Is self-publishing a salvation for authors? The case of Lithuanian printed bestseller in the digital environment

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Abstract

There has been much speculation in the past years about self-publishing. Some argue that publishing houses do not have a future as publishing service providers. Others claim that it is very easy to publish a book as an e-book. There are many success stories of self-publishers. More and more authors are wondering if they actually need a publisher and a retailer knowing they always take the biggest cut of the pie.

The paper looks at the case of a Lithuanian author bestseller (in print). This book has also received the Lithuanian Book of the Year Award in the Fiction category. The author had the book published in Lithuanian by a traditional publishing house. It was quite successful so he decided to self-publish a digital version in English. The steps taken by the author to publish his e-book on Amazon are described and analyzed. Finally, the paper presents the results of selling and promoting his e-book on Amazon platform and provides some insights into facing the market without professional help.

KEYWORDS: self-publishing, e-book, Amazon, *Hour of the Wolf*.

Introduction

Self-publishing is not a new phenomenon. Although authors have been self-publishing since the beginning of the history of the written word, Ben Franklin is often considered the pioneer of self-publishing. Starting in 1732, he wrote and self-published a number of books of various genres. Many well-known writers also self-published some of their books: William Blake (1757-1827), Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), Charles John Huffam Dickens (1812-1870), Mark Twain (1835-1910), Marcel Proust (1871-1922), Joseph Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), James

Joyce (1882-1941), Virginia Adeline Woolf (1882-1941), George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), Edgar Rice Burroughs (1875-1950) and many others (Poynter 2007).

In the past, self-published authors had to spend considerable amounts of money to publish their books. Everything changed with the advent of the internet and digital publishing in the last decade of the 20th century. In 2000 Stephen King wrote on his web site, "My friends, we have the chance to become Big Publishing's worst nightmare" and self-published (through *Scribner*) an internet-only novel "The Plant" (Dubner 2000). But the new era for self-publishers actually began in 2007 when *Amazon* launched *Kindle Direct Publishing* (https://kdp.amazon.com), the platform where authors (and publishers) independently (and easily) publish their books directly to *Kindle* e-readers.

Over the past years scientist have also become involved in the research on the self-publishing phenomenon. There has been much speculation in the past years about self-publishing. Some argue that publishing houses as publishing service providers have no future. Lynch (2001), more than ten years ago, noted that while self-publication might work in theory, the major problem was still finding readers. In his opinion the success of author self-publishing seems less clear, with perhaps a very few exceptions. Dilevko and Dali (2006) examine how academic and public libraries dealt with the book self-publishing phenomena during 1960-2004 and debate that against the background of an increasing corporatization of mainstream publishing, book self-publishing can theoretically be situated as one of the last bastions of truly independent publishing.

Carolan and Evain (2013) raise the question whether book quality control is feasible when eighty percent of people believe they have a book in them and the opportunities provided by new technologies are responding to their needs. Chi (2014) offers four 'e-approaches' for the publishing industry to evolve and thrive in today's digital landscape in order to adapt to the situation where e-books have become mainstream and author self-publication is becoming more and more common. Danet (2014) is predicting that due to the popularity of self-publishing in the past years, content discoverability will become the biggest challenge for publishers. He wonders how we can be sure that the future consumers will be able to have access to the books, and not the pirated ones.

Laquintano (2010) argues that online self-publication has supported authors and readers to work together to produce e-books through sustained authorship. Sustained authorship conceptualizes authorship as sustained interaction among authors and readers (writers) as the work of publishing becomes absorbed into online networks as literate activity. Poynter (2007) noticed several self-publishing advantages: an author keeps all proceeds from self-publishing and has faster and full control of the publishing process. Sometimes it is thought that nowadays it is very easy to publish a book as an e-book; however, self-publishing has some well-known disadvantages: an author needs to invest his/her own money and take into account all possible risks. The author then faces another challenge: s/he

must have some additional skills (besides the writing skills) to do the publisher's job. And not only skills; s/he must have the time to do the publisher's job.

There are many success stories of self-publishers. More and more authors are thinking: do I really need a publisher and a retailer when they always take the biggest cut of the pie? The same question could be asked in a country that has a large book market and a country with a small book market. What are the key factors for success and what are small language author's chances to achieve success with his/her self-published book? The aim of this paper is to go through the self-publishing workflow using a particular case, and identify the main challenges facing self-published authors and possible success factors. The research object is a self-published author. To achieve this aim the following tasks were formulated: to select the case for the analysis; to collect, evaluate and analyze the data by going through the self-publishing workflow of the selected case; to explore and prepare possible recommendations for self-publishers.

Methodology

In order to explore and describe the research phenomenon, the case study (exploratory and explanatory analysis of a person) was selected as a research strategy. The research method involved using multiple sources and techniques in the data gathering process. Interview with the author combined with some facts already published on the author's blog[1] were used. Focused, short, repeat interviews were used to gather additional data to verify key observations or check a fact.

In order to find linkages between the research object and the outcomes, the data was analyzed using many interpretations. The research conclusion makes assertions and suggestions for further research activity. The limitation of this research comes from using the case study method: a single case can offer no strong grounds for generality of findings.

On selecting the case, a few requirements were considered: the case had to be considered typical; the case had to be from a small language market; the author had to be well-known in that market; the e-book had to be self-published on a large worldwide publishing platform in English.

There are only tens of titles of Lithuanian authors' and publishers' e-books in international bookstores (*Amazon*, *Apple*, etc.). It is obvious why e-books in Lithuanian are not popular in the international market. However, Lithuanian books translated into English did not do well either. The case of Andrius Tapinas' book *Hour of the Wolf* was selected. In fact, there are no cases similar to that one in Lithuania at the moment (2014). The bestseller of a small language book market was originally published in print in Lithuanian by the largest Lithuanian

1   Available at: http://www.tapinas.lt/knygos/

publisher *Alma Littera*. A digital version was later self-published by its author in English. Andrius Tapinas is well-known in Lithuania: he is a popular TV show host and a blogger.

Success of the print version

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the context of the selected case in a small country market, some facts about the printed version of the book will be provided and analyzed. The sales of printed and digital versions (both in Lithuanian) of Tapinas's steampunk novel *Vilko valanda* (*Hour of the Wolf*) started on February 16, 2013, on the same day when the first presentation of the book took place at the Vilnius University. On February 22, 2013, the book was presented at the Vilnius Book Fair as part of an extensive promotional campaign. An interview with the author of the book was conducted on Lithuanian National Television[2], a special book webpage (www.vilkovalanda.lt) and a video trailer[3] were created, and a book presentation was held at the Book Fair (with an impressive model of Zeppelin). During four days of the Book Fair, Tapinas signed about 700 copies of his printed book[4]. Additional presentations were held across Lithuania.

In early 2014, bestselling books in Lithuania were announced and *Hour of the Wolf* was among bestselling books in Lithuania by a Lithuanian author: No. 6 in adult fiction category of bestselling books in *Pegasas* bookstore chain (No. 1 among Lithuanian authors) and also No. 6 (No. 2 among Lithuanian authors) in *Vaga* bookstore chain (Lzinios.lt 2014). *Pegasas* and *Vaga* are the largest bookstore chains in Lithuania with 64 bookstores (out of a total of 207 bookstores in Lithuania) and about 67 per cent of sales market (Gudinavičius 2013).

Hour of the Wolf received a number of important book awards in Lithuania. The book won the biggest award from Lithuanian readers – the *Book of the Year 2013* title in Lithuania (Skaitymometai.lt 2014). *Lithuanian Literature and Folklore Institute* included *Hour of the Wolf* in its TOP-12 list of *The Most Creative Books of 2013 in Lithuanian Literature* (Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas 2014). *Hour of the Wolf* also won the *Patriot's Award* (established by the *Ministry of National Defence of the Republic of Lithuania* and the *Lithuanian Publishers Association*) for best book for young readers (Lietuvos leidėjų asociacija 2014).

An audio-book of the *Hour of the Wolf* (in Lithuanian) was published by *Audioteka.lt* on February 21, 2014. It was recorded by the author himself with special sound effects and more than 2 hours of music. The price was set at 5.79 EUR. In addition, a game for mobile devices called *The Howler* based on the *Hour of the Wolf* storyline was launched on July 26, 2013.

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2   Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zd-LP4qRLKA
3   Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5UX8mHFXEuI
4   All numbers and other facts about the Hour of the Wolf and Andrius Tapinas are from his blog (http://www.tapinas.lt/knygos/) and from paper author interview with Andrius Tapinas.

In 20 months of sales, (at the time of writing, November 2014) 14,000 printed hardcover copies in Lithuanian were sold (7th edition on sale, the price is 12.5 EUR). These numbers are quite big for the Lithuanian market. In the same period, about 500 digital copies (EPUB, 9.5 EUR) and 350 audio-book copies (MP3, 8.99 EUR) were sold (all in Lithuanian). So, the printed book version was quite successful for such a small market as Lithuania.

Preparation for self-publishing on Amazon

For an e-book to be ready for sale on *Amazon.com* several things need to be done: translation, conversion into the right format, selection of the right cover, ISBN acquisition, submission of cover information, decision on *Digital Rights Management* preference, confirmation of publishing rights and selection of the territories, selection of royalty option and setting the e-book price, creating *Amazon Author Page* and dealing with the matter of US *Individual Taxpayer Identification Number*.

Translation. According to Tapinas, translation took about half a year. Translation into English and the first edit were done by Lithuanians, and the second edit was done by a British English native speaker (non-standard English was used intentionally). A lot of time was spent on translation of Lithuanian last names and place names.

Conversion and publishing. The translated manuscript had to be converted into a digital book format that *Amazon* accepts. *Amazon* is using its own format - MOBI. A lot of third party conversion services are offered. Prices start from 50 EUR for conversion only and reach up to 200 EUR for conversion and publishing to the biggest bookstores in the world (*Amazon*, *Barns & Noble*, *iBookstore*, *Kobo*, etc.). There are some options for free conversion and publishing to internet bookstores, but in this case a lifetime commission is charged on each copy sold.

Tapinas decided to use *Amazon* native conversion tools. These tools are available after registering as a self-publisher on *Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing* (https://kdp.amazon.com). Amazon accepts the following main text formats for conversion: *Word* (DOC or DOCX), HTML (ZIP, HTM, or HTML), MOBI (MOBI), *ePub* (EPUB), *Rich Text Format* (RTF), *Plain Text* (TXT), *Adobe* PDF (PDF).

In the publishing process on *Amazon* several steps must be done. First, a self-published author needs to enter cover page information (about 18 items of information, some of them are required, some are optional). The next step is selecting the *Digital Rights Management* (DRM) preference (enable or not enable) and uploading and previewing the e-book content. Here the publisher can either use the *Online Previewer* or the *Downloadable Previewer* to see an approximation of what the eBook will look like on various *Amazon Kindle* devices. After that, the publisher has to confirm the publishing rights and select the territory (or

select worldwide) where s/he will hold the electronic publishing rights for the e-book being published. There is also an option to select 'public domain work' if an e-book consists entirely or primarily of content that is public domain.

Toward e-book success, there are a lot of important decisions and steps that a self-publisher must take at this stage:

- Choose the right cover for his/her e-book. It is better if the cover is attractive and stands out from millions of other covers on the long shelves of an internet bookstore. *Amazon* offers *Cover Creator* to make an e-book cover based on an image provided or to select from *Amazon's* gallery of stock images.

- Make a good description of his/her e-book. *Amazon* allows a description consisting of 30 to up to 4,000 characters.

- Purchase an ISBN (*International Standard Book Number*). Print edition ISBNs should not be used for digital versions.

- Choose the right category (the number of categories is limited to 2 on *Amazon*), age and grade range.

- Select good search keywords to help readers find the e-book (*Amazon* allows 5-7 keywords or short phrases that describe the e-book). It is recommended to do an analysis of *Amazon* visitors' most searched keywords and search trends.

- *Create Amazon Author Page* (https://authorcentral.amazon.com) by adding the author's biography, photos, blog, etc. This tool also allows one to see and analyze e-book sales trends over time.

The advantages of different approaches in this stage can be discussed. If the self-publisher is an experienced computer user, it is better to do conversion and publishing on the internet platform by oneself (using the tool provided by the platform). In that case the author has more flexibility in future error correction, statistics on sale and views, and so on. For example, on *Amazon*, if a self-publisher makes any changes to his/her e-book metadata, the changes will be reflected on the *Amazon* website within 48 hours. But if an author is not familiar with the technology, services of third parties are available for a reasonable price. It is important to be careful when accepting proposals for 'free' conversion and placement services – a big lifetime commission can be hidden behind such proposals.

Taxes. One more important thing to do when planning to sell e-books on the US market is to deal with the issue of taxes. *Amazon* will freeze 30 per cent of self-publisher's proceeds from US customers if the *Individual Taxpayer Identification Number* (ITIN) is not registered on *Amazon*. Getting the ITIN from the IRS may take 3-4 months and a lot of paper correspondence with the US tax authorities. After analyzing several options, Tapinas found an easy workaround: get an *Employer*

Identification Number (EIN) which is used to identify a business entity. In that case a private company should exist, but the US *Internal Revenue Service* does not require any proof of its existence. So, after a 15-minute phone talk with an IRS agent, Tapinas got an EIN which he submitted via electronic web form confirming his electronic signature to Amazon and after 24 hours he received a confirmation from *Amazon*.

The US market is big enough to be worth spending the time to do this step and sort out the situation with the US tax authorities. But a self-publisher must have some additional skills to analyze the situation and get the required US taxpayer/employer identification number (because the situation is changing rapidly and after some time Tapinas' shortcut to getting an EIN may no longer work); to make some international phone calls, and to fill in application forms. Self-published authors less experienced in tax matters might need some help – this is an opportunity for professional publishers or agents.

Pricing. The final step in the publishing process is selecting royalty option (35% or 70%) and setting the e-book price. Usually the e-book price is expected to be different than that of the printed edition. *Amazon* pays largest royalties if the e-book price is set between 3 and 10 USD. Many e-books are priced at 0.99 USD, but these books are sometimes treated as cheap items and readers do not respect them because they can be bought in bulk. A self-publisher has several options. One is to set the price and just wait to see what happens. Another is to consult an experienced publisher or an agent. It usually takes approximately 12 hours for an e-book to be available for purchase online.

Finally, on September 3, 2013 a digital *Kindle Edition* of *Hour of the Wolf (Steam and Stone Saga 1)* was published on *Amazon*. The price for US citizens was set at 3.99 USD and 7.25 USD for non-US buyers. In Europe the price for the *Amazon* version was set at 2.99 EUR. Author's royalty was 70%. The Lithuanian language digital e-book version costs approximately 9.5 EUR.

That's it? Done? Or buried under 3.4 million e-books? According to Claude Nougat (2014), a writer, economist, painter and poet, the number of e-books available on *Amazon* is growing at a great rate; there is 'a new title every five minutes'. Realizing that this was not the end of his self-publishing adventure, Tapinas said: "One per cent of all self-publishing work is done."

Pushing the e-book forward

There are two paths to take after you publish an e-book on *Amazon*: do nothing and wait for the money to start trickling into your account or start promoting your e-book. Tapinas chose the second option. According to Tapinas, he prepared well before he started selling his book. He created a home page on *Amazon* with the book description, keywords, and photos related to the e-book; he also set

up the *Author Page* on *Amazon* containing his biography and other detailed information. There are a lot of free or partially free tools to promote an e-book, one of them being social networks.

Social networks. Social networks play an important role in the book publishing business allowing quick and easy interactive communication between readers, authors and publishers. The world's largest site and social network for readers and book recommendations is *Goodreads* (www.goodreads.com) with 30 million members (November 2014 data). Tapinas joined this network by creating a *Goodreads Author* profile along with *Facebook*, *Amazon*, *Twitter* and e-book blog and integrated a trailer into it. He also created author accounts on other, similar networks: an online service which helps people easily catalogue their books – *LibraryThing* (www.librarything.com, 1.8 million members); community-powered encyclopaedia for book lovers – *Shelfari* (www.shelfari.com; acquired by *Amazon* in 2008); *BookDaily,* which offers readers an opportunity to read the first chapters of more than 60,000 titles (www.bookdaily.com) and a social platform that connects people through words – *Wattpad* (www.wattpad.com, 38 million users).

The main challenge the author faced on social networks was that you must be an active member (post news, answer readers' messages and comments, participate in discussions, and so on) if you want to be noticed. And all that activity requires a lot of time.

Reviews. Reviews are a very important part of the book promoting process. According to Chevalier and Mayzlin (2006), reviews are overwhelmingly positive and an improvement in a book's reviews leads to an increase in relative sales. Here Tapinas asked for help from his social network followers. Good results came from *StoryCartel* system (storycartel.com, reader gets a free copy of an e-book in exchange for an honest review). According to Tapinas, the *Hour of the Wolf* was the most downloaded e-book in the history of *StoryCartel.* Of course most of them were Lithuanian readers but some reviewers came from the USA, Canada, Mexico, and the United Kingdom. After a month the e-book had 36 reviews.

Results after one month of active promotion. After the first month of selling on *Amazon, Hour of the Wolf* ranked at No. 38,000 among *Kindle* books and at No. 45 in *Steampunk* (printed and e-books) category. Tapinas ranked at No. 40,162 among *Amazon's* authors (No. 17,087 among *Kindle* authors) (Tapinas 2014).

KDP Select. During the second month of sales, the author used *KDP Select* program (kdp.amazon.com/select, you choose to sell your e-book on *Amazon* exclusively and in return earn higher royalties and can choose between two promotional tools, for example you can offer your e-book to readers for free for five days). Before launching in *KDP Select,* an extensive advertising campaign was carried out on *BookBub*, *Book Blast*, *Frugal Reader*, *Digital Ink Today*, *Kindle Fire Department*, and *Free-booksy*. In the period of 3 days from enrolling in *KDP Select* program, 21,000 free copies of the English version of the *Hour of the Wolf*

were downloaded. During his enrolment in *KDP Select* program, his e-book ranking peaked at No. 28,000 in the *Kindle* chart and No. 29 in the *Steampunk* category. It means that 2 copies were sold per day on average.

99 cent campaign. After *KDP Select*, a one-week-long campaign of e-book selling for 99 cents (USD) was launched. The e-book reached No. 23,000 in the *Kindle* chart and No. 22 in the *Steampunk* category, but still the overall sales were low (you can get only 35 per cent royalty from Amazon if your e-book price is below 2.99 USD).

Other formats and publishing platforms. In April 2014, an interactive English version of the *Hour of the Wolf* was presented at the *London Book Fair* and published on *iTunes* (4.49 EUR). A lot of multimedia gadgets and 3D models were included in this version. The version for *Android* devices has been available since May 2014. This version of the book won (Informacinės visuomenės plėtros komitetas prie Susisiekimo ministerijos 2014) *Best Mobile Content Solution Award* 'Naujasis knygnešys 2014' in the category of mobile entertainment and lifestyle (established by the *Information Society Development Committee under the Ministry of Transport and Communications of Lithuania*). Later on, this interactive e-book version was selected for round two of evaluation for the *World Summit Award Mobile* 2014. In April 2014, *Studio Mitkus* launched a comic book based on the *Hour of the Wolf* ('Vilko valanda: nepapasakotos istorijos') and later (with the financial support of the *Lithuanian Film Centre*) created a short animation *Towns of Stone and Steam* (original title 'Akmens ir garo miestai').

Results after 14 months. Short overview of the sales results for the *Hour of the Wolf* after 14 months of sales on Amazon (the first two months with very intensive campaign, the following 12 months without any special marketing): selling on average 5-10 e-books per month; in total, 500 copies were sold in seven months. According to Tapinas "it is better to spend more time on writing books than on marketing."

Conclusions

The case of 2013 bestseller shows that a lot of effort is needed to achieve success outside Lithuania despite the great success of the printed book in the Lithuanian market. Self-publishing has some advantages: in most cases, an author can get up to 70-80% of the proceeds, but there are also disadvantages: an author needs to spend many hours keeping his readers engaged. Self-published authors have to do marketing constantly; it takes constant effort and one cannot expect quick results (most likely scenario: snowball effect).

Self-publishers must be skilful enough to organize (or do themselves) the following: translate, edit, convert, design the cover, acquire an ISBN, deal with the issue of taxes, create accounts on many social networks (and keep them active), follow up on reviews, do advertising campaigns and still have time for

further writing. The advantage of such self-publishing platform is that everything about the sales is transparent – self-publishers have access to near real-time information on their e-book sales.

As seen in this case, an author can be well-known in a small market, but that does not help in a big market: "the small fish in the big pond" (Carolan and Evain 2013). According to Tapinas, the fact that you are not an Anglo-Saxon also does not help. It seems that it is better to produce and sell more than one book (a serial novel) to keep the sales up. After self-publishing, Tapinas decided to hire a literary agent and write another book. Which brings us back to the beginning – is publishing for publishers only?

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Sažetak

Je li samostalno objavljivanje spas za autore? Slučaj litvanskog tiskanog bestselera u digitalnom okruženju

Posljednjih se godina mnogo raspravlja o samostalnom objavljivanju. Pojedini autori smatraju da nakladničke kuće nemaju budućnost kao pružatelji nakladničkih usluga, drugi smatraju da je vrlo lako objaviti knjigu kao e-knjigu. Mnogo je priča o uspješnom objavljivanju u vlastitoj nakladi, pa se sve više autora pita trebaju li im doista nakladnik i distributer, znajući da oni uvijek uzimaju najveći dio kolača. Rad prikazuje slučaj litvanskog autora tiskanog bestselera, knjige koja je dobila nagradu za litvansku knjigu godine u kategoriji književnosti. Autor ju je objavio na litvanskom jeziku u tradicionalnoj nakladničkoj kući, a budući da je bila vrlo uspješna, odlučio je samostalno objaviti

digitalnu inačicu na engleskom jeziku. U radu se detaljno opisuju i analiziraju koraci koje je autor poduzeo kako bi objavio e-knjigu na Amazonu. Naposljetku, predstavljaju se rezultati prodaje i promocije e-knjige na Amazon platformi te pruža uvid u suočavanje s tržištem bez profesionalne pomoći.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: samostalno objavljivanje, e-knjige, Amazon, *Hour of the Wolf*.