

**IPA in Conversation with ...**  
**Iroo Joo, Executive Director, Korean Publishers**  
**Association**  
**May 15<sup>th</sup> 2020**  
**Transcript**

HS: Iroo Joo! Thank you very much for joining this call and for being able to do this interview for the International Publishers Association. Iroo Joo is CEO of EUM Publishing House in Seoul in Korea. He is also Executive Director of the Korean Publishers Association, he is the CEO of the Seoul International Book Fair and also a friend of IPA and of mine.

I think there are a lot of interesting things to discuss about Korea, about Seoul. I had, personally, the opportunity of visiting Seoul last year for the Seoul International Book Fair, especially for a very well-organized Prix Voltaire Award Ceremony. Iroo Joo, thank you very much for joining this call.

IJ: Thank you

HS: If it's okay, I have some questions I would like to ask you. If that's okay, let me start.

IJ: Yes, let's start, Hugo.

HS: So Iroo, could you please give us some context about the publishing industry in Korea. How many publishers are there in the trade publishing, educational publishing and STM sectors? How many bookstores are there across the country? And what was the turnover of the publishing industry last year?

IJ: In Korea, maybe we have sixty thousand publishing houses. We can set up publishing houses by registration, it is not difficult to do it. Among them, seven thousand publishing houses publish at least a book per a year. In case of bookshops, we have 2,012 stores all over the country. Turnover of Korean book industry in 2019 was about seventeen million US dollars. That is the long sketch of our industry

HS: That is very interesting. How many publishers did you mention, Iroo?

IJ: Sixty thousand

HS: Sixty thousand?

IJ: Yes, sixty thousand publishing houses. Just by registering you can establish a publishing house in Korea.

HS: That's very interesting. That's a lot of publishing houses in Korea. And are they all part of the KPA?

IJ: No, because sixty thousand is too much. We have almost two thousand. Maybe seven thousand publishing houses publish at least one book per year. Those are the small publishing houses. But there are many.

HS: That's very interesting. That sound like a very strong publishing industry. That's very interesting.

Considering that it is a very strong publishing industry, that leads to my next question I wanted to ask because I remember you were mention on how you were coping with this crisis, with the pandemic. And while almost the rest of the world has been in lockdown for several weeks now, I understand from our conversations that that is not the case of Korea. That Is astonishing. Can you tell us more about this? Has the publishing industry been affected someway?

IJ: Actually, we never locked down shops over the corona crisis. Government recommended some pubs and dance halls to close for two or three weeks when there were corona patients. Public facilities closed for two months including museums and theaters. Schools also closed over the corona crisis. We have a plan to open high schools next week. However, private businesses are open all the time.

In case of publishing houses, some allowed their editors work in their own home for safety measures. However, most of our publishing companies are working as usual. That is the situation in Korea at this moment.

HS: That's very interesting. For example, bookstores didn't have to close at all. You could continue with business almost as usual?

IJ: Yes, that's right. Yes.

HS: That's very interesting. Do you think there has been any problems with the industry? Has the industry been somehow affected by this even though you didn't have to close?

IJ: It didn't have to close, but there should have been a small number of guests. Because some people fear the disease as well, the contagion. We had to keep the social distance between people. So there should have been a decrease of the number of the selling in the publication industry.

HS: Do you have any number of the decrease in sales?

IJ: Actually, we do not know exactly. I don't have the exact number at this moment, but the educational publishers had very difficult times because .... could not sell their books

to students properly. So they had a dramatic decrease in their selling. But in general, trading (trade) books, our turnover was almost like with normal time so it's a ... situation.

HS: While educational publishers were affected the most because of school closing, trade publishers were not affected?

IJ: Yes, that's right:

HS: Okay, That's very interesting.

So, what do you think about digital. What was the rough split of sales physical versus digital before the pandemic? Has that changed, even if you didn't have any lockdown?

IJ: In Korea, digital book takes just 5% in publishing industry. Still we cannot see obvious change for this share. What we can say, online bookshops which deliver books to readers by post become more popular before corona crisis. So offline bookshops, their sales decreased, but online bookshops their sales increased.

HS: That's very interesting. So even if bookstores were open, perhaps people were afraid of going out and preferred to buy books online?

IJ: Yes, that's right.

HS: Ah, okay that's very interesting.

Even if there was no lockdown, have there been any actions of your publishers, have publishers done anything to support society during the crisis? Even if you didn't have a lockdown, I can imagine you were also living in a kind of crisis and especially as you mention in education and elsewhere?

IJ: Yes, Korean publishers did three things during this Corona crisis. First of all, we sent books to quarantine facilities. KPA gathered books from member companies and sent them to quarantine facilities in Daegu. Many publishers independently sent books to people who needed help. Education publishers provide textbooks to students for free. For free for the time being, 2 or 3 months. Some publishers provided readers the loan of e-books without charge. We have a long list of publishers' support for the public in Korea.

HS: That's very interesting. It is impressive to know all these actions. I mean, even if you didn't have a lockdown, all the actions you took. And educational publishers, even if their sales were declining, that they did those actions, that is really interesting.

IJ: They tried to do their own social responsibility.

HS: We have been hearing stories from publishers all around the world within the IPA. We have been hearing stories similar to that. But that is really amazing; even in the midst

of a crisis especially for educational publishers, that they responded in such a way. That is really amazing.

IJ: That's different from other industries I think as well.

HS: Absolutely. That's why I am personally proud to be a publishers.

Iroo, we mentioned at the beginning that you are, besides being the Executive Director of the Korean Publishers Association, you are CEO of the Seoul International Book Fair. So, the Seoul International Book Fair, if I remember correctly takes place usually in June. I remember in a conversation we had recently you mentioned plans to go digital with the fair. Do you think it will be partially presential and partially digital, online? Or could you tell us more about this? I find this a very interesting subject because of so many book fairs being affected by the crisis.

IJ: We will build a new kind of bookfair. We will find out new way of book display on the net. Our new site will give readers a new way to enjoy books according to their preference. As you know, book display in bookfair is different from that of bookstore. Publishers decide how to show books to readers. We will make many ways to find out books for on-line site. In addition, we will apply gamification to our online bookfair. We started to talk with game companies to how to use their game engines for bookfair. However, it does not mean that we will totally move to online. We will make Seoul International Book Fair as an O to O (online to offline) Book Fair. We will invite selected readers to the seminars, exhibitions, and events. Other can enjoy same events at home by online. To secure time to develop programs and online tools, we will have our fair in September rather than June. So we postponed it to September.

HS: Ah, the fair has been postponed to September? Could you share the dates in September with us so that people can know when the dates will be?

IJ: End of September. We need time to develop all of these programs, websites and rearrange the events offline as well.

HS: I find it is really amazing how, if I understood correctly, you are teaming up and collaborating with technology companies, with game companies to produce better platforms for the book fair; better online platforms.

IJ: Yes, that is right. That is what we are doing in Korea now for the Seoul International Book Fair.

HS: That's very interesting. I am really excited. If a part of it will be online, I am very excited to be able to participate. I would prefer to go to Seoul of course, but this is becoming this year a bit complicated. But then you will be making it possible for people all over the world to participate online. I think it's great.

So, Iroo, do you think there will be any medium to long-term impact of the pandemic for the publishing industry?

IJ: I think we have to prepare for new normal. We cannot extinguish corona virus for the time being. Our scientists cannot tell when we conquer this corona virus. So we are vulnerable to other, new viruses as well. Therefore, we have to develop new ways to deliver our contents to our readers. Still I do not have the exact image of the future, new normal period. However, I can tell you, there will be changes in spatial structure of libraries and bookshops. They should have more spaces to keep distance between readers. In addition, we have to use un-contact (contactless), untact technologies more than before in the process of editing books and selling books. Bookfairs will be changed permanently. We might participate in Moscow bookfair as a guest of honor via online this September. Taipei bookfair asked us to be a guest of honor next February. However, we cannot decide anything at this moment. Still it is unclear what will happen tomorrow. We have to wait. It is difficult to tell anything for the future. Let's see what will happen. We have to wait, I think.

HS: Yes, you are right. That's very interesting, Iroo. I find particularly interesting how you put it. You mention that we will have to adapt to the "new normal". I think that is the expression you used. And I agree with you. We cannot see yet to what extent things are going to change, but what I think we can definitely foresee is that things will not go back to the old normal again, so will have to adapt to the "new normal", whatever shape that has in the future. And as you were mentioning, perhaps it is too early now to try to guess how that will look like. But definitely I think you mentioned digital will play a bigger role in our lives as before.

IJ: I totally agree with what you say.

HS: That's very interesting. I think that is something a lot of publishers around the world are asking themselves: how do we cope with this? Not only in the crisis, but also, as you mentioned, in the new normal. How do we get back to business again? Do we have to adapt to this whole new world which will emerging after the pandemic. I find it very interesting, so thank you for your insights on that.

IJ: You are welcome.

HS: So, to what seems to be my last question. Even without lockdown, can we speak of a recovery phase for the publishing market in Korea? What strategies do you have in mind for that recovery – or perhaps it is not recovery. Perhaps it is a growth phase? Of course, depending on what sector of the publishing industry. Apparently trade publishers were not affected, while educational publishers were heavily affected. So, what do you think the next steps will be for the industry in general?

IJ: As I told you, in terms of turnover, there was big damage for educational publishers. Because schools are closed, their revenue dramatically decreased. Even though we cannot exterminate corona, we have to open school in near future. After that, there will be recover for educational Publishers.

For trading book publishers, they have to adapt the changes by corona, new-normal period. Compare with Netflix and VOD providers, growth of publishing industry will be tiny. In Korea, over the corona period, VOD market expanded a lot. As always, publishing industry faces many difficulties in the future. However, we have history to overcome many difficulties as well. I would like to stand on the optimistic position. That is what I can say at this moment, Hugo.

HS: Very interesting, Iroo, thank you. I do think that even with difficulties that sometimes may seem unsurmountable, I think we have to remain optimistic of course and we have to do our best. We have come out of other crisis in the past as well and especially in Korea you have a very interesting history of overcoming difficulties. I totally agree with you in the way we have to remain optimistic.

IJ: IPA can play a very crucial role to gather the wisdom from all over the world and to spread that wisdom to individual publishers all over the world as well. You are in the centre of the publishing industry, Hugo, so you have to keep doing your role very well.

HS: Thank you, Iroo. And thanks to the efforts of all our members, but yes, that is something of course the IPA is of course trying to do: to spread all this knowledge, to share all this knowledge of what is going on in different parts of the world. And that is why I also think all your insights and your knowledge of what is happening in Korea will be definitely very interesting to publishers all around the world. So, thank you very much, Iroo.

IJ: Thank you very much. I will be expecting the stories from other places as well. Keep your interviews with the other publishers all over the world.

HS: Sure. We will continue, Iroo. So, Iroo, is there anything else you would like to add?

IJ: It's okay.

HS: Iroo Joo, Executive Director of the Korean Publishers Association, many thanks for being in this interview for the International Publishers Association. Take care, Iroo.