

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

### Who are the independent editors, how did they reach their role and what are their associated job satisfactions?

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#### Abstract

This paper presents new evidence on the world of the independent editor in the publishing industry, analysing their demographic background, education and training, working practices, links with professional organisations, motivations for 'going it alone' and job satisfaction. The results help contribute to the understanding of this important and growing segment of the publishing industry, challenge some of the commonly held beliefs about their role in the industry and set these within the broader context of changes in work organisation in publishing. Contrary to the assumption that self-publishing largely takes place without the involvement of an editor, research into the processes of self-publishing (previously published in this journal) found that editors (and other providers of publishing services) were in fact often involved. The results are significant for the traditional publishing industry, the users of independent editorial services and the editors themselves.

#### Introduction

While responding to questions after his keynote paper 'Academe and the Cult of the Book' at the 10<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the Book in Barcelona, 30<sup>th</sup> June 2012, Professor Jeffrey Di Leo asserted that '...the difference between publishing and self-publishing is (the involvement of) an editor' (Leo, 2012). This echoes a strong previous assumption, within both the traditional publishing industry and academia, that self-publishing is a process operating outside the confines of the traditional industry and by implication, without observing the same series of careful and sequential associated processes. In short, if authors are self-publishing, the conventional wisdom is that the involvement of an editor is not expected.

However, a growing body of research has indicated that this may be an outdated and too broad a generalisation. This paper extends a programme of research into self-publishing (Baverstock, 2012, 2013b; 2013c; Baverstock and Steinitz, 2013, published in *Proceedings of Annual International Conference of Journalism and Mass Communication, Logos, The Guardian and Learned Publishing*) and the identification within that research of a growing demand for publishing services within the self-publishing market. For example, Baverstock and Steinitz (2013) found that 59% of the research cohort studied had used an editor and there was also evidence of them using a range of other publishing services in the development of work (21% had taken legal advice and 26% purchased marketing services such as publicity and PR support).

There is evidence to suggest that there is a growing awareness among self-publishing authors that professional editing is an essential component for increasing the chance that their work will sell. Mark Coker, Founder of ebook platform Smashwords has pointed out that '...after a decade of exponential growth in ebooks...growth (is) slowing.' Within this market, he points out that 'Good isn't good enough' and the 'most commonly underutilised best practice' is that 'many indies release their books without professional editing and proofreading' (Coker, 2014). This would imply that

there are increasing opportunities for independent editors to provide publishing services for what seems to be a growing market, although as the established publishing houses consolidate there is also likely to be an increase in the labour pool of independent editors. As demand increases, people who may not have had editing as their core career skill, but are in fact capable, may also enter the market.

The motivation and working practices of editors, and the nature of their associated client base, have been under-researched. Previous research has addressed the role of independent editors in the book publishing industry (Granger et al., 1995) although this was prior to the rise of self-publishing which provided an added impetus to this form of work. Given this knowledge-gap, this paper addresses their demographic background, education and training, working practices, links with professional organisations, motivations for 'going it alone' and job satisfaction. A second paper will consider their client base and associated relationships. The analysis will be of interest to a range of individuals and organisations, from independent editors to those managing and commissioning their services, both within the traditional publishing industry and analysts of the emerging economy in publishing services.

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### **Methodology**

A key starting point is to define what is meant by an 'independent editor'. A more familiar term used in the UK is 'freelance editor' but the term 'independent editor' is used here as more relevant to an international market. The Society for Editors and Proofreaders (SfEP) in the UK describes itself as a professional organisation for 'the people who strive to make text accurate and readable', focussing in particular on copyediting and proofreading services ([www.sfep.org.uk](http://www.sfep.org.uk)). The National Association of Independent Writers and Editors (NAIWE) includes copyeditors, proofreaders, academic writing evaluators and fiction editors involved in a range of tasks including ghost writing, indexing, rewriting and technical writing ([www.naiwe.com](http://www.naiwe.com)).

As part of the previous research into self-publishing (Baverstock 2011), several members of SfEP were interviewed about their involvement with self-publishing authors. After an initial discussion of the associated issues was published in the SfEP journal (Baverstock 2013a), an invitation to speak at the SfEP conference (September 2013) was accepted. There was strong interest from the SfEP membership in the development of self-publishing. The specific issues arising from dealing with first-time self-publishing authors were also discussed: both how to explain the role of the editor and how to price involvement.

While there are various meeting points and forums available for independent editors online, and reasons why practitioners might decide not to join the prominent association serving their profession, for reasons of effective project management, it was decided to concentrate on this specific and highly targetable group and permission was subsequently sought to conduct research among the SfEP membership. Once permission was gained a questionnaire was drafted and circulated to all members and associates of the SfEP for feedback and comment. The research team

were also asked if it could be circulated to the other and international organisations with whom the SfEP has professional links, and who display each others' information on their websites.

After a period of trials to ensure functionality and clarity, the survey was announced, despatched, and a reminder sent by the secretariats of the various professional organisations over a three week period in late 2013. Responses were returned via Qualtrix, an online computer aided software package that permits a high level of subsequent analysis and comparison. It was also the system that the research collaborators, Kingston University's Small Business Research Centre, were most familiar with. The question format was a mix of multiple choice questions, rating scales with a 10 point scale (1 is low, 10 high, 5 the mid-point), and open-ended questions.

As the questionnaires were circulated by the various membership administrations to their members, and they were encouraged to pass them on to other independent editors, the precise total sent out is unknown. In all a total of 514 responses were received. 48% (257) of the response came from the UK, the same number who self-identified as being SfEP members, which would imply a response rate of 14% from SfEP members. Response rates to online surveys vary enormously, but the median is estimated at a rate of 26% according to an estimate by Supersurvey (2011). Having begun, most responders made it through to the end of the questionnaire, with 272 respondents offering comments at the end of the questionnaire (52.9% of the cohort). There were also options for additional comments, using the boxes provided throughout the questionnaire, and many of those offered were extensive in nature. These consistently reflected a high level of engagement in the research process and many thoughtful contributions were submitted. Several of those completing the questionnaire emailed to comment on it being pleasant to be noticed and wishing our research project well. In the context of previous research undertaken within the publishing and writing sector, this was most unusual.

Before discussing the survey results several caveats about the potential for bias should be noted. This could have stemmed from:

- Sampling bias: the organisations to which the questionnaire was sent may have impacted on the range of those involved. Similarly, although the research group was asked to forward the questionnaire to the entire membership there may have been a degree of selectivity imposed; thus the cohort approached may not be fully representative of the target population.
- Response bias (i.e. the tendency of respondents either consciously or unconsciously to distort responses). In this instance there may have been an element of 'courtesy bias', as the respondents were sent the questionnaire by a familiar organisation, and even though assured of anonymity this may have influenced their responses.
- Non-response bias. There may be a difference between those who were sent the link to the questionnaire and responded and those who did not.

While these caveats and unexamined areas must be borne in mind when interpreting the results it was felt that the survey offered interesting insights into the role of the independent editor, particularly given the opportunity to make more substantial comments through the open-ended questions.

This article will concentrate on offering an overview of the research population, their path to earning from independent editing and their associated satisfactions in relation to the overall structure of the

market offering independent editorial publishing services. A second paper will examine the role of freelance editors working within the traditional industry and within self-publishing, make comparisons between the two areas in which their professional skills are deployed – and predictions for future developments.

### General characteristics of the research cohort

The final section of the questionnaire asked for demographic information. This is a useful starting point. 85% of responses were from females and 15% from males. This echoes the balance of the audience who attended the SfEP conference. The age of respondents offers a fairly even spread with a concentration in the fifties and early sixties (Fig. 1). The ethnicity of the group was predominantly white (94.5%). While respondents were spread worldwide, there was a high response from the UK, US and Australia which may reflect the nature of the organisations used in the survey (Fig. 2). The majority worked in English only (78.6%). Of those working in other languages as well, 33% offered French, 14% German and 12% Spanish and 9% Italian

When asked to rate their location in terms of its population-density and geography, the majority rated it as urban (50.1%) or semi-urban (27%) with 22.8% regarding it as rural. We concluded that location (rural or urban) does not play a significant role in the decision to be an independent editor. Respondents were also asked about property ownership. 79% were owners and 21% rented, with a general increase in property ownership with age. 81.8% owned a personal vehicle of some kind.

Respondents emerged as an educated cohort, with the vast majority having a degree and a high preponderance of Masters and PhDs (Table 1 and Figure 3). There was a concentration in Arts and Languages, with significant number of graduates in English, Journalism and a cluster around Classics and Philosophy (half- and full field):

- English and/or English/American Literature – 135 (26.3%)
- Journalism – 15 (2.9%)
- Classics and/or Philosophy including Philosophy with English – 28 (5.48%)

Interestingly this high education level is not as high as that reported in the study of self-publishing authors (Baverstock and Steinitz, 2013) where the final level of education was Undergraduate degree (32%) and Postgraduate degree (44%).

Table 1. Undergraduate degrees of the cohort.

	Number	Percent
STEM <sup>1</sup>	95	18.5%
Social Sciences and Humanities	112	21.8%
Arts and Languages	240	46.7%
Business and Law	22	4.3%
not answered	45	8.8%
Total	514	100%

<sup>1</sup> Sciences, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (including *Medicine*)

Asked to indicate their current family structure, across a range of different descriptors, respondents were fairly equally split between those with children and those without. While we can speculate that having children may influence the decision to become an independent editor, because of the flexibility that such a work role can provide, it is also a role that needs concentrated periods of attention, fitting in with the need for parenting during day and allowing work during the evenings and weekends. From cross-tabulating family structures of the cohort with age-groups, it would seem that while becoming parents regularly motivated becoming an independent editor, the decision to remain one outlasted the initial rationale.

### The nature of editorial work

The vast majority of responders were self-employed (87.1%) with small numbers being either an employee or business owner, whether part of a partnership or a limited company (Table 2). This also cross tabulates with age and it would seem they are more likely to be working in a publishing company at the younger end of the age spectrum (30-39) and to have set up in business if they are older, with those in the 45-49 age group more likely to have established an independent company.

**Table 2. The distribution of age groups within each employment category (n=504, missing 10).**

Age Group							Total
		Employee in publishing house	Self-employed	Business owner-partner	Business owner	Other	
	25-29		2.5%				2.2%
	30-34	33.3%	3.9%			7.1%	4.4%
	35-39	22.2%	8.0%		20.0%	3.6%	8.2%
	40-44		11.7%	9.1%	6.7%	10.7%	11.2%
	45-49		12.6%	18.2%	26.7%	7.1%	12.6%
	50-54	22.2%	17.6%	9.1%	6.7%	21.4%	17.4%
	55-59		12.1%	36.4%	13.3%	25.0%	13.2%
	60-64	22.2%	16.2%	18.2%	26.7%	17.9%	16.8%
	65-69		11.2%			7.1%	10.2%
	70 and over		4.1%	9.1%			3.8%
All ages		1.8%	87.1%	2.2%	3.2%	5.8%	100%

When asked about when they had started working as an independent editor, or had set up their own business, the research cohort emerged as an experienced group, with the majority established in the 1990s and noughties (Fig. 4). This relates to age and family structure, but also to changes in the workforce, perhaps such roles being moved 'out of (the publishing) house' rather than maintained 'in house', and hence individuals more likely to set up as an independent editor in mid-life. 56.2% had begun as an employed editor (39.3% as self-employed editor).

Significantly, most respondents started their careers in the publishing industry as editors (67.3%). Of those who had worked in other publishing jobs before becoming an editor, 42.1% had only worked for 1 or 2 years before becoming an editor (Fig. 5). This could indicate preparatory administrative work; it was relatively routine for aspiring editors to work as a personal assistant or secretary before moving into a role as an editor. The spike of moving into editorial work after 5-6 years in the publishing industry could relate to personal commitments. Late transfers into editorial work from a background in other publishing areas are much rarer. Based on previous research (Baverstock, Bowen and Carey, 2007) and confirmed by Skillset ([www.creativeskillset.org](http://www.creativeskillset.org)), this reflects a wider tendency to move jobs and develop new types of working pattern rather than follow a single career path.

Around a third (31.9%) had been trained for an editorial role while working for a publishing house, but two thirds (68.1%) had not. This reflects the emphasis in many publishing companies on training 'on the job' rather than through formal training courses. However, 83.9% of the sample had undertaken training since then and three fifths had paid for it themselves. A fifth had secured funding for training from elsewhere. Verbatim answers included "jointly paid for" and "charitably funded training" or application for "relevant grants". This reveals determination and resourcefulness by individual editors in securing training by various routes and the value placed on training by the market.

#### **The working practice of independent editors**

The majority of respondents are working 20-40 hours per week on editorial work (Fig. 6). When asked about the number of hours they can work on editorial tasks before needing a break, the majority was 2-3 hours, with some people able to work for longer periods (Fig. 7).

When asked if they worked elsewhere many respondents indicated spending time on other paid employment (Fig. 8). Although over half the respondents did not answer this question, it does indicate that many of the research cohort juggle a range of commitments.

Fig. 17 charts hours spent on editorial work plotted on the X axis, with hours spent on other employment on the Y axis in order to find a trend/relationship between two. The trend line added shows a decreasing trend, so people who spend less hours on editorial work spend more time on other employment. However, the strength of relationship is weak – it is measured using  $R^2 = 0.087$  (around 8%). Each dot represents a respondent (or several respondents if they overlap).

When asked about whether editorial work involved working in the evenings, only 7.2% said this never happened, and only 4.8% said they never did editorial work at weekend. This could be to meet deadlines, make ends meet or more time released at weekends through shared childcare. Surprisingly we did not find any obvious relationship between family structure and working in the evenings and at weekends. For example, of those saying they sometimes worked in the evenings, the response was 56.2% from married people without children and 55.7% from married people with

children. The comparative figures for single people without and with children were 47.6% and 54.5%. From an examination of the mean working hours for each category of response to the question of whether they ever worked in the evenings or weekends ('Never', 'Sometimes', 'Often' or 'All the time') it appears that while those working fewer hours are slightly less likely to work during the evenings, there is otherwise a fairly even tendency to work outside the traditional working week across the cohort, with a slight concentration among those working most hours. It could be that those who are fitting work around their other commitments are working evenings and weekends – so it's a combination of their choice and good time management.

Not all editorial work done by the cohort were for publishing houses. Other customers included:

- working in an editorial capacity for an organisation not within traditional publishing
- working in a university
- working in a museum
- working in both an employed and self-employed capacity

There has been a general decline in publishers employing editors within the organisation with a shift to using freelance services (Clark and Phillips, 2014). However, other organisations are increasingly in need of the services of independent editors. The ability to manage and present content effectively is not something that is requirement within the publishing industry alone. Many companies, for example, need official information for a variety of audiences, schools need prospectuses and charities need information for donors. Universities are evidently employing editors to manage their information for internal and external audiences, and some are starting to publish their own resources for students. There has similarly been a rise in organisations such as museums and galleries doing their own publishing as opposed to contracting with a traditional publishing company (Baverstock, 2015). All these developments create new opportunities for independent editors.

### **Membership of a professional body**

When asked about their membership of a professional body, which had led to them being sent the questionnaire, the most significant membership was the National Association of Independent Writers and Editors (50%) with 49.8% reporting 'other'. The most common forms of engagement with a professional body are reading newsletter/bulletins (80.7%), reading their website (69.5%) and attending a training session organised by them (59.1%) (see Fig. 9). Significantly, 53% of the cohort said their form of engagement had been consistent over the past three years with 26.3% reporting increased involvement. Such associations are evidently offering support and connectedness to a largely independent workforce.

### **Motivation, satisfaction and perception of the role**

Respondents were asked about their motivation for becoming an independent editor, the options offered being based on discussions with editors as well as the general literature on the reasons for individuals becoming self-employed. Clearly not all options were anticipated as one of the most popular categories selected as 'very important' was 'other' (Fig. 10). Having encouraged responders to consider the variety of reasons for becoming independent, and to rate all listed motivating factors in their decision, respondents were then asked which was the most important factor at the time.

'Freedom to choose when to work' (22.5%) and 'lifestyle choice relating to having children' (18.5%) were the most popular reasons. Redundancy or voluntary severance also scored highly (12.9%) as a motivator.

Interestingly, 'escape from a large company' and 'fed up with internal company politics' were strong motivating factors for leaving their previous roles and embarking on an independent professional life. 'Lack of prospects in previous job' is also relatively highly listed, perhaps a reflection of the outsourcing of the editorial role within many publishing companies. There has been a rise in the recruitment of commissioning editor roles without an editorial background, and this may have motivated editors to seek to work in a different environment. Over half the responders (57.1%) considered these factors still relevant to their continued work as an independent editor, but 13.3% thought them not at all relevant and 29.6% only somewhat relevant; thus for 42.9% the factor(s) that had prompted their decision to be an independent editor were no longer of pressing relevance.

Asked about the particular source of satisfactions related to the job of being an independent editor, the most commonly quoted include the ability to fit work around other aspects of life (27.3%) and the ability to decide on their own pattern of work (23.1%). Other motivators include good client relationships, getting the job done on time and being one's own boss (Fig. 11).

Questions on how their role is more widely perceived drew interesting and largely consistent responses from the research cohort with 33.1% feeling that the role was not understood at all, and 65.9% feeling that it was partially understood. It is interesting that a relatively high percentage of those who responded thought the role of the editor was understood to some extent, and perhaps bears witness to the initial rationale for undertaking this research, that due to the rise of self-publishing the role of the editor was being more widely utilised and hence understood.

The cohort felt very strongly that they were part of a profession, the majority (66.7%) scoring the question 9 out of 10 on an agreement scale.

As might be expected, most independent editors worked on their own (70.2%) with about a quarter working occasionally as part of a team. However, they also emerged as a very collaborative profession, likely to recommend others rather than leave someone without services (Fig. 12). They are however more likely to recommend someone within their own professional area than to suggest someone in another area of publishing service (57.7% said they would not). The evidence suggests that the extent of their entrepreneurialism may be low since although there seems to be a rising market and hence greater opportunities for their services, most reported themselves as unlikely to consider establishing a wider scope of a business in future (Fig. 13). This suggests that for many independent editors, they are most likely to continue to be one-person enterprises.

## Discussion and conclusions

This research offers some baseline evidence and analysis into a group of professionals whose role has in the past has often been invisible to the general public and to some extent underestimated within the publishing industry. Independent editors suffer the ongoing irony that when their role has been well executed their involvement in the final text is often not apparent; 'The queries and suggestions, the deletions, transpositions and alterations to the manuscript. The mark-up, the cuts and fills at proof are never seen by readers. They don't know we exist or what we do.' (Horn, 1993). Or more simply, 'Effective publishing is often most evident when absent.' (Baverstock, 2011b)

Editors emerge as a group of well organised individuals who manage their time well, are confident in their skill set and operate as independent suppliers within a diverse market. In particular they are:

1. **well-educated**, although this is arguably a necessity as they are working with a well-educated client-base.
2. **work hard and for long hours.**
3. **work mainly in an urban location.** This undermines a popular perception that editors take on an independent role in part to relocate to a more rural location.
4. **are effective managers of their time.** They are adept at fitting their role around personal and other work commitments, either because they cannot work at it for too long, or because they have other obligations. Well organised and effective managers, they display an understanding of length of time work will take and are methodical in allocating their resources accordingly.
5. **precise about their own motivation;** they are inclined to be self-reflecting and consistent.
6. **generally satisfied with their role**, but a large part of the satisfaction comes from the associated management and delivery. It is significant that their satisfactions are more self-generated than client dependent, e.g. they get satisfaction from factors such as managing their workload and balancing their different commitments. Good client relationships and the nature of the work on which they are employed are part of a range of wider satisfactions.
7. **mostly work on their own.** Some reasons for this emerge (e.g. many chose editorial work as a role that could be fitted around their existing commitments) but a significant proportion of those interviewed have continued even though the initial rationale is no longer relevant. It may be speculated that the editorial process is an instinctively solitary one or that working on their own, in a role that demands high periods of acute concentration, simply suits them.
8. **are increasingly independent of the traditional publishing industry.** Most have been independent for a long time, and in general they both resource their own training, seek support from a professional organisation, and work for clients outside the traditional publishing environment.
9. **Are a mature cohort, with a strong understanding of their role.** Overall, while the personal circumstances that motivated an initial change to independent work are still relevant, others have become more important. This implies a cohort that understands its role, is clear on its competencies and its own motivation.
10. **highly professional.** They see the role of the editor as a profession and may spend their own money on resourcing their improved performance through training. The majority had been

independent long term but 83% of those who had formerly worked for a publisher had undertaken training since leaving a full time role.

11. **well connected to a professional body.** Editors place great value on being part of a professional body. This creates opportunities for these bodies to provide a wider range of services to members and to support them should they decide to broaden their role, e.g. by grouping various editorial services together, or recruiting additional colleagues with a similar offering to their own, and so extending the capacity available to clients
12. **highly collaborative.** Whilst they work independently, editors are highly collaborative and will recommend other editors whose work they know rather than leave a client without access to a service. They are also less likely to recommend publishing services other than those they provide. This suggests an awareness of these services and potential providers but a reluctance to consider either developing those services themselves or developing collaborations with other types of provide to provide a more comprehensive set of publishing services for clients.
13. **while they are accurate observers of patterns of workflow, conscientious and think about how best to deliver what is needed, they are generally not entrepreneurial or leaders of change.** It seems few are setting up in groups to work together; opportunities arising in general not being anticipated as starting points for new business ideas (although it may emerge that this is a trend among editors of particular ages). Overall the individual responses to the questionnaire suggest accurate and thoughtful observation of the current profession's role rather than an active engagement in shaping how things develop. They are clearly part of the publishing process but not seeking to direct it.

This paper has gone some way to developing a profile of independent editors but we recognise that this is only a partial analysis. It is anticipated that a second paper will consider their relationship with both the traditional industry and self-publishing, and how they juggle the two.

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