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Random Ramblings: One Small Step for Smashwords, One Giant Leap for Self-publishing

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Random Ramblings — One Small Step for Smashwords, One Giant Leap for Self-publishing (Perhaps)

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I suddenly feel very uninformed about my current area of research expertise — self-publishing. In the last eighteen months, I put together a special section of *Against the Grain* on self-publishing, participated in a **Charleston Conference** pre-conference on the topic, and wrote a major paper on the bibliographic control of self-published materials for the **2014 IFLA Conference** in Lyon, France. I follow multiple discussion lists for both public and academic libraries. During this time, I spent hours researching the topic, mostly on the Internet. One of the areas that I researched was the availability of self-published materials on eBook platforms. I found nothing until I saw the announcement in late May that **Smashwords** was partnering with **OverDrive** to offer packages of eBooks to libraries. This development was to be the focus of this column and will still be in part.

So What Happened?

Today, in verifying my facts for my intended column, I discovered that **Smashwords** has had an agreement with the provider of a major eBook platform for over two years — the Axis360 Digital Media Library Platform from **Baker & Taylor**. In a publicity release dated March 2, 2012, **Smashwords** announced that **B&T** would make "nearly 100,000 original **Smashwords** eBooks available to Blio readers" and also "to public libraries that subscribe to **Baker & Taylor's** new Axis360 digital media platform." **Smashwords** also publicized on August 8, 2012 that it was selling eBooks directly to libraries and that two library organizations — Douglas County Libraries in Colorado and Califa, a library consortium in California — had purchased large opening day collections of its most popular works.

And What Does This Mean?

I have some initial thoughts. The first is that self-published materials face more of an uphill battle to become a legitimate part of library collections than I had believed. While self-published titles account for between 50-75% of the titles published in the United States (the percentages vary according to the source) and for fifteen of the best-selling titles in *Publishers Weekly*'s top 100 best-sellers for last year, most libraries don't appear to have much interest in purchasing them for many reasons including the lack of reviews, minimal or no bibliographic information, and continued general non-availability through the traditional distribution network. Next, if I was unaware of this agreement with all my scanning of the professional literature, the Web, and discussion lists, libraries were also unlikely to know about the availability of self-published materials from **Baker & Taylor**. As proof, in all the activities chronicled above, no one corrected me when I talked about their absence from eBook platforms.

Why Is The Recent Overdrive Announcement Positive News For Self-Published Materials?

OverDrive is the driving force in the eBook market, especially for public libraries who are the logical purchasers for self-published materials and especially for self-published fiction. According to a relatively recent report on the Forbes Website: "In terms of market share, **OverDrive** says that they serve over 90% of the 16,400 U.S. public libraries, with a 99% renewal rate in that segment." (*http://www.forbes.com/sites/avaseave/2013/11/18/are-digital-libraries-a-winner-takes-all-market-OverDrive-hopes-so/*) Public libraries with any interest in self-published materials now have an option to acquire these materials easily through a trusted and familiar source.

The other advantage is that **Smashwords** offers nine pre-selected packages of their most popular materials at very attractive prices. **Smashwords** is first and foremost a distributor so that they track the aggregated sales results of titles across multiple retail channels (**iBooks**, **Barnes & Noble**, **Kobo**, **Scribd**, **Oyster**, etc.) and use this data to identify the most popular eBooks. The packages include these titles and are available by top titles, by series, or by author. The areas include fiction, romance, YA fiction, sci-fi, and non-fiction. The pricing is under $4.00 per title except for non-fiction at $7.35. For a public library that wishes to test the waters, "**Smashwords** Hot 100 (recent bestsellers)" is available for $370. At this price, even all but the smallest public library should be able to take the risk of discovering whether self-published materials will circulate if made available in the library. The fact that these eBooks are the best-sellers on **Smashwords** guarantees some level of quality control. For libraries that wish to start with more comprehensive collections, "**Smashwords** Top 250 Author Collections" can make available 3,650 titles for $13,900 ($3.81 per title). For the voracious romance readers, the "**Smashwords** 200 Romance Series" provides 1,300 titles for $4,700 ($3.62 per title).

Do Problems Still Remain?

Of course, I still see some issues. The first concern is **Smashwords** distribution plans. How often will **Smashwords** change the packages of pre-selected eBooks? If a library buys a package, will there be any way to get additional content as the packages change? If yes, could this happen automatically within the limits set by the library? How would the pricing structure work? In addition, is it possible to use the **Smashwords** Website as a selection tool? Unfortunately, **Mark Coker**, CEO of **Smashwords**, who reviewed this article for factual accuracy, says no. The **Smashwords** Web site doesn't identify which titles have been distributed to **OverDrive** and are therefore available for purchase by libraries. It appears that after the initial purchase, libraries will need to buy titles individually from **OverDrive** though the pricing will generally remain around $4.00 per fiction title.

Beyond these technical issues, I'm more concerned about the responses to a message that I sent out on the PUBLIB discussion list. I asked for comments about the **Smashwords** announcement from the over 10,000 subscribers to this list. I received only three substantive responses beyond the emails asking me to share the results. One consortium had purchased two items, but the librarian also said that "they are a little tricky to find because **OverDrive** has them segregated into their own section." Self-published materials apparently remain second-class citizens, though I doubt that readers care about who the publisher is. They care about authors, and many self-published authors are quite popular. Another consortium is looking into getting **Smashwords** titles added to its **OverDrive** offerings. The third response came from one of the pioneers in making self-published eBooks available, the **Los Gatos Public Library** in California, whose experiences will be part of the future book on this topic from the **University of Purdue Press** that I'm co-editing with **Kelly Leonard**. The lack of comments surprised me because I expected more enthusiasm for this inexpensive option to discover empirically whether self-published materials would circulate.

What Next?

My first hope is that more publicity — like this article — will tempt additional public libraries to take the plunge. This column will most likely be indexed in *Library Literature Online* and help make the **Smashwords** options better known. Furthermore, the librarian supporters of self-published materials might post more on the various discussion lists including PUBLIB with its large audience. I also don't know if **Smashwords** has an advertising

budget or if their sales to date would justify additional advertising in the library marketplace, but they should consider this option if economically feasible. Finally, perhaps one of the public libraries that has integrated self-published materials into its collections could publish a use study. I would support doing so even if the study showed little circulation since such a study would at least answer my questions about the current importance of self-publishing for libraries. For this very reason, I eagerly await the two papers from public libraries that will appear in the **University of Purdue Press** volume mentioned above.

What Did I Learn?

Perhaps I've been too optimistic about the importance of self-published materials for libraries. With the general decline in library funding, public libraries may not yet be willing to take on responsibility for collecting in a new area that doesn't conform to the traditional practices of collection development. On the other hand, I still find it hard to fathom that libraries can avoid forever over 50% of the titles published in the United States. I also continue to believe that library patrons won't hesitate to ask their libraries to make available self-published materials that that they encounter on **Smashwords**, **Apple iBooks**, **Amazon**, **Goodreads**, readers advisory blogs, and genre discussion lists. The best thing that might happen would be for **Amazon** to tempt a best-selling author to self-publish a novel that makes it to the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list so that public libraries couldn't refuse to buy it. Overall, $4.00 per title seems like a great way to offer a large amount of additional content to fill the wants of voracious fiction readers. Maybe the tipping point for self-published materials is farther away than I thought, but I'm patient enough to wait. 🌿

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on the *ATG* NewsChannel — *"Americans still spend just as much on print books as eBooks."* This article presents **Bureau of Labor Statistics** charts showing the breakdown of consumer expenditures on books and other reading materials by age of reference person. Fascinating.
http://www.vox.com/xpress/2014/10/2/6889911/ americans-still-spend-just-as-much-on-print-books-as-e-books

Hey!! Did y'all see that there is a new TV series called **The Librarians**. Voice over: "humanity's end begins at the library" is the mysterious lead in… TNT premier December 7th. We don't watch much TV but this is something to keep an eye on definitely!
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3663490/

LJ just published an interview with **Sam Brooks**, Executive Vice President at **EBSCO**, and **Allen Powell**, President of the **EBSCO** Subscription Services division about the **Swets**

bankruptcy, see *http://www.infodocket.com/ wp-content/uploads/2014/10/140925_LJ_EBS-CO_SWETS.pdf*.

William G. Bowen's talk on October 13, at **Rice University's De Lange Conference** is presented in **Ithaka's S+R's recent Issue Brief** introduced by the awesome **Deanna B. Marcum**. To quote **Ms. Marcum**: "**William G. Bowen**, president emeritus of both **The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation** and **Princeton University**, argues that we are not doing well on several fronts: the rate of higher education degree attainment has been near stagnant for the past 40 years; the time it takes for undergraduates to earn their degrees is

rising; socioeconomic inequalities are growing; and, in an age of eroding government support and rising tuition, higher education is less affordable for many students and their families. …Technology is not a panacea, and **Bowen** appreciates how faculty roles and higher education governance itself will need to evolve before technological innovation can lead to positive educational outcomes. But this provocative paper asks us to consider new ways to reach our goals. I look forward to hearing your thoughts on this topic and invite you to comment on our blog."
http://www.sr.ithaka.org/blog-individual/technol-