

## KNOWLEDGE RECORDING IN MEXICO: THE LIBRARY'S CONTRIBUTION

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### ABSTRACT

Mexico's knowledge recording industry is discussed from the point of view of book production. The country ranks as the second largest publisher of Spanish books after Spain. The number of new titles produced per year varies from 3,000 to 5,000, with a total of over 160 million copies. Other basic statistics and a discussion of the main problems of this industry are included in the paper. The library's role in working as both a laboratory of author's ideas and a promotional outlet for publishers is also analysed. Finally, a brief analysis is made of the potential book trade which exists between the Spanish speaking Caribbean countries and Mexico.

## 1. PUBLISHING IS AN OLD TRADITION IN MEXICO

Publishing is an old tradition in Mexico. The first printing shop on the American continent was established in Mexico City in 1535, more than four hundred and fifty years ago. Today, Mexico's book publishing industry is the second largest in the Spanish speaking world, with more than 500 publishers. They record the knowledge production of about 10,000 registered authors, giving employment to 8,634 people (see Table 1).

Table 1

PUBLISHING INDUSTRY'S BASIC STATISTICS [11]	
Authors (registered)	10,000
Publishers	500
Number of employees	8,634

In 1983, the national publishing industry produced nearly 10,000 titles which included 3,500 new titles and 6,390 reprints. The total number of copies was over 45 million, plus 18 million textbooks produced for secondary schools (see Table 2).

Table 2

ESTIMATED ANNUAL BOOK PRODUCTION, 1983 [11]			
New titles	3 500 titles	10 000 000	copies
Reprints	6 000 "	25 000 000	"
Children's books	390 "	11 500 000	"
Primary school textbooks	---	95 000 000	"
Secondary school textbooks	---	18 000 000	"
Total	9 890 titles	159 500 000	copies

Besides commercial publishing output, printing of elementary school books is carried out directly by the government with an

output of 93 million textbooks. These monographs have been distributed free of charge to every schoolchild regardless of their income since 1959. Including book statistics of private and government publishers, Mexico prints an average of 160 million books per year (see Table 2).

## 2. PROBLEMS FACED BY THE INDUSTRY

The figures discussed in relation to book production may convey the idea that publishing is flourishing in Mexico; however, it faces numerous problems. Some of the most important ones are:

2.1. Imports are greater than exports. Mexico imported books worth 1,957 million pesos in 1983 against 1,641 million pesos in exports. However, exports of books have increased in the last years, making this trade balance less unequal [1]. Imports are greater than exports due to the fact that scientific books are imported. Scientific development of the country is low, therefore, science writing productivity is poor. Most of the scientific texts available in the country are translations, which are a must up to the undergraduate level, since students seldom read a foreign language. However, at graduate level, books in English are more common and have to be imported because of their up-to-dateness [14]. This limitation of language education creates an important market for books from overseas, affecting the national publishing trade balance.

2.2. Low demand. Book demand is badly affected by poor reading

habits. Most people read, but not books. An old study of the circulation of 89 love story comics found that five million magazines were sold in a week in 1977 [10]. However, a bookseller estimated in 1988, that only 2% of the population, i.e. 1,700,000 people, buy books [6,12,13]. Publishers and booksellers have failed to create a demand for their products, despite the fact that there is a large potential market for books in the country - 25 million Mexicans are studying from kindergarden to postgraduate courses.

2.3. Poor research-oriented education. Perhaps Mexico's book market is not as bouyant as it could be because the educational system is based on textbooks and seldom gives importance to the reading of additional materials. Research oriented education is absent in schools; consequently a demand for books and journals is lacking. Even though government gives low priority to research oriented education, the main bookstore chain in the country relies more now on the student market than before. In 1978 25% of the business of these bookstores was in distributing texts and scientific works, and 75% of their sales was in selling general-interest books. Ten years later, sales of texts and scientific monographs have increased dramatically to 65%, while general-interest books transactions dropped to 35% [12].

2.4. Economic crisis effect. Even though Mexico's population is 85 million and has 85% literacy, it has is a small book market because most people find it difficult to acquire books [4,5]. Book demand does not grow enough because of the economic crisis

which the population has faced for more than eight years. It is common to find homes lacking even a dictionary and an encyclopedia.

2.5. Need of book promotion. Besides the low acquisition power of the population, there is a need for an organised and permanent book promotion at national level. Mass media should be used to promote reading habits. Mexico entered the electronic age of mass media without having created reading habits, unlike developed countries. Most of the newly literate people started their reading lives with a television set, which offers, without any effort, a more glamorous and easier communication. Therefore, mass media should be used to promote reading and books.

### 3. DISTRIBUTION OF BOOKS

Marketing of books is limited. Mexico City has about 700 bookstores for 18 million people, and the rest of the country has 1,900 outlets (see table 3). Obviously, these bookstores are not enough to reach most towns in the whole territory. Distribution of books is not even efficient in these stores because they tend to be small, lacking mail services or works not in stock. They sell mainly textbooks, and just those which register a high demand.

TABLE 3

BOOKSTORES [11]		
Mexico City	700	Approx.
Rest of the country	1900	"

Mail of books is, on the other hand, expensive. Postal and courier services have rocketed their prices in the last six years. If a book is cheap, it becomes prohibitive to mail it. This is a strong limitation to the distribution of books, especially in a large country like Mexico [7].

#### 4. LIBRARIES FOSTER BOOK PRODUCTION

Libraries are the part of the communication process where knowledge is generated, recorded and disseminated. However, the contribution of libraries to this important process varies according to the development of countries and libraries themselves.

Libraries start their role in the knowledge process, as they are part of authors' education. Their role in education is undeniable. They contribute to school curriculum, broadening education given in classrooms. Therefore, their contribution starts when potential writers are educated. Later, they continue their work, providing information when research is conducted by writers.

Libraries are also writers' laboratories. They are thinking places for authors, and locations where they foster their ideas. It is public knowledge that writers spend important time in libraries while working on books.

The contribution of libraries to the knowledge process varies according to the development of countries and the development of libraries themselves. Mexican libraries are not all qualified to play well such a role because of the incipient organisation that many of them have. However, within their limitations, libraries foster book production.

#### 5. LIBRARIES' ROLE IN DISTRIBUTING RECORDED KNOWLEDGE

Libraries have been criticized of competing with publishers and booksellers. It is thought that libraries reduce books sales, because they offer books free of charge. However, libraries work as outlets of publishers and booksellers since their material is promoted among potential readers, whose book buying interest may, in many cases, start here. Mexican libraries, for instance, outnumber bookstores. There are around 5,000 libraries, among university (950), school (554), special (448), and public (3,047) libraries (see table 4). Even though the Mexican library system varies in quality from centre to centre, they are present in many towns where there are no bookstores, being the only places where books are available. The public library system, one of the best in Latin America, has at least one library in every municipality as well as in most places where there is a secondary school [8,9].

Table 4

ESTIMATED NUMBER OF LIBRARIES, 1988 [3]	
National	1
Public	3047
University	950
School	554
Special	448
Total	5000

Libraries are, on the other hand, book buyers of Mexican authors. Although, it has to be said, not all libraries have a budget to acquire publications. This is a situation which has worsened in the last decade because of the economic crisis of the country. However, public libraries were an exception. They flourished during the worst part of the crisis. They sprung up in many towns, acquiring important collections. Nine million books were bought in five years for public libraries by the General Directorate of Public Libraries (See Table 5). This is an impressive amount of volumes which were predominately in Spanish. The public library program continues with the same impetus after twelve years of its initiation, giving a strong support to the publishing industry during this period of economic recession.

Table 5

BOOKS ACQUIRED BY PUBLIC LIBRARIES [8,9]	
1983	1'332,000
1984	907,417
1985-6	3'895,083
1987	3'001,800
TOTAL	9'196,300

#### 6. POTENTIAL MEXICO-CARIBBEAN BOOK TRADE

Mexico and the Caribbean countries, whose language is Spanish, have a potential book trade to carry on among them. Present commercial book links could be improved, since Mexico is the largest country (85 million) of the Spanish speaking world; and



Cuba (10 million), The Dominican Republic (6 million) and Puerto Rico (3 million) are also the most populated nations in the Caribbean. These four countries have literacy levels which are higher than 80%, except the Dominican Republic, whose literacy rate is 67% [1,2]. In a few words, they have a population which could be an important market for their publishing industries.

The book production of the Spanish speaking Caribbean countries is also among the highest in the region. Cuba certainly accounts for a high output in relation to its population; her production was 2,168 titles in 1985. The Dominican Republic printed 1,504 titles and Mexico 5,482 titles during the same year [1]. Puerto Rico has also a good publishing production, although no statistics were available. Mexico and her Caribbean neighbours could benefit from their geographic vicinity, which makes transport of books cheaper than from any important publishing countries such as Spain and Argentina. Communication among them is fairly good. There are flights between Mexico and Cuba and Puerto Rico, although links are poor with the Dominican Republic.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

7.1. Despite the fact that the Mexican publishing industry faces problems of low book demand caused by the educational system and the economic crisis, it is one of the strongest in Latin America. This industry, as well as government bodies such as the Ministry of Public Education, should encourage reading and

promote national books. A permanent campaign of this kind can help Mexico to gain greater diffusion of national ideas, because Mexican writers are the voice of the country.

7.2. Libraries have a responsibility in book distribution. They should give priority to the acquisition of national books. Some libraries tend to buy foreign publications with blanket orders, but national books are neglected because they are more difficult to locate. Libraries should include national works in their collections whenever possible because they have a duty in preserving national publications. In this way, libraries can strengthen local publishing and contribute to the promotion of national authors.

7.3. The Spanish speaking Caribbean countries and Mexico have a potential book market to develop. Book trade is already carried out between, at least, Cuba, Puerto Rico and Mexico. However, a coordinated program of book production and distribution should be worked out. At the present moment, it is easier to buy American or European books than Latin American ones. A cooperative program of this kind could take advantage of the potential market which represents the Spanish speaking world.

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