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**Watching the Watchmen: The integrity of reviews in digital self-publishing.**

**Abstract**

This paper will discuss how digital publishing websites are attempting to address concerns about the quality of online reviews of self-published titles. In digital self-publishing, where there is no publishing house to signal the quality of the work, online reviews have become a key means by which the literary value of works is established and contested. Evidence suggests, however, that the integrity of reviews are being seriously compromised with the increasing prevalence of ‘faked’ five-star reviews, often planted or purchased by authors. Websites such as The Books Machine, BRAG Medallion and iDreambooks have sought to address this issue through strategies such as rating reviewers as well as books, critic reviewers and awarding outstanding self-published works.

**Biographical Note:**

Rachael Rippon is a second year PhD candidate at the University of Canberra. Her research is focussed on digital self-publishing and the part reviews play in quality-controlling the market. Part of this includes looking at the prevalence for self-published authors to both purchase and fake positive reviews. She both writes and reviews self-published books and is an active member of the self-publishing community.

**Keywords:** digital, self-publishing, reviews, reviewer

## Introduction

Many well-known authors have self-published their work – at least initially. From Virginia Woolfe to E. E. Cummings and, more recently, from Matthew Reilly to E. L. James, self-publishing has been a means for authors to get their words read. Traditionally, it has also been an expensive, not to mention risky, venture and the odds of making a living from it are low. Further, self-published works have a reputation as ‘vanity publications’ with many negative connotations attached to this term. In 1999 Manley, a prominent book reviewer, wrote that mainstream publishers reject books published through vanity presses because they are “poorly written pieces of drivel” (Manley, 1999).

The perception, however, that self-published books are ‘drivel’ may slowly be changing. In her paper ‘The Role of Self-Publishing in Libraries’, Laura Dawson questions previous negative images towards self-publishing and the changing image of mainstream publishers. She states:

Just because it’s published by a mainstream publishing house doesn’t make it good. And just because it’s good doesn’t mean it’ll be published by a mainstream publishing house. (2008: 35)

Whether these perceptions are changing or not is debatable. In recent years, however, since e-books have become more accessible due to e-reading devices, there has been a dramatic increase in digitally self-published books with 391,000 self-published titles published in 2012, up by 59% over 2011 and 422% over 2007 (Bowker, 2013). Some self-publishers have even established themselves as successful, full-time authors achieving critical recognition, such as New York Times best-selling author Hugh Howey (Oler 2013). If we can accept that the stigma surrounding self-publishing is dissipating and that the output of self-published works is increasing, to what extent, then, is the role publishers play necessary?

In his book *Merchants of Culture*, John B. Thompson asks several questions of the publishing industry including:

[...] what reason is there to believe that the role of the publisher itself might not be rendered redundant? What are the core activities or functions of the publisher? Are these activities that could be phased out by new technologies, or that could be done by others? Could publishers themselves be disintermediated from the publishing chain? (2010: 18-19)

Thompson is sceptical about the benefits of cutting out publishers altogether, however, and lists six key functions of the publisher citing how publishers add value. They are as follows:

- Content acquisition and list-building
- Financial investment and risk-taking
- Content Development
- Quality Control
- Management and Coordination
- Sales and Marketing

(2010: 19)

In self-publishing, each of these key functions is taken on by the individual rather than an organisation and authors often pay third parties for such things as cover design, editing and promotions. Cover design, for instance, can range from simple \$30 pre-made covers to professional made-to-order covers for \$1,000. And while self-publishers may consider themselves to have fewer restrictions in content development – erotica, for instance, remains one of the most popular genres in self-publishing – financial investment and risk-taking are often far more perilous for self-published authors who have little or no economic capital and may risk everything on a book that attracts little interest. Each of these six key functions could be the topic of a paper in itself – that is, looking at each way traditional publishing adds value compared to self-publishing, and considering the question, ‘do we actually need publishers?’ I am primarily going to discuss, however, to what extent ‘quality control’ is established in the self-publishing field and the role reviewers play in evaluating quality and maintaining integrity within the field.

If we accept, therefore, that it is possible for a self-published novel to become widely read, then presumably some measure of quality control is being employed. While authors may use

quality control methods of their own – such as employing an editor – for consumers the most obvious form of quality control are reviews. Reviews can be found on the book's sales page on sellers such as Amazon or iBooks, they can also be found on reading applications such as Goodreads or Shelfari. With no validation from a publisher, reviews are one of the primary ways in which self-published books are accepted or rejected by consumers.

### **On-line Reviews and Consumers**

In terms of the broader digital market, prior literature has established that reviews shared through digital applications allow consumers to make more informed decisions about the product/seller quality thereby building trust between consumers and sellers in online markets (Ba and Pavlou 2002; Resnick and Zeckhauser 2002; Dellarocas 2003; Chen and Wu 2005; and Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Chen, Dhanasobhon and Smith 2008). There is also thought to be a correlation between online reviews and the probability of purchase. For instance, Resnick (2002) established that seller reviews on eBay influenced the probability of a sale, and Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006) observed that product reviews at Amazon.com impacted book sales. Comparatively, however, Chen and Wu (2005) and Duan et al. (2005) have indicated that high ratings do not necessarily correlate with increased sales, suggesting that as consumer's tastes are so varied, not all consumers use reviews to make their final purchase decision. Nevertheless, it is evident that high product ratings convey two things about the product. Firstly, they may be perceived to indicate high quality, secondly they imply that the general public likes the book, thereby socially validating the book itself.

Indeed, according to Cialdini (2000) social validation is highly influential in a consumer's decision to purchase a product. As such, consumers may be more inclined to purchase a book which has achieved high social validation than one which has not. A book with a majority of good reviews could be said to have been generally approved by the general public, if not by critics. As such, for consumers reviews can be highly useful in establishing the quality of a product.

### **On-line Reviews and Authors**

Comparatively, self-published authors also place high value on reviews themselves. *Not a Gold Rush* (2012), a survey conducted by Taleist on self-publishing, established that there was a moderate correlation between reviews and sales of self-published titles, which explains why authors are so eager to garner reviews. They also determined that close to 90% of authors surveyed gave away review copies as part of a marketing campaign, further indicating the high value of reviews for self-published authors.

Another study conducted by Tim Laquintano in his paper ‘Sustained Authorship: Digital Writing, Self-Publishing, and the Ebook’, analyses how expert poker players self-published guides and lesson books and how reviews have impacted the success of these books. In the context of this study, he states:

The potential—and possibility—of self-publishing is perhaps nowhere more instantiated than in the reader-generated book review. If a writers’ claim to authorship is partially based on expertise, and certainly based on foregoing anonymity, then book reviews function as peer reviews that provide critical assessment; reviews are written, scrutinized, and debated by readers and potential readers [...] Reviewers were not immune from criticism either, and discussion constantly focused on the quality of each review. Advocates of the book were often discredited if they were friends with the author and did not provide a disclaimer of their prior relationship with him. (Laquintano, 2010: 484-485)

Consequently, while in a general sense reviews can be said to provide social validation for authors, this social validation is only accepted to the point that the reviews themselves can be in turn validated and quality controlled.

Whether consumers are directly influenced by reviews or not may be debatable, but there is enough data to suggest that even if reviews are not directly influential, they do carry some weight for receptive consumers. Reviews, then, may be vital for a book to make a sale or at least are *perceived* to be vital by self-published authors. This has necessarily caused a number

of issues for authors, the primary one being that reviewers of self-published works are in short supply. In her article 'The Future of Self-Publishing', Suw Charman-Anderson states:

Access to book reviewers, for example, can be problematic for the self-published. At the very least it's highly time-consuming to do the research into which reviewers read in your genre and which of those accept unsolicited books from self-published authors. At worst, there's a whole swathe of reviewers who are simply out of reach of self-publishers. (Charman-Anderson, 2013)

One directory of reviewers of self-published books is the Indie View. It provides links to a great number of reviewers with different submission requirements and intakes - some reviewers will only review specific genres and due to the high volume of review requests, reviewers cannot accept every book pitched at them. The Indie View has over 200 reviewers, but it is exceedingly unlikely that an author will get a review from all of them.

### **Faking Reviews**

Due to the lengthy and often fruitless campaign of requesting reviews and the difficulties in getting reviews as a whole, authors may resort to other means, such as faking reviews. Indeed, there are many cheap and easy ways to fake reviews online. One of the simplest is to create a sockpuppet account – a fake account generated in order to promote or discredit books. Goodreads and Amazon in particular are popular platforms on which to create fake accounts as they are widely used by genuine consumers. There are several characteristics of a sockpuppet account, including:

- No user photograph
- Only one high rating, often in conjunction with a positive review
- The user has been inactive since rating this one book
- The account may also have been used to rate rival books poorly

Goodreads and Amazon both prohibit dishonest reviews in their review guidelines (Goodreads, 2014; Amazon, 2014), but as most authors use sockpuppets sparingly, fake

accounts can be relatively hard to discover unless used on a wide scale. For instance, self-published author Andrew Domonkos was accused of creating 153 sockpuppets in order to rate his book *Zara's Curse* positively and competitive books in the same genre poorly (Luedke, 2013). Due to the obvious and rampant use of sockpuppets in relation to his book, a great many sockpuppets were exposed and his book suffered from the bad publicity (Goodreads, 2014). As sockpuppets are easy to create and use, this is perhaps one of the most prominent ways in which reviews are faked and their function as 'quality control' is undermined.

A second way reviews can be faked is through purchasing fake positive reviews from a third party. One major site for this kind of activity is Fivver, although individuals may also engage in the practice in less public arenas. Fivver allows individuals to sell services, products or reviews for a minimum of five dollars. Bookworm Girl is one such reviewer. Her profile states:

I will write a thoughtful, engaging 150+ word review that offers potential readers an insight into why yours just might be the right reading choice for them. Additionally, I will add the novel to 5 different Listopia Goodreads reading lists. I will review any type of genre, both fiction and non-fiction. (Bookworm Girl, 2014)

Another site, now shut down, that allowed authors to purchase positive reviews was GettingBookReviews.com. *New York Times* journalist David Streitfeld, examined this case in his article 'The Best Reviews Money Can Buy'. Todd Rutherford the owner of this website, sold single reviews for \$99.99, 20 reviews for \$499 or 50 reviews for \$999. Self-published author John Locke ordered 300 reviews and went on to sell over one million e-books. Locke also wrote a book titled 'How I Sold One Million E-Books in Five Months'. He does not mention purchasing reviews and is quoted in the *Times* as stating, "Reviews are the smallest piece of being successful. But it's a lot easier to buy them than cultivating an audience" (Streitfeld, 2012).

As such, the purchasing of positive reviews is an issue although it is hard to say how big an issue, particularly as few – if any – self-published authors would admit to purchasing reviews and the difficulty in proving that they had.

How, then, can reviews truly establish themselves as quality controllers? There are several websites, including The Books Machine, the B.R.A.G Medallion and iDreambooks, that are attempting to do this, but it is still too early to say whether they are effective.

### **The Books Machine**

The Books Machine was founded in 2014 and allows readers and authors to work together to promote quality reviewing. Authors are permitted to sign up to ten of their titles on the website and are committed to providing at least five of these titles to readers each month, only, of course, if they receive a minimum of five applications. Readers in turn must finish the book within thirty days and write an honest review rating the book. In turn, authors may also rate readers (The Books Machine, 2014).

There are, of course, several flaws in this system, the major one being that authors must pay thirty dollars for a month's subscription. As five *positive* reviews can be purchased on Fivver for twenty-five dollars, why pay thirty dollars for a website that does not guarantee you reviews, positive or otherwise? This is a critical issue in regards to the Books Machine and depends on authors recognising the benefits of honest reviews. Further, the temptation for an author to rate a reviewer poorly based on a negative review is another possible flaw in this system.

The positives associated with this model, however, are many and, in a utopian sense, could theoretically provide some measure of integrity and 'quality control'. By allowing authors and reviewers to rate each other, each party has a vested interest in keeping reviews 'pure' and the relationship between author and reviewer becomes somewhat symbiotic as opposed to the traditional relationship of two separate, and sometimes conflicting, entities.

As this site has only just been launched, it is hard to say to what extent the Books Machine is providing quality reviews as anticipated. As a concept, however, it seems sound and only time will reveal its flaws.

### **The B.R.A.G. Medallion**

IndieBRAG LLC, a company dedicated to assisting self-published authors, was founded in 2012 and established the B.R.A.G Medallion that same year. To date, IndieBRAG has received close to 3,000 submissions with an entry fee of twenty dollars each, but compared to some review sites such as Publishers Weekly and Kirkus, which ask for hundreds of dollars, IndieBRAG is far cheaper and negative reviews are not made public. The selection process is rigorous, which, perhaps, explains why so few self-published authors receive the medallion. All books are subjected to an initial screening test to ensure that minimum editorial standards in terms of quality and content are met. If it passes this preliminary assessment, it is then read by several IndieBRAG members from their global reader group. They judge the book against a comprehensive criteria list including plot, writing style, characters, copy editing, dialogue, cover and interior layout. The final factor the readers use to judge the book is whether or not they would recommend it to a friend. According to IndieBRAG, on average 50% of books submitted fail to pass the initial screen and a further 40% are rejected by IndieBRAG readers, hence only 10% of books submitted actually receive the Medallion (Indie BRAG, 2014).

While IndieBRAG could be said to give reliable and trustworthy reviews, their impact on the reviewing of self-published books is relatively small due to the comparatively few reviewers they have and the rigorous reviewing methods. And while they certainly can help promote books of high quality, by neglecting to promote negative reviews; this limits consumers in their ability to assess the ‘quality’ of any particular book. These flaws, however, are also the BRAG Medallion’s strengths. The rigorous reviewing methods ensure that medallion honourees are at the very least well-edited and at the most presumably readable and enjoyable books for the right consumer. Further, by not exposing negative reviews, this gives authors a greater motivation to submit their work – which is certainly advantageous from a business perspective – and allows for a greater pool of possible honourees. Essentially, the BRAG Medallion plays an important service in quality control methods in that it recognises what it perceives to be quality work. As there are few affordable awards that function in this way, it is unique in the self-publishing field.

## **iDreambooks**

Finally, iDreambooks is a database that integrates self-published books alongside traditionally published ones and has both critic reviews and user reviews displayed on a book's page. They describe their site as being similar to Rotten Tomatoes or Metacritic in that it provides a way for readers to both find books and rate books (iDreambooks, 2014).

Books can be discovered by searching for high critic ratings or high user ratings. When users view a book, both critic reviews and user reviews are visible. This allows users to get a sense of how 'good' a book is. Often users can be over-profuse and, as already mentioned, can generate fake reviews. By having critic reviews visible in the same place, users can see another opinion which may be perceived as more reliable. For the reader, then, iDreambooks is a valuable resource when it comes to discovering critically acclaimed self-published books.

For the author, however, while iDreambooks is an excellent resource for readers, it does little to help authors garner reviews. Nevertheless, books who do manage to receive critic reviews – particularly from reputable review sites such as Kirkus or Publishers Weekly – are far more visible on the site than books with low or no critic reviews. In this regard, therefore, iDreambooks maintains 'quality control' by allowing books with a higher degree of critic analysis to become more visible.

## **Conclusion**

While sites such as The Books Machine, the BRAG Medallion and iDreambooks all seek to provide quality reviews, due to the rising number of self-published titles, reviewers are increasingly in demand. With the exception of The Books Machine, these sites do little to allow authors and readers to connect and exchange reviews, instead they are consumer orientated and allow readers to discover quality content. Due to the value of reviews to authors, however, and the difficulties in procuring them, authors have resorted to less-than ethical means to garner reviews. While self-publishing has been evident for centuries, digital platforms are rapidly changing the self-publishing field and, due to underdeveloped infrastructures in regards to reviewing, the integrity of reviews is a major issue in regards to the 'quality control' of self-publishing.

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