

Publishing Trends in the Contemporary Hungarian Book Market

Júlia Anna MAKKAI

Hungarology Studies Doctoral School
Babeş–Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
E-mail: julia.makkai@gmail.com

Abstract: *America and Western Europe has been dictating highly market-oriented editorial and book distribution trends in the Eastern European region. The Hungarian book market has been submitted to evident changes throughout the last fifteen years. Today, Hungary's smaller editors with a single profile and editorial and distribution activity hall-marked by old-school businesses are replaced by department stores and multi-profiled editorial enterprises. One of the main aspects of the modern bookselling is the conquest of marketing and PR (public relations). Today, the mercurial market has a different definition of the task of the editors and the writers. Besides writing, the author also has to participate to advertising the book. More and more editors encourage the authors to use the social media to promote themselves and the book, and to go to festivals and writer-reader meetings. My paper presents the nature and tendencies of the contemporary Hungarian publishing and book distribution trends.*

Keywords: *trends, publishing and book distribution, Hungary, PR-public relations, online selling.*

America and Western Europe has been dictating highly market-oriented editorial and book distribution trends in the Eastern European region. (Schröder 2015) The Hungarian book market has been submitted to evident changes throughout

the last fifteen years. Today, Hungary's smaller editors with a single profile and editorial and distribution activity hallmarked by old-school businesses are replaced by department stores and multi-profiled editorial enterprises. One of the main aspects of the modern bookselling is the conquest of marketing and PR (public relations). Today, the mercurial market has a different definition of the task of the editors and the writers. Besides writing, the author also has to participate to advertising the book (Kinberg 2014). More and more editors encourage the authors to use the social media to promote themselves and the book, and to go to festivals and writer-reader meetings. My paper presents the nature and tendencies of the contemporary Hungarian publishing and book distribution trends.

Phenomena like the editorial activity of the Alexandra book emporium, the high-paced expansion (then cessation) of the Ulpius-ház, the conquest of Bookline.hu lead us to the conclusion that the Hungarian editorial and book distribution scene seems to have shifted through the past 25 years. Smaller editors with a single profile and editorial and distribution activity hallmarked by old-school businesses seem to be replaced by an editorial practice directed by market logic. This consumer-oriented trend inspired the topic of this paper, since the company policy of the publishing houses influences the selling, and the books that are sold influence and shape reading habits, needs and public taste. Nowadays, the themes and authors of some of the more popular books are assigned by the market and the mass-media (Wallin and Maceviciute 2014).

The operation of the contemporary Hungarian book selling market is focused towards three large book trading companies: the Libri-Shopline Company, the Alexandra group and the Lira Books Corporation. As a result of the 2013 merger of the Libri Publishing House and Book Trading Ltd. and Shopline Web Shop Plc. (that also runs the largest home online book web shop: Bookline), the Libri-Shopline Company was created, an exchange listed public limited company. Publishing houses belonging to Libri's sphere of interest (Libri, Park, Trubadúr, Kolibri, Helikon, Diafilm and Bookline) have received a platform in Libri's shop network according to their market shares. The merger also owns a commercial sector (members are online book trading enterprises and web shops like Libri, Shopline, Bookline, Libri Antikvárium, Liners and eKönyv) and a media branch (Port.hu, Fidelio, Bóbita, Színház.hu). After the merger, some publishers of Libri-Shopline left the Hungarian Publishers' and Booksellers' Association¹ (HPBA), a decision that was meant to be a message among Hungarian publishers and book traders. Their

1 The HPBA is the Hungarian editors' and book traders' market and advocacy organisation, one of the oldest professional organisations of Europe. HPBA has approximately 140 members, companies in Hungarian, foreign or joint ownership. See: Magyar Könyvkiadók és Könyvterjesztők Egyesülete, <http://www.mkke.hu/tortenet>, 13 September 2016.

secession, the Hungarian book sector has somewhat become polarized between the HPBA and Libri-Shopline. The directors of the company have expressed, in several interviews, their concerns about the professional operation of the Association. They sensed the lack of modern changes in organizing professional events in the book sector, in the communication of the association, and in the lobby of validating professional interests (Rostás, Ruff 2014; "Egy cégcsoportban...", 2013).

The another, aforementioned relevant actor of the Hungarian book sector is the Alexandra group, which has significantly and visibly expanded over the last decade, nationwide. Behind the curtain of building the wide shop network and the opening towards editorial activity hide some grave financial problems, as various media sources later revealed. According to the experts, the large-scale developments have caused the company's problems, since the executive of the company spent a high percent of the incomes on these. Over the last few years, significant increase has not occurred in sales rates. On the other hand, the amount of outstanding debts towards publishers has accumulated, influencing the printing houses, the authors and the entire Hungarian book market (Jankovics, 2014; "Irtózatós nagy gáz van...", 2014).

Changes in the management and management strategy have occurred at several publishing house members if the Lira group, e.g. at the Magvető Publishing, which has been elected five times the publishing house of the year over the last decade by the profession. Important Hungarian authors like Péter Esterházy, László Krasznahorkai, Imre Kertész, Lajos Parti Nagy and Pál Závada have published their books here, but the company also worked with the studies of Péter György and the translations of Gabriel García Márquez's and Ljudmila Ulickaja's novels. In March 2015, Krisztián Nyáry, literary historian and communication specialist (whose series, posted in installments on Facebook, about famous writers' loves has appeared in book format) took over the administration of the publishing. The goal of the publisher house, as stated in their press release, is: "to make the relationship between the readers and the authors more colorful and rich, hence proving that high culture can flourish among market conditions, too." (Nyáry Krisztián lesz..., 2015).

This structure, though schematically presented, basically represents today's Hungarian book market, and has received a lot of criticism. The structure, according to the HPBA is overly centralized, more than a hundred smaller publishing houses work with three book distributors that basically cover the entire Hungarian market. This centralization annihilates the variegation of the market, because many publishers already belong to a given distributor, and even the independent ones need to accommodate to the conditions imposed by the large ones (Kifakadt a Librire..., 2014).

In Western Europe and America, thanks to the e-technology, the book market has reached special levels, e-books, e-book readers and web shops dominate

the market. Amazon, the global leader web shop sells at least as many electronic books as printed materials, furthermore, its most saleable product, Kindle (e-book reader) has generated more sales with its own online store than its paper-based versions. (Frunteş 2015) In Hungary, by comparison, e-book sales are much more reduced, web shops like Bookline, Alexandra online, Libri online and Líra online, on the other hand, make up a significant portion of the total market.

These book stores and publishers are trade oriented, which means that they have an open editorial profile, they deal several genres: contemporary Hungarian and international literature, fiction, educational books, children's books and comics (this includes the Libri group with members like the Helikon publisher and the Líra group with the Magvető). The owners of these enterprises believe in diversification (Szekeres 2011; Szarka 2014); besides dealing several genres, the leader book traders try to also enter the editorial market (e. g. the Alexandra group).

Along and due to these trends, the audience has also changed, this can be sensed in the types of the more popular genres. Starting from the '90s, the novel as genre has gained more and more respect in the eyes of the critics, but even more, the readers. Nowadays, people read less short stories and novelettes, but in the recent years, the appearance of genre hybrids can be observed, like the mingling of popular (or considered to be popular; alternative either way) and belle-lettre styles (Szarka 2014). A characteristic example can be András Cserna-Szabó's novel.

According to book traders, there is a certain, ever-narrowing intellectual layer that follows and buys the products of the contemporary literature, but the vast majority of the readers seek easier, more readable books for entertainment and leisure. The majority of the consumers are women. Surveys show that those Y-generation women (in their twenties and thirties) shape the book market that has grown up on the Harry Potter-series. They have a considerable impact on the sales indicators of thrillers, psycho-thrillers and young adult novels. According to specialists, women consumers are a priority group, since their purchasing power is growing in the upcoming years (women are the main buyers of the nonfiction genres related to health, diet and gastronomy) (*A Harry Potteren szocializálódott...*, 2016). After recognizing this target group category, editors aim certain genres at them, and these are capable of creating a reader base comparable in number to the light novels' reader base, "as long as they address the voice, the sensation and problems of the age, which speaks about present topics to the man of the present, the man that searches not only aesthetic pleasure, but the meaning of the world in literary works, just as always in the history of literature." (Wekerle, 2014). Editors, in order to fulfil these requests, started to specialize on light novels, popular literature and bestsellers, e. g. the *Ulpus-ház*, whose zippy expansion was followed bycession at the end of the last year (they published re-editions of the works of György Méhes, the novel of Zsolna Ugron, whose second edition was taken over by Libri).

This ever-changing market re-interprets the roles of the editors and the authors, the author, besides writing the book, also has to undertake a part of advertising the book. More and more editors call for the writers to use the social media to promote themselves and the book, to engage in media coverage, to go to festivals and to meet with the readers. Critical reception and professional acknowledgment define popularity, e. g. the KönyvesBlog usually labels books as “Book of the year” (last year, György Dragomán’s third novel, Máglya – Bonfire – was voted the “most anticipated book” by KönyvesBlog). There are platforms to bring contemporary literature closer to laymen, they offer reading suggestions, they compose “hit lists” according to sales. The Libri group has created the “Libri literary prize” and the “Libri public’s choice award”, which can only be received by living Hungarian authors, along with the possibility of a significant media support that can be used in promoting any of their books (Rakovszky és Bartis a Libri-díjas, 2016).

Book publishers that have published the volumes I have analysed (Ulpius, Libri, Magvető, Kalligram, Helikon), have also started to surrender to this editorial practice aimed on producing marketable belle-lettre, and focused on competition. In the market competition, counting up to tens of thousands in number of copies, one has to accommodate to the expectations that have been set up by the readers, or, if you shall, consumers.

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