A scheme to improve the international inter-library loan service in the National Library of China

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Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to propose a scheme to promote and improve international interlibrary loan (ILL) service at the National Library of China (NLC). The NLC is the center for international ILL in all of China, but as user needs change in response to the rapid development of information technology, it is necessary to investigate how to recast the international ILL service of the NLC.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper uses a systematic case study approach. First, a brief introduction to international ILL practice in the NLC is given. Second, issues that concern request communications, copyright and payment methods are analyzed. Next, a scheme to modernize and improve international ILL is proposed as a response to the aforementioned problems. Finally, new challenges to international ILL are analyzed.

Findings – The NLC should make the following efforts to improve international ILL service: enhance and expand the number of request transmission methods, update the legacy ILL and document delivery system, create a Chinese interlibrary loan alliance and fashion more reasonable copyright and payment policies. In addition, it should foster sustained innovation to meet the ongoing challenges to international ILL in the information age.

Originality/value – This paper offers practical solutions for Chinese libraries engaged in international ILL activities.

Keywords China, Interlibrary loan, Interlending, Document supply, International interlibrary loan, National Library of China

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

With increased access to faraway databases and resources, more and more patrons are requesting materials that are found only in foreign libraries today (Hilyer, 2006). International interlibrary loan (ILL) service has become the most common resource sharing activity between libraries around the world (Atkins, 2009; McGrath, 2009). The National Library of China (NLC) is the largest library in Asia and as such it holds one of the largest and richest collections of Chinese literature and historical documents in the world. International ILL has more than 50 years of history in the NLC. As the nation’s center for international ILL, the NLC plays an important role on behalf of China. International ILL service is a critical part of document delivery in the NLC. It meets all the information needs of domestic and overseas users by combining traditional reference skills and advanced information and network technology. To date, the NLC has also formed partnerships with 557 libraries in 117 countries and regions for the exchange of publications.

The Document Delivery Centre (DDC) in the NLC leverages the huge collections and well-trained library staff to provide international ILL service to patrons. International ILL is divided into two parts: incoming requests from overseas users (ILL lending) and the outgoing requests from domestic users (ILL borrowing). Libraries around the world can request loans, while all users can request document delivery. Meanwhile, the DDC also offers an inquiry service, or forwards inquiries to related departments in the NLC. Loans are sent via airmail, and documents can be delivered via airmail, Ariel or email. Domestic users may request only those documents that are not available from the resources of Chinese libraries. This requires a check of the union catalog before requests to international ILL suppliers are submitted. An order is then accepted on a special form, either printed or electronic.

The Interlibrary Loan and Documents Delivery System (ILDDS) has been in operation since 2009. This system complies with ISO 10160 and 10161, which are the Interlibrary Loan Application Service Definition and Application Protocol, respectively [1]. The international lending and borrowing modules are integrated into this system so as to provide the international lending service, and international ILL requests can usually be completed within one to two days. Meanwhile, the scope of international ILL...
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performed by the NLC is expanding around the world. So far, the NLC has established ILL cooperation with the British Library, OCLC, the National Diet Library, SUBITO and Russian State Library. The NLC has more options to choose from among documents providers, resulting in decreased costs for international ILL requests.

Data collected from the ILDDS demonstrate the trend of international ILL in the NLC, as shown in Figure 1. It shows that international lending requests have been steadily increasing while there has been a great increase in the number of international borrowing requests since the ILDDS was established in 2009. Generally speaking, fulfillment rates for international ILL have been maintained at a high level, about 85 per cent, in recent years. It should be noted that borrowing requests have increased greatly since the NLC became a member of OCLC in 2010, while borrowing fulfillment rates decreased greatly in 2012 because the NLC began to remodel the main building and closed the lending service for some literatures at that time.

Issues for international ILL in the NLC

International ILL has remained a persistent topic in the NLC. With the rapid development of information technology – for example, the Internet of things, mobile connectivity, big data and cloud computing – libraries and library users can easily identify resources from all around the world. This ease of discovery raises new issues for international ILL. To enhance and improve the internal ILL services of the NLC, issues that concern request communications, copyright and payment methods are analyzed.

Request transmission methods

Traditional methods like fax, phone and mail are still used in the international ILL service, but fewer requesters choose these methods because of the longer delays for borrowers. Since NLC joined the OCLC WorldCat Resource Sharing (WCRS – now known as OCLC WorldShare) and began making its collections discoverable through this global ILL platform, overseas patrons have employed OCLC, direct email or ILDDS to send international ILL requests to the NLC. Meanwhile, ILDDS is an important request communication avenue for some international users, such as non-OCLC users or non-English speaking users. Note that the ILDDS lacks interoperability with the ILL systems of the most preeminent international libraries, although the system was designed specifically to comply with ISO 10160 and 10161 which was intended to facilitate exactly this type of system interoperability. To make international ILL more efficient, it is critical to increase and enhance the request transmission methods with libraries around the world.

Copyright

Copyright is a form of protection provided by the laws of a country to the authors of “original works of authorship” including all intellectual works (Hilyer, 2006). This protection is available to both published and unpublished works. The NLC has placed increasing emphasis on copyright in recent years. ILL regulations of the NLC hold that the copyright agreement must be signed before a request can be submitted by any organization or individual. The primary elements of the copyright agreement set responsibilities and obligations between a requestor and a responder. Compared with the copyright policies and declarations employed by the British Library or other libraries and library organizations, the language of the NLC agreement lacks clarity and precision. Therefore, the NLC should clarify its copyright policies and procedures to address copyright more effectively.

Payment methods

The NLC provides several payment options to international borrowers, such as invoicing, credit card payment, IFLA vouchers and postage. Note that the overseas users have more payment options than domestic users. For example, overseas users can pay online via PayPal, which is a more convenient and secure payment platform. In addition, they can use the ILL Fee Management (IFM) feature of OCLC WorldShare Interlibrary Loan to pay for materials from the NLC. However, domestic users have fewer choices for paying resource sharing charges. They can use cash, invoicing, credit cards, or postage. It is important to address an easier and more flexible mechanism to pay for international ILL charges.

Proposed scheme

It is critical to develop the international ILL service to best meet the increasingly diverse user needs. This scheme to improve the international ILL service provided by the NLC is proposed as a response to the issues in the heading of “Issues for international ILL in the NLC”.

Enhance request transmission methods

The NLC should seek to expand the number of request transmission methods it uses. This issue exists in both the traditional ILL system and direct borrowing systems as well. In today’s information society, an automatic and comprehensive ILL and document delivery service should make its collections accessible through as many request channels as possible for international ILL, which may result in improved fulfillment rates. The prevalence of cooperative collections in China facilitates responses to requests for Chinese information materials from all over the world.

Update the interlibrary loan and document delivery system

It is obvious that a total ILL system can provide all of the functionality that international lending departments and

Figure 1 ILL borrowing and lending request volume and fill rate in the NLC

![Figure 1 ILL borrowing and lending request volume and fill rate in the NLC](image-url)
library users expect to have in today’s networked environment; therefore, the NLC should update its international ILL system to include state-of-the-art functionality and interoperability. First, online components that allow almost all interactions between staff members and users should be added to the ILDDS, as it currently houses the essential functions to manage international ILL. In light of the rapid development of the mobile connectivity, the online components must be able to support interactions between staff members and mobile users. Additionally, the ILDDS should be seamlessly blended into the NLC’s Web site to supply all of the international ILL features users wish to have, such as automatic acquisition of electronic documents and online payment. It should be noted that the ILDDS should bolster the interface to interconnect with systems used by other libraries in China and by prominent libraries around the world. This interconnectivity and interoperability with those libraries can strengthen channels of request communications. Requests from all over the world can be deposited directly into the database for staff processing, and unmediated forwarding of requests to other libraries can be provided if desired. Furthermore, new information security and image processing technology should be employed to develop an improved document delivery module to support a controllable file output.

Create Chinese interlibrary loan alliance
Current ILL and document delivery practice in China demonstrates an urgent need to create an alliance for ILL for Chinese documents. The online catalog for Chinese collections and library holdings is also created based on the alliance. The alliance will enhance request communications and improve the breadth and depth of institutional support. It is certain that international ILL activity will benefit from library-to-library cooperative relations in this alliance.

Copyright policy
The NLC has been committed to respecting the needs of authors and copyright owners to obtain a fair economic return on their intellectual property. It supports effective enforcement of copyright, and plays a crucial role in controlling as well as facilitating access to the increasing number of domestic and overseas information resources. The key to making a perfect copyright policy is that it can not only give strong and effective protection for the interests of rights holders, but also provide reasonable access to information resources. Foremost, the NLC should promote awareness of copyright protection among library users. It is critical to develop a series of systematic regulations for copyright protection, including the agreement, declaration, copyright form and payments, so that the types and scopes of the copyright coverage are defined more clearly. In fact, the NLC has been learning from the advanced practices of preeminent libraries and vendors around the world, such as the British Library and OCLC. At the same time, it should be noted that the IFLA guidelines relating to copyright and international resource sharing (IFLA, 2009; IFLA, 2000) must be abided by the NLC. In addition, advanced information technology should be employed by the international ILL system to provide a controllable and secure file output so that the copyright of electronic information resources can be protected very well.

Payment policy
The NLC has endeavored to maintain a reasonable and simple mechanism for charging and payment. Several payment methods are available to requesting libraries, as mentioned in the heading of “Issues for international ILL in the NLC”. Note that the list of international ILL charges is provided on the NLC Web site. As quite a few potential ILL partners do not use OCLC or OCLC IFM, the NLC has been promoting alternatives to pay ILL charges. Requesting libraries may choose any payment option accepted by the NLC. Meanwhile, the NLC has been focused on creating more reciprocal ILL agreements with selected overseas libraries whereby each library need only pay for its part of the shipping. In addition, there is a trend to incorporate fee payment into the request system. This requires that the system must be able to provide an interface with an online charging system.

Challenges and innovation
In the current information age, libraries of all types have been profoundly transformed by the rapid development of computer, communication, networking and other information technologies. They are undergoing drastic changes. Users can access library resources at any time and anywhere via the use of diverse devices, such as computers, smart phones and other handheld mobile devices. As a result, requests from international ILL users have grown ever more diverse. They reach out to a wide spectrum of providers, from library collections to all types of resources obtainable from cyber space (Atkins, 2009; McGrath, 2009; Percy, 2013; Baich et al., 2009). They include, but are not limited to, books, serials, digital resources, gray literature and other resources that can be searched via the Internet. The library, as a conduit for information, should play a critical role in meeting a wide spectrum of information seekers (Fagbola et al., 2011). International ILL providers must innovate to meet the challenges. A comprehensive platform incorporating mobile access and searching is essential. The platform should combine micro blogging and instant messaging with Web site access for requesting by and responding to patrons. The architecture of document delivery incorporating mobile access is proposed in Feng and Zhang (2013).

Furthermore, the new role of libraries in this era of information explosion is to be a learning and knowledge center. As a learning organization, the most important mission of a library is to expand the access of knowledge for their users (Fagbola et al., 2011). International ILL requests are changing from traditional document delivery to knowledge delivery. The NLC must face this new challenge to satisfy the wide diversity of requests. It is essential to foster vitally important innovation in the NLC. This may mean not only change in the ILL service itself, but also a redesign of the information resource, regulations and so on. All this will be a long-term, but vitally meaningful, task for every librarian in the NLC.

Conclusion
This paper gives a brief introduction to international ILL service in the NLC, and some issues that hinder the development of that service are analyzed. A scheme to improve the international ILL service is proposed. Finally, a
challenge to international ILL, driven by the development of information technology, is analyzed. The NLC must innovate to meet the challenge. This is a long-term, but vitally meaningful, task for all librarians.

Note

1 Information about the ISO 10160/10161 interlibrary loan protocol and subsequent updates to it may be found at www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/iso/ill/main.htm

References


About the author

Jing'an Feng is an Associate Professor in the Document Delivery Centre of the National Library of China. She received her Bachelor degree from the College of Applied Arts and Science of Beijing Union University in 1998. And then, she has been a librarian of the NLC. She worked as a System Administrator in the Department of Collection Lending of the NLC from 1998 to 2002. Since 2002, she has been engaged in the International Interlibrary Loan service in the Document Delivery Centre of the NLC. In November 2002, she got an IFLA/ALP IT scholarship to go to the Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand to attend a course in the Information Technology for the senior librarians of the developing countries in the Asia-Pacific Region. In July 2007, she went to the Library of Congress of the United States to receive a one-month training course of digital library technology. She has so far published more than ten papers of journals and conferences. Her current research interest is the International ILL Service under the network environment. Jing'an Feng can be contacted at: fengja@nlc.gov.cn

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