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# Op-Ed-Opinions and Editorials-REWIND-A Publishing View of the SPARC Initiative

Anthony Watkinson

*Independent Information Consultant, [anthony.watkinson@btinternet.com](mailto:anthony.watkinson@btinternet.com)*

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# A Publishing View of the SPARC Initiative

by **Anthony Watkinson** (Independent Information Consultant) <anthony.watkinson@btinternet.com>

The **SPARC** offer of partnership to publishers and its apparent acceptance of the publishing function initially impressed me.<sup>1</sup> To my mind it was a good starting point for any library campaign. My essential position is that authors and users need publishers and librarians to enable communication to work optimally.<sup>2</sup>

The **SPARC** approach seemed rather different from the way in which the **eLib** program in the UK initially set out its stall.<sup>3</sup> However, in the intervening period since its inception, I have become disenchanted. **SPARC** is offering partnership but on **SPARC** terms. I see no reason to believe that these are terms that are drawn up by the Academy.

I do not feel the need to rehearse the **SPARC** mission that is set out in some detail on the Internet.<sup>4</sup> Even delving briefly into the recesses of the site behind the home pages, a search brings up a melange of unproven assertions, overblown rhetoric and a denial of actuality and history. In private **SPARC** emissaries are much more outspoken and various hidden agendas come to the fore. Much of what is written and said reads like the campaign for circulation of a tabloid newspaper or the presentational hype of a presidential campaign. It does not read like the reasoned proposals of a respected representational organisation. What is particularly disturbing is that criticism of **SPARC** has become a taboo area for the library community. Attacking motherhood statements like "Putting scholars back in control" is not easy, even if it would be interesting to see the slogan become the rule in setting of library priorities.

After making these tendentious statements I need to put my own cards on the table. I have spent thirty years as a publisher in both the for-profit and non-profit sector. I would claim to have a little more knowledge of the concerns of the academic community than **SPARC** management. I am currently a consultant to a number of companies and organisations and it is only fair to them to make clear that I my views are my own. I have however been a librarian. I also work for libraries and library organisations. **SPARC** does represent a proactive response to the serials crisis by a section of the library community. It replaces reactive whinging. A contributor to the **SPARC 1999 Membership** meeting considers that, "**SPARC** helps us demonstrate that librarians are not lemmings — automatically following each other to the funding trough."<sup>5</sup> That

is not how a publisher sees the picture, of course. Might not the serials crisis look very different if library leaders had convinced their paymasters that the funding of the purchase of publications should keep pace with the funding of the research that generated all those additional articles? For the justification and the argument that library budgets have declined per capita (user) over the decade plus many other relevant and real statistics see Tenopir and King.<sup>6</sup>

**SPARC** is supported by the membership of the coalition. In other words it is a top-slicing of the library budget of money which could arguably otherwise be spent on journals which the patrons have asked for but for which funds were not available. Not only that but individual **SPARC** initiatives such as **BioOne** request further financial support. The FAQ on the **BioOne** section of the **ARL/SPARC** website at January 2000 indeed told us that "Librarians around the country have already contributed hundreds and thousands of dollars" but presumably not from their own personal salaries. It is not surprising that the latest **SPARC** initiative is "Create Change" which is a "year long campaign to help faculty transform the system of scholarly communication" to be paid for in part from **SPARC** funds. It is very noticeable that the learned societies, who must have a strong claim to represent the academic community at least in theory, are noticeably absent from most **SPARC** platforms except as recipients of **SPARC** largesse.

**SPARC** libraries pay for those **SPARC** journals created for under the **SPARC** "Alternatives Program" a second time by a commitment to buy them. These are not replacement journals but additional journals so that, when, as **SPARC** claims of the fruits of its liaison with the **ACS**, "For a print subscription to *Organic Letters*, institutions will pay only \$2,300, compared to more than \$8,000 for the most expensive competitor." **Elsevier** and **Tetrahedron Letters** are coyly not mentioned directly on this Web-site but everyone knows what is meant. Actually the cost in 2000 to libraries with decent chemical holdings will now be \$10,300 rather than \$8,000 — nearly a thirty per cent increase.

**SPARC** has a central theme. It is to create competition — "to bring sky-rocketing journal prices down to earth" by subsidies. It is not clear whether the real aim is to "transform" scholarly communication so that commercial publishing no longer has a role or whether it is to

bring commercial publishers to heel, to get them to lower prices or price increases. The **SPARC** Web-site shows that some groupies even hope to dispense with the publishing function altogether. For example, one presentation at the membership conference concludes, "There are hopeful signs that authors, driven by ambition to be read, will self-publish in semi-organized or highly-organized non-commercial databases, thus weakening of monopoly grip of major publishers."<sup>7</sup>

To many Europeans what is essentially national intervention (because that indirectly is where the funding mostly comes from) to interfere with the international free market with the aim of lowering the overall costs of the system (eventually) does not seem essentially unreasonable. To the European it is also strange that the US public regards similar action in the health sector as so politically incorrect. **Richard Johnson** does not seem to approve of making profits at all. His analysis of the historical dimension in his *D-Lib* article<sup>8</sup> is quite remarkable in its a-historical and anti-commercial approach. The section headed "How We Got Here" is full of nudges and winks. Take this sentence: "Commercial firms found there was money to be made publishing the overflow of articles that couldn't be accommodated in society journals." The big commercial journals succeeded because commercial companies invested in what they found the academic community wanted. They got many of the best papers because (at the time) many learned societies were reluctant to publish in new areas and certainly to provide sufficient pages for all the new research being funded.

**SPARC** "executives" disclaim a publishing role but it is obvious that they do not give money without strings attached. Pricing is perhaps the central publishing role and there is every evidence that the paymaster dictates pricing. The purpose of the rest of this short article is to look at some of the **SPARC** initiatives and raise questions about **SPARC** judgement, about how power is exercised.

The flagship project is the partnership with the **ACS**. The **American Chemical Society** is the largest scientific society in the world. The leading commercial houses respect it as a thoroughly professional publishing giant respect it. The accounts of the society are not available on its site but I would be very surprised if it is not the possessor of a handsome war chest or even a cash mountain. Li-

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brarians may not be aware that many learned societies sit on (rather than use) substantial reserves that were until recently not used to invest in those publications pressed for by the membership. Dr. Lustig, who was treasurer of a leading learned body, has gone on record as saying of the larger societies that "net returns of thirty per cent or more have not been uncommon."<sup>9</sup> Not bad going for a charity not paying tax.

**Organic Letters** seems an excellent idea. There seem to be enough good papers for another journal — or so submissions so far seem to show. In parenthesis it is interesting to note that the price per paper is very little lower than **Tetrahedron Letters** (to give an example) but that is a different case to argue. Clearly if **SPARC** comes along with the offer of immediate subscriptions from its member libraries, no sensible publisher would turn this down. Getting a new journal off the ground always requires serious investment — and **SPARC** support must really help the cash flow. My obvious question is — if there is a need for this journal why does **SPARC** have to subsidise it and why did not this wealthy society start it before?

The second venture into chemistry publishing is in partnership with the **British Royal Society of Chemistry**, which enables **SPARC** to claim that they are an international body. Again the **RCS** is a respected publishing company which contributes to society finances. They have a worthy record of experimenting with electronic-only journals. **PhysChemComm** has now been in existence for about two years. Those who paid their \$350 received 15 articles during the first paid year (1999). Volume year 2000 looks no better. By mid-August 9 articles have been published. As the subscription rate for this year is \$353 and assuming a trend, each article in electronic form only will cost \$30 an article.<sup>10</sup> In fairness to the **RSC** it has to be recorded that they seem to have persuaded **SPARC** to let them price the journal for 2000 at a much more reasonable \$100 for the year but meanwhile the customers have paid out. The question must be what steps did **SPARC** take to discover whether there was actually a demand for this journal? This is a basic publishing function.

The big initiative so far in the "Alternatives Program" is the support of *Evolutionary Ecology Research*. I have an interest in this journal under its pre-**SPARC** title, because for some years I was actually its publisher. During the period 1988 to 1994 I was responsible for the pricing and every year the editor **Mike Rosenzweig** and I agreed the price amicably. I admired him as an editor then. My picture of our relationship was not that given by him in his most recent account



and I am certain that his calculations are wrong.<sup>11</sup> Since then his "memory" has become even more dramatic and explicit — see the Welcome from **Michael Rosenzweig** on the "Create Change" site.<sup>12</sup> My memory is that, although the journal was profitable, it did not reach the levels of profitability we aimed for in order that we could invest in new publications. It is a niche journal. Subscriptions had reached a plateau: I would be interested to learn how many **ARL** libraries actually subscribed before they were forced to — and whether their faculty all use this journal. It is my picture that there is not room for two journals in this niche and I would be amazed if either **SPARC** or **Rosenzweig** think otherwise. It is not an alternative but a replacement or rather (in practice) the transfer of a journal from one publisher to another. The original editorial (now removed from the site) began "And now for something not completely different."

I shall conclude with short critiques of two other **SPARC** initiatives.


**BioOne** represents an "alternative" but it is primarily an alternative to **HighWire**, which offers much the same range of services. Certainly **Allen Press Inc**, a commercial organisation, seems to get an excellent deal and one capable of infinite expansion with the sort of backing that **SPARC** is giving them.<sup>13</sup> As far as one can tell (**HighWire** does not disclose their charging) **HighWire** offers hosting services which are significantly more expensive than those offered by its commercial competitors such as

**CatchWord** and **ingenta** which are up front. The main difference between **BioOne** plus **Allen Press** and **HighWire** lies in the library subsidies (already mentioned) being offered to the former.

A whole lot of bluster seems to me to be hiding a whole range of questions that could be asked. An example of what I mean is a speech given by **Dr. Robert Kidd** of **Allen Press Inc** at the 22nd annual meeting of the **Society for Scholarly Publishers**. He produced a wonderfully conceived straw man by suggesting that some of the society journals involved would have been sold to Elsevier if **SPARC** had not stepped in. How many society journals have any commercial publishers bought? How many society journals have been saved by the investment and professionalism of a commercial or non-commercial publishing partner? My main publisher's questions would be: is this the way patrons want money intended for serial purchasing used, and are these journals (and the ones to come) the journals they want?

Finally a very few words about "Create Change." No-one doubts that the opportunities presented by electronic publishing are only too easily turned into threats with higher costs/prices and navigational problems being among the most obvious. Faculty does need

to be informed but are the adjurations in **HYPERLINK** <http://www.createchange.org> really helping rather than hindering? Let us take the example of copyright transfer. Is it really going to help access to information if the publisher does not get the rights it needs to give the warranties that libraries require in licensing a document or libraries have to negotiate with every author?

To summarise: is **SPARC** an integral part of a new structure which will become the dominant force in scientific communication or is it fatally flawed because it is too busy fighting imagined enemies and not talking to potential friends? In the end the answer lies in the hands of the scholars, the patrons — they will vote with their papers. 

This is an updated version of the *OPED* in *ATG'S* Sept. 2000 issue, V12 #5, p. 46, 48, 54.

#### Endnotes

1. Watkinson, Anthony, "What the scientist really wants from electronic journals." Against the Grain v. 10 # 6 (December 1998/January 1999) pp. 26-29.
2. Rusbridge, Chris, "Towards the Hybrid Library." D-Lib Magazine (July/August 1998). **HYPERLINK** <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/july98/rusbridge/07rusbridge.html> [www.dlib.org/dlib/july98/rusbridge/07rusbridge.html](http://www.dlib.org/dlib/july98/rusbridge/07rusbridge.html)
3. [www.arl.org/sparc](http://www.arl.org/sparc). Revisiting the site reminds me how difficult it is going to be for historians recording the development of movements in the Information Age. What is deleted from a Website is deleted from history unless someone has printed out the page.
4. **HYPERLINK** <http://www.arl.org/sparc/michalak.html> [www.arl.org/sparc/michalak.html](http://www.arl.org/sparc/michalak.html)
5. Towards Electronic Journals: Realities for Scientists, Librarians and Publishers. Carol Tenopir and Donald W.King (2000), SLA Publishing, page 29 and passim.
6. **HYPERLINK** <http://www.arl.org/sparc/bainton.html> [www.arl.org/sparc/bainton.html](http://www.arl.org/sparc/bainton.html)
7. Johnson, Richard K. "A Question of Access: SPARC, BioOne and Society-Driven Electronic Publishing." D-Lib Magazine (May 2000). **HYPERLINK** <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/may00/johnson/05johnson.html> [www.dlib.org/dlib/may00/johnson/05johnson.html](http://www.dlib.org/dlib/may00/johnson/05johnson.html)
8. H.Lustig in Electronic Publishing for Physics and Astronomy edited by Andre Heck (Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht) 1997, p.118.
9. The RSC site is not the easiest one to find one's way around so I am giving the URL for the contents ([www.rsc.org/is/journals/current/PhysChemComm/pcccon.htm](http://www.rsc.org/is/journals/current/PhysChemComm/pcccon.htm)) and for the subscription rates ([www.rsc.org/is/journals/current/PhysChemComm/pccprices.htm](http://www.rsc.org/is/journals/current/PhysChemComm/pccprices.htm))
10. Rosenzweig, Mike, "On taking back control of commercially published academic journals." **HYPERLINK** <http://www.evolutionary-ecology.com/citizeln/citizen.html> [www.evolutionary-ecology.com/citizeln/citizen.html](http://www.evolutionary-ecology.com/citizeln/citizen.html)
11. [www.createchange.org](http://www.createchange.org).
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