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Impact of inter-library loan systems before digitization

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Abstract

Interlibrary loan (ILL) systems served as a fundamental mechanism for resource sharing among libraries before widespread digitization. These systems enabled libraries to extend access to materials beyond their own collections, thus enhancing research support and user satisfaction. This paper examines the nature, processes, challenges, and outcomes associated with ILL operations in pre-digital environments, with a focus on Indian library practices. Using a literature review of studies and professional reports published before 2013, the study identifies the significant impact ILL had on collection access, cooperation among libraries, and user service quality. The paper concludes that although manual operations were laborious and time-intensive, the principles and outcomes of ILL laid a strong foundation for contemporary digital resource sharing.

Keywords: Interlibrary loan, resource sharing, enabled libraries, user satisfaction, pre-digital environments

Introduction

Interlibrary loan (ILL) refers to the formal process by which one library lends materials to another library to fulfill a user's request. Before digitization, ILL was a central strategy for libraries to overcome collection limitations and provide users with access to a broader range of materials. In a time when printed books, periodicals, and special collections constituted the bulk of library holdings, effective resource sharing helped sustain academic research and community learning activities.

In the context of Indian libraries, ILL was especially valuable due to disparities in collection strengths among institutions. Government reports and professional literature before 2013 underline the strategic importance of ILL networks, cooperative agreements, and union catalogs in facilitating access across institutional boundaries.

Literature Review

1. Interlibrary Loan in Pre-Digital Context

Before digital catalogs and electronic communication, ILL relied on manual processes, including correspondence by mail, telephone, and library bulletin boards. The key elements of pre-digital ILL involved:

- Communicating requests through postal mail or fax
- Manual searches in union catalogs
- Physical transport of materials
- Record-keeping in card systems

According to Ranganathan (1981) ^[4], resource sharing through ILL was an extension of the library's service responsibility to meet users' diverse information needs.

2. Indian Perspectives on Resource Sharing

Indian scholars documented the adoption and impact of ILL in academic and public libraries:

- Gopinath (1989) ^[1] emphasized that cooperative networks among Indian university libraries compensated for collection deficits and supported scholarly research.
- Hashim (1992) ^[2] argued that ILL fostered collaboration among institutional, public, and special libraries, enhancing service quality despite logistical challenges.
- Pandey (2006) ^[3] observed that union catalogs were essential tools for ILL operations before digitization and greatly influenced search efficiency.

These studies, conducted prior to the widespread adoption of digital systems, provide insight into how ILL shaped resource availability and library cooperation.

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Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative literature review approach, synthesizing findings from Indian research and professional literature published before 2013. Sources were selected from library science journals, national reports, and conference proceedings emphasizing ILL operations before digitization. The review focuses on key themes: operational processes, challenges, cooperation, and impact on user services.

Findings

1. Operational Processes of Pre-Digital ILL

In pre-digital environments, ILL operated through well-established but labor-intensive steps:

- **Request initiation:** Users submitted ILL requests to their home library.
- **Search and identification:** Librarians consulted printed union catalogs, book lists, or bibliographies.
- **Communication with lending libraries:** Requests were sent by postal mail or telephone.
- **Borrowing and delivery:** Physical materials were shipped through postal services or courier.
- **Tracking and return:** Borrowed items were tracked using manual ledger systems.

Although slow, these processes were systematic and supported by professional standards promoted by library associations.

2. Impact on Library Services

Enhanced Access to Resources: ILL enabled users to obtain books and journals not held by their home library, expanding access to scholarly content. Gopinath (1989) ^[1] noted that many students and researchers relied on ILL to access specialized materials.

Strengthened Library Cooperation: Libraries developed formal and informal networks, sharing acquisition information, union catalogs, and borrowing protocols. Hashim (1992) ^[2] Emphasised that interinstitutional cooperation improved professional communication and collective bargaining.

Improved User Satisfaction: ILL was associated with higher user satisfaction since libraries could meet diverse information needs that would otherwise go unfulfilled. Pandey (2006) ^[3] Observed that even manual processes were appreciated by users for bridging collection gaps.

3. Challenges of Pre-Digital ILL

Despite its benefits, several challenges were widely reported:

- **Slow turnaround time:** Postal delays and manual communication lengthened delivery times.
- **Lack of standardized records:** Manual card catalogs and union lists varied considerably.
- **Resource risk in transit:** Physical materials were prone to loss or damage during transport.
- **Limited reach:** Smaller or isolated libraries sometimes lacked formal networks.

These operational challenges underscore why digital transformation was eagerly anticipated by librarians.

Discussion

The literature indicates that pre-digital ILL played a crucial role in shaping library services and interinstitutional cooperation. Although constrained by technology, the emphasis on resource sharing, professional networks, and user service orientation extended the value of library collections far beyond their physical boundaries.

Indian authors uniformly stressed that cooperative frameworks and shared catalogs mitigated some challenges by enabling better identification of available resources. As Ranganathan (1981) ^[4] articulated in his work on library principles, the responsibility of libraries includes providing users with the widest possible access to information an objective that ILL directly supported.

While digital technologies later streamlined ILL, the foundational principles of cooperation and user-centre services from the pre-digital era continue to inform contemporary resource sharing practices.

Conclusion

Interlibrary loan systems before digitization had a substantial impact on library services by enhancing access to resources, fostering cooperation among libraries, and improving user satisfaction, despite technological limitations. In the Indian context, union catalogs, formal cooperative arrangements, and professional commitment allowed libraries to navigate resource gaps and support scholarly needs. Although manual processes were time-consuming, they laid the foundation for the efficient digital ILL systems used today.

Understanding the trajectory of ILL before digitization not only honors historical practices but also highlights enduring principles of collaboration and service that remain relevant in modern library operations.

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