

IPA in Conversation with ...
José Ignacio Echeverria
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The current situation for publishing in Latin America
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Transcript

Bodour: Welcome to the series of interviews that IPA has put together for you this month. I am excited to be interviewing someone special. Before I start, I want to mention that all our interviews will be available on IPA website. My special guest today is José Ignacio Echeverria, known as Nacho. He is the president of the Grupo Iberoamericano de Editores which brings together representatives of publishers from Latin America, Spain and Portugal. He has been publishing director at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and managing director of empresa azteca for more than 35 years. He was also president of IPA's Mexican president CANIEM. It is a pleasure to have you here today. How is everything with you in Mexico? How is the publishing industry?

Well, it is rather difficult. The publishing industry has been slowing down for past five years and obviously, this pandemic is not helping at all. Sales have been going down by 20 % in past months, but this is something that is happening in all Latin America and Spain as well. But I think this is a worldwide situation.

Absolutely. We don't have the opportunity to meet during book fairs or the IPA Congress this year. Grateful to have this opportunity to connect via Zoom. Let me ask you about the Ibero-American publishing group. Tell me a bit more about this group, a long-time member of IPA. Who are your members, when was this group formed and what are the reasons for your association?

The group was initiated in 1979. There were four members, from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico. It started to make a group that would mirror the European Association of Publishers, with the intention to represent all countries in Latin America. At that time, it did not include Spain and Portugal. It had to do with a program the United States had at the time, the US Information Agency, with budgets for the translation of American books into Portuguese and Spanish language in Latin America. It was done to regulate that, otherwise it could become complicated. That program disappeared a long time ago unfortunately, because it was good for Latin American Publishers. After that it became an organization through which we tried to influence our governments to have policies to benefit publishers. Every country has a different attitude to these policies and we are 19 countries at this moment. So it is very difficult to say one policy, you have to go through different countries and regions to get an idea. The whole is that publishing

industries are suffering in this pandemic, but again, it has to be on a country by country basis.

It is a great opportunity to exchange information and ideas and suggestions, especially in this time of uncertainty. It helps to have this network that you can all consult and share best practices. It's wonderful to have this association in place right now. Can you give us some context on the publishing industry in Latin America – approximately how many publishers are there, how many book stores and can you give us some numbers on the turnover of the publishing industry last year, for example?

We are not very good with statistics in Latin America, so it will be difficult to give you a number for last year. Up to 2019, we had around 7000 publishers in Latin America, excluding Spain and Portugal. Around 4000-5000 book stores, which is a small figure, since we are about 400 million Latin Americans. For example, compared to Spain, Spain has about one book store for every 12- 14,000 inhabitants. Argentina has one for about every 40,000 and in Mexico less than one for 80,000 inhabitants. So it is a very bad distribution chain. Some of them are not even book stores, but paper stores and they sell some text books too. The distribution systems are very complicated. Mail is very expensive. It is cheaper to send a book from Spain to Paraguay than from Uruguay to Paraguay sometimes.

It sounds like our publishing industry. I am just nodding my head because I am seeing parallels to publishing industry in the Arab world – it is fragmented, we have problems with distributions and there are not enough book stores. About Mexico specifically: We've been under lockdown for months now. What has the situation been like in Mexico right now? Can you give us an idea where the main challenges are and also, where do you think there are opportunities for invention of our business models? Start about Mexico first and then generally about Latin America.

In Mexico we have a very wishy-washy situation. We are supposed to be in a sort of voluntary lockdown, but you can do whatever you want to do. We are supposed to be at home working, but there are some essential industries which did not close. Everything that has to do with the publishing industry is closed. Book stores are not open yet. Printing is also not working. Physically, there is little work in the publishing industry. General situation in Mexico: pandemic is slowing down according to government figures, but there are more deaths everyday. So we don't know how to match that. I would say that we do not have, in Mexico, a strategy to control this pandemic. So it is not helping at all. It is confusing, the government has decided not to have more tests done, which worldwide seems to be a way to work. So we don't have very precise figures. Some states around the country have really confronted the federal government.

What is it like specifically for the publishing industry? Any opportunities for changes in our business model?

Well, yes. I have been an advocate for change in our model of business. We have a model which is about 500 years old since Gothenburg started the mobile printer. It's time that publishers become more aware of the opportunities. This might be the chance for advancements. I see the publisher, not the publishing houses – in Spanish, editor is for publisher and publishing houses, it's a bit confusing. The editor, not the publishing house, I see him more as curator of contents, which decides whether you want to be published in

paper, audio, television, films, podcasts, whatever you have. I believe, a book in paper, print, will be lasting many years, but we have to have more vision and open ourselves to other possibilities. If not, other people will do it. We have the content, why don't we try to open it in other matters? That is for the content. As a publisher, you have to also look at ways of distribution. There are many different ways to get to the market now. You don't need a huge warehouse full of books, logistics of people working there, mixed inventories. I think that we have to look at things like publishing on demand. You send your PDF there and in Latin America you have maybe 5 plants, and they print for you. It's really changing the world. As for the kind of marketing we do, we have to be more aggressive. We have to look at libraries as a different kind of ally. Many libraries have changed, they have coffee shops, have more to offer. We have to make a closer alliance, but in a proactive way. We as a publisher, in theory, should have contact with your reader. It's like the medical industry. You go to the doctor, but he is not your consumer, it's your sick person. Library is not your client, but channel to reach consumer, the one who reads. We should have reading lists to reach these costumers. People who bought this book were also interested in, things like that. I think that's valid for all Latin America.

I have seen quite a few new good ideas come up with lockdown and the coronavirus pandemic, people are getting creative especially in marketing. I had a chat with a colleague in Nigeria and she told me they are using WhatsApp to do their marketing. I think that's a great opportunity. You mentioned print on demand as an opportunity to fulfill costumers needs. Do you see any increase in online sales of books? In ym publishing house in UAE, our online sales have gone up in past month because book stores were closed. Has this happened in Latin America?

Yes, it certainly has happened. We don't have figures because number 1 player in this does not release figures, so we don't really have an idea about what is going on. One thing that happened here in Mexico and which might be an idea, is that CANIEM had lots of meetings with book stores association. They publish every week a list of about 60 book stores which deliver books to you after you buy it online. This is helping local book stores and smaller publishers to reach the public. This year in february, just before big pandemic started. In Cuba, it is a specific situation regarding book exports. It's very difficult for them to export. One, because of embargo. And also because of the price, it's so expensive to send something by boat. I suggested that they should look at print on demand. You send a PDF which is very simple and then have 50 books published in San Francisco and 100 in Rio, which would also help the smaller publishers who have the most difficult time in this situation.

That is a good example. It's advice that people need to take into consideration now. Education system in Mexico and how has the government been coping with changes in online education? We are all grappling with online learning and trying our best as parents and publishers to meet the demand. How was Mexico responded to the change and have publishers contributed to online learning? System in place or challenges to overcome?

There were and there are many challenges. Not many were prepared to have a total online educational system. Here, we stopped schools around March 23. Recently, about a month ago, they started having online and television schooling. In a country like mine where not everybody has internet, it is very difficult. So there is television also. It's not only a problem of the media, which can be solved with more money. The problem is how does a teacher of

50 years old who has never been faced with this situation control what he wants to say, how he talks to the children. The houses are not very big, we have a lot of places where apartment is 40, 50 square metres, one computer if at all for the whole family – how do you handle that? It's not just a question about the system or the program, but the whole sociological thing. A lot of publishers have been freeing up their catalogue online so mainly children can have access to books online. Again, there are many places in my countries with no electricity or internet. I believe this is applicable to most Latin America.

I hear about these challenges in Africa as well, who are facing challenges because some areas are not connected. Access to devices and technology is minimal, let alone have a space to work. It's an opportunity for publishers to reconsider what they are offering and publishing to meet this new demand. Subject of book fairs: I know that Guadalajara is one of the biggest book fairs in Latin America. Many have been cancelled. What are the plans for Guadalajara later this year? And also, I personally want to know because Sharjah was meant to be guest of honour. I would love to be there, obviously.

I would love to see you there. Officially, the situation is that there will be a Guadalajara book fair. But it will be difficult, not only about what will be happening, but because of the attitude of the whole world, not just publishing, has: a very careful situation. Maybe the book fair this year will be a bit more local, less fancy as we are used to. But I am sure there will be big activity around it. I don't think we will be able to have thousands of people there every day, because that is not adequate. Apparently, there will be a reduction in space. If things go as they are, I see a difficult situation. Government there has been very proactive in facing coronavirus situation. I do hope that Sharjah will be able to be there. I am very frustrated as well because I was planning with CANIEM to have a seminar on Friday before the opening with 3-4 points regarding publishing industry in Latin America and I was hoping to focus on exchange between Arab world and Latin America. In a sense, we have a similar approach to many things. It was my idea, since February with the president of our Mexican chamber, so I was very excited.

If the flights are going, I will be there. It would be my pleasure to join you. I think we need that face to face contact after so many book fairs having been cancelled, we are missing that interaction. Fingers crossed. So, I want to talk a bit more about the pandemic. It is the topic of the day, everyone is talking about it. I don't know whether we know how much it has impacted publishing industry. How do you see this play out in the future? It has impacted our book fairs, sales have been affected, travel has been stopped, especially in term of selling rights. A lot of publishers depended on London and Bologna Book Fair to sell rights. What do you see in terms of Latin American publishing? Is the government doing something to support publishing?

It has had an impact on sales of rights. Now Frankfurt also will have a heavy impact on this. Governments have reacted on different merits. I don't know if this is just a Latin America phenomena, but in all of our countries politicians love talking about culture and books and how important they are for the lives of everybody in their countries or regions. But then they go, and what are the actions afterwards? Budget for culture in all of our countries has gone down, severely. In Mexico it has gone down more than 50 % in the last 5 years. How can you combine that there is really care for the publishing and cultural industries if the budget goes down. If they don't back publishers by buying books for libraries. In Mexico,

there has been a terrible blow for culture, this has been happening all over Latin America. In Brazil there is a definitive position against backing publishing industries. Again, mailing costs which depend on the government are high and there is no guarantee. There is no real backing for these cultural industries, particularly our industry.

It is important for governments to step up right now. We need all the support we can get right now. I have seen good examples in Germany and elsewhere and hope that other countries will follow as well. It has been a pleasure. One last question: We've seen a lot of people reading more books right now. What are you reading right now and what would you recommend that you can share with us?

Spanish woman author who has a series of 6,7 books about Spanish civil war. My parents were on the wrong side. I was born in Spain but we immigrated to Mexico. I am reading the last title, the daughter of Frankenstein. One thing I would like to say about reading: The Z generation, millenials, has been reading for years now on their smart phones and tablets. They do not have a challenge to change from paper to electronic, they are already electronic readers. It's not like my generation, I was born much before the digital age. I had to adapt, but I like it. That's something that we should take into consideration.

We should, and publishers should take this into consideration to look at digital. Chance to take a leap of faith and explore publishing in the digital form.

Looking at the music industry, we should start working on something before we start working against something. Not reactive.

That is good advice and brilliant to end this interview with. Thank you for your time. Hopefully we will have the chance to meet you.