

some problems
of distribution
for...

independent
publishers

&

independent
booksellers

introduction

Book publishing, in its many forms, is a complex process that, generally, involves collaboration between the people who make / write whatever is in the book, designers, printers, binders, distributors, advertisers, and booksellers. Over time these collaborative networks have become amalgamated into larger institutions and the corporate publishing and distribution firms that have established themselves over decades, which exist to make a profit, have come to prioritise a certain kind of book for a certain kind of market. Obviously, there is a broad range within that system but it excludes plenty and those whose work falls outside the system or those who reject the corporate, market-oriented framework, must publish independently.

This independent publishing is too a broad category—too broad for proper and complete definition here—but it should be clear that independent publishers are often working with limited finances, limited time, limited design facilities, limited access to appropriate printing and binding equipment, and limited opportunities for distribution and marketing. The same can be said for those who decide to support independent publishing by setting up stalls or shops and selling independently published books. Independent booksellers are troubled by a similar set of problems as independent

publishers and in that sense they have a co-dependent existence with those whose work they are selling.

In referring to independently published books I mean to talk about books that are ‘self-published’ —by people with esoteric interests that are not necessarily marketable to a (so called) mainstream audience. Books that might not have a broad appeal, which is one reason that they are produced in short print runs of a-hundred to a-thousand copies (which is one reason that they are of no interest to corporate publishing). Artists books, hand-made books, political pamphlets and journals, art-writing, magazines and ‘zines, poetry, illustration, that sort of thing. Vanity publishing might describe some of it, but not in a negative sense. Independently published books do have an audience, albeit a small one.

This leaflet is a brief attempt to highlight some of the problems that independent publishers and booksellers are faced with in relation to distribution. It is based on some personal experiences.

some problems of distribution for independent publishers & independent booksellers

Independent publishing is, generally, a long-term investment. The delay between printing a book and getting money from the sale of it can be several years. In between, many problems arise for publishers and booksellers. These problems have a lot to do with the process of distribution.

Making a book, designing and printing it, takes a while. Certainly, in the past it would have required the co-operation of a variety of tradespeople; in typesetting, printing, binding, and finishing. Today, one person could do all of this using a personal computer, an inkjet printer, and a stapler. Repeating the process two-hundred-and-fifty times, however, is painful and time-consuming. More often, different people do the different jobs in the production of the book. Either way, by the end of it a problem arises in that there might not be much energy left to do the distributing, or anything else that helps to put the book out into the world for people to see. This problem also arises from the, I think, likely situation that people who make books are more interested in organising the making of books than organising the distribution of them.

The independent publisher is their own wandering salesperson —dragging a bag of books around to every bookshop they have heard of in some big city

somewhere. In a bookshop, a bookseller might agree to take a few copies, three or five, on sale-or-return. They might ask for a “50% discount” meaning that if they sell the book they keep half the money. At first I was surprised but I stopped worrying about it after thinking it through. Some booksellers take 30%, some take 60%. I prefer the 30% kind but I understand that, whilst the independent bookseller is working under the same conditions as publishers, their income and running costs, it seems to me, are directly tied to the keeping of their business afloat. Of course, publishers also have bills to pay but I reckon the stakes are lower. (whatever the deal is) The publisher hands over a few copies of the book and the first part of the distribution process is complete.

Here arise problems associated with being disorganised. Distribution is complicated and involves a fair amount of travelling around, talking to people, keeping account of who you have given books to, how many you gave them, what price they are selling them for, what percentage they will take, what their name is, when they will pay you, when they will contact you, what their contact details are, what they look like, if they were interested, if the shop seems good, if it seems likely that they will sell your book, if they will promote your book, all of it, loads

of other stuff. How many writers, or artists, or activists, or whoever, do you know who are also good at keeping track of a-hundred books they are selling in thirty bookshops in twenty cities—and all of the details? Of course, it is possible to be organised about it but it seems as though to be organised about it would involve more work than is involved in making the book.

Sale-or-return (in case it is not obvious) is a form of exchange used by booksellers that does not require them to take on the financial burden of keeping a well-stocked bookshop. If the bookseller sells the books they will send some money to the publisher. If the bookseller does not sell the books they will return them to the publisher—or they leave them on the shelf until the publisher comes to collect them. Whilst the bookseller and the publisher might share responsibility for the return of the books this is not necessarily discussed when the books are delivered and, inevitably, leads to more problems as time passes and the books go from the front of the shelf to the back of the shelf to storage to the FREE box. It also requires regular communication between bookseller and publisher.

Another problem is knowing where the bookshops are and whether they are the sort of bookshop that would sell an independently published book. I have made books that are “too big” for the shelves in one bookshop, “too delicate” for another, too “hand-made” &c. Finding booksellers who want to sell books that are different, awkward, not very interesting, is difficult, partly because it is not

entirely likely that they will sell. There are bookshops that will try to sell those books but not many. Not all booksellers of independently published books are active at making themselves known to the world; they are not necessarily good at marketing. There is no list of all of them printed somewhere for publishers. More often, in my experience, booksellers pass on information about other booksellers who are interested in a particular kind of book or bookshops that a book might be likely to sell in.

Travelling to the big city looking for bookshops. The proceeds from all of the books sold, when the cheque(s) arrive(s) in the post eight months from now, might cover the train fare. Does the postal service offer some alternative to endless wandering? We will try to imagine how it could work:

I send a copy of the book to a bookshop somewhere with a letter asking if they would be interested to sell it. The postage is £ 2. The bookseller is enthusiastic - they ask for four more - they will sell the books for £ 8 each - they will take half the money. I send four more copies. The postage is £ 7. Four months pass. The bookseller has sold three copies of the book. Another four months pass. None have sold as the book slips to the back of the pile. The bookseller writes to say that they will send the remaining two copies back with a cheque for £ 8 - sales minus £ 4 for postage. I lose £ 1 (ignoring the cost of materials for the book and the labour involved in the production of it).

For all of the problems described above, the same can be said for independent booksellers. Where publishers are making a long-term investment, booksellers expect the same slow turnover of stock, with books sitting on the shelves for years before the right person comes in looking for something. Keeping in stock—and keeping stock of—hundreds of books that might sell once or twice a year, or never, is surely a burden, not lessened by disappeared publishers.

The daily visits from publishers hoping to sell their books probably bring mixed feelings, much depending on how good the books are, how busy the shop is and all the rest. My experience of trying to sell books to booksellers and being terrible at maintaining contact with them was, I am sure, more difficult for them than it was for me (Where have I gone? Am I going to turn up one day asking for money? It has been seven years, can they throw my books away now?).

Certainly booksellers are inclined to be more organised about their stock than a bumbling first-time publisher but that does not guarantee sublime organisational skills. Keeping track of all of the stock and different publishers over the course of years, without some specialist database system, is bound to be difficult, and, again, it is as likely that someone who runs a bookshop with a business model based on selling books about “nothing” (for instance), is as prone to the problems I have unfairly ascribed to publishers throughout this writing.

There are plenty more problems that I have forgotten about or never experienced and so cannot write about here. Much of what I have said has to do with a lack of experience, I suppose, but I think that there are inherent problems for independent publishers, to do with being more interested in making books than selling them, and for independent booksellers, to do with being more interested in selling books than storing them.

some thoughts about distributing independently published books

As far as I am aware, there is no UK network of independent booksellers who sell independently published books. There are bookshop maps but they seem designed primarily as an aid for consumers rather than publishers and booksellers and many of the bookshops listed, whilst independent, acquire the majority of their stock from corporate distributors and (this is not a criticism) do not sell a lot of independently published books. That is not to say, however, that they cannot be persuaded. There are distributors who serve independent publishers and independent booksellers who deal in smaller quantities of books. I have never used these distributors but I assume that publishers must respond to a set of criteria before their books are eligible for distribution.

In some sense, a network of booksellers does already exist but it has no material significance. Booksellers know other booksellers and recommend each other to publishers. A map or list of independent booksellers across the country (and beyond...) could form the basis of an independent and informal distribution network. I say informal because I think that, given the many problems that might arise, to impose a complex distribution structure on independent booksellers, whose work is already complicated enough, would be a foolish and short-lived endeavour.

At the very least, independent booksellers could establish a network of communication that provides the means to make recommendations and share advice. From that, perhaps, an exchange of books between booksellers could begin, becoming more regular and organised over time, whilst, hopefully, retaining its informal character.

Imagine a network of ten independent booksellers in Britain. A publisher takes a book into one of the shops in the network. The bookseller thinks that it might be of interest to five of the other members of the network and so takes 18 copies of the book. Each fortnight the booksellers in the network exchange parcels of books. In the next parcel the bookseller sends three copies of the book to each of the booksellers they think might be interested. If they are not interested they send them back in their next parcel. If they like the books they keep hold of them. If they sell some then they either pay the publisher directly (by cheque or using some on-line payment platform), or they transfer the payment through the bookseller that sent the books. Un-sold books are returned to the bookseller that sent them for later return to the publisher.

This is the first thing that came to mind when I thought for a while about what an independent distribution network might look

like. It probably all falls apart as soon as you question any single aspect of it. All it is is an attempt to approach the problem. It seems to me that the network has to be structured around something solid. Booksellers need to be somewhat organised if they are to maintain their business and they operate from a specific location, they have an address.

It could be that, whatever form the network takes, the input is greater than the output and that could mean that it is not worthwhile. I think that the immediate benefits of increased communication would be enough to attempt it. Being able to share information about publishers who are making good work would, I assume, lead to the selling of more books.

Another approach would be to not worry about making money. I do not mean that independent publishers should not get paid for their work but that they should assess the situation and think about how much money, realistically, they are going to make, and then decide whether to worry about it or not. It could free up a lot of time if a publisher were to send some books to a bookseller somewhere and ask them to send them half of the money from any sales or otherwise give the books away after a year. This is likely what happens to a lot of books anyway. It is similar to a system used by a lot of journals and magazines whereby stockists send back the torn off covers of unsold copies to show that they were not sold. The publisher pays for the ones that were sold and the stockist throws the rest of the magazine in the bin.

I occasionally make a small newspaper about British foreign policy that I hand out on the street for free. I like to stand outside train stations with it because the people going into the train station might read it and leave it on the train and then the train goes somewhere else and it uses the rail network as a distribution network. There is also something to do with not restricting access to the work by handing it out on the street, which I think is important for anything that might be aimed at a general audience. Handing your work out on the street is highly rewarding. I have interesting conversations with strangers about what is in the newspaper or some other political issue, and knowing that something I have made is moving around and being seen by lots of people is great. This method of distribution perhaps only works for pamphlets or leaflets that can be printed cheaply.

I hope that there is something in amongst all this that can help work towards solving some of the problems raised.

by Adam Burton

for X-Operative

at Wysing Arts Centre in Cambridge

curated by Eleanor Vonne Brown
X Marks the Bökship

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