The Legacy of the Vanity Press and Digital Transitions

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Introduction

As its name suggests, “vanity publishing” did not acquire a stellar reputation in the twentieth century. Although some vanity publishers have served authors with niche audiences, others ran such notorious scams that they helped stigmatize the business of author-subsidized books. But fraud was only one reason for the stigma against vanity publishers. They were also criticized for producing low-quality books and failing to act as gatekeepers. By the late twentieth century, the stigma had received limited attention in scholarly literature, but among professional authors, publishers, and librarians, avoiding vanity presses was mostly common sense.[1] Aspiring authors were warned that publishing with a vanity press could be a career-killer, and commentary in articles and trade journals suggested publishers and librarians were exasperated with the quality of the books that rolled from vanity presses and the treatment of authors who used them.[2]

The precise definition of vanity publishing has been slippery. Bill Henderson wrote in 1983 that vanity publishers will “publish anything for which an author will pay, usually at a loss for the author and a nice profit for the publisher.”[3] This definition, however, sits squarely in the age of print, and different vanity publishers have worked across a spectrum of honest and dishonest behavior. Moreover despite the educational efforts of publishing industry watchdogs, the term vanity publishing has been used haphazardly, conflated with self-publishing and/or other kinds of author-subsidized publishing. The term is also slippery because vanity publishers themselves have run scams using alternate terms like “joint venture” publishing.[4] It is this slipperiness that has allowed the term to be deployed widely to describe digital changes to publishing in the twenty-first century.

The depth of the scorn against books published by vanity presses seemingly exceeds the nuisance they pose to librarians, publishers, and readers. It suggests something more significant about the business of authorship and publishing in the late age of print. In this article, I show that a term that once defined a select group of twentieth-century publishers with questionable ethics continues to play an important role in debates about digital publishing. While predatory vanity presses still
exist, the term *vanity publishing* has also been used more capaciously, functioning as a proxy for anxieties about the fate of books and authorship, or as a way to distinguish traditionally published books in the midst of the vast output of digital technologies. This has especially been the case in royalty publishing, where money almost always flows from the publisher to the author, and the author does not subsidize the production of his or her own book. Across the twentieth-century, vanity scams and their victimized authors served as evidence that the royalty system should be the dominant model, and despite the continual presence of diverse arrangements of capital used to produce books, it became mostly taboo for authors to invest in publication and for publishers to charge authors for services. As digital technologies have fostered emerging models of publishing that do not necessarily operate on this traditional twentieth-century economic arrangement, the vanity stigma has been extrapolated from its position as the nefarious other to the royalty system and carried into debates about the legitimacy of new models of publishing. A fuller picture of what helped solidify a dominant model of authorship and publishing, then, will produce a more precise understanding of how the assumptions embedded in print publishing continue to encroach on, and shape, the emergence of twenty-first-century digital models.

The discourse that emerged from commentary on major vanity press scams suggests the stigma has at least five important dimensions: a perceived lack of gatekeeping that generates anxieties about too many books and their quality, publisher fraud, the impropriety of buying authorship and the commercialization of books that comes with it, anxieties from established authors about issues of amateurism, and exploitation of the dream of authorship. The events recounted in this article to elucidate these dimensions, some of the most significant events in vanity publishing’s history, show that these dimensions tend to overlap, and different connotations appear in different configurations at different times. My purpose is not to argue there is a monolithic iteration of the stigma but rather to discuss how the term has been deployed and its capaciousness as a signifier. After tracking important events in vanity publishing’s twentieth-century history, I offer a preliminary examination of how the term has been deployed in some contemporary publishing contexts, including nontraditional book publishing. I’ve worked to fill out the dimensions of the vanity press and its stigma by examining discourse about it that has appeared in publishing industry memoirs, advice manuals for authors, information published by authors’ societies, court-case files, scattered anecdotes in library and book trade journals, and popular press articles on vanity publishing from the *New York Times* and *Publisher’s Weekly*. My analysis is mostly grounded in the United States but I draw in minor ways from events in England.

The Multiple Dimensions of the Vanity Stigma

Commission Publishing: Resistance and Early Concerns

Vanity has been a religiously inflected anxiety of Western authorship through most of its history—as have the continuously sour relationships among authors and printers/publishers. But the immediate progenitors of twentieth-century vanity publishers were nineteenth-century commission publishers, some of whom were disreputable enough that they sparked organized resistance in nascent authors’ guilds. The resistance shows that author-subsidized books were common and perhaps the best economic arrangement for the author at times, but it also shows that the work of commission publishers was acquiring a reputation that held some of the connotations that would become part of the vanity stigma.

Contemporaries were concerned that the quality of some author-subsidized books would debase authorship and that commission publishers were exploiting would-be authors who wanted to see
their writing in print. In 1890, the English novelist Walter Besant helped document the abuses of commission publishers in the *Author*, a periodical meant to spread relevant news of the nascent Society of Authors. The (still extant) society formed to protect the economic interests of writers, and Besant received much credit for helping the society launch and for advancing authorship as a profession. [6][en6] In an editorial, Besant took issue with authors who paid for publication using commission publishing, a model where the author shouldered the financial risk for producing a book and the publisher helped him or her market it, earning commission on sales. Besant was concerned that a flood of would-be authors would continue to use commission publishing with little knowledge of the industry and little evidence their book would sell. In an argument seemingly haunted by anxieties over mass literacy, and one that will appear familiar to those who have read laments about amateurs publishing in digital spaces today, he worried that the flood of work would irritate reviewers and degrade the status of the “noble art of fiction.” “Literary vanity is, of course, at the bottom of this folly,” Besant wrote, “All the writer asks for is to be in print, only to be printed; if he can obtain this, as he always can on such terms, he will pay anything and sign anything.” [7][en7]

From its inception, the Society of Authors took an antagonistic stance toward publishers. [8][en8] Although the flood of authorial output concerned him, Besant had criticism just as harsh for unscrupulous commission publishers, who often manipulated their accounts to exploit authors, an enterprise that contributed to continuing distrust between authors and publishers. [9][en9] Despite his criticism, commission publishing was exceedingly popular, and Besant himself used commission publishing for a number of his own novels. In 1887, the Society of Authors had argued that if the publisher were honest, it could be the most profitable system for the author. [10][en10] By the end of the century, though, Besant concluded that commission publishing was irredeemably flawed by conflicts of interest that resulted in the abuse of aspiring authors. [11][en11]

Commission publishing was not as popular in the United States, where the royalty system emerged earlier than in England. Yet despite the ascent of both the royalty system and publishers as risk-taking entrepreneurs who were responsible for investing in the production and distribution of books, [12][en12] it was still quite common in the nineteenth century for authors to subsidize the production of everything from local history to memoirs to fiction. [13][en13] In his study of Ticknor and Fields, one of America’s most prestigious nineteenth-century publishing houses, Michael Winship found that the house would regularly print books at the author’s expense, and it used multiple arrangements of capital investment to reduce its own risk and build its list. [14][en14] As its reputation for publishing quality books surged, and as more authors began sending unsolicited manuscripts to the house, Ticknor and Fields responded to authors with letters that offered to publish the manuscript for a fee on the commission model. [15][en15]

John and George Putnam documented the commission model in America in their *Authors and Publishers: A Manual of Suggestions for Beginners in Literature*. In the 1897 edition, the book noted that royalty payments had by then become the most common arrangement between authors and publishers, but it also described the kind of books for which author subsidy was popular. There is no hint, at least in this text, that reputable publishers were stigmatized for publishing author-subsidized books as they would be in the twentieth century. For example, the manual suggested that subsidy publishing was an appropriate method for books that possessed scientific or literary value, or books that would boost the status of the imprint but would not yield a return on the investment. It also noted author subsidy was a frequent expectation for poets and first-time authors with no market value assigned to their name. [16][en16]
The precise term *vanity press* seems to have emerged in the 1920s and 1930s, although it was probably in circulation before then. In 1933, *Time* reported on some especially dubious vanity presses that published poetry at the expense of authors, one of which was established in 1910. [17] It also reported the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) refused to take action against any of the presses because they technically adhered to their vaguely written contracts. [18] In 1937 the *New Yorker* ran a profile of a vanity publisher, Henry Harrison, who embraced the label but insisted that it “should not be approached with a nasty viewpoint,” suggesting that Harrison had already experienced contempt aimed at his trade. [19] Harrison began as a vanity publisher after subsidizing his own first book, which the *Salt Lake City Telegram* reviewed as “the worst book ever published.” [20] The author of the *New Yorker* article about Harrison took a tone toward him of cheerful yet sneering skepticism. The writer was either incredulous that anyone would pay to have his work published by Harrison, or she/he knew vanity presses were amassing a reputation for deception. [21] Harrison’s transition from self-subsidized author to vanity publisher recurred as a theme in the twentieth century, and in the case of Carlo M. Flumiani, an author turned vanity publisher, things did get nasty.

**Fraud in Book Culture: C. M. Flumiani**

Commission publishers earned reputations for deceptive dealings, but the case of Flumiani was the first high-profile court case involving a vanity press in America. It was covered extensively in the *New York Times* and the facts of the case were often repeated in popular press articles about vanity presses in the decades that followed. Not every vanity operation engaged in fraud, but Flumiani was not the only one to find himself in court. By the end of the twentieth century two of the biggest vanity presses—Edward Uhlan’s Exposition Press, as well as Vantage Press—would both find themselves defending their practices as fraud continued to be associated with vanity presses.

Flumiani scammed writers out of $500,000 with an operation that ended in a high-profile conviction that sparked intense publicity of the corrupt machinations of his vanity press. Flumiani was an Italian immigrant who self-reportedly held a PhD in economics from the University of Milan. He was arraigned in federal court on suspicion of mail fraud in March 1941, charged with obtaining more than $500,000 from writers and overcharging them 500 percent when he printed their works. [22] The indictment claimed that he had begun entering into publishing relationships with prospective authors under fraudulent pretenses as early as 1935. Working under at least four aliases and with names of eight different publishing imprints, Flumiani returned editorial reports without “regard for the truth,” which induced authors to enter into publishing and printing relationships. The extant court papers document that Flumiani had interacted with close to 150,000 prospective authors and writers, planning or executing at least 2,000 publications and 2,525 author contracts. [23]

Flumiani solicited manuscripts from his agency and took no action on them for a month. [24] The indictment said he then sent rejection letters on letterhead from one of four different imprints with carefully chosen names to evoke reputable publisher—for example, American Universities Press or the Associated Publishers of North America. [25] The letters indicated the rejected manuscript had been forwarded to a different publisher for consideration, which was merely one of Flumiani’s other imprints. After rejecting manuscripts from multiple imprints, Flumiani finally sent an acceptance letter from Fortuny Publishers to what was presumably a despondent author. Fortuny’s letterhead claimed there was “a Fortune to Gain in Each Fortuny Book,” if only the author would agree to subsidize the cost of production. [26]
During his trial, Flumiani testified that his road into vanity publishing began in the early 1930s with his Life Research Institute and Mental Advancement Society, where he attempted to sell memberships and help people learn “the new science of life,” “psycho-synthesis.” It was constant rejection of his manuscript, *An Introduction to Life*, from publishers that provoked him to begin a publishing company to publish his own manuscript. 

Irene Watson testified that she began working as the editor-in-chief at Fortuny’s after graduating from high school. She worked with forty other high school students to correspond with would-be authors, selecting from 146 stock paragraphs to craft response letters to manuscript queries. *Time* reported that the paragraphs were crafted to meet “every conceivable contingency” and included the “season paragraph” that told the author the time “was ripe to bursting for his book to appear,” and the “fighting paragraph,” which reassured the author that his or her work was worthy of publication. 

*Time* reported the “action paragraph” in detail: “We believe this book is an original. It reveals an individual mind. It possesses characteristics of an unusual contribution to present literature. . . . Its style is of exquisite quality.”

The defrauded writers included housewives, teachers, clergyman, and lawyers; witnesses included a pastor who paid for the publication of a fifty-six-page book of maxims and, because of his knowledge of Confucian aphorisms, became one of the government’s star witnesses. The jury found Flumiani guilty after less than an hour of deliberation and Judge Simon F. Rifkind imposed an eighteen-month prison sentence and a $2,500 fine. Flumiani apparently resurrected his life as an author and publisher in flamboyant fashion in the decades that followed his publishing debacle. Database searches return books he authored in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s under the imprints of the Institute for Economic and Political World Strategic Studies, the Library of Wall Street, and the American Classical College Press.

Perhaps the most notorious of vanity publishers, Flumiani deftly exploited the writer’s aspiration for publication and the psychological devastation that comes with a publisher’s rejection. In 1958 Howard Sullivan claimed that although Flumiani had been convicted for mail fraud for his shenanigans, he had also exposed a lucrative and robust market for vanity publishing that would flourish after World War II—fertile ground to exploit the aspirations of would-be authors to be sure, but also a place for amateur writers to have their work realized in book form.

By the end of World War II, however, the royalty system was so dominant few people other than subsidy press owners were advocating publishing models that would require an author’s own capital investment. Flumiani’s activities helped further crystallize an expectation (that had been in place) that the publisher foots the bill for production and marketing, especially in trade publishing—an expectation that, as we will see, persists deeply into debates about digital publishing.

## Buying and Selling Authorship and Publication

Beyond the legacy of outright fraud, vanity presses also enable people to buy authorship and publication, something that has vexed professional authors and trade publishers working in the royalty model. Edward Uhlan’s work demonstrates why this is problematic. Because he owned a vanity/subsidy press and wrote a sustained defense of it in a memoir, Edward Uhlan became one of the only vocal proponents of author-subsidized publishing in post–World War II America. The first vanity press member admitted to the Association of American Publishers, Uhlan ran Exposition Press and insisted on calling it subsidy publishing because he considered himself honest and he thought there was a genuine need for the work he did—though if his *New York Times* obituary was any indication, he was termed a vanity publisher until the end, an indication of how slippery publishing terms can be. Uhlan’s self-published memoir is a critique of the publishing
industry, an “uncensored” story of publishing that argues earnestly for the importance of reputable
time/subsidy models. Uhlan said that he dealt with the 99 percent of books that were rejected by
publishers, although he professed to have standards and claimed to have rejected as many
books as he had published. His memoir betrays an utter fascination (and respect) for how
much writing the general population produces, how much “music they had in their souls,” even if it
has sometimes sounded to him like “the death rattle of an alley cat being skinned alive.”

Uhlan’s memoir shows a commitment to the business of well-designed books, not their sanctity. He
expresses confusion about why his work was so disparaged when, as he claimed citing an article in
Time, all major publishing houses at that time routinely produced subsidized books. Uhlan clearly resented the legacy Flumiani helped leave him and the corruption in the vanity-publishing
business. His lowly place in publishing world seemingly compelled him to be provocative, and he
stated in interviews that: “Most people can’t tell the difference between a vanity book and a trade
book anyway. A book is a book.” He fleshed this out in his memoir, recounting stories of
people he had helped achieve professional advancement simply because they had a printed book to
show people. What this position suggests is that Uhlan and vanity publishers traded on the gravity
of the book’s materiality—not necessarily the ideas inside it—to help writers purchase authorship
in the service of some other goal. In this model, the book can become an adjunct to some service
offered, a business card with its value in its superficial branding capacity and not in its content.

Professional authors have long complained about this dimension of the stigma: some have believed
the practice of selling authorship and publication intrinsic to Uhlan’s profession presumably
devalues the status they have worked to accomplish. Being published and having a book can be
constitutive of an author’s identity, an indication the quality of their writing has reached the point
where someone is willing to invest time and money in their work. From the professional author’s
perspective, subsidy publishing turns a vocation’s status into a purchasable market good—the very
same imagined market many authors already have an antagonistic relation to. Vanity authors
seemingly purchase a goal that torments professional writers, a goal achieved through delayed
gratification. Of course published authors have been quick to point out that vanity authors are not
authors, and they often point to the failure of vanity books to achieve any sort of widespread
distribution as evidence of this. But Uhlan’s provocative statement that “a book is a book” remains
capable of inducing a lingering suspicion: that the difference between author and vanity author is
only meaningful insofar as the audience can discern it through judgment of the text or through
recognition that a book carries a respectable publisher’s imprint. Uhlan was convinced that in
many localized settings the audience could/would not make this judgment, or that in other
settings, the audience would value the content of the niche books he produced regardless of
whether they had been vetted.

The suspicion that unvetted book publication can be a raw commodity to be sold and that
audiences might not bother to discern a book’s quality clashes with the sensibilities of many
professional royalty publishers, too. The extent to which people believe “a book is a book” is also
the extent to which the value editors add to manuscript development in the royalty model remains
unrecognized. A royalty publisher’s investment in a book has not only represented the confidence
he or she could recoup his or her investment, but in many cases that the quality of the book was
sufficient to bring to the public. At times, publishers have also produced books even though a solid
return on investment was unlikely simply as a commitment to knowledge. But the care and
attention publishers take with quality control, and the internal development of ideas, means little
as long as the audience sees the book’s material object as more important than the content inside.
From the perspective of publishers who perceive themselves as careful curators of writing that
comes to the public, vanity presses have circumvented processes used to produce credible information, and there is often suspicion that they do not hold themselves to the same standards of taste and propriety. Buying authorship, however tenuous an identity that might be for vanity authors, also creates the possibility of writers paying to publish fringe texts. If the book has earned its reputation by materializing the West’s most important knowledge and information (a reputation perhaps deserved and perhaps not), then such fringe elements represent a threat to the book as the highest standard of knowledge.

When he assumes the book will circulate as a showpiece or resume line rather than a text that is carefully read, Uhlan abuses what the book’s material package ideally signifies. Publishers who have objected to vanity presses have sometimes done so on the grounds that vanity operations exploit the reverence for the book that they have worked to nurture—a reverence difficult to sustain especially because the book’s status as mass commodity means there have always been professionally produced books of uneven quality. From the perspective of publishers, vanity arrangements parasitically profit from, and destroy, the book’s prestige. Vanity presses sell the media form that represents the very authority that a publisher’s investment means to bestow, and their customers purchase the status of books and (at least allegedly) further devalue them by publishing “bad” writing, or “semiliterate garbage,” according to one commentator.

To be clear, leveraging the book’s materiality, as Uhlan thought his authors were able to do, only went so far. Uhlan’s press and other large vanity presses created marginal brands that as we will see were routinely ignored by reviewers and librarians. But this kind of stark commodification of authorship and publishing Uhlan seemingly delighted in has long provoked bitter laments that are a ubiquitous part of discourse on subsidized presses, stretching back to at least nineteenth-century commission arrangements. Moreover, vanity presses were in contact with fringe writers. In his bid to be a respectable publisher, Uhlan refused to publish the content of those he referred to as “perverts, crackpots and propagandists,” but he also noted his business had been classified with the vanity presses that would publish such content. These fringe authors and their reported zeal have been a crucial trope that helps justify disdain for vanity presses. Fringe authors circulate in discourse as delusional self-evangelists, and their work provides (occasionally comedic) anecdotal fodder that legitimizes contempt for presses willing to produce such books at the author’s expense.

Vanity Authors and the Problems of Amateurism and Commercialism

Even though Uhlan credited Flumiani for the stigma against subsidy publishing, it was not just Flumiani’s court case but also the dominance of the royalty system and the professionalization of authorship that made conditions fertile for the stigma’s intensity across the twentieth century. These processes of professionalization came with attitudes toward commercialism that contributed to the devaluation of author-subsidized books published with vanity presses. In the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century America, the viability of professional authorship grew in jerky fits and starts along with the protracted modernization of the book industry. This was a nuanced process that resists any monolithic narrative, but dominant trends included new systems of production and distribution, the implementation of best-seller lists, the rise of the literary agent, the growth of public libraries and professionally curated collections, and literary canon formation. The maturation of the book industry included very few developments that would find value in the writing of the amateur, local, or self-publishing author, the kind of writers
most likely to use vanity presses. Moreover as Ann Fabian has noted, amateur authors have long contended with the tendency of professionalizing authors to shore up their status through the systematic devaluation of amateur work. [42]

The continued expansion of professional authorship and publishing explains why, as the stigma developed across the course of the twentieth century, it was not simply trained on the presses that committed outright fraud, but also on the authors who used them. Amateur authors not only contended with a problematic status vis-à-vis professional authors, but were also tainted because they had to engage in commercial activities if they tried to distribute their books. Laura Miller’s work shows how the desire of royalty publishers to produce high-quality texts fostered a culture resistant to the commercialism that grew with the twentieth-century book industry. [43]

But the royalty system was also well suited to this resistance. It enabled publishers and agents to partially insulate professional authors from commercial activity, an arrangement that helped preserve the idea of the moral author detached from the market.

The figure of the professional author who could eschew the business aspects of books to work on his or her craft (limited in number though they were) produced an irony that became layered into the stigma against vanity authors: as an “other” to professional authors, vanity authors could be seen as unprofessional hacks with unrefined texts that were not commercially viable enough to attract a publisher; on the other hand their lack of access to professional publishers meant they could be disparaged for having to engage in commercial activities. In the discourse of this vision, vanity authors violated propriety for not meeting high writing standards, and they violated propriety for engaging in workaday business aspects without the insulation the royalty system afforded some professional authors. Taken together, these issues created the eye-rolling skepticism that surfaced in twentieth-century popular press aimed at authors who paid for publication. That many of them became victims of bona fide scam artists made them all the more pitiable (or worthy of contempt), sometimes seen as naïve dreamers who didn’t know enough about publishing to avoid being fleeced. [44]

Exploiting the Dream of Authorship

This (alleged) naïveté of the aspiring author forms the basis for the final dimension of the legacy I discuss; it has played an important role in how vanity publishing has been conceptualized and why it generates such anathema. Going back to Besant, the aspiring and earnest author is a figure who appears in discourse as exploitable because he or she knows little about publishing and will do anything to get his or her book in print. That publishing is complex, its nuances or operations rarely taught in formal education, probably lends an element of truth to the figure as publishing scams continue to this day despite industry watchdogs and educational materials; however, the exploitable-aspiring author takes on lynchpin importance in discourse about the vanity press.

Unlike the problem of bald fraud, some vanity publishers have skirted a fine line when advertising their services. The language they use doesn’t simply offer book publishing for sale—it can also contain ambiguities about services offered and how successful their authors’ work might be once printed. In Uhlan’s 1960s case, the Federal Trade Commission issued a cease and desist letter to him based on language in his advertisements, a scuffle that led to a court case that eventually barred vanity presses from using the term “royalty” when they worked with authors. According to Jonathan Kirsch, because Exposition Press required authors to pay the cost of production for their book, the FTC took issue with their advertisements that claimed authors would receive 40 percent royalties on sales of their book. The author had paid for the cost of production, and the FTC called
Uhlan’s use of *royalty* misleading, a position ultimately held by the courts. [45][eN45]

In Uhlan’s court case, the majority opinion claimed that of Uhlan’s authors, “less than 10% of its authors recoup their investments and derive actual profit from their writing.” [46][eN46] That opinion seeped into the publishing industry and the number was used to dismiss the value of subsidy publishing, further evidence that royalty publishing was better suited to the goal of widespread distribution. If professional publishers had long seen vanity presses as the nefarious other to the royalty system, the FTC’s action helped codify that distinction in law. Beyond publicizing the sales numbers of vanity books, newspaper articles from the 1970s and 1980s that focused on Exposition and Vantage Presses showed that the stigma of vanity publishing was operating in two ways. The articles did hint at a glimmer of respectability for vanity presses because academics were using them, but they concluded that book reviewers would routinely throw out vanity books without looking inside them based solely on the imprint, and that libraries and bookstores would mostly ignore them as well. [47][eN47]

Uhlan’s FTC case shows that if vanity publishers have violated propriety by selling authorship or engaging in fraud, the ambiguous language they have used to market their services is objected to vehemently as it sells the dream to aspiring authors whose subjectivity is cast by opponents of vanity presses as highly vulnerable, exploitable, and naïve. This was partially noted by the courts in Uhlan’s case, where it was argued the production of a manuscript did not serve as evidence that writers had any knowledge of publishing, and, at any rate, the test of whether language was deceptive took into account the least capable readers and not the best. [48][eN48]

The exploitable author’s source of vulnerability comes from what is cast as an extreme desire of would-be authors to see work published, something Besant did when he reported that many authors would “pay anything” just to see their work in print. [49][eN49] This is an important point, as the extreme desire for publication helps manufacture the prestige of authorship. In other words, that so many writers seem desperate to be published helps distinguish the status of those who have realized the achievement. In discussions of vanity fraud, this exploitable subject also tends to be cast as vulnerable because of the highly intense and personal relationship an author can develop with his or her work and because he or she is overestimating the benefits that come from publication.

The intensely personal relationship to writing and the misleading language of vanity-press advertisements contributed to a class-action lawsuit against Vantage Press in 1977 that dragged on for decades. Frank Stellema initiated the suit against Vantage after paying them $6,000 to publish a memoir he wrote after his son died. On behalf of 3,000 plaintiffs, the lawyers built a case that Vantage wasn’t necessarily in breach of the very nebulous contract they had offered the writers, but rather that by calling themselves a publisher they had committed common-law fraud because their lackluster attempts at book promotion and distribution meant that they were not actually a publisher according to any “objective definition.” [50][eN50] The authors eventually won the suit after it dragged on for more than two decades—a victory that Kirsch estimated might make vanity presses reassess the strength of the language they use in promotional materials. [51][eN51]

Situations such as Stellema’s suggest the vulnerable writer isn’t as much a complete fiction as he or she is an intensifier of the emotions that swirl around vanity cases. Stellema had written a deeply personal memoir, a genre commonly printed by vanity presses. The aspiring author’s intimate relationship on display in the memoir contributes to his apparent exploitability. When this relationship between author and manuscript becomes tangled with vanity publishers willing to
profit from the situation, it produces a legally actionable situation to be sure, but it also makes
selling the dream of authorship seem particularly cruel, especially when companies dangle unfilled
promises of promotion to authors intent on sharing personal experiences.

**Sketching Implications for Digital Publishing**

Bill Henderson’s 1983 article on the small press shows how, in the age of print, he still felt
relatively confident differentiating self-publishing and small presses from vanity presses, which he
defined as outfits that would publish any book for a fee while dangling dubious promises of reviews
and advertisements. Although still defined in diverse ways, the term appears in scattered
comments from book professionals in the 1970s, ‘80s, and ‘90s that the term mostly signified a
book carrying the imprint of a known vanity publisher, which disqualified it from consideration at
book-review venues and prevented it from entering most library collections and bookstores.

Yet even though print professionals like librarians and booksellers could often determine
whether a book was from a vanity press and subsequently ignore it, its nasty history helped
generate its own significance. Its specter became semiotically loaded and dirty: it signified the
absence of a formal publisher, and it was shot through with a history of fraud, exploitation, and
impropriety. The diverse dimensions of the vanity stigma and the term’s derogatory power meant
that it was relatively easy to appropriate and use it to describe the rapid rise of new publishing
technologies when they began circumventing twentieth-century professional publishing
infrastructures. If an element of an electronically published text shared but a single dimension of
the vanity stigma, then that stigma could be deployed to frame—and cast suspicion upon—the
output of the new technology. This has included the output of the World Wide Web, Print-
on-Demand (POD), and new kinds of self-publishing.

One obvious example of this appropriation came when print stakeholders began comparing the
World Wide Web to vanity presses in the late 1990s. Unlike vanity presses, the web did not charge
participants exorbitant rates to publish a message, but its ease of access and unfiltered nature
induced people to create analogies between nonvetted vanity-press books and nonvetted
information published to the web. The suspiciousness aimed at information published to the web
generated editorials that the Internet was the “global village’s vanity press,” and that the
“the Net—and especially the Web—has the potential to become the world’s largest vanity press.”

These formulations ricocheted around as information literacy experts in academics and
beyond worked to discern the conditions under which the web could provide credible information.
The metaphorical association of the vanity press with new web technologies presumably helped
cast distrust (some of it justified) on information on the web, distrust that recruited the derogatory
nature of the term to presumably function as a conservative force to retain print’s prestige as the
standard of information.

**Nontraditional Book Publishing**

Perhaps more extensively than information published to the web, vanity has been used to frame
debates about nontraditional book publishing. In the 1980s, 1990s, and the 2000s, we experienced
the emergence of desktop publishing, POD, the Internet, and e-readers. These technologies
afforded authors with the opportunity to produce books and reach readers directly and cheaply
through various distribution systems without the mediation of an agent or publisher, affordances
that have led to the current explosion of nontraditional book publishing. Bradley et al. define
nontraditional publishing as books that have been published through methods other than a
publisher securing a manuscript through a royalty arrangement, which includes royalty-free
content and the expanding phenomena of self-publishing. [56]

The economics of digital-publishing technologies have created confusion over whether the output of self-publishers constitutes vanity publishing. This is especially the case with POD, a technology quickly associated with vanity publishing after its emergence, [57] but one whose affordances created the possibility of altering the traditionally expensive arrangements between vanity publisher/author. POD made it possible to print extremely small runs of books economically. It was quickly used for self-publishing, and a number of companies emerged offering printing services to writers wishing to produce manuscripts they had written. [58] These companies’ products at times have something in common with the products from twentieth-century vanity publishing, as many POD books have not been vetted—or professionally edited—before being printed. Many companies have also offered à la carte editorial, marketing, and distribution services, referring to themselves as aids to self-publishing to avoid the vanity label. Some of these companies have avoided accusations they were exploiting aspiring authors by allowing writers to publish for free, taking a commission on each e-book sold or simply charging POD printing fees. This eliminates the author’s need to invest intense capital in publication he or she may never earn back, the source of an objection often made against vanity publishers. Other companies have used POD technology to continue dubious—and aggressive—practices that closely resemble those of the shadiest twentieth-century vanity presses. So although the line between self-publishing and vanity publishing has never been completely clear, the distinction has become more complex with the proliferation of new publishing and distribution services.

Author services companies exist because self-publishing’s rapid growth has helped uncover legions of aspiring authors willing to invest in their own manuscripts. The scramble to earn money from self-publishers has sparked debates over whether and how publishers should ever profit from the output of aspiring authors. The question of exactly what constitutes a vanity press, how to negotiate its legacy, and vanity’s relationship to self-publishing has been at the core of debates over this activity. In November 2009, for example, the romance-publishing giant Harlequin announced a new venture called Harlequin Horizons. Harlequin Horizons teamed with the POD company Author Solutions to offer self-publishing services to writers who’d had manuscripts rejected from Harlequin imprints. Harlequin announced that it would be monitoring sales of texts published through Harlequin Horizons to potentially publish the ones with the most promise (or highest sales) through one of its traditional imprints. The program represented an attempt to earn profits from the explosion of self-publishing. It was presumably designed to monetize the writing of authors with rejected manuscripts and to exploit networked user-generated filtering to find titles with sales potential without having to take the initial risk of publishing them.

Harlequin’s idea met with intense resistance from groups that advocate for the rights of authors. Such groups have a long history of exposing vanity-publishing scams, and they have worked to educate aspiring authors about the potential pitfalls of using them. [59] Despite the fact that twentieth-century books were produced through diverse arrangements of capital investment, the resistance of authors’ groups to vanity presses across the twentieth century were an important contributing factor that helped galvanize the expectation that a formal publisher would pay to produce, market, and distribute books, and that the author would not be involved in subsidizing production. Contemporary watchdogs concerned with educating aspiring authors and helping them avoid being scammed widely refer to this as Yog’s Law, a dictum coined by the novelist James D. Macdonald, which states that in a publishing relationship, “money flows toward the writer.” [60] This expectation has also been codified in the National Endowment for the Arts’ capacious...
definition of vanity presses, which indicates that author paying for publication is a primary indicator of vanity publishing.  

Even though Harlequin had assiduously avoided the term *vanity* in the initial announcements it used to publicize the venture, authors and professional author organizations reacted immediately to Harlequin’s announcement through blogs, discussion boards, and websites. The authors’ groups committed to the royalty system naturally objected to Harlequin’s decision to profit from the output of aspiring authors. They further objected to what they saw as deceptive language coming from Harlequin to describe the mission of the new press, and Harlequin authors—sensing the impinging legacy of the vanity press—objected that a self-publishing imprint would dilute Harlequin’s status as the premiere romance publisher. One commentator noted the impetus behind the deal was “downright dirty,” one that would allow “hacks who love the hanky-panky to publish their own bodice-ripping, hay-rolling romps under the imprint Harlequin Horizons.”  

Shortly after Harlequin’s announcement, multiple groups representing authors’ interests responded to the venture. The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America refused to entertain Harlequin’s assertion that the venture was self-publishing, calling it a vanity press in their release, which slammed the company for using aspiring authors to books profits. After the Romance Writers of America declared that Harlequin books would no longer be eligible for its awards, Harlequin relented and changed the name of their self-publishing imprint from Harlequin Horizons to DellArte Press.  

The language of vanity framed the resistance to Harlequin’s venture. The case of DellArte Press shows that if publishers seek to profit from the output of self-publishing, they clearly need to negotiate the dynamics derived directly from the vanity stigma. The royalty system has been so thoroughly naturalized into professional publishing that profiting from aspiring authors incites immediate reactions from the authors’ groups who formed in part to guard against such arrangements, reactions that clearly shape the trajectory of the digital-publishing landscape. Those reactions are intensified whenever there are vague promises to potential clients, or when profiting from self-publishers is couched in discourses that sell the dream of authorship. At their root, such discourses take the naive aspiring author as the normative subjectivity that needs help to avoid exploitative publishing practices.

**Conclusion**

In this article I tried to outline, in a preliminary way, some events that generated the vanity stigma and the reasons so many stakeholders in professional book culture have a negative reaction to the term. The dominance of the royalty system in twentieth-century publishing with vanity publishing as its other has meant the stigma has played a lively role in debates about digital publishing. These debates are couched in the already problematic and fickle relationship books have to markets. Publishing is rife with attempts to shield the book from market forces, and the vanity press lays that relationship bare, producing books for anyone willing to pay, skirting the established procedures of deeply important professionally built systems of knowledge production. This contributes to the emotional charge of the stigma and its discursive power.

Vanity has acted as a primarily conservative element in the transition to the new configurations of publishing that digital-publishing systems make possible, one reason why those invested in self-publishing have worked to shed the label and differentiate their activity from vanity. At the same time, opportunities for fraud still exist in publishing, as do companies that hold one or more of the dimensions of the twentieth-century vanity press. The term is still slippery. Vanity presses
are both a real and imagined problem, and each dynamic has material consequences for publishing and authors. Despite arguments that certain kinds of digital publishing are not vanity publishing, then, the dimensions of the stigma have provided enough flexibility and enough emotional weight that they have shaped early debates that circulate around new models of publishing.

In the last few years, there has been a growing chorus among advocates of nontraditional publishing that the vanity stigma is obsolete. The digital ethos has, perhaps, made it less audacious to seek an audience for one’s own writing without the intervention of a publisher. Nontraditional publishing has also continued to grow and as more authors have used it to find a widespread audience. The imminent death of the stigma is a bit optimistic, as the history of books and authorship suggest ideologies and dispositions accrue around them and persist tenaciously, sometimes regardless of whether or not they align with empirical facts. The multiple dimensions I discussed work to provide a heuristic to understand the extent to which any given publishing arrangement reflects the problems that gave rise to the stigma, or whether the term is being used as an inflammatory tactic to privilege certain kinds of texts over others.

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Notes


2. Although it is easy to find opinions about the vanity stigma and how widespread it is—in a recent article Jenna Freedman called it “universal” among serious writers, publishers, and libraries—to my knowledge, there are no data-driven studies about how widespread the stigma is in trade publishing. There have, however, been studies about academic publishing. In 1981 C. Knowles found widespread prejudice against self-published books among British academics and the concerns voiced mirror complaints about vanity books that come from the trade industry: concern that such books would be of low quality because publishers always publish worthwhile books; or concerns that self-publishers were either “wealthy cranks” or “religious people” looking to pass on a message. See C. Knowles,
Self-Publishers and Their Books (Primary Communications Research Center, University of Leicester, 1981), 15–17. [N2-ptr]


4. For a detailed look at how one phony literary agent ran an extensive literary scam using the term “joint venture” publishing, see Jim Fisher, Ten Percent of Nothing: The Case of the Literary Agent from Hell (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004). [N4-ptr]

5. There have been some objections to the term nontraditional book publishing because it suggests there has been such a thing as monolithic traditional book publishing, when a more accurate term for traditional book publishing would probably be Anglo-American trade publishing, which has only been one sector of the entire publishing industry. As I will explain, when I use the term nontraditional book publishing I am following the term as defined by Bradley et al. in “Non-traditional Book Publishing,” First Monday 16, no. 8-1 (2011). [N5-ptr]


7. Walter Besant, “On Paying for Publication,” Author 1, no. 3 (1891): 75. [N7-ptr]


13. For an overview of these kinds of mass publishing practices in nineteenth-century America, see Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, Literary Dollars and Social Sense (New York: Routledge, 2005). [N13-ptr]


15. Winship, American Literary Publishing in the Mid-nineteenth Century, 52. [N15-ptr]


17. “Drivel Racket,” Time, April 17, 1933, 34. [N17-ptr]

18. “Drivel Racket,” Time, April 17, 1933, 34. [N18-ptr]
22. “Publisher Held by U.S.: Head of Fortuny's Charged with Suspicion of Mail Fraud,” New York Times, March 9, 1941, 24. PLEASE ADD AUTHOR’S NAME. [#N22-ptr1]
34. Uhlan, The Rogue of Publishers’ Row, 13. [#N34-ptr1]
35. Uhlan, The Rogue of Publishers’ Row, 43. [#N35-ptr1]
36. Uhlan, The Rogue of Publishers’ Row, 18–19. The Time article, published in 1955, claimed: “Almost every publishing house now goes in for commercials that are subsidized by a corporation’s pledge to buy from 2,000 to 50,000 copies. Publishers generally are careful, however, not to include more than two or three such titles in their annual lists, lest they get a name for subsidized books.” “The Commercials,” Time, July 18, 1955, 104. [#N36-ptr1]
39. Leslie Howsam’s work on commission publishing in Victorian England provides a caustic example of such a lament originally published in the Bookman: “There is something
irresistibly pathetic in the spectacle of a learned man issuing a work in eight large volumes to illustrate a theory which will certainly not find acceptance by any mind but the author’s.” Leslie Howsam, *Kegan Paul: A Victorian Imprint: Publishers, Books and Cultural History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 132. 40.


44. Despite his provocations, at the least Uhlan’s memoir certainly complicates this image. Many of the authors he discusses in his book were simply writing and publishing nonfiction in his press whose interest to the public was extremely limited.


53. As Knowles’s study does suggest, though, despite how well-known vanity imprints had become, self-publishers also had their work tagged with the vanity stigma whether or not they used vanity presses. See C. Knowles, *Self-Publishers and Their Books*, (Primary Communications Research Center, University of Leicester, 1981), 15–17.


58. For an overview of changes to publishing technologies see John B. Thompson, Merchants of Culture (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), chapter 9.  
59. Jim Fisher’s detailed account of how a literary agent duped authors for thousands in fees includes a depiction of authors using early Internet technology to uncover publishing scams. Jim Fisher, Ten Percent of Nothing: The Case of the Literary Agent from Hell (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004).  
60. “Yog-Sothoth,” SFF.net.  
61. The 2011 application for creative writing fellowships for the NEA stated: “For the purposes of this category, a vanity press is defined as one that does any of the following: requires individual writers to pay for part or all of the publication costs; asks writers to buy or sell copies of the publication; publishes the work of anyone who subscribes to the publication or joins the organization through membership fees; publishes the work of anyone who buys an advertisement in the publication; publishes work without competitive selection; or publishes work without professional editing.”  
63. SFWA statement on Harlequin’s vanity press imprint, SFWA.org.  
65. For explications of this relationship across the twentieth century see Ted Striphas, The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); and Laura Miller, Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).