

The effect of online on the romance publishing industry

The growth, and adoption, of online technology has significantly changed the publishing industry. One of the centers of this shift is romance publishing, simultaneously one of the most valuable segments of the publishing industry, and rarely taken seriously in wider culture and literary circles (McAlister et al., 2020). Romance novels account for potentially up to half of all paperbacks sold, and 15-25% of the general fiction market (Brouillette, 2019). Despite facing a generally negative public image, often involving public derision (Lauren, 2020), and a public stereotype that homogenised romance readers into stereotypes such as the “middle-aged housewife” (McAlister et al., 2020), romance publishing has always been a leading innovator for the wider publishing industry (Brouillette, 2019). Tapper (2014, cited in McAlister et al., 2020) characterises the romance publishing industry by its “stalwart refusal to flinch away from social, cultural and demographic change”. The industry is by no means free of controversies, including accusations of racial discrimination and historically lower pay for its predominantly female authors (McAlister et al., 2020). The romance publishing industry however has grown into one of the most successful and innovative segments of the publishing industry. As technology has begun to democratise the production process of publishing, authors have used social media and other online platforms as a key part of their strategy (Ha, 2016). Dissemination of romance works is now, more than ever, made possible through a wide range of digital and online “gatekeepers” (Steiner, 2018). These disseminators, such as readers, critics, reviewers and other authors allow self-published romance authors to reach a wide, international audience (Lauren, 2020). Ultimately, online networks are helping to disrupt the traditional romance publishing industry, while also making the industry a leader of publishing innovation.

The number of romance titles published every year is hard to calculate. A growing segment of romance books published do not have ISBNs, and so are unrecorded. However, it is generally clear that the number of books produced is increasing yearly (Steiner, 2019). During a period where traditional genres, such as science fiction and crime, have faced decreasing sales and revenue, romance revenues continued to grow

(Tapper, 2014). Similarly, 2009 to 2014, romance authors median income increased, while general fiction writers median income actually shrunk (Larson, 2020). The industry is divided between traditional publishing, consisting of the just five major conglomerates (Steiner, 2019), self-publishing where the authors publish directly to eBook distribution services such as Apple iBooks and Amazon (Steiner, 2019) or hybrid publishing, where traditionally published authors have chosen to also self-publish at the same time (Larson, 2020). Amazon is perhaps the largest player in the digital publishing industry, with its popular Kindle eReaders, its online marketplace, and through its subsidiaries GoodReads (book reviews), Audible (audio books) and AbeBooks (secondbooks). Subsidiaries Moibipocket and BookSurge were purchased and then merged into Amazon for their print-on-demand services, and the .mobi eBook format (Steiner, 2019). As a result of Amazon's dominant market position, self-published authors are particularly reliant on Amazon's platform, even as they are independent from traditional publishing conglomerates (Steiner, 2019).

The 1970s saw the growth of the romance publishing industry into what is the form most familiar to us today. It became a bestselling industry, driven by new advances in binding and printing technology. These allowed romance to produce books cheaply and made them an affordable product, available at grocery stores, newsagencies and pharmacies (Larson, 2020). The role of Vivian Stephens, who as Editor in Chief of Candlelight Books, a Dell Books imprint, was instrumental in the modernisation of romance publishing must be credited. The modernised woman of the romance novel of the 1970s was, combined with the ability to produce hundreds of thousands of novels quick and cheap, instrumental in changing in the industry (Swartz, 2020). This attitude of innovation was critical to the way the industry has grown till today. Though it had its moments of pause - Stephens was ousted from the industry in 1984 (Swartz, 2020) - the romance industry would not stop innovating, going on to be one of the earliest adopters of eBooks and reading apps, led by Harlequin Books (Tapper, 2014). Through its own community website, Harlequin.com, the company began to use the online communities that formed around its books as a method of research. The publishing industry adopted reader surveys, focus groups, and online communities quickly, using them to understand

what their readers wanted, perhaps in a more detailed way than any other segment of the publishing industry (Tapper, 2014).

The present role of both social media communities and online networks in the romance publishing industry is an outgrowth of this history. The growth of the major tech conglomerates, most especially Apple, Amazon and Google, has changed how publishing is done. It is cheaper than ever to publish a novel, but it is also harder than ever to reach your readers. Self-publishers and small publishers are “reliant on the large media companies as agents of transfer” (Steiner, 2018). A new network of gatekeepers and promoters has had to take up the slack, from the bookseller to the critic. McAlister et al. (2020) highlights how communities have had to develop around romance publishing to enable authors to succeed, often connected by the internet. These groups, whether they gather by Facebook, Twitter, or email, are both support groups and a way to share skills, creating a network of participants in the publishing process (McAlister et al., 2020) It is this process that allows self-published authors, especially those from marginalized groups, to reach their reader and their editors, cover designers, and community as a whole. A romance novel published in one country is now available globally, a fact that is sometimes connecting a local community more strongly, or creating a community from across the world (Lauren, 2020).

As mentioned earlier, romance readers fill face stigma. They may be derided for reading romance, or characterised in popular media as unintelligent. As a result of this stigma, romance readers are often only able to speak to other readers about their interest and favourite authors. According to Lauren (2020, “the shame surrounding romance forces readers to rely on others.” Social media communities have given readers a place to talk to each other, recommend romance books to each other, and become the gatekeepers and disseminators of a genre (Steiner, 2018). Many readers of romance make separate Goodreads and Facebook accounts in order to discuss romance, afraid that family and friends would frown on their choice of reading material (Lauren, 2020). Romance is, afterall, “the most popular, least respected literary genre” (Regis, 2003, cited in Tapper, 2014). However, readers are also more diverse than ever, thanks to digital technology. Romance readers now draw from a worldwide audience (Lauren, 2020), able to

appreciate and disseminate these books via online networks and social media, with greater freedom than ever before. The growth of the romance reader into a more diverse audience is driving the innovation necessary for the industry to continue to grow.

According to Jennifer Enderlin of St Martin's Press (2014, cited in Tapper, 2014) "Reading used to be solitary . . . now you read a book, you go to the website, you chat with the author, you chat with your friends". Romance authors have begun to harness this online ecosystem to engage with their readers or fans, and create close, intimate (McAlister, et al., 2020) social media communities around their chosen reading material. Though this phenomenon is not exclusive to romance readers and publishing, the general stigma that reading romance should be a "dirty little secret" (Larson, 2020) has given romance readers an incentive to seek out other people online that share their interest. Technological developments allow readers to avoid some of the stigma previously associated with romance reading, and interact on social media communities either anonymous or without much risk of their friends and family knowing about it. Similarly, eReaders allow them to read a romance book without possibility of someone accidentally seeing the cover (Greenfeld-Benovitz, 2012). But romance authors need to be able to reach these readers, empowered as they are by technology to read wherever and whenever in relative anonymity. The romance publishing industry has always taken to digital platforms, such as Harlequin.com, mentioned earlier. Goodreads is a significant player in the online reading world (Steiner, 2018), but it serves most of all as a place to read reviews and assess a book before purchasing or reading. Perhaps most successfully for their community building, the romance publishing industry has used Facebook, where many romance authors cultivate their relationships with readers (Ha, 2016).

According to McAlister et al., (2020) "one of the key ways in which romance fiction has innovated in the twenty-first century has been in self-publishing." With fan communities behind them, authors have worked to counter the "polarized market" (Steiner, 2018) that is dominated by trade publishings connections to critics, bookstores and marketing outlets. Instead, online social media communities are the marketing force and the book selling platforms of self-published authors. Larson (2020) establishes that romance authors have become more financially secure than writers in any other genre over the last

decade. This ability to explore new genres and innovate with what they write. Authors are able to create books that wouldn't have received a New York publishing house contract because they can sell straight to the reader (Ha, 2016). The "gatekeepers and promoters" (Steiner, 2018) are now the readers themselves, whether engaging directly in social media communities or via review sites and blogs. In the case of #RomanceClass, a Filipino-based romance writing community, the readers are also participants in the production process themselves. Whether as editors, authors, beta-readers or cover designers, the readers have become a "professionalised community" who produce the books just as much as they read them (McAlister et al., 2020). This harnessing of online spaces has seriously disrupted the industry, leaving self-publishing platforms such as Amazon squaring off with the major New York publishing conglomerates (Steiner, 2018).

The romance publishing industry has always adopted innovation, and continues to do so today, through the use of online networks and social media communities. Ultimately, self-published authors are continuing the tradition started when romance publishers were some of the first to adopt ebooks, eReaders and online fan communities (Tapper, 2014). Today, romance authors continue to earn more on average than any other genre's authors (Larson, 2020), partially thanks to the growth of self-publishing and hybrid publishing. From the early Harlequin fan communities, to massive Facebook fanbases today (Ha, 2016), romance authors are using online platforms to change the game and move the process of dissemination from traditional methods to an online platform. Amazon, Apple and Google have become major players in the publishing industry (Steiner, 2018), as this trend continues to grow. Online communities have, in many places, become integral to the production of romance novels (McAlister et al., 2020). Romance has a "vanguard status" (Brouillette, 2019) among publishing, for its continued pioneering use of digital technologies, and while this has begun to place Amazon and its competitors at odds with the New York publishing conglomerates (Steiner, 2018), it has also helped romance authors to seek and reach success (Ha, 2016; Larson, 2020). The ability of romance publishing to create communities around their work continues the long tradition of romance authors having a close relationship with their fans, using new technology to broaden the scope of that audience and reduce the restraints placed on it by gatekeepers

and physical distance alike (Tapper, 2014). Romance publishing is a key innovator in the use of social media and online networks, among all forms of genre publishing.

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