A definitive history of vanity publishing can probably never be written. There is evidence to indicate that it has existed and at times even flourished during the last thirty-five or forty years, and it is not unreasonable to surmise that it goes back in time beyond that. But much of the published evidence takes the form of accounts of individual experiences with vanity publishers with the identities of all concerned quite carefully concealed, so that while these accounts are undoubtedly true, they are not the stuff from which a documented, statistical history can be compiled. One is also confronted with the impossibility of formulating a tight definition of the term vanity publishing, which would show its historical continuity.

Today, when what its critics term vanity publishing has emerged as a statistically significant part of the American book industry, the houses alleged to practice it reject the term and prefer to call themselves “subsidy” or “cooperative” publishers. Perhaps what is needed more than a definition is a new, neutral term so that any partisan discussion can at least have a common point of reference.

The very use of the term vanity publishing implies contempt for the book produced and a judgment on the author and publisher—on the former because he has chosen an unorthodox way of attempting to achieve a recognition his talent does not merit, and on the latter because he has pandered to another’s weakness for his own profit. Traditionally vanity publishing has operated like a kind of confidence game, although one that managed to remain, if at times only barely, within the law. Authors were persuaded, or flattered, or duped if you will, into paying a purposed publisher for producing manuscripts which any reputable editor would reject as being totally without merit. Usually the books themselves were examples of wretched presswork and shoddy binding, and showed evidence of only cursory editing and proofreading, if any. The payments asked ranged from a few

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hundred to a few thousand dollars and were all too often scaled to what the traffic would bear rather than to actual costs; and the contracts often contained some startling, and disillusioning provisions regarding the size of the edition, the eventual ownership of the books, and matters of promotion and sale.

Because of the implications, even the harshest critics of vanity publishing recognize that the term must be used with restraint. All author subsidized books are not automatically vanity books in this special connotation of the adjective. For example, books devoted to genealogy or local history, and many scholarly books and graduate theses often have been and are issued at the author’s expense without being stigmatized as vanity publications. Privately printed books, whether good or bad, are usually exempt from inclusion in the category, probably because this kind of venture is assumed to be a straight business deal with no elements of flattery or misrepresentation involved. During the post World War II decade something which has enough resemblances to and differences from traditional vanity publishing to stir up hot and inconclusive argument has assumed a position of statistical importance. The houses engaged in this form of enterprise refer to themselves as cooperative or subsidy publishers and frankly and openly advertise that for a fee they will publish books. The militant opposition scorns these new adjectives and considers them euphemisms for “vanity,” and even resents the use of the noun publisher. The subsidy houses, while admitting that their procedures differ in some ways from those of “royalty” publishers, which is their term for practitioners of traditional publishing, carefully point out differences between their mode of operation and those of vanity houses in the past. The two attitudes cannot be reconciled here, but they can be examined so that a better understanding of the situation can be effected.

Subsidy publishing has risen to its present statistical eminence from the debacle brought about in 1941 by the federal government’s conviction for mail fraud of C. M. Flumiani, who exemplified vanity publishing at its classic worst. Flumiani, the head of Fortuny’s and at least two other publishing firms, was accused of having mulcted some five hundred would-be authors of a total of $250,000 in publishing fees by holding out the lure of lush financial returns from sales of books and promising big promotion campaigns and expert editing. The promotion turned out to be a line in a catalog and the editing was done by a high school girl who “accepted” all legible manuscripts,
up to twenty-five of them a day. He also ran a literary agency which, for a small fee, would “place” a manuscript with one of his own firms; a lecture bureau which registered authors at $30 a head (no lectures were ever booked); and something called the Associated Publishers of North America, which attested to the reputability of all his other firms on an impressive letterhead. During his last eighteen months in business Flumiani issued 117 books and paid out $75 in royalties. A few days after Pearl Harbor he was sentenced to eighteen months in prison, but he had provided a point of departure for a special kind of publishing enterprise which could not be fully exploited until the war ended.¹

Flumiani was not tried for vanity publishing, which was and is no crime, but for conducting a vanity publishing business in an illegal manner. He had demonstrated that there was a bigger potential market for this kind of operation than many people had imagined. While his methods had brought him afoul of the law, some of them, if used with restraint, could function successfully within the bounds of legality and ethics. Today’s practitioner feels that vanity publishing does not really exist any more and that he has been responsible for replacing it or converting it into subsidy or cooperative publishing by dealing fairly with authors, by telling them plainly what they are buying and giving them their money’s worth. These claims may not be accepted at full value by everyone, but there can be no doubt that the present day subsidy publisher has conscientiously and successfully opened as much distance as possible between himself and an operator like Flumiani.

The present day subsidy publishers want very much to escape the stigma of the vanity designation. The major ones point out that in appearance their products cannot be distinguished from the books of any trade publisher, and in general it is true. They operate from attractive offices at respectable addresses. They boast that they function just like the conventional trade or royalty publisher in all respects but one, and state quite plainly that this one is the requirement of the payment of the costs of publication by the author. This immediate and frank admission of their method of operation is probably the chief difference between the old style vanity publisher and the self-styled subsidy publisher, because in order to survive they must have a constant supply of paying authors, and to reach the authors they must advertise.

Now advertising for manuscripts is not an orthodox practice in the publishing industry and to do so is a departure from tradition.

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But the tradition has been breached in some very reputable periodicals and the advertisements of Exposition Press, Vantage Press, and Pageant Press—to name but three, although the three most active and ambitious of the subsidy publishers—can be found regularly in the *Saturday Review* and *Writer’s Digest*. The larger ads sometimes state a brief, if understandably biased, case for the subsidy arrangement in general and for the specific house in particular, often contain testimonials from a few satisfied authors already on the list, and usually call attention to the kinds of promotion campaigns conducted in the past. The smaller ads usually limit themselves to a direct solicitation of manuscripts or of a further inquiry.

An inquiry to any one of the three houses mentioned above will bring by return mail various combinations of booklets, brochures, catalogs, and perhaps even a flyer announcing a prize contest for the best manuscript published or contracted for publication during a specified period. This promotional material is attractively done. The copy is by no means “hard sell” by present advertising standards, and if the Federal Trade Commission from time to time takes exception to some of the wording, no blatantly fraudulent promises are made. There is of course a maximum opportunity for favorable inference. The text almost inevitably contains references to best sellers of the past which were rejected by one or more publishers and to now famous authors who had to pay the costs of publishing their first books. There is also usually a discussion of the rising costs of publishing and their effect on the possibilities of getting a non-commercial book produced the conventional way. No reasonable person will deny the truth of these and other similar statements, but a prudent person will probably hesitate before applying them to his own circumstances.

The actual amount the author must pay for publication is never mentioned in specific figures because, it is explained, it can only be determined after an examination of the manuscript and then is computed on the basis of the number of pages required, the necessity of or desire for illustrations or special art work, in short on the basis of all the factors that must be considered in estimating the production costs of a book no matter how published. In a pamphlet issued by Exposition there is a table of what are termed some typical costs and these range from $950 for sixty-four printed pages in an edition of 1,250 copies, to $4,000 for 352 pages in an edition of 3,000. The payment can sometimes be made in three installments with the last due just before publication. In addition to the cost to the author the con-
tracts usually contain provision for a royalty of 40 per cent of the retail price, and for subsequent printings, if necessary, to be at the publisher's expense with a reduced royalty to the author. The publisher normally retains ownership of the books. Some of the houses also offer the author as much as 90 per cent of the proceeds from the sale of subsidiary rights for motion pictures, reprints, translation, and serialization. Much is made of these generous percentage allowances in contrast to those of conventional publishers, but since they are based on sales, and since, with a few notable exceptions, subsidy books do not sell, they are actually rather meaningless except as window dressing.

It is in the area of promotion and sales that the present day subsidy publishers draw the most criticism, and it is here that they are most vulnerable. Their advertisements and brochures—at least those of the leaders in the field—lay stress on their ability and facilities to use all the media of book promotion: reviews, advertising, autograph parties, and direct mailing. That they can do all this is seldom questioned; the debate usually centers around the degree of accomplishment. Review copies are mailed out and sometimes an author-subsidized book will get a review in a national medium, although more often it will get merely a listing in a "books received" column where it shares the company of the products of some of the nation's leading publishers. Whether the subsidized book is not reviewed because it is not considered worthy or whether its neglect is occasioned by the antipathy review journals have for the imprint it bears is a moot question. For understandable reasons these books can best be promoted in their authors' own cities or locales and their usual critical notices are home town reviews. None of the identifiable subsidy houses appear to have any far flung sales organization and they are not represented in the annual directory of travelers and commission agents appearing in Publishers' Weekly. It seems apparent that while an author can probably get support and advice from his publisher, in most cases any significant number of sales will be through his own efforts.

The catalogs carry listings of books by members of virtually all professions and occupations: lawyers, doctors, teachers, clergymen, sailors, housewives, cowboys, and businessmen, to name those immediately identifiable from the books listed. The lists themselves place these houses among the general publishers because every one of the broad categories commonly used to classify the output of the book industry is amply represented. There are books of history, economics, psy-
cholecy, child rearing, biography, philosophy, travel, self-help and how-to-do-it, religion, personal memoirs, drama, fiction, and poetry. Just reading over the lists leaves one with the impression that they are made up almost completely of one-book authors and that they run rather heavily to memoirs by retired teachers and clergymen, juveniles, novels, and poetry, to give them in ascending order. If these houses can be said to have any speciality it is poetry, but this is not so much the result of deliberate design as the current low status of poetry as a marketable item.

Poets have long been the special prey of vanity publishers and they have always seemed deserving of more sympathy than other victims because for a long time now they have practiced their art in an indifferent and even hostile environment. Even poets of the first rank have difficulty achieving publication in book form through the usual channels, and the difficulty increases geometrically for those of lower rank. Oddly enough, while the audience for poetry seems to diminish steadily, the number of those who feel an urge to write it appears to increase or at least remain constant. Occasional appearance in the local newspaper or in magazines only whets the desire for publication in a more permanent form. At least to a limited extent present day subsidy publishing grew out of the pay-as-you-go poetry anthologies which were popular about twenty years ago. In a quasi autobiography, *The Rogue of Publishers' Row,* Edward Uhlan, president and founder of Exposition Press, gives an account of how he produced these anthologies during the 1930's. He tells how he made up a mailing list from names signed to poetry appearing in magazines and newspapers and solicited manuscripts from the poets for entry in a prize contest. After receiving a poem he would next offer to include it in an anthology if the poet would subscribe for copies at three dollars apiece, two for five dollars. It was the increasing success of this venture that led him to expand his operations to include writers of books of all types and on all subjects. “All I Promise Is Immortality,” reads the final chapter heading of Uhlan’s book. Few poets on his list can seriously hope to see this promise realized, but under the present methods of operation in subsidy publishing they stand a much better chance of at least achieving the somewhat lesser satisfaction of seeing their work given a decent burial.

Statistics are available for the several houses which identify themselves as subsidy publishers, but there may be others who operate on the fringes of this category or with a foot in each camp, so the
extent of this kind of publishing cannot be stated with exactness. It is not the intention here to suggest the presence of conspiracy or dissimulation in the publishing business but rather to indicate that it is not unusual when discussing this subject with people in or close to the book trade for the names of three or four well-known houses to be mentioned. A trade publisher who puts out a few or several author subsidized books is not altering the character of his imprint or the standing of his firm, but he is falsifying the statistics. The chances are however that even if the full extent of author subsidization were known, mathematical accuracy would be served but the over-all picture would not be significantly changed. Because the startling fact remains that less than a dozen firms which exist solely or primarily by payments from the authors have had a combined annual production ranging from about six hundred to seven hundred new titles during the last few years, nearly half the number issued each year by some forty university presses or some twenty paperback publishers during the same period.

The most active of the subsidy houses are Exposition, Vantage, and Pageant. During 1956 they issued 135, 223 and 112 new titles respectively, and shared with Macmillan, Doubleday, Oxford, McGraw-Hill, and other major publishers a place on the list of the thirty-one houses producing one hundred or more new books. The big three have consistently during the past few years accounted for almost the total output of author subsidized books and might even be pushing their smaller competitors to the wall, although it would be difficult to establish this conclusively. For while the output of Dorrance and Company, a long established firm, has seemed to decline over a ten year period (from a high of sixty-four in 1947 to sixteen in 1956 with considerable fluctuation between these two extremes in the intervening years), Comet Press increased its production between 1952, when it first appeared on the annual list, and 1956; and 1956 also saw the appearance of two new imprints, American Press and Greenwich Book Publishers, with six and nineteen titles respectively. Actually not very much can be made of what statistics are available except for the overall annual total and the relative size and activity of the firms which frankly proclaim themselves to be subsidy publishers; even the latter fact cannot be established mathematically beyond 1956, because in the annual statistics number for the 1957 publishing year Publishers’ Weekly dropped individual listing of the subsidy houses.

This action represented no sudden or spiteful change of policy but
rather a logical extension and expression of its long held editorial attitude toward the vanity press, and it sees little distinction, if any, between it and what is now termed "subsidy" or "cooperative" publishing—and Publishers' Weekly always uses the quotation marks. This attitude reflects a basic opposition to the use of the word "publisher" in this context as a perversion of the accepted definition of one who risks his own money on his judgment of the worth of a manuscript and derives his profit, if any, from the sale of books. It is based on the conviction that the satisfaction of authorship is derived not solely from seeing one's words in print between the covers of a book, but from knowing the book is being distributed through conventional channels. The editors felt that over the past few years the statistics in their annual output table had been misused by the subsidy houses; by Vantage, for example, which during 1957 advertised itself as the sixth largest publisher in the United States and substantiated its claim by reproducing a portion of the Publishers' Weekly ranking table showing Vantage placed between Oxford and Simon and Schuster. However, publications of the subsidy houses continue to be entered in the Weekly Record, the houses themselves in the annual directory of publishers and their catalogs in the Publishers' Trade List Annual.

If Publishers' Weekly disputes the use of the noun "publisher," there are others in the trade who are sensitive about the adjective "subsidy." It is not at all unusual for a trade publisher or a university press to receive help to cover or defray the costs of producing specific books, either in the form of a direct financial grant from a foundation, or of a guaranteed sale of a specified number of copies to an individual, group or government, or of a waiver of royalties in whole or part by the author. An unknown number of scholarly monographs, company histories, and biographies of industrial and labor leaders, to name some of the most frequent types, have been published under some arrangement of this kind by well known houses of impeccable reputation. But while it may be said that a subsidy is a subsidy regardless of who pays it or how it is paid, the royalty or risk publisher feels strongly that there is this important difference: he is primarily in business and his organization is geared to, and depends for survival on, distributing and selling books and not on making a printing profit at an author's expense. This may be a difference of kind or degree depending upon how you look at it, but how you look at it in turn will probably determine your basic attitude toward and your choice of adjective for vanity-subsidy-cooperative publishing.

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Subsidy publishers have been subject to harassment by the Federal Trade Commission and during the past few years each of the big three has had to answer at least once charges that it makes false or misleading claims in its solicitation of manuscripts from authors. In one complaint this year the F.T.C. objected, among other things, to use of the adjective "cooperative" by Vantage Press, claiming that the author alone paid all the costs. Although a hearing on the charges had not been held at the time of this writing, it would be a good guess that the publisher will point to service as his contribution and the decision on this point will hinge on an interpretation of the meaning of "cooperative." Many of the F.T.C. complaints in the past have centered around the use of words which easily and perhaps deliberately lend themselves to an interpretation which places their user in a different position than he occupies in fact. Other charges are directed at claims concerning the size of the organization cited, the success of its publications, and the extent and amount of promotion done for its books. The hearings on these complaints usually result in the signing of a consent order by which the publisher agrees to refrain from making specified representations. The F.T.C. takes no position on the basic character of subsidy publishing but merely tries to clarify, or purify, the atmosphere in which it operates.

An attempt to synthesize various complaints into a set of standards that would obviate future F.T.C. action was made about a year ago in Writer's Digest in an article by Aron Mathieu, a staff member of that magazine. Mathieu suggested, among other points, that use of the word "publisher" be dropped in favor of a term like "book printer and manufacturer," that subsidy publishers make detailed factual statements about their promotion and sales rather than general ones, and that Publishers' Weekly eliminate subsidy publishers from their output tables and instead list their production separately under a heading such as "book printers." By stating some of what he termed the very excellent reasons a writer might have for subsidizing his own book, and by spelling out just as clearly some of the risks he would run by doing so, Mathieu established a reasonable compromise position on a controversial issue, but so far there seems to have been no stampede to rally on this neutral ground.

If the opponents of the subsidy press have been articulate in their condemnation, the authors who employ it have been eloquent in their financial support. Whether you believe with the opposition that the subsidy publishers exist by the exploitation of human vanity or with
the subsidy houses themselves that they perform a valuable service in giving the unpublished author a hearing and in producing the non-commercial book, it must be acknowledged that they do exist and even flourish. And having accepted the fact of their existence, it remains to determine their place on the publishing scene.

While the statistical position of subsidy publishing can be stated with reasonable accuracy, its influence on the book trade is less easily determined, chiefly because there seems to be little if any. The objections of the conventional publishers must ultimately rest on a fear or resentment that by indulging in sharp practices the subsidy houses can give the entire industry a bad odor, because the two kinds of operation can hardly be said to compete. Occasionally a subsidy publisher will have a successful book and there is one case on record of a best-seller, Manley Cole’s Jehovah’s Witnesses, published by Vantage in 1955, which made the list for several weeks. But it is unlikely that the royalty publishers are losing many best-sellers, or even good-sellers, to the subsidy firms. It is also safe to say that royalty publishers could have almost any author they wanted from the subsidy lists. Indeed the subsidy publishers often suggest in their advertising that appearance under their banners can increase the chances of getting a second work produced under a royalty imprint, but there is no clear evidence that they function as a minor league in developing talent for the big time, nor any indication that they will in the future.

If subsidy publishing is not a serious threat to the industry, neither is it quite the necessary adjunct it would like to appear. Other segments of the industry also produce non-commercial books and seem to get first choice of significant titles. For example, people in the academic world, where being the author of a book can have tremendous practical importance, seem to prefer university presses even though it often means a payment in some form, or working directly with a printer, where again it is necessary to pay the bill. If the subsidy press has by its existence saved from oblivion any manuscripts of great value or discovered any authors of major talent, such instances have not yet been recognized for what they truly are.

Although its active influence may be considered negligible, subsidy publishing can be said to have made a passive contribution by its very existence. There obviously is a demand for the services these houses offer, and while the opposition may claim that the service can be had by dealing directly with a printer, the fact remains that unless an author has a knowledge of and a talent for the book production arts,
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he will probably get better looking, and consequently more satisfying, results by taking the package deal offered by the subsidy houses. Whether this demand will continue at a level sufficient to support the number of firms engaged in catering to it at present remains to be seen. Already the competition among them, especially among the three largest, is severe. It is this competition for paying authors which lead to excessive claims and reckless statements, which in turn leads to censure from the rest of the industry and from the F.T.C., and conceivably could bring one or two of them afoul of the mail fraud laws. But even if some destroy themselves by intemperance, the chances are that one or two will survive to become a permanent, if not accepted, part of the publishing trade as long as the book continues to enjoy its traditional prestige, and vanity continues to motivate human actions.

References