

# Public Libraries as Publishers: Critical Opportunity

Kathryn M. Conrad

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## Abstract

*Libraries have a long and distinguished history of publishing, since their earliest days. Traditionally libraries published to expose their collections through bibliographies, facsimiles, and catalogs. While the Internet has made discovery and dissemination of library holdings easier than ever before, digital publishing technologies have also unlocked compelling new purposes for library publishing, including through Open Access publishing initiatives. The self-publishing explosion and availability of self-publishing tools and services geared to libraries have heralded new opportunities for libraries, especially public libraries, to engage their communities in new ways. By supporting self-publishing initiative in their communities, public libraries can promote standards of quality in self-publishing, provide unique opportunities to engage underserved populations, and become true archives of their communities.*

**Keywords:** library publishing, self-publishing, public libraries

## Introduction

Self-publishing has exploded in recent years (Bowker, 2014), indicating a clear consumer demand. Tools and services are available to libraries to support both print and digital self-publishing, but should public libraries engage in self-publishing efforts? Leveraging their long history as publishers, public libraries have a unique opportunity to engage local communities in new ways. Community-based self-publishing programs in libraries can provide access to a service that might otherwise be out of reach while enhancing libraries' ability to work with underserved populations. *Public libraries should invest in community-based self-publishing programs to engage local communities, to reach underserved populations, and to fulfill their mission as an archive of and for a community.*

## History of Library Publishing

Libraries have been engaged in publishing activities since the replication of books at Alexandria. Oxford's Bodleian Library published its first catalog in 1604 (Canty, 2012, p. 58) or 1605 (Way, 1988, p. 35). The Library of Congress began publishing soon after its founding with its first book published in 1801 (Pratt, 1981, p. 330) (Way, 1988, p. 35). The British Museum began publishing in 1843 (Way, 1988, p. 35), though Canty traces the first British Museum Library publication to 1780 (Canty, pp. 56–57).

Nick Canty (2012) documented the long history and current publishing activities of major libraries around the world, including the British Library, the Bodleian Library, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, the Biblioteca Nacional do Brasil, the State Library of Victoria, and the National Library of Australia, which all feature robust publishing programs. The Newberry Library and the Pierpont Morgan Library are among other large libraries with developed publishing programs. Such programs undertake both scholarly and general interest books either on their own or, often, in collaboration with either university or commercial publishers (Kniffel, 1989).

Public libraries have publishing histories as well. The Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore has had an active publishing program since 1930 (Kniffel, 1989, p. 737). The New York Public Library has had a publishing program since the late 19th century. In the 1980s the New York Public Library leveraged and enhanced its brand by partnering with a commercial publisher to produce consumer reference books. Its signature book, *The New York Public Library Desk Reference*, was published in 1989 and had generated almost \$250,000 in royalties for the library by the spring of 1991 (Mestrovic, 1991). The fourth edition of *The New York Public Library Desk Reference* was published in 2002.

Library publishing's primary function has been to make collections known and available. Historically this was through the publication of bibliographies. The first publication of the Library of Congress was a record of the Library's first acquisitions; publication of bibliographies continued as part of the Library's mission to make its holdings known to the

general public (Pratt, 1981, p. 329–31). Facsimile editions that could extend the reach of certain holdings have been another important part of the publishing mission: Librarian of Congress Herbert Putnam noted in 1904 that these could “save excessive wear and tear upon the originals” and “enable the texts to be studied by investigators who cannot come to Washington” (Pratt 1981, p. 331–32). Exhibition catalogs serve the purpose of exposing materials that are not often publicly available for use (Pratt, 1981, p. 333). The British Museum Library began their publishing program in the 18th century to produce catalogs (Canty, 2012, p. 56–57) and it continues to publish books “to enhance our popular exhibition programme . . . and showcase quirky, humorous and unexpected treasures from our collections” (British Library). The State Library of Victoria is another that emphasizes items such as maps and manuscripts from their collections (Canty, 2012, p. 60).

Urbana Public Library entered the publishing arena in the 1970s to make out-of-print works of local significance available to its community (Kniffel, 1989, p. 736). Some national libraries have particular mandates to publish (Canty, 2012, p. 56) and the Biblioteca Nacional do Brasil was charged with a particular mission promoting literacy and reading when it came under the ministry of culture in 1990 (Canty, 2012, p. 59). Finally, some libraries have found purpose in publishing professional books. The Enoch Pratt Free Library published *Reference Sources: A Brief Guide*, a professional book that went into multiple editions and was used in numerous library schools (Kniffel, 1989, p. 737) and the Inglewood Public Library (California) published a full series of professional manuals for librarians (Perkins, 1978).

At its core, however, the library publishing mission has been a traditional one: “making their institution’s collections more accessible” (Way, 1988, p. 37) and “[promoting] the resources of the Library” (Kniffel, 1989, p. 735). The New York Public Library’s consumer reference books have been described as an example of a traditional library service delivered in a new way: “Instead of coming to the library, the library comes to the user” (Mestrovic, 1991). Charles Robinson described Baltimore County Library’s publishing activities as “Part of our obligation to our community” (Kniffel, 1989, p. 373). Pratt summarizes it as an obligation to publish: “A library does only part of its job if it simply gives repose to its holdings . . . It has an obligation to makes its resources fully available” (Pratt, 1981, p. 329).

There was such interest in library publishing that an International Group of Publishing Libraries (IGPL) was founded in 1983 (Kniffel, 1989, p. 735) (Canty, 2012, p. 56) out of a gathering of library publishers at the British Library. This conference recognized another purpose of a library publishing program: it “enlarges the presence of the institution from which those publications flow” (Way, 1988, p. 36). The IGPL sought to enhance knowledge and collaboration and to explore best practices for library publishing in terms of editorial development, marketing, and profitability while still maintaining focus on the core mission of increasing accessibility of library collections (Way, 1988, pp. 36–37) (MacLam, 1989).

The IGPL held its last meeting in 2007 (Canty, 2012, p. 56). The closure of the IGPL mirrors the dramatic shifts in the publishing industry in the 2000s, a period of increasing consolidation among commercial publishers and other media businesses, as well as dramatic digital disruption, making print successes such as the *New York Public Library Desk Reference* of YXXX, so successful in the previous two decades, unthinkable. Though some library publishers were beginning to offer PDF and HTML versions of publications by 2012 (Canty, 2012), Canty questions how bread-and-butter illustrated books from libraries would fare in a move to digital publishing: “Whether and how these often highly illustrated books can be reproduced digitally remains to be seen” (Canty, 2012, p. 61).

## Digital Publishing and New Opportunities

Digital publishing provided significant opportunity for academic libraries that had not been heavily involved in publishing activities previously, however, and it led to a new purpose for library publishing: Open Access. Members of the Association of Research Libraries established the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC) in 2002 “as a means to exploit fully the revolutionary potential of the digital age” (Groen, 2007, p. 219) to advance a more open scholarly communications ecosystem and take a larger role in scholarly publishing (Groen, 2007). A 2012 research paper funded by SPARC shared case studies of current academic library publishing initiatives at Purdue, Georgia Tech, and the University of Utah libraries (Mullins et al., 2012). SPARC includes campus-based publishing among its current initiatives and provides “resources for libraries, presses, and other academic units interested in launching and maintaining campus-based publishing ventures, as well as guidance on best practices” (SPARC).

The SPARC report advocated collaboration between libraries (Mullins et al., 2012) and prompted discussions that led to the creation of the Library Publishing Coalition (LPC) in 2014. Like the IGPL before it, the LPC was created out of “the need for a community dedicated to advancing the field of library publishing” (Library Publishing Coalition).

Digital publishing has also enabled a self-publishing boom in recent years. Self-published title output increased 436% between 2008 and 2013, reaching over 458,000 in 2013 (Bowker, 2014). A study based on a 2008 sample of self-published books showed that only 58% of that sample had been cataloged by Bowker. While that rate of cataloging may have increased in subsequent years, it is safe to say that Bowker's 2014 statistics continue to underreport self-published titles.

Public libraries have seen the need to acquire self-published content for their collections, and they are beginning to support the creation of local content (Pecoskie, 2014, p. 129) with a rapidly growing set of services and programs that grow out of a long history of programming around local writers and writing groups and more recent support of the Maker Movement (LaRue, 2015a, p. 41). The new tools and services of digital printing and publishing make it possible for public libraries to provide self-publishing services in their communities as never before.

In his 2012 book *The Librarian's Guide to Micropublishing*, Walt Crawford advocates for libraries supporting self-publishing using simple desktop publishing templates and print-on-demand services such as Lulu and CreateSpace (Crawford, 2012). The Espresso Book Machine (EBM) is another tool that has made it easy for libraries to provide self-publishing services. The EBM can print a paperback book in a few minutes (On Demand Books) and many libraries have acquired them (Rapp, 2011). Sacramento Public Library's I Street Press offers Espresso services to allow local authors to both print their work and make it available outside the city via the EBM Network (Pecoskie, 2014, p.129). Mid-Continent Public Library in Kansas City, Missouri, will use an Espresso as part of its Story Center, currently in development (LaRue, 2015, p. 41). BiblioBoard's SELF-e platform, a project with *Library Journal*, allows users to upload files for curation and inclusion in statewide collections. (SELF-e, 2015) Though SELF-e has been controversial in the author community because the platform does not allow compensation for authors (Rooney, 2015) (Lowe, 2015, SELF-e), founder Mitchell Davis describes the benefit of SELF-e as a discovery tool above all else (Lowe, 2015, p. 4). Beta testers for the SELF-e platform included the Los Angeles Public Library, the San Diego County Public Library, the Cuyahoga County Public Library (Ohio), Arizona State Library's Reading Arizona project, and the Massachusetts e-book Project sponsored by the State of Massachusetts (LaRue, 2015b). In a different effort, self-publishing e-book distributor Smashwords has supported co-branded self-publishing portals with the Seattle Public Library (Scardilli, 2015, p. 26) and the Los Gatos Public Library (Pecoskie, 2014, p. 129).

## Library Publishing Finds New Purpose

Even before digital publishing, libraries saw the potential of library-based publishing activities for community engagement, especially with youth. Mesa Public Library in Arizona began an annual science fiction magazine, written and produced entirely by young adult patrons, in 1978, with a program that ran for at least ten years (Williams, 1987). In a contemporary example based on the same idea, the Los Gatos Public Library partnered with a local high school to publish a digital poetry anthology by Los Gatos High School students that was sold by major e-book retailers (Staley, 2015, p. 19).

Some libraries see providing self-publishing tools as part of their broader agenda to become places of creation as they do with makerspaces (LaRue, 2015a). Sacramento's I Street Press is a natural outgrowth of its Library of Things, which lends sewing machines, GoPro cameras, and musical instruments, among other things (Brown, 2015). The Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library "sees self-publishing authors as microbusiness owners and focuses on increasing their access to resources to publish better products" (Staley, 2015, p. 18).

Publishing activities are also intended to engage local arts communities. The Provincetown Public Library in Massachusetts created its own publishing imprint, Provincetown Public Press, to help support the needs of "the longest-running artists' community in the country" (Koerber, 2014, p. 21). Later the same year Williamson County Library launched Academy Park Press, "a publishing imprint with the ability to empower our arts community by providing truly worldwide exposure" (Williamson County Public Library). Sue Perry has documented the community impact of the Windsor Public Library's acquisition of an Espresso Book Machine, which she calls "the mechanical heart of Canada" (Perry, 2014, p. 12). The machine drew writers to the library's Xpress Self-Publishing Centre, which became a vibrant hub for an emerging literary community.

Libraries also have an opportunity to influence the quality of self-published books. "One of the goals of the Xpress Self-Publishing Centre is to raise the quality of self-published items to avoid the negative reputation they have sometimes earned" by offering editing and design workshops, according to Paul Vasey, Canadian author (Perry, 2014, p 13). Mid-Continent's Story Center and Sacramento Public Library's I Street Press offer educational programs and writing workshops in addition to the Espresso as a tool for book printing (LaRue, 2015a) (Pecoskie, 2014, p. 129). Los Gatos Public Library worked with Smashwords to develop a pilot program to teach local writers about e-books, including introductions to e-books, to digital borrowing, and to digital publishing best practices (Coker, 2013). Tenth grade student

Nitin Srinivasan, who participated in the Los Gatos High School poetry project sponsored by the library, reflected on her experience: “I can imagine publishing my own book in the future if I put in the time and effort to become a better, more inspiring writer” (Staley, 2015, p. 19).

Emphasis on local culture and history has been a common strategy in public library self-publishing programs (Huwe, 2014, p. 31), which make those programs a natural fit with self-publishing authors. After fiction, history and autobiography/biography, including place-based autobiographies, are the most popular BISAC categories for self-published books (Bradley, 2012, p. 129–30). History is also among the top categories of self-published nonfiction titles collected by OCLC member libraries (Dilevko & Dali, 2006, p. 221–23), most likely because of their local interest value (Dawson, 2008, p. 46). “People are documenting their experiences, their family histories, and issues of local interest more easily than ever before,” writes Dawson (Dawson, 2008, p. 47). Urbana Public Library noted that customers for its publishing program were primarily people interested in Illinois history (Kniffel, 1989, p. 736). David Christensen of the Seattle Public Library observes that authors working with their self-publishing service often have an emphasis on the local: “They are writing about local topics, or the stories take place in Seattle, and it may or may not have broad appeal. . . . Yet those things are still of interest to the local community” (Scardilli, 2015, p. 26). Robert Holley has noted that such self-published materials have scholarly value for future researchers as well: “The experiences of a veteran who served several tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan may have direct historical insights that are unlikely to be found in commercially published materials. . . . A biography of ‘Dear Aunt Clara’ would have the same value” (Holley, 2015, p. 707).

BiblioTech Digital Library based in Bexar County, Texas, the first all-digital public library in the United States (About BiblioTech), has actively supported the creation of local history. To create *Recetas de mi vida*, a collection of stories and recipes, the library and its partners called on community members to “document your stories and the memories they spark.” Anise Onofre of Gemini Ink, the San Antonio arts organization that partnered with the library on the project, describes the stories as “very South Texas; often they code-switch. . . . They touch on elements of South Texas culture that are everyday to this area, but to an outsider might seem exotic or even bizarre.” Onofre says that their availability from the library is important “because to know our history is so important. And these are histories that are not revised, that are honest, that sound like us” (Porter, 2015).

## Compelling Opportunities

If self-published content has special value to local communities then it is important to consider access to self-publishing. Research undertaken by Baverstock and Steinitz (2013) on self-publishing authors in the UK reveals key facts about the demographics of self-publishing authors: 76% of individuals in the sample had a university degree vs. 37% of the overall population (Baverstock & Steinitz, p. 213–14). The median estimate cost of self-publishing was £1,500, according to respondents, and the average time spent on the publishing project was 7 months excluding writing.

Similar data is not available for the US, but we can approach the idea of access in other ways. Self-publishing platforms such as Kindle Direct and Smashwords offer free self-publishing tools and charge only through commission on sales (Smashwords) (CreateSpace). BookBaby charges no commission on sales but charges a one-time fee of \$149 for e-book conversion and distribution; costs increase as services are added (BookBaby). These services may include design templates but none includes design consultation, marketing consultation, or any type of editorial work. Reedsy, a website devoted to connecting self-publishing writers with professional resources for those tasks, used data from 2000 transactions made on their website to report average costs for various components of self-publishing. The average costs of copyediting and proofreading for a 60,000 word manuscript were \$1020 and \$540 respectively, and the average cost of a professional cover design was \$700 (Reedsy, 2016). These costs are consistent with cost ranges reported by MediaShift in 2013, which enumerated other potential costs, such as obtaining an ISBN, developmental editing, and marketing (MediaShift). Four self-publishing writers profiled by The Write Life quoted costs ranging from \$150 to \$1650 for their projects. Some noted reducing their costs by bartering for work (The Write Life, 2015).

It is important to note that the lowest cost options require access to technology for creating, uploading, and formatting content. Pew Research Center data from 2013 indicates that 14% of individuals are not Internet users. Of these, 37% earn less than \$50,000 a year and 44% do not have a high school diploma (Pew Research Center, 2013).

Worldwide, access is far lower. According to the International Telecommunication Union, less than 50% of households worldwide have Internet access (International Telecommunication Union, 2015, p. 4).

Based on these facts it is not difficult to draw the conclusion that self-publishing is out of the reach of many with lower educational achievement, lower income, and less free time.

Of course there are challenges to widespread adoption of self-publishing services in libraries. The discoverability problem with nontraditional publishing has been well documented (Bradley, Fulton, Helm, & Pittner, 2011). Stephen Arnold summed this up nicely by stating, “It’s easy to create published works but harder to find them” (Arnold, 2014, p. 52). Heather Moulaison and A. J. Million have shown that there has been no broad assessment of public library digital preservation policies, which are important in supporting the production of original content from their communities (Moulaison and Million, 2014, p. 89–90). “Libraries must . . . consider the gravity of their obligation to their authors and to their communities to contribute, in a lasting way, to the cultural record and the preservation of memory” (Moulaison & Million, 2014, p. 95). A 2015 survey showed that public librarians have a high level of concern over library publishing initiatives, concerns including equipment and staffing costs, legal concerns, and concerns over the need to develop related services (Moulaison & LeBeau, 2015).

Libraries continually seek ways to support underserved communities. The success of the Akaltye Antheme collection at the Alice Springs Public Library (Australia) aptly demonstrates that a focus on content specific to a community, including locally produced resources, will increase engagement by that community (Senior, 2007). The library drew on expertise and resources from regional indigenous councils to create the collection, resulting in “a major increase in library use by Indigenous people,” which enabled the library to develop as “one of the few places in Alice Springs where Indigenous and non-Indigenous people come together” (Senior, 2007, p. 28). This model can easily be adapted to employ community-based self-publishing to attract and serve underserved communities. The BiblioTech Digital Library’s collaboration with Gemini Ink (Porter, 2015) is just such an example.

## Conclusion

Addressing the International Congress of Bibliographers and Librarians in 1934, José Ortega y Gasset lamented the explosion of books, saying, “There are already too many books” and if publication were to proceed apace, “the problem posed by the excess of books will become truly terrifying” (Ortega y Gasset, 1961 [1935]). Ortega y Gasset could not have imagined the explosion of books enabled by digital publishing. He could not have imagined the tools of digital discovery that have transformed librarianship, bringing new challenges such as digital preservation and new objectives such as Open Access scholarly communication. But he could imagine a future for librarians as publishers:

“Is it too Utopian to imagine in a not too distant future librarians held responsible by society for the regulation of the production of books, in order to avoid the publication of superfluous ones and, on the other hand, to guard against the lack of those demanded by the complex of vital problems in every age?” (Ortega y Gasset, 1961 [1935], p. 153)

Technology for publication has virtually eliminated the need to restrict what is published. The same technology has given libraries new tools to engage with local communities and reach underserved populations. Libraries have a long and distinguished history of publishing. Libraries can leverage this history to take a central role in preserving local cultural outputs to become living archives of their communities.

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**Kathryn Conrad** is director of the University of Arizona Press [<http://www.uapress.arizona.edu>]. She has held positions at the University of Missouri Press, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, and River Styx literary magazine. She can be reached at [kconrad@uapress.arizona.edu](mailto:kconrad@uapress.arizona.edu).

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