

SPARC: A Conference Supporting Open Access Scholarly Publishing

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SCHOLARLY PUBLISHING ENVIRONMENT

As librarians, scholars, and research organizations understand, it costs a lot of money to have access to research. Large publishers charge premium prices printed academic journals and bundled electronic databases of these journals. These large publishers have a pigeon-hole on academics and academic institutions alike.

The current state of higher education requires faculty to not only teach but also publish. Not only should they publish, but they should publish in the most prestigious journals in their field. In order for faculty to get published, his/her/their research must be submitted to a publisher where the work will undergo a peer-review process. The research is then reviewed by other scholars in their field and returned to the publisher. The publisher will then accept the research under the condition that it is revised, including the suggestions of the peers, or it will be denied.

Who's getting paid in all of this? It isn't the publishing faculty or the peer-reviewers. It is the large publishers that are seeing big profits. According to McGuigan (2008) it is Reed Elsevier, Springer, and Wiley that are the big winners in the academic journal publishing business. "Estimates indicate that these three account for approximately 42% of all journal articles published," (Stanley, 2002).

They make their money by selling scholarly journals to organizations such as university libraries and other research institutions for an inflated price. Those not affiliated with an organization subscribing to electronic or print journals sold by the publisher will not have

access to scholarly research. Unfortunately, not all researchers reside within the structure of a formal research institution.

This seems wrong. Research that was likely paid for by taxpayers is not viewable by taxpayers (Alliance for Taxpayer Access, 2011). Those taxpayers that are affiliated with a research institution are in one form or another paying a second time due to organizational fees that pay for journal subscriptions, such as segregated fees for students at universities.

McGuigan (2008) explains that research libraries are in conflict with the publishing business model because they aim to provide all the journals necessary to support the research needs of their respective faculty and students, which are varying and specialized, while operating within an increasingly restrictive budget.

What if researchers didn't publish in these journals? What if instead they published in open access repositories? This is an option. Many researchers have done. However, there are some concerns with publishing in this manner. First, there is no peer-review process. Without an authority reviewing the research, the research is not checked for quality in a way that is recognized by research organizations. This could be overcome by a coalition of field specific researchers who agree to review each other's work. If a publishing company can mediate a system that has peers review scholars' research articles, so too could an independent group or research organization.

Second, the university or other research organization that a researcher is affiliated with judges the quality of the research based upon the publishers' opinion of the work. If the work is of high quality, the publisher will publish the research. If it is not high quality, the publisher does not publish the research. There is a check and balance of inherent 'goodness' of the research. Without the publishing system, how is a university to know the quality of the research? Again I believe there is a way around this issue. Although more time consuming on the part of the scholars' associated organization, may that organization be a university or not, the tenure committee or other similar type of group should develop a research review committee to decide on the quality of the research.

There are other questions to ask such as who manages the research if not a publisher? Would the researcher? Would the associated library? Would an independent party? And how will the research be retrieved? How will other researchers know to look in a certain place? What technology is needed to support an endless growth of research papers and data? How will we curate this data? Who pays for undertaking such a task?

I raise these questions because they are the very questions being asked by librarians, researchers, and other stakeholders in the scholarly publishing community. Academia and research communities at large are greatly affected by the answers to these questions. And those answering these questions are the very people organizing and attending the SPARC Open Access Scholarly Publishing Conference.

NATURE OF SPARC

SPARC is the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition. It was developed in 1997 by the Association of Research Libraries for the purpose of international academic and research library collaboration on developing scholarly communication models (SPARC, 2011). The organization aims to increase the dissemination of scholarly research so that the impact of research can be increased, fueling the advancement of knowledge, while the financial burden on academic and research libraries is reduced. SPARC collaboratively “builds on the unprecedented opportunities created by the networked digital environment,” advancing its mission with the support of 220 academic and research library members as well as affiliates SPARC Europe and SPARC Japan (SPARC, 2011).

Themes discussed revolve around digital technology, open access, institutional repositories, data curation, and open educational resources.

NATURE OF CONFERENCE

March 11-13, 2012 will be the organization’s first large conference, named the SPARC Open Access Conference. The group has had smaller meetings since its origins in 1997. Growth of institutional repositories and a number of issues in the scholarly publishing community necessitated a more formal outlet for scholarly research discussion.

The conference expands on the well-established biennial SPARC Digital Repositories meeting. It will provide a North American-based complement to the popular European

conferences put on by COASP and APE as well as the “Innovations in Scholarly Communication (OAI)” workshop held annually in Geneva, (SPARC, 2011).

ATTENDANCE

While institutional repository librarians and scholarly publishing researchers are the intended primary audience, other groups are represented at the conference as well.

According to the SPARC website, other stakeholders such as publishers, analysts, and technologists will attend so that they stay abreast on issues that will directly affect them.

The most active participants are the librarians who manage institutional repositories as well as researchers. Some of these researchers are already affiliated with groups that support open access. Some are not.

OBJECTIVES

The objective of SPARC is to organize a community of open access publishing experts that will discuss and develop the best practices for open access publishing. The SPARC Open Access Conference provides a forum for that discussion on the many threads of the global OA movement, “with an emphasis on how communities can continue to effectively collaborate and take action to make Open Access the norm for the communication of scholarship and research,” (SPARC, 2011).

The conference is interdisciplinary in the respect that stakeholders, especially scholars, have different research disciplines and play different roles in the Open Access movement.

These varying roles include technology development, copyright permissions rules, archival development, data curating development, standardization and equality between varying institutions and international locations, and much more. It is also interdisciplinary in the respect that it is a collaborative initiative between libraries, universities, publishing companies, technology companies, and arguably legislators.

The SPARC Open Access Conference is not a place intended for career development in the respect that it has organized sessions devoted to just that. However, the very purpose of the SPARC Open Access Conference necessitates conversation and collaboration which is inherent to networking and making professional connections that leads to jobs.

PARTICIPATION & RESEARCH DISSEMINATION

While papers, poster sessions, and panels are common place at conferences, it is unclear whether or not these opportunities exist with SPARC. There is a need for SPARC to develop or better clarify outlets for participation. The SPARC Open Access Conference website does discuss an online forum for presenting new technology and ideas. Ideas from this forum will be discussed at the conference in what is called an Innovation Fair.

The uniqueness of SPARC and the SPARC Open Access Conference lends itself to atypical outlets for research dissemination. SPARC publishes a monthly newsletter that is published with open access on the ARL website. There are no guidelines provided for author submissions. It seems as though they may not take submissions and rather rely on

internal authors. As might be expected, they do not operate under the typical publishing business model.

All other SPARC publications are also accessible through the ARL website. These include papers and guides, articles, presentations, webcasts, videocasts, podcasts, SPARC enews, and brochures. Again, there are no guidelines for author submissions which makes it seem as though outside submissions are not accepted.

IMPACT & CONCLUSION

While many other social science organizations and their respective conferences have existed for decades, the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition supported by the Association of Research Libraries has existed since 1997. For the first time SPARC has expanded its annual meeting into an international conference to discuss Open Access.

The practice and policies of Open Access Scholarly Publishing is in its infancy and in my opinion is an exciting area to be researching right now. The SPARC Open Access Conference seems to be a major initiative in developing those policies and practices in a way that can be used in a broad international scope. The consequences of these decisions will affect higher education, primarily scholars and their respective universities, as well as libraries, publishers, and technology companies. The scholarly publishing business model will be a casualty of this process, resulting in great change for all stakeholders.

RESOURCES

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