

Going Local with National Geographic!

Interview with Miha Kovac from National Geographic

by Adina Luca itim consultant

AL: National Geographic has begun publishing local language editions and has been extremely successful. Would you say the decision was made too early or too late?

MK: The idea to start the local language editions is 10 years old. To a certain extent, National Geographic was one of the innovators in this field, because no other magazine published local language editions before 1995, so they had to discover the whole technology and the organisation skills to do it.

AL: So the answer to that question could be “too early” if they were the innovators...

So what do you personally perceive as cultural differences?

MK: From my point of view, there are two sets of cultural differences as I understand them. First, different cultures see things in different ways. I mean that we can imagine that some Europeans can see the WWII in a different way from other Europeans. Second, cultural differences are strongly linked to different values. For example, there is a long tradition in Eastern Europe that people rely strongly on the state. They think that the state is there to solve most of their problems. On the other hand, in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, the state is not seen as something that should interfere with life of individuals and individuals should take care of themselves. The reasons for these two differences are, of course, historical and

very deep. Another issue is egalitarian values. They are stronger in Eastern than in Western Europe. So when one conducts business, all these differences should be taken into account.

AL: What do you mean by “egalitarian”?

MK: By egalitarian I mean that those who are successful and who have money are considered suspicious. In Eastern Europe, there is an old tradition of hiding wealth, which comes from “good” old communist tradition when one had to hide wealth when one had it. That’s what I mean by egalitarian.

AL: So, on the one hand you see cultural differences as an expression of different interpretation of different events.

MK: Yes, and on the other hand different cultural and social values, which are related to the state and the market.

AL: If these are the two perspectives, how do they influence the publishing market?

MK: That’s an interesting question, because when we talk about publishing, there is one additional problem. In many small European countries, I am not talking only about Eastern Europe, the language is considered one of the most important parts of national identity. Due to the fact that books, papers and magazines are printed in local languages, they are considered a tool for preservation of national identity. As a result, in many small countries, the state interferes with publishing market with different forms of help. For example, important segment of cultural policy in such countries is sustaining a big network of libraries

which buy books from publishers and then loan them to people, in the places where it is not possible to open a bookshop, because the town is too small to enable a bookshop to survive on market terms as there are not enough customers. Then there are different subventions, public lending rights which help authors that lend many books through the library network, publishers get money from the state, the VAT is lower in certain countries and so on. So on one hand we have this role of the state, which is more important in small countries than in big markets. Another problem is that in some Eastern European countries, trading, selling and buying and producing books on a market basis, that were considered pillars of national identity, was seen as something un-proper. You really don't do business with national identity, went this way of reasoning, as it's something sacred and people don't trade with sacred things. In some cultures, this created quite a lot of problems for publishers in the way that they were considered as a kind of people who are betraying their national identity because they are doing business with something that should not be traded on the market. I did a comparison between the development of Slovenian book publishing just before the WWII and the British book publishing. In Britain, for example, Alain Lane created the Penguin books and the Penguin series by producing them into a pure market good, because he was selling the books in supermarkets. He was the first in Europe who started to sell books in supermarkets. He created nice covers, with lots of colours. He treated the book as a market object. And, of course, when he retired in the 60s, he was knighted by the Queen because he was considered somebody who highly influenced British cultural life. On the other hand, in my country, in Slovenia, if you read the papers in the 30s, you can find many stories about dirty, nasty capitalist publishers that are exploiting Slovenian authors and Slovenian culture. In other words, the publishers were considered ugly because they were entrepreneurs.

AL: So what do you think this says about identity in the UK and in Slovenia?

MK: I would say that this story says that market values are part of British identity and they are not part of identity in my part of the world, in Slovenia, and I would say that they were not part of the identity of other East Europeans for a very long time, let's say until the end of the 20th Century.

AL: That is quite a conclusion! And how does this specifically influence the National Geographic?

MK: The National Geographic is a completely different story. The National Geographic is published by a non-profit organisation, the National Geographic Society, and part of the society's program is also the preservation of small languages. There are more than 30 language editions and all this is seen not only as a business enterprise but also as a kind of cultural policy, that helps people who use other languages to read about latest scientific research and discoveries in their own language. The problem we sometimes have is that we don't know how to translate certain notions into Slovenian language that appear in top class articles about, say, some scientific experiments that are going on in the European Union or the United States, or when we translate an article about astronomy.. When we show such texts to our specialists, to researchers in our universities and research institutes, who are good in their field of work and very often part of international research projects, they say: of course, we are dealing with this on a daily basis. But then we say: what do we call it in Slovenian language? The answer is: oops, we have to think about this! Then we try to invent

proper translation. In other words, I think that this kind of local language edition somehow helps to develop the language of science and research. Otherwise it will degrade into a kind of a kitchen language.

AL: You could also say that language is an expression of different cultural values, because if there isn't a word for that concept, that concept is not perceived in that local culture, if it needs to be borrowed.

MK: I would not use the word "borrowed", I would use the word "localised."

AL: What is to localise in translations?

MK: It is to localise the terminology and with this to enable the language to be able to express the latest scientific achievements as part of their own culture. That is one side. And, of course, the other side, which is done in the localisation of this kind of magazines, is the constant adaptation of stories, because they are written from an American perspective and what you want to do is to give them a kind of international perspective. I wouldn't call it European, because it is too local, I would prefer to use the word "global" here.

AL: What is an American perspective, what do you mean by that?

MK: American perspective is whenever you say "we like to do this and that" about something that is culturally part only of American culture.

AL: You mean that some statements that come from a certain cultures, such as the United States, would assume that the entire world would want that.

MK: That is a very narrow way of seeing things, although it is very obvious that the American culture is somehow a kind of a leading culture, or dominating culture of the contemporary world, although it is still a local culture. Whenever I talk about globalisation I like to use culinary metaphors. For me, McDonald's is not a global dish. It's a typical American dish, the best of American cuisine, if I may be a bit cynical. A global dish is, let's say, a combination of Chinese and Italian dishes. And of course, such combinations could appear only in USA.

AL: Why are you saying that?

MK: Well, global is for me when on the one hand, different cultures start to mix into something else, something completely new, and on the other hand global is when you have a variety of choices to choose from. For example, Queensway in London is quite a short street with a lot of restaurants. I did a test once and I counted eighteen different restaurants with eighteen different national backgrounds. And when you walk through that street you can go either into Afghanistan, or Austrian, or Chinese, or Pakistani or Indian, or whatever. That is globalisation for me, not eating McDonald's. McDonald's is only a part of the global kitchen.

AL: So globalisation doesn't mean one value that is spread all over, but the simultaneous existence of different values.

MK: There is another reason why American values cannot become entirely global. Of course, some parts of American values are today entirely global. For example, today we all believe in a free market. There are not a lot of socialists walking around anymore. Forty years ago saying that a non-market economy doesn't work by default was considered an extreme far right view. Today, the saying that only a market economy works is a common truth accepted all around the world. So I would say these kinds of values are global. But what is not global and why American way of seeing market cannot become global is because the understanding of the market is tailored to the American market, which is huge. And on such a huge market you can do on a lot of things in the market which you cannot do in small countries. For example, if I go back to the book business, which is my area of expertise, in such a huge market, with 300 million potential customers, you can sell books and produce books for the market without any bigger problem. But in a small market, such as the Slovenian, or Danish, or Norwegian one, you cannot create books and distribute them as efficiently only on market basis as you can do in the US. You have to use other support mechanisms, you have to interfere on the market in order to supply books to all people who need them for education and so on and so forth. Furthermore, I would say that, in Europe, we have one economic model which is, from my point of view, as effective as American although it is different. If you look at the Competitiveness Yearbook published by IMD in Lausanne, you can see that America is always on the top, but very close to US are the Scandinavian countries, which have different market models than US. They are very competitive and very open and very free societies. Yet, they have very effective social networks and very effective welfare states. Scandinavia is a kind of a proof that you can have effective welfare state and highly competitive society, as competitive as US are. So there are different models and I think each country and each culture has to tailor a model which suits it best. However, there is no

doubt that at least in media, American culture is strongly dominant. The very good example for this is Frankfurt bookfair where you have to pretend that you are English or American if you want to sell rights. According to UNESCO database, which I think is a bit outdated and the percentage is a higher, more than 50% of translations are done from English. So every publisher who comes to Frankfurt to shop and to buy rights goes to the hall where American and British publishers are. In other words, first you go shopping to Britain and to US, and then, if there is some money left in your pocket, you perhaps go to a German, Italian, or French hall, and if you have a little imagination and are a bit weird, you go to the Eastern European hall too. But nobody shops there as a matter of fact. Five years ago, a Slovak publishing house, SlovArt, got a brilliant idea. They opened a small branch in the UK and then this branch bought a stand as a British publishing house, in Hall Ten. In the first year they sold many of the books that they had tried to sell over the last ten years. In the next year they were followed by Mladinska Knjiga Publishing House and it was the same effect. They are specialised in children's books and they really succeeded to push one of their authors to the global arena. They could do this only from American and English hall. Completely crazy!

AL: Why do you say it is completely crazy?

MK: Because it just says that you have to be in the right place if you want to sell. You have to be in the English hall, because everybody who shops goes there. And, of course, if you are a Slovenian, or Slovak, or Romanian, or Bulgarian publisher, you have to translate your books into English. Because nobody will translate from Romanian, Bulgarian or Slovenian in Japan, they will translate from English, because they have English translators, they don't have

Slovenian or Romanian translators. That is how some publishers from Eastern Europe started slowly-slowly to become more global players. They started to behave like English, they started to sell the books and the rights in the same way the British publishers do. They became clones of British publishers.

AL: Interesting. What does that tell you, how do you interpret that?

MK: It tells me that English is not a local language anymore, it is a global language. And I don't consider speaking English as speaking a foreign language. It is more or less a technical skill you have to perform if you want to survive in a global world. It's the same way that Latin was used in the Middle Ages, when anybody who was educated spoke Latin all around Europe to be able to communicate. This is the same with English today. All of us speak English besides our local language. If one wants to survive in a global world, one has to speak English.

AL: True, we are talking in English right now and you are Slovenian and I am Romanian. You also mentioned that National Geographic was successful and turned around its financial situation as a result of going local.

MK: That was a side effect. It sells more than 3 million copies in the local language editions and most of the magazines which are published in English lost half of their readers in the last ten years. National Geographic didn't, because it gained local audience in Europe and in Asia. This is one of the secrets of the success I think.

AL: Can we say that this could be a case that when you become localised you actually become successful internationally?

MK: Yes, I think when you become able to adapt to local cultures and circumstances, that is one of the secrets of success. Another area that I am following is the children's book market. That is one of the few local markets where in all of the small nations there is very strong local production of books. Small children's books are really part of the local culture. And the trick in the children's publishing is that parents usually buy their kids the books which they were reading when they were kids. This is how children's books become long sellers. One of the pre-conditions to become a long seller is that the author has to be part of the local culture. He or she has to appear in schools, on TV, in talk shows, and so on, he or she has to be a kind of a local celebrity. And you really cannot do this with a foreign author. The most successful children's books in most European countries are locally produced. There are of course some exceptions, apart from Harry Potter, such as the Swedish author Astrid Lindgren, who is very popular in some Central European countries. She is Swedish but she became part of the local culture in many countries. But that is more the exception than the rule.

AL: So that contributes to the success of publishing, the more you take into account the local habits. Thank you very much.