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Back Talk — Library Puzzles

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It was my intent to deal with a single jigsaw puzzle in this space: Do print ownership, interlibrary loan, commercial document delivery, and the owning/leasing of electronic journals fit together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, or are they separate communication technologies that are in combat one with another? But then one of my earlier articles was referred to by **Albert Henderson** (*ATG*, June 1999, p.36). In this case, the puzzle was, should I ignore the words of an apologist for predatory publishing, or should I take the bait and legitimize his thesis by taking it seriously? I decided in the end both puzzles had merit.

So, for the first puzzle. I believe that print ownership, interlibrary loan, commercial document delivery, and the owning/leasing of electronic journals fit together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle: They compliment each other.

To illustrate my point, let's begin with how print ownership and access mechanisms like interlibrary loan and commercial document delivery work together. The two most important elements in this analysis are speed and money. To be successful, the question is, how fast can we afford to bring our patrons and information together? The following graph illustrates this point:

On the other hand, the more limited your resources, the more you need to rely upon interlibrary loan (ILL) or commercial document delivery (CDD) access mechanisms.

Now, since none of us (excepting LC and Harvard perhaps) have enough money to own everything our patrons might need, access mechanisms play important roles in our information delivery plans. The puzzle is, when do we use interlibrary loan and when do we resort to commercial document delivery? Again, speed and money are the key variables.

If you have a lot of money—but not enough to own all the information you need, commercial document delivery is the fastest form of access. However, if your resources are limited, you need to rely upon interlibrary loan. This rule has been clouded by the improved speeds achieved through user-

initiated interlibrary loan programs. But as long as commercial document delivery services are profit driven and interlibrary loan systems are “virtue” driven, I will bet on commercial document delivery services to provide faster service. We further cloud the issue when we claim researchers in some fields don’t care how fast they go from one book to the next. This is sheer nonsense. Time is the major resource researchers own and starting and stopping research is not an efficient or enjoyable use of their time.

For journal articles, this leaves us with the final comparison of electronic journals vs owning print journals, interlibrary loan, and commercial document delivery. Once again, I think it is useful to employ the speed and dollar variables to look at the problem.

While many have looked to the e-journals as the white-hat solution to the fiscal problems faced by libraries, for the present they are more ex-

pensive in every way: They take more time to select, money to purchase (since most of us are still doing print plus electronic), time to process, energy to service, and time and technology to archive (we are still trying to figure out how much it will cost and who will take our money). Yet, as the users of today’s new and improved e-journals can testify, there is nothing like clicking on a reference in an index or on a reference at the end of an article, and instantaneously having the article appear on your screen. This is a new, wonderful research experience.

But e-journals outside of the sciences are still somewhat of a rarity (less so each day), so we still need to own printed journals and use commercial document delivery and interlibrary loan when we can’t afford this luxury.

While speed and money have been the two variables emphasized in this piece, it is not my intent to suggest that we have a poor/slow and rich/fast dichotomy among libraries. Rather, all libraries in various circumstances vary in the degree to which they choose to use their fiscal resources to bring their patrons and information together. Our job as librarians is to figure out when and where to use these complementary information delivery mechanisms.

Now for **Albert Henderson’s** thesis on the ills of academic libraries today. He suggests that libraries have failed to keep up with the growth of information, not because of the predatory pricing policies of commercial publishers, but because (a) universities have failed to support libraries at past fiscal levels because (b) librarians have failed to articulate the information needs of their users. I agree with Albert. **ARL** statistics ably illustrate this deterioration in support. But what he fails to recognize is that these same universities have invested millions in the technical infrastructure that serves as the foundation for our use of digital technology to deliver information. We are living in a different world. We don’t want to just collect printed books and journals—whose expenditure is tracked by the **ARL** statistics he points to so ably. In addition to printed books and journals, we want electronic reference tools, electronic fulltext books and journals, user-initiated interlibrary loan and commercial document delivery, online multimedia, and we want our students and faculty to enjoy all of these and the riches of the Web from their dorm rooms and offices. Mr. Henderson’s quibble is technically correct, but fails to appreciate the whole picture of today’s libraries.

Electronic Journals vs Owning Printed Journals, ILL or CDD