

A Different Kind of Conversation: The Sparky Awards and Fresh Views on Change in Scholarly Communication

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Campus rivalries, we know, are not only about football. This year, though, campuses may go head-to-head for the first time over something totally new: the number of students who speak out about their right to research.

As campuses take up the call to syndicate the Sparky Awards (SPARC's now-annual student video contest), digital commons, libraries, and student groups are coming up with creative ways to make the contest their own and bring more students into the conversation on access to research. A southwestern library may challenge their football rival to take up the Sparky Awards contest, and a northeastern digital commons has already started a three-way partnership with the university television station and the school of communications to support it.

The Sparky Awards is a contest that recognizes the best new short videos on the value of sharing information, and aims to broaden the discussion of access to scholarly research by inviting students to express their views creatively. The student voice brings freshness and energy to this ongoing conversation, highlighting that students are not only the stewards of new and social technologies, but also that they have the potential to reshape scholarly communication entirely—simply by holding fast to the sharing practices now a part of their daily lives.

The 2007 grand prize winner, Habib Yazdi's voiceless illustration of Pac-Man-like figures growing bigger and stronger through sharing information, is about as explicit and compelling a case as can be made.

The grand prize winners for 2008, from the University of Illinois at Chicago Honors College, point to the basic fact that sharing critical research findings has made advances in engineering possible—from the wheel to the rocket. (See “To Infinity and Beyond,” By Danaya Panya, Sebastian Rivera, Hemanth Sirandas, Uriel Rotstein, and Jaymeni Patel, <http://urliek.blogspot.com/2009/01/sparky-awards-entry.html>. To view all available past entries, visit <http://www.sparkyawards.org/entries/>.)

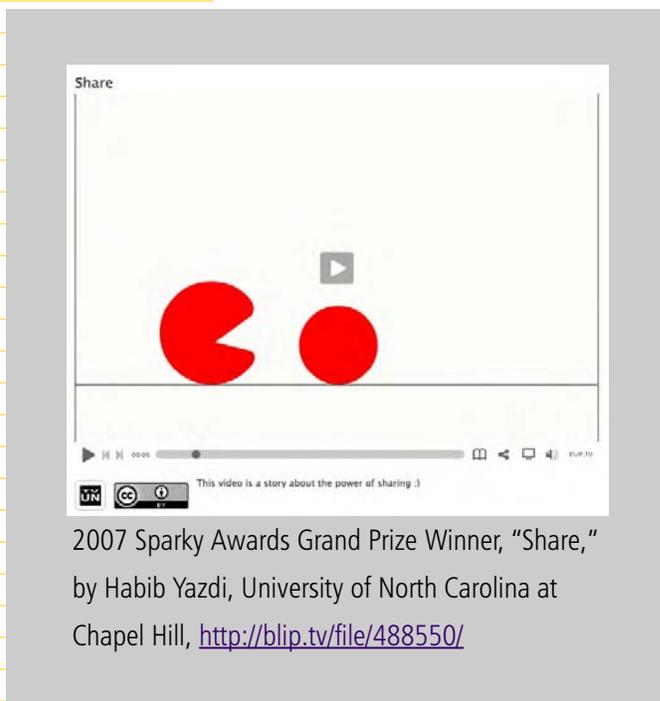
Through basic or intricate arguments in Sparky Awards entries, students have advocated energetically for wider access to research—giving us valuable tools for opening and broadening conversations with other students, faculty, and administrators.

The Sparky Awards is a great start to a different kind of conversation, and an opportunity to promote library services—including the information commons or media services—and underscore that the library is a key part of everyone’s learning experience. The library can be the place to edit video, browse media, work collaboratively, and learn about citations and copyright.

This year, building on initiatives by University of Pennsylvania, Brigham Young University (BYU), and Dartmouth College in 2008, SPARC is calling on libraries to syndicate the contest, so that students might

submit their entries to local contests as well as the national one. Randy Olsen, University Librarian at BYU, reports from last year:

At BYU...the experience was remarkable. Although our contest was open for less than a month, we received seven submissions prepared by 58 students. The night we screened the entries I invited the video producers to introduce their works. In every case the students spoke articulately, even passionately, about open access and it was obvious that they had become conversant with all of the issues we as librarians care so much about. By the end of the evening I felt that our investment in the awards—an iTouch and two \$50 checks—was money well spent.



2007 Sparky Awards Grand Prize Winner, “Share,”
by Habib Yazdi, University of North Carolina at
Chapel Hill, <http://blip.tv/file/488550/>

It's simple to host your own Sparky Awards. Make the national contest your template; all the fine print is done. Set a deadline that works for you, sometime in advance of the national deadline on December 6, 2009; name a panel of judges who will help attract attention on your campus; and offer your own prizes—such as video cameras or iPods. More details on the contest, past winners, and how to syndicate are at <http://www.sparkyawards.org/>.

Working with students, through the Sparky Awards, the SPARC “Right to Research” campaign, other forthcoming projects, and the SPARC summer intern program has brought welcome energy and fresh perspective on creating change in scholarly communication—at SPARC, but also on campuses. Adopting the 2009 Sparky Awards is but one more opportunity students have helped inspire to take the conversation ahead, and we look forward to learning where they will take us next.

Anu Vedantham at University of Pennsylvania Libraries and Barbara DeFelice at Dartmouth College Library contributed to the text adapted here.

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