

## **Book statistics – what are they good for?**

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### **1. Introduction**

In his book on the summer of 1927, Bill Bryson declared that the 1920s were ‘very possibly a peak decade for reading’. As radio was still in its infancy and television not yet in service, ‘reading remained for most people the principal method for filling the idle time’ (Bryson, 2013, 47). US publishers produced 110 million books and ‘more than ten thousand separate titles’ each year (ibid). With a population of around 110 million inhabitants the country saw production of one book per inhabitant.

Nearly ninety years later, in 2016, the US book industry produced around 300,000 titles (over one million with the inclusion of self-published titles) and the number of copies sold in the trade market in both electronic and print formats was around 1.1 billion. (AAP, 2017) The population had reached 325 million inhabitants and book production was over three books per inhabitant. This growth in production took place alongside the arrival of social media and the internet and in a media ecosystem overflowing with choice from games to TV. Yet nobody is talking about a golden age of writing and reading; instead, the death of the book remains stubbornly on the agenda (Kovač, 2016).

What can we learn from this discrepancy between book statistics and our everyday experience of books and reading? If we travel by subway or bus to work, we do not see many people reading books; they are more likely scrolling through social media on their smartphones, or playing games. Yet declaring a given period to be a golden age may have more to do with emotion than with the real

data; the same may apply to prophecies about the end of the book, which have been around for nearly 500 years.

The use of statistical data in such discussions offers focus: if the end of the book continues to be discussed in a period when levels of book production remain high, there must be other factors fuelling the discussion. We could argue that it is more likely the social and cultural role of books that has changed and not the intensity of book production. Competition from other media is driving a significant amount of cultural angst. For example, the novelist Robert Harris suggests that the novel is less central in our culture today than it was 40 years ago.

There were no videos, there was no way of accessing this culture ... now we've got the box set which takes 10 or 12 hours to view a series. ... that's the same length of time it takes to read a novel and my impression and certainly my own habit is that these series are pretty sophisticated, a lot of them, and they are, in many ways, our modern novel and they're more central in our culture – you hear more people talking about *Breaking Bad* or whatever it might be, *The Americans*, than you do about a novel. (*The Bookseller*, 4 September 2017)

The incompatibility of our cultural angst with the current book statistics does not mean that there is no grain of truth in the idea that the book is in decline. If we could produce exact statistics on manuscript production and printing in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, they would very likely show that the production of manuscripts was at its historic peak and the role of printing was statistically insignificant (Febvre and Martin, 1958). The comparison with the levels of book production in the early days of the internet in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is suggestive.

Today it could be argued that the production of fiction is at an all-time high given the proliferation of self-published titles and literature available online. But these works are not necessarily turned into

printed books. Of course a TV box set starts out as a script, even if this is not usually a text for reading. Stories thrive in forms and formats that are hardly ever turned into a printed book, or even a digital version of a book, with a clear-cut beginning and an end. In China, online writing and reading platforms have found audiences in their millions, and this trend was picked up less by traditional publishers and instead by internet and mobile companies. The most successful online authors are now able to exploit their properties across both traditional and digital media. Tencent, a Chinese tech giant serving social communities online, raised over 1 billion US dollars in fresh capital for expanding its community of 6.4 million authors through going public on the Hong Kong stock exchange (*Financial Times*, 7 November 2017). Meanwhile Hachette Livre, a traditional publishing corporation with offices around the globe, has engaged in a partnership with Wattpad, a self-publishing platform with 60 million registered users, in order to exploit popular works of fiction in, for example, audio form (*Publishers Weekly*, 15 March 2017).

Nevertheless, if the prophecies of the death of the book do start to become true, surely statistics will have to show a significant drop in book production and consumption. The main point of this paper is that any discussion about the role of the book in contemporary society should be backed up by data on basic trends, especially now that reading is increasingly of shorter than book-length texts. This data will not only allow us to analyse changes in book production but also to observe the evolution of the media landscape. Further we will better understand the prejudices and emotions that arise from the latter development. However, this is currently almost mission impossible as there is no standardized methodology, or standardized definitions, that would allow comparisons to be made amongst national book industries and generate an overview of global trends in publishing and reading.

Why is this the case? From Gutenberg on, book publishing was considered an economic activity, yet among cultured and learned audiences book content was seen as something above the sordid realities of the market. Public libraries and low or even zero VAT on books were invented in order to loosen the grip of market forces on the dissemination of knowledge and culture in book format. Therefore, a significant element of book statistics – predominantly in the area of library loans, reading habits and the use of books in education – was traditionally seen as something belonging to the cultural sector. By contrast economic statistics on publishing were left to publishing associations and – in some countries – to chambers of commerce. Often there was a failure to produce detailed statistics on book production and publishing revenues. One of the main reasons for this was the complexity of the data: As noted by Clark and Phillips (2014), the book industry operates with a number of different products (titles) that significantly exceeds the number of lines in a shopping mall. Further, books are often (depending on the country) sold through a variety of channels in a huge number of retail outlets. Until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was no technology that would enable an up-to-date database of such book sales, and publishers had to accept a large number of unsold copies in order to ensure the presence of a book across retail channels.

Publishers had also been involved in a varied set of activities. Again depending on the country, some publishers owned bookstores or even bookstore chains and, besides publishing books, they were involved in other types of publishing, printing or merchandizing. As a result, in many countries throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was almost impossible to produce exact data on book sales and separate the turnover derived by publishers from books and other activities. With the exception of data such as the number of published titles, the available evidence remained limited. All this started to change with the advent of digital technologies and in most advanced book markets it suddenly became possible to follow retail book sales on a daily basis, giving publishers and booksellers the information to target more effectively the right audiences. In combination with the arrival of digital

printing and the growth of online sales, data became an important tool in the optimization of publishing processes. Nevertheless, such data generation required IT investments that only the big players could afford: the entrance of Nielsen into the book market, the growth of Amazon, and increasing consolidation in the publishing industry all reflect the importance of size for the effective use of Big Data.

Such developments caught the whole book industry off guard. Due to the messy and proprietary nature of publishing data, most national publishing associations avoided getting involved in the creation of national and international publishing statistics. On the other hand, since the 1990s, in most cases initiated by European political bodies, there was a set of attempts from outside the industry to produce data on book production and consumption and on the turnover of book industries. Such attempts were conducted by academic institutions or private companies separate from the publishing and library sectors.<sup>i</sup> Not a single data-gathering effort was repeated using the same methodology, perhaps confirmation of a flawed approach.

On the consumption side of the book business, in the library sector, similar developments occurred: thanks to digitization, it became easier to produce library statistics. Nevertheless, at least according to the IFLA website, there were few attempts to produce statistics on book loans in European countries. As we shall see, the situation is similar regarding surveys of reading habits.

## **2. The key challenges**

The main issues surrounding book statistics are that data on book production and consumption is gathered in different cultural and economic sectors of society, there is no standardized methodology for their collection, and there have been no attempts to connect data on publishing, library loans and

reading habits to form a consistent picture of the state of reading in contemporary society. In such a context, this paper has two modest ambitions.

The first is to outline the usefulness of data for publishers, booksellers, educators and policy-makers. On this basis, we want to draw a blueprint for a sustainable book data system that will be publicly available and could serve as a reference point in any discussion of book ecosystems. Mapping the territory is especially important at a point in time when the media landscape is undergoing massive change and the world of digital big tech has entered into direct competition with publishers. For several centuries books have been formative in human culture. This has led to what is sometimes referred to as the Order of the Book. The Order of the Book does not just depend on the book infrastructure of publishers, booksellers and libraries. It also extends to such book-based institutions as religion, science and scholarship, the law and, most importantly education. Books and reading have become the bone and the marrow of Western societies.

A few sweeping observations can be made about the drastic transformation of the position of the book and reading in society since the peak period described by Bill Bryson. The 'old new media' of film, radio and television gradually attracted especially the more marginally literate readers away from reading for entertainment. If despite that, the position of the book has remained relatively stable, this is largely due to the book's privileged position in education. Within the last decade the convergence of all media and modalities on the same digital screen has increased the competition for old-fashioned long-form reading as epitomized by the paper book, also in education.

Whilst the parameters of the book can be drawn reasonably tightly, by contrast the picture around reading is one without borders. The internet has brought about an unprecedented growth in reading

and writing, so that the practice of reading has greater significance for the average person than it has had at any earlier time in history. However, this concerns a particular form of reading, which does not involve books so much as short chunks of text. This changes the nature of our reading culture, and places much of this activity outside the traditional circuit of the publishing industry and libraries. In order to establish the extent and nature of these changes and to attempt to extrapolate from historical trends, we need a better grasp of the statistical facts.

The second ambition follows naturally from the first: to propose some indicators that would make sense in order to understand the role of books and book industries both in contemporary societies and in recent history. We want to open a discussion about where to look for the data and what is needed to make book statistics reliable and internationally comparable. Let us start the discussion by looking at those indicators that could explain the role of books in a given society and internationally.

### **3. Trade publishing and recreational reading**

#### **3.1 Number of published titles**

This is the oldest and most reliable data on book production and is usually compiled by national libraries; since the mid-1960s it has been based on the number of issued ISBNs. Despite its longevity and apparent simplicity, the data on the number of published titles is not 100 per cent waterproof. First, as each format of the same title gets its own ISBN, the number of published titles should not be mistaken for the number of books actually written. Secondly, due to the growth of self-publishing the number of issued ISBNs should not be mistaken for the number of titles published by trade publishers. Also sometimes the figures do not separate out trade, educational and academic titles, presenting a problem when trying to understand book production in a given publishing field. Thirdly, Amazon has its own version of the ISBN, ASIN, so books published in its ecosystem (either self-

published or by Amazon imprints) do not appear in the usual library statistics. Fourthly, a growing amount of fiction reading takes place on fan fiction platforms that do not use ISBNs; and those texts published in these platforms are usually not considered as books regardless of the fact that their content is bookish.

In addition there have been contrary views on title production. In publishing circles and beyond, even at the turn of the 21st century, the number of published titles was seen as an indicator of the condition of the book industry: the more titles published, the healthier the book industry (see Thompson, 2005, 53). However, Ann Blair describes how already before the modern era, there were complaints that increasing book production caused information overload (Blair, 2010); and a few centuries later, in the 1960s, Robert Escarpit grumbled that in the UK, yearly book production had exceeded 15,000 titles. One way to understand the nature of this discussion about saturation/healthiness is to consider it in conjunction with figures on the number of copies printed – and sold.

### **3.2 Printed and sold**

When taken together with the number of published titles and the number of books loaned, the number of printed and sold copies is one of the best indicators of book penetration locally and globally. Unfortunately, there is no fixed methodology in this area. As a proxy, in the mid-20th century, estimates of the number of globally published copies were based on global sales of paper to printing houses (see Escarpit, 1966). By the turn of the 21st century, for a limited number of book markets more data on sold copies became available through services such as Nielsen Bookscan and from distributors (Kovač and Wischenbart, 2018; Phillips, 2017). We also lack exact data on online and ebook sales as the main player, Amazon, seldom reveals any information. Nevertheless, thanks

to organizations such as Authors Earnings and to the readiness of some distributors to share, we at least approximately know the main trends.

The data on sales and print runs matters for two reasons. First, as an indicator of the sustainability of the print book industries. As the fixed costs per copy decrease with the growth of sales of a given title, there is more money left to publishers and authors: a publisher's margins and the author's earnings are closely linked to the number of copies sold. Conversely, decreasing print runs per title lead to lower incomes for authors and for publishers, making the industry more vulnerable and the whole business model less sustainable. Secondly (see Kovač and Wischenbart, 2019), throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century the number of published titles grew while print runs and the number of sold copies remained stable or even decreased, indicating a continuous divergence of book production and consumption. In order to understand this divergence in a given country over a longer period (or to make the process internationally comparable), an estimate of the copies sold and printed in a given country needs to be weighted per million inhabitants.

### **3.3. Loans in public libraries**

The number of book loans either in print or electronic format supplements this picture. Again there is little data readily available on the number of library loans in public libraries in different countries (Libecon compiled data only for 2003 and the IFLA statistics website offers limited information). For individual countries and more globally, estimates have to be used due to a shortage of data. At least from the Libecon study we know that in Europe, the number of library loans per inhabitant in public libraries differs a lot. The data should at least be a good indicator of the role of the public sector in sustaining the book and reading culture in different countries. Yet the role of library loans can only be properly understood alongside data on reading habits. If the number of library loans is falling in

countries with a strong reading culture (such as Finland and the Netherlands), what is the picture elsewhere in the world? (Statistics Finland, CBS Staline, Netherlands)

### **3.4 Reading habits and the consumption of other media**

In general, two types of data reveal reading habits in a given country: the number of people who read books and the average time spent reading. Although the first surveys on reading habits took place before the First World War, predominantly in educational establishments in continental Europe, the first survey of recreational reading habits among adults took place in the USA in 1937 by the Gallup Institute. In the USA and in Europe, longitudinal reading research projects and surveys of reading habits started to appear only after the Second World War and were not based on a uniform methodology. Additionally, only a small set of such data in non-English speaking countries is available online and in English. All this makes international comparisons difficult and requires extreme caution to avoid mixing apples and pears. On the other hand, research on consumption of other media is methodologically more reliable and detailed especially when based on time diaries; again unfortunately, such surveys take place only in a small set of countries (see Southerton et al., 2012).

When combined with data on the number of books sold and loaned and the number of published titles, data on time spent reading and the number of readers can expose three different trends. First, the degree of fragmentation of reading; secondly, the number of book readers implies the potential volume of the book market in a given country and its limits to grow; and thirdly, correlations between reading habits and demographics of book audiences will reveal social factors with a strong connection to book consumption. As shown elsewhere, comparisons among available publishing and library statistics, and surveys on reading habits and on media consumption, reveal a negative correlation between book reading and consumption of audio and visual media and a positive correlation with education and a developed network of public libraries.

### **3.5 Ebook penetration, audio, and the growth of e-reading**

The impact of ebooks on the publishing landscape has been most radical in Anglo-Saxon countries, where ebooks have gained a significant market share and developed a new ecosystem with its own dynamics, favouring self-publishing and small publishers, and with Amazon as the dominant sales channel. There is also the arrival of digital downloads for audio titles, and ebook readers may have a text to speech facility.

A striking feature of this new ecosystem is that it is heavily gender-determined: a typical ebook reader is female and aged over 45. (Kobo, 2016) The majority of ebooks and almost all the top sellers are romances, thrillers and fantasy fiction. On the other hand in continental Europe, ebook penetration is less pronounced. It started first in the biggest European markets such as Spain and Germany, suggesting that important factors in ebook growth are the size of the market and the number of titles available. A second factor that slowed down the growth of ebooks in continental Europe is very likely a weaker tradition of direct mail and online sales: in the USA, ebook sales were a logical continuation of growing internet sales, whilst in continental Europe, online bookstores never gained such a significant market share as in the USA (more on this, Global Ebook Reports 2013-2017). Thirdly, taxation on ebooks was much higher in the European Union by comparison to the USA.

As already mentioned, alongside the arrival of vanilla ebooks – direct digital replicas of printed books – there has emerged a set of alternative online storytelling communities (Phillips, 2014). Content in these websites is generated partly by users who are at the same time able to comment and like stories or join groups associated with the website. Wattpad is home to ‘a community of 55 million people who spend over 15 billion minutes a month engaged in original stories’. (wattpad.com) Only

about half of the users are from USA, the rest coming from all over the world including the Philippines, Russia, Myanmar and Slovenia. Content from commercial publishers is also finding new ways to consumers, especially in digital audio versions – popular, for example, in Scandinavia, with streaming often substituting for individual downloads.

Ebooks and online platforms such as Wattpad matter for many reasons. Since ebooks on Amazon and stories on online platforms do not have ISBNs they are below the radar of conventional measures such as the number of published titles; the number of consumed texts – and the extent of reading - is therefore higher than indicated through official statistics. In addition the growth of ebook ecosystems is eating away at the market share of trade publishers and booksellers. However, as the main ebook genres are only partly in the domain of traditional trade publishing and bookselling (before the advent of digital, the main sales channel for romances was supermarkets and convenience stores), the impact on trade sales is likely to be weaker than sometimes assumed. As English is not the first language for millions of Wattpad users, we can perhaps assume that the growth of online reading is also an indicator of the growth of global English. Lastly, as a set of research studies has revealed significant differences in print and digital reading, the market share of ebooks can be seen as an indicator of broader cultural changes (Singer and Alexander, 2017).

#### **4. Educational and academic publishing**

##### **4.1 Textbooks and digital learning tools in schools**

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, instructional materials in book format (printed textbooks and workbooks) were one of the pillars of educational and instructional processes. Thanks to compulsory school attendance, educational companies have traditionally had the broadest audience of all book publishers, since they provide books for entire age cohorts and, for some people at least,

textbooks were practically the only books they encountered in their entire life. As a result, school systems more or less successfully 'trained' generations of readers and were at the same time important purchasers of books.

Educational publishing has two features that separate it out from trade. First, the content of textbooks is, to a certain extent at least, pre-determined by educational goals and objectives as contained within national or regional curricula and examination standards. The relative openness of textbook markets can therefore be seen as a direct result of state attitudes toward education: the more controlled and prescribed the curriculum, the lower the possibilities for serious competition. Secondly, the financial turnover of educational publishing depends on state subsidies for the purchases of learning tools, on regulation of textbook provision, and on the existence of a collective rights system to compensate publishers for photocopying in schools. Therefore the size of textbook market and the way in which they operate are directly correlated with attitudes towards education in a given country, i.e. with cultural values and political decisions.

The number of textbooks and workbooks for the same course and the extent of approval procedures indicate how open the educational establishment is to diversity and competition; and the number of copies sold per title indicates the sustainability of the industry. This matters also for trade publishing as the more open and less regulated is the textbook market, the more possibilities there are for trade publishers. Further, in many book markets, there exists a correlation between models of textbook distribution and the number of bookstores: when the latter are the main sales channel for textbooks and workbooks, they generate a significant amount of their turnover in the back-to-school period, especially if they sell stationery too. Textbook distribution systems are therefore in many countries one of the indicators of the robustness of bookstore sales.

Usage of audio-visual media, the penetration of digital learning tools, and the appearance of electronic textbooks have undoubtedly diminished the role of printed textbooks in education: to an extent, printed textbooks have become an accompaniment to digital learning tools and vice versa (Kovač and Sebart, 2018). Schools have ceased to be a bastion of the book and the ratio between print and digital learning tools can therefore be seen as an indicator of the diminishing role of the book in contemporary society – plus as an indicator of the future of trade publishing. As an inclination towards reading is very often the result of family and educational influences (Evans et al., 2010), any future growth of digital reading will correlate with changes in educational systems and greater usage of digital learning tools.

#### **4.2 Scientific monographs and academic textbooks**

Over the last fifty years, scientific journals grew into the main media of scientific communication. As a response to this trend, academic monographs have become more specialized and have retreated to disciplines from the humanities. In the future many will be published only in electronic format, either by publishers or made freely available in open access repositories. They have long disappeared from general bookstores and the space dedicated to them in academic libraries has shrunk alongside the growth of digital resources. The print runs of academic monographs decreased by 10 times between the 1980s and 2010s (Thompson, 2004; van der Weel, 2015). As shown by Furedi, the in-depth reading of entire monographs started to lose ground in academia, even before the advent of electronic learning tools, as students (and their teachers) shifted to reading shorter texts such as chapters, papers or even extracts from chapters (Furedi, 2004, 1-3). Just as in primary and secondary education, through these processes, the printed book started to lose its aura as the main bearer of knowledge in academia. The extent of the changes is revealed by the growing amount of money that rights collection agencies gather from universities from the bundling of chapters into packages for students. As well as the number of monographs now available on online platforms and the lower

print runs of their print counterparts, the extent of bundled learning materials in print and paper is an additional indicator of the diminishing role of the book.

Another big change that occurred in the last thirty years is that many authors from non-English speaking countries either started to publish in English with American and UK university presses or in English with local publishers. The longer historical trajectory is from Latin as lingua franca to national languages (in larger language areas: Russian, French, German, English) to English as the new lingua franca. This trend has destroyed the relationship between the language and geographic origin of academic authors and their publishers, making it harder to follow statistics on the production of academic monographs in different countries.

The future of academic textbooks is similar to that of textbooks in primary and secondary education. Although a significant number of academic textbooks have migrated to electronic format and are often read in chunks, both student behaviour and user surveys still show that for in-depth reading, paper is preferred to screen (see, for example, McNeish et al., 2012; Baron, 2015). Similarly, academic researchers prefer to print out journal articles when they intend to read them thoroughly (Tenopir et al., 2015). All this indicates that, against all odds, print still has its niche future in academia.

## **5. Indicators**

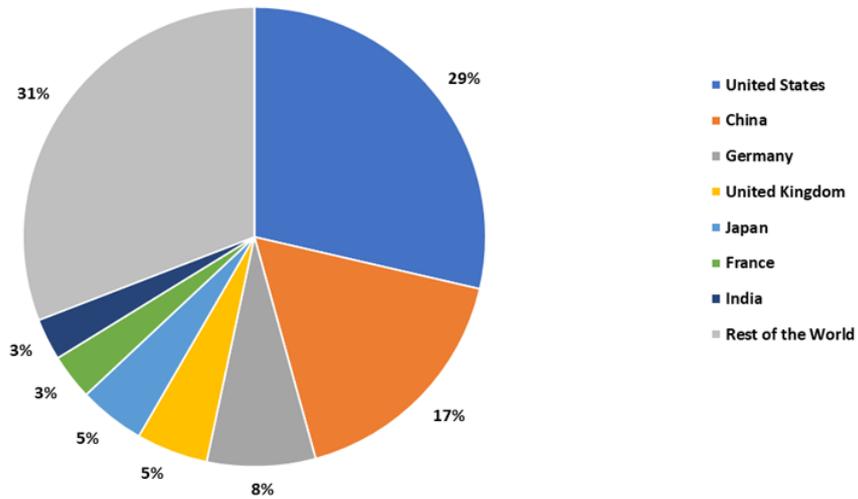
The following is a proposed set of indicators that would measure the health of the ecosystem of the book. For a definition of what is a book, we could return to the UNESCO definition of a book as a 'a non-periodical printed publication of at least 49 pages, exclusive of the cover pages, published in the

country and made available to the public', although we suggest that some updating is required to cover ebooks and include (or exclude) audio formats (unesco.org).

- Annual sum of library loans and the number of sold copies in a given society weighted by million inhabitants: *per head book consumption*.
- Consumer spending per capita: *book consumption compared to national income*
- Number of published titles and new editions per million inhabitants: *diversity of book production*.
- Number of published titles divided by number of produced copies: *sustainability of book production*.
- Number of book readers in a given society: *potential volume of book market*.
- Number of published titles per reader: *degree of fragmentation of reading and writing*.
- Average annual reading time per reader divided by number of books consumed: *depth of reading*.

Analysis that is based on such indicators reframes our whole discussion of the role of books and publishing across countries, in often surprising ways. Take the following two examples:

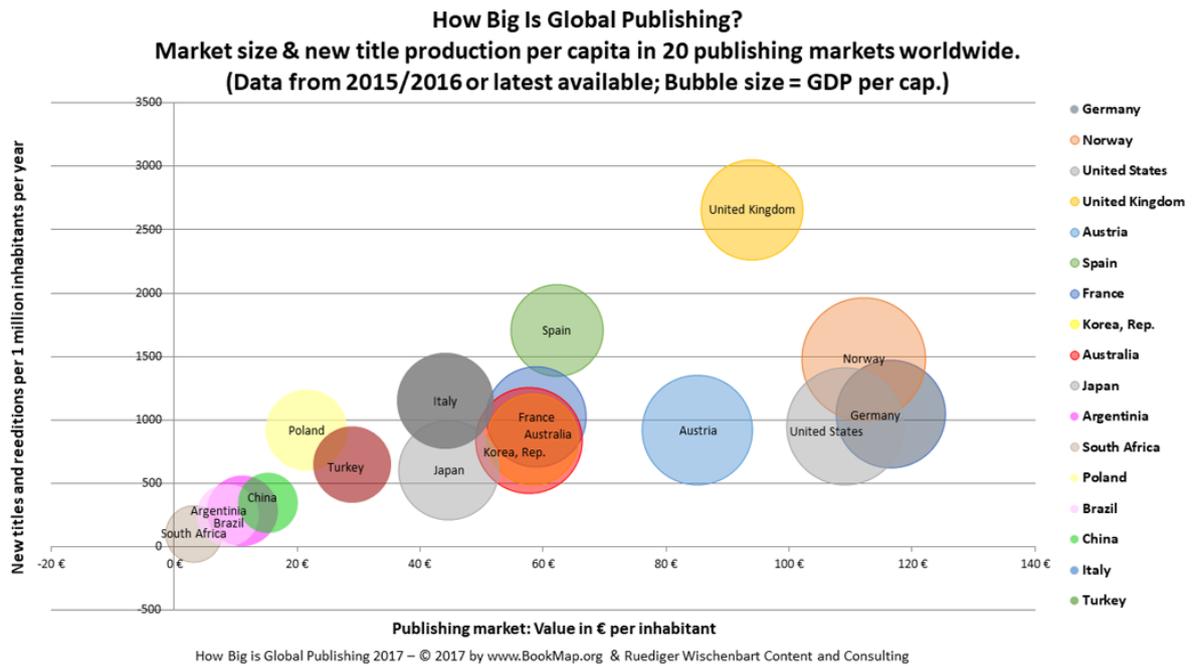
**Top 7 largest publishing markets  
(by market value, in % of World, 2015/2016)**



How Big is Global Publishing 2017 – © 2017 by www.BookMap.org & Ruediger Wischenbart Content and Consulting

Source: How Big Is Global Publishing? Report by BookMap, October 2017, [www.bookmap.org](http://www.bookmap.org)

Much of the consumer spending on books and related products is concentrated in just a few countries that are either wealthy, or particularly populous. The seven largest book markets account for well over two-thirds of the book industry’s global turnover at retail value. France, at 67 million inhabitants, has a bigger publishing market than India, with a population of 1.3 billion. However, the Indian population of consumers who buy books regularly is estimated to be at around 50 million, and growing; in addition books are much cheaper there than in Europe or the USA.



Source: How Big Is Global Publishing? Report by BookMap, October 2017, [www.bookmap.org](http://www.bookmap.org).

The size and the scope of a country's publishing industry not only reflect the number of inhabitants - or consumers, readers, learners - but also a number of demographic, social, cultural and, most of all, economic factors. A country's wealth strongly defines the hopes and desires of its people to be educated, purchase books, or access them in well-stocked libraries. But also cultural and historical contexts matter. Only a few countries are strong exporters of books internationally, beyond those neighbouring countries sharing the same language. Exports to more distant territories usually relate to past imperial connections, as is the case with the United Kingdom, by far the world's leading exporter of books, or Spain, which maintains a strong presence in Latin America.

## 6. Conclusion: What are publishing statistics good for?

I found myself better able to imagine what's going on in the lives of people throughout my presidency because of not just a specific novel but the act of reading fiction. It exercises those muscles, and I think that has been helpful. And then there's been the occasion where I

just want to get out of my own head. Sometimes you read fiction just because you want to be someplace else. Barack Obama, quoted in the *New York Times*, 16 January 2017

Book statistics are important if we want to follow the vicissitudes of reading in our society, and make predictions for the future. In the last few decades, the book has had to step aside and watch other media become more central to our lives. Nevertheless, as shown above, a set of reading surveys (McNeish et al., 2012; Baron, 2015) suggests that linear reading of long form texts in printed format still fills an important niche in our daily lives. Laboratory research on reading confirms that we hold such preferences for good reasons. Mangen et al. (2013) for example, observed that we remember more when we read from a paper than from a computer or a tablet as the fixity of 'text printed on paper supports a reader's construction of spatial representation of the text by providing unequivocal and fixed spatial cues for text memory and recall' (Mangen et al. 2013, XXX). Similarly, Ackerman and Goldsmith warned that the 'common perception of screen presentation as an information source intended for shallow messages may reduce the mobilization of cognitive resources' (Ackerman and Goldsmith, 2011): paper is often the preferred substrate for more thoughtful and deliberate reading and learning.

The value of publishing statistics, along the line of the indicators described in this paper, will be at least threefold. First, they will help book industries to understand more fully trends in book consumption. Secondly, data on ebook and print book sales will highlight differences between different genres and business models. Thirdly, statistics on sales, print-runs and the number of titles published will become a marker of viability of long-form reading both as a recreational exercise and for learning. As such, these statistics might become a useful tool for policy-makers in education and culture (for more on the correlation between reading comprehension and book as a reading format, see also Tanner, 2014).

This paper argues for a wider debate on book statistics and the role of books and reading in society, and suggests how to develop a set of indices that could be employed by national book industries, and would enable comparisons to be made for book consumption between countries and across periods of time. For the first time in history, we are in a position to monitor the ups and downs of long-form reading via book production and consumption by indicators that reliably indicate the main trends. It would be a pity to miss such an opportunity.

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i Initiatives include the IP/FEP initiative of 2007; the expert meeting in Amsterdam (2008) at the occasion of the city being the international book capital; and a 2010 scoping project from the Unesco Statistics Office