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French Publishing Industry facing Sustainable Issues : the pressing Need to Reinvent Future

David Piovesan is Associate Professor in Management Science at Magellan Laboratory, in Lyon 3 University. He is also visiting researcher in the Arts Management Department, Faculty of Business Administration, VSE university, Prague. After a career break as CEO of a bookshop, he is now conducting a research about how publishing industry reinvent itself.

Jean-Marc Francony is Associate Professor in Information and communication sciences at the GRESEC Laboratory, in the Grenoble-Alpes University. For more than 20 years, he has been responsible for training projects in the various sectors of the book professions and more particularly of the publishing professions.

Fanny Valembois is a senior consultant in the field of sustainable development of ICCs. Her work focuses in particular on the issues of decarbonization. She co-leads the cultural department of the French Think Tank The Shift Project.

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Abstract

Sustainable issue in the publishing industry is not yet a major concern in the research academic field regarding the lack of articles published about this topic.
Of course, there is a long research tradition about the transformation of the book industry either from the economical point of view (Benhamou, 2006) or the sociological one (Bourdieu, 1996 and Thompson, 2010). A main part of recent work is dedicated to the impact of the digital disruption (Thompson, 2021 ; Benghozi, Salvador, Simon, 2021 ; Salvador, Benghozi, 2021) on reading habits (paper book versus ebook and more recently versus audio book) or on selling channels (online, bookshops, big stores).
But, as far as we know, nothing has been published about how the publishing industry is dealing with the challenge of sustainable development and seeking to reinvent itself in the face of radical change that environmental challenges impose. Yet, this paper aims at filling in this blind spot with the case study of the French publishing industry.

In terms of methods, the paper confronts several points of view. The approach is built on an original multilevel analysis :

1. The Shift Project report (published in France in november 2021) was performed by one the author of the presentation. It has collected a huge and relevant material of ongoing change in the book industry related to climate and sustainable issues.
2. Change process, players' perceptions and actions are also described and analyzed thanks to an organizational ethnography method. Deep inside knowledge of what is at stake in the field can be depicted relating to a 9 years professional experience inside a bookshop as a CEO.
3. This article also confronts these issues with the role that the university can play in these transformation processes, both from the point of view of research and of training. One of the authors has been teaching and coaching students in a book industry master for more than 20 years. Another academic researcher supports many bookshops into competing and elaborating strategic answers in the digital world.

4. Last, one of the aims of the presentation is to show to what extent the French case study can be expanded to other European book industries. This philosophy is undoubtedly a major concern in an action oriented-research: are results totally focused on the specificity of the case ? or can they be extended to other European book chains ? according to what conditions ? This approach will benefit from the ongoing european based-work performed by one the author about the publishing industry change in Europe.

Three main parts will compose the article.

1 - sustainable stakes and issues in the French publishing industry

A book is not only an intellectual work, it is also a physical object, manufactured from a flow of matter. Cutting trees, producing pulp and paper, printing, cutting, binding, shaping, transporting, storing, marketing, promoting : each stage of the book's life consumes energy and resources. Reducing the environmental impacts generated by the book industry, as well as reducing its dependence on physical resources and fossil fuels, requires measuring those impacts, and being able to differentiate the issues of pollution, resource depletion, and contribution to global warming.

We will explore several topics : the impact of paper production, which represents nearly 70% of GHG emissions from book production; the overproduction and destruction of 13% of new books ; the distances traveled by a book whose production is delocalized in several countries, even continents. We will also put into perspective ebooks and e-readers, as recent studies show that their ecological impact is significant.

Both of these issues expose the book industry to commercial, logistical and image risks. This can be illustrated by the crisis the French book industry is currently facing : paper shortage, disruption of global freight and service disruption of one of the main book distributors, have a huge impact on the industry.

2 - ongoing process of transformation due to sustainable challenges

The issue of ecological transition has emerged in the publishing industry. Publications are popping up on bookstore shelves : essays, novels, comics, children’s literature, practical books, have all taken up the question. There is also a rise in awareness and desire to act among book industry players.

Every key player of the field (publishers, printers, distributors, sellers whether they are online or bookshops, consumers) will have to think out of the box. As for now, the perception level of the need to change is heterogenous and disparate, from unconsciousness to pioneering attitude.

Solutions do exist, to use less and cleaner energy, reduce distances, limit waste, etc.

Many bookshops are trying either on their own or in collective actions (local and national associations of booksellers) to reduce their carbon footprint. There is also a shy but real effort from Bookfairs to reinvent the transportation model of festival attendees.
The list of ongoing change is obviously not yet finished as the whole industry seems to recently take into account the sustainable issue.

However, the scale of the climate and environmental challenges will require, beyond eco-friendly gestures and technical and organizational solutions, a profound change in the production and distribution of books, in order to perpetuate the circulation of works and ideas in a sustainable world.

3 - Experiment performed by the teaching team of the master of book industry (master "métiers du livre et de l'édition") in Grenoble Alpes University.

Academic training in the book trade was created at the beginning of the 1990s as a specialisation of a technical diploma named *Diplôme Universitaire Technologique (DUT) for information and communication professions*. The unity of training that emerges from this generic title meets the need for a coherent national curriculum while offering the possibility of local specialisations. It is only later that this pedagogical unit will be put at the service of an integrated understanding of inter-professional issues mainly associated with the emergence of digital skills. Since, the emphasis has been placed on the recomposition of professions and skills. As in other fields, including the social sciences (Plantin, 2014 and Marres, 2012), this recomposition is envisaged within invariant frameworks of practice.

Although climate issues appear in specific training programmes, they remain absent from training for the book trade. However, preparing future generations to understand the constraints of decarbonisation and to integrate them into their practices is one of the missions of professional training.

Two main causes seem to be at the origin of this delay. Firstly, the settled industry has more interest in favouring an approach to reduce their carbon footprint (CSR approach) rather than taking the risk of a structural transformation. Secondly, the reflection on activities and professional skills has so far focused on the existing actors and processes of the book chain without reflection on possible exogenous change.

To make up for this delay, we must be able to innovate in the definition of a *new training contract involving the professional and academic worlds,* involving an in-depth investigation of the possible scenarios of transformation within the book chain and a creative approach to educational engineering. The empirical and experimental approach developed in the previous paragraphs is part of the answer.

Several Grenoble-Alpes University systems are thus mobilised. Firstly, the Flexi-TLV project, which supports the development of flexible, skills-based training. Secondly, the Design Factory that the University of Grenoble-Alpes is setting up. This service unit is designed to support the development of entrepreneurial and creative skills and practices, giving students the confidence to act in a complex world marked by major transition issues. The aim of all these systems is to link professional experts, academic researchers and training teachers.

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Keywords :
publishing industry – entrepreneurial university – bookshops - carbon footprint

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