

PUBLISHING PERSPECTIVES

Italy's Stefano Mauri in Madrid: Three Points of Digital Impact on the Book Market

In Feature Articles by Porter Anderson July 13, 2018 2 Comments



The Italian publishing industry icon Stefano Mauri speaks with Publishing Perspectives and the Readmagine audience in Madrid on how the digital dynamic has affected his marketplace—and about the brain drain that may be starting in the USA.



At Madrid's Readmagine Conference '10 Years After' Day. Image: Porter Anderson

'Many Bookstores Have Closed'

During last month's **Readmagine conference** in Madrid, a full day was given to issues that might be facing publishers "**Ten Years After.**" And as happens in so many discussions about the future, it's the present that came quickly into focus, thanks to a uniquely positioned context from Italy.

"Many bookstores have closed," said the Italian publisher **Stefano**



Mauri when *Publishing Perspectives* joined him and the **Fundación Germán Sánchez Ruipérez** director general **Luis González** onstage for a conversation.

What Mauri was describing was three key forms of impact on the comparatively traditionalist marketplace of Italy, three ways in which the rise of e-commerce is changing that country's books market.

And the first took him directly to the point of sale—or, for many retailers, a point of lost sales.

"The first impact of e-commerce," Mauri said, "on any major industry, of course is large. And this is always the case with retail. It's enough if e-commerce takes even a share of just 10 percent: that can put all the rest into crisis because everybody has a low profit, and 10 percent means the difference in making and losing money."

The arrival of the digital dynamic, he said, quickly played out as the survival of the fittest among booksellers.

"Those who were not in the perfect position," Mauri said, "the stores that didn't have the right relationship with their customers—direct personal relations with their customers...?" Mauri stopped talking and simply gestured as an Italian maestro might: the inevitable losses were drawn a shrug and a soft stroke of the air.

This program was part of a full week of discussions focused on digital realities and innovation, debates organized by the foundation in the conference center of the **Casa del Lector development** in the Spanish capital.

The programming—fielding some 55 speakers—was produced by González in association with **José Manuel Anta**, managing director of Spain's **Federation of Distributors'**



Stefano Mauri. Image: Readmagine

Associations(FANDE) and **International Publishing Distribution Association**.

And Mauri arrived as one of the most accomplished international publishing figures brought in for the event.

He's the chairman and CEO of the sprawling Milan-based **Gruppo editoriale Mauri Spagnol** (GeMS)—ranked as the second-largest publisher in Italy—and vice president of its controlling shareholder, **Massaggerie Italiane**. Mauri also represents the Italian industry to the **Federation of European Publishers** and sits on the board of Scuola per Librai Umberto e Elisabetta Mauri, the bookseller training institute founded in 1983 by Luciano Mauri.

By the late summer of last year, GeMS had a list of some 12 million books of its own and another 6 million titles under licensing deals, according to *Publishers Weekly's* snapshot of the company. In its own promotional material, the company counts nine publishing houses operating under its aegis, and Massaggerie Italiane, the distributor, serves some 700 publishers and as many as 4,000 points of sale.

The company has estimated that it controls some 18 percent of Italy's ebook market, having continued to invest in digital development even during the economic contraction of 2010.

A founder of the distribution operation **Edigita** and creator of the IoScrittore literary competition, Stefano Mauri—an ingratiating, commanding personality—is among the most astute observers of the evolution of modern Italy's publishing market and its challenges.

The Second Impact: 'With E-Commerce, the Ebook'

"In the second main impact" of digital pressures on the Italian industry, Mauri said, "we see that with e-commerce comes the ebook. And it means that our [physical store] booksellers are selling less fiction, especially genre fiction, which goes very well in ebooks.

"The ebook market in Italy is only five percent, but if you take sexy novels, it gets to 50 percent. If you take romance, it gets to 30 percent. For thrillers, it's 20 percent."

Stefano Mauri

"Yes, the ebook market in Italy is only five percent, but if you take sexy novels, it gets to 50 percent. If you take romance, it gets to 30 percent. For thrillers, it's 20 percent.

"In every country in which Nielsen has data from publishers, the only genre that's growing is children's books. And why is that? In my opinion, booksellers have smaller shelves for fiction—because part of that is sold as ebooks—and they widen the share for children's books because you want to open up a book if you're to give it to a child, to see what's inside.

"And the child loves a tangible pleasure. You cannot substitute that with an ebook."

Mauri, of course, was describing the trend seen in so many markets supported in part by parents' abiding preference for print over digital reading with children.

“But at the end of the day,” Mauri said, one of the most compelling effects of ebooks in the Italian market is in bestsellers.

The Third Impact: ‘Competing With 1 Million Titles’

“It’s very clear,” he said, “our bestsellers today sell much less. They sell about 30 to 40 percent less than they sold six years ago. The top 10 titles in Italy last year sold 40-percent less than they sold in 2010. The top 100 titles sold 34-percent less. The top 1,000 titles sold 30-percent less.

“In the past, when you launched a new book, that new book was competing with 50,000 titles. Today, your new book is competing with 1 million titles.”

Stefano Mauri

“But on the other hand, there are 300,000 titles that sell three copies instead of two copies. This is the effect of e-commerce. It makes all the books available at once.

“In the past, when you launched a new book, that new book was competing with 50,000 titles—the last 10,000 new books and 40,000 long sellers. Today, your new book is competing with 1 million titles.

“Plus it’s competing with Netflix, with the social media. It’s competing for that leisure time that paper once had a monopoly on—in the train, in the bed, traveling. That’s why, today, we’re investing in audiobooks, because at least that’s a way that books can invade time that might be spent with other [digital] media.”

And a Fourth Potential Impact: Following the Money

As González and Mauri considered a question recently taken up by the UK's Publishers Association—the concern that high-quality film and television and theater may be created more frequently than in the past without a book as its genesis—Mauri offered one more potential impact of digital.

“Today, talented people may try to enter their careers in screenplays, writing for a television series” rather than books.

Stefano Mauri

If there is—and this is still being debated—a shift of the originating energy in storytelling from books and reading to screens and visual media, then, he said, “You have to remember the talent.

“Talented people go where the money is. Talented people in their 20s who might have started a career as a journalist or as a writer, when I was 20, maybe 10 years ago started a career instead in app design. And today, those talented people may try to enter their careers in screenplays, writing for a television series.”

And with that observation, Mauri had led our discussion not into a glimpse, necessarily, of where publishers might be in 10 years but a place they'd rather *not* be: a scenario in which the best authors, the most creative storytellers, might all “go West” to Tinseltown.

Probably correctly, he predicted that the first hints of this happening would be seen in the States, which lives so close to its film and television industries and invests so many resources there.

Maybe those first hints already are being spotted from Italy by the acquisitions teams of Gruppo editoriale Mauri Spagno at some of its houses that include Longanesi, Bollati Boringhieri, Garzanti, Slani, Vallardi, and Corbaccio.

“I can tell you this,” Stefano Mauri warned. “It’s true that many of our editors have complained for at least two years now that few people are writing interesting first novels, and from the USA, especially.

“And I think this may be because the [Hollywood/screen] industry may be draining talented people.”



Image: Porter Anderson

More from Publishing Perspectives on this year’s Readmagine conference is [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Porter Anderson is Editor-in-Chief of Publishing Perspectives. He is also co-owner and editor with Jane Friedman of The Hot Sheet, the newsletter for trade and indie authors. He formerly was Associate Editor for The FutureBook, at London's The Bookseller. Anderson has also worked with CNN International, CNN.com, CNN USA, the Village Voice, the Dallas Times Herald, and other media.

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Comments

JULY 13, 2018 **Mark Williams - The New Publishing Standard**

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“Three ways in which the rise of e-commerce is changing that country’s books market...”

“Talented people go where the money is. And today, those talented people may try to enter their careers in screenplays, writing for a television series.”

Respecting and accepting that Stefano Mauri “is among the most astute observers of the evolution of modern Italy’s publishing market and its challenges” I can only assume he consciously chose not to mention the “other” factor that will in part account for the woes of the physical bookstores, the falling volumes of sales needed to conquer the bestseller lists, and that is the obvious alternative to video that will account for the brain-drain.

That is, self-publishing.

Not for one minute to suggest self-publishing can compete at the highest levels in terms of revenue or reach, where publishers still hold a huge advantage.

But for all the explosion of video opportunities for writers this past decade, relatively few novelists and even fewer non-fiction writers are going to have the skills-set to easily switch from publishing, where all the barriers are down, to video where the competition has never been higher.

“I can tell you this,” Stefano Mauri warned. “It’s true that many of our editors have complained for at least two years now that few people are writing interesting first novels, and from the USA, especially.

“And I think this may be because the [Hollywood/screen] industry may be draining talented people.”

No doubt it is, at some small level. But its self-evident in the Anglophone markets that the biggest brain drain for publishers is talent simply opting out of the traditional system to go it alone with their books, or talent not opting into the traditional system in the first place.

Hard to imagine Italy is so very different.