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Publishing turns page with print on demand

A burgeoning number of authors are putting out books on their own as digital technology improves and small press runs become less expensive

By **Dennis Nishi**

Special to the Tribune

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Digital technology is dramatically changing how books are printed--and by whom.

The growing use of print-on-demand services is creating a new generation of self-published authors. It also is changing how traditional publishers bring books to the market.

Doug Cummings, a reporter for WGN-AM 720, is one aspiring novelist who turned to self-publishing after two literary agents failed to find a publishing house for his mystery novel, "Deader by the Lake." (WGN is owned by Tribune Co., which also owns the Chicago Tribune.)

Through iUniverse, a self-publishing service that helps authors design, print, distribute and promote books, Cummings has sold 1,250 copies since December. He recently sold about 70 books at a Barnes & Noble book signing.

"I'd like to have a hand in erasing the stigma of self-publishing. I was never pleased by the regular publishing process, since they basically own you once they buy your book," he said. "And many authors are abandoned after the book is released."

More self-published books have started to show up on the racks at major booksellers for several reasons.

One is that self-published authors, like Cummings, spend a lot of time promoting their work.

Another reason, and perhaps more important, is that the books are becoming indistinguishable from those printed by traditional publishers. That has become a key selling point for services like iUniverse and Xlibris.

"The early days of self-publishing and [print on demand] suffered from a lack of reliability and quality but have since evolved to a point where traditional publishers now look at us," said Susan Driscoll, iUniverse's chief executive.

Furthermore, new digital printing technology allows these services to offer aspiring authors full-color covers in hardback and paperback editions as well as the option of full-color pages inside. Each book includes a bar code and an international standard book number.

But the key advantage to print-on-demand publishing is that books are produced

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as needed. That has gotten the attention of mainstream publishers seeking to avoid the biggest publishing headache: remainder copies.

Publishers usually take a significant loss on unsold books unloaded to wholesalers, who, in turn, sell the books to clearance resellers.

Now, for first-run titles where sales success is in question, small publishers are turning to print on demand to avoid the expense of a large print run.

Also, publishers of technical books, including John Wiley & Sons Inc., use print on demand to lower costs. They are willing to trade lower overall printing costs, but higher costs per book, for a smaller profit.

"Publishing is an industry that has always had tight margins. It's not expanding; it's not improving. Any technology that's going to save is going to be adopted," said Thad McLeroy, a publishing consultant and analyst.

For Lighting Source Inc., a print-on-demand publisher based in Tennessee, the short-run book market is pretty big.

The company prints as many as 500,000 books a month with a round-the-clock printing operation. Some of those orders are single copies, which the company says it profits from, even though margins are small.

Orders also come from traditional publishers that want to keep backlisted titles--older books that have small but regular demand--in circulation.

Until recently, it was not practical for publishers to print fewer than 5,000 books on an offset press. But offset printing--a process that uses metal plates and ink--is losing ground to digital printing.

"The quality difference between offset and digital presses would not be noticed by 99 percent of the population," said Kirby Best, Lightning Source's CEO.

"The cost difference between digital and offset printing is rapidly shrinking," added publishing analyst George Alexander. Eventually, he said, digital printing's improving quality will make it a viable choice for bigger runs.

For some authors, self-publishing has opened doors at big publishing houses.

Laurie Notaro, a former humor columnist for The Arizona Republic, had little luck peddling her essays to publishers. Although her collection included a few of her newspaper columns, most of it was edgy, personal work. She was rejected 70 times before turning to self-publishing at iUniverse.

"It was only \$99 to start, and I got one book," said Notaro. "But I kept buying more. I think I had 500 to 1,000, roughly. And I submitted my own cover."

Today, the iUniverse basic setup fee is \$459, which includes five books.

Once her book was published, Notaro advertised on Amazon.com. Her ad attracted a literary agent who was able to sell it to Villard Books, a division of Random House Inc.

"The Idiot Girls' Action-Adventure Club" reached No. 10 on The New York Times' best-seller list and prompted a six-figure advance for a follow-up book, "Autobiography of a Fat Bride."

A third book, "True Tales of a Loudmouth Girl," is expected this year.

"I'd been doing it for so long and had met with so much rejection," Notaro said. "But when the right person sees you at the right time, that's when it comes together."

Paul Glen, a technology management consultant, used self-publishing to promote his services. But he found print on demand to be too expensive and opted to do his own legwork.

"I figured I could do it myself and save money," Glen said. He contacted printers directly and wrote and designed the book using Microsoft Word. The only thing he contracted out was the four-color cover design.

Glen regularly sends copies of his self-published book to potential clients, and he brings copies when he gives speeches. He puts it alongside his newest book, "Leading Geeks," which was recently published by Jossey-Bass, a San Francisco-based business publisher.

Although Glen hasn't made any money from his first book, he insists that was never the intention. Still, he intends to self-publish more titles, as well as write for Jossey-Bass, a unit of John Wiley.

"Each book has its own purpose," Glen said.

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Printer offers hint of future

Digital technology may be revolutionizing publishing, but digital printers like Hewlett-Packard's Indigo and Xerox's iGen3 still fill entire rooms. And neither printer will do what the InstaBook Maker can do in five minutes: paginate, print and bind a softcover book while you wait. It also can print artwork on the inside pages.

About the size of a large office copier, the InstaBook Maker aspires to achieve the print-on-demand ideal of total automation.

Customers can choose to print a book from a large online catalog or can print their own work. The rest is handled by the machine.

It's the fastest way to get published, though the quality falls short of what print-on-demand publishers offer.

Florida-based InstaBook Corp. plans to penetrate the library, retail bookseller and government markets with its all-in-one product.

But products like the InstaBook Maker could have limited potential in the retail market.

"Studies show that most book purchases are made on a whim," said publishing analyst Thad McLeroy. "People like to thumb through books they find interesting."

-- Dennis Nishi

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