SPARC – THE CURL PERSPECTIVE

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CURL (Consortium of University Research Libraries; http://www.curl.ac.uk) reviewed its strategic directions during 2000. As CURL members are mainly characterised by having large heritage collections, as well as significant investment in current acquisitions, the resource management issues associated with such a collections profile have been and remain of primary concern.

However, CURL had never been involved, as a consortium, with scholarly communications issues, despite the fact that CURL members pay very significant sums of money to commercial publishers. The concern is a global one – academic libraries world-wide are facing the challenges posed by the need to provide as much information for their communities as possible, in an era of journal inflation, and emerging electronic provision. The issues are complex and involve:

- the disproportionate levels of library budgets spent on journal subscriptions, particularly in the STM area;

- the concentration of a significant part of scholarly output in the hands of a small but highly influential number of commercial publishers;

- the need to provide electronic access to as much scholarly information as possible;

- a wide-spread reluctance to cancel print until electronic archiving arrangements are secure;

- the need for organisational structures to ensure access to digital archives;

- the complexities of intellectual property rights and copyright issues;

- restrictive license conditions;

- the use of published research output as a performance measure;

- the emerging technical standards to facilitate open archiving.

As a result of the strategic review, the CURL Board decided to set up a task force with a specific focus on scholarly communications. The group is a lively one and is chaired by Dr Paul Ayris from University College London. It was agreed that CURL would endeavour to influence the scholarly communications model by lobbying the relevant policy and funding bodies, by dialogue with commercial publishers on pricing models, and by seeking active involvement with other initiatives. To that end, CURL joined the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC) in 2000, as one such initiative (http://www.arl.org/ sparc).

SPARC, based in the United States, was set up by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) as an attempt to introduce competition, change and alternative strategies into the market place. It has had some notable successes and now has three programme areas:

- the Alternatives Program – aimed at providing lower cost, direct competitors to highly priced STM journals e.g. Organic Letters, Evolutionary Ecology Research

- the Leading Edge Program – sponsors technological use or innovative business models e.g. Internet Journal of Chemistry, New Journal of Physics

- the Scientific Communities Program – supports development of portals aimed at a distinct scientific community e.g. BioOne, Project Euclid

A major component of SPARC's work is about advocacy – actual change on campus. The Create Change and Declare Independence campaigns illustrate this.

Although it could be argued that introducing competitive titles simply increases the numbers of titles to which libraries might wish to subscribe, it is interesting that growth in demand for *Tetrahedron Letters* declined significantly, once SPARC launched *Organic Letters*. It has proved that it is possible to influence the market.

However, SPARC's work is largely focused on North America. As many of the issues are global, there is a need for the development of SPARC activities beyond North America, in order to move towards collaborative international solutions. CURL also felt that there was a comparative lack of awareness about the SPARC programme in the United Kingdom.

To that end, CURL, SCONUL and JISC sponsored a visit to the UK by SPARC representatives in February 2001 partly to raise awareness of SPARC activities and partly to consider widening the SPARC agenda towards Europe. There was wide support for taking this forward, from those present at the meetings.

At the time of writing, work is ongoing to set up a European SPARC. The initial step will be to attract sufficient funding across Europe in order to employ an executive officer to develop a programme of activity that will be complementary to the existing SPARC programmes but which will have a particular focus on European requirements. Elements of such a programme may well include:

- adapting the 'Create Change' and 'Declaring Independence' brochures for use in Europe;

- development of campus-focused advocacy programmes, aimed at members of editorial boards and authors;

- activities specifically focused on changing the scholarly communication process and including;

- close partnership with the OAi initiative, in order to support an emerging e-print servers network; to lobby important research;

- organisations to establish their own archives; to consider SPARC involvement in developing the required infrastructure;

- development of policies with regard to intellectual property rights which support open repositories in institutions;

- development of partnerships with learned societies and research organisations;

- investigation of business and funding models;

- investigation of European electronic publishing initiatives which may provide useful partnerships.

The success of such a venture, and indeed the longer term influence of SPARC on the scholarly communications market, has yet to be seen. There are now a considerable number of exciting developments in this area, such as the Public Library of Science (http://www.publiclibraryof science.org). However, it is important that libraries do recognise that concerted and