

# PROUD OF DIGITAL

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## SOME DISTURBING QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

As a general concept, do you approve of mass book burning or shredding?

If you answered No to the previous question, then are you aware of the fact that the “Return” rate of newly printed but unsold books, which are then either remaindered to second-hand book shops or destroyed is **over 50%**? Yes, according to the ABA’s own statistics, over half of all books printed are *not* sold, and, therefore, if no half-price bookstore or discount outlet wants them, they are returned to the publisher for destruction (traditional hardcover books, that is). Paperbacks never even make it back to the publisher. Booksellers merely tear off the covers of paperbacks like scalps or hides and return them for credit, throwing away the coverless editions in their own trash. Nevermind the environmental argument about such a waste of paper and the killing of trees, can you conscience a regular practice of mass destruction of perfectly good books?



Did you know that the typical retail lifespan of a book published by a traditional publisher, short of it becoming a bestseller and/or perennial favorite, is six months or less—quite often 90 days or less—before it practically becomes “Out-of-Print” (i.e. unavailable) and will likely never be reprinted? That is, booksellers typically give a New Release a couple of months to see if there’s any serious demand for it. If no one is coming in asking for it shortly after its release, then they return the book for credit and free up that shelf-space for the next month’s new arrivals.

If you didn’t know about a book’s short lifespan, did you also realize that publishers typically hold the exclusive publication rights to an author’s work for many years after it goes Out-of-Print, with the author unable to get them back and thus unable to have any chance for their work to go back into print and become available again with a different publisher—assuming that a publisher could be found who is willing to publish a previously published book? This common practice effectively “banishes” a given story in a manner such that no reader is allowed to ever discover it and enjoy it again.

Why would a publisher hold the rights to a book they have no intention of printing or distributing any further? There’s no logical reason other than their own selfish motive of hedging their bet that some other work by that author might one day mysteriously become a big success, and *THEN*, they can dust off and reprint the older works and therefore capitalize on the success of the author’s name—a success that they likely may have had little or nothing to do with making happen.

Are you familiar with the concept of a “print run”? This is a measurement of size, literally of how many physical copies of a book a traditional publisher commissions to be printed for the release of a new title. For bestsellers, this can be in the millions or hundreds of thousands. For relatively popular authors (non-bestseller), it may be in the tens of thousands. However, for new authors, or what is referred to as mid-list

authors, in may be only a few thousand. The point being is that if an author's initial print run is only a few thousand, for example 5,000 copies, and all those copies do not sell quickly during those first critical months of retail shelf-life, then that becomes the deciding factor for a publisher to choose not to reprint any additional copies, and therefore limits the total availability of that title to its original print run, assuming all unsold copies are not returned for destruction.

Are you aware that most major publishing houses have migrated their new title acquisition policies to one of "bestseller or nothing." On the surface that sounds fine, if not admirably ambitious. It's not unheard of for acquisition editors to use the evaluation criteria of: "If it can't sell 100,000 copies, we don't want it." But how many new books can really meet that criteria? Think about it. What really constitutes a bestseller these days? Look at the lists. What do you see? Or better yet, what *don't* you see? Well, the first thing you see is that the vast majority of contemporary bestsellers are Non-Fiction. That's right.

The top selling books for many years now have steadily gravitated toward the "cult of personality" genre of politicians, political pundits, Hollywood celebrities, war heroes, criminals, journalists, radio and television talking heads, and the like. Then there are all of the self-help books serving as the catalyst or backup documentation for the latest diet and/or exercise fads, pseudo-psychology, inspiration, motivation, etc. Then there are all the business, technical, or How-To books of debatably useful information of an allegedly practical nature. A sub-category of the self-help genre are all the parenting and relationship books, with tons of those coming out all the time. Then there are the never ending "how to succeed/get rich quick" type written by purported experts designed to prey upon desperate souls looking for hope to escape their meager circumstances.

However, when it comes to fiction, while you may see a smattering of it amongst the bestsellers, you'll notice that fiction bestsellers are 99% confined to the same popular names you've seen for years. It's like an elite club that rarely accepts new members, notwithstanding the fact that those top names are continually eschewed by critics as "talentless hacks"—even if millions of their fans disagree.

Are we really to believe that there aren't any new voices, no new talent, no new vision among storytellers being born every day? Is the art of storytelling destined to be a dying and arcane art, mastered only by a remnant among us? Or has the art and joy of storytelling just been made obsolete by new mediums such as movies and video games? Admittedly, every now and then a heartwarming exception comes along, like Ms. Rowling and her little wizard Harry Potter, to renew your belief that, on occasion, people really do still enjoy a good story envisioned within the confines of their own imagination. But for the most part, new fiction from new authors seems to be an endangered species. While a sad and discouraging truth, it's not hard to understand why. From a business perspective, fiction is harder to market, harder to find a newsworthy angle to promote it, and if the authors are unknown, nearly impossible to get them booked on the talk show circuit, etc. New fiction is a tough sell—and definitely not the path of least resistance for a publisher who wishes to sell lots and lots of books. So why does the publishing industry work this way? Simple economics: Money.

You see, long ago, in another century when most of the culture, policies and practices of the publishing industry were instituted and enshrined (and haven't changed much since), some factors outside the industry were very different. For one thing, paper was very cheap and the bulk of the expense of producing a book was in the up-front labor and production costs, not the raw materials of the finished products. So it didn't really impact the bottom line too severely if the majority of the "units" produced didn't sell. The breakeven point, financially speaking, was low enough that a profit could still be enjoyed, even at fairly modest sell-through rates. So the practice of producing a modest print run for an unknown author was not unreasonable in order to see if there was any positive market acceptance of a new work. Much like the venture capital community, having one out of ten projects turn a tidy profit was usually sufficient to cover any losses on the other nine.

However, over the last two decades, evolving market factors have changed the validity of that thinking. First of all, paper isn't nearly as cheap as it was 100 years ago. But more importantly, publishers realized that the very concept of taking business risks on unknown names was the one unpredictable variable in the whole equation that they most needed to avoid. This explains the inordinate emphasis on all of the non-fiction "cult of personality" books. Quite simply, it's much easier to sell books written by someone who is already famous, already has a large well-defined audience, and who is regularly in the public eye (i.e. leveraging publicity that the publisher doesn't have to pay for!). This also holds true for those handful of top fiction writers who have managed to develop a large and loyal audience over time—back when they were allowed to do so. But today, it's exceedingly more difficult to take an unknown author and make that person a household name. From a marketing perspective, this is called "branding," and in these days of media and advertising saturation/overload, new product branding can be a very expensive and difficult process with little genuine assurance of success.

Another aggravating factor of the traditional publishing paradigm is the sheer myriad of entertainment alternatives available today. A hundred years ago (and when literacy rates were much higher than they are today), reading a good book was one of the primary forms of entertainment that most people had available to choose from. Today there are hundreds of high-definition digital television channels, home theaters, sound systems, computers, video games—all equating to more and more entertainment choices than a person has hours in the day to consume. In fact, even Hollywood is beginning to lament the steady decline in theater attendance. But the reality is, to enjoy a good movie people don't have to go to the theater anymore and pay outrageous ticket prices and get gouged at the concession stand, or have to mingle with the unruly ill-behaved unwashed masses any longer. They can simply wait for the movie to come out on DVD or broadcast on their local Pay-Per-View service and watch it in the comfort for their own homes on their own home theater systems, free to pause the show when they need a snack or have to go to the restroom. On the other hand, the threshold where Hollywood actually enjoys more revenue from DVD sales of a movie, rather than its box office performance, was crossed many years ago, so they're not complaining too loudly. It's more of a nostalgia complaint. It's the theater owners who are most adversely affected.

Hollywood definitely shares one common trait with traditional book publishers: they have become very risk adverse of late and rarely deviate from the beaten path. A look at the list of recent films over the past ten years reveals an appalling lack of originality and daring. It seems the only films being made anymore are either major franchise films, remakes of previously successful films or popular television shows, formulaic genre films, or media cross-over films such as all the comic book heroes and in some cases even popular video games. The common thread in all of them is quite obvious: **a built-in audience**. God forbid if someone ever has an original thought or a new spark of inspiration! Laughably, when some adventure-some movie producer or book publisher does take a chance on something new, and people love it, then you can be guaranteed to see dozens of copycat versions of the same thing coming right on its heels. That's the most disturbing irony of it all—that those who are annually regaled with prestigious awards and lavished with wealth and fame for their artistic creativity rarely "create" anything new anymore, rather they just facilitate a different iteration of someone else's *original* creativity.

## JUST LOOKING FOR A BREAK?

In the context of everything discussed to this point, this paints a grim picture for an aspiring novelist. Even if his manuscript is reviewed by a major publisher, the acquiring editorial committee is sure to be asking the following questions: What's the target audience demographic for this book? How big is that audience? Can this book sell 100,000 copies? Has anyone ever heard of this writer? If the answers to these type of questions aren't readily known, will a publisher "bet on the come" that a large audience *might* exist for this book? Even if a particular editor really believes in a certain book, fights for it, and convinces the publisher to give it a chance, and it only gets a modest print run and little to no marketing

and promotion, then its chances for making a big splash in the market are still very small. It is more likely that in a short amount of time it will join the thousands of mid-list titles that quickly go Out-of-Print, and where over half of the copies printed end up being “recycled.”

Furthermore, even if a book does have a favorable market reception and all of the initial copies of a print run are sold, unless there is a substantial backorder demand from the retailers for it, there will still be no second printing. Even when a substantial backorder does exist, the traditional publishing industry primarily works on six month accounting periods, so they may not even be aware of a popular small title for a long time. And should they elect to commission a second printing, traditional offset print runs take a month or more to physically produce (if it could be scheduled right away), and therefore the market momentum initially generated may wane before any additional copies can make it to market to satisfy the demand. Ergo, more books for the shredder or incinerator.

If you’re coming to the conclusion that the whole business model of traditional publishing only makes sense for existing large-audience release, and is detrimental, if not openly antagonistic, to new voices, then you’re starting to understand the real issue here. What does this model say for our entire culture when—despite all the lip service to the contrary—the fruits of new imaginations are no longer nurtured and cultivated and given a high priority, and when the big brand names become the only choices?

### **BUT WHAT IF...**

- What if there was a way for a new author to get their book into print, professionally published with top quality, but do so on the strength of the story itself and without having to prove to a publisher that there were already thousands of people who couldn’t wait to buy it?
- What if a new book could have no print run limitations, and also be kept in-print and available forever, so that anyone in the world who wanted one could have one—even if that turned out to be a million people or more in a very short time, or just a few hundred a year?
- What if the exact number of books could be printed for everyone who wanted one, no more, no less, so the waste of 50% or more of printed books was eliminated?
- What if retail bookstore shelf space were eliminated as a restriction for the availability and promotion of new titles, and therefore new titles could be seen, sampled, reviewed, etc. with no limitations?
- What if publishers didn’t have to worry about warehousing and logistics for their books anymore? That is, what if their books could be promptly manufactured as they were ordered and sent directly to the customer?
- What if hundreds of millions of readers, worldwide, could shop for new titles in the comfort of their own home, find anything that’s ever been written, purchase it and have it delivered right to their door, no longer having their choices limited by the current stock of their local bookstore?

If all of these things could happen, then surely new voices would have a much greater opportunity to be heard, readers would have a vastly more rich library of choices to enjoy, and publishers would have a much more efficient business model. You’d think if all this was possible, it would revolutionize the publishing industry and flourish overnight. Think again.

Unfortunately, the sad truth is, at this point in time, all of these wonderful benefits *already exist* and *are already possible*. The ability to achieve all the items listed above is a product of the state-of-the-art digital printing and book manufacturing technology called Print-On-Demand, or POD, pioneered by information technology leaders such as IBM and Xerox. In a nutshell, POD printing allows publishers to create computer-based digital master files of books that can then be printed one at a time (very rapidly) on an order-by-order basis. If a single individual wants a POD available book, it is printed and mailed to them. If a bookstore wants a dozen or a hundred, a dozen or a hundred are printed and shipped. It is a very efficient Just-In-Time (JIT) print-to-order process. There are no print run limitations whatsoever, and master files can be kept available for printing indefinitely, thus books never go Out-of-Print. There's no warehousing involved. Best of all, the end result product quality rivals that of any traditionally offset printed book in both hardcover and paperback formats. However, to date, the dominant publishing industry has not been dramatically revolutionized by the advent of POD technology, nor have these new capabilities become the dominant new paradigm. Why is that, you ask? For several reasons.

### **THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION WAR**

First and foremost, the traditional publishing industry sees no need to diverge from its current path because selling primarily to large audiences in volume is the best financial strategy for them, i.e. it turns the biggest profits. That's simple to grasp. Never make the mistake of confusing the "business" of publishing with the creation of art. Major publishers exist to make money and grow successful businesses, not to enrich culture. If that ever happens it's a positive, albeit incidental, byproduct.

Secondly, the established publishing industry views any publishing entity, large or small, as competition for market share and consumers' discretionary book buying dollars. So you can be sure that they are not shy about using their existing clout and relationships with the entire wholesale and retail book distribution and sales community to demonize any digitally manufactured book or its publisher for no other reason than that they can. The net result is that many bookstores actively shun POD titles, and won't order them if they learn a book is a POD title—not because a given book isn't any good, but because there is a pervasive institutional prejudice and discrimination against POD titles as a group.

Thirdly, it is because a significant portion of the commonly accepted negative reputation of POD books is well-deserved. Due to the lower setup and prepress costs of POD technology a new POD title can be created for hundreds of dollars instead of thousands or tens of thousands of dollars as is common in the offset printing world. This lower economic threshold of market entry has opened the door to countless fly-by-night operations, many of whom are nothing but vanity presses, preying upon the millions of wannabe authors languishing in anonymity and frustrated with continual rejection from traditional publishing houses. In fact, when you hear the phrase "POD Publisher" it is most often being used in a disparaging pejorative sense to refer to one of these illegitimate author mills. This fact has forced many legitimate small presses who use digital manufacturing for its economies and efficiencies to hide this fact, avoiding the negative stigma of the label at all costs. It's silly, but it's true. There really is no such thing as a "POD Publisher." There are only good publishers and bad ones. Both good ones and bad ones have at their disposal the ability to use either digital or offset printing technologies in their business.

The trade publications, genre organizations, and book review communities are also deeply involved in the negative propaganda campaign against POD produced books. Many book review organizations flatly refuse to review POD books (if they learn that's how they were made). Some don't openly state that they do, but place restrictions on acceptance for review or membership/affiliation with their groups with policies like: "The book must have a print run of at least 2,000 copies." That's a euphemism for "No POD." If the criteria were: "Must be able to service a demand of one million copies within a single fiscal quarter" most of the offset printed books would be eliminated but any POD book would qualify.

But don't misunderstand. There is no organized "conspiracy" by the book industry against POD technology. There is just an entrenched aristocracy and parochial culture that has no intention of giving up any of its power and position. Regardless of printing method, even among wholesalers, booksellers, and readers, there is an unspoken aversion to books that come from small presses or unknown publishers. The general logic of it is that if a book were really good, then a "real" publisher would publish it. Ergo, if all the "real" publishers rejected it, then it can't be any good.

The fourth strike against POD produced books is pricing. In simple economic terms, POD books cost more to print per copy than traditionally offset printed books. For example, in significant quantity, most paperbacks can be printed in bulk for a dollar or less each, and in mass-market volume for pennies each. That same book manufactured via POD technology might cost five dollars or more to produce. With that as a production cost basis, it becomes virtually impossible to sell a POD paperback at the same retail price rates as mass-market paperbacks (i.e. less than ten dollars), and still be able to compensate the author, give wholesalers and retailers the normal trade discounts, and still make any profit for the publisher. Thus, this is why you see more "Trade Paperback" sized POD books selling in the fifteen to twenty dollar range. In non-fiction that's more acceptable, as book buyers tend to see a non-fiction book purchase as the value of the information they are buying, the intellectual property, not necessarily the cost of the physical book. With technical books, such as computer reference manuals, pricing can be quite high, and therefore the base production cost becomes less relevant. However, with fiction, all bets are off. An eighteen dollar trade paperback of a murder-mystery or romance is a tough sell! With fiction, book buyers calculate their own personal entertainment value of the book, placing a dollar value on the time spent and experience of reading the story, and therefore expect a certain degree of parity in pricing across the board.

For hardcover books, the pricing and margin issues aren't quite as extreme. While it may cost ten to fifteen dollars to produce a hardcover book via POD, as opposed to five dollars or less via Offset printing, the POD version can still be sold for profit in the same MSRP range as offset produced hardcovers, albeit at not as great a profit margin.

Then again, bear in mind that there is nothing that precludes a publisher from using both printing technologies in parallel based upon the existing demand for a particular title. That is, rather than commissioning an initial offset print run of 10,000 copies of a book, hoping to sell most of them, a publisher could introduce a book in a digital format via POD, and if the market responds favorably to it, then supplement its availability with offset runs to increase profit margins. Actually, this hybrid strategy is becoming much more common. In fact, even the largest publishing houses in New York employ some elements of it. POD makes a lot of sense to use to keep a popular title in print years down the road, rather than having to warehouse boxes and boxes of copies awaiting orders. The Punchline to the joke is that many books people buy at their local bookstores are in fact POD produced books, they just don't know it.

The fifth biggest obstacle to POD's proliferation is the lack of critical mass among the publishers who use it most. The vast majority of publishers who use POD technology either exclusively or primarily typically are small and don't have the financial resources available to accomplish two very important elements of publishing: 1) professional editing, design, and production, and 2) effective sales and marketing. Again, this just adds fuel to the fire of those who shun POD books in general.

From an editorial standpoint, a badly produced book is a bad book no matter what machine was used to print its pages or bind it, regardless of whether that machine was spitting out one at a time or many at a time. If a book has ten typos on the first page, the reader will quickly get the impression he's dealing with an inferior product, and also likely to be incensed if he had to pay more for it than what he is used to paying for other similar books. If a book has an unimaginative or flawed cover, it reflects poorly as a shabby, less than acceptable product. Clearly, a sub-standard product is unacceptable, no matter who the publisher is, or what method they choose to produce their books.

From a sales and marketing standpoint, if a new book isn't aggressively promoted in some fashion (which takes money), the book buying public isn't psychic and certainly can't be blamed for not knowing it exists. So a lack of sales and marketing capability by *any* publisher can be a significant factor in the poor sales performance of any new title, especially by a new author no one has ever heard of (i.e. one with no preexisting audience).

## **JUDGE A TREE BY ITS FRUIT**

So are all the shortcomings of POD technology enough to render it untenable as the foundation for a viable publishing model? Many would have you think so. It's reasonable for many people to conclude that with so much "rubbish" produced by POD publishers, there's no good reason to waste any valuable time on it, and certainly not any hard-earned leisure entertainment dollars. Yet for all those new authors and new voices waiting to be heard, despite the unprecedented opportunity that POD affords them to become published, how can they reasonably expect the general public to feel otherwise? Who would dare spend twenty-five to thirty dollars on a hardcover book by an unknown author, having no idea whether the book might be enjoyable or whether it is a complete waste of time and good money? Logically, no one would do so other than the author's family and friends, and perhaps a few adventuresome souls with a lot of discretionary income. So where does that leave the newly published author?

The answer to this complex dilemma is surprising simple: Samples. Give them a free taste.

This is where the power of the Internet is at its best. A good publisher's website can feature all of their available titles, along with in-depth descriptions, reviews, endorsements, ratings, statistics, and lengthy samples for potential book buyers to explore at no cost to them. It's a much easier purchase decision for a consumer who has read the first three or four chapters of a book and becomes hooked on the story than for someone standing in an aisle at a bookstore just looking at cover art and jacket blurbs. That is, a consumer who reads a substantial portion of a book for free has the luxury of deciding whether or not he likes a new author's work and style before he spends a cent. That's powerful!

As to the issue of product quality, a consumer need only order one copy of a book from an unknown publisher to see first-hand if that particular publisher is turning out industry level products or "rubbish." Although, it can certainly be said that many large, well-established, well-respected, traditional publishers, who only offer offset printed books in high volume, professionally edited, are in no way immune from producing "rubbish" on occasion—if not regularly.

The truth of the matter is, each and every book must stand on its own merits, both on the strength and talent of the author and of the publisher. The finished product is the final word on quality, good value for the money, and whether a book is memorable and enjoyable enough to inspire the reader to want to purchase more of that particular author's work in the future. Yet to get any potential book buyer to the point of making a decision to try something new, to even try a sample of a new voice, to agree to entertain a new perspective, then a veritable cultural war must now be waged and won.

This cultural war harkens back to the whole idea of the traditional publishing industry battling fiercely to protect its own turf and the continual industry-wide stigmatization against digitally produced books. However, the solution to this problem isn't so simple. It requires education. It requires new information to penetrate a lot of stubborn minds. A lot of people have very well-defined comfort zones when it comes to their favorite authors and genres, and rarely stray from them. For them, they need to be enlightened about what they're missing.

Go back to the initial disturbing questions at the outset of this article. Do you think the average consumer has any idea that when it comes to fiction, most of the books at their local bookstores are just the same old tried and true material regurgitated over and over again? Do they realize that most of the books on the shelves they see whenever they go into the bookstore won't be sold and will be destroyed—all due to an arcane and grossly inefficient business model? Do you think the average book buyer has any idea why it is that when he buys a new book written by an author he's never read before, and enjoys it, he may rarely see that author's work again? Or does he understand why it is that months later when he wants to purchase another copy of a book he enjoyed as a gift he may discover it's Out-of-Print and unavailable?

But what if the consumer *did* intimately understand all of the underlying reasons? Perhaps that might influence his future choices and book buying decisions. What are the bookstore people going to do if their customers start saying, "Is this author's work available via POD so I can get it in the future? If not, I don't want it." That would generate one of the biggest cultural shifts in the industry you could imagine. That's not likely to happen any time soon, but if the truth were known about how the system really works, change would be inevitable. Ironically, while POD books represent the most widely available titles in the world, most booksellers treat them as the *least* available. In a bookseller's mind, if a book isn't physically sitting in their store in stock or in their distributor's warehouse, then it doesn't exist. The basic concept of simply ordering a book for a customer, having it printed and shipped to order is something that few of them have been able to fully grasp. But even that, too, is starting to change.

## RAYS OF HOPE

One of the largest book wholesalers and distributors in the world, Ingram Books, owns a subsidiary called Lightning Source, Inc. (LSI). LSI is one of the (if not THE) largest POD printers in the world, digitally printing books for thousands of publishers. For many years Ingram listed LSI's POD titles in their database so bookstores could easily order the titles for their customers, but they classified and segregated them in their catalog as POD titles. That was usually enough for many bookstores to refrain from ever ordering any. Ingram had a policy for a long time of stocking a couple of copies of each of LSI's titles in one or more of their warehouses in order to reflect the existence of physical stock on hand. Unfortunately, over time that practice became unwieldy for Ingram to continue, a problem compounded by the proliferation of the many fly-by-night vanity presses who never actually sold any books, rather they made their money from charging wannabe authors production fees. So Ingram stopped their POD stocking policy.

The problem then shifted to one where if Ingram's database didn't show a physical copy of a book in inventory, despite the fact that copies could be promptly printed and shipped to satisfy any order in any quantity, their computer systems showed the book's status as "unavailable." This was also true for the POD books that *were* selling well, i.e. if the couple of copies that Ingram regularly had on hand were sold and they were awaiting replenishment. Consequently, many authors whose books were published by publishers using POD technology were dismayed to go into bookstores attempting to schedule book signings and promotional events, only to be told that their books were "unavailable." Please bear in mind that to the garden-variety bookseller, who is only used to the offset printed world, "unavailable" means out of stock, needs to be backordered, unlikely to have the backorder ever filled if it isn't a popular title, and will take six to ten weeks to receive even if it is reprinted, compounded by the fact that it is extremely rare for any retail customer to want to wait that long, and therefore no sale. So in a bookseller's mind, "unavailable" means just that: you can't have it—ever.

Thankfully Ingram stepped in to address this situation by reflecting in their computer systems a "virtual" stock of 100 copies of all POD titles. This strategy was much easier than trying to explain to thousands of bookstore clerks the simple fact that any POD book can be ordered and received in a week or two. Instead, they simply had their computer "lie" (known as "spoofing" to the IT savvy folk out there) to the



bookseller's computer and make it believe that an ample supply of books exists and is "available," just shipping in a week or two. It's comical, but it's true; and for the most part, it works. Yet there are still those booksellers who won't touch a POD printed book, if they know that's what it is. For them, it's more of a "religious" issue, or more aptly a "superstitious" issue, rather than one of substance or fact.

## **TURNING THE TIDE**

What will really make a difference in helping POD books take their rightful place in the publishing industry is when more and more consumers and booksellers come to understand exactly what it is they are supporting by refusing to embrace POD manufactured books, as well as what benefits the new technology represents that they're missing. In a very real way, as demonstrated by their actions, anti-POD people are in favor book burning and shredding on a scale that would make Hitler blush. They are in favor of an elite exclusionary industry that censors and effectively silences new literary voices and talent by institutional policy on a regular basis. They support an industry that embraces mediocrity by choice, and do it purely for corporate and financial self-interest. Is that what you believe in and support?

Will POD publishers ever put the old publishing empire out of business? Of course not. There will always be large fan bases for those same perennial "bestselling authors and talking heads," and the bulk of the industry will continue to support those segments where they make the lion's share of their revenues. If a POD publisher manages to have a "hit" on their hands, i.e. a book that really starts to take off in a big way, they will naturally elect to use traditional offset printing technology to minimize their production costs and increase their profit margins for as long as demand remains high.

Conversely, as they are already doing, more and more traditional publishers of the old vanguard are going to discover the economic common sense of using POD technology to both test market and introduce new titles, as well as perpetuate backlist title availability long term—only they are not going to be as adamant as they are today about keeping such current practices a secret. The logical conclusion to all of this will be a situation where there is no longer an industry segregated by printing technologies, but one where all publishers enjoy a hybridization of printing technologies (the right tool for the right job approach), and we will see the emergence of a marketplace of large and small publishers all trying to produce good books that people want to buy. The difference here is that with the judicious use of POD technology, more publishers will be in a position to give low risk publication opportunities to new talent and to see if there is a place for their work in the market. All publishers pray for bestsellers; but POD represents an alternative to the "bestseller or nothing" strategy, and a very viable means for publishers to find the "next new thing." This trend will inevitably mean more competition among publishers in general, which of course the old empire despises and the new up-and-coming crop of publishers relish. The winner in that battle can only be the authors and readers. More competition always means better products at better prices. Competition is, and has always been, the best cure of institutional complacency and obsolescence.

## **CONSTRUCTIVE ACTION**

### **For Unpublished Authors**

If you are an unpublished author, we strongly encourage you to seek out the biggest and best publishers you can find to publish your work and give it the best possible opportunity for broad market success. If you've tried that for years and all the biggest ones have passed on your work, then consider some smaller presses, regardless of whether they use POD technology, offset printing technology, or both. However, if they are offset printing only, then you need to find out things like the size of initial print runs, backorder reprint thresholds, sales and marketing capability, distribution access, and most importantly, how long

you have to wait when your book is Out-of-Print before you can have your rights back. You want that time period to be as small as possible, preferably measured in months, not years or decades.

If the publisher you are considering is POD-only, then take a look at their entire catalog of titles. Would you buy and read any of their books? If any part of their program involves fees or charges to the author, run from them. That means they are one of the countless crop of vanity presses. Legitimate publishers (regardless of printing method or size of company) pay to publish books, authors get paid to write them. Never forget that, no exceptions. But assuming the POD-only publisher you're considering doesn't charge fees, be sure to check out their work. Order a sample copy of one of their books to investigate the quality of their editing, book design, product appeal, etc. Find out what, if any, marketing and sales support they offer. If the answer is none, then that means that the job of letting the world know your book exists will fall exclusively on you. Are you prepared for that? Is that acceptable with you?

The best of all worlds is to find a publisher who uses both POD and offset printing technology in a hybrid fashion, enjoying the benefits of both and the limitations of neither—and who intimately understands how to market and promote the sale of their books. That's a publisher who is best positioned for the future.

### **For Readers**

If you are a book reader, then you are strongly encouraged to challenge your personal comfort zone and try some new authors and stories you might never have considered before. You can do it for free. All it takes is access to the Internet. Depending on your tastes, there are many readers groups and fan sites for just about any genre or category. These websites routinely list links to many recommended publishers' sites where you can sample new works for free and then make your own informed buying decision on what you'd like to try. Indeed, you may be asked to pay a little more for some of these works than the mass-market bestsellers down at the mall, but hopefully you'll deem the value of your enjoyment in new discovery more than worth it. Next, if you find a new author you really like, please tell people. Word of mouth recommendations are still one of the most powerful book marketing tools in existence. And please take the time to look for other works by the new authors you find. If their email addresses are available, send the authors feedback on their work and thereby help them to become better in their craft.

### **For Booksellers**

If you are a bookseller, you may be wrestling with the dilemma that no matter how big your store is, there is no bookstore ever built that can stock a copy of every book that's ever been printed. You may have an aversion to POD books for one of many reasons cited in this article, or for issues like the lack of a full return policy by many small presses who use POD, etc. But you need to realize that you don't need to physically stock every book ever printed to be able to sell any book that is legitimately available. If you're an independent bookstore, and haven't done so already, we'd recommend you seriously consider joining the ABA's BookSense network ([www.booksense.com](http://www.booksense.com)). This allows online shoppers to special order books, and that includes most POD titles, through your store if you're the closest zip code to that buyer. That's incremental revenue for you without giving up any shelf space. And above all, please realize that any author, famous or aspiring, who is willing to come to your store for free and give you hours of their time in an effort to help sell books, and enabling you to enjoy a profit, are all books that wouldn't have sold had they not been there.

### **For Published Authors**

Lastly, if you are an author whose book has been published using POD technology, you have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. You should be proud of it—if indeed your book was published by a reputable

publisher known for producing high-quality books. Indeed, you may have a lot of educating to do with people who don't understand what POD really means, but that may be easier to do than you realize.

For example, let's say you are at a writing event where authors get together and start talking, as they are wont to do. If another writer wants to play a little one-upmanship and says, "Yes, well my book was published by Bantam (or some other big NY name) a couple of years ago," you should acknowledge their accomplishment, but also show them a little pity. Yes, that's right—*pity*—because unless that author's book was a bestseller and/or the author is an established "name," and it's been over a year since their book came out, you can simply ask them, "Is your book still available? Where can I get a copy?" Simply watch the look of hesitation if not horror in their eyes. After they stammer and him-and-haw a bit, they will usually concede, "...uh...well you can still probably find some used copies of it here and there..." or "I have some at home and can send you one..." meaning that their book is effectively Out-of-Print. Conversely, when someone asks you, "Where can I get a copy of *your* book?" you can always reply, "From any bookstore. If they don't have it in stock, they can special order it for you, and it will be there in a week or two. Or you can order it online from Amazon or Barnes & Noble. They all have it." Most importantly, unlike the other fellow whose book is Out-of-Print, you will be able to say yours is available and in-print for years and years and years to come. And it will be true.

## NEW HOPE FOR NEW FICTION

Arguably, in today's publishing industry, the advent of POD printing technology represents one of the best opportunities for new, unknown storytellers of fiction to get their work into print and then let the market ultimately decide its fate. This is true because even the largest major publishers in the world still launch most of their new fiction titles written by unknowns in a conservative manner that only gives those books a very slim window of opportunity to gain positive sales traction and thus warrant incremental investment by the publisher in additional production and promotion before they quickly go Out-of-Print and stay Out-of-Print for years, if not forever. That's not the case with POD.

POD printing technology represents **infinite and perpetual availability**. Best of all, POD gives the rookie author *TIME*, crucial time to let their creation find its audience niche and grow, with no premature abortion of its life before it's been given a fair chance to succeed. If a book fails to make much of an impact sales-wise, so be it. But let it be so because readers don't care for the writing, not because of any artificial production constraints or industry imposed limitations or prejudices.

Obviously, for all its benefits, POD technology can't ensure the success of any title, but it can give many new books a chance to exist where before there was little to none. And if you care, it also saves a few trees along the way.