Challenges

Difficulties are faced when ILL encounters eBooks in commercial collections, most notably NetLibrary, ebrary, EBL, and Questia, and through research databases, such as Psychology and the Springer eBook Collection. It is with these eBooks that deep concerns surface over user preferences, cataloging, resource sharing settings, accessibility, and “loanability.” As tech-savvy Millennials and others continue to insist on full-text electronic library resources, it seems that the trend within the library community is that eBooks will only grow in importance. Thus, concerns regarding eBooks by ILL departments need to be shared and addressed.

Some patrons still are reluctant to use eBooks. Joyner’s borrowing and document delivery services have begun to receive requests for titles available in our NetLibrary collections. These requests were not made by patrons who had failed to check the online catalog; rather, these patrons had deliberately chosen not to use our NetLibrary eBooks citing as their reasons convenience, access to computers, and health concerns. After canceling such requests because the titles were owned by the library, we began to fulfill the requests for print versions when we realized that our library exists to serve our patrons, that not all patrons can use or want eBooks, and that the ILL code does not prohibit requesting a version of a title that is not owned. Thinking that if we knew which patron groups preferred print books to eBooks or which subjects were frequently avoided as eBooks, we could tailor training and collection development accordingly, I reviewed the transactions but found no trends. What is clear, though, is that while some loathe eBooks, many others have become accustomed to using, often even demanding, e-articles for their research and also are quickly adopting eBooks. Libraries and ILL departments should do all that they can to seek to further understand patron research behaviors regarding eBooks and to meet the format desires and needs of all patrons.

Through OCLC WorldCat and Joyner’s own online catalog, our eBook holdings are discoverable not just by local patrons, but by libraries and individuals worldwide. As such, Joyner ILL lending has begun receiving requests for eBook titles from other libraries. These requests currently must be denied, for our eBooks are locked behind proprietary licensed interfaces that prohibit loans or copying, much like many e-journals are. Not being able to loan or photocopy a class of library materials is not a new problem for interlibrary loan staff, however; there have always been materials that libraries could not or would not loan to other libraries, most often special collections (genealogy, archival papers, etc.) and audio/visual materials. Yet, unlike those items, eBooks are not one-of-a-kind and are not recorded on a medium that can easily be damaged in the mail. What is paradoxical with eBooks, and e-journals for that matter, is that libraries have less latitude to lend from their collections, even as methods of transmitting documents physically and electronically are constantly improving. This restricting trend is dangerous because patrons are able to discover that materials exist outside of the library like never before and then learn that they cannot access the information — further bolstering the popular misbelief that libraries cannot meet the information needs of today’s patrons. Should libraries not take action, our market share will continue to fall to search engines and the commercial vendors to which they connect.