

THE NEXT **INDIE** REVOLUTION

Following in the footsteps of the film and music industries, indie book publishing is now the fastest-growing way for authors to get books to market.

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AUTHOR SOLUTIONS

For decades, filmmakers had little choice when it came to producing their films. Prohibitive costs and access to distribution channels gave the Big Five studios restrictive control over the industry. As a result, countless scripts never made it to the silver screen, and most others were altered to fit the whims of the studio bankrolling production.

Now appearing: the independent film

With the development of new technologies and the creation of independent film festivals, moviemaking changed dramatically, and the term “independent film” entered our vocabulary. *Easy Rider* starring Dennis Hopper, Peter Fonda, and Jack Nicholson was the first “indie” film of the “New Hollywood” era, and debuted in May 1969. From that point forward, the production of independent films grew dramatically, but 1994’s *Clerks*—which was filmed for about \$28,000 and won a pair of awards at the 1994 Cannes Film Festival—is widely credited for re-invigorating the genre. That success led to other mainstream indie hits, including 1997’s *Chasing Amy* and 1999’s *The Blair Witch Project*, and the independent film became as much a part of our entertainment culture as Warner Brothers or MGM.

Music was next

The music industry has followed a similar path. Bands once dependent on major labels to produce their work now employ new technology to make their own music, and utilize the Web and social media sites to promote and develop a following. As a result, many new groups enjoy the label of an “indie band,” which speaks to their ability to control their creative product and connect with their audience.

Although this idea has only really taken hold in the past decade, it has been around for a while. The band, REM was an indie sensation before signing with Warner Bros. in 1987. More recently, accomplished artists like Wilco, Barenaked Ladies, and Radiohead have gone “indie” to open up additional markets for their music.

The time for indie book publishing is now

Now it’s publishing’s turn. For decades, authors seeking to get published needed to hire an agent, who pitched the manuscript to the few large publishing houses that dominated the industry. Although it was often a time-consuming and heartbreaking process, it was the only way authors could bring their work

to market. For most, this system resulted in stacks of rejection letters and never reaching their goal of becoming a published author.

Although there are no definitive industry statistics, discussion with industry insiders would lead you to believe that less than one in twenty manuscripts actually gets published, which is why this system is so frustrating for writers seeking to become authors.

It also doesn't appear to be working well for the book trade either. According to the Sept. 1, 2008 issue of *Publisher's Weekly*, the world's five largest publishers experienced one-half of 1 percent in combined growth in the first half of 2008. That's understandable when you consider that according to Nielsen BookScan, fewer than 10 percent of new titles published in the U.S. in 2007 sold more than 1,000 copies in their first year. In short, if you are an author named King or Grisham or Rowling or Patterson, this system can still work for you and the publisher. But what about everybody else? And what about discovering new talent? How does that happen?

Let the reader decide

Over the last decade, as new technologies have emerged, the obstacles that once loomed in front of prospective authors have all but vanished. Since the introduction of print-on-demand technology and the Internet bookstore, the process of getting a book to market is following the pattern previously established in film and music. It's no longer necessary for authors to wait for years for someone else to put their book in the market. Now, through indie book publishing companies like AuthorHouse and iUniverse, authors can let the readers decide if their book is any good or not.

Supported self-publishing is not the same as vanity publishing

Authors have two options when choosing indie book publishing. The first is often referred to as *vanity publishing*. With this option, an author works with a company that designs and prints a book. In many cases, the author is required to purchase a certain quantity of books, which is one of the major drawbacks to this method. In addition, these books are

Over the last 12 years, more than 70,000 independent authors published over 100,000 titles in every genre.



usually not available for distribution in major retail or online channels. Also, vanity publishers typically do not offer additional services to help edit, market, or promote the book.

By contrast, the fastest-growing indie book publishing option is known as *supported self publishing*. With this method, authors purchase publishing services and use print-on-demand technology to produce books. All of these books are assigned an ISBN and are put into distribution, which makes them available for order at retail outlets and through online book sellers such as amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com. In addition, most supported self-publishing companies offer a range of editorial, promotional, and bookselling services to help authors reach their goals. More importantly, there is no requirement to purchase books, although the author has the option to buy books at a substantial discount and resell them at whatever price he or she can garner.

Independent publishing is great for authors

Just as with film and music, authors can still find a big company to take their work and market and distribute it, but for many writers, indie book publishing provides significant benefits.

The first is control. Authors have input on all aspects of the book, including the design. Many writers want this type of involvement in their creative work, but



are prohibited when using traditional publishing. A second benefit is retention of rights. Authors control all their rights with indie book publishing, whereas traditional publishers usually lock up all the subsidiary rights to a book. With indie book publishing, authors are free to sell foreign or movie rights if someone comes calling with a six-figure contract. A third reason why more writers are choosing this option is speed-to-market. With traditional publishing,

it often takes years to find an agent, collect rejection letters, get a contract, design the book, and get it printed and distributed. Authors using indie book publishing can get books to market in a matter of months. A fourth and final benefit to authors is potential for increased revenue. Although very few people actually make a living these days as a writer, the share of every book sold is usually significantly greater for authors who independently publish.

Answering the critics

Even though there are clear benefits to independent publishing, there are still objections. Two criticisms that are often leveled at independent publishing are that the author has to pay to get published, and authors often have to do their own marketing. True, an author has to make an investment in getting his or her book to market, but for many, the cost is around a thousand dollars. However, with that investment, authors are assured their book will be in the market, and if the book is any good, they will start to recoup their costs pretty quickly. The second argument often made

against independent publishing is that the author has to do his or her own marketing. The reality is that today, even if your name is Clancy or Rowling, you will do your own marketing. There are two reasons for that. First, many traditional publishers have trimmed their marketing and publicity staffs significantly, to try to remain profitable. Second, the best person to promote any book is the author. Even J.K. Rowling does a press tour. So authors who think they can simply write a manuscript and collect a check while everyone else does the marketing work do not understand how book marketing works in today's world.

Both new and experienced authors are enjoying independence

As more authors become aware of this new publishing option and traditional publishing houses reduce the number of titles they publish each year, both new and experienced authors are turning to independent publishing.

Take Reg Green, for example. Sadly, Reg's seven-year old son Nicholas was murdered in Italy 14 years ago on a family vacation. He and his wife made the decision then to donate their son's organs, and the story received worldwide attention. Since then, Reg has become a leading advocate for organ donation, and wanted to write a book about how this critical decision affects the people involved in the process. He is very passionate and has a great sense of urgency, so he didn't want to wait for months or years to have traditional publishers decide whether or not they would publish his book. He has independently published *The Gift that Heals* with AuthorHouse, and it is selling well. He has received worldwide attention, including being featured in *People* magazine and



USA Today. Reg speaks all over the globe as an advocate for organ donation.

The real winners are the readers

Certainly, independent publishing is great for authors because it gives many an opportunity to invest a few thousand dollars and get their manuscripts published. However, the biggest winners with this new system are the readers. Voices that otherwise may have never been heard are now able to be published, which means readers, not editors, can decide whether a book is good or not. Readers and book buyers get a vote now equal to the acquisition editors of major publishing houses.

Stunning growth so far

Much in the same way independent filmmakers and musicians changed their industries, the number of authors choosing independent publishing is having an impact on the book trade. Recently Bowker, the organization responsible for issuing all U.S. ISBNs, reported that growth in the traditional publishing sector was "basically flat." Conversely, on-demand and short-run books experienced a "stunning five-fold increase" in the number of titles published in 2007. There's no argument that the independent publishing model is changing the book-publishing industry; the only question left is how soon it will become the standard, and how quickly traditional publishing houses will adapt to this model to remain profitable and continue to discover new talent. That's the next chapter.



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