



French-language publishing in Belgium

This text goes with the attached file “Presentation on Belgian Publishers.”

- **History**

Presentation of a few key moments in the history of Belgian French-language publishing that shaped the current publishing landscape.

1. Historically, Belgium is a land of printers. In the 15th and 16th centuries, the figure of the “publisher-printer-bookseller” gains in importance. Christian Plantin (image on the left of slide 3 of the attached file) is one of the most prominent incarnations of this figure.
2. During the 17th and 18th centuries, printers invested in the counterfeiting business, reprinting works to which they did not own the rights. Meanwhile, the religious book sector continued to grow. Jean-François Bassompierre (slide 4) is a typical example of the figure of the printer-bookseller of that period. He printed both religious works and counterfeit antireligious works.
3. In 1852, a convention on the respect of publishing ownership signed between France and Belgium puts an end to the age of counterfeiting. This is when actual publishing begins in Belgium. Firstly, religious publishing kept going strong, especially in peripheral provinces, which explains today’s decentralized publishing landscape in Belgium. Secondly, the first literary publishers started appearing and targeting editorial niches French publishers had left vacant. At the end of the 19th century, exchanges between Belgium and France grew stronger. This explains why some Belgian authors started pursuing a career in Paris while some French authors decided to get published in Belgium (slide 5), essentially for the bibliophile market.
4. In the 20th century, Belgian publishers strengthened their niche-targeting strategy, which led them to rush into fields such as school books and paraliterature, focusing on minor genres that had no cultural legitimacy at the time (comic strips, fantasy, detective stories). Meanwhile, new ways of publishing and distributing books appeared, allowing publishers to target new audiences. One example is the pocket-sized, paperback novel (slide 6).

- **Publishing in Belgium**

What is a French-language Belgian publisher? (Slides 7 to 9)

- **A decentralized publishing landscape**

There are about 300 publishers in Brussels, including publishers affiliated with universities, academies and official bodies. (Slides 10 and 11)

Publishers are scattered all over Belgium, but large publishing companies and subsidiaries of international groups usually settle in Brussels.

The capital also welcomes a large number of small enterprises.

- **Production**



In order to understand the statistics, it is vital to understand the difference between the economic weight of the publishing sector and of the economic weight of the overall book market. The first set of data shows the production of publishers, meaning the number of books they produce and sell in Belgium or abroad. The second set of data shows the total number of books that were bought by Belgian residents.

This part of the presentation goes into detail on the turnover of the Belgian publishing industry (slides 12 to 19).

The turnover of the Belgian publishing industry is 268 million euros. It is important to know that there is a difference between the price for retailers and the price consumers pay, which explains the gap between the turnover generated by publishers' production and the book market turnover.

The turnover of the Belgian publishing industry is generated by three main sectors: comic strips (52%), science and humanities (26%) and school books (14%), which account for 90% of production.

Another key information on the publishing industry is that digital editions account for 24% of turnover, and most of them are databases aimed at professionals. We should also note that 50% of total production is exported.

- **The market**

The overall book market in the Wallonia-Brussels Federation is worth 243 million euros. This amount corresponds to the sum of all sales, no matter the origin of the book (slide 20). The market heavily depends on the importation of French books (70 to 75%). The only publishing sectors that manage to be independent are school-book publishers and legal publishers.

- **Challenges and opportunities for cooperation**

What are the main challenges for the future of French-language Belgian publishers?
(Slide 21)

- **Description of two associations of publishers**

The ADEB (Association of Belgian Publishers) and the Éditeurs singuliers (Atypical Publishers) conclude the presentation by briefly going over their histories, their purposes and the projects on which they collaborate, among which the platform Wallonie-Bruxelles Édition (Wallonia-Brussels Publishing).