

Heather Joseph: Getting the message across

For Heather Joseph, it's all "A question of access" (1) to scholarly research

Many *JCB* readers will remember Heather Joseph (nee Daltorio) from her time as Managing Editor of the ASCB's journal, *Molecular Biology of the Cell* in the late '90s. Her drive to "get people the information they need, when they need it, and in the form they want it", has led her to the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC), where she serves as Executive Director.

SPARC is an organization of college and university libraries across the U.S. and Canada. It was founded ten years ago largely out of the librarians' growing frustration over escalating journal prices, which hampers their ability to provide faculty, students, and researchers with the resources they need.

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SPARC has been a catalyst for action to create a more open system of scholarly communication using networked digital technology.

Heather took time to talk to the *JCB* about her efforts to promote SPARC's message to everyone from students to Congressmen.

ADVOCATING ACCESS

What does SPARC do?

SPARC has active programs in three areas. First, we run a series of educational campaigns for the academic community on everything from Open Access to published research, to maximizing the reach of their research through understanding things like copyright. Second, we try to put our money where our mouths are by helping to support new alternatives to traditional scholarly publishing venues. So, for example, we have an incubation

program that provides resources to ventures that are experimenting with new models of publishing and new, more sustainable business models to support them. Finally, we have an advocacy program, where we support policies that promote more open models of scholarly communication.

How do you carry out these advocacy efforts?

SPARC advocates for policies that recognize that the communication of results is an essential and inextricable part of the research process—that an experiment is not really complete until you can share the results with others. We build awareness among policy makers that the broad and fast sharing of research results helps advance the pace of scientific discovery, fuel innovation, and ultimately, return the benefits to society as a whole.

We do the vast majority of our work in partnership with other organizations that share our goals. For example, SPARC founded the Alliance for Taxpayer Access—a coalition of universities, patient advocacy groups, publishers, consumer groups, and student organizations, all of whom advocate policies that broaden the public's access to results of research—particularly research conducted using public dollars.

MANDATING ACCESS

Was SPARC involved in promoting the NIH mandate for public access to the results of NIH-funded research?

Yes. The NIH Public Access policy is a crucial, landmark policy, and we have very actively supported both its creation and implementation for the past four years. It's a great example of a funding agency that invests an enormous amount of public money into re-



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search (nearly \$29 billion each year), stepping up and saying, "the best way to leverage this investment is to make sure that the results are available quickly to anyone who would like to use them." Remember—it's not just scientists to whom this information is valuable. This is crucial, health-related information that is of great interest to physicians, patients, health-care workers, and members of the public.

The public access policy mandates that papers resulting from NIH-funded research be made available to the public 12 months after publication. Although SPARC and our coalition members may have preferred a policy that required immediate access to this information, we threw

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our support behind the NIH policy because we felt it represented a careful approach that balanced the needs of all stakeholders. It provides reasonably rapid access to members of the public, while ensuring reasonable protection to the financial interests of journal publishers.

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Do you think Congress will continue to support the mandate in the future?

I do. We find that the more policy makers delve into the issue and understand the benefits of the mandate for advancing science and improving public health, the more committed and supportive they become. The roadblocks we’ve run into have been largely the result of misinformation—members of Congress have been told everything from, “the policy will encourage government censorship of science,” to, “the policy will destroy peer review,” to, “the policy will encourage bioterrorism.”

The latest area of confusion has been copyright. Opponents of the policy have long argued that the NIH public access policy conflicts with current U.S. copyright law. However, as leading legal experts have attested, the policy is a contract issue, and does not present a conflict in any way with copyright law (2).

As this became clear, the latest attempt to derail the policy took a new tack—the introduction of proposed legislation to **amend** current copyright law to make policies such as the NIH’s illegal. The “Fair Copyright in Research Works Act” (HR 6845) would change U.S. Copyright law to forbid agencies like the NIH from conditioning their grants to require public access to the published results of its research. The

bill would essentially forbid all government agencies from seeking any rights to the research that they fund, and continue to limit the reach of results to only those who can afford to pay for them.

As with all of the previous attempts to block or reverse the NIH policy, the most effective countermeasure is accurate information. Members of Congress need to understand that researchers want greater access to the work of other researchers, and that they want other researchers to be able to access their results seamlessly as well. They need to know that journals such as the *JCB* thrive with access policies that do even more than what the NIH policy calls for, and in doing so effectively serve the interests of the scientific community and the public.

PROVIDING ACCESS

What can scientists do to help the SPARC cause?

Scientists can help by making their desire to get the greatest reach for their research known—to their academic institutions, to their scientific societies, to their publishers, and to Congress. It is in their interest to have their work reach the widest possible audience; the more people

who can access their work, the more that can read it, cite it, and build on it.

They can also help by making informed choices about where they publish their work. Journals with short embargo periods (under 12 months) like the *JCB* are great choices—they demonstrate that the high quality journals can thrive while proving faster access to a wider audience than just those institutions who can afford to subscribe. The *JCB* is setting a terrific example in another way—by providing access to its articles under a Creative Commons license, it is ensuring that not only can the material in the articles that it publishes be accessed, but also that it can be used in new and innovative ways by the research community. **JCB**

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1. Joseph, H. 2008. A question of access—evolving policies and practices. *J. Libr. Admin.* 48:95–106.
2. Suber, P. 2008. A bill to overturn the NIH policy. Open Access Newsletter #126. <http://www.earlham.edu/~peters/fos/newsletter/10-02-08.htm#nih>.



Heather Joseph on Capitol Hill