Self-Publishing: A Bibliographic Essay

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As institutions, libraries have relied on publishers to act as bellwethers for the building of collections; and, as a result, publishers and their distributors have been tightly integrated into our workflows in a highly efficient system of physical and intellectual bibliographic control. This has left the relationship between authors who self-publish and libraries somewhat fraught with difficulty. With the rise of e-books, significant disruptions to the publishing industry have opened up the field for authors to self-publish titles at such rates that libraries can no longer ignore them. While the current trend of self-publishing is not entirely driven by e-books, research presented in 2011 by Kelly Gallagher, vice president of publisher services for Bowker, suggests that while e-books make less money, they move the most individual units.\(^1\) Gallagher’s research also provides insights as to the content of the self-publishing market with the unsurprising result that, while fiction also moves more units, it makes less money than nonfiction. In short, while self-publishing has always been a problem for libraries and publishers, the ease of self-publishing e-books has made it impossible to ignore the vast increase in the number of titles. More recent surveys of U.S. ISBN data in 2013 by the publisher Bowker peg the number of self-published titles at 391,000, a 59% increase from 2011;\(^2\) and other selective surveys of Amazon Bestseller lists indicate that the Big Five publishers make it only 16% of the time.\(^3\) In the mass market in particular, the real story of self-publishing and libraries is a question of volume. This is a selective essay designed to introduce this vast topic. While much has been contributed to the literature, the intention
in this chapter is to provide the general contours of self-publishing and libraries over the last 10 years.

To get a better sense of the self-publishing market, a good place to start is Jana Bradley et al.’s *Non-Traditional Book Publishing*, which defines and roughly measures a number of nontraditional publishing avenues from self-published e-books to publisher-supported “nontraditional” publishing. To support the idea that self-publishing is currently driven by e-books, they found that the sales of self-published print books averaged in the hundreds per year (with a handful of exceptional titles) and that only 27% of the sample titles were held by libraries. Of note, in the self-published e-book section, libraries are not mentioned as these titles tend to be sold through a platform directly to the consumer. The idea that libraries are being bypassed in the self-published e-book market is supported by another article by the same group of authors using similar data: in a 348-title sample from 2008, they found only 102 that were held by at least one OCLC member library though 98% of the sample was still available for purchase in 2010. At the very least, it is clear that libraries are not large buyers of self-published e-books. The impression given by Bradley and her coauthors is that, since self-published books are often overlooked by the library/publisher dyad, it will take new kinds of discovery tools to make them accessible. This conclusion may miss the crucial point: discovery, along with production, is largely happening elsewhere.

**PUBLISHERS**

If libraries have generally overlooked the self-publishing trend, the book industry as a whole has been incredibly responsive. Anecdotal evidence of traditional publishers being bypassed by authors, as in the case of best-selling thriller author Blake Crouch, understates the fact that he started out publishing four books with St. Martin’s Press before becoming a DIY (do-it-yourself) published author. E-books were the primary driver of his move away from traditional publishers. The anecdotes continue to support the idea that having some kind of institutional support is desirable. A number of children’s authors, after beginning in self-publishing, signed deals with major publishing groups. Such support comes not only from traditional publishers, but also from their biggest competitor, Amazon. The Amazon Kindle Direct Program gets several mentions in *Publishers Weekly*’s
The proliferation of self-published titles has largely been a marketing-driven move to capture the “long tail” that e-books provide. Bradley and others have lamented that this expanding volume of works is not easily searched by librarians’ discovery tools, especially since self-published books provide a wealth of information by nonacademic experts. Traditional gatekeeping roles could fall by the wayside due to market forces. Ann Haugland, University of Iowa, in a great essay on traditional royalty publishers, print-on-demand subsidy publishers, and wholly self-published authors, applies the lens of cultural production (Howard Becker’s Art Worlds and Raymond William’s Sociology of Culture) to find that new gatekeepers such as Mystery Writers of America have begun to take over the function traditionally left to publishers of validating these amateur forms of cultural production.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES

In the meantime, public libraries have led the way in dealing with self-publishing. Given that fiction tends to drive self-publishing and e-books, Juris Dilevko and Keren Dali’s 2006 paper on self-publishing and libraries contains few surprises but many illuminating facts. It begins with a comprehensive literature review of self-publishing in the 20th century and focuses on the growth of three self-publishing houses: AuthorHouse, iUniverse, and Xlibris, all print-on-demand services that got their start in the 1990s. Their literature review of libraries and their relationship with such services reveals a consistently skeptical stance toward their products. More importantly, it provides the earliest data on library holdings. Among the types of libraries, public libraries were twice as likely to hold self-published titles, largely in fiction, U.S. history, and the social sciences, especially for titles from the above-mentioned services.

Like much of the discussion around self-publishing, economics are of primary concern for publishers and public libraries alike. In a column for The Digital Shift, Jamie LaRue, director of Douglas County Public Libraries
(Colorado), examines the economic strains put upon public libraries by the Big Five publishers (*All Hat, No Cattle*). His response was making e-book deals with 12 groups of publishers (800+ companies). In addition to this model of finding smaller publisher partners who are willing to provide e-books directly to libraries, public libraries have been leaders in implementing print-on-demand (POD) publishing services through the availability of Espresso Book Machines. This step ties public libraries to the spirit of maker culture where locally produced goods are highly valued. This trend is echoed in the sentiments of the 3-D printer crowd in academic libraries and is tied to the move from traditional academic libraries to the Information Commons in the early and mid-2000s. Nonetheless, looking at the list of locations that provide POD services, public libraries are in the minority compared to independent booksellers and university bookstores. Outside a higher rate of collecting and occasional forays into POD, the story of self-publishing and public libraries is largely unresearched, albeit widely discussed.

**ACADEMIC LIBRARIES**

If one piece of writing should be considered representative of the directions that academic libraries have taken and will continue to take in regard to self-publishing, it is Carpenter et al.’s *Envisioning the Library’s Role in Scholarly Communication in the Year 2025*. In a survey of selected library directors, this study found that a number of them saw an important role for the academic library as publisher and facilitator of scholarly publishing. A majority of them saw the economics of scholarly publishing as a driving factor. Such concerns were, however, less important than defining new subject-specialized and faculty roles for librarians and aligning libraries more closely with the pedagogical interests of MLIS programs. This viewpoint might reflect either the surrender of libraries to the goal of increasing market forces in collection development or the arrival of a much more service-oriented institution in both teaching and knowledge creation services and facilities.

In the survey article *Research Library Publishing Services: New Options for University Publishing*, a high number (70–80%) of libraries published journals, proceedings, and monographs. They also saw great demand for hosting services and much demand for publishing consultation services. In light of limited resources, academic library publishing tends to be simple, open access, and volunteer-run to avoid the higher costs of
providing subscription services. The authors noted: “[T]here appears to
be no dominant sequence of service evolution, but publishing services
are co-managed and often integrated with a range of new services such
as digitization initiatives, digital humanities initiatives, digital repository
deployment, development of learning objects, digital preservation activi-
ties.” Similar and more recent research can also be found in Walter’s The
Future Role of Publishing Services in University Libraries.18 Because of
the “pay for it twice” model that academic libraries operate under, issues of
copyright in the publication of journal articles have had interesting effects
that influence the ways that academic authors self-publish.

There is, however, a counterpoint to this optimism. In their article Dip-
ital Repositories Ten Years On, Nichols et al. found that library directors
considered the resources spent on library article repositories “very modest
indeed” and that they are not thought to “herald a major reform of the schol-
arly communication and publishing system.”19 That is not exactly a vote
of confidence in a major part of libraries’ contribution to self-publishing,
but it does recognize the limited role that libraries play in the practice.
There is very little research on the acquisition of self-published materials
by academic libraries. As opposed to public libraries, academic ones are
positioning themselves to be publishers themselves.

COPYRIGHT AND SELF-ARCHIVING
Kristin Antelman’s Self-Archiving Practice and the Influence of Publisher
Policies in the Social Sciences20 found that, in a group of select social sci-
ence journals, more self-archiving happened for articles in journals that
prohibited it than those that did not. Clearly, some academic authors feel
the need to rely on their home institution’s services rather than a publish-
er’s. Such outright disobedience (willful or not) is interesting in light of the
increasing opportunities for authors to legally participate in self-archiving.
The clearest discussion of why this occurs is found in Communication
Regimes in Competition: The Current Transition in Scholarly Commu-
nication Seen through the Lens of the Sociology of Technology,21 which
found in 2001 that 68–83% of preprints in arXiv were later accepted by
traditional journals. The authors contend that self-archiving is primarily
used for distribution, and traditional venues are used by authors for credit-
allocating and quality control. A later study by Denise Covey at Carnegie
Mellon University\textsuperscript{22} examined the publications listed by faculty on their Web sites combined with faculty interviews to determine faculty views on self-archiving. Covey notes that faculty tended to favor self-archiving recent works. She also discovered disconnects between the breadth of adoption by faculty in various disciplinary departments and the depth (number of works archived) by individual faculty members with only 11\% of the faculty doing so habitually. She also found that only a minority of publisher policies forbid self-archiving, both pre- and postprint. In addition, many faculty either were unaware of the publisher’s policy or disregarded it in self-archiving.

When it comes to self-archiving, two clear points emerge: first, although it runs in concert with traditional publishing avenues, the total savings to higher education could be substantial, depending on which system of open-access publishing and archiving is used, even if there would be a loss in net benefits in the short term;\textsuperscript{23} and, second, open-access articles of any kind have significantly higher impact rates.\textsuperscript{24}

Nichols et al. ran a similar survey project on digital repositories across a wider variety of institutions and focused on the impact that self-archiving has had on the behavior of scholars. The survey confirmed a handful of previous studies that emphasized the importance of digital repositories for the physical sciences over other disciplines but more notably that they also placed a copy of all or most of their outputs on their personal or departmental Web pages.\textsuperscript{25} The authors wonder if this is a matter of covering formal and informal channels of distribution, which may bypass digital repositories or traditional journals, but do not consider that faculty could easily be linking to repository or other copies, further complicating the question. And while 87.3\% of respondents to the survey claimed to use digital repositories to find information, they also are concerned with the difficulty of their use and the varying quality of the material. All of this supports the idea that archived journal articles may have higher impact rates.

**CONCLUSION**

A lot of the discussion and research on self-publishing and libraries focus on e-books and how they will disrupt “business as usual” for large, slow-moving institutions. Models focused around “disruption” are useful as catalysts for change but in practice rarely focus on long-term goals. While many readers who look at the literature on the relationship between self-publishing
and libraries might conclude that libraries will soon be left behind the market, it is worth taking the longer view that libraries will most likely successfully adapt to the changed publishing environment. Given the difficult task of responding to economic pressures while still maintaining the ability to meet our communities’ needs with quality and lasting access, incremental experimentation and slow consensus building are not only desirable, but preferable. This volume will be a step toward an increased understanding of the advantages and pitfalls of self-publishing. Public libraries are starting to deal with this issue because of pressure from patrons who want to read self-published materials. Academic libraries are far behind.

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