Against the Grain

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

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A Publisher's view of the SPARC Initiative
by Anthony Watkinson (Independent Information Consultant) <anthony.watkinson@btinternet.com>

This is a formal version of a contribution to a panel discussion concerning the ARL SPARC initiative (Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition) given at the 1999 Charleston Conference. One of the many excellent features of the Charleston Conference is that real exchanges of seriously different understandings are allowed in ambience of mutual respect. I have tried, both in my contribution and in this write-up, to be as frank as possible. Unfortunately, in this whole area there are rather a lot of hidden agendas and taboo areas. As a consultant I work and have worked for a number of companies and organisations and it is only fair to them to make clear that these are my views only.

At the conference Julia Blixrud set out the SPARC rationale with clarity and it is available at www.arl.org/sparc/. I will not repeat it here except to state that there have been subtle developments since the project was announced and clearly not all the membership share the official line. The other contributor to the session at the conference, Dr. Peter Boyce, took the high ground and criticized SPARC from his viewpoint of how electronic publishing should develop. My aim, in contrast, was to concentrate on practicalities. Because, however, much of what I said was essentially an informal reaction to and dialogue with the SPARC Website and those of its partners, not all of it can be transferred to the print medium. In any case, even since November there have been changes and, in addition, I have learnt more of the actualities of the SPARC/publishing partner relationships since I gave my talk. I have therefore extended my introductory remarks and cut back on the detail.

Publishers must be ambivalent about SPARC. The good news is the ARL does seem to recognise the publishing function and even actual existing publishers. This is a contrast to the situation we are used to in the UK where the state-funded electronic libraries programme has been steered by a group who have only gradually acknowledged the existence of publishers and who are still far from cooperating over resources development.1 The bad news is, on the one hand, the number of qualifications, which hedge around the offer of partnership. There is a high moral ground taken here. Only recently have librarians editing or on the board of library journals begun to look at the publishers of those useful routes to promotion and tenure in a way that is as careful and discriminat-

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ing. On the other hand, equally bad news is that (to my mind) the recognition of publishing does not thoroughly extend to the recognition of the responsibilities involved -- more on that below.

SPARC does also represent a proactive response to the serials crisis by a section of the library community. It replaces reactive views that contributors to the SPARC 1999 Membership meeting considers that, "SPARC helps us demonstrate that librarians are not lambs -- automatically following each other to the funding trough." 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.

Some publishers have been riled by SPARC because they see this approach as trespassing on their turf. I cannot see how such objections can be maintained. What is surprising in the context of the changes over the last five years is that new structures of publishing have developed, but, on the contrary that, in contrast to projections, how little of the ownership of primary research publishing has changed. There is a distinction between publishing as a function within the information chain and "traditional" publishers as exercisers of the function.

A more serious complaint about SPARC can be made when we consider the function of the information chain itself. The starting point for all of us is that authors and readers must be to recognise that publishers and librarians alike are intermediaries.2 Publishers are not doing their job if they do not facilitate communication. Librarians are not doing their job if they do not seek to purchase what their patrons want -- or so it could be argued, though I do recognise that it is a little more complicated than that.

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 tells 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.

SPARC libraries pay for those SPARC journals created 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 cooly mentioned directly on this Website but everyone knows what is meant. Actually the cost to decent libraries with chemical holdings will now be $10,300 rather than $8,000 -- nearly a thirty percent 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 communications 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 Website shows that some groupings 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."3

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 inappropriate.

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Papa Lyman Remembers from page 45

the top pros among professional book editors. . . . Barbara Meyer's pull-quote from her story on library - publisher relationships: "Contrary to popular librarian opinion, publishing is a lot more than just getting ink on paper or data into computer." *All best wishes to Barbara, our recently espoused fellow ATG contributor.* . . . FYI announces a new publication by the Association of Higher Education of North Texas, "AHE Vendor Directory of Acquisition Librarians" which gives pertinent information about 134 vendors worldwide. I regret never seeing this publication but I'd surely like to get my hands on a copy. My wild guess is that an up-to-date vendor directory would report less than 50 of those entries exist in the year 2000.*

**Vol. 2, No. 1, Feb 1990:** *Printed on crinkled and lighter stock than that in preceding 3 issues.* Greenwood Press, Inc. is now GREENWOOD PUBLISHING GROUP according to president Robert Hagedoel. *Are you enjoying retirement, Bob?* . . . John Tagler is now Director Corporate Communications at Elsevier, NY. . . . Page 32 lists about 75 academic libraries with systems used. I count 17 systems including 15 "none," in first place closely followed by 14 reporting INNOVAC and 8 "IN HOUSE." I recognize less than ten of the "respondents" as being or having been ATG writers, Gold medalist is, guess who, KS herself. Half of page 31 lists 30 "Libraries changing to a new system." Eleven of these were still undecided.

Vol. 2, No. 2, April 1990: Chuck Hanaker *LSU* recently represented Pat Berger (ALA President) in meeting with Congressional staffers regarding, guess what? Journal pricing issues... If you've been wondering why Chuck has not appeared earlier in this story, please bear in mind that it is General Election time and Chuck is the only person I've known who got into Congress by holding out on the electorate... Neatly doubled folded between middle sheets of this copy of ATG is a bright yellow flyer touting the 10th Annual Conference which will be held for the first time... at the new Conference Center. Registration fee $100. Late fee, after October 22 is $25. Spirit of Charleston Dinner Dance Cruise (6:30 - 10:30pm) $35 - it is described as "a highlight of this 1989 conference." If memory serves me, I cancelled ditto for 1990. *How about ditto for CC Coming Of Age in 2001?* . . . Ann Okerson has been elected President of NASIG... Does anyone recognize the make of the automobile used in Ballen ads to show everybody works on it in customer service. For that matter, who are the six guys pictured hard at work on this crate? Has any of them called on your library? . . . 1990 Buzzword "Synergy" in giant typeface tops full page Blackwell ad.

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Adventures in Librarianship: Ranked in Order of Relevance

by Ned Kraft (Order Librarian, Ralph J. Bunche Library) <kraftno@stae.gov>

Your search for...
Saturday Evening Post

Found the following sites, ranked in order of relevance:

1. Forrest Green Race Results
   Saturday, post time 3:30, Evening Sun lead the pack into the finish, followed closely by Big Dimples and Burnt Rye Toast. Evening Sun payed 5 to 2, while...

2. Message Post
   3/5/96, 2:56am. Green Lattern: "Bubba, whatcha doin up so late this evening? Saw your flame on Saturday. Can always count on you to over-react, you big...

3. Saturday: An Evening with Vectra
   Members of the Neptune Club and listserve are invited to spend an evening with Vectra Diaspora author of "The Saturn Charts and Aural Colorations." This is an exclusive invitation, as Vectra will reveal the secrets of his...

4. &%$#%
   . . . take the first door past the old post office, up to the second floor. There's a beauty parlor that looks abandoned and a storage closet marked "emergency." Go up to the next floor, late any Saturday evening and you'll find...

5. Message Post
   1/25/98, 5:05pm. LoveLorn: "Listen, I know you don't know me, really. I know that I really don't know you, accept so far as, you know, our email and stuff. But I thought that maybe this Saturday we could...

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germane to their subject specialties. We know what terms are being searched which also serves as input for building the database.

We index 40,000 Websites linking to 100,000 records each with its own URL. We’re adding about 60,000 sites per year. Properly selected and indexed Websites are part of an individual’s work which is becoming more complex. To insure current links, we run link checker and find that less than one tenth of one percent of the links are dead. We attribute this success to good up front selection and editing.

**ATG:** Is there any plan to work with the producing agencies to provide electronic, full-text of the grey literature that is indexed by some of the CSA databases?

**JM:** The Web is a good example of the fastest growing area of grey literature. One of the biggest sources is NTIS and I’m concerned about what is happening to these. **ATG:** Are you thinking of expanding your existing databases or adding new ones?

**JM:** Yes, very definitely. Our goal is to expand in our areas of concentration. Within the last three months, we’ve acquired Aquiline (a UK database), which will enhance our Environmental offerings; and, the Aerospace Database which is a perfect complement to our METADEX/Materials Sciences.

We have plans to add two more databases in the social sciences before the end of the year. We’re investing in more data in those areas adjacent to our subject strengths. This enables us to create database packages with proprietary content which provides us with a real competitive advantage.

**ATG:** Have you worked with the portal concept?

**JM:** If you mean developing a single access point for a specific area - yes, we have and didn’t feel it was successful. We’re experimenting again with social science with a portal, with bibliographic data, news and best practices. Because we are focusing on the researcher rather than the casual user, I am not certain the portal concept will amount to very much.

**ATG:** Do you plan to work with aggregators like OCLC FirstSearch?

**JM:** We have worked with SilverPlatter, Ovid, and EBSCO. Originally, these relationships came about as CD distribution arrangements. These third party arrangements worked extremely well before the advent of the Internet. Now, virtually all third parties provide our data through various Internet services and we sometimes find ourselves competing with our distributors.

Relative to FirstSearch/PerSearch, we provide an abridged version of our Sociological database (coverage of 225 of our 1,500 journals), and a citations only Environmental database. Again, we try to differentiate our offerings so we are not in competition with ourselves.

Our newest and perhaps the most exciting partnership is our relationship with E-Psyche. We are now offering E-Psyche as a part of our Internet Database Service and currently have several dozen institutions evaluating this new social science offering.

**ATG:** Tell us about your interests. What are your favorite books and hobbies?

**JM:** Pat and I have been married for 33 years and have three sons: one is an attorney in Atlanta, another is a sales manager in LA and the third one’s in high school. I was born, bred and educated in Brooklyn, NY. I entered the Marine Corps after graduating from St. Johns with an MBA in 1966. After three years in the Marine Corps, I joined Dunn & Bradstreet and I’ve been in the information business ever since. For professional reading, I’m partial to anything written by Peter Drucker. For pure pleasure I enjoy reading 20th century history. David Kennedy’s "Freedom from Fear" is my current read.