

# When a company becomes a book. A glance at the phenomenon of corporate monographs in Italy

## **Descrizione**

### **Abstract**

The paper investigates the phenomenon of company books, published by enterprises and other kind of organisations to narrate their corporate history and activities. Such publications, conceived according to several possible disciplinary standpoints, narrative approaches and expressive languages, represent a very singular literary and communicative tradition in the Italian context.

A preliminary analysis aims at framing in brief the historical origins of the sector, its characteristics, development, and contemporary exploit. In such a review, a special attention is devoted to corporate monographs - company "history" or "anniversary" books - representing the primary and most refined genre within company literature. Then, an overview is proposed about specialist libraries and documentary centres dedicated to corporate books in Italy, with a special focus on the "BibHuB" project, promoted since 2018 by the Sapienza University of Rome.

### **1. On the borders of communication studies**

The paper investigates the phenomenon of company books, published by or for organisations (private firms as well as public and non-profit bodies) to narrate their own corporate history and activities. Such publications, conceived according to several possible disciplinary standpoints, narrative approaches and expressive languages, represent a very singular literary and communicative tradition in Italy.

A review of company monographs and books appears to be relevant under a multiplicity of aspects and research perspectives. First of all, because they represent a specific literary genre, characterised by its own narrative models and rules. Secondly, they define an editorial market niche that is flourishing, especially in Italy, in the past and nowadays, according to the rise of a specific management approach regarding heritage and storytelling seen in recent years (Balmer, Greyser & Urde 2006; Cinquegrani, 2019; Martino, 2013; Montemaggi & Severino, 2007; Napolitano, Riviezzo & Garofano, 2018). Furthermore, books identify a corporate communication context

among the most classic and complex ones and, in absolute terms, rarely investigated by international scholars, with the exception of a very few contributions in Italy (Foroni, Magagnino, 2010; Martino & Bardelloni, 2019; Tomasetig, 1996) and Germany (Hasenbeck, Wolf, 2011; Klung, 2016).

Not least, the books that organisations dedicate to themselves also offer a singular case of “books-non books” (Martino, 2019), affected by a fundamental prejudice about their literary quality and credibility. This minority condition can be explained by two major features and anomalies: on the one hand, the “hybrid” nature of such publications, always in balance between history and invention, marketing and cultural approach. On the other, a singular “distributive paradox” (Eco, 1991, p. XIII), usually making these books’ lifecycle very ephemeral because of their circulation, mainly limited to special corporate occasions (anniversaries, expositions and events, openings, product launches etc.; Dolci, 1999; Tomasetig, 1997) and very select audiences and corporate PR targets (primarily investors, business partners, special customers, local institutions, politicians, etc.).

From this scenario, a preliminary analysis aims at framing in brief the historical origins of the sector, its characteristics, development and contemporary exploit. In such a review, a special attention is devoted to corporate monographs – company “history” or “anniversary” books – representing the primary and most refined genre within company literature. Then, the second part of this paper proposes an overview about specialist libraries and documentary centres dedicated to corporate books, which outline in Italy a sort of companies’ “diffused library”. A special focus is on the “BibHuB” project: an experience promoted since 2018 by the Sapienza University of Rome in order to investigate, conserve and value the librarian heritage of Italian companies.

## **2. An Italian tradition, from history to the present time**

A historical investigation demonstrates, as a first element, a long-standing habit by Italian companies to dedicate books to their own history and most relevant activities (especially those with a social and cultural aim), which was largely diffused throughout the Twentieth Century.

Indeed, corporate books began their history in the early 1900s (Tomasetig, 1996; 1997)[\[1\]](#) and flourished especially after the World Wars and during the years of the

Italian economic boom, when the first examples of modern-style corporate monographs and booklets were published (Bigatti & Dardi, 2014, p. 7), to celebrate the role of companies in the impetuous industrial and socio-economic development of the country (Tomasetig, 1996; 1997). In the following decades, such publications were largely diffused among the major Italian corporations: first of all Olivetti (which can be considered a real example of a company which “made by books”[\[2\]](#)), as well as Pirelli and Italsider. They usually involved well-known artists, designers and authors in the publishing process, calling them to mediate between humanistic culture and technical-industrial aspects (the so called “two cultures”: Snow, 1959), in order to ennoble emerging firms and market products in continuity with the best Italian artistic and visual tradition. Thus, for the major Italian companies, the book culture and even “bibliophilism” reveal itself also to descent from a typical twentieth-century vision: a pedagogic and paternalistic approach, conceiving books as a privileged context for internal relationships in order to educate workers and, more in general, elevate public taste (Vinti, 2007); this was generally considered a durable “investment” in image and reputation over time for companies competing internationally.

Furthermore, in Italy the phenomenon of corporate literature and publishing is connected to a wide circulation of corporate house organs and magazines (Incletolli, 1996; 2016), being historically the context in which the partnership between companies, artists and intellectuals was in the absolute most continuous and relevant (Vinti, 2007, pp. 267-311). Thus, company publishing of both books and house organs represents in Italy a prestigious and long-standing tradition, due in the past to two major factors: on the one hand, the patronage approach carried out by banks, ever committed to “give back” value to the local territory and stakeholders by investing especially on arts and heritage (ABI, 2018; D’Orazio, 2016; Martino & Scarcella Prandstraller, 2018; Schettini Piazza, 1991), animating a unique editorial phenomenon since the second half of the nineteenth century; on the other hand, the artistic-cultural policies promoted during the economic boom by an avant-garde of Italian corporations, diffusing Italian companies’ products and reputation internationally starting from the post-war period (Bigatti & Vinti, 2010; Pizzi, 1986; Vinti, 2007).

From the nineties, in the context of a rapid development of marketing and corporate communication in Italy (Invernizzi & Romenti, 2013), corporate books publishing has come out from the original market niche and continuously grown in numbers, thanks to a multiplicity of both technological and cultural factors (Hasenbeck, Wolf, 2011). They contribute to transforming the most brilliant Italian enterprises in a sort of “creative” and “media” companies (Cennamo, 2020): actors committed to *produce*

*culture and contents*, even before than quality products and services (Bettiol, 2015).

### 3. Company books today

Under the general concept of company (or corporate) literature, promoted by private enterprises and other organisations, it is possible to recognise several genres and types of books, published for different purposes and occasions during the company's life.

Corporate books are generally commissioned to a publisher or even self-published, printed in limited editions and not sold, but rather offered to select audiences by the promoting organisation, as a gift or a form of homage. Thus, they represent a typical example of unconventional and "grey literature" (Alberani, 1992), financed and distributed by organisations operating outside of the traditional publishing channels and, thus, not easily accessible by the public. The special expressive freedom, guaranteed by a company's investment, makes these books a privileged context for graphic and typographic experimentation, as well as for hosting creative or even erudite contents that could have no market without the financial efforts of some sponsor.

The major and most classic genre, in this field, is represented by *corporate monographs and company history books*, aiming at celebrating an organisation's chronology or prominent corporate anniversary. For contexts, form and contents, such books correspond to a typical editorial and literary model, summarised below according to major features and emerging trends in the sector.

#### 3.1 Corporate monographs and other literary genres

Largely promoted by historical and long-standing family companies, corporate monographs can be considered the result of an *institutionalisation process*, which sees a company become a stable point of reference for the territory and the community it belongs to (Corbetta, 2010; de Geus, 1997; Giaretta, 2004; Rossato, 2013; Stadler, 2011).

Indeed, such commemorative books (or *festschrift*) are very common especially among those historical-family businesses usually cultivating their own memory and

roots. In some cases, books are written by businessmen or family members and conceived as a sort of “diary” or “memoir” they want to share with the stakeholder and the community, by this way finally opening the “treasure chest” preserving a company’s memory (Napolitano, Riviezzo & Garofano, 2018). However, nowadays such books are increasingly promoted also by SMEs and other kind of organisations (public and non-profit ones), as several factors are making the publishing process faster and inexpensive and increasing the number of publishers and editorial series dedicated to business stories.

Corporate monographs exalt the biographical and reflective experience (Czarniawska, 2000) that a company can invest in when it decides to narrate itself and its own activities and choose, for this purpose, a powerful and analogical “identity” medium like a traditional paper book. Books represent perhaps the most relevant and also challenging context for corporate communication (Klug, 2016), aiming at revealing and narrating companies as social and not only economical actors, with all the risks of the case. One mistake, above all, has to be avoided in conceiving a corporate story: that of resorting to a nostalgic, standardised or purely self-celebratory and self-referential narrative, rather than choosing a relational and stakeholder-oriented one (Martino & Bardelloni, 2019), capable to put company identity and history in a wider context.

Companies are usually not interested in divulging such publications, but rather tend to consider them as precious design “objects”, to be offered and shared only with select audiences. Indeed, corporate books are rarely mentioned on the corporate website and almost never diffused (or sold) in a digital or e-book version, because they are just conceived to exalt the experiential value of paper print and analogical communication.

The packaging offers sometimes a rare example of book art and design. Corporate monographs distinguish themselves for a big or “maxi” size (up to monumental “coffee-table” editions), together with a vertical opening and accurate binding. The cover, which is in general a hard one, is inspired by the corporate logo and iconography and the title explicitly mentions the promoting organisation. Only in a few case a specific author is mentioned, as corporate monographs are in general nameless or referred to the organisation as a whole. The typographic form is not secondary but, on the contrary, very relevant, because not only contents, but the value of the book as an object itself must reflect corporate identity and testify, for dimension and style, to the relevance of a company.

The list of chapters is often based on a chronological narrative of corporate history and “successes”, introduced by a preface signed by apical representatives of the company’s general management, as well as by relevant external witnesses or public persons. A wide space is usually dedicated to company’s advertising and communication campaigns, promoted especially in the past (Martino, 2018a).

The internal pages (in average, between 100 and 200[3]) are published on quality and often coated paper. The dialectic between text and image (in particular, photographs) can be very innovative: they are equivalent to text or visual narrations and can even predominate, privileging archives and author’s contents, if available, and supporting a rich and “immersive” reading experience (Tomasetig, 1996). Historians, archivists, sociologists, journalists, writers and poets, photographers and illustrators, designers and art directors, in addition to publishers and printers, are the categories of professionals which can be involved in the production of a high-quality corporate book.

The occasion to publish a celebrative company book usually derives from a corporate “full” anniversary, especially centuries or quarters of centuries (Klung, 2016; Hart, 2006), and can be inspired by the historical corporate archive, when existing. At the same time, a corporate book, thanks to its special reflective and testimonial function, can become the starting point to activate or empower corporate identity and heritage (Balmer, Greyser & Urde 2006): a means that is extraordinarily capable to make “visible” and “tangible”, at first for businessmen and business families themselves, the value of a company’s culture and history, as a strategic intangible asset to invest in and communicate to the stakeholders (Martino, 2019).

In addition to classic corporate monographs and company history books, it is possible to identify other cultural genres representing “minor” expressions of such multifaceted editorial production. Among them, company profiles and booklets, biography of businessmen, market products or brands, thematic monographs, valuable and jubilee editions, gift books, catalogues illustrating company exhibitions and museum collections, photographic and multimedia monographs, literary portfolios and guides, novels and romances inspired to a company’s life, annual report, special issues of corporate house organs and magazines, up to sponsored editions (Martino & Bardelloni, 2019).

#### **4. Cultural initiatives promoting the sector**

In recent years, a growing attention for such an editorial phenomenon has been influenced by the rise of topics such as corporate heritage, storytelling and content management (Balmer, Greyser & Urde 2006; Cinquegrani, 2019; Martino, 2013; Montemaggi & Severino, 2007; Napolitano, Riviezzo & Garofano, 2018), in the frame of the “narrative turn” extending to strategic management and communication from the nineties (Salmon, 2007). The interest in company stories and books is becoming even more relevant, both by scholars and organisations, with the pandemic crisis: this in order not only to rediscover positive business stories and lessons from the past, concerning historical and enduring family business, but also to document – by means of words and images printed on paper – such a unique and complex historical change that today companies and the country itself are going through.

In such a climate, some specific experiences – specialistic libraries, as well as dedicated cultural centres – have been promoted in Italy, especially during the last decade, to conserve and promote the “underground” heritage of both historical and contemporary company books: indeed, this is a unique documental source concerning the business and communication history of the country, which could reveal itself to be useful especially in order to preserve traces of a highly “digitalised” present, risking to easily disappear in the future. Several specialistic librarian funds help the archive and librarian heritage gathered in company archives and foundations that, all over the country, are committed to preserve the history and identity of single enterprises or local economical districts.

Among the major experiences carried out in the national context, a mention is due, first of all, to the experience of Via Senato’s Library Foundation[\[4\]](#), created in 1997 in the centre of Milan. With more than 7 thousands books, concerning Italian business history since the national unification, it represents the largest library dedicated to Italian companies’ stories, as well as the most important historical book collection in the sector, promoting exhibitions and other kinds of cultural events.

Another important experience in the field is the one promoted since 2012 by the OMI association in Verona[\[5\]](#) and strictly dedicated to the genre of corporate monographs and biographies. In partnership with the Department of Business Economics of the Verona University, hosting the initiative, OMI coordinates a dedicated national observatory, an archive and, not least, an Award celebrating every two years the best corporate monographs published by Italian companies.

More recently, also Assindustria Venetocentro, the associative network of companies in the areas of Padua and Treviso, created its own Business Library[6], as the documental core of a wider project safeguarding local business history and culture. The centre was launched in Treviso just before the lockdown, in November 2019, in the spaces of the Giacomelli Palace, which hosts the association's headquarters. According to its mission, focusing on a specific industrial territory, the Business Library includes not only corporate books, but also monographs and studies coordinated by independent experts.

Not least, a special collection dedicated to the illustrious publishing tradition carried on by banks in Italy, defined by Umberto Eco as being "unique worldwide" (Eco, 1991, p. XIII), is the one created by the Italian Banking Association (ABI): the "Stefano Siglienti" Library[7], opened to the public since February 2015 within the Stables of the Altieri Palace, the association's headquarters in the centre of Rome. The library collects more than 12 thousand books from the second half of the Eighteenth century, especially in the fields of arts and territory, among which a relevant number of limited and valuable editions; it is enriched over time with the new book productions from ABI's affiliates.

#### *4.1 The BiblHuB project*

In such a scenario, also the Sapienza University of Rome participates with an initiative launched by the Department of Communication and Social Research, promoting since 2018 the "BiblHuB" project: both a specialist section of Sapienza Library System and a research programme dedicated to corporate culture and literature, including company history books and other genres of corporate and cultural monographs, published by both private and public organisations[8].

Company books are gathered, collected and studied as an expressive testimony of corporate culture and identity, testifying to one of the most prestigious and little known chapter in the Italian business and communication history (Martino & Bardelloni, 2019). One of the main objectives is to contribute to the rediscovery of the role of paper books: that of a cultural artifact objectivating both private and collective memory, by thus expressing special documentary and educational potentialities at different levels.

The research activity carried out by the BiblHuB library has collected to date almost 1,700 books, some of which are rare and valuable, offered to the Library of Communication and Social Research by more than 600 private, public and non-profit organisations from all around Italy. The librarian fund participates in the National Library System, also available online, and can be consulted by appointment by scholars, students and external users in the Sala Rossa, a reading hall that takes its name from some shiny furniture by Vico Magistretti, one of the founding fathers of the Italian design tradition.

Company books are not only preserved, but valued by means of specific cultural, scientific and educational activities, coordinated by a team that includes Sapienza scholars and students. According to a logic of so-called university's "Third Mission" (Martino, 2018c; Martino & Bardelloni, 2019), research activities are carried out in parallel with a constant cultural dissemination toward a not only specialist audience. In particular, the books collected by the BiblHuB library foster a constant production of insights and original contents, which are diffused through dedicated academic studies, dissertations and presentations, as well as on the web and major social platforms in the form of snippets and "content pills" (videos, interviews, book reviews, discourses and articles).

By doing this, the BiblHuB project wants to experiment a new model of interaction between the academic system and the business world: to this end, events and projects are promoted - according to the logic of an open "hub" - in partnership with companies, associations and external bodies. Among the initiatives, it is possible to mention several conferences during the "Company Culture Week", the national programme of events promoted by Confindustria every year in November. The BiblHuB also supports, as corporate partner, the above mentioned OMI Award held in Verona. Not least, thematic workshops, events and internships are dedicated to Sapienza students attending several disciplines.

For its characteristics, the BiblHuB project stands as a unique experience in the Italian university context. For both its academic and geographical centrality, it could represent in perspective an ideal centre of gravity, aggregating the other initiatives in the field of business cultural communication and publishing.

## 5. Conclusions

The wide diffusion of books edited by major enterprises as well as by SMEs and local organisations, historical or otherwise, reveal unique and unexpected connections, which have been only rarely investigated, between books and business culture in the Italian tradition. Indeed, it seems relevant to underlie in this context the records that describe printed books as the first design object of history (De Fusco, 2019) representing for centuries one of the major Italian productive excellences (Benini, 2018) and, thus far, the largest cultural industry in the country (Symbola, Unioncamere & Fondazione Edison, 2019), standing among the leading ones also in Europe (AIE, 2020).

The long-standing minor role of company literature within academic studies (in particular, cultural and communication investigation), in spite of its historical and contemporary relevance in the Italian tradition (Dolci, 1999), can be explained in the light of several factors. First of all, the company books' limited diffusion among audiences and "real" stakeholders of such a genre: researchers and students, as well as educational and cultural institutions (primarily civic and university libraries), which could be interested in company books for their own learning and documental purposes. Thus, the already mentioned "distributive paradox" affecting company books (Eco, 1991, p. XIII) limits their circulation to very select audiences and corporate PR targets, among which a sector of very passionate consumers and collectors.

A second factor can be connected to the "trivial" origins of company books, historically deriving from the genres of commercial publishing: product catalogues and sales brochures, as well as first customer magazines, originally made only by a few pages supporting the presentation of products (Incletolli, 2006). These publications represented the most direct antecedent in the sector, later evolving toward more complex narratives and a real corporate approach.

A third, but not least, aspect to be highlighted is the hybrid nature of such "special" publications, always standing in a precarious balance between fiction and non-fiction, self-celebration and collective memory. This aspect represents an anomaly if compared with the implicit agreement, based on credibility and authorship, traditionally existing between a book and its readers. As a consequence, such commissioned books are generally considered a provocation, as they dare to contaminate "high" culture with business: indeed, a minor form of literature at the extreme borders of art collection and bibliophilism, with limited or no relevance at all in the perspective of scientific investigation.

In front of this lack of attention, cultural and communication studies and research can finally discover and investigate the phenomenon of company “books-non books” from several standpoints: as *cultural objects*, incorporating a collective culture belonging to both organisations and communities, by this way making it visible and accomplishable in a tangible and “recorded” form; *historiographic documents*, preserving official business and communication history (Bigazzi, 1990; Bigatti, 1992), and in particular a great visual fresco of the Twentieth Century (Tomasetig, 1996), as well as more fluid and local memories of the past, concerning minor territories, products and companies; *artistic-cultural creations*, offering original literary contents as well as aesthetic values and experiences to their readers; not least, a challenging example of *corporate media*, strategically designing an organisation’s identity to communicate it to different categories of stakeholder (Martino, 2018b).

Under all these aspects, corporate books reveal themselves to be a real “iceberg” of the twentieth-century culture and publishing, whose dimensions must be discovered (Dolci, 1999, p. 24) and, indeed, a privileged platform for Italian companies’ culture and identity over time. At the same time, they give voice to a multiplicity of minor narratives and contents safeguarding pieces of local tradition otherwise risking oblivion or, in the best case, remain hidden within a multitude of company archives and libraries disseminated throughout the country.

Thus, company books must be no longer considered simply as a colourful “accident” in the history of communication, but as a publishing and cultural tradition to be finally investigated. An inspiring “key” to understand the essence and evolution of Italian companies’ identity and *style* since the early 1900s, as well as to rediscover the everlasting role of books themselves in modern culture and communication.

## Footnotes

[1] For a bibliography and historical review of the sector, see in particular Dolci, 1999. According to Andrea Tomasetig, an antique books dealer who is highly specialised in the twentieth-century and a pioneer author dealing with company publishing (Tomasetig, 1996), the oldest company book in Italy can be considered the one

published in 1903 by Fratelli Branca, a historical distillery in Milan. It took the form of a refined corporate photo album in Art Nouveau style, edited by the well-known graphic and poster designer Plinio Codognato at the beginning of its career (Tomasetig, 2014).

[2] Olivetti represents the real prototype of a “literary company”, as it promoted during the twentieth century a multiplicity of books and editorial partnerships supporting its business mission, based on “products for writing” and a refined “culture of written communication” (Zorzi, 2018, pp. 11-12). The original imprinting, due to Adriano Olivetti (publisher and book author himself) became even stronger from the second half of the Sixties, when the company published a multitude of publications: corporate monographs and catalogues dedicated to prestigious exhibitions promoted in Italy and worldwide, as well as art and gift books, illustrated diaries, periodic “restoration notebooks” and, not least, several technical manuals dedicated to internal personnel as well as to the users of the innovative Olivetti’s machines. For a bibliography see, in particular, the website <<https://www.storiaolivetti.it>>, edited by the Olivetti’s Historical Archive Association in Ivrea.

[3] This can be deduced from a focused investigation that the Author dedicated to a vast sample of corporate monographs, participating in the five editions of the “OMI Award” for the best Italian company monographs (*forthcoming*). See also the following paragraph.

[4] <<https://bibliotecadiviasenato.it/patrimonio/fondo-storia-dellimpresa-italiana/>>.

[5] <[www.monografieimpresa.it](http://www.monografieimpresa.it)>.

[6] <[www.palazzogiacomelli.it/home](http://www.palazzogiacomelli.it/home)>.

[7] <[www.abi.it/Pagine/Societa/Biblioteca-Stefano-Siglienti.aspx](http://www.abi.it/Pagine/Societa/Biblioteca-Stefano-Siglienti.aspx)>.

[8] The BiblHuB project can be reached at the webpage: <<https://web.uniroma1.it/bibliocoris/biblhud-di-letteratura-aziendale/fondo-di-letteratura-aziendale-biblhud-sapienza>>.

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## Campi meta