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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 at 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 rehash 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 critiqued **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-

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 whining. 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."² 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 not 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 not authors and readers must be to recognise that publishers and librarians alike are intermediaries.³ 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 coyly not 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 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** Website 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."⁴

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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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. Is SPARC getting value for the money invested is the main theme. Clearly some of these remarks are unfair and tendentious and more appropriate for the cut and thrust of a question session that we did not have time for.

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. 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. Librarians may not be aware that many learned societies sit on (rather than use) substantial reserves.

Organic Letters seems an excellent idea. There are clearly enough good papers for another journal -- or so submissions so far seem to show. 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. This is why the commercial sector came into existence -- because they were willing to invest when learned bodies would not. 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. It has already attempted to work with an electronic-only journal, which appears to have died. PhysChemComm has now been in existence for over a year. Those who paid their \$350 received 15 articles during the first paid year (1999). 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 other initiative so far in the "Alternatives Program," that part of the program which is central to the aims, is the support of Evolutionary Ecology Research. I have an interest in this journal, because for some years I was publishing director of Chapman & Hall Limited. I admire the editor Mike Rosenzweig. 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.⁵ It is a pity he could not, although billed, not make it to Charleston. 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 pic-

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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 Librarian" 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 extant in the year 2000.*

Vol. 2, No. 1, Feb 1990: *Printed on crinklier and lighter stock than that in preceding 3 issues.* Greenwood Press, Inc. is now GREENWOOD PUBLISHING GROUP according to president Robert Hagelstein. *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 her-

self. 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 Hamaker *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 how 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@state.gov>

Your search for ...
Saturday Evening Post
Found the following
sites, ranked in order of relevance:

1. Forrester 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 Latern: "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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<<http://www.against-the-grain.com>>

McGinty Interview from page 52

interfaces in Japanese, Korean, Spanish and French, including the thesauri which are kind of unique.

ATG: *What are your current goals/challenges?*

JM: We want **CSA** to be the primary bibliographic source that someone turns to who is seeking information in a specific area. If you want something in environmental science, I want **CSA** to be the leading source with a lowest cost per search.

We need to be prepared for a constantly changing environment. **CrossRef** is a good example in that it allows us to serve our customers better. We must constantly challenge ourselves to add value to our basic service while keeping our cost and hence our prices under control. I believe we have done this effectively by adding **Recent References** and **Web Resources** to **IDS**.

We've also added more than 20 thesauri in the past 18 months. We've been able to provide our customers with an entire acquisition module enabling e-journal linkage without increasing basic cost of our service.

ATG: *Where do you see the future business models in relation to individual subscriptions or article level sales?*

JM: That depends to a great degree on primary publishers and we'll have to wait to see how that plays out. If primaries want to provide access to their material at the article level, we'll be there to support it. Intuitively I think that will happen. It is definitely in the cards.

ATG: *What is the role of CSA's subject specialists in developing the various databases?*

JM: We have editors in every area and their role is to select journals and abstracts. More and more they are focusing on the Web. They are responsible for indexing Websites

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 going to happen there.

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 have acquired **Aqualine** (a UK database), which will enhance our Environmental offering; 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 as 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-Psych**. We are now offering **E-Psych** 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 is 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 **Dun & 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. 


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ture 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." Very true.

I concluded my contribution with some questioning of the rationale of **SPARC** investment in **BioOne**. **BioOne** is in an "active development stage" and my comments made in November would need to be expanded if I covered here all the points I covered then. **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.⁶ 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. My publisher's questions would be: is this the way patrons want money intended for serial purchasing used in this way, and are these journals (and the ones to come) the journals they want?

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? In the end the answer lies in the hands of the scholars, the patrons - they will vote with their papers. 

Endnotes

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3. Watkinson, Anthony, "What the scientist really wants from electronic journals." *Against the Grain* v. 10 # 6 (December 1998/January 1999) pp. 26-29.
4. <http://www.arl.org/sparc/bainton.html>.
5. Rosenzweig, Mike, "On taking back control of commercially published academic journals". <http://www.evolutionary-ecology.com/citizen/citizen.html>.
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