

An “accidental profession”: small press publishing in the Pacific Northwest.

Abstract

This research examines contemporary, independent publishing in the Pacific Northwest (USA and Canada). Through a series of interviews with small publishers in Seattle, Portland, and Vancouver, BC, this paper will investigate whether independent publishers, based outside of the major publishing hubs of New York and Toronto, believe they can: compete in the global publishing environment; help to promote and preserve regional cultures and identities; and maintain diversity in cultural output. It will also explore how independent presses see themselves situated in the national and international publishing arena and identify what structures are in place to support them to do so. Although the focus of the empirical research is the Pacific Northwest, this paper has been contextualised within national publishing discourse.

Keywords: small presses, alternative publishing, authors, digital publishing, Canadian publishing, independent publishing, diversity

1. Introduction

Globalisation, the development of technology, and the concentration of resources have transformed, and polarised, contemporary, trade publishing. Today, the North American, English-language publishing industries are characterised by their disparity. At one end there is a small number of large, international, trans-media conglomerates and at the other there is a large number of smaller publishers with a more regional, national, or niche focus [36]. In North America, the large, trans-media, conglomerates are: predominantly based in New York and Toronto; dominate the market; and influence cultural output, often to the detriment of smaller, more regional, publishing communities.

Although small, niche publishers operate within the fringes of the industry; their development and, often, demise ensures that there is constant regeneration and diversity in an environment that is dominated by large companies with substantial marketing budgets and global infrastructures. This generation and regeneration is aided, in part, by the proliferation of digital publishing technology, which benefits smaller, regional companies because it eliminates the costs and time previously associated with publishing. Moreover, both new and established, small publishers are receiving recognition for producing quality work and have, occasionally, penetrated the larger trade market. For example, one of the participants in this study, Arsenal Pulp, published the English edition of the French graphic novel *Blue is the Warmest Colour*: the film adaptation won the

Palme d'Or at the Cannes film festival. This suggests good reasons to be optimistic about the continuation and development of small press publishing.

The gravitational pull of the capital cities has, in the past, meant that the US and Canadian publishing industries were, mostly, New York or Toronto-based [18, 22]. However, there are creative hubs across North America: with companies operating from places as remote as a sailboat on the Pacific Coast. Furthermore, a recent study found that the West Coast of America was a particularly creative region [25]. Enterprising networks have spread across North America, as the publishing landscape becomes increasingly decentralised, which supports the needs of local and regional talent [10, 11, 1]. Developing such talent could help to create vibrant local and regional cultures and creative communities, and can be used to develop innovations in local industry [14]. Therefore, it is pertinent to study regional creative communities outside of the major publishing centres. While there have been some oral histories and interviews with independent publishers in this region: there have not been any recent studies [1, 9]. Based on interviews with small, independent publishers in the Pacific Northwest: This paper will examine the relationship between small presses, their authors, and larger trade publishers, and the support structures that enable them to exist in the national and global publishing environment.

2. Development of North American Publishing

The struggle between commerce and culture is one that runs through the history of publishing in the Anglo-American tradition. While the North American publishing industry was developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it was very different to the publishing industry we know today [31]. At this time, publishing was guided by economic pressure and constraints. In a practice that has continued into the twenty-first century, publishers provided most support for the bestselling authors, taking fewer risks on authors that had not yet proved their profitability. During the nineteenth century it was British authors, published illegally, that proved most popular during this period: American authors were overlooked by commercial American publishers as a result [18]. Consequently, some of the first stirrings of the alternative publishing movement grew out of the aspiration to publish American authors. Unlike later movements, this one was lead by authors rather than publishers, with key authors and titles being self-published in response to/to protest against the lack of support from large,

commercial publishers of the time¹ [21]. Additionally, American publishing companies were mostly situated in the North East of the country and were also run by men from similar religious, cultural, and economic backgrounds that shared the same, conservative, worldview. Consequently, experimental authors and/or those with apposing social, cultural, or religious views were deemed as unpublishable [21, 18]. The second alternative publishing movement, in the 1890s, was in response to these homogenous publishing programmes: a number of non-commercial publishers began publishing the polemical and radical authors that had been rejected by the core, commercial publishers [21, 32]. Tebbel, using the publisher Copeland and Day as an example, surmised that this movement demonstrated "how bookmen whose minds were not on the countinghouse and who could not hope for commercial success nevertheless were able to make a lasting impression on American cultural life" [32]. Since then, publishing has become an even more commercial, corporate arena; however, as in the nineteenth century, there are a number of small, alternative, presses that publish non-commercial work, as will be discussed in this study.

2.1. The Golden Age of Publishing and The Age of Acquisitions

The period between 1920-1940 has been described as the *Golden Age of Publishing* [34]. Instead of focusing on reprints, American publishers began to produce new content, and forge identities and reputations for themselves [31, 32]. There are many flattering accounts of the American publishing industry during this period, which paint a picture of an industry focused on providing titles of both literary and education merit, and that managed to balance commercial gain and cultural reputation: "One after another came books that were either important in themselves, popular sellers, or both" [33]. Many publishing historians look back at this era with sentimentality, surmising that it was "a much smaller, and more intimate activity than it is today, and the titles published by any publishing houses tended to reflect to a greater extent the interests and priorities of the proprietor than abstract market forces" [13].

The landscape of the American publishing industry began to change as early as the 1950s. By 1952, there was more pressure to sell large volumes of books and thus more emphasis was placed on finding bestsellers [27]. Although there were many independently owned publishing houses in New York in the 1950s, the 1960s, when Random House absorbed

¹ Such as Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*.

Alfred Knopf, saw the beginnings of the publishing industry being subsumed into larger, mass media conglomerates [36, 38]. It was between 1960 and 1990, which is often referred to as *The Age of Acquisitions*, that the publishing industry changed mostly dramatically, with a reported 573 merges/acquisitions [11]. In comparison, up until the twentieth century, the Canadian publishing industry was dominated by foreign publishers and imported titles [22, 17]. For example, foreign-owned companies published 70% of books sold in Canada in the 1970s. Consequently, there has been a national impetus to develop mechanisms to support Canadian-owned publishing companies. These strategies have been successful: 69.8% of Canadian publishers were Canadian-owned in 2010 [20].

2.3. Publishing today

Contemporary publishing underwent a spate of major contractions in 2013 and 2014: Penguin Books and Random House merged in 2013, and in 2014 HarperCollins acquired Canadian Harlequin and Hachette bought the largest independent publishing group, Perseus Books Group. Greenfield said, “These three deals alone make 2013-14 the busiest period in book publishing mergers and acquisitions in recent history” [12]. Five global conglomerates now dominate contemporary publishing. The issue of commerce versus culture is very much in existence today, since these large companies control the market share and guide cultural output. As such, small and alternative presses play a key role in representing possibilities for counter-hegemonic transformation. Additionally, print book production, by the traditional and non-traditional publishing sectors, has seen a decline in recent years. Although the market is still relatively stable, traditional publishers saw a 2% decrease from 2012-2013. The non-traditional sector – reprint publishers, presses dedicated to self-publishing, and micro-niche publishers – saw a decline of 46% [8].

Critics of modern publishing castigate the relationship between business and the creation of cultural content: the corporate structures, brought about by conglomeration, are criticised as possible threats to the creativity and risk-taking that is at publishing’s core as a creative industry. Epstein bemoaned, 15 years ago, that “trade publishing is by nature a cottage industry, decentralized, improvisational, personal; best performed by small groups of like-minded people, devoted to their craft, jealous of their autonomy, sensitive to the needs of writers and to the diverse interests of readers” [7]. This idea of “groups of like-minded people” epitomises the small and alternative publishing movements. However, indie publishers have found it difficult to maintain, and elevate, their position

within, and were increasingly pushed to the fringes of, the publishing industry as it contracted, had closer affiliations with the wider creative industries, and focused evermore on bestsellers [38].

3. Methodology

This paper helps us to understand contemporary, small press publishing from the perspective of small publishers based in the Pacific Northwest. This will help answer the questions of whether independent, trade publishers believe they can: compete in the global publishing environment; help to promote and preserve regional cultures and identities; and maintain diversity in cultural output. It will also examine how small presses, based outside of New York and Toronto, see themselves situated in the national and international markets. Small publishers in the Pacific Northwest – focusing on Seattle, WA, Portland, OR, and Vancouver, BC and its surrounds - are used as the main case studies in this research since they are small publishing communities that exist alongside the larger, dominant, publishing industries in New York and the Toronto. While publishing activity in the Pacific Northwest forms the basis of this study: the findings are applicable to other publishing communities.

One of the positive outcomes of *The Age of Acquisitions* is that publishing began to move away from the traditional centres such as New York. Publishing communities, with a more regional focus, began to spring up across the country, which brought more opportunities for authors and publishing professionals in these parts of the country [10]. While small presses are found across Canada and the USA, there is a high concentration in the Pacific Northwest [39]. In particular, Vancouver, BC has a tradition rooted in the 1960's literary underground movement, which started with the emergence of many literary magazines. Several of these, such as Talon, have grown into publishing companies (Talon Books) [26, 9]. As the publishing industry, and cultural output, becomes concentrated into the hands of a few global conglomerates: it is important to study independent publishers and small regional communities.

It is difficult to identify exactly how many publishers there are in the Pacific Northwest. The 1993 *Writer's Northwest Handbook*² estimated that there were 3000 publishers of books, newspapers, and magazines in these states [30]. However, this was the last

² A biennial directory of resources, for the writing and publishing community, which focused on Oregon, Washington, Montana, Idaho, Alaska, and British Columbia.

publication of this handbook, and there is not one, more recent, publication that lists publishers based in all the different states of the Pacific Northwest. Trade associations and arts organisations such as the Association of Book Publishing in British Columbia (ABPBC), Book Publishers Northwest (BPNW), and Literary Arts list publishers in the region but they tend to be state specific. ABPBC focus on British Columbia and lists 28 members: all 28 were contacted and five were interviewed. BPNW focus on Washington and list 58 members: all 58 were contacted and five were interviewed. Literary Arts focus on Oregon and list 28 members: all 28 were contacted and five were interviewed³. This report is based on semi-structured interviews with 15 publishers in the Pacific Northwest⁴. The interviewed publishers are dispersed across Vancouver, BC, and its surrounds, Seattle, WA, and Portland, OR, and represent a mix of different types of small presses (Table 1).

Table 1. List of participants

Publisher	Location	Established	Publishing Output (main)*
Arsenal Pulp	Vancouver, BC	1971	Underground literature; LGBT literature; Multiracial literature; Graphic novels; Progressive and activist non-fiction; Works in translation; Vegan cookbooks
Bennett & Hastings Publishing	Seattle, WA	2000	Everything
Booktrope	Seattle, WA	2010	Everything
Coffeetown Enterprises	Seattle, WA	2005	Memoirs; Literary fiction; Academic non-fiction; Nonfiction; Literary mysteries
Eraserhead Press	Portland, OR	1999	Bizarro fiction
Forest Avenue Press	Portland, OR	2012	Literary fiction; Literary non fiction
Harbour Publishing	Pender Harbour, BC	1974	Children's; Fiction; Non-Fiction; Poetry; Cooking; Gardening; Regional
Hawthorne Books	Portland, OR	2002	Literary fiction; Literary non fiction
Microcosm Publishing	Portland, OR	1996	Zines; Underground culture; Progressive and activist non-fiction; Comics/Graphic novels
New Star Books	Vancouver, BC	1974	Fiction; Non-Fiction; Poetry; Regional
Perfect Day	Portland, OR	2011	Literary non fiction

³ Although more publishers agreed to be interviewed for this research, five from each state were chosen based on convenience i.e. the ability to be interviewed in Portland, Seattle, or Vancouver.

⁴ All interviews were with the Managing Directors of the companies.

Saasquatch Books	Seattle, WA	1986	Children's books; Non fiction
Talon Books	Vancouver, BC	1967	Poetry; Fiction and drama; Non-fiction books on literary criticism, ethnography, and environmental and social issues.
Tradewinds Books	Vancouver, BC	1996	Children's books
Wave	Seattle, WA	2005	Poetry and chapbooks

* Note: Lists may include a wider range of genres but this is a snapshot of the most published genres in the front and back lists, as described by the publishers.

4. A Picture of Small Press Publishing in the Pacific Northwest

All of the publishers, interviewed for this research, were small, independent companies with five or less full-time staff members. In fact, many (seven) of the publishers, particularly those based in Seattle and Portland, were micropublishers: one-person operations, producing fewer than five titles a year. One Portland-based publisher was, what could be considered as, a pico-publisher: run by one person who was working full time, in another job, and producing a book every second year. This could be because three out of the five Portland publishers and four out of the five Seattle publishers were established after the year 2000, so are relatively new, while most of the publishers based in BC were established before 2000, many were established in the 1970s: so had more time to grow their businesses, build up their lists, and employ new members of staff. That being said, over two thirds (11) of the publishers said they would not be recruiting any new members of staff in the near future, so they will remain very small enterprises.

4.1. Authors

There are many differences between small press publishers and larger trade publishers. These have, traditionally, been size, ambitions, and ethos. Larger companies have larger operations, greater ambitions, and a commitment to publishing books that will be profitable. While small presses do not eschew profits, they are often characterised by their commitment to their authors and the products they publish. For example, Alfred A. Knopf, “intended to publish what he considered to be the best literature whether it sold or not” [35].

The pressures of conglomeration has made it difficult for new, emerging, or niche authors to get published and it is clear that small presses offer an alternative for these authors. Additionally, midlist authors, that struggle to achieve the large volumes of sales of brand name or celebrity authors, have suffered: publishers have dropped many of them [5]. This

has resulted in small presses, existing or new, being able to publish talented but, by large publisher standards, underselling authors without having to compete for unaffordable advances. There have been many criticisms about the detrimental effects the conglomeration and homogenisation of the industry has had on authors and literature. For example, The Authors Guild complained: "for many authors of artistically meritorious works lacking immediate commercial appeal it jeopardizes or diminishes their bargaining power with publishers and their opportunity to be published" [38]. All of the participants believed that the focus on bestsellers, and the market's reliance on them, has led to the limitation of smaller, more diverse, voices.

Emerging, avant-garde, and non-mainstream authors often face difficulties when trying to publish with large, mainstream publishers. Thus, small publishing companies – that do not focus on sales or the bottom line - are important gatekeepers. All of the participants acknowledged that small presses, as Tradewinds put it, "publish writers that big publishers will miss or won't be able to publish". Arsenal Pulp added that they were keen to nurture authors that may not be published otherwise: "We want to help and nurture new fiction and literary non-fiction titles: titles that wouldn't get published without the funding so the careers [of these authors] would not start if it wasn't for that support". Additionally, Harbour stressed that their writers were grateful and remained loyal to them as a result of their close relationships: "Our writers...feel quite bound to us because they cannot publish the type of work they write in Toronto or New York".

The conglomeration of the publishing industry has changed the role of the editor: as publishing companies grow, and develop large overheads, editors have less time to spend, and support, authors [15]. There is also the danger of losing editorial autonomy when a large company acquires an independent one and that "careful editing has ceased under pressure to focus on profit-making blockbusters" [16]. Small presses, such as the publishers interviewed for this research, have less bureaucratic infrastructure than their larger counterparts, and thus have more involvement with the author and title. Arsenal Pulp said their author relationships were "closer than corporate publishing because there are fewer degrees of separation between management and authors here, and all small publishers" and thus they could help the author to develop more creative and innovative work. Additionally, Harbour Publishing stressed how important the nurturing role of small presses was:

The big presses...do have Canadian publishing programmes, it's a small part of their businesses, and they depend entirely on writers who have already developed a national audience: almost every single one of those authors published their first three or four books with small independent Canadian publishers. You would not have the upper story of star Canadian writers if you didn't have a place for them to get on the first rung of the ladder and begin their writing careers, and that's a job that has always been done by the smaller independent publishers and...would always have to be. It's just not a job that the big multi-nationals, that keep getting bigger, and keep having demands for larger and larger print runs, are engineered to do.

Additionally, many of the small presses were established as a result of this; showing that market homogenization can lead to innovation and regeneration:

*I pay attention to the fact that they are not always publishing the kinds of novels that I would like to see published, so that has become part of my aesthetic and my main reason for existing. **(Forest Avenue)***

*One of the main problems with becoming a writer in the West Coast...there was very little in the way of a West Coast publishing scene...so it was pretty evident to me that if I wanted to have any freedom to publish the kind of writing about this region then I would have to tackle the problem of how to get it published, and the most obvious thing seemed to be to start my own company. **(Harbour Publishing)***

*We're not just doing these things because of the economics of it; we're also doing it because of the social side of it too. If we let this continue, we have these tastemakers that are doing this, sort of, oligarchical, society that they get to tell us what we get to read and think. **(Booktrope)***

It is evident that small presses play a key role in the cultivation of new writing and authors: supporting them to get the best work from them over time. This could be because many small presses are author-run: Five of the publishing companies interviewed for this research were. There are numerous historical examples of author-run presses; however, unlike many of these presses, for example Hogarth Press in their early days, the majority

of the companies are not self-publishing platforms: only two of the participants published the work of their founders in addition to other writers, although Bennett and Hastings conceded that there had been a lot of “stigma attached” to this. Many of the participants were keen to dismiss the misconception that they published their own work and the work of their friends. Perfect Day Publishing, on the other hand, candidly explained that the press was established as a result of their, and their friends, “frustrations for not getting published”. As we have seen, small presses are often the easiest routes into traditional publishing for emerging authors, especially for those without literary agents. Many internationally successful authors started their careers with small publishers⁵. However, these authors inevitably leave to publish bigger companies that can offer larger advances and marketing budgets: the big companies based in New York and Toronto publish the most commercially successful authors. Seven of the publishers based in the Pacific Northwest had authors who had left to publish with a larger publisher. However, small publishers do not seem bitter about this, in fact, Hawthorne Books said “if they can get a better deal then I’m not opposed to that”. For example, Hawthorne Books published *Clown Girl* by Monica Drake: Crown (Penguin Random House) offered a \$10,000 advance for Drake’s next book while Hawthorne Books could only offer \$1000. When talking about this move, Hawthorne Books said, “There was absolutely no hard feelings: I was delighted for her: it shines the light back on our catalogue and our books: A win for everyone”. The question of whether larger publishers should play more of a supportive role towards small presses was raised since larger publishers benefit from the creativity and experimentation fostered by small presses, often picking up authors who have demonstrated the surety of their sales.

4.2. Niche output

Small publishers are perhaps most well known for working in distinct literary niches, what Bourdieu called the field of restrictive production, such as poetry, experimental fiction, regional writing, or new and emerging genres, which are not mainstream and thus often neglected by larger publishers [4]. Mathieu et al describe how such, small, community publishing endeavours engender the publication of “underrepresented voices”, including “people of color, women, working-class radicals, gay and lesbian groups, and homeless advocates, among others” [19]. While Atton argues that alternative media “are crucially about offering the means for democratic communication to people

⁵ For example, small Canadian presses originally nurtured internationally renowned authors, such as Michael Ondaatje, Carol Shields, and Margaret Atwood.

who are normally excluded from media production” [2]. This is reflected in the publishing focus of the regional publishers. Outputs ranged from experimental poetry to hand-made ephemera to Bizarro fiction to picture books about indigenous animals to local kayaking guides to short stories about LGBT life in the Pacific Northwest. Microcosm was keen to demonstrate that over half of their books were by female writers: this is interesting given the recent discussions about the dominance of male writers and the lack of diversity in books [6, 29]. However, not all the small presses had such a niche focus, many (eight) small presses have a very mixed list as Arsenal Pulp said “we don’t have all our eggs in one market” so have diversified their list - or had a more commercial focus, as Forest Avenue explained. “I’ve seen a lot of small presses focus on the really out there experimental, extreme type books and I know that there are a lot of really worthy local and national presses that do that, but, we’re pretty mainstream with a literary bent”.

Previous studies about the development of small presses suggest they were established in response to various counter-culture movements and have existed, for decades, alongside hegemonic media companies [1, 2, 37]. While seven of the interviewed publishers had a very strong, counter-culture, ethos: the remaining presses (mostly Seattle and Portland-based), while also publishing new authors and non-commercial work, were influenced, to varying degrees, by mainstream trends. Additionally, presses like Vancouver-based Arsenal Pulp, New Star Books, and Talon Books, that were founded as a part of the literary counter-culture movement in Canada in the 60s and 70s, have all experimented with more commercial publishing in recent years. While these three companies all found commercial success with their cookbook programmes, Arsenal Pulp and Talon Books were both quick to stress that they still had a countercultural ethos, but New Star were much more pragmatic about it: “We don’t want to be a corporate publishing company” (Arsenal Pulp); “We publish some really, really difficult books that may take you three or five months to read, that are dense, and that are saturated with the Western literary canon. Our books aren’t commercial in intent” (Talon Books); “The press had to reconfigure itself, so as not to be a socialist press but a press that addressed contemporary conditions in a much more broad fashion” (New Star Books).

Eraserhead Press, a self-proclaimed “renegade” publisher that publishes Bizarro fiction⁶ and finds it “stimulating working outside the realm of what big publishers create”, also have slight commercial considerations when it comes to meeting readers’ needs (i.e. even if they do not hope to sell large quantities of the books, they still want readers to be satisfied with their output and buy their books):

We’ve had to pass on some of the projects that, in the past, would have been our passion projects and focus more on what we think our readers would enjoy. However, some people misinterpret that as me being really commercial but how the hell is Bizarro fiction ever going to become commercial: by nature, it’s alternative, out-there, stuff. You don’t have to sacrifice any creativity to satisfy a reader.

4.2.1. Regional

Pollard and Smart outline how small publishing communities are often confined by their geographic location: this is reflected in the localness of their publishing output [23]. While the majority of the publishers thought it was important that writing from their region was represented nationally: they did not all focus, solely, on local authors or writing. All of the interviewed publishers work with authors from their region, and many of the publishers, particularly the Canadian publishers and some of the newer American presses, focus solely on regional authors. These publishers disclosed that having a regional focus could be a strategic decision because it can give publishers a niche or a unique selling point and give a platform for regional voices. For example, Hawthorne Books stressed that:

I’m going to be focusing more on Pacific Northwest authors and it will give my catalogue a bit more flavour and identification...For a long time I really resisted a regional label and then just recently I decided that it made sense... it occurred to me that if I had a regional focus but still had national ties and national authors, that would make the catalogues stand out to a New York publisher...it would just give the catalogue a little more definition rather than just competing with every other literary novel or memoir out there.

⁶ Bizarro fiction is a genre that Eraserhead coined in collaboration with their online community, of other publishers, writers, and genre enthusiasts. They describe it as “the kind of thing that we wish we could read and the kind of thing that doesn’t exist elsewhere”.

As can be seen from the above quote, Hawthorne Books realised that a regional list could be more noticeable – this particular publisher is working towards becoming a subsidiary of a larger New York based publisher, with the aim of still operating from the Pacific Northwest because they believe that, “New York is still the epicentre of publishing in the US”. Hawthorne Books continued by saying “I want to be part of the community. That’s where it all happens”. Although this is a stand-out case this is the only publisher who specifically stated that they wanted to be subsumed into a larger publisher – it does show how some small publishers view themselves in relation to larger companies and how important it is for them to have a strong identity, which is often based around the region that they publish in. For example, Forest Avenue Press said:

Why should we in Oregon...wait on people in New York to realise that this is an important story? Why should writers in Oregon tie their sense of themselves as writers to gatekeepers in New York? Why not embrace the DIY ethic while retaining the curatorship that’s so important to traditional publishing? Forest Avenue Press is an outgrowth of my belief in community and my desire to support local writers, artists, and independent bookstores. Although we’re a regional press, the stories our writers tell are universal ones, so we push hard to publicize our titles nationally.

Those who only publish local authors do so for many different reasons: time, energy, desire to develop local literary communities, desire to provide a stepping stone for local authors, desire to give back to the local community, need proximity for a good working relationship. In particular some of the newer presses found it easier to work with local authors. Harbour Press, who described themselves as a “thoroughly regional press operating in all genres”, said they have shifted their view on this since acquiring Douglas & McIntyre. However, they were still disparaging about Toronto publishers and the role they played in preserving and promoting regional writing:

The Toronto publishing scene is a world unto itself: it’s not particularly interested in regional material. They publish quite a few BC authors, but mostly if they write books that are addressed to a national audience. The continuous growth of these enormous multi-nationals, they are getting less ability to pay attention to the nooks and crannies or regional, or even national, cultures that the independent publishers are native to: so, I think, the job we do is going to become

more important and it's going to become more obvious that we're the only people that can do it.

All of the interviewed publishers had a national and/or international focus: they did not, solely, depend on local or regional markets. Most of the publishers, however, were very proud to operate out of their region and were proponents of regional writing, even if they did not focus on it. Being based in a regional hub, outside of the main publishing centres, was not restrictive to the interviewed publishers, especially those that published digitally: many of the of the publishers worked with international authors, sold their work overseas, exploited their work through digital formats, and were considering co-publishing with small publishers in other countries. Nearly a third of the interviewed publishers, however, did not like the label 'regional publisher' and believed they were publishers that were based in that particular region, rather than publishers who served that particular region: "To say regional publishers implies a physical constraint" (Booktrope); "We have a regional element, there are books that are only BC books, but we also have a very global reach, so I don't, primarily, consider myself as a regional publisher" (New Star Books); "We are an international publisher with diverse categories that include regional publishing" (Arsenal Pulp); "Portland feels ownership of us: in that way, we're regional. I was a bit flummoxed because that's not how I think of us" (Microcosm).

Publishers with a regional focus, or that publish to support a particular community, face the risk of appearing parochial; however, there are incentives for small presses, particularly those based in Canada, to publish local writers because of the belief that national identity can be formed and spread through cultural output such as book publishing and the willingness to support such endeavours. Arsenal Pulp said, "We get assistance to publish Canadian authors from Canada council so we generally publish Canadians first": an issue that separates small press publishing in the USA and Canada. Hawthorne Books bemoaned this difference: "our government funds very little funds in the arts, it's a tragedy".

4.3. Support systems

The constant concerns of all of the interviewed small presses were survival and funding. In addition to traditional publishing expenses, such as distribution, marketing, warehousing etc., smaller presses have to contend with high unit costs, per book, as a result of smaller print runs. Consequently, publishing books with expensive production

costs, such as cookbooks and children's books – products that some of the interviewed publishers published – put pressure on publishers to sell more copies to break-even. Therefore, capital is at the forefront of small publishers' concerns. Most of the interviewed publishers had to depend on personal savings, bank loans, or, in the case of Canadian publishers, government subsidies to survive. As outlined earlier, since the dominance of foreign-owned companies in 1970s and thus the inundation of British and American titles squeezing out Canadian titles, the Canadian government has designed a variety of policies to augment Canadian-owned publishers and Canadian authors. Such national and regional funding has given these publishers more liberty and control in their choices [3]. Arsenal Pulp stressed that this government support was “very important if you want to publish the titles that are not commercial” but recognised how lucky they are especially because they believed such support leads to increased literary activity, “We have small press publisher friends in the USA and we sometimes feel sheepish with the support we get because they have to struggle along with similar programmes to us without any grant support”. They surmised that “there is, proportionately, less literary publishing in the USA, in comparison to Canada, as a result of this lack of funding” and that:

There would be an awful lot of interesting books, that describe the specificity of this place and the provinces, that wouldn't exist if it wasn't for the support. And they are really great book that ended up selling really well but they wouldn't have got off the ground in the first place if the publishers didn't have the support.

Recent discussions about government support has lead to the following question being asked: “Does contemporary government support makes it possible for Canadian publishers to take risks on publishing books on themes that might not sell in huge quantities?” [40]. Harbour Publishing, said that the grant system exists “not so that we can publish unprofitable books, but so that Canadian publishing can survive...in a landscape where the Canadian sector could easily be swallowed up by giant multinational houses.” In Tradewinds' case, they said that the diversity in their publishing helped their books stand out in the market, particularly when they began selling into the U.S:

One way to compete is to differentiate ourselves from the competition, and in a children's publishing environment where more and more success stories are about adult-style blockbusters with mass appeal, I think we have made the right

choice in focusing on other voices and points of view.

Arsenal Pulp concluded that small presses, “would have to think about publishing in another way and the province would miss a lot of its identity” without these grants. Additionally, Harbour, Talon, and Tradewinds said they would not be able to survive without the government support: “It makes a difference between going into debt and not going into debt” (Harbour Publishing); “Our income is 50% grants, 50% sales” (Talon Books); “We couldn’t survive without grants” (Tradewinds).

4.3.1. Relationship with book retailers

Finding alternative ways to survive is what small presses in Seattle and Portland are doing. Despite not having any financial support, independent publishing has continued to thrive in the USA. One of the reasons that small presses are growing in numbers in America, Portland in particular, could be because of the independent bookstore scene and their close relationship with it. While many of the Canadian small presses bemoaned the demise of independent bookstores in Canada, the dominance of the chain bookstores, and their focus on bestsellers, which benefit larger publishing companies:

Because still the best, and for all intents and purpose, still really the only way to reach significant audiences is through bookstores... that is a real problem for us because that depends on a vibrant and healthy marketplace for books that is characterised by a diversity in different types of booksellers, including ones that are accommodating to not just the kinds of books that we do but more the kinds of readers we have. And right now in Canada, that is really difficult. (New Star Books)

These chains have “edged” out smaller, indie publishers who do not have the resources to compete for shelf space. Such pressures have led to small presses being subsumed into other larger companies or being pressured out of the market. In comparison, the Portland presses all extolled the virtues of Powell’s, “the largest independent bookstore in the world”, and their support of local small presses.

Although having a local, supportive independent bookstore was important to all of the interviewed publishers, there were several that recognised how Amazon could support the long tail of publishing output, and thus some of the more niche content they published.

Additionally, as shelf space in chain bookstores becomes more difficult to claim, the interviewed publishers are increasingly using Amazon as a key way to reach customers. Booktrope stated, “we have a good relationship with Amazon” and explained that “Amazon, and things like Amazon, really enable our system to exist”. Forest Avenue experienced, first hand, how Amazon could boost sales and visibility saying that; “I disregarded Amazon with the first book and lost out by not putting it on Amazon earlier”. Since they placed their books on Amazon “there has been a momentum in sales”.

The general consensus, amongst the interviewed publishers was that independent bookshops were invaluable to their survival, especially if they published niche or alternative subjects. As New Star Books surmised:

There is a particular political resonance to a lot of the literary work that we publish so that it overlaps heavily with people that are extremely critical of global capitalism. Those people are already allergic to institutions like Chapters, or Barnes and Noble, or Waterstones, and, to a certain degree, it is counter-productive almost for us to push those kinds of books through those channels and in fact, don't.

4.3.2. Digital publishing, DIY, and Community

Developments in digital technology have lowered the barriers for cultural production, what Shirky describes as the “mass amateurisation of publishing” [28]. The rise in self-publishing is evidence of how authors, and publishing hobbyists, are capitalizing on new technologies to create a plethora of print and digital content. As the publishing industry consolidates, making it difficult for medium size enterprises to compete, independently, against the behemoths: perhaps the abundance of small and micro-presses will be responsible for disrupting the status quo? This influx of small companies into the marketplace, although making it more diverse, does not always guarantee quality. DIY culture is a response to the mass-produced, commodification of culture and many of the interviewed publishers stated this as a reason for creating the types of products they did. In fact, all of the Portland-based publishers agree that there been a spate of DIY and/or micro creative industries established in Portland in recent years. Perfect Day Publishing surmised, “Small presses are fashionable in Portland at the moment”.

Digital publishing has been “considered as a panacea to bridge the gaps between different sized publishing companies: allowing small, independent companies to compete on an equal footing with cross-media conglomerates”; however, not all of the interviewed publishers were engaging with new technologies. [24]. Only four of the publishers were actively publishing eBooks, as Arsenal Pulp explained, “We try to have all the titles that we do, almost simultaneously, available as eBooks because, especially in fiction, that is a huge chunk of our sales”. However, they were also quick to state that they “would like to keep print as the main part of our programme”. Harbour Publishing agreed with the print-focus, stating, “it’s important not to abandon your main core activity in order to pursue any of these marginal ones but it’s important to keep your eye on them and keep moving along”. Microcosm argued that, given the aesthetic nature of their titles, eBooks were not suitable for their publications: less than 1% of their sales came from eBooks. Most of the publishers were, to some degree, involved in other aspects of digital publishing: particularly audience engagement through social media, and print on demand (POD).

Many of the publishers used POD to publish their books. Microcosm, however, argued against the cost-effectiveness of this model arguing that POD was “expensive” and that “small publishers don’t understand what is included in unit cost”. Relying on POD is “not sustainable for small publishers”, according to Microcosm, especially when it is subsidised by free labour (often from friends and family: something that several of the interviewed publishers did). Microcosm surmised, “The friends and relatives model is cool if your brother is a graphic designer and your mum is an editor but I find it a bit offensive really that you would devalue these things to the point of unpaid labour and that your entire business would be based on that”.

This idea of publishing as a hobby, an “accidental profession”, instead of a business is one that characterises a couple of the publishers interviewed for this research: particularly those based in Portland and Seattle [9]. Perfect Day Publishing openly admit that “I feel like the press is more of a hobby in that I don’t see it making money, whereas at the start I thought it would. Long term I don’t think I’ll ever make a living out of publishing and that’s been a surprise”. They were quick to add, “I would love to be a commercial success. I don’t want to paint myself as an anti-success story. I would never take on a book that wouldn’t make its money back because that’s when it becomes unsustainable”. Several of the other publishers started out “accidentally” or as a “hobby”: turning

professional has changed their attitudes towards what they publisher. For example, Eraserhead admitted:

In the past, when it was more of a hobby, I would release books because either I cared deeply about them or the author cared deeply about them. And sometimes the writers were almost dictating to me what they wanted to do...since I'm supportive of artists; I was really into that writer-friendly model. But recently, I'm far more invested in things actually making money because I'm not only supporting myself full-time but I have staff and a goal to create successes.

Other publishers recognise their limitations and believe that support can be found in the local and regional literary community. Under the umbrella of ABPBC, small presses in British Columbia work together, support each other, and, according to Arsenal Pulp, have “friendly relationships”. Arsenal Pulp added, “Collegial, competition is rare. We do well if we all succeed together. As an industry we can have a presence if we can agree on things”. However, they do add that, “loyalty to participating in every event is a bit tenuous at times”. Although the publishing communities, in Portland and Seattle, are not as cohesive – since such an organisational body does not exist in either city – the same attitudes towards the plethora of literary events exist. Perfect Day Publishing stated, “The more you go to, the more you’re obligated to go to. It’s a little self-congratulatory. I think there is a lack of criticism and I think it misses the point”. They did, however, concede that, “Small presses promote other small presses in their communities”. Bennett and Hastings, Booktrope, and Eraserhead Press were particularly dedicated to community building (with new and existing small presses): “We have helped a couple of people start their own small publishing companies. The way that technology works, there is no reason that someone can do this with very few assets” (Bennett and Hastings); “I was always interested in growing a community. Really my dream was not as much tied to book publishers as it was that I had a life that was creative and I worked with other creative people and I was part of a community” (Eraserhead); “We are incubators to build a community” (Booktrope).

5. Conclusion

The consolidation of the book publishing industry has resulted in an increased focus on bestselling authors: ergo, it is more difficult for new and emerging, or non-mainstream, authors to get published. Independent publishers provide a solution to the plethora of

authors that are rejected by the larger transmedia conglomerates. Independent publishers, especially the smaller presses, are often run for the love of the product rather than for profit, and their output is guided by taste rather than consumer insight and sales data. Small presses have been, and continue to be, the bulwark of avant-garde literature and for new voices. They are also, often, the territory for the alternative and nonconformist communities. As we have seen from this research: several small presses have developed niche markets for specific multicultural interests, women's issues, and LGBTQ matters, and unprofitable markets such as poetry [1]. These presses are also responsible for introducing these niches, and new authors into the marketplace and into the visibility of larger publishers: allowing them, the authors, the space, and time, to create and innovate. Although it is clear that small presses and large trade publishers can co-exist, and as this research found, compliment each other: larger trade publishers, especially in the USA, could do more to support smaller presses since they financially gain from authors that small presses have nurtured.

The issue of support is an important but complicated one. While policies and funding have been put into place to protect Canadian culture and writing: the Canadian, English-language, publishing industry is still dominated by publishers in Toronto. Therefore these publishers, and the Canadian government, are responsible for producing most of the country's literary output. However, it is clear that the support the Canadian publishers receive enables them not only to survive, which was the most important concern for all of the interviewed publishers, but to publish without commercial worries. The Canadian small presses were also much less likely, than the American small presses, to emulate or be influenced by trends from larger publishers in Toronto or New York. The small presses in Seattle and Portland struggle with this lack of support and many of the American publishers have to work part-time, or with no permanent staff, in order to grow their businesses and/or build up their lists. Vancouver-based Talon Books went as far as describing setting up a small press in the contemporary publishing environment as a "fool's mission" because of the lack of backlist, which takes the pressure off the frontlist. More support, whether it is from local and national governments, larger transmedia conglomerates, readers, or local community, is required so that the American small press mission is a not foolish one, less of a "hobby", and that they can attain the same longevity, and extensive backlists, as some of the, funded, Canadian presses.

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