due to the ALA and the Library of Congress. During its early years, a main theme that its founders and members embraced was cooperation, particularly regarding resource sharing. This persists to this day. Though the founders intended for the Library of Congress to be the main supplier of loaned materials, they had in the past shared materials locally. This set the precedent of sharing between libraries, and it was unable to be changed despite the founders’ wishes. In 1950, the ALA set a standardized form for interlibrary loan requests. This form was instrumental in making interlibrary loan service administration easier for every library, which in turn only led to more interlibrary loans between them (Gilmer, 1994).

During the 1930s and 1940s, interlibrary loans and resource sharing were an important part of libraries because of the Great Depression. Similar to today, the economic pressure made the libraries much more open to the idea of sharing materials. In addition, the proliferation of rail lines, highways, telephones, and the introduction of the United States Postal
Service parcel post made interlibrary loan slightly easier than it had been (Straw, 2003).

In the early days of interlibrary loan, sharing resources took quite a bit of work. It required finding the library that owned the necessary item, writing a letter, and waiting for a response. If the response was favourable, another letter, perhaps more than one, had to be sent working out the terms of the loan. Some libraries had partnerships that had these terms set in contractual agreements, but this was not always the case (Straw, 2003). Once that was set, the lending library packaged the item and shipped it to the borrowing library where the patron collected and used it. When the patron returned the item, it was packaged and shipped back to the lending library. This process could take months, and there were many opportunities for error to further delay the process. Without all of the amenities we take for granted today, such as email, electronic document delivery, overnight postal service, and various databases, interlibrary loan was a very lengthy and involved process (Gilmer, 1994).

In addition to being arduous, there was little standardization between libraries in their methods of request during these early years. Each library had its own form for patrons to fill in, and these forms did not always include enough information for lending libraries to find the proper item. Different forms included different pieces of information, and were not even the same size. The introduction of the standard, triplicate carbon-copy form by the ALA in 1950 helped change this, and increased interlibrary loans even further (Gilmer, 1994).

Another reason that interlibrary loans increased during the postwar period was due to the Cold War. Competition with Russia led to a boost in funding for academic endeavours, and this translated into a boost for academic libraries as well. The libraries were receiving more and more funding from the government; new libraries were built quickly in an effort to outstrip the Communists. While it would appear that this should reduce the number of interlibrary loans, as libraries had more money that they could spend on materials, it did not. Universities were receiving funding for research as well, and the amount of information that was being produced only increased. Despite having more funds than ever before, libraries still could not manage to collect all of the information generated by researchers. This research was needed in all corners of the nation to advance American society and keep ahead of the Russians, and so the loaning of these materials between libraries, particularly academic libraries, also increased (Straw, 2003).

The 1960s saw much of the same expansion and growth as the 1950s had, for many of the same reasons. Libraries also began to work even more closely, creating consortia between similar types of libraries. These consortia were an outgrowth of the cooperative mindset of libraries from the previous years and also the result of libraries truly grasping the idea that there is simply too much information to be gathered in one place (Straw, 2003). The 1960s also saw the introduction of machines and electronics on a large scale to improve library services, as well as machine-readable and
standardized cataloguing practices (Straw, 2003). In the 1970s, computers entered the scene and became an integral part of interlibrary loan services (Hilyer, 2002).

Perhaps the most important advancement for interlibrary loan came in the sector of cataloguing. In 1967, 54 libraries in Ohio formed the Ohio College Library Center, which was established with the goal of streamlining and reducing the costs associated with cataloguing new materials. Its intent was to provide a network of libraries with access to all the catalogue records of other member libraries; this way, a member library did not have to waste time or resources on creating a catalogue record from scratch. The librarians could simply copy the record, rather than create a new one entirely. In 1971, OCLC went online for the first time. It expanded in exponential fashion, eventually incorporating libraries around the globe. OCLC is an integral part of interlibrary loan because of this; it is the largest database of catalogue records, and it is also the largest database that shows where those items catalogued are held. It has spurred many emulative consortia and computer programs, but remains the largest and most widely used. OCLC has also released its own interlibrary loan program platform. Paper requests are occasionally sent and filled, but the majority of interlibrary loan requests now come through software like OCLC’s ILLiad. Though OCLC started as a cataloguing effort, it expanded into so much more, and is now an integral part of interlibrary loan (Straw, 2003).

Technology

Interlibrary loan has come quite a long way since the days of the monks exchanging sacred texts. The previously discussed advances on the part of the ALA, Library of Congress, and OCLC have had a huge impact on the way interlibrary loan services are performed. The advances in technology, especially computer technology, have enabled interlibrary loans to be faster and more efficient than ever before. Arguably, the Internet has had the largest impact; libraries are now networked in ways that were unimaginable only a few decades ago, and communication between libraries and the proliferation of available information have reached incomprehensible levels. Unfortunately, discussion of the Internet and its enormous influence on libraries is beyond the scope of this paper. A discussion of the online platforms that are used in interlibrary loan is of merit, however. These platforms are able to take the wondrous technology that is the Internet and harness its power to be used to the sharing of resources.

There are two distinct types of interlibrary loan software. The first is management software; this kind of software allows patrons to electronically request items and librarians to process and manage the requests. In addition, they also allow the exchange of electronic materials, keep various statistics, and can even keep track of financial affairs. The second type of software is delivery, and it is only for the exchange of materials; patrons must put requests in through management software or contact lenders via
telephone or email. Many of these different software platforms are compatible; this allows circulation of loan materials without libraries having to purchase multiple subscriptions or be limited in the number of libraries from which they can borrow (Hilyer, 2002).

The largest interlibrary loan management software is the aforementioned OCLC ILLiad. It is a Windows-based program that allows libraries to manage all aspects of interlibrary loan service without paper. Librarians have one interface that does a variety of things. It starts by allowing patrons to place requests electronically either in the form provided by ILLiad or by a direct link in WorldCat or another database. Once librarians have used the OCLC catalogue to locate an item, the request is delivered to the lending library via email. An RSS feed at the lending library notifies the librarian there that a request has come in, and the librarian then locates the item and either packages it for shipping or scans it and sends it electronically. Electronic materials can be sent from any interlibrary loan software; Odyssey, the standalone delivery software produced by OCLC, can open any file sent from any interlibrary loan system, even if it is not ILLiad (“Overview,” n.d.).

ILLiad is also able to help in the management of more than just items. It can also track materials and keep many different kinds of statistics on borrowing and lending. These statistics can help in collection development and budget allocations, ensuring that copyright laws are observed, and can also be used to place staff efficiently and effectively. ILLiad can also keep track of financial resources, paying charges levied by lending libraries and issuing invoices to borrowing libraries. For the user, ILLiad shows the status of their requests and notifies them of the arrival of requested materials. Librarians are then relieved of answering questions regarding when the materials will arrive and of notifying patrons when the materials do come in (“Overview,” n.d.).

OCLC ILLiad is a very useful tool. However, it is not the only interlibrary loan software on the market. A large competitor is Clio, also a Windows-based program. Fully compatible with ILLiad, it does many of the same things, such as take and manage patron requests, supervise financial matters, and produce statistics. It has added features that were not noted on ILLiad’s description page, such as the ability to print book straps and overdue or recall notices. It can even automatically check a library’s own catalogue to ensure that the patron is not requesting an item that the library already holds. Clio also uses Microsoft Access, and in Access or Microsoft Excel a librarian can customize a search for specific data that may not be included in one of Clio’s preset search functions (“Clio Software,” n.d.).

There is also a variety of software that is not as elaborate as management software. Delivery software is a useful tool for smaller libraries that may not be able to afford ILLiad or Clio software or may not need it very often. This delivery software often sends copies of material that are neater than those from facsimile machines or scanners, and it is
compatible with other types of management software. An example of this software is Ariel. Ariel employs the standard file transfer protocol (FTP) of the Internet to send a document to any other Ariel workstation in the world. Once it is received, the file is downloaded as a PDF, and the person can view, save, or print it as they wish. There are also some tools in the software that allow tracking and record-keeping on a more limited basis (“Ariel Interlibrary Loan Software | Infotrieve,” n.d.). Another brand of delivery software, Prospero, is similar. Originally developed to work with Ariel, Prospero is compatible, open-source software with many of the same functions. Prospero is more customizable than Ariel, but because it is open-source, there is no assistance when the program ceases to work properly (“Prospero 2.0,” 2003).

Issues

There are many different issues in the field of interlibrary loan, and because of these concerns, there are some who think that interlibrary loan will disappear from the list of library services provided. The main issues deal with the costs of interlibrary loan and the fact that some libraries do not reciprocate properly. Also, with the rising movement toward open access and electronic publishing, some feel that interlibrary loan will no longer be needed.

Cost is a main issue in libraries as a whole, not just in the interlibrary loan departments. But interlibrary loans often feel the pinch, for many reasons. Interlibrary loan systems are costly, as is shipping materials between lending and borrowing libraries. Librarians also must be paid to sort and fill loan requests. Some libraries, like Purdue University, have opted to reduce interlibrary borrowing or not use interlibrary loan at all, finding it cheaper to purchase the materials outright rather than spend precious resources on an item the library is not even allowed to keep (Anderson et al., 2002).

For a library to provide interlibrary loan service, it must first have a platform from which to administer the service. Some platforms, like OCLC ILLiad and Clio, have already been discussed. These platforms can be expensive; OCLC, for example, charges an institution between $2,410 and $6,025 each year for service, depending on the number of requests to borrow materials the institution sends out each year. In addition, there is a $2000 charge for training librarians on the system (“Standard fee structure,” n.d.). Clio, a Microsoft Access-based interlibrary loan system (“Clio Software | Products,” 2010) also has a pricing structure that is based on the number of interlibrary loan requests. The initial purchase price is between $3,500 and $4,500, and it costs between $1,500 and $2,000 to maintain on an annual basis (“Clio Software | Pricing,” 2010). Libraries that do not often use interlibrary loan or choose not to offer the service on a large scale can use delivery software platforms, which are still rather expensive. Ariel costs $1,295 for the newest version available. Upgrades from older versions range from $695 to $945. A limited version that can only receive documents will cost a library $795, and $425 to $645 for upgrades. This does not even include the subscription fee, which is...
$498 for the full version and $298 for the receive-only one. It is also worth mentioning that Ariel can only be placed on one computer. Should a library want to place the program on more than one terminal, they must buy the program again. However, Infotrieve, the company producing Ariel, will take pity on these poor institutions and give them a discount after ten copies are purchased (“Ariel Pricing | Infotrieve,” n.d.).

The librarians that administer these expensive systems must also be paid. A beginning librarian’s average salary in 2007 was roughly $45,000 (Grady, Davis, & Bragg, n.d.). At that salary, a librarian working 40 hours a week for 50 weeks out of the year earns $22.50 per hour. Each minute worked earns him or her 37.5¢. If it takes a mere five minutes to process and send a requested book or article, the library has already spent almost $1.88. Processing returned or received books also costs money in the form of a librarian’s time. In most cases, it is likely that it will take a librarian longer than five minutes, costing the lending library even more money. If the item is a book that is being shipped, it must be packaged as well. It costs 44¢ to mail a single letter (“USPS - The United States Postal Service,” n.d.); a book, particularly a heavy book, will cost much, much more. Thankfully, electronic copies of articles do not cost anything extra to send, as long as the library loaning the article does so properly, within copyright law. A 1997 study found that, on average, it costs a lender $9.48 total to loan a book through interlibrary loan. The borrower, to receive, process, and return the book, averages a cost of $18.35 (Anderson et al., 2002).

The average costs of interlibrary loans are steep because of all of the work that must go into processing them. Even with the advanced and automated technology that we have at our disposal, it is still expensive. Some libraries, to offset this cost, charge a fee to libraries wishing to borrow from them. This is their right; a library can charge whatever it feels is necessary to deter or otherwise limit requests. It is when libraries take advantage of the system to meet their needs without reciprocating that these charges, among other issues, become a problem.

Reciprocity is a sensitive issue. Libraries do not appreciate being called “weasels” (Morris, 1999), but some of them simply are. These libraries charge lending fees to other libraries, but only borrow from libraries that do not charge such fees. They may also borrow many more items than they loan, turning away requests because they lack the money or staff to fill requests. Some libraries may even borrow from other libraries, but refuse to lend altogether. This behaviour is unethical; these libraries are taking more than they are giving to the interlibrary loan system. If a library cannot afford to lend as much as it borrows, it ought to cut borrowing (Morris, 1999).

Ideally, the borrowing to loaning ratio should be roughly one to one. This means that for every book borrowed, one is loaned out. Libraries that do this are doing their part to ensure fairness between libraries. Those libraries that have low borrowing rates to high loaning rates are going above and beyond the call of
duty, supplying materials to patrons that they have no technical obligation towards. The borrowing to loaning ratio can be slightly misleading, however. If a library borrows a high number of books, but only lends a low number, it can be indicative of the aforementioned low moral standard. However, if the library only receives a low number of requests and fills them all, it is not unethical. A library cannot lend books that no one asks to borrow, and as long as no request goes unfilled, the library should continue to borrow as it sees fit (Morris, 1999).

There are also debates regarding access to materials. Interlibrary loan is often relied upon to fill gaps in a library collection; many small libraries depend on interlibrary loan to get current and varied materials for their patrons. Other libraries’ holdings are also used to gauge what a library should purchase. If a large number of libraries in a consortium have a certain title, then perhaps an alternate library with the same consortium would not need to purchase the title if it is readily available (Walters, 2006). But issues arise when certain libraries do not participate in consortiums or try to control other libraries instead of cooperate with them. There are some libraries out there that do not play well with others; these libraries, often large ones, do not wish to share resources with smaller libraries, be the resources financial or material. These libraries feel that they are not obligated to work with other libraries, and turn the noble art of providing information to citizens into a corporation or business (Berry III, 2005). Libraries, as a general whole, understand that there is a higher mission than turning a profit; indeed, university presses are coming to realize this and are making efforts to continue providing new information to educate the public. But as has already been noted with the costs of interlibrary loan, it would not come as a surprise to see more libraries turning to this sort of self-preservation in an effort to weather the current recession.

Fortunately, there have been many libraries and librarians that have had an opposite reaction to the various monetary crises. In recent years, the open access movement has gained momentum. Open access is a new concept, enabled by the Internet and cooperation of authors. It is also “digital, online, free of charge and free of most copyright and licensing restrictions” (Suber, 2008). Open access (OA) provides material on two platforms; the first is through open access journals, and the other is through open access archives and repositories. Publishers of OA journals operate very simply; they provide peer review, manuscript preparation, and server space. Beyond that, their expenses are few. There is no printer or distributor to pay, and the publishers do not have to sign a contract with a database provider like EBSCO to get the journal into the hands of the public. These expenses are taken care of by the fees that authors or the authors’ affiliated institutions pay in order to be published. It is even easier for authors to publish with OA archives; the authors must merely upload their work themselves, without paying a fee. However, these archives are not always peer reviewed, and many contain unfinished works in progress (Suber, 2008).
These unfinished works are potentially disastrous for those relying on them for correct information (Morrison, 2006).

However, there are many obstacles impeding the growth of open access. First, many authors and their institutions do not want to pay the aforementioned fees to publish (Guterman, 2004). Also, publishing is tied very closely to promotion and tenure in university settings (Markey, St. Jean, Rieh, Yakel, & Kim, 2008); many authors fear that the quality of OA journals is not as high as standard publications, and do not publish in them because they do not want to risk losing their professional positions (Xia, 2007). Some even fear that putting work on OA platforms invites plagiarism, in part because authors usually must waive copyright when submitting items. Many authors wish to retain ownership of their intellectual material and feel that it is safer in a non-OA journal (Behrnd-Klodt, 2008). However, there is evidence that more authors are opening their minds to publishing in OA journals. OA journals are growing in number, and some prestigious universities, such as Harvard University, are now requiring that their faculty publish their research in these journals (Guterman, 2008). There may come a time when all scholarly material is published online without restrictions to its perusal (Nowick, 2008). This may, as some argue, result in the elimination of interlibrary loan (Morrison, 2006).

Even though the OA movement is still gaining momentum, electronic publishing as a whole has become an integral part of libraries, and of interlibrary loan. Electronic publishing invades the lives of students in many different ways; they access databases that hold digital copies of journal articles and books, and they can find vast amounts of information on various web pages. Interlibrary loan systems deliver electronic copies of materials that students require, when the library itself does not have a subscription to the journal (Allen, 2008). Interlibrary loan is also responsible for converting print pages to electronic; at our own University at Albany, a student can request that an article held in print be scanned and delivered as a PDF. Electronic books and textbooks are slowly making their way onto the stage as well (Pellé, 2009). These items are very valuable for many reasons, chief among them their portability. Many students can access these materials simultaneously and distantly, courtesy of the Internet. And for those who are worried about the delicate state of our planet, electronically published materials are environmentally friendly.

However, one thing that many people forget about electronic publishing is that online access is not equivalent to free access. Libraries must still purchase subscriptions to digital journals and monographs, and these subscriptions can cost as much if not more than print subscriptions. A survey of academic libraries in 2004 found that they spent more than half of their acquisitions budgets on electronic materials (Allen, 2008). Embargoes also exist on many items, specifically to buoy sales of print collections. These embargoes delay the release of materials to online databases for specific period of time, forcing libraries to have
print versions on hand for patrons to use until the embargo period is complete (Brooks, 2003). This also assumes that a library’s patrons have access to computers and other machinery necessary to access electronic materials. Broadband Internet access is not universal by any stretch of the imagination. Roughly ten percent of Americans are living in places where broadband infrastructure does not exist; of the ninety percent that do, 37% of them do not subscribe for reasons of price or inability to operate a computer (Bleed, n.d.). And only a tiny portion of the population owns an electronic book reader, like the Kindle or Nook (Pellé, 2009). Some universities have distributed Kindles to students, but these experiments have met with limited results as students found them cumbersome and blind students were unable to use them at all (Young, n.d.). A boycott is in effect at a number of universities until this design flaw can be corrected (Reisinger, n.d.).

**Conclusions**

The issues presented above would seem to construct a solid argument for the eventual disappearance of interlibrary loan. It is monumentally expensive and some libraries choose to take advantage of other libraries within the loan system. Open access journals are growing in number, and electronic publishing is also increasing. But for many of the same reasons, interlibrary loan will not be vanishing any time in the near future. Until long strides are made in any one of the four issue areas, the convergence of these circumstances will result in a continued need for interlibrary loan services.

Open access and the idea of the freedom of information have been around for quite some time; in fact, university presses were established with intent of distributing information to the general public for little or no cost (Givler, Abel, & Newman, 2002). However, scholars have clung to the copyrights of their intellectual property. Mandates by some universities requiring affiliates to publish in open access journals have had some effect (Guterman, 2008), but this reluctance will take many years to be fully overcome. Commercial presses, on the other hand, have always had dollar signs in their eyes. Even if all scholars were to provide their research results free of charge, there is still a vast amount of literature being produced that will require payment to access. Textbooks are but one example of this; any college student is aware of the disgustingly high profit made by textbook publishers. Not all professors are going to be able to rely on articles to thoroughly explain course material, and textbooks will continue to be a source of restricted, paid-access-only material. Other materials, though they may not be scholarly in nature or even informational, items of popular fiction, children’s books, and multimedia items such as DVDs will still be requested. Though on a smaller scale, and most likely within small regional public library systems, items will always need to be transferred from one library to another. Interlibrary loan may be reduced by open access, but it will not be eliminated.

Electronic publishing will not extinguish interlibrary loan either. It has already been shown that a large percentage of the
American public does not have access to broadband Internet; until legislation is passed that makes broadband Internet a fundamental right, as in the case of Finland (Stross, n.d.), some people will still need a physical method of delivering needed materials. Books, especially those produced by commercial publishers, are also slow to move to the electronic front. Digital electronic book readers have not become as popular as their creators thought they would be by now, and as such, books will continue to be made of paper rather than bits and bytes for the foreseeable future. Additionally, these materials cannot be transmitted over the Internet, so interlibrary loan will have to suffice for the time being.

Cost is another issue that must be addressed. Interlibrary loan software is quite expensive; this is not in doubt. But there are many different cost-cutting techniques available. One only has to troll EBSCO’s Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts to find a number of strategies that can reduce the time and money that librarians spend on processing interlibrary loans. It can be argued that cutting out loans and the librarian to process them is the best money-saving tactic; however, this could prove to be difficult. Purchasing items instead of borrowing them still requires spending money, and it also requires space to store the items. An increase in materials, as well as increases in open access and electronic publishing, will still require a librarian to assist patrons in sorting through the colossal assortment of information. As for reciprocity issues, librarians should simply stop accommodating the weasels. They will get the message quickly enough, should lending libraries no longer allow themselves to be manipulated.

Should any sort of breakthrough be made in one of these areas, we may see interlibrary loan play a diminished role. But until all publishing is online, digital, and openly accessible, and all people have broadband Internet access, library patrons will continue to use and pay for library services, including interlibrary loan.
References


