

Beyond the British Library: How Crisis Reshaped UK Resource Sharing

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It's been over five years since the pandemic hit, and frankly, the mad scramble to recreate remote ILL solutions for our institutions—or just capitulate and provide nothing for our patrons—feels like a lifetime ago. What we've witnessed since then is nothing short of remarkable: two major disruptions that could have destroyed UK resource sharing have instead forced us to become more innovative, more resilient, and arguably more effective than we were before.

RAPIDILL: THE UNEXPECTED ACCELERATOR

Let's be honest—nobody saw RapidILL coming. Before 2020, it was barely on the radar for most UK libraries. Then the pandemic hit, and suddenly this platform was offering a generous three-month free trial with no lending requirements—just borrowing from volunteer libraries. It felt too good to be true, but as anyone who took up the trial will attest, it was an absolute lifeline.

The transformation has been staggering. RapidILL went from having a handful of UK members at the end of 2020 to over 70 institutions today. That's not just growth; that's a complete shift in how we think about resource sharing. Other solutions have mirrored this success—Research Solutions (Reprints Desk) carved out their niche with premium document supply, while RSCVD stepped in as the free “last resort” for those impossible-to-find documents. Remember those handy IFLA plastic tokens worth 4 and 8 euros? They still exist, though they seem almost quaint now compared to the digital solutions dominating the landscape.

PREMIUM VS. PRACTICAL: TAILORING SOLUTIONS TO INSTITUTIONAL NEEDS

Then there's Rapido—RapidILL's more sophisticated cousin. Everything RapidILL and Alma Resource Sharing can do, Rapido can do with additional features and enhanced functionality. The investment required reflects the comprehensive nature of the solution, and for institutions with the budget and need for advanced capabilities, it delivers impressive results. What's particularly exciting is the potential for eBook lending via Rapido—while the underlying functionality is already in place, the legal and copyright complexities remain a hurdle. Cracking this challenge could significantly extend the reach of digital ILL services, especially for institutions seeking to balance access with compliance.

Meanwhile, in the premium services space, Research Solutions (Reprints Desk) continues to provide valuable support for staff workflow, but it's worth noting the growing role of Article Galaxy Scholar. Its seamless integration with discovery layers offers academics near-instant access to articles, often faster than RapidILL, albeit at a cost.

Other institutions take a different approach, building solutions from open-source platforms like Koha and developing integrations that meet their specific requirements. It's inspiring what can be achieved with creativity and determination, and these approaches often deliver exactly what institutions need, if not exactly everything they want.

The beauty of our current landscape is that there's genuinely no single "right" approach. Different institutions have different needs, budgets, and priorities. The key takeaway is choice—and empowering institutions to align their resource sharing strategies with both user needs and institutional priorities. What matters is that we have options and that all these different approaches can work together in our broader resource sharing ecosystem.

THE BRITISH LIBRARY'S CHALLENGE: A LESSON IN RESILIENCE

The British Library's 2023 ransomware attack presented the sector with an unprecedented challenge, but it also revealed something important about our collective resilience. The incident highlighted how interconnected our resource sharing ecosystem had become—and while that interdependency created vulnerabilities, it also demonstrated the value of a collaboration we'd perhaps taken for granted.

The BL's recovery has been impressive. They're re-emerging with enhanced capabilities, adopting Clarivate technology (Rapido) while maintaining vendor neutrality in service provision.

BOLD MOVES: LIVERPOOL AND WHELF+ LEADING THE WAY

University of Liverpool deserves credit for thinking big with their hybrid pod initiative, trying to bring together Rapido, Alma Resource Sharing, and other solutions under one umbrella. While it's currently stalled in the investigative stages, there's hope it might re-emerge as the great uniter we desperately need. Someone has to try these ambitious approaches, even if they don't always pan out immediately.

Then there's WHELF+ - what a success story for the Wales-led consortium! They've expanded to over 30 members spanning Wales, England, Scotland, Ireland, and even North America. Currently working primarily with Alma users, they continue seeking ways to integrate others—and that commitment to inclusivity strengthens the whole network. We build better resource sharing when we find ways to include rather than exclude institutions based on their system choices.

INNOVATION'S NEXT FRONTIER: THE CDL DILEMMA

Let's talk for a moment about Controlled Digital Lending—a concept with enormous potential that remains frustratingly difficult to implement at scale. The OpenLibrary case ruling created additional complexity for UK libraries considering CDL approaches, though forward-thinking institutions like LSE have explored implementation at the institutional level. For interlending purposes, we're still working through the legal and technical challenges.

This cautious approach reflects the sector's responsible attitude toward innovation. While we want to push boundaries and explore new possibilities, we need to ensure that innovations are sustainable and legally sound. The challenge is finding the right balance between prudent risk management and necessary innovation.

A WEALTH OF OPTIONS: NAVIGATING THE NEW LANDSCAPE

Resource sharing is in flux, constantly evolving, and more necessary than ever. We have an abundance of solutions available - institutions can choose to be early adopters like Liverpool, implementing multiple approaches simultaneously, or they can take a more measured approach, evaluating options carefully before making strategic investments.

What's remarkable about the current moment is how much we've learned from recent challenges. The institutions that have navigated the disruptions of the past five years most successfully are those that built diverse, flexible approaches rather than relying on single solutions. We've discovered that resilience comes from having multiple pathways to achieve our goals.

The sector's evolution has been accelerated by external pressures, but it's resulted in innovation that strengthens our collective capabilities. We may have moved beyond the elegant simplicity of earlier models, but we've gained something valuable: a distributed, adaptable network that can respond effectively to whatever challenges emerge. Given the pace of change in our sector, that adaptability will continue to serve us well.

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