

The Rethinking Resource Sharing Initiative – an overview for South African Librarians

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Introduction

You may be wondering why so much international attention is being given to this initiative, what is it all about, and is it relevant to us here in South Africa? Well, this initiative is exactly what it says it is – a complete rethink of the whole way of conducting resource sharing, in the context of the global internet revolution, and all the developments that have arisen from that. I am going to give a broad overview, and have had to sift through a lot of information to condense my presentation to the most salient aspects.

Background – how did it all start?

As usual, it started in the United States, during 2005 when a group of librarians, product vendors, and ICT experts were working on the updating and refinement of ISO 10160, version 3. (This is the ISO ILL protocol, for those who are not familiar with it). The current ASN.1/BER structure, which has defined the basis of this protocol, was found to be inappropriate in the current technology development environment. The group working on this ISO standard felt increasingly that they were working on improving a protocol that is on its way to becoming completely redundant. To give an illustrative analogy, it was a bit like trying to perfect a typewriter protocol, when everyone is now using personal computers or laptops.

In addition to that, there has been frustration with levels of interoperability between systems, as well as the proprietary nature of many methodologies developed to deliver materials electronically. There is such a proliferation of new technical standards, such as ZING, SRW/SRU, XML Query and openURL, to name just a few.

The other factor which has served as a huge wake-up call to libraries is the fact that according to OCLC's report published in 2005, entitled *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources*, only ONE PERCENT of individuals consult a library web page or online catalogues to begin their search for information, while EIGHTY-FOUR percent use a search engine. While this applies to a study in the US, it is a good indicator of the global trend. The reliability of this sample in the global context is strong, and it is reasonable to take this as an indicator for other regions as well.

This group thus felt that it was necessary to wipe the slate completely clean, and start all over again, looking at the environment we now operate in, rather than a model developed in a time that has passed. In other words, it is now time for a complete paradigm shift. They thus wrote a White paper, for discussion, and began the initiative to get librarians across the world talking about it. The IFLA Document Delivery and Resource Sharing Standing Committee now has full representation on the Rethinking Resource Sharing Initiative, and has endorsed the recently published Manifesto.

There has been an overwhelmingly positive response from librarians in the area of resource sharing for this very timely initiative, as we have indeed come to a crossroads with regard to the traditional notions of interlibrary loan, document delivery and resource sharing. The very future of library participation in global information resource sharing depends upon a successful outcome to this initiative.

A Manifesto for Rethinking Resource Sharing

Before I describe what this all means in practical, down-to-earth terms, I want to give an outline of the Manifesto, which clearly spells out, from a policy framework level, what the RRS Initiative is about. I have extracted, and will read parts of the Manifesto, as follows:

“If libraries want to expand and promote information accessibility, and to continue to be valued resources, we believe that libraries must improve their information delivery system.....

We believe that the user should be able to get what s/he wants on the terms that s/he chooses without undue hurdles from the library community. As libraries are making their collections visible on a global scale, so should they provide an international resource delivery system or a service model that combines the strengths of all participating libraries. Toward that end, we believe the following principles embraced by libraries and librarians will encourage the sort of resource sharing and delivery that will enhance the role of libraries in the expanding information environment while maintaining the integrity of the institution’s mandate and collections.....

(The principles are as follows:)

1. Restrictions shall only be imposed as necessary by individual institutions with the goal that the lowest-possible-barriers-to-fulfillment are presented to the user.
2. Library users shall be given appropriate options for delivery format, method of delivery, and fulfillment type, including loan, copy, digital copy and purchase.
3. Global access to sharable resources shall be encouraged through formal and informal networking agreements with the goal towards lowest-barrier-to-fulfillment.
4. Sharable resources shall include those held in cultural institutions of all sorts: libraries, archives, museums, and the expertise of those employed in such places.
5. Reference services are a vital component to resource sharing and delivery and shall be more readily accessible from any initial “can’t supply this” response. No material that is findable should be totally unattainable.

6. Libraries should offer service at a fair price rather than refuse but should strive to achieve services that are not more expensive than commercial services, e.g. bookshops.
7. Library registration should be as easy as signing up for commercial web based services. Everyone can be a library user.

...Each of these general principles is being implemented today to various degrees by various institutions in concrete ways, from floating stock to digitization on demand, from revised circulation policies to fee-for-personalized service, from unmediated request to unmediated delivery.”

Those were extracts from the Manifesto, the full Manifesto can be read online on the RSS's web page, and also from their WiKi page.

As can be seen from this outline, the user is placed first. In a world where users have become used to searching the internet and getting instant, unmediated access, this is what we need to do for libraries to stay in the game. At present, while many library OPACS are on the web, the individual items in their collections are not retrievable from search engines. This becomes relevant later.

RSS Initiative Committees

There are a number of areas to focus on, and thus several Committees were established to focus on the aspects identified.

There is the *User Needs Committee*, which will conduct research into user behaviour for the purpose of defining user needs in the areas of information access and resource sharing. They will examine and synthesize existing user needs studies, and evaluate usability and statistical data generated from the first pilot project (more on that later).

The *STARS Rethinking Resource Sharing Policies Committee (ALA)* will develop and refine the policy framework for an expanded resource sharing ideal that addresses services offered and how those services are offered to users. They have already developed the manifesto, and will also work on integrating the Rethinking Resource Sharing principles for the interlibrary loan code for the United States, liaising with international resource sharing groups and communicating regarding other national codes.

The most vital Committee that will change the face of Resource Sharing, is the *Interoperability Committee*. They are tasked with identifying the technology framework that will make it possible for users to obtain what they find inside the library or outside on the open web. The Committee will function as the NISO Resource Sharing Interoperability Work Group. It is this group that will run a pilot which will serve as proof of concept application as the initial step in the creation of the global service framework. They will track and report back on the evolving standards that relate to resource sharing, identify and provide specifications of registries needed to support the global service framework, and also expand the pilot further. They have already laid out the specifications, and I will elaborate on that next, as this now comes down to the nuts and bolts practical application of it all.

Finally, they have a *Finance Committee*, and a *Marketing Committee*, both of which are self-explanatory.

Interoperability – the GET-IT button

If you have not yet heard of the “GET-IT” button, you will soon. The philosophy behind it is that we have moved away from traditional resource sharing in the form of “discover, locate, request and deliver”, to a simple “get it” model. The functional specification requires that it operate as a plug-in for a web browser, which is invoked in web domains that contain references to published items. The plug-in will be independent of any other software application.

How it will work is that the web user downloads (for free – this will be open source software) and installs the GET-IT plug-in application to their browser (in much the same way as we can download a google or yahoo toolbar for our browsers now). The user is then able to configure the plug-in for personal use by supplying certain information such as geographic location, which will retrieve all items that have the plug-in GET-IT button added to their display, according to their pre-set criteria.

The software has already been developed, and is going to be tested soon in the pilot. The sample screens show the GET-IT button as it will appear on:

1. A sample page for amazon.com
2. A sample OPAC web page
3. A sample of what results the screen will yield once the GET-IT button is clicked – as you can see, it lists places to purchase, as well as library loans – it combines previously separate options into one summary pop-up screen, and the user can select whether to purchase or borrow.
4. A sample of a list of resources for items in a page of unknown origin (in this case, a blog).

As we can see, the GET-IT button will integrate search results from webpages, library OPACS, blogs, online booksellers, commercial document suppliers, and any other potential resource even with unknown origins. Thus, for the user, instead of having to search a variety of different platforms, ranging from library OPACs, to search engines, they can GET-IT all in one.

Magic? No. Just technology.

For those who do not wish their original medieval illuminated manuscripts to go zooming around the world to Joe Soap in the USA, one can still use the GET-IT plug-in, but specify that copies will be provided in digital format, and subject to restrictions (such as no commercial resale of the images, or acknowledgement of the source if the image is to be used in a publication), and so on. This option should satisfy the qualms of archives and museums who do not have a culture of resource sharing, and rather prefer the users to physically come to them to access their material.

Further technical aspects of the specification for the GET-IT service can be found on the webpage. (I have listed the references at the end of this paper, which will be available to anyone who would like a copy).

Resource Sharing Policy Issues

The GET-IT service is the most innovative and potentially paradigm shifting aspect of the RRS, and is the one aspect I am most excited about. It means that libraries can stay relevant in this information age, and not disappear into complete obscurity, being replaced by search engines and very bright software-writing 13-year olds who can move at a pace that libraries cannot even conceive of.

However, as a spin-off from the GET-IT service, there are a number of other library related policy issues that need to be relooked as well, with more integration of traditionally “separate” library services into more seamless service units. Libraries need to work out these issues, and quickly, so that they are able to provide excellent service from all queries arising from the GET-IT service. If libraries falter, or are slow in delivery, then users will simply stop using them and go elsewhere. They already have - they use search engines, rather than OPACs, for the most part. The GET-IT service gives libraries a chance to get back in the game, and thus libraries need to demonstrate that they too can be competitive in terms of service delivery. This means that libraries need to stop looking at designing processes and systems to suit librarians – they need to adapt and modify their processes and systems to suit the user. This new paradigm thus STARTS with the user, and not the other way around.

Some of the policy issues identified for discussion, refinement and modernization by the RRS group include:

- *Circulation* – lending and fines/fees for late returns/charges for non-returns – these serve as barriers, and other options such as “floating stock” (where the user does not have to return the item to the point of loan, but can return it locally to a depot much closer to them) need to be considered – the Consortia have already made great strides in this area.
- *Digitize on demand* – most libraries have now discovered that it is not at all cost effective to attempt to digitize their entire collections – the cost is formidable and even the biggest, most wealthy libraries cannot afford to do it – so, the best way is to “digitize on demand” – each time a digital copy is requested, the Interlending staff can do the scan, once, and use the scan to integrate into their catalogues in thumb-nail form, as well as provide an instant service to their user. Thus two functions are served at once – instead of having a whole separate digitization department, the existing Interlibrary Loan or even Reference staff can do it, once, serving both the user, and adding to the Library’s digital collections. Costly duplication is thus avoided. Nor is it difficult – Interlibrary loan staff are already familiar with scanning to Ariel, it is part of their workflow, so scanning to another format will be “a breeze”. However, again, this needs to be properly planned to take into consideration Copyright, Standards (Metadata), choice of hardware and software, delivery method for digitized items, interoperability for federated searches, and so on.

There are quite a few other aspects which are being examined, including Leasing books, Purchase on demand or just-in-time acquisition, and Direct delivery, all of which are heading for a new business model: a World library Service. I am not going to go into

these other aspects now, you will be able to read up on them if you wish to explore further.

Conclusion – how is this relevant to South Africa?

You may be wondering what all this has to do with us in South Africa. As Kate McCullum pointed out at the DAC/NCLIS Workshop on Copyright held in Pretoria last year, just under 10% of the South African population have access to the Internet. That includes those of us who work or are enrolled students at library or academic institutions, government, corporate, and private users. However, just because this is the current situation, does not mean it will always be so. With more and more options being opened up through wireless technology, and more local government initiatives to provide their citizens with free access to the Internet in their municipal areas, this will change. We thus cannot ignore overseas initiatives in this area, and need to keep pace with them.

Another very significant project that is in process, according to Dr Francis Galloway who mentioned the initiative at the recent “World Elsewhere” conference held at the Centre for the Book in Cape Town, NASPERS are embarking on a project to digitize all the books ever published in South Africa, and place them, full-text, online. This means that many of our users will go straight to the publishers to access books instantly, and this will definitely have a major impact on Interlending in South Africa. Even Google is not (yet) putting books still in Copyright full-text online. No doubt there will be some pay-per-view mechanism installed, as the South African publishers will not put themselves and their authors out of business. If libraries wishing to supply items on Inter-library loan wish to “stay in the game”, it seems that the GET-IT service would be a way of doing this. This is speculation, of course, it remains to be seen what will happen.

It will be interesting to see the results of the first pilot projects that are about to be conducted in the United States. When they are at a certain stage, the technology will be made available to everyone, and it will be up to individual libraries and consortia to decide whether they wish to participate or not. This is certainly an Initiative to keep our eye on. The RRS web page lists each development, and they are moving very quickly, so we should have a fully downloadable product for free by the end of this year, or early next year.

We live in exciting times! I hope this overview of the Rethinking Resource Sharing Initiative has interested, if not excited, you as well. Thank you.

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