Self-publishing: Experiences and opinions

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At TUG'09 I gave a presentation on self-publishing. My reason for talking about self-publishing is that after one gets done typesetting something, e.g., a book, one needs to get it printed and distributed and self-publishing is one option. This note is a summary of that presentation.

The presentation and this note are based on my experiences. Other, more experienced, self-publishers may disagree with some of what I say. Also, things are changing very fast in the self-publishing world so what may be true today may be false or irrelevant tomorrow.

1 Types of printing and publishing

I'll start by touching briefly on offset versus digital printing.

Offset printing is the traditional way books are published in volume: typically at least a few thousand copies are printed at a time; plates are created that print many pages on a big sheet of paper; pages on a sheet are folded and cut into signatures; signatures are bound into books.

Digital printing is done commercially with bigger, faster machines that are like printing out a single copy of a book on a home laser printer on two sides of each sheet of paper.

The advantage of digital printing — so-called print-on-demand — is that a short run doesn't cost much, e.g., $3.75 for a single copy of a 200 page book, while a minimal offset run costs, say, $1,000. Also you don't have to inventory all the books from a 1,000 book run, and you can consequently update without obsoleting lots of old books. Digital printing is also good for a publisher wanting to keep a book minimally in print.

The disadvantage of digital printing is that the per-book cost of printing lots of books is not much less than printing a single book. With offset printing, the per-book price drops rapidly as you move from printing 500 to 2,000 copies to perhaps $1.50 for a run of 5,000 books.

Digital printing is still questionable for color books and books requiring very fine production, but it is getting better.

There are three kinds of publishers: traditional, subsidy, and self-publishing.

The traditional publisher is professionally staffed, may be large or small, is connected into traditional distribution channels, typically invests in the development and production of a book and pays the author a small royalty per book, historically mostly has used offset printing, and now can use digital printing to keep books "in print" forever.

Subsidy (or vanity) publishers make their money by the author paying them to develop and print a few copies of a book. Print-on-demand has allowed expansion of the subsidy publishing business because they no longer have to charge thousands of dollars to produce those few books; for instance, Lulu's business model is to publish 100 books for a million authors (rather than a million books for 100 authors).

A self-publisher is someone who is neither of the above and gets the ISBN (International Standard Book Number) and manages development and production of his or her book himself or herself. My impression is that the majority of self-publishing authors who hope to make significant money from a book do an offset run (although they may use print-on-demand for review copies).

By definition, the publisher of a book is the person or entity providing the ISBN. Traditional and subsidy publishers typically provide the ISBN. You as an individual are a self-publisher if you provide the ISBN.

Historically, the conventional publishing industry, book reviewers, book stores, and authors are dismissive of self-publishing. Some reasons for this may be: the quality of the writing or publication can be quite poor; there is confusion with the subsidy publishing industry; there isn't a connection to traditional acquisition or distribution channels; self-publishers don't like returns while the norm in the U.S. publishing industry is that all books are returnable by bookstores for full credit.

Nonetheless, self-publishing is a venerable option. Some very famous books, including a number of classics, by some very famous authors were originally self-published. For a list of examples, google on "famous books that were self-published".

2 Publishing and self-publishing economics

The rough economics for a traditional U.S. publisher might be something like the following. The cost per book for an offset run of a few thousand books might be $2 per book. The retail and wholesale prices might be $30 and $13.50 (a 55 percent discount). Of the $11.50 margin, the publisher has to cover development costs (perhaps $5,000 to $10,000), the print run, marketing, business overhead, and returns of books for full credit. The author gets perhaps $1 or $2 per book.

I have less idea about the economics of traditional publishing elsewhere in the world.

My self-published, 280-page book *Breakthrough*

Management has the following economics. I set the list price at $30 (and roughly equivalent amounts in U.K. pounds and Euros). I paid about $3,800 for editing, illustration, and proofreading. The cost of an ISBN in the U.S. is about $25 each in lots of 10.

There was no setup cost for print at Ames On Demand in Somerville, Massachusetts, and no shipping cost since the company is close to my home and I picked up the printed books with my pickup truck. The per-book print cost from Ames was about $5. I sold these books via my web site (which I already had so there was no additional cost) for $32 for shipment within the United States and $36 for shipment outside the United States. Since shipping in the United States actually cost closer to $5 and shipping to outside the United States actually cost closer to $11, I cleared between $20 and $22 on books printed by Ames On Demand and sold via my web site.

Later I paid Lightning Source Inc. (LSI) — a large print-on-demand company about which I will say more later — about $120 in setup fees to upload my interior and cover PDF files and to send me a proof of the book. LSI charged about $4.60 to print one book with a $1.50 handling charge per order of books drop shipped to the same address. Thus, I still cleared only a little less than $20 to $22 per book for orders I took via my web site and fulfilled via LSI (paying whatever shipping cost LSI quoted).

However, books available from LSI are also available via an electronic catalog to book stores around the world, for which I gave a 55 percent discount to go with my $30 list price. In this case, I received (deposited to my bank account three months in arrears) the $13.50 wholesale price minus the print cost, netting about $8. In this case, the shipping cost has nothing to do with me; it is collected by the bookstore and sent to LSI to pay for drop shipping.

With a mix of sales by Amazon and other on-line book stores and sales via my web site, I recovered my development costs with the sale of about 300 books.

Our TₑX *People* book (self-published on behalf of TUG by Karl Berry and me) requires more paper and thus the per-book print cost at LSI is greater by $2 or $3. Barbara Beeton edited every interview for free (thank you, bb); and she, we, and our interviewees did our own proofreading. Books we sell via Amazon and the other on-line book stores will have a good margin (to benefit TUG). Books we sell to members at a big discount from list via the TUG web site will have a modest margin to go to TUG.

Self-publishing makes sense when:

- You want to control the book's pricing and rights, including updating, deal making with other publishers, and long term reuse.
- You can't get a "real" publisher (and don't want to use a subsidy publisher).
- A "real" publisher is willing but insists the (technical) author must buy a large number of books.
- You are not a big-name author and so aren't going to get big publisher distribution anyway
- You don't want the editorial "help" a "real" publisher wants to provide, i.e., you want to write the book you want to write.
- You are willing to forgo the "validation" of having a "real" publisher (and to receive some scorn for self-publishing).
- You have a narrow, highly targeted market.
- You can afford the development costs you find necessary to have done for you.
- You want the margin that would otherwise go to the "real" publisher and think you can make more money selling (most probably) fewer books at a higher margin.
- You have *much* time to spare from writing the book (and everything else you have to do in life).

Essentially you are paying in time and money to retain full control.

I don't know the details of Prof. Gilbert Strang's situation, but his web site (`wellesleycambridge.com`) lists seven books available via self-publishing. He gives some reasons for self-publishing his books on page 174 of *Recountings: Conversations with MIT Mathematicians* (edited by Joel Segel and published by A.K. Peters Ltd., Wellesley, Massachusetts, 2009).

> My first self-published book was [in] 1986 on applied mathematics. Essentially, I wanted the adventure. And you work so hard on the book, it's like your child, and I didn't want to put it out for adoption. Not that I had such terrible experiences, though editors and publishing houses come and go with lightning speed, as I now know ... But I thought I'd have the adventure of being in contact with people who use the book, which is still a pleasure. And also of being able to change it, being able to write conversationally if I wanted to ... And just staying with the book rather than writing it and saying goodbye ...

> I do [supervise the typesetting, cover design, and interior design]. Not that I know so much, but I care so much, and maybe that makes up for not knowing what you're doing. I'm still discussing the cover for the new book. I have views about it and the interior design,

and you just have freedom to try things, and innovate. It's interesting to me.

In addition to the motivations above for self-publishing, maybe Professor Strang also makes some money with self-publishing. He has a lot of students each year at MIT, and his books are highly regarded beyond MIT.

[The *Recountings* book just quoted was also inspired by the *Mathematical People* books that inspired our T_EX *People* book, and I commend this book of interviews of MIT mathematicians to you.]

3 A few resources for self-publishing

I recommend first the Yahoo Self-Publishing discussion group: `finance.groups.yahoo.com/group/Self-Publishing`.

Dan Poynter's *The Self-Publishing Manual* and web site (`parapublishing.com`) provided me with good overall insight.

Pete Masterson's *Book Design and Production, A Guide for Authors and Publishers* and web site (`zeonix.com`) was where I learned about dealing with printers.

Morris Rosenthal's *Print-on-Demand Book Publishing* and web site (`fonerbooks.com`) was where I first grasped the economics of self-publishing.

Robert Bowie Johnson and Ron Pramschufer's *Publishing Basics* and Pramschufer's web site at `selfpublishing.com` was where I first learned about different types of paper.

Later I read Aaron Shepard's book *Aiming at Amazon*, but it might be a good first place to start.

John Culleton's annotated book list (available at `wexfordpress.com/tex/shortlist.pdf`) is a place to discover other books that can be helpful.

The "Reference Desk" area of Marion Gropen's web site (`www.gropenassoc.com`) deals with the business issues of self-publishing.

John Culleton and Marion Gropen are two of the moderators of the Yahoo Self-Publishing discussion group.

4 Components of self-publishing

The components listed in this section are relevant for both self-publishing and traditional publishing. I limit this discussion to my thoughts about self-publishing.

You can do any of these tasks yourself or hire them done. I do the ones I think I can do well enough or want to learn to do, and I hire someone to do the ones I don't want to spend time learning or which I think must be done by someone other than me.

Writing the book. Before you write the book, you should probably decide what your goal is and

whether it makes sense to write the book and if you have a plausible path to getting it published at a cost and effort you can afford and sufficient payback, whether tangible or intangible.

If you are self-publishing, you can specify which typesetting system to use. I use some version of T_EX, e.g., L^AT_EX, memoir, or ConT_EXt.

I draft in my typesetting system (some version of T_EX) rather than drafting in some other editor or word processor and flowing the manuscript into the typesetting system later. It helps my motivation to keep writing if successive drafts of the manuscript, however rough or fragmentary, are nicely typeset on pages; it makes me feel closer to being finished.

Editing; illustration. I believe you must have someone else edit your writing. You simply cannot see everything that needs to be seen in your own writing.

There are various levels of editing: (a) correcting misspellings, punctuation errors, bad grammar, etc., and enforcing a particular style for titles, references, etc.; (b) improving correct but awkwardly written sentences; (c) suggesting substantive changes to the content, order of presentation, etc. You need to decide which levels of editing you want. I want all three.

If you are paying the editor yourself, you should select an editor who provides the levels of editing you want and who works with you in a way you find constructive and supportive rather than bothersome.

My management book has a large number of line drawings. I hired an illustrator to do the original creation of the drawings based on a style sheet (typeface, font size, overall size compared with page size, etc.) on which we agreed. She used Adobe Illustrator. I did corrections to the drawings using Illustrator after my editor reviewed the final draft manuscript.

Permissions. One school of thought in the self-publishing discussion group is that you should always ask permission for material you want to quote or of which you want to include a copy. Another school is that you should always ask a qualified lawyer. I don't agree with either of these ideas.

Of course, you should always give credit. Giving credit is independent of asking permission. You also have to ask permission when there is no question of "fair use". And I would ask permission if there is a question of courtesy involved, for instance, if I know the person and he or she would take offense if I didn't ask.

But, fundamentally, I believe that you need to learn enough about fair use to understand when there is a good case for fair use (which is not precisely

defined in the United States — I don't know about other countries). If you ask a lawyer, he or she will charge you lots of money and will not give a definitive answer. If you ask permission, there is a good chance the entity you ask (e.g., publisher of the book you are quoting) will charge you a permission fee whether or not fair use fits the situation. You need to be able to assess the risk of being sued even though you have a good case for fair use. If I have a good case for fair use and mine is a relatively low profile publication, I feel I am unlikely to be sued.

Interior design; typesetting. Historically book design and typesetting were separate functions. Today it seems that many (perhaps most) typesetters also see themselves as book designers.

In the self-publishing discussion group there is lots of discussion about whether or not a person new to self-publishing can do his or her own typesetting at a sufficiently competent level. To summarize, I think there is general agreement that someone can learn to do typesetting over time and that it is best not to try to do it in Microsoft Word (about which beginning self-publishers ask).

One can successfully use TeX or one of its variations to typeset a book and configure its output to be acceptable to on-demand printers and to publishers. However, the printers and publishers don't provide templates for TeX like they do for the commercial typesetting systems such as Adobe's InDesign (they do provide an EPS or PDF template or at least specifications).

The self-publishing discussion group experts admit that TeX, et al., exists and "does as good a job of typesetting as InDesign", but with few exceptions they are dismissive of the non-GUI command model of TeX and put off by its learning curve. In other words, TeX is far from the mainstream of self-publishing — basically irrelevant except for people who already know and use it. I think this is unfortunate since (a) I believe learning to use TeX well is probably no harder than learning to use InDesign *well*, and (b) I suspect a novice typesetter can do a better job of typesetting with less experience using TeX.

Obtaining the ISBN. In the United States, you get ISBNs from `isbn.org` which is operated by Bowker. As I write this in July 2009, you can buy blocks of 10, 100, or 1,000 ISBNs for about $245, $930, or $1,570 respectively. Bowker is trying to make a profit and offers lots of options (e.g., a bar code) which clutter the process of just trying to buy a block of ISBNs.

I believe that in some other countries an ISBN is free.

Proofreading; indexing. I believe that proofreading must be done by someone other than the author or editor. From my experience, you need to make clear that you only want proof reading; this is not the time you want the page proofs to be cluttered with additional editing suggestions.

I suppose I could learn to do indexing, but I am not interested in doing so. For those of use who are used to indexing commands being embedded in the TeX manuscript (such that index entries automatically get new page numbers if the pagination of the book changes), my impression is that most professional indexers don't like embedded indexing. They prefer to work with their own indexing software package using absolute page numbers from the page proofs.

Cover design. For self-publishing, where likely you will be selling books via on-line book stores rather than from the shelves of physical book stores, you need a cover design which shows well on-line and which meets any relevant standards (e.g., from Amazon and your printer).

In the self-publishing discussion group, there is lots of talk about the importance of having an expert cover designer. I am sure there are professional designers who can create wonderful covers that will somehow sell a lot of books. However, I bet the typical self-publisher cannot afford someone with as good a track record as, say, Paula Scher. I'll further bet that hiring one of the self-styled cover design experts is not worth the money compared to doing it yourself if you have the time and inclination to learn a graphics system (e.g., Illustrator, PSTricks, or TikZ — I think many self-publishers do their cover designs as well as their interior typesetting with InDesign).

I did the first of the covers in figures 1 and 2 with Illustrator and the second with PSTricks and a couple of manipulations with Illustrator. I also used Adobe Photoshop to twist the background design in example 1 and to adjust the photos in example 2.

Printing. Lightning Source Inc. (LSI) is a big print-on-demand company with a big distribution connection to on-line book stores through its parent company, book distributor Ingram. It has printing plants in the United States and the United Kingdom. It does not have a store front. Many other U.S. and Canadian printers offer print-on-demand (Pete Masterson's web site has a list). Some of them offer store fronts. Some companies that offer print-on-demand, e.g., Lulu, have some of their printing done by LSI. Last year it seemed that print-on-demand was not available much outside of the United States; it is increasingly available as time goes by. Traditional offset printers are increasingly offering print-on-demand
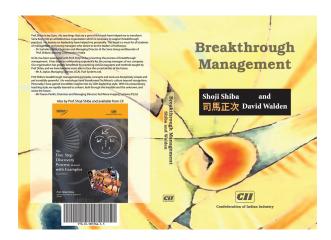
David Walden

Figure 1: Cover example 1

Figure 2: Cover example 2

as a short-run option.

For my *Breakthrough Management* book, I provided interior and covers PDFs to both print-on-demand and offset printers:

- two offset runs of 2,000 each in India for sale by the organization with which my co-author works;

- LSI in the United States and United Kingdom for sale by bookstores and my web site and drop shipping from LSI;

- Ames On Demand in Somerville, Massachusetts, for inventory at my home and sale via my web site (runs of 250, 100, 50, 50, 25, . . .) — I have to handle shipping for these;

- local printers of non-profit organizations in Quebec, Portugal, and Pakistan to which I have given permission to print locally and make a profit from selling my book.

Other self-publishers also use other Amazon options or Lulu, CreateSpace, etc.

Marketing. With self-publishing, you have to do all the promotional work that would be done with a book published via a traditional publisher. Review copies are easy to get using print-on-demand. You will also want to try all the modern communication tools such as blogs, Twitter, podcast, etc.

Distribution; fulfillment/shipping. With self-publishing, the odds are against you having books on the shelves of physical bookstores, except perhaps a few local or specialty stores where you have a particular connection. Nonetheless, you (or on-line bookstores) can take orders via the Internet and in theory books can be shipped around the world.

However, if you want to get books to more than a few friends or family, fulfillment is a hassle. International shipping is expensive and with tremendous variation depending on the size and weight of what

is being shipped and the destination. Shipping gets really expensive if you use a trackable method; but, if you don't use a trackable method, you will probably have to absorb the cost of books lost in shipping. Unless you are ordering a large number of books a week, you have to do manual ordering via LSI's web site; electronic data interchange is not available to you. Having books printed in another country results in currency exchange costs and foreign transaction fees if you pay by credit card. If you collect payments through PayPal, they of course charge fees.

All in all, I am happiest when customers order from Amazon (or another on-line bookstore), I am not involved in fulfillment, and the difference between the wholesale price and the print cost is deposited in my bank account by LSI.

Bulk orders (where people ask for a discount) are a particular bother for me. I have to package the books for shipment from the local inventory I maintain, buyers want to be invoiced and pay by bank transfer rather than simply paying by credit card, and in some cases they do accounts-payable manipulations such as delaying payment or subtracting the currency exchange and bank transfer fees from the price I stated was after such fees.

You can hire a company to do fulfillment for you. There is also an Amazon program where you provide Amazon with an inventory of your books and Amazon does the fulfillment.

A key to making fulfillment work is to have enough margin to cover these costs in addition to the printing cost. I did this with my *Breakthrough Management* book. In the case of the TUG interviews book, *TEX People*, we are offering the book with not so much margin to TUG members, which complicates things for us.

Legal and bookkeeping issues. If you are going to self-publish and sell a lot of books, you will want

to think seriously about controlling liability through some form of incorporation. You will also want to be legal by obtaining a state business license (which also may allow you to avoid paying state sales tax to suppliers such as a printer) and by collecting state sales taxes and forwarding them to the state.

My sales in my home state of Massachusetts were not significant enough for me to seek a state business license, and I haven't thought the liability risks were big enough to justify incorporating. I pay income taxes on the difference between book revenue and book expenses (development and cost of sales) in each calendar year. I tell my accountant each year how few books I have sold within Massachusetts (countable on less than all the fingers of one hand), and he has so far told me that any sales tax is so immaterial it is not worth reporting.

5   Reflections

The lines between types of publishing continue to narrow. Traditional publishers outsource many functions and use print-on-demand to keep books in print. Authors have begun making new types of deals with traditional publishers. Every once in a while a self-published book gets picked up by a traditional publisher. The Espresso machine for printing books on demand in bookstores has signed up some traditional publishers, and it is also being used by self-publishers to print a few books for friends and family. E-books are beginning to sell in competition with printed books. All types of publishers, including self-publishers, can sell via the Internet. Traditional barriers of all types are falling.

The barriers that are not falling fast enough are the spread of print-on-demand throughout the world and the price of reliable shipping throughout the world.

My view is to use self-publishing if it fits your situation. Don't worry about traditional discrimination against self-publishing.

Self-publishing has been working for me, and I will continue to use it for books which have a narrow, easy-to-access market and for which it is worth it to me to pay the (relatively modest) development costs in order to have the books in print (and perhaps

enough books will be sold to cover my costs and maybe even a little more). The list of books so far:

- Self-publishing my *Breakthrough Management* book has been very satisfactory.
- Our decision to use self-publishing (nominally) by TUG for *TEX People* still seems like a plausibly good decision. For more about that project, see the *TEX People* paper by Karl Berry and me elsewhere in this issue.
- I am currently finishing a book on the computer history of Bolt Beranek and Newman (where I worked for many years), and I will use self-publishing to produce it and make it available to prior and current BBN people (and perhaps a few technology historians will also buy copies).
- I will be reprinting oral histories of my mother and of my mother-in-law which my wife created and which were originally published using Kinko's copyshop technology and a thesis binding company.
- I am turning a photo slide show my son (a professional photographer) and I created a number of years ago into a book (typeset with ConTEXt to take advantage of grid typesetting).

Self-publishing has fit my situation. I've been happier with it than with my books which were published by a traditional publishing company. If it fits your situation, use it.

Acknowledgments

⋄ David Walden
  http://walden-family.com