

BOOK PUBLISHING IN CROATIA TODAY

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Abstract

The author argues for the need to introduce data collecting and research methods as basic means by which to plan the development of a book industry in Croatia. The article starts by describing the wider social context in contemporary Croatia and identifying the main characteristics and trends in the post-war country, with emphasis on the dominant values of Croatian society and its book market. Recent and actual book market characteristics are described based on publisher activities, state support for book publishing, and legal activities in regard to copyright and education. Attention is given to the media presentation of book production.

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Introduction

Looking back at the past five years it is difficult to trace changes that would, in the near future, bring the book industry to such a level that it could play an important role in the development of Croatian society. The bookstores network is poorly developed. While a geographically evenly distributed bookstores network existed up to 1990, such a network has not been significantly rebuilt following the strong decline in early nineties. The presence of books in mass media is marginal, while cultural magazines and journals that publish book reviews have very low print runs and are confined to the intellectual elite.

Data collecting about book production, distribution and reading habits has remained within the realms of modest statistical methodology. The strong centralisation of major financial, infrastructural and intellectual power in capital Zagreb, keeps the rest of the country in a marginal situation in regards to publishing. Previous relatively weak initiatives to form a national professional publishers and booksellers association that existed in the late 1990s have now ceased. The number of books published has been steadily increasing over the years, but it is still not possible to trace the content structure of its production.

As a very sensitive element of a society, books have been undergoing the consequences of these dominant characteristics of Croatian society. One of the main problems concerning the book industry is how to find the balance between market and subsidies. One of the first steps would be to establish cooperation between the ministries that provide subsidies, but even at the operational level, simple necessary cooperation is not carried out. For example, there is no cooperation among the ministries of science, culture and education in their book subsidies. The absence of cooperation is partly due to lack of awareness of the complex characteristics of the book industry as a basis of knowledge infrastructure, and partly to the antagonism among different ministries because, in a coalition government, ministries are very often led by ministers belonging to different parties. Also, there is traditionally no cooperation between ministries; they too often don't behave as if they belong to the same government.

Is it proper then to expect cooperation among publishers, when not even the ministries want to cooperate, and society as a whole is dominated by a value system, which is quite unfriendly to books and culture as a way of life? Absolutely. Publishing is a real lifelong mission for many publishers on an individual basis, but when it comes to cooperation within a professional association, personal antagonisms are often much stronger than any common interest that might be gained. Besides the mission-oriented publishers, there are two other dominant profiles – the ones that wants to get rich as fast as possible, and a much smaller group that wants to change the world, also as fast as possible. Without a proper professional association, and with no communication and no education, it is difficult to foresee when the mission-oriented group will become dominant. Within the writers' and publishers' profession, if strong confrontations among different interest groups arise, the habit is to establish a new association of the like-minded, instead of finding a way to build a strong and influential professional association. Consequently in Croatia there are several writers' and publishers' associations, without an umbrella organisation.

Book History in Croatia

The book has played an important role in Croatian history. It can be said that, for long periods of Croatian history, the book was one of the dominant proofs of the existence of a nation, since the actual Croatian territory was often under different foreign rulers. Of course, this is not the case only for Croatia. Neighbouring Slovenia had a similar history, and books are regarded there as the keepers of a nation, too. This is not true only for countries in Central Europe, but for Scandinavia also – the Finns and the Norwegians, for example (Andreassen 2002; Hakapää 2002). Of course, in Central Europe there are also many beautiful examples of cultures in small regions where a language and literature have been for centuries the expression of identity, like the *lingua Ladina* in Trentino Alto Adige.

In Croatia there have been big changes in the rate of distribution and outreach of books throughout the centuries. The ruling elite, social groups that are better off financially, urban inhabitants, and students are traditionally the groups closely connected with the production, distribution and reception of books. Generally speaking, the book has always been a substantial part of Croatian culture, even though with very different public support and control, depending on the degree of dictatorship or democracy.

Croatia is a comparatively small nation (proximally four million inhabitants today), and the key issues of the book market have to be looked upon while having this figure in mind. The history of the book in Croatia gives a picture of multiculturalism. The presence of different ethnic groups (see “Popis” 2001) and affiliation with different states and federations is reflected in publishing. Books in Croatia were published in Latin, Italian, German and Hungarian, and in Glagolitic, Croatian Cyrillic, and Latin script. Today they are also published for ethnic minorities in their national languages, Serbian and Italian having quite a strong publishing production.

Not less important, Croats inhabit the border region. Since the fall of the Roman Empire, this has been war-torn territory. This has caused long periods of poverty for the majority of the population. Poverty and a developed book market don’t very often go hand in hand. Because of these reasons, the book in Croatia has many times been the victim of very turbulent situations. Nevertheless, there have always been at least several printers and publishers that found their ways to publish books, many times simply because they couldn’t do otherwise, because of a passion for the profession.

Even if publishing has a longstanding tradition, at the same time the book phenomenon *per se* has been neglected. Social and economic implications of the book industry have not been researched, and book statistics have been neglected in spite of the awareness of their inadequacy. The Association of Croatian Publishers and Booksellers, and Croatian Independent Publishers, have declared their support for future undergraduate and graduate education for publishing and bookselling. Remuneration for authors and publishers has legal grounds in Croatia (the new copyright act was introduced only in October 2003) but collecting has not started yet because the collecting societies are not established.

The war, with all its repercussions, and the breakdown of long-established publishing houses and bookstore chains, changed the publishing scene completely. At

the same time, reborn energy has brought to light many newly established publishing houses, many more than the market really needed. This was also part of national enthusiasm and the illusion that the market economy would bring good income overnight if one only established a company. Many forgot that until 1990, publishing production was directed at a market of 20 million inhabitants of Yugoslavia. The most interesting markets for Croatian publishers were Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Books in the Croatian language were selling very well because of language similarity. Monthly instalment plans were a very popular way of buying books, and publishers had door-to-door salesmen who mostly sold books to employees in companies.

Because publishing was one of the very few entrepreneurial activities that could be started without previous experience or professional education, many decided to start a publishing company. It took several years to understand that a book in Croatia is not purely a market product – which it was believed to be in the early nineties – and subsidies were introduced again for book publishing. The fact that Croatia is a centralised country with most of its potential in the capital Zagreb also affects publishing and bookselling. During the recent war in the region, Zagreb was not, like many other cities, directly involved in military engagements. A large number of war titles were published during the wartime, keeping records of war damage, publishing novels and poetry books with war themes. The war period coincides with the establishing of more than 1,500 publishers. Many published only a title or two and disappeared after several months or a year, disappointed with low sales and no earnings. At the same time, a group of independent publishers, headed by former editors from larger Zagreb publishing houses in the pre-war period, established a new publishers' association, Croatian Independent Publishers. Started partly as an opposition to the right-wing government ideology, it gradually planned the building of a publishing and bookselling infrastructure in Croatia, and was the first to establish contacts with the Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbian markets after the war. This association never attracted much financial support from the government, nor did it succeed in starting other infrastructural programs beyond regional book fairs and a distribution centre, which is still run by one of the members. Besides this cooperation within a relatively small publishers' association, the newly (un)shaped industry underwent greater problems, and did not push publishers to cooperate in order to build an infrastructure, which at the beginning would have been an investment, but would have paid off soon.

In the post-war period, the biggest problems for publishers started with the introduction of a 22% VAT on books, which is now again at 0% rate. The VAT has raised the price of books that were already considered expensive. Also, state subsidies are given only for direct book publishing, not for building an infrastructure, which should at least consist of a decent bookstore network. The government acknowledges that book production must be partly subsidised, but does not care about the marketing (aside from subsidising book fairs) and distribution network, nor are publishers organised to build one.

Publishing Today

Book production today is very developed, but the infrastructure is underdeveloped: there is no education toward publishing as a profession, and no research.

The Department of comparative literature at Zagreb University initiated a graduate program for library science in the early seventies and the Library department at Osijek University is now planning graduate courses for publishers and booksellers. A lack of any form of education for publishing means that all publishers, editors and booksellers start learning about the profession only when they get a job or, at best, working part time as students. This leads to a much slower involvement in the business than a person would have who is being educated for a profession. Also, some important areas of publishing are not covered in terms of skills necessary for effective business, such as management and planning, marketing and promotion, and electronic publishing. These skills, of course, can be acquired through practical work experience, but with a different level of quality and at slow pace. In a survey conducted in 2001, all publishers that sent in their answers expressed the opinion that education for publishing is necessary.

The absence of research about the book market results in a great lack of awareness among publishers about the new media market emerging in Croatia. Part of this problem is also that there is no data on the reception of a given book. Of course, individual publishers can draw conclusions from their own sales, but on a larger scale only extremely limited and uncertain data are available. Rare attempts to organise the publishing infrastructure in the past ten years have mostly failed. The traditional book fairs are usually the only occasion where publishers meet, and only recently some new ideas about book promotion have arisen. The most attractive is a Dreamlike book fair in Pula (www.castropola.hr), Istria, which is becoming more and more international, and was nominated as the fourth most successful cultural event in Croatia in 2003. The largest book fair, Interliber (www.zv.hr/sajmovi/), held every year in Zagreb, was in third place.

There are two main forces guiding publishers in Croatia today: the market and subsidies for book publishing. There has not been, up till now, a driving force that would pull the publishers to work together on common ground. This is in great part due to very deep political differences among publishers. These differences, which arose during the last war period, still persist. We see two main forces driving these attitudes which, from political disagreements, transfer to professional ones. After fifty years of party-ruled society and economy, building a structure of cooperation that has to be planned repels many, because of fear of diminishing the finally acquired independence. Second, there is ignorance among a great many publishers about the benefits that the profession can achieve by making decisions based on facts that come out of research. Research is still, to most publishers, regarded as an activity alien to their profession.

Another difficulty is the heterogeneous structure of the publishing industry. The great variety of profiles of publishers makes it difficult to cooperate, but this is true for every publishing market. One can judge the low degree of professional cooperation in Croatia by the lack of even one professional magazine or even a newsletter. But the attitude that underlies every publishers' decision concerning any engagement outside their own company (with very few exceptions) is immediate financial benefit. If publishers don't recognise the immediate benefit for their company, they are not ready to get involved in any activity. This is why measures should be introduced on a state level. This would start building an infrastructure that would gradually become largely commercial.

The transition from socialist to market economy was expected to be much easier. Now, learning from mistakes seems to be very expensive. It is obvious today that everyday logic is not enough to run a book economy in a country where a population has low income, only 7.82% have a university diploma, and almost 700,000 out of four million inhabitants older than 15 years of age have not completed elementary school ("Popis" 2001). This means that there is enormous work to be done, from developing reading habits among children and young adults, to bringing adults to literacy. This is a task that should become part of a well-developed national plan launched in 2003 by the Ministry of Education. Fragmentation, which today is a rule within the book chain, is the main obstacle too much bigger success of many very worthy activities, of which quite a number are recognised internationally.

It is understandable that the book people would want the mass media to cover the book industry at least as much as sports, or at least as much as some sports, which in Croatia would mean to have a daily broadcast or section in every regional newspaper. The reality is much different. There are several biweekly cultural newspapers that regularly publish book reviews (*Vijenac*, *Zarez*, *Hrvatsko slovo*). A fairly large number of cultural magazines also publish book reviews regularly, selecting the titles mainly according to the magazine's profile. Because of very small print-runs, their influence remains within a very narrow circle of experts in the respective fields.

Daily newspapers mainly publish information about books related to public presentation or meetings with authors. The largest space is dedicated to books during book fairs, since daily newspapers are covering the events held there. Some major daily newspapers publish book supplements during the time book fairs are held, but have stopped publishing weekly book reviews, which usually appeared on Saturdays.

Croatian radio has several good, established broadcasts that present books regularly. The radiobroadcasting scene has changed greatly since the year 1990. Many new broadcasting stations have been established, but most of them run only commercials and popular music. A third long-time established state-owned Croatian radio program most regularly presents books and authors, but has a very small audience.

Croatian television neglects books, since it broadcasts only one hour of cultural news weekly, and books are only a small part of it. This neglect is a long-established and well-preserved tradition dating back to the socialist times. This is mainly the result of TV editors' opinion of books as marginal products and book publishing as marginal activity.

Because it is state-owned, Croatian television could play an important role in book promotion. TV editors and journalists are much more prompt to promote activities and personalities that will bring them popularity and influence. Authors and publishers are not their kind of people.

Altogether, the book does not have a prominent public role. Small-scale research done for diploma work by my students on the reading habits of young adults shows that athletes and celebrities attract most of the attention in the media, and that most people experience reading books more as a punishment than a pleasure. The same is true with authors and publishers. Although some writers and literary crit-

ics have their columns in daily newspapers and weekly magazines, they will hardly ever have a chance to comment on some important events on national television, for example. Since they act mainly individually, publishers' public influence is weak.

We consider this an important point. Ideas promoted by books fit into a much different framework of ideas than those promoted by other media, especially those on Croatian television. Promoting consumption is in accordance with the aims of the elite, and therefore it is obvious that all means are welcome to preserve and promote the dominant role of media that will fulfil this task. The changing role of Croatian television in regards to books and authors is an unavoidable prerequisite for the greater influence of values they present: "Within the industrial society, political mobilisation is hard to achieve without the mass media, primarily the electronic ones" (Županov 1995, 145).

Since mid-2003, some daily newspapers (e.g. *Vjesnik* and *Jutarnji List*) have been commenting on a renaissance of Croatian publishing. These comments are primarily based on book production, but neglect the other elements of the book chain, and are in great part due to the fact that journalists are paying greater attention to book production than they did before.

We see several reasons for this attention. In 2002, a group of important writers resigned from membership in the Association of Croat Writers and established a new association. This attracted considerable public attention, since some of the best-known writers left the long-established association. Second, a group of mid-generation writers started publishing novels that were very well received and sold, among them several women writers.

Joining forces with their publishers, good public and cultural events were made out of their books. A high quality of professional standards resulted, with strong public attention. There are minor rumours about the triviality of some of these books, but generally speaking this is no doubt a fresh wind.

Third, subsidies from the Ministry of Culture have been steady. The Ministry is providing support for pre-press activities, and after a book is published buys 50 to 200 copies, occasionally 300 copies, for public libraries. This has been a significant help to publishers for publishing new titles.

Also, it seems that publishers are finally recovering from the 22% VAT. This has done great damage to the whole publishing scene in Croatia. The sensitivity of the book market is well evidenced by the fact that the same government that introduced the linear VAT, after two years voted for 0% VAT only for medications, milk and books.

Finally, the two above-mentioned book fairs, which introduced many new programs, have attracted quite a large public attendance. This has probably also been an element that, along with really high-quality book production, pushed journalists to pay more attention to books and authors.

Is There a Way Out?

In an early analysis of post-communist societal changes in Croatia, Katunarić stated (1996, 163):

Radical social changes will hardly be a consequence of a revolution that will abolish the existing class structure, but might be achieved by the change of the quality of the ruling elite. This approach might be contradictory, aristocratic

and radical at the same time: the qualitatively better elite needs a support of "people of full age," which would have the will and the capabilities of ruling the society. The immature elite can hardly wait for the people to stop being interested in changes and ruling.

Is this possible to achieve? In Croatia the answer is certainly no, especially if the culture, or even the level of literacy, remains as today. The state plans to reduce the level of illiteracy among the adult population by 50% by the year 2012. But it is clear that today the book is not the only medium to be used to change the cultural level of the population. If the book retains today's status in the future, and other media keep the profiles we described, how will people "become of full age"?

An important obstacle to the development of the book infrastructure in Croatia is its centralisation in Zagreb as a capital city. As the administrative and industrial centre of Croatia, Zagreb has a GNP seven times higher than the average of the rest of Croatia, and more that twenty times higher than the poorest parts of the country. Even access to culture, which in areas distant from the capital is easiest to achieve through books (libraries, bookmobiles, bookstores), is under the considerable influence of this great unevenness of development between different parts of the country. Decentralisation is needed to foster a more balanced development of the cultural infrastructure and access to culture for everybody, and for a stronger international cultural cooperation.

This attitude towards decentralisation is opposite to what we have witnessed in the recent development of Croatia in general. The trend has been to centralise all activities in the capital. The social democrat government has inherited this development politics from the right-wing government in power during the presidency of Franjo Tuđman. Both governments have paid great attention to the development of public libraries, but have forgotten other elements of book infrastructure.

An uneven development of Croatia, with a strong concentration of the national book production in Zagreb, together with the "crescent-roll" geographical shape of the country and inadequate public transportation, puts citizens outside the Zagreb area in an inferior position in regards to all public infrastructure and employment possibilities.

Very important work concerned with the promotion of the book is being done by libraries. One of the main comments concerning this work is that it is restricted to library patrons. This comment is directed to publishers, not to librarians, because it must not be expected that librarians will do all the necessary work. Librarians in public libraries in Croatia are running about fifty programs to promote good reading habits.

Reaching out to the wider audience with information about the promotion of reading and developing reading habits is very important for attracting new members to libraries, new readers to books, and hopefully bringing up "people of full age." Just this small element of book culture shows very clearly that there are no simple solutions, and that all developmental and research questions concerned with books are very complex. The question of the complexity of the book industry will have to be elaborated soon, with the aim to sort out all the neighbouring themes of interest and propose a division of work between different disciplines that have to join forces within the research about books.

But even before that, the need to build a profession with its own infrastructure (association, magazine, code of ethics, international membership and cooperation, etc.), is a necessary condition for all other activities, as has been stressed several times in this article. This also will be a very difficult task because in Croatia, according to (Županov 1993, 4):

the anti-professional attitude underestimates professional knowledge and methodology and puts in front of it a common-sense approach and knowledge, confronts political and ideological criteria with professional ones... The professional is under pressure to retreat from professional norms – professional methodology and ethics in the first place.

Conclusion

There are no rational reasons that would indicate that research methods should not be introduced to solve the actual problems of the publishing industry in Croatia, on the contrary. Of course, there are a number of obstacles in the way of this approach. We have described some of them. Another problem we have not described is the overall crisis in the publishing concept and model in this country. Within the book sector there is a general crisis of model from general to particular situations. Of course, it is the role of a profession with support of state agencies from ministries to Parliament to formulate and formalise models. Much has already been done in this respect, from the conceptual to the legal level. The Ministry of Culture has introduced professional boards that are advising the Minister. Among other things, the Board for Books and Publishing was also introduced, a vision for the development of cultural activities in Croatia was written and published, a new law on copyrights and neighbouring rights was passed in Parliament in October 2003, a new law on science and university education was passed in July 2003.

But much more is needed to solve the problems within the book sector. There is hardly any awareness of the complexities within this sector. Aside from the contextual reasons described in this article, this lack of awareness is the major problem, and it goes hand-in-hand with the absence of educational programs, research, etc. The complexity of a book chain is not surprising. At the same time, the level of awareness of the importance of books as the transmitters of content that no other media can transmit properly is very low. The interaction between the text and the reader is unique because it creates patterns of ideas the reader cannot reach otherwise.

It should also be kept in mind that publishing in Croatia is part of a wider system. This means that in introducing new statistical and research methods, much attention has to be paid to future comparability of data. Due to the complexity of a book chain, quantitative data are not sufficient any more. Accurate research, in countries with a book market like the Croatian one, subsidised by the government, conducted with the help of experts in library science, is a task to be fulfilled in the near future.

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