



Evidence Summary

Inter-Library Loans and Document Supply Services in Italy Appear to Supplement Journal Subscriptions Rather Than Replace Them

A Review of:

Bernardini, E., & Mangiaracini, S. (2011). The relationship between ILL/document supply and journal subscriptions. *Interlending and Document Supply*, 39(1), 9-25. doi: 10.1108/02641611111112101]

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Received: 23 May 2011

Accepted: 23 Oct. 2011

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Abstract

Objectives – To examine patterns of Inter-Library Loans and Document Supply (ILL) in a large network of libraries over a period of five years, in order to establish whether ILL services are being used to replace journal subscriptions. The authors also aimed to establish which journal titles were most requested in their network, to inform future acquisitions policy.

Design – Longitudinal study using transactional data collected from the Italian Network for Inter-Library Document Exchange (NILDE) for the period 2005-2009.

Setting – The Italian library sector.

Subjects – Member libraries of NILDE, which is the largest ILL network in Italy with several hundred libraries. These consist primarily of university libraries, but also hospitals and health research institutions, public research institutions, and not-for-profit and public organisations.

Methods – ILL request data collected from the NILDE network software were analyzed. Figures were retrieved for the number of different journal titles requested per year of the study overall and by individual institution.

Further analysis was undertaken on requests for more recent articles, those published up to five years prior to being requested. This involved creating a list of the most requested titles for each year, and then compiling a core collection of journals that were requested 20 or more times in each year of the study. These core titles were analyzed for trends by subject and publisher, and for any significant correlations between either Impact Factors (IFs) or citation counts and ILL requests for particular journals.

Main Results – The data revealed that the number of ILLs processed through NILDE increased every year during the period of the study. The majority of journals were only requested a small number of times in the five year period of the study, with 60% being requested five times or less. In the majority of instances, institutions were not borrowing the same title regularly. Analysis of the core collection of journals revealed that these repeated requests of the same title were mainly in the biomedical sciences and science and technology subject areas, and that these journals were often produced by smaller publishers who were not included in consortia purchasing. There was no correlation between journal impact factors (IFs) and ILL requests, but there was a statistically significant correlation between citation counts and ILL requests.

Conclusions – ILL numbers are increasing despite big deals and consortia purchasing. The majority of requests are for articles that are two years old or older, and the authors suggest that this indicates that ILLs do not influence journal subscriptions. The authors suggest that ILLs may have increased during the course of the study (and may continue to do so) due to the current global financial crisis and its impact on library acquisitions.

Commentary

This article adds to an established body of literature on the topic of ILL and its impact on

journal subscriptions. It follows on from an earlier study about the NILDE network of libraries in Italy, which the authors state is the most popular ILL network in Italy. The data set is large, covering tens of thousands of ILL requests over a five year period, which lends a great deal of weight to the study. Data for the study were anonymized, so individual libraries could not be identified. Many of the observations the authors make are interesting, such as the predominance of science and technology and biomedical sciences titles in the most requested journals, and a large proportion of requests being for journals from small publishers. There are some good applications for the Italian library community, such as using the data to inform national acquisitions policy. The published literature backs up many of the findings, and the authors make good suggestions for further work, such as investigating the impact of the global recession on the situation regarding ILL and journal subscriptions.

There are difficulties, however. The conclusion that ILLs do not have an impact on journal subscriptions is extrapolated from a range of factors, such as the number of requests per journal and the age of the article requested. While each factor is clearly referred to in the results, they could have been drawn together more effectively in the conclusions section. As it stands, readers may be confused by the seeming contradiction between the conclusion based on the large proportion of ILL requests for articles that are two years old or older, and the reported annual rise in requests for newer articles. Another confusing element is that the authors make no mention of their hypotheses at the beginning of the article, which are then referred to in the results.

Overall, the scale of the study is impressive, and the authors mention some practical ways in which the results have impacted practice in the Italian context, such as in journal subscription negotiations. The study also leaves plenty of room for further work in the area. Future work

could use a mixed-methods approach to investigate the perceptions of acquisitions librarians about this topic. Given the strength of its methodology, this study should be replicated in future years, and in other contexts, in order to keep track of changes in the field over time.