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Books, E-books, And Americans In Paris

By Calvin Reid | Feb 14, 2011

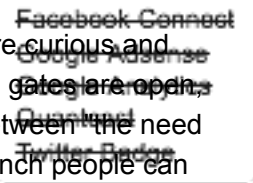
Organized as part of a cultural cooperation agreement between the French Ministry of Culture and the French-American Foundation of New York, a group of six American publishing professionals spent a week in Paris, January 23–28, meeting their French counterparts at publishing houses, the publishers association, libraries, and bookstores, with an emphasis on observing the state of digital publishing in France. While the Americans pointed out the differences—in particular a very active government presence in the market and a general wariness about digital delivery—they were also impressed by French efforts to act on digital initiatives while protecting physical bookstores and preserving French publishing culture.

Evan Schnittman, managing director, group sales and marketing, print and digital, at Bloomsbury, told PW after returning from the sojourn that he was most impressed by a presentation at the Ministry of Culture and Communication on book policy and how the French "think about publishing. There's a real difference. They are serious about preserving independent bookstores." In addition to Schnittman, the group included Mitzi Angel, director of FSG imprint Faber and Faber; Brendan Cahill, v-p, Open Road Integrated Media; Ira Silverberg, literary agent and director of foreign rights at Sterling Lord Literistic; Peter Costanzo, director of content at F+W Media; and Robert Stein, director of New York's Institute of the Future of the Book.

"There's no price competition. Stores compete on quality and service," Schnittman said in describing French bookselling, "and stores that create a better collection and services are rewarded with tax incentives." As part of the tour, the Americans were introduced to Gallica, a Google-like database project of the French National Library (BNF), that is digitizing millions of contemporary and historical books and documents. The Americans were also treated to a presentation on EdenLivres.fr—an e-book distribution service that Schnittman compared to LibreDigital—developed and controlled by three publishers: Gallimard, Flammarion, and La Martinière Groupe. The tour also included visits to La Procure, an independent physical bookstore that also sells e-books, and to Fnac, the 69-store French national chain selling books and electronic merchandise that has developed its own digital reading device.

While French houses are moving forward on digital delivery, Schnittman described their efforts as reminiscent of U.S. publishers about two or three years ago, and cited their "fear of letting go of the digital files." Schnittman understands their concerns, but said, "I told them that only allowing publishers to host files doesn't work. They have to have contracts that trust retailers to hold the files if they really want to grow the market." Asked their response, Schnittman laughed. "I got a lot of polite smiles. It's going to take time. They want to protect their books and they're afraid of piracy, but not having digital product in the marketplace will drive piracy."

During previous transatlantic discussions, Silverberg, currently in negotiations with Gallimard about the Jack Kerouac backlist, said Gallimard editors generally did not seem to know much about digital. But after meeting with Gallimard editors in Paris, Silverberg said the French editors are very interested and really want digital, but "there's a divide between editorial and the digital side at French houses" that seemed to keep the editors in the dark. But, he said, his discussions with French editors during this trip gave him much more "emotional security" in dealing with French publishers about e-books. Silverberg said he generally hears skepticism about digital delivery from French publishers, "the traditional publisher's rap," he said. But "the editors actually seemed better prepared for digital than we were,



Costanzo agreed: "Young publishing people at Gallimard were very excited about the iPad. Folks are curious and want to know how the U.S. is responding to digital. They're about two years behind us, but once the gates are open, they'll be a lot more prepared than we were." Costanzo said he was struck by the French conflict between the need to hold on to history and taking action to move publishing and bookselling forward at a pace the French people can accept."

Indeed, they were all very impressed by the French "passion for the written word" and concern for protecting bookstores. "I was struck by the idea of helping physical stores by giving them incentives," said Schnittman. "We could Americanize that—perhaps reward points, something like co-op, but from a collective pool of something to help stores rise to the challenge," he said. "Maybe some kind of industry initiative. Thanks to Google eBooks, my local store is now selling e-books. A healthy indie bookstore is a really good thing."