The Role of Self-Publishing in Libraries

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Abstract
The boom in self-publishing has created a market of hundreds of thousands of new books a year. The Library of Congress doesn't catalog most of these. Is it fair to dismiss these books as "vanity publications," or are there some valuable resources in this book glut for collections-development librarians to explore? Are there sensible ways of acquiring these books? And how do Web searches affect types of content we haven't always seen as having value?

Introduction
The April 27 issue of the *New York Times Book Review* carried an essay by Rachel Donadio on the self-publishing phenomenon, called "You're an Author? Me Too!" In it, Donadio notes the decreasing book reading rate in the United States (citing a study by the National Endowment for the Arts, which reported that 53 percent of Americans hadn't read a book in the past year); at the same time, she shows, there is a massive increase in the number of books written (according to R. R. Bowker, four hundred thousand titles were published in 2007 and three hundred thousand in 2006), which can only be explained by the self-publishing movement (see Donadio, 2008).

According to Donadio,

> University writing programs are thriving, while writers' conferences abound, offering aspiring authors a chance to network and "workshop" their work. The blog tracker Technorati estimates that 175,000 new blogs are created worldwide each day (with a lucky few bloggers getting book deals). And the same N.E.A. study found that 7 percent of adults polled, or 15 million people, did creative writing, mostly "for personal fulfillment." (2008)

Of particular interest to the library world is the technological development that makes so much self-publishing possible. With print-on-demand services, self-publishing websites such as Lulu.com, blog-to-book trends, and other innovations, self-publishing is no longer simply a question of shipping a manuscript and a check off to a vanity press. On the flip side, however, these innovations make the library arena very interesting in terms of storing books, making them searchable, and affecting their collection development efforts.

The big question for libraries, of course, is what role do they play in a world where there is so much publishing going on? (And so little reading?)

Self-Publishing: Is It Vanity Presses All Over Again?

As we know, self-publishing has boomed in recent years. With the advent of Lulu, iUniverse, Lightning Source, and BookSurge (among others), self-publishing companies are entering the market at an alarming rate—some say eight to eleven thousand companies per year (*Book News,* 2008). Generally speaking, more and more writers are taking the self-published route rather than going up against large publishing houses or agents, and incurring rejections. Seventy-eight percent of titles, according to the Publishers Marketing Association, come from small publishers or self-publishers (DiVita, 2007).

And they run the gamut. According to Donadio,

> At the Book Review, dozens of self-published books arrive each week—poetry collections, children's books, memoirs, self-help manuals, sci-fi novels, religious titles. "The Chronicles of a Hip Hop Legend: Paths of Grand Wizardry" recently crossed the transom, as did a technical monograph on the death of Napoleon, complete with charts on possible arsenic poisoning; an illustrated religious guide, "Hell: For Those Dying to Get There"; and "Disney Your Way," with suggested itineraries for navigating Walt Disney World. There are memoirs by Holocaust survivors and people fighting eating disorders, and novels like "September Sun," in which, "enticed by the powerful aphrodisiac of sex, Michael learns to his chagrin that Murphy's Law is always in play." (2008)

Currently, there's no breakdown in statistics that will tell us how many books are self-published and in which subject areas. It's safe to say that many of these titles are memoirs. Many are also regional titles, or books about a particular, very specific area of expertise. It's also pretty safe to say that a large percentage of these titles are not of interest to anyone outside the writer's immediate family (and arguably to them, either). The term "vanity press" is a negative one, but in many cases it's quite accurate.

However, a rising tide floats all boats—the percentage of special-interest titles published this way is growing. It's worth noting that R. R. Bowker is launching a website to help self-published authors participate more fully in the book supply chain—offering them an easy way to get ISBNs, DOIs,

and other identifiers that will give these writers a leg up in the world of online sales.

There's a very real reason why the numbers are growing as they are. Self-publishing is easy. I've done it—at Christmastime, I published a cookbook for my family of recipes that my partner and I have cooked for them throughout the years. And technology has made it incredibly easy to accomplish this. An author simply contracts with a service like Lulu or iUniverse (in my case, I went with Tastebook), writes the book, uploads the text, and chooses formatting and cover art. The service outsources the actual printing—to Lightning Source or BookSurge or Xlibris, for example. The service, by necessity, must format digital files for the printing process—which means that deriving ebooks from these files is also possible.

But libraries traditionally have not acquired self-published titles. The Library of Congress does not accept CIP data from self-published authors. As David Williamson of LOC says,

> There are just too many of them for us to deal with. Since they do tend to have a limited market, we need to put our energies on titles that will be widely acquired across the country and around the world. While they are out of scope for CIP, when they are submitted for copyright deposit, we do look them over and if a selection officer thinks the title is of interest, we will catalog it and add it to the collection. (D. Williamson, personal communication, June 2008)

Thus mainstream publishing really dictates what publications get taken seriously in the library market. As the criteria at publishing houses comes under increasing scrutiny, however, the snobbishness directed at self-publishing is dissipating. Just because it's published by a mainstream publishing house doesn't make it good. And just because it's good doesn't mean it'll be published by a mainstream publishing house.

Most self-published titles are not available in physical bookstores, particularly outside the author's locale; they are not generally reviewed in the periodicals that collections development staff traditionally consult. Self-publishers resort to fairly unorthodox awareness campaigns—e-mail, Facebook, or MySpace pages, blogs—that are not within the workflow of most librarians. Says Kitty Little of Queens Public Library, "Generally it's the author or other interested party bringing them to us. E-mail to every address in our website seems the most prevalent form of promotion. These tend to send a website link promoting the book" (K. Little, personal communication, June 2008).

As we know all too well, the role of libraries is a dual one: to serve as an archive, and to provide useful information to its constituency. Public libraries in particular pride themselves on their local collections—local authors, local interest titles, etc. They become repositories for the archives of a given community.

Just as libraries in the past have housed census and genealogical material, diaries, collections of letters, and other content of local interest, libraries today can offer many self-published titles as legitimate archival material that has real value for its community. Kitty Little notes,

> If it's of local interest or a local author we'll consider it. If it's really unique locally we'll buy heavily. We know it will be gone forever. We find the local neighborhood histories to be in this category. When local authors give us their books we generally accept them and put them in the catalog and shelve them in Central or their community library. If the books don't get use we pull them from the collection in our regular weeding cycles. (K. Little, personal communication, June 2008)

However, what works for a public library may not be so appropriate for an academic library. Bob Holley of Wayne State University's library says,

> In my research library, the amount of funding has declined so much for books that I don't have enough money left after buying faculty requests to purchase much else. (My funding for monographs has declined about 50–75 percent from a few years ago.) To consider a self-published book, I would have to judge it as a key resource for faculty teaching or research because of its subject content, find it to be reasonably priced, be able to tell that the author takes an "objective" viewpoint rather than a polemical one unless I'm looking for polemical materials, and judge that the author's credentials looked reasonable for the subject matter. Most of the time, I see self-published books only when they arrive as a gift so that the author, I presume, can take a tax deduction. [Wayne State] lets the Detroit Public Library collect materials of regional interest. Otherwise, I would consider this to be one of the few areas where buying a self-published book would be justified. . . . In my 25+ years of selection for the Romance Languages, I don't think that I've ever bought a self-published item. I have lots of other material of high priority that I can't buy. (B. Holley, personal communication, June 2008)

So how much self-published material gets collected depends on the individual mission of each library. Peter Brantley of the Digital Library Federation (and guest-editor of this issue) points out that large research libraries may at some point wish to collect self-published titles "to represent cross-sectional cultural output"—in other words, as an anthropological effort to capture a societal movement (P. Brantley, personal communication, June 2008). As artifacts.

THE TECHNOLOGICAL IMPACT
Of course, libraries make a vast number of resources available. In the library market, ebook business is booming. Sales of ebooks to libraries in 2005 were up 20 percent over those in 2004: a total of 1,692,964 units, or

nearly $12 million in sales. (In that year, 5,242 ebooks were published. Libraries are not trading on a lot of volume in that regard [International Digital Publishing Forum, 2008].) According to a study done by OCLC in 2005, 31 percent of college students have downloaded at least one ebook from their library. And a study done by Pew and the University of Illinois at Urbana states that 61 percent of broadband users have used a library in the last year, as opposed to 39 percent of non broadband users (Mindlin, 2008).

In addition to ebooks, of course, there are the massive numbers of databases available online to those with a library card, such as those from Gale and EBSCO. And of course there are the scanned books from the Google and Microsoft projects. But one area that's gotten very little attention in the mainstream press has been the scanning of local collections. This has been going on for well over a decade, and ILS vendors have supplied various repository tools to accommodate this initiative. Maps, letters, photographs, and personal papers have been digitized, stored, made searchable, and made available online for anyone to view. (Recently I went to the Library of Congress website and had a great time spelunking around in Hannah Arendt's papers.)

Of course, local collections are not simply limited to historical material. Perhaps a better way to say this is: history is being made every day. With the proliferation of self-publishing technology, people are documenting their experiences, their family histories, and issues of local interest more easily than ever before. And so, depending on the criteria imposed by the library, a local collection can run the gamut from the 1600s to the present time.

In terms of archival development, this is unprecedented and may well be a case of "be careful what you wish for." If archivists thought they were swamped before, they are drowning in material now.

Obviously, at this point physical space becomes a concern. But if the historical material is digitized and the present-day self-published material is provided as ebooks, that concern becomes one of network storage space rather than building annexes to the main library. And in addition to the space issues, if regional or specialized titles are provided digitally and are made fully searchable, then users can access them online.

CURATORS OR LIBRARIANS? OR BOTH?

On his blog, Seth Godin talks about books as "souvenirs":

> Holding and owning the book, remembering when and how you got it
> . . . that's what you're paying for. Books are great at holding memories.
> (Godin, 2007)

Rare books, such as illuminated manuscripts and Gutenberg Bibles, are obviously artifacts—of interest in themselves—as well as bundles of ideas.

The incursion of digital technology has made it possible to divide up the concept of the book as Godin so neatly does—the thing itself, and the ideas inside it.

If you are in charge of storing the things themselves, it could be said that librarianship is a form of curating. Just as a museum curator has to decide which paintings to display, has to have artifacts cataloged, has to make value judgments on what's worth storing and what's not, so a librarian of physical books has to make decisions about which books to collect and which are not worth it.

And for centuries, librarianship has largely involved curating: growing or pruning collections—preserving rare books and selling off or giving away books that are not getting much circulation.

However, technology has recently made it possible to view librarianship in a different way. In most libraries there's now no need for separate archive rooms with expensive atmospheric modulation to keep manuscripts and diaries and whatnot at just the right temperature and humidity level. Those materials can be divided into artifacts (which can be stored offsite, possibly even at a museum) and intellectual property (which can be scanned and put online).

A librarian can now amass resources with very little impact on the physical plant—digital storage space is not nearly so expensive as new building space. There's just no need to be so selective. Storing assets digitally means you have more room for more assets. The question of selection—of what's worth keeping—becomes rather different when you are talking about the pure intellectual property of a book rather than the artifact.

This brings us to the issue of materials that traditionally have not been of much interest to librarians, such as self-published books. If it's now possible to gather many more resources than we have in the past, why not include self-published works in collections?

Once the issue of physical space is taken away, once librarians are not so much in the artifact-storing business and more in the information-providing business, it's possible to look at self-published documents in a different light than we have in the past.

SEARCHING QUESTIONS

Of the library's various functions, its greatest problem comes in the form of search. From indices to concordances to card catalogs to OPACs to federated search to embedding Google searches into their websites, libraries have always been very concerned with finding the right resources in the best possible way.

Some of the most prominent libraries in the United States have been busily working with Microsoft and Google to scan their books and make them searchable online. What this means is that when a user types "viral marketing" into a search box, these search engines will spider through dig-

itized books about viral marketing as well as websites, blogs, and databases and every other online resource. Books will appear in the search results.

And if a viral marketing guru has published his own book about the subject, choosing to bypass traditional publishing in favor of getting a bigger chunk of the royalties and printing his book on demand, will that book appear in a library's search results?

Only if the library has acquired that book in a digital form where it's searchable—and integrated with other searchable material.

The same is true of memoirs and regional material as well. Depending on the constituency of the library, those documents may well become digital assets that can be accessed through search on the library's website—and integrated with results from other self-published material as well as more traditional digital material. The value of self-published books increases when it's juxtaposed with other material on the same topic: journal articles, monographs, database entries.

To use the example of our viral marketing guru again, his work becomes more meaningful when found in the context of the topic of viral marketing, alongside articles from *Adweek*, blog posts from other marketers, and other sources of specialized information that libraries are already in the business of providing their users.

Self-published content about regional issues almost speaks for itself in terms of value to a library. Along with diaries, postcards, maps, census material, and other documents about a specific area, a memoir or a local cookbook could be a great contribution to a library's regional collection—and would have much more value to the community in the context of those other works than it would on its own.

IT SLICES, IT DICES

Of course, the great thing about self-published books is that they are available digitally. And where there is digital content, there are gadgets.

For years, libraries have been making ebooks available through Overdrive or NetLibrary, or ebrary, or other vendors. Adding self-published books to the mix really isn't such a stretch.

If the self-publishing service is BookSurge, that means that the ebooks will be Kindle compatible; if the service is Lightning Source, that means the ebooks will be Sony Reader compatible. So if libraries are loaning out these devices preloaded with relevant content, including self-published titles is very easy.

Many self-published writers (particularly those in the business world, but also some novelists and memoirists) also create podcasts, which libraries can link to and offer for download to iPods and other MP3 players. Self-published authors frequently create streams of related material that libraries can offer to their users through links in the online catalog. Just as libraries offer reading-group guides and study aids from mainstream

publishers, they can offer ancillary material from self-published authors—much of which can be downloaded onto devices that readers are already using.

Conclusion

The publishing world has been going in two directions simultaneously for the last 40 years or so—combining to form large monoliths (CBS owning Simon & Schuster, Bertlesmann owning Random House, News Corp owning HarperCollins, etc.), which in turn gives rise to independent publishing efforts, which publish what the global houses can't. Those independent entities have, in fact, further fragmented—and are frequently the authors themselves. (This is anything but a new model—when printing presses first began, many of them contracted directly with authors, and publishing houses were born from these deals.) When authors are in charge of their own publications, they earn more money per book. And while they may sell fewer books through their own efforts than a large publisher would—in the increasingly unlikely event that their books are accepted for publication—self-published authors do have more autonomy over marketing and publicity than they would at a large house. The more specialized a title is, the less likely it is that a large house will pick it up and publish it. However, the more specialized a title is, the more likely it is to be very useful to a certain group of people.

In other words, it's no longer a given that large publishers are the arbiters of what books we find useful.

Libraries do need to grapple with the self-publishing phenomenon. This means taking a good look at one's constituency, and determining what resources would truly be of interest. It means learning more about what kinds of authors are pursuing the self-publishing option. It means checking out those pesky links in e-mails, or browsing the catalogs at sites like Lulu and iUniverse. Self-published books, like any other source of information, can be both a dense forest of content as well as a rich vein of useful information.

As libraries increasingly get more digitized, *content* (to borrow a term from Thomas Friedman) "flattens"—as digitization makes information easier to access, the wealth of information available gets confusing to users. Librarianship here is essential—getting beyond the traditional viewpoint that "if it's bound, it's better," and looking for very real ways to integrate useful data into robust search results. Rather than displacing the librarian, digitization (as we know) increases the number of areas where librarians are needed—and evaluating self-published resources is one of them.

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