The Editor and the Mediatory Function in a Literary System

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The paper deals with the role of a book editor as a key mediatory function in the literary system. It strives to outline the complex network of factors and constraints that have an impact on editors' mediatory activities and choices. Three categories of such constraints are analyzed in greater detail: economic factors, political (ideological) factors, and networking effects.

Keywords: literary system / literary mediation / publishing / book market / editor / editorial policy

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In this contribution I focus on the function of an editor and sketch out the network of factors that influence his mediatory choices and decisions. Such a focus can be well justified. Generally, the role of mediators – not only editors, but all those involved in the complicated process of book production (printers, typesetters, proofreaders, copy-editors, publishers, librarians, booksellers, and distributors) – is underestimated or completely ignored both regarding their contribution to the final version of texts[1] and regarding their complex role in shaping the totality of available reading material in given historical situations. Remaining deliberately in the age when the printed book has been a predominant material carrier of mental content, it is possible to say that mediators have significantly helped shape the stock of *ideas in circulation,* in both vernacular literary fields and international exchange (cf. St Clair, *The Reading Nation*; Chartier).

In modern literary systems such as have evolved in the general process of social differentiation, especially from the eighteenth and nineteenth century onwards, the central mediatory position is obviously occupied by the editor (cf. Dović, *Slovenski pisatelj*; Schmidt).[2] The editor seems to be a "gatekeeper"; his function can be understood as an entrance-filter, but not as some kind of indifferent sieve – he directs the author's creativity from the outset, defines the ultimate version of the text, conceives the issuing, marketing, and promotional strategies, and so on (Glas 386). By accepting

a certain text, he simultaneously connotes the author and attaches new (external) identity layers to both of them (Nooy 514). This is especially the case with book editors: research has proven that the role of magazines for literary text is more transitory. It is true that most authors start in magazines, but the majority of them never get to a book; and without a (continual) book opus there can be no durable accumulation of symbolic or economic capital (Verdaasdonk, "Literary Magazines" 230–231; see also Janssen).

Although there are plenty of good reasons for studying the function of the book editor and its equivalents in different historical circumstances, there is little theoretical and methodological support to be found for such an enterprise. Typically, researchers also complain because of the lack of exact data and difficulty of their interpretation in given contexts. Only gradually, literary sociology – from the classical school of Escarpit and evolving interdisciplinary research on the history of books or the political economy of reading to newer information-system-based study of book markets – has managed to offer more serious research instruments for exploring the mediatory role.[3]

The editorial function: The impact factors

The figure of an editor may come to mind first when asking the question *Who chooses?* However, it is hard to ascertain whether the editorial function is actually as autonomous as it may first seem and whether it is not necessary to seriously consider – along with the editor's *primary enthusiasm* – a number of other potential factors. Imagine for a moment the figure of an editor that many agents in contemporary literary systems would consider ideal. The motives of such a figure would probably be adjusted with the logic of autonomy – that is, the request that is essential for artistic systems of recent centuries. An autonomous editor would strive to choose exclusively such works – both original and in translation – that would meet his expectations about the desired special literary or aesthetic quality of the text.

In practice, such high principles face various kinds of constraints that the traditional editor as a decision-maker has to negotiate all the time. Such constraints can be classified in various ways. One of them is represented in Figure 1: it includes *economic, political/ideological,* and *networking* categories.

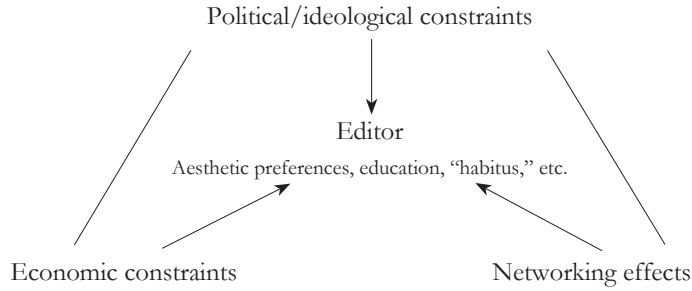

Figure 1. The editorial function and its constraints

It is not necessary to emphasize that in practice the three groups are not always easy to delimit; the model in Figure 1 therefore remains theoretical. Separate factors interfere, combine, and in the end always connect with economics. This is why one should never forget – even when dealing with other kinds of factors – that the editorial function always intersects with economics; the production of books as the material bearers of intellectual content has its own specific logic, but as a branch of business it inevitably remains part of a larger social order. This means that any publishing enterprise in the long term has to find an equilibrium for its financial balance (expenses should not exceed the total income, regardless of how this is collected: sales, monopolies, subsidies, benefactors, etc.). The editor is therefore obliged to help *preserve stability:* he should not endanger the long-term existence of the company (and his own position) with his editorial choices. This is almost an axiom, valid regardless of the degree of historical differentiation of mediatory functions, the size of the market, or other parameters.

Apart from this, it is important to note that, in book publishing, sales success is never entirely predictable: only a small number of titles yield a high profit whereas the majority hardly cover the production costs. For the stability of publishers – and even more so of those that deal with literature – the continuity of opuses of renowned authorial names is therefore crucial.[4] Publishers strive to shape the recognizable group of "house" authors, but the more predictable sales of their repertoire opens space for risky enterprises (Glas). Such practical remarks have also been confirmed by one of the few empirical studies of publishers' lines of literature, which showed that under the pressure of the market Dutch publishers shape structurally similar lines with an emphasis on prose and the works of domestic authors (Verdaasdonk, "The Influence"). At their very center were books by "successful" authors that form a *backlist* for a particular publisher. In general, the core of successful authors and the continuity of

their opuses are crucial for long-term success while providing a basis for better planning and also for more innovative policies. However, if reader demand is the factor that forces publishers towards unification – and this does not seem surprising – the more interesting finding of this study is that at the same time the market stimulates a certain kind of diversity: it forces publishers to swiftly respond to the activities of their rivals and to shape a selection that is recognizable and distinguished by a certain *differentia specifica,* a distinction that raises it from the monotony of structurally similar material.

Economic factors

Let us now examine the economic factors in greater detail. In the completely liberal economic model, the decisive factor is obviously *the book market*. The demand of readers (or, more precisely, purchasers) that are willing to take their wallets out of their pockets (the question of whether they will eventually read the book is irrelevant here) would represent the only authoritative framework of estimating the quality of editorial decisions. It is quite obvious that the historical parameters of the actual book markets were highly diverse and need to be considered in their various contexts. Such parameters are the size of the market, the degree of differentiation of publishing and bookselling functions, the prevailing types of sales channels (the structure and branching of bookstore networks); types of publishing companies, the potential range of editions and average print runs, purchase prices and price policies in general (defining the demand curve and the timing of access for different social strata), modes of regulating book sales (taxation, unified book prices, and subsidies), the role of public or private library networks,[5] and of course buyers' habits, general education and literacy rates, available information systems, and so on. Historically, all of these factors have substantially influenced the behavior of not only readers, but also authors and mediators.

It has turned out that the structure of books in circulation was notably determined both by *manufacturing techniques* and *intellectual property regimes* (St Clair, "The Political Economy" 10–13). The economics of print and physical limitations in general have determined print runs, the extent of books (the length of novels or poetry collections), and also their selection.[6] On the other hand, the question of intellectual property (authorial rights) – while belonging primarily to the realm of ideology or policy – has (at least from the publishers' point of view) always been an economic question with a clear and immediate impact on editorial decisions.[7] In fact,

the economic dimension is very important for any other factor that comes from policy regulation, such as various *subsidy programs,* ways of taxing (or tax exemptions), supporting various segments of the book chain, public repurchasing of books, supporting library networks, and so on; all of these factors have a common feature: they attempt to diminish or mitigate the law of economic demand.

When thinking of economic constraints, it must be acknowledged that the space of editorial autonomy is very much confined within the broader framework of the *organization of the publishing company*. In this respect, it is by far not irrelevant whether the publisher is organized as a joint-stock company, obliged to anonymous investors interested exclusively in profit, or whether the company is organized in a different way: while pursuing other aims in society, it may for example be quite satisfied with bare "survival" in terms of business. As Miha Kovač has demonstrated with cases from the Slovenian transition, in the first type the sales sector inevitably narrows down the space of editorial decisions (Kovač, *Skrivno življenje knjig*). The reasons that this does not happen at any time and any place must be sought in those factors that try to diminish the operation of exclusively economic logic in the literary field. Let us take a closer look at these.

Political and ideological factors

When thinking of the political and ideological constraints of the autonomy of editorial judgments – setting aside the presumption that yielding up book production to the "invisible hand" of the market is non-ideological in itself – the first thing that comes to mind is the *mechanisms of textual control* and censorship (together with the corresponding dose of self-censorship). Historically divergent modes of such control reached their extreme form especially in the totalitarian regimes that attempted to establish full control over the cultural field; endangered in its autonomy, the latter evolved various interesting strategies of opposition.[8] Compared with the liberal market model, authoritatively regulated literatures are determined by entirely different parameters. The role of the market is seriously limited, institutions tend to be centralized, artistic production is bureaucratized, and mechanisms of ideological control such as censorship and supervision of the means of consecration are established (cf. Dović, "Totalitarian and Post-Totalitarian Censorship"; Neubauer).

Nevertheless, in such circumstances the answer to the question "who chooses," or at least who is assisting the editorial choices, is an easy one. In general, it is possible to agree with Gisele Sapiro's finding that the de-

limitation between liberal (democratic) and totalitarian regimes is relatively sharp. In democracies, the tendency towards total control is obviously absent; but this does not mean that political and ideological factors are set aside entirely. On the contrary, on closer inspection it turns out that such factors have very often tailored the behavior of the mediatory sector to a significant degree. This is quite evident in situations in which actual political relationships are reflected in the cultural field: in this case, the explicit political, philosophical, or other orientation of a certain mediatory institution becomes an important factor of choice.[9] The impact of *intellectual property regimes* has already been mentioned. Once again, this is a highly complex and delicate issue that has been a subject of friction and quarrel ever since; and we cannot even tackle all of its various dimensions (cf. Chartier's *Inscription and Erasure* and Lawrence Lessig's *Free Culture*). Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that means of legal regulation of authorship rights do affect the choices of editors and publishers: to illustrate this, one only has to think of countless cases of publishing outbursts that followed the expiration of copyright for particular works.[10]

Apart from this, ideological impact factors must be sought in the *policies of regulating* book markets. Such policies are always derived from certain ideological value presumptions. Based on such presumptions, countries implement a set of passive or active interventions that have immediate effects on editorial practices and in this way help shape the literary field. Quite often, these policies take the form of direct subsidies to individual elements of the book chain (authors, translators, publishers, or booksellers); the funding of (public) libraries also counts here. From this perspective, the declared aims of support programs, their structure, and the mechanisms of deciding (committees, priority lists, special categories, etc.) need to be examined in order to ascertain the leading motives of such policy regulation. Is it ideological control, which is characteristic of totalitarianism? Are there any nationalistic motives in the background that have their roots in the times of creating national literatures and nation-states? Is it the prestige of expansionist cultural policy that attempts to surpass the confines of its own culture, or is it following and promoting different values and ideologies – for example, tolerance, integration of minorities, protection of marginal social groups, and so on? All such motivations structure the support regimes and in this way influence decisions in the mediatory sector.[11]

In this respect, special attention must be devoted to one of the motives that seem to help direct the regulation of modern book markets – namely, the ideology of *literary autonomy*. National regulatory mechanisms are most often understood as a necessary corrective of the market and its con-

straints, the latter supposedly being responsible for the "uniformity" of production. Interventionist policies are therefore legitimized as assistance to the literary field to preserve a certain degree of autonomy with regard to the market and its inherent tension towards standardization; as such, it should contribute to the diversity and quality of the goods on the "market of ideas."[12]

To a considerable degree, contemporary interventionist mechanisms can be explained from the ideology of artistic autonomy. Apart from that, however, another ideological presupposition might be even more important – which is definitely the case in peripheral and semi-peripheral literary systems: namely, the idea of the crucial importance of the written corpus and especially of literature for establishing and sustaining linguistic and *national identity*. From this perspective, not only special attention dedicated to the literary life of small linguistic communities, but also the phenomenon of mediators that understood their role as a special cultural and national *mission,* can be much better understood. The faith in this apostolic vocation has sometimes been so strong that particular editors and publishers continued printing and publishing books in spite of their financial failure. As Kovač has pointed out, their decisions were motivated by specific cultural presuppositions rather than by the economic interest (*Skrivno življenje knjig*).

At this point, one might already see a certain conflict that makes it impossible to treat publishing as just another branch of business. The transitory position in the intersection between the worlds of business and artistic and intellectual life has turned publishing into the kernel of the conflict between two types of capital: *symbolic* and *economic*. This conflict has always been constitutional for contemporary art and culture (see Pierre Bourdieu's influential analysis in *The Rules of Art*). This friction is the main reason for the evolution of the subfield of "restricted production" in publishing. This subfield seeks to distance itself from the "commercial" and, instead of the profane taste of masses, enthrones the judgment of peers as its value criterion. In this way, in publishing the delineation between the domains of "elite" and "trivial" are reproduced – a boundary between the world of short-term profit (which at the same time means farewell to symbolic capital) and the world that temporarily ignores profit to invest into the stock of works that may once become "classic" (which is actually the way to translate accumulated symbolic capital into economic capital).

The appeal of the theoretical distinction that Bourdieu illustrates by contrasting the French publishers Laffont and Minuit is quite manifest. However, in practice it turns out that the borders are not at all that sharp. The relations between "commercial" and "non-commercial" are complex:

although the "commercial" publishers are never completely immune to the charms of symbolic capital (especially when it is about to "translate" into real money; for example, after the work has been awarded), on the other hand the small "non-profit" publishers never complain if their sales figures are good from the start. In addition, the publishing of bestsellers often provides financial backup for more risky enterprises; as many examples have shown, the predictable income from the backlist of the "stable" of writers serves to enable experimentation (cf. Sapiro; Verdaasdonk, "The Influence"). The mechanical application of Bourdieu's distinction has been critically tackled by Frank de Glas, who used an empirical example to show that there are no sharp boundaries and that the picture in which on one side there are those that only care for the profit and on the other those that exclusively aim for quality (symbolic capital) is far too simplified. However, it is possible to agree with him that Bourdieu's distinction between symbolic and economic and his analysis of the mechanisms of approval have notably improved the understanding of the literary fields.

Networking effects

In an area in which the accumulation of symbolic capital is so important, one should also consider the effects of *social networks* – and even more so when considering the fact that they have seldom been discussed and have mostly remained outside the methodological horizon of literary criticism.[13] Only on the basis of actual diagrams of network relations can the restoration and distribution of symbolic capital in certain cultural situations be properly explained – but such research is scant and its results cannot be mechanically transferred to other situations.[14]

However, it is possible to hypothesize that networking effects are much more important when the role of the market is being diminished by various kinds of regulation. At the same time, the general tendency among agents – for example, the connections among publishers, media, universities, juries, committees, and cultural politics – is to keep the network somewhat concealed. Publishers and editors are certainly inclined towards creating a systematic network of relations and positioning themselves within the prestigious core of such a network (betweenness) with many links (density) to other influential agents and cliques and also other areas of social life (a bridge), all of which offers them better control over the "means of controlling the intermediaries: publicity in the media, close relations with the critics and the members of literary juries, representation of their houses in the juries" (Sapiro 451).

For editors of literature, the quality of relationships with authors is of vital importance. The symbolic capital of an editor is primarily reflected in the capability to maintain friendly and often very personal ties with authors; this also contributes to establishing and preserving the group of loyal authors indispensable for the survival of the publisher (cf. Verdaasdonk, "The Influence"; Glas). The central position within dense networks also enables editors to discover new literary talents more promptly.[15] Although the majority of literary publishers also act as international cultural mediators (by publishing literature in translation), editors of some merit must also be included in broader networks – in this case not so much directly with foreign authors, but mostly with professional literary agents or with cultural "scouts," the connoisseurs of certain (source) literatures that are often the potential translators into the target languages at the same time. This micro-network of mediators and enthusiastic initiators often affects the choices of literature in translation. In general, the dense and quality *international network* of an editor broadly opens the space for successful translation policies and at the same time also heightens the risks of questionable uses of decisive power.

It is furthermore in the vital interest of an editor to establish more than only professional links with *media agents:* cultural reporters, reviewers, critics, radio and television editors (and managers), especially in the mass media that can greatly contribute to promoting a book.[16] Similarly, the editor is highly motivated to assure himself a chance to influence the (non-market) means of approval: for example, to members of the award-giving juries and subsidy committees, to professional associations, leading editors, critics, or essayists, and even to university humanities programs, through his network. With his endeavors, the editor strives to consolidate the symbolic capital and prestige of the publisher he represents and to promote and strengthen its specific identity: it is not irrelevant whether the publisher has a reputation of being a discoverer of new names, an issuer of classical works, a supporter of a certain quality literary group, of being only interested in sales and profit, and so on. The symbolic capital of the publisher affects the books of the authors that publish under its label. The role of the editor is crucial here: his proper name becomes a third pillar of identity in addition to the names of the author and publisher – sometimes even with the aura of a mediatory "genius." In any case, by regulating the distribution of symbolic capital, networking factors have a significant influence on the behavior of the mediatory sector – even when there is no evidence of their immediate impact on particular editorial decisions.

Conclusion

The model described here – focusing on the role of the book editor and the numerous factors that direct his choices – can serve as a point of departure that offers greater insight into the behavior, evolution, and specificity or anomalies of the mediatory sector in various historical circumstances. In the Slovenian case, for instance, one could discuss the comparatively high importance of nationalist ideology for publishing organization and operations – which was already the case at the beginnings of Slovenian *belles letters* in the nineteenth century and has remained so to the present day, when modified elements of such an ideology still contribute significantly to the regulation of the book market. Other issues of interest would be the role of communist ideology and censorship under totalitarianism, or exploring the greater or lesser role of the market (economy) in certain periods. Considering all three categories presented above also makes it much easier to explain the condition of the Slovenian literary system, which seems to be quite specific in many respects.[17] In general, the role of mechanisms that are meant to correct barely market-driven production is quite strong – which obviously gives strength to political and ideological factors and heightens the impact of what have been denominated here as "networking effects." The analysis of the contemporary Slovenian mediatory sector should therefore take into account the ideologies that direct the selections of different financers (in addition to the parameters of the book market)[18] and should study the complex social networks that influence the distribution of symbolic capital and access to the means of approval. Based on such an analysis, the entire regulative policy could be corrected – especially in those segments that do not operate optimally.

NOTES

[1] The question of the share of those "overlooked" is especially intriguing from the perspective of theory of authorship (cf. Bennett; Chartier, this issue).

[2] This very central position of the classic book editor was not challenged until the information-technology revolution (cf. Kovač, *Od katedrale do palačinke*; Schreier, this issue; Vaupotič, this issue).

[3] Pioneering work is represented by the study of the Dutch literary field, inspired by Bourdieu's sociology. Such systematic collection and interpretation of empirical data was only possible with the backup of the Tilburg department of Marketing and Sociology of Books, closely linked with the work of Hugo Verdaasdonk and also with the journal *Poetics*, which has published a substantial corpus of empirical research since the 1980s.

[4] The value of a recognizable group of authors for a publisher is evidenced by metaphorical denominations from the field of horse breeding (Eng. *stable*, Fr. *écurie*, Srb. *ergela*).

[5] An excellent example is the role of Mudie's private commercial chain of libraries and its impact on editorial choices, described by William St Clair ("Following Up" 725). Authors rejected by this library for repurchase had much smaller chances of building a great career.

[6] When a particular technique (because of the tendency to maximally exploit the means of production) stimulates production of a fixed number of copies, it thus structures the supply. On the other hand, the high costs of translating (and printing) very long books motivate editors to choose shorter texts.

[7] The economic roots of authorial rights are demonstrated by their historical evolution (cf. Bennett; Rose; Lessig; St Clair, "The Political Economy").

[8] Sapiro mentions metaphorical and allegorical deviations, illegal publishing, and publishing abroad. As she points out, the long struggle of the arts against the censorial control has contributed significantly to laying the foundations of the autonomy of the field (Sapiro 499).

[9] In this way we are obtaining mediatory institutions that more or less obviously declare themselves to be Catholic, conservative, liberal, socialist, and so on. Some cases show that politicization is more characteristic or explicit for magazines compared to book publishers. This may at least partly depend on the evolutionary phases of the system (cf. Dović, *Slovenski pisatelj*; Andringa, this issue). Exploring this interesting problem could prove very fruitful.

[10] In this sense, St Clair's analogy with the pharmaceutical and information-technology industry is quite justified ("The Political Economy" 5).

[11] At this point, discussions on "zero tax" for books should be mentioned. Its advocates presuppose that taxing books is actually taxing ideas – which makes it highly unreasonable.

[12] The utmost example of deregulation is supposed to be the US, where the production of standardized, cliché genres is predominant, whereas poetry, drama, and even translated literature (due to high initial costs) are marginalized (Sapiro 450).

[13] Social network analysis has especially developed in empirical sociology and anthropology. It conceives of individuals as nodes in a network of mutual ties; its basic interest is to explore how the structure of these ties affects individuals' norms and behavior.

[14] For example, Wouter de Nooy and Frank de Glas have explored how Dutch publishers acquire and maintain symbolic capital, and Susanne Janssen has empirically investigated how authors' parallel activities (in addition to publishing books) affect their chances of success: it turned out that networking effects do play an important role here. Her analysis includes three categories, and the network – the ability to engage influential colleagues/peers, critics, committee members, and so on – turns out to be crucial especially for accumulating social capital (Janssen 277–78).

[15] In larger markets, this role is increasingly taken over by specialized literary agents.

[16] As Sapiro has noted, the approval power of mass media is increasing. However, the brevity of media focus usually redirects attention from content to the author as a "star" (456).

[17] In general, the Slovenian book market is characterized by the following features: it is relatively small (two million potential readers), the degree of differentiation of publishing and bookselling is comparatively low, direct book sales have a high market share compared to the bookstore chain, lending in public libraries is very high compared to sales, and there are not many cheap paperback editions. The number of titles is constantly increasing, but the average print runs are becoming smaller. Due to numerous means of support, publishing of literature is least bound to the law of supply and demand. The share of fiction titles is high (decreasing from almost a quarter of the total title production in 2004 to approximately one-

fifth in 2008, or 1,274 out of 6,385 titles published that year), but the print runs are lower than average. With regard to genre, prose is dominant (63%), followed by poetry (20%; all data refer to 2008). The share of translated literature is very high (44% or 565 out of 1,274 fiction titles); such "openness" is a consequence of both the restricted production base and subsidies that eliminate the initial difference in costs. As elsewhere, translations from English dominate (55%) and other languages do not exceed 10% (cf. *Statistični letopis 2009*; Grilc).

[18] Regarding the initial question, it is not irrelevant how calls for applications are structured or how the external specialist committees that evaluate projects and programs are organized. In Slovenia, the most important co-financer of literature is currently the JAK (Slovenian Book Agency), but there are also other subsidy programs and opportunities (especially for publishers).

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