

IPA in Conversation with ...
**From Author to Bookshop: Coronavirus and the Publishing
Chain**
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Transcript

Moderator:

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Participants:

Hugo Setzer, President, International Publishers Association

John Degen, Chair, International Authors Forum

Fabian Paagman, Co-President, European and International Booksellers Federation

Porter Anderson, Editor in Chief, Publishing Perspectives: Thank you for joining us. I am joined today for our program, 'From Author to Bookshop: Coronavirus and the Publishing Chain', by three terrific speakers. Hugo Setzer is the president of International Publishers Association, based in Geneva, he is in Mexico. John Degen, joining us from Canada, is the chair of International Authors Forum. Then there is Fabian Paagman, co-president of the European and International Booksellers Federation. Thank you for coming.

As we get started, because we are talking about an important topic about what's happening to our industry, I would like to check – as the journalist that I am – the latest figures from Worldometer, which is also used by the John Hopkins tracking system. At this point, the world total is 7,476,188 cases of COVID-19 in the world and the death toll is 419,361 people. What this reminds us of, of course, is the role of so much of what our publishers do, authors do, booksellers do, is communicate to the world the sheer gravity that we are going through and the many we help them deal with it, coping with it, and learn more about it, and respond to it in the most intelligent way possible.

But what we must not forget is the enormous level of mortality and suffering on a planetary scale and I think this makes the urgency of this conversation today, on what the shape of this industry is in, all the more important. The final note here being is that we must never think at this time in the experience we are done yet. Unfortunately, too many are eager that the problem is done. Unfortunately, there is much farther to go. There is no vaccine yet. With that in mind, the importance and the gravity of what publishing is trying to respond to really comes to the fore.

Hugo, if you'll start us off, with your purview of the many nations – some 69 nations I believe are members of the IPA – what are your associations saying: what is the biggest stumbling block publishers are looking at in the current stage of the pandemic?

[Hugo Setzer, president IPA: It's an honor to be in this panel. I agree with you on the importance to have this discussion right now with our main partners, authors and booksellers. There are a lot of things happening, like late book releases, collapsed revenues, we have had cancelled industry events which have impacted our industry, like our](#)



International Publishers Congress which was supposed to take place in May in Lillehammer, where publishers from all around the world should have come together to meet and discuss around the main themes we are concerned nowadays. That had to be cancelled. As you have mentioned, and I was going to say as well, you are right. We have 69 countries. 83 associations as members from IPA coming from 69 countries. Every one of those 83 associations has in turn a lot of individual publishers. Through them, we represent thousands of publishers around the world. Not only our congress was cancelled, but many book fairs, which was really the place where we can meet and discuss, we meet with authors, booksellers, readers – those have been mostly unfortunately cancelled. Those are some of the main challenges we are facing.

Porter Anderson: It is an extraordinary structural bump. So many ways in the way we normally work, not only authors and book sellers and distribution, how publishers actually talk and move. For an indefinite amount of time, another uncertainty. It is quite unique. It is devastating. And times to contemplate. Let's move, John, to look at authors now. We have gone in a sense from publishers who present the work to people who bring it to us, the very bedrock of the industry, the engine, our author community. In many ways, I think the authors are the most vulnerable in the supply chain. Just taking it from all sides, as we each are, but their entire brand lives within their own work. What do you see as most critical feature of impact the authors are feeling right now?

John Degen, chair IAF: I think everything Hugo was talking about – the publisher's schedules disrupted, authors who had books ready for launch in the spring having those launches put off or cancelled, having to scramble to try to do an online launch and whether or not that is as effective in terms of sales as an in-person launch – all of those things. A hidden impact which has not been talked about a lot, and you really put it into perspective there at the beginning, we are in the middle of a global health crisis. There is this funny meme or trend out there on social media that authors are natural introverts, that this is the perfect opportunity to work a book, and all of that – it ignores the fact that authors are now taking care of kids that are not in school, taking care of elderly parents who are vulnerable, so in fact I would say productivity is probably way down for authors who are used to having that work time for themselves. It's caused a real problem. I heard the other day that literary agents are seeing a spike in submissions, but those spikes seem to be books that were written during lockdown. The author who has been working on a book for 2, 3 years, and then the lockdown comes, real level of disruption there. We won't see impact of that until months down the road.

Porter Anderson: I have heard of the myth of genius during lockdown. I was just thinking today about an author in Sweden, who said he cannot work just because of the anxiety of the situation. He and his wife don't have children and they are both accustomed of being at home for work. He sits down and he can't focus, he is worried about the danger and contagion.



John Degen, chair IAF: Yeah, and social media is telling him that if he were William Shakespeare, he would be writing King Lear right now. There is this immense pressure as well coming with this weird time we are living in.

Porter Anderson: Fabian, speaking of vulnerable elements. We all look at book stores as most endangered and most susceptible to calamities of what is happening economically. We have seen people making wrong deliveries and curbside deliveries. We saw this wonderfully in USA, they fought this tool and nail and continued to work as best they can. What is biggest impact?

Fabian Paagman, Co-president, EIBF: What we have seen, because we are on the endline and forefront, depending on how you look at it, are directly impacted by the change in consumer, reader behaviour. It happened overnight once lockdowns were implemented in several countries and as it spread through world. We experienced it immediately. Differences are enormous. You mentioned incredible numbers of casualties we have worldwide. But if you look at it per country, it varies a lot. Not only that, but country regulations are very different. Some countries with complete lockdowns or areas, some limited lockdowns. This is affecting book sellers in a way they have never experienced before. All of a sudden, they have to not only be innovative and think of new business models, but deal with how to respect 6-feet apart way of serving customers in a completely different way than you are used to. This leads to new challenges. How do I stay alive without being able to sell one book? I am able to keep my store open, but with all restriction. Very complicated situation where, to a certain extent, we learn as we go. On a positive note, the entrepreneurship of many book sellers. Great number of new initiatives and we like to think that book sellers are very innovative people who are very open to new developments. We see that in a lot of our member organizations.

Porter Anderson: That is a fascinating point you are making about innovation. One thing that has come out of Brooklyn, NY, is a shot of a young woman on her phone, looking into a book shop and at the book seller who is holding up the book for her, and she is talking to him by phone and saying: and I also need this and this. He hands them out the door. There have been marvelous moments like that. It is quite heart-warming.

Fabian Paagman, Co-president, EIBF: I would like to add to that. We have also in general seen a huge sense of empathy, also from readers and consumers, being very willing to somehow find ways, reach out to independent or closed down book stores. We see also online, benefitting from shift from offline sales to online sales. One of the hopes we have is to keep that willingness of the public to find their ways to the independent, brick and mortar stores.

Porter Anderson: Do you have any sense on how many lay-offs are occurring? There have been losses of jobs. Without income, an owner of book store cannot pay staff for very long. Many jobs loss on a world scale?

Fabian Paagman, Co-president, EIBF: Except for the US, which is a different situation, in Europe and also Australia and NZ, little layoffs and hardly closure of book shops. In Denmark, they had to close. Besides that, things have been so far, so good. This is because many governments have all sorts of support programs going on to support entrepreneurs, compensate some of the salaries. That automatically brings us the worry we have that we might face, later this year or in 2021, the actual effects that are resulting not so much from health crisis, but economic crisis.

John Degen, chair IAF: Kind of looks like the delayed effect across the board, really.

Porter Anderson: That's right. As Hugo was telling us, one of the big effects has to do with the delay of releases too. Assuming that there is a less restrictive governmental structure in place for actual mitigation of transmission, so many books have been delayed and will be released at once. Some of us in the States are worried about new authors, debut authors, who might have come to the market in a good way, this traffic jam of new work – it might be much harder. Do you hear publishers worrying about this, Hugo?

Hugo Setzer, president IPA: Well, we are certainly a bit concerned about how the recovery phase will be. That is also interesting – everyone will try to release new titles almost at the same time. On the other hand, we are confident that we will be able to continue, not life as usual, but new normal, but that we will be able to continue working. We saw response by our main partners, readers.

Porter Anderson: That is good to hear. All sectors are going to need to work together. If author looks at book delayed or cancelled, this must be devastating, this means finding an entirely new sale?

John Degen, chair IAF: I think it brings with it an incredible amount of anxiety. Whether it is accurate or not, there is a perception with a lot of authors, especially with their first book, that you only have one shot. If you have been working on it for so long, and doing so much preparatory work towards this one launch and retail moment, to launch into an incredibly crowded marketplace with a very distracted consumer base – it brings a lot of anxiety of a first-time author for sure. I want to get back to what you said about book stores and independent book stores. One of the things I have seen happening in author and reading community in Canada, we are exchanging book store gift certificates. We are investing in the sector, to try to mitigate that long-term effect. We are giving the money now and we are hanging on to our gift certificates for when we can get back in and browse.

Fabian Paagman, Co-president, EIBF: It was very unfair of me to say that only the customers are very supportive. We also see a lot of support of authors in all sorts of different ways. We see authors as curiers, online readings and interviews, events trying to replace brick and mortar and live events book stores organise a lot. I think in general we can easily say that book stores and authors have become closer due to the coronavirus.



John Degen, chair IAF: Yeah, there have been no good effects of worldwide pandemics, but if you search in our sector, I think the strengthening of relationships on all sides – I had so much communication with publishing and book selling sector, I find that heartening at least.

Porter Anderson: One of the nicest stories we had recently I think is in France, a publisher decided to create stickers showing how far to stand apart, for book stores to use. To print free of charge and provide little stands for hand sanitisers, so at least they wouldn't have to go out to find their own material for customers. I love to see that kind of cooperation. A generous thought on part of that publisher. Hugo?

Hugo Setzer, president IPA: I really do think that in the middle of such a crisis, it's really a tragedy to see so many infected and deaths, but there are positive things. Like this increased collaboration. We usually have a good cooperation with our authors and book sellers, but this has been really a good chance to strengthen this collaboration. We at IPA signed a joint statement for World Book Day in April, together with authors and book sellers, calling for governments to support book chains in all different countries. For example, we are engaging with authors and they are very willing to take part in online activities with publishers. Trying to do also activities with book sellers as much as we can. They are helping publishers with innovation they are doing with delivery. There is also something very positive, just one example of the Colombian Publishers Association. They did a fundraising with readers and consumers to raise money to pay for wages of book stores employees. They raised a substantial amount of money for book stores who were going through really hard times and they didn't know if they could maintain all their staff.

Porter Anderson: I love that. We saw that in the United States recently, there is a large charitable effort going on among publishers to raise money for book stores. Trivia to get money. Seeing these elements of the industry working together to support the most vulnerable in the chain is fantastic. It's what we need to see. I like the direction you are taking us, the good parts. John, what do you see from the authors community, is there a silver lining?

John Degen, chair IAF: It's tricky. Trying to find the silver lining is a difficult job. But I am sure it's there. One of the things that we did very early on in Canada – we were worried that authors might not fit into government-structured relief program. Author's incomes are lumpy, come in chunks at different times of the year and are not as logical and dependable as other parts of the work force. So there was a lot of lobbying we had to do to educate the government on how our sector works and to make sure that authors qualify for relief funding. Apart from that, we were concerned about immediate loss of income. We did a study and we found that authors were losing immediately about 10,000 dollars each. And the government programs were not going to satisfy that need for sure. So we put together our own emergency relief fund. We've got corporate donations, partnership donations and an amazing amount of individual donations from authors that may be better off than some of their colleagues or peers. And it was extraordinarily generous and wonderful to see. If there is a silver lining, I would say that would be it.

Porter Anderson: Looking at book stores – is it possible that more book stores and book sellers are learning to use the web. We always thought of the digital sales process to be limited to the platforms. But perhaps there is actually an upturn for book sellers themselves. Do you see this happening?

Fabian Paagman, Co-president, EIBF: Yes, with this twist that I think that many book sellers were already ready and up to speed, now they have to change to explore it more and they see more of their customers and sometimes even a new customer base reaching out to them online. Online, we are not talking only about sales, but streaming or other services. Here, our concern and worry is that this is not only for the time being and now – how can we build on this also in the future? The real threat would be that the crisis pushes a definitive shift to the big world e-commerce giants. Not only a threat to the book sellers, but in my country, we recently published a study. We now see all sorts of studies, because now they can start looking back at what is actually happening in this corona crisis. What we can see is that the variety of titles and especially unknown authors, debuts, are really having a hard time with shift to online. Brick and mortar store which we thought is ideal place to discover these new titles, this is really where we excel, we hope this will not be lost due to this crisis. Hopefully there will also be a certain bounce-back.

Porter Anderson: When you talk about preserving that special relationship between the book seller and consumer, I think we have to look to next as we near some forms of recovery different in all parts of the world, is the importance of our industry standing together and saying to our governments: we are here, the creative industries are important and we cannot be left out from subsidy and support programs. Does that sound right?

Hugo Setzer, president IPA: Absolutely. I was thinking that I just remembered, we had a talk by one of our authors online and he was speaking about the importance of positive thinking. Importance of individual and collective positive thinking. I have been trying communicate to our community that we will overcome the crisis, we have to be positive about this. It gives me encouragement to have a conversation like this with our partners in the business. Seeing everyday how many authors, book sellers and publishers are helping their communities as well – that makes me really feel proud of being part of this book chain.

Porter Anderson: That is a wonderful note to end on. I love what you are saying Hugo. We are actually in this together. In this industry in particular, it is great to see so many parts pulling together. It has been a great conversation and thanks to IPA and our audience.