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## Self-Publishing: A New Challenge for Universal Bibliographic Control

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### Abstract:

*Self-publishing in the United States has increased to between 50-75% of book titles published annually, facilitated by the popularity of ebooks and print-on-demand. Amazon.com and other companies have encouraged the trend by paying royalties and providing support to authors. This increase in self-published materials poses a new challenge for Universal Bibliographic Control (UBC). Today, UBC is much different in the age of information overload compared with the relative information scarcity before the arrival of the Internet. Libraries have nonetheless retained an interest in bibliographically controlling traditional books. Self-published books can be indistinguishable from trade publications but fall outside many of the structures of traditional publishing. Since both public and academic libraries have reasons to acquire self-published materials, the author believes that ways should be found to provide increased bibliographic control since the current system mostly ignores self-published materials. The Library of Congress, the chief bibliographic control agency for the United States, does not purchase many and excludes them from Cataloging in Publication. Most library vendors do not include them in their inventories. The major library reviewing sources do not publish book reviews or do so separately from reviews of commercial publications.*

*Some libraries, mostly public, have nonetheless started collecting self-published items, a majority by local authors, and are adding records to the OCLC database. Another positive factor is the large number of reader-generated reviewing sources such as Goodreads. A blogger has proposed a cooperative project to purchase and place self-published materials under bibliographic control. If the estimate is correct that fifteen of the 100 bestselling books of 2012 were self-published, libraries, bibliographic agencies, library organizations, and traditional publishers should monitor developments as self-publishing becomes increasingly important.*

**Keywords:** Self-publishing, Universal Bibliographic Control, Library Vendors, Book Reviews, Collection Development

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### 1. The Importance of Self-publishing

Self-publishing in the United States has experienced phenomenal growth. While accurate statistics are difficult to obtain, in part because many self-published works are not under

effective bibliographic control, most estimates place the number of self-published titles at between 50-75% of the total book publishing output. The most often cited statistics are found in the analysis from Bowker of 2012 self-publishing activity that gives a total count of 391,768 publications of which 234,931 are print and 156,837 are ebooks. (1) Taken from the Bowker Books in Print database, these statistics underestimate the total production of self-published materials because they include only those items with an individual International Standard Book Number (ISBN) that the author has asked to be included in Books in Print. Traditional trade publishers, of course, still account for a much higher percentage of purchases; but the goal of universal bibliographic control is to account for all publications, not just commercial publications.

An industry has grown up around the production and sale of self-published materials. Statistics show that the most important player in this marketplace is Amazon.com with 131,460 self-published books in 2012. (1) Amazon has the goal of being the dominant company in the sale of books (and almost anything else) in the markets that it serves by having the widest possible selection of materials. One strategy has been to encourage self-publishing both for its revenue generating possibilities and as another way to offer the largest number of titles to buyers. Amazon's Web site, Create, makes it easy for authors to upload their print, music, or film creations and also provides access to a wide range of self-publishing services that authors can purchase to improve their creations (2). Amazon pays royalties on sales, often at a higher rate than trade publishers because this process eliminates the publisher as middle man. For Kindle Direct Publishing, the royalty can be as high as 70%. (3)

Beyond Amazon, other companies are involved solely in the production and sale of self-published books. According to the Bowker report cited above, the two largest "publishers" are Smashwords with 90,252 titles in 2012 (<https://www.smashwords.com/>) and Lulu Enterprises Inc. (<http://www.lulu.com/>) with 57,531. They mostly operate on the same principle as Amazon with a mix of free and paid services. The difference between these sites and Amazon.com is that they include only self-published materials.

Finally, other sites offer help in producing self-published materials, most often ebooks, without any efforts on their own to make them available. They send out emails offering their services and often hint at great profits by referring to runaway successes like *50 Shades of Grey*. Some such services are legitimate while others are considered scams. (4)

In sum, as can be seen from the section above, self-published materials have greatly inflated the number of items that potentially should be under bibliographic control. Libraries of all types have not yet realized the potential importance of these self-published materials and the challenges that they pose. In the United States, patrons are beginning to ask for self-published materials; but some libraries are unsure about how to deal with these requests since many of these books fall outside of normal purchasing channels, do not receive reviews, and lack detailed bibliographic information.

## **2. Universal Bibliographic Control before the Internet**

I was active in the Division of Bibliographic Control from 1981-1995 when changing job responsibilities made it difficult for me to attend the annual IFLA Conference. In addition, I served on the Universal Bibliographic Control Advisory Committee in 1986-1987. I often tell my students how different the world of information/data was in those days before the arrival of the World Wide Web. The problem for librarians was the scarcity of resources, not their

overabundance. This scarcity made Universal Bibliographic Control (UBC) a reasonable goal. Libraries had greater financial resources than they do today, especially in the developed countries, though librarians certainly did not believe so at the time. While librarians knew that this goal was literally impossible, they considered it possible enough to try to achieve it.

IFLA developed its own strategy for UBC. The national library in each country would be responsible for acquiring and cataloging to full standards all the publications produced within that country. The national library would then publish a national bibliography in print or microform. "In 2003 the UBCIM core activity was closed and the coordination of bibliographic standardization was moved to the IFLA CDNL Alliance for Bibliographic Standards (ICABS)," (5) A decade later in 2013, IFLA, however, reaffirmed its commitment to this strategy in "The IFLA Professional Statement on UBC."

A National bibliographic agency (NBA) has the responsibility for providing the authoritative bibliographic data for publications of its own country and for making that data available to other NBAs, libraries, and other communities (for instance archives and museums) through appropriate and timely services with the goal of increasing open access to the bibliographic data. (5)

The national library was also to be the lender of last resort to assure the universal availability of publications (UAP). The IFLA UAP Office also closed in 2003. (6) In theory, this strategy might miss some publications but would make the more important materials both findable and available. In practice, many national libraries in the developed world came close to achieving these goals; but third world countries struggled with the lack of resources and the less organized nature of publishing.

### **3. The Arrival of the Internet**

The arrival of the Internet coupled with increased data collection, declining resources for libraries, and alternative information resources had a profound effect upon libraries and the concept of universal bibliographic control. An era of an overabundance of information arrived to replace the former era of information scarcity. In the early days of the Internet, libraries still initially believed that they could collect everything and organize this new information resource; this hope quickly faded when faced with the vast quantities of information/data.

The decline in relative and even absolute funding hit libraries hard and impacted heavily their operations. The concept of the perfectly cataloged item, most often a book, gave way to the principle that some access was better than none. Metadata replaced cataloging data. The Library of Congress somewhat reluctantly relinquished its role, gathered together partners through various shared cataloging initiatives, and even began to accept publisher and vendor data with much less scrutiny than in the past as was recommended by On the Record: Report of The Library of Congress Working Group on the Future of Bibliographic Control. (7) Perfection mutated into expediency. "Big data" became one of the hottest trends. "Small data" including universal bibliographic control began to be considered as an old fashioned, even quaint concept.

A third important factor was the increase in alternative ways to find out about traditional library materials and the increased efficiency of searching even within library resources. Before enhanced computer searching, the Internet, and even a rudimentary online catalog,

using the library card catalog required explicit rules for bibliographic control because not knowing the first word of the title or how to spell an author's name meant that an item was often unfindable. Cataloging rules become much less important, though not useless, when it is possible to search the entire record. In addition, the Internet provides access to many bibliographic or quasi-bibliographic resources. OCLC remains one of the richest resources for bibliographic searching but requires paying for the searches. Amazon is not only a place to buy books but can serve as a resource for verifying materials even with fragmentary information. The meta-search engines like [used.addall.com](http://used.addall.com) and [bookfinder.com](http://bookfinder.com) query multiple used book vendors including those in non-English speaking countries and can provide access to books offered for sale that are not held in libraries. Finally, the major search engines such as Google, Bing, and Yahoo are very good at finding materials.

The end result was that libraries gave up any hope of collecting all information/data of potential use to their users. Even with the arrival of the Internet, they have remained more committed to collecting and providing access to traditional library materials such as books and media. The arrival of self-published books outside the traditional distribution channels has created a new collection and bibliographic control dilemma.

#### **4. Why Self-published Books Are Different from Other Internet Resources**

While my previous remarks above show that libraries have given up any attempt to control all information/data with the arrival of the Internet, they still remain concerned about books even with the reduction in the number of them with detailed cataloging.

Self-published books cause problems for libraries because they are in large measure created partially but not totally outside this traditional system. Without a title page, determining whether a book is from a traditional publisher or self-published is very difficult. Thus, the self-published book is still a book and should fall within the continuing commitment of libraries to collect and control this type of publication. Libraries have already decided that traditionally published ebooks are not essentially different from print books. They should make the same decision about self-published books whether they are ebooks or print.

Evidence exists that library users make little distinction between commercial and self-published books. Public library patrons learn about such books and ask libraries to make them available. Some public libraries in the United States already have mechanisms in place to do so and consider self-published materials as an important component of their service. Others are resisting any inclusion of such titles for many reasons including the fact that they have policies requiring positive reviews though relatively few self-published books receive official reviews in library sources.

Academic libraries also have reasons to collect self-published books. The current academic reward system works against self-publication because faculty in most colleges and universities do not receive much credit towards promotion and tenure for self-published materials. On the other hand, independent scholars and faculty not concerned about academic reward often find self-publishing to be a preferred option because they have complete control over the material and can publish enhanced editions with supporting materials that would most likely not be acceptable for a commercial publisher. These scholars can also publish research that is not commercially viable. Finally, self-published materials can be important source material for academic research. The academic library with comprehensive interest in an issue such as the Iraq Conflict does not care about the scholarly quality of a personal narrative about the war since this self-published work acquires value as a primary source.

## 5. The Current State of Bibliographic Control for Self-published Materials

For this section, I will assume that the goal within the IFLA definition of Universal Bibliographic Control would be one source with rich detail and powerful searching capabilities, but a distinction needs to be made between the creators of the record and the sources from which they may be retrieved. Within the United States, the Library of Congress (LC) is considered the highest standard for record creation. Since the arrival of printed catalog cards in 1901, libraries of all types have depended upon LC products. (8) LC is responsible for the Library of Congress Subject Headings, Library of Congress Classification, and the Dewey Decimal Classification. LC also creates the definitive authority records that are a critical part UBC. Especially with the distribution of MARC records that began as a pilot project in 1966 to provide libraries with machine readable cataloging data, (9) most libraries have abandoned efforts to modify LC products and standards to meet local needs since doing so is very expensive.

OCLC, “a nonprofit, membership, computer library service and research organization dedicated to the public purposes of furthering access to the world’s information and reducing information costs,” (10) may be the preferred retrieval source for libraries because its database includes all the LC records plus millions of additional records from member libraries, other bibliographic agencies, and miscellaneous sources. Any solutions that would facilitate the bibliographic control of self-published items by LC or their inclusion in the OCLC database would help not only United States libraries but libraries around the world.

One of LC’s most important services for commercially published books is Cataloging in Publication (CIP), started in July 1971. (11) The CIP Office receives pre-print versions of books from commercial publishers, does preliminary cataloging, and then returns this cataloging to the publisher to be printed within the book. These records are included in the MARC distribution service and therefore appear in OCLC and a myriad of other bibliographic resources. Unfortunately, self-published materials, no matter how well done and potentially popular, are not eligible for CIP cataloging because they are not produced by a recognized publisher. (12)

The Library of Congress also does not acquire many self-published materials for its permanent collection and thus does not catalog them. The information section on LC Card Numbers specifically states: “please note that many collection policy statements explicitly treat the selection of self-published and vanity press materials.” For example, the policy for Literature and Language states: “Vanity press and self-published works are not collected, although self-published works of quality may be collected in areas where self-publishing is an important part of the publishing spectrum (e.g., poetry, African American literature).” LC does collect self-published materials in areas such as genealogy where self-publishing has more importance. (13)

Full or even brief cataloging by libraries and vendors is the second best way for self-published materials to enter into the system of bibliographic control. Some libraries, mostly public, purchase self-published materials to meet patron demand and honor purchase requests from local self-published authors. These libraries then add these materials to their online finding tools and most often to the OCLC database. Some have established systematic initiatives to collect local authors and make their publications available. For example, “to support, encourage and foster access to West Michigan talent, Kent District Library is creating a Local Indie @ KDL collection....” (14)

The evidence for vendor providing self-published materials is sparse. Only three of ten prominent American vendors gave any evidence of their interest in providing self-published items. Midwest Library Service (15) and Baker & Taylor (16, 17) provide some evidence of support. The vendor with the greatest interest in self-published materials is Ingram, in part because they offer “Resources for Self-published Authors” not only in the United States but in Great Britain and Australia since “Ingram has relationships with several companies worldwide that offer a wide variety of author services.” (18) “Ingram touches self-published books in more traditional ways, too. Over the past year our New Title selectors at Ingram Coutts, for example, have offered over 400 self-published titles to academic library customers.” (19) Other vendors are most likely willing to order self-published materials for their customers but do not specifically advertise this possibility.

I was not able to discover any evidence that the major ebook platforms include self-published ebooks. If they do, these platforms do not widely publicize this fact.

A second library-related way that self-published materials can directly and indirectly come under bibliographic control is through book reviews. A review both creates a record in a library/publisher related resource and makes it easier for libraries to discover and purchase the title. Many libraries have a policy of requiring one or more positive book reviews before purchasing an item. For an example, see the collection development policy of the Grand Rapids Community College Library & Learning Commons. (20) The American Library Association (ALA) warns in its Fact Sheet on “Marketing to Libraries”: “Please be aware that you may run into difficulty in getting your self-published/print-on-demand book or e-book reviewed and into libraries.... Know that your local public library or libraries may have purchased a copy in a show of support for local authors..., but this will not be the case with other libraries around the country.” (21)

*Library Journal* does review some self-published materials according to the blog authored by the Annoyed Librarian. “The Library Journal has reviewed a few Createspace publications, but none from Smashwords that I can find...” (22) *Kirkus* also publishes such reviews but has special rules for them. (23). *Publishers Weekly* charges a minimum of \$149 for which “your book receives an announcement listing in PW Select--which is bound into issues of Publishers Weekly and appears online at publishersweekly.com..” (24) One librarian, not identified in the blog, commented: “I was excited by the prospect of being able to add all sorts of interesting self published titles to my library's collection. Unfortunately, PW Select has not lived up to my expectations and perusing it has generally been a pretty depressing experience.” (25) Finally, Booklist has a very selective review process and gives no evidence that it reviews self-published items.

The reviews on Amazon and self-publishing sites can serve a similar purpose. The library must search for the review, which is possible because both Amazon and the other sites provide some access by genre and topic though it is not always easy to sift through these lists. For all types of materials but especially genre fiction and self-published books, Goodreads ([www.goodreads.com](http://www.goodreads.com)) is one of the best places to look for well-crafted reviews. “Goodreads offers the most comprehensive database of quality book reviews on the planet. Our 25 million members bring unparalleled passion to their reviews, offering diverse opinions and perspective that is invaluable.” (26) Goodreads includes a long list of genres and sub-genres to make selection easier. Librarian Nancy K. Herther believes that Goodreads provides a valuable service to libraries that wish to identify, purchase, and put under bibliographic control self-published items. (27) Fan sites that focus on specific genres are another possibility.

After having read the Bowker report from Bowker on self-published materials, (1) I had high hopes that Bowker included all self-published materials with an ISBN in its online Books in Print database. The author “must submit your meta-data to Bowker on an Advanced Book Information (ABI) form” (28) and “register as a publisher.” (29) The two step process of first registering as a publisher and then filling out a form for the individual item most likely discourages self-published authors from including their items in this source. Some support services for self publishers do add this data. “Lulu will feed data to the U.S. ISBN Agency as well as to Bowker’s Books In Print ® and other industry databases. The data will identify Lulu.com as the publisher.” (30) I therefore have no idea of the number of self-published books with ISBNs that appear in Books in Print. Self-published materials without an ISBN certainly do not. While not comprehensive, Books in Print may nonetheless be one of the better sources for finding current self-published materials.

To return to libraries and self-published materials, David Vinjamuri, who teaches branding and social media at NYU and for ThirdWay Brand Trainers, published a blog column on the Forbes Website where he stresses the importance of public libraries. He notes: “It would be easy to ignore these books if they resembled the vanity press works of previous years. Some do, but others do not. Publisher’s Weekly estimates that fifteen of the 100 bestselling books of 2012 were self-published.” The problem is discovering the good ones. “Yet if each library discovered just one interesting book a year – and shared that result with other libraries ... there would be 16,000 interesting books for libraries to review. If we assume that just one in one hundred of those reviewed books are “great” libraries would still have discovered 160 great new books to recommend to library patrons each year.” (31) While this proposal would not lead to Universal Bibliographic Control, the most important self-published books would come under more effective bibliographic control and be available to libraries, bookstores, and the public.

## **6. Conclusion**

While IFLA continues in principle to support UBC, it and its members devote many fewer resources to this goal. The arrival of the Internet has destroyed any hope of controlling the world’s information. “The Indexed Web contains at least 4.64 billion pages” as estimated on April 27, 2014 along with more unindexed data unaccounted for. (32) Libraries and library agencies have narrowed their goals to controlling information of interest to their patrons, a much more restricted universe. Bibliographic agencies such as the Library of Congress have also become less concerned with the perfect bibliographic record.

Self-published materials have posed a new challenge to this limited objective. Anyone can self-publish an ebook or print-on-demand book at minimal cost. A self-published work is indistinguishable in many ways from a traditionally published work but most often does not enter into the publishing or bibliographic control network. The Library of Congress purchases very few of them and does not provide Cataloging in Publication. Only a few are reviewed in traditional library sources. The public libraries that purchase self-published books most often collect only local authors. Nonetheless, some are cataloged and get added to OCLC and other library databases.

Yet I believe that most libraries will be forced to confront the issue of acquiring self-published materials as their importance grows. Amazon.com, Smashwords, Lulu Enterprises, and other services to support self-publishing are inspiring an increasing number of authors each year to produce more books. The Publishers Weekly’s estimate that fifteen of the 100 best sellers in 2012 are self-published shows that public demand exists for these items. At



some point, a vendor, library group, or yet unknown entrepreneur will figure out a way to market self-published materials to libraries. Perhaps some cooperative library venture will find a way to share responsibility for reviewing and cataloging these items.

To conclude, libraries, bibliographic agencies, library organizations such as ALA and IFLA, and the traditional publishing community should monitor developments in self-publishing. Self-publishing has the potential to change radically how these four groups go about their business if universal bibliographic control remains a goal.

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