

WHAT AUTHORS WANT

A Survey of Authors
to Understand Their Priorities
in the Self-Publishing Era



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INTRODUCTION

We used to call it “vanity publishing,” when an author paid to have a book published—usually because he or she was unable to secure a contract with a book publishing house. The term was meant derisively and was considered a vain thing to do.

How times have changed. Today, self-published authors are seeing both commercial and critical success. In 2012, the number of self-published authors who have made more than \$1 million selling books on Amazon grew substantially. Several self-published authors parlayed their self-made success into big contracts with established publishers—often with terms that were fairly advantageous to the author. The toughest and most-respected book reviewer at the vaunted New York Times named a self-published title as one of the best of the year.

Aspiring and published authors both are seeing the opportunity. Since 2006, the number of self-published books in the U.S. is up nearly 300% according to the latest figures from Bowker Market Research. In 2011, it is widely thought that the self-publishing industry took about \$100 million in revenues away from the traditional trade publishing industry. It sounds like a lot, but it's \$100 million versus nearly \$14 billion—the total amount the trade publishing industry generated that year. In 2012, that number is sure to have risen. And it will likely rise again in 2013. The publishing industry has taken notice.

Publishers are scrambling to explain to authors, agents and the rest of the world how they add value to the publishing process. Recently, Random House put out a series of videos explaining what each of its departments does to bring a book to market. Other publishers have made similar moves. Hachette has created a manifesto that talks about what it does for authors.

Meanwhile, new companies have emerged that have been built to cater to the needs of self-publishing authors. Some of them help authors produce their titles; some help them distribute them; others are marketplaces where authors can contract editorial and book production services; and some are

full-service, self-service shops where authors can do all of the above. And the competition among these companies is stiff. The past several years has seen an arms race among them to attract the favor of authors, sometimes by lowering prices and other times by adding new or better services.

Perhaps caught in the middle of this are literary agents. When asked about the biggest challenges she faces today when looking for her next author, literary agent Jane Dystel told Digital Book World:

[We must convince them] that we can help them do better than they're doing themselves, and that is a huge challenge because many of these self-published authors are doing phenomenally well. Probably the majority doesn't have a choice [between publishers and self-publishing] but the ones who are doing very well do have a choice and they will continue to have a choice as time goes on.

As recently as five years ago, publishers had all the power when it came to selling books. Even if an author did manage to create her own self-published book, it would never be stocked in bookstores and, therefore, would never sell very many copies. Through the power of distribution, publishers controlled the publishing ecosystem. Today, agents, publishers and self-publishing vendors compete aggressively for the favor of authors. The question is, what do authors want?

Our survey of nearly 5,000 authors— aspiring, self-published, traditionally published and those who have done both—seeks to answer this question. Our intention is to give agents, publishers, booksellers and anyone else with a stake in the publishing industry an idea of what authors want and what it will take to gain their favor.

For the purpose of this report, we will mainly focus on ebook publishing, as many of our questions related specifically to it and this is our expertise in the marketplace.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

So, what do authors want?

Before we can answer that question, we should tell you a little bit about your typical author. (See our complete methodology at the end of this report to understand the scope and limitations of our survey.)

We divided the world of authors into two distinct groups: Those who have published in some form and those who are aspiring to publish. We break the group that has published further into three parts: self-published authors, traditionally published authors and those who have done both, which we are calling “hybrid” authors.

About half our authors were aspiring, and the published set breaks down fairly evenly. In this report, we will be making comparisons between the three kinds of published authors and aspiring authors as well as between all published authors and aspiring authors (see Figure 1).

All five sets of authors are different, with their own demographics and attitudes. In this report, we will attempt to tell you as much about each group and about the whole as we can.

Authors as a Whole: Who They Are

Authors as a group skew female, older, well-educated and well-off¹. About three-quarters of authors surveyed (73%) are female, with an average age of 50 years old. Three-quarters of them have a college degree or higher. They have an annual income of \$73,415 a year on average with about \$12,710 of that (17.3%) coming from writing (though income from writing is weighted heavily toward published writers). Some 45% of them make no money at all from their writing (80% of aspiring authors).

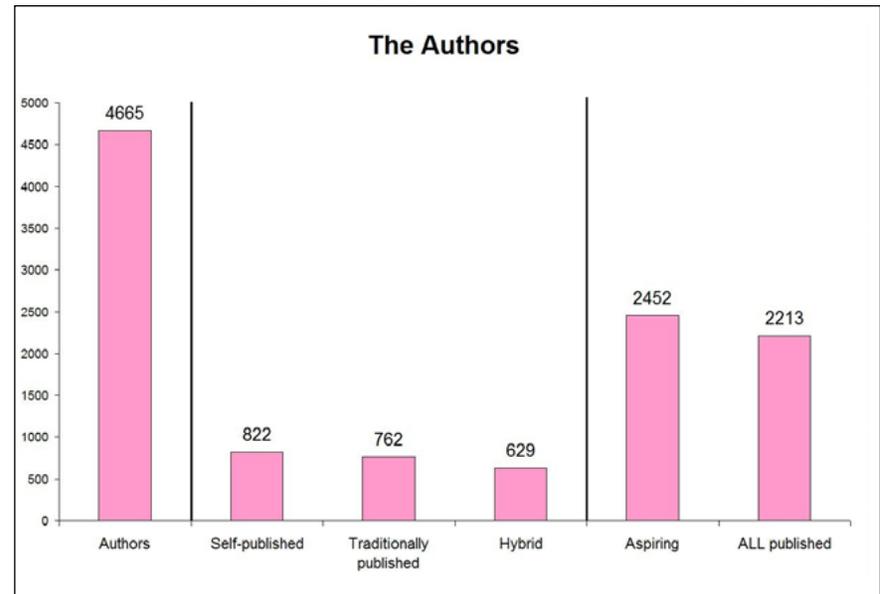


Figure 1

¹ Please see methodology on page 52 for limitations on this survey sample.

Nine out of ten authors we surveyed write fiction (89%), a quarter write specialized nonfiction (books that focus deeply on a specific event, situation or problem), 12% write popular nonfiction and 10% write academic works. The writers we surveyed have completed an average of 5.6 manuscripts and expect to have their next one ready in about 10 months.

Authors as a Whole: What They Do to Build Their Platform

Authors use social media to promote themselves. However, considering the amount authors and observers talking about the importance of using social media, fewer authors participate in some form of social media than one might expect:

- 41% of authors post writing-related tweets on Twitter
- 41% maintain an author or book page on Facebook
- 30% maintain an author presence on Goodreads
- 18% pin writing-related items on Pinterest

Perhaps not surprisingly, the biggest new-media participation among authors comes in the form of blogs with 48% of authors writing a blog that is related to either their books or their writing life (see Figure 2). We will be breaking down the varying social media habits of each group later in the report.

Authors as a Whole: What They Think

Like many inside (and outside) the publishing industry, authors have opinions on crucial issues like ebooks and libraries, author advances, ebook royalties, digital rights management (DRM) for ebooks, the role of agents, the role of publishers and much more.

Not surprisingly, authors believe that they should fairly generous advances on royalties for their work: \$28,530 on average. And once they start earning royalties against that advance, they believe they should get 37% of

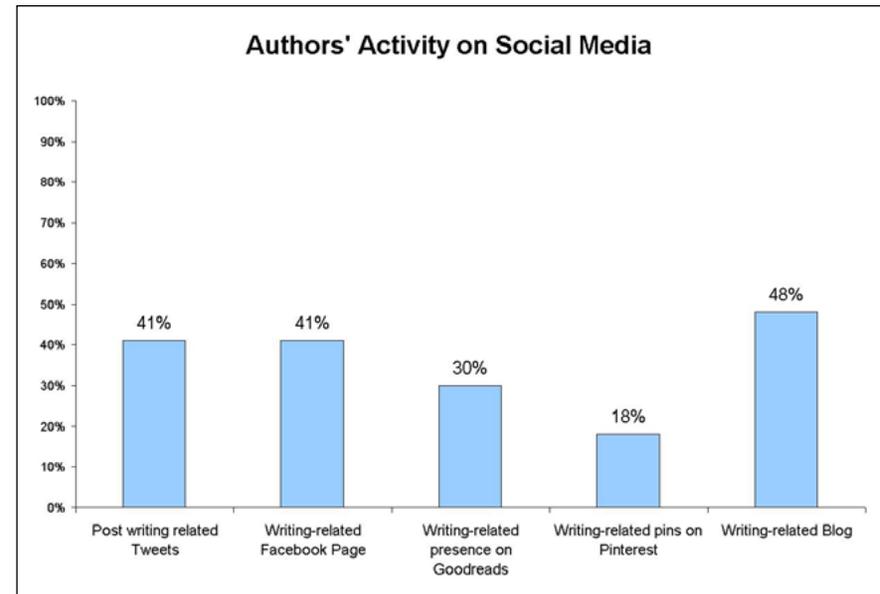


Figure 2

revenues from ebook sales, as opposed to the 25% that has become standard in the traditional publishing side of industry (and, perhaps the 70% that has become standard for authors who self-publish).

While they want a larger cut of the proceeds, they also want to see ebook prices go down, by and large. Half (51%) of authors think ebooks are priced too high and only 4% think they are priced too low. About a third (29%) think they're priced correctly and about a quarter did not indicate to us how they think they should be priced.

In general, authors seem to be in favor of DRM. A third of them say DRM should be strengthened to prevent ebook piracy. About one in ten say it should be left alone and the same amount say it should be abolished (11% for both). About one in six (16%) say it should be changed to be more flexible and about a third (30%) had no opinion on the matter (see Figure 3).

When it comes to agents, more than half of authors think it's important to have someone help manage their career (55%).

When it comes to libraries and ebooks, nearly two-thirds (60%) think library lending of ebooks is good for authors.

Breaking It Down: Published Versus Aspiring

While the above results are interesting and instructive, not all authors are created equal and, when divided into different groups, they have differing opinions on important issues.

In the report, we will go into detail and show all of the differences between these groups. For the sake of this summary, we will only highlight some of the more significant differences.

Published Versus Aspiring: Who They Are

Most authors and aspiring authors are female. Published authors are, on average, about eight years older than aspiring authors. They have about the same level of education but published authors have an average income

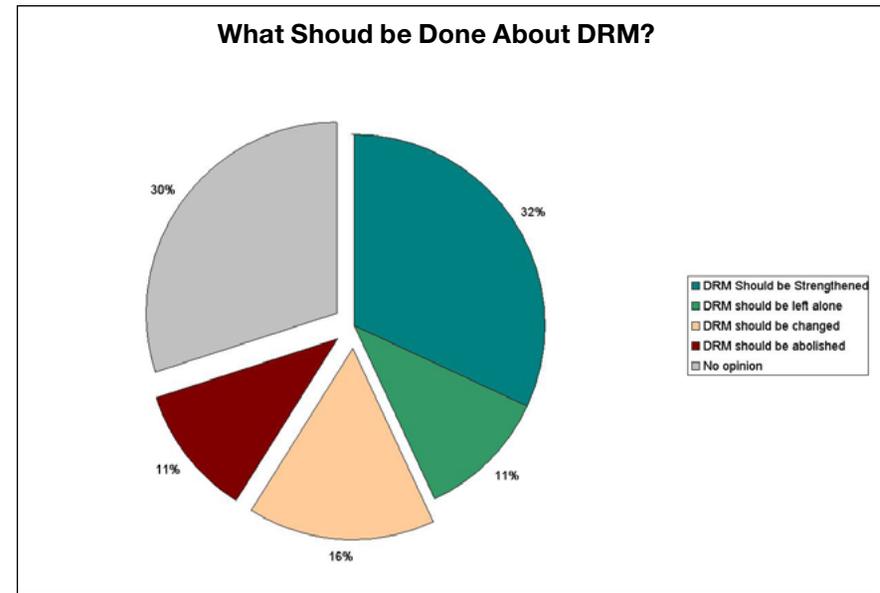


Figure 3

\$18,862 higher than aspiring authors; perhaps mostly because published authors tend to earn about \$20,718 more a year from their writing than aspiring authors (see Figure 4). It should be noted here that 45% of aspiring writers said they had no income from their writing.

The breakdown for the kinds of work authors produce is about the same between the two groups (see Authors as a Whole: Who They Are above). Not surprisingly, published authors have completed many more manuscripts than aspiring authors (9.12 versus 2.3, on average).

Published Versus Aspiring: What They Do to Build Their Platforms

When it comes to social media and self-promotion, published authors are far ahead of their aspiring counterparts (see Figure 5):

- 54% of published authors post writing-related Tweets on Twitter versus 30% for aspiring authors
- 66% of published authors have an author or book page on Facebook versus 18% for aspiring authors
- 52% of published authors maintain an author presence on Goodreads versus 10% for aspiring authors
- 24% pin writing-related items on Pinterest versus 14% for aspiring authors
- 59% of published authors write a blog relating to either their books or writing versus 37% for aspiring authors

Their increased efforts have led to increased results in terms of platform building:

- Published authors have, on average, 1,271 more Twitter followers
- Published authors have, on average, 715 more “likes” on their Facebook fan pages
- Published authors have, on average, 277 more friends on Facebook

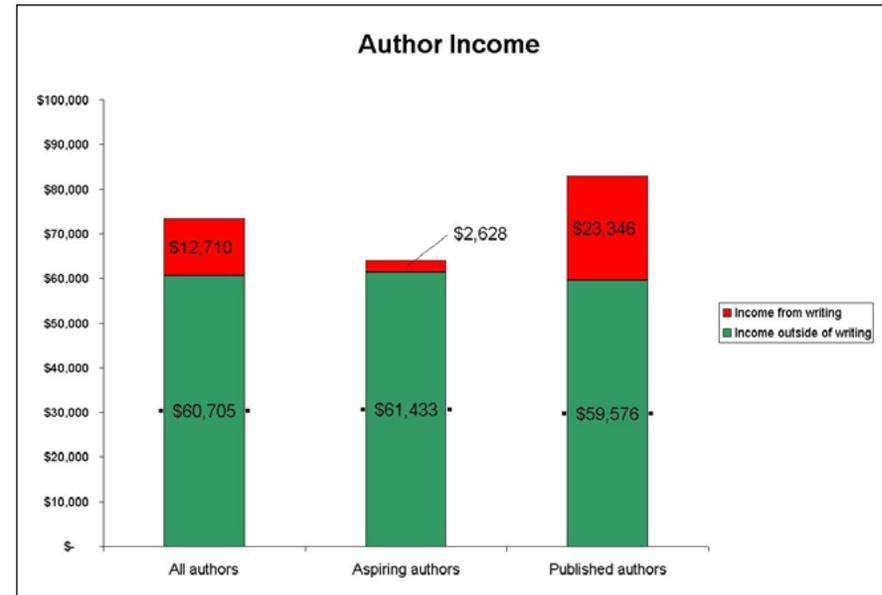


Figure 4: Income from writing is the “cherry on top.”

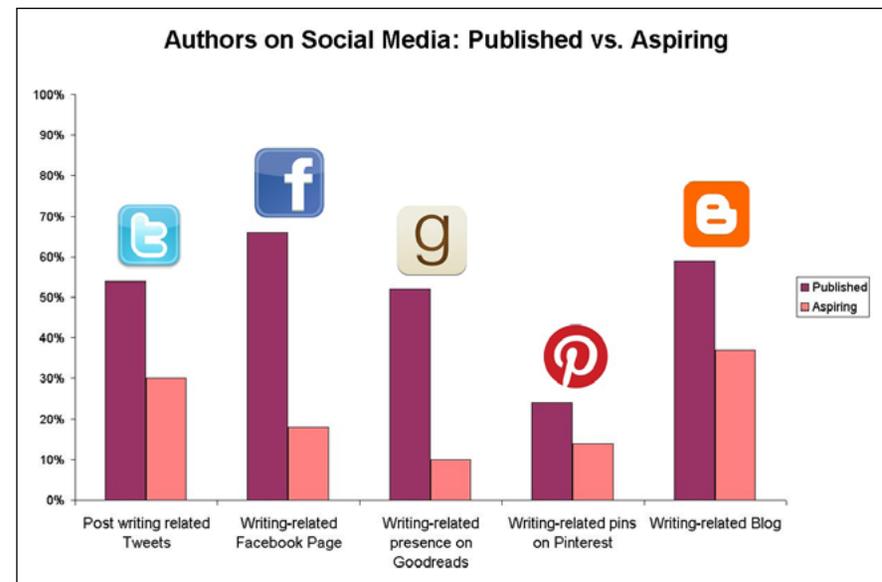


Figure 5

- Published authors have, on average 176 more followers of their boards on Pinterest
- Published authors get, on average, 2,012 more visits per month on their blogs

Published Versus Aspiring: What They Think

While all authors are in lockstep on some issues, there are several key publishing issues in which they differ (many of which we have not yet mentioned in this summary specifically relating to publishing with a publisher or self-publishing; we will dive into them later in the report).

Not surprisingly, published authors believe that they should be making more from their writing compared to aspiring authors. Published authors say that they should get about \$3,409 more of an advance on royalties for their work (\$30,349 versus \$26,940). And they want to receive about seven percentage points more in ebook royalties against that advance (41% versus 34%).

The two groups also differ on ebook pricing with 57% of published authors thinking ebooks are priced too high vs. 45% of aspiring authors.

Published authors also have a more polarized opinion about DRM. Some 45% of published authors think it should be strengthened or left alone versus 41% of aspiring authors. And 14% of published authors think it should be abolished versus 8% of aspiring authors (the number here for published authors is skewed heavily by hybrid authors, with nearly a quarter—23%—wanting to see DRM abolished). While only a quarter of published authors have no opinion on the matter, more than a third of aspiring authors (35%) have no opinion (see Figure 6).

Surprisingly, aspiring authors are more interested in agents and career management than published authors. Less than half of published authors think it's important to have an agent help manage their career (48%), while nearly two-thirds of aspiring authors want help with career management (61%).

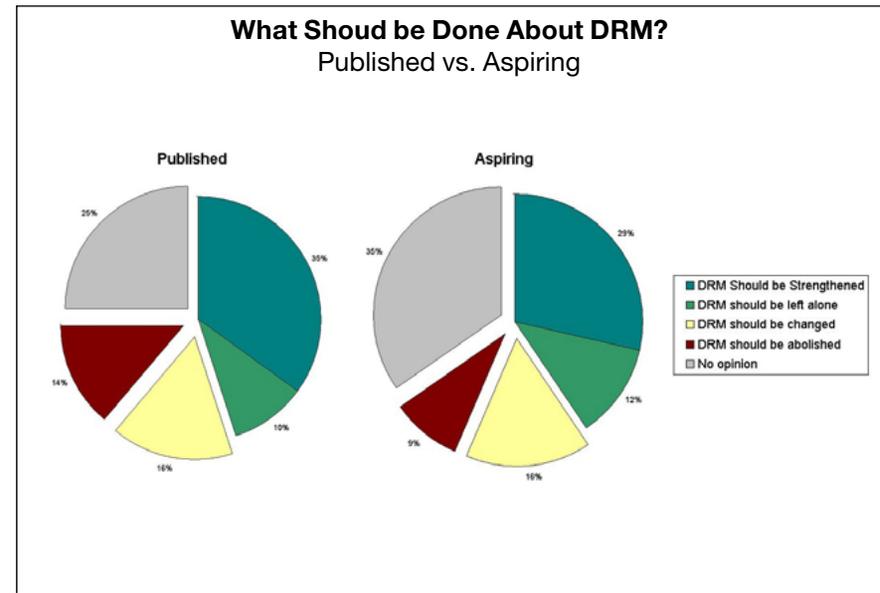


Figure 6

Breaking It Down: Self-Published Authors Versus Traditionally Published Authors Versus Hybrid Authors

These three groups differ widely on a number of core publishing issues, especially in regards to working with publishers and self-publishing. This analysis is the core of this report: When it comes to publishers and self-publishing, what do each of these groups want?

We will not break down the answer to this question in this summary and instead will dive into it when we talk about each group. However, we will share one general observation that might be the most important one in this report.

While self-published authors seem to be fairly invested and in favor of the institution of self-publishing and traditionally published authors seem to be slightly more wary of self-publishing and invested in and in favor of the world of traditional publishing, hybrid authors—those who have done both self- and traditional publishing—are mostly in favor of self-publishing and critical of traditional publishers, even more so than the self-publishing group.

Later in this report we will highlight this phenomenon.

Conclusion

This summary just scratches the surface of what is revealed in this author survey. We have not even delved into attitudes of authors toward publishers, self-publishing and so much more. Still, we can already make some conclusions.

First, authors in general are invested in social media but those who have published in some capacity better understand its new level of importance in the book world.

Second, authors believe their work should be highly valued, seeking fairly generous advances on royalties and royalty percentages. Published authors

believe their work is more valuable than aspiring authors believe their work is worth.

Third, authors are in favor of DRM, perhaps because they lose out materially if a copy of a book is pirated and not sold. The notable exception here is hybrid authors, nearly a quarter of whom believe DRM should be abolished.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, aspiring authors seem to be most enamored with the traditional publishing industry, and hybrid authors seem to be least enamored with the industry. (This concept will be shown more clearly throughout the rest of the report.) This last conclusion should be both encouraging and worrisome to publishers.

While outsiders who probably have among them the next generation of best-selling authors believe that publishers can help them and have fairly high opinions of publishers, those who have experienced both publishers and the alternative have a very low opinion of publishers by comparison.

Perhaps this is because those authors whose works have been both self- and traditionally published are unreasonably bitter as a group by some slight they experienced at the hand of a publisher. Or perhaps they have made a reasoned comparison of what the publishing industry offered them and what self-publishing offered them and were more satisfied with the latter. Either way, it would suggest that traditional publishers could do more to woo and impress published authors.

The good news for publishers is that aspiring writers still believe in their ability to help them. It's not too late for publishers to improve their services to authors to attract and retain the next generation of best-selling authors.

