Chapter 34
The Boston Library Consortium and RapidR:
Partnering to Develop an Unmediated Book Sharing Module

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is intended to describe the history of collaboration between the Boston Library Consortium (BLC) and RapidILL in developing new and unmediated resource sharing products: RapidX, RapidX for All, Rapid chapter sharing and RapidR, (Rapid Returnable sharing). This narrative explains the process of testing and piloting these products as part of a consortium that has a long partnership of being forward thinking in improving resource sharing among its partner libraries. Some of this chapter describes Interlibrary Loan and consortiums in detail which is intended to provide historical perspective to the 21st century implementation of RapidR. It is hoped that the story of the BLC and RapidILL may give guidance and provide advice to other libraries and consortiums if they are in search of new ways to share library materials in a more efficient, cost effective and unmediated manner.

INTRODUCTION

The Boston Library Consortium (BLC) launched a pilot project to share returnable items through the *RapidILL* system beginning in the fall of 2013. A small group of BLC partner libraries, Williams College, Northeastern University, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and University of Connecticut, became involved with this trial after helping test other Rapid projects such as *RapidX*, *RapidX for All*, and *Rapid* chapter delivery. The development of *RapidR* took the *RapidILL* system a step further to the new world of unmediated book sharing. The history recounted in this chapter covers a period of several years, showing that each new Rapid technology leads to the invention of a succession of new components.

This narrative will describe interlibrary loan, briefly, explain how it is traditionally thought to be a slow and expensive service, but one that it is essential to fill gaps in library collections. The desire by

libraries to make research material more easily accessible to users has led to the development of new patron-initiated technology at can make interlibrary loan a more transparent and unmediated function. This chapter provides a brief overview of *Rapid*ILL, its staff, and how it all works together. This account also records the history of the collaboration between the Boston Library Consortium and Rapid staff in developing Rapid products, most recently *RapidR*, and describes the events that facilitated the success of this endeavor.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The history of Interlibrary Loan provides a backdrop to the 21st century development of *RapidR*. Interlibrary Loan or what is now commonly called "resource sharing" is the process used by libraries to lend materials to institutions that do not own them, and conversely borrow items for users that are not held in the home collection. No library can afford to purchase, house, and maintain all of the material needed by their patrons. Resource sharing ensures that researchers have access to resources that meet their needs.

In the pre-electronic world, a scholar doing research would look in the card catalog by title, author, or subject to determine whether their institution held needed materials. The library catalog was a real, tangible piece of furniture that was filled with drawers containing thousands of index cards that chronicled all of the entities held by the local library. This catalog was the first step that patrons took to discover if their own library owned a book or a journal. If a particular item was not available in the collection, the scholar might decide to use something else that was held locally. More in-depth research would have required the person to seek the item in another library. If frustrated, it was also possible that the researcher would give up and walk away. Interlibrary loan was the way to seek additional resources if they were deemed important and if time permitted. The user needed to fill out a manual request form with all of the pertinent bibliographic information for the material.

During this period when no online methods existed for discovery or for submitting requests, ILL had a big job to do since locating library holdings was not at the tip of their fingertips like it is in the 21st century. Often the place for staff to begin the search for items held by other libraries was the National Union Catalog that is an enormous set of books much like the volumes of an encyclopedia. Most ILL requests were labor-intensive on the part of the researcher and library staff, the information was often out of date, and the chance of receiving the material was mostly poor. Requests to borrow were typed or handwritten by workers on ALA (American Library Association) forms and mailed to the potential lending library for fulfillment. This was the slow, time-consuming, and inefficient method practiced by many Interlibrary Loan departments in the 1970s and 1980s. Yet, at the time, it was the best system available.

OCLC: Connecting the World to Library Material

A small group of Ohio libraries began in 1967 as a way to aid in the discovery of library collections and help streamline sharing among their libraries. By the 1980s, OCLC expanded beyond Ohio and began the huge project of gathering cataloged holdings from libraries all over the country. These holdings were coded to each record in the OCLC system, making this library material discoverable to interlibrary loan.

The process of placing interlibrary loan requests in the 1980s to the late 1990s still consisted of many steps from initiation to completion. ILL staff would search OCLC and assign a lender string of up to five libraries in the effort to obtain the requested item from another library. For article requests, ILL

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