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Special Issue Editors' Introduction

The Past, Present, and Future of Self-Publishing: Voices, Genres, Publics

Jason Luther, Frank Farmer, and Stephen Parks

In the history of writing studies scholarship, one of the most celebrated terms has been *voice*, a term made famous by its most ardent proponent, Peter Elbow, who has written extensively about voice, especially as a writerly quality that is neither defined by, nor obligated to, academic discourse. While voice is one of our most celebrated terms, it is also one of our most contested terms, owing largely to the fact that it has historically been aligned with expressivist pedagogies that have been largely (though not entirely) discredited by the profession at large. Darsie Bowden's, *The Mythology of Voice*, is one critique that, as its title suggests, calls into question the actuality of written voice, and wonders if such a thing as written voice even exists. If it does not, then the venerable task of "finding a voice" is rather beside the point, a quixotic pursuit at best.

But for community literacy workers, voice, whether written or spoken, has a different resonance altogether. Whether heard in the streets or in shelters, in jails or in town halls, in church basements or in public libraries, or in the many texts that circulate in community circles, voices have an undeniable reality, not simply because they are expressed, but rather, because they are heard, greeted, affirmed, disputed, questioned, parodied—in a word, *answered*. In community literacy contexts, then, the problem of voice is not one of personal exploration or authentic self-expression, as in "true voice" constructions of authorship. Instead, voice is real because it is originally social, not individual. Voices are heard, and only heard, because they exist in relation to other voices. Community literacy activists know firsthand what the Russian language theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin, long ago stated, namely that "A single voice ends nothing and resolves nothing. Two voices is the minimum for life, the minimum for existence" (252). This is especially true in the life and existence of communities.

Yet, this fact does not address the problem of whose voices may be heard, whose voices are included and whose excluded. Not all colloquies are hospitable to all who wish to be heard. Not all forums are open forums. Not all venues are accessible to all. This is as true (if not more true) of the written word as it is of the spoken. When written publication is construed as a distinction, a privilege, or a matter of high achievement, it goes without saying that a number of written voices may never be heard, may never find a responsive, answering voice. Understood this way, the traditional problem of "finding a voice" might be better thought of as the problem of finding a medium that would allow for one's voice to be heard. And if such a medium is not readily at hand, it might need to be invented or devised by the person who has something to say.



In a recent issue of *The Economist*, an anonymous feature writer points out that the heyday of the big, glossy magazine may be on the wane. To support this claim, the writer points out that over the last decade, the popular women's magazine, *Glamour*, has lost half of its readership, and is now moving its publication to the web, "promising only biannual 'collectible' print issues." While other publications have not suffered such substantial losses in readership as *Glamour*, the author reports that "British paid for magazines lost 6% of their readers last year," an appreciable decline from previous years for most publications of this sort.

What's especially interesting about this piece is that while readership is declining among the glossies, certain handmade "micro-publications," commonly known as zines, are enjoying a "boomlet" these days. This renaissance in zine publications, of course, is well known among zinesters, and has received wide coverage in the mainstream press, as zine festivals, zine archives, and zine publications have all proliferated dramatically in the last decade. While it would be mistaken to think that *Glamour* readers have migrated en masse to their kitchen tables to enjoy the pleasures of zine making, it would *not* be mistaken to observe that recently, many, many people have taken up zine making. Zines, after all, are an exemplary genre of self-publication, and part of their emerging appeal, no doubt, has to do with this fact. Still, and as the several contributors to this special issue attest, self-publication assumes many forms, zines being one notable genre, but certainly not the only one.

Tobi Jacobi and Michelle Curry, for example, report on their experiences in conducting a writing group among a local jail population, and how self-publication is a broader yet more nuanced activity than simply having one's work appear in an institutionally-sponsored publication, *SpeakOut! Journal*. Chelsea Murdock explores what self-publication means for authors, like herself, who write fan fiction, and who try to balance the competing demands of academic writing and fan fiction writing, especially in the rewards and challenges that accrue to both. Terese Guinsatao Monberg discusses how one organization, the Filipino American National Historical Society (FANHS), fosters an "infrastructure" for self-publication, and does so in its various functions as an institution, a community, and a counterpublic. Charles Lesh reports on an ethnographic study of graffiti writing in Boston as a counterpublic genre that produces spaces wherein oppositional discourses may exist alongside dominant genres. Finally, the issue concludes with Paula Mathieu's meditation on materiality, circulation, and affect as illuminated through examples of personal contact brought about by textual exchanges, street newspaper transactions being a notable one.



At the risk of stating the obvious, to publish is to make public. But at the further risk of stating the obvious, not all publics are the same, and it is therefore reasonable to ask if the publics addressed by self-publication are somehow distinct, or indicative of qualities not found in mainstream or official publications. Certainly, by virtue of being located outside established channels of publication, and thus excluded from the benefits enjoyed by those who write within such channels, authors who self-publish are aware that they do not always have an intact or already existing public to address. In other words, self-publishing writers must often find or make their publics, and do so knowing that a public is never only a public. It is, at once, an audience, a readership, a community, as well as a public. But what kind of public?

A number of the articles presented here allude to counterpublics, and it is hardly a coincidence that they do so. If the relationship of counterpublics to official publics is, by definition, an oppositional one, the same might be said of the relationship between self-publication and traditional publication. In other words, acts of self-publication, apart from whatever else they may say, voice a critique of entities that assert an exclusive purchase on what counts as legitimate or authorized publication. The articles gathered here challenge this idea of legitimacy, and do so through the various genres of self-publication represented in their individual topics.

Collected here, then, are accounts of many writers who have sought to have their voices heard through genres that are often unfamiliar, in publics that are not always recognized as such, on behalf of communities that many never knew existed.



Self-publication has been a longstanding practice in American letters, with such notable titles as Ben Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanac* and Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, often headlining the marquee of self-published works. But there have always been parallel and lesser known traditions of self-publishing as well, traditions that include the pamphlets and broadsides of the eighteenth century, and the National Amateur Press Associations of the nineteenth. The twentieth century likewise has seen its fair share of notable self-published works, including much of e.e. cummings' early work, as well as Sergio de la Pava's *A Naked Singularity* and Stephen King's *People, Places, and Things*, to name just a few. At the same time, though, the twentieth century also witnessed the emergence of "below the surface" self-publications. Amateur journalism, science fiction fanzines, *Hobo News*, labor union circulars, underground newspapers, posters, bills, fliers, zines, and other forms of textual expression were common among activists and artists throughout the entirety of the last century.

At the outset of this century, however, the most profound change in self-publication has doubtless been the many opportunities afforded by digital technologies. E-books, blogs, wikis, fandom, open source publishing, not to mention online hosting platforms courtesy of Amazon and Google Play, among other corporate entities, have made publishing it yourself (PIY?) a real and relatively convenient prospect for any number of aspiring writers.

But what is most interesting about these recent developments, and what is most evident throughout the articles included here, might be called a postdigital sensibility about the new media at our disposal. The postdigital is often described as what occurs when the digital becomes habitual and commonplace, when we have the luxury of taking for granted, even forgetting, our many devices and the “smart” technologies that are routinely deployed on our behalf. One of the affordances of such a postdigital awareness is that it allows us to recover, and thus to remediate, earlier material forms and formats, lending to them new understandings and new possibilities. All of the articles in this issue share this postdigital awareness, and each points to the future of self-publication as one characterized by the mediation and remediation of material and digital forms. If this is true, then we should expect to see new voices, new genres, and new publics emerge because of those who choose to self-publish their works. We honor their work here.

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