

Competition: A Unifying Ideology for Change in Scholarly Communications

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It's a hot topic at academic conferences, library association meetings, and scientific forums. During the past decade, the debate about how to transform scholarly publishing has animated discussions across America and around the globe. The problem is clear: Scholarly journals cost too much. But though a variety of solutions have been proffered, none has yet been so widely embraced that the underlying structures have shifted appreciably.

Many participants in the discussion have staked their claim to one potential solution or another, serving as effective champions for change and calling attention to needs and options. SPARC was created to support these efforts in all their diversity. It is built around a unifying ideology that embraces and complements such initiatives. This central idea is that competitive market forces must be unleashed if the status quo is to be challenged. This simple, but not simplistic, idea is intended to give voice to a range of actions, to demonstrate at last our readiness to act in concert.

SPARC has not been the first to call for competition as a response to the growing journals crisis. The roots may be seen, for example, in the 1998 Pew Higher Education Roundtable report, "To Publish and Perish," which called for libraries to "be smart shoppers." In 1994, the AAU Task Force on a National Strategy for Managing Scientific and Technological Information recommended that universities take action to "introduce more competition and cost-based pricing into the marketplace for STI by encouraging a mix of commercial and not-for-profit organizations to engage in electronic publication of the results of scientific research."

And in 1989 a study of the serials market prepared by Economic Consulting Services Inc. said, "[T]he library community would benefit greatly from such measures as the encouragement of new entrants into the business of serials publishing, and the introduction of a program to stimulate greater competition among publishers."

Competition is the one overarching ideology today that enjoys broad support among the disparate stakeholders in the scholarly communication process, including scientists in wide-ranging disciplines, librarians, administrators, and societies. The far-reaching support SPARC has obtained in the short time since its birth is testament to the breadth of its appeal. SPARC's agenda is entirely compatible with a range of proposals for potential systemic change— reform of promotion and tenure policies, NEAR and other proposals that would alter copyright assignment practices, "decoupling" of peer review and publication, or a broad-scale move to the document delivery model, for example. Each approach has merit and could be supported by SPARC. But each option is also a potentially long-term, high-risk undertaking.

SPARC is not a single-minded venture: the "SPARC Alternatives" program to support lower-priced alternatives to high-priced titles is but the first of a series of initiatives to test for soft spots and demonstrate where the leverage points are. In the months since SPARC was formally launched in June 1998, it has focused on supporting competition among high-priced scientific journals as a means of constraining and reducing prices. The logic is that: 1) if authors have superior alternatives to existing high-priced journals, they will ultimately move to the outlet that better satisfies their need for both recognition and broad dissemination, and 2) if publishers have market support for bold (but inherently risky) new ventures, they are more likely to make the investment.

SPARC seeks to get the ball rolling by offering prestige, readers, and reduced risk through its "publisher partnership" programs. To do this, SPARC collaborates with qualified scientific societies and other organizations that have strong, well-established ties to authors and can attract leading editors to alternative journals. These editors attract leading research, which ultimately imbues a journal with its own prestige. At the same time, the growing recognition of SPARC and the high quality of its partners' products will add another measure of attraction to the new journals.

But what about readers— how will SPARC ensure that research is widely used and valued? Traditionally, it takes years for a new journal to establish itself. During the building period it can be difficult to attract authors, and without authors, there is no prestige (and ultimately no journal). Here is where SPARC's library support is invaluable. SPARC library members have earmarked funds to support the journals published by our partners. So in a relatively short period of time, a journal can have a respectable base of readers as a foundation upon which to further build its circulation and attractiveness to authors. SPARC expects its endorsement of new ventures will draw attention and subscriptions from the broader market beyond SPARC's membership.

SPARC also supplies an incentive to shift publishers' product development expenditures away from creating unique new journals that fill the gap between two established titles ("twigging"). By reducing the risk of competing against an established title, we offer motivation for publishers to direct their investment toward offering consumers a choice. This gives societies, for example, an inducement to launch titles that reclaim key ground lost to commercial publishers. Such strategic action will be essential in the world ahead, in which control of a critical mass of content will decide who dominates the users' desktop.

In addition to its support of competition via the "SPARC Alternatives" publisher partnership program, SPARC is already engaged in identifying solutions that explore the dynamic of migrating content to more cost-efficient outlets. The SPARC Scientific Communities Initiative is a good example of this. SPARC will be providing seed capital to stimulate and accelerate creation of new university-based "scientific information communities" serving users in key segments of science, technology, or medicine (what has been called the "discipline-based server model"). This model offers a promising strategy for addressing inefficiencies in the current scholarly communication process.

A vital step in addressing the scientific journals market is to understand its segmentation and the forces and motivations at work on it. That is what SPARC is doing. Solutions won't come to us in a vision. And they won't come from SPARC alone. They will evolve and emerge through the kind of market engagement SPARC and others have begun. By starting at the beginning, putting one foot ahead of the other, SPARC is initiating change that will ultimately lead to more open and accessible scholarly communications.

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