Conversation, communication, talking—these are the fundamental, bedrock methods that we, as humans, rely upon to share and build knowledge. From our earliest age, we communicate with one another using sounds and physical expressions. These communications can be brief interactions or involved conversations. But regardless of their brevity or intensity, each contact, each communication, each conversation builds our knowledgebase. Babies and children learn to vocalize and verbalize their needs through sustained, repeated conversations with their parents, siblings, and caregivers. We learn how to exist in the world, sharing space with others—especially with those with whom we live—through conversations.

When you step back to look at the broader history of human communication, storytelling has long existed as a means of capturing a people’s history and collective wisdom. Stories are used to impart knowledge to children. Fables and legends and fairytales are not mere entertainment but contain truths to be imparted. Elders pass down history through oral traditions, from songs and ballads to stories and poems. These conversations have been crucial to human history. And looking beyond humans, other systems in nature use “conversations” to communicate, from whale songs to trees’ mycorrhizal networks to birdcalls. Knowledge relies on conversing with one another.

It makes sense then that scholarship, our method of building upon others’ knowledge, of contributing our own, and of sharing for others to use, can be understood as one big, long, continuous conversation. That said, writ large, scholarship is actually a collective conversation, comprised of many smaller conversations with many different participants, and not everyone is talking to everyone else. But like any good collective conversation—think a big dinner party or even a faculty meeting—there are usually smaller, side conversations that occur before and throughout the larger conversation to aid it along. That happens in the conversation of scholarship too.

For those of us in the academy, we know that these smaller side conversations are critically important to the larger conversation of scholarship and that they occur in a variety of venues. They occur in classrooms between faculty and students and between students and students. They occur in labs between researchers. They occur at conferences both in the formally presented written papers and presentations and in the informal hallway conversations that are often far more valuable for the connections that they yield. These smaller conversations of scholarship occur in offices, in faculty lounges, in stairwells, on quads, and in bars. (And that last place might be the most productive and fun of them all!)
Of importance to us in libraries, the conversation of scholarship, both large and small, happens in publications—in books, in journal articles, in data sets, in digital projects: in the realms that are our expertise. And within the textual presentation of scholarship, within the books and articles, the conversation is happening both in the text itself and also in the citations. Citations in bibliographies and reference lists are callbacks to previous conversations. In face-to-face conversations, we all make reference to conversations that occurred before; citations are the translation of that verbal practice into paper scholarship. Citations trace the roots of scholarly conversation.

At this point, you may be wondering why the idea of conversation as scholarship is so important to me. It stems from a statement that Heather Joseph, the Executive Director of SPARC, the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition, made about 12 years ago at a meeting at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Health Sciences Library. At that meeting, Joseph shared that her goal, in any interaction with someone to whom she was advancing SPARC’s mission of open access, was to “have a conversation, not a convert.” The truth of that resounded deeply within me and has been an anchor for my work in scholarly communication throughout my career.

At the time I heard Joseph share that a conversation was her goal, I was still new in my career, learning how to effectively advocate for scholarly communication, from understanding copyright and author rights to open access. I was a reference librarian at the Wake Forest School of Medicine Coy C. Carpenter Library, tasked within my first two weeks to build a scholarly communication program. The concept of scholarly communication as a distinct service area in academic libraries was nascent enough that I had not encountered the phrase or the concept in graduate school. In fact, when I was told to create a scholarly communication program, I responded “That’s great! What’s that?” Not only was I learning how to have conversations in my professional capacity generally, I was learning to have them in and around an area I was learning simultaneously. For anyone who has engaged in scholarly communication outreach and advocacy, you know it is not easy to have such conversations, let alone converts. Therefore, it was incredibly reassuring to hear Joseph say her goal was a conversation, not a convert. I have since heard Joseph speak many times about SPARC’s work, and from what she has shared, I know three things:

1. I am deeply grateful to Joseph and everyone at SPARC for their commitment to open advocacy.
2. I could never work on The Hill.
3. This work is about the long haul, about sustaining connections, about maintaining ongoing conversations.

To be sure, we are in the business of conversation. We understand each other through conversation. We make change—effective change, sustainable change—through conversation. While breakthroughs and converts and big wins are exciting and what you hope for, at the end of the day, at the end of the year, at the end of the decade, the change that we need to see in scholarly publishing practices, in the practices that structure the conversation of scholarship, will only be achieved if we strive to have conversations with one another, where we listen to understand, not simply to respond or react. That is why I believe that we must understand scholarship as conversation: It assumes participation from all sides and—at its best—is inclusive and welcoming of all viewpoints.

So, where does that leave us as librarians? Where and how do we join the conversation?

Certainly, as scholars in our own right, we are contributing to our own field-specific conversations within the broader conversation of scholarship. We share our research, we share best practices, and we share what we have done at our respective institutions. We go to conferences to have conversations with others, both formally and informally. But beyond our own scholarship and scholarly contributions, we are the gatekeepers, the stewards of scholarship for others. We provide the entry point into the conversation. We have the opportunity to widen the circle to let someone new join in, to pull up another seat to the table, to wave across the bar in welcome. Through the materials that we acquire to the organizational systems we impose to the discovery tools we adopt, we have a powerful role in the conversation of scholarship. And we are having lots of side conversations among ourselves that influence and impact scholarship broadly.

We are having collection conversations within our libraries, among our library staffs continuously. And those conversations, when they are running smoothly and respectfully, are inclusive of all voices and viewpoints, and mindful that we must balance the needs of our users with the responsible stewardship of our budgets. We bring data points into our conversations, hopefully with transparency, to understand where they come from and what they mean. We are increasingly having conversations about balancing shelf space and off-site storage and collaborative print retention plans. These conversations are complex, layered, and involve many stakeholders, with far-reaching impacts.
Case in point: Figure 1 shows book circulation for Wake Forest faculty over the past 10 years, during which time their print book checkout patterns have held steady. As a physical-book-loving librarian who met her spouse working in a bookstore, this makes me happy. Libraries are still about books, in addition to all our other great materials! However, despite my inner happiness at knowing faculty use of our print collection remains strong, these data cause concern too, as I know that we are running out of shelf space. This graph adds more complexity to our local conversations about collection growth and sustainability. How, when data back up faculty claims of “But I still use books!” do we tactfully, transparently explain our decisions to move collections off-site, to alleviate space constraints, to create more study space for which students clamor? Through conversation.

Beyond the selection and movement of materials, physical and digital, we also contribute to and shape the conversation of scholarship through the systems we employ to order, describe, and facilitate discovery of our collections. Machine-readable cataloging (MARC) records and metadata serve a critical role in facilitating the discovery of information. But our orders of structure for knowledge, for information, are problematic. Library of Congress Subject Headings are inadequate if not outright discriminatory and racist (Adler, 2017; Knowlton, 2005), and that impacts people trying to join the conversation if they either cannot figure out what terms to use to find the scholarship they need, or if they are angered or hurt by the terminology they discover in our systems.

When it comes to discovery systems for navigating the information we hold in our collections, wading through the thousands upon thousands of returns when searching for information to join the scholarly conversation can be overwhelming, especially for new students. My colleagues at the Z. Smith Reynolds Library at Wake Forest created a “Bento Box” results page to improve discovery points for students and scholars, serving as a guide to joining the conversation (see Figure 2).

The goal is to better orient users to the different types of information available through predetermined entry points, as opposed to continuously scrolling through comingled results. But it is not just our library tools and organizational systems that can prove barriers to entry; it can also be our job titles. What the heck is a scholarly communication librarian anyway? The number of times I have answered that question is innumerable, and while it does provide entry
into a conversation to explain my role, I at times wish for a more straightforward job title. Beyond how we organize our materials, we need to also think about how we organize and name ourselves and what that signals to users.

Looking beyond our library colleagues, the conversations that we have with publishers can influence scholarship in critical, concrete ways. Many academic librarians are keenly aware of the University of California system’s decision to break their big deal negotiations with Elsevier in February 2019 (Office of Scholarly Communication, University of California, 2019a) and their April 2019 announcement of successfully reaching a read-and-publish deal with Cambridge University Press (Office of Scholarly Communication, University of California, 2019b). These negotiations are reverberating across the library landscape. We have seen the collapse of big deal negotiations with Elsevier in Germany and Sweden but an agreement reached in Norway, albeit with criticism (McKenzie, 2019). MIT Libraries announced the first successfully negotiated read-and-publish deal in the United States in June 2018 with the Royal Society of Chemistry (MIT Libraries, 2018), and several other libraries have canceled big deals, primarily over cost concerns (SPARC, 2019).

What is particularly striking about the UC decision, though, is that it was driven not only by concern over unsustainable cost but also by a deep commitment to open access. This decision was driven by a clear signal across all 10 campuses of the UC system that the institutions value their faculties’ contributions to the scholarly conversation, recognize the breadth of their collective impact, and are willing to take a decisive, principled stand. But UC is making this stand following lots of conversation, which has been happening over years. Administration, librarians, faculty, and staff have all been involved throughout. There has been impressive coordination across the 10 UC campuses to ensure uniform messaging to faculty, staff, and students. It did not happen in a vacuum or behind the scenes. And that is critical. That is a key lesson we can all take from the UC-Elsevier situation, regardless of whether our own institutions are looking to break big deals or to try to negotiate read-and-publish agreements or not. The transparency, the upfront messaging, was key. And I have not heard anyone calling for the outright failure of the scholarly publishing system during such negotiations. That is not the goal. Change is the goal. And change takes understanding needs and wants, what works and what does not. Change takes conversation.

Fortunately, most of our conversations with publishers are positive, and we have a shared goal of getting the structural elements that facilitate scholarly conversation—journals, books, data sets—into the hands of our scholars. We may disagree—considerably and pointedly—on price and format and access options, but this is where conversations, sustained through relationships, move us forward. For publishers, I hope that when you are in conversation with libraries, you are truly listening to our needs and concerns. Our conversations do need to be two-way to maximize effectiveness for all. For myself, my

Figure 2. ZSR Library Bento Box.
conversations with publishers by and large have been ones where I feel listened to. May that be true for us all. But when it is not, do not give up, and certainly do not give in—librarians, we must be willing to take a stand.

Publishers are not talking only to libraries; they are also talking to scholars. Often. Publishing contracts are one element of their conversations. Peer review coordination and editorial services are other elements. These on their surface may not seem like conversations, but they are, as information is exchanged between two parties. By and large, librarians are not privy to the conversations that happen between publishers and scholars. As a scholarly communication librarian, though, a large part of what I do has impact on the conversation between publishers and scholars. When I teach faculty about copyright and how to better manage their rights as authors, and they in turn ask for better publishing contract terms, I am shaping the conversation. When I advocate for open access and a faculty member chooses to publish in an OA journal, they are engaging in conversation with a different publisher and perhaps a different, broader audience. Admittedly, as a scholarly communication librarian, I have a more directly visible role in the publisher-faculty side conversation, but scholarly communication librarians are not the only positions within libraries that engage with scholars around publishing issues. As we engage with scholars, we must remember that the publisher-scholar side conversation influences and shapes the larger conversation of scholarship with as much impact as our own.

Our conversations with graduate students and undergraduate students impact the publisher-scholar conversations too. Our grad students are our future faculty, so if we can help them understand the tensions in the publishing system now, if we can get them into the practice of retaining author rights when publishing, in not equating open access to lower quality, we are making our future work, our future conversations easier. With undergrads, beyond aiding in information discovery, we can engage around open educational resources, addressing the high cost of textbooks. This will have an impact on publishers and faculty who produce textbooks, but that may not be a bad thing. Conversation can be positive and disruptive too.

Finally, I would be remiss in talking about the conversation of scholarship if I failed to note that scholars do in fact talk to one another, and not only through their publications, although that is a large and critical part. As previously noted, scholars talk to one another at conferences, in hallways, and over drinks at the bar. But they also increasingly talk to one another online, on Twitter, on blogs, and via ResearchGate, through shared Zotero libraries, through data deposits in Dryad or Dataverse, and through articles posted to arXiv. These conversations are not always easy to track, nor should they be ones into which librarians seek to insert ourselves, but we can help facilitate them by working with our faculty to understand copyright and author rights, to publish in open access venues, to negotiate for open access via read-and-publish deals with publishers, to talk to faculty about the limits of for-profit repositories and social networks, and hopefully redirect them to nonprofit archives and disciplinary commons. We have a role to play in helping scholar-to-scholar conversations through open access advocacy on campus. Scholarly communication principles are infused throughout all areas of the library and are core to what we do and to what faculty do. Therefore, it is incumbent upon all of us in libraries to advocate around scholarly communication, regardless of whether we have scholarly communication in our job title or not.

The conversation of scholarship is long and many-threaded. It has multiple participants, some of whom are talking to one another, in different groupings, and all of whom are having smaller, side conversations that directly and indirectly influence the conversation at large. And the conversation of scholarship is evolving. It is constantly changing and responding to the forces we all bring to bear. We must acknowledge and embrace our responsibilities as key participants. We cannot work behind the scenes, quietly cultivating our collections, ignoring our role in this conversation. Nor can we withhold information that might be crucial to fostering better understanding of the structures that uphold the system. We must be bold. We must speak up. We must engage.

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