

## Comment

# Scientific publishing: some food for thought

**Vittorio Bo**

Scientific publishing, here to be considered in a broader sense, as publishing of both specialised scientific journals and science popularisation works addressed to a wider audience, has been sailing for some years on troubled waters. To gather some possible food for thought is the purpose of this brief article.

Firstly, a crisis has apparently invested traditional paper publishing, owing to a number of problems that, in my view, can no longer be addressed at this point, e.g. more and more manifest delays between the time the article is written and its actual publication, that is preceded by a number of pre-prints and different pre-publication versions that make paper journals an inadequate updating instrument for scientists. In addition, there has been a general, and sometimes excessive, increase in costs and, correspondingly, cuts in funds available for libraries to purchase journals, that has led to an even more harmful vicious circle. Finally, paper journals inevitably imply a storage problem, given the increasingly high number of publications libraries have to archive. Hence the birth of on-line electronic journals, apparently a necessary and appropriate solution that must be harnessed and guided towards its most useful evolution for the benefit of scientific communication and research itself.

In this scenario the crucial issue of the free access to scientific information stands out more and more conspicuously. Even though, in principle, basic scientific information should be available to all interested readers, or at least to the entire scientific community, this is, in actual fact, blatantly not so. Think, for instance, of wide stretches of the scientific community in developing countries. And if this difficulty in accessing scientific publications was already an issue for paper journals, it does not automatically disappear with electronic journals; on the contrary, it exists in another insidious form, the digital divide. On the one hand, the digitalisation of information and the world-wide web have allowed for a revolutionary spreading of scientific information, but on the other hand we should be careful not to overlook the new issues together with the old and still pending ones.

Another crucial point to be raised is that in the past few years we have witnessed attempts to take over/usurp and privatise the results of the most advanced research, with a consequent attempt to conceal them. For instance, what has happened in the race to map the human genome. A possible and interesting response is apparently being provided by the ideas behind the open source movement, open access archives or, at a different level, the onset of free encyclopaedias, such as the popular Wikipedia. This article is not the appropriate place for dealing extensively with such complicated issues, but even in the relation between collective information and the structure of scientific information, there are a number of problems that cannot be disregarded. The interesting article by Jarom Lanier (2006), "Digital Maoism the Hazard of the new On line collectivism", [http://www.edge.org/3rd\\_culture/lanier06/lanier06\\_index.html](http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/lanier06/lanier06_index.html) is one such useful example.

Finally, the other side of scientific publishing, as it is presented here, is the one of the texts dealing with popularisation, and this is a central issue in science communication, given the now evident importance of scientific information within society. Since scientific culture is central within culture in a broader sense, the publication of a work of science popularisation becomes a highly significant and most necessary cultural offer. In the scenario of the past few years – that have witnessed a general revolution in publishing triggered by the digital revolution and the arrival of the Internet and of the world-wide web – books have to redefine their function as an instrument of knowledge and should take on new and different roles. In this context, scientific books acquire the fundamental role of an instrument for the dissemination of information and in-depth analysis, meeting a growing demand outside and inside the scientific community. Indeed, in a context marked by a progressive specialisation of scientific

disciplines, popularisation literature becomes essential for scientists themselves, as they seek new ideas in areas that they are unfamiliar with.

As a consequence, we are witnessing an evolution in scientific publishing that needs to be understood and guided to the best achievable result because, although its role is can be redefined, it is a decisive and central element in the communication of culture, both at specialised and at popularisation levels.

*Translated by Massimo Caregnato*

### **Author**

In 1976 he set up the publishing firm “Il melangolo” in Genoa. After several managerial posts in industrial corporations (Ansaldo, Erg, Dalmine), he was appointed General Manager for over 10 years at Giulio Einaudi Editore (1990-2001), one of the most authoritative publishers in Italy.

He has held official positions in Mondadori both in arts and educational publishing. He regularly holds publishing courses, currently at the University of Urbino. In 2002 he set up Codice idee per la cultura, that develops and runs cultural projects. In 2003 he launched the publishing house Codice Edizioni and was appointed Director of the Genoa Science Festival as of the same year. E-mail: [v.bo@codicecultura.it](mailto:v.bo@codicecultura.it).