

# The Other “C” Word: How COPPUL Learned to Compete<sup>1</sup>

By Frank Winter

There are many *Cs* in COPPUL’s world: COPPUL itself, its parent body COWCUP (the Council of Western Canadian University Presidents), and a variety of other acronyms with *Cs* for Council or Committee or Canadian and so on. Cooperation, collaboration, and consortia, too, are other *Cs* that appear frequently in the record of COPPUL’s activities. It’s how we roll. But the *C* I wish to talk about is *competition*.

But, first, a bit of history and background.<sup>2</sup>

“On or about December 1910, human character changed,” Virginia Wolff famously wrote in 1924. She was writing about the emergence of the modernist movement in English *belles lettres* but her formulation of “on or about [some date] [some thing] changed” has spawned a host of variations. I contend the world of research libraries changed fundamentally on or about January 2000. That was the date that many librarians realized that there was now a critical mass of digital full-text high quality scholarly journal literature easily accessible through various databases or via the open Web. This change meant that the workflows of scholars at all levels could now bypass the library, a development whose implications have been explored in detail by library leaders such as Lorcan Dempsey. COPPUL played an important part in helping western Canadian university libraries implement and navigate this change.

COPPUL’s early organizational history was typical of its ilk: an occasion for library directors – in these case library directors in Western Canadian universities - to get together to talk about issues of mutual interest. Initially, like most of these organizations, COPPUL was run off the side of that year’s chair’s desk. One of the main tasks was reconciling the interlibrary charges among cooperating institutions, a tedious compilation task that occupied many staff hours at each library and part of every meeting until one director proposed a motion either at COPPUL or CARL – passed unanimously! - banning (in vain, as it turned out) any future discussion of this topic, ever.<sup>3</sup> It was that same director, too, in my memory, who felt strongly that COPPUL ought to stop being primarily a talking shop and actually, you know, do stuff. Stuff that had an impact. Stuff that would attract outside resources. Stuff that we could show to our bosses to demonstrate how we made a positive difference in the mission of our universities.

So COPPUL started doing more ambitious things. And this meant we needed more organizational capacity. That led to Hazel Fry being hired as Project Officer in 1992 and then being appointed as our first Executive Director. Some of the things we did based on the print and analog world worked out very well – reciprocal borrowing, eventually Canada-wide. Other things never did get off the ground – for example, cooperative collection development or buying bulk OCLC MARC record sets for large

microform collections. The University of Alberta's BARD facility, while open to deposits from any COPPUL library, attracted little interest. Many of these failures (if failures they were: perhaps it was more a case of the times not being receptive) were rooted in a world where a strong local print collection, balanced and representative and assembled to meet the needs of current and future scholars, was viewed as the core service the library provided to its host institution. Other services such as interlibrary loans, traditional reference, traditional library instruction, and so on orbited around that local collection.<sup>4</sup>

That world, however, has mostly Gone Away.<sup>5</sup>

What changed was the increasing penetration and functionality (browsers, the Web, and search engines, especially Google) of the internet and the increasing availability of good quality digital resources of interest to scholars. It is no accident that many of COPPUL's successes for many years were based on internet technology and digital content which supported and even more strongly promoted large scale collaborative approaches. An early example would be ACCOLEDS (A COPPUL Consortium Of Library Electronic Data Services), which was formed in 1992 in response to the availability of digital datasets such as, initially, ICPSR (the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research). Relatively shortly afterwards ACCOLEDS was well placed participate in the 1996 national Data Liberation Initiative (DLI).<sup>6</sup> ACCOLEDS recognized that "cooperation, group collaboration, and resource-sharing would be the key to mastering this new resource" and in many ways set the template and the tone for future COPPUL activities.

Consortial site licensing of digital products also became an increasingly important part of COPPUL's activities in the 1990s and we joined the array of licensing consortia that began to litter the landscape of librarianship at every level from the local to the international. Another example would be the formation in 1993-1994 of the Virtual Western Canadian University Library (VWCUL, usually pronounced *View-Cul*) in response to the need for university libraries to devise, in the absence of acceptable commercial applications, a suite of services to manage the rising tide of digital resources. We wanted to be able to deploy these resources in a way that would enable cooperative resource sharing as well as advance what one early library automation guru described as the be-all and end-all of any library automation activity: to get the document into the hands of the user.<sup>7</sup>

I remember meeting after meeting at which a game but generally technologically-challenged bunch of COPPUL directors (with the notable exceptions of Lynn Copeland of SFU and later Mark Leggott, during his time at Winnipeg) tried to get their heads and arms around the strange vocabulary of VWCUL building blocks such as A-Z lists, link resolvers, knowledge bases, and citation managers as this brave new world was being invented. The development path (including funding, which came from special assessments on top of normal COPPUL dues) for VWCUL eventually proved to be a point of sharp division and eventual split among COPPUL

libraries between those who favoured an open source solution (eventually called reSearcher) that would support resource sharing and those who preferred commercial solutions.

While this was going on, what else was happening? Underlying my answer is my belief that every important factor in the evolving mission and role of university libraries is exogenous. We have no meaningful control or influence over the ecosystem of scholarly communication where Elsevier and its ilk and Google are the dominant players. So, in brief, the Canadian dollar tanked – again- and journal prices escalated - again. Journal cancellation projects proliferated. Elsevier’s name was generally invoked in the same manner as the inhabitants of Dog River reacted whenever the name of neighbouring Wullerton was mentioned.<sup>8</sup>

Does any of this sound familiar? *Plus ça change.*

The other exogenous change in Canada in the later 1990s was the decisive re-entry of the federal government into the funding of higher education in a way that had not been seen in decades. But rather than general support, the federal government would target its money in support of research and innovation.<sup>9</sup> Of particular importance to university libraries was the creation of the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI) in 1997 to support research and research infrastructure.<sup>10</sup> *Research infrastructure* was defined in the Act which created CFI as “equipment, specimens, scientific collections, computer software, information databases, communications linkages and other intangible property used or to be used primarily for carrying on research, including housing and installations essential for the use and servicing of those things.”

Well, were we excited! How could “information databases” not be something right down the middle of our wheelhouse? We were quickly disabused of this notion when Dr. Keith Brimacombe, the first president of CFI, attended a CARL meeting and told us that these words did not perhaps mean what we thought they meant. Research libraries were not, according to him, research infrastructure and thus ineligible to apply for any CFI support. This was very upsetting, to say the least.<sup>11</sup>

One story, but one which I believe to be true, is that this interpretation was changed in the course of a plane ride from Toronto to Ottawa on which Sally Brown, then Senior Vice President of AUCC, sat next to Dr. John Evans, chair of the CFI Board. Over the course of the one hour trip she convinced him that libraries ought to be able to apply. Sally Brown had been a member of the AUCC-CARL/ABRC Task Force on Academic Libraries and Scholarly Communication. Her knowledge of and support for the vision and goals of Canadian university libraries for the communities they served, as set out in the Task Force’s 1996 final report, *The changing world of scholarly communications: challenges and choices for Canada*, was decisive in enabling her to make our case for us. Regardless of the truth of this story, however, somehow the interpretation changed and university libraries became eligible to apply.

But then CARL was told by CFI that it could not submit an application for a national project because CFI, which was at that time hard at work devising processes, procedures, and timelines as it stick-handled through its start-up pains, could not accept applications for nation-wide proposals. Regional proposals, on the other hand, were okay. Thus, COPPUL was faced with the task of generating group proposals that could be presented to each member's university for approval to submit them to CFI for support.

And so, finally, we come to the topic of competition. As COPPUL generated its proposals we also had to come to grips with funding sources. CFI would provide 40% of the funds. Most provincial governments had a mechanism that would match a grant, so that was another 40%. That left another 20% that had to be found from somewhere. And all these matching funds had to be obtained, institution by institution, in competition with every other group on campus, and other institutions in each province, who were also competing for CFI funds.

As a first step, COPPUL had to generate proposals. We solicited ideas from all members and then worked transform these ideas into costed proposals. This was a lot of work and a very new approach to grant requesting that involved innumerable meetings in the Airport Hilton in Calgary, the city that hosted COPPUL's World Headquarters but conveniently central – or equally inconvenient – for all members as well as a blizzard of faxes, emails and attachments, and conference calls, all within the tight CFI deadlines. As with all association activities, the time and mindshare for each director was additive. None of our other responsibilities went away. We formed a committee consisting of one director from each province - Ted Dobb (SFU), Carolynne Presser (Manitoba), probably Frits Pannekoek (Calgary), myself (Saskatchewan) as well as Hazel Fry and the pro-bono help of a Calgary-based technical writer. We wrote and rewrote. Sometimes committee members would fly into Calgary on Friday evening, work on the proposals that evening and the next day and fly out later on Saturday. Working on a CFI scale and attempting to address the labyrinthine and ever-evolving requirements and objectives of the CFI process was a steep learning curve and quite exhausting. Sometimes tempers frayed.

Eventually our committee was able to present 3 proposals to the COPPUL directors: a geospatial and dataset service building on the functionality of the University of Calgary Library's LANDRU (Local Access to Networked Data Retrieval Utility) service; an ambitious document delivery service building on the University of Alberta Library's ARIEL project; and a COPPUL-wide full-text consortial full-text journal licensing project. Each of these built on existing local and COPPUL initiatives including ACCOLEDS, our existing database licensing activities, and components of VWCUL. Then the work of piloting these proposals through each COPPUL institution began, in an environment where each institution and province was also inventing their own processes by which CFI proposals could go forward.<sup>12</sup> Many meetings and

many signatures later, the COPPUL consortial database licensing project was presented to CFI.

By a startling non-coincidence, CFI received similar database licensing proposals from OCUL, the CREPUQ Sous-comité des bibliothèques, and CAUL. The good folks at CFI thought about this for a bit and then asked the four regional associations to submit a national proposal! CFI approved the proposal in 1999 and thus CNSLP – now CRKN – was born with \$20 million of CFI funds for a \$50 million project.<sup>13</sup> Karen Adams (Alberta) served as COPPUL's representative to CNSLP as the proposal moved forward to implementation.

As noted at the beginning of this brief narrative, I believe that the introduction of significant quantities of high quality digital scholarly content funded through CNSLP was transformative for Canadian university libraries. Without much exaggeration, if this transformation had not taken place, the decades-long cumulative trajectory of print journal price increases and journal cancellation projects that came to a crisis point in the later 1990s was such that at least one possible future for Canadian university libraries resembled that of a Looney Tunes cartoon character running at full speed around a corner - spang!!! splat!!! - right into a brick wall. CNSLP, CRKN and other Big Deals have kept us afloat for almost twenty years now and allowed university libraries the time and space to try to craft a sustainable future that supports and advances our core values and mission. For this to happen, to get the financial resources necessary for this to happen, COPPUL had to learn how to compete.

---

<sup>1</sup> Prepared by Frank Winter for COPPUL's 25th's Anniversary celebration held in Vancouver on March 2, 2017. I was a member of COPPUL during my time as Interim Director and Director of the University of Saskatchewan Library, 1991 – 2005. I served as Chair of COPPUL for the period 1997 – 1999, the period during which the events described in this text took place.

Standard disclaimers and weasel words apply. This narrative is based on what I can reconstruct from a patchy personal archive of documents and emails and memories. The missing records are probably buried in the same place as the COPPUL tractor hat that one chair – not me - thought was good idea to hand out. I have not been able to locate any pictures of COPPUL meetings either. No group photos and no group hugs were core COPPUL values during my time and the absence of smart phone cameras and Facebook or Instagram meant that there were no bootleg photos. It is a pleasure to report, however, that the COPPUL hat and a few pictures made an appearance at the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration. As befits the occasion that has prompted it, this text is informal and anecdotal and intended to be as much entertainment as history. Acronyms are not spelled out when I assume the audience will be familiar with what they stand for. Errors and omissions, for which I apologize in advance, are inevitable and corrections are welcome. Other COPPULites who were there at the same time will very obviously have different stories, different perspectives, and different emphases, each just as valid as mine.

This text has benefitted from comments and suggestions from several colleagues from that time. As Paul Wiens notes [personal communication], “the importance (or not) of peer colleagues' support,

---

views, opinions, advice - mostly pure gold, but also an occasional sprinkling of fool's gold - is an essential and incredibly valuable" part of any director's life. In case it is not clear, I valued my time with my COPPUL colleagues, not only for the personal growth it afforded me but, far more importantly, for the benefits COPPUL brought to my library and the university community it served.

<sup>2</sup> See the [History of COPPUL](http://www.coppul.ca/history), <http://www.coppul.ca/history>. A distinguishing characteristic of COPPUL, of course, is the fact that it spans four provinces with sometimes very different socio-economic circumstances in their post-secondary sectors. There were also intra-provincial arrangements, for example the British Columbia Electronic Library Network (BC ELN), which cut orthogonally across various COPPUL activities, or vice versa. Then there were the distinct institutional mindsets and every director's personal beliefs and preferences that COPPUL collectively and especially our Executive Director somehow had to accommodate. The executive director also had to work with the fact that COPPUL issues, concerns, and activities were rarely at the top of the multitude of things each director was engaged with. One former executive director of a national library association once told me during her time as executive director, she had to come to grips with the fact that most members read the agenda and the accompanying materials on the plane ride to the meeting. It would have been much the same for COPPUL directors, I expect, but this also describes the reality of most associations.

Among the COPPUL libraries at that time, besides interprovincial differences and differences in size and resources, the University of Athabasca Library, with its distributed student population, was the most different. Royal Roads University Library, which joined COPPUL in 1997, also had a distributed student population.

I often felt that the closest analogy to COPPUL among US library consortia – and certainly one whose activities were worthy of emulation - was the CIC (Committee for Institutional Cooperation - now the Big Ten Academic Alliance) Center for Library Initiatives.

Although not discussed in these remarks, the most active COPPUL groups were the ACCOLEDS/ DLI librarians, the systems librarians, and the distance education librarians. Sandy Slade, COPPUL's second executive director, came from the distance education librarian community, where he was a leading figure. During my time there were one or two joint meetings with directors and collections librarians but conversations at that level were not a high priority.

<sup>3</sup> Resource sharing has historically been a constant and vexing challenge for Canadian libraries lacking, as we did, a dominant agency such as OCLC or the British Lending Library on which the vast majority of interlending operations could be optimized and on which subroutines for special cases could then be added as needed. In Canada, we had the union catalogs of UTLAS and the National Library of Canada, neither of which was comprehensive. We had to devise and maintain all sorts of arrangements by a considerable effort of will and sustained commitment in the face of sometimes considerable stresses.

<sup>4</sup> Now that the concept of the collective collection has gained traction it has been interesting to me to observe COPPUL successfully re-engage with the print world in the form of CSPAN. Preservation – that red-headed stepchild of library operations – has also benefitted from successful COPPUL digital preservation initiatives such as CLOCKSS.

<sup>5</sup> Winter, F. 2014. [Traditionalists, Progressives and the Gone-Away World](https://words.usask.ca/ceblipblog/2014/10/14/traditionalists-progressives-and-the-gone-away-world/). [Blog post], <https://words.usask.ca/ceblipblog/2014/10/14/traditionalists-progressives-and-the-gone-away-world/>.

<sup>6</sup> See [About ACCOLEDS](https://accoleds.org/about/), <https://accoleds.org/about/>. This page contains some photos from the first meeting with familiar - and still active in the field after 25 years – faces: Chuck Humphrey (Alberta);

---

Darlene Fichter (Saskatchewan); and Marilyn Andrews (Regina). The page also links to an article about the formation of the Data Liberation Initiative (DLI) in 1996. Canada lagged far behind the USA for many years with respect to the availability of freely accessible government statistical datasets and geospatial information. ACCOLEDS and the DLI were fine examples of building capacity until the federal government finally saw the light and adopted its Open Data and Open GIS policies.

<sup>7</sup> See [About reSeacher](http://www.sfu.ca/~kstranac/researcher/about.html), <http://www.sfu.ca/~kstranac/researcher/about.html>.

<sup>8</sup> See [Corner Gas Wullerton Superclip](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yio3Pin43eA), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yio3Pin43eA>. While it is easy – really, too easy and often with more than a little smug self-satisfaction with our own self-anointed virtue – to mock Elsevier, the reality of Elsevier’s role and ever-growing importance in the ecosystem of scholarly communication is challenging to engage with.

<sup>9</sup> CARL’s response to this development reminded me strongly of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) meeting in the fall of 1992 when ARL flagged the expansion of American federal government interest in higher education that was expected with the likely election of Bill Clinton and Al Gore Jr. It was anticipated that “very high-level and sustained attention will be paid to networks and networked information in the new Administration.” (*ARL: A Monthly Bimonthly Newsletter*, November 1992, 16). ARL libraries might have a shot at National Science Foundation (NSF) money but, as some warned, NSF did not entertain proposals that did not have at least seven zeroes in the ask. This was a big leap even for the largest ARL libraries and resulted in something delightfully called “Project Big Ideas” which was ARL’s attempt to brainstorm projects on an NSF scale. See <http://old.cni.org/hforums/cni-bigideas/1993/0002.html> for the work plan for Project Big Ideas in its home in the Coalition for Networked Information. There is a document listing the Big Ideas that resulted from this process buried somewhere in the Internet Archive of ARL’s web pages.

Although not germane to this text, there is another interesting outcome of the theme of competition insofar as it led to the increasing requirements for published research and scholarship for University of Saskatchewan librarians and archivists. The implications of the targeted re-entry of the federal government into university funding were flagged as an important development by Peter MacKinnon at the very beginning of his time as President of the University of Saskatchewan in 1999. President MacKinnon stated that the University would have to learn to compete much more effectively in many different areas such as student recruitment and retention, faculty members who would be recognized globally as among the very best in their fields, research funding, high quality graduate programmes, and so on. Although his emphasis on the urgency of developing the institution’s capacity to be better able to compete successfully on multiple fronts was not greeted with universal approval by faculty members, one of the consequences was a focus on increasing the quality of evidence that would be required for tenure and promotion to ensure that the University met the highest standards for granting tenure to faculty members. The high level revisions to the *University Standards for Promotion and Tenure* that implemented these changes led to increased requirements for scholarship and research (and in particular publication in peer-reviewed outlets) in the *Library Standards*. This in turn led to a push-pull evolution in the language of collective agreement between the University and Faculty Association. The librarians, through the Association, negotiated fewer and fewer differences between the terms and conditions describing their status and those of other faculty members because they were being required to meet the same standards. Then the higher level collegial bodies responsible for developing and administering the requirements of the *Standards*, as well as other high level planning and evaluation bodies on campus, said that if there was no difference then the same standards and expectations should apply to the Library and the librarians. Then the librarians would request further changes in the collective agreement that eliminated any remaining differences between them and other faculty members. Lather, rinse, and repeat over several iterations lasting several years of *Standards* revisions and collective agreement negotiations.

<sup>10</sup> Budget Implementation Act, 1997, SC 1997, c 26, Part I, <http://canlii.ca/t/j0mt>.

---

<sup>11</sup> Dr. Brimacombe was a very accomplished professor of metallurgical engineering and perhaps his disciplinary training and experience did not lead him to think of libraries as research infrastructure. University libraries then and still now have to fight to be recognized as essential components of Canada's research infrastructure. CFI itself, by virtue of the clear language in its enabling legislation, was in the business of advancing STEM-related infrastructure initiatives. This necessitated some fancy footwork when libraries asked for support for full-text journal databases that might include humanities and social sciences titles.

<sup>12</sup> As this text has tried to convey, CFI at this time was in start-up mode: devising many of its programmes, processes, procedures, timelines, and requirements quite quickly, as it dealt with the challenges of creating a competition and funding process that satisfied the terms of its statutory mandate. Each university's research office faced its own challenges devising internal processes to mesh with CFI's evolving processes. Most COPPUL libraries had had few if any interactions with research offices and were unfamiliar with how they worked. It was vital that libraries understood how all this worked – the players and the ropes to jump and the ropes to skip, so to speak. At the University of Saskatchewan Library, for example, our Associate Director one day scored some buffalo jerky and Red Bull from the Library IT office's supply cupboard and disappeared across the frontier on a one-man reconnaissance mission into the domain of research services (speaking figuratively here of course). Some time later he reappeared at the border triumphantly bearing a comprehensive and comprehensible roadmap of who controlled what pots of money, what internal review committees existed, who sat on them, who had to sign what and when, what sort of documentation was required, and a myriad of other details that had to be checked off to eventually produce a library proposal with the University's imprimatur that could be submitted to CFI. I expect similar scouting expeditions, *mutatis mutandis*, took place at many other COPPUL libraries.

<sup>13</sup> See Groen, F. (2000), Canada's national initiative to advance access to electronic journals. *Health Libraries Review*, 17: 189–193. doi:10.1111/j.1471-1842.2000.00293.x for a very readable, less anecdotal, and more systematic account of CFI and CNSLP.