



# Against the Grain

*“Linking Publishers, Vendors and Librarians”*

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## I Hear the Train A Comin' — SPARC

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With **Heather Joseph** succeeding **Rick Johnson** this summer as Executive Director of **SPARC** (The **Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition**), it seems an appropriate time to check in on this **Association of Research Libraries** offshoot. Launched in 1997, **SPARC** is an international alliance of more than 300 academic and research libraries “working to unleash the potential of the Internet to enhance scholarly communication,” according to its mission statement. This work has included convening conferences on alternative models in scholarly communication such as institutional repositories, creating toolkits for libraries and nonprofit journal publishers, and partnering with scholars and institutions to launch Open Access journals and other alternative avenues for scholarship. **Heather Joseph** comes to **SPARC** from **BioOne**, an aggregation of high-impact bioscience research journals that was developed under **SPARC**’s auspices. What has **SPARC** accomplished, what is its view of the current scholarly communication landscape, and where are we headed? **Heather Joseph** was kind enough to provide her perspective.

**What is the status of the “scholarly communications crisis”?**

**HJ:** Well, first, I’m struck by the fact that you asked about the “scholarly communications crisis” rather than the “serials crisis “...to me, that’s a telling indicator that the scholarly community has moved beyond thinking about the issues facing us as simply questions of price. While the issue of journal pricing was without a doubt the wake-up call that brought many of us to the table, it has been critically important for us to try to understand the broader context in which these pricing trends are occurring, as well as the wider consequences.

By acknowledging that we’ve got adjustments to make on a system-wide level, I think that the stakes have become higher, but I do think that the

potential benefits are well worth the risks. It’s been particularly notable to me to see the discussion of access to scholarly scientific research results gain such traction as a public policy issue, not only in the U.S., but worldwide [with the **PubMed Central** and **Research Councils UK** initiatives, among others].

I’m encouraged that the community seems to have made so much progress in collectively working to try to better understand our shared landscape. I think we’ve reached a point in this process where there is a greater willingness in many parts of our community to roll up their sleeves, take some risks and try to implement positive, collective solutions. In particular, I think initiatives that are essentially joint ventures between publishers and librarians have made some really valuable contributions in changing how we view the potential role of different constituents in our community. When librarians are involved in the hands-on business decision making processes of a publishing venture, as they now are in **Project Euclid**, **BioOne**, **AnthroSource**, etc., a fundamental new awareness is built. Ditto for publishers in ventures like these, who then have to walk a mile in the library community’s shoes to make similar decisions. Of course, we’ve still got a long way to go!

**What are the most promising developments in terms of emerging forms of scholarly communication?**

**HJ:** The way that researchers interact with their data has always driven scholarly communication. The question of how to enable the widest possible use and, especially, re-use of data is, to me, one of the most exciting issues currently on the table. I can not imagine living in a more exciting time in terms of the possibilities that technology has opened up in this arena! I’m intrigued with the idea of what I’ve heard referred to as “radial journals” — where the data are the main items, and commentary and peer-reviewed articles grow out of a particular data set. As the data set becomes the destination for interested scholars, and new ideas and conclusions are posted around the data set, a

whole new kind of researcher-driven learning environment springs up — very exciting.

**SPARC’s three objectives are incubation, advocacy and education. What have been some of the notable successes in each area?**

**HJ:** **SPARC** has an admirable track record in identifying opportunities to effect change in each of these areas, which is one of the main reasons that I am so pleased to have the opportunity to be associated with **SPARC**. **Rick Johnson**, **SPARC**’s Founding Director, while a very tough act to follow, set a terrific example for how **SPARC** can act strategically in each of these areas — simultaneously and effectively.

I think that **SPARC**’s educational activities have served to lay the foundation for each strategic direction that **SPARC** has pursued, and in many ways, the incubation and advocacy activities have grown up around these educational campaigns. This perspective is of course, largely influenced from my vantage point outside of **SPARC** for the past five years, so it will be interesting to see how this shakes out in actual practice!

In the past, **SPARC** has created campaigns aimed at both enhancing awareness of issues affecting the scholarly community, as well as encouraging and supporting community participation in the scholarly communication process. Of course, the Open Access campaign has been arguably the most visible of **SPARC**’s education campaigns, and is certainly our most active current drive. This campaign is specifically designed to promote the awareness and adoption of Open Access models, and does this through a variety of different avenues. **SPARC** created a rich Web-based resource articulating the potential benefits of Open Access, and followed that up with a widely-distributed brochure targeted towards educating faculty — to date, nearly 20,000 of these brochures have been distributed (by request) to various universities. We’ve produced and published a two-part business planning guide for running Open Access journals, and coordinated and run workshops and forums on this

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topic. Additionally, **SPARC** became the publisher of the very popular *Free Online Scholarship Newsletter*, created and edited by **Peter Suber**. It's an incredibly vibrant program — updates on activities appear in **SPARC's Open Access News Blog** on a daily basis.

Earlier in **SPARC's** history, The "Create Change" and Declaring Independence campaigns were very effective in raising awareness among librarians and authors about the consequences of the decisions over which they have direct, day-to-day control — what journals to submit articles to, review articles for, edit and subscribe to. They served as a call to introduce increased competition in the marketplace, driven by scholars, not commercial entities. The "Create Change" campaign, which was driven in close collaboration with the **Association for Research Libraries**, has had an impressive reach. Over the past 4 years, **Julia Blixrud**, **SPARC's** Assistant Director for Public Programs, has given invited presentations related to this campaign on dozens of university campuses, not only in the U.S., but worldwide. We've also seen more than 50,000 supporting brochures be requested by campuses for distribution to faculty members.

One of the things that I have long admired about **SPARC** is that, through its incubation strategy, it does more than just pay lip service to the importance of increasing competition through the creation of alternative ventures. **SPARC's** activities have run the gamut from partnering with individual organizations to introduce reasonably-priced alternative journals into the marketplace to organizing much larger, multi-publisher ventures, such as **Project Euclid**, **ASCUS**, and of course, **BioOne**.

Over the past five years, people have often asked me what role **SPARC** played in launching **BioOne**, and the answer serves as a great example of just how powerful a tool **SPARC's** Incubation program can be. I'm not sure people realize that **SPARC** served as essentially **BioOne's** venture capital and business planning partner. That is to say, that along with working to establish the critical partnerships that sustain **BioOne**, **SPARC** raised the start-up capital needed to launch **BioOne** in the form of pre-subscription commitments from its members in the library community. **SPARC** also donated the services of a business consultant to help in the design and incorporation of **BioOne's** operating model. It's a very practical, business oriented tool in **SPARC's** portfolio.

On to the advocacy plank. While advocacy has always been one of **SPARC's** major strategic activities, this program area really gained national and international attention with **SPARC's** focus on Open Access. Initially, the advocacy program focused on outreach targeted at stakeholder groups internal to the scholarly communications community (e.g., librarians, faculty, and editorial boards), along with communications and public relations activities. In recent years, though, it has been greatly expanded to include an extremely active public policy focus. **SPARC** has been outspoken on

policies that pertain to public access to federally funded research results, in particular on the recent **NIH Public Access Policy**.

The focus on public access to federally funded research led **SPARC** to spearhead the formation of an unprecedented alliance of leading library groups, public interest organizations and patient's advocacy groups, the **Alliance for Taxpayer Access**. This group quickly coalesced into a growing voice in the Open Access movement, calling for greater access to taxpayer-funded research to help drive the return on investment of public funds.

*In what ways is SPARC poised to make the biggest impact over the next 2-3 years?*

**HJ:** I think that **SPARC's** biggest opportunities will center around our ability to effectively combine a continued, aggressive, focused public advocacy campaign on Open Access with concrete, market-based activities that support the kind of changes that a successful campaign are likely to bring.

For example, I often hear the concern that small, society publishers who have traditionally been "good citizen" players in the scholarly communications arena are among those at greatest risk should funding agencies mandate a move to Open Access. As someone who has spent the majority of my career working to support scholarly societies, I am not unsympathetic to that concern. I believe that **SPARC** is uniquely positioned to leverage its education and outreach programs to focus on identifying and implementing market-based initiatives that can help create the kind of market conditions in which scholarly society (and other non-profit publishing organizations) can continue to play a vital role.

The challenge is to find ways to keep the development of **SPARC's** three strategic areas driving in the same direction, and at roughly the same pace. It's the combination of our efforts in education, advocacy and incubation that have the potential to truly effect the greatest change.

*In your view, how well has SPARC partnered with the commercial publishing world?*

**HJ:** I'm not sure that I'd say we really have! The focus of **SPARC's** extensive partnership program over the past seven years has been, deliberately, on partnerships that support non-profit publishers, particularly scholarly societies. It's never really been part of **SPARC's** goal to work explicitly with commercial players. One notable exception: **SPARC** has partnered with **BioMedCentral**, a commercial venture with an Open Access business model, in an effort to promote experimentation on a wide variety of Open Access publishers.


*What is your view of the open access movement, in particular its economics?*

**HJ:** I'm completely supportive of the aims of the Open Access movement. Creating barrier-free access to scientific and scholarly research can only advance the process of scientific discovery and scholarship, which has been at the heart of **SPARC's** agenda since its inception. As far as the economics go — whenever I'm part of a discussion about the economics of the movement, the first thing I usually hear is "there is no proven Open Access business model," and the second thing I usually hear is a

claim that any Open Access model is likely to cause economic harm to some subset of the scholarly communications community. While I agree that much more work needs to be done to create viable, market tested models, I think these kinds of statements only look at half of the issue — the potential costs of Open Access.

I would like to see us focus our energies on the other side of that equation — the potential benefits of an Open Access model. I think it will be important for us to find a way to examine, and to try and quantify what the potential return on investment is that we, as a society, can realize by making the results of scholarly and scientific research openly accessible. I think that generating some data on this side of the equation would be a very enlightening and important exercise.

*What are some alternative forms of scholarly communication beyond launching new low- or no-cost journals that institutions should consider?*

**HJ:** Well, I think institutional repositories are potentially rich breeding grounds for new kinds of scholarly communication activities. A trick will be for the community to throw out conventional thinking when considering how to populate them, and with what types of materials. Again, I think that turning the question over to researchers, and directly asking them what they need will be the key to developing the next wave of resources. 

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