

Knygų leidyba

## SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL: THE ROLE OF BOOK INDUSTRIES IN SMALL EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

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*This paper deals with four cultural and historical features of book industry that still determine the nature of book business. The paper concentrates on how these features impact book industries in linguistic communities with a relatively small number of speakers. The paper also examines the reasons for absence of the publishing education and contemporary publishing research in the world of academia. In its final part, the paper shows the reason why, at least for the time being, e-books will not outperform printed books and stresses that current developments have triggered not only new research on contemporary books, but also created a set of threats and opportunities for book business in small language communities.*

*Key words: book, book market, e-book, publishing studies.*

In this paper, I will discuss four historical and cultural features of the book in the Western world. These features have different impacts in small and big language communities and still affect contemporary book culture. As a result, these features have to be dealt with differently throughout Europe. These features are as follows:

1. The invention of printing played an important role in the formation of European national communities. This still determines the role of the book in contemporary societies.
2. By the end of the 20th century, English became the globally dominant language of business and scientific communication. Throughout this process, Anglo-Saxon book industries became globally dominant and as such heavily effect small language communities in East Europe.
3. Contemporary book publishing and contemporary books as a medium are a blind spot of contemporary media research.
4. Regardless of the digital revolution, the printed book in codex format remains the most useful information tool for

storing complex products of the human mind in written form.

#### THE BOOK AND THE NATION

Forty years ago, Benedict Anderson wrote his canonical work, *Imagined Communities*, in which he stressed that, throughout the process of the invention of printing in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, vernacular languages became standardized, and speakers of these languages started to imagine themselves as members of national communities that shared the same cultural, linguistic and communication framework. In addition to printing with movable type, these processes were determined by industrialization, the spread of market economies, and the growth of commerce that required widespread literacy. Additionally, these processes were enhanced by the Protestant revolutions that introduced reading of the Bible in vernacular languages.

The outcome of this huge transformation was different in relatively big and homogeneous communities with a long tradition of statehood, such as English, Spanish, and French, from that in small language communities such as Latvian, Estonian, Slovenian, and Croatian that failed to establish stable nation-states until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For most of their history, these small language communities belonged to different multi-lingual empires; there, these communities were often subject to strong assimilation processes. Consequently, books printed in these small communities' languages became bastions of their cultural and national

identity. In addition, as most of these small language communities were part of broader, predominantly undemocratic multinational empires, the book often became a means of expression of the voices of the socially, culturally and politically oppressed. Thus, the book was seen not only as a product of cultural importance but was also both a carrier of national identity and a medium with a subversive social and political potential. Throughout these processes, the book gained an almost sacrosanct status.

After 1989 when the majority of such small communities formed nation-states and introduced democracy and market economies, the book ceased to be the guardian of cultural and ethnic identity and at the same time became protected by state cultural policies such as lower taxes and subventions. In the '90s, both in the book industry and among authors, this rather controversial process of simultaneous dethronization and protection created an identity crisis that has not yet been fully and successfully resolved (for more on this, see [8]). The most visible embodiment of this identity crisis is the contradiction between the market and the cultural nature of the book business. Although this contradiction exists in big language communities too, its impact is bigger in small language communities due to the cultural context described above and bigger financial pressures which, because of smaller print runs, appear in small book markets. Namely, book business was always a business with high fixed costs: illustrations, corrections, layout and the preparation of

printing machine cost the same regardless of the print-run; therefore, the lower the print-run the higher the per unit production costs. This might be one of the main reasons why a comparative research of north-east and south-east European book industries and book histories might be of enormous importance – not only because similarities and differences among these cultures might enable book professionals to better conduct book business under extreme financial pressures, but also because these differences and similarities might enable us to better understand the processes of formation of cultural and ethnic identities of small European nations.

#### ENGLISH AS A NEW LINGUA FRANCA

In most small European national communities, having a second language is nothing new: there was always one. The reasons for this were twofold: on the one hand, the second language was the language of the power, i.e. of the empire these communities were part of, and on the other, the second language was a window to the broader cultural and scientific worlds as it was impossible to translate all significant literary and scientific works into these small languages. In continental Europe, the shift between the two poles varied from one country to another: in some cases, the second language was more the language of the empire and in some more a window to the world.

At least for small language communities in northern and southern Europe, the fact that English is slowly kicking out other

second languages seems to be a rational decision: in all of them, English has never been the language of the oppressors and thus does not evoke resentment. Furthermore, thanks to the fact that English is the biggest second language that ever existed, it is also the biggest possible window to the world.

However, in combination with the changes in the publishing industry that took place in the last 20 years, this global spread of English created a set of cultural controversies.

#### NEW BERLIN WALLS

A variety of data has shown that in the 1990s, around 60% of translations in Europe were from English. However, as shown by my Viennese colleague Rüdiger Wischenbart's and my research [10], in general there are no significant differences in what Eastern and Western Europeans read: while French, Swedish, Dutch, German, and Italian best-seller lists are dominated by European authors (either translations or originals), Eastern Europeans read slightly more translations of Anglo-Saxon authors than Western Europeans; nevertheless, their bestseller lists are dominated by European and domestic authors. Even more interestingly, European best-selling authors hopped from one Western European book culture to another without English as a mediator, undoubtedly as a result of the fact that many publishing houses in big European language communities still employ editors who can read languages other than English. However, on the other hand, East European

bestselling authors didn't cross their national borders and have never made it to the top either East or West European bestseller lists (for more on this, see [10]).

Additionally, books in English became an important segment of book sales in small European language communities: in 2008, for example, United Kingdom (UK) book exports to Slovenia totaled to GBP5 million, to Czech Republic GBP11 million, to Croatia GBP4 million, and to Estonia GBP1.7 million<sup>1</sup>; at least for those countries for which data are available, sales of English books represent 5% to 10% of the total book market. Again, for most of these countries, this is nothing new: in my hometown, Ljubljana, in 1913, in the town's main bookshop, 40% of the book stock was in German, and today around 40% of the stock of the city's main bookshop is in English. Online bookshops such as Amazon have further enhanced these processes. Furthermore, due to the changes in academic culture, European universities are becoming obsessed with validation of scientific work through publication in international academic journals and citation. Therefore, more and more academics in small language communities read, write, and publish their scientific work in English.

To summarize, three processes are taking place in small European language communities in the eastern side of the continent: local academics are shifting their publication

efforts to journals published in English, a significant amount of so-called recreational reading is being done in English, and recreational reading in local languages is overwhelmed by translations from West-European languages, English being the absolute number one among them. No doubt, there is a strong element of one-dimensionality in these processes – as if, in terms of reading culture, Eastern Europeans found themselves surrounded by new Berlin walls. However, most of these processes are not properly researched, in most cases because of the fact that publishing studies as a new academic research discipline are still in the nascent phase.

#### BARBARIANS AT THE GATE

When we enter the field of contemporary book research, we are immediately faced with a set of paradoxes, the most obvious among them being the fact that research on contemporary book publishing industries was almost nonexistent throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Quite surprisingly, library and information science and bibliography as established academic disciplines had never paid serious attention to the editorial and publishing processes of contemporary book industries. The same goes for media studies and the sociology of mass media. There were some lonely attempts in this direction, perhaps most widely known being the ones by the French sociologist Robert Escarpit who, in the 1950s and 1960s, provided a considerable insight into the global book production and dissemination during that time [3].

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.publishers.org.uk/en/home/market\\_research\\_and\\_statistics](http://www.publishers.org.uk/en/home/market_research_and_statistics)

Although his books on books were translated into the majority of European languages, his work had no significant international response; for example, he is not mentioned in the English-language version of Wikipedia at all. Even more, he understood his attempts as a kind of a side discipline to the academically more favoured comparative literature or sociology of literature and never considered his research as something that might lead to the establishment of publishing studies as an integral part of academic instruction.

A new set of studies on contemporary book industries appeared at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The results were published in two journals, *Publishing Research Quarterly* and *Logos*; furthermore, a variety of books on books were written (for more on this, see [9]). A significant number of these papers and articles were produced in places all around the world where publishing education had succeeded in establishing itself as an academic discipline. Some of these researchers found a friendly umbrella in the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP), where their field is rather paradoxically called contemporary book history – all this undoubtedly being a result of the fact that some started their careers in book history and found its research methods useful for contemporary book studies (for a bit more on this, see [12]). We are still waiting to see whether these research efforts will establish publishing studies as a fully recognized academic research field.

All this describes the ways in which contemporary book research started to emerge,

but it does not explain its late arrival in the world of contemporary media studies or its failure to produce international research societies such as SHARP. Even more, the whole academic context of book research, publishing, and library education poses a challenging question: why, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was retrieval of information in book format considered a job for academically educated professionals, while filtering and publishing the information was a job for enthusiastic (and sometimes not very sophisticated or highly educated) amateurs? Furthermore, as stressed by John Thompson in his research on British and American academic publishing, how is it possible that academic publishers practice their business in an un-reflected way as “they know how to play the game and they have the views how the game is changing”, but they “might not be able to sum up the game” – similar to how uneducated speakers of a native language know how to follow basic linguistic rules but are not able to formulate them? [14, 40] Additionally, why, in the 1970s, did one of the founding fathers of academic publishing, Robert Maxwell, practice business methods that belong more to Berlusconi’s Italy or to some Eastern European backwater than to the world of academia in a country with one of longest academic traditions in Europe? Were there barbarians at the gate for most of the history of printed works? And are they still there?

Let me try to briefly sketch the answer to this question. Undoubtedly, the late arrival of publishing studies and publishing educa-

tion in the world of academia is somehow linked to developments in the publishing industry. As shown by a variety of book historians, book publishing was a business with a high-enough income that allowed the in-house transfer of publishing skills from one employee or family member to another (see, for example, [2]). On the other hand, the employment market was too small for universities to provide special training for publishers. In comparison with libraries, this quite clearly indicates that till the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the library system required more trained work force than publishing industry. Additionally, at least in continental Europe, being a librarian is traditionally a regulated profession in state-financed institutions; regulated academic instruction is a logical consequence.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, things started to change in US and West-European book publishing industries, when a set of simultaneous processes took place: as a result of widespread education (i.e. much higher enrolment in high schools and universities), both the demand for books and the turnover of the book industry started to grow, and the ownership structure of publishing houses started to change such that many family-owned publishing houses became publicly held companies (for more on this, see [5; 7; 2]). Additionally, there was a constant growth in the number of published titles: in 1960, 18,000 titles were published in the UK and 24,000 in the United States, and forty years later the publishing indus-

tries in both countries published 120,000 titles each [3; 12]. Obviously, this enormous increase in the number of published titles required a bigger workforce with publishing-specific skills.

This growth in the number of published titles was accompanied by a downturn in print runs: in 1972, R. Escarpit noted that, in big Western book markets, book print runs were between 7,000 and 17,000 [3]; 30 years later, Chris Anderson, in *The Long Tail*, stressed that the average book print run in the U. S. was only around 500 [1]. Undoubtedly, the main reason for these small print runs was the changed printing technology that lowered fixed printing costs and made small print runs economically possible. Additionally, the birth of mega bookstores and later Internet bookshops drastically extended the “shelf” space in bookshops as they were able to stock an almost unlimited quantity of books. Nevertheless, at least in the field of general publishing, bestsellers remained the main source of publishers’ income and profits.

The result of the processes described above is obvious: as there were fewer bestsellers and more books with small print runs, publishers’ incomes decreased. In other words, there was a bigger demand for the workforce and less time and money for in-house training. Out of this, the need for a trained publishing workforce – and with it, for institutionalized publishing education – emerged. Out of this process, publishing educators who evolved into publishing researchers were born.

However, this does not explain why book and journal publishing did not attract media researchers before these processes took place.

#### A BLIND SPOT OF SOCIAL RESEARCH

One of the old truths of social research is that the most interesting parts of the social fabric to dig in are those that seem to be self-evident: behind them are often hidden historical and cultural forces that determine our behaviour but have become so much part of our nature that we become blind to them. L. Febvre and H. J. Martin's *Coming of the Book* (1958) [6], for example, was born from attempts to explore patterns of daily forms of book usage and production in various historical periods, predominantly before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. What these authors and their followers failed to notice, however, was that contemporary book production and dissemination were even more un-researched than book history.

The big question, of course, is not only why academics and social researchers failed to see this blind spot throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also why we are not blind to it any more.

Let me allow a speculative answer: one of the reasons why it is so is because book reading ceased to be a self-evident part of academic education. Only a few years after H. J. Martin and L. Febvre wrote their seminal book [6], Christopher Lasch described the decline of classical learning in the American secondary and tertiary education system and the substitution of classical courses such as history, rhetoric, Greek, and

Latin with more pragmatic modules such as management of free time, book-keeping, mountain climbing, and similar courses [11]. However, he did not yet link these processes to the decline of the book in academia. This was done 30 years later by Frank Furedi in his work *Where Have All the Intellectuals Gone?* (2004) in which he described a clash he had with a senior university manager who fiercely opposed F. Furedi's paper in the *Times Literary Supplement* in which he claimed that students should read "whole books" as part of exam preparation.

Undoubtedly, this attitude held by university officials and students is the backside of the fact that authorship of "full monographs" in many universities ceased to be a prerequisite for getting a full professorship. In other words, the processes so meticulously described by John Thompson in his *Books in the Digital Age*, namely that in American and British academic libraries journals are kicking out monographs [14], are caused not only by the changes in the evaluation of academic achievements that emphasize quotation indexes and international journals, but are a consequence of much broader and older cultural processes through which the book ceased to be a self-understandable part of academic education – and as the book lost its self-understandable status, the book also ceased to be a blind spot of media research. To make all long story short, if the content of printed books becomes obsolete, it will be so not only because of IT and digitization, but also because of the deeper cultural changes.

But will it? My answer is rather self-assured: no. I believe that humankind will still need the complex texts that for the last 2,000 years formed the intellectual backbone of our civilization. Perhaps the number of those who read such texts will be proportionally smaller in the population of the tertiary educated than it traditionally was. However, the number of intellectuals was always small anyhow. I believe that the decline of the book in academia as a result of the processes described by C. Lasch [11] and F. Furedi has more to do with the changed role of universities in contemporary societies than with the death of the book. In short, what we are looking at here is more the death of the university than the death of the book.

#### IS AN E-BOOK READING DEVICE SIMILAR TO A MOBILE PHONE?

Another challenging question, of course, is whether, in the process of storing and transmitting long and complex texts, e-book reading devices will start to outperform printed books in the same way DVDs and iPods outperformed vinyl records. In other words, in the future, will we access book content in the format of a codex or by e-reading devices?

At least at this very moment, I would bet on the codex. Let me explain this with a short comparison of the introduction of mobile phones and the introduction of e-reading devices. Mobile phones perform all the functions of classic landline phones in a much more efficient way: if we could use a classic phone only in a room with a

landline, we can use a mobile phone everywhere. Furthermore, the business model of mobile-phone companies was, from the user's point of view, an upgraded version of the business model of landline phone companies: in the beginning of the mobile era, the payment system for mobiles was similar to that for landline phones, as we had to pay a monthly subscription and a fee for the time we spent talking. However, mobile phones were much more user friendly than old landline phones as we could use mobile phones anywhere. When mobile-phone companies started giving away the phones for free (and, of course, covered the cost by charging subscriptions) and experimenting with various charge systems (a monthly fee and 1,000 minutes of talk for free, etc.), this looked like another big improvement of the old landline business model as we were getting for free something that we had had to pay for before. As a result, we consider mobile phones better and more useful and cost-efficient devices than landline phones.

The situation with e-book reading devices is just the opposite. In the UK, where the e-book market is the most developed in Europe, they cost around GBP220, and e-books cost around half the price of printed books. Similarly to mobile phones and laptops, one can expect that such devices might collapse after 2 years of usage; keeping in mind the fact that paperbacks in UK cost around GBP10 or less, in a 2-year period, the price of 40 e-books plus a reading device equals the price of around 70 printed paperbacks. Some goes with the

Kindle that became available in continental Europe in November 2009: together with postage it costs 350 USD, an equivalent of 30 paperbacks.

From this point of view, for any passionate book reader, buying an e-book reading device is not a viable financial alternative to a printed book. Furthermore, with e-books we cannot do things we can do with printed books: we cannot loan the ones we bought to our friends as e-books are DRM-protected, and reading devices are still electricity-dependent so that our reading ends when the machine runs out of energy. Not to mention the fact that you cannot charge the device if you forget the cable at your summer cottage (as it happened to me) and one coffee dot on the screen becomes a coffee dot on 60,000 pages.

Therefore, one might expect that e-reading devices will gain momentum when reading e-books is cheaper and more flexible than reading printed books – similar to how mobile phones became dominant because they are cheaper and more useful than landline phones. My guess is that this will happen when the price of reading devices is so low that publishers or web booksellers will be able to give the devices away for free and cover the cost of the device with lower printing and distribution costs. Keeping in mind the fact that, on average, citizens in the European Union spent 70 euros per year on books – the most recent available data are from 2001 [4] – and that production costs are usually less than 10% of the price of the printed book, this means that the

production cost of an e-reading device per item should be only a few euros. At this very moment, mission impossible.

## CONCLUSIONS

If all of the above trends continue, it is quite clear that, in continental Europe, pressures on book publishers, booksellers, and authors will grow in general: the increasing importance of English in business, science, and tertiary education will most likely continue to diminish the sales of books in local languages. Additionally, the effects of the long tail might further squeeze publishing profits as smaller and smaller print runs hardly cover publishers' overhead costs. E-books do not provide a viable business alternative to such problems and are, thus, at least for the time being, not a solution for such problems but an integral part of them. These problems are even bigger in small language communities where one-million-copy print runs (which cover the losses created by books in small print runs and still generate healthy profits for publishers) are impossible: consequently, the long-tail effect and the domination of English will make publishers' margins even thinner in small communities compared to those in bigger communities. Most likely, the result of such financial pressures will be a growing concentration and vertical integration of the industry in a way that most of the book business will be controlled by one or two companies that will perform both publishing and bookselling operations and will control most of the bookselling infrastructure.

On the other hand, all the above-mentioned trends represent not only problems but also challenges: never in history, printing small print runs has been so cheap and easy. The invention of print on demand, and especially machines such as the espresso book machine, is opening up new opportunities for sales of printed books in the codex format; also, we live in the most open world that has ever existed, and the dominance of English allows for the exchange of ideas and experiences on an unprecedented scale. Furthermore, the development of publishing education and book studies established an unprecedented body of knowledge and data on books and book publishing. And, last but not least, it is very obvious that the book still has an important information and cultural role in contemporary societies; whether this role will be executed by the printed codex or by an e-reading device does not matter much in the long run. As stressed, the latter will gather momentum only if the device performs its communication function bet-

ter than the former – and if this does not happen, authors, readers, publishers, book sellers, and librarians will stick to the printed codex for the next couple of hundred years, as now seems to be the case.

To make a long story short, in small language communities, the book as a medium is facing unprecedented pressures. However, both book content and the book in the codex or electronic format are far from being doomed. Furthermore, book professionals have at the tip of their fingers both the tools and knowledge such that professionals have never had in their long history, which might enable them to perform their professional tasks more efficiently than ever. It is entirely up to book professionals whether they will know how to use these tools and knowledge and successfully resolve the identity crisis of their book worlds.

We live in a big, open, and challenging world. Let us make it survive by enhancing the role of the book.

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## TAI, KAS MAŽA, YRA GRAŽU: KNYGŲ INDUSTRIJOS VAIDMUO MAŽOSIOSE EUROPOS ŠALYSE

MIHA KOVAČ

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje aptariami keturi Vakarų pasaulio knygos istoriniai ir kultūriniai bruožai. Jie skirtingai veikė mažų ir didelių kalbų bendrijas ir vis dar daro įtaką šiuolaikinei knygos kultūrai. Todėl Europoje apie juos reikia kalbėti atsižvelgiant į skirtumus. Prie šių bruožų priklauso:

1. Spaudos išradimas, atlikęs svarbų vaidmenį formuojant Europos nacionalines bendrijas. Spauda vis dar lemia knygos vaidmenį šiuolaikinėje visuomenėje.

2. XX a. pabaigoje anglų kalba pradėjo dominuoti verslo ir mokslo komunikacijoje. Dėl šio proceso anglų saksų knygos pramonė išivyravo pasaulyje ir todėl padarė didelį poveikį mažesnių kalbų bendrijoms Rytų Europoje.

3. Šiuolaikinė knygų leidyba ir šiuolaikinė knyga kaip medija yra balta dėmė dabartiniuose žiniasklaidos tyrimuose.

4. Nepaisydama skaitmeninės revoliucijos spausdintinė kodekso formos knyga lieka naudingiausi įrankiu saugant sudėtingus žmogaus proto produktus rašytine forma.

Straipsnis rodo, kaip XV ir XVI amžiuose spaudos išradimo procesas padėjo kurtis ben-

drinėms kalboms, ir kalbantieji tomis kalbomis ėmė įsivaizduoti priklausą nacionalinėms bendrijoms, turinčioms bendrą kultūrą, kalbą ir komunikacijos sistemą. Tačiau šios didžiulės permainos rezultatai buvo skirtingi sąlyginai didelėms vienalytėms bendruomenėms, turinčioms senas valstybingumo tradicijas, kaip antai Anglijai, Ispanijai, Prancūzijai, ir mažų kalbų bendrijoms, pavyzdžiui, Latvijai, Estijai, Slovėnijai bei Kroatijai, kurios nepajėgė sukurti stabilų nacionalinių valstybių iki XX a. Per ilgą istorinį laikotarpį šios mažų kalbų bendrijos priklausė skirtingoms daugiakalbėms imperijoms. Jų sudėtyje jos dažnai patirdavo stiprius asimiliacijos procesus. Todėl knygos, išspausdintos tų mažų bendrijų kalbomis, tapo jų kultūrinės ir nacionalinės tapatybės tvirtovėmis. Straipsnyje aiškinama, kodėl ir kaip šie istorijos pokyčiai vis dar lemia knygos vaidmenį mažų kalbų bendrijose.

Straipsnyje atskleidžiamos šiuolaikinės leidybos tyrimų trūkumo medijų studijose per visą antrąją XX a. pusę priežastys. Taip pat parodoma, kad tokius tyrimus pagaliau paskatino tai,

kad akademinė bendruomenė suvokė knygos vaidmens silpnėjimą paskutiniajame XX amžiaus dešimtmetyje. Straipsnio pabaigoje pabrėžiamas šiuolaikinio knygos verslo dvilypumas: viena vertus, niekada nežinojome apie knygos verslą tiek daug, kiek žinome šiandien; antra vertus, knygos verslas patiria milžinišką socialinį, kultūrinį ir finansinį spaudimą. Daroma išvada,

kad dėl to, jog skaitmeninės knygos gamintojai nesugeba sukurti gyvybingo verslo modelio, ji negali išspręsti šiuolaikinės knygų industrijos problemų, tampa jų sudedamąja dalimi. Dėl to, kad skaitmeninės knygos rinka yra nedidelė, ir dėl ypatingų istorinių priežasčių, analizuojamų straipsnyje, šis spaudimas turi didesnę poveikį mažųjų kalbų bendrijoms negu didžiųjų.

Įteikta 2009 m. lapkričio mėn.