

Scholarly Publishing and the SDGs: Leading with Purpose for a Sustainable Future

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As human beings, we often have a tendency to delay action or take things seriously only when a situation becomes critical.¹ Driven by circumstances, this reactive mindset reflects a lack of true freedom and intelligence of mind. It signifies carelessness and indifference rather than thoughtful awareness.

In contrast, nature and the cosmos inherently operate in perfect harmony and order—the very term *cosmos* means order. Yet, human societies, with the structures we have created, are often characterized by disorder. The existence of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals² (SDGs) is a testament to the immense disorder we have generated in various forms. At the same time, the global commitment to sustainability reflects a shared desire to address and rectify this disorder.³ However, the demands of business and modern life often place us in conflict with this goal, forcing compromises that challenge our progress.

Sustainability is fundamentally about recognizing the environmental costs of our actions. At its core, it acknowledges that the environment is not separate from us; it is an intrinsic part of who we are. We originate from the environment, are nourished by it, and eventually return to it, while future generations continue this cycle.

Sustainability calls for a shift in perspective: moving beyond immediate goals and necessities to cultivate a holistic consciousness. It reminds us to view ourselves as integral to the environment, part of its ever-evolving process of life. By embracing this interconnectedness, we can act with greater awareness and responsibility, aligning our actions with the broader rhythm of the natural world.

In an era defined by unprecedented global challenges—climate change, inequality, poverty,⁴ and more—organizations across all sectors are being called upon to think beyond mere survival and profit. Scholarly publishers, as the custodians of knowledge and facilitators of academic discourse, occupy a unique and pivotal position in this landscape. They have the potential to significantly impact societal progress by disseminating research that informs policy, shapes public understanding, and drives innovation.

This article advocates for a paradigm shift in scholarly publishing—a new model of enlightened leadership that transcends traditional success metrics and embraces sustainability, equity, and long-term societal well-being as core objectives. By actively supporting the SDGs, publishers can demonstrate their value in meaningful ways, building trust and satisfaction among a diverse array of stakeholders, including funders, institutions, researchers, and society at large.

As the publishing industry becomes increasingly commoditized, stakeholders—authors, researchers, academic institutions, funders, and readers—are seeking greater value from publishers. This value should go beyond traditional metrics and encompass meaningful social and environmental contributions that address the urgent challenges of our time.

The Imperative for Change

Redefining Organizational Purpose

Historically, scholarly publishers have focused on ensuring academic rigor, integrity, and quality. Although these remain crucial aspects of their mission, the current global context demands a broader, more holistic approach—one that aligns with the urgent need for sustainability and equitable development.

Publishers now must envision themselves as key contributors to environmental and societal health. This requires a fundamental mindset shift in which

- the environment is treated as a key stakeholder, integral to the publishing ecosystem's long-term sustainability and relevance;

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- **organizational objectives are aligned with global sustainability goals**, measuring success not only by profit or academic achievement but by tangible contributions to societal and environmental health; and
- **decision-making is guided by a sense of universal responsibility**, ensuring publishers prioritize ethical practices, sustainability, and social impact alongside meeting the expectations of shareholders and the academic community.

This redefined purpose naturally aligns the core mission of ensuring research quality and integrity, with the broader goal of improving the global environment. By connecting their work to a higher purpose—making the world a better place for all living beings—publishers can infuse their operations with greater meaning and impact.

The Role of Purpose in Organizational Success

Teams thrive when their work is rooted in purpose. Although tasks and objectives often dominate the workplace focus, the most successful teams go beyond execution—they connect their efforts to a shared and meaningful goal.

Leaders play a pivotal role in this process by clearly defining and consistently reinforcing a sense of purpose. When teams understand the *why* behind their work, they become more motivated, cohesive, and effective, achieving not only short-term goals but also long-term success.

The benefits of this approach are multifaceted:

- It provides employees with a shared sense of purpose, enhancing engagement, motivation, and job satisfaction.
- It positions the organization as a leader in sustainability, attracting like-minded talent, partners, and collaborators.
- It demonstrates a commitment to global well-being, potentially improving brand perception, loyalty, and trust among stakeholders.

The Triple Bottom Line: People, Planet, and Profit

Enlightened leadership in scholarly publishing requires moving beyond profit as the sole measure of success. A triple bottom line approach—where people, planet, and profit⁵ are given equal importance—should be adopted:

- **People.** Prioritizing employee well-being, diversity, and societal impact by fostering inclusive, equitable research environments. This includes the following:
 - Implementing fair labor practices and promoting work-life balance
 - Ensuring diversity in hiring, promotion, and leadership roles

- Supporting early-career researchers and scholars from underrepresented groups
- Facilitating mentorship programs and professional development opportunities
- **Planet.** Minimizing environmental footprints through sustainable practices, digital innovation, and promoting environmental research. This encompasses the following:
 - Transitioning to renewable energy sources for operations
 - Implementing circular economy principles in production and distribution
 - Developing eco-friendly alternatives to traditional publishing materials
 - Prioritizing and fast-tracking research on climate change, biodiversity, and environmental sustainability
- **Profit.** Ensuring financial stability, not as an end goal but as a means to further mission-driven initiatives that contribute to global sustainability. This involves the following:
 - Reinvesting profits into SDG-aligned research and initiatives
 - Developing sustainable business models that support open access and equitable knowledge dissemination
 - Creating partnerships with nonprofit organizations and social enterprises to amplify impact

This holistic approach aligns publishers with long-term sustainability goals, positioning them as resilient, purpose-driven organizations capable of thriving in an evolving world while contributing meaningfully to global challenges.

Strategies for Advancing SDGs in Scholarly Publishing

Aligning Research Priorities with SDGs

Scholarly publishers can drive global efforts toward solving pressing challenges by prioritizing research aligned with the SDGs.⁶ This can be achieved through:

- special issues or dedicated journals focusing on SDG-related topics such as climate change, poverty, and health disparities;⁷
- curated collections highlighting interdisciplinary research that addresses the SDGs;⁸
- AI-based research discovery tools that help policymakers and researchers identify studies most relevant to sustainability goals;
- developing SDG-aligned metrics for evaluating research impact beyond traditional citation counts; and
- offering fast-track review processes for urgent SDG-related research, particularly in crisis situations.

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Fostering Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Global challenges require multidisciplinary solutions. Publishers are well-positioned to encourage cross-disciplinary collaboration by:

- Creating platforms for collaborative projects that address SDG-related challenges
- Offering incentives like awards or grants for interdisciplinary research focused on the SDGs
- Hosting forums, webinars, and workshops that bring together researchers and practitioners from diverse fields
- Developing special publication formats that showcase interdisciplinary approaches to SDG challenges
- Partnering with academic institutions to create interdisciplinary research centers focused on specific SDGs

Ensuring Ethical and Transparent Research Practices

SDG Goal 16⁹ (Promote Just, Peaceful, and Inclusive Societies), which focuses on peace, justice, and strong institutions, aligns with the need for ethical research practices. Publishers can support this by:

- Implementing robust peer review processes to ensure credibility
- Promoting open data policies for greater transparency and reproducibility
- Encouraging open peer review models, particularly for SDG-related content, to foster trust in research
- Developing clear guidelines for ethical research practices, especially in sensitive areas related to the SDGs
- Implementing blockchain technology to ensure the integrity and traceability of the research process

Amplifying Diverse Voices and Perspectives

Achieving SDG Goal 10¹⁰ (Reduce Inequality Within and Among Countries) involves promoting inclusivity in global research. Publishers can democratize the research landscape by:

- Prioritizing research from underrepresented regions, especially the Global South
- Supporting gender equality in authorship, editorial boards, and leadership positions
- Integrating both traditional and scientific knowledge to include indigenous wisdom and alternative perspectives
- Offering translation services to overcome language barriers in research dissemination

- Creating mentorship programs to support early-career researchers from underrepresented groups

Leveraging Technology for Greater Impact

Technological advancements offer opportunities to scale SDG-related research. Publishers can:

- Develop AI tools for evaluating manuscripts based on their contribution to the SDGs
- Create digital resources that make research more accessible to decision-makers and the public
- Use blockchain for transparency in research funding, authorship, and dissemination¹¹
- Implement virtual and augmented reality technologies to visualize complex SDG-related data and scenarios
- Develop machine learning algorithms to identify emerging SDG-related research trends and gaps

Sustainable Data Publishing

Data is vital in addressing SDGs, particularly in areas like climate change and global health. Publishers can foster sustainable data practices by:

- Encouraging open access to real-time environmental and climate data¹²
- Building infrastructure for long-term data preservation
- Facilitating data-driven collaborations between researchers across borders
- Developing standardized metadata schemas for SDG-related research data
- Creating data visualization tools to make complex SDG-related information more accessible to policymakers and the public

Creating a Culture of Sustainability

To embed the SDGs into their operations, publishers must make sustainability a core value.¹³ This can be achieved through:

- **Education and engagement**¹⁴—Implementing learning programs like hackathons or discussions focused on sustainability.
- **Internal communication**—Using newsletters or meetings to highlight SDG-related impacts and foster collective purpose.
- **Crafting a narrative**—Developing a powerful story about the publisher's role in addressing global challenges.
- **Motivating employees**—Encouraging personal and professional growth through sustainability-focused initiatives.

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- **Leadership commitment**—Ensuring that top management embodies and champions SDG-aligned values and practices.
- **Cross-functional teams**—Creating task forces that bring together diverse departments to work on SDG-related projects.
- **Supplier engagement**—Extending sustainability practices to the entire supply chain and partner network.

Measuring Impact and Progress

To maintain momentum and accountability in advancing the SDGs, publishers must implement effective measures to track their progress. This can be achieved through several key strategies:

- Incorporating SDG metrics into journal and research impact assessments
- Developing citation metrics that capture societal and environmental contributions
- Regularly reporting on SDG contributions to maintain transparency
- Collaborating with external bodies for validation and benchmarking of SDG-related initiatives
- Implementing a balanced scorecard approach that includes SDG-related key performance indicators alongside traditional business metrics
- Conducting regular stakeholder surveys to gauge perceptions of the publisher's SDG contributions
- Participating in industry-wide initiatives, like the SDG Publishers Compact¹⁵ to develop standardized SDG reporting frameworks for scholarly publishing

Embracing Discontent as a Driver of Change

Discontent is the spark that drives our willingness to step into the unknown and explore new possibilities. It is only real discontent that fosters initiative, and without discontent, there can be no growth or transformation. Organizations where nothing changes, where progress stalls, are often those where senior management is complacent—content with the status quo and unwilling to be disturbed. However, disturbance, born from discontent, leads to questioning, seeking, and the initiative that drives growth. Without discontent, there is no initiative, and without initiative, there is no creativity.

To truly embrace the SDGs, publishers must be willing to challenge the status quo.¹⁶ A sense of constructive discontent with current practices can inspire the innovation and creativity required for meaningful change. This approach

involves fostering a culture of continuous improvement, creating spaces where employees feel safe to voice concerns and propose solutions, and regularly reassessing business practices against SDG benchmarks. By embracing discontent, publishers can fuel the innovation necessary to drive real, impactful change.

However, the transition toward aligning scholarly publishing with the SDGs does not come without its challenges. A major hurdle is resistance to change, which can manifest in various ways across organizations. Deep-rooted traditions, entrenched processes, and a focus on profit-driven outcomes can lead to reluctance in adopting sustainability-driven practices. Additionally, some stakeholders may view these changes as threats to established workflows or core business priorities. Overcoming resistance requires clear communication, unwavering leadership commitment, and a strategic investment in training, education, and gradual implementation. By addressing these challenges head-on, publishers can cultivate a culture that values sustainability without compromising operational efficiency or academic integrity.

A Transformative Imperative for Scholarly Publishing

Scholarly publishers stand at a critical crossroads in the global knowledge ecosystem. By aligning their operations with the SDGs, they have the unique opportunity to shape the future of our world. The future of scholarly publishing is intrinsically linked to our collective ability to address global challenges. This transformation demands more than incremental changes—it requires a fundamental reimagining of our purpose, processes, and potential impact.

Scholarly publishers must become active architects of change, not passive disseminators of knowledge. By strategically aligning with the SDGs, they can:

- Amplify research that drives meaningful societal progress
- Create inclusive platforms for global knowledge exchange
- Develop innovative mechanisms for interdisciplinary collaboration
- Establish ethical frameworks that prioritize transparency and impact

The path forward is neither simple nor guaranteed. It demands courage, systemic thinking, and an unwavering commitment to transcending traditional boundaries. Publishers must cultivate organizational cultures that embrace complexity, encourage continuous learning, and

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view sustainability not as an optional strategy, but as an existential imperative.

Now is the time for decisive action. Publishers must lead with purpose, innovate with integrity, and publish with impact—not only for academia but for humanity and the planet. The future we create today will shape generations to come. Let's seize this opportunity to build a more sustainable, equitable, and knowledge-rich world.

By embracing this new paradigm, scholarly publishers can become catalysts for positive global change. They can enhance their relevance in an evolving academic landscape, attract top talent committed to making a difference, forge deeper relationships with stakeholders, and contribute meaningfully to solving the world's most pressing challenges.

The journey ahead requires courage, creativity, and unwavering commitment. We must innovate relentlessly and push the boundaries of what's possible. Only through greater creativity can we drive progress and become true agents of change.

The rewards—both for publishers and for the planet—are immeasurable.

Disclosure

Generative AI tools were used for editing, proofreading, and rewriting some parts, based on my original drafts.

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