

Recent developments in Remote Document Supply (RDS) in the UK – 3

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British Library to pull out of document supply

You read it here first. Purely for the sake of artistic and dramatic licence I've omitted the question mark that should rightly accompany that heading. But even with the question mark firmly in place it still comes as a shock, doesn't it? Can you imagine life without the Document Supply Centre? Can you think the unthinkable? Why should the BL pull out and where would that leave RDS? Rather like a science fiction dystopia, I've tried to imagine what such a post-apocalyptic world would look like and what form RDS might take. Assuming, that is, that RDS would survive the fallout. This article will attempt to show why the BL may be on the verge of abandoning document supply and what could fill some of the huge gap that would be left.

Seven minutes to midnight

We can think of the likelihood of a post-BL document supply world in the same terms as the Doomsday Clock positing the likelihood of nuclear Armageddon – the nearer to midnight the clock hands then the closer the reality. Perhaps we'll start it at seven minutes to and then adjust in future articles? Perhaps a clock could adorn the cover of this esteemed journal?

It could be argued that trends have been pushing the BL towards an exit for a while – the relatively swift and ongoing collapse of the domestic RDS market, for example. But the idea was first publicly mooted or threatened (take your pick) at a seminar jointly organised by the BL and CURL on 5th December 2006 at the BL in London. Presentations from the event can still be found on the CURL website [1]. This event brought together all those with a stake or an interest in the proposed UK Research Reserve (UKRR), a collaborative store of little-used journals and monographs. Librarians are notoriously loathe to completely discard items, preferring to hang on to them in case of future need. Sooner or later this creates a storage problem as space runs out. Acquiring extra space is often problematic and expensive. What is to be done? Moving to e only preserves access to the content and frees up space but can't be wholly trusted, so print needs to be held somewhere – just in case. Co-operating with other libraries, HE institutions can transfer print holdings to an off-site storage depot and, once an agreed number of copies have been retained, can dispose of the rest. This is the theory underpinning the UKRR.

The UKRR is a co-operative that will eventually invite institutions to become partners or subscribers. The first phase involves the following institutions working with the BL – Imperial College (lead site), and the universities of Birmingham, Cardiff, Liverpool, St Andrew's, and Southampton. Research has shown that the BL already holds most of the stock that libraries would classify as low use and seek to discard – an 80% overlap of journals held by the BL and CURL libraries has been identified. Additional retention copies (meaning a minimum of three in total) would be required to placate fears of stock accidentally being destroyed. It is not felt that extra building will be necessary – stock will be accommodated at BLDSC and at designated sites by encouraging some institutions to hold on to their volumes

so that others can discard. SCONUL will be the broker in negotiations as to who will be asked to retain copies.

The first phase began in January 2007 with 17.3 km of low-use journals being identified among the partners for storage/disposal. If the BL already holds most of these volumes, and there is a need to ensure that two more copies are kept, it will be interesting to see how much of the 17.3 km will actually make it to disposal. I expect that libraries will be asked to hold on to much of the material that they would like to send for disposal. In fact, at a subsequent CURL members' meeting in April 2007, Imperial disclosed that 30 out of 1300 metres of stock selected for de-duplication had been sent to BL. This represents only 2.3% being offloaded. Once participation widens then there will be increased scope for disposal, but I can't see the partner institutions creating much space until that happens. Should the UKRR really take off then there may be a need for more building space to accommodate stock, although the BL now has a new, high density storage facility at Boston Spa.

The business model behind the UKRR will mark a change in the way remote document supply is offered to HE institutions and could determine the future of the service. Instead of the current transaction-based model the new model will be subscription-based and will comprise two elements – 1) a charge to cover the cost of BL storage and 2) a charge according to usage. Institutions that don't subscribe, including commercial organisations, will be charged premium rates. The theory is that costs will not exceed those currently sustained for document supply. Assuming funding is provided for Phase 2, we will see the roll-out of this new model after June 2008.

Advocacy will be crucial to the success of the UKRR. The original study reported widespread buy-in to the idea but will that translate into subscriptions? Many libraries will already be undertaking disposal programmes, particularly those with more confidence in and/or subscriptions to e repositories such as Portico. Will anyone really want access to that material once it's out of sight (and out of mind)? If requests remain low (and decline further) and take-up isn't great then that could spell the end as far as the BL & RDS go. The editor has already commented on the apparent lack of commitment to RDS from the chief executive of the BL (McGrath, 2006). This year the BL faces potentially very damaging cutbacks from the 2007 Spending Review with threats to reading rooms, opening hours and collections together with the possible need to introduce admissions charges. RDS wasn't mentioned as a possible target for cutbacks but then the BL will want to see how the UKRR and the new model fares. Tough financial targets in the future coupled with low use/low take-up could lead to a time when the BL announces enough is enough.

I'm sure that scenario has been considered by a new group of senior managers set up within the British Library – the Document Supply Futures Group. Not surprisingly little is known about this Group (again this was something divulged at the CURL December presentation) but if it's looking at all possible futures then it must also be considering no future. The group is headed by Steve Morris the BL's Director of Finance and Corporate Services. McGrath reported in his paper just quoted that senior figures were seriously considering the future of document supply in 2001. Whatever will come from this Group's deliberations the present tangible outcome is a commitment to the UKRR. We'll see where that goes – the clock's ticking.

Alternative universes

If ever we're left adrift in RDS without the BL then what are the alternatives? One option is to go it alone and request from whoever will supply. For this a good union catalogue will be a fundamental requirement. COPAC has had a facelift and, as with other search tools, the Google effect can be seen in the immediate presentation of a simplified 'quick search' screen. Expansion is taking place with the catalogues of libraries outside of CURL also being added e.g. the National Art Library at the Victoria and Albert Museum already added and the Cathedral Libraries' Catalogue forthcoming. The national libraries of both Wales and Scotland are on COPAC, as is Trinity College Dublin. The national library of Scotland has always had an active ILL unit, although this is far too small to take on too many requests. Further development of COPAC has seen support for OpenURLs so that users are linked to document supply services at their home libraries.

CISTI is the Canadian document supplier that would welcome more UK customers. However it should be remembered that the BL acts as a backup supplier for CISTI, so without them CISTI could only play a minor role. A new service for 2007 is the supply of ebooks. For US\$25 users can access the ebook online for 30 days, after which the entitlement expires. As far as I'm aware this is the first solution aimed at tackling the problem of RDS in ebooks. Ejournal licences have become less restrictive and usually allow libraries to print an article from an ejournal and then send it to another library. This obviously isn't an option for ebooks, and neither can libraries download and pass on the whole thing or permit access, so the CISTI solution is an attractive option.

Of course a major undertaking of the BL is to act as a banker on behalf of libraries for the supply of requests. Libraries quote their customer numbers on requests to each other and charges can then be debited and credited to suppliers once suppliers inform BL (via an online form or by sending a spreadsheet). IFLA vouchers can act as currency but these are paper-based rather than electronic, even though an e voucher has long been desired and projects have looked at producing one.

Realistically, survivors in a post-BL document supply world would need to band together with like-minded others to form strong consortia and reap the benefits from membership of a large group. Effectively that boils down to two options – joining up with OCLC or with Talis.

Despatches from the Unity front – no sign of thaw in the new cold war

OCLC and Talis have both, naturally enough, been promoting their distinct approaches to a national union catalogue and a RDS network that can operate on the back of that, while firing an occasional blast into the opposing camp. Barely was the ink dry on the contract between The Combined Regions (TCR) and OCLC for the production of UnityUK, than opening salvos were being exchanged. At the time Talis had announced they were going ahead with their own union catalogue and RDS system. Complaints relating to data handover and data quality were being lobbed Talis' way.

Since then news items on UnityUK have appeared regularly in CILIP's 'Library + Information Update' (Anon, 2006) along with a stream of letters (Chad, Froud, Graham, Green, Hendrix, McCall, 2006), including one from a Talis user and two from senior Talis staff, bemoaning the situation and seeking 'a unified approach'. Talis' position is that they would like to enable interoperability between Talis Source and OCLC for both the union catalogue and the RDS system. I'm sure TCR's position is that OCLC won the tender to

provide a union catalogue and RDS services, while Talis didn't bid, and they are happy to press on without Talis, thank you very much.

An article by Rob Froud, chair of TCR, in a previous issue of ILDS (Froud, 2006b), providing some history and an update on progress, was met with a counter-blast from Talis' Dr Paul Miller in the Talis Source blog (Miller, 2007). A particular bone of contention was the decision taken by Rob Froud to withdraw a number of TCR libraries' holdings from the Talis Source union catalogue. Not an especially surprising move given the circumstances, but neutrals should note that libraries can contribute holdings records freely to both. However access to the union catalogue will only be free with Talis. This free access for contributors has seen more FE and HE libraries joining Talis Source. It's interesting comparing membership lists. While there isn't great overlap between the two there is a significant minority of public library authorities who are members of both. Will this continue, and, if so, for how long?

UnityUK and Talis Source have staked their claims to be the pre-eminent union catalogue and RDS network on their respective websites [2, 3]. UnityUK have this to say - "In 2007, the combined UnityUK and LinkUK services will bring together 87% of public libraries in Great Britain, Jersey and Guernsey in to one national resource sharing service." They show their extent of local authority coverage with the following membership figures-

- 97% County Councils
- 97% London Boroughs
- 97% Metropolitan authorities
- 75% Unitary authorities

Meanwhile, Talis Source announces itself as "the largest union catalogue in the UK comprising 26 million catalogue items and 55 million holdings from over 200 institutions." (April 25th 2007).

No more ISO ILL for NLM

In January 2007 the National Library of Medicine (NLM) in the U.S. said that it would no longer accept ILL requests into its DOCLINE system via ISO ILL. The reasons cited were poor take-up (only three libraries were using it), and the drain on resources by having to test separately with every supplier and every institution that wanted to use it. The protocol itself is quite long but implementers do not have to implement every item – they can select. This meant however that each implementer had to test with NLM even if they were using one (out of only four) of the systems suitable for use. The time and effort required to support ISO ILL was too much and so the NLM pulled the plug.

This raises a number of questions about the use of ISO ILL and its future. It doesn't seem to be well-used in the U.S. e.g. OCLC's Resource Sharing website lists nearly four times as many Japanese libraries using it compared to those in the U.S., and the British Library hasn't developed its own ISO ILL gateway since that came on stream. That gateway is of course run on VDX. On the other hand, ISO ILL is used in VDX-based consortia in the UK (UnityUK), the Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand. Quite where all this leaves ISO ILL I don't know, but I wouldn't be too optimistic about its prospects.

Big deals - unpicking the unused from the unsubscribed

Statistics on ejournal usage have moved on apace since publishers committed themselves to achieving COUNTER compliancy in their reports. By creating a common standard, COUNTER reports from one publisher can be meaningfully compared with those of another, knowing that both treat data in the same way. SUSHI takes that a step further by consolidating reports from several publishers into one to provide easy comparisons and show usage across platforms. These can be accessed via Electronic Resource Management Systems (ERMS) or by subscribing to a service such as ScholarlyStats. By utilising such tools analysis of these statistics will be becoming increasingly sophisticated, but I suspect that for the moment it remains at a somewhat elementary level. After all, who has the time to look much beyond full text downloads and what titles are or are not being used?

The Evidence Base team at the University of Central England have been running a project involving 14 HE institutions that looks at their usage of ejournals, specifically big deals. Libraries are given reports on their usage of ejournals within selected deals and how these rate for value etc. Furthermore, libraries can compare their use with use made at other libraries in the project. At King's we have received a number of reports including our use of Blackwell's STM collection in 2004-05, ScienceDirect in 2004-05 and Project Muse in 2005 (Conyers, 2006-07). The Blackwell's report runs to 22 pages and provides a wealth of detail. Some key findings are highlighted –

- 19% increase in usage from 2004-2005
- 91% of requests come directly from the publisher's web-site, compared to 9% through Ingenta
- The average number of requests per FTE user was 6.7 in 2004 and 8.4 in 2005
- 50% of titles in the STM deal were used 100 times or more and 96% of total requests were generated by these titles
- 62% of high priced titles in the deal (£400 and over) were used 100 times or more. Higher priced titles were used more frequently than those with a low price (under £200)
- 78% of subscribed titles and 39% of unsubscribed titles were used 100 times or more
- 62 titles (14% of total) received nil or low use (under 5 requests) in 2005. 22 of these (35%) were unpriced titles not fully available within the deal and a further 18 (29%) were low price (under £200)
- The average number of requests per title in 2005 was 369. Average requests for a subscribed title were 860 and unsubscribed title 186
- The heaviest used title was Journal of Advanced Nursing which recorded 15,049 requests in 2005 and 13,840 in 2004

So the report confirms that heavy use is made of titles in the deal, that practically all use is concentrated on half the titles, although practically every title gets some use, and that it is the expensive titles that are most used, but also that unsubscribed titles can attract heavy use. Furthermore, in discussing costs the report finds that the average cost of a request to a subscribed title is 84p in 2005, and just 16p to an unsubscribed title. Pretty good value when all is said and done.

The second report confirms much of what the first found. I'll focus on two of the deals – ScienceDirect (SD) and Project Muse (PM) – as the first is our biggest deal (and will be the case for other libraries too) and PM has a humanities focus which provides a nice contrast. In SD 35% of titles were used 100 times or more, in PM 15%. SD had 2% of titles with nil use*, PM 4% (*nil use doesn't include 'unpriced' titles with limited availability). SD had 80% of

subscribed titles used 100 times or more and 27% of unsubscribed titles; for PM the figures were 36% and 9% respectively. This reflects the relative importance of ejournals to users in STM and Humanities fields but also shows how much users gain from a big deal like SD. The average cost for a request to a subscribed SD title was £1.12 and only 2p for an unsubscribed title.

One of the arguments against big deals is that you are buying content that you don't really need – a lot of filler is thrown in with the good stuff. While not totally dispelling that presumption, research such as that produced by Evidence Base can counter that argument somewhat and certainly puts a lot more flesh on bare bones. If you choose carefully which deals you sign up to then your users can make good use of this extra content. At the time of writing (June) Evidence Base were recruiting institutions for a second round of the project.

A report from Content Complete (the ejournals negotiation agent for FE, HE and the Research Councils) outlined what they discovered from trials involving five publishers and ten HE institutions that took place between January and December 2006 (Content Complete Ltd, 2007). The idea behind the trials was to look at alternative models to the traditional big deal, and in particular focus on unsubscribed or non-core content and acquiring this via pay per view (PPV). Although the common idea of PPV as a user-led activity was quickly dropped as impractical, a cheaper download cost per article was agreed for all but one of the publishers instead. PPV was then considered in the context of two models – one where unsubscribed content is charged per downloaded article, and the second also with a download charge per article, but this time, should downloading reach a certain threshold, PPV would convert to a subscription and there would be no further download charges.

This second option appears more attractive to librarians at first glance as it puts a ceiling on usage, and therefore cost per title, but costs could still mount up considerably if the library saw heavy usage across a wide range of unsubscribed content and was forced into taking further subscriptions.

The report highlights a number of problems to do with accurately measuring downloads such as the need to discount articles that are freely available, to not count twice those that are looked at in both HTML and PDF, and to include those downloaded via intermediaries' gateways. Ultimately these problems proved too much of a technical and administrative difficulty to overcome during the trials for both publishers and librarians. Such problems are likely to continue for some time, although one imagines, given sufficient incentive, they could be overcome with automation and developments to COUNTER and SUSHI. However, would the incentive exist? For the trials also found that the PPV models didn't compare too well against the traditional big deals in terms of management, and in almost all cases ended up more expensive.

Updates

In Recent Developments...2 I reported on the RDS proposal for the NHS in England. There's been some progress on this but there's still quite a way to go. A list of options has been trimmed to five to undergo cost-benefit analysis before deciding on an eventual winner. The options range from doing little or nothing to improving direct access to content to using a vendor's RDS system to outsourcing. Building a search engine across catalogues or developing a national union catalogue were the rejected options. It won't be until November

that the preferred option is chosen and then should procurement prove necessary that will take until September 2008 with implementation following early in 2009 (ILDS Task Group, 2007).

There have been two significant developments on open access (OA). Firstly, the UK version of PubMed Central launched in January 2007. Like the original U.S. version this will be a permanent archive of freely available articles from biomedical and life sciences journals. Although initially set up as a mirror service, the UK version has 307 such journals at the time of writing (June 2007) against 334 in the U.S version. We can expect future developments to favour UK and European resources. The UK version is supported by a number of organisations – the British Library, the European Bioinformatics Institute and Manchester University are the suppliers while a number of organisations including the Wellcome Trust provide funding. Secondly, for researchers who do not have access to an institutional or subject repository JISC is now offering a service called the Depot, where peer-reviewed papers can be deposited. The Depot is not intended as a long-term repository but rather more of a stop-gap until more become available.

eTheses – a long time coming

Of course, repositories don't just have to be homes for journal articles; they can contain a lot more. The possibility of institutions holding their own theses in electronic form has been mooted since the early to mid nineties. Early projects often had a Scottish base and had wider dissemination of research material as a key factor in their raison d'être. An important group looking into the subject was the University Theses On-line Group (UTOG), chaired by Fred Friend. A survey they undertook showed how important theses were to those who consulted them, how authors would be happy to see their own theses more widely consulted, that most theses were being produced in electronic form and so should therefore be easily adapted to storage in an electronic form (Roberts, 1997). One of the members of the UTOG, the Robert Gordon University, subsequently led a smaller group to look at etheses production, submission, management and access. The recommendations from that group led to the EThOS (Electronic Theses Online Service) project which in turn is in the process of establishing itself as a service. From that service researchers will be able to freely access theses online while deposit can be directly into EThOS or by harvesting from institutional repositories. Digitisation of older theses can also be undertaken by the British Library as part of the service. Around the peak of BLDSC's RDS operations in 1996-97 over 11,000 theses were supplied as loans with more than 3,000 also being sold as copies (Smith, 1997).

Final point

With UK PubMed Central and EThOS the British Library will be making material freely available that would previously have had to be obtained via RDS. That seems to be the way that much RDS has been going. Previously it was quite expensive, took a while and had to be done via an intermediary; increasingly the documents traditionally obtained via RDS are free and available directly to users immediately. It's an interesting turnaround isn't it?

Notes

1 BL & CURL presentations on the UKRR from the December 2006 meeting can be found at <http://www.curl.ac.uk/projects/CollaborativeStorageEventDec06.htm>

2 TCR/UnityUK <http://tcr.futurate.net/index.html>

3 Talis Source <http://www.talis.com/source/>

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