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Elena Formia
Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna

Eleonora Lupo
Politecnico di Milano, Italy

Lorela Mehmeti
Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna

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PRO-DES: Localising design research for scientific publishing. A case study of research and experimentation in Italy.

Eleonora Lupo^{a*}, Elena Formia^b, Lorela Mehmeti^b

^a Politecnico di Milano, Italy

^b Università di Bologna, Italy

*Corresponding author e-mail: eleonora.lupo@polimi.it

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Abstract: This paper addresses issues related to the scientific publishing of design research through a national-scale approach that can serve as a reference model and be transferred or replicated in other contexts. In 2023, within the Italian Design Society, the national research group *Pro-Des: Scientific Production of Design* was established to investigate and experiment with the complex phenomenon of scientific publication in design from cultural, institutional, interdisciplinary, and technological perspectives. Over the past two years, the group has coordinated several activities to position the topic and stimulate discussion at the national level, while maintaining a dialogue with the international landscape. Since its establishment, *Pro-Des* has explored new formats and innovative publishing processes, responsible models for evaluating quality and impact, and diversity in design publishing, later extending its focus to the ecosystemic dimension of the publishing landscape, Open Access, and emerging technologies such as AI in scientific publishing. This paper presents Pro-Des as a case study showing how global issues in scientific publishing have been addressed locally by the Italian design community, to raise awareness and influence structural policies for scientific knowledge production. It focuses on the main research phases and objectives and their outcomes, offering an analytical reflection on how design research has been shaped by the specific conditions of the Italian publishing ecosystem. Adopting a dialogic, multi-stakeholder, and multi-agency perspective, the paper discusses how localised practices can interpret globally relevant concepts and provide a reference for further innovation in the publishing ecosystem.

Keywords: design publishing; situated research; distributed leadership; plurality

1. Introduction

The global debate on scientific publishing has grown consistently in the last decade: scientific journals have been put under discussion (Cope & Phillips, 2014; Bienfield, 2014), as well as university press (Pochoda, 2010), and various scholars addressed the improvement of articles reading experiences (Aalbersberg et al., 2012), the revision of editorial practices



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(Horbach & Halffman, 2020), while others questioned the critical aspects of quantitative metrics like impact factors (Curry, 2018; Waltman & Traag, 2021) and potential bias of qualitative evaluation performed by peer review (Mulligan et al. 2013; Heesen & Bright, 2021), calling for an alternative perspective on impact (Dinsmore, Allen & Dolby, 2014), that should refer to the “reputation economy” (Fetcher et al., 2017). Finally, the existence of a publishing oligopoly (Larivière, Haustein & Mongeon 2015), affected by linguistic bias (Larivière & Desrochers, 2015), has been put in evidence.

At the same time, open access publishing platforms and infrastructures have been established and have gained scientific recognition and reliability (Open Research Europe, 2021) and new trends in publishing emerged (Kim et al., 2008) up to dynamic and collective authoring writing processes (Heller, The & Barting, 2014), contributory authorship models (Bradt et al., 2015), hybrid and interactive content formats (Hohman et al., 2020) and living books (Adema, 2021). In this context, a greater critical attention and awareness have been devoted to the most recent developments in AI-Artificial intelligence and its contribution to the processes of scientific writing and production of articles in an automated way (Marconi, 2020), ethically questioning the authenticity, reliability, and quality of content and the attribution of publications to authors.

In the design domain, we observed a trend on expansion and quality improvement of design journals (Atkinson, Valentine & Christer, 2021) discussing also their quality perception (Gemser et al., 2012), publishing patterns (Gemser & De Bont, 2016) and visual designs and reading experiences (Barness & Papaelias, 2021), but concerns have been raised about their global diversity (Trinidade, Pereira, 2023) in terms of topics, authorship and plurality of the editorial boards, encouraging experimentations out of the mainstream (Formia et al., 2024). In parallel, international design conferences are exploring innovative ways of presenting research such as pictorials (IASDR Conference, 2023), conversations (DRS Conference, 2024) and explorations (DRS Conference, 2026) to offer more dialogical and shared forms of inquiry.

Therefore, it is crucial and timely to address the open questions related to scientific publishing from a design perspective: design research can be a pivotal field for the experimentation and discussion of new visions and approaches, calling also for the awareness and responsibility of the whole design community (Valentine & Mehmeti, 2022).

This paper presents a case study showing how the Italian design research community has engaged with these global issues. The case study is the national research group Pro-Des. Scientific Production of Design, that was established in 2023 within the Italian Design Society. Being rooted in a *cultura del progetto* that is culture-led, context-based, and process-oriented (Julier, 2000), the national design culture has encouraged the research group to frame scientific publishing through a systemic perspective. Scholarly knowledge is understood as an ecosystem (Altman & Cohen, 2022) that requires a holistic and integrated approach (Birdsall et al., 2005). The research group was committed to researching and experimenting with the complex phenomenon of scientific publication of design from a cultural, institutional, interdisciplinary, and technological point of view. Adopting the ecosystem perspective, it also implies addressing the specificities of the local publishing ecosystem in Italy, focusing on widespread research initiatives, stakeholders involved, institutional publishing patterns and policies, and identifying needs and insurgent topics. Over the last two years, the research group has coordinated and developed several activities

to position the topic and set the discussion at the national level by looking at the international panorama presented in the paper.

From the description and discussion of the case study, the research aims to demonstrate the relevance of observing local practices to understand how the interpretation of the global challenges of the publishing system in a specific context can offer insights into how to set and situate a comparable framework of research and analysis in different contexts.

The paper opens with a brief theoretical contextualisation that builds on the research group's long-standing engagement with the topic and situates the discussion within the Italian context. It then describes the Pro-Des initiative by situating it within the national design research society and detailing its objectives, phases, and activities, as well as the related outcomes and outputs. The discussion then turns to the research process and methodology, examining how these were influenced by and tailored to the Italian design context and research community. From this analysis, the paper identifies key factors to consider and several transferable methodological principles for shaping situated research in this area. The paper concludes by outlining intentions to scale up this method in future actions and initiatives.

1.1 Background and contextualisation within the Italian design ecosystem

The evolving relationship between knowledge production and scientific publishing concerns not only the issue of dissemination, but also the organization and transfer of knowledge.

Within the field of design research, this relationship is also a matter of identity. As a relatively recent discipline, at least in its theoretical and critical dimension, design has been the subject of numerous attempts at definition and codification, progressively fostering an academic community and an ongoing open debate (Bertola & Manzini, 2004). This sustained effort of reflection has clarified the role of design as an ideal bridge between scientific and artistic-humanistic knowledge, between organizational and technical professions, and between know-how (embodied knowledge) and know-that (conceptual knowledge). Owing to this hybrid identity, the literature has often described design as a “third culture” (Archer 1979), a bridge and mediator between different forms of knowledge, and as a form of situated or embedded scientific inquiry within project practice (Findeli, 2001).

In the Italian scientific context, this issue acquires additional connotations, shaped by a long-standing internal debate within both the disciplinary and professional spheres (Celaschi, 2008; Celi & Formia, 2016). Unlike in other geographical and academic settings, where *Designerly Ways of Knowing* (Cross, 2006) has, since the late 1970s, traced the development of a research interest in articulating the nature of design cognition and the profile of the designer, in Italy the relationship between different design cultures (in particular the fields of architecture, interior, and product design) was shaped by a prototypical and practice-based approach, marked by close empirical integration, rather than theoretical abstraction.

This condition is rooted in a multidisciplinary tradition that has historically embraced both the arts and the scientific disciplines, as well as in the widespread nature of design practice. Although industrial design did not enter the Italian public university system as an independent field of study until the 1990s, its diffuse presence and practice, as mentioned before, have already fostered reflection and critical debate: design became both a form of culture and a mode of critique, even if not always formalized through traditional scientific

research methods, tools, and media. In Italy this can be historically traced back to critical approaches such as “radical design” (Ambasz, 1972), or “design diffuso” (diffuse design) (Branzi, 2006) or “progetto di comunità” (community project) (Olivetti, 1943) that define locally (sometimes being also precursor) situated, participatory, social or systemic design approaches nowadays internationally acknowledged. In such Italian tradition (from which we derive our positionality that prioritize local knowledge), critical thinking often follows practice rather than preceding it, systematizing it in a cultural process akin to the concept of “reflective practice” (Schön, 1993). The publishing landscape also reflected this characteristic. While in the Anglo-Saxon world the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a major expansion of journals dedicated to design research, theory, and methodology (Cross, 2006), the national culture of scientific dissemination in design remained deeply rooted in publications originating within the architectural domain (Martignoni, 2002; Santi Gualtieri, 2003; Baglione, 2008), specialized periodicals (Dalla Mura & Vinti, 2013; Piazza, 2010, 2013), and in experimentation and professional magazines (Camuffo, 2013).

This multiverse configuration, together with the absence of a stable institutional infrastructure of governance, is also mirrored in the relationships developed around national design cultures through professional and promotional associationism (Formia & Peruccio, 2011). Such associations often arise from the perceived need of individual professionals to promote design and highlight its significance as a distinct field of practice to a wider audience. At the same time, they seek to affirm design as an autonomous discipline governed by its own principles, engaging stakeholders from related domains such as education, culture, and commerce.

This background defines the framework for opening a new reflection on the multiple transformations that have reshaped the landscape of scientific publishing in design research at the national level. Among these transformations, several emblematic shifts have exposed structural gaps, which in turn have become areas of study, collective experimentation, and action for national scholars within the disciplinary scientific community.

The digital revolution and the emergence of the open access paradigm have significantly transformed the modes of production, distribution, and accessibility of scientific knowledge. Yet, traditional publishing models continue to dominate, struggling to adapt to new digital and collaborative forms of knowledge creation (Lupo, 2022). At the same time, the contemporary pluriversal context increasingly calls for the recognition and legitimation of diverse knowledge systems, challenging dominant modes of academic dissemination and promoting perspectives from geographies outside the mainstream (Formia et al., 2024). Finally, to truly dismantle existing structures and make them more permeable, it is essential to redefine evaluation models, together with criteria for excellence and impact assessment, in ways that align with a pluriversal understanding of research quality and responsibility (Mehmeti, 2025).

2. The Pro-Des initiative: structure and objectives

In this section, we introduce *Pro-Des* as a case study: a national research group within the Italian Design Society which, recognising the gaps outlined above, has undertaken a line of inquiry aimed at promoting an epistemological transformation of scientific publishing in the

academic design community, fostering more open and distributed processes of dissemination and knowledge sharing.

The Italian Design Society is a national scientific society whose aim is the development and diffusion of design research culture, the progress of studies in this field, and their valorization in scientific, educational, academic, social, and civil contexts. Its members are university professors and researchers affiliated, according to the Italian ministerial system, with the Scientific and Disciplinary Sector (SSD) of Design, and who teach in the 30 public universities that offer undergraduate and graduate degree courses in design.

In 2023, it launched a call for bottom-up research groups, through which Pro-Des was established to address design research publishing as a core issue linked to research policy. The group now gathers 25 senior and early-stage researchers from 12 universities nationwide.

The objectives of the group are driven by a long-term vision but scaled down in medium-term actions:

- Raising awareness within the scientific community
- Promoting research and experimentation in the field
- Training young researchers about the rules, opportunities, and diversities of the publishing ecosystem
- Impact on structural policies of scientific knowledge production

During its first two years of activity, the group conducted several actions aligned with the objectives outlined above and organised into different phases, as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Overview of the Pro-Des Research Methodology.

Phases	Activities
Research	Literature review Case study research Focus group Scouting of independent research Doctoral research
Experimentation	Call for experimental articles in national journals
Training	Lectures in national PhD programmes Vademecum
Networking	Special panels in international conferences Track editing in scientific conferences
Dissemination	9 publications
Policy observatory	Inter-journal Platform of national Design journals Mapping of publishing strategies of national scientific societies in the scientific disciplinary group of Design

The research included thematic focus groups based on topics selected and agreed upon by local scholars. These discussions enabled bottom-up identification of issues, shared analysis of literature and case studies, and the formulation of key recommendations (outlined in the next section). In parallel, a scouting activity mapped institutional and independent research, such as PhD projects and grants, to build synergies and give visibility to relevant work across different geographical contexts.

The experimental dimension comprises actions still underway, including the design of a permanent call for special-article sections in national design journals. This work progresses slowly due to editorial constraints and national evaluation policies that require balancing innovation with scientific recognition.

The training component involved open seminars and PhD-level lectures delivered since 2023 on alternative publishing and assessment models and on the biodiversity of the design knowledge ecosystem.

Networking and dissemination activities included participation in international conferences, the curation of panels and thematic tracks, and contributions to scientific journals.

Finally, the policy observatory engages with stakeholders ranging from policymakers to scientific societies and national journals. Within this framework, the Pro-Des group established an inter-journal platform to discuss journal positioning, classification criteria, evaluation and review models, and other potential innovations. A parallel mapping of publishing strategies of scientific societies helped reveal their political and cultural influence on institutional publishing patterns.

In the following section, two of the activities will be described in more detail, for their relevance to the research group and its local context, their advanced stage of development, and offering the most appropriate ground for framing and discussing the themes emerging in the DRS2026 track call.

3. Methodological note: a design-led research process

Within the broader methodological framework of this research process, which adopts a design-led and participatory approach to understanding the Italian ecosystem of scientific publishing in design, two main activities have been carried out: 1) a series of focus groups was conducted to engage the national academic community in a collective reflection process; 2) an inter-journal platform has been established gathering 16 editors from 10 national design journals.

These activities constituted a key phase of the Pro-Des research action, aimed at qualitatively investigating perceptions, practices, and visions regarding current and future models of design publishing. The process was structured as a series of peer-to-peer dialogical meetings, in which researchers (various seniority levels) and editors were invited to share experiences, articulate critical issues, and collectively explore possible directions for the evolution of the system. The design-led approach of the process is less based on the adoption of a specific design theory than on the project-oriented structuring of the inquiry. The meetings were conceived as exploratory and iterative spaces of discussion in which participants collaboratively mapped problems, articulated shared concerns, and

progressively elaborated possible trajectories for change. In this sense, the research adopted a practice-based and prototypical approach, where insights emerged through interaction and collective sense-making rather than through predefined analytical frameworks.

These activities represent a key phase of the *Pro-Des* research action, aimed at qualitatively investigating perceptions, practices, and visions regarding the current and future models of design publishing. By enabling direct dialogue among scholars, editors, and early-career researchers, the *Pro-Des* model provided a plural understanding of the system's criticalities and potentials. The results collected through this process have informed the analytical and conceptual directions of this research, supporting the discussion on localised models of scientific publication within the Italian context.

3.1 Focus Groups (FG)

The following section presents the methodological framework of the focus groups. The articulation into three thematic workshops allowed for exploring, in a dialogical and participatory way, three main topics:

- FG 1: Innovative Forms of Publication
- FG 2: Plurality and Inclusion in Design Publishing
- FG 3: Quality and Impact Assessment in Design Publications

Each workshop was developed through three well-defined methodological phases:

- an initial icebreaker to facilitate interaction among participants;
- a central dialogue phase, where the main contributions emerged;
- a final statement to synthesise the shared conclusions.

3.1.1 FG1: Innovative forms of publication

The first workshop focused on innovative forms of publication, critically questioning the adequacy of traditional formats in representing the contemporary complexity of design research. Participants shared the widespread perception that the classical scientific article, anchored to a linear textual structure and rigid evaluation criteria, is no longer sufficient to express the richness and multifaceted nature of knowledge production in the design field. The discussion highlighted how the very nature of design demands editorial tools capable of embracing multimedia contributions, projects, prototypes, visual narratives, and other non-institutionalised design processes. A recurring theme was the need to open up towards inclusive and non-hegemonic publishing platforms. Participants stressed the importance of overcoming the limits of traditional academic journals, often perceived as closed and self-referential, in favour of experimental spaces that encourage the circulation of knowledge among different communities, including international ones. In particular, the creation of digital platforms capable of integrating text, images, videos, 3D models, and other representational formats was seen as crucial to reflect the multidimensional nature of design. Innovation in publishing formats was recognised not merely as a technical issue but as a foundational value for the future of scientific publishing in design.

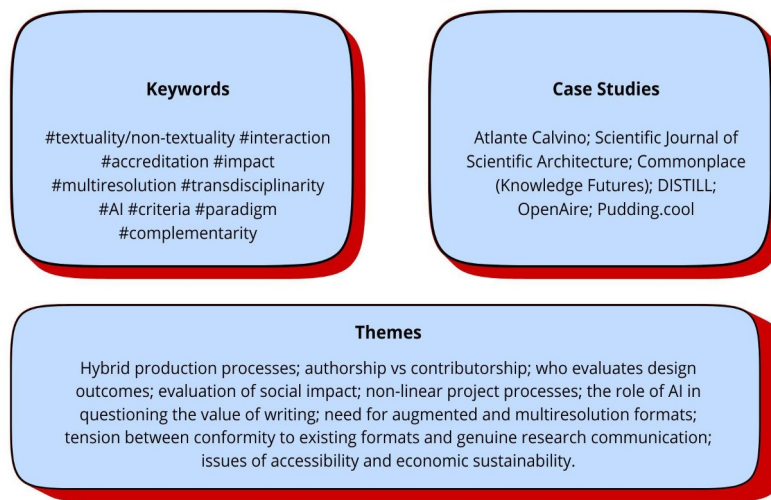


Figure 1 Notes from the FG 1.

The main outcomes of the first workshop can be summarised as follows:

- A strong call to move beyond the traditional notion of the “article” in favour of augmented and multimedia content.
- Recognition of innovation in publishing formats is a central issue for the future of design scholarship.
- The need for inclusive and non-hegemonic platforms capable of welcoming contributions from diverse and non-Western contexts.
- The proposal to redefine notions of excellence and impact through a “multiversal” lens and to imagine new workflows for accessing, evaluating, and preserving scientific production.

3.1.2 FG2: Plurality and inclusion in design publishing

The second focus group addressed the theme of plurality and inclusion in editorial processes, bringing to light the systemic tensions and imbalances that characterise the current landscape. Participants shared the awareness that the predominance of Anglo-American and Western perspectives in design journals hinders the full appreciation of cultural, disciplinary, and geographical diversity. Through concrete examples, the discussion tackled issues of tokenism, bias, and subjectivity in content selection and the composition of editorial boards. Inclusion was not understood as the mere “addition” of diverse voices but as a deeper transformation of editorial practices. Participants emphasised the importance of fostering genuine participation in the co-creation of content, moving beyond formal representation towards authentic collaboration. Inclusion was thus recognised as a foundational value for building a more equitable and representative scientific community. The discussion also highlighted that transparency and accessibility are often shaped by political and cultural factors, demanding a critical reflection on the role of editors and advisory boards. Participants pointed out the need to review criteria for selecting reviewers and board members, ensuring greater representation from non-Western contexts and diverse

disciplines. Moreover, they stressed the importance of recognising and valuing research originating from traditionally marginalised regions and cultures.

The conversation further revealed that transparency and accessibility are often influenced by political and cultural factors, calling for critical reflection on the role of editors and advisory boards. Participants suggested revising reviewer and board-member selection criteria to ensure representation from non-Western regions and other disciplines, and to recognise research emerging from traditionally marginalised cultures.

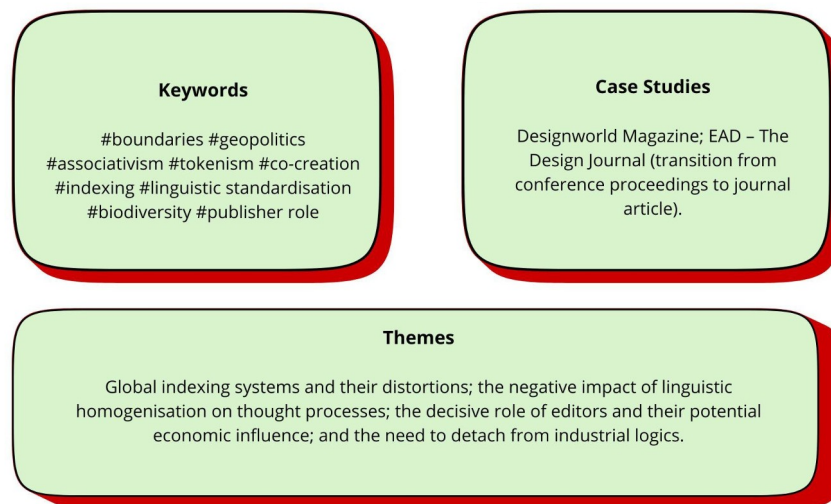


Figure 2 Notes from the FG 2.

The main outcomes of the first workshop can be summarised as follows:

- Recognition of systemic imbalances due to Anglo-Western dominance.
- Need for inclusive and transparent editorial processes.
- Emphasis on diversity (cultural, gender, disciplinary) beyond tokenism.
- Importance of reforming reviewer and board-selection criteria.
- Recognition of non-Western and marginalised research as essential to a plural design publishing landscape.

3.1.3 FG3: Quality and impact assessment in design publications

The third workshop focused on assessing the quality and impact of design publications, with particular attention to peer review processes and selection criteria. Participants pointed out the difficulties arising from the lack of clear and shared criteria, as well as the disciplinary differences that often make evaluation processes opaque and exclusive.

The discussion revealed that, while peer review remains a cornerstone of scientific validation, it is often experienced as a mechanism of exclusion rather than as a means of recognising diversity. Central to the debate were alternative models of review, such as open peer review and enhanced editorial involvement, as potential tools to ensure greater transparency. Participants discussed the strengths and limitations of various models (single-blind, double-blind, open), emphasising the need to experiment with more open and

participatory forms of assessment. Another key topic concerned power dynamics and decision-making processes within editorial boards. Participants shared experiences of rigid hierarchies and gatekeeping practices that often hinder the publication of innovative contributions or those from non-mainstream contexts. A particularly relevant aspect discussed was the training of reviewers, especially among early-career researchers. Participants emphasised the need to develop a culture of review based on transparency, respect, and inclusivity. The question of reviewer remuneration was also addressed, recognising the fundamental value of their work for ensuring scientific quality.

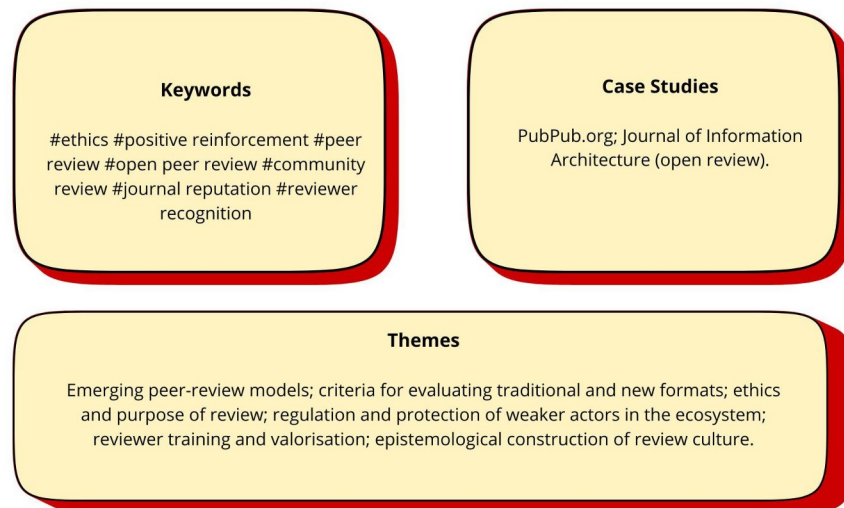


Figure 3 Notes from the FG 3.

The main outcomes of the first workshop can be summarised as follows:

- Need for clearer and more transparent review criteria sensitive to disciplinary differences.
- Discussion of open and participatory review models.
- Importance of reforming evaluation systems to integrate qualitative + quantitative metrics.
- Reflection on power hierarchies and distributed leadership in editorial boards.
- Emphasis on reviewer training and fair recognition (including remuneration).

The analysis of the three focus groups reveals a scientific community that is highly aware of the limitations of the current publishing system and oriented toward more open, inclusive, and innovative models. The collective reflection calls for a rethinking of the culture of scientific publishing in design, promoting transparency, plurality, and the recognition of diversity as foundational values for the future of academic publishing.

3.2 *The Pro-Des inter-journal platform*

In June 2025, Pro-Des organised the first meeting among the editors from ten national-based design journals. This initiative emerged from a shared awareness of a clear mismatch

between the current status of design publishing and the needs of the national design research community. The meeting aimed at: creating a space for peer sharing and learning among the different stakeholders of the system; supporting a coordinated and systemic action on editorial policies, encouraging co-design processes that could lead to a permanent working group able to leverage policymakers; orienting the national research community through shared positions and principles.

The first objective concerns the intention to share visions and strategies, alongside editorial best practices, among the actors, through the creation of a process that could be described as peer sharing and learning. Secondly, the need emerged to support a structural lobbying effort aimed at influencing design journals' policies through the perspective of editors, in order to initiate systemic, coordinated, and ongoing co-design processes (through the formalization of a dedicated working group). Finally, there is an underlying intention to guide the national design research community through a set of positioning statements (guiding principles) about how each journal perceives the main *Pro-Des* topics.

In parallel with these actions, there is also a shared ambition to establish a system of monitoring and dialogue with the international publishing landscape, starting from a stable national platform that fosters opportunities for networking and collaboration.

We are aware that this platform does not represent all the Italian design publishing, however, it marks a first step toward building a collective platform enabling a triangular process between connection-collaboration-knowledge sharing.

The following paragraph discusses the results of this activity, integrated with the reflections emerging on the situatedness of the research process, as part of the overall methodological inquiry.

4. Discussion

4.1 *Research outcomes*

The outcomes of the *Pro-Des* activities reflect a process-oriented understanding of research and analysis, where actions and results are closely intertwined within a systemic inquiry on design publishing. Each outcome constitutes a node in an evolving ecosystem attempting to connect: empirical research → collaborative experimentation → policy dialogue.

The outcomes can be articulated across four interconnected types of action, each contributing to a transformation of the design publishing ecosystem:

Empirical research: the publication of a database of design journals, initiated through doctoral research, together with the inter-journal platform created within *Pro-Des*, provided quantitative evidence of the national publishing ecosystem. The outcomes of these activities offered an original analytical overview of how journals operate, evolve, and position themselves within both national and international contexts and issues, forming the empirical foundation for subsequent discussions and evolutions.

Collaborative actions/networking: the inter-journal platform initiative strengthened the community dimension of this research, aiming to transform fragmented editorial efforts in the Italian territory into a collective infrastructure capable of providing reflections and

influencing institutional and future policy frameworks. This exchange revealed an orientation of the national design publishing system toward internationalisation and openness, striving to overcome self-referentiality through inclusion in international databases such as Scopus and Web of Science. At the same time, editors expressed concerns about the economic sustainability of open-access models, often managed without Article Processing Charges, and about the difficulty of securing stable funding. The discussions also showed a shared commitment to innovation in editorial formats and processes, with ongoing experimentation involving augmented articles, visual content, and more transparent peer-review models designed to promote participation and accessibility. Finally, several systemic challenges were identified across journals, including the complexity of accreditation standards, the scarcity of reviewers, the slowness of editorial processes, and the limited international recognition of Italian journals.

Knowledge outputs: doctoral research generated during the process, two international conference tracks, and the forthcoming *Vademecum* as a collection of best practices on design publishing, consolidated a national reflection while looking at the international debate on this issue. These outputs not only disseminated the findings of this research but also positioned the national design community as an active interlocutor in global debates on open and responsible publishing.

Development of tools and repositories: bibliographic database and interactive materials (including QR-based resources, alternative publishing platforms), enable knowledge traceability and the open circulation of data. This repository of digital tools ensures that the research outcomes remain accessible and reusable, contributing to transparency and collective learning and sharing of results.

4.2 *Emerging reflections on local and situated practices*

The overview of the research outcomes illustrates why and how the processes of research on scientific publishing in design have been shaped for the national academic context within the Pro-Des research methodology.

As previously introduced, the Italian way of designing or the “Italian design culture” is rooted in a multiverse dimension (Bertola & Manzini, 2004) which recognises multiple approaches and continuously expands its boundaries, in a collective process of production and institutionalisation of design knowledge.

Bottom-up and peer approaches are distinctive of the plurality of Italian design cultures, and this specificity has informed the constitution of the Pro-Des group itself, and its methodology and process of research (*participatory approach*). Consequently, the choice to employ thematic focus groups, co-creating - through peer sharing - a shared basis of references, literature, and case studies, was intended to create open exploratory spaces for discussion rather than impose top-down, predefined procedures for framing the topic, especially in light of the growing debate on publishing issues in Italy. The focus groups contributed to structuring the research by identifying and validating the themes collectively recognised by the local scholars.

The characteristics of the local context in terms of publishing policies and stakeholder ecosystem have been carefully addressed (*situated approach*). In Italy the normative system of academic publishing is articulated and complex, involving actors and procedures at

different institutional levels that are crucial for academic career development, especially for young researchers, whose scientific publications are part of the parameters of evaluation for tenures, promotions, and grants. In this complex ecosystem, the National Agency for the Quality Evaluation of Academic Research defines the criteria for each Scientific Disciplinary Sector (SSD), distinguishing between bibliometric and non-bibliometric areas, in agreement with the respective scientific societies. These criteria include the assessment of publication quality (the VRQ, a compulsory three-year research evaluation exercise for universities) and the designation of “Class A” journals as eligible high-quality publishing venues, even when they are not indexed in the WoS or Scopus databases.

The complexity of the system makes it difficult to promote changes and improvements needed to address the ongoing transformation toward greater transparency, diversity, openness, and impact beyond citation.

This led to the development of the multi-stakeholder set of actions presented in the previous sections: in particular, the creation of the Inter-journal Platform, which brought together national design journals to share proposals for action; the mapping and analysis of the editorial and cultural production of various SSDs through the publishing patterns of their scientific societies (including annual conferences, society journals, and books) to identify innovative examples; and the training of early-stage researchers, considered one of the most crucial target groups in which to foster awareness of these issues.

Even though the work is still ongoing, some preliminary conclusions can already be drawn. On one hand, through the situated combination of empirical research, collaborative experimentation, and policy dialogue, the Pro-Des group has initiated essential steps toward innovating the national ecosystem, pluralising and diversifying its impact across topics and stakeholders, and setting the groundwork for systematic and structural transformations. On the other hand, we need to acknowledge that the impact on national and university publishing policies is far from becoming effective and systemic: some initial and promising results are for instance that, for the first time, in the last Italian research quality evaluation exercise (VQR), the eligible research products for the design disciplinary sector included beyond traditional articles or editorial works, projects, prototypes and multimedia content¹. Anyway a more concerted action among academic scholars, stakeholders of the publishing system and ministry institutions is needed to transform policies to legitimise alternative forms of knowledge production and sharing. These context specific aspects, that might look over detailed, are exemplificative of the possible positive impact of design research on scientific publishing pluralisation.

A synthesis of the principles and approaches adopted to shape this situated research in scientific publishing is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Pro-Des principles for a situated research approach.

General principle	Pro-Des approach	Transferability
Bottom-up	Multiverse/plural scouting of research and topics; community-	Local ownership; context-specific relevance; adaptable to diverse research communities

¹ Bando Anvur VQR 2020-24 (Decreto n. 8 del 31 ottobre 2023)

	driven agenda and topics	(interdisciplinary)
Exploratory	Focus group and open discussion venues; iterative research; experimental formats	Flexibility and adaptability to the evolving ecosystem, both in terms of technologies and policies
Participatory	Multi-stakeholder involvement; peer exchange; inter-journal platform	Shared and distributed governance; collaborative editorial culture
Situatedness	National specific dynamics; national evaluation context; local publishing constraints	Links and connects global issues with local structures and contexts
Plurality	Diversity of publication formats; multi-stakeholder involvement; plurality of models	Enhances inclusion; addressing hegemonic models; integration of underrepresented perspectives
Systemic	Ecosystemic view; linking research-experimentation-policy; inter-journal platform and coordination	Structural change; creating permanent infrastructures; improvement of publishing culture transferable to other fields

We are fully aware that the principles require further development to move from a conceptual level to more practical actions in the publishing process. So, the next step of the research will imply practical experimentation and testing to make the principles operationalised and more actionable.

5. Future perspectives from local practices to global action

While the *Pro-Des* group continues to advance its vision, methods, actions, and thematic focuses within the national context, these efforts are simultaneously opening up towards new international initiatives currently being developed by the authors. This evolving trajectory reveals a growing consonance with the objectives and perspectives outlined in the DRS2026 track call.

To foster a transition from a local to an international debate, on the one hand, and to strengthen the ecosystemic potential of coordinated activities, on the other, a proposal for establishing new forms of alliances in design publishing is currently under development. The initiative aims to promote collaborations among international journals that share a set of recurring principles and characteristics: a focus on the understanding of design practices, cultures, and research as field of investigation; open-access and open-knowledge modes of dissemination; peer-reviewed, scientific and academic orientation; independence and non-profit governance; representation of diverse geographical contexts; international editorial boards embodying a global perspective; and an openness to experimentation across the entire editorial process. These principles allow for the scaling of the experience while taking contextual factors into account, in order to avoid effects of overgeneralisation and forms of homogenisation and hegemony. The approach raises key questions about how a locally

grounded method can be scaled without reproducing the very dynamics it seeks to challenge.

The proposal, which has already led to the convergence of four journals from Europe, South America, Asia, and Africa, envisages as its next step the organization of workshops and focus groups involving multiple stakeholders from the international publishing ecosystem. These activities are conceived as spaces for collective reflection and co-design, aimed at developing shared principles, articulated in a *Manifesto*, for equitable scholarly dissemination (Mehmeti, 2025). The overarching goal is to challenge conventional publishing standards, amplify collective intelligence, promote interdisciplinary research, and foster innovative publishing models that make design knowledge more accessible, plural, and socially impactful, while resisting processes of homogenization.

Potential outcomes include advancements in editorial and peer-review practices (such as the creation of shared reviewer pools, common guidelines, and standards for peer evaluation), as well as collaborative strategies for promotion and co-branding (including joint media campaigns, co-organization of conferences, workshops, and webinars). In the longer term, the initiative aspires to ensure the sustainability of such collaborations through international public funding schemes, positioning this alliance as an alternative cultural and economic model within the design publishing sector.

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About the Authors:

Elena Formia (Ph.D.) is Full Professor in Design at the Department of Architecture of Università di Bologna. Since 2024 she has been Vice-Dean of the Department. From 2019 to 2025 she was Director of First Cycle Degree in Industrial Design and the Second Cycle Degree in Advanced Design.

Eleonora Lupo Associate Professor at the Politecnico di Milano and PhD in Industrial Design and Multimedia Communication. Her main research interests concern product and process design cultures, Design for the Cultural Heritage system, and cultures of design research and scientific publishing, dealing with a pluriversal approach for decentring design knowledge and narratives. She is Vice President of SID Società Italiana del Design and Vice Coordinator of the PhD Program in Design at Politecnico di Milano.

Lorela Mehmeti (Ph.D.) is a researcher in Design Cultures at the University of Bologna. Her work focuses on the evolution of knowledge cultures in design, with particular attention to the publishing ecosystem of the discipline, scientific assessment models, and the transformation of academic practices in an open-access perspective. She investigates publishing as a critical and design space, exploring new ways of producing and disseminating knowledge in the field.