

US Libraries as Publishers: Status and Concerns

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Abstract:

Although there are successful instances of library publishing in the United States, there has not been a large-scale implementation of library publishing initiatives. The literature on library publishing, however, is copious. Librarians voice a number of concerns about the quality of the essentially self-published books produced through library publishing initiatives and about the role of the library in helping to produce them. To understand better the status of library publishing and the concerns of librarians in the United States, a survey was carried out at the 2015 American Library Association Midwinter Meeting among attendees at the Association of Library Collections and Technical Services forum, "Libraries as Publishers: Next Steps in Self-Publishing?" Respondents represented public, academic, and special libraries/other, and responses indicated that few library publishing initiatives were successfully up and running (10% of respondents); perhaps unsurprisingly, respondents with successful publishing initiatives had far fewer concerns about library publishing overall. The rest of the respondents were either attempting to launch a project, were in the planning phases, or were just curious about library publishing. The concerns of these librarians included potential legal issues, the usefulness of library publishing programs, and the implementation of services necessary to support self-publishing through the library. Ten percent of respondents expressed concerns about the question of the quality of the materials and about the role of the library in collecting them. To supplement the professional literature, additional research is needed into library publishing in general, including into best practices. More research into the question of the library's role in collecting library-published/self-published materials also needs to be carried out.

Keywords: Library-as-publisher, self-publishing, librarian concerns, surveys

Introduction

Libraries have experimented with publishing for decades. Nick Canty (2012) recounts the publishing record of some of the world's major libraries, The Library of Congress and the Bodleian, for example. Generally, these large, prestigious libraries publish for the purpose of displaying their collections, and a copy of the published items sits proudly on their shelves (Canty, 2012). Complexities arise when libraries as trusted institutions assist their own patrons, going on to publish patrons' work under the library's imprint. At the same time, self-publishing is becoming increasingly common, no longer simply being for authors who cannot find a traditional publisher (Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013). Numbers of self-publishers have been increasingly on the rise. Bowker's 2009 data indicates that two-thirds of books published were from non-traditional publishers (Bradley, Fulton, & Helm, 2012), and current estimates of the percentage of self-published materials hover at fifty to seventy-five percent (Holley, 2014), suggesting the lessening of the self-publishing stigma. Although self-published works are clearly of interest to authors, implications for library collections are less clear.

With self-publishing becoming a major force in publishing, libraries in the U.S. have begun considering the potential for a role in their communities as publishers. Already one hundred and fifteen well-endowed academic libraries have formed the Library Publishing Coalition (Lippincott, 2014) and are actively engaged in campus publishing, but there are many more academic, public and special libraries contemplating their potential for involvement. What can we say about the status of library publishing in the U.S., and what concerns do librarians have at varying stages of implementation? Because library publishing is a present-day concern that is understudied, the kinds of libraries are moving to support self-publishing in this way is also unclear.

In this paper, we begin by reviewing developments in library publishing and in self-publishing, and consider some of the implications of digital technologies in the process. We also consider the role of the library both in supporting self-publishing, but also in collecting self-published materials. Next, we present the method and results of a survey of U.S. librarians interested in self-publishing. We analyze their concerns, taking into consideration the kinds of libraries in which they work and the status of the library publishing projects with which they are affiliated. We conclude with a discussion of the findings and recommendations for future work.

Review of the Literature

A good deal has been written on the state of the nascent field of library publishing, but much remains to be studied. We begin this overview of the literature by looking at library publishing initiatives and self-publishing. Next, we look at work in digital self-publishing, especially in libraries and then assess the literature on the necessary training. Finally, we look at the question of quality and the somewhat limited literature on library acquisitions of library-published resources.

Self-Publishing Authors and Libraries

Modern examples of library publishing pre-date the digital age. As early as the 1970s, John Perkins (1978), director of the Ingelwood (CA) Public Library, shared his library's experience as he carved out a niche for publishing library manuals, written by staff and sold

to other libraries. The city of Inglewood printed the manuals long before most libraries even owned a computer. A decade later G. B. Williams (1987) writes about a different form of library publishing—the patron or customer-authored collaborative publication. Mesa Public Library (AZ) is just one of many public libraries that organized and produced a publication comprising content from its customers. Mesa chose a science fiction/fantasy theme specifically to appeal to young adults, naming its magazine *E.T.*, inspired by the movie.

Juris Dilevko and Keren Dali (2006) and Laura Dawson (2008) examine the role of libraries in light of the boom in self-publishing that accompanied the digital era. Writing at the beginning of the great recession when library budgets were in decline, Dawson (2008) observes heightened activity surrounding self-published books. Self-published books cannot be ignored by libraries, especially when established library vendors like R. R. Bowker offer supporting services for these authors. Despite the growth in self-publishing, Dawson takes note of the Library of Congress policy not to “accept CIP data from self-published authors” (p. 44) which complicates library access to MARC records. Moving forward, libraries must address decisions about “storing books, making them searchable and affecting their collection development efforts” (Dawson, 2008, p. 44). She has discovered that while many libraries do not collect self-published works, others attempt to collect higher-quality works devoted to local, regional and specialized topics that would be of less interest and less profitable for traditional publishers (Dawson, 2008).

Libraries and Digital Self-Publishing

A number of changes were wrought with the advent of the World Wide Web, including in the areas of publishing and subsequently, in self-publishing. Publishing consultant, author and editor, Estelle Jobson (2003) writes enthusiastically about the many applications for digital publishing in academic and non-academic environments. She discusses the growing acceptance of self-publishing and on print-on-demand services many of which were extensions of established distribution services. She downplays the effort required to market one’s work, but admits that self-publishing “success stories are not in abundance” (Jobson, 2003, p. 21). Since self-published works in e-book format require little physical space, Dawson (2008) feels this is all the more reason for libraries to include them for consideration along with commercial books.

Perhaps the most vocal proponent for digital self-publishing has been Jamie LaRue (2012), former director of Douglas County Libraries in Colorado, USA. At his library, LaRue raised the bar for library collections by creating his own platform to support an e-book operation. LaRue claims to have a simple premise for libraries: “it is our job to provide access to the intellectual content of our culture” (2012, p. 34). LaRue (2012) does not limit *intellectual content* to commercial publishing alone. According to LaRue (2012), in libraries, “We’re not just the end of the distribution line, we are increasingly partners and content co-creators ourselves” (p. 33). More detailed coverage of the Douglas County Libraries experience is covered by Sue Polanka’s (2012) article about the convergence of the problems posed by commercial e-books and the rise in the interest in self-publishing. Polanka (2012) notes that LaRue moved his library from being “passive recipients of the marketplace” (p. 55) to assuming a more active role developing a new business model for both commercial publishers and self-publishers.

Training and Services

If a library decides to support publishing initiatives, where will its staff get their training? Katherine Skinner, Sarah Lippincott, Julie Speer, and Tyler Walters's (2014) article on library as publisher grapples with the necessary training and knowledge needed by staff to develop a library publishing program. The authors found there were no *library publishing* tracks in library science education programs. Skinner et al. (2014) identify the knowledge and business skills necessary for academic publishing, including "project management, product development, marketing leadership, [and] copyright knowledge" (para 46). The authors remark about the potential for tension between librarians "advocating for new skill sets" (para. 10) and business models, and those who find comfort and familiarity with traditional content management. In the process, "libraries are focusing on the capabilities and possibilities of new models rather than slavishly duplicating or simply automating traditional models" (Hahn, 2008, p. 5). Even academic libraries involved in publishing are attempting to assess appropriate roles based on skill sets, since librarians know how to develop collections, but editors and publishers are more conversant with the "editorial layers" (Brown, Griffiths, & Rascoff, 2007, p. 26).

Collecting Self-Published Materials and the Question of Quality

Self-published materials have been slowly making their way into library collections for decades. Dilevko and Dali's (2006) excellent study on self-published books examines public and academic library holdings of these works between 1960 and 2004. The authors use OCLC data and confine their research to seven known publishers (author service publishers or publishers servicing self-publishers). The article provides rich analysis of collection data by type of library. Noteworthy among their findings was the fact that public libraries generally hold twice the number of self-published titles as university libraries, although the ratio varies by subject. The study also revealed interesting information about the type of self-published works public libraries collect, the most numerous of which were "handbooks, manuals, guidebooks and self-help titles" (Dilevko & Dali, 2006, p. 219).

Dilevko and Dali (2006) find evidence of cheerleading in the 1980s and early 1990s in favor of libraries embracing the self-published book for its specialized content; in the 1990s, the print-on-demand model reinvigorated self-publishing. The addition of author services made it easy for self-published authors to abandon their efforts to gain recognition by large, commercial publishers (Dilevko & Dali, 2006). The authors speculate as to why there was not a better distribution of self-published books in libraries. Could it have been partly attributable to the influential piece by Will Manley (1999) in which he pronounced "'99.99 percent' of self-published books are 'drivel'" (as cited in Dilevko & Dali, 2006, p. 212)? Other reasons include poor marketing, a lack of library vendor-self-publisher relationship, an absence from approval plans, and a lack of financial incentive to purchase. Dilevko and Dali (2006) write of the "awkward silence" (p. 211) from librarians about self-published books because librarians so often base purchases on book reviews from traditional sources.

Despite the growing self-publishing trend and the modest presence of self-published books in libraries, the question of quality has persisted for a long time. Should consumer-created content be added to a library collection? This is a difficult question for public libraries, which are not chiefly "maximizing the production of and access to high quality research" (Brown, Griffiths, & Rascoff, 2007, p. 28) as high-level academic libraries are, but academic and research libraries need to worry all the same (see Dawson, 2008).

Not everyone is enthusiastic across-the-board about collecting essentially self-published, library-published materials. For example, Brian Kenney (2013) questions assumptions about digital library publishing that LaRue (2012) puts forth. Kenney counters LaRue's assertion that libraries should own content paid for with tax dollars. Considering that most public libraries plan to turn over their collections in a matter of years, he wonders why it is important to own all this content. Kenney also questions the quality of self-published work. Although Kenney (2013) acknowledges there are "nuggets of gold" (p. 20), he questions how one easily identifies them. Merely purchasing thousands of Smashwords titles, as LaRue has done, is not the key to developing a collection (Kenney, 2013). Kenney's looming question, yet to be fully answered, is "does anyone in Douglas County want to borrow this stuff?" (2013, p. 20). Similarly, Sanchez (2013) advises that libraries should be discriminating about the "dark matter" (p. 21) they choose to add to their collections, just as they would with commercially produced content. The libraries' role is to respect artistic freedom, provide "limited production support" (Sanchez, 2013, pp. 21-22), and acknowledge the creator's ownership rights. Libraries must also develop ways to host this locally-generated content and to make it discoverable and accessible as applicable, according to their missions and policies.

Rationale for the Study

At present, a great deal of professional consideration has been given to the question of library publishing. However, best practices and research into aspects of library publishing, such as use and quality, have not been carried out to our knowledge. At a more basic level, we also identify a gap in the United States in knowing which kinds of libraries are engaging in library-publishing initiatives and what the status of those initiatives are. The concerns of librarians interested in and involved in self-publishing are likewise not known at present. The current study aims to fill this immediate gap, and to explore avenues for future study in the process.

Method

To investigate U.S.-based library work in self-publishing, a survey was distributed to attendees at the American Library Association (ALA) Midwinter Forum entitled *Libraries as Publishers: Next Steps in Self-Publishing?* This event was held on Monday, February 2, 2015 at 10:30 AM and was presented under the aegis of the ALA Association of Library Collections and Technical Services (ALCTS).¹ A copy of the survey is available through the MOspace repository: <https://mospace.umsystem.edu>.

During the session, participants were invited to respond to a brief survey about library publishing. The survey was distributed via paper and collected at the end of the session. Thirty-three session participants responded, and the results are presented below, followed by a discussion and recommendations.

¹ A recording of the session can be found online: <http://www.eventscribe.com/2015/ALA-Midwinter/presentationinfo.asp?presenter=89252&sess=&pres=80782&sessID=57069>

Results

Respondents were primarily from academic libraries (n=18; 54.5%), with 11 (33.3%) from public libraries and four (12.1%) from special libraries or other institutions.

Ten respondents (30.3%) had a library publishing program in place in their libraries, with only 9% (n=3) of respondents reporting a program that was going well (2 academic libraries, 1 public library) versus a library publishing program that was new (n=7; 21.2%). The remaining 18 respondents (54.5%) were curious about library publishing, with five (15.2%) hopeful to start a library publishing program in their libraries.

Greatest Concerns about Library Publishing

Seven concerns were listed out in the survey, and respondents had the option of choosing any of those as being *most concerning* or of writing in additional concerns.

Concerns expressed by academic librarians were primarily about staff-related costs (n=9; 50%), and equipment costs (n=5; 27.8%) along with publishing related services (n=5; 27.8%). Public librarians were also most concerned with these same three issues. Additionally, over half of public librarians were also concerned about legal issues (n=6; 54.5%), usefulness to users (n=6; 54.5%), and unforeseen issues (n=6; 54.5%). Special librarians and others were most concerned about legal issues (n=3; 75%), followed by the question of usefulness to users (n=2; 50%) and the problem of implementing publishing-related services (n=2; 50%). See Table 1 for more details.

Table 1. Concerns by Kind of Library

Concerns	Academic (N=18)	Public (N=11)	Special/Other (N=4)
Equipment costs	27.8% (n=5)	72.7% (n=8)	25% (n=1)
Costs to hire/train staff	50% (n=9)	72.7% (n=8)	25% (n=1)
Legal concerns (e.g. that photo we published wasn't authorized)	33.3% (n=6)	54.5% (n=6)	75% (n=3)
Usefulness to users (if we build it, will they come?)	38.9% (n=7)	54.5% (n=6)	50% (n=2)
Unforeseen issues with sponsoring self-publishing initiatives	16.6% (n=3)	54.5% (n=6)	25% (n=1)
Programming to support self-publishing	22.2% (n=4)	45.5% (n=5)	25% (n=1)
New publishing-related services to implement (i.e. ISBN services)	27.8% (n=5)	63.6% (n=7)	50% (n=2)

We can consider these concerns also based on the status of a library publishing initiative at the respondent's home library. Perhaps unsurprisingly, concerns were relatively limited in institutions where publishing was going well. The greatest concern in these three libraries was that of publishing-related services that would need to be implemented (n=2; 66.7%). In

libraries where publishing services were just beginning, the major concern was about the cost to hire and train staff (n=5; 71.4%). Among those hoping to begin a library publishing program in their libraries, concern was primarily about the publishing-related services that would need to be implemented (n=4; 80%). Those who are curious about library publishing without intending to begin a program were most concerned about costs to hire and train staff (n=10; 55.5%). See Table 2 for additional information.

Table 2. Concerns by Self-Publishing Program Status

Concerns	Library Publishing Going Well (N=3)	Library Publishing Getting Started (N=7)	Hope to Start Library Publishing (N=5)	Curious about Library Publishing (N=18)
Equipment costs	0	42.9% (n=3)	60% (n=3)	44.4% (n=8)
Costs to hire/train staff	33.3% (n=1)	71.4% (n=5)	40% (n=2)	55.5% (n=10)
Legal concerns (e.g. that photo we published wasn't authorized)	33.3% (n=1)	57.1% (n=4)	60% (n=3)	38.9% (n=7)
Usefulness to users (if we build it, will they come?)	0	57.1% (n=4)	60% (n=3)	44.4% (n=8)
Unforeseen issues with sponsoring self-publishing initiatives	33.3% (n=1)	42.9% (n=3)	20% (n=1)	27.8% (n=5)
Programming to support self-publishing	0	57.1% (n=4)	20% (n=1)	27.8% (n=5)
New publishing-related services to implement (i.e. ISBN services)	66.7% (n=2)	42.9% (n=3)	80% (n=4)	27.8% (n=5)

Beyond the seven concerns listed here, participants were invited to write in additional concerns. Concerns included quality of materials, marketing, buy-in from the administration, and buy-in from (campus) stakeholders.

Most Need to Know

In the final section of the survey, respondents were asked to supply free-text responses to the question of what they most need to know about self-publishing in libraries. The academic libraries with a successful library-publishing operation in place needed to know about business models and “indexing, abstracting, DOI assignment, marketing” (respondent 27).

Three libraries with a nascent library publishing operation needed to know about best practices (2 academic, 1 public). One academic library starting out mentioned outreach as a concern; another mentioned advocating for the program.

Among participants in libraries with no current publishing operation, academic librarians reported needing to know about funding, the reward versus the investment, the problem of quality, and the need for more library-based resources to be available. Public-library based participants also were looking for help with getting started, including identifying funding sources. A special library reported needing to know more about legal concerns.

Quality

The question of quality came up as a write-in response in three respondents' comments (respondents 19, 20, 31).

Respondent 19, an academic librarian with no plans to begin a library publishing operation, listed the "legitimacy of self-published scholarly work" as a write-in option for what most concerned him/her, and indicated a need to know more about "perception of self-publishing; quality; reputation."

Another participant (participant 20), a public librarian also with no intention of starting a library publishing program, had a similar response to the last survey question, stating "How do you address concerns about "quality" of what gets published?"

An academic librarian (participant 31) working in an institution with a new library publishing initiative, stated as a concern the problem of the "perception that "self-published" materials are low quality or not valuable to collect." This academic librarian states in the question about needs that he/she is most interested in working with the academic community on publishing initiatives, but that "our [state] collection does collect self-published regional materials," implying a perceived value of these materials.

Discussion

Although the literature presented in this paper focuses almost exclusively on public libraries, public librarians in the U.S. are not the only ones interested and involved in library publishing. Academic librarians were very interested as well, perhaps indicating that librarians are also moving past the stigma of self-publishing that authors have been doing for a while (Baverstock & Steinitz, 2013).

Of the respondents, all of whom had attended a session on library publishing, relatively few had a program in place. This seems to confirm the observation, based on the literature, that this is a new field of practice in libraries. Having few successful programs in place gives additional context to the needs of respondents to learn about successful library publishing initiatives and best practices.

Concerns were plentiful, as might be expected with any new undertaking in libraries. Many of the concerns expressed by respondents were skills-based, with examples, in the form of best practices and toolkits, being the way librarians seemed to want to address their own knowledge gaps. At the same time, concerns expressed by participants in libraries with no successful current publishing operation align well with the required skills for library publishing laid out by Skinner, Lippincott, Speer, and Walters (2014).

The question of quality that was raised by respondents echoes some of the general concerns about quality expressed in the literature (c.f. Kenney, 2013). Quality of materials inherently relates to deeper questions of the library's publishing initiatives and collections/acquisitions practices. Among respondents, the academic librarian with materials from the community included in a special collection seemed to endorse library acquisitions of self-published materials, at least within specific circumstances. The other two respondents mentioning quality did not mention any familiarity with self-published materials; they were hesitant about perceptions. This suggests that, as libraries become more implicated in library

publishing, they will need to re-examine their collection development practices as well as their attitudes toward self-published works, finding ways potentially to include more self-published materials in targeted, specific ways.

As libraries work to understand their place in the publishing arena, a number of obstacles will need to be overcome. In working as a community to understand how best to support their communities in these initiatives, librarians must not forget that it is also an obligation to think of their long-term commitment to these resources (Moulaison & Million, 2015), including the potential inclusion of these resources in their library collections. Perhaps libraries should find guidance in the Ithaka Report which suggests a libraries' "publishing strategy should reflect its core mission and circumstances" (Brown, Griffiths, & Rascoff, 2007, p. 29). The librarian's obligation to self-publishing authors does not end with the publication of the manuscript. Librarians must remember to think beyond the question of what they need to know in the immediate future to create and sustain a successful library publishing initiative, but also what they need to do farther into the future in support of their self-publishing patrons.

Limitations

This very brief survey was carried out among librarians interested in the topic of library publishing. These librarians were active enough to commit to attending the ALA Midwinter Meeting, and were engaged enough to attend a session on self-publishing in libraries and to share their ideas with the researchers. It is not clear if these librarians are representative of all U.S.-based librarians interested in library publishing initiatives.

Recommendations and Conclusion

This paper has traced work in library publishing and has considered the changing perspectives of self-publishing at the same time. Quality of resulting materials is important, but so is the work that librarians need to undertake to implement publishing services. A survey of 33 U.S.-based librarians attending a session on library publishing at the ALA Midwinter Meeting in 2015 indicated that few libraries have a successful library-publishing initiative in place, and that many libraries are getting one off the ground or hoping to start one. Librarians in all kinds of libraries are interested in self-publishing, not solely academic/research or solely public.

The question of quality, however, is one that continues to emerge in discussion of self-publishing. The stigma of these publications is waning as self-publishing continues to grow. "Cambridge sociologist John Thompson (2010) observes that 'It's become easier to publish but harder to sell'" (cited in Canty, 2012, p. 61). The question of how libraries should best handle the acquisitions of self-published and library published books warrants further investigation, as libraries struggle with the technical and social aspects of moving into publishing. The questions remain: are libraries buying self-published books? And, should they? Further research will be required to address these and other questions relating to the challenges of library publishing brought forth in this paper.

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