

PREFERENTIAL POSTAGE RATES FOR BOOKS: URGENT FOR LATIN AMERICA

Massively used by small publishing firms to distribute their products to bookstores, libraries and readers, the postal service is the most popular means of circulating books throughout the world. However, the absence, suppression or questioning of special postage for books is an impediment to bibliodiversity in many countries.

In Latin America, with the huge territory to cover and limited circulation, a large share of publishers ensures the delivery of their products¹ themselves. For these publishers, preferential postage rates for shipping books are all the more vital.

BOOKS: SPECIAL STATUS RECOGNISED BY THE UNIVERSAL POSTAL UNION

A specialised agency of the United Nations, the Universal Postal Union (UPU) acts as a regulator and mediator between countries on postal issues. Considering mail exchanges to be one of the essential vehicles for access to information, the UPU defends the idea of a "universal mail service" and encourages the postal services of member countries to offer affordable, quality services to their entire population, regardless of geographic location or social status.

As a component of the international exchange of ideas, books are not forgotten by the Universal Postal Union. Its statutes thus recommend establishing preferential rates for mailing books and magazines² internationally, recognising that the role played by books in sharing and distributing information is fundamental. For the same reasons, international organisations such as UNESCO or CERLALC³ advocate the establishment of preferential rates for books. Despite these recommendations, few countries in Latin America actually apply them. Idea sharing is thus greatly jeopardised.

¹ Read about Elena Enríquez Fuentes' study conducted on behalf of the International Alliance of independent publishers "El comercio de libros entre España y América latina: disonancia en la reciprocidad", December 2008, http://www.alliance-editeurs.org/IMG/pdf/Comercio_del_libro.pdf

² "The designated operator of origin may allow, for letter-post items containing: 7.1 newspapers and periodicals published in its country, a reduction of not more than 50% in principle of the tariff applicable to the category of items used; 7.2 books and pamphlets, music scores and maps, provided they contain no advertisement material or publicity other than that appearing on the cover or the fly leaves, the same reduction as that provided for under 7.1." Article RL 107 7.2 of the "Letter Post Manual", International Bureau of the Universal Postal Union, Berne, 2009.

³ Centro Regional para el Fomento del Libro en América Latina y el Caribe: <http://www.cerlalc.org/>

POSTAGE RATES AND BOOKS IN LATIN AMERICA

A recurring topic when independent Latin-American publishers meet, their postage costs are regularly denounced as one of the major obstacles to the circulation of books in Latin America⁴. An overview of the rates applied in various countries reveals situations at the very least varied, but it makes it possible to clearly identify, through a few symbolic examples, several issues threatening book distribution.

- **Preferential rates that are no longer applied**

The existence in legal texts of a preferential postage rate for books unfortunately does not guarantee its application. In Uruguay, a special rate for publishing professionals is still in place theoretically. In practice, it is no longer applied and is no longer offered by the Uruguay national mail service. **The actual suppression of this postage rate has made it almost impossible to send individual books abroad, as the postage costs alone very often exceed the price of the book.**

The suppression of preferential rates falls in with a more general movement toward the liberalisation of mail services. The national mail services, in Latin America as elsewhere, tend to emulate the operations of private enterprises and to forget their remit as a public service. No doubt deemed not profitable enough, special postage rates for books are being dropped by national mail services, both public and private.

- **A purely symbolic discount**

Making the distribution of books by mail possible is not just a matter of applying current law; the preferential rate must represent significant savings compared to regular rates. In Guatemala, the national mail service⁵ indeed provides for a special rate for mailing books within the country and abroad, but the reduction of 3% which this rate allows for parcels between 1 and 2 kilos⁶ does not really offer publishers and bookstores any substantial savings.

⁴ Further to questions by several of its Latin-American members, the International Alliance of independent publishers decided to develop a questionnaire for the purpose of finding out how they use mail services. The Publishing Chambers of the various Latin-American countries were also involved. Not claiming to be comprehensive, this survey nonetheless highlighted some salient problems forming the basis of this appeal. A digest of this survey will soon be posted on the Alliance website.

⁵ Since 1997, the government of Guatemala has decided to entrust the management of the country's mail service to a private company. Further to a public process, the Guatemalan government mandated "El Correo", which signed a contract with Canada Post, Canada's mail service, which operates as a company independent from the State (Source: Official Web site of the Government of Canada and Wikipedia).

⁶ "Para el envío de impresos con un peso de entre 1000 y 2000 gramos el 'El Correo' de Guatemala tiene una tarifa 'preferencial' que es 3% más baja que la de cartas y documentos", Raúl Figueroa Sartí, "Obstáculos a la circulación del libro en Centroamérica", contribution presented during the round

- **No guarantee on sustainability**

Elsewhere, the absence of preferential postage rates for the item "book" in legal texts pushes the Publishing Chambers of certain Latin-American countries to sign agreements with public or private mail operators. This was the case in Argentina where the Book Chamber signed an agreement with the national mail service ("El Correo Argentino") but also with private operators. Renegotiated every year or every two years, allowing companies to compete for the business, these agreements often make it possible to get significant discounts over current rates for the general public⁷. **Yet, this could not replace preferential postage rates: on the one hand because you have to be a member of the Publishing Chambers to enjoy the benefits, and on the other hand, they do not guarantee a sustainable reduced rate for publishers and bookstores.**

- **Totally non-existent protection**

In countries where there are no reduced postage rates for mailing books, independent publishers are often simply unable to accept orders from abroad: the abundant offering remains confined to the local markets although a large part of the 15-20,000 titles that are published every year are of considerable cultural interest to readers in other countries. This phenomenon has repercussions on cultural life as a whole⁸.

Faced with this alarming situation, the International Alliance of Independent Publishers calls for the governments and national mail services of Latin-American countries to:

- **Comply with current laws by actually applying preferential postage rates for "book" items.** The special postage rates should be applied to both national and international parcels, and differentiate the object "book" from ordinary merchandise. Thus, they would be confirming the special status granted by the Universal Postal Union to various cultural products.
- Develop appropriate legal provisions when there are none. The preferential postage rates may, in fact, find their place in a law on books as is recommended

table "Centroamérica: literatura, comercio y propiedad intelectual", on 19/02/2009, in Granada, Nicaragua.

⁷ For example, in Argentina, the agreement with DHL offers a 65% discount to publishers who are members of the Book Chamber for mailing abroad (see the study on the International Alliance of independent publishers' Website).

⁸ "La circulación del libro entre los países latinoamericanos: problemas y recomendaciones", Taller de Comayagua, Bibliodiversidad y Circulación, Subdirección Libro y desarrollo, CERLALC, May 2009.

by CERLALC in its sample law (ley de Guyaquil)⁹. **These special rates should offer everyone, and most importantly publishing professionals, a discount of at least 50% off the regular rate for national and international parcels, regardless of the number of books to be sent.**

- **Establish or reinstate the M-bags system.** This system makes it possible to send bundles of books of up to 30 kilos. On the brink of being discontinued, or non-existent, the M-bags system offers nevertheless a particularly economical solution to publishers who wish to send a large number of books to a point of sale abroad. In this respect, it is an essential tool for the distribution of books and the exchange of ideas. In Chile, thanks to the perseverance of the association Editores de Chile, the M-bags system was reinstated a little over a year ago by the national mail service. However, all the advantages that publishing industry professionals enjoyed have not, to date, been restored in this country.

Finally, we are appealing to the governments of the various Latin-American countries as well as to the national mail services to become aware of the need for preferential postage rates for the entire publishing chain. These rates make it possible to distribute and circulate publishers' products to bookstores, libraries and readers, and contribute to bibliodiversity by allowing publishers, regardless of their size, to circulate their products nationwide and internationally. By encouraging orders of individual books, these rates help bookstores offer readers a broad range of products that is representative of the editorial diversity. They also participate in the development of mail-order sales in bookstores, an essential issue for the future of the profession in the face of the increased competition from online sales sites.

These proposals are in line with the aim of UNESCO's Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions¹⁰ of which some principles were reasserted in 2006 in the Latin-American Cultural Charter. This text thus recognizes the importance of the cultural industries and recommends the implementation of cooperative mechanisms that favour the distribution of cultural property within Latin America and beyond, paying very special attention to the film and audiovisual sector, to music and to publishing¹¹.

⁹ "Capítulo III. - Artículo 9: Los libros impresos y editados en (país) gozarán de tarifa postal preferencial o reducida, de acuerdo con la ley nacional y con los convenios postales internacionales, y circularán libremente. Únicamente por sentencia judicial podrá limitarse la circulación de libros." Guyaquil sample law, http://www.cerlalc.org/documentos/ley_tipo.htm

¹⁰ "Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions", UNESCO, Paris, October 20, 2005.
http://portal.unesco.org/culture/fr/ev.php-URL_ID=33232&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

¹¹ The Latin American Cultural Charter was adopted during the 16th Latin American Summit in Montevideo (Uruguay), in November 2006 : <http://www.oei.es/xvicumbrecarta.htm>

Whereas:

- In a context where publishers are concentrated and book sales are being monopolised by big business, it is becoming increasingly difficult for independent Latin-American publishers to distribute their products,
- Independent publishers and bookstores are major players in cultural diversity,

We, as independent publishers, assert that it is ever more necessary - in this era of the development of digital books - to set up, improve or preserve preferential postage rates for better circulation of paper books and the maintenance of an indispensable bibliodiversity.

Appeal coordinated by



www.alliance-editeurs.org

LIST OF SIGNATORIES

THE COORDINATORS OF THE ALLIANCE'S LANGUAGE NETWORKS

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LATIN-AMERICAN INDEPENDENT PUBLISHERS' COLLECTIVES

Alianza de editoriales mexicanas independientes (**AEMI**), Independent publishers' collective comprising 16 publishing houses, **MEXICO**

Alianza peruana de editores independientes universitarios y autónomos (**ALPE**), Independent publishers' collective comprising 14 publishing houses, **PERU**

Asociación de editores independientes de Chile (**EDIN**), Independent publishers' collective comprising 28 publishing houses, **CHILE**

Alianza de editores independientes de la Argentina por la bibliodiversidad (**EDINAR**), Independent publishers' collective comprising 31 publishing houses, **ARGENTINA**

Liga brasileña de editores (**LIBRE**), Independent publishers' collective comprising 103 publishing houses, **BRAZIL**

Red de editoriales independientes de Colombia (**REIC**), Independent publishers' collective comprising 27 publishing houses, **COLOMBIA**

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LATIN-AMERICAN BOOK CHAMBERS

Cámara Argentina del Libro, **ARGENTINA**

Cámara Argentina de Publicaciones, **ARGENTINA**

Cámara Dominicana del Libro, **DOMINICAN REPUBLIC**

Cámara Hondureña del Libro, **HONDURAS**

Cámara Paraguaya del Libro, **PARAGUAY**

Cámara Uruguaya del Libro, **URUGUAY**

NON-GOVERNEMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

Grupo Iberoamericano de Editores (**GIE**), represents the publishing industry in Latin America, Spain and Portugal through 27 collectives from 23 countries.

International Publishers Association (**IPA**), comprises some 60 organisations from approximately 50 countries in Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe and the Americas.