

Self-Publishing and Academic Libraries

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Self-publishing has had phenomenal growth over the last few years. According to statistics from Bowker, self-published titles may now account for the majority of titles published in the United States.¹ Sales of titles from trade and university presses are, however, much higher since many self-published titles sell only a few copies. Many factors are responsible for this increase in the number of titles. The ability to create ebooks and to distribute publications through print-on-demand (POD) has made it easier for authors to self-publish. Amazon, Smashwords, Lulu, and other sites have encouraged self-publication both by making these works available and by marketing services to potential authors to improve the quality of their books.²

Libraries have mostly overlooked this increase in the number of self-published titles and are only beginning to grapple with the implications of the self-publishing revolution. Libraries of all types have built their collection development and acquisitions processes around traditional publishing. The fact that self-published books are different works against their acceptance. While they do not have to be inferior to commercially published items, many are because of sloppy editing, typographical and grammatical errors, inferior content, and substandard illustrations and cover art. Most authors who self-publish do not have any publishing experience. Services are available from Smashwords, Lulu, and other sources that fulfill many of the functions of traditional publishers and improve the quality of the final product but they cost money that many self-publishing authors are unwilling to spend.

Furthermore, libraries depend upon established distribution channels with their sophisticated processes built up over decades if not centuries. Self-published materials are mostly created and distributed outside these familiar paths. For example, they often lack high quality cataloging or quality metadata. The Library of Congress (LC) Cataloging in Publication program explicitly excludes them.³ LC acquires and catalogs self-published works for its own collections only in exceptional circumstances.⁴ Only recently have the traditional reviewing sources for libraries begun to provide book reviews though some new review sources for self-published books have started to appear.⁵ The traditional library jobbers have not yet figured out how to provide these self-published books to libraries though a few, notably Ingram, are trying to do so.⁶ In conclusion, even libraries interested in self-published books will encounter difficulties in discovering, acquiring, and cataloging them.

The Public Library

Talking about self-publishing and public libraries is useful to give some perspective since public libraries are currently more likely to be acquiring self-published materials. One of the chief functions of public libraries is to provide recreational reading materials for their users. Avid readers require a steady stream of new books, especially those that are hooked on genre fiction. These patrons are also more likely to ask for self-published materials that they have learned about on Goodreads and other reviewing sites, including those that focus on self-published materials. Furthermore, some bloggers specialize in publicizing the best

self-published works in their areas of interest including genre fiction. Public libraries may have a hard time turning down patron requests for self-published materials if they have honored most or all requests for materials from traditional publishers. Libraries struggle with the difference between traditional and self-published books, but patrons just want the items on their reading wish lists.

Self-published authors can also access Web sites such as *Stories to Tell* to learn how to get their self-publications into book stores and libraries.⁷ In fact, this same source includes a short bibliography about other resources easily available on the Internet. Besides convincing libraries to purchase their books, self-published authors frequently ask to give book talks where they can both publicize their works and also sell them to the members of the audience or at least tell them where and how to buy them.

One exceptionally important recent development is the agreement between Smashwords and Overdrive to have Overdrive sell packages of ebooks to libraries. To quote from the publicity release:

Libraries will soon have the option, for example, to purchase the top 100 YA fantasy novels (approximate price: ~\$400), or the top 1,000 most popular contemporary romances (~\$4,000) or top 200 complete series across multiple categories (~\$2,000), or the top 200 thrillers, mysteries, epic fantasies or memoirs. With most of our bestsellers priced at or under \$4.00, you can do the math to appreciate how incredibly affordable these collections will be.⁸

Since most of these packages, which are now available for purchase, are fiction, these titles are intended for public libraries.

Academic Libraries

Why then should academic libraries collect self-published materials? For the most part, they do not have voracious readers of fiction who would ask for self-published books. Many would say that academ-

ic libraries of all types are interested only in serious, scholarly publications from reputable publishers. These publishers have editors, peer reviewers, and editorial boards to help guarantee quality. While this statement is partially true, things are not quite this simple. The sections below give good reasons why academic libraries should collect self-published books.

Primary Source Material

Self-published books can provide excellent primary source material. Peer review and scholarly respectability are not relevant factors when evaluating primary sources. To quote *Wikipedia*:

A self-published source can be independent, authoritative, high-quality, accurate, fact-checked, and expert-approved. Self-published sources can be reliable, and they can be used (except for claims about living people). Sometimes, a self-published source is even the best possible source, such as when you are supporting a direct quotation. In such cases, the original document is the best source because the original document will be free of any errors or misquotations introduced by subsequent sources.⁹

Some self-published books can exceptionally valuable for future researchers since they provide the direct evidence that makes primary sources important. Their authors may be less skilled writers, but they recount their personal experiences or give evidence about topics where they have first-hand knowledge. Autobiographies or personal narratives can be especially useful. For example, the experiences of a veteran who served several tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan may have direct historical insights that are unlikely to be found in commercially published materials written by military officers, politicians, and academics. In the same way, a personal story of growing up in the region where the library is located could be valuable for local history and present the perspective of “common folks.” A biography of “dear Aunt Clara” would have the same value. As evidence

of the possible scholarly worth to future researchers, these items are similar to the ephemeral materials that have appeared in many major microform/digital sets such as *Early English Books*. While the majority of their contents are not scholarly in the least, academic libraries have spent thousands of dollars for these collections because of their value as primary source material. The same may be true for collections of contemporary self-published materials.

Popular Culture

A second value tied to the first is that self-published materials can provide evidence of the popular culture of the era. Books that would never be commercially published can record the ideas of writers who are outside the publishing mainstream or do not belong to respectable scholarly communities. In addition, many of these writers lack the skills to prepare a manuscript acceptable to a commercial publisher or do not know enough about how to present an effective book proposal. The larger trade publishers would avoid some topics for being too controversial. Thus, these books may provide some of the best source materials on popular culture trends such as creationism, Holocaust denial, anti-vaccination, extreme political views on the left or the right, and non-traditional sexual practices. The issue, once again, is not the quality of the work but rather its ability to provide a window on American cultural trends that would be difficult to document elsewhere. A researcher can even get a rough idea of the popularity of these trends if the books are sold on Amazon by looking at the sales rankings that Amazon provides. In a similar fashion, the sales rankings could provide evidence of popularity of fiction sub-genres such as zombie books. Overall, Amazon rankings indicate a work's resonance with the general reading public and supplement the sales figures from trade publishers.

Early or Later Works by Important Authors

Self-publishing and traditional publishing are not completely separate because trade publishers are on the lookout for self-published books that are popular

enough to be successfully repackaged and sold through the traditional markets. Perhaps the most cited example of this phenomenon is *50 Shades of Grey* that was originally self-published. Random House became aware of the popularity of an early self-published version of this book and published it commercially and turned it into a massive best seller. In his blog, Ronald H. Balson gives nine examples of this phenomenon.¹⁰

As you read these words, an unknown author may be self-publishing his or her first works years before becoming a critically acclaimed author. In their desire to be comprehensive, future literary scholars will be interested in these early self-published items to trace in greater detail the literary path of these authors. In addition, Amazon is trying to lure established authors to publish ebooks with them. The company makes it easy to do so and offers better royalties than traditional publishers, up to 70% in some cases.¹¹ In addition, as will be seen in the next section, self-published authors also have much greater control over the contents and format of their books.

Independent Scholars

For this paper, the term "independent scholars" includes both researchers without an academic affiliation and professors, who, for whatever reason, do not care about receiving the credit from being published by a traditional academic publisher. Most university tenure and promotion committees give little weight to self-published books because they have not gone through the traditional review process. One of the main reasons faculty, especially those on the tenure track, avoid self-publishing is that tenure and promotion committees seldom give much value to these publications.¹² On the other hand, acceptance of a manuscript by a university press is considered to be a sign of its scholarly importance and a strong positive for granting tenure and promotion. A full professor with tenure has much less to worry about and may be more interested in wider distribution of a self-published or open access book compared with a university press publication where the library or individual buyer must pay a much higher price.¹³

One principal reason for self-publishing is that university presses and trade publishers no longer find some research to be economically viable. Even if the scholarship is impeccable, the focus of specialized research in the Humanities and some Social Sciences is so narrow that only a handful of scholars will be interested in reading about the subject. Many larger university libraries used to purchase automatically all publications from university presses within their collecting areas. With the decline in library resources coupled with the increased reliance on patron driven acquisitions, most academic libraries now purchase only those university press titles with demonstrated demand from their user communities.¹⁴ For such research, self-publishing is the only choice other than open access, which does not provide any economic reward for the author and does not get the broader distribution that Amazon and other sites provide.

Self-publishing also gives the author greater control over both the contents and the format of the book. The scholar may discover after signing a contract with the publisher that they disagree about the final product and that the publisher has the final say. Many scholars are more interested in the best way to present their findings to peers while the publisher has to take into account production costs and sales potential to a broader audience including libraries. For the author, the intellectual integrity of the book may be compromised by making it more marketable and accessible to a greater number of readers. In a recent article, Donald Beagle describes his publishing experiences both with an academic press and as a self-publishing author and concludes that publishers may make cost cutting decisions that work against the academic value of the work.¹⁵ The virtual ebook format also allows the scholar not only to control the content but also the format of the text since the researcher can include as much supporting documentation, statistics, charts, illustrations, and photographs as she wants. For printed books, making the supporting documentation available in a separate Web site was an option, but its immediate accessibility within the main text is a far preferable alternative. One last advantage is that

self-publishing authors can keep their books in print forever.

Textbooks

The ability to provide self-published textbooks for students at an acceptable cost may be the most exciting development for academic libraries. Most academic libraries have rules against purchasing most textbooks because they are expensive, frequently published in new editions, and lack original content. To quote the University of Georgia's *Collection Development Policy*: "In general, the Libraries' emphasis is on collecting works presenting new and original research or primary source material rather than textbooks."¹⁶ Faculty have started self-publishing text books for their classes that are generally available on the sites, notably Amazon.com, that sell self-published materials. They normally cost much less, which helps students cope with the heavy financial burden from the increasing cost of textbooks. To give an example of the exploding cost for textbooks, Richardson recently published a column in the *Wall Street Journal* about an Econ 101 textbook that cost \$250.¹⁷ By cutting out the textbook publisher, self-publishing lowers the costs for students while providing to the professor the higher royalties that self-publishing offers. Ever vigilant to seek increased revenue from emerging trends, Amazon has also announced plans to support textbook publishing.¹⁸ In conclusion, the much lower cost of these self-published textbooks may make it possible for academic libraries to reverse their former policies against buying textbooks. Doing so would meet one of the most important information needs for their students and make a college education at least a little more affordable.

Comprehensive Collections

One remaining unanswered question for this author is the importance of self-published books for comprehensive collections. In the past, some of the largest research libraries tried to collect as comprehensively as possible in subject areas that they considered their specialties. While it was never completely possible to achieve this goal, the proliferation of resources on the

Internet and the growth of self-publishing have perhaps made this task futile even to consider. To give some context, the definition for the Comprehensive Level of the RLG Conspectus, as listed on the Library of Congress Web site, is:

Comprehensive Level: A collection which, so far as is reasonably possible, includes all significant works of recorded knowledge (publications, manuscripts, and other forms), in all applicable languages, for a necessarily defined and limited field. This level of collecting intensity is one that maintains a "special collection." The aim, if not achievement, is exhaustiveness. Older material is retained for historical research.¹⁹

Do any large research libraries still attempt to collect comprehensively for parts of their collections? If yes, do their efforts include self-published books? The only reason not to collect them would be if they were excluded for not being "significant," but this paper gives reasons why at least some should be important for academic collections. One issue with comprehensive collections remains the same as in the pre-digital ages: spending the time to discover non-traditional publications. A "free" item can become quite pricey when the expense of the bibliographer's or curator's time to locate it is considered as part of the cost. Internet search engines have made it easier to find known items, but the size of the Internet has also created so many more places to look for possible relevant information resources. Even for traditional books, the increase in the number of titles from the growth of self-publishing has made scanning for important but unknown items increasingly difficult. Self-publishing may produce titles that are needles, perhaps even golden needles, in very large haystacks of worthless chaff. Furthermore, even if self-published materials are important for current researchers, the largest libraries in the world may be hesitant to take on the task of acquiring them because of diminishing resources for libraries. Comprehensive collecting may no longer be possible except for very narrow areas.

One Last Issue for Academic Libraries

Two assumptions for this paper are that academic libraries are interested only in self-published materials from the United States and perhaps Canada and the United Kingdom and then only in English. This paper does not therefore consider that self-publishing may include materials in other languages in these countries, particularly Spanish within the United States and French in Canada, and does not deal with self-publications from the rest of the world. Further research is in order beyond this paper's focus on traditional American self-publishing. Thus, self-publishing may have a larger impact on some academic libraries beyond the issues as discussed above.²⁰

Final Thoughts

This presentation gives the reasons to justify the collection of self-published books by academic libraries. Whether they will decide to do so is a completely different matter. Serials, databases, "big deals," and other types of digital resources require increased expenditures just to keep up with inflation. Colleges and universities are facing increased demands for resources coupled with political and competitive pressures to restrain tuition increases. Not surprisingly, few academic institutions are able to fund their libraries at optimal levels. When many academic libraries do not have enough funds to purchase important books from university presses, diverting money from other areas to collect self-published materials is difficult to justify without faculty and administrative support. In addition, several of the most important reasons, such as collecting primary source materials and the history of current popular culture, are most likely important for future users rather than for current research. A leap of faith is needed to collect for users in the next century while not buying what current users want right now. Finally, self-published books require more staff time, which may be in shorter supply than money, to identify, purchase, and catalog.

The most powerful prod for academic libraries to purchase self-published materials would be for users, especially faculty, to request them. Yet these research-

ers might be tempted to purchase them on their own and thus avoid the delays and hassles of asking the library to do so since most self-published books are inexpensive and sometimes free. The second most likely reason would be for special collections librarians to seek out self-published materials in those areas of particular interest to their collection goals. They might focus on subjects comprehensively collected or books of local interest. These librarians are skilled in ferretting out difficult-to-find materials. A final less likely possibility would be for a vendor to do for academic libraries what Smashwords is doing for public libraries—identify works of potential interest to academic libraries and then sell them in relatively inexpensive packages. Works of scholarly value published by independent scholars would perhaps be of most interest.

To conclude, self-publishing is still in its infancy. As stated above, public libraries are more aware of the meteoric growth of self-published titles; and some have started to grapple with its implications. Academic libraries will need to do the same sooner or later.

Notes

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