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Mass Authorship and the rise of self-publishing

2016

Eight years of research and 81 interviews with self-published authors

Most of the writers were for the United States and Canada

A few writers were from Europe and the Philippines

Self-publishing

Position 1	Position 2
Rise of freedom	Without gatekeepers there are concerns with quality

intermediaries



The self-published authors interviewed think that professional book publishers will remain relevant because they provide value to book production:

- They have stringent **copyright laws** protecting their backlist
- They largely control access to brick and mortar **distribution**.

This book argues that multiple viable models of publishing have emerged to compete and complement one another.

These multiple models force us to consider publishing both as a professional practice and as a literacy practice accessible to everyday people.

We need to remove the idea of dis-intermediation as the way to understand self-publishing. When writers circumvent publishers, they still need to fill the vacuum of labor left by the absence of the Publishing Company.

Self-publishing is also mediated:

The work of the authors is distributed across digital platforms of giant corporations and smaller startups through an emerging industry of support services and through the authors' mediated engagement with the peer-to-peer energy of readers in participatory culture.

Two key points

- Self-publishing is entailed in shifting systems of mediation.
- Writers who self-publish books are still influenced by the ideological legacy of more exclusive forms of individual authorship

There are two types of Author:

- The author with the capital A is the romantic author, the author as a cultural beacon, also called the modern author or the individual author. There are not many of these authors and they are frequently male and their work has to be made visible by protecting the world from a flood of bad books.
- The other type of author is different. It's a person like us; not special; a person who embraces collaborative writing, re-writing, **remixing**.

However, the new author needs to deal with the Romantic author because **print standard values** and expectations have been developed over hundreds of years. These values are still relevant.

Key point: Digital media enable a blurring of reading and writing activities.

Participatory culture: The production is fueled by peer-to-peer exchange

Wikipedia is an example of the influence and power of participatory culture.

PROBLEM

Some studies suggest that participation can be more limited than we thought since a small percentage of users are often responsible for producing most of the content on social media.

Corporations have worked to centralize, and exploit amateur production.

A note on terminology:

- Traditional publishing follows the royalty model established in the 19th and 20th centuries
- Non-traditional publishing includes
 - digital reprint of public domain books;
 - low-volume spam ebooks,
 - and self-publishing.

Self-publishing authors are responsible for acting as the **general manager** of their publishing process which gives them a measure of control that authors relinquish in the royalty model.

What are the categories of self-published authors?

1. Hobbyists and recreational writers who post both the fiction of nonfiction writing to web communities
2. Non-fiction writers who create texts that are valuable enough to sell on the internet but who could never find traditional publishers (too specialized).
3. Entrepreneurs who carry on the tradition of writers we use books as a kind of business card
4. Self-published authors who want to develop as writers and build an audience and move into traditional publishing
5. Hybrid authors who move back and forth between traditional publishing and self-publishing
6. Self-published authors who hope to make a living from writing
7. Academics who self-publish textbooks, and, in some cases, scholarship

Self-publishing is developing as we talk, and the game might change during this semester!

Debora Brandt Wrote a book entitled [*The Rise of Writing Redefining Mass Literacy*](#)
Brandt claims that there has been a shift from a reading-oriented literacy to a writing-oriented literacy

- In reading-oriented literacy systems the author holds more power. Only certain people, those who have had the writing certified by publishers, are able to introduce their ideas to a reading public. There is a **stigma for people who circumvent gatekeepers** and fund their own books.
- **In a writing-oriented model, authorship is more diffuse** . Writing is less planned, more spontaneous.

New technologies had an impact

- Apple wanted its device users to buy books for their store.
- Amazon wanted its Kindle users to buy books from its store.

Amazon began letting writers distribute content to readers through the Kindle Store.

The opportunity to publish directly to e-readers began in 2007.

Amanda Hocking sold millions of her self-published ebooks.

Then she obtained a \$2 million contract with Saint Martin's press

An example that demonstrates the potential for self-published authors to enter the traditional royalty publishing systems

The *New York Times* reported that self-published titles constituted roughly 25% of Amazon's 2012 best sellers.

However, the number of authors who actually earn a livable wage right by self-publishing ebooks has remained only a small percentage of those who wish to do so.

Organizations: one of the largest is the [alliance of independent authors ALLi](#)

Who are the **new intermediaries**?

- Corporations like Amazon and Apple help self-published authors distribute their work
- Harlequin Horizons 2009
- Penguin purchased Authors Solutions, a publishing on demand company in 2012

In contrast to traditional publishers like Penguin who try to enter the self-publishing industry while maintaining a commitment to print and the royalty model, other intermediaries took a startup mentality and built their business model around digital self-publishing.

Wattpad

Wattpad.com is

- An ebook website populated by young writers and readers.
- A platform that sought to be an open YouTube-like system that enabled users to post the writing and their books.
- A website that attracted venture capital because of its ability to keep readers engaged and works well with mobile technologies.

The developers built a number of features that were designed for younger users and writers. Its users serialized their work, a great move because the developers designed Wattpad for mobile use.

Users tend to be positive and encouraging about one another's writing, but authors must follow community norms.

Wattpad has served as an incubator for print publishing by working with publishers to help popular writers monetize their content. Some of its most popular writers have moved into traditional publishing.

Wattpad represents one broad digital intermediary of self-publishing and has been joined by other startups that seek to help self-published authors with distribution.

Smashwords has built its business model on taking a commission for facilitating distribution. Users upload their books on Smashwords and sell them through the store. Smashwords also distributes the book to a number of retailers and takes a commission on each sale.

Becoming an author without a publisher

Abigail Gibbs

This author started writing on **Wattpad** when she was 15.
She wrote a novel entitled *Dinner with a Vampire*.

She stopped posting chapters of this book before finishing ...
Her fans were upset that she had completely disappeared.
They thought: We helped you become famous and now you owe us.
They were very invested with the story and the author.

Abigail offered a full explanation of why the uploads stopped and announced that the book had been finished for Harper Collins.

She explained that she had started writing when she was only 15 and she wanted new readers to read a new edited version of her book so that readers would not be put off by 15 year old Abigail.

Abigail described the reaction of her fans as a mob at war.

Her success makes her an outlier; some of her fans complained when she announced that the ending would be available through purchase.

Complaints focused on accessibility.

- Was the book going to be available in Pakistan or in the Philippines?
- What should readers do if their parents would not let them use a credit card to buy the published book?

These complaints show how important Wattpad's open design had been to the popularity of the story

Jessica

Jessica began writing fiction on the web at 16.

She was accused of copying the plot of another writer. The conflict drew attention to the story

Writing for the web gave her confidence as she went through the process of applying to a creative writing program.

Jessica refused to mention her internet writing to the classmates and the faculty.

She did not want them to know that she had self-published because she found the program's **environment to be hostile to the kind of popular writing.**

She was one of the few participants in the study who wished to remain anonymous so that no one in her creative writing program would know what she had been writing online.

She explained:

"I very much wanted to improve my writing skills because now I've realized that I actually do want to be a published author. I don't want to self publish a book and have people pay for it and go – Oh my God: I just wasted 10 bucks on this book, look at all the spelling errors.

I have lots and lots of room for improvement before I can even publish

I think there is a huge difference between being published online where you know the main audience is teenage girls, compared to having your book in a bookstore."

Digital writing is recognizable to her as a **feedback system** that helps to improve writing skills through engagement with readers. **It's an apprenticeship.**
The training ground for authorship.

Hannah Leed

graduated from college with a degree in English literature and maintained an active reading life.

She gradually finished writing a book and drew on online writing groups to learn the basics of self-publishing.

She published two books in rapid succession that she classified as women's fiction / Romance and began working on a third.

She invested in professional editing, formatting, and design.
Her marketing efforts placed her work on an Amazon bestseller list in early 2014, and her books received hundreds of Amazon reviews.

She explained,
“I do Pinterest, I do Facebook, I do Twitter, I do Google plus and Instagram.
The business aspect of it becomes overwhelming and it's very distracting from the creative process so I've had to step back from all of that.”

She wrote her first book while working full time and raising a child as a single mother.
She wrote in the car at work, while walking.

This distributed process is becoming common for writers. Writing is a more and more distributed Act.

Indie authors

<https://www.allianceindependentauthors.org/>

In the past, the indie author was a person working with a small house.
Today, indie and self-publishing have become almost synonyms

The **indie movement** is about control, freedom, inclusiveness, and self-identification.
It is, ironically, also about a push for standards, precisely because it is the subset of self-publishing that wants to be seen as professional.

Many people argue that the quality of self-published books has improved dramatically in the last decade, but that is difficult to determine.

Because of the nature of self-publishing, it will always include books that do not adhere to professional publishing standards. It's the Achilles heel the defenders of traditional systems aim for.

There is a tension within the Indie community.
if it becomes a space that promotes professional boundaries similar to other kinds of professional publishing, it relinquishes its promise of inclusivity and access.

Role of standardized language.

Standardization imposes restrictions on language itself, an otherwise abundant and almost limitless resource.

The reader still wants a well-written and well edited book.

Readers have daily exposure to non-standard language on social media and in other digital spaces, and they develop reading strategies to engage these materials. **With books, however, readers are used to standards of grammar and editing established in the age of print.** They tend to expect these standards when they pay for them.

Amazon as a new intermediary

Amazon provides experimental publishing environments.

The ranking and recommendation system is always evolving.

Amazon algorithms

Amazon authors believe that the ranking algorithms largely determine the success and failure of the book sales. The authors need to understand and adapt to these algorithms.

Authors have control over their text and its copyright,

This allows them to make rapid changes to their books to propel sales.

They change

- Metadata, ([Kindle direct publishing](#))
- Color design,
- Cover,
- Pricing

In response to what they perceive as rapidly changing publishing conditions, and they do so without needing permission from a publishing firm.

This control is the hallmark of this new authorship.

We have been experiencing the shift in the way people access information and cultural goods, from an editorial model to an algorithmic model.

Whereas editors used to generally control access to the information that reached the public, now algorithms play an increasingly central role. Algorithms like Google search filter information and influence our thinking. Corporations hide the intricacies of how the algorithms work as proprietary information.

Algorithmic culture: The owners of search algorithms claim these algorithms are objective but this claim to objectivity is hard to sustain. Algorithms are manipulated to increase advertising revenue.

Indie authors know how dependent they are on search engines, social media. But social media can frequently change algorithms like Facebook did in late 2013 and early 2014.

We also need to discuss Big Data and data analytics:
Amazon provides various kinds of data analytics tools to the authors
These tools allow authors to analyze their sales and publishing performance.

The data and analytics allow authors to experiment!

Independent writers can see:

- in what country they are selling book
- when their competitors plan to publish books.
- sales ranking relative to other books and authors,
- where they stand on various lists.
- The number of reviews they have received,
- The average review score (5-point scale)

All this data allows writers to make changes on the fly;

- change the cover
- change the title
- change the blurb,
- change the design.

Amazon marks new releases as new in the Kindle store for only 90 days.
Books have the most visibility during this window.

On the one hand, authors praise Amazon for giving them a chance to sell and find readers.

On the other hand, Amazon is in some ways yet another giant corporation in the David vs Goliath narrative.

LISTS

For Indie authors lists are very important.

In 2015 the most important list

- the [New York Times ebook fiction list](#),
- the [USA Today bestseller list](#),
- [top 100 best sellers in the Kindle ebook store](#).

A writer made the USA Today list by

- Reducing the price of the previously released book
- Releasing the book in a slow week of new releases from authors who wrote in a similar genre.
- Doing a large advertising push on Monday, the first day that USA Today begins calculating sales for the week

Some authors aggressively cultivate fan communities

In some cases fans/readers provide labor like website design and book cover design; some readers also moderated fan communities and in some cases provided editorial work.

Matthew Wilson provided copies of his work to 200 fans.

As they read his work, they discovered dozens of errors that were missed by the professional editor he had hired.

Fiction writers benefit from fan labor but also want to distinguish themselves from their fans, establish a distance

For example Martha Bird (a pseudonym) **rewrote the plotline of her novel after her fans guessed the ending of the novel she was serializing.**

She wanted to maintain an element of surprise, which was lost when the fans guessed the plot, and she also worried that her fans would think she was stealing their ideas or relying on them to provide content so she moved to affirm her ownership.

The authors interviewed by Laquintano spend considerable time mobilizing their fans in anticipation of a new release. Once they release their books on Amazon, the authors monitor their quality ranking carefully (Number of stars on a five-point scale)

If the ranking begins to slump, an author with a loyal fan following can send emails to encourage fans to post reviews.

For indie authors data analytics and control mean an opportunity to experiment; but the need to constantly keep abreast of changes also induces anxiety and exhaustion.

The interaction with fans lead to constant requests for new writing. The writers have to keep feeding the beast and they worry that this can dilute the quality of their work.

Intellectual property

- There is a **copyright fundamentalism** in corporate mentality
- and a **copyright abolitionism** in the minds of young people

Fiction writers on **Wattpad** are concerned about plagiarism.

Fiction has been one of the most tightly protected forms of expression in copyright law.

Plagiarists are regarded with scorn on Wattpad

The question is

- What exactly is plagiarism?
- To what degree one can borrow, reshape, manipulate, remix?

Do writers need an author's permission to write "lemons"?

Romantic scenes rewritten with emphasis on sex (fanfiction).

Question: If my friend wanted to share a story originally posted on an abandoned website, could he or she repost it without getting into trouble?

Some of these questions are complicated.

Website users mostly negotiate these issues among themselves.

Wattpad's terms of service include detailed instruction for reporting copyright violation and the administrators have a reputation for being responsive to copyright concerns.

Besides contacting the administrators of the website,

Wattpad writers have stopped unauthorized sharing by threatening to withhold installment of their texts, actually withholding them or threatening to abandon the site. Plagiarism also means that people are paying attention.

One Wattpad writer saw her work gain popularity during a conflict over its originality.

Jessica attributed the clicks her story got to an accusation of plagiarism because people become curious.

Recommendation systems do not distinguish hate reading from reading for enjoyment.

Another writer found herself ambivalent about copyright violation when browsing on Wattpad she discovered a book that she had recently self-published through Kindle.

The incident introduced her to a new set of readers. Instead of suing teenagers, the author recorded a video of herself as an introduction to the community that identified her as the author of the story.

Another Wattpad writer, only 18 year old, was okay with fans using her characters to write derivative works. She argued that permission was important, coupled with attribution. She expected fan writers to ask before they adopted their characters and credit her for creating them.