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The something service: on calling interlibrary loans interlibrary loans

Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)

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There is a department at the London School of Economics (LSE) Library which lends and delivers items from the library's collections to other libraries throughout the UK and internationally, as well as locates and borrows items from collections across the globe to support research activity free of charge to the school's students and academic staff. This department is a busy service which, at the time of writing (June 2013), is staffed by two full-time library assistants and one senior library assistant. In addition to their department's core activities, these library assistants spend time contributing to various user services such as staffing the membership desk, help desk, service counter and supervising the archives reading room. For the period June 2012 – June 2013 the department successfully received just under 4,000 items from other libraries and lent just under 3,000 items from its own. This department, which borrows and lends books and receives and delivers articles and book chapters, calls itself the IDD, or Interlending and Document Delivery, department.

At least it calls itself that when officially advertising its service on the library's webpages, posters and flyers. However in email correspondence, and especially when interacting with users of the library at its various service points, members of the IDD team as well as other library staff regularly and automatically interchange IDD with "interlending", "ILL", or "interlibrary loans"; the latter particularly when we are thinking in nouns rather than verbs. There may be ILLs or interlibrary loans on the shelf but one obtains them through the IDD process. Or at least they should, when we are not accidentally calling it interlibrary loans, ILL, interlending, or throwing in a sneaky hyphen.

Multiple names for the same service leads to a confusing situation for our user base. It dilutes what the service is and reduces its visibility. Whilst the department at LSE is looking at ways to increase its presence within the range of services that the library offers, I would argue that such a confusing situation is not unique to LSE but a global problem where the

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activity of borrowing, lending, supplying and delivering within a digital environment is not quite sure how best to describe itself. Perhaps 90% of the issue here is down to advertising and the degree of success in integrating interlibrary loans into a range of services that a library can provide. But let's explore that 10% of the problem: the global un-consensus over what to call ourselves. As the prospect of 'lending' electronic material directly to users starts to become reality, should we look at calling ourselves something else entirely?

As a service, interlibrary loans is a complicated thing. From its historical development as a serviced that borrowed print, we have now reached a hybrid stage where it continues to do this in addition to e-lending. In addition to this, not all libraries are uniform in providing jthe same service. Some departments will choose not to lend their collections as they do not have sufficient resources available. Interlibrary loan departments within library office structure is also often varied due to the unique nature of the service. It could be a service that is part of collection development, circulation, research support, or an ad hoc activity carried out by liaison librarians.

Because of this confusion, the names of our departments are understandably varied. A quick browse of other UK interlibrary loan departments produces three groups based on broadly similar structures:

Group I: **Inter + Library + Loan**

Group II: **Document + Supply/Delivery**

Group III: **Group I + Group II (Inter + Library + Loan + Document + Supply/Delivery)**

Many of those departments with names following the structure of Group II wereformerly in group I, and changed their name around the same time BLDSC did. LSE formally changed its interlibrary loan department from ILL to IDD in 2004. Some departments chose to retain

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features of their old name, leading to the more accurate (if a little more confusing) hybrid name of Group III.

None of these names adequately convey to a user what the service is. Although "document" fully encompasses the range of material that can be lent or borrowed, it is also a term which is easily misunderstood. I hope this does not sound too over the top by suggesting that it also feels quite cold. Likewise, is "deliver" appropriate when we sometimes "lend"? Is "lend" appropriate when we sometimes give? Is "loan" appropriate when we sometimes have?

It would be great if at this point in the article there would be a great drum roll before a new name for interlibrary loans is revealed that encompassess all the activities of the service in an immediately understandable, one-word phrase to llibrary users. Regretabbly, this moment has not arrived yet. Instead I would like to open up the discussion to other readers of the FIL Newsletter. None of the names I came across including anything about "finding" or "searching", and I would be tempted to reframe the service as an extension of research support rather than using words which describe the physical, administrative process. But what do you think? Does it even matter?

NB: This is the accepted article which was written in January 2013.