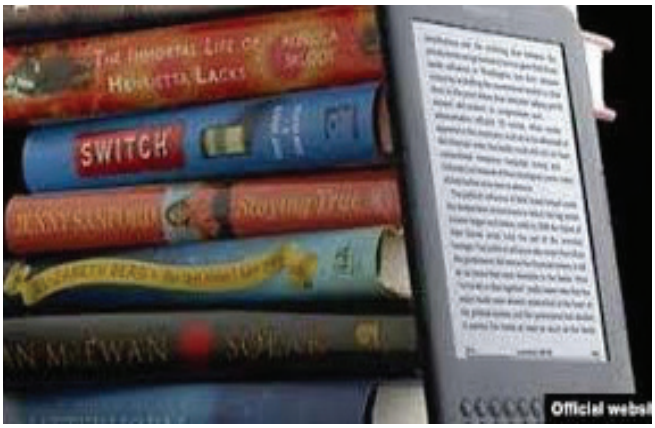
Retooling Canadian publishing

by Robert Ferguson

In recent articles we've written about the retooling of certain prominent brands: how the venerable Washington Post was so handcuffed by its mission that it narrowly-escaped the fate of many newspapers; how Queen's University might better-leverage publishing to build an impactful global brand; why museums should think about disruption. The disruption theme continues as we argue in favour of looking at publishing through a different lens.



The Canadian publishing community is characteristically anxious but, lately, people are particularly upset at the prospect of a new Godzilla-sized publishing house dominating the Canadian idea market. They believe Penguin-Random House's takeover of Simon & Schuster – leaving only two large publishing houses in Canada (HarperCollins being the other) – will reshape Canada's literary culture and damage the ability of Canadian-owned houses to compete in their own market.

Maybe it will, then again, this merger doesn't really change anything: Canadians haven't controlled their literary marketplace for years. The Random House 2011 takeover of McClelland & Stewart had greater significance, but even that was symbolic – the barn door had been left open years earlier. Neither Big Two is Canadian-owned, authors already have few potential buyers for their proposals and manuscripts, and readers already face a shelf of titles further dominated by bestsellers selected on the basis of their promise of big earnings. The Big-Two will continue focusing narrowly on the upper-end of the scale, producing shelves of bestselling and lucrative titles.

Don't believe what Canadian publishers say about their concern for readers' interests or authors' needs, they are only upset about being shut out of the bestseller sweepstakes. We need more publishing, not less, so instead of arguing our branch-plant publishing world should remain controlled by three conglomerates instead of two, they have to stop complaining and rethink their business.

This country needs publishers who develop ideas the big publishers won't touch; are willing to take chances on untested authors the traditional publishing world treats like pariahs. We need publishers willing to give voice to new ideas. If Canadian publishers are actually concerned about a diversity of interest in subjects and literary tastes – about readers losing their selections of books that make it to the marketplace – they can retool their business model to better support Canadian authors and tell more Canadian stories.

Rethink where book ideas come from

Publishers might ally themselves with museums. With the pandemic on the way out, museums have to renew themselves. Lockdowns forced many to pivot: virtual tours made them "visible," but fewer developed meaningful content. And that's because they enigmatically "think" they already

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tell a great story. But they take their trusted status for granted, which means most don't believe they need to reach out. Museums have a bad habit of believing people innately understand what they do and will always visit and will always support them. So they focus on in situ programming but generally neglect their potential to engage a broader audience.

And, yet, museums are important places. Louis Menand wrote in his book, *The Marketplace of Ideas* that "it is the academic's job in a free society to serve the public culture by asking questions the public doesn't want to ask, investigating subjects it cannot or will not investigate, and accommodating voices it fails or refuses to accommodate." This is especially true at the moment in Canada: new stories need to be told while old stories are placed in context so people can understand each other better. We need to explore the patterns of the past so we better appreciate how we've arrived at this moment and how to prepare for the future.

This is an age for storytelling and publishing, one way to overcome society's problems. The conceit of PBS's American Experience is there's no one narrative to explain national identity, rather there is a series of disjointed stories – but it's in the collection of stories that we find our identity, and its up to the viewer to see the bigger picture. This concept is well-suited to telling the Canadian story: maybe our story doesn't get to have a clear narrative thread. We never were the "melting pot" after all – that was the United States. Instead, we embraced the "mosaic." Maybe we have to think of the Canadian story as more like a Jackson Pollock painting.

If telling a more diverse selection of stories represents a way ahead for society, museum publishing can be a catalyst for positive societal change. It's also how museums themselves can get ahead. "Place" is limiting. If museums refine their approach to outreach they will secure new audiences, hold their attention, and earn their trust.

"Hit 'em where they ain't"

Consider "Wee" Willie Keeler: one of the smallest players in baseball over a century ago, yet one of the most successful. His streak of eight consecutive years with 200-or-more hits was a record for more than 100 years; his 44-game hitting streak in 1897 stood for 44 years until Joe DiMaggio broke it; and his .424 average in 1897 remains the record for left-handed hitters. He's best remembered for telling people the secret to his success was to "hit 'em where they ain't."

Canada's Sports Hall of Fame is in the process of learning to "hit 'em where they ain't." The 65-year-old Hall, a collection of approximately 110,000 artifacts featuring everything from Olympic medals to kayaks to curling rocks originally resided at Toronto's Exhibition Place, but low visitor numbers made it seem irrelevant. It reopened in 2011 at a 40,000-square-foot purpose-built building at Calgary's Olympic Park but, again, the location never really worked: as was the case in Toronto, it didn't draw sufficient traffic or awareness.

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According to Cheryl Bernard, the hall's chief executive officer, "Just being about a building was limiting what we were to this country," a rich collection telling "the stories of the people, places and events that have shaped, and continue to shape, our country." And its limited operating budget meant the Hall couldn't digitize its collection. The solution was to allow the Hall's collection to be acquired by the Canadian Museum of History where the creation of new digital content will enable the Hall to reimagine its outreach.

We don't need less, we need more.

Content development – let's call it what it is: publishing – is the way ahead. The Government of Canada has committed $1.9 billion of its 2021 budget to provide arts, culture and sport organizations struggling with the pandemic with the financial means to pursue innovative and transformative business ideas. The funds will be used to research, create, and produce, to invest in re-engaging existing audiences and building new ones, and to support partnerships initiatives.

Communicating can be a tall order for any one museum – Canada's Sports Hall of Fame learned that lesson. There is collaborating between institutions, but joint ventures between publishers and museums also offers solutions that make sense.

But if traditional publishing houses remain too busy chasing bestsellers to be interested, leave them out of it; new stories can come from non-traditional publishing houses. By embracing museums can hit the Canadian story to "where it ain't," and build defensible, meaningful, and enduring public brands. They're already invested in telling it, they just need to find a larger audience. Finding their voice will make themselves stand out in a cluttered marketplace.

Retool Lab is a collaborative focused on helping cultural, entertainment and public institutions regroup, reshape, and retool their strategy to recover from the economic impact of the current crisis, and to use these insights as a springboard to thrive far into the future. You can contact us at info@retoollab.com or at www.retoollab.com

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