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I Hear the Train A Comin' -- From the Paris of the Plains

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I Hear the Train A Comin’ — From the Paris of the Plains

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In March, I was pleased to attend SPARC’s first North American meeting devoted to all matters open access. While the organization has hosted a series of conferences on digital repositories since 2004, this event expanded upon its predecessors to encompass the many threads of the open access movement. Three hundred librarians from around the world convened in Kansas City to hear from some of the leading voices in scholarly communication, including Heather Joseph, John Wilbanks, Michael Carroll, and Caroline Sutton. I will leave it to others to provide a detailed summary of the various talks and sessions. Instead, I am using this issue’s column to present the three big picture conclusions I took away from the Conference of the Plains (that’s a real nickname — look it up!):

1. The aborted Research Works Act has lit a fire under the open access movement. As I detailed on these pages last issue, the ill-fated Research Works Act stirred deep antipathies within academia. The notion that a certain segment of the publishing industry would seek to roll back postprint accessibility truly angered a large number of professors, researchers, and librarians.

2. Shortly before the SPARC 2012 Open Access Meeting, Elsevier withdrew its support of the Research Works Act. Nevertheless, a theme both on the dais and in the hallways was the need for practical action to capitalize on this emotion. One popular subject was the “Cost of Knowledge” Elsevier boycott, which has accumulated nearly 9,000 signatories as of this writing. A decade ago, the Michael Eisen/Pat Brown petition against subscription control helped kick-start the open access movement. It eventually led to the establishment of the Public Library of Science. It remains to be seen whether the Research Works Act kerfuffle will have similar consequences.

3. Judging by the clear-eyed determination of the SPARC 2012 Open Access Meeting participants, there is intense interest in moving from the “talking” to the “doing” stage. This could certainly include a new wave of campus-based publishing initiatives, a hot topic at the meeting. It might also mean a redoubling of efforts to pass the Federal Research Public Access Act (HR 5037), a bill that would ensure free, timely, online access to the published results of research funded by eleven U.S. federal agencies. The bill, known as FRPAA, would require those agencies with annual extramural research budgets of $100 million or more to provide the public with online access to research manuscripts stemming from such funding no later than six months after publication in a peer-reviewed journal. The bill gives individual agencies flexibility in choosing the location of the digital repository to house this content, as long as the repositories meet conditions for interoperability and public accessibility, and have provisions for long-term archiving. It may well be, of course, that this anger fades into complacency; however, judging by the intensity of feeling in the City of Fountains (more than 200, according to the hotel magazine),
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I would bet that this is the start of a new push within the open access movement.

2. The commercial services supporting open access have proliferated in recent years. A vendor showcase was held in conjunction with the SPARC 2012 Open Access Meeting. It was truly impressive to see the number and range of organizations that have a business interest in open access. This extends beyond obvious publishing candidates such as BioMed Central, Springer Open, Copernicus, and Wiley Open Access. The burgeoning industry also includes hosted institutional repositories (Digit Commons), repository support services (@Mire, DiscoveryGarden, Longsight), and publication management systems (Symplectic, Public Knowledge Project). Some might object to the commercial exploitation of open access, believing that it somehow cheapens or co-opts the movement. I take a different view. The entry of these organizations — big and small, privately-backed and university-incubated — demonstrates the maturity of open access. There is enough heterogeneity within the open access space that a variety of approaches are needed to support it.

3. Open access publishing might benefit from more business model experimentation. In my discussions with librarians at the SPARC meeting, I got the sense that their patrons still retained some reservations about the article processing charge (APC) system. Some scholars feel that it is akin to vanity publishing. Others fret that neither their grants nor their institutions provide the financial latitude required to pay these fees. There is some concern within the library community that the “author pays” model simply transfers the burden wholly from the consumer to the producer. The content pool for open access journals may very well be constrained as a result. It was interesting to hear this opinion expressed in informal conversations, but to hear little from presenters or vendors about business model alternatives. With limited exceptions (BioMed Central’s Membership scheme, for example) we have seen little experimentation on this front. My observation from the SPARC meeting is that there is a disconnect between service providers and the market as to how settled this issue in fact is. The former sees a model that is basically set, with the major variable being the cost of the APC. The latter has yet to embrace this view wholeheartedly.

The conclusion I took away from the Cyclone City (ok, I made that one up) is that the open access movement, like many aspects of life, contains multitudes. It is not just a political cause, although its legislative acumen has made mainstream media headlines in recent days. It is not just an industry sector, although an increasing number of businesses are finding profit in the services that support open access. It is not just a business model, although those who believe that open access has hit upon the one true formula for funding publications risk an increasing disconnect with a more cautious authoring community. Open access is none of these things, and yet it is all of these things. A decade after the Budapest Open Access Initiative, the SPARC 2012 Meeting demonstrates the energies and complexities that will propel the movement forward.