Self-Publish or Perish: An Ethical Imperative for Collection Development in 21st Century Libraries

INFO 266 – Collection Management

Emily Moss

Summer 2017

Despite its intention to serve as a space of unfettered access and equality, the library has traditionally been glimpsed as a space of rules and boundaries. Patrons must literally stifle their voices, librarians can be viewed as authoritarians, the facilities are meant for three activities: reading, studying, and/or writing, and titles are not intuitively located but rather, grouped through a complex series of alphanumeric characters and relationships intentionally opaque to patrons. The processes of collection development and management have similarly adhered to rigid guidelines and behaviors. However, with the catalyst of the Internet and subsequent embrace of Web 2.0 platforms by users, libraries are increasingly re-assessing and re-branding their space to provide relevant and viable services in a networked era through the implementation of maker spaces, e-books, information commons, and more. Unfortunately, collection development policy has been relatively slow to follow suit instead restricting its practice to the established standard of traditional publishing houses, trade publication reviews, and library vendors for acquisition. Self-published titles (sometimes referred to as 'independent titles') as works that are produced and distributed outside the traditional model of an established publishing house are well-positioned to add value to a collection, serve patron-driven information needs, demonstrate value of the institution to its stakeholders, and exemplify the professional mandates to provide equitable access to all users and advocate for intellectual freedom. There remains a reticence however in considering these titles on the part of collection development librarians because they exist separate from the conventional pipeline through which library acquisitions occur hindering their qualitative value and ability to seamlessly integrate into established materials collections. While these concerns are legitimate, in the twenty-first century, it's necessary for librarians to integrate these titles into their collections and in fact, embrace self-publishing culture in their organizations. In part, self-publishing is glimpsed as an emerging

technology and the opportunity to provide that service to patrons is one that should be seized toward serving the community. However, it's equally valuable for the library to present itself as part of the collective space where people are creating, producing, disseminating and consuming content. As Bibliolabs' Mitchell Davis (2015) states in the Foreword to *Self-Publishing and Collection Development: Opportunities and Challenges*, "In many regards, the library's ability to survive as an institution depends on it being an effective and valuable part of this indie ecosystem" (Davis, 2015, Intro., para. 15-16). Further, the ways in which titles are created and recognized in the context of library culture significantly relates to collection development (Pecoskie & Hill, 2014). Within the Web 2.0 era, people are increasingly eschewing traditional institutions to access and consume content. To maintain relevance and capitalize on the move toward participatory culture as it relates to content, it behooves libraries to ensure their place in the movement and part of this process includes acknowledging and embracing the culture of self-publishing. Therefore, to best meet the needs of their patrons, organizations, and profession, librarians must prioritize the inclusion of self-published works in their practice of collection development and management.

In construction of this argument in favor of incorporating self-published titles in library collections and self-publishing culture in libraries, a very brief history on the technological developments that allowed self-publishing to flourish will be provided, followed by a short explication of the reluctance by librarians to include self-published titles in library collections. Subsequently, the argument will then be made for the myriad reasons why it's critical that collection development managers re-think and embrace self-published titles for the sake of their readers, organizations, and profession. It should also be acknowledged that this debate remains relatively young and with the expansion of emerging technologies, grows increasingly complex.

Even texts devoted to the topic are unable to provide comprehensive analysis on best practices as in many ways, information professionals are just now truly contending with what it means to embrace self-published titles. As such, this argument seeks to highlight the breadth of benefits to the whole of the library as an institution with the acknowledgement that the literature and debate encompasses critical analysis merely touched upon in the proceeding discussion.

Significantly, self-publishing is a rather new phenomenon as 2008 is seen as the boom year for the explosion of self-published works in the marketplace. "[This was] in large part due to the proliferation of e-books that let an author publish a book without the costs of printing and binding and to the print-on-demand world where books did not have to be printed in advance of sales" (Cassell, 2015, para. 1). As has been well documented in trade and popular literature, the rise of e-books was feared as the end of both print literature and brick-and-mortar bookstores. Similarly, libraries were concerned with maintaining their relevance in this new era of digital access. Publishers were also uncertain of the future of their industry and reduced both the number of manuscripts they acquired as well as the type of literature they would consider for publication. As the technology allowed for it, authors seized this opportunity to circumvent the established model and published their work on their own. As Holley (2015) notes, "this has changed with e-books, print on demand, and Amazon and other Internet outlets. In fact, an industry has grown up to support these authors" (Intro., para. 2). The rise of e-books led to another unexpected occurrence in that print literature remained popular such that a story in *The Washington Post* noted that while e-readers were downloading books onto their devices, they were still also checking out titles from libraries or purchasing them through bookstores (Kang, 2012). By 2012, e-book sales had begun to decelerate from their rise in 2008 and print sales volume continued to grow. However, the culture of self-publishing had taken hold and in 2014,

Bowker reported “approximately 460,000 self-published titles, up 17% over 2013” (Cassell, 2015, para. 10). In 2015, that number grew to 625,327 titles (Anderson, 2016) therefore, librarians must acknowledge the ubiquity of these titles and assess their potential for acquisition but there is still a reluctance to do so due to issues of both quality and logistics.

Self-published materials produced independently of the traditional publishing industry subsequently suffer from a reputation of being of low quality. (Sandy, 2016, p. 896)

The argument against incorporating self-published titles in library collections is two-fold. In Sandy’s (2016) survey of librarians interested in publishing initiatives through their libraries, concern about the quality of materials published was paramount. The author acknowledges this concern about “quality” is evident in the literature as well and linked to discussion on collection and acquisitions practices. Traditional publishing houses provide a kind of vetting infrastructure that implicitly asserts the quality of a title they produce. “The ‘reputational economy’, a concept that relies heavily on the qualitative value of the editorial committee goes a step further and can be considered as a counter argument to the rise in self-publishing” (Carolan & Evain, 2013, p. 293). In his look at the stigma against self-publishing, Bankhead (2015) positions editors as historically meaningful citing the example of Max Perkins’ role in shaping the literature of Fitzgerald and Hemingway. Titles that don’t make their way through the conventional practice of evaluation, editing, and publication by a venerated gatekeeper are perceived as inferior to those that do. Additionally, publishing houses control distribution by way of production and their relationships with vendors and trade publications serve as the triad through which libraries acquire materials. Titles that are self-published are rarely reviewed nor included in a vendor’s

inventory. This latter phenomenon accounts for the second reason librarians would prefer not to acquire self-published titles.

Overall, even libraries interested in self-published books will encounter difficulties in discovering, acquiring, and cataloging them. (Holley, 2015, para. 1)

Books that aren't procured through vendors lack the kind of metadata and bibliographic record that allows a library to easily incorporate a title into its collection. Libraries must typically manually order these titles and then contend with questions about appropriate or intended readership as well as specialized cataloging procedure. "The lack of bibliographic control for self-published materials is one of the key obstacles standing in the way of broader library discovery and purchase of self-published books" (Holley, 2015, para. 9). Additionally, metadata refers to cover art, synopsis, author photograph, and all other information associated with the book that is not the book itself. Without an established standard for what those assets comprise as traditionally managed by publishers and/or vendors, the onus falls on authors or libraries to supply or create them such that the book can be effectively presented to patrons. Finally, there remains a stigma against self-published titles informed by the historically popular but now pejorative phrase 'vanity press'. In the textbook, *Collection Management Basics* (Evans & Saponaro, 2012), neither 'self-publish' nor 'independent publish' appear in the index though 'vanity press' is present. Within the section on various publishing methods, vanity press is still the preferred term though many associated with self-publishing (Spirn & Whiteside, 2014; Holley, 2015) would argue that it has a negative connotation that damages the perception of self-published authors and their work. These concerns about the incorporation of self-published titles are reasonable and legitimate as the practice is still immature. There exist gaps wherein the

technology didn't yet meet the need and then the required expertise didn't yet meet the technology. It has grown quickly as an industry but there remains a learning curve as well as many unanswered questions about best practices for authors, platforms, and libraries. That said, there are many reasons why embracing self-published titles and their attendant culture is to the benefit if not necessity of twenty-first century libraries as evidenced through the following discourse.

Public libraries and their vendors can see evidence of demand for self-published e-books merely by looking at the latest best-seller list. (Nardini, 2015, para. 34)

With decreased budgets and an increased number of platforms in which patrons can access content, it's required that library collections include the titles that readers want. Patron-driven acquisitions have become popular facets of collection development policies to ensure that libraries are satisfying the information needs of their community. To the extent that self-published authors are effective in generating awareness and interest in their work, patron-driven acquisitions are also often the method through which librarians consider self-published titles. "[Kent District Library] also occasionally purchases nonlocal self-published books…generally the purchase is due to a request for the title from a patron…the majority of the requests are for teen and adult genre fiction, especially romance and mystery" (DeWild & Jarema, 2015, para. 10). In fact, most self-published fiction is genre fiction which has historically been looked upon dubiously regarding its value to readers. Recent discussion of reader response theory and readers' advisory practice finds that escapist reading holds therapeutic benefits for genre readers (Begum, 2011).

While intellectual stimulation and imaginative processes are engaged through genre works, studies show that people in high-stress and/or harmful situations such as those who are chronically ill, invalids, incarcerated, or abused cite escapist reading as psychologically beneficial. There has long been debate on reading for pleasure versus edification but the rise in genre fiction suggests that its readers are prevalent and prolific and thus, their interests and needs must be prioritized equally with readers of literary or non-fiction. Additionally, to the extent that genre fiction is providing therapy for certain readership, libraries are obligated toward equal access to meet the information needs of these readers. The ubiquity of genre titles in self-published fiction demonstrate their benefit to this potentially underserved population.

Yet with the disappearance of other artifacts that record day-to-day reality of certain communities and areas, there is a potential that works of limited interest today, with proper preservation, will be of value in the years to come. (Sandy, 2016, p. 908)

Texts documenting local history as well as memoir and autobiography are popular genres of self-published work that can serve as valuable primary sources and cultural artifacts in library collections. In his look at self-publishing, Holley (2015) argues for the use of these titles by researchers "seeking a more direct perspective from less skilled writers who publish items about their personal experiences and about topics where they have firsthand knowledge" (para. 6). He additionally makes a point about self-published work as a cultural record that aligns with discussion from Tkach and Hank (2014) on the ability of self-published work to avoid censorship and/or homogenization by avoiding the traditional publishing method that sterilizes socially or politically incendiary material such that it no longer resonates as authentic to the moment in which it was created and distributed. Tkach and Hank (2014) further cite the move by the

Library of Congress to archive tweets from the Web 2.0 platform, Twitter, as preservation of "self-published, born-digital ephemera" (p. 13) in their argument in favor of libraries incorporating self-published printed work.

An interesting thought experiment and one that is especially relevant now is to consider *The Diary of Anne Frank* as both a primary resource and a self-published text. Following the success of the publication in Europe, an English translation was submitted to Doubleday for publication in the United States. Doubleday initially rejected the manuscript which had already been rejected by several other New York based publishing firms in 1952. A junior employee at Doubleday discovered the manuscript and persuaded her bosses to publish it (Tabachnick, 2009). Had the rejection stood would the *Diary* have been self-published and would that format have influenced how libraries and booksellers received it? The answer to the latter question is of course, yes. What might be lost to the cultural record had the world never learned the story of Anne Frank nor had her work resonated as an invaluable primary resource for the experience of Jewish children during World War II. While the value in self-published primary source documents is not often immediately apparent, it's vital to consider its imagined worth in assessing its future potential for information and edification of a historical moment or event.

The value of self-published books increases when it's juxtaposed with other material on the same topic… (Dawson, 2008, p. 49)

In addition to meaningful cultural records, self-published work can also serve as value-added material for an existing collection. Eroded budgets in recent years have reduced the number of materials that academic libraries can feature in their collections but prior to that development, comprehensive collection building was a common practice. In that vein, the

inclusion of self-published titles to achieve a well-rounded collection is essential. The example of Garner's *Quack this Way* also serves as a cautionary tale against not considering self-published titles for collection acquisition. Garner's text features an interview he did with author, David Foster Wallace, shortly before Wallace took his own life. Focused on getting the work out there for Wallace's fans, Garner elected to self-publish the text rather than incur the extensive process of going through a traditional publishing house. Unfortunately, this move hurt the work which aside from a brief mention in *The New Yorker* was never evaluated in trade publications (Nardini, 2015). Ingram Coutts, the vendor who was distributing the title, had difficulty raising interest from libraries even though Wallace's tome, *Infinite Jest*, is a seminal and iconic work repeatedly devoured by its fans and taught on college campuses. *Quack this Way* could've served as excellent rare supplementary material to Wallace's oeuvre had libraries acknowledged its potential despite its auspicious origins (as a self-published work).

Self-published authors frequently create streams of related material that libraries can offer to their users…much of which can be downloaded onto devices that readers are already using. (Dawson, 2008, p. 49)

Value is also added to a collection through ancillary content. Self-published authors are likely to create supplementary material as their motivation for publishing is provision of access and thus, they will do what is necessary to make that possible including creating additional material and working with libraries to promote their work. A curious but useful antecedent from which libraries could learn about encouraging, marketing, and distributing supplementary work is found in the ways in which fan fiction authors act within their respective information communities toward engaging readership and building support for their work. In the *Twilight* fan

fiction community, wherein initially self-published bestseller *Fifty Shades of Grey* originated, fandom fundraisers were conducted via auctions and anthologies. Fans would bid for the prize of a favorite fan fiction author writing a story of the fan's choice. In some instances, this piece was an original story but more often, it was an outtake or missing scene or alternative character point-of-view from the author's most popular story. The auctioned work would then be compiled into an anthology PDF that anyone had the ability to purchase. *Grey's* author, E.L. James, also known as Icy to *Twilight* fans participated in one of these fandom auctions wherein over 1,200 fans pooled their money to bid on her work. They paid $28,391.70 to share one story amongst them from the author (Romano, 2014) when, at the time, she had only written one *Twilight* fan fiction story, *Master of the Universe* (which became *Grey*). Self-published authors are perfectly positioned to create that content and libraries would be well-served to encourage that creative work and then use it to appeal to readers and support writers. As this example evidences, fans have long been making use of participatory culture to create, share, and disseminate content. Accordingly, it would be worthwhile for libraries to further explore these activities such that they can emulate effective practices and provide models of participation with which patrons are already familiar.

In addition, the movement for libraries to become loci for creation in addition to consumption, that is, the Makerspace movement, has played a significant part in the rise of interest in e-book self-publishing centered on the public library. (Bankhead, 2015, para. 31)

While self-published titles serve the interests of patrons and collections, integrating self-publishing culture into a library's practices and services can benefit the institution as well. In part, libraries' involvement in self-publishing culture is a way to maintain quality control over

the work being produced as Tom Bruno citing Allison Brown suggests. “Libraries can help enforce standards for description and discovery and foster some critical and editorial oversight by means of such things as writing circles, local author days, and even workshops taught by members of the writing community” (Bruno, 2015, para. 19). In this process, libraries can guide authors toward the creation of work that serves as a meaningful addition as well as encourage practices that position that work to be incorporated into their existing materials collection. Libraries should also involve themselves in writer culture. Self-publishing has exploded and thus, library patrons are now likely also authors, reviewers, editors, and/or consumers of self-published work. It would behoove libraries toward maintaining relevance and engaging stakeholders to be part of the conversation around independent production and distribution. With this move, they are well-positioned to foster and sustain not just the culture of self-publishing but the library’s critical role within it as evidenced by the Kent District Library. “Finding a way not just to accept local self-published authors, but actually to welcome them, invite them into the library, and help them hone their craft and their marketing skills, has resulted in a beneficial experience for the library and our patrons” (DeWild & Jarema, 2015, para. 18).

Homogeneity at the top means editors and publishers too often produce homogenous literature. (Roh, Drabinski, Inefuku, 2015)

Following exploration of the significance of incorporating self-published titles in library collections as it impacts patrons and libraries, it’s now important to consider the larger ethical implications of this move including the economic, political, social, and cultural ramifications. Traditional publishing functions as a top-down method of production in which consumers are reliant on producers and authors are reliant on the judgement of designated gatekeepers. Not only

does self-publishing circumvent this hierarchy and collapse or flatten its imposed boundaries, it grants agency to the people who were previously beholden to its power structure including authors, readers, and librarians. "The assessment of quality has migrated away from the traditional means of production and toward the consumer of the written work through the independent agency of the author" (Bankhead, 2015, para. 10). This move is incredibly meaningful for several reasons including that the hegemonic traditional publishing industry maintains massive influence on which work is published as well as an implicit bias in consideration of that work. *Publisher's Weekly* posted a salary breakdown of the top publishing houses in 2014 that showed 89% of employees identify as white. Further, the substantial salary discrepancy between men and women suggests that while there are more women in the industry, there are more male executives and senior management. "The dearth of minority employees directly affects the types of books that are published, industry members agreed…" (Milliot, 2014). Given these statistics, it's worth re-examining the traditionally held belief that publishing houses are the arbiters of quality as it's clear these acknowledged arbiters are predominantly white men. Glimpsed through that lens, the self-publishing movement appears near revolutionary with regard to controlling the means of production through the act of publishing stories that might not otherwise be told and being paid for labor through a royalty structure that favors the author. Most self-published authors will agree that the money is not substantial but having their work socially and monetarily valued is still significant. Libraries, as forces for public good (Marek, 2015), must be in support of this democratization of information access.

As Dilevko (2008) puts it, 'Intellectual freedom was…a collection development issue'. It still is." (Tkach & Hank, 2014, p. 15)

Intellectual freedom is recognized by the American Library Association as the following:

> The rights of library users to read, seek information, and speak freely as guaranteed by the First Amendment. Intellectual freedom is a core value of the library profession, and a basic right in our democratic society. A publicly supported library provides free, equitable, and confidential access to information for all people of its community. (*American Library Association*, 2017)

Within the profession, there is an assumption of liberal neutrality but it's a flawed framework as the "neutrality" is determined by the makeup of the community in which the library exists. Tkach and Hank (2014) invoke the work of Berman, Danky, and Dilevko to suggest that collection development is a political act. The discussion of self-published work, suggest Tkach and Hank (2014), "opens to a more general consideration…of the role that a library has in both handing down the tradition of the population it serves and enlarging the intellectual horizon of that same population" (p. 14). Librarians make choices about what information is included and excluded. While always imperfect, they are obliged to make every effort to incorporate as many voices and perspectives into their collections as possible. Toward diversity, intellectual freedom, and equity of access (Wong & Figueroa, 2015), it's especially critical to ensure the presence of marginalized voices. Self-published authors, as those who exist outside the mainstream production model for literature, are quite literally, on the margins. "What we elect to add, or not add, to our collections has an impact on our users' access to information as well as on their freedom to explore ideas, topics, and even recreational enjoyment without restriction" (Evans & Saponaro, 2014, p. 303). In fact, self-censoring including the rejection of certain materials based

on assumed quality is arguably unconstitutional. As gatekeepers of information, librarians retain great power within their communities but with that power, comes immense responsibility to act ethically and collection development librarians must forever remain cognizant of that fact.

As the technology improves and evolves, self-publishing will further adapt to user needs and in their best interests as well as the best interests of their patrons, libraries will follow suit. To position themselves to make this move however, it is critical that they seize the current moment to embrace the culture of self-publishing via the integration of self-published titles in their collections and self-publishing practices in their programs and services. The phenomenon of self-published work presents a unique opportunity for libraries to meet the needs of their patrons, benefit their stakeholders, demonstrate value to their communities and exemplify ethical practices within the information profession. It's imperative that they reconcile their apprehension with this less familiar model of production, distribution, and acquisition such that they can serve as leaders and champions of progress in this new era of information.

References

American Library Association. (2017). Retrieved from http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom

Anderson, P. (2016, September 7). Bowker: 727,000 US self-published ISBNs registered in 2015. Retrieved from http://publishingperspectives.com/2016/09/bowker-isbn-self-published-us/

Bankhead, H. (2015). E-book self-publishing and the Los Gatos library: A case study. In R. Holley (Ed.), *Self-publishing and collection development: Opportunities and challenges for libraries.* [Kindle edition]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

Begum, S. (2011). Readers advisory and underestimated roles of escapist reading. *Library Review, 60*(9), 738-747.

Bruno, T. (2015). Self-publishing and libraries: The slush pile is the platform. In R. Holley (Ed.), *Self-publishing and collection development: Opportunities and challenges for libraries.* [Kindle edition]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

Carolan, S., and Evain, C. (2013). Self-publishing: Opportunities and threats in a new age of mass culture. *Publishing Research Quarterly, 29*, 285-300.

Cassell, K.A. (2015). Do large academic libraries purchase self-published books to add to their collections? In R. Holley (Ed.), *Self-publishing and collection development: Opportunities and challenges for libraries.* [Kindle edition]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

Davis, M. (2015). Foreword. In R. Holley (Ed.), *Self-publishing and collection development: Opportunities and challenges for libraries.* [Kindle edition]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

Dawson, L. (2008). The role of self-publishing in libraries. *Library Trends, 57*(1), 43-51.

DeWild, M., and Jarema, M. (2015). Supporting self-publishing and local authors: From challenge to opportunity. In R. Holley (Ed.), *Self-publishing and collection development: Opportunities and challenges for libraries.* [Kindle edition]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

Evans, G.E., and Saponaro, M.Z. (2012). *Collection management basics*. Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited.

Holley, R. (2015). Introduction. In R. Holley (Ed.), *Self-publishing and collection development: Opportunities and challenges for libraries.* [Kindle edition]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

Holley, R. (2015). Why academic libraries should consider acquiring self-published books. In R. Holley (Ed.), *Self-publishing and collection development: Opportunities and challenges for libraries.* [Kindle edition]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

Holley, R. (2015). Self-publishing and bibliographic control. In R. Holley (Ed.), *Self-publishing and collection development: Opportunities and challenges for libraries.* [Kindle edition]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

Kang, C. (2012, April 4). Survey finds e-readers are spurring consumers of books in all formats. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/economy/survey-finds-e-readers-are-spurring-consumers-of-books-in-all-formats/2012/04/04/gIQAo1T8vS_story.html?utm_term=.04882b5efc3e

Marek, K. (2015). Information policy. In S. Hirsh (Ed.), *Information services today: An introduction.* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefeld.

Milliot, J., (2014, September 19). Publishing's holding pattern: 2014 salary survey. Retrieved from https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/publisher-news/article/64083-publishing-s-holding-pattern-2013-salary-survey.html

Nardini, B. (2015). Book vendors and self-publishing. In R. Holley (Ed.), *Self-publishing and collection development: Opportunities and challenges for libraries.* [Kindle edition]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

Pecoskie, J.L., and Hill, H. (2015). Beyond traditional publishing models: An examination of the relationships between authors, readers, and publishers. *Journal of Documentation, 71*(3), 609-626.

Roh, C., Drabinski, E., and Inefuku, H. (2015). "Scholarly communication as a tool for social justice and diversity" panel at the Association of College and Research Libraries Annual Meeting.

Romano, A. (2014). How fangirls changed the future of publishing. Retrieved from http://kernelmag.dailydot.com/issue-sections/features-issue-sections/10789/twilight-fandom-publishing-motu/

Sandy, H.M., (2016). The role of public libraries in self-publishing: Investigating author and librarian perspectives. *Journal of Library Administration, 56*(8), 893-912.

Spirn, A.W., and Whiteside, A.B. (2014). The promise and problems of the visual e-book. *Art Documentation, 33*(2), 206-226.

Tabachick, T. (2009, April 1). The editor who didn't pass on Anne Frank; Jones recalls famous diary. Retrieved from http://thejewishchronicle.net/bookmark/2225171-The-editor-who-didn%E2%80%99t-pass-on-Anne-Frank-Jones-recalls-famous-diary

Tkach, D., and Hank, C. (2014). Before blogs, there were zines: Berman, Danky, and the political case for zine collecting in American academic libraries. *Serials Review, 40,* 12-20.

Wong, P., and Figueroa, M. (2015). Diversity, cultures, and equity of access. In S. Hirsh (Ed.), *Information services today: An introduction.* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefeld.