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Print On Demand: @Bringing Writers and Readers Closer to Each Other

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APPREB Home

Print-on-Demand Emerged in Sweden

@First some basic facts to understand why Print-On-Demand (POD) has emerged in Sweden.

@Sweden is one of the richest countries in the world. In the very north of Europe it has been living in peace for more than 200 years. Sweden managed to escape two world wars and has always been very keen to stress its neutrality in its foreign policy. Today, however, Sweden with its 9 million inhabitants has become member of the European Union (EU). It is still too early to conclude what this means for Sweden as an independent country but as EU is a political project this will certainly affect the traditional Swedish foreign policy. Sweden has become an integral part of Europe. This will also have an impact upon the Swedish cultural climate.

@Today Sweden is extremely influenced by Anglo-American culture; in fact Sweden is living under the same cultural shadow as Canada, a country that has a lot in common with Sweden in spite of the geographical distance. The whole public life of Sweden is still under strong American domination: on the TV you find the same soap operas and in the book stores the same piles of American bestsellers. About 80% of all translated books on the Swedish book market come from the Anglo-American hemisphere and only 20% from the rest of the world, including Europe! In order to guarantee that Swedish books appear on the Swedish market, a literary state subsidy has been introduced. All books of quality benefit today from this system. Also the distribution of quality books to the bookstores and libraries are today supported by the Swedish state.

@Anglo-American domination might be balanced in the years to come since the impact of the European Union will increase. As Sweden today has become a multinational country with about one million immigrants from many parts of the world, one would think that the book market should be more diverse. But still the dominating book chains have very little place for cultural diversity. Selling the most popular titles in as many copies as possible has become the commercial ideal. Instead the public libraries have become important literary institutions, also for our immigrants. Every year more than 100,000,000 (one hundred million) books are being lent out free of charge. Statistically it means 10 book loans per capita!

@The heavy commercialisation of the book market and of the ordinary Swedish publishing houses has created demands for a new type of publishing. Many writers suddenly found themselves being locked out from their publishers if they don't fit in to the marketplace. Therefore a growing number of writers have turned to Print-on-Demand (POD) as a new method of publishing and distributing their books. Also in other countries around the world you will today find the same development. In Japan a group of writers are recently setting up a new digital publishing house to combat the market forces. In fact POD has become a necessary weapon to safeguard the freedom of speech and cultural diversity that is threatened not only by poverty in the third world but also by financial monopolies in the rich world.

Advantages and Disadvantages of POD

@ So what are the advantages of POD? First of all, it is a way of printing small, tailored editions at reasonable costs. A print-on-demand machine can be described as an advanced photocopy machine that in minutes prints out a formatted book including binding and covering. The manuscript can be delivered to the POD machine by Internet as a PDF file; a format that does not change on its way from the computer to the POD machine. This is indeed a very light form of printing as you minimize the devices needed and still are able to produce real books.

@ And the disadvantages? First of all the price of the POD machines. If you want a Xerox machine it costs a lot of money and also needs experts to handle it. This means that the cost of printing is much higher than

ordinary offset printing. On the other hand you don't have to print more copies than you can use; print on demand means that you only print a copy when you demand a copy. If you only have need for a limited edition POD publishing is much cheaper than ordinary offset where you must print and sell a considerable edition before you get back your costs. But now a new generation of small and handy POD machines are entering the market.

@ One example is the InstaBook machine that is manufactured by Mr. Victor Celorio in Florida, USA. This handy machine is the size of a small breakfast table and consists of a laser printer and a cutting and binding section and operates automatically. The only thing that you must do by hand is the covering but that part will also be built into the system in the future. The construction of the machine is very simple and anyone can learn how to operate it in twenty minutes. The production cost per copy is also very low; less than one USD for a book of 200 pages. Mr. Celorio is now introducing InstaBook on the Canadian book market, offering the machine to independent bookstores. The idea is that the machine will print out books while the client is waiting; a sort of literary vending machine! You may visit InstaBook on the net: www.instabook-corporation.com.

Activities of PODIUM

@ In Sweden a group of writers has started, with the support of a cultural foundation, a digital publishing house called PODIUM (www.podium.nu). It is a cultural-political experiment aimed at investigating how POD technology can be used to broaden the range of quality Swedish and foreign literature. Books which through their relatively low demand (for example, because the publication language is spoken by a few people within a geographically limited market) or literature that has a slow distribution rate-and cannot for financial reasons be printed-here has a chance.

@ Using POD technology, the book's original is stored digitally and is not printed until it is ordered. With such an innovative approach, no books are printed unnecessarily, avoiding the problem of storage costs and safeguarding backlist titles. So far PODIUM has published almost 50 titles within the genres of prose, classics, lyrical poetry, non-fiction, children's and young people's literature, drama and titles in foreign languages for immigrants living in Sweden. It has also built up an extensive publication list of its own professional authors and created a distribution system consisting of some 50 affiliated bookstores within the country and also in the Finnish island of Åland and in Oslo (Norway). The books can be ordered either in these bookstores or directly from PODIUM's homepage.

@ To summarize, the most important achievements we have obtained by our POD publishing are:

- ¥titles aimed at narrow, specific groups (titles with a limited readership, e.g. drama)

- ¥backlisted titles

- ¥titles that require continuous updating

- ¥titles with a slow rate of distribution

- ¥titles in foreign languages (with the possibility of international distribution on the Internet, so-called 'distance publishing')

- ¥international joint productions

- ¥exchange of titles with print-on-demand houses around the world

Distance Publishing

@ An especially significant aspect of POD publishing is "distance publishing". The fact that you can print out books in any place in the world opens great new possibilities for meeting new readers. PODIUM has, among other titles, published a bilingual Swedish-Japanese anthology of Haiku poems in Stockholm and Tokyo simultaneously. We have also published a Kurdish-Turkish dictionary, the first one of its kind, that today can be printed out everywhere in the world where the Kurds live but also in Turkey in spite of the political resistance. As a method to manifest freedom of speech nothing can compete with POD. Another quality is that POD guarantees cultural diversity. Thanks to POD books in less diffused languages can today reach readers across the world. New poetry from South India can suddenly find readers in Stockholm and Oslo.

Palestinian poets can find their way to small publishing houses in London or Copenhagen. The literary diversity of Asia can through POD be known, translated and loved in Europe and other continents. In the near future, which is already here! we will experience virtual book fairs, not the net. Perhaps there is already a site where you can order POD books from all over the world. A site where you click yourself from country to country and from genre to genre until you find a title that interests you. And then you order it to be published near your home!

POD for Writers and Publishers

@Also for the writers POD already today represents a great challenge. During the last decade, when history speeded up in Europe and the Berlin wall fell, two new centres for writers and translators were created on the Swedish island of Gotland (1993) and the Greek island of Rhodes (1996). Both centres were the results of two historic literary cruises with writers and translators from the whole of Europe (east and west). On these two beautiful islands these centres offer working studios and meeting places under the auspices of UNESCO. Next step is to introduce POD as a way to communicate all the literary works that are carried out there today!

@ Still the commercial publishers, at least in Sweden, hesitate to use POD as a tool in commercial publishing. There are many reasons for this attitude. First of all, POD is not designed for bestseller printing. But it could be successfully used for printing backlist titles and there are some big publishing houses that have chosen to do so. POD could also be a way to test the market. There is an example of a title in France that started as a text on a website, then was printed out as a POD book and finally appeared as an offset printed bestseller. For the reader it does not matter in what way a book is printed. The main thing is that it is a book that speaks to him.

To try to find as many ways as possible from as many writers and cultures as possible to as many readers as possible-this is what cultural diversity is about!

Peter Curman

Born 1941, he is former President of the Swedish Writers' Union (1987-1995) as well as a poet. He has worked as a literary critic in several Swedish newspapers, and as editor-in-chief of the cultural sections of 'Stockholms-Tidningen' (1981-83) and 'Aftonbladet' (1983-87). Initiators of Literary Centres for writers and translators of Gotland (Sweden) and Rhodes (Greece). Today he is the President of the Swedish Joint Committee for Literary and Artistic Professionals (KLYS).

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