



Public Engagement in Canadian Book Publishing

A Response to the Canada Council's "Public Engagement in the Arts"

The members of the Association of Canadian Publishers, representing independent, Canadian-owned publishers of English-language books, congratulate the Canada Council on publication of its discussion paper, "Public Engagement in the Arts." This is a timely consideration of an important issue for the cultural sector today.

The Association of Canadian Publishers is the national voice of Canada's independent English-language book publishers. Our 120 members are drawn from all ten provinces and Nunavut. They publish in every genre, and serve literary, trade, educational, scholarly, and specialty markets. Public engagement is at the core of publishers' activities; increasingly, over the past four years, it has become a core focus for the ACP as well, as manifested in the National Reading Campaign, the 49th Shelf, and eBOUND Canada. All of these initiatives are intended to foster public engagement, from the most fundamental act of reading, to the application of technologies that enable new kinds of communication among authors, readers, publishers, and the public at large.

Supporting a Reading Public

The act of reading is the primary means through which the public engages with the literary arts. Reading is an essential component in a host of social benefits upon which a civil society depends: education, participatory democracy, critical thinking and analysis, and the ability to know and understand others. It is essential that Canada as a sovereign nation, through all its institutions, maintain and nurture a culture of reading. The Canada Council's support of literary arts and publishing has played a crucial role in this process, and must continue to do so. Many (perhaps most) Canadians encounter the arts for the very first time as babies, when their parents read to them. Reading remains an important activity at all stages of life; recent research conducted by BookNet Canada reveals that more than 50% of Canadian adults read books several times a week, with close to 30% reading books daily. When magazines and newspapers are also considered, the numbers are even higher (*The Canadian Book Consumer*, BookNet Canada, 2012, p. 53). The National Reading Campaign, supported by the ACP and the Canada Council since the inaugural Reading Summit in 2009, strives to sustain that primary connection, and to ensure that reading remains integral to the lives of all Canadians, at all ages.

Building Community

Historically, Canadian book communities grew up anchored by three local institutions: independent bookstores, schools, and libraries. The first of those is fast disappearing from the landscape; the other two are under intense pressure as a result of funding constraints and other challenges. Public libraries are in many places being forced to reduce their open hours. Many school libraries are not managed by professional librarians, and are unable to provide students with the current, relevant, high-quality literature they need and deserve. As a result, the nature of community in the context of Canadian readers has changed; physical spaces where readers gathered to hear authors read, to find new books, to discuss them with other readers, are far fewer than they were twenty-five years ago. These shifts represent a significant challenge to Canada's ability to engage the public in the literary arts, and to maintain Canada's place as a premier producer of excellent writing.

Publishers have worked with school and public librarians on a number of initiatives that work against these trends. The "tree awards," a series of provincial and regional children's book programs, bring classrooms and school book clubs together to discuss the nominated titles each year; the excitement about reading and books instilled in students of participating schools is palpable and inspiring. The TD Summer Reading program, funded in part through

the private sector, encourages children of all ages to connect with books through their public libraries; again, the results are hugely positive. But these programs are not uniformly adopted across Canada, and not all Canadians can benefit directly from them. They need the means – in both financial and public policy terms – to extend throughout the country. Investment in programs like these would do much to increase the exposure of children and youth to Canadian literature, and in turn foster a population of lifelong readers. As bricks-and-mortar retail spaces disappear, libraries are more vital than ever as a forum for community-building and public engagement in the literary arts.

At the same time, digital technologies and the social media which they enable have created enormous opportunities to establish different kinds of public engagement in Canadian books, new kinds of communities, and new roles for readers and the public at large.

The ACP's 49th Shelf is an example of an online community that has grown up around Canadian-authored books. It was created primarily to address the challenge of decreasing discoverability for Canadian-authored works, as retail space for books shrank overall and what remained was increasingly dominated by a narrow range of (mostly American) commercial fiction and celebrity biographies. As online bookselling grew in size and reach, it mirrored the trend toward promotion of top sellers, to the detriment of the vast majority of books published, and particularly of Canadian titles. At the same time, space for book reviews has declined, prompting publishers to seek alternate channels through which to introduce readers to new works. In its efforts to counter the effects of these developments, the 49th Shelf developed a following of readers who now exchange opinions and reactions to Canadian writing, share recommendations and updates, communicate directly with authors, and participate in an online community that celebrates Canadian-authored books.

Extending the reach of Canadian writing

The introduction of ebooks has made it possible for Canadian books to reach many more readers at home and around the world. Recent research informs us that boys – a segment of the public whose reading had been steadily declining in recent years, in tandem with their academic performance – who read ebooks are now reading more books for pleasure (*Kids & Family Reading Report*, Scholastic/Harrison Group, 2013, p. 8). People of all ages who use e-readers report reading more books overall than those who read only in print, and 30% of those who read digitally report spending more time reading than they did in the past (*The Rise of e-Reading*, Pew Research Centre, 2012, p. 4). Although these surveys reflect American populations, it is reasonable to expect similar results within Canada. Those with visual impairment (or other disabilities that make print books unusable) now have access to materials previously unavailable to them. The ACP is participating in the TIGAR project of the International Publishers Association, which facilitates access across national borders and copyright restrictions for those with disabilities, through multinational exchange of ebook files.

EBOUND Canada, the ACP's ebook initiative, is at the heart of these developments in Canadian publishing. In assisting publishers to navigate the uncharted waters of ebook production, promotion, and distribution, eBOUND has helped to ensure maximum exposure of Canadian writing to readers at home and abroad, and to bring new sectors of the public into the realm of Canadian literature.



Expanding the conversation

Written communication in this century far exceeds anything the world has known before. The mechanical aspect of writing is easier than at any time in the past, for those who have access to computer technology, and the dissemination of digitally produced content can be far less expensive than print distribution. Powerful search engines allow people to compile a great deal of information on any area of specific interest. Platforms such as Goodreads and 49th Shelf offer curatorial functions. Anyone can be a writer, and any writer can be a publisher. The implications for professionals in the literary arts are a subject of ongoing discussion in the book world, as publishers, authors, readers, and members of the general public all reconsider their roles in the publishing process and the criteria that define them.

The question of self-publishing continues to evolve, as technology enables a proliferation of authors who eschew traditional contracts. Those who do opt for traditional channels are now often expected to conduct more of the marketing activity themselves, through their social media networks. And as traditional reviewing media disappear, readers are providing the critical opinion that guides other potential readers, as professional reviewers and other experts once did.

The roles of professional author and publisher may evolve in new ways over the years ahead; nevertheless, members of the ACP strongly believe that the value professionals bring to the process will always be the foundation of a healthy and diverse body of Canadian literature.

Conclusion

Book publishing, like all areas of arts and culture, has experienced unprecedented change in the past ten years. Most of the changes are rooted in technology, either directly, as in the proliferation of ebooks, or indirectly, as in the decline of bricks-and-mortar retail fuelled in part by the rise of online alternatives. Each change presents challenges for authors or publishers or both, but all of them arise from a process in which the public has become increasingly engaged in the creation, production, dissemination, and evaluation of writing in general.

These developments are affecting every aspect of our work and the way the public engages with it, and we must understand the nature of their engagement in this new environment. To that end the ACP is working with a range of other organizations in the writing and publishing sector on public-opinion research to understand the place of reading and writing in all aspects of Canadians' lives, and the value they place on the written word.

It is the job of literature, as with all art forms, to lead and not to follow. In order for Canadian writing to flourish, it cannot merely reflect back our world back to our citizens, or reinforce popular points of view or trending tastes; it must provoke new ways of understanding the world and ourselves, identify and promote new perspectives, and encourage new ways to express ideas. This is the core mission of independent publishers.

Public engagement is something book publishers have always sought. We are eager to work with the Canada Council in the months ahead, in exploring the implications of public engagement in the arts, and the means by which to further it.