

French consortium Couperin: achievements and goals

Created in 1999 by four university head librarians, the consortium Couperin is, after less than ten years in existence, the only one in France for higher education and research and the second biggest in Europe. Couperin's main goals are to evaluate, negotiate and purchase electronic information, to share skills and experiences in information and library sciences and to participate in national, European and international co-operation on these topics. As of today, Couperin has negotiated over 120 information resources for its 112 members. National licensing, back-files purchasing, long-term preservation of electronic resources and lobbying at European level for tax reduction are some of the many subjects that Couperin will continue to work on in the future.



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Background

Couperin was launched in 1999 by four colleagues, university head librarians from major scientific French universities (Jean-Claude Brouillard in Angers, Marie-Hélène Bournat in Marseille, Jacqueline Gaude in Nancy and Iris Bieber in Strasbourg), with the strong support of Jean-Yves Merindol, former President of the Louis Pasteur scientific, technological and medical university in Strasbourg.

This joint initiative from a university president and librarians has experienced rapid growth as the result of the involvement of information professionals committed to the project, especially the directors of other university libraries, with support from university presidents.

From the outset, the close relationship between Couperin, university presidents and the Conference of University Presidents (CPU) strengthened the growth and development of the project. The original group, comprised of five members only (one president and four library directors making up Couperin's board), could react quite quickly, which helped solve numerous issues raised by the

development of what would become the second biggest consortium in Europe.

Having to face the unsustainable increase in the price of periodicals, the original Couperin creators decided to join forces and went to Elsevier and other major publishers such as Springer, Academic Press, American Chemical Society, Blackwell and Wiley, asking these publishers to give access to all titles subscribed to at least once by one of their four universities, to all users of these universities. The publishers accepted. After these cross-access agreements were put in place, giving access to more titles each time, Couperin increased its membership, and Elsevier and the major publishers proposed even more: access to the whole periodicals collection. Based on this first 'micro' big deal, Couperin gathered membership from all French universities, numerous engineering and business schools, and research institutions like the French National Institute for Agricultural Research (INRA), Institut National de Recherche en Informatique et Automatique (INRIA) and the Institut de recherche pour le développement (IRD). Couperin expanded

rapidly, and by 2003 boasted over 100 members. There are currently 211 members. The Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), the biggest French Research institute, and Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale (INSERM) are not members of Couperin, but participate in several important joint licensing agreements.

Couperin is an association governed by the French legal principles of 1901 and can be compared with a not-for-profit organization. It is the only consortium for higher education and research in France.

Since 2003 there have been important milestones in Couperin's structure:

- creation of a Steering Committee (Conseil d'Orientation) composed of university presidents and vice-presidents as well as representatives of engineering high schools. This Committee was replaced in 2006 by the Executive Board (Conseil d'Administration), the political branch of Couperin
- enlargement of the Professional Board from four to ten members, all information professionals, six of them also head librarians. The Professional Board holds meetings on a bi-monthly basis. The Executive Committee holds meetings regularly (two or three times a year)
- creation of two departments: the Pricing and Purchasing Department and the Prospective and Technical Department
- creation of Couperin's website: <http://www.couperin.org/>
- creation of mailing lists.

Couperin today

Couperin aims to:

- evaluate, negotiate and purchase, according to the current regulations, electronic information products for its members at the best price
- share skills, human resources and financial means so that each member can build its own collections development policy
- organize a collaborative information policy at a national level (purchase, preservation) between the members and the trustees (Libraries Department of the French Ministry of Education, Research Department, etc.) and their patent partners: Bibliothèque Nationale de France

(BNF), Agence Bibliographique de l'Enseignement Supérieur (ABES), Institut National pour l'Information Scientifique et Technique (INIST)

- participate in international co-operation, especially at a European level
- negotiate specific grants required for the achievement of this policy, and establish fair financial contribution rules for all members
- build a national network of skills and exchanges in the field of information systems, so as to analyze and evaluate these systems, allowing each member to set up its own local information system. This is more specifically related to the issues of integrated access to e-resources, long-term archiving, alternative resources description and institutional repositories
- foster and improve communication with the members by means of mailing lists and the website.

Couperin currently has:

- 211 members (95 universities, 81 engineering and business high schools, 30 research institutions and 5 other institutions). Criteria for being able to join are: to be a publicly-funded institution whose budget depends on the state or its representatives in local government, and whose aims encompass educational and research purposes.
- 50 librarians as negotiators, all working on a voluntary basis 'on top of' their regular job
- Two departments:
 - The Pricing and Purchasing Department (PPD): organized in six sections (Science and Technology; Medicine and Life Sciences; Law and Political Sciences; Economy and Business; Human and Social Sciences; Big Deals), PPD leads all negotiations with publishers and information suppliers. It conceived guidelines for negotiators of each type of product, and organizes special training courses for negotiators on a yearly basis, gathers statistics on licences and usage of electronic resources at the consortium's level, participates in International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC) conferences, etc.
 - The Prospective and Technical Department (PTD): manages Couperin's technical workgroups on several topics (institutional repositories, long-term preservation, electronic resources management systems (ERMS), e-books, etc.). PTD has been mandated by the

consortium's Professional Board to watch and analyze technical issues related to the diffusion of electronic resources. It fosters sharing of experiences and projects in this emerging field of the profession, which is vital for the development of our institutions. The workgroups, based on a voluntary participation, are open to any Couperin member's librarians, and external experts may participate. They meet regularly, and keep working through dedicated mailing lists, as well as wikis. The groups also prepare the PTD's work, in concert with the Professional Board and the Executive Committee.

- Three mailing lists:
 - couperin@cru.fr
Open to all members, this list provides general information about the consortium's activities.
 - couperin-achats@cru.fr
This list gives information about the current negotiations and tests. It is limited to the people in charge of e-resources at the member institutions. Subscription to this list is subject to the institution executive's validation.
 - couperin-technique@cru.fr
This list is an internal exchange and discussion tool for Couperin's Technical Workgroup (CTW). It is restricted to CTW members.

Achievements

The action plan adopted by the Executive Board on January 2007 is:

- to strengthen the co-ordination between universities and research organizations in licensing
- to develop studies on the usage of electronic resources in the different scientific communities so as to reach a better fit between the real needs and the costs; Couperin is a member of COUNTER (Counting Online Usage of NeTworked Electronic Resources) and participates also in French research programs on this topic
- to set up an archiving policy for online resources and guarantee perpetual access to the data purchased by the members
- to facilitate the spreading of open repositories in higher education and research
- to facilitate the use of resources by implementing ERMS
- to strengthen the links with the other consortia in Europe and the world via an active participation in ICOLC work.

Couperin is supported by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research, in terms of financial contribution in 'big deals' and three librarian's positions and, since 2008, from its membership (fees range from EUR300 to EUR500). However, Couperin has no purchasing power; it negotiates terms and conditions with publishers that apply to all members. Each member has its own individual collection development policy.

The agreements with vendors present two options: with many of them, a Couperin licence is validated after negotiation, each member ordering the resource directly and paying the bill; for the major publishers, Couperin negotiates price and conditions, then one member or a partner such as ABES or CNRS constitutes a purchasing group, organizes a public tender, pays a unique bill, and receives the contribution of each member. With purchasing groups, publishers provide additional discounts, as their costs are lower. Another activity of the purchasing groups is to apply across the consortium charging criteria decided by the members and to balance the expenses between 'rich' and 'poor', so as to permit all researchers nationwide to access the major resources. At this time, 16 purchasing groups have been set up.

The guidelines of the Professional Board for negotiating and licensing are mainly:

- to negotiate resources whose content has been validated by the scientific communities and to monitor the real use of these
- to give preference to purchasing groups whenever possible, to set them up when at least 15 members are willing, and to extend them to external institutions that are not Couperin members
- to place greater importance on the legal clauses of the licences so as to ensure the use for teaching and learning.

There is a debate in the consortium on the question of appointing (or not) professional negotiators, paid with a percentage of the discount they obtain from the vendors. This would be perhaps relevant for the largest agreements, but any good negotiation is one that satisfies as much as possible the

needs and interests of all the members and that is concluded by an agreement with the vendor. Of course, librarians must acquire new skills for this new job, but they are qualified for leading these discussions with vendors. They are best at negotiating the access and services provided. They are also able to give feedback from the end-users, and to suggest to the publishers ways to improve the quality of the service provided. For this reason, Couperin participates in library advisory boards set up by publishers such as Elsevier, Institution of Electrical and Electronic Engineers (IEEE) and Springer, for discussion on strategic and marketing issues.

After almost ten years in existence, Couperin has achieved the following:

- about 120 negotiated products (periodicals, databases, e-books), of which 16 are via purchasing groups
- expertise in publishers' economic models, pricing models, institutional repositories (IR), ERMS
- recognition at the national level as an expert partner in its area.

Although the number of agreements with vendors is particularly high in comparison with other consortia, many members contract only a few licences: the 2006 figures show that 46% of the members signed from one to ten licences, 35 % from 11 to 20 licences and only 19 % more than 20 licences. Counting the number of licences per publisher, only five of them contract with 50 members or more: American Chemical Society (ACS), Elsevier, Encyclopédie Universalis, Springer and Wiley; the financial value of these big deals is more than 50% of the total expenses.

In the same way, for the resources for which the vendors provide usage reports, the total number of articles downloaded for nine major resources in 2007 is 13.3 million, but usage is concentrated: only two resources are above one million downloads (ACS, 1.1 million, ScienceDirect, 10.1 million). The implementation of ERMS and library portals combined with open access will perhaps introduce greater diversity in researchers' sources.

National licences for the purchase of back-files and current issues of the major resources would be a good thing, but for the moment a centralized country such as France has not been able to follow this path.

Conclusion

A lot has been done since 1999, and our four colleagues can be proud of their 'child'! There is still a lot to do, for example: to work with other consortia, especially in Europe, to 'lobby' publishers and institutions to obtain better conditions to access and spread scientific information; to obtain better tax conditions for library electronic resources; to succeed in several important negotiations that failed in the past, and act to improve the organization of scientific and technical information in France.

Today's challenges are exciting. With the recent ScienceDirect agreement, Couperin is at a turning point to e-only, and will push for a co-operative national plan for paper subscriptions preservation; above all, it will support, with the other European consortia, the adoption of new regulations concerning the taxation of e-only library resources, whose cost is still higher than for print resources. Couperin also pays significant attention to new models of open access, such as SCOAP3 (the European Commission or Sponsoring Consortium for Open Access Publishing in Particle Physics) initiatives, and to new options combining the author-pays model and the reader-pays model. Additionally, with the co-operation of the French universities in research and higher education poles or the merging of some of them, Couperin will lead a think-tank on its internal organization, so as to support research, teaching and learning more strongly in France and in the European context.

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