

## Report of the EASE Italian Regional Chapter meeting (17 June 2021)

### Satellite session of the 15th EASE Conference

Federica Napolitani on behalf of the EASE Italian Regional Chapter Meeting participants\*

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The EASE Italian Regional Chapter meeting took place online on the 17th of June 2021, as a satellite session of the 15th EASE Conference (23-25 June 2021). After a short Introduction by Paola De Castro (chair of the Chapter) and a welcome address by Duncan Nicholas, EASE President, the discussion, moderated by Federica Napolitani (author of this report) was opened among the participants, whose names and affiliations are listed above. The discussion focused on the theme of the EASE Conference "Promoting sustainability in scholarly publishing: the role of editors".

Sustainability has become a very popular topic nowadays so much that the same terms "sustainable" and "sustainability" are sometimes overused and overheard especially at media level. But what is the exact meaning of "sustainability"? Maybe we should start from here. According to the Italian Encyclopaedia Treccani, sustainability is: "In the environmental and economic sciences, a condition of development capable of ensuring the satisfaction of the needs of the present generation without compromising the possibility of future generations to realize their own" (translated from Italian).

The concept of sustainability, therefore, embraces broad and different areas and has environmental, economic, social and cultural dimension. However, its implications in science editing and in the production of scholarly journals still need to be explored.

Taken up by a thousand other daily chores we tend to forget that sustainability *is* a key daily thing. It is a moral commitment and an ethical responsibility that should be part of our daily routine, both professional and private, motivating us to change our ways. But how does sustainability have an impact on the publication of scholarly journals? Which areas can be affected? The first might be in the general work organization. These months of lockdown forced many innovations to take place. Among them, the so called *smart-working*, which could be better defined, according to Luca De Fiore one of the meeting participants, as *home-working* given the difficult situations many people experienced while working from home. Luca's point of view is particularly meaningful as he is both an editor and an owner of a publishing company. Typically, the work of a science editor is conducted in strict contact with authors, reviewers, other editors, personnel of the administration or marketing offices and so on. It feeds on a continuous confrontation between individuals or groups of individuals, to which remote working might, indisputably, be a possible obstacle. We have, therefore, to imagine something new, new ways to share processes, projects and editorial choices, more efficient solutions concerning logistics which can impact positively not only on the movement of employees to and from their workplaces but also on the transport and delivery of printed editorial products, this latter still generates an enormous amount of traffic in many countries.

Another area where sustainability could have an impact is the production area, which is interdependent and strictly connected with the organizational one. In this regard, strong determinants should be *lightness* and *rapidity*. We should treasure one of the famous *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* - a series of lessons written by Italo Calvino for the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard (USA) and never delivered because of the death of the author. The first lesson is about lightness, certainly a term which in the context of science editing could easily acquire a strong negative connotation (an editor cannot take things lightly) but which is somehow a key word for sustainability. Lingering too much on the production of editorial products makes any project not only unproductive from an economic point of view but very heavy from the point of view of sustainability. Simpler and faster paths should be introduced in the peer-review and publication processes, as happened with the pre-prints.

A third area where sustainability could have an impact is dissemination. A sustainable approach in circulating the products of scientific communication cannot be separated from a disenchanting evaluation of the real trade off between digital and printing.

We all know that there is a strong narrative which implies the greater sustainability of digital vs printing, but this is by no means taken for granted as shown by independent studies, not carried out by the great digital players. In terms of environmental sustainability the weight of digital products is very strong, just think of the energy consumption of all the powerful servers in the world and the very serious problem of the disposal of thousands of tons of electronic devices, which in some developing countries is beginning to become a real environmental emergency. Unfortunately, it is not at all certain that a greater push for digital can turn into a benefit from the point of view of sustainability. However, if and whenever printing is preferred, this should be done by using environmentally friendly printing products, including recycled paper or paper coming from sustainable forest management. Publishing companies should act quickly, taking all possible sustainable-oriented decisions and reducing carbon footprints as much as achievable. Optimizing the use of online meetings could also help in reducing unnecessary travel costs. Also, are the Boards of science journals gender-oriented? Perhaps more could be done in this regard by adopting the UN Sustainable Development Goal no. 5 on Gender Equality.

The concept of sustainability is also linked to the concept of *preservation* of knowledge for the future generations and of the *accessibility* of knowledge to all, including the developing countries still experiencing a scarcity of technological and financial resources and network availability. New models of open access to information and of open access sustainable journals should be explored to make the information as open as possible and as close as necessary.

In general, the great challenge that we face as publishers, editors, authors and reviewers is that of a greater sobriety in the production of scientific literature. As long as writing and publishing will be the bargaining chip in our professional career we will not get out of this terrible impasse. We need to consider that the filtering activity of the quality of literature has an important implication in terms of social and environmental responsibility. It is not necessary to publish everything and the validity of the peer-review process in the coming years will be assessed also on the basis of its capability to reduce waste, and have a positive impact in lowering the disturbing "noise" produced by too much information.

Ironically, the *Publish or perish* principle is changing into a *Publish and perish* omen. More and more publications, more dissemination, more space used in the Web, more products to be disposed of and an explosion of information profoundly interfering with the communication efficacy will end up by creating an enormous *weight*, which will have a negative impact on sustainability, totally in contrast with the powerful "lightness" that Calvino recommended for this millennium. Certainly to ensure a future to scientific research, sustainability is at the heart of the problem.