

## **BOOKS IN TIME OF PANDEMIA: ROMANIA, ONE WAY AGAIN – FROM PAPER TO INTERNET?**

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### **Abstract**

The Book Industry has recovered very hard after the economic crisis of 2008-2012, and the continuing development of the internet technologies have forced the switch to the e-book constantly. And yet after a rapid increase in e-book sales in recent years their market has begun to decline. Under these circumstances, book publishers have been forced since mid-March 2020 to take measures to limit the effects of closing book-stores and libraries. In this paper I will present the main directions for resetting the global and national book market, the possible trends and the forecasted solutions for restarting this industry. In this paper there will be presented the results of a qualitative study about the way in which his crisis was perceived through the perspective of Romanian Bookstagrammers in direct connection with the reactions of the authors (both independent or from the system of large publishers) as well as the publishers. The interviews have highlighted the mode of action on social media, the possible changes in consumption habits: reading and buying books changed after the announcement of the state of emergency.

### **Keywords**

Book industry, e-book, pandemia, paper books, social media, bookstagram, Instagram.

### **JEL Classification**

M10, M31.

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### **Introduction**

The rapid increase in the number of readers through massive literacy in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, the rising standard of living in Europe and the United States, and the rapid development of printing technologies led to the sale of hard to imagine book. The twentieth century has led to the circulation of millions of copies, and successful authors of Paolo Coelho, Dan Brown or Sandra Brown can boast hundreds of millions of books sold from their entire work.

Initially, the advent of the Internet and the e-book seemed to destroy the book market and especially the paper book market. After several years in which e-book sales exploded, the market (especially in countries with a billion-dollar book industry) stabilized and then paper book sales began to grow again. As contradictory as it may seem, the screenings of literary works and the appearance of social media have generated an increase in the sale of books, mainly books on paper. There are still Western countries today, Denmark for example, where the electronic book is difficult to penetrate.

Another example of the victory of books on paper is the opening of bookstores of the Amazon conglomerate, but also the opening in recent years of many independent bookstores all over the world, with a deep socio-cultural role in those communities.

### **Literature review**

The types of book sales methods differ depending on the respective markets, the Anglo-American, the important West-European market, the Eastern European market, Asian, etc., based on geographical and socio-cultural criteria. Over 200 years physical bookstores have replaced the street vendors of the Middle Ages, bookstore chains have developed in the most isolated places in the world, in Iceland for example there is a network- the Eymundsson bookstores, from 1872 (Hrib, 2018).

The world book market has undergone a revolution not only as a result of the advent of the internet and the e-book, but also, perhaps especially, the explosion of new media, especially what we call today – the social media - Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc. All these new communication channels have changed the balance of power in the book market by tipping the balance from publishers, who have been negotiated to reduce your spending more and more to authors, who are increasingly involved in promoting their own books. If in the early 2000s there was a lot of talk about the profession of employee publicist of the publishing house - an average US publisher who published 75-100 books per year, had 2-3 people employed as a publicist (Warren, 2004), nowadays this occupation has moved to the area of free-lancer and is increasingly in direct contact with the authors.

Directly related to promotion, the sale of books has had to adapt to the speed of information flow and to the methods of rapid distribution through online bookstores and delivery by express courier.

The Romanian model did not copy any of the others, being an uneven mixture of free market with minor financing interventions from the state, uneven and incoherent system with successive changes over the years, because the state has no policies at strategic level to support culture. An example would be that in Romania there is a 5% VAT for books, and in Great Britain the VAT for books is zero.

Cultural, social and economic motivations - the years of dictatorship - with the publishing houses, reduced in number, owned by the state, the small number of titles and censorship - then the economic crises that slowed the natural development of the book market, superimposed over the development of the Internet, they caused a massive fall in the years of the economic crisis from 2009-2012, and the recovery was extremely slow.

Simona Kessler, the most important literary agent in Romania, states: “The book market has remained on an upward trend since 2012 and we could say that only after ten years it has approached the level of 2008” (Chivu, 2019).

The Romanian market did not use in promotion, for example, Anglo-American models, the announcement of Cover Reveal or as the Blog Tour - the succession of cascading reviews to promote a new title. It does not use, partially justified given the small size of the market, the ARC (Advance Reading Copy) model - which means sending a considerable number of free copies before the date of publication (Hrib, 2018) and has a different way of using social media - hardly communicates at all via Twitter, unlike English-language markets where it is used intensively and highly recommended (O’Byrne, 2015), which rather avoids the use of

Instagram. Thus, the built system is extremely vulnerable as external factors, in this case to the economic effects of the pandemic.

### **Methodology**

In order to evaluate the impact of the pandemic on the book market, we chose to conduct a qualitative research on the impact of the pandemic on the book market in Romania viewed through the eyes of Romanian Bookstagrammers. As a research technique in this case I chose to use the interviews sent by email to a number of Romanian Bookstagrammers, female, aged between 16 and 30 years, with over 1000 followers and more than a year experience in social media. In addition, I have selected three important actors with much more experience on several components of social media: well-known personal blogs and participants in activities related to the publishing market (Georgiana Vladulescu, Jurnalul unei cititoare), experience in publishing (translator and book editor: Liviu Szoke, Biblioteca lui Liviu) or social media professional (influencer: Cristian China-Birta).

I have chosen to use for this study also the opinion of an editor (Rebeca Cojocaru, editor in chief Tritonic) as well as that of a bookseller (Augusta Oniță, Libris). The latter should underline or, on the contrary, counterbalance the conclusions drawn from the interview with Bookstagrammers.

The 14 identical interviews (11 Bookstagrammers + 3 experienced actors) have been completed in April 2020. The questions were chosen in order to obtain complete and objective answers. The answers received have different dimensions, some questions were omitted answers and to focus the analysis I decided to avoid excessive enumeration and eliminate words or phrases that are not the subject of research and used only to emphasize sensations or feelings. I have tried to remain fully objective, but I have not used answers that do not relate to certain question or do not contain personal views. I avoided using impersonal or very general answers.

### **Results**

At the beginning of the interviews I have chosen the first question: When did you notice that there is something special on Instagram about the way posts (photos and texts) appear lately? All responses referred to the same time interval: changes in the content of posts on Instagram appeared immediately after the announcement of the state of emergency or at most one week later.

The second question was chosen much more specifically: Is the content of the photos different from the period before the emergency? But the speed of their appearance? All the answers were in the terms “the content is slightly different, but not much”. For example: @cristianchinabirta: “Most of the photos are contextual. By this I mean both those in the series stay at home, go out with the dog, go shopping etc.” and “the pace has increased” @bookworm\_in\_a\_cozy\_corner: “there are accounts that post three times a day.”). Mention a response that summarizes the situation: @jurnaluluneicititoare: “Some may feel more creative than usual, but it does not seem to me that their pictures are more elaborate or uploaded. Maybe just experiment more, with new angles or technologies, but nothing necessarily spectacular or special out of the ordinary. After all, it's about pictures with books, I think there is a limit to innovation in the field and it has long been reached on Instagram. I don't think it's different about speed (...).”

The third question has tried to detail the content of the posts: Do you think there are more posts in the period since the announcement of the state of emergency? Are they more elaborate, richer? I insisted with this question trying to find out exactly if there is any relevant change in the way the posts on Instagram were made. But if all respondents agree that there are more posts, opinions are divided on the content: four of the Bookstagrammers think they are richer, one thinks the story part has improved, two think the images are more elaborate,

but the rest think that there are no important differences. Two diametrically opposed opinions should be mentioned:

@emiliasreading: “I don't see a big difference between the posts before and after the declaration of the state of emergency, they seem the same.”

@ciobanuldeazi: “They also try to elaborate the topics, they discuss a lot about this state of emergency, they come up with ideas about what people should do more while they are at home, reading being a suggestion not only healthy, but also relaxing.”

The following two questions detail the relationship with authors and publishers: How do you feel about the relationship with the authors after announcing the state of emergency? Something has changed? If so, please detail. Three Bookstagrammers have no collaboration with the authors so they did not respond, two consider that the relationship is unchanged, the others said that the authors are much more open to readers and try to be more visible using social media methods:

@ciobanuldeazi: “I noticed many very nice initiatives, such as personal interaction with online readers. They post clips talking about their books, reading an excerpt from them, so they open the door to an open dialogue based on the book.”

A response that summarizes the situation is as follows:

@cristianchinabirta: “I see that there are two categories of authors. Some who understood that they have to make an effort to be visible and try how they can (some even spamming) during this period and those who totally laid down their weapons.”

The next question is: How do you see the relationship with the publishers after announcing the state of emergency? Something has changed? If so, please more details. This question sought to clarify how publishers are viewed. Six responses stated that they did not notice any changes in the relationship with the publishers. One refrains. Four states that publishers are more “active” and “communicate more with us readers” (@ deliaph.reads). Three categorical and detailed answers consider that the relationship has changed substantially in a negative way:

@bookworm\_in\_a\_cozy\_corner: “The relationship with publishers is different, in the sense that most have stopped collaborating with various bookstagram accounts or blogs, and, for now, focus only on online orders and opt for personal promotion, thus avoiding exposure of their employees.”

@citesc\_cu\_sufletul: “The relationship with the publishers has changed, unfortunately, and this is understandable, considering that the situation is critical. Many publishers have stopped collaborating and are now focusing strictly on online sales.”

@liviuszoke: “I saw several publishers complaining that the Romanian book market, which is so fragile and unstable, has collapsed; Not surprisingly, the economy itself has collapsed, and not just ours, and when unemployment and recession are announced, people no longer think about buying books, but whether they will have money left over from bills next month or if they will he still had a job; another problem is the eternal division between publishers, everyone does what they do on their own, there is no closeness, openness, desire to collaborate, creating a kind of union to represent their common interests in the relationship with partners; as in most cases, we seem like a divided people, whose eternal motto seems to be let me escape, that's all that matters, the rest, their problem.”

In conclusion, opinions are obviously divided and reflect the personal relationship, of course built before the state of emergency, of each Bookstagrammer with the book market and a number of publishers. We cannot thus issue a generalizing statement.

The next question is: Are you reading more books now? Why? What genre? The answers were almost unanimous (9 of them): “I read more because I have more free time and I did not change my preferences”. Three other answers stated: “I think I read the same as before”, justifying the fact that they kept their jobs and attended school classes. Two answers were extreme: one answer categorically confirmed the hypothesis: @cristianchinabirta: “Yes,

almost double. I stayed on the same reading habits, though. Contemporary Romanian authors, personal development, psychology, anthropology, history and fiction from various countries.” And another refuted the hypothesis of the article: @jurnaluluneicititoare: “My feeling is that I ended up reading less than before, because it’s much harder for me to sit still and be distracted by reality, when the reality these days is quite full of insecurity and fear, feelings which require quite a lot of attention.

We can conclude that the changes are predictable by the appearance of extra free time, but they will not cause a long-term change in consumption habits, because after lifting the restrictions the extra free time will disappear.”

The answers to the question “Are you buying more books now? Why? What genre?” were unanimous: No. There were two arguments: the financial one and I present the defining one: @bookworm\_in\_a\_cozy\_corner: “When it comes to buying books I’m on standby, financially I can’t afford to indulge as I normally would. Although all publishers have tempting offers, unfortunately I have to refrain from buying books, otherwise I would not be able to handle this critical period.” And the other was related to the existence in the library of many unread books and to the opportunity now arising to read these volumes: @one\_girl\_thousand\_books: “On the contrary, we have reduced book purchases. I had time to reconnect with my library and began reading unread books.”; @de\_vorba\_cu\_cartile: “I don’t buy more books now, I was ready and I have about 60 unread books in my library.”

It is important to note that none of the interviewees stated that the decision not to buy books was determined by the fear of being infected by physical objects that could have been in contact with sick people on the distribution route: courier, distributor, publisher .

The following answers have been given to the question “What kind of book are you buying: paper book or e-book? Has anything changed in your purchasing decisions after announcing of the state of emergency?” The answers to this question are unanimous: I buy a book on paper and very rarely or occasionally an e-book (@one\_girl\_thousand\_books: “I buy physical books, because I like to have them in my library at home...”). It is worth mentioning an answer that can anticipate future consumption habits in the Romanian book market: @jurnaluluneicititoare: “I almost never order an e-book and I do not plan to do it in the near future. Of course, if the market changes and the news that interests me will only come out in this format, I will adapt too (...).”

### **Conclusions**

Following the interviews, we can draw the following general conclusions. Although some accounts posted photos more often and with much more contextualized content, the changes were generally minimal. For various reasons, the lack of time or the mental state required for reading did not substantially increase the number of books read during this period. The consequences have been seen in the sales, as there was no substantial increase in sales volume, with most respondents considering that they had enough books previously bought to read. Besides, there are no changes in consumption habits regarding the type of book purchased. All the respondents prefer paper books, not e-books and they have not changed their preferred literary genres.

For the future or the a analysis of the Aftermath of the Romanian Publishing Industry, I have finally kept the answers to the last question, which, I consider as a possible radiographic answer to the title question: How would you assess the state of the book industry at this time from your position? Do you have any ideas to change / support / develop the book industry right now? The answers are also to this quasi-unanimous question: the state is “critical” (@citesc\_cu\_sufletul, @liviuszoke). Expressions are used such as: “large losses”, “postponement of appearances”, “the industry is on hiatus”. @citesc\_cu\_sufletul: “The only possibility to sell more books remained online, and my proposal would be to continue with different offers to encourage readers to continue buying books.”

An important clarification for this comes from @one\_girl\_thousand\_books: “At the moment I think the book industry is not a priority for many people.” There are three answers to the question of the support that the state should give to the book industry:

@jurnaluluneicitoare: “At the moment, the only people the industry can rely on are hardcore readers, those who have read anyway before and will always do so. It does not seem to me that new people can be attracted to reading during this period (...) Well, there is also the option in which the state could support the book industry. I don't think he will.”

@liviuszoke: “I would suggest that the government pay more attention to education and culture (...).”

@ciobanuldeazi: “...we hope that the Government will also get involved, the literature being absolutely necessary for both students and adults, and in these months the book needs financial support more than ever (...).”

A summary of the current situation, as well as the deeper causes for which this point has been reached, provides the following answer:

@cristianchinabirta: “This crisis, like any crisis, does not only show us the current situation, but especially how it came at this moment. In other words, the players in the book industry who did not have a strategy of building a strong brand and creating a community around the brand, now find themselves isolated (much like they were, in fact, in normal times, only then they did not they realized). Also, those who have built a professional digital presence over time, now get benefits (and are about the only ones). Suggestions: don't forget that any book is a product and that every product needs marketing. Better a poor horse than no horse at all.” For a point of view from inside the industry I received an answer from Rebeca Cojocaru, Editor-in-Chief of Tritonic: Do you think that publishing should be suspended during this period? If so, why not? She answers that “Editorial activity should not be suspended. It is a time when we should reorient ourselves. A period in which we can prepare new projects, to announce new titles, to print new titles, to try to get closer to readers and more, to honor online orders. (...) We cannot stop now, because this period will finally end and we must make sure that we have books that we can sell when everything reopens. At least it's a way to maintain the flow of knowledge.”

For an opinion on the distribution situation, I turned to Augusta Oniță, Libris Acquisition Director: “It is difficult to say what will happen in bookstores in Romania in the period after the cessation of emergency measures, it is very possible that readers will return gradually and initially in a smaller number. The cultural events that were until now part of the daily life of our bookstore, most likely will not be able to resume soon, and this clearly affects the dynamics of visiting and buying books in the short and even medium term. The book market is a very sensitive market in Romania, I think there will be a challenging period for everyone, not only for those who work in the field of books, but that does not mean that we will not find solutions to recover. “

Regarding the possible International tendencies, foreign publishers or authors have the same views, like the feature where Clemence Michallon discusses several authors whose books should have appeared in the same period, even if releases, including promotional tournaments, are suspended, books published as e-book versions or can be pre-ordered on the main online platforms (The Independent, 2020). It is obvious that not being a strictly necessary product, the paper books will not be distributed with priority during this period, but professional readers can support the market through paid pre-orders.

An option in which publishers would completely abandon paper books cannot be taken into account - in relatively small markets as the number of speakers of that language is not justified a translation only for a number of e-books sold at a much higher price. Also, the release of some or all of the free digital volumes would mean an exploitation of the author's work, as stated by Douglas Preston, president of The Authors Guild (New York Times, 2020) referring to the National Emergency Library initiatives, which digitized volumes still under copyright.

In conclusion, James Daunt, CEO of Barnes & Noble and managing Director of Waterstones, the largest retail bookseller in the UK, states “There are all sorts of reasons to think that the book industry is very much more resilient than many industries.” (Library Journal, 2020)

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