

THE VARSITY

Self-publish or perish?

Due to a rise in internet tech, doing it yourself may be the only way

Jade Colbert 17/09/07

“When people first started thinking about what putting art and literature online might be like, they had a sort of sexier idea of the way that it would work,” says former Coach House senior editor and Wilfred Laurier communications professor Darren Wershler-Henry. “There’s a kind of gap between what the publishing world is doing and the kinds of content that people tend to get excited about.”

Wershler-Henry was speaking at a panel discussion, “Free-economics: Free Culture and the Future of Creative Content,” on October 13 as part of BookNet Canada’s series analyzing intersections between book publishing and emerging technology. While publishing has been slower than other cultural industries to undergo a web-revolution, individuals are increasingly using avenues such as blogs to self-publish. The industry is starting to take notice.

Wershler-Henry notes that one reason the industry has yet to fully embrace the Internet as a medium is the stretched resources most small presses face: “everyone is so busy getting by doing what they’re doing, making books and publishing them and getting them out into the world, that the idea of trying to figure out how to do all this digital stuff on top of it has just seemed so daunting.”

He notes that several publishers are currently exploring different mixes of online and traditional formats. While he was at Coach House, the press began publishing books online, a move that even today could be considered ahead of the curve. But the industry has yet to reach any agreement on questions of what to sell and what to give away for free.

To help answer some of those questions, publishers are looking to other cultural industries that have embraced online media. The other speaker at the panel on Thursday, Gregg Taylor, is the founder of Decoder Ring Theatre, an independent theatre company that has moved to producing audio-dramas distributed as podcasts. Radio-dramas in the styles of the 1930s and ’40s aren’t what most commercial radio stations are looking for, yet Decoder Ring Theatre has been able to make it work through podcasts and voluntary listener- support donations on paypal. Taylor’s model could easily be applied to publishing poetry.

In much of Canadian publishing, says Taylor, the question at the heart of cultural creation remains “Would you do it if no one was paying you?” He argues that those who don’t answer to some extent, “Yes”, don’t have what it takes to become a success in the industry.

To those, Andrew Keen among them, who argue that online “amateur” culture is destroying the potential for “professional” culture (or culture that people can make a living at), Taylor and Wershler-Henry agree that publishers will continue to play the same role, as reliable filters of cultural product that consumers can turn to for expert advice. Online publishing may

form a kind of "farm team" for the existing industry.

It's an opinion directly contradicting Keen's own. Where Wershler-Henry follows O'Reilly Media's experiments in online publishing for potential models, Keen in his freshly-published *Cult of the Amateur* targets O'Reilly as Web 2.0's main evangelizer.

Keen, founder of the now-defunct audiocafe.com, argues in his book that what is passed off as "democratized" online media is, in fact, "the noise of a hundred million bloggers all simultaneously talking about themselves." Keen sees the end result for traditional media vastly different from that proposed by Taylor: "the free, user-generated content spawned and extolled by the Web 2.0 revolution is decimating the ranks of our cultural gatekeepers, as professional critics, journalists, editors, musicians, moviemakers, and other purveyors of expert information are being replaced."

There's an argument to be made for the other side though. According to Wershler-Henry, the number of amateur media analysts who provided evidence questioning the authenticity of documents in a 60 Minutes report tarnishing George W. Bush's military record, is a counterargument to Keen's self-described elitism.

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