

A Qualitative Analysis of Authorship, Accessibility and Inclusivity in the Digital Self-Publishing Era

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ABSTRACT

The long tradition of writing and preservation of those writings has allowed human history to survive. This paper offers a structured exploration of how publishing came into being and has evolved within today's digital landscape. The advent of digital self-publishing has democratised what we call the publishing industry to a great extent and this paper aims to examine how access, authorship and inclusion are hashed out through the study of paratext theories, the emergent narrative space and the shifting roles of readers and writers shaping contemporary self-published works. The very definition of literature is changing owing to the multimodal contents which flood the electronic literary space, solidifying new canons in literature. The purview of democratised publishing is an enticing one that needs to be studied in order to comprehend whether real democratisation has taken place or it only appears to do so. Inferences drawn from careful examination of related books and digitally published content suggest authors find unprecedented creative autonomy without the hassle of traditional publishers; however, the mediation or the algorithm set by these platforms often hints at subtle forms of gatekeeping that decide which written novel or poem goes viral and which ones do not, pointing towards the question of inclusivity in current publishing trends. This study raises pertinent questions about how digital literary space has moulded itself into a cultural site and how authors build their artistic identity and legitimacy through the use of paratextual elements and digital literacy.

Keywords: Digital Self-publishing, Paratexts, Inclusion, Gatekeeping, Digital literacy.

Introduction:

The image of writers cosied up in their study rooms, with their pen and paper, writing in isolation, completely surrounded by books has taken a drastic dismantling with all these technological onslaughts. In an age defined through constant transitions from traditional mediums of communication to a more precise and fast-paced one, the arena of publishing and writing, too, has taken its 'varied forms' of adaptability. Self-publishing, specifically, digital self-publishing, has become a central site for cultural preservation as well as dissemination. Any struggling writer, in the last few decades, is fully aware of the advantage social media-driven platforms have given them in terms of ease of publishing. The process of the past was all about aspiring writers holding onto their manuscripts, going from door to door, just to get a publisher or an editor to read their work, only to wait for months on end for a reply, and most times they were met with no response at all. Now, the script has changed; most aspiring writers or already existing professional writers write their work and upload their manuscript on any digital publishing platform of their choice or alliance, and the work is ready for readers around the world to reach out and add it to cart for purchase. It is an undeniable truth to state that barriers which once appeared in the publishing landscape have been significantly lowered. Many young talents have been discovered through digital self-publishing, more new words have been introduced to the study of linguistics and authentic stories, poetry find their way into the reading community, not bound by strict editorial setups.

Despite this aspirational ease lies a complex terrain which is either overlooked or under-looked, both of which raise significant research gaps. It is true that anyone with a social media account can publish any article or

story; however, not all writers who have ventured into the effortless terrain of digitised self-publishing have found success in the form of recognition or sustained readership. Upon careful content analysis, it is observed that what breaks or makes a literary genius in this age is based on the paratext and the multimodality of digital platforms. The hashtags, categories, collaborative promotions, frequent feedback through creator-reader interaction, Graphic designs, interface intervention etc, are what fundamentally determine how a work is interpreted. Thus, this points to the involvement of multiple players in order to gain success as a professional writer. The paper focuses on a qualitative approach analysing theoretical texts as well as various content online to examine how self-published authors create meaning around their work. The idea of curation is not confined to art and fashion alone; it has now touched the landscape of literature through curated self-representations of authors, building an online persona that speaks both for the works and the authors. As mentioned above, the methodological approach reviews key works by Hodder, Hippel, Thompson and other scholars in order to establish a conceptual foundation regarding self-publishing. Their works are associated with digital democratisation, cultural production and platform-driven authorship. One of the key theorists discussed is Gerard Genette, a French literary critic, who worked on paratexts, a technique where authors use elements like titles, book covers, prefaces by famed authors, blurbs by reputed dailies etc. to promote their literary work or contents. The emphasis has been placed on evaluating the interactions between readers and authors, multimodal narratives or presentations and birth of book enthusiasts who have taken on the role of recommending literary works, playing a pivotal role in marketing the finished books. These methods have provided a holistic approach to understanding the relation between authors and publishers in the ever-evolving publishing industry and understand these paratextual elements that enhance readership and authorial success.

Historical Foundations of Publishing:

The urge to share information and preserve any form of knowledge was the impetus behind the invention of the printing press. With the rise of the industrial revolution, printing press began to emerge in large number and with this increase, publishing houses followed suit. The history of publication stretches back to carvings on ancient tablets, writing on papyrus scrolls, and producing manuscripts through painstaking effort. The printing press, invented in the fifteenth century, represented a monumental shift. Suddenly, books could be reproduced on a mass scale, reducing costs and expanding access far beyond the elite. In an intriguing article by Zul M titled “*Is E-book Revolution Dead?*” hosted on PublishingState.com, he makes his argument by mapping out the different stages of publishing history. It begins with the painstaking human efforts to record and transmit information on stone tablets and papyrus scrolls. This earlier form of record keeping “established key concepts like documentation, duplication, distribution, and permanence of the written word” (Zul M). With an impactful opening statement like this, Zul M draws our immediate attention to the central point situating publishing as a pivotal phenomenon in preservation of civilisation. The article then continues to seamlessly cover the Middle Ages through industrial revolution where mechanised printing aided in mass circulation of pamphlets and books, which were once reserved only for the elites. However, it is important to note that Zul M treats the accessibility through mass production as a uniform process which, oversimplifies historical stages. In today’s digital age, e-books, digital platforms and AI aided business models have lifted the insurmountable burden faced by writers and digital creators. The disruption of traditional models of publishing appears to do away with mediation of strict publishing firms but it seems to have created another set of algorithmic gatekeepers that are still functioning as the traditional reviewers and mediators.

In studying the history of publishing through the ages, there is due recognition given to various professionals like editors, agents, printing houses, publishers, retailers etc. and in another critically acclaimed book by John B. Thompson called *Merchants of Culture* (2013), he states that the whole ecosystem of cultural intermediaries was curated and this cemented the issue of access and publication. The advent of digitally advanced technology forced all the traditional counterparts to transition and adapt to the changing literary culture, the whole idea was captured beautifully in *Book Wars* later on. The modern structures not only brought ease in publishing but also made it extremely easy to expand access to texts with immediacy. In Jennifer Howard’s “The Publishing Ecosystem in the Digital Era: On John B. Thompson’s *Book Wars*” there is clear mentions made of data collected by Thompson for his book as quoted below:

“Thompson has invested decades of his professional life in studying the industry, and it appears to have earned him a rare level of trust. He’s not an insider, but he cultivates sources who are, *Book Wars* draws on some 280 interviews done for his previous book, *Merchants of Culture* (2010), an ethnography of trade-book publishing in the early 21st century, plus some 180 new interviews that took place primarily between 2013 and 2018. He often anonymizes his sources and their employers, a tactic that yields valuable information; one of the big publishing houses, ‘Olympic,’ even provided 10 years’ worth of data on eBook sales. That’s a real coup, given that publishers guard sales data as if it were the One Ring” (Howard, 2021).

This gives a solidified comprehension of the fact that while process of publishing may look transparent and easier, true influence and control still lies with those groups that have the industry’s data and knowledge. In brief, these figures show that ease of publishing does not necessarily mean ease of understanding how the industry works. Howard’s article also discusses major revelations about the rise of e-books as well as increased sales of books during Covid pandemic, demystifying the concept of ‘End of printed Books’ as upheld by many traditionalists including Sven Birkerts.

Upon close analysis of Howard's article, there is ultimately shifting of power even in the distributor front with Amazon dominating yearly book sales both print and Kindle editions, which makes us question whether it truly cares about publishing and distributing books, in the same manner that traditional agents and publishers do? There is a clear negative as Amazon and other companies benefit off of what Thompson calls 'informational capital' or data of its buyers or users unlike traditional publishers whose primary business approach prioritises creative content and relationships with authors and booksellers. At the same time, digital platforms have significantly lowered roadblocks to authors bypassing traditional gatekeeping and reach their readers or audiences directly, as seen in cases like Andy Weir's *The Martian*. Many authors used to think of self-publishing as a vain endeavour, however, this idea has been deconstructed in this state of economy driven by cost effectiveness and lower risk as mentioned in Kular's paper. The uneven power dynamics will continue to exist alongside the ever-transitioning literary culture empowered by newer formats of publishing in the digital era.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework:

Contemporary literary culture has been an amalgamation of deconstructive as well as reconstructive impulses questioning meta-narratives, destabilising fixed meanings and challenging the authoritative voices while still recreating meaning through plural voices, hybrid genres and ethical frameworks. This peculiar literary culture is perhaps the reason why there has been a rise of digital self-publishing marking it as one of the transformative developments in literary societies and the world at large. To consider this statement, Steven Hodder's work *Self-Publishing in the Digital Age: An Author's Guide*. (2012) has been studied as it gives considerable analysis of digital mediums and tools that enable contemporary authors to create a unique place of being an author/publisher. The process of creating a work comprising of the manuscript, book cover designs, pricing, editing etc. associated with publishing could be finalised in a day or two, which significantly reduced logistical and financial burdens. Such are the allures of digital self-publishing that encouraged and still continues to encourage writers and entrepreneurs to partake in it. Hodder's pragmatic theory reframes authorship role from just being a creative creator to an individual with multiple roles. Self-publishing is not just a mere alternative to traditional publishing route but a fundamental breakthrough in the publishing paradigm through virality increasing discoverability and immediate feedback loop through author-reader interaction that infers towards a long-term holistic development of asset building rather than short term validation. His emphasis on a strategic alignment of all the process involved instead of isolated techniques of production has been instrumental in understanding how writers can attain autonomy of their written work and much more. This transformed books from a very static artefact to a dynamic and adaptive entity leading to demystifying the amateurism associated with self-publishing. The most empowering aspect of digital age is the power of discoverability where attention becomes the primary currency of success, where writers not only write but curate an appealing sales technique or marketisation of their work not through an intrusive manner but through consistent branding. His take on major corporate platforms like Amazon, Apple Books, and social media as not a threat but as platforms providing a support is true to a large extent. Most importantly in his book, he reconfigures failure and experimentation as quintessential characteristics of digital self-publishing. Hodder's concept infers that liberty that has come about in the digital age also comes with great responsibility and ultimately draws attention of his readers and aspiring writers to the fact that success may be apparent through virality; however, strategic marketing and approach is what sustains that attention and turns it into long lasting fame.

In contrast to Hodder's work, the article written by Carolan and Evain in 2013 titled "*Self-Publishing: Opportunities and Threats in a New Age of Mass Culture*," gives a critical study of the structural shift occurring inside the publishing industry and places the argument that such a shift inevitably changes not only the entire literary ecosystem but also the mass culture. The first half of their argument is in coherence with Hodder's understanding and concepts of ease in publishing, while their second half argues that self-publishing also brings with it, a plethora of problems including openness leading to over-saturation in market, question over quality and erosion of aged established institutions and professions. They highlight a key argument which talks about platforms renegotiating standards through the phenomenon of visibility replacing critical recognitions as the main marker of success, which can privilege marketing skills over literary merit. Their article blurts out an uncomfortable truth that digital self-publishing is a double-edged sword which democratises publishing while dismantling all the pivotal institutions that stabilise literature and literary culture.

As briefly mentioned earlier in the introductory section, Thompson's analysis in *Book Wars* (2021) emphasises on power dynamics between traditional modes of publishing and the contemporary digitally supported self-publishing. The shift in power intensifies with giant corporations like Amazon becoming retailers and distributors prioritising profitable titles over genuine works that could preserve cultural standards. He explores the roles of algorithms and platform capitalism in production of colossal number of work while compromising on critical contribution of the voluminous literature. He also clarifies that traditional values of publishing too placed importance on branding and capitals so perhaps this new medium can be understood as a continuity rather than a total disruption of long-established publishing model. In what appears to be a conclusive take, Thompson argues that traditional publishing industry must renegotiate its roles in a digitally aided world to maintain its relevance as well as define a sustainable niche for the future of publishing.

The Role of Paratexts in Digital Authorship and Author's Identity:

The term appears for the first time in Genette's *Introduction à l'architexte* (1979) and is mentioned again in *Palimpsests* (1982) as one of five types of relationship between literary texts [1]. For Genette "the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered to its readers and, more generally, to the public" (Genette 1997, 1). In doing so, Genette points out the importance of paratextual elements in transforming the text into a book, and the fact that a text is not necessarily the same thing as a book, even if texts often appear in book format. (Skare).

This definition highlights the key difference between abstract texts and the cultural object called the book, stating paratexts as crucial mediation in bringing out such a difference. The article by Roshwita Skare also gives the composition of paratexts as a combination of 'peritext and epitext.' In simple terms, peritexts are materials that are attached directly to the book itself while epitext constitutes the cultural leanings surrounding the book in the form of public promotions, author interviews etc. In the digital publishing landscape, paratext have come to establish an interesting transformation as well as key position in curation of literature. Elements such as titles, cover designs, blurbs, keywords, and author bios are indispensable not only for aesthetic appeal but for lasting impression. As mentioned above, paratexts are not new unfolding but have existed even in the traditional publishing industry often styled and shaped by editors and marketing teams. In the current digital context, the authors themselves have to learn certain digital skills and operate these paratexts themselves to give the maximum output. This is where digital literacy becomes an important factor that centres today's aspiring authors. The need to understand the use of electronic devices, the working of the internet, strategizing algorithmic practices, publicity through collaborations and brand building, all becomes quintessential traits that contemporary authors need. The authors of the digital age are not just a poet or a storyteller, rather they are cultural embodiments navigating the demands of highly fluidic digital publishing environment. It is imperative to note that for a book to be critiqued, to be read and to be purchased must have good publicity and in the age of social media, such publicity and marketing are solely curated by writers themselves if they cannot afford a full editorial team. Thumbnails, clickbaits, giveaways and book clubs dominate the **#bookstagram** and **#booktok** wave. The social persona perceived through aesthetically designed photos or screenshots of small excerpts from the book influence a reader's likelihood of buying the book. Paratexts, thus, play a vital role in signalling the human as well as algorithmic systems to promote credibility of the content as well as quality of the book. Most writers do not explore various themes and tabooed topics as traditional publishing houses flag them for rejection to avoid controversies. However, such censorship of sort does not impede digitally self-published writers. There is freedom of choice in themes, in language and graphics making the writing process more fluidic and spontaneous as it bypasses rigid scrutiny of structure and rules set by tradition editors and publishers. This enables a more inclusive literary society thriving on the richness of immediate audience or reader interaction along with creation of global discourses. The rise of electronic literature and projects is an offshoot of such events where readers become more active and collaboration is deemed a more successful venture rather than segregated understanding of the text. Thus, author's online persona as part of the paratext becomes an extension of their writings in many ways and shape author's identity which then becomes not just part of the text but also extends beyond it.

Accessibility and the Paradox of Inclusion in Digitally Democratised Landscape:

Uniformity does not forge unity; making room for everyone to belong does and this is the central idea that laid the foundations of inclusivity in discourses. Writers have taken on the herculean task of writing novels, stories, poetry and even academic articles in order to promote and create a safe haven to bring on diverse and multitudinal topics in the forefront. Today, it is easier for marginalised voices and regionally absent narratives to become part of the mainstream due to digitally supported publishing and the internet. The pressure to conform to a set standard is disrupted heralding the democratisation of publishing. Eric von Hippel in his *Democratized Innovation* argues that the advent of democratised publishing is on account of user friendly, accessible and cost-effective technology that guarantees talent exposure without depending on centralised institutions. He further raises a prime argument that traditional gatekeeping is discontinued when creation and production of books or other works are directed towards the users themselves. He reiterates the aforementioned points on author's autonomy and independence in creation of books and identity. Unlike previously discussed theorists and writers, Von Hippel emphasises that democratisation does not eliminate expertise or quality but redistributes creative power. The geographical constraints, physical roadblocks in production of manuscripts and other cumbersome issues have found its ease through digitally empowered accessible tools and platforms.

With the participatory nature of literary culture on the rise, inclusion and accessibility seems to have no problem. The paradox, however, lies in the execution of the said democratised publishing culture. There is an imposition of gatekeeping still in existence, and the role of these new gatekeepers are none other than algorithms. The set of instructions which are finite coded into our systems actually wield more power when it comes to distribution and dissemination of literature. The older standards of publications were based on collective decision by editorial boards, agents, writers and publishers but algorithm privileges interactivity and engagement metrics over all else. This is exactly what Carolan and Evain argued that the surge of mass production from accessibility also drowns out potential geniuses of literary craft. This is further complicated

by expectations of reading communities who are incessantly online and demanding interactions like never before. The most noticeable observation made in regards to the digital reading communities is that they often gravitate toward familiar narrative structures or stylistic conventions. For writers to be successful or to have a sustained profession in this arena, must be able to navigate and equip themselves with digital know-how and balance authenticity alongside algorithm-friendly publicity.

Conclusion:

The history of publishing and transformation it has undergone over centuries is noteworthy and enlightening for contemporary discussion on the same subject. Digital self-publishing has made profound impact using its technological tools on production and consumption of literature. Human creativity is endless and what we are witnessing in the digital era is simply a reinvention of that creativity. The narratives are multiple, community-driven and marked by endless space online. Authorship and readership have taken on new roles through the standards set by social media platforms and the need of the hour fostered by digitisation. Paratexts, inclusivity, and algorithms have become the most used register in terms of comprehending the digital publishing atmosphere; they have expanded onto becoming a full-fledged discourse in this light. These shifting of structures are part of the transitional phase experienced by humankind in totality and not to be looked at from publication perspective. The literary craft, authenticity and values still remain intact and at the centre of all the alterations that have come about, Digital self-publishing is not just a tech-phenomenon but evolution of cultural practices. The tools or medium of spreading knowledge may have shifted but the enduring quality of values and literature remains.

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