Review

The “book” medium and scientific editorial communication: prospects and ongoing changes

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G. Vitiello, Il libro contemporaneo, Editrice Bibliografica, Milano (2009)

ABSTRACT: The volume “Il libro contemporaneo” (The Contemporary Book) by Giuseppe Vitiello offers a global view of the “book” as a model and as an instrument of communication and for learning in the society of knowledge: it specifically deals with scientific editorial communication, through a complete and systematic reconstruction of the bodies involved, of the production and dissemination processes, also in the framework of the technological changes pushed by new media. In particular, the author critically analyzes some relevant aspects such as the role played by the journal as the most relevant mean for scientific knowledge dissemination, the scientific writer figure, the strengthening of large publishing groups and the challenge open access implies.
which are more and more united, libraries form consortia, giving birth to a phenomenon, as it is defined in the book, of “bilateral oligopoly” which sees the contraposition of two power centres: on the one hand library consortia, and on the other hand large scientific publishing companies.

In a systemic perspective, the book comprises an interesting and complementary in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of alternative publishing and of open archives, where open access does not simply designates “a professional platform, but also a political and social mobilization which crosses the topical contemporary issues of a sustainable development founded on a knowledge society” (p. 308).

The author reconstructs the two circulation patterns for open access scientific publications: the first features a direct mechanism, and an author-reader unidirectional relation, without evaluation and control by an editorial office; the second revalues the role by the editor as an intermediary and an aggregating agent. The proposed analysis follows an interesting economic approach which evaluates the spill-over costs for both libraries and institutions which are references to researchers.

As mentioned, Vitiello proposes an innovative reflection on the role played by scientific writers who in general are hardly considered, as we always are mainly focussed on literary writers. After a brief review on the “biodiversity of researchers” (p. 124), marked by mechanisms such as peer reviewing and impact factor (which are both also reconstructed in the book), the analysis turns to the aspect, which is much more topical and stimulating, to my mind, of the role played by the author and of the related elements of authorship and certification of the work, in the digital era of Wikipedia and of collective intelligence. Indeed, in the communication networks, as the author correctly underlines, it becomes much less obvious to define individual ownership, which may become a collective exercise, where certification can be exerted not only by editors but also by users’ consensus.

The influence of communication networks is also used as an interpretation key in the chapter devoted to the free use for scientific purposes: the analysis carried out highlights both the regulating-sanctioning framework which has recently inserted the subject into a system, and the comparative approach with the models followed in other European countries and in the US, and finally also the difficulties, but also the opportunities that new media guarantee, between the danger of copyright infringements and the potential dissemination of culture and science.

To conclude with, a relevant chapter is the one devoted to the role of libraries, even in the perspective of the guarantee of the access to information and scientific literature and the protection of public interest. In this regard, Vitiello says – and one cannot but agree with him – that plurality, which public libraries should promote, “is not the expression of an apportionment of knowledge, but it is a positive selection, aiming at promoting, within the library collection itself, a dialogic relation between ideas and at expressing the contents through a stimulating and critical public narration” (p. 207).

Translated by Massimo Caregnato

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