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Independent Publishing: Making and Preserving Culture in a Global Literary Marketplace

Programme summary

Context

The Scottish Insight Universities Institute (Scottish Insight) held a Programme of Knowledge Exchange in 2011 on the topic of **Independent Publishing: Making and Preserving Culture in a Global Literary Marketplace**. The Programme addressed the opportunities and challenges of the global literary marketplace for small and independent publishers at the beginning of the 21st century.

Publishing is a highly globalised industry, dominated by large international publishing groups and, in the digital environment, increasingly by large technology providers (Amazon, Apple and Google). Such a situation provides significant challenges for small and independent publishers in terms of access to markets and lack of power in relationships with distributors and retailers, and yet the advent of digital technologies has meant that barriers to entry are very low, and it is easier than ever before to start a new publishing company.

A series of events was held from June-August 2011 in Scottish Insight's premises in Glasgow, with an additional event held at the Edinburgh International Book Festival in association with Publishing Scotland in August 2011, to investigate these opportunities and challenges. The events brought together publishers, authors, policy makers, government, librarians, academics from multidisciplinary backgrounds, publishing students, and others with an involvement in books and publishing from Scotland, the UK and beyond. The Programme was supplemented by a series of interviews with independent publishers. These are detailed in the full report of the Programme of Knowledge Exchange.

The themes of the three events were:

Digital Technologies and Publishing
Globalisation and Independent Publishing
Cultural Policy

Observations and Recommendations

The Programme of Knowledge Exchange made four key observations:

The eco-system of independent publishing has undergone a rapid rate of change in response to the possibilities made available by technology and delivery.

All publishing in the twenty-first century operates in a global literary marketplace and yet independent publishers often identify with a niche market or are significantly attached to ideas of the local or regional.

Independent publishers are central to a healthy culture of books and reading, yet it can often be difficult for small participants to identify, access and benefit from partners through shared investment.

Policy makers have the potential to shape independent publishing at a sector and individual level.

The headline recommendations made in response to these observations were that:

1. Independent publishers need to show a readiness to embrace digital culture by assessing the opportunities that the digital environment brings to their product and audience.

2. Independent publishing should seek to explore the positive interactions between the local and global environments.
3. Independent publishing would benefit from enhanced networks, both within the industry and across different stakeholder communities.
4. The commitments and responsibilities of policy makers should be made more transparent.

In more detail, the recommended activities and behaviours made by the Programme in relation to (1) are to:

prioritise investment in knowledge, acquisition and training in this field; give consideration to digitising backlist, exploring digital product formats, growing audiences through digital engagement (using technologies including social networks, Google Analytics, social reading sites);

explore the alternative business models offered by the internet environment, capitalising on the potential of the app marketplace, the 'freemium' model, free advertising on sites such as YouTube and Flickr, and exploring licensing possibilities including those offered by Creative Commons; develop visibility both for authors and books, as well as articulating cultural distinctiveness, through web 2.0 tools such as blogs, forums, podcasts;

identify niche markets and maximise the potential of the distinctiveness of the brand using search engine optimisation and analytics;

explore benefits of selling subsidiary rights, specifically for electronic and audio books; exploit alternative funding models, such as crowdsourcing, dual formats, transmedia opportunities (e.g. games, apps);

and explore collaborative ventures with technology partners e.g. Faber Factory; develop a strategic approach to preservation and archiving of material relating to editorial, marketing and promotion, production, e-communications and sales.

Recommended activities and behaviours in relation to (2) are to:

exploit the global range of publishing rights (including translation), and import and export opportunities;

exploit diversified sales channels that would support local interests (e.g. tourist centres, museums, festivals and live events);

advocate national support for independent publishers whose promotion of highly particularised or localised cultural and aesthetic values may otherwise be under threat in times of intensified international competitiveness;

and attend to best practice models of independent book selling in order to sustain and develop a healthy literary cultures at both the level of the local and the global, in the face of the rise of the online marketplace.

Recommended activities and behaviours in relation to (3) are to:

foster closer collaboration and dialogue among authors, publishers, libraries, readers, academics, archivists and statutory bodies (including cultural, educational policy-makers);

acknowledge and exploit the benefit of research conducted by universities and the relevant expertise in literary and publishing history, cultural politics, archiving and preservation, library and information science;

and give due attention to the flow of information between cultural institutions across the constituent parts of the UK, including Creative Scotland, Arts Council England, Arts Council Wales, trade associations (such as Publishing Scotland and the IPG), third sector organisations and local authorities.

Recommended activities and behaviours in relation to (4) are to:

promote equity, access and participation;

foster intersectoral relationships;

and build closer relationships between the making and preserving of culture.

The full programme report is available at:

<http://bit.ly/rTtpaE>

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