



Evidence Summary

Electronic Journals Appear to Reduce Interlibrary Lending in Academic Libraries

A review of:

Wiley, Lynn and Tina E. Chrzastowski. A. "The Impact of Electronic Journals on Interlibrary Lending: A Longitudinal Study of State-Wide Interlibrary Loan Article Sharing in Illinois." *Library Collections, Acquisitions & Technical Services* 29.4 (Dec. 2005): 364-81.

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Abstract

Objective – To determine the impact of electronic journals on interlibrary loan (ILL) activity. The hypothesis predicted that ILL requests would fall by approximately 10% during a four-year period, that e-journal use would increase by 10% per year and that there would be a correlation between the two.

Design – Longitudinal data analysis of interlibrary loans over an eight year period from 1995 to 2003. The second part of the study is a retrospective data analysis of e-journal use from 2001-2005.

Setting – The 26 largest libraries in the state of Illinois, USA; all but the Chicago Public Library are academic institutions.

Subjects –

1. Journal article photocopy requests originating in the 26 libraries divided into three data sets: 1995/96, 1999/00 and 2002/03.
2. Electronic journal usage statistics from 25 libraries subscribing to packages within the EBSCOhost database for the fiscal years 2001-2005.

Methods –A retrospective analysis was conducted using interlibrary loan data for journal article photocopy requests either originating from or being satisfied by the 26 libraries in the study. It examined the data in three ways: the 26 libraries together, requests sent to libraries in the state of Illinois excluding the 26, and requests using libraries outside the state. The second part of the study examines usage data of

electronic journals available in 25 of the 26 libraries.

Main results – In the period from 1999 to 2003 a reduction in ILL requests of nearly 26% was observed within the participating 26 libraries.

Analysis by broad subject discipline demonstrates that social sciences and sciences show the largest drop in requests – a 25% decrease from 1995-2003. The number of requests from an individual journal title drops significantly in science by 34% within the state and by 37% for out-of-state requests.

While the humanities actually showed an increase in the number of requests, the large increase in out-of-state requests (20.6% overall between 1995 and 2003) slowed significantly with an increase of only 2.6% from 1999-2003 indicating that sources other than ILL are providing articles to this field.

Nearly identical peaks and troughs in ILL requests over the three study periods demonstrate predictably consistent high and low use subject areas.

Use of the e-journals collection was shown to increase at well over 10% per year.

Of the most highly requested ILL titles, 46% were available as e-journals, indicating a significant lack of awareness or inability to access electronic resources among some library users.

Conclusion – The hypothesis that state-wide ILL requests would decline by 10% was far surpassed. Libraries most frequently borrowed titles that were low-use and outside the scope of their collections. Titles requested more than 20 times in each study period were those least frequently borrowed, as well as least requested from outside the state, which demonstrates a cost-effective

use of library resources. This indicates that libraries are judiciously providing access to high-use titles locally. All three data sets included in-state titles requested more than 20 times, as well as 18 titles requested from out of state, suggesting that they should be considered for purchase within Illinois. While access to e-journals appears to have reduced the number of ILLs, there is clearly a need for some libraries to improve the way in which they help their users access the collection.

Commentary

The authors take a popular view – the more e-journals, the fewer the ILL requests – and place it under a bright spotlight. This is the third article the authors have published on the subject, all of which examine the developing picture in Illinois, so they are clearly very familiar with the territory. Broadly speaking the hypothesis is upheld and ILL requests do drop significantly. This is in line with similar, previous studies. In Miami, the Louise Calder Memorial Library experienced a drop in interlibrary loan activity of over 30% in a five year period following the increase in availability of e-journals (Burrows).

While it is reassuring when research upholds our professional instincts and observations, does this study actually provide the evidence to uphold its conclusions? While a great many of the authors' conclusions are likely, they themselves state "It is not possible to definitively correlate the predicted statewide reduction of ILL requests to specific holdings of electronic full-text journals" (367). Certainly the two coincide, and are *probably* related, but we are never presented with hard and fast evidence to that effect.

It is important to remember that much of the research into collection management is very

context-specific, and to date the majority of the evidence comes from case studies. As with this article many of the case studies are university-based, and if approaching the article from outside academia it will probably not take long for the “Yes, but...” factor to come into play. The users of university libraries are likely to be engaged in active research with a clear goal and to be reasonably familiar with electronic resources. Yet if 46% of the most highly requested journals are available as e-journals, and they are not being accessed electronically by university users in this study, what are the chances of the more casual library user getting to grips with the demands of electronic access?

The reason interlibrary loans are dropping in this study is likely that the users are finding the full-text for themselves. The importance of links between bibliographic databases and full-text e-journal collections is also emphasised here and the authors rightly call for us to provide a more connected service to our users in terms of e-journals and databases: “libraries often represent aggregations of journals together as a package, not splitting out individual titles and therefore making them nearly impossible for patrons to find” (378). Research has shown that online journal collections without links from bibliographic databases demonstrate lower levels of use (de Groote).

There are a great many charts, figures and tables, and graph fatigue does set in after a while as the brain struggles to interpret the information being presented. At times the results are confusingly laid out and you are obliged to flick back and forth through the pages, jumping from table to chart to graph and attempt to marry them to the text in order to keep up. Time and again the authors present these statistics suggesting that there is a link between the two, but that evidence is not present.

What I continue to struggle with, even after repeated reading, is Section 6 detailing the analysis of the electronic journal access. Are the e-journal titles selected by the libraries or a pre-packaged bundle provided by ESBCOhost? While the latter seems likely this is not explicit in the article. Several readings in and I am still not clear quite how the authors arrive at some of the figures in this section on e-journals. What exactly are the 7300 access points they refer to here? I longed to be part of an audience to ask questions for clarity.

A recently published study provides useful complementary reading, exploring similar themes around the impact of e-journals, but this time within the healthcare setting of the UK’s National Health Service (NHS) and well away from universities (Crudge). Among the conclusions is that at present the national NHS e-journal collection – a pre-packaged bundle – does not meet the current awareness reading needs of healthcare staff. While the e-journal collection does include many high-impact factor titles, there is a very real need for the local print holdings in libraries to supplement this in order to meet the needs of staff.

So while the authors present a great deal of food for thought, do they actually present us with evidence? Well, it does seem...very likely...probably...?

Works Cited

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