A Look at Digital Publishing Startups, Self-Publishing,

and the Diminishing Role of Literary Agents

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Contents

The publishing industry experienced widespread panic during the early years of the ebook, and

its fears permeated through discussions of piracy and loss of print. Not only changes within the

industry, but digital innovation in all areas led to new platforms and devices that altered personal

and professional interactions as well as the way products were made and sold. Over the years,

publishing companies have tried to predict the future yet were slow to adapt, watching startups

like Amazon become giants that eventually dominated markets and chipped away at standards

the industry took for granted. Now more than ever, the industry is at a crossroads; adapt or be left

behind. However, a question not often asked is how literary agents have fared in this evolution.

How have they stayed relevant in this digital age, and is their role in the publishing process at

risk? An analysis of the activity of digital startups in the publishing industry during an age of

technological innovation reveals a rising favor for self-publishing that threatens the role of

literary agents in the process, pressuring agencies to either evolve or lose business.

I. Digital Startups Settle on a Target

In 2012, *Publishers Weekly* covered a groundbreaking report produced by BlueLoops Concepts,

a research and consulting firm, which observed the rise in digital startups within the publishing

industry and the possible effects that digital innovation would have on the industry's future. The

report is no longer available, but Calvin Reid reported the main findings in his article, "New

Report on Digital Startups from BlueLoop Concepts."[1] BlueLoop Concepts defined a digital

publishing startup as a "'collaborative' creative platform that allows either authors or publishers

to produce and distribute digital content."[2] In the report, the researcher identified 92 startups that

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1. Calvin Reid, "New Report on Digital Publishing Startups from BlueLoop Concepts,"
Publishers Weekly (Online), January 2012.

2. Reid, "New Report."

focused on "production-level independent e-book author or publisher platforms and services."[3] The key trends of the report were summarized as "'collaboration, discovery, distribution, and connection'... [and it] focuses on the importance of 'audience development' and the need to identify digital tools that can help bring authors into the market and connect them directly to readers."[4] While published several years ago, the report points out an important trend that is still relevant: digital innovation has created both the ability and the demand to produce digital content and strengthen the connection between author and reader.

A few years later, Reid and his cowriter Jim Milliot published an article, "Survival Test: Startup Review 2015,"[5] in which they reviewed several digital startups, whether they were successful or failed, and how their influence would affect the industry. From 2013 to 2014, they explained, the field of startups went from promising to dismal; several companies with exciting potential had ceased operations. On the other hand, the company Vook, an ebook creation and distribution company led by CEO Josh Brody, acquired two startups: Byliner, which published long form journalism, and Coliloquy, which focused on reader-response driven ebooks. To get an idea of strategy behind these business ventures, Reid and Milliot interviewed Brody. When asked why Vook decided to acquire the startups, Brody explained that he believed "the next wave of innovation will give authors more control over their works and give them the ability to reach more readers... [empowering authors] will be the next big thing." This prediction affirms the BlueLoops Concepts report of 2012, which revealed a trend in connecting audiences to authors

3. Reid, "New Report."

4. Reid, "New Report."

5. Calvin Reid and Jim Milliot, "Survival Test: Startup Review 2015," *Publishers Weekly* 262, no. 1 (January 2015): 40-6, Ebscohost.

and increasing ability for digital content creation. Further, he provides insight for what will be the dominating trend in years to come: self-publishing. He believes that "the distinction between self-published and traditionally published authors will erode further."[6] Traditional publishers and agents had always held the power of book publishing; hiring an agent was an author's gateway into being offered a deal, and that deal would come from an established publishing house. This system was now being challenged as authors obtained more control over the creation and distribution of their content, and the stigma on self-publishing was quickly fading.

Even though 2014 was a year of turnover for digital startups, innovation flourished as new companies continued to open in the industry for the following years, and publishing houses floundered as they attempted to adapt. In response, Laura Dawson wrote her article, "Not All Publishing Startups Have Died,"[7] in which she highlights Macmillan's failed attempt to adjust to the steady acceptance of self-publishing through their self-publishing arm Pronoun, once Vook, while digital publishing startups were innovating in promising ways. Macmillan closed Pronoun shortly after its start, citing their inability to find a profitable business model. Dawson explains that this failure led to questions about whether the publishing industry was truly committed to fostering innovation. The article then lists several startups that seemed promising, such as Fireside Fiction, which published short fiction, Kadaxis, which used data science to formulate effective SEO for book discoverability, and Serial Box, which published sections of ebooks and audiobooks like episodes on a television show. Dawson closes the article by saying, "It's clear from these examples that, though the rapid proliferation of publishing startups has died down,

6. Reid and Milliot, "Survival Test."

7. Laura Dawson, "Not All Publishing Startups Have Died," *Publishers Weekly* 264, no. 48 (November 2017): 4, Ebscohost.

entrepreneurs still have creative ideas about how to create, publish, and distribute all kinds of books to all kinds of readers."[8]

It seems that the entrepreneurial spirit of startups in the industry had not diminished but had learned from experimenting with many different innovations so that their attempts could be better targeted. Andrew Albanese conducted an interview with Thad McIlroy, a blogger who conducted extensive research in the digital startup field, to uncover the most recent trends in publishing. In the interview featured in the article "London Digital 2017: Publishing's Startup Culture,"[9] McIlroy explains that he began his research because of his "broader interest in where book publishing is going... [because] surely, the startups should be some kind of leading indicator."[10] When asked about the trends he uncovered, McIlroy explained, "There is a remarkable amount of diversity in the startups, but a few patterns emerge. Generally speaking, self-published authors are the main target."[11] Sadly, while Macmillan acknowledged this trend through Pronoun, they failed to commit enough of their efforts towards making the branch successful. Meanwhile, startups focused on promoting self-publishing were gaining viability.

The answer to why digital startups were posing such a threat to the publishing industry can be found in McIlroy's report, "Startups Within the US Book Publishing Industry."[12] The main explanation is the capacity for "business disruption," or "disruptive technologies." McIlroy

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8. Dawson, "Not All Publishing Startups Have Died."

9. Andrew Albanese, "London Digital 2017: Publishing's Startup Culture," *Publishers Weekly* (Online), March 2017.

10. Albanese, "London Digital 2017."

11. Albanese, "London Digital 2017."

12. Thad McIlroy, "Startups Within the US Book Publishing Industry," *Publishing Research Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2017): 1-9, Ebscohost.

explains that the concept of disruptive technology was first termed in 2005, and it has since become "central to understanding the value of Internet startups—that a new company can propose to disrupt existing business practices using the low-cost scale inherent in the Internet worldwide network."[13] This capacity for disruptive technology, posing a threat to the traditional players of the publishing industry, is so high because there has been very little growth or change since World War II. Because of this stagnation, entrepreneurs can easily justify that "book publishing is ripe for disruption... fertile ground that led to the creation" of hundreds of publishing startups.[14] McIlroy then highlights that self-publishing is a huge shift in the industry that most startups are now chasing, and it represents $500 million in consumer spending.

While the nature of startups is a turbulent one, the publishing field is ripe for enterprise, keeping established traditional publishing companies and agencies on their toes. Many changes in the digital environment, such as social media, blogging, and search engines, have created new challenges for how business is done, but they have also made publishing and audience-building tools accessible to authors who are gaining confidence in a more independent approach to publishing. Ebooks, the most notable digital change in the way books are packaged, may have been the start to disruptions for the industry, but they also propel the next big disruption.

II. The Threat of Self-Publishing

With every passing year, reports and interviews corroborate the story that self-publishing is the way of the future. Ebooks have only made it more possible and less taboo for authors to distribute their content without the help of traditional publishers and agents. Several established

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13. McIlroy, "Startups."

14. McIlroy, "Startups."

authors that had published through traditional publishing houses in the past are seeing the merit in self-publishing, giving rise to the phenomenon of hybrid-career authors and snatching even more money away from the traditional players that otherwise would have been a promised profit. Now, traditional publishers and literary agents must prove they have other services to offer if they want to maintain their roles as essential means to an end.

McIlroy pointed out the key turning point from publishing to self-publishing in his interview, explaining, "Ebooks are a profound change for publishing. Specifically, they're often just a digitization of an analog format. But they've changed the economics, how authors reach readers, the balance of power for the traditional players, the number of books the public can access at any time, and onward from there."[15] In other words, ebooks superficially changed the packaging of a book, but more importantly offered a new pathway for authors to reach their readers without the need of a traditional publisher. Authors can turn to vanity presses if they'd like but can also easily create an ebook by themselves to sell through popular platforms like Amazon. A quick search online turns up hundreds of articles like "How to Make an Ebook in 5 Steps in Under 2 Minutes"[16] and "8 Steps to Creating and Selling Your Ebook on Your Website,"[17] all offering free advice and software. The ease and promise of total control for the author might be hard to turn down, especially after countless agent rejections and the promising results other self-published authors have gotten on their own.

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15. Albanese, "London Digital 2017."

16. "How to Make an Ebook in 5 Steps in Under 2 Minutes," *Designrr*, August 31, 2020, https://designrr.io/how-to-make-an-ebook-in-5-steps-without-breaking-a-sweat/.

17. Jo Gifford, "8 Steps to Creating and Selling Ebooks on Your Website," *Selz*, August 2019, https://founderu.selz.com/7-steps-create-sell-ebook-website/.

In 2015, Lissa Staley wrote "Leading Self-Publishing Efforts in Communities,"[18] in which she promoted an initiative for libraries to guide and support local authors on their journey to become self-published. She explains that traditionally, self-publishing has had the stigma of being a lesser form of book publishing; these works have not gone through the extensive editing and design expertise of traditional publishers that often guarantee a polished book. However, she writes that some libraries, such as Provincetown Public Library in Massachusetts take it upon themselves to make self-published works available through the library's press. They "undertake publishing efforts as a way to demonstrate the viability of self-publishing to their customers and communities."[19] As another example, Staley writes about another successful library publishing program: the Community Novel Project at Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library (TSCPL). In conjunction with a self-publishing platform startup, Smashwords, the library publishes free ebooks and audiobooks from local authors and prints them through Createspace to be sold on Amazon and in the library's Booktique for $5.99. These authors saw significant amounts of preorders and copies sold through this program. Staley concludes, "TSCPL sees self-publishing authors as microbusiness owners and focuses on increasing their access to resources to publish better products."[20] Free resources like articles online and libraries like Provincetown Public Library have been fueling the confidence and success of self-publishing in the digital age. Staley explains, "Any library can position itself to guide local authors toward becoming savvy and competent independent publishers. Ebooks and print-on-demand options leverage the

18. Lissa Staley, "Leading Self-Publishing Efforts in Communities," *American Libraries* 46, no. 1-2 (2015): 18, Ebscohost.

19. Staley, "Leading Self-Publishing Efforts in Communities."

20. Staley, "Leading Self-Publishing Efforts in Communities."

strength of their platforms to reach larger audiences and make publishing possible within the library."[21] This initiative has continued to spread and help many aspiring authors sell their books without a second glance at traditional publishers.

One success story for self-publishing is Christopher Paolini, the author of the self-published phenomenon *Eragon*. Martin Phillip interviewed Paolini to learn more about how *Eragon* came to be. Phillip explains that Paolini's family felt that the draft had commercial potential, so "deciding to publish it themselves as a family business project, they took another year to copyedit the book and prepare it for publication. The book, *Eragon*, was finally self-published in 2001. Christopher had just turned 18."[22] For the next year and a half, the family helped Paolini to promote his book by touring libraries, bookstores, and schools, and soon 10,000 copies had been sold to his young reader fan base. The talented writing and proven success of the book later led to a six-figure deal with Knopf, where it was republished as a four-book series and became Penguin Random House's biggest launch of 2011 with 500,000 copies sold and 2.5 million copies printed.[23] While Paolini chose to move from self-publishing to a traditional publisher with his already successful book, many authors started their careers and continued to flourish in self-publishing alone.

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21. Staley, "Leading Self-Publishing Efforts in Communities."

22. Philip Martin, "Christopher Paolini's Amazing Success: For the Bestselling Author of the Inheritance Cycle, It All Came Together Thanks to Discipline and Learning How to Structure and Pre-Plot a Story," *Writer* (*Kalmbach Publishing Co.*) 125, no. 5 (May 2012): 24-6, Ebscohost.

23. Martin, "Christopher Paolini's Amazing Success."

Deirdre Donahue describes in her article, "Self-Published Authors Hit it Big with E-books,"[24] the unbelievable profit that some authors have made in ebook self-publishing. Donahue begins by highlighting several authors that have made substantial amounts of money self-publishing their ebooks, including J. A. Konrath, who actively promotes self-publishing's ability to hand control back to the authors. She explains that "Konrath, 41, who had modest success writing mysteries published by several traditional publishers (who still publish him), is now also a best-selling writer of self-published e-books." Konrath's story shows just because book ideas are not favored by publishers and agents does not mean they will not be successful. Because of this reality, traditional publishing is missing out on the profit that acquiring these books would provide. In fact, Konrath's ebooks became bestsellers whereas his traditionally published books only did moderately well. Further, Donahue writes, "Meet attorney and debut novelist Darcie Chan, 37. This year, she self-published her debut novel, *The Mill River Recluse*, after being rejected by more than 100 literary agents... It spent 16 weeks on USA TODAY's best-seller list, peaking at No. 6. Chan says she has sold 416,000 copies of the 99-cent e-book."[25] In this case, agents weren't willing to take a chance on this debut author, so Chan took her career into her own hands and became a bestselling author without traditional publishing's help.

Debut authors are not the only ones turning to self-publishing; there are countless stories of established traditionally published authors turning to self-publishing as well. One example is

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24. Dierdre Donahue, "Self-Published Authors Hit it Big with E-books," *USA Today*, December 13, 2011, http://rlib.pace.edu/login?url=https://search-ebscohost-com.rlib.pace.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=J0E413631549111&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

25. Donahue, "Self-Published Authors Hit it Big with E-books."

Michael Prescott, whose thrillers were originally rejected by traditional publishers. Donahue writes, "Today, the soft-spoken Prescott, 51, is living his dream. He is one of 15 self-published authors whose e-books, often selling for just 99 cents, have cracked the top 150 on USA TODAY's Best-Selling Books list this year, threatening to change the face of publishing."[26] With a low price point like that, many would not expect a large profit, but Prescott has earned more than $300,000 by selling over 800,000 digital copies this year.[27] Traditional publishers are now missing out on a swath of widely popular Prescott novels while the author is raking in a larger profit than he would have with a conventional book deal.

Michelle Nelson-Schmidt is a picture book author and illustrator that turned to self-publishing later in her career when her publisher rejected her idea for a middle grade novel. In "Reaching Readers, No Matter the Means,"[28] Matia Burnett explains that "Right around the time that Nelson-Schmidt signed her contract, Kane Miller was acquired by a direct-sales company, Usborne Books & More... [and as a result] her titles would not be sold in major retail outlets. Rather than panic, Nelson-Schmidt adjusted her approach."[29] Nelson-Schmidt took the initiative to market herself, using her networking skills to speak directly to booksellers and educators to sell her books where her publisher no longer would. In this spirit of self-promotion, Nelson-Schmidt realized she could publish her own books, too. Burnett states, "Having name recognition and a robust audience... came in handy when she decided to self-publish her first middle grade

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26. Donahue, "Self-Published Authors Hit it Big with E-books."

27. Donahue, "Self-Published Authors Hit it Big with E-books."

28. Matia Burnett, "Reaching Readers, No Matter the Means," *Publishers Weekly* 265, no. 22 (2018): 43-45, Ebscohost.

29. Burnett, "Reaching Readers, No Matter the Means."

novel. 'I originally offered it to my publisher, but they declined to buy it... It's a story I really need to tell, and self-publishing made a lot of sense.'"[30] Prescott and Nelson-Schmidt's reasons for diverging from the traditional path to self-publish are only a few of many.

An article from 2016, "Why Traditionally Published Authors are Choosing to go Indie,"[31] gives a few examples of this trend. Amy Edelman writes that several authors, like Cornelia Funke and David Mamet, have chosen to begin self-publishing after lucrative careers in traditional publishing because of creative differences and disappointment in the services that their publishers provide.[32] In the past, authors have stuck with their publishers because of a lack of other viable options, but now that self-publishing has proven to be legitimate option for debut and established authors alike, it is easier to cut ties with the traditional publishing process when an author becomes disillusioned with their publisher. Author Cornelia Funke decided to launch her own publishing company to continue her bestselling *Mirrorworld* series when creative differences with her publisher arose. Edelman adds, "There were other issues as well, including Little, Brown marketing Funke's *Mirrorworld* series in the 9-12 age range despite Funke intending it for readers 14 and up."[33]

Funke no longer saw a benefit to publishing traditionally, especially as she could keep more profit as a self-publisher. Edelman explains that Funke was able to not only release new content, but rerelease old books, making them available to readers again and allowing her to

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30. Burnett, "Reaching Readers, No Matter the Means."

31. Amy Edelman, "Why Traditionally Published Authors are Choosing to Go Indie," Huffpost.com, Verizon Media, October 19, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-traditionally-publish_b_8294250.

32. Edelman, "Choosing to Go Indie."

33. Edelman, "Choosing to Go Indie."

"reap up to 70% of a book's sales price—much larger than the typical royalties return from working with a publisher, which can be as little as 7% for print books of 25% for digital."[34] With negotiations of advances and royalties out of the way, Funke took control of her content and enjoyed the rewards.

Edelman lists many other authors that found refuge in the freedom of self-publishing as well, including Eileen Goudge, who was no longer happy only writing the content that her publisher would buy. Edelman writes that once Goudge began to self-publish, she "was able to turn her attention towards the mystery genre, something she'd always wanted to write."[35] In addition to gaining creative control, Goudge can use the increased money she makes on her books—no longer held to the conventional advance and royalties deal of a publisher—to sell works at a lower price. By selling at an affordable price, Edelman explains, she can build her audience in this new genre.[36]

Regaining control over one's career is a common interest for Warren Adler. Adler, who traditionally published 27 novels, decided to divert to publishing his works through Print on Demand services. In an interview, Adler explained, "Beyond moments of joy and fulfillment of which there have been many, the obsession of control lingers. Technology offered me the gift of independence and self-sovereignty, and I jumped at it."[37] Edelman concludes by saying that having so many well-established authors choose to self-publish has been a key factor in legitimizing and popularizing self-publishing.

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34. Edelman, "Choosing to Go Indie."

35. Edelman, "Choosing to Go Indie."

36. Edelman, "Choosing to Go Indie."

37. Edelman, "Choosing to Go Indie."

Beside the grumblings of authors who want more control over their career, the marketing

of their books, and their profit, there are movements on the side of publishing houses that might

cause some to favor self-publishing. As the world of self-publishing flourishes and loses its

stigma, the traditional publishing world is becoming more consolidated, and some feel that it is

less forgiving. The tension between authors and publishers is not a new issue, as can be seen by

Carolyn E. Lipscomb's analysis in her article, "Mergers in the Publishing Industry."[38] She writes

that the consolidation of publishing from many independent companies to huge corporations

swallowing each other up worries many who care about the quality of literature published. She

points out that *Business Week* expressed the concern over increasing amounts of mergers in the

industry in 1970.[39] Lipscomb quotes *Business Week*:

> With the big fish swallowing the little fish, the book business is becoming increasingly
> competitive and brutal. It is evolving into an industry of giants and dwarfs with middle-
> size companies a vanishing species. Financially oriented executives are taking over where
> traditionalist genteel editors used to hold sway.[40]

This quote is not the only evidence of this concern. Lipscomb goes on to explain that "The

regular item on mergers and acquisitions in the *ALA Yearbook* reported in 1978 the Authors

Guild of America's view that publishing mergers represented a threat to free expression by

reducing outlets for authors and the number of titles published."[41] A concern about free

expression hit the publishing industry like an accusation, spurring a response from the

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38. Carolyn E. Lipscomb, "Mergers in the Publishing Industry," *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association* vol 89, no. 3 (2001): 307-8. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC34566/.

39. Lipscomb, "Mergers in the Publishing Industry."

40. Lipscomb, "Mergers in the Publishing Industry."

41. Lipscomb, "Mergers in the Publishing Industry."

Association of American Publishers (AAP). Lipscomb states that the AAP responded, "The

number of firms had increased by 25% and the number of titles published by 200% in the prior

twenty years... [the 1982 growth in the number of publishers] is our best assurance that the

critical balance of corporate size and type still exists in publishing."[42] Their response further

explained that Congressional Research Service concluded that the book publishing industry was

"not particularly concentrated."[43]

Fifteen years later, the concern is still prevalent—Steven Barkan writes in his article

"TAA President: Publishing Consolidation has Consequences,"[44] that the academic world and

textbook authors were being deeply affected by publishing consolidation. He writes that

consolidation "reduces the publishing options for academic and textbook authors, making it more

difficult for authors to publish their work than in years past when more companies and more

editors were seeking their work."[45] He also cites Julia Wright of Nova Scotia's Dalhousie

University, who wrote that "Every time the large corporations buy a small publisher there are

fewer acquisitions editors, fewer book series and so fewer voices in the discussion about what is

worth publishing."[46] Whether the accusations hold merit or the retorts are true, the tension

between author and publisher is real and growing as authors become more empowered and are

offered enticing alternatives. If more authors find that it has become too competitive to get deals

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42. Lipscomb, "Mergers in the Publishing Industry."

43. Lipscomb, "Mergers in the Publishing Industry."

44. Steven Barkan, "TAA President: Publishing Consolidation has Consequences," *Textbook and Academic Authors Association*, February 10, 2016, https://blog.taaonline.net/2016/02/taa-presidents-message-publishing-consolidation-has-consequences/.

45. Barkan, "TAA President: Publishing Consolidation has Consequences."

46. Barkan, "TAA President: Publishing Consolidation has Consequences."

with publishers, then more authors will attempt to self-publish instead, potentially fueling digital

startups that cater to their needs.

III. Literary Agents Feel the Pressure to Adapt

When traditional publishers lose business, so do literary agents. While editors have salaries,

agents only make money by commission, relying on their sales of books to publishing houses to

survive. Agents have long been deemed the "gatekeepers" of publishing; in most cases, they are

the first stop for a serious author to be considered by a publishing company. Unfortunately, this

also means they are often the first and only group of professionals from which authors receive

rejections, affecting how many authors view agents in general. With the rise in self-publishing

and digital publishing startups, there is a rise in alternatives to not only traditional publishing

companies, but agents as well. Regardless of alternatives to agents, many authors have succeeded

in book sales despite lacking agent representation. The burning question becomes: what do you

do when all the roles you fill in your industry have been substituted by cheaper and more

enticing options? Hopefully, you evolve.

The threat that literary agents face and their attempts to evolve is exactly what Janet

Spavlick addresses in her article, "Fitting Literary Agents into the Digital Publishing

Equation."[47] First, she reiterates how self-publishing has become popular and a viable option for

authors as more people prove they can be successful with ebooks. Throughout this phenomenon,

however, Spavlick complains that not much has been said about how literary agents fit into this

new environment. She writes, "Traditionally, it's been the role of the agents to advocate for their

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47. Janet M. Spavlick, "Fitting Literary Agents into the Digital Equation," *EContent* 34, no. 7 (2011): 8-12. Ebscohost.

clients with publishers—negotiating contracts, helping in cover decisions, and things of that nature—for a percentage of the author's earnings. In the world of self-publishing, though, it's harder for agents to find their place at the table."[48] Spavlick gives the example of Amanda Hocking, who had been rejected so many times by publishing houses that she turned to self-publishing her work in ebook format and sold more than a million copies. Hocking's success turned heads of publishing houses, who then entered a bidding war that resulted in a four-book deal. If authors can prove to publishing houses that their work is valuable without an agent advocating for them, what will happen to the opinion and the role of agents within the publishing industry?

In Amanda Hocking's case, she took on agent Steve Axelrod to handle the contract negotiations with the publishing house. In cases where self-published authors are not interested in being traditionally published, or do not receive an offer, staying self-published and never needing an agent is a sustainable option. Karen Hunter, president of First One Publishing, does not recommend authors seek an agent if they only wish to publish in ebook format. She says, "I'm an author as well and started in this business as an author. Of the 20-plus books I've [written], I've only used an agent three times."[49] First One Publishing is a digital publisher started in 2011 that acquires ebooks, started by Karen Hunter, publisher of the Simon & Schuster imprint Karen Hunter Publishing. Hunter explains that literary agents have not been involved in most of their acquisitions at the digital publisher, saying, "There are so many self-published and

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48. Spavlick, "Fitting Literary Agents into the Digital Equation."

49. Spavlick, "Fitting Literary Agents into the Digital Equation."

new authors out there who cannot get an agent that we have been very fortunate to not have to worry about [acquiring] content and quality books."[50]

Another perspective from the publishing house side is from Andrew Martin, publisher at St. Martin's Press. In his interview with Deirdre Donahue, Martin explained that publishers are beginning to change the way they find content in the digital age. Donahue writes, "In the midst of this revolution, Martin sees a silver lining for traditional publishers. In the past, editors, agents and publishers depended on their gut about whether a book would connect with readers. Now the stories are being pre-tested in the online marketplace. 'It's like the old-fashioned slush pile being road tested—with the cream rising to top.'"[51] What Martin does not say is how this leaves agents out of the publishing equation; if editors can find quality content that has proven successful already, then they do not need agents to be the "gatekeepers." If authors realize that they are more likely to get a traditional publishing deal if they self-publish first without the help of an agent, then they might attempt that before they attempt to query agents. When a traditional publishing house reaches out to a self-published author, it seems the only thing keeping agents in play is the house's suggestion an author should get an agent before the contracts move forward. How substantial is this caveat, and will it last?

While many remain optimistic that the traditional publishing process will stay strong, Karen Hunt warns agents to keep an eye on industry changes. She states, "Literary agents [can't] ignore the digital publishing marketplace and the impact that ebooks have had on the industry... They have no choice but to focus on it and change the way they've done their business or be left behind."[52] Many agencies have assessed their options and taken different avenues to make

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50. Spavlick, "Fitting Literary Agents into the Digital Equation."

51. Deirdre Donahue, "Self-published Authors Hit it Big with E-books."

themselves more valuable in the publishing process. For example, Dystel &

Goderich Literary Management (DGLM) began offering epublishing services to its clients in

2011. Spavlick refers to their blog post, which explains how their new services work:

> [We will] facilitate e-publishing for those of our clients who decide that they want to go this route, after consultation and strategizing about whether they should try traditional publishing first... We will charge a 15% commission for our services in helping them project manage everything from choosing a cover artist to working with a copyeditor to uploading their work. We will continue to negotiate all agreements that may ensue as a result of e-publishing, try to place subsidiary rights where applicable, collect monies and review statements to make sure the author is being paid. In short, we will continue to be agents and do the myriad things that agents do.[53]

In their post, DGLM recognizes that there are some issues with their new venture; they suppose

that many will think they are taking advantage of authors who can't sell otherwise, or that it is a

conflict of interest.[54] Spavlick explains that, just as DGLM had supposed, there was a mix of

support and disagreement. She states, "Some who commented [online] were in support of... the

agency as 'embracing change,' while others disagreed with the idea of charging a commission to

assist authors with digital self-publishing services. After all, part of the benefit of self-publishing

is the ability to keep the profits for yourself."[55]

     DGLM decided to emphasize that they are agents, not publishers, but in contrast, Ed

Victor Ltd. opened up its own publishing arm, Bedford Square Books. The issue of conflict of

interest is also prevalent in this situation, where one agency acts as both agent and publisher. To

address this, Charlie Campbell, an agent of Ed Victor Ltd., clarified that there is no commission

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52. Spavlick, "Fitting Literary Agents into the Digital Equation."

53. Spavlick, "Fitting Literary Agents into the Digital Equation."

54. "Announcement!," *Dystell, Goderich, and Bourett LLC Blog & Newsletter Archive*, June 27, 2011, https://dystelblogarchive.wordpress.com/2011/06/27/announcement/.

55. Spavlick, "Fitting Literary Agents into the Digital Equation."

earned on books published through their publishing arm. In his interview with Spavlick, he explained, "Of course, there is the possibility of a conflict of interest, but we are doing all we can to avoid such a thing. We would always prefer to be the agent than the publisher, and so, if a suitable offer was made [to an author] by a publisher, we would accept that and revert to being the agent on the deal."[56] At the time of the interview, the goal of Bedford Square Books was to publish out-of-print titles by existing clients, and no plan had yet been made to publish new material, but Ed Victor Ltd. agents were open to the idea when the right opportunity arises. Campbell continued, "As for our long-term plans... like everyone in this fast-changing digital environment, it is hard to predict anything concrete, except that we will continue to act in the best interests of authors."[57] Since the launch, Bedford Square Books has gone on to publish only two original works and eleven client's out-of-print works for sale in ebook and print-on-demand. The Bedford Square Books website states that "Publishing in this way will allow us to continue the life of our authors' work as well as bring them to a new platform for the 21st Century reader,"[58] but the option is not used often by their clients or new authors.

Similarly, Waterside Literary Agency partnered with Vook, a digital publishing startup, to enter the digital publishing arena. Wendy Werris reported on this new venture in her article "Waterside Literary Agency Establishes Digital Publishing Division Powered by Vook."[59] She explains that William Gladstone had partnered with Vook to publish ebooks through the newly

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56. Spavlick, "Fitting Literary Agents into the Digital Equation."

57. Spavlick, "Fitting Literary Agents into the Digital Equation."

58. "Home," *Bedford Square Books: eBook and Print On Demand*, 2016, http://www.bedfordsquarebooks.com/index.htm.

59. Wendy Werris, "Waterside Literary Agency Establishes Digital Publishing Division Powered by Vook," *Publishers Weekly Online*, April 2012.

established Waterfront Press to offer authors a 75% royalty rate. In an interview, Gladstone

explained, "It's all or nothing in New York, where the big houses either pay advances of a

million dollars or ten thousand dollars, and offer e-book royalties as low as 25%. I hope to

change that landscape with my own digital publishing division."[60] Werris further stated that

Waterfront Press would be publishing through both ebook format and print-on-demand, but that

it would focus on both regular and enhanced ebooks. Gladstone's wish was that this effort would

help the publishing industry move towards internet distribution. When asked about his choice to

partner with Vook, he explained, "A publishing partner has to be in it for the future, for the long

haul... I found this kind of commitment in Vook. Also, their ability to create enhanced e-books

was a major incentive in choosing them as our distribution partner."[61] Gladstone believed that

ebooks would be the primary source of income for authors, so retaining ebook rights for authors

in publishing deals was a priority.[62] However, over the years, publishers have almost entirely

secured ebook rights as non-negotiable rights in contracts, and the ebook format did not end up

being as dominant as many predicted. Waterfront Press has since revised their business ventures,

building up their platform to offer audiobooks and traditional print books as well as print-on-

demand and ebooks. Now, their website explains "Waterside Publishing titles have sold millions

of copies and our primary focus is on authors who have established audiences and are able to

promote their books aggressively."[63] The digital publisher's shift from ebook-centric publishing

to all formats, as well as keeping brick-and-mortar institutions like bookstores involved, shows

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60. Werris, "Waterside Literary Agency."

61. Werris, "Waterside Literary Agency."

62. Werris, "Waterside Literary Agency."

63. "Book Publishing," *Waterside Productions, Inc.*, Waterside Productions, 2018,
https://www.waterside.com/publishing/.

that the digital age did not move in the direction that many believed. Instead, Waterside

Publishing realized that digital innovation was pushing authors to be more involved in their

online platforms and marketing.

While many attempted to predict the future of publishing and the effects of digital

innovation, most clung to the concept that the significant change would be the format of the book

itself. Although justified, the fixation on digital formats left a much more important shift in

publishing underappreciated and less documented—how digital innovation is fundamentally

changing the process and avenues of publishing. In Michael Bourne's article "Inside Publishing:

The Book Publicist,"[64] these major changes are considered to better understand the future of

publishing. Bourne states:

> Forty or fifty years ago, if you were a writer who wanted to reach readers, all you really
> needed to do was write a great book. Once your book had been acquired, publicists
> quietly reached out to the editors of the book sections that then filled most big-city
> newspapers, along with a few prestigious magazines and radio programs. Critics at those
> outlets wrote reviews, and if the reviews were positive, readers went out and bought the
> book.[65]

As Bourne explains, this entire process is almost unrecognizable to modern publishing. The

digital age brought about websites like Amazon and Goodreads that turned readers into critics

and significantly lessened the importance of professional criticisms. Many literary magazines

and newspapers have removed book reviews from their print editions, if they still have them, to

focus on their digital publications.[66] More importantly, the process of finding authors has

radically changed.

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64. Michael Bourne, "Inside Publishing: The Book Publicist," *Poets & Writers: 50 & Forward*, Poets & Writers, Feb 12, 2020, https://www.pw.org/content/inside_publishing_the_book_publicist_0.

65. Bourne, "Inside Publishing."

Social media platforms turned private individuals into public brands that must be built and constantly active to promote book sales, which means authors can no longer rely on their writing talent to make a profit. Katie Leimkuehler explains this in her article, "How Social Media is Changing the Publishing Industry."[67] She states:

> The biggest asset authors are gaining from social media is a platform. They're gaining marketing momentum before their books are released and creating buzz that they would never have had before... The key for authors and writers is to engage with their fans and followers on a personal level. People aren't looking to be sold on a product; they're looking to be sold on the product's creator.[68]

While this change in publishing has given authors a free way to market their books, it also has changed agents' and editors' expectations of authors before they decide to represent or acquire the book. In *Forbes*, John Hall wrote an article, "3 Ways This Startup Aims to Democratize Book Publishing,"[69] that addresses this issue. He writes, "Literary agents have more methods than ever for heaving even the most adventurous and resolute new author out the door — particularly if the author doesn't arrive on the agent's doorstep with an existing base of eager readers."[70] As the rise of social media gives way to authors reaching their current and potential readers, publishers and agents expect authors to have built their platforms before they approach with a book. In a response that echoes many authors' gripes, John Hall asks, "What new and

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66. Bourne, "Inside Publishing."

67. Katie Leimkuehler, "How Social Media is Changing the Publishing Industry," *SocialMediaToday*, Industry Dive, Nov 13, 2012, https://www.socialmediatoday.com/content/how-social-media-changing-publishing-industry.

68. Leimkuehler, "Social Media."

69. John Hall, "3 Ways This Startup Aims to Democratize Book Publishing," *Forbes*, Oct 10, 2018, https://www.forbes.com/sites/johnhall/2018/10/10/3-ways-this-startup-aims-to-democratize-book-publishing/#7b69136421c2.

70. Hall, "Democratize Book Publishing."

unaided author can show up with the needed number of followers in tow? I would guess the number may amount to about zero."[71] All these changes reflect a movement to online presence, but they also point to what some have been calling a "democratization" of book publishing; while the traditional publishing process has become arguably more narrow, other avenues have made publishing available to all. For authors that struggle to become impressive enough online to grab the attention of an agent, digital publishing startups have rushed to the rescue.

Ready to take advantage of this new author-centric and self-publishing-friendly environment are many digital publishing startups that answer the call for pre-publishing "buzz." *Publishers Weekly* brought up a successful example: Publishizer. In the article, "Literary Agency 2.0: Publishizer is Building an International Virtual Agency,"[72] Ed Nawotka explains that the business was originally a happy accident—a good idea for one aspiring author turned a successful business model. Once they established themselves, Publishizer evolved with needs of the industry:

> Initially, Publishizer launched its own crowdfunding platform to fund books that would then be self-published, taking 5% of the money raised as a fee for the service. As the company grew, it began seeing that publishers were interested in acquiring books that had garnered more than 500 preorders on the platform and began placing books with publishers on behalf of authors. Today, Publishizer takes a fee of 30% of the crowdfunding campaign's earnings, but it gets no cut of any ensuing publishing deal, and authors are also free to sign up agents and publishers on their own.[73]

Since its beginning, the article reports, Publishizer had signed on 800 authors to raise $1.6 million and sealed 160 publishing deals with established publishing houses, including Harper

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71. Hall, "Democratize Book Publishing."

72. Ed Nawotka, "Literary Agency 2.0: Publishizer is Building an International Virtual Agency," *Publisher's Weekly* 266, no. 30 (July 2019): 16. Ebscohost.

73. Nawotka, "Literary Agency 2.0."

Collins, BenBella, and Hay House. Nawotka continues that this record of success made

Publishizer confident that they could soon sign deals as if they were a traditional literary agency.

Nawotka states, "With Publishizer as the agent, Loudermilk... sold his next book, *Experience the*

Revolution, to Wiley in April after 517 preorders. In return, Publishizer is taking the traditional

15% fee against advances and royalties for domestic rights, as well as 20% for foreign rights, on

top of the initial 30% for the crowdfunding."[74] Publishizer has had a lot of success with

nonfiction since the beginning, but they have also begun working with fiction.[75]

John Hall brings up Publishizer later in his *Forbes* article, explaining that the startup is

responding to the industry's growing standard to have books prove themselves on author's online

platforms and the market before acquisition is considered. In an interview with Publishizer's

CMO, Lee Constantine, Hall outlines the ways this digital startup is disrupting and

democratizing publishing. The first item on the list is that there are no more rejections of new

book ideas: Publishizer allows any author to use their services, regardless of content or

subjective potential. Hall writes, "Crowdsourcing can eradicate these traditional roadblocks and

inefficiencies by validating book ideas with readers who preorder copies after reviewing an

author's proposal, which Publishizer helps create according to industry standards."[76] In other

words, Publishizer puts the book idea out there for readers to decide if it is worth publishing by

"voting" with their money. Hall continues, "Authors then get matched to publishers based on the

specific interests of acquisitions editors — before any of the book is written. So rather than being

painfully rejected dozens of times over months or years, authors can be quickly connected with

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74. Nawotka, "Literary Agency 2.0."

75. Nawotka, "Literary Agency 2.0."

76. Hall, "Democratize Book Publishing."

interested publishers."[77] This crowdsourcing alternative helps the author to prove the worth of their book by showing that they can gain a following by themselves. In turn, the need for an agent is weakened; if Publishizer can connect successfully crowdsourced books with interested publishers, then the agent's role of representing and selling the book disappears.

The second item on the list addresses the stigma of self-publishing and the realities of lesser-quality production. Hall explains that using Publishizer's services would help authors to publish high quality books without the "gatekeepers" of the industry imposing their importance. He states, "Most authors find themselves trapped between the restricted but more respected path of traditional publishing and the less credible but more attainable path of self-publishing. While still in its infancy, book crowdfunding has the potential to delightfully combine the advantages of both, and in the process democratize an entire industry."[78] With the digital startup's help, authors could tackle publishing in a whole new way. He continues, "Crowdfunding may just turn the entire traditional publishing model upside down. Readers may even take the place of agents, finding authors that please them and not a publisher's business algorithm. Crowdfunding may single-handedly bring about an era that we have not seen before in publishing."[79]

There are many examples of author success using Publishizer that cannot go unnoticed. For example, the *Orangeville Banner* published an article, "Going His Own Way,"[80] in which a local aspiring author is highlighted. J. T. Ruby launched his first book with the help of

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77. Hall, "Democratize Book Publishing."

78. Hall, "Democratize Book Publishing."

79. Hall, "Democratize Book Publishing."

80. "Going His Own Way," *Orangeville Banner*, (Orangeville, Ontario), Feb 29, 2016, Gale General OneFile, https://link-galecom.rlib.pace.edu/apps/doc/A444821186/STND?u=nysl_me_pace&sid=STND&xid=9e53f2 7c.

Publishizer's crowdfunding service and raised four thousand dollars in forty-five days. He used

this money to create a professional cover for hardcover and paperback, hire an editor, and fund

the marketing of the book, all to produce a book that would fool the traditional publishing

industry. Making the book available on Amazon, a local store, and his website, he sold a

thousand copies and was entitled to as much as seventy percent of the sales—more than a

traditional publisher. The *Orangeville Banner* called Ruby's success a "testament to an evolution

in publishing."[81] A similar article was written by M2 Presswire, "A captivating modern

adaptation of Greek mythology raising funds on Publishizer."[82] The article highlights Ivan Del

Valle, IT Enterprise Architect from Puerto Rico, who decided to launch his author career through

Publishizer. It states that Del Valle used Publishizer to launch his debut book titled *The Ring Of*

The Witch and intends to use the funds to publish, "hoping to make as much impact as possible

in the literary fiction category within the writing industry."[83] The article goes on to state that the

book *The Ring Of The Witch: The Curse of Apollo* is in the middle of its campaign and that two

publishers have already shown interest.[84]

The concept that digital publishing startups like Publishizer might turn the industry

upside-down is not a new one, yet it is still startling news to traditional players. To authors,

however, it is a welcome idea. Authors and readers have gained more influence on what gets

published during the digital age, where open discussion, digital formats, e-commerce, and the

budget-friendly options for advertisement and promotion on free social platforms are all made

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81. "Going His Own Way."

82. "A Captivating Modern Adaptation of Greek Mythology Raising Funds on Publishizer," *M2 Presswire*, Normans Media Ltd, March 27, 2017, Gale General OneFile.

83. "A Captivating Modern Adaptation."

84. "A Captivating Modern Adaptation."

possible. At the same time, the role of agents as "gatekeepers" is meaning less when startups can prove the value of books. Additionally, the phenomenon of agencies adding publishing services raises questions: Is the role of the literary agent being threatened to the point that their services have to reach into other roles in order to stay relevant? Is Publishizer the answer to what must replace literary agencies in the digital age?

IV. COVID-19 Accelerates Digital Innovations

The need for digital innovation had never been clearer than when the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world. Entire countries implemented strict emergency lockdowns and prepared their healthcare workers for the worst. Aside from the human tragedies that so many faced due to the virus, the economy suffered unprecedented blows to its stability and businesses scrambled to alter their daily operations and strategies. Across the board, industries realized that the use of digital tools was the only way to continue business, and services that had already begun utilizing digital tools to create new markets or fulfill needs suddenly received an influx of users and customers. Experimentations of remote work, digital events, and e-commerce possibilities all became necessary realities that businesses had to embrace wholeheartedly or risk failure. The publishing industry was no exception.

The pandemic altered the way that business was done on every level. Consumers isolated in their homes, most stores were forced to close indefinitely, supply chains suffered, and employees had to adjust to working remotely. Switching gears to digital solutions salvaged many aspects of the process for publishers, authors, and agents. In *Publishers Weekly*, Amy Roost

explained in her article, "An Unfortunate Ripple Effect,"[85] how each section of the book world

was affected by the pandemic. First, she explains from her point of view as an author, saying,

"The coronavirus outbreak is punishing the economy, but as a debut author, I never imagined the

release of my forthcoming anthology would illustrate the impact of economic ripple effects... I

decided I couldn't in good conscience travel from city to city hosting large gatherings."[86] Roost

decided to abstain from her author tour, and her plans to have voter registration booths set up

next to her author booths were thwarted. The effect she was hoping her book would have on her

readers was dampened by the lockdowns and uncertainty. Additionally, Roost had hoped to

make enough on the book to offset the costs of producing and promoting it, but those hopes were

dashed as well. She states, "My financial goals were to earn enough royalties to fund the tour,

pay contributors an honorarium, and offset my $925-permonth health insurance premium for the

remainder of the year. It looks like even these modest goals may have been too ambitious."[87]

Event cancellations do not only affect the author, but the publisher who was counting on

book sales that would result from them. Roost continues by explaining that "event cancellations

mean a high influx of book returns from retailers. These come at significant cost to the press's

bottom line..."[88] She also interviewed the publisher and editor-in-chief of Regal House, who

stated that their print runs were "determined by retail preorders in the fall of 2019, long before

coronavirus was on anyone's radar, and, like all trade publishers, Regal House relies upon

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85. Amy Roost, "An Unfortunate Ripple Effect," *Publishers Weekly*, 267, no. 12 (March 2020): 88, Ebschohost.

86. Roost, "An Unfortunate Ripple Effect."

87. Roost, "An Unfortunate Ripple Effect."

88. Roost, "An Unfortunate Ripple Effect."

bookstore events to drive buzz and ultimately revenue to recoup invested production and printing costs."[89] Roost is a former marketing consultant to independent booksellers, so she understood what these cancellations would mean for bookstores that relied on events to boost sales. Many wanted to reschedule events for the fall or follow rigorous guidelines that would attempt to create safe environments for the events, but most cancelled events completely. She explains, "authors canceled their in-store events due to fear of contracting the virus, a sense of moral obligation, and/or because they anticipated a low turnout. Given the fluid circumstances, Politics and Prose now offers authors a digital option. My coeditor and I are scheduled to present an online reading..."[90] Roost concludes by remarking that book tours have been losing their status as an industry staple for years now, but that publishers still rely on tours with celebrity authors to "contribute to propping up an industry with wafer-thin margins."[91]

Her outlook is dim, but industry professionals have also been working hard to replace the traditional book tours with a more sustainable and cost-effective option: virtual author events. During the early stages of the pandemic lockdowns, Linda Duggins, senior publicity director at Grand Central Publishing, an imprint of Hachette, explained in a video call that the move towards virtual events could and should be a permanent change if they prove viable. When asked specifically about virtual author tours in the future, she affirmed, "Absolutely, if we can sell the same amount or more books while cutting the cost of travel for authors, there's no reason to not move most or all of author appearances to digital instead of in-person events."[92]

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89. Roost, "An Unfortunate Ripple Effect."

90. Roost, "An Unfortunate Ripple Effect."

91. Roost, "An Unfortunate Ripple Effect."

92. Linda Duggins, video call with the author, April 1, 2020.

Not surprisingly, digital startups saw this shift in the publishing industry and the issues that rose from the disruption of the pandemic. After several months, publishers had regained some footing and began implementing the virtual events and digital solutions mentioned above, but in the meantime, many authors' book launches and events had been irreversibly impacted. This issue gave way to digital startups like A Mighty Blaze, which is described on its website as "a social media community and organization helping writers and readers connect online in the age of Covid-19 and beyond—and helping all literary endeavors pivot to the digital age."[93] A Mighty Blaze has been very successful since its start by two *New York Times* bestselling authors, moving entire book festivals online and offering many social media events that help authors and readers connect over new books that would have otherwise been lost in the overwhelming pandemic environment. They have been promoted by *The Washington Post*, *Oprah Magazine*, *People*, *Publishers Weekly*, *The Boston Globe*, and *Entrepreneur*.[94] A movement as successful as this is more than a passing phase; digital startups like A Mighty Blaze have their eyes set far beyond the length of the pandemic.

Digital startups have continued to step in where they see a need, and needs have been abundant during the pandemic. *Forbes* issued an article directly addressing this: "How Digital Transformation And Innovation Have Been Accelerated Due To Covid-19."[95] Rishi Khanna

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93. "Home," *A Mighty Blaze*, accessed September 29, 2020, https://www.amightyblaze.com/.

94. "Home." *A Mighty Blaze*.

95. Rishi Khanna, "How Digital Transformation And Innovation Have Been Accelerated Due To Covid-19," *Forbes*, July 24, 2020, https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2020/07/24/how-digital-transformation-and-innovation-have-been-accelerated-due-to-covid-19/#1630445413d3.

starts, "For many years, business owners and leaders have known that digital transformation was essential; however, Covid-19 made the urgency to deploy digital solutions necessary, as opposed to a luxury. As a result, we've seen some great innovations coming forward."[96] Khanna bases his article on the "theory of constraints," where all businesses have had to confront their weakest links and work on them in order to survive during the pandemic, and as a result, digital innovation has soared. He continues that without digital innovation, companies would not have survived—it has created a sense of urgency to invest in digital transformation that has never existed before. Khanna concludes that "While this sense of urgency has caused a bit of anxiety among business leaders... it has undoubtedly been a good thing in the long run. This means that businesses are now set up for success and have undergone digital transformation in a much shorter time frame."[97]

Publishing houses, led by Penguin Random House, have started to embrace change and rapid digital innovation, especially once they were pressured by severe circumstances to deliver on their promises to bookstores, authors, and agents, or suffer massive losses. In his article "PRH Ups Digital Efforts in the Covid Era,"[98] John Maher describes the many efforts that Penguin Random House has made to add to the digital space of the publishing industry, even before the pandemic hit. He states, "Many of Penguin Random House's recent virtual efforts build on the direct-to-consumer marketing programs that were put in place across the company more than a decade ago and have been maintained primarily by the publisher's Integrated Marketing

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96. Khanna, "Digital Transformation And Innovation."

97. Khanna, "Digital Transformation and Innovation."

98. John Maher, "PRH Ups Digital Efforts in the Covid Era," *Publishers Weekly* 267, no. 19 (May 2020): 5-10, Ebscohost.

Publicity Department."[99] Maher lists some examples, including an audio author series featuring

phone conversations between authors and editors called "I'm Glad You Asked," a virtual book

club called "How Have I Not Read This?," Instagram programs like "Lunch & Learn" and

"Random Pantry," and a virtual event program launched in the hopes of "driving more book

sales on different online platforms, including Bookshop."[100] Maher also interviewed Theresa

Zoro, executive vice president and creative director for the marketing and public relations

department, who explained that when the pandemic hit, they knew it was time to try new things

and pivot towards digital ideas, so they launched many ideas that they had been developing in

the past while adapting in-person events to be virtual as well. While the transition was difficult,

Theresa explained that it was necessary and beneficial for the company and the industry:

> What I see happening is that different imprints and different companies are producing bespoke events and experiences around their content, and I think we should all be doing that. There are lots of readers out there. And I think for a long time, because of very traditional methods, we tended to reach a similar group of readers. This has given us all an opportunity to go a little bit beyond that, but also to produce content that feels really authentic to certain groups of people who are hungry for it.[101]

This interview turned out to more of a warning to other publishers that Penguin Random

House was on the move towards taking drastic steps regarding these industry trends. A few

months later, in August, Penguin Random House announced its division in Spain, PRH Grupo

Editorial, had secured a new partnership with Wattpad Books, a self-publishing platform. Porter

Anderson writes in the article "Spain's Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial and Canada's

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99. Maher, "PRH Ups Digital Efforts in the Covid Era."

100. Maher, "PRH Ups Digital Efforts in the Covid Era."

101. Maher, "PRH Ups Digital Efforts in the Covid Era."

Wattpad Strike Rights Deal"[102] that this deal would result in a new PRH imprint called Wattpad

that would "publish Spanish-language Wattpad stories in Spain and in other Spanish-language

markets... The deal will also see Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial granted translation

rights to English-language titles from Wattpad Books."[103] The literary director for children's

books at this PRH division explained that "Wattpad is the world's leading social storytelling

platform and partnering with them gives us access to a strong pool of diverse new voices in the

Spanish language."[104] In one strategic, bold move, Penguin Random House has created a division

that is devoted solely to acquiring content from an online self-publishing platform. As the

publisher who often paves way for others, this deal is a monumental red flag to agents that the

tides have changed for self-publishing, even in the midst of a pandemic.

Authors, as previously mentioned, have already made massive strides in digital

innovation by accepting self-publishing options and championing their own online presences to

promote their works. The question remains: what should agents do in response to these changes?

Agents have not gone untouched, yet their attempts to evolve with the digital age have not been

as extensive or obvious. When asked about what she has noticed in terms of the effects of digital

innovation at her agency, Claire Dippel from Janklow & Nesbit Agency explained that she has

seen some changes but still believes in a brick and mortar agency. In response to a question

about digital agencies, namely Publishizer, she stated, "We actually lost two employees to digital

agencies. There's a place for them, but they aren't quite the same. They don't offer the same

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102. Porter Anderson, "Spain's Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial and Canada's Wattpad Strike Rights Deal," *Publishing Perspectives*, August 27, 2020, https://publishingperspectives.com/2020/08/spains-penguin-random-house-grupo-editorial-and-canadas-wattpad-in-rights-deal-covid19/.

103. Anderson, "Spain's Penguin Random House."

104. Anderson, "Spain's Penguin Random House."

caliber of service.... We pride ourselves in our several departments, especially our legal

department, which does some intense negotiating for our authors to get the best deal. I'm not

sure if these startups and digital agencies can provide the same attention."[105] Dippel also was not

convinced that self-publishing delivered a quality product that the traditional publishing route

could offer authors. However, she did state that as an agency, Janklow & Nesbit encourages

digital innovation and that they have clients who use digital services in tandem with their

professional advice. Regarding authors who have found themselves to be successful in self-

publishing, Dippel explained, "You have to make sure that you need an agent. You want to make

sure they're earning that 15%. If [they aren't necessary to your author journey], that's okay... We

definitely have to pay attention to innovations in the industry and adapt to those changes."[106]

Brent Taylor,[107] an agent for Triada US, expressed similar sentiments when interviewed,

yet he was more confident about working his job in a virtual environment. Taylor remarked that

the biggest changes to agency workflow due to digital innovation have been the digital

processing of contracts and paperwork, as opposed to mailing physical documents, and the newer

emphasis on social media marketing and strategy that is now essential to the success of their

clients. When asked about his views on Publishizer, he said, "I do not think that I understand

their business model, nor do I feel that it's aligned with high literary representation standards."[108]

Taylor was equally unforgiving when it came to self-publishing, explaining that his attitude

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105. Claire Dippel, video call with the author, April 29, 2020.

106. Claire Dippel.

107. Brent Taylor, interviewed by author, September 17, 2020.

108. Taylor.

hadn't changed about it over the years, but that he has noticed certain genres lend themselves better to successful publishing on digital platforms. He explained, "Amazon Publishing and Bookouture are digital publishers that have a track record of publishing e-book originals to great success."[109] While Taylor's comments regarding self-publishing and digital startups seem to emulate the general views of the traditional publishing industry, he had stronger views about the industry's reaction to working virtually. He stated:

> I have always felt confident in my abilities as an agent outside of New York City, and the pandemic has not changed that in any way. Perhaps other people are now being enlightened to the fact that you can successfully participate in this industry outside of NYC, but I have always known that... [Because of the pandemic], publishers are now much more open to allowing more of their staff to be more remote.[110]

When asked if he felt that continued digital innovation and solutions, accelerated by the pandemic, could and should decentralize the industry and move it to a more virtually-based environment, his answer was an emphatic affirmation. He stated, "Our industry has a workforce diversity problem, and decentralizing it will help the industry bring in people from marginalized backgrounds."[111] In this case, even if the traditional publishing industry isn't open to digital innovation's changes to their workflow and expansion outside of New York City, Taylor emphasizes that it could open the door to solutions for long-ignored festering problems.

Approaching the end of the year 2020, there is still no end in sight to the COVID-19 pandemic and publishers are still straining under the weight of negatively-impacted book launches, delayed publishing dates, and the worsening capacity issue for printers. Literary agents have been trickling out of the city to live elsewhere and work from home permanently, and in

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109. Taylor.

110. Taylor.

111. Taylor.

some cases, whole offices have moved locations. Authors, though wearied by the present state of publishing, have not run dry of ideas or discontinued their work. It is the hope of the book world that traditional publishers will continue to rise to the occasion and deliver on their promises, but with each passing day, new needs will arise in the industry and digital innovators will be keeping watch to offer solutions.

V. Conclusion

The publishing industry has come a long way from the panic of the ebook, yet still has catching up to do when it comes to digital innovations, making the industry "ripe for disruption." Digital startups have proven to be a key indicator of the direction in which the industry is moving, so publishing professionals would be wise to pay attention to them and respond accordingly. A less appreciated aspect of these startups is that they can flag important issues that have been neglected by traditional players, stepping in to provide solutions for authors who feel underrepresented, underappreciated, underpaid, or have become disillusioned with their publisher or agent's services in the face of ever-improving alternatives. In the same way that a startup-turned-giant like Amazon can step in for the publishing industry's inability to succeed in direct-to-consumer ecommerce, other digital transformations can take over the responsibilities once held by traditional publishing professionals or provide new services while being more efficient, affordable, and accessible.

Digital innovation has been more directly attacking the roles of publishers through self-publishing services, but it's encroachment on the roles of agents has been less detectable. Traditional literary agents might find themselves in an increasingly difficult situation if they do not carve out a more sustainable role and continue to have the unwavering support of publishers.

For now, most traditional agents are clinging to their negotiation and contract expertise, the support of editors, and their general claim to professional experience. However, as free resources become more widely available, stigma for self-publishing subsides, and authors and publishers catch on to the movements within the industry, those privileges could fade quickly. Similarly to real estate agents, who still are widely used yet can be replaced by a more affordable and accessible options like owner sales through online platforms, literary agents can essentially be replaced by keen use of social media, self-publishing platforms, and crowdfunding resources. This realization, especially as startups continue to refine their niches and services, should be cause for concern. The digital advancements within the industry are blurring the lines between a traditional agency and a digital one, which raises questions about the agent's authority on taste and who becomes published. On the other hand, if fully embraced, the digital transformation seen in traditional publishers in 2020 could save them, at least for now, from falling behind in the digital age.

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