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Print-On-Demand Publishing – A Definition and a Comparison

By Michael LaRocca

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Print On Demand

A Definition and a Comparison

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The purpose of this article is to consider Print-On-Demand publishing as an alternative for the aspiring author. It has its strengths and its weaknesses. You may wonder as you begin reading this, but in the end I'm going to say some good things about it.

To a large extent, the title explains the technology. The way that literature has traditionally been printed involves running many copies simultaneously in order to bring the price per copy down. Smaller print runs, such as advertising brochures or concert programs, cost more per copy because they are small print runs. Until recently, printing a single book was all but unthinkable.

In the case of novels, the traditional print publisher begins by publishing several thousand copies. His goal is to run off the smallest number of copies he can while getting the best possible price per copy.

These books are then sent to bookstores, which tend to prefer something along the lines of what has succeeded before. The remainder sits in a warehouse somewhere. Perhaps to be shipped as the orders come in, perhaps to be joined by any "remaindered" copies the bookstores couldn't move.

This represents an investment on the part of that publisher, hence his paranoia about experimenting with new formats or (more importantly) new authors.

Print-On-Demand (POD), as the name implies, uses a completely different process. The end result is, the price per copy on a small run is much lower. How small of a run? Try one book. Zero inventory. The book is economically produced when the reader orders it, not before.

This technology was probably invented for sales literature. Then someone realized it might be a pretty cool way to get ARCs (Advance Review Copies) out to the book reviewers before the book

was actually available. Finally, someone decided to get it into the publishing mainstream.

Why is it so much cheaper to publish a single book via POD? The reasons really aren't relevant to this article, besides which they'd probably bore you. But if you care, the first link below spells it all out.

http://www.jdwrite.com/writing/pod_01.htm
http://www.jdwrite.com/writing/pod_02.htm
http://www.jdwrite.com/writing/pod_03.htm
http://www.jdwrite.com/writing/pod_04.htm
http://www.jdwrite.com/writing/pod_05.htm

I recommend reading (or at least skimming) all five of those, by the way. It's quite a comprehensive analysis of how. Then come back to this article to determine why. Or if.

Have you ever heard of the author who self-published and wound up with a best-seller? They do exist!

Now look at all the self-published authors who couldn't do that. They're the vast majority. The author who uses POD could be facing similar long shot odds.

(Keep reading. I'll say good things about POD eventually.)

POD has a definite advantage over self-publishing, in that you don't wind up with a few hundred (or more?) copies of a book in your basement because you can't sell them. Thus, it's cheaper, with no difference in quality unless you hook up with losers.

But neither option will bring you the readership that you'll get from a successful book with a traditional print publisher.

I have self published. I went to a local print shop back in the pre-POD days, ran off 80 copies at \$3 a copy, and sold them to local bookstores for \$6 a copy. Lots of fun, and lots of learning, but I didn't get rich. My wage per hour stunk, but that was fine with me because I honestly didn't care. I broke even and gave away the rest. A pleasant way to spend lunch hours during the work week.

Most of us, though, just don't have that kind of time. And even if we do, why bother? Take the money you'd have invested and buy some Microsoft stock, then take the time you'd have invested and write more books. You'll be happier and you'll make more money.

Having said all that, why am I recommending POD at all? In my

case, it's because I've written some books that no print publisher will ever pick up. That's my honest appraisal.

If I were a mercenary type, I'd follow that up with something like "Why'd you even write those books then?" But if you are a REAL writer, you know the answer.

It's always about writing first, marketing second. Two different hats. I'm assuming you already did the writing and now are wondering what the heck to do with it.

As an example, my EPPIE 2002 finalist is too short. I wrote it back when print publishers wanted 40,000 words. Now they want 50,000. But it doesn't take 50,000 words to tell that particular story, and I'm not padding it. Even if I were willing, it'd stink and nobody would buy it. Give the publishers some credit. They know padding when they see it. The same goes for the readers.

As another example, consider my short story collection. Critically acclaimed and selling moderately well, but no traditional publisher wants short story collections from unknown authors. It's just that simple.

So, I simultaneously published these books in e-book form and POD form. E-books are cheaper and more environmentally friendly, but the paperback option is still there for those who can't or won't ever read an e-book.

(Daddy is in that group, by the way. How about your family?)

Places who publish only POD began by accepting anything sent their way. Pay your money, and do your own editing and marketing. This gave POD a credibility problem. There are POD outfits who don't operate this way, but the credibility problem will take time to heal.

As an author, your goal is to write what's in your heart, find people who like to read what you like to write, and get it out to them. (That's my goal, anyway.) If your name happens to be Tom Clancy, that equals many readers. But that's simply luck of the draw.

Many of us don't have such mass appeal. Possibly you're the sort of writer who knows exactly where you stand in that respect. But many don't, and they're flooding the POD market with stuff that most readers just plain don't want. Add to that the badly edited stuff, and the credibility problem with POD is understandable.

Ideally, what you want is for your e-publisher to simultaneously

release your book in both formats without charging a POD setup fee. That way, you can direct all your promotional efforts to that single URL. However, these e-publishers have a real problem with backlog now, so if you want to travel the road I did, you'll need much more patience than I did.

Taking advantage of a free POD option with your e-book will also help your promotional efforts. Many reviewers just plain won't touch an e-book. If you've done the POD bit, in addition to being able to tell all your friends and family, "Look at this, I'm a real author because here's the paperback," you'll be able to send review copies via POD to those book reviewers.

(I told my friends and family to kiss my butt, but I'm just a crochety old cuss.)

If you find yourself with an e-publisher who doesn't offer free POD, you may wish to shop around for a POD publisher. As you do this, remember the business model. If a publisher makes all its money from writers, it doesn't need to sell a single book to a single reader to stay in business.

No matter how much praise they send your way, that's the bottom

line. Writing is a calling, but publishing is a business. Those authors who can't distinguish between the two are what keep the opportunists in business. (I was such an author for most of my life.)

Some POD places are no more than thinly veiled vanity (or subsidy) presses. They have a valuable role to serve, but let's be honest. Most do no editing, and they don't care. They may not be making a massive profit from your setup fees, but they're certainly making enough to stay in business. Even if you don't sell any books to anyone except your Gramma.

(A few new POD places help with marketing and charge no fees of any kind. I've been told <http://www.bewrite.net> is such a place, but have yet to visit it.)

Earlier, I recommended e-publishing before print publishing for the free editing you'll receive. If you're going with POD, consider it mandatory. Either that, or pay an editor. The author who can write a mistake-free manuscript does not exist.

Still interested in POD publishing? I've done it, by the way, and it worked out well. Here are the questions you should ask yourself when you select a POD publisher:

A) Sale price of each book

- 1) Who decides what it is?
- 2) Will readers pay that much for your book?

B) Profit per sale vs. your setup cost

- 1) How many copies must you sell to break even?
- 2) Can you do it?
- 3) If not, do you care? How big of a financial hit are you willing to take just to see your name in print?

As a rule, US\$100 or less setup cost is good and US\$1000 is very bad. The latter, no matter how much publicity they promise you, is only a thinly disguised vanity publisher. You will not sell enough books to recoup that \$1000 unless you are a real marketing machine. Even then you shouldn't pay the \$1000 up front. Pay \$100 or less and then sell all those books. \$1000 or more won't get you anything that \$100 or less won't.

A comprehensive list of POD publishers, along with descriptions,

can be found on–line at <http://dehanna.com/database.htm>

The site mentioned fails to mention Booksurge (<http://www.booksurge.com>), also known as Digitz (<http://www.digitz.net>), and Publish America (<http://www.publishamerica.com>). The first charges US\$99 and the second is free.

Another that isn't mentioned is Digital Print Australia at <http://www.digitalprintaustralia.com>. I've used them before. My setup cost was AUD\$35 (roughly US\$18), which compares rather favorably to those listed.

Their price per copy is also excellent. The quality is at least as good as what you'll find in the bookstores. If you've ever bought a paperback from Writers Exchange E–Publishing, you've seen it already. If not, Digital Print will send you a free sample. They sent mine to China.

Two problems you may have with them, though, are shipping charges from Australia if that's not where your readers are located, and the fact that they don't offer a way to sell the books on their site.

For selling the books, I used the Book Store feature on Authors Den (<http://www.authorsden.com>) back when it was free. It offers a secure server. I know some authors who I trusted enough to send money to without a secure server. But I suspect that most of your prospective readers won't know you that well. In fact, they won't know you at all.

Another option is the shopping cart feature at PayPal (<https://www.paypal.com/refer/pal=BH2CTDYDK8RPW>), which I haven't researched. But take a look. You oughta have PayPal anyway, because it lets people send you money or vice versa through email, absolutely free. They'll give you \$5 just for signing up.

If the POD place only prints "trade paperbacks," which are the larger ones, your cost per book (and sale price per book) will be higher than if you can print "mass–market paperbacks." The choice is yours, but whatever you decide, visit the local bookstores and price similar–sized books. If you write like Stephen King but charge twice as much per book, readers are going to buy the author they've heard of, and that's probably not you. Yet...

Michael LaRocca's website at <http://freereads.topcities.com> was chosen by WRITER'S DIGEST as one of The 101 Best Websites For Writers in 2001 and 2002. He published two novels in 2002 and has two more scheduled for publication in 2004. He also works as an editor for an e-publisher. He teaches English at a university in Shaoxing, Zhejiang Province, China, and publishes the free weekly newsletter Mad About Books.

How Three Publishing Myths Kill the Author

By Judy Cullins

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Agents and publishing houses have their best interests at heart, not the author's. Save yourself from headaches, disappointments, and money down the drain. Become your own independent publisher and produce your book faster and cheaper. All you need is a little help from professionals.

Myth: You need an agent or big publishing house to market your book and make big money.

Since big publishers don't look at unknown authors, now is the time to look at what they can do for you. Dan Poynter, self-publishing guru, says that if a publisher can't sell four times as many books as you can, you're better off selling it yourself. Self-publishing first is good because it acts as a test market for your book. If it sells well (over 10,000 in a year), publishers may be interested in your book. Traditional publishers and agents accept only 1–2% of authors' submissions, and even if you are one of the "chosen" you may not make much money after printing, bookstore, distributor, wholesaler and other expenses—probably \$2 on a \$14 book. Yes, you get an advance, but your sales must meet that and more. And after the initial book tour, the trainee marketing person is onto the next new author. Then, your books disappear from the bookstore shelf unless you, personally, devote a lot of time to marketing them.

Book Publishing is a new game today. Think self-publishing where the profits are all yours. Self-publishing is in. Thanks to Dan Poynter of the Self Publishing Manual for giving us permission to do part of the task ourselves. If you self-publish and decide to print, you need to print only the copies you need (5–500) with the new technology Print on Demand (POD). No more unsold cartons of books in your closets or garage. You print as you go leaving enough cash flow to market your book splendidly.

Myth: To be a respected author, you must invest thousands of hours of time on your full-length book.

The reality is that people today want concise and useful information. You don't have to write a 200-page book to be a real author. Remember *The One-Minute Manager* and the *One-Minute Salesperson*? Around one hundred pages. People want information

fast and convenient. Create short information products you can sell online, even if you don't have your own Web site.

If you choose to print your book with Print Quantity Needed (PQN), your perfect bound books will look as good as any book on the bookstore shelves.

Myth: Authors must spend a lot of money to publish themselves. The printing costs for 1500 copies of a 160-page book might cost \$3000, about \$2 a unit. Small runs cost even more per unit. That's a lot of cash for anyone to put out all at once, and it's not worth it to many of us to use our home equity or life savings to finance our book. The answer is a small run with Print on Demand (POD) where you can print only 500 for around \$2.40 for 160 pages. Without the high inventory, you can maintain a comfortable cash flow.

You save even more money if you don't print your book. Book publishing is going Internet. You can write small books in less time, market them easily and inexpensively on the Web and reap profits sooner. Try an e-book. It can be downloaded, it takes no printing costs because your buyer prints or downloads it. You don't even have to have the whole book finished to sell it. Just include your table of contents at the end of each chapter and present it as an e-serial book.

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