

Research Proposal: Describing the Information Seeking Behaviors of Authors in an Increasingly Digital World

In an August 2011 publication by BookStats, a program formed by the Association of American Publishers and the Book Industry Study Group, researchers found that total book publishing revenue in the United States rose to \$27.9 billion in 2010 (Publisher's Weekly, 2011a). Though printed books have lost popularity, the sale of e-books has risen substantially to make up for and eclipse the declines, accompanied by growth in the sales of adult fiction, juvenile books, and publications for higher education. A Communications Industry Forecast from September 2011 also predicts a 102.8% gain in spending on e-books through 2011 (Publisher's Weekly, 2011b). These figures represent a significant change in consumer habits, from buying mass trade paper books in brick-and-mortar stores to downloading stories on Nooks and Kindles.

These changes provide the potential for authors to replace the traditional publication industry of literary agents and big-name editors with a more democratic direct-to-consumer model. In 2009, the number of titles produced by self-publishers and "micro-niche publishers" was more than double the output by mid- and large-sized companies (Milliot, 2010). However, many of these were reprints of traditional books, and the rise in sales reported by BookStats indicates that a large percentage of potential authors continue to send their queries and manuscripts to New York City to sell their copyrights to the likes of Simon & Shuster, Random House, and Pearson.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that "writers and authors held about 151,700 jobs" in 2008, and approximately seventy percent of these consider themselves self-employed (BLS 2010). This makes for a professional population that is highly dispersed and individualistic. Writers often work from their homes on irregular schedules. They may hold "day jobs" and

consider writing a hobby, or attend conferences and workshops once or twice a year to connect with other writers. In general, they lack an educational background in business and rely on social networks, agents, or the Internet to inform them on how to best disseminate their works to the public. Few established support structures exist outside the traditional publishing industry to provide writers with information about marketing, career management, copyright law, and sales.

To illustrate the uncertain, fragmented nature of the profession, I draw from my personal interactions with writers during the construction of this proposal. When I consulted with a doctoral candidate in the English program at Indiana University for potential contacts, he referred me not to a student or staff member on campus, but to a former colleague he knew briefly several years ago. That contact, an experienced science fiction writer, had since moved to Delaware. She indicated, via email, that almost all of her communication with other writers is mediated electronically, by sites like Facebook and Twitter. Her knowledge of the publishing industry also comes exclusively from remote contacts or resources on the World Wide Web. When asked who she consulted for information, she cited "Sites...that consolidate writers' guidelines and keep an eye on the markets," "Workshop websites for writing advice and information," and "Sites like Preditors and Editors if I'm suspicious about something." At no point did she mention local groups, *in-person* workshops, agents/managers, or traditionally authoritative sources.

From limited experiences like these, and a sampling of successful writers' cultivated presence on the Internet, I infer that writers are a reasonably tech-savvy group. A Pew Internet & American Life Project survey from May 2011 shows that 57% of American adults own a desktop computer and 56% own a laptop, with probable overlap (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2011). As generally highly-educated, middle- to upper-class individuals, most writers are

probably proficient with these devices and use them in daily work. The largest e-book distributors, like Amazon and Barnes 'n Noble, allow writers to sell their works directly from uploads created with common software. Services like Smashwords convert Microsoft Word documents into formats accepted on Apple iPads, Nooks, and Sony Readers for a fraction of the commission of traditional publishers. Yet authors continue to utilize agents and publishing companies that take large percentages of the profits for minimal input. The Author's Guild, an advocacy group for American writers, condemns the "current practice of paying 25% of net on e-books" and the generally low royalty rates offered by publishers (Author's Guild, 2009). This 25% of net profit equates, for example, to an approximately \$1.03 return for a \$6.99 sale on Amazon's Kindle after commissions to the publisher, the agent, and the online distributor, versus a \$4.89 return for publishing independently (Rusch, 2011).

Why do authors allow agents and publishers to take such heavy profits from the sale of their works if they are capable of publishing themselves? Not all agents and publishers are unscrupulous, of course, and many provide invaluable services in copy editing, publicity, and print production. But often, authors do not make strictly rational decisions about the contracts they sign, and may eventually find themselves short-changed by or embroiled in lawsuits against their agents or publishers. I do not attribute this to a lack of interest in royalties, marketing, or copyright law on the part of humanities-centric authors. On the contrary, a myriad of online articles and blogs aimed at the population focus on the business aspects of authors' career management. Forum participants worry constantly about the rankings of their books on bestseller lists, their numbers of Twitter followers, and the amounts on their next paychecks from distributors. The aforementioned science fiction author isolated payment as her number one

concern when seeking information about different avenues of publication, "figuring that prestige follows money."

Instead, I hypothesize that the information writers are exposed to when they seek to publish their manuscripts shapes their beliefs about publishing and the approaches they take to the sale of their works. In this assumption, I draw from and expand upon the works of Brenda Dervin, Robert Taylor, Reijo Savoleinen, and others. This school of research proposes that the information seeking behavior of individuals is highly contextualized, dependent on both the immediate and larger cultural environments. I suggest further that the beliefs internalized by individuals engaged in information seeking behavior, and consequently the cultural environment itself, can be influenced by the information found.

From an extensive search of indexing services like the Web of Knowledge, EBSCO Host, and the library holdings at Indiana University, I have found that little literature exists on the information seeking behaviors of non-academic writers. Scholarly communication is a popular field in library and information science, with many researchers examining patterns of publication and citation in print journals and institutional repositories; however, the interest ends at the boundaries of academic (primarily scientific) departments. Dozens of books and articles instruct authors on the theory of "how to publish," but I could find none that address how authors *learn* about publishing, or the statistics describing how they actually follow through. Informal sources inform me that institutions are not only uninterested in describing how people publish, but they rarely guide even academics through the process. To quote an English doctoral candidate I spoke to, "We're told what we 'should' be doing and then set afloat."

Given that writers as a whole are highly dispersed, and not neatly institutionalized like researchers, medical professionals, lawyers, etc., the research methods appropriate to studying

the population are unfortunately limited. Ethnographic observation, for example, is out of the question. The factors that influence publishing decisions are too numerous and intangible to observe directly in an hour or two, and authors may not naturally sit down for a solid session of information seeking on the industry. Interviews, structured or unstructured, are less reliable than observation in general, but in this case they might provide more relevant information. However, the results of interviewing a handful of authors may not be generalizable to the rest of the extensive and varied population. Surveys would allow data collection from a wider, more representative sample, but they would not provide the richness of observations or interviews.

In order to address the problems inherent in studying this population, I propose to limit the scope of the research to one manageable subset of authors at a time. A series of smaller studies would provide more accurate description than one unwieldy undertaking. For example, I could approach:

- Genre authors who have published short stories in magazines or anthologies
- Authors who have established contracts with mass market publishers
- Authors who have established contracts with agents to *sell* to mass market publishers
- Authors who self-publish exclusively online

I could use other criteria to distinguish these groups as well, such as geographical locale, educational and socioeconomic background, or age (*e.g.* college-educated authors in their twenties with extensive experience in modern technologies). Amassing the results from each of these groups, I could form a greater picture of how authors learn about the publishing industry.

I would also propose a two-step research process of (1) in-depth interviews and (2) online surveys for each mini-study. This combination of methods would allow me to balance richness with reliability for a more complete overview of the user group than either would alone.

First, as a preliminary study, I would interview four to five representatives of the group. The informants would be selected primarily on convenience and geographical proximity, as interviews are best conducted face-to-face, rather than by telephone or written communications (email, instant messaging, etc.). Face-to-face narrative interviews are "particularly appropriate to person-centered studies of everyday information behaviors" because the intimate interaction can encourage the flow of conversation, overcome the barriers to communication afforded by socioeconomic differences or technological intermediaries, and allow the researcher to gain a holistic understanding of an individual's values, environment, and needs (Bates, 2004). These interviews would be unstructured or semi-structured, covering only the basics of their information seeking needs and activities as related to the publication of their works. Beginning each study this way, with no (or few) preconceived notions about what to ask, would allow me to remain empirically unbiased and see the unique characteristics of each group.

I would then use the results of the interviews to influence the structure and content of a survey to gather less comprehensive, but more generalizable information about the user group. Relying on publishers of varying sizes, professional groups (*e.g.* Romance Writers of America, Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America), and authors' personal websites for names and contact information, I would recruit a minimum of thirty participants per study to fill out a questionnaire about their demographics, information seeking behaviors, and personal views on publishing. The volume of surveys distributed would be significantly larger than thirty to account for anticipated response rates, but this number would allow me to run the most basic of statistical tests to determine the accuracy of the patterns observed in the results.

To reduce costs and potential inconvenience to participants, the survey would be housed online through a free service like the Google Docs Forms feature or a custom-tailored script on

an independent server. This method of distribution could potentially bias the survey towards younger, more tech-savvy respondents with steady Internet access, and could lead to a population description that overemphasizes reliance on World Wide Web resources and favorable attitudes towards independent e-publishing. However, I believe it is safe to assume that modern writers as a whole are proficient in typing and the basic computer skills that would allow them to complete and submit the survey. As long as I contact writers directly using a variety of recruiting sources, rather than advertising on Facebook or other demographically constrained media, this decision should not adversely affect the results of the studies.

After gathering survey responses, I would perform minimal statistical tests to determine the quality and generalizability of the trends in the data. However, this is a primarily exploratory study. My purpose is not to identify variable X, Y, or Z as a predictor of publishing decision-making, but to identify general patterns of behavior within the writing profession in order to properly address authors' information needs. Hence, I would not pursue advanced statistical tests or extensive modeling, but rather synthesize my findings into a descriptive report.

I believe that the findings of these studies would provide valuable information to a number of groups involved in the publishing process. For writers, the report could encourage them to reflect on their own careers, to isolate which of their needs have been neglected or how their environments have shaped their assumptions. It could also provide an opportunity for them to gain awareness of the prevailing norms and decisions of others in their profession, as fragmented as it is.

For those on the business side of the equation—agents, traditional publishers, e-publishers and distributors—an understanding of writers' information needs and behaviors could have less sentimental value. Each of the parties in the chain has a vested interest in the decisions

writers make about their careers, either for pushing the industry towards an anarchical future or for pulling it back into a structured past. Traditional publishers could, in theory, salvage their rocky business by paying close attention to writers' wants and needs and doing their best to fill them before complete self-sufficiency takes hold. After all, print sales have only begun to decline within the past five years; Nooks and Kindles could simply be a passing fad.

In summary, the publication industry is rapidly changing in the wake of new technologies. Authors in all areas have a growing number of choices for distributing their works to readers for higher profits, but the isolationist tendencies of their profession may prevent them from discovering or fully understanding all of the options. I propose to study their information seeking behaviors regarding career management through a multistep research process involving many mini-studies of narrowly defined sub-groups. Each study would consist of, first, a loose narrative interview with select representatives, and second, a custom-tailored online survey. The results would be synthesized into a primarily qualitative report of the findings for all stakeholders in the publishing industry to take into account in their immediate decision-making, as well as their projections for the future of the market.

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