

Print Publishing vs Electronic Publishing

By Michael LaRocca

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Actually, "versus" isn't the best word. The two mediums are different, but they're not mutually exclusive. Meaning, you can publish the same book in both mediums. In fact, that's my goal. Each attracts a different group of readers and I want all the readers I can get.

If you're not familiar with electronic publishing (epublishing), visit <http://www.closetohome.org/about%20e-books.htm> for a quick definition.

But the best way to learn about publishing is to buy some ebooks. If, like me, you don't want to read a book on your computer, print it. It's still cheaper than a paperback, and you can recycle paper and ink cartridge when you're done. And, by the way, print on both sides. It's better for the environment.

Breaking into the traditional print market is my ultimate goal, because it has so many more readers. However, it is also more difficult. They prefer the safe bets. This means, something like what they've done before. What they can easily place in the bookstore chains. They invest an advertising budget, and the cost of carrying a print inventory, in every new author they accept. In four out of every five cases, they lose money. Thus they are cautious. That is simply good business sense. Remember, writing is a calling, but publishing is a business.

When I write, I write for me. An idea grabs me and won't leave me alone until I write about it, so I do. Later, I think of "target audience" and such. I presume most of us do that. I don't believe

it's possible to write "for the market" because you'll fail, or it'll be bad writing, or both. That simple reality can make "marketing" a challenge.

With epubublishing, the business model is different. They don't carry a physical inventory. Their advertising doesn't cost much money, but rather time. Also, they will invest editing time. Print publishers won't do that for a new author.

The epubublishers will edit because they have a credibility problem. They're new. A print publisher wants to receive a manuscript from a new author that is "ready to read." Meaning, no editing. If you work with a respectable epubublisher first, your manuscript will be ready to read.

Fringe benefits of epubublishing include publication within six months of acceptance, as opposed to the usual two years of print publishing, and the fact that you'll get instant feedback from readers. That's good for your ego.

It's always in an epubublisher's best interest to publish as many manuscripts as possible. Quality manuscripts, of the type that bring a reader back to buy more. As an author, your goal is to find an epubublisher who publishes something along the lines of what you write.

How to find such a place? How to find an epubublisher that is reputable, not just some glorified vanity press that accepts anything and everything and doesn't have enough pride to edit worth a damn?

As I say, it's a new medium. You'll find the new and the different, the books that should be in print but aren't. As the market tries to sort itself out, you'll also find a bunch of losers publishing garbage who are wholly unworthy of the name "publisher."

Just like Mercedes still thrives but Yugo is a distant memory, so will the epubublisher market sort itself out into winners and losers. There are no voodoo economics on the Internet, no mystical unfathomable reason for dotcom crashes. Those who are set up on a sound business model -- deliver a quality product and ensure that revenue exceeds expenses -- always survive. As for the rest, their collapses are no big loss to any of us.

I can recommend two websites to help you find the quality epubublishers. The first is by sci-fi legend Piers Anthony, and it's at <http://www.hipiers.com/publishing.html> . He's gone out of his way to identify and analyze the good, the bad and the ugly.

http://free_reads.tripod.com/onlinefictionbooks.html is my site. Basically, it's where I keep a list of the ones I believe are good, to refer to whenever I finish writing a new book. At the

bottom of this article I will list my criteria.

The selection process for epubshers is the same as for print publishers. Look at the services they provide. Make sure they're all free -- authors don't pay to be published. Look at what they're publishing. Read a book or two and be sure you approve of their presentation, editing, price, customer service, etc.

Some otherwise fantastic epubshers may have a clause in their contract saying you can't submit the "edited" manuscript to anyone else. That, of course, defeats the whole purpose of my "stepping stone" approach, so look out for that.

It's possible you've written a fantastic manuscript that, for some reason, will never make it to a traditional print publisher. Be honest. One of mine, an EPIE 2002 finalist, is simply too short. Another is an acclaimed short story collection, but it's utterly impossible for an unknown to sell a short story collection. If you find yourself in a similar situation, you may be thinking Print-On-Demand. I am.

If you're not familiar with Print-On-Demand (POD), a quick visit to http://free_reads.tripod.com/printondemand.html will fix that. If you choose to go that route, epubshing becomes crucial, for the editing. POD publishers never provide editing, and they really will publish anything. Think of a POD publisher not as a publisher, but as a print shop.

Ideally, you can find an epubsher who will simultaneously publish your book in a POD format with no setup fees. This will allow you to direct all your marketing efforts after the sale at bringing people to the same URL. Several such epubsher/POD operations are on my list at the website mentioned above.

Regardless of how you choose to ultimately publish - traditional print or POD -- I recommend epubshing first. You'll work with professional editors, free of charge, and you'll sell a few dozen or a few hundred copies of your book. Then, with a renewed sense of confidence and some idea of what to expect, you can approach a print publisher with the magic words "professionally edited manuscript."

MY CRITERIA FOR EPUBLISHERS

* Authors do not pay to get published. They are paid for the privilege.

* The only thing the epubshers sells is books. No editorial services, no packaging fees, no marketing fees, no artwork fees. (Selling eBook readers is okay, however, so long as the books themselves don't require one to read them. Meaning, HTML and/or PDF must be available formats.)

* Free editorial service is a must. If the publisher's going to put his name on my book, and he's not proud enough of his name to make sure the e-book is done right, screw him. He won't last very long as a bookseller anyway.

* The web site must look professional. Meaning? I have to like it. Fast, good-looking, professional, designed so the reader can see the titles or the appropriate menu option right there on the first screen of the home page. No busted links. No missing artwork. No pop-ups. No big hype about their publishing services plastered all over the front page, while the potential reader has to hunt for what he wants.

* There can be no typos. Not a damn one. I saw one site with typos in their ad for "editorial services for a reasonable fee." You know what they can kiss.

* Hit counters can lie. But if they have one, I'd better see more than 47 hits. Trust me -- there is such a place. But they aren't listed on my website.

* If their site spends a great deal of effort advertising some contest that closed in April 2000, screw em. Keep the place up-to-date, please.

* They must accept e-mail submissions. I live in Hong Kong. I'm not mailing anything to the US except a signed contract and possibly a disk along with it. Furthermore, this shows they're serious about using the Internet. What kind of epubisher wants you to use paper?

* Promoting your book. Okay, now you're published. Great! But what will this publisher do after it's all said and done to make sure your potential readers know you exist? If the epub promotes itself and you promote yourself, that's fine. If the epub promotes both itself and you, that's even better. An epub with distribution channels such as Amazon, B&N, Gemstar is also excellent, as odds are you can't afford to do that part yourself.

Michael LaRocca is the author of four published novels and an EPPIE 2002 Award finalist. He is an American living in Asia, and he's been a full-time author and editor since December 1999. His website is designed to help you find the best free & low-cost quality reads, and to help you improve/publish/promote your own

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