

Be Your Own Gatekeeper:

The Crucial Steps for Self-Publishing in a Sharing Economy

by Amanda Rooker

I can't imagine a more exciting time to be in publishing, whether as an author or a media professional (or both). We're in the midst of the tectonic transition from a Gutenberg economy,¹ where publishing is laborious, expensive, and therefore risky, to a sharing economy, where publishing can be instantaneous and even free.

Gutenberg economics is in its twilight years. With Wordpress and Twitter, Garage Band and Kindle, we can instantly share our creative endeavors – globally. If you're thinking about self-publishing, you're consciously becoming part of a new publishing economics that will become the default economy in a few years' time. But this economy is precisely the opposite of the Gutenberg economy we've all grown up with and have been taught to adulate – and the sooner we understand exactly how it differs, the sooner we can dive in and make the most of it. "Sharing economy" is becoming a popular generalized term, but as particularly applied to publishing, I haven't seen a specific term emerge yet. I'll just make it up: Instant Publishing Economics. Here's a quick bulleted comparison:

Gutenberg Economics

- The technology of the printing press was expensive and required multiple professionals to run.
- This expense required publishers to only publish low-risk works (either works already in print or extremely carefully vetted works), which required another set of professionals to do the gatekeeping (editors), and another layer of expense.
- The number of published works was highly limited due to the economic risk of production.
- Low supply creates high demand: if something is limited, it becomes highly valuable. Everyone with something to say wants to become "a published author"; authors take on celebrity status in our society. Publishers happily fan into flame this dynamic of celebrity author, because it sells more books.
- For the author, "being an author" becomes more important than whether the work truly adds something to the literary marketplace, so writers pursue publication primarily to get published, not primarily to share their insight with people who could benefit. Or if people do believe they've crafted something truly new, because they don't fully understand Gutenberg economics, they quickly get disillusioned when their work is not accepted at various publishing houses, when the publisher judges a worthy investment based on whether it will

¹ The whole idea of Gutenberg economics and the fact that the one who owns the platform is the one who makes the money come from Clay Shirky's *Cognitive Surplus* (Penguin Press HC, 2010). I'm indebted to his insight as I attempt to apply these concepts to the reality of self-publishing today and how authors can make their best decisions regarding how to publish their work.

make the company money, which means that it must have a demonstrable and sizeable market. The paralyzing weight of this “being an author” ideal smothered many a good idea.

Instant Publishing Economics

- The technology of publishing is free, instantaneous, and no longer requires professionals.
- Low or free production expense means that any work can be published (made public), resulting in a lack of gatekeeping and quality control.
- The number of published works is escalating, creating difficulty in discerning what is truly valuable and worth reading before you buy.
- High supply means low cost; also, when there’s no guarantee of quality, most are willing to gamble a couple dollars, but not too much more.
- Anyone can be a published author, so the label has lost its celebrity status. Now the focus must be on finding a way to establish quality control from the beginning: creating works that truly contribute to the literary marketplace.

Where there is increased access, there is decreased quality, because the very reason professional publishers became gatekeepers of content was the huge financial risk of printing. They were making sure whatever they invested in would indeed sell. Traditional publishers still operate under this reality, which is why it is so hard to get published. But make no mistake: the gatekeeping primarily involves not the cultural import or literary quality of the work, but whether or not it will sell a certain (large) number of copies. More than anything, it must demonstrate before it is published that it has a sizeable market. Does this help explain all the advice you’ve been hearing lately about “getting published” and “developing a platform”? And all those rejection letters piling up in your inbox, despite your following this advice to the letter? Printing-press publishers just can’t afford too many risks these days, and from a business perspective, we certainly can’t blame them.

As we shift from Gutenberg economics to the sharing economics of instant publishing, here are two principles particularly relevant to writers and independent publishers:

1. *Publishing is now about collaboration, not competition.* In terms of published content, we’re working in a surplus, not scarcity. Unless you’re measuring people’s attention spans. In a time when science has demonstrated that crowds are smarter than the smartest person, we’ve all got to develop some humility and give credit where credit’s due – how dependent every one of our ideas are on the ideas of others before and around us. Vanity publishing has no place in professional publishing.
2. *The primary value of the published work will be the quality of the content, not the polishing of the package.* When we don’t need professionals in order to push the “publish” button, as Clay Shirky has said, that means the quality of the message is all important. Yes, there shouldn’t be typos, and if you’re converting your manuscript into an e-book then you should know how to edit and write code (or hire someone who does *and will show you the e-book proofs before it’s posted*). But you can learn to do this. We’re all learning this – it’s all open source and there’s no secret knowledge. It’s actually kind of fun. So if and when you invest in help for your publishing project, whether it’s hiring a freelance professional, crowdsourcing your novel,

handing it over to CreateSpace, hashing it out with your trusted colleagues or your writers' group, or running a contest on Facebook, remember to invest more in the quality of the idea or story itself rather than polishing the finished product. Investing your money and/or time mostly on production is Gutenberg economics. When anything can be published instantly, time is of the essence, too. Better to get your idea out there, interacting with other ideas to make it better, rather than slaving over its appearance for a year, only to discover your perspective is hopelessly out of date. It's much less important that you hire an expert in the Chicago Manual of Style than someone who can help you know for certain your work is truly insightful or powerful or says something that needs to be said – not just for your benefit, but for your intended readers' benefit.

The good news is that instant publishing has given us the opportunity to think anew about the value of quality. Both readers and writers are bothered by the fact that there's no clear gatekeeper of quality. Readers are used to paying up to \$25 for books, yet there are great books out there selling for 99 cents. The problem is that quality is so poor that readers aren't willing to risk more than 99 cents to find out whether this is a great book or not. Readers would likely be willing to pay significantly more than the going rate for e-books if they could generally trust the quality. What price can you put on a book that transforms your perspective for the better? \$25 could be a bargain. Under an economics with no initial gatekeeper and thus a glut of published material, both readers and writers need to come up with a new and appropriate method of gatekeeping, or quality control, so works can be properly valued.

In terms of gatekeeping, readers are doing it already with social media and word of mouth in their own Internet and face-to-face groups. But what about self-publishing authors? Quite simply, author-publishers need to take up the mantle of the acquisition editors of the publishing houses and *be their own gatekeepers*. You, as the author-publisher, are responsible for quality control. And the best way to ensure quality control is to have a replicable process for publishing quality works that not only make a real and lasting contribution to the literary marketplace, but change your readers' lives for the better. In short, you are the only one who can ensure you're not engaged in vanity publishing (or publishing in vain, as I find myself calling it). Because if all we do with this newfound freedom to share our work is simply to gain the old prize of "being an author," our work truly will be in vain. We'll squander all our opportunity to gain the trust of the public, and the stigma of self-publishing will be well deserved.

If you want to be your own gatekeeper and take the mantle of publisher seriously, here are the crucial steps of professional publishing that will help ensure you'll make a real contribution to the literary marketplace:

1. *Develop your core message, first alone and then by sharing.* Your core message is the insight or the scene that renders you speechless at the board meeting or in the wee hours of the morning. The one that keeps repeating itself to you, quietly but relentlessly, until you finally honor it enough to write it down or tell someone. And when you finally do this, you find that it grows larger than you thought it was. In fact, with every sharing, it grows larger still. That's how you know you have a message or story worth publishing, or making public: it not only demands to be shared, but sharing grows it. Professional public speakers know this when a

particular topic keeps resonating with even diverse audiences. If you fear that someone will steal your idea, then you're operating out of a vanity publishing mentality, where "being published" or "being an author" is primarily a badge to boost your own ego, rather than truly wanting to serve your readers or the public with a truly valuable idea. What matters is that you're part of sharing this valuable message. If you're the one who introduces it powerfully to your people, speaking their innate language and allowing them to take action to make a real difference in their lives – giving credit where credit is due, of course – they'll remember you as the creator of that idea for them anyway, and they will come back to you for more because what matters most is specifically translating your core message into the right vernacular. The best ideas are simply applications of old ones in new contexts, so don't get too possessive of "your" idea. Chances are, it was inspired by the work of many, many others before you.

2. *Decide which media fit your message – and understand how translating your message into particular media will add another layer of meaning and set of assumptions to it.* We've all heard that "the medium is the message," and there are so many publishing choices for your message or story that from the beginning you must think about which medium best fits your message. Is the long-form, carefully crafted print book best? This medium, once our only choice, has now become the artisan choice for both writers and readers. It sends the specific message that the content therein is best read savoringly, perhaps curled up comfortably in a corner or riding on a subway, transporting you to a different place and time, to be read again and again. An e-novella, which is meant to be read quickly and perhaps not more than once, still has few conventions associated with it. It could be either a literary perspective-shifter or short-term entertainment for the commute home – it's still a pretty transparent medium. What about a Twitter serial with links to a graphics- or video-embedded blog post? This would imply collaboration from readers is welcome. Or a series of short stories or articles on a single theme, with a teaser for each serially posted on Facebook and a link to the entire piece as a blog post heavy with other links to snippets of others' works, if a montage is the best venue? If you've only been thinking of a book, you're still thinking according to Gutenberg assumptions. Why spend a ton of money in book publishing (or a ton of time, which is money, trying to find a publishing house to publish it), when your investment may never be recouped? Test it out, and see if a tangible copy really is the best medium. If it is, go for it. But make sure the benefits outweigh the costs, whether tangible or intangible. Book publishing is not for the faint of heart.
3. *Completely map out, write out, revise, and complete your work in draft form.* Even if you're planning a Twitter or Facebook serial – don't post it yet. (Unless the work itself is inherently collaborative, of course, in which case you're still really on #1. You're just developing your core message collaboratively, and then you can decide if you want to produce a quality published work out of what's emerged.) Here is where sharing is most crucial: workshop it, however you like to workshop your work. Share it with trusted friends or colleagues who would appreciate this kind of work and who will tell you the truth to help you improve it.
4. Edit your manuscript, so that every word is exactly as it should be. For objectivity, hire (or crowdsource, or barter for) a professional editor. Since I'm an editor, I have a few opinions about this:

- a. *Hire for experience in your medium.* This editor should demonstrate professional expertise in the medium you've chosen (if it requires a level of professional expertise, like the book or e-book), evidenced through a client list or testimonials. Unfortunately there is no established set of professional credentials for editing; most everything we learn, we learn by doing. Experience with your specific area, and satisfied clients, best identifies a quality editor *for you*. If no special production skills are required for your medium, then your editor should be experientially aware of the assumptions and culture of your chosen interactive media (Twitter, Facebook, websites, blogs).
- b. *Hire for expertise in your topic or genre.* Just as important is the fact that this editor is well read in your topic or genre. Your goal here is quality control from the start: if your editor knows of a work with the same premise that came out last year, you'll need to show awareness of that so you don't seem like a trite copycat. (Even if your work was totally original and you were too busy writing to read anyone else, your readers won't know that.) And if you make a point that unknowingly contradicts an expert in your field, you'll need to show awareness of that as well. Most of us need help chasing this down.
- c. *Hire for personal connection and trust.* Maybe even more important: this editor should be someone you personally connect with. You're paying your editor not to just prep your manuscript for the "publish" button, but to tell you the hard truth about the quality of your work and empower you to improve your craft. If you don't believe your editor really is your advocate on every level, even to the point of telling you you're not ready to publish because he or she cares about your reputation maybe even more than you do, then when you receive the inevitable hard news about what needs to be cut, you may result to unbecoming activities, like voodoo.
- d. *Hire a generalist.* I used to advise self-publishers to avoid the one-stop shops and find their own separate professionals, which would (under Gutenberg, production-heavy assumptions) include a manuscript review (by a professional or their own writers' group), a line editor, a copyeditor, a designer, a proofreader, an e-book designer (making sure someone could proof the code here too), and a printer. That, frankly, costs many, many thousands of dollars to hire true professionals and is typical of the cost a publisher shoulders when publishing a book. Self-publishers, initially, were trying to replicate this model with their own limited bank account. But with no gatekeeper, and the market generating less and less cost for their product, there's no way most would ever recoup their investment. No wonder there was so little quality control – who could afford it? But now that rapid technological changes are forcing me out of Gutenberg assumptions faster than I expected, I really believe a much more streamlined editing and production process is preferable. I think the ideal editor for a self-publisher (not for traditional houses – their scale requires more differentiation and thus efficiency) will be one who is well versed in all stages of publishing and production, from comparing the quality of the manuscript to the current literary marketplace, to proofing the code of the website or e-book. If the tools are frankly simple enough for amateurs to use, then if you're hiring a professional editor, they

need to know more about the publishing process than you do. Otherwise you could do it yourself. (And if you can produce it yourself, you absolutely should. As a self-publisher, you at least need to educate yourself on every stage of the process so you know generally how print books and e-books and websites are created, and thus know what you can do yourself and what is worth paying for.) I really believe this is what it will take for an editor – a position created under Gutenberg assumptions, after all – to stay relevant and necessary under an instant publishing model. They'll have to keep up with new publishing platforms as they arise even monthly, even though editors of days past only had to understand one platform, the printing press, which kept its static monopoly for nearly 500 years. And increasingly, in our age, that means understanding how to write html and use the Adobe Creative Suite – or have a close subcontractor or employee who provides this as part of the editor's services.

5. Prepare your manuscript for production, if needed. (This is only for print and e-books: for other digital or social media venues, skip to #6.) Note: as you'll see, the production process for print and e-books has many steps requiring professional expertise and/or extreme attention to detail. This means the number of things that can go wrong also increases considerably. As you delve into this process, appreciate the many tasks a publishing house takes care of for its authors. Don't jump into this responsibility lightly, even if just for yourself, because errors here are very visible to the reader and can significantly impact book sales, even if your content is excellent. Too narrow margins, for instance, can render a book useless and a paying reader very angry.
 - a. *For print versions, decide on the trim size and format of your book.* Standard trade paperback is 6x9, for example. Hardcover or softcover? Dust jacket or no? Most independently published books are print-on-demand softcovers for cost efficiency, with a separately published e-book version. Standard interior margins are 0.75" with a healthy gutter. (I've learned the hard way not to skimp on the gutter.) For exact measurements, get the format guide from your print-on-demand company, or if you plan to hire your own printer, download free templates for various trim sizes and suggested margins from lulu.com.
 - b. *Design your book cover* – or hire a designer, if you're not a skilled illustrator. If you design your own cover, it is very difficult to avoid an amateurish feel unless you are a professional yourself (and if you're not a professional, you probably wouldn't be able to see the difference), so I would highly recommend hiring a designer with professional software and expertise.
 - c. *Fill out an ISBN (International Standard Book Number) publisher application with Bowker (www.bowker.com), and buy the needed number of ISBNs.* Every version of your book needs a separate ISBN (print, audiobook, e-book, etc.), so be sure to order a block if you intend to publish in different formats. Some print-on-demand companies will serve as your technical "publisher" and can give you an ISBN directly from their own block. Now is also a good time to register your copyright with the U.S. Copyright Office (<http://www.copyright.gov/>).

- d. *Decide on the price of your book.* This is wildly variable; compare to going prices of similar works and desired profit. Then order barcodes with the price inserted (usually generated as a second step from whomever you got your ISBN from in the first place) and deliver to your cover designer so he or she can insert it on back cover.
 - e. *Choose a printer.* You may prefer a print-on-demand company, which handles all inventory and usually requires no minimum purchase in exchange for a percentage of each book sold, or if you don't mind handling inventory and shipping, you could order copies from an offset printer in bulk and sell them yourself to keep the full profit. To print your book, all the printer needs is a print-ready pdf of your book's interior, and a print-ready pdf of your front and back cover (with barcode) as one document. The question often arises: if I get my Word doc perfectly designed, and I'm happy with the font choices and graphics exactly as they appear on the screen, can I just save it as a pdf and send it off? Answer: only if you have no color images and you're satisfied with an extremely short list of fonts. The pdf Word produces is not a print-ready pdf, although it can turn out OK in limited circumstances. To be absolutely safe and have maximum design capability (i.e., to truly look like a professionally produced book), you'll need to get it typeset in Adobe InDesign, the industry standard software for book design.
 - f. *Create an e-book version.* Some companies, like Smashwords, offer free e-book conversion for a percentage of each book sold. If you have a more complicated layout, you may need to hire a professional to make sure every detail translates properly - unless you know html, in which case you may be able to do the conversion yourself. Be sure to research every step of the production process so you understand exactly what's involved, because new tools and platforms are coming out every day that may make what previously required highly trained professionals now free and easy to use for the general public. (I only recently realized I was instantly publishing e-books from my Microsoft Word documents whenever I e-mailed them to my Kindle.) But with every automated service, you lose some level of control over the appearance of the books, so as the publisher, it's your responsibility to understand every stage of the process and decide what you'd like to do yourself to get it just right, and what you want to contract out.
6. *Push the "publish" button.* You're done! Your work is now published and available to the general public. Now, if only they knew about it, which leads to...
 7. *Market and distribute your work.* Your marketing actually began all the way back when you were sharing your concept and improving it. By now you should have several pockets of people eager to buy or download or read your newly published work. You don't need a gimmick.
 - a. *Your online conversation space.* Bear with me; I have a lot to say about this. I know a lot of authors complain about "having" to have a website or online following before they can even get published, particularly as they pursue traditional publishing. But I think that perspective misses the sea change that's resulted from the shift from Gutenberg economics to a sharing economy - and the point of why we (should) write in the first

place. We *should* already be talking about what we're passionate about or expert in – and doing it online is just how most people do it now. The people who actually have the most interesting things to say won't be able to help sharing them, and people won't be able to help reading them. Online numbers are just an easy and obvious way to gauge this. And this doesn't have anything to do with personality; if you're shy, you get to write to your heart's content and you don't have to talk to a soul. It has to do with your energy surrounding your ideas. Publishing is about making your work *public*. If you're not already making your ideas public in small ways, then you're certainly not ready to make your work public in a big way. (Precisely here is where an author needs to be honest about whether publishing is really about sharing ideas or stories to benefit others, or about "becoming an author" to benefit your ego. I have absolute sympathy for you, I've been there, but publishing is not the place to work out self-worth issues.) So having a robust online presence is simply a symptom of having something interesting to say – it's not a prerequisite. Hopefully you'll already have an active website, blog, or other conversation space about topics you're passionate about, and what led you to want to write a book or other long-form work to begin with. (Note: the fact that you have a book out, as thrilling as that is, is not enough of a topic of interest to draw followers. Remember what we said about misusing instant publishing as vanity publishing. Publishing a book these days is no longer newsworthy. Anyone can do it. It's what's inside that counts.) Your conversation space will certainly have a place where you promote your book, but it's not the focus – your conversation space is primarily a forum for you to share your ideas in pure form and for readers to post comments and develop conversations, and it's a way for people unfamiliar with your work to sample it easily (and for free). If you become known as a trusted source for information or creative works of a particular type, this is the best marketing of all.

- b. *How to share the news.* If you've had this kind of conversation venue all along, then prep potential readers and share your news just as you would the birth of a child. Send out personal, tailored e-mails to all your contacts. If you're a Facebook kind of person, before your book comes out, post a countdown, run a contest for a free book, or otherwise engage likely readers in a fun activity online relevant to your book or work. If a book review would speak to your intended reader, then research book reviewers and offer to send e-books for possible review. And if there's local interest, offer to speak on your book's topic at local writers' groups or interest groups, libraries, bookstores, or other industry or interest group gatherings.
- c. *Check and doublecheck your distribution platform before you send actual "buy" or "download" links.* Before you spend too much time sending out links, make sure your distribution platform is ready to go and can start churning out your books at a moment's notice. If your work is web-based, then this is already done. If you have print or e-books, be sure they're easy to find, easy to sample, and easy to buy through Amazon, Barnes & Noble, e-book distributors like Apple, Kindle, Nook, and Kobo,

relevant brick-and-mortar bookstores (at least via ordering), and all the usual spots we look for books.

The beauty about publishing a truly quality work rather than vanity publishing is that marketing won't feel like selling yourself at all. If you've successfully used a tailored publishing process as a quality gatekeeper, then your audience will see your natural enthusiasm and connectedness to the topic, because you'll know deep down you're sharing truly valuable stuff. Ideas that grow. And the self-publishing stigma will fade away permanently, because we've used these new freedoms to their best end – to create works that truly contribute to the literary marketplace.

Amanda Rooker (www.amandarooker.com) is an editor, writer, and designer who specializes in book development, thought leadership marketing, fiction and nonfiction manuscript reviews, and helping authors and businesses become publishers. A passionate advocate for authors, she considers the costs and benefits of new communication technologies for writers, editors, and publishers at Sustainable Communication (<http://amandarooker.wordpress.com>) and reviews independently published narrative works at Split Seed Review (<http://splitseedreview.wordpress.com>).