

# Self-Publishing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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## **Abstract**

Utilizing web-based platforms have become increasingly powerful tools for marginalized groups to take publishing into their own hands when other avenues to make their voices heard on a more widespread level may not be available. Self-publishing platforms can come in many forms such as Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr and blogging platforms such as Blogspot and Wordpress and they have their uses in being able to publish works with next to no limitation. Self-publishing also addresses a societal need for a diversification of voices largely absent from the world of mainstream publishing. However, since writers that choose to use web based platforms to tell their stories they tend to operate largely autonomously and therefore have significantly less in terms of financial backing and advertising power which are both available in spades to publishing giants such as Penguin Random House. While the concept of self-publishing is powerful and can be useful to marginalized groups to spread their messages it points to a larger issue that calls for an overhaul of the publishing industry to be more inclusive in the writers they produce.

The internet has proven to be a useful to writers of all stripes making traditional forms of publishing less crucial for literary success with each passing generation of writers. Aikiwenzi-Damms article suggested that indigenous writers particularly have trouble finding publication sources to tell their stories because those stories will have a high likelihood of either being rejected for not being marketable to a wide audience or be subjected to an orientalist gaze which could result in the story being changed to be more accessible to a non-indigenous audience. A variety of blogging platforms, such as Wordpress for instance, offer aspiring writers tell their own stories without having to go through the middle man. This holds many possibilities and benefits particularly for writers

representing marginalized communities. To make my case I will go through the following points. First I will discuss what self-publishing is and what it looks like within the context of this argument. Second, I will discuss the issues that self-publishing works to confronts, which is giving a platform to writers belonging to marginalized groups. The platforms I will discuss are social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr and Twitter as well as blogging platforms such as Blogspot and Wordpress, with writers such as Ranier Maningding of *The Love Life of An Asian Guy*, who writes about social and political issues relevant to the Asian communities, or *Son of Baldwin* who writes largely for the Black and gay communities. These are just examples as there are writers who for Eurocentric audiences as well such as Milo Yiannopolis who has gained fame for some of his more controversial statements. The last point is the limitations of self-publishing in this way and how they stand against the financial power of publishing giants.

The most appropriate place to begin would be discussing the basics of what self-publishing is and how it works. The dictionary definition of the concept is plainly when a writer publishes their own work at their own expense.[unsure if citation needed...] However, with the scope of online sources you can more or less take out the part concerning the writers “expense” as there is a plethora of online resources available with relatively no charge that give aspiring writers to make their own work widely available. This method of defining self-publishing may sound borderline utopic to aspiring writers where you can make your work accessible to prospective readers, followers, maybe even fans, but there are some nearly insurmountable drawbacks that will be discussed later on. The concept of self-publishing holds popularity because of the general idea of, to utilize the cliché, “cutting out the middle-man”. Simon Carolan and Christine Evain, writing about the opportunities and threats that come with the tools that allow writers to do this, quote that the “low costs and low risks associated with self-publishing makes it easier for authors to publish their own documents. Compared to the user-friendly self-publishing workflow, the traditional publishing marketplace exists as a highly structured environment with strict requirements for publishing protocol”. [Carolan, Evain, 2013]

In sum, why have the work that you, as a writer, presumably have put your soul into, be made to jump through hoops of an environment that you, the writer,

don't care for? This notion particularly applies to writers that don't fit within the parameters of demand for a mass audience where their work would have to be made accessible to that mass audience, when in reality, their work isn't meant for that demographic at all (more on this moving forward). The questions posed above are rhetorical and are meant to consider what would make self-publishing an appealing, viable option to an aspiring writer. Self-publishing can come in a number of different forms, many of which would be common to nearly everyone who has a phone, tablet or computer. Commonly used social media platforms such as Facebook and even Twitter and Instagram can function as platforms for self-publishing for aspiring writers. If you were a writer that was aiming to make a name through expressing ideas through short blurbs, Twitter serves that function. Instagram and, even more so, Facebook both have the capacity to be utilized as blogging platforms. Outside of popular social media platforms there are designated blogging platforms, Blogspot, Tumblr and Wordpress being a couple of the most popular. Self-publishing has worked to be a gateway to many prominent writers in today's literary scene. Rupi Kaur for example started as a Tumblr and Instagram blogger which offered her a rise to international fame. Certain far right activists that exist outside of Canada such as Milo Yiannopolous and Daryus Valizadeh (stylized "Roosh V") (whether considered agreeable or not) acquired fame and notoriety through blogging before being offered book deals from publishers. Regardless of whether you, or I for that matter care for these particular writers or not, or would be willing to read them or not, they epitomize the value of self-publishing and the problems that self-publishing helps to address, but not necessarily solve. This is what self-publishing is and the examples suggested above show the avenues through which it shows itself. Now, lets move on to why it's important.

The primary topic of discussion intended with this paper is to talk about how the world of traditional publishing is largely devoted to telling stories that would appeal mostly to the North American hegemonic status quo. This is to say, that the intended audience for the high majority of widespread published works tend to be white. With the marketability of published works being aimed at this specific audience comes the inevitable consequence of the publishing world privileging some authors over others. To illustrate this phenomena I will be

consulting the works of Jen Sookfong, Scaachi Koul, and Kateri Aikiwenzi-Damm. A buzzfeed article by Scaachi Koul gives a scathing and often times profane review of Canada's publishing industry for being overwhelmingly white. She says "Canada publishes a laughably low number of books by people of colour, namely black and Indigenous writers, and the discrepancy is just as bad in journalism...You have to actually find people who write and speak and live from different perspectives, and promote them. And pay them, because historically and currently, they're not getting work, and they're not getting money. White writers using their very histories and cultures, naturally, get their dues". [Koul, 2017] Koul cites that, in the world of journalism at least, that nearly 90% of columnist are white. [Koul, 2017] To give an idea of the scope of the problem, The Cooperative Childrens Books center released a report of the books they've received. In the year 2016 they found that a meager 12% (Less than 500 out of 3400 books that year) were written by authors of color. This statistic by the way is only for childrens books. [Horning, 2017]. Beyond statistics, personalized accounts from authors of color paint a very real picture of what navigating through the world of publishing is like for them to get their voices heard. Jen Sookfong Lee recounts her experience saying My first taste of this was when my agent was showing the manuscript of my first novel to publishers. One of the most prominent editors in Canada, one who is continually and publicly lauded for her career, told us that she just couldn't justify taking on "one more Asian woman writing about her dead grandfather." This was 2004, when the number of Asian women publishing fiction in Canada could be counted on one hand." [Sookfong Lee, 2017] In her article Aikiwenzi-Damm makes the claim that "When Indigenous authors in Canada submit their work to a publisher it is always in the context of a colonial history built on exclusion, segregation, abuses of authority, domination, and social policies of assimilation meant to destroy Aboriginal languages and cultures, remove Aboriginal peoples from their lands, disrupt familial relationships, and eliminate the special legal status of any remaining "Indian" peoples."(Aikiwenzi-Damm, 2016) Indigenous people, as Damm suggests, face challenges that are unique to their circumstance, that everything that they submit to a publisher, particularly works discussing the issues within their community, will be viewed from a post-colonial, post residential school gaze. It

will be viewed from the orientalist (get definition\ citation) gaze that comes from a place of privilege to interpret a work that comes from a place of a colonized and, essentially, broken culture. This is essentially what the problem looks like. As these authors argue, the voices and stories of marginalized groups are by and large invisible within the wide world of publishing. This brings us to how self-publishing helps to address that problem as well as some of the limitations that come with that.

This brings us to how this concept of self-publishing works to address this problem of a lack of diversity in the publishing world. What makes self-publishing such an appealing option for many writers is its sheer ease of access. As Aikiwenzi-Damm points out for us above, the market controlled by publishing giants isn't easy to break in to if the writer is telling a story that isn't easy and/or conceptually accessible/ relatable to a mass audience. Self-publishing cuts that middle man out of the equation and gives writers full control over the stories they are trying to tell and how it gets told with an abundance of platforms to host those stories available at the writer's fingertips. Zetta Elliot, a black feminist writer with a passion for social justice and social change discusses her reasoning for turning to self-publishing stating "One reason I self-publish is to provide a degree of transparency that is largely missing from the traditional publishing process, and to refute the claim that the low number of books by people of color is a question of "merit." [Elliot, 2015] Elliot's sentiment in many ways echoes Aikiwenzi-Damm's, who, when discussing colored writers (in her case, specifically indigenous writers) attempting to make it through the editing process, they are often met with hurdles where they are either forced to change their stories to meet a more mainstream audience, thus removing the transparency into their world mentioned by Elliot, or the risk of be unable to publish their work. This isn't to say that the publishing industry doesn't have pockets available that are dedicated to telling stories of marginalized groups. Aikiwenzi-Damm makes note of three publishers that are considered Canada's aboriginal publishing houses: Pemmican and the Gabriel Dumont Institute (both of which focus exclusively on Métis writing) and Kegeedonce Press [Aikiwenzi-Damm, 2016] Elliot also expresses some optimism "that more public libraries will embrace a community-based publishing model and assist diverse patrons as they learn how to tell their stories, becoming producers

and not just consumers of books.” [Elliot, 2015] However neither the option of aboriginal publishing houses in Canada, nor the possible future of library run, community based publishing would have the marketing power available to publishing giants such as Penguin Random House, that comes with being a publishing corporate giant. I will discuss this among other limitations to self-publishing further down.

Now that we have a bit of an image of what self-publishing is, how it works and the problems that it works to overcome, let’s look at some writers who utilize this concept. Examples of aspiring and established authors alike who are working to build their image using social media platforms or blogging platforms as self-publishing tools are plentiful and they cover a wide range of topics. For example, one such writer is Ranier Maningding who uses his Facebook page called The Love Life of an Asian Guy, to talk about a variety of political issues concerning racial dynamics that, incidentally, rarely, if ever, have anything to do with an “Asian guys” love life. Ranier has over the course of his career amassed a following of over 200, 000 users, some of who he has enlisted to help run his page. He, however is the only writer. Another similar writer, running a Facebook page calls himself Son of Baldwin. This page, modeled after late social critic, activist and writer James Baldwin features discussions on issues primarily pertaining to the black/LGBTQ community. We also have a writer that I have quoted above, Zeta Elliot, who, aside from using a platform garnered from book sales and essaying for some publications such as the Huffington Posts and Diversity focused Journals, also utilizes blogging through her own personal site to a large degree for the purpose of, in her words, “increase transparency”. [Elliot, 2015] More relevant to Canadian issues, a good example of an indigenous self-published initiative is a page called Indigenous Nationhood, which discusses issues pertinent to Canada’s Indigenous community in a legal context.

The limitations to self-publishing can be considered by simply comparing the amount of power individuals have against large corporate publishers. Carolan and Evain say that “most self-published authors should be considered as small fish in a big pond. A more accurate metaphor would probably be plankton or even amoebae.” [Carolan, Evain, 2013] Self-published authors, particularly self-published authors who have yet to reach a high point in their careers in terms of

acquired readership, do not have the advertising power that is available to corporate publishers. While self-publishing has its strengths in the autonomy that it offers those who do choose to work without an established publishing firm, or simply lack the availability to one, it is profoundly limited in its immediate scope. In this case, since we are discussing self-publishing in terms of using new media technology, this comes with the very likely consequence that creators are not generating any income from the stories they are telling.

There are many reasons to pursue a career as a writer without the aid of a publisher. However, the need for self-publishing comes from the prevailing issue of a lack of diversity in voices being represented in the world of traditional publishing and, for all intents and purposes, while the use of blogging platforms and social media do work to skirt around those issues, there is a power dynamic in place that keeps autonomous writers from really being able to put much of a dent in the underlying issue. While writers of color being able to take their careers into their own hands does carry a certain power the deeper power dynamic that exists in the world of publishing between privileged groups and marginalized groups will never disappear without significant change in the industry itself.

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