

**IPA in Conversation with ...**  
**Trasvin Jittidecharak**  
**Secretary General, ASEAN Book Publishers Association**  
**ASEAN publishing during the COVID-19 Pandemic**  
**Thursday, May 28 2020**  
**Transcript**

Hugo Setzer: Hello everyone! Thank you all for joining us for another one of our interviews as part of our IPA in conversation with interview series, where we are looking at the impact of the COVID pandemic on publishers around the world. I trust that by now you will have been able to watch some of our other interviews. In any case I invite you to go to our website for a lot more information about how publishers around the world are responding to this pandemic.

Today it is a real pleasure for me to speak to Trasvin Jittidecharak in Bangkok. Trasvin has her own publishing house Silk Worm Books but is also Secretary General of the ASEAN book publishers association and will talk to us about this very important region in the world.

ASEAN is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. It was founded in 1967 and is an intergovernmental organization that aims to promote economic growth and regional stability among its 10 members. Those members are Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia and Vietnam.

The ASEAN Economic Community was established in 2015, envisioning the block as a single market with free flow of goods, services, investments, skilled labor and a more open movement of capital. The total population of ASEAN is 650 million people with a combined GDP of 2.8 trillion U.S. dollars. So that sounds like a very important market. Trasvin, thank you so much for joining us.

Trasvin Jittidecharak: Hi, hello everyone, and thank you for having me.

Hugo Setzer: It's a pleasure, it's a pleasure. And so let's start, perhaps, with some questions I have prepared for you. Trasvin, could you tell us more about the ASEAN Book Publishers Association? Could you tell us more about the countries you represent and their aggregated publishing markets?

Trasvin Jittidecharak: Right, thank you. First of all I'll give you some background of the ABPA or the ASEAN book publisher associations. It started in 2005 by the publishing Associations of Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore. These were the first five, we always call them that, because when ASEAN was established it was by these five countries. So, the first five started again and later Brunei, Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia joined us. But, Vietnam and Myanmar have been very interesting emerging markets with a lot of young people together. Besides you know, of those six hundred and fifty million people, forty percent are under 25 so it's a very young country. You have some aging societies like Singapore and Thailand where we have a lot of old people but the rest of the region has a lot of young people. You can see that it's dynamic.

However, the representatives from Brunei, Laos and Cambodia they are government agencies. These three countries still don't have real Publishers Associations but they have publishing, they have publishers they have book markets but no real Association.

ABPA had a secretariat office in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and it's unfortunately because of this COVID-19 otherwise you and I would be meeting there with this year as Kuala Lumpur designated as a UNESCO World Book Capital. Otherwise we would have interesting working time and enjoyable time together there.

So, our region is culturally diverse. Each country has its language, we have a lot of ethnicities and dialects, different religions. You know, the Philippines is mainly Catholic and Muslim, Indonesia is the biggest Muslim State in the world and Thailand and Myanmar are Buddhist. Singapore is a mix. Malaysians are Muslims. So, we have all these differences of religions and beliefs, unlike Latin America where the majority are Catholics so that's kind of easy in a way and you speak Spanish so at least you have something in common. We have something in common, you know we have snacks we have food.

Hugo: Delicious delicious food by the way.

Trasvin: At least you know if you can't speak to each other then you can invite us to eat something and then we'll be happy and you know by five minutes then we start talking it's okay.

So that's about it. We have a high fatality rate, and the book market is promising because of the 40 percent under twenty-eight and the twenty-five.

Vietnam and Singapore have a very high rank in OECD's PISA score. Singapore was top three. Vietnam is surprisingly coming up really high. I mean the rest of us as about in the middle you know , about 50 something. You have Philippines which is fluent in English and they have exported their labour and services around the world. So, these young people actually they need to upskill, they need to learn. And it's a huge huge market I think.

Hugo: That sounds promising, especially I guess for for educational publishers. But, may I also ask you, Trasvin, in these interesting, and to some extent diverse markets, for those in the audience who don't know could you tell us a bit more about the recent times? I mean how the lockdown measures have affected your region? How has it been different in the different countries you represent?

Trasvin: The pandemic has affected us tremendously because for a country like Thailand, tourism's contribution to our GDP is almost 20 percent. So when we had no tourists that was like *shoom* (signals a collapse). Everything was shut down. At the beginning of the pandemic in early January, although we responded quite fast, but at the time people predicted that Thailand would be the sort of second most cases after China which is true at the beginning but we have a very good healthcare system and it was able to control you know so, our health care system is number one in Asia not ASEAN, but in Asia.

Hugo: In the whole of Asia, the system in Thailand? Okay.

Trasvin: In Singapore and Malaysia actually the health care systems are good too, but then there were some clusters that happened later on which made the lockdown the most harsh. In Thailand we have locked down and bookstores have been affected most because most of the bookstores are in the shopping malls. The shopping malls had to be closed so the bookstore had to be closed. One of the big three chains, their income had drop 90 per cent.

Hugo: Ninety percent? That's astonishing!

Trasvin: In Singapore and Malaysia also because of the total lockdown, in Malaysia in the first two weeks only the head of the family was allowed to go out to get some essential things twice a week and Singapore was also the same thing. That was very difficult, but in Singapore and Malaysia, the governments have provided the package to support them. Thailand doesn't have that. In Vietnam they have a very good control also, so it's not not so bad for them but we don't have clear statistics from Laos, Cambodia and Brunei but I think they are similar. Indonesia is the hardest in the sense that they didn't lockdown, for economic reasons. Now I think they have the highest death rate from the COVID-19 and I think people are very scared.

Hugo: I'm sorry to hear that. It's interesting to see how there are differences in the different countries and in the different markets. Now that you mentioned that, so in some countries bookstores were closed but were home deliveries allowed?

Trasvin: Yes, that is allowed. So in Thailand the online sales were up, but of course what we call up is up from the same period and it's triple but it doesn't mean that it could replace the sales from the bookstore.

Hugo: Okay so if I understand correctly the online sales have tripled but not necessarily replacing the lost sales in the bricks and mortar, of course.

Trasvin: In Myanmar, the online sales shot up about 70%. And sales from bookstore, this is Myanmar, a new small country that doesn't have the logistics system yet, but I think in a big city the books are located only in the major cities, and the bookstores, they didn't close down, but the sales dropped 30%.

Hugo: Okay, and what about digital? What do you think was the rough split of sales in physical format versus digital before and after this crisis?

Trasvin: eBooks are not big in our region, compared to a physical book it is less than five percent of market share. In Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia it's about the same, its double but you know that the base is so small, so double doesn't mean much but it is still double.

Hugo: We have been doing these interviews and we have seen one of the trends is that in many countries people went to online shopping. A lot of online physical book shopping as well but also in many countries increasing in digital.

Trasvin: The online sales of physical books is increasing, that's for sure, and you know that double is for Thailand I think it went up double or more than double. We don't have the figures from Vietnam yet. They just finished their online book fair and they still didn't have available numbers for us. I tried to get it before this interview but...

Hugo: Trasvin, we were also talking a moment ago of the decrease in sales that to some extent, if I understood correctly, has been up to 90 percent? I mean that's crazy change.

Trasvin: That's only from one bookstore chain.

Hugo: Ah, from one bookstore chain. But in general, have you seen a decrease in sales?

Trasvin: Yes, because most of the bookstores in Thailand are closed and they are not allowed to have a Book Fair which is a retail fair. So all together the only, not replacement, but (alternative) we had at the time that PUBAT, which is the publisher and bookseller Association of Thailand, made was this quick decision, even before the government announced the lockdown, that we would change from an on the ground Book Fair to an online book fair. We made a lot of publicity and the buyers, the readers participated well. The first day of the opening, the server crashed because a hundred thousand people hit the button at same time. The platform provider didn't expect that even though we had warned them not to underestimate our readers.

Hugo: That's also some good news that it crashed because of so many people wanting to get in.

Trasvin: Right, because actually they want to go to the book fair, and they can't, so they were eager to know what is this all about this online (bookfair)? Then they made fun, they were joking, because normally at our Book Fair people would just fly in on the first day at the opening so they would type it in and say: "who stepped on my foot?" "You know I'll get you back!" and then they were saying "There's no car park. I still can't park my car!" They were joking, it was so funny, we were laughing! It was a good atmosphere, but of course only thirty percent of our members joined this online book fair. At the same time we estimate that the income of the book fair was also about thirty percent so it wasn't that bad but you know (still low) compared to the physical, on the ground book fair.

Hugo: But it's amazing that you could, in a very short time, organize it fully. It was a fully virtual fair then?

Trasvin: Yes, we had the book call, every publisher was participating with their fan club etc. So, it was fun. But I must compliment the young board members of our association. They are very dynamic and

they worked almost 24 hours before the fair trying to uplift the publishers' spirits. So in that sense it has been a good experiment. We weren't really down or sad or desperate, you know, I mean we are desperate, but we don't feel that bad.

Hugo: That's encouraging to see how, and we have also seen this example of how publishers have been innovative and finding new solutions to get to readers and to get over this difficult situation. So, we have seen how publishers, to some extent, have responded, there's further down the road another question. But how have governments responded in the region? I was thinking of the dropping in sales, which is a difficult time for many companies. Have governments responded somehow to support publishing, publishers and the publishing sector in general? And what about authors and book sellers?

Trasvin: Only the Singapore government has a package for authors and booksellers but not publishers expressly but we are included into other businesses. Singapore has an overall package to add authors, lay out designers, some get this monetary assistance. Bookstores have been given rental rebates from the the proprietor you know, compulsory by the government. For the art sector Singapore government provided so some literature publisher but support but not all publishers nothing special for publishers but you can apply as a business entity to get help. That's for Singapore but Singapore's one of the richest governments in the world, right.

Malaysia divided it's support into two categories. A general support for SME businesses like soft loans, deferment, loan moratorium with subsidies. That kind of support. The Thai government offers something similar to the Malaysia government so the Thai and Malaysia governments are more or less the same. The Malaysian government also has what they call a digital marketing grant. So MABOPA, the Malaysian Book Publishers Association, was able to apply for the online book fair support and so their online book fair will be next week. So it will be ever be interesting to see how they develop because once PUBAT, the Thai Publishers Association started and you probably already heard that we had the webinar for the ASEAN Book Publishers Association, which was very well attended, so now Malaysia will do it and the Philippines are considering doing it. For Myanmar and Vietnam, I don't think the governments did anything. They had some monetary assistance but not that high. Small, personal help. The Philippines government didn't do anything and Indonesia doesn't really have a package, just the discount coupon for books and that kind of thing, free ad time.

Hugo: So I suppose it has also to do with the economic situation as you mentioned as if perhaps Singapore is one of our your wealthiest members it has to do with that. And you know that from IPA we have been calling on governments to support their creative industries.

And how about, Trasvin, we have seen the publishers all around the world, and I would be interesting to know what publishers of your membership have done locally to support society during lockdown? How have they adapted to support teachers or pupils or parents needing to entertain children?

Trasvin: I don't think they've been doing much. In Thailand, for children, publishers were trying to have this online thing to keep mother and children, that are together because of lockdown, keep entertaining them in that sense. But nothing like your Read the World program and that kind of thing, we haven't done that.

Hugo: But you could, of course, participate also in the Read the World program?

Trasvin: But you have to do it in local languages here in our part of the world. Except in Malaysia and Singapore and Philippines, they can participate but not for Thai families, that would be difficult. However, I don't know about (whether) the other Associations have started something but for my association for PUBAT we are starting to work on the reading program and next week we will talk to the programmer that we want to create the reading app programme. I'm not supposed to reveal the details yet but once it's done I think it would be exciting so I have to reveal this maybe next month. I can talk to you about this.

Hugo: Okay! Please share the news with us when you're when you're ready to do so.

Trasvin: And we hope that we could share with our ASEAN members what we are cooking up at the moment.

Hugo: Okay. That sounds interesting. So Trasvin, my last question to you would be that, well nowadays perhaps it's difficult right now, but I'm sure there are positive things to this as well. What do you think the positive outcomes might be for the future?

Trasvin: Well right now the the most positive thing that I see is that actually this pandemic make us in ASEAN closer. We were close before but we are even closer now in during the lockdown because, thanks to all this software, the Zoom meeting or that we have more time to talk, we have more time to reflect and we have more time to seriously think about how we're going to adapt and adjust ourselves. I think there's an opportunity and you start to work and think more strategically. Before we just, I mean it's just like you keep moving without thinking you can have no time to stop. There's a Chinese proverb that says that 'When there is the thunderstorm take one step backward and then the storm will calm down'. I think this pandemic reminds me of this proverb very much.

Hugo: Okay. Thank you, Trasvin. I think it's encouraging to know how, as you mentioned, publishers, and I think we have been seeing that all around the world, are adapting to circumstances and are working together, are working together with their authors with their booksellers community. You also mentioned that it has brought your members more together which I think is also very important especially under circumstances like these. So, it's encouraging to know that, Trasvin.

So, Trasvin it has been great talking to you. Thank you so much for joining this interview. Thank you. Bye-bye

Trasvin: Bye, thank you for having me. Thank you.