Moshe Y. Vardi

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Why ACM?

“Another reason to ditch ACM,” thundered an ACM member in a social-media posting during the recent debate over the Research Works Act (RWA), introduced in the U.S.

Congress in 2011. The proposed legislation prohibits open-access mandates for U.S.-funded research. While deep concerns with the bill were widespread, the nasty tone of the posting was surprising to me.

In this particular case, the member was frustrated by ACM's slow response to the introduction of RWA. Furthermore, ACM is a member of the Association of American Publishers, which supported RWA. (ACM issued a statement against RWA in February 2012, see <http://www.acm.org/news/featured/rwa-frpaa-feature?searchterm=RWA>.) I suspect, however, that the reasons for this anger toward ACM have to do with ACM's overall publishing business model, focused on issues such as open access, copyrights, and the like. It is inevitable that members' positions on some issues may not always agree with ACM's position. It is useful, therefore, to step back and look at ACM from a broader perspective.

ACM is a professional, scholarly association. Such associations have a very long history. The Roman collegia, starting from the third century B.C., included guilds of craftsmen that controlled secrets of their trade. The earliest universities, in Bologna, Paris, and Oxford around 1200 A.D., were formed as guilds of students or teachers, which is where the modern term “college” originated. The Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge, known as the Royal Society, founded in 1660, is the oldest scientific society.

ACM, whose purpose is “advancing computing as a science and a pro-

fession,” was founded in 1947. ACM today has an amazing range of activities. A typical ACM member is usually familiar with only a few of the association's activities, say, the Turing Award, the Digital Library, and a couple of conferences and journals, but these constitute only a small slice of ACM's total portfolio. For a fuller picture of ACM's range of activities, read ACM's Annual Report at <http://cacm.acm.org/magazines/2012/1/144822-acms-annual-report/fulltext>, which describes activities pertaining to publications, education, professional development, public policy, students, internationalization, electronic community, conferences, and award recognition. So, before one calls for “ditching ACM” because of disagreements with ACM's policies, one should ask, paraphrasing the American columnist Ann Landers, whether one is better off with ACM or without ACM.

Beyond the utilitarian argument for ACM, it is important to put one's disagreements with ACM in perspective. ACM is governed by a council, chaired by a president. As a democratic association, the president and the members of the council are elected by the membership. ACM's publication policy is set by the Publications Board, whose members are appointed by the council. Thus, ACM's policy is not determined by some abstract entity, but rather by flesh and blood members, who are, just like you, computing professionals. When you disagree with ACM, you are disagreeing with your colleagues. Yes, ACM does have pro-

fessional staff, responsible for daily operations of the association, but, ultimately, decision making is vested with the “volunteers,” which is ACM's parlance for the members who generously offer their time to help run the numerous activities.

Of course, we are all entitled to our own passionately held opinions, and we are not obligated to agree with the decisions of ACM Council. Still, an association with over 100,000 members, tremendously diversified across geographical and occupational lines, is bound to reach decisions that are not always unanimously held. By all means, get involved, lobby for your opinions, write to ACM's president and council members, but accept their authority to reach a final decision in the best interests of the association.

Finally, as members, we are all obligated, I believe, to work in the best interest of the association. The open-access issue has raised a lot of passion, but we must consider this issue in the context of ACM's financial well-being. Publishing is about one-third of ACM's business. Thus, changing ACM's publishing model may have serious consequences for the association and should not be taken lightly. Generally, open access implies changing the business model of publishing from reader pays to author pays. Surprisingly, most people who tell me that ACM should adopt open access seem to equate open access with free access, as in “no one pays.” Such an argument cannot be taken seriously. Open-access advocates cannot ignore the need to accompany their advocacy with serious business-model proposals.

Remember, ACM is not some abstract, anonymous organization. It is an association of you and your colleagues. Our slogan should be “l'association c'est nous,” that is, “ACM is us.”

Moshe Y. Vardi, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF