

# The precariousness of independent publishing

Call for contributions – *Bibliodiversité* review, issue 11, March 2024

While recent studies show that new publishing houses are being professionalised from the outset (Legendre, 2023)<sup>1</sup>, precariousness is prevalent among independent publishers despite their resilience in the face of the challenges inherent to the profession.

Among the smallest publishers (size obviously being no indicator of editorial quality and a publisher's contribution to bibliodiversity), financial difficulties are very real - so real that publishers can sometimes be likened to the "working poor".

## Poor workers?

They have a number of characteristics: they often hold several jobs in order to sustain their activity, and are paid little to nothing. They work to the point of exhaustion, both because they work long hours, and because their areas of expertise encompass several tasks at once (from manuscript selection to book promotion and accounting). Furthermore, their work has a high degree of "portability" (a manuscript can be read anywhere, at any time), and they are caught up in a commercial system that encourages productivity, and because the psychological burden associated with a small cultural enterprise is particularly high - don't they have to succeed on all fronts, both commercially and in terms of symbolic capital? Finally, the statutory nature of independent publishing houses - often likened to liberal professions - does not offer the most protection, while representative organisations are still lacking at national level, or do not have the means to operate as it should be...

## "Venture capital" in bibliodiversity

Yet the contribution of independent publishers to bibliodiversity is well established. The latter owes a great deal to these editorial explorers, the real "venture capital" of culture, who often see returns on their investment slip through their fingers, to the benefit of highly capitalised publishing groups, which, for example, snatch up newly discovered authors. Yet these are professionals who are discovering the raw talent of today and tomorrow, as shown by the exceptional catalogues of the latest independent publishing houses... They are the ones who, with the support of private funds in the 2000s, produced the first North-South solidarity co-publications - which the (particularly French) book institutions are now pretending to discover (or even invent) ... They are the ones who innovate, even in terms of the materiality of the book, as Olivier Bessard-Banquy shows in his latest work *Modernité du livre*<sup>2</sup>...

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<sup>1</sup> **LEGENDRE, Bertrand, 2023.** "Renouveau du champ éditorial en France. Eléments de bilan et perspectives". In *Bibliodiversité*, "Transmissions et renouvellement. Joinville-le-Pont/Paris: éditions Double ponctuation/Alliance internationale des éditeurs indépendants.

<sup>2</sup> **BESSARD-BANQUY, Olivier, 2023.** *Modernity of the book. New publishing houses for new readers.* Joinville-le-Pont: Double ponctuation.

It is important (both sectorally and politically) to note and document this situation: the precarious situation of the main creators of bibliodiversity is not just a sentiment. Admittedly, it may not be new - for a long time, the publishing start-ups of the 1980s in France had to juggle complex economic contexts and combine sources of income (food and publishing)<sup>3</sup>... But it is safe to say that the phenomenon of casualisation in independent publishing has worsened. Mechanically - because there are fewer gatekeepers and because books are losing market share in the cultural industries. Competition is tougher, there are fewer buyers and print runs are declining.

### **Supporting independent publishing to strengthen bibliodiversity**

In addition to these observations, we need to focus on developing proposals - noting and proposing, in a way, are the dual objectives of the forthcoming issue, which will result from this call for contributions. Paradoxically, while publishers are at the heart of the milieu, and are exposed to greater financial risk, in a context where private funding is still not easily accessible (few banks, in fact, are willing to invest in independent publishing), public aid and support are fairly scarce. Where it does exist, it is subject to stringent conditions, or is severely capped. How can we change this situation?

Aren't we waiting for a major legislative breakthrough to protect bibliodiversity, like the Lang Law on the single price of books in France in 1981? What would be the scope and content of a major law to protect bibliodiversity, which would this time focus on supporting creative work (whether by authors or independent publishers) to get out of this precarious situation? To give new impetus to creation, shouldn't public efforts this time focus on the main players and venture capital in bibliodiversity, i.e. independent publishers? If we decide that "long" (as opposed to the shortcuts of social networks), "complex" reading and well-argued information and knowledge are the foundation of our democracies, shouldn't we now be rethinking the way they are produced, accessed and promoted - in a world that is continually being reshaped by new digital technologies produced and driven by players hitherto outside the sector (the GAFAs, more specifically)? What ideas are independent publishers putting forward as a way out of this precarious situation?

These are just some of the issues and questions that the contributors to this issue will address in their analyses and personal accounts<sup>4</sup>. Don't hesitate to contact us if you would like to take part in this conversation: [contact@double-ponctuation.com](mailto:contact@double-ponctuation.com)

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<sup>3</sup> On this subject, read the comprehensive account by **Colleen Higgs**: "Difficulté de la transmission pour une petite maison d'édition indépendante". In *Bibliodiversité*, "Transmissions et renouvellement", *op. cit.* The situation described by the South African publisher echoes that of a multitude of independent publishing houses around the world.

<sup>4</sup> Naturally, testimonials may be anonymised if the authors so wish. Above all, the aim is to report on a situation as close as possible to the realities experienced by independent publishers.

## Provisional publication schedule

Please contact us if you would like to submit a contribution to the review *Bibliodiversité* under the topic "The precariousness of independent publishing": [contact@double-ponctuation.com](mailto:contact@double-ponctuation.com) (see the provisional timetable below).

- Collection of contributions from book professionals: **from June 2023**.
- Deadline for submitting proposals for testimonials and articles: **August 2023**.
- Deadline for submission of first draft of contributions and first editing phase: **November 2023**.
- Layout (3 sets of corrections): **January 2024**.
- Publication date: **March 2024**.

## Article

Articles should be between 25 and 40,000 characters including spaces (+/- 20%). Testimonials from professionals may be shorter. Writers are invited to title their contribution and use sub-titles, and to provide an abstract, a short biography and a photo.

## References

As regards the format of bibliographical references, *Bibliodiversité* complies with the international standard ISO 690 ([http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/ISO\\_690](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/ISO_690)). Only references cited and referred to in the text (including tables and graphs) are presented at the end of the article; the editor will check that these citations correspond to the final list. In-text references include the name of the author and the year of publication. At the end of the article, the references are listed in alphabetical order, without numbering.

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