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The Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition

An evolving agenda

When I stepped into the role of SPARC director in July 2005, I thought I was reasonably familiar with this dynamic, action-oriented organization. From my vantage point in helping to launch and to lead BioOne—a collaborative publishing venture that was among the first projects founded by SPARC (the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition)—I thought I was well versed in SPARC's founding principles and proactive agenda. But as the realities of leading our day-to-day activities have become clear, I have been reminded time and again of the challenges inherent in the unique role that SPARC plays—identifying opportunities to effect positive change in the scholarly communication system and creating and supporting programs that advance those changes.

SPARC is, first and foremost, a strategic organization, and its agenda and programs have therefore evolved over its lifetime. In this article, I will sketch SPARC's past accomplishments, outline ways that the organization has evolved, and share a sense of the direction SPARC will move in during the coming year.

SPARC'S mission

SPARC was created by the Association of Research Libraries in 1998, to serve as a catalyst for action and to reduce barriers to the access and use of information. As an alliance of more than 200 academic and research libraries, SPARC's mission is to correct imbalances in the scholarly publishing system that have driven up the cost of scholarly journals and diminished the community's ability to access

information. At the core of our mission is the belief that these imbalances inhibit the advancement of scholarship and are at odds with fundamental needs of scholars and the academic enterprise.

Since 2002, SPARC's highest priority and most visible activity has centered on advancing the goal of open access to scholarly literature, and this will continue to be our main focus. We do, however, recognize that change will play out differently in individual disciplines of scholarship, and that, in some areas, the interests of the community may be best served in the near term by affordable subscription-supported publishing solutions. Our programs are designed to build a broader understanding of the opportunities for change as we move steadily towards a more open system of scholarship.

To achieve its mission, SPARC's activities center around three program areas: *educating* stakeholders on issues in scholarly communication, *advocating* policy changes that support the potential of digital systems to advance scholarly communication, and *incubating* market-based initiatives that demonstrate business and publishing models that advance changes benefitting scholarship and the academy.

SPARC has an admirable track record in identifying opportunities to effect change in each of its program areas. Rick Johnson, SPARC's founding director, set a wonderful

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example of ways that SPARC can deploy programs in each of these areas, strategically and in concert with one another.

Education

SPARC's educational activities have served to build a foundation for each strategic direction that SPARC has pursued. We have created effective campaigns designed to enhance scholars' awareness of issues in scholarly communication, and to encourage and support their active participation in the scholarly communication process.

The "Create Change" and "Declaring Independence" campaigns have been effective tools in helping to raise awareness among librarians and authors about the consequences of decisions over which they have direct, day-to-day control: what journals to submit articles to, review articles for, edit, and subscribe to. They have served as a call for scholars to act to increase competition in the marketplace and to introduce new publishing venues driven by scholars, not by commercial entities.

SPARC's campaign promoting awareness and adoption of open access has been, and will continue to be, the most visible of our educational projects. In addition to using traditional print channels, SPARC supports a series of rich Web-based resources articulating the benefits of open access. The "SPARC Open Access Newsletter" and the "Open Access News Blog," both created and edited by Peter Suber, are vibrant channels that provide information on open access activities worldwide. Updates appear in the blog on a daily basis, and these are supplemented by Suber's thoughtful and thorough analyses in the monthly newsletter.

SPARC's Whitepaper Series has also played an important role in introducing new ideas into academic and publishing circles. In particular, "The Case for Institutional Repositories" contributed to an entirely new way for the community to consider the long-term possibilities for access and archiving of their intellectual assets. This kind of educational outreach, speaking directly

to individual scholars, will continue to be crucial to effecting change in the marketplace and in the scholarly communication process overall.

Incubation

I have long admired SPARC because it does more than just pay lip service to the importance of increasing competition in scholarly communication. Through its active incubation program, SPARC supports a unique and active program helping to create and support sustainable alternative publishing ventures. SPARC's activities have evolved dramatically in this arena, starting with an early program designed to introduce reasonably priced electronic journals as alternatives to expensive titles.

This approach grew into an effort to organize much larger, multipublisher ventures, such as Project Euclid, Columbia Earthscape, and, of course, BioOne. SPARC has also partnered with institutions to support developments in the Institutional Repositories arena, such as the California Digital Library's "eScholarship" program. These programs highlight SPARC's commitment to working collaboratively with the community on concrete projects that demonstrate the viability of alternative publishing programs.

As an offshoot of our experience in assisting in the start-up of a large number of alternative ventures, SPARC also runs a consulting service. It has provided business and strategic planning services to dozens of nonprofit publishers, concentrating on the central goal of designing viable, financially sustainable alternatives.

Advocacy

SPARC's advocacy program has risen to the forefront of our activities. Initially the program focused on outreach targeted at stakeholder groups internal to the scholarly communication faculty and editorial boards along with communications and public relations activities. During the past two years, however, it has been greatly expanded to include an extremely active public policy

focus. SPARC has gained national and international attention with its active advocacy work for open access. SPARC has been outspoken in support of policies related to public access to federally funded research results, in particular on the recently implemented NIH Public Access Policy.

The focus on public access to federally funded research led SPARC to spearhead the formation of the Alliance for Taxpayer Access, a unique alliance of leading library groups, public interest organizations, and patient advocacy groups. This group quickly coalesced and developed a powerful voice in the open access movement, and is a good example of SPARC's ability to identify opportunities to spearhead collaborative action.

SPARC's highly visible support for policies that support open access have helped to contribute to a growing sense that change in the scholarly communication system is required, and that a more open system will have benefits that can be realized far beyond the academic community.

Future challenges and directions

SPARC's greatest opportunities will depend on our ability to effectively combine a focused, highly visible public advocacy campaign on open access with concrete, market-based activities that support the kind of changes that a successful campaign are likely to bring.

The challenge is to find ways to keep the development of SPARC's three strategic areas driving in complementary directions. The combination of our efforts in education, advocacy, and incubation has the potential to help us effect the greatest change.

SPARC will also continue to listen closely and respond to concerns coming from our membership and the scholarly communication community as a whole. I often hear the concern that as SPARC actively advocates for public access to federally funded research, the small, society publishers (who have traditionally

been "good citizen" players) may be left in a vulnerable position. SPARC is uniquely positioned to leverage its education and outreach programs to focus on identifying and implementing market-based initiatives that can help create the kind of market conditions in which scholarly society (and other nonprofit publishing organizations) can continue to play a vital role.

As SPARC moves forward, we will work to address these vulnerabilities. At the moment, we're developing a discussion paper on the concept of applying the economic principles of cooperatives to the publishing arena. The notion of publishing cooperatives is agnostic to what particular change is driving the marketplace, and focuses on directly addressing the vulnerabilities of independent players to help build a foundation that can leverage a strength-in-numbers approach.

It's also very important that SPARC identify initiatives that reflect an understanding of the full life cycle of scholarly communication—programs that center on the end-to-end work of scholars. Ultimately, we can help support projects that directly address the ways scholars conduct their work, and that integrate mechanisms and standards to facilitate the open conduct of scholarship into the workflow of scholars. SPARC will actively seek to back initiatives that explicitly recognize that dissemination is an essential, inseparable component of the scientific research process and that address questions of access to data as well as to the primary literature.

While the issue of journal pricing was the wake-up call that brought many SPARC supporters to the table, it is vitally important for us to try to understand the broader context in which these pricing trends are occurring, as well as the wider consequences. By understanding that adjustments are needed at a system-wide level, we at SPARC, and those that believe in SPARC's mission, can focus our energy on the long-term goal of contributing to a more open system of scholarship. *zn*