

Opened Podcast #3 Transcript

Small Presses, the internet and ePublishing

Steve: Should we make a distinction between small presses and little magazines in this discussion?

Alex: What is the distinction?

Steve: Good point! I think sometimes it's quite hard to distinguish between the small press and the little magazine. I guess the small press would more likely feature individual poets in each publication with the little magazine featuring multiple poets. Both would have quite distinct agendas, presumably - whether you'd want to publish small collections by individual poets or whether you wanted to reach out to a community of poets in each issue. What do you think?

Alex: I'm wondering what would make you pick one or the other, what you'd be wanting to achieve as a publisher and what would make you choose being a small press over being a little magazine, what kind of social and political aspects there are to that. I guess the little magazine, you could argue it's a more community-based project?

Steve: You kind of can, just because each issue is involving more people but I'm tempted to think it's harder to put together a really decent small press, just because it's harder to keep that momentum. That's what's so impressive about Arthur Shilling - you have the sense that there's a community of poets grouped around the press now because the publications came out so quickly.

Alex: I'm interested in the idea that Arthur Shilling is somewhere between the small press and little magazine, that the publications are produced at such a fast rate that in retrospect they could potentially be grouped into large groupings which could be defined as a magazine of some sorts.

Steve: I think that's definitely possible. Maybe we should get on to the central question of how small press, and let's include little magazines - how they've been affected by the internet, in terms of distribution, production quality, the way they publish new work - I think it's important to keep poetry in the centre of the discussion.

Alex: Let's start off pragmatically first. What are the pragmatic differences between producing an Arthur Shilling publication as opposed to producing the same poetry online? First of all, you don't have a necessarily large initial cost in producing the work?

Steve: I don't think you'd have a particularly large initial cost either way, I mean there would be a cost when you're putting paper together but that's not that expensive. You could argue that the internet encourages visual and coloured work in a way that working with a book does not. Even from the poet's perspective they know it's going to be more expensive for the publisher if it's in colour rather than black and white I think that's something for poets to consider as much as publishers.

Alex: Could we argue that the internet is potentially changing the way poets consider their work as they're writing it because of these new possibilities for publication on the small press scale?

Steve: I think you could argue that, I don't think all poets do that, but I think that's pertinent.

Alex: For instance I remember Allen Fisher talked about one of his poems being a single line which was practically impossible to print, it was not feasible, yet online it was reproducible, but at the time it wasn't.

Steve: Three things to say about that. One is, [Allen] writing a poem that couldn't be reproduced [on the page] is very different to the poem that can be reproduced online. It doesn't mean the internet has realised his project because part of the project was creating a poem that couldn't be reproduced.

Alex: Yeah, that's what interested me, is that a work that wasn't intended to be reproduced is suddenly easy to reproduce.

Steve: Which somehow changes the work, it doesn't *realise* it. The second thing is a work that can be produced online is [materially] different - [Even if it were possible to have a long enough piece of paper to print it on - it would still be a different work. I'm such a materialist that I'm hesitant to call the internet a virtual space because I'm aware I've got a computer in front of me, there must be a server somewhere that takes up a whole room, and cables, it's not some kind of utopian space for me which is detached from these material constructs.

Alex: I think a better term might be physically disconnected space.

Steve: Do you think? The content can exist on my computer here and it's the same content being produced on a computer in Cambridge or in Buffalo, we're sharing the same information, and I know you could argue books could be in multiple places at the same time, but I don't think that's physically disconnected, is it? Is it really that different from a book? Maybe it is.

Alex: There is always a go-between between you and the text, and I'm not talking about it in terms of the act of reading, I'm talking about it in terms of actual physical interaction. You have a book, you have a page with text on that is there in front of you. The electronic text does not exist. It exists on a server, like you said, but that server is physically disconnected from you, you cannot read the server, you have to read the text on an instrument which is designed to read the server, so you are in a sense physically disconnected from that text.

Steve: Or from the material carrier of the text. I guess you can't really make the same argument for books other than that the technology of a book has been naturalised to the point that you don't see it, so there is a disconnect from the material of the book unless the text specifically draws attention to it. There's a way that texts on the internet although they can challenge the medium of the screen or the page, or even projects like Jodi that play with the code, they can't really interrogate the server that is supporting them.

Alex: If they were to do that, the reader would not be aware of that act.

Steve: Or it wouldn't function, you wouldn't be able to access it at all.

Alex: That's another state of disconnection whereby the method with which the text is being delivered cannot be tampered because the reader would not even be aware there was a text or that a change had taken place.

Steve: There was a poem which used a code I think called Python which was actually a virus, and part of the realisation of the text was spreading it as a virus, and it sounds a bit lame but the interesting part of it was Norton Antivirus recognised that code and spotted it as a virus so on the poem page they've included a screen from Norton saying 'we've spotted this virus, watch out for it' and it's actually a poem.

Alex: What's that doing though?

Steve: I don't know!

Alex: Is that interrogating the delivery process of the text?

Steve: It's confusing what's a legitimate text with what's not a legitimate text and at least it's trying to think about control and dissemination on the internet. More interesting than putting a PDF up online.

Alex: You come to the question of, everybody has access to a means of publishing work that people didn't used to have, on the scale that potentially anyone in the world could read the work, which is a completely different way of disseminating a work than to produce a series of chapbooks which you would distribute among a poetry community.

Steve: It's important to be able to build up a communal space online so that's not lost, or even build a communal space offline so when you publish online there's a community to engage with it. I'm not that interested in trusting the utopian possibilities of the internet in that anyone can see it, because I still think you have to do the work to make people see it, and just because the internet is often described as being an overwhelming saturated space full of noise, it's no more noisy than the street. But I don't think you can build communities purely online, there has to be an offline element. What do you think?

Alex: I agree. I think you could potentially build a community online but I think that its characteristics and its purpose would be very different from an offline community, and at this stage I don't think that you could run an online and proximity-based physical community as separate things, I think that one has to map on to the other at the moment, because I don't think peoples' perception of community on the internet is different from what it is in a physical space.

Steve: I disagree with that. People do act differently in online communities, even though they might think about them the same way broadly, their actions betray their thoughts, people act differently online. The way you phrased it was 'at the moment', what I'm saying is that it's not desirable to have two separate communities, it's the crossover between them that's interesting but it seems to me what you're saying is that you think more positively about the internet, that it would be good to have a completely online community. When we're talking about this it's a community to share publications specifically, right?

Alex: Yes, when you phrase it like that maybe I disagree with myself. I think being in the same physical space as other people, even in, say, a poetry reading, or physically

exchanging works with each other, has a very specific social function that cannot be replicated in the online space.

Steve: What do you think that social function is?

Alex: I think, going back to that idea of the dissemination of work, the notion of accessibility, the notion that a publication comes from a certain physical location, a certain group of people that will probably be, in relation to the small press, a group of people or an individual that will probably be well known or known to the community in which the work is disseminated. I think as a publisher I'd argue for both print and online, you automatically occupy a certain socio-political stance, just from the way you market your books, the way you produce them, the way you set up your website. And I don't think that's necessarily so explicit online.

Steve: So is there a sense of heightened responsibility offline that can be avoided or negotiated online? Or is it just different?

Alex: I think at the moment that's how a lot of online publishing is seen; that it's okay to publish something online that you wouldn't necessarily invest the time or effort in publishing the same thing in print.

Steve: It seems to me we're muddling a few things. One is [about] making a judgment - you can publish things online because there's not the same kind of quality control, but it's not the quality control of the publisher - our argument is that it's the assumptions of the audience that allow a publisher to get away with publishing something online which you wouldn't do in print, is that correct?

Alex: Yeah I think so. What do you think?

Steve: I'm interested in how that might have something to do with the material space that surrounds the publisher and how the publisher promotes themselves and talks to the community of people they want to get the books too, and how that has bound up with a certain set of assumptions about how good that work needs to be. It's a political question because it would be hard to imagine, say with yt communication, the publisher Sean Bonney publishing purely online. So much of his own work is about the performance space and encountering the work in, say, an abandoned church or a room in a pub - when you get a yt communication book it's somehow tied into those spaces.

Alex: Do you not think that somehow that ties into this notion of the book as a physically connected object to you as a reader? In the sense that it has to exist within that space that you're describing - the book exists within that pub, within that place because your association with the book is physical, in the same way your association with those places are physical.

Steve: I think that's definitely part of the same kind of nexus. So when you get what seem to be on the surface fairly conservative arguments - "we're going to lose the materiality of the book", "I really love the smell of the pages", "you can't get *that* online", "there's so much crap online", "I know who I'm getting it from" - is actually really talking about all these other types of material spaces, the communities that they're within, the politics associated with those communities.

Alex: For instance, when you say I like the smell of the pages, what's implicit in that is you recognise that book as being physically connected to a space that in more important terms, political terms, is something that you empathise with or agree with, a second-hand bookshop.

Steve: I think if you say part of what's good about being a small press publisher offline is that you have this very unique relationship with publishers because the publishers are also poets, and you share their politics, you're interested in the politics of their work - which in the kind of scene we're in tries to be both ethically responsible and challenging, when you say you like the smell of the pages of the book, smell being so linked into memory, maybe there's an argument about translating that physical book online and the fears that come along with that, maybe that is a legitimate fear about losing that community which is so rich, I think, and so real - the occupation of physical space is still an important political fact, I think.

Alex: But there is something about the street protest which is, again, a physical incursion upon a space that can be ignored in an online space. For instance, a protest outside Parliament where the police have to establish a boundary, just because it is a physical interruption on an explicitly political space. The only analogy I can make to that on the internet would be, as you said, if someone was to hack the White House website or the government website, but that requires a degree of expertise and knowledge that going out on the street and protesting doesn't.

Steve: Yes, and just to link in about the distance from material space, you could do anything you like with a web page but it's going to be difficult, probably, to access the servers, which is the real material of the online space and is sited offline. It would be nice to try and talk about the positive and useful attributes of the online space, but what stops me wanting to get too carried away with it is those kind of comparisons.

Alex: Let's take a ridiculous image and play with it. Would it change it for you in any way if, going back to yt communication, if Sean had his online work running off a private server, the physical manifestation of the online work was in his house, say, and he chose that the only method of distribution would be if you were within the Wi-Fi signal of his house, and if you were within that distance you could download his publications free of charge, or that was the only way to get his publications, does that change anything or is that a facile notion of mapping something that can't be mapped on to a physical space?

Steve: I don't think that's facile as an idea. That's about owning a means of production. Presumably, not getting too much into the realms of sci-fi, if you owned your own server and that server was mobile, Sean could put something up online saying he has three new publications and he will be outside a protest at Number 10 and if you're within a hundred metres of that rally you'll get the publication free online, you could actually make people come to a physical space.

Alex: Do you think that makes explicit ideas that are implicitly present in the print space, or is it representative of something new?

Steve: I think that would be new. I guess you could say if you come here I'll give you ten new publications, but it's a comment on the internet in a way that handing out books isn't necessarily a comment on the internet. You're using the internet like a book, you're using it actively.

Alex: You're engaging with the medium.

Steve: You are. I'm sitting in my home, it's comfortable, I can consume publications online, but if I wanted to get my poetry online, for free, but had to go somewhere to get it, I think that's a comment on the internet, on the book, on politics. Imagine if 10 poets had their small servers and you had to wander round to different locations to download the pages of a magazine and after travelling to those locations you'd have your complete magazine.

Alex: Bringing in the idea of what does publishing even mean in an online space. Who's the publisher, the distributor or the assembler, or are they both publishers?

Steve: At least you're asked to think about those questions. The internet raises those questions anyway, but they're intolerably boring. Everyone knows the online space is a sharing of information but often these arguments get nowhere. It's important to use the space somehow - not saying that I do, or Opened does necessarily all the time, but in an ideal world....

Alex: That is the standard model of publishing online at the moment, you try to replicate the printed artefact.

Steve: Do people, though? I know there's a few websites which have a magazine and you can turn the pages online, but a PDF doesn't really replicate the material artefact, does it?

Alex: You could argue that it does in the sense that it's split up into pages, albeit digital pages, but it is still split up into a sections you would have in a book which is not necessarily needed - you could potentially create a PDF which is just a single long page and then change the spacing of the individuals poems but then you're changing the poetry because the poems are then not existing within a page space, then you have these issues as a publisher - that's going back to the Allen Fisher poem, which is that if we don't replicate the printed version of this poem it's not the same poem. It's not the same poem anyway by virtue of being online but it's almost like you're trying to compensate for the loss rather than embracing the fact that there will be a change and saying as a publisher what can be done with this work? How can we work with the poet to create a different work online? Because it is going to be different.

Alex: I'm thinking about a poet [that] has a very definite sense of what the poem is, and then finding a way to map or transfer that work online, because I think most poets still work primarily thinking about how their work will print in the sense of page space and line breaks and all those technical things. And for the poet to say, okay, that's my work in print and now to consider it for the online space, and that doesn't necessarily mean that I have to engage with the code that's underlying what my text is doing online, just in the same way that I might be quite happy for my book to be published in A4 format - I don't need to do anything with the page space, so I don't need to do anything with the code, or is that a wrong comparison to make, maybe I do need to do something with the code - I think those are interesting questions and I think again that comes down to, in the way we're accustomed to making and sharing books, at the moment we're not accustomed in the same way to sharing online work - there isn't that community aspect to online work, it exists separate from the community, and it's visited or it's downloaded and it's not part of that space, like you said.

Steve: Which is odd considering music file sharing sites and how popular they were to the extent record companies had to come down hard on them.

Alex: Music's a prime example of what you were saying about homogenisation, right? It's still got a way to go, but you can now reliably download a music file and know what you're going to play it on. Or alternatively, you can go the way the iPod went and know what device you've got, so you know where to go to get the music to put on that device. And because these structures of distribution and dissemination have been established, there is then the opportunity for people to illegally distribute that work, because they know there is the delivery mechanism on which people can listen to it. If there wasn't MP3 players, there wouldn't be MP3 pirates. If you couldn't play pirated music on a device reliably - if every single device or if every single way of listening to that music was coded differently, then piracy wouldn't be an issue because there wouldn't be any gain from pirating music. I think print's in the opposite position which is that, at the moment, what gain is there to be had from thinking about the online aspect of a work when there isn't an existing socio-political framework.

Steve: Well there's PDFs and people know that if you want someone to read your work you send in a Word document or PDF document or something that can be read by other peoples' computers. Maybe it's just that poetry can't be monetized, turned into a commodity as easily as music can. If you're saying one of the reasons that sharing music became so popular was potentially partly because of the internet but also to do with the fact that there were industry standards being established to make money out of it, and so becoming an MP3 pirate was an important thing to do. But if there's no real economy for small press work offline, then there's no impetus to build a community online. Does that work? We were just saying how there's not really a community for the online exchange of poetry - you go to individual sites and download it - there's not the sense of real exchange or sharing of work. I don't download a PDF from a website and then send it on to 20 friends. I don't get 50 PDFs in my inbox, probably no one does unless people are sending them work to be published offline. There's not a sense of rapid exchange of poetry online going on like there is in music.

Alex: But just because the actual publication can't be monetized doesn't mean it can't work within a monetized system. So I'm thinking - take the iPod and iTunes as musical analogy - iTunes sells music in a format that is ideally suited to playing on an iPod, and is a separate format from MP3, which is the kind of democratised standard of music distribution, if you like - if you want something to be played on everything, you'll format it as an MP3, but because Apple have established a massive monetized ecosystem with the hardware device, they are then able to monetize the content in a way that suits them. What I was thinking was when print gets to that stage and everyone has their print equivalent of an iPod, if that ever happens, is it then that poetry enters into that community space online as well, when you can have three or four poets - I know it might seem like a dystopian vision - all with their eReader at a reading and then they electronically exchange books rather than exchanging the physical object - is it at that point, does that ecosystem, that monetization need to occur before the social mechanisms of print exchange can be replicated in the online space? Because then in effect everyone has their own personal server, like we were talking about, everyone is Sean Bonney with his Wi-Fi signal right? It becomes your personal object which you're then exchanging with someone else face to face and all the socio-political positions that come along with that.

Steve: I think that's probably right but does that mean poetry is always playing catch up, it's always a parasite driven by larger forces than itself?

Alex: I think when you have a poetry that is written not to be monetized, without the goal to sell, without the goal to just provide some kind of aesthetic pleasure, when you have a poetry that engages on a political level with things, it's naturally - got to tread carefully here - because of exactly that it's got to be difficult for it to establish its own structures of distribution.

Steve: I'm thinking now I can write a poem on a torn piece of paper - that's always going to be possible even if paper becomes really expensive and all work is produced online, but if eReaders only really read Word documents or PDFs and you can't shape your own page as intuitively as you can rip a piece of paper into an abstract shape then it is going to change, even though the poets might be there at the readings with their eReaders, finally at the point where they can have a gift economy of distribution, there's going to be serious limits on what can be done in that space, but it's impossible to imagine how code will work and how poets will be able to work with code.

Alex: It's an interesting paradox - in order to establish that gift economy you need to have a monetized economy to give you the system in order to distribute.

Steve: And you'd need to be able to afford all the hardware.

Alex: So, how could you establish a structure or a community of distribution online that would not be dependent on industry standards - I mean, is that what the internet is now? Is it literally I've put my poem up in this format, in order to read it you need to make sure your computer can read this format? Does it depend on effort from the reader, is the position to take, well, we know there are disadvantages to online publishing and it's not as comfortable, it makes your eyes tired, screens are different sizes...

Steve: And what we talked about earlier that all those things are tapping into larger concerns about access to real politics.

Alex: And maybe that's okay. Maybe that's a position to take online. Not saying it's necessarily a desirable one - maybe that's the one that everyone is adopting by default - we know these things aren't engaging on a political level and that will have to do for now because until we have a structure with which we can engage with, what are we going to do? How do you establish a gift economy in an economy that doesn't have any standards of exchange?

Steve: Does the internet have any standards of exchange?

Alex: Music is one you pointed out, you exchange files among devices that are pretty much standardised now.

Steve: The other thing is stuff like Facebook, which seems to make its money mostly through advertising, so you could potentially feel like you're in an environment where there's no particular - though there's big standards for exchange of information in Facebook - but you could feel you're cut off from anything to do with money but every time you go on a page you're sustaining the network. Maybe that's a separate issue.

Alex: So what's good about the internet for small presses? Or how could small presses make the internet good?

Steve: This is going to sound utterly banal, but I don't think you have the information gap that you had 20 or 30 years ago when you don't know what a small press is doing when it's publishing in Newcastle, you might find out in a bulletin three months later. We publish something today, we can tell people about it in a minute's time, and someone can buy it and have it the next day, so there's a speed, and so for small presses they can respond to events incredibly fast.

Alex: Do you think that changes its value though? If you're waiting three months and you have to actively pursue that publication in order to gain access to it?

Steve: The possibilities are completely different. If there was a local issue I wanted to respond to, say, the council looking after the people in the borough, and I wanted to write about that, in three months time that might not be a hot political issue anymore, but you were talking then about it being more from the perspective of someone wanting to get the publication. What you're saying is does the internet lessen your commitment to the work because you're not having to work as hard to be involved, you can be a part-time poet, and I guess things like Opened encourage people to do that because they can see at a glance all the different events that are going on, they feel like they can learn a community without having to give anything back or really be involved themselves or give any of their time, because something like the Opened Reader collects news from 25 different poetry sites and many of those will be small presses so you can see the output of those small presses at a glance instead of actually having to know the poets. Depends what you want out of it I guess. I'm as guilty of that as anyone else. This is again a negative spin on the internet. I think that speed is important, being able to react and disseminate quickly. Whether actually anyone reads it or not is another thing.

Alex: That is a distinct advantage in the sense that people maybe became very quickly aware of what happened at Sussex with the poetry readings there recently and the protests that went on, and that can be an incredibly powerful thing - disseminating a report of that event through a poetry community can do things, right, that word of mouth can't, in terms of a speed of distribution of knowledge.

Steve: Yeah, I mean it hasn't happened but I could imagine the report got sent out, reports of how the reading went, which I guess could encourage more protest readings at other university campuses - those reports could have been sent around in the form of an ePublication with photos of the event, the poems written down with the readers reports at the back - that could have been sent around in a day in a way that if they put that together as a book - it couldn't be.

Alex: Is that a way to replace what's lost in online publishing, to do some kind of real-time publishing.

Steve: I think at least again you're using the possibilities of the internet positively.

Alex: And that act of publishing takes place alongside a live event that is situated in a physical space, that the online publication of that work then becomes explicitly tied into that performance, that event.

Steve: The promoter in me makes me think the danger in that is that people stop bothering to go to the event.

Alex: I see what you mean.

Steve: I think it is important but you fall foul of one of the bad things about the internet which is that it encourages consumption rather than engagement. For me that seems to mark out peoples' attitudes online when you have communities of people online, they're not really marked out by proper engagement.