

Don't Try to Explain Interlibrary Loan  
to Your University President!

June 21, 1976

Number 25

*Few American readers will need to be told that Art Buchwald is among the widest-read and most entertaining of American newspaper columnists. One of his specialties is dialog parody of conversations that must have taken place among eminent personages. This attempt--on a subject whose sometimes ludicrous intricacies I'm sure would appeal to him--is presented with both apology and admiration. What follows is an imaginary dialog between a university president (UP) and his chief university librarian (UL), the latter assisted by his reference librarian (RL).*

**UP:** Now, chief, about the library budget. I see from this report of yours that the average cost of *one* interlibrary loan is seven dollars.

**UL:** That's right. As members of the ARL--Association of Research Libraries--that's the figure we've agreed to use. And it's easily that, if you take into account all the costs involved--professional and clerical labor, machine costs, postage, telephone or TWX, forms and supplies, etc., etc. So even forgetting overhead, it *is* rather surprising the ARL came up with just \$7.00 this time.

**UP:** Yes. Well, I don't know that I really understand interlibrary loan, old man, but I understand seven dollars. I was told last night--by my wife, no less--that there's a company in Philadelphia that gives the same service by phone or mail for only \$3.00 or \$3.50. Why don't you use them? Last year, according to this report of yours, you filled 50,000 interlibrary loans. At seven bucks a shot, that cost us \$350,000. You could have saved 200 grand.

**UL:** You've got to take that \$7.00 figure with a grain of salt. It's not exactly fictitious. I'd say 'useful' would be a better word. Looked at one way, interlibrary loans really don't cost us anything, because we get almost as much as we give. The figure can't be too big, of course, or the others might begin to think of charging *us* what it really costs *them*. But clearly if another library lends us as much as we lend them, then neither of us spends anything on interlibrary loans--over and above, that is.

**UP:** Over and above what?

**RL:** The reciprocal free service, Mr. President. Some requests, of course, *are* troublesome to handle. I've seen them come in on brown-bag paper! You'd never think the person probably got the reference from a computer terminal in the first place!

**UL:** Computerization *has* had an enormous impact on ILL, boss. . .

**UP:** What's ILL?

**UL:** Interlibrary loan, boss. . . . an

*enormous* impact. And we've probably only seen the beginning. Still ILL does give *us* a great deal of free service.

*UP:* The free service is good. I like that. But are you telling me we're going to be having *more* of these ILL's at \$7.00 a crack? I need money for a new dining hall! If we have to keep giving away all these copies just to stay in the library club, why don't you use those people in Philadelphia?

*UL:* Do you mean ISI® ?

*RL:* But they're a profit-making organization!

*UP:* So? Hell, we'd be better off sending all these ILL people \$3.00 and letting them go to ISI. Besides, the lawyers don't like any of this business. They tell me we're violating copyright everytime we do it. You're even encouraging the kids with all those machines you've installed in the stacks. What happens to all those nickels they keep pouring into them, by the way? I could probably build two dining-halls with those nickels!

*UL:* The nickels pay the rent on the machines, boss. As for the copyright business, the lawyers obviously haven't told you about Williams & Wilkins.

*UP:* Wilkins & Williams? Never heard of it. What is it? Some private school?

*UL:* Williams & Wilkins is a publisher. Of scientific journals. About five years ago they decided to sue the National Library of Medicine for making photocopies of articles from their journals without permission.

*UP:* Well then, the lawyers are right.

*RL:* No, Mr. President, the NLM provides free interlibrary loans. It's in their charter. They don't make a profit. Actually, the cost of their free loan averages \$15. But the taxpayers pay for it, like they paid for that hyperbolic paraboloid roof.

*UP:* If I was Director of the NLM, and found my people giving away for nothing something that cost me \$15 per, I'd hope somebody *would* sue to make me stop it. I'm surprised the place has any roof at all.

*UL:* NLM testified that it would cost a fortune to collect royalties from all the people they make copies for--people like us. It would cost the NLM \$5 and more just to collect fifty cents. And, believe me, by GAO standards, NLM is efficient.

*UP:* Why doesn't NLM go to this Philadelphia outfit then? Nobody's going to throw NLM out of the club.

*UL:* Well, you see, if NLM used ISI they might have to charge us for the service we get free now--ignoring the taxpayers' \$15.00, of course.

*UP:* How come this William Wilkins guy didn't try to nail the ISI people?

*RL:* I believe, Mr. President, that the ISI group has an agreement with publishers about this sort of thing.

*UP:* What does he mean, agreement?

*UL:* I believe ISI pays publishers, including Williams & Wilkins of course, a royalty for every copy they sell.

*UP:* You just told me that NLM says it's impossible, or too expensive.

*RL:* As a matter of fact, Mr. President,

the ISI people sell more tear sheets than copies. They actually tear articles out of the journals--as awful as that sounds--and they pay royalties on the tear sheets as well as the copies.

*UP:* It doesn't sound so awful to me. If everybody did enough of it, there wouldn't be all this interlibrary loan copying mess. But you haven't answered my question. I thought it was too expensive to try paying publishers royalties.

*RL:* It's too expensive for NLM, Mr. President, but ISI is a profit-making organization, and they can afford to figure out a way to do it.

*UP:* OK, let's make a deal with NLM. You get them to send you the \$15 it costs everytime we want a loan--hell, you can set up a new group just to grind out loan requests--and then we'll go to this ISI place, pay the three bucks, rake a \$12 profit per, and I'll have the new dining hall!

*UL:* That's a fine idea, boss, but then our users--lots of them faculty, you know--might want us to pass it along.

*UP:* Pass what along?

*UL:* Well, the profit, so to speak. Some of the faculty aren't above asking for a cut in a situation like this. I can just see the phys chem people asking for a piece of the action, or the whole \$12 for that matter, so they can buy stamps from ISI and get around us altogether.

*UP:* Stamps?

*RL:* OATS© stamps. Mr. President.

*UP:* What's he talking about?

*UL:* These ISI people simplify things by selling stamps you can use to pay when you order. They call them OATS--sales gimmick, I believe.

*UP:* What the hell is ISI anyhow?

*UL:* Some wheeler-dealer bunch of smart-assed data-processing pseudo-librarian types who've figured out how to make a profit off the backs of scholars like all of us.

*UP:* Anybody who can "make a profit off the backs of scholars like all of us" must work hard at it, as I have good reason to know. Now, why can't we do this? You've got \$7.00 in that budget for every copy you're going to need, right? You can get the copies for \$3.00 per, right? So, why don't you shake these ILL or ARL or whatever, and save the \$4.00? We'll use it to buy up stock of this ISI thing. And the dividends will pay for the new dining hall!

*RL:* But ISI is a profit-making organization, and we are a non-profit organization, Mr. President.

*UP:* Don't remind me.

*UL:* We can't go getting too cozy with out-and-out for-profit people. Somebody in the legislature would raise a fuss. Besides, there are too many non-profits, like good old NLM and our sister universities, that need our help.

*UP:* All they do is help spend money we usually don't have and have a hard-time getting when we do. They're not helping pay for any dining hall, that's for damn sure. So what if we buy stock in ISI. Let the rest of them buy stock in Xerox or something. Besides, this can be the library's business. You under-

stand? You don't have to publicize it. Just keep giving them copies. They don't care where you get them. This ISI gets more business, we get more dividends, I get my dining hall.

UL: I don't know whether we should really encourage things like ISI with university business.

UP: Why not?

UL: You encourage those people, and then they become more efficient and make bigger profits, and so on. . .

UP: And we get bigger dividends, and you get your copies. So we keep the stock business quiet--what's the problem? Of course, you've got to keep certain people clued in on things like this. They find out, and all hell breaks loose if you haven't let them in on the deal a little. Everybody wants a piece of the action. I'll have to speak to a couple of my presidential buddies, and you plan on getting me to see this NLM Director of yours, but from there on, play it cool. . . Now, before you go, give me that article from *University Management* I phoned you about.

UL: Oh, I'm glad you mentioned it, boss. The issue is at the bindery, but we've been promised delivery in a month.

UP: A month?

RL: The bindery's quite reliable sir.

UP: A month, to get one article?

UL: No, no, just to get the bound volume from the bindery. We can get the article in a week or so by interlibrary loan.

UP: A week or so? And for \$7.00 no doubt.

UL: Well, yes. Or, if you can wait just a little longer--ten days, say--the BLL will get it to us for \$1.50.

UP: Who's BLL. You haven't mentioned them. That's cheaper than these Philadelphia ISI people. What kind of shysters are they?

UL: BLL, boss, is the British Lending Library. It's government subsidized--provides non-profit service, of course.

UP: I won't ask about buying stock in that.

UL: Naturally not, But since they are non-profit, and since the British are broke anyhow, they figure they don't have to pay any publisher royalties. We can get copies of stuff from American journals cheaper through BLL than through ISI.

UP: Just a minute! I can see this BLL place giving all this away to the British, but you mean they fill orders for anybody, even for us?

UL: Oh, yes indeed. And they're very good about it. Prime Minister Wilson was convinced by BLL that it was important for British labor to support British industry as well as American and other indigent foreign scholars. So the British government pays BLL several million pounds every year to acquire all the journals it can.

UP: I'd like to meet the Director of that BLL. I'll bet *he* could show me how to raise money for the faculty dining hall!