



## A Library-publisher Partnership for Open Access: Building an Innovative Relationship between Scholarly Publishers and Academic Libraries

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### Abstract

This article presents an overview of a strategic partnership undertaken by the Canadian Research Knowledge Network (CRKN) and the Érudit Consortium (Érudit) to support the move towards open access for Canadian francophone scholarly journals. CRKN and Érudit have had a relationship through a traditional commercial subscription model since 2008. In 2014, the two organizations recognized the need for a new relationship that would address two major challenges: the fragility of the Canadian not-for-profit scholarly publishing environment and the increasing pressure from libraries and funding agencies for scholarly journals to move towards open access. Érudit and CRKN have worked collaboratively to create an innovative partnership, which provides a framework for a new relationship between publishers and libraries, and helps to provide financial support to Canadian publishers during the transition to a fully open access model. This paper presents the perspectives of the two organizations involved in the partnership by outlining the common goals, objectives, and strategy, as well as the differing needs and perspectives of libraries and publishers. It summarizes

the key aspects of the partnership as well as the challenges faced. Through this case study, the authors demonstrate how university libraries can play an active role in working with journals to support open access to research.

**Key Words:** open access; scholarly publishing; partnership

## **1. Introduction**

As the importance of open access continues to grow, there remains no clear consensus on the ideal model to sustain scholarly publishing while making content openly accessible. Publishing and providing access to content is not free – there are real costs associated with most aspects of publishing – and there is no standard approach to who pays this cost and under what model.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the many different models currently being explored, there are also an increasing number of open access publication mandates from various funding bodies, such as the Wellcome Trust (UK) and the National Institutes of Health (US). Most recently, the Tri-Agency Open Access policy, a joint policy of three federal Canadian granting agencies, the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), was launched. This policy requires that all peer-reviewed journal publications arising from agency-supported research are freely accessible within 12 months of publication (“Tri-Agency Open Access Policy on Publications”, 2015). This policy has increased the pressure on Canadian journals to make their content open access so that Canadian researchers with grants from one of the funding agencies can easily publish in their journals without needing to make arrangements to self-archive in an open access repository in order to comply with the policy.

As the scholarly publishing landscape continues to shift and change, libraries, researchers, publishers, and other stakeholders are searching for solutions. Libraries are looking for ways to support scholarly publishing, while also encouraging a move towards more accessible and open content. Journals are trying to respond to this need, while remaining sustainable and financially viable. There are currently a mix of models and approaches, including but not limited to: article processing charges (paid by authors, research funding

bodies, libraries, or other sources of funding), crowd-sourced funding or “cost pools” (“The Open Libraries of Humanities”, n.d.), hybrid journals, “freemium” programs (“The OpenEdition Freemium programme”, n.d.), fully open access journals subsidized in other manners, and multiple options for self-archiving in open access repositories. Another approach is to fund the journals at the outset, transforming the funds that were previously provided as a subscription fee to be used to support the journals in making their content freely available to all. This model is the one currently being explored by CRKN and Érudit as part of their partnership agreement.

### **1.1. About the Canadian Research Knowledge Network**

The Canadian Research Knowledge Network (CRKN) is a partnership of Canadian universities dedicated to expanding digital content for the university research enterprise in Canada. CRKN represents 75 Canadian university libraries and undertakes large-scale content acquisition, licensing initiatives, and other special initiatives and projects, in order to build knowledge infrastructure as well as research and teaching capacity in Canada’s universities.

Originally launched as the Canadian National Site Licensing Project (CNSLP), the organization secured \$20 million in funding from the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI) by demonstrating that “systemic access to published research constitutes an essential component of Canada’s research infrastructure” (“A History of the CRKN”, n.d., para. 5). Participating universities and provincial governments matched the CFI funding by contributing an additional \$30 million. In addition to securing access to content from seven major scientific publishers, CNSLP also established a “made-in-Canada” model license agreement, which set superior terms of use for the academic community. On April 1, 2004, CNSLP was incorporated as a not-for-profit organization and renamed the Canadian Research Knowledge Network.

Following the success of the initial CFI funded project, CRKN launched the Digital Content Infrastructure for the Human and Social Sciences (DCI) project, which aimed to expand access to humanities and social sciences content across Canadian institutions. This project was awarded \$19.1 million in funding from CFI, and matching funds totalling \$28.6 million were also provided by nine provincial governments and 67 universities (“Digital Content Infrastructure Project”, n.d.).

Since its inception, CRKN has played a “key role in building knowledge infrastructure in Canada, providing equitable and cost-effective access to scholarly content for universities nationwide” (Appavoo & Pagotto, 2014). CRKN manages over 52 licenses at an annual value of approximately \$100 million dollars and continues to work to secure broad access to knowledge for the benefit of its member universities and the communities they serve.

## **1.2. About the Érudit Consortium**

Founded in 1998 as a pilot project to digitally develop the scholarly content of five journals from the University of Montreal Press (PUM), Érudit has evolved to become the largest digital production and publication platform for Canadian francophone and bilingual scholarly journals in North America, with more than 107 active scholarly journals in the social sciences and humanities (SSH), 24 intellectual journals in arts and literature, and 20 archived journals from 130 Canadian publishers. The majority of the journals published come from not-for-profit organizations, small scholarly associations, or from university departments. In 2014, the Érudit platform counted 200,000 scholarly articles, more than 21 million page views per year, and 1,000 subscribing institutions from over 30 countries.

The consortium is led by the three largest French-language universities in Canada: Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research and creation.

While the platform also disseminates books, proceedings and research documents, and harvests the theses of seven universities, scholarly journals are the largest sector of the platform. Érudit provides publishers with XML markup, distribution and preservation, referencing, indexing, and commercialization services. It provides libraries and users with all the services and tools necessary for their published content.

As a service provider, Érudit has a distribution and commercialization licence with each journal, which allows it to sign agreements with other partners in their name. This last point is important because it allows Érudit to enter into agreements on behalf of the 130 journals, within the established framework, and thus increases small journals’ negotiation power relative to international consortia and aggregators and also gives a considerable presence to

Canadian francophone SSH journals both locally and internationally, thanks to the weight and quality of the Érudit corpus (Larivière & Macaluso, 2011).

The commercialization services offered by Érudit are uniquely aimed at libraries and institutions in the form of subscriptions to the last two years of journal publication. Some journals have chosen to be open access, counting for 20% of Érudit's catalogue. All archives, however, are freely accessible. Thus, 85% of the articles on the Érudit platform are freely available to everyone.

This business model has certain limitations, such as the emphasis on content from the last two years, whereas the publication life cycle in the social sciences and humanities stretches beyond this period (Davis, 2013). In addition, open access journals, which also incur expenses for their publishing activities, receive no income or financial support with this subscription model.

## **2. The Initial CRKN-Érudit Agreement (2008–2013)**

From 2008 to 2013, CRKN and Érudit had a license agreement, which was a consortium subscription to all the available content on the Érudit platform at the time of the agreement, which included 69 francophone scholarly journals. This subscription was a part of the six-year DCI Project, detailed above. The first three years of the project involved matching funds from CFI, contributions from provincial governments, and contributions from the participating institutions. The second three years of the project were completely funded by the universities. During the final three years of the project, all participating institutions were obligated to participate in all of the DCI Project license agreements as part of the terms of receiving the matching funds in the first three years, which meant institutions were required to continue subscribing to the original 69 titles. Over the course of the agreement, Érudit's collection grew significantly, with the addition of 25 scholarly journals. These journals were offered to the institutions optionally and were subscribed to by half of the participants. Note that these institutions were mostly francophone or bilingual. Once the DCI Project was complete, institutions would no longer be obligated to participate.

This subscription agreement allowed the journals hosted on Érudit to benefit from stable income for six years and facilitated their transition from paper to a digital version. At that time, many of these journals were available to their readers in a paper version only, and the shift to a digital version jeopardized

their source of income from paper subscriptions. The consortium agreement stabilized incomes for six years and encouraged publishers to continue with digital versions of their journals. However, the agreement was problematic in that it favoured only some of the scholarly journals—the original 69. Moreover, only the journals with a moving wall benefited, with the fully open access journals effectively excluded from the agreement despite having virtually the same financial requirements.

The subscription model is also highly volatile: journals cannot predict how many institutions will renew their subscriptions from one period agreement to another, which forces them to increase their subscription rates in anticipation of potential loss. In turn, these increases prevent some institutions from renewing their subscriptions. This condition leads research stakeholders down a highly speculative commercial spiral in which nobody wins.

As the DCI Project drew to a close at the end of August 2014, Érudit and CRKN opened discussions on what the relationship would look like going forward. Rather than pursuing a traditional subscription agreement, the two organizations embarked on an exploration of how a collaborative partnership could be more beneficial for all parties involved.

### **3. The CRKN-Érudit Partnership**

The CRKN-Érudit partnership has multiple elements that are key in differentiating this relationship from a more traditional subscription model.

#### **3.1. Access to Content**

Although the agreement has moved away from a traditional subscription model, a key element is still access to content. University libraries who participate in the partnership have access to all scholarly content hosted on the Érudit platform by virtue of their participation. At the time of writing, there are 107 scholarly journals available through Érudit. Should Érudit add any scholarly journals to their offerings during the partnership, those journals will automatically be added to the agreement. In addition, participants also have access to the data and metadata of the entire Érudit corpus, which can be used for various research projects, including projects that will involve

text and data mining. This is made possible by Érudit's digital production of articles specifically geared toward French-language scholarly content. Such consistency and standardization allows for improved data mining and search capabilities.

### 3.2. Open Access

Since its inception, Érudit has been committed to promoting and disseminating research, and this has included a focus on open access. Although not all journals on the platform are open access, all articles over two years old are freely available. The subscription model, which was intended as a way to support journals, created inconsistency over time, as 85% of the articles on Érudit are freely available, while only 15% receive financing from libraries through subscription. As an organization, Érudit has been working towards shortening, and ultimately eliminating, the embargo period; however, as funds gathered through subscriptions are one of the sole sources of funding for the journals, Érudit has thus far been unable to move to a completely open access model.

Although the long term goal of the partnership is to move to a model where all journals involved in the partnership are open access, the initial two year agreement involves an interim measure of reducing the embargo period to 12 months. This will allow the journals to measure the impact of these changes and respond appropriately while maintaining the safety net of commercialization. It will also give Érudit time to establish a revenue distribution model that will encourage the journals to transition to open access. The main concern with going open access is that without the need to subscribe, libraries will cancel their subscriptions and there will be no revenue to sustain the journals. CRKN and Érudit are trying to demonstrate that under the right conditions, libraries are willing to support the journals by continuing to provide financial support equal to that of a subscription, even if the journals are otherwise freely available to all. It is important to note that the partnership is also establishing a specific fund to support journals on the Érudit platform that are already open access. In this way, Canadian universities will be able to financially sustain all active journals on Érudit. In order to move to a fully open access model, where all journals on the platform are immediately freely available, Érudit needs to be able to demonstrate to publishers that there is long-term financial support for this type of model, and this partnership is a step in that direction.

### **3.3. Support for Canadian Publishing**

Another key aspect of this partnership is support for Canadian scholarly publishing. Many libraries are seeking new ways to sustain the scholarly publishing ecosystem – ways that do not rely on subscription fees and restricted access.

The importance of supporting local and national journals should not be underestimated. These journals provide a unique venue for articles of local and national interest that international journals, which are often Anglo-American, are much less likely to publish (Larivière, 2014). Within the international sphere, the journals on the Érudit platform may be considered quite specialized or niche in that they are Canadian, French-language, and in the field of the social sciences and humanities. This means that the market for commercialization using traditional subscriptions is somewhat limited, and therefore the importance of the Canadian library and scholarly community supporting these journals in a non-commercial arrangement is of even greater significance. If these journals were to depend solely on commercialization, they may no longer be financially viable to publish, resulting in a loss of important Canadian content.

Although the journals currently hosted on the Érudit platform are only a subset of Canadian academic journals, this project aims to demonstrate to the broader Canadian academic publishing community that there is a viable model for libraries and publishers to work together to transform the nature of scholarly publishing in a manner that is sustainable for all parties. As the project evolves and is evaluated, there is the possibility of expanding beyond the content that is currently available through Érudit.

### **3.4. Change in Relationship**

In order for this partnership to be viable, both parties had to move from a customer-vendor relationship, to a partnership based on collaboration. This involved finding common goals, and figuring out how the goals could be achieved together.

Under a subscription model, many libraries are accustomed to evaluating content offerings based on factors such as overall cost, cost-per-use, usage

statistics, comparisons to other packages, journal ranking measures such as Impact Factor and Source Normalized Impact per Paper (SNIP), citations, and number of faculty publications in the journals. Examples of these types of evaluation metrics can be seen in the CDL Journal Value Metrics assessment methodology (Wilson & Li, 2012) and in the CRKN pilot journal package review (Jurczyk & Jacobs, 2014). Some of these aspects are still relevant in a partnership, but they need to be balanced with other elements such as the value of supporting unique Canadian content, the importance of sustaining Érudit's well-developed research dissemination platform, and the long-term potential of the partnership to be expanded to include other content. These less quantifiable factors require an examination of the partnership from a broader, more strategic, perspective and necessitate the evaluation of whether or not to participate to be reframed as a strategic decision, not solely a budgetary decision.

The change in relationship also resulted in a much more collaborative process with an emphasis on working together. Both parties were flexible and open to changes proposed by the other organization, and changes suggested by the libraries and journals were also incorporated into the terms of the agreement. Even if the initial offer reflected the spirit of a partnership, the terms—such as a fixed price per institution and requiring payment for optional services like text and data mining—were still too close to a commercial offer.

The initial offer that was presented to CRKN members did not garner enough financial support, and both CRKN and Érudit were able to gather input from the libraries, make revisions to the offer together, and then come back to members with another offer, which was successful and closer to a partnership. Érudit, in consultation with CRKN, worked to establish the total amount of funding that was necessary for the journals to make a transition to a 12-month moving wall, and then CRKN worked with its members to collect this total amount. In that way, the actual costs were clear to libraries. This approach also meant that the more libraries that participated, the lower the cost would be for each individual library, as the total amount was based on maintaining the financial sustainability of Érudit and the journals, not on the number of libraries participating. In addition, all services that were initially proposed as optional, such as text and data mining, have been included in the offer for no additional fee. In a traditional subscription arrangement, there likely would not have been such a collaborative effort to revise the offer.

### 3.5. Governance and Participation

As a part of the partnership, a CRKN member representative now participates as an observer on the Érudit Consortium Board of Directors. A call for nominations was sent to the entire CRKN membership, and the representative was selected by the CRKN Board of Directors.

**Érudit Governance Chart**  
*The number of voting members on Érudit Board is determined by the contribution of each university to the consortium.*

**Executive Committee**  
*3 representatives from each founding university are elected on the executive committee*

- Chairman
- Vice-Chairwoman
- Secretary-Treasurer

**4 Voting Members**

- Elected Journal director
- Université de Montréal Press representative
- Université de Montréal representative
- Université Laval representative

**3 Observers**

- Quebec Funding Agency representative
- Érudit scientific director
- CRKN representative (new)

This position allows CRKN members to participate in, and contribute to, Érudit's governance and help set directions and priorities for the Érudit consortium moving forward. CRKN members will also be invited to participate in Érudit's User Committee, which is a committee made up of a group of librarians. The group discusses potential improvements to the Érudit platform. Before launching any new services or developments, Érudit presents the ideas to this committee for feedback.

### 3.6. Unique Ability to Bring Large Groups Together

CRKN works with 75 university libraries and Érudit works with 130 different journals, and both have received a negotiating mandate from their members, making this an ideal way for these two large groups to communicate with

each other. Without the CRKN-Érudit partnership, it would be very difficult for these two disparate groups to come to an agreement for financial support. Although there are still challenges (e.g. neither the libraries nor the publishers form truly cohesive groups), the chances of finding alignment between 53 libraries and 130 individual publishers is much greater in a collaborative partnership.

## **4. Shared Challenges**

### **4.1. Change in Perspective from Commercial Relationship to Partnership**

As mentioned above, a key aspect of this partnership was changing the relationship. This was a challenge for both libraries and journals. In decision making, many libraries are focused on cost-per-use and other quantifiable metrics of value. For journals, there is still a lot of emphasis on number of subscribers and subscription revenue. Shifting the focus away from short term elements, such as cost-per-use and subscription revenue, to more long-term strategic goals, was a challenge for all parties involved because it demanded a great deal of communication and transparency among members.

### **4.2. Language**

The content hosted on the Érudit platform is predominantly French-language. Although Canada is a bilingual country, the reality is that a large number of CRKN member institutions are predominantly Anglophone. This means that for many CRKN institutions, the usage of content provided by Érudit is quite low when compared to other journal packages. This makes the change in perspective, from a customer to a partner, even more important, as the language challenges make typical metrics of value, such as usage, less relevant.

Language posed a further challenge in communication between all of the parties involved in the partnership. Ensuring the various parties understand one another involves an extra layer of translation – literally and figuratively. Language can create a barrier, but it is a barrier that everyone is working together to reduce.

### **4.3. Accepting an Imperfect Model and Having “Unknowns”**

Throughout the process, many questions were raised for which there was no definitive answer. Questions such as “when will all content be open access on the platform?” and “how will the funds be divided up without any subscriptions?” and “what exactly will this partnership look like in 2017?” are unanswerable at this juncture. Moving ahead with the partnership required an element of trust between the libraries and the journals, and necessitated some level of comfort with uncertainty.

## **5. Challenges from the CRKN and Library Perspective**

### **5.1. Limited Budgets**

In recent years, pressure on the collections budgets of university libraries in Canada has increased, due to a combination of the ever increasing cost of subscriptions, flat or reduced budgets, and the declining value of the Canadian dollar. Several CRKN institutions have issued statements addressing the financial difficulties their libraries are experiencing, and some have had to make difficult decisions to cancel subscriptions (Busby, 2015; Cavanagh, 2014; Gallilee, 2015; Schmidt, 2015; Truitt, 2015).

There are currently a multitude of models and projects involving support for scholarly publishing and open access. With limited funds and many commendable initiatives, libraries cannot participate in every project, which affected the final number of participants in the partnership.

### **5.2. Optional Participation Model**

CRKN agreements are optional, meaning each individual library must review the details of each offer and decide whether or not their institution is willing and able to participate. For the partnership, this meant a per-institution financial contribution amount had to be set without knowing the final participation numbers. Essentially, a critical mass of participation was needed in order for the agreement to be financially viable. In the end, 53 institutions elected to participate, which was sufficient for the agreement to go ahead.

## 6. Challenges from the Érudit and Journal Perspective

### 6.1. Moving to the Model Proposed by the Partnership

Aside from the technological changes that lowering the moving wall to 12 months produced, and the creation of specific interfaces for text and data mining, the partnership brought about organizational and strategic changes for Érudit. The transition to 12 months of restricted access, rather than 24, caused many reactions from journals that Érudit's small team had to manage. A series of meetings and communications had to be organized with hesitant publishers to demonstrate the positive impact of the partnership and reduce their uncertainty. At the same time, the large number of enthusiastic journals who decided to transition directly from 24 months of restricted access to immediate open access had to be managed by sending a series of communications to their subscribers and developing individual plans for their transition.

The partnership also involved reviewing current consortial subscription agreements and encouraging partners to change their subscription to a support-based partnership. While the logic of partnership applies well to Canadian institutions, it is a little more difficult to convince institutions outside Canadian borders, where each institution is already asked to support its own national research efforts. Since nearly 30% of digital subscription revenues for journals on Érudit are from abroad, substituting these revenues for financial support for open access is all the more strategic because it will take some of the financial pressure off the shoulders of Canadian university libraries.

### 6.2. Allocating Funds to the Journals

One issue that Érudit had to address was how to allocate funds to the journals. While in the past, the formula was simply based on the subscription rate provided by each journal, in the context of a partnership, this cannot be the sole criterion. The fact that many Canadian francophone SSH journals deal with "niche" or specialized topics complicated the matter and required further refinement of the redistribution method in order to take into consideration the unique nature of each journal.

Several variables were identified to assess the financial return for each journal: usage, annual production, length of existence of the journal, newness of

research topics, originality of research, etc. The more criteria there were to base these returns on, the more the differences were smoothed out, and the more the amounts tended to be equal. Given the complexity of the problem, Érudit has decided to undertake bibliometric studies to measure the scope and impact of the criteria to determine how many and which criteria are equitable given the situation of each journal.

### **6.3. Changing the Relationship between Érudit and the Journals**

Historically, the relationship between Érudit and the journals was one of reference, with many journals turning to the expertise of Érudit for questions related to digital publishing and publishing strategies. However, the commercial link between the two parties was still the basis on which decisions were made. The partnership has created a new dynamic between the journals and Érudit based on trust and transparency. Although journals are concerned about the effect of transition on their income, they are willing to trust Érudit in guiding them toward the best possible long-term solution, in exchange for which Érudit is committed to transparency regarding both financial data and the strategic directions of the partnership. To facilitate such communication, Érudit has established a journal review committee to collaborate in the next phases of the partnership.

## **7. Next Steps**

Unlike a typical subscription agreement, where most of the discussion takes place during the initial license renewal stage, the partnership is an ongoing project. Since its inception, both parties have been working together to share our work at various conferences and meetings and will continue to do so in the future. We will also be looking at ways to facilitate discussions between libraries and publishers, so that both parties can better understand each other's perspectives and challenges.

As the partnership progresses, we will be discussing how the model can evolve to meet the changing needs of both libraries and publishers and what the parameters of the partnership will be once the initial pilot stage is complete in 2017.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For discussions about Open Access business models, see e.g. Kennison & Norberg (2014) and Schimmer, Geschuhn, & Vogler (2015).