

# From Our Own Correspondent...

## the Canadian Research Knowledge Network

**Abstract:** John Eaton from the University of Manitoba at Winnipeg, describes an important Canadian knowledge initiative within the academic library community relating to acquisition of digital resources.

**Keywords:** academic libraries; online services; consortium services

### Introduction

Canada has long been a country with fiscal structures in place to ensure equality of funding between the provinces for programmes of significant societal benefit. In an earlier article I wrote for this journal, “The Nature of Canadian Federalism” (Vol 3, Numbers 3/4, page 166), I remarked upon the unique Canadian practice of having the federal government gather tax revenues nationally and then redistribute the pool back to the provinces on a roughly *per capita* basis, which means that some provinces pay more into the federal coffer than they receive back, while others receive more than they contribute. On a smaller scale this collectivist mindset is also evidenced in a programme of interest to librarians called The Canadian Research Knowledge Network, or CRKN.

CRKN serves as a striking example of the benefits which can be attained through large-scale – in fact, massive scale – collectivist strategies with regard to digital content acquisition. And while it is true that these types of consortia arrangements exist in many countries, including the United Kingdom through such endeavours as JISC, Canada’s national foray into this sphere is arguably the world’s largest and its impact has been nothing short of transformational for academic libraries.

### History

In 1997 Canada’s federal government created the Canada Innovation Fund (CIF), an independent corporation mandated to provide funding for the creation of the country’s “research infrastructure” and to strengthen and enhance



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scholarly research in the country’s universities, research institutions, and hospitals. CFI quickly recognised that increasing academic access to the proliferating mass of scholarly publications in digital format was one of the keys in reaching this goal. CFI was also aware that there were enormous differences in the purchasing capabilities of the country’s universities and colleges and so, in adherence to the principle of nationwide equity mentioned above, they attempted to “level the playing field” and provide increased access across all the nation’s

universities and colleges.

Canada’s academic institutions were invited to solicit for funds and after receiving four separate applications from regional academic library consortia, CFI decided to fund one national body to negotiate nationwide purchases of scholarly digital content. This body became the Canadian National Site Licensing Project (CNSLP) and, in 1999, it began a three-year pilot project with approximately \$50 million in funding, \$20 million of which came from CFI and the rest coming from nine of the ten provincial governments, the universities and colleges themselves, and a few other sources.

Soon after its formation, CNSLP entered into negotiations with the publishers of electronic journals in the fields of science, technology, and medicine and by 2001 claimed subscriptions to over 750 such publications which provided access to approximately 650,000 students, faculty members, and researchers in all regions of the country.

In 2004 CNSLP was re-branded as the Canadian Research Knowledge Network and by this time 72 Canadian universities and colleges were on board. This figure represents almost total participation by the country’s leading academic institutions.

## How CRKN works

Before the advent of CRKN, libraries and library consortia had little clout when negotiating with publishers and digital content providers and, more often than not, paid the providers' "asking price" and accepted the terms of the providers' licensing agreements with few, if any, amendments.

CRKN has essentially turned this process around. A CRKN procurement officer, whose role it is to negotiate the contractual particulars with the publishers, invites them to compete, by way of requests for proposal (RFP), for opportunities to sell their content to the CRKN member institutions. This is in stark contrast to the normal model of library acquisitions, where the library approaches the publisher, requests a price quote, and tries, often without success, to get the price lowered, or to purchase only a hived off portion of the content, as that is all they can afford. Furthermore, in this common scenario the greater share of bargaining power rests with publishers, who are usually loathe to deviate from the specifics of their licensing agreement templates.

The process is stood on its head because CRKN dictates the licensing terms to which the RFP must adhere and the vendors are aware that their requested price needs to be attractive or their "bid" will fail. Moreover, a necessary pre-condition of the RFP is that the full suite of the product's content be included, and there must not be any kind of modular pricing for various components of the provider's digital product. When an RFP is successful, the negotiations begin in full and all the specifics of the contract are hammered out.

Once CRKN has negotiated an agreement with a vendor for a particular product, the 72 member institutions are invited to subscribe. It is important to note that it is not mandatory that each academic partner subscribe to everything procured by CRKN. Forty per cent of the contract price is paid by CRKN. The remaining sixty per cent is shared among all the subscribing institutions according to a formula based on each participant's size of student body and faculty and projected product use. The net effect is that the smaller institutions pay less money than the larger ones for the same resources, thereby ensuring all interested libraries are equally capable of participation.

## CRKN'S effect

The existence of CRKN has been transformative for Canadian academic libraries in a number of ways. The most profound result has been the estimated forty per cent reduction in the overall subscription price charged to university libraries for digital content. Given the vast sums spent on these materials, this represents a hugely significant figure saved by the country's universities and colleges. It is important not to confuse the forty per cent cost borne by CRKN with the forty per cent reduction in the vendors' subscription rates, as these are

independent of each other, and both affect the final amount paid by CRKN participants.

Other results, while less dramatic, are also noteworthy. One is the degree to which the wide availability of these titles has encouraged and facilitated interdisciplinary research. Whereas previously there were certain areas of research which simply could not be conducted at some universities for lack of meaningful resources, their researchers now have access to an array of products formerly not available to them.

Another outcome has been a reduction in physical traffic in the libraries themselves and a decrease in interlibrary loan transactions. Whilst many might argue that these are not necessarily positive developments, the former provides evidence of increased convenience for library clientele by way of desktop delivery, while the latter would suggest that libraries' collections are more able to deliver product to meet their users' needs without reliance upon other repositories.

Not all of the benefits have accrued to the consumers of these products. The publishers and vendors also realise advantages from involvement in the programme. For one, their products achieve practically national saturation, a state which they could only dream of in earlier years. Secondly, the agreements with CRKN are for three years at a stretch. Prior to this programme vendors usually signed one-year contracts with libraries individually. For the vendors, CRKN means many fewer staff hours spent negotiating contracts and more stable funding for a three year period, as opposed to a patchwork of many single deals frequently coming up for renewal and subject to cancellation.

CRKN solves a lot of problems for academic libraries and is revered among most university library directors, but it does have its detractors. One problem it presents for some university administrators is that they are no longer able to "brand" themselves or distinguish their universities from others by way of pointing to their vastly superior collections of digital resources. Under CRKN all universities, from the giants like the University of Toronto, to the small Liberal Arts institutions like Bishop's University in Québec, provide their patrons with roughly the same access to the same resources.

Within university library systems there have also been those, like myself, who have seen their acquisitions budgets subjected to "off the top" deductions to pay for CRKN, with no discernible benefit to their collections. As the first contracts negotiated under the programme were all in science, technology, and medicine there was no content of interest to law libraries included in these packages. Thus it was galling to see one's precious acquisition dollars reduced to accommodate those titles. However, the current round of negotiations between CRKN and the publishers are all in the realm of the humanities and the social sciences and, while so far no titles of interest to law libraries have been placed on the table, rumours persist that CRKN and LexisNexis are interested in talking about a deal. For me and other academic law librarians the inclusion of legal research

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content would serve as an effective analgesic to the pain of those previously lost dollars.

Has CRKN made Canada a smarter, better educated country? No one can answer this question with any certainty, and empirical study will never ever be able to make such a determination. However, it would appear rather obvious that CRKN has been a major contributor in the development of a national research infrastructure.

It is unknown what CRKN's future holds. The CFI and CRKN are creations of the former Liberal federal government, whereas Canada is now governed by the Conservative party. However, the Tories are in what we refer to as a "minority government" position (which in the UK is called a "hung Parliament") and, by the time of this article's publication, they could be out of office. Nonetheless, philosophically the Conservatives are less favourably disposed to expensive large-scale national initiatives than were their Liberal forerunners, which makes the survival of the programme beyond its current three-year term somewhat less certain.

### Conclusion

CRKN stands as an example of what collaborative planning on a national scale can accomplish. In Canada it

has inspired library communities outside academia to think along the same lines. An umbrella organisation called Consortium Canada is now established as a "consortium of consortia" and is attempting to leverage the same kind of power for public and other libraries as CRKN has achieved for university and college libraries. The genesis of CRKN began with library organisations petitioning the Canadian federal government to develop a national strategy with regard to the acquisition of scholarly digital content. A decade later it is a tremendously valuable initiative which has radically improved the capability of academic libraries to deliver electronic content to their users. The lessons of CRKN are, of course, easily transportable to other nations, such as the United Kingdom and to other library sectors.

Just as there is something in the fabric of the Canadian polity that facilitates equitable apportionment of national wealth, there is something endemic in librarians to share. These two impulses are evidenced in the existence of the Canadian Research Knowledge Network. Through this programme our national government has made expensive digital knowledge available to every institution of higher learning in the country and has placed Canada's academic library community at the forefront of this laudable experiment.

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Compiled by Katherine Read and Laura Griffiths at the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies

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