

Recent developments in Remote Document Supply (RDS) in the UK – 4

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Abstract

Fundamental changes are required for the British Library to continue to support RDS to HE libraries. A Steering Group has been established to agree and then recommend these changes to the sector. Problems caused by encryption continue to dog RDS processes and innovation, and can be felt in other areas such as digitisation. Switching software appears to offer a short-term solution for RDS, while a longer-term resolution will depend on publishers following the lead of the music industry. For digitisation, Google appears set on exerting tighter control over an ever-increasing amount of content.

Mind the gap

The British Library has been charged with achieving cost recovery for its document supply operation within two years – by March 2011. This isn't going to be easy. Ongoing efforts to streamline processes, by making good use of technology, have ensured that there isn't a lot of slack in the system. With falling demand there isn't the high volume of easy requests to satisfy, but there is an increasing percentage of the more difficult ones. All of which leaves costs as the primary route to achieving this aim. And although the charge for borrowing books is now quite a bit dearer than obtaining an article copy, it nevertheless doesn't match the high cost of lending books, and it is this that is causing the most difficulties. To continue to offer a document supply service the BL would have to increase costs quite dramatically to fill the gap between the income taken and the income that ought to be taken. At the same time the BL doesn't want to increase costs so drastically that customers sharply reduce demand as a result and therefore perpetuate a damaging spiral.

To help resolve this dilemma the BL ran a series of focus groups for HE customers during the summer of 2008 in which a new, subscription-based model was proposed. The six groups were attended by approximately 110 people from 70 institutions. Although a subscription based on transaction levels formed one component of the proposed new model, there was also a desire to continue with accounting for transaction numbers. Certainly in the discussions of the group in which I took part a consensus was soon reached that the top-up layer as outlined in the proposal would prove impractical and cause too many problems, both for customers and for BL. I believe the other groups reached a similar view. However, the idea of a subscription, based on bands of request traffic, with a payment up front at the start of the academic year, and augmented by transaction charges met with general approval.

The focus groups represented the initial consultation phase. A Steering Group was established to take forward the ideas generated and see about implementing a new model for non-commercial document supply, once the BL had considered the feedback and revamped its subscription model. The Group comprises representatives from BL and 13 individuals with interest and experience in RDS from a range of universities. At the time of writing (December) the Group had met once with plans to meet every six months.

The detailed deliberations of the Group are subject to a confidentiality agreement, but there is some news that I can pass on. The subscription bands are based on past and predicted traffic,

with most institutions mapped to one of nine bands. Any institution with such a low level of requests that it fell below the lowest band would continue with transactional payment.

We also looked at the proposed benefits that the BL was offering as part of a subscription package. As well as including the banker function whereby the BL charges and credits customers for document supply between each other, there was the suggestion that much cheaper charges for 2-hour and 24-hour turnaround would be of great benefit. The Steering Group was not persuaded that this would offer a great incentive, preferring the guarantee of future price-capping.

As this is a new model, aimed initially at HE customers, the current model will also continue. However, the prices for the purely transaction-based model will be higher and increases will be steeper than the capped pricing of the subscription-based model. The BL has obviously spent a lot of time in coming up with the banded prices, transaction prices and mapping customers to the new model, showing how, in most cases, institutions would be better off making the move to subscription. If institutions are given a comparison of where they would be now and in the following year, based on whether or not they committed to subscription pricing, and this comparison works in their favour, then making the switch is obviously in their interests. It would also suit the interests of BL to move as many customers over to the new model as possible by cutting processing costs at their end.

Saved the world, but foiled by encryption

Not content with merely solving the problem of the future of document supply, the Steering Group has also looked at the thorny problem of encryption in electronic delivery. Now, solving that little conundrum would be quite something, so you won't be totally surprised to hear that after the one meeting there is still some way to go. The key difficulty however is that encryption is a solution to a problem that doesn't exist – or at least only exists in the mind. I think it's significant that where there is a problem with copyright infringement and loss of royalties – in the music industry – there has been a move away from digital rights management (DRM) in recognition of the fact that it was mostly causing problems for legitimate users, rather than protecting rights holders. If only publishers can make that same step then we'd all be a lot better off. In the meantime we have to make the best of a bad job, and that means overcoming the obstacles that Adobe sets up.

Users will be familiar with the restrictions imposed by the BL's Secure Electronic Delivery (SED) service; however these have not prevented SED from rapidly becoming the BL's most popular delivery mechanism for items. Neither do the fresh body blows which each new version of Adobe's Reader seems to inflict appear to have damaged uptake. But perhaps that is more down to a lack of alternatives or a lack of faith that libraries will be legally covered in using an alternative. Yet in 2009, with a major change to Adobe scheduled, the time may have come to say enough is enough. The Adobe Content Server that the BL uses to encrypt documents will be upgraded from Version 3 to Version 4. This will be done in two phases, with April seeing 3 and 4 running concurrently, and a complete switch completed in September. For users this will mean loss of compatibility with Adobe readers without Digital Editions (ADE). It is essential therefore that customers make the switch to ADE. Thankfully, Adobe will be making available a standalone installer that will enable installation to be done centrally.

The problem of compatibility, and ensuring that upgrades to software do not leave users behind, locked out of documents, has prompted a look at alternatives. If we have to live with encryption we can at least ensure that any solution will have fewer technical complications.

One other area that the Steering Group is looking at is the development of a new system to request and supply documents. With a catchy title of the 'Integrated Request Management and Delivery System' (IRMDS) this will help deliver the requirements of the UK Research Reserve (UKRR) (see below). I mentioned at the beginning the lack of slack in the current system, achieved by the efficiency gains in adopting and developing technology over the years. That isn't to say though that the system cannot be improved further. Indeed, the BL has high hopes that IRMDS can deliver significant savings. And it isn't only at BL that efficiencies can be achieved, for customers should also benefit. The idea is for an interface that will seamlessly connect with existing Library Management Systems as well as with the BL finance systems, providing relevant information to users at much earlier points e.g. costs and availability of items before checkout/invoice.

The UK Research Reserve (UKRR)

The UKRR was established in order to provide a central, conservation grade facility, with at least two alternative locations, for libraries that want to dispose of low-use journals. This has been based on the collections of the British Library at Boston Spa, from which the BL can provide a document supply service.

The project is about to enter its second phase in January 2009. HEFCE announced the award of nearly £10 million in funding in July 2008 in order to open up UKRR to all HE institutions. Prior to that, UKRR sought additional partners to add to the initial six plus BL and named the Universities of Exeter and Newcastle as new members.

The recruitment of a UKRR Manager for the five years of Phase 2, set to take up the post in February, will lead to an invitation for institutions to join UKRR in the summer. Subscriptions will be JISC-banded, with a top tier price of £10,000 annually, and a commitment to five years.

In Phase 1 there was much talk of tying in a subscription to UKRR with changes to the model of document supply. Although the two programmes continue to be linked, the ties seem much looser and developments seem to be running separately. As a subscriber to UKRR an institution will be able to draw on funds to dispose of unwanted journal stock. I'm not convinced such an arrangement will suit every library or whether the recompense for disposal will provide enough of an offset to the subscription fees. But I think enough libraries are sufficiently interested for the second phase to get off to a good start.

Dubious ethics at EThOS

A service that didn't get off to a good start, even with a soft launch, has been the BL's e-theses service – EThOS. Due to launch on 14th October, the online availability of theses was eagerly awaited, not least by those institutions that had had requests for said theses returned, on the basis that they would soon be available electronically. There was a great flurry of activity on the LIS-ILL mailing list at the time from people seeking information and trying to find out what others were doing. It soon became apparent that there was a gap in provision, owing to the delay in an institution making one of its theses available for digitising and the

item becoming available online. Responses posted by BL staff enforced the point that library staff would have to wait for the e-version rather than obtaining a microfilm copy, as this was no longer 'sustainable'.

If this was not bad enough, the full horror of why it was not sustainable soon emerged. Unbelievably, although the BL had copies of theses, it would copy afresh each thesis every time it was loaned and then discard this duplicate copy upon its return. With angry RDS staff storming the electronic barricades and the promises of a service proving illusory, the BL was forced into conceding that a hybrid alternative, supplying microfilms, would be in place temporarily. In December EThOS moved to a beta phase, and the hybrid alternative was removed, but with the proviso that it could be reinstated if required. The end of January should now see the official launch of EThOS.

Move it and lose it

A major programme of moves of BL collections is set to begin in January – details are on a special BL webpage [1]. The last time there was such a huge move, when the St Pancras site opened, a large number of items, including national treasures, went missing, many never to be found (Chittenden, 2005; Giannangeli, 2005). I mention it, not to have a go at the BL, or, not just to have a go at the BL, but because librarians often get very precious when it comes to lending books via RDS. Some concerns may be legitimate but just as often they are rather spurious and exaggerated and, like the fear that leads to inappropriate use of DRM, purely imaginative. Librarians often worry about lending to certain types of library, to libraries in other countries and directly to end users. When I was on the Task Force for investigating a new model for RDS, with the possibility of supplying directly to users, there was great concern that items would probably go missing as addresses change, often without notice; users and the post couldn't be trusted; users may be out at the time of delivery and packages just left in open view, etc. What is overlooked however is that any library that simply permits access to material can expect some loss. Lending inevitably incurs loss, but librarians wouldn't deny borrowing rights to their own users on the chance that something may not come back. Some RDS, and particularly RDS direct to users, is often seen as a rather reckless activity that responsible librarians would naturally shy away from. But the fact that the responsible librarians at the BL, guardians of our national treasure, have nevertheless managed to lose some irreplaceable items should put fears about RDS into perspective.

Reaching the lost

From Sarah Washford's 'Info Junkie' blog [2] I was intrigued to find out about the following service, particularly in the light of the foregoing. Newport City Council has decided to target a traditionally difficult to reach and largely unknown section of the population – non-library users – by offering a service that gives those non-users an opportunity to order books online and have them posted to them. The Book Express service offers 50 books a year from across Newport's libraries and items are sent with a prepaid return bag [3]. There's even an extra service whereby staff will make selections for users, based on favourite authors and titles, and send those at regular intervals.

National service

If ever a UK national lending service is to take off then it will be on the backs of schemes like Newport's and the models of direct delivery from the internet pioneered by the likes of

Amazon. I've already mentioned the work of the Task Force looking at a new RDS model. Well, one of the dreams of that group was the possibility of users borrowing directly from libraries as they do in the U.S., Denmark and the Netherlands. Ultimately, however, costs and technical issues around authentication proved a couple of obstacles too far, but the dream lives on in various forms. One of those is the provision of a national, unmediated loans system, currently being studied by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA).

For some time, we have been promised the publication of a feasibility study. It's yet to happen although it is still scheduled, alongside the public consultation, by the end of February. However, we are told that there is widespread support for such a scheme and that it is indeed feasible, although disappointingly the website of the MLA doesn't refer to it. What we have seen instead is a presentation by David Potts at FIL's Interlend 2008 and a paper by him in this journal (Potts, 2008). The traditional strengths of the current RDS system in public libraries – established processes, an audit trail, agreement between authorities – are outweighed by the disadvantages – staff intensive, charging discrepancies, requires a transport system, can take too long. Furthermore, RDS in public libraries is often a hidden service. An alternative, built around the needs of users, similar to lending schemes for DVDs for example, where users pay for loans and have them shipped to their homes with a prepaid envelope for return, would mark a great leap forward. And it would bring public libraries into line with other organisations that are providing these services.

Potts has outlined how 'Library Loans Online' (LLO), as it is currently called, could work, so I'll just briefly restate the key points – users search a simple, Google-like interface, which is in effect a national library catalogue, and results are presented in a very clear and simplified form, perhaps utilising features that have long been available on Amazon and are now appearing in OPACs – for example pictures of book jackets. Users may use their existing library card to authenticate themselves (and there are MLA plans for a national library card scheme) or by previously registering with LLO. Payments might be made by credit/debit card with libraries then printing off address labels and posting directly to users with a prepaid envelope for returns.

Theoretically this sounds okay and there are examples of similar schemes working in other countries and for book and other media supply services. But the same applied when the Task Force considered connecting users and libraries and we came unstuck with costs as well as the problem of authentication. I would have liked to have seen more detail as well as the feasibility study itself. I would also like to see some prominence given to the project on the MLA website and read progress reports on consulting users and library staff. So, for all the optimism emanating from MLA, this may be a scheme that remains a dream for a while longer.

D2D

Something similar to the above which looks to have more chance of reaching fruition is a partnership between MIMAS and EDINA [4]. Their discovery to delivery project has rather unfortunately been rendered into something resembling text-speak, as D2D@E&M. In this scenario users again undertake the search themselves (via COPAC) and request via a RDS option. COPAC already offers an OpenURL link to libraries' RDS services, typically taking them to relevant web pages, so users can request items – but here users will be able to take that step for themselves within COPAC and have the request forwarded to the RDS section of their home library [5].

The idea is to integrate with libraries' existing RDS workflows, rather than setting up something new and extra to manage. But receiving a submission in email form from a user via COPAC may not suit everyone, particularly if rekeying data is required. Further, although the project will focus on monographs there is a need to be sure that reference, short loan and items out on circulation are not included. Additionally, a user will logically assume that because he has found a copy of a book at one library then that is where he will be getting the book from. RDS staff are not going to suddenly change to requesting from libraries in preference to BL. So, it is not the big step to direct requesting from other libraries but, nevertheless, an encouraging step along the way.

Google - the ties that bind

Although subject to final court approval, Google appears to have settled the copyright lawsuit brought by authors and publishers for the scanning of in copyright books as part of the Google Books Library project. It is the in-copyright books that caused contention as rights holders felt their rights were being infringed. The full settlement has been posted on the web , but if you don't feel like wading through the hundreds of pages then a 23-page summary document produced by the American library Association (ALA) and the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) is also available, as is a one page summary from Google themselves [6], (Band, 2008). If that still seems too much then here are a few essentials, gleaned from these sources, minus the legal definitions, qualifications, obfuscation, exceptions, exclusions, clauses, sub clauses and sub sub clauses.

Google estimates that 70% of published works are in copyright but no longer commercially available, 10% are commercially available and 20% are in the public domain. Google has progressively generous rights depending on which category a book falls into, but rights holders have the option to choose what uses Google can make of their works and request these changes at any time, or even to opt out of any agreement.

Public domain books will be accessible by anyone. For books that are in copyright, but not commercially available, Google will display up to 20% of the text and they will be available for purchase. And for commercially available books there will be a very limited display of pages such as title page, contents and index.

Public libraries and HE libraries will get free, full text access to the not commercially available and public domain books via a special Public Access Service terminal that Google will provide. Additionally, institutions can also subscribe to the database of these works.

The above settlement applies to libraries and users in the U.S. so we'll have to see how it translates to the UK and what the subscription charges will be. A national deal via JISC for HE and FE libraries would seem a logical way to go. But acquiring a Google terminal that's effectively outside the library's control cannot be a strong selling point for any library.

A key point in the ALA/ARL summary document relates to how the Project Partner libraries get to access the works that Google has been scanning. The Google terminal is one component, demonstrating Google's determination to exert total control and track what everyone does. For the partner libraries that will receive digital copies of scanned in-copyright books, Google is insisting that elaborate and, to my mind, inappropriate and excessive, security systems are put in place, with threats of dire legal, and therefore monetary, retribution a consequence of failures, breaches and any action taken by plaintiffs. Yes, we're

back in the DRM nightmare. Oxford University is the only UK partner, and they haven't been scanning the in-copyright works, and may, in addition, be subject to different terms and conditions, but I can't imagine anyone, U.S. or otherwise, rushing to sign up for that deal. Perhaps that's the idea?

Retroconversion – a glass half full?

It looks then as if users may still need to track down print copies in libraries. To help them in this task, a Research Information Network (RIN) report from 2007 highlights what progress has been made in making catalogue records available online [7]. While gains have been made, the report also shows how much more remains to be done (RIN/LISU, 2007). To quote from the report - "librarians estimate that 50% of material in their research collections is now covered by online catalogues, compared with 31% five years ago." So, we're only halfway there. As regards actual quantities of what's still to do, the report estimates that there are six million individual titles in the HE sector, five million in the public sector, and, from 20 selected special libraries, a further six million titles. The total cost across the UK for retroconversion is estimated at £80-100 million.

Snippets from CONARLS

Just a brief mention for a couple of news items emerging from CONARLS [8]. CONARLS is known for running its own RDS scheme, which is cheaper than the BL for supplying books. The first item to note is the merger with The Combined Regions, known for the UnityUK service, due to take place on 1st April 2009 [9]. And the other item is the publication, nearly ten years after the previous edition, of a new guide to the Joint Fiction Reserve (JFR) (CONARLS, 2008). Libraries that participate in the JFR agree to collect new fiction by authors whose surnames fall within an alphabetical allocation. The guide shows how these have been split by area. These items are available for RDS and the guide has updated contact details of supplying libraries.

Fade out

And finally, some news that I think has been on the cards for some time, although no less sad for all that. Long promised but forever delayed (never a good sign) the next generation version of the ILLOS system, ILLOS-NG, will not see the light of day. Jenny Brine of Lancaster University (who produce and support ILLOS) posted the news to the LIS-ILL mailing list in December, reporting that the University was unable to secure enough commitment from current customers to ensure a firm foundation for future development and support. So, by the end of 2009 ILLOS will be no more.

I've never used the system myself, but I've known quite a few people who have worked with it and never heard a bad word said against it, which is quite an achievement for a library system, or indeed any piece of software, and a fitting tribute to those who produced and developed it over many years.

Notes

1 BL collection moves <http://www.bl.uk/collectionmoves/>

- 2 Info Junkie <http://swashford.wordpress.com/>
- 3 Book Express http://www.opac.newport.gov.uk/opac/book_express1.htm
- 4 MIMAS and EDINA. National data centres providing support and access to services for UK HE and FE.
- 5 COPAC. A national union catalogue of the major academic, research and national libraries in the UK and Ireland.
- 6 Google settlement http://www.googlebooksettlement.com/r/view_settlement_agreement
- 7 RIN. Undertakes research and develops policy to support UK researchers.
- 8 CONARLS. Originally the Circle of Officers of National and Regional Library Systems, a co-operative with representatives from each of the English regions, Ireland, Scotland, Wales and the British Library that supports resource discovery and resource sharing.
- 9 UnityUK. A national union catalogue and network for resource sharing, mainly used by public libraries.

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