How is the role of the independent editor changing in relation to traditional and self-publishing models of publication?

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Abstract

This paper considers how the role of the independent editor is changing as new opportunities for editorial work emerge. It explores the practice of independent editors operating largely within the publishing industry and how their working routines have developed over the past three years, including how they find work, allocate their time and the changing nature of their clients. A comparison is made between the processes and practices of their work for 'traditional' publishing houses and how this compares with work for self-publishing authors. A shift emerges from working for traditional publishers towards working for new clients, including self-publishing authors; relationships with traditional publishers are strained for a variety of reasons, and increasing satisfaction levels are discernible in relationships with experienced self-publishers. The paper considers the consequences of editors' changing patterns of work and client base, and likely future outcomes. Areas for further close monitoring and research are suggested.

Introduction

Previous research into self-publishing (Baverstock and Steinitz, 2013) has revealed that self-publishers often use independent editors in the development of their work. This is surprising, given the often held assumption that self-publishing authors are choosing to 'go it alone' by managing the publishing process themselves. If this is the case, how is this new market affecting the work of independent editors and their relationship with traditional publishing companies? This paper will examine how independent editors allocate their time between these different types of customer. It will examine how the processes and practices of working with traditional publishers compare with working with self-publishing authors. This research offers the first comprehensive, original analysis of independent editors, and builds upon the previous publication in this journal which looked at general working patterns amongst this group (Baverstock, Blackburn, Iskandarova, 2015).

The project methodology was covered in detail in the previous paper. The research population for the survey was a sample recruited via the Society for Editors and Proofreaders[i] and 15 professional organisations with which they had links. Individual recipients were encouraged to pass on the questionnaire to other independent editors so the precise total of questionnaires sent out is unknown. A total of 514 responses were received, mostly from the UK and US. The online questionnaire, made available through Qualtrix, included a mix of multiple choice questions, rating scales with a 10 point scale (where 1 is low, 10 high, so 5.5 is the mid-point), and open-ended questions which permitted longer responses.

Before discussing the survey results, several caveats about the potential for bias should be noted. Potential types of bias include: sampling bias; response bias (and in particular courtesy bias) and non-response bias, all of which were outlined in the previous paper. In addition to these considerations, it should also be borne in mind that this survey relied on the independent editors to self-assess their work allocation, and to make comparisons with the arrangements they were making three years ago. No check was possible, nor made, as to whether the times they allocated were

accurate. But respondents emerge from the process as detail-orientated; their responses are not 'blanket' i.e. they did not give the same response to all questions. As they also invested significant time in completing their answers, their responses are considered a valid basis for deductions.

How do independent editors find work?

Figure 1. The importance of potential sources of work (Ns vary from 422 to 497)
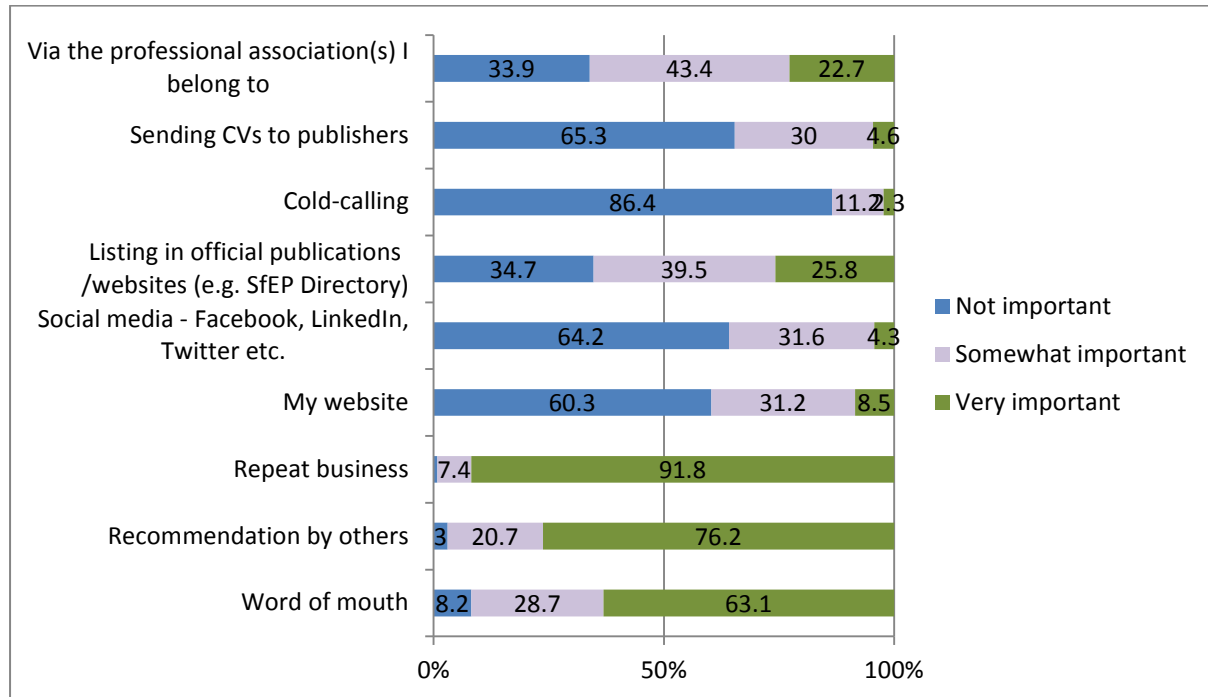
The ways independent editors find work are summarised in Fig. 1. It is interesting that the most important source of work is 'Repeat business' (91.8% rated it very important), followed by 'Recommendation by others' (76.2%) and 'Word of mouth' (63.1%). The professional association also emerged as important, whether through its specific agency or inclusion in official publications. The data also shows that independent editors are generally disinclined to find clients by cold calling or through social media.

The analysis showed no strong association between the age of the respondents and the sources of their work. The general pattern in Figure 1 is consistent across all age groups with a few exceptions. First, the importance of 'Social media' as a source of work was very low – only 4.3% of all respondents said that social media is very important. It might be expected that younger editors would be more likely to use social media. Our data analysis supports this thesis: 12.5% of respondents in age group 25-34 years old see this as very important. The second interesting observation is that 'Listing in official publications/websites' is quite important for age group 65-69 years old – it was indicated as very important by 39% of respondents in this age group, compared with 25.8% in the whole sample. Third, for age group 35-39 years old the importance of 'Sending CVs to publishers' is higher – 14.6% of respondents in this age group find it very important, compared with 4.6% for the whole sample.

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Who do independent editors work for?

Table 1. Estimation of working time spent on editorial work for different types of clients (respondents were asked to allocate percentages)

Percentage of time spent	Editorial work for traditional publishing houses		Self-publishing authors approaching you on an individual basis for editorial services		Self-publishing firms, with you providing editorial services as part of their wider publishing service		Other editorial work	
	2010	*2013*	*2010*	*2013*	*2010*	*2013*	*2010*	*2013*
0%	209	193	327	291	441	415	211	182
1%-25%	35	49	112	123	35	47	107	128
26%-50%	39	44	35	51	16	23	44	56
51%-75%	40	49	9	16	5	9	28	36
76%-100%	191	177	28	31	12	15	121	112
Total	N=514	N=512	N=511	N=512	N=509	N=509	N=511	N=514

Based on a high number of responses from the cohort, this table indicates that there is a notable increase in the amount of work being done for new clients. Those working most heavily for traditional publishing houses in 2010 (76-100% of their time) are spending less time on work for publishing houses three years later, and editors in each time band are spending more time on self-publishing authors and for firms offering a self-publishing service. The amount of time being spent on other editorial work has also gone up. By 2013, 62% of sample are working for traditional publishing houses, 43% for self-publishing authors (up from 36%) and 18% for self-publishing firms with 65% doing other editorial work (up from 59%). This broader client base is confirmed in verbatim comments:

> As a freelancer I'm approached more and more by people wishing to self-publish, either print on demand or e-books. I get fewer contracts from professional publishing houses, though my work for government and private enterprise has remained steady.

What kind of work do independent editors do for clients?

Table 2. Distribution of different types of editorial work in 2010 and 2013 (respondents were asked to allocate percentages)

Percentage of time spent	Project editing		Structural editing		Copy-editing		Proofreading		Other	
	2010	*2013*	*2010*	*2013*	*2010*	*2013*	*2010*	*2013*	*2010*	*2013*
0%	348	360	290	260	87	55	156	172	398	388
1%-25%	88	105	126	150	104	86	221	214	66	72
26%-50%	56	30	75	77	138	163	80	82	21	31
51%-75%	11	12	10	17	91	104	22	24	13	10
76%-100%	9	7	7	9	94	106	34	21	13	12
Total	N=512	N=514	N=508	N=513	N=514	N=514	N=513	N=513	N=511	N=513

'Editing' is a broad term and may include several different types of editorial activity. For example, 'project editing' generally means managing an entire project, often including several component parts and liaising with other service-suppliers such as typesetters and designers. 'Structural editing' usually involves looking at a manuscript as a whole and making recommendations for its more effective sequencing. 'Copy-editing' is concerned with close attention to the text and the production of a seamless reading experience. 'Proofreading' is checking the text after typesetting, with or without the original text (the latter is known as 'blind proofreading') and as a final check prior to production/distribution. These various roles may attract different rates of remuneration; project management and writing generally attract higher rates than copy-editing and proofreading.[ii]

By 2013 Copy-editing was undertaken by 89% of the sample, Proofreading (67%), Structural editing (49%), Project editing (30%), and Other (24%). It is interesting that copy-editing is the only activity that is done by some on an almost full time basis (41% spending more than half their time on it with 21% spending more than three quarters of their time doing it).

When asked what kind of work they included within 'Other', respondents listed a variety of activities such as writing and rewriting, indexing, translation, research, consultancy, meetings, permissions, fact-checking, copywriting and manuscript appraisal. Of these, the most common was writing, and the number of respondents involved increased between 2010 and 2013; 22 out of 109 respondents were involved in writing in 2010 (20%) and 30 out of 110 respondents (27%) in 2013.

In general, the cohort emerged as not only willing but increasingly required to tackle various roles in their client relationships:

> I could not exist on just copy-editing, and expanded into full project management including typesetting some years ago.

There's certainly an expectation that the editor (or at least the freelance editor) will do more than simply edit a text; I often find myself styling documents prior to typesetting, or working in InDesign, or marking typeset documents in Acrobat.

Comparing the experience of working for traditional publishers and self-publishing authors

The research cohort was then asked to comment on the experience of working for traditional publishers (Table 3), first time self-publishing authors (Table 4) and established self-publishing authors (Table 5), and to make comparisons between 2010 and 2013.

Table 3. Working with professional publishers in 2010 and in 2013 (respondents were asked to grade their experience on a sliding scale from 1 to 10)

	I was able to charge a fair rate for the work I do		I was offered a fixed rate contracts which gave me little opportunity for negotiation		I regularly found that contracted work took more time than was budgeted	
	2010	*2013*	*2010*	*2013*	*2010*	*2013*
Strongly disagree/disagree (1-3)	23%	18%	14%	14%	23%	23%
Neutral (4-7)	46%	50%	27%	33%	36%	40%
Agree/Totally agree (8-10)	31%	32%	59%	52%	42%	37%
Mean	5.84	6.19	7.32	7.14	6.4	6.34
Number of responses	N=273	N=283	N=265	N=284	N=244	N=260

Note: In order to ease comparison, we a) reduced the 10-point scale responses to three bands (1-3, 4-7, and 8-10) and calculated cumulative percentage on agree-disagree scale, and b) calculated the mean values for each question.

Table 4. Working with first time self-publishing authors in 2010 and in 2013 (respondents were asked to grade their experience on a sliding scale from 1 to 10)

	I was able to charge a fair rate for the work I do		I was offered a fixed rate contracts which gave me little opportunity for negotiation		I regularly found that contracted work took more time than was budgeted	
	2010	*2013*	*2010*	*2013*	*2010*	*2013*
Strongly disagree/disagree (1-3)	12%	14%	61%	63%	15%	18%
Neutral (4-7)	34%	35%	30%	22%	45%	51%
Agree/Totally agree (8-10)	55%	50%	9%	16%	40%	31%
Mean	7.24	7.11	3.5	3.94	6.73	6.3
Number of responses	N=121	N=153	N=56	N=64	N=108	N=128

Note: In order to ease the comparison, we (1) reduced the 10-point scale responses to three bands (1-3, 4-7, and 8-10) and calculated cumulative percentage on agree-disagree scale, (2) calculated the mean values for each question.

Table 5. Working with established self-publishing authors in 2010 and in 2013 (respondents were asked to grade their experience on a sliding scale from 1 to 10)

	I was able to charge a fair rate for the work I do		I was offered a fixed rate contracts which gave me little opportunity for negotiation		I regularly found that contracted work took more time than was budgeted	
	2010	*2013*	*2010*	*2013*	*2010*	*2013*
Strongly disagree/disagree (1-3)	10%	6%	77%	57%	21%	22%
Neutral (4-7)	52%	31%	18%	30%	57%	56%
Agree/Totally agree (8-10)	38%	63%	5%	13%	21%	22%
Mean	7.74	7.78	3.05	3.87	5.86	5.51
Number of responses	N=50	N=97	N=22	N=47	N=28	N=68

Note: In order to ease the comparison, we (1) reduced the 10-point scale responses to three bands (1-3, 4-7, and 8-10) and calculated cumulative percentage on agree-disagree scale, (2) calculated the mean values for each question.

It should be noted that the numbers responding to the questions about working for traditional publishers are much higher than those responding to questions about working with self-publishing authors. For instance, fewer of those who are/were working with first time self-publishing authors (N= 152 in 2010, N=183 in 2013) answered the question about fixed rate contracts (N=56; N=64).

One possible area of bias to bear in mind is that it is possible that the question about contracts between independent editors and self-publishing authors did not feel appropriate. As an example, one respondent offered specific feedback on her reason for not answering:

> …the question was irrelevant… The reason I'm not 'offered' non-negotiable contracts is that I break off negotiations as soon as I realize that's the situation.

However, the broad trends in attitudes remain clear. To make comparison easier, Figures 2-4 compare responses for scale questions about the experience of independent editors in working with different groups of publishers in 2010 and 2013.

Figure 2. Comparison of mean values of answers to 'I was able to charge a fair rate for the work I did', working with professional publishers, first time self-publishing authors and established self-publishing authors in 2010 and 2013
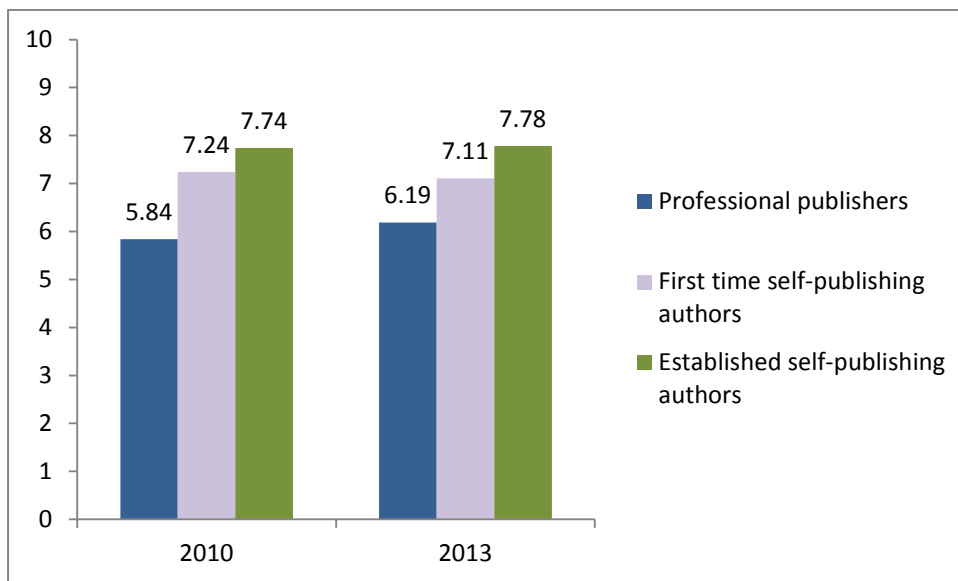
Figure 3. Comparison of mean values of answers to 'I was offered fixed rate contracts which gave me little opportunity for negotiation', working with professional publishers, first time self-publishing authors and established self-publishing authors in 2010 and 2013
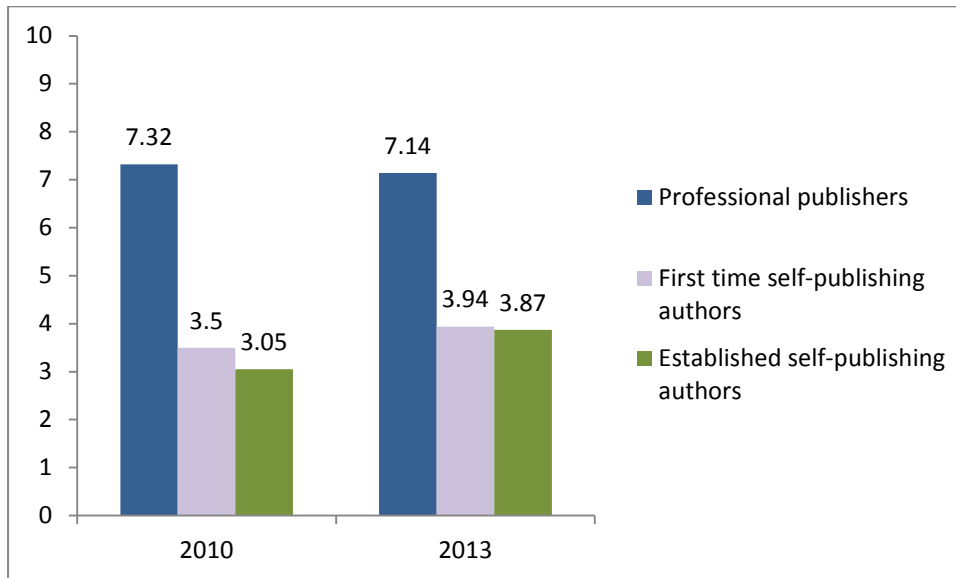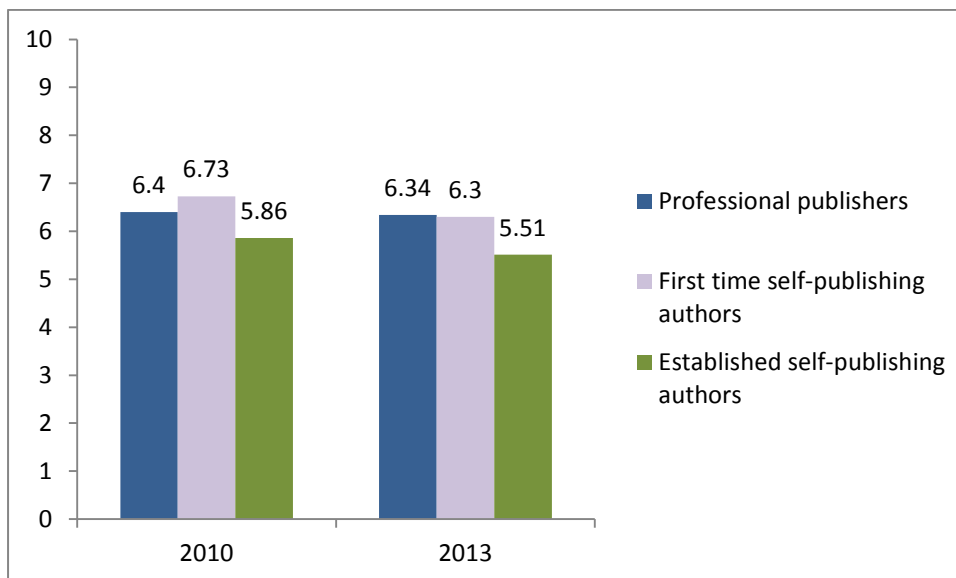

Figure 4. Comparison of mean values of answers to 'I regularly found that contracted work took more time than was budgeted' working with professional publishers, first time self-publishing authors and established self-publishing authors in 2010 and 2013

Looking at Figure 2, it would appear that working with self-publishing authors increases editors' ability to charge a 'fair rate' and significantly reduces being locked into 'fixed rate contracts which gave me little opportunity for negotiation'.

Figure 3 indicates that it is much more common for independent editors to be offered fixed rate contracts by traditional publishers rather than by self-publishing authors, although there is a slight tendency among self-publishing authors to move towards fixed rate contracts with little opportunity for negotiation.

Figure 4 would imply that whoever the client, editorial involvement generally takes longer than anticipated, but that established self-publishing authors are slightly easier to predict, and first time self-publishing authors are growing slightly more so. This may be due to independent editors' increasing familiarity with self-publishing authors as clients; or perhaps a wider understanding within society of the role of the editor – or other factors. It is notable that discussions of relationships between independent editors and self-publishing authors, and associated negotiations over rates of pay and process, have featured on the SfEP annual conference programme in recent years.[iii]

The experience of working with traditional publishers

This section expands on the attitudes of independent editors to working with traditional publishers. Many respondents provided detailed comments on their experiences of working with publishers. Much mention was made of tighter budgets with comments such as the following:

> Much tighter control on budgets. Fewer publishers allow me to charge by the hour.

> Budgets for freelances are very low, take little account of recommended rates (NUJ[iv], SfEP) and force quality down. 'Business' requirements now set a level of acceptability at around 80%, whereas it used to be possible to strive for 100%.

The move from paying an hourly rate towards fixed fee contracts was felt, in some cases, to offer a poorer return for editors:

> I find some companies are moving towards contracts for fixed fee projects, which generally don't end up paying as well as, as most projects seem to turn out longer and more complex than first anticipated. These include projects that last more than 6 months, working on a variety of manuscripts, most of which are 'unseen' before handover, so tricky to gauge how much work they will need at the outset.

> There is more work being placed on a fixed-fee basis, usually meaning the freelancer is paid less.

A decline within publishing of what is considered an acceptable standard was also frequently mentioned:

> Traditional publishers appear to have given up on meticulous copy-editing practices. I am constantly finding academic books published by reputable houses which are full of factual errors and inaccuracies, not to mention straight poor writing.

> Many publishers/writers want projects turned around post haste and don't seem to care about quality anymore. It's all about product.

A number of reasons were given for this perceived decline in quality. Respondents pointed to the lack of expertise in-house as one of the key issues:

> Publishers seem to have got rid of much of their internal staff, so as a result freelancers are expected to digest quite a lot of specialised instructions and documentation before

beginning the work (e.g. installing templates, coding and styling, giving instructions to artwork department / typesetters).

This loss of expertise was linked to the trend of outsourcing editorial and production work to cheaper locations (often in the Far East) employing 'offshore workers/typesetters', which was seen as disappointing as it affects the quality of the final product and the rates offered for other type of work, e.g. proofreading services. Moreover, it also changes the contact practices between publishers and freelance editors, who 'used to be treated well by publishers, providing training and regular contact':

I no longer get detailed briefs and the ability to talk to a desk editor personally is limited or non-existent.

Associated with this was a reduction in the required number of editorial interventions by publishers commissioning work, e.g. proofreading. This had regularly led to instances of authors assuming, or being required to assume, responsibility for their own editing:

I feel that the role of the editor has diminished among traditional publishers, particularly in the book industry. More and more, publishers place the responsibility on authors to find competent editorial help, expecting them to submit essentially 'finished' manuscripts.

Organisations new to commissioning editing can be even more unfamiliar with the editorial role, and editorial work from book publishing start-ups backed by venture capital was seen as a new challenge for independent editors:

This kind of editorial work often arrives on the editor's desk without adequate instructions, and much (unpaid) time can be spent on finding out what is wanted, helping these publishing novices understand the connections between editing and design/production, creating editing templates so that the work can be done efficiently, and enduring unpleasant negotiations about rates, since start-ups have a tendency to want to incite an economic race to the bottom between experienced freelancers and far less qualified people (the start-ups don't really know the difference).

Independent editors respond to changes in traditional publishing industry by changing their own pattern of work/practices, and in some cases quite radically:

I've left the 'traditional publishing industry' behind - they pay badly and treat you badly. Non-publishers pay more and are much more appreciative of what you can do for them.

Nevertheless, the changing situation is probably not fully comprehended by traditional players and there is a lack of publisher awareness of competition for the services of editors:

Publishers…haven't yet learned that they are competing with self-publishing and unsigned authors for our services -- authors who are often willing to pay more for our services and accept more reasonable schedules for the work.

The experience of working with self-publishing authors

Having undertaken further discussions with independent editors since the questionnaire was distributed, it was found that relationships between independent editors and self-publishing authors are generally one-to-one and unmediated. While an hourly rate and anticipated total spend are discussed, such arrangements are rarely established on a contractual basis. Close involvement with an editor may mean that initial thresholds of money and time are subsequently extended, by mutual consent. How well more informal arrangements worked was linked to how experienced self-publishing authors were. This can be seen in Figure 5 which shows the level of satisfaction in working with both first time self-publishing authors and established self-publishing authors.

Figure 5. The experience of working with first time self-publishing authors (N=275) and with self-publishing authors who have been through the process before (N=208)
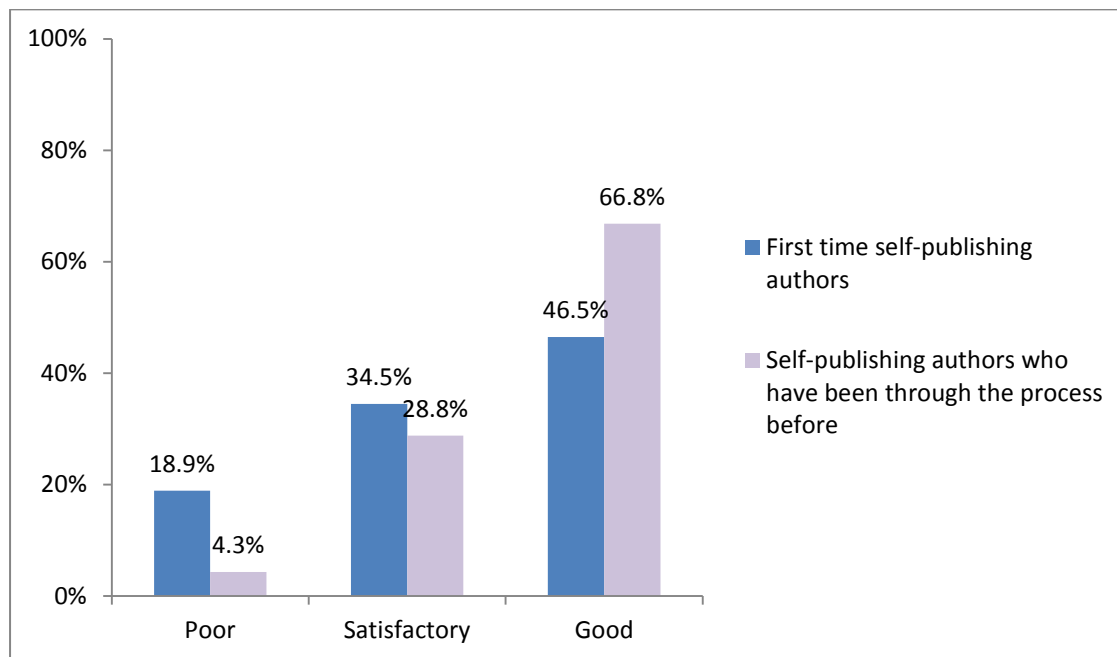
When asked about working with first time and established self-publishing authors, there is a clear correlation between job satisfaction for the independent editors and their authorial clients' experience of the self-publishing process. Comparing responses within Tables 4-5 and Figures 2-3, it can be seen that in general working for self-publishing authors promoted a greater ability for independent editors to charge what they considered a 'fair rate' for the work done, and reduced the tendency for their work to be locked into 'fixed rate contracts' which offered 'little opportunity for negotiation'. Furthermore, these trends increased as the self-publishing authors became more experienced. Table 4 and Figure 4 show that the editors' ability to estimate how long the project would take was similar when working with traditional publishing companies and first-time self-publishing authors, but when working with established self-publishing authors, their precision slightly increased. It can be deduced that as independent editors and self-publishing authors grow more used to working together, this trend will continue. Indeed, one respondent looked forward to the development of such a relationship:

> I am reluctant to work with self-published, first-time authors <...> However, when my finances are a bit more settled I might take on a project from a self-published author, as it would be nice to have a single project that I could work on at my own pace.

Verbatim comments shed further light on both the issues and opportunities that arise when working with self-publishing authors. They are a new source of work, and expand 'exponentially'. While more tutoring through the publishing process might be needed:

> One may also need to do more teaching as part of the editing process, since the client may not be familiar with how a book is produced

there were many comments about this being a time of opportunity for independent editors:

> This is an exciting time, with the publishing industry changing so rapidly. I see many opportunities and a growing professionalism within the self-publishing community.

But while an increase in demand for their services was widely noted, only one respondent commented that they had acted on the associated business opportunity:

> I have recently set up a small publishing company to help people to self-publish (but not to rip people off like a lot (most?) of the on-line publishers do). It is in the early stages, and it will be interesting to see if changes in publishing make this a viable option, both for myself and for authors who wish to self-publish.

Conclusions

This article has explored how independent editors have depended to a significant degree on repeat business from an established client base; relying on a small number of channels to attract new clients, particularly professional society websites and 'word of mouth' recommendations from other editors. It has explored the shift in the work that independent authors do away from traditional publishing houses and towards the self-publishing sector, where they are attracting steadily increasing business from self-publishing authors. This article has shown that while the amount of time spent by editors on copyediting has grown, there has been an accompanying shift towards a broader client base and the availability of a wider range of services beyond the traditional focus on copyediting.

In particular, it has charted an increasing dissatisfaction with working for (at least some) traditional publishers, fuelled by a declining availability of work as editorial and production services are outsourced to other providers (e.g. in the Far East). Other factors contributing to editorial dissatisfaction include the imposition by traditional publishers of tighter budgets on editorial processes which can mean the offering of less profitable fixed term contracts rather than hourly rates of remuneration, and a perception of declining standards with less in-house editorial expertise, less priority and resource given to editorial services such as copyediting and proofreading, even to the point of publishers' seeking to shift these tasks back to authors.

At the same time, independent editors are gaining increasing work and levels of satisfaction from self-published authors. There are risks for editors in this new market, including unrealistic and unreasonable demands from new and inexperienced authors as well as potentially lower standards in a sector with low costs of entry both for authors and editors. However, the rewards for editors can be significant, particularly when working with more experienced authors who appreciate the

value of what independent editors can contribute to the quality of their work, are clearer about what they need, reasonable in the rates they agree and flexible about timing and cost as projects develop.

Issues for traditional publishers include facing increasing competition for the services of independent editors and addressing the dissatisfaction a significant number of independent editors feel. More broadly, publishers need to reassess the importance of editorial quality in publishing and how much resource they are willing to devote to it, for example in selecting high-quality editorial services and remunerating providers accordingly.

Issues for independent editors include more proactive promotion to a broader client base, particularly self-publishing authors, to build up new markets and maintain income in the face of declining business and less favourable rates from traditional publishers. This more market-focussed approach will need to include a willingness to embrace new avenues such as social media as well as expand the services they provide to meet the needs of new types of clients more effectively, for example a full suite of publishing services (e.g. design and marketing services).

For the future, the editorial role in managing content is needed by traditional publishers, new publishing start-ups and self-publishing authors. How such services will henceforth be managed, made available and remunerated paid for are timely subjects for further research.

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