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ATG Interviews: Heather Joseph, Executive Director, SPARC

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ATG Interviews Heather Joseph

Executive Director, Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC)

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ATG/BS: Reviewing the past is frequently a good way to understand the present. How about if we begin with your explaining what SPARC is, your role in it, and how it fits within the Association of Research Libraries (since your email ends in arl.org)?

HJ: Good place to start! **SPARC** was founded in 1997 as an initiative of the **Association of Research Libraries** to address a chronic problem facing the library community: the high — and ever-increasing — cost of journal subscriptions. The idea for **SPARC** was born out of the collective frustration of the member libraries on **ARL's** Board of Directors that no amount of discussion was ever going to solve this problem, and that concrete action was needed. I like to think of it as the library community's "Network" moment, where someone leans out the window and yells "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going take it anymore..."

So channeling that frustration into something productive, the **ARL** Directors created **SPARC**, which was given the specific charge of being a "catalyst for action" in the scholarly communications marketplace. It was tasked with finding ways that libraries could collectively leverage the power of digital technologies to more effectively and efficiently distribute research articles and, in doing so, relieve some of the financial pressures libraries were facing. It sounds like a pretty broad charge, but when you drill down, it actually gave us quite specific parameters for our strategies and programs.

And if you look at **SPARC's** earliest programs, you can see that they were tailored to exactly address this charge by attempting to introduce new lower-cost, online journals into the market to provide competition to some of the more expensive journals. For the first several years of its existence, **SPARC** tinkered with this strategy, working to find ways to make it scale through aggregation projects and communities practice — **BioOne** being a prime example of this.

However, one of the crucial lessons we learned along the way was that creating meaningful change using this strategy was going to be an uphill battle, unless some of the fundamental assumptions about how the scholarly communication marketplace operated were challenged, and some of the underlying rules of the game were changed. This led **SPARC** into shifting its focus towards reimaging how the system could be optimized for scholars and researchers, and into a strategy that focused more on education and policy advocacy to help such a system evolve — and that's where our primary emphasis is today.

ATG/BS: When you say "optimized for scholars and researchers" is that defined as just open access? I ask because the common response I get when I ask people, "What is

SPARC?" is that it is an open access advocacy group. How comfortable are you with the description?

HJ: I'd say that's a fair characterization. We have definitely become well known for our advocacy in promoting open access to research articles, and we are very proud of that work. When the Budapest Open Access Initiative was convened, it was in a sense to ask folks to think about the answer to the question, "If we could rebuild the system of how scholars and researchers share the results of their work, and optimize it to serve their needs first, what would it look like?" And we at **SPARC** certainly think that open access — the immediate, free availability of online articles coupled with the rights to use those articles fully in digital environment — fills that bill.

That said, while we spent the better part of a decade almost completely focused on scholarly articles, over the past two years, we've made some pretty aggressive moves to expand our program areas to cover other elements in the research, teaching and learning process that we feel it is vital to expand the open sharing of as well, specifically research data and educational resources. We feel strongly that making sure that both of these outputs are readily accessible and fully usable under similar open terms and conditions as articles is vital in creating a robust environment for our students, faculty and researchers (not to mention those in the private sector and members of the general public) to advance their work.

ATG/BS: It is clear that the scope of advocacy at SPARC is expanding, and that's worth exploring more deeply. In the presentations I've seen by SPARC personnel about open educational materials, it seems that SPARC is taking on a more proactive role than mere advocacy: promoting (and managing) the development of new open textbooks. Is that a correct characterization? If so, does this put SPARC in a more adversarial role in relation to "traditional" publishers?

HJ: It's true that our advocacy around Open Educational Resources specifically encourages not only the adoption of Open textbooks and other OERs, but also their creation. This can take on many different forms, from providing financial resources to support the development of new materials, to vetting and evaluating resources as they evolve, to contributing specific content. While some might feel that this is departure in terms of the traditional role of libraries, we do not.

Libraries have, of course, always been well positioned to facilitate the location of high-quality open resources, but over the past decade, they've also increasingly moved into a more active role in facilitating their creation. Dozens of libraries have established active "open access funds" to support authors who choose to publish in OA journals, for example. When these funds began to surface, they were certainly a new phenomena — we hadn't seen libraries establishing funds to pay publication fees like page charges or color charges for authors to publish in subscription access journals, for example. But this is now an accepted practice, and it help set a precedent for libraries to also move into more active financial support of other educational materials like textbook.

At the same time, we're also observing a growing trend of libraries moving into the publishing space in other ways, with more and more university presses and libraries collaborating closely as business units on our campuses. The emergence of the Library Publishing Consortium is a good illustration of this.

There seems to be a growing momentum behind the idea of higher education institutions playing a much more active role in the creation, distribution and, ultimately, ownership of the content generated on their campuses. This may very well feel like competition to traditional publishers, but competition is part of keeping a marketplace healthy, and our member libraries have a key role to play here.

ATG/BS: I suspect many publishers would say that there's much more to managing a publishing enterprise than meets the eye. Do you think libraries appreciate the work involved and are prepared to take on the many functions required to maintain that enterprise at acceptable standards?

HJ: This is a critical point. Having spent 15 years as a managing editor and publisher of journals, I do see that people sometimes underestimate the time commitment and complexities that managing a robust publishing operation entails. I've seen this occur with

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start-up publishers both inside and outside of the library community. However, it is certainly not always the case, and libraries do have the unique advantage of being nested in the heart of the research enterprise on campuses, which can help position them to be responsive to the evolving needs of scholars and researchers. We are also seeing a growing trend of much closer relationships with university presses and libraries, which provides a terrific opportunity for traditional publishing expertise to be shared and deployed in new ways.

That said, I would also point out that when we think about the concept of libraries as publishers, we should also be thinking the publication of non-traditional scholarly outputs as well as articles. The development of digital institutional repositories coupled with the growing production of digital data — and the demand for sharing this data in new ways — is an opportunity for libraries to serve as publishers of an entirely new generation of outputs.

ATG/BS: Having said that, it is clear that an increasing number of commercial publishers are initiating and expanding their open access offerings. What impact do you think that has on the overall open access environment? And as OA expands in general, do you see any discoverability issues affecting access to open access articles? There seems to be some concern about that among public services librarians.

HJ: Competition is an indicator of healthy market, and I consider the addition of any high-quality Open Access journal options a positive development, whether the publisher is a large commercial player, a small non-profit organization, or a completely new kind of entrant. The trick is, of course, to make sure the market stays healthy and functioning properly, to ensure we don't end up with an APC market that mirrors the pricing dysfunctions that have plagued the subscription journal market. It's important that the academic community as a whole (including publishers) play an active role in facilitating financial transparency so that the true costs of supporting quality open access publishing can be fully understood. Financial decisions should be informed by evaluating the true value of the product provided against the price of the product — not driven by lack of choice.

As the Open Access journal market continues to expand, it will face all of the challenges that any emerging (and rapidly growing) market faces. Many of the new players in the Open Access journal-publishing space have been new, small, single-title producers, and we have seen some challenges arise in terms of ensuring effective discoverability of all of the materials they are producing. The availability of articles in a growing array of Open Access repositories adds another layer of complexity to the situation as well. I think the good news here is that increasing discoverability is in the interest of all players involved, and the community has organizations that are well-positioned to help in addressing this issue. The **Open Access Scholarly Publishers Association (OASPA)**, for example, provides a locus for the development of standards and best practices in this arena, as does the **Confederation of Open Access Repositories (COAR)**. Collaborating with **NISO** and similar organizations on this front would certainly be a welcome development.

ATG/BS: Your mention of repositories touches on the issue of data: its capture, access and curation. I understand SPARC is moving more actively into issues related to data management. Can you discuss what initiatives are developing? I also understand that you've recently been appointed to the Department of Commerce's Data Advisory Council. What is that, and what role do you see playing in that group?

HJ: SPARC's program areas have indeed been expanding! While we have long been interested in promoting practices and policies that support the open sharing of research data, we've struggled to find the time and resources to develop a serious program around it. Happily, we recently received funding to specifically support the establishment of a full advocacy program to work with research funders (both public and private) to develop Open Data policies that are harmonized around a common set of principles, and that promote full accessibility and reuse of data.

We're hopeful that the more coordinated funder policies are in this area, the lighter the compliance burden will ultimately be on the research community. We're already working on sketching out a set of common policy requirements — including breaking out some of the common elements in data management plans — to help the **SPARC** library community prepare in advance for new policies that are likely to come down the pike.

The focus on Open Data has certainly been exploding, not only here in Washington, but around the world. The new **Commerce Data Advisory Council (CDAC)** that you mentioned is just one reflection of how quickly data has moved into a position of priority for policy makers. The Council is tasked with helping to guide the Commerce Department's "data revolution," (their words!) which aims to foster innovation, help create jobs and drive better decision-making throughout our economy and society. I love the positivity and energy that the Department is bringing to the table in rising to this challenge, and am humbled to have been asked to serve along with an amazing group of people from organizations ranging from **Ebay**, **Intel** and **GE** to **Code for America** and the **Center for Data Innovation**. The range of perspectives around the table should make for some lively discussions!

We're also quite excited about having libraries (and the higher education institutions they are a part of) work collaboratively with researcher funders on Open Data policy development so that we can take advantage of the infrastructure that our community has already invested in developing — for example, digital repositories — by making sure that they are part of the compliance solutions for data polices. We also are taking this opportunity to educate funders about the further potential of digital repositories to not only provide a point for researchers to store and access data, but to also provide a potentially robust working environment for researchers to actively interact with data. It's an incredibly rich area for libraries to explore.

ATG/BS: Speaking of funders, what's your take on the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation decision to go from a public access mandate, allowing for an embargo period, for published research from projects it funds to an open access mandate, insisting on "born open" upon publication, in 2017? Do you think this is going to put pressure on other funders and governmental agencies to rethink mandates that allow for embargo periods?

HJ: I like the way you've characterized the move by the **Gates Foundation**! To me, it represents a seismic shift in the policy environment. Policy development is, by nature, incremental, and the funder policies we've seen to date have all contained (to greater and lesser degrees) components that Open Access advocates consider compromises — I'm thinking specifically of the inclusion of embargo periods and the exclusion of any specific guidance on reuse rights. That was largely to be expected, as it was a very big leap to expect subscription journal publishers to move away from a model that had been functioning for hundreds of years to a completely new model overnight. But more than a decade into the Open Access movement, the ground has been much more fully prepared for this new model to successfully take root. We've got thousands of viable Open Access journals that authors can publish in, as well as several thousand well-established open digital repositories, and this provides the kind of solid infrastructure that gives all stakeholders more confidence that providing Open Access is not only possible — it's sustainable.

So I think it is a very hopeful sign that the **Gates Foundation** have chosen to move the needle forward towards full Open Access. I do think that other funders will watch how things play out with this new, "born open" policy, and quite possibly choose to take another look at their own policies. It's a nice thought that we might see additional pressure that can help bring the new ideas contained in scientific and scholarly journal articles even more quickly, and to make them even more useful to a wider audience than they currently are.

ATG/BS: So one final question. As is entirely possible, what if you find yourself in the middle of a large lake in a rowboat with a researcher, an ARL librarian and a scholarly publisher. What would you tell each of these people to expect their scholarly environments to look like in five years?

HJ: Ah, yes, as so many of us do, I often hold important professional discussions whilst punting about in a rowboat.

Once I get past the great visual your question conjures up and hopefully dispel the notion that any of the boats inhabitants are waving their oars threateningly at me, my answer is probably disappointingly non-radical. Having

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been part of the scholarly communications community for about 25 years now, I realize that change happens incrementally and slowly. There won't be one sweeping piece of legislation or radical technological development that changes the picture for any of us — librarian, researcher, publisher — overnight.

However, one interesting and encouraging characteristic of incremental change is that it tends to be cumulative — so the small steps forward we take in the next five years will be added onto the progress we've made to date. When we look back over our shoulders at the total mileage we've logged on this road towards a more open system, we'll be surprised at the distance we've come.

I also think that the unrelenting nature of the pressure to improve the system of scholarly communications has had another interesting effect: people under similar pressures tend to find ways to work together to find ways to improve their collective situations. We've certainly seen lots of examples that happening as researchers, publishers, librarians and funders have struggled through the past decade to try and carve a sensible path forward. The pressure has led to the majority of established subscription access journal publishers changing models and establishing Open Access options, to be sure, but it's also led libraries to rethink their budget allocations, and to provide ways to support these new OA journals. The pressure has led research funders to establish new expectations for what authors must do with articles that report on their funded research, but it has also led authors to become more aware of what their rights are as authors, and more vocal about what they value the ability to be able to do with their own works. The changes we've seen — and that we'll continue to see — play out in an atmosphere where a certain amount of balance is necessary, and I just don't see that changing.

That said, **SPARC** will still be sitting in the rowboat asking the question, "Are we doing everything we possibly can to create the ideal way for scholarly works to be shared and built upon?" over and over again, and doing our best to back up our words with positive, productive action.

ATG/BS: Thanks for taking the time to chat, Heather.

HJ: It has been my pleasure.

Rumors
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because of the push for maximum publications. See this issue, p.52.

Wish I could have been there — the opening of the **Weston Library** which opened 20 March, 2015. It is now "the place to see and be seen." Read all about it this issue, p.66.

Lots of mergers, consolidations, buyouts have been happening. For example, **EBSCO** has been very active. They bought **YBP** in February and recently have bought **Learning Express, LLC** which is an educational technology company that provides eLearning solutions for workplace skill-building, professional development, and academic success. They partner with libraries, institutions, corporations, and government agencies to provide customized online learning resources, employee engagement solutions, and skills development content.

https://www.ebsco.com/blog/article/ebsco-acquires-learningexpress-learn-why

http://www.learningexpresshub.com/corporate/about-us/mission

ProQuest (through its affiliate Bowker) has acquired Palo Alto-based SIPX creator of a digital course materials solution that addresses a variety of copyright and cost,concerns for universities. Developed from **Stanford University** research, **SIPX**

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