

IPA in Conversation with ...
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Publishing in Europe: The impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic
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Transcript

- 1) What has been the situation about the pandemic around Europe? Which countries have been hardest hit?

The situation has been quite catastrophic for everyone, for the the whole book ecosystem, with bookshops being closed down since mid-March approximately or their access has been restricted. And even when they were open as was the case in Sweden, the stressful climate has diverted customers. The outcome is rather dramatic and we expect that we will suffer an annual loss of about 30 % turnover. This means endangered publishers and booksellers, many titles not published or postponed, with an impact on authors' revenues who have written the books and are waiting to do lectures and to talk to the public about their book. Bookfairs have been cancelled, although the latest news is that Frankfurt is going on in autumn. But the London Book Fair, Bologna Book Fair, Leipzig – we had a spring time without any public event of any importance. We as a Publishers Association try to propose measures to develop some help in this worrisome times.

- 2) Those figures are really worrying. But it is certainly encouraging to see all the work you are doing, especially with booksellers. I know FEP has been extremely active. How has FEP supported its members?

Thanks for that. Almost the first day after lockdown, there was the initiative by our Secretariat to create a special Whatsapp group, which we called PublishersVersusCorona, everybody could join in and we exchanged information and experiences across Europe, what is happening in France, in Italy, in Sweden, Latvia, in Belgium, you name it. We have an exchange of ideas and together with the Whatsapp group, we also produced a Daily Newsletter that we mailed and put on our internet site, where we give a survey of the situation in every country and the measures that we are taking or that we are veering to be taken by the European Commission or National governments. We are trying to support each other and to be united.

- 3) That is awesome. We agree on the importance of sharing importance with our members in times as these. I fully agree that we need to remain united in these circumstances, absolutely. How are you personally dealing with this difficult situation? What about your own publishing house and the situation in Belgium?

My publishing company is in the Flemish market. The Flemish market has suffered, Flemish bookshops were closed since mid March onwards until they were reopened some two weeks ago. The general decrease of 30% throughout Europe is definitely happening in Flanders as well. My publishing company is mid-sized in this market, and I was quite lucky to have two titles in the beginning of May. One non-fiction, on Belgian political situation, launched with a Zoom-presentation that was widely viewed and acclaimed, so that book entered the bestsellers list. And the same happened to a fiction title, we won the award for best crime novel in the Netherlands with a Flemish author, which is rather exceptional. Which means that we are selling quite well this new title in Dutch market. You need a few titles to sell for the rest of the year, for the diversity of your business.

- 4) Congratulations for that. You mentioned twice the luck you had – but it's also the result of a lot of work you have done. It is partially luck, but also a lot of work.

Yeah, that is true for every publisher. I don't want to be too euphoric, because even then, it does not make up for the sales we had last year, for example. The online sales and bestseller list are helping a lot.

- 5) Going back to Europe. How is the situation in Europe? While bookstores were closed in many countries, I heard that they are reopening again. How is this going? Are home deliveries allowed? Are books classed as essential?

Europe is a fairly diverse continent. And despite most of us having united in the European Union, health policies remain national prerogatives, meaning the opening of bookshops was different from one country to another. In some countries they remained open (I mentioned Sweden but this is also true for the Netherlands or Latvia although with some restrictions), in other countries, there were deliveries books to their customers with all means of transport. I remember having the snapshot image of a German bookseller skating to deliver books. Home delivery has become quite accepted in these weeks.

As for essential products, unlike in the US, where all States decided to keep books within the list of essential products, here in Europe, in France, companies like Amazon were not allowed to deliver non-essential products and books were listed as non-essential. In other countries, books were considered essential products indeed. To be very honest, this issue was less a concern for traditional bookstores which were never prohibited to

deliver books themselves, although this does not compensate for lost physical sales, as I said before. But economic reasons obliged Amazon not to forbid sending books to the customers.

- 6) I have been following this discussion if books should be considered essential and the response in different countries is so different. While in countries books are considered essential and book shops are first shops to be opened again, in countries like mine, Mexico, books are definitely not considered essential. The first thing to open was beer production here, so beer is more important here than books, which is a pity. IPA has asked governments around the world to do so, to classify books as essential, to recognize the importance of books for culture in a society. How important has international cooperation been?

Honestly, FEP is focusing on European approach, clearly sharing our national experiences with the WhatsApp group and Daily Newsletter and other ways, so we try to put pressure on our governments and the European Commission in the first place. Nonetheless, we were and are very keen to get ideas and to know that we have to work together to develop the right and fair solutions. The understanding that we have with IPA is quite crucial and reciprocal for both of us.

- 7) Absolutely. I agree on the idea to work together, which is why it is always a pleasure to collaborate with FEP and you personally. How has the European Union responded to support publishers and the publishing sector in general? Are any sectors receiving specific support?

In terms of budget the EU has little money for culture, in general less than 0,1% of the total budget. Nonetheless, we had a useful video conference with the Commissioner for Culture, Mariya Gabriel some weeks ago, she was very supportive and suggested several paths to support the sector. However, even if the budget is doubled as the Parliament, this would not be sufficient. The EU has opened up the state aid to 100%, which would allow Member States to fully finance projects and the EU is also massively injecting money into European economies. Only a few days ago, Mrs von der Leyen announced to lend 750 million euros to support the most problematic countries. That's happening and hopefully member States are encouraged to support the cultural sectors and the book sector in particular.

- 8) I really hope so, because the figures you mentioned before about the budget for books being less than 0,1 % is really disheartening. I hope that your efforts will be able to achieve something. If there is any way for IPA to help, please let us know. What about our most important partners in the business: authors and booksellers?

Sure. We have kept in constant contact with authors and booksellers association, because any solution must support the entire ecosystem and this has been our guiding principle. With EIBF, we have designed 10 measures to help the book sector to overcome the crisis.

We prepared a compilation of European measures and national measures that we, recommended to be urgently adopted by our governments or European institutions. Both documents recouped pretty much. We have, in preparation of the video-conference between the European culture ministers of this week, developed two specific measures. The first being a book voucher for citizens to go and visit local bookshops and inject liquidity in the entire chain, supporting authors, publishers and booksellers. This voucher can be introduced in one country in a different way than in another country, but the principle is to have liquidity. The second one is a broader one and would consist (and we know that several countries are adopting it) into massive public purchases of books, again via local bookshops, for libraries and educational establishments. Both measures would help all stakeholders and society in general, to have access to books and to enhance that access and reading itself.

If there is something good coming out of the covid19 crisis is that lockdown has encouraged citizens to read, to find books comforting and useful. French figures show that in average, people have read 2,5 books during the two months of confinement, this may not sound much to a publisher but this is far more than usual. It's 54 % having read at least a Book during the 8 weeks of lockdown and 11% more than 7 books (a Book a Week). We are happy with that, to be honest.

- 9) Those sounds like great ideas. With the book voucher, if I understood correctly, the idea would be that people can use it in different countries as well. If you get a book voucher in France, you could use it in Germany as well, for example?

No. The idea is to discuss this with the national governments and to have a voucher to spend in your local bookshop to start. But why not try to have a second way, cross-border. That is something to keep in mind, why not.

10) Those are really great ideas; I truly hope they will be implemented. And I fully agree with you as well that there is a positive outcome to all of this with people turning to book during confinement.

What have publishers done in different countries to support society during the lockdown? How have they adapted to support teachers or pupils? Or parents needing to entertain children?

Educational publishers have acted very responsible, as social actors in supporting education. They have been working with libraries to address the extraordinary increase in demands, although they themselves took a great toll in this crisis and saw their revenues nearing zero in this period. Yet, they did their utmost to satisfy the needs of a population locked at home. Opening online possibilities and sharing the educational content available. I am very proud of publishers who have played the role that was expected of them. I hope that public authorities will play theirs as well and will help

publishers, and their natural allies, authors and booksellers, and libraries, to continue thriving to the benefit of all. General publishers also helped book shops with extra margin to compensate for the online sales and bringing books to public.

11) I also have hope that authorities will also play their role. Especially educational publishers who have been really hit hard by this crisis – encouraging to hear. Responses by publishers globally made me feel proud to be one. I really trust authorities all over the world will recognize and support the value chain of authors, publishers and book sellers. What do you think about our role as publishers, especially in times like these?

We have to emphasize it in these difficult months. Quality, diversity and professional editorial content and management, that is what makes the differences. Internet, television, radio – they have been an important window to knowledge and to information, but it is crucial that citizens are able to access information which is professional and edited. Officially, with the quality that we guarantee. That's for text books, fiction and non-fiction. This importance of nuance and diversity is crucial.

12) I agree with you. There is so much fake news going around, the role of publishers curating information is so important. Do you have a message for other publishers around the world who are dealing with the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic?

My message would be: Think creatively. Continue explaining to all politicians how they can help us. If they help publishers, they help authors and book sellers, the ecosystem as a whole. Take advantage of the crisis to learn more from your readers and to connect with them via online events. I had a good personal experience with this Zoom presentation that opens new possibilities after the crisis. Lastly, emphasize: Cooperate with colleagues, booksellers, authors. And surely, resist the crisis.

I fully agree with you. I also think that cooperation is really essential, among authors, publishers and book sellers. I have no doubt that we will come out of this together. We have to resist. It has been a pleasure, thank you for your time and valuable insights.