

CREATING CHANGE IN EUROPE: SPARC EUROPE AND SCHOLARLY PUBLISHING

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Abstract.

Even since its inception, SPARC - the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition - has been international in character. The European programme and membership has now become so strong as to warrant the establishment of a European focus, called SPARC Europe. The mission, goals and objectives are those of SPARC world-wide but the particular applications and initiatives will be European. A SPARC Europe Steering Group has been established to reflect the European membership base and an Executive Director will be recruited and based in a European institution. European publishers willing to introduce competition and change into the scholarly publishing market-place will be welcome to work with SPARC Europe on new models. SPARC Europe has also initiated a programme to raise awareness amongst European academic authors of the factors leading to change. The electronic revolution is causing and enabling change in access to academic publications, and SPARC Europe will be working with the grain of change in order to achieve better access.

Introduction : a changing world.

It is clear that the scholarly communication system is going through a process of change across the world. A revolution in authoring, publishing and reading following the use of new technologies has already begun. If there is any author, publisher or reader who is not using the new technologies, they are missing out on opportunities to add value to their work and study - and they risk impairment of their role as the world changes around them. More difficult to assess are the long-term implications of these changes in scholarly communication. Does the author with a PC and a connection to the Internet still need a publisher? Does the reader with a PC and a connection to the Internet need a librarian? These and many other questions cannot be answered quickly, but while answers are emerging all stakeholders in scholarly communication are trying to maximise opportunities and avoid threats to their position. The changes taking place are shaking the relationship between authors, publishers, librarians and readers, a relationship which all understood in the paper world, a cosy relationship of mutual need and service. Yet all are still in the same scholarly communication process and, whether they are now partners or competitors, have a mutual interest in exploring the future.

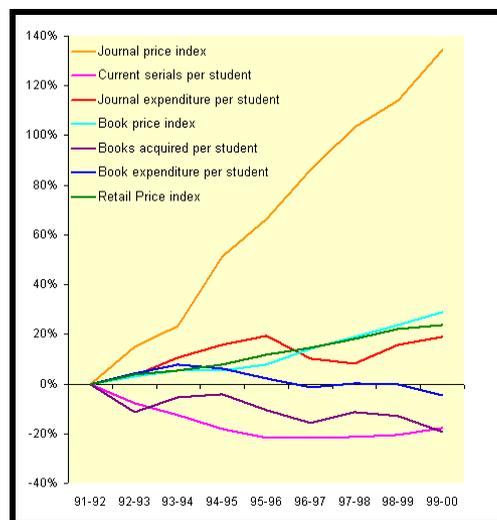
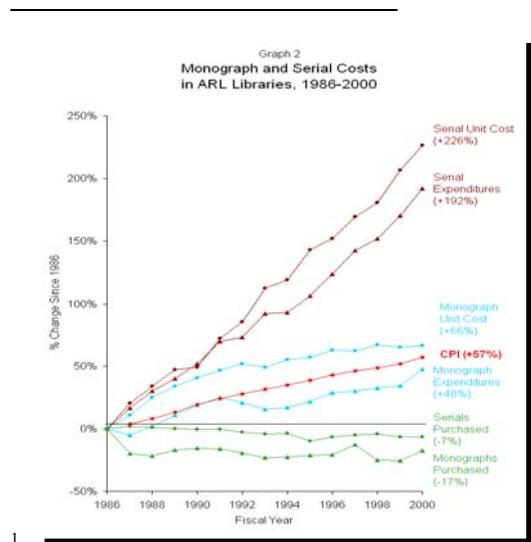
SPARC : born into a troubled world.

It is against this background that the development of SPARC, the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition, has to be understood. SPARC has

specific objectives and a specific agenda but the movement is part of the response of the academic community to the wider changes taking place in scholarly communication. The specific situation out of which SPARC was born is the response of academic librarians to the rise in prices of scientific and medical journals, but SPARC is about more than journal price rises and involves other stakeholders as well as librarians. There is no reason why publishers - particularly society publishers - should not see SPARC as part of their response to the opportunities and threats in the changes in scholarly communication. Like some other recent developments, SPARC has at times been painted falsely as "anti-publisher" whereas publishing partnerships have been an important feature of SPARC's work since it began. Likewise, the journal price rise problem is treated by SPARC in a holistic way, as a symptom of a deeper malaise in the scholarly publishing body, or - to use a more positive metaphor - as one of the growing pains as scholarly publishing grows to a greater maturity.

It is true that anger in the academic library community at the rise in prices of many journals well above normal inflation was the "spark" that set SPARC aflame. This price rise can be seen very clearly in the two charts below¹ which illustrate the US and the UK situations and which would be replicated if data were taken from any country in the world. In fact, while the US and UK graphs are set in the context of relatively-stable exchange rates, the price rises in countries with higher currency fluctuations have been devastating upon library budgets. What matters about these price rises is not the price rises per se but the consequential effect upon other library purchasing opportunities. Journal purchasing now takes such a big slice of many library budgets that monograph purchasing is squeezed out. The UK graph below shows how this trend has had a detrimental effect upon the number of books available for students in UK universities. Librarians have justly felt anger and frustration as they face students unable to get access to undergraduate texts while a research journal escalates in price.

What could be done about the situation? For many years librarians have been talking to publishers about the effect of journal price rises. Some publishers have responded sympathetically and kept journal price rises low, but the major international STM publishers have listened politely but made no change in their pricing policies. Their response has been: "Ask your paymasters for more money". Librarians are always



asking for more money - talk to the head of any university! - but this is not the answer to the journal price-rise problem. Around ten years ago, for example, the UK library organization SCONUL persuaded a government minister to allocate several million pounds extra to university libraries specifically to meet journal price rises. The effect was like pouring petrol on a fire and prices continued to rise because more money was available to pay the invoices: a classic inflationary situation. Since then, cancellations of journal subscriptions have become a very common response to price rises, but cancellations do not benefit either users or publishers and have a bad effect upon the morale of librarians. If academic librarians are not talking to university authorities about more money, they are talking to them about cancelling journals important for teaching and research. No wonder that librarians in some countries have a poor reputation!

SPARC : a better way.

There has to be a better way, and that is where SPARC enters the picture. Anger in the academic library community about journal price rises turned into commitment to take positive action to improve the system of scholarly communication. This commitment was very clear to me as a UK library director attending meetings of library directors of ARL libraries. ARL, the Association of Research Libraries, had like SCONUL in the UK been talking to publishers about the effects of journal price rises over many years, and ARL library directors reached the point where they felt that they had to commit to change in the scholarly communication system. They understood that the commitment to change had to be financed and had to bring in other stakeholders as partners, including publishers committed to reducing the rate of price rises. So in 1997 ARL set up SPARC with initial funding from ARL member institutions and with a broad programme for change in the arrangements for the publishing of academic journals. The specific objectives of SPARC and the programmes designed to meet those objectives can be seen on the SPARC web-site <http://www.arl.org/sparc>

Although SPARC was a US-led initiative, right from the beginning it had international links and soon began to attract international members who shared ARL members' motivation. In a paper given in Berlin in February 1998 and published in "Serials"² I wrote: "ARL does not wish SPARC to be perceived as a solely American programme. The authors, publishers and users of scholarly material act internationally. So will librarians and academic organisations". Amongst the first categories of SPARC membership was "International Supporting Member... open to all non-North American academic institutions and independent research libraries." And one of the earliest "publishing partnerships" was with the Royal Society of Chemistry in the UK. As early as 23 November 1998 SPARC was able to announce in a press release: "The Scholarly Publishing & Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC) and the Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC), based in the United Kingdom, have agreed to collaborate on a series of new high-quality peer-reviewed electronic journals that will be offered at far below the prices of competing commercially published journals. SPARC also announced it will be represented in the UK and

² FRIEND, F.J. Alternatives to commercial publishing for scholarly communication. *Serials*, vol. 11 (1998), 163-166.

Ireland by the Standing Conference of National & University Libraries (SCONUL), which includes 129 leading libraries in its membership, and has established an affiliation with Denmark's Conference of Directors of Research Libraries, an organization of 12 major libraries." Since then interest in SPARC from academic organisations all over the world has continued to grow apace with awareness of the flaws in the journals market.

Onto SPARC Europe.

SPARC Europe is a natural development from this world-wide interest in SPARC. Support for SPARC activities had grown to such an extent that in early 2001 several European organisations invited SPARC staff to a meeting in London to discuss the formation of a European branch or "chapter". Three UK organisations - JISC, CURL and SCONUL - took the lead in organising this meeting but it was supported warmly by the Board of LIBER, representing libraries across Europe. An Interim Steering Group was formed and discussions began on the legal and financial status of SPARC Europe and its relationship with the parent body in Washington. A major step forward came in July 2001 when the LIBER General Assembly voted unanimously for LIBER to serve as the umbrella organization for SPARC Europe, and at the same time a number of national organizations agreed to act as sponsors, supplying start-up funding. Although the long-term funding for SPARC Europe will - as in the US - come from member institutions, the complex academic situation in Europe will result in consortia or organizations taking responsibility in some countries. As of April 2002, the SPARC Europe membership had risen to 27 individual institutions from nine European countries in addition to the four sponsoring groups of institutions.

The SPARC Europe Steering Committee has agreed a programme of action which adds a European dimension to the programmes already in place for SPARC world-wide. The main strategic thrusts will be those for SPARC as a whole but the particular activities will be tailored to the European situation. Advocacy is a strategic imperative for SPARC and this role will be especially important in Europe. Raising awareness in the European academic community of the flaws in the current scholarly publishing system is a major undertaking given the variety of educational structures in all the countries in Europe. Although many in the academic world speak English, there may be a need for SPARC Europe information - such as the "Create Change" leaflet - to be translated into a variety of languages. SPARC Europe will be able to employ one member of staff - an Executive Director based at a European university - but will be very dependent upon "champions" in various countries to organise advocacy events and provide guidance on local situations. For the UK CURL, the Consortium of University Research Libraries, has already undertaken this role, organising advocacy events in around twenty major research universities. SPARC staff have assisted with these events but they would not have taken place if CURL had not been convinced of the importance for research universities of the issues facing scholarly publishing.

The theme of the SPARC advocacy events is the need for change in the scholarly publishing system, and SPARC also offers academic authors assistance in making changes. The SPARC "Declaring Independence" and "Gaining Independence" guides will be as applicable in Europe as they are in the US. A particularly strong development in Europe is the formation of institution-based repositories for academic

authors to make their work available to a wider readership, and SPARC Europe will be supporting this development. Related to this is the Open Archives Initiative, which SPARC Europe will be supporting by organizing - together with LIBER - a workshop in Geneva in October. SPARC Europe is also keen to build upon the work already done by the US organization in collaboration with publishers. Assisting society publishers in constructing and testing new economic models which reduce or eliminate charges to readers may be an important role for SPARC Europe. This is an area of work in which SPARC Europe will collaborate with the Open Society Institute through the Budapest Open Access Initiative <http://www.soros.org/openaccess/>. SPARC is a leading movement for change in scholarly publishing and receives widespread support from the academic community but no single organization can hope to achieve major changes in scholarly communication on its own. The collaboration with like-minded organizations such as OSI or not-for-profit society publishers will be an essential feature of SPARC Europe's success.

Conclusion.

The electronic revolution is causing and enabling change in access to academic publications. The use of word processors for authoring and of servers linked to the network for delivery is leading to changes in scholarly publishing. The same technology is enabling greater access to more academic information, provided – and this is a big proviso – that the economic model for publishing allows greater access. This is the point at which the work of SPARC becomes vital. Through collaboration with all stakeholders, SPARC Europe will be working with the grain of change in order to achieve better access for users of academic journals.

Improvements in access to academic journal articles will be the test of success for SPARC Europe. Some organizations measure their success by their longevity, but for SPARC Europe perhaps the shorter its life, the more successful it will have been! Although we have to be realistic about the timescale for change in a structure as complex as scholarly publishing, there is an urgency about SPARC's wish to open up access to affordable journal literature. Some organizations also measure success by their own achievements. SPARC Europe on the other hand will see success in improved access if that success is achieved through the achievements of other organizations as much as its own. What matters is improved access to journal literature, not who claims success. The reality is that success will most likely be achieved through collaboration between a number of organizations, each - like SPARC Europe - fulfilling its own particular role in achieving improved access to journal literature. What is important is that everybody who wants to see more journal articles read by more people should work for that result. In SPARC Europe we are working hard for affordable access to academic journals. You can help by joining us.