On document supply in Ireland and the USA: experiences at the Boole Library, Cork University

Susanna Ashton

Department of English, Clemson University, Clemson, South Carolina, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to compare the Boole Library at Cork University, Ireland with university libraries in the USA in terms of resource sharing and inter-library lending.

Design/methodology/approach – Comparisons are made between Boole Library and university libraries in the USA with reference to lack of funds and resources. The paper highlights the differences in funding of inter-library lending.

Findings – Much could be said about how electronic resources are altering the landscape and future of interlibrary loan, but no media forms have evolved to entirely satisfy readers’ need to handle the physical book in front of them.

Originality/value – One of the remarkable things about the physical book is what a superb technological form it is. Books are both portable and strong. There is still no better way to read lengthy texts. Although more people are requesting articles electronically, the demand for books seems to keep growing apace with the development of shared library catalogs.

Keywords Document delivery, University libraries, Ireland, United States of America

Paper type Viewpoint

Boole Library at Ireland’s University College Cork was not as luxurious as many American university libraries to which I was accustomed. The carpets were worn and the book selection relatively small for such a strong research university.

But the library sure was heavily used. I rarely found a time of day or night when I did not have to squeeze by students chatting on the staircases, and it was often hard to find an open seat.

I was on a Fulbright grant, spending an academic year in the city of Cork as a visiting scholar with the university’s English department. I was there to help teach American literature on a blessedly limited basis, (it is amazing how much more attention you can lavish on students when you have only 12 a semester instead of 85).

The other part of my time was to be spent doing research on the life and work of John Boyle O’Reilly, a 19th-century Irishman deported to Australia for treason who managed to escape to the United States and make a career as a poet, newspaperman, and civic activist. I hoped to spend my year in Ireland compiling and editing his poetry for an authoritative edition of his work.

As research often does, though, my project moved in unpredictable directions. It turned around at a moment when I came to appreciate something very special about my university privileges back home, and even about my American heritage.

My realization came at the interlibrary loan desk. Earlier that day I had received a note informing me that various books I had ordered from other libraries in Ireland and Britain had arrived and were ready for pickup. The librarian brought out 10 books for me, and I handed him my campus identification card, expecting I would check out the books, and that would be that.

Instead, he asked me very pleasantly for 20 voucher tokens. I looked at him blankly and explained that I was a visiting faculty member with the English department and was authorized to check out books. He asked me if the department had given me any voucher tokens for my use and assured me that the departments usually did their best to help faculty members cover their research expenses.

It turned out that he was essentially asking me to pay about $200 in interlibrary-loan fees. My book requests had been neither international nor urgent; I had ordered standard volumes available at standard rates. Yet the university policy was to charge about $20 for each book request.

It had never occurred to me that there would be a fee, which is why I had inadvertently put in a request I could not afford.

Although I discovered later that my host department would gladly have granted me some tokens to help cover the cost, I felt bad about draining its already limited resources. From that point on, I decided to pay my own interlibrary-loan fee or not order the books at all.

Ultimately, I did not request many books I needed, and my research project foundered.

In the weeks that followed, I developed a deep appreciation for the abundance of great bookstores in Ireland, a reflection of a very literate culture. After a brief panic over being forced to change my usual research methods, I also began to rethink my research agenda.

This piece appeared originally in the Chronicle of Higher Education, March 14, 2007 and is reprinted here with their kind permission and that of the author.
In a moment for which I will always be grateful to both the Fulbright program and the Irish passion for literature and storytelling, I turned my work around and spent the rest of the year writing a screenplay about the life of John Boyle O’Reilly – outlaw, poet, and activist.

Local libraries have always been a particularly important but somewhat taken-for-granted part of my life: My mother is a librarian, and I am a scholar with a specialization in the materiality of books, the diversity of print cultures in America, and library history. I should have been well aware of what a precious thing free or cheap interlibrary lending is for virtually every student, scholar, and recreational reader in the United States.

But, like most academics, it had never occurred to me. If anything, interlibrary loan was always a necessity I faced with irritation, hating the prospect of filling out more forms.

I have since learned that interlibrary lending is not free at all but a gift paid for by every American taxpayer. The average American probably does not know it, but interlibrary lending in the United States costs somewhat more than what the University College Cork was charging to cover its expenses.

That adds up to a transaction cost of well over $30 for each volume. Even when patrons at private or public libraries in the United States are asked to pay for the service, the charge is usually minimal and does not go far toward actually offsetting the true cost of the practice. For the most part, libraries silently eat the costs.

The significance of that sacrifice goes largely unnoticed. It is not the sexiest line on a library budget. But there is something profoundly democratic, surprisingly compassionate, and deeply civic in sharing our national resources in this manner.

The monetary sacrifice of the loan, along with the relinquishing of a physical book that represents a considerable investment on the part of the provider library, is even more astonishing during an era in which we hear daily reports about budget cuts to public, school, and research libraries in every state. The American Library Association notes that cuts in library funds that have been announced in libraries in every state. The American Library Association reports about budget cuts to public, school, and research libraries in every state. The American Library Association notes that cuts in library funds of all types have been announced in libraries in every state. The American Library Association reports about budget cuts to public, school, and research libraries in every state.

The system works precisely because it helps everyone. If too many libraries withdraw from the sharing systems because they believe they are incurring more costs than benefits, the system falls apart. Interlibrary lending only works when, in some fundamental way, libraries consider all of us to be their patrons. They must have the foresight and the imagination to see that all knowledge in some way, someday, will serve everyone. What goes around may, both literally and figuratively, come around.

Much could be said about how electronic resources are altering the landscape and future of interlibrary loan, but no media forms have evolved to entirely satisfy readers’ need to handle the physical book in front of them. One of the remarkable things about the physical book is what a superb technological form it is. Books are both portable and strong. There is still no better way to read lengthy texts. Although many people are requesting articles electronically, the demand for books seems to keep growing apace with the development of shared library catalogs.

Michael Gorman is immediate past president of the American Library Association and, until he retired in December, dean of library services at California State University at Fresno. In a recent phone conversation, he told me that while one might think that interlibrary lending is a risky enterprise and that the danger of losing books to irresponsible patrons considerable, the opposite has actually proved true.

“One of the most remarkable things about the interlibrary loan system is that users do tend to treat the books with special care”, he said. “Indeed, damage and loss to interlibrary-loan books is minuscule compared to the damage and loss found with books in regular circulation.”

You might think that all that handling and transportation would damage books out on interlibrary loan, but that is not the case either. Even though patrons are not paying directly for the privilege of use, we evidently treat those books as fragile guests, deserving of care.

Even more heartening is Gorman’s observation that interlibrary lending is “the only professional service I can think of in which the provider pays the cost”. The faith our libraries show in the ability of that service to somehow, someday, contribute to a greater good is remarkable, and yet usually goes unremarked.

The greatest resource sharing our libraries practice is sharing their faith in us.

About the author

Susanna Ashton was a Fulbright scholar to the Republic of Ireland and is associate professor of English at Clemson University in South Carolina. She can be contacted at: sashton@clemson.edu
This article has been cited by:
