The traditional publishing model has been underperforming for small authors for several years now as writers test out the waters of self-publishing. New models have risen in popularity to help authors make a living, but none have been so revolutionary as the new funding and publishing model that has developed around crowdfunding websites like Kickstarter and Indiegogo. The larger practice of crowdfunding refers to audiences making microinvestments into new ventures, usually in the creative industries (Jenkins et. al., 2013). Crowdfunding has been popular for new technology and video projects, and has now become a source of income for publishing projects as well (Kickstarter, 2015).

From comics to novels to cookbooks, Kickstarter features around 600 active projects at any given time under the “Publishing” section. The money raised in crowdfunding efforts is used for everything from an advance for the writer to begin the project, to money to handle the postproduction of an already completed manuscript (Jenkins et. al., 2013). Since launching in 2009, over $70 million has been pledged to publishing projects on Kickstarter, and in recent years the number of successful book-related projects has more than doubled from 735 in 2011 to 2064 in 2014 (Bausells, 2015).

While Kickstarter and Indiegogo certainly paved the way for crowdfunding models to develop, publishing-specific sites have now emerged to focus wholly on funding book-related projects. Publishing crowdfunding platforms tend to take two approaches: the first involves the site acting as a traditional publisher once books have succeeded in their funding goals. An example of this model is Inkshares, which pays authors 50% of gross revenue on physical books with nonexclusive rights after using some of the funds for marketing as well as national and digital distribution (Kaye, 2015). The second approach is found in Publishizer and PubLaunch (Previously Pubslush), which takes only a small 4-5% processing fee of funds raised, and leaves authors to market and distribute their own books as they see fit (Kaye, 2015). These platforms have been moderately successful at giving new authors the opportunity to publish books that would not normally interest traditional publishing firms, they also guarantee preorders for those who have contributed to the projects. However, recent campaigns have proven that the most successfully funded projects were marketed and supported by communities of fans that existed prior to the campaign’s start.

Online fandoms are often undervalued by corporate media giants who prefer to stick to
heteronormative storylines and show cancellation plans rather than acknowledge the outcries of their fandoms. In 2013, the success of the Veronica Mars movie kickstarter was largely the result of the online following the TV show had maintained over the years (Gutierrez, 2014; Hills, 2015). The Veronica Mars campaign had hoped to raise $2 million in a month, which it attained in less than ten hours. The project broke the record as the fastest project to reach $1 million and was the largest successful film project in Kickstarter history with total donations raised of $5.7 million in a single month (Hills, 2015). The Veronica Mars campaign reveals the importance of fan communities in the success of crowdfunding projects. Although this example is an outrageous one, the story is the same elsewhere. Popular Tumblr webcomic Check Please! built a devoted following online through enthusiastic fan reblogging and fictional character interaction on Twitter. When the creator of the webcomic started a kickstarter to fund the creation of a bound book version of the online comic, the project exceeded the funding goal of $15,000 for a total of over $74,000. What was important in these situations is that there was already a group of fans and followers who had an interest in a new way to experience the online content. Hills (2015) calls crowdfunding of this type ‘fan-ancing,’ connecting fans’ emotional connections to content with methods of raising money. It is important to stress that new models of publishing crowdfunding require authors to be comfortable being their own marketers (Belmaker, 2012).

Clearly, this kind of publishing funding will change the ways authors relate to their audiences. While authors will have a greater ability to write what they feel is important by moving beyond the traditional publishing corporation and take on projects that traditional publishers won’t, they also need to be willing to participate online and market themselves during a crowdfunding campaign and after. In some situations, crowdfunded publishing may require authors to create a dialogue with fans and readers and participate in their own fandoms if the situation requires it. New crowdfunding models allow writers to ‘test the waters’ for new book ideas and build a community around a project that might not get as much publicity through traditional means (Bausells, 2015). Crowdfunding also enables journalists to take on alternative news projects and offer a more democratic approach to the stories they want to see covered and funded (Bennett et al., 2015). Authors under this model will also have a bigger responsibility to those who fund their projects. There are expectations around how the money will be spent and the products supporters expect to see from their donations. The system requires a great deal of accountability that might otherwise be invisible in a traditional publishing situation.

Crowdfunded publishing models undoubtedly influence the way readers interact with and consume media texts. For readers, supporting a book project allows them to be a part of cultural production that they would otherwise be outsiders to. Readers are able to support projects they deem important, like the We Need Diverse Books campaign (WNDB) that raised $181,000 in one month in 2014 to fund diversity in children’s literature. WNDB continues to be a strong voice in the Young Adult publishing sphere at schools and book conventions. Crowdfunded publishing also gives pre-existing fans access to certain benefits like merchandise and exclusive content they wouldn’t otherwise find with traditional publishing. Hills (2015) explains that previously value was added to content through DVD extras and official merchandise, but with crowdfunding, rewards are ‘tiered’ and exclusive to campaigns, giving fans insider access to an objectified fan culture. This kind of fan inclusiveness gives audiences the notion of being ‘in’ the media and a part of its creation, creating even more devout brand followers and advocates who are more likely to spread the content to their networks (Hills, 2015; Booth, 2015). Simply put, readers who contribute to a project simply find pleasure in the creation participation and the connection with an artist (Booth, 2015).

Publishers probably haven’t noticed a dent in their submission numbers and surely the ‘slush pile’ of manuscripts has not shrunk despite the successes of crowdfunded publishing, but publishers still have
things to learn from these new models. Readers today want to be more involved in the media creation process, and authors want to have more say in the work that is ‘worthy’ of publication. Publishers like Swoon Reads have caught on to the participatory tendencies of their young adult audiences and have leveraged their readers’ desires to contribute and read low-quality manuscripts with the hopes of helping ‘discover’ great books. These models impact the traditional publishing industry in subtle ways that could, over time, call into question the validity of publishing gatekeepers. If these publishing crowdfunding practices catch on further than the current early adopters, it will be important for traditional publishers to invest in crowd-sourcing online spaces of their own where they can interact with the readers and authors who are so eager to give their input.

By way of conclusion, there is a third type of ‘crowd-sourced’ participation previously mentioned that is found in Feiwel and Friends’ newest publishing imprint, Swoon Reads. Swoon Reads is an online platform that allows previously unsold manuscripts to be posted and accessed online for free. Similar to websites like Wattpad, readers can rate and review manuscripts, classifying them as more or less ‘Swoonworthy.’ The highest rated manuscripts are read by Swoon Reads’ publishers, and the best are chosen to be published. Swoon Reads specializes in the Young Adult romance genre, but it has gathered a significant amount of media attention in the publishing world after the 21 titles they have chosen for publication in the last year and a half alone.

While Swoon Reads is garnering the attention of the most participatory group of online readers, there is still space for publishing crowd-sourcing in the industry. In fact, Gartland (2011) touches on a point that I believe could suit the future of the crowd-sourced and crowd-funded publishing industry. Currently, crowdfunding models begin with an author’s book that is pitched to the crowds, which readers fund if they like the sound of it. What I suggest (and what Gartland echoes), is that the formula could switch to begin with a book concept that readers want and can commission online, which authors can write in exchange for the commission. Gartland (2011) suggests that reader-commissioned books will be the next step in the new book economy as a natural evolution of today’s crowdfunding models. If a platform were to exist that allowed readers to suggest book ideas that other readers could support, the best books could be requested and created with an audience already in mind. Crowdfunding has already revolutionized the way tech startups initiate projects, who is to say that the book publishing industry cannot undergo the same transformation as the Internet continues this phase through the wisdom of the crowds?

Works Cited


