

Why Self-Publishing May Be Your Best Option

AN AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE

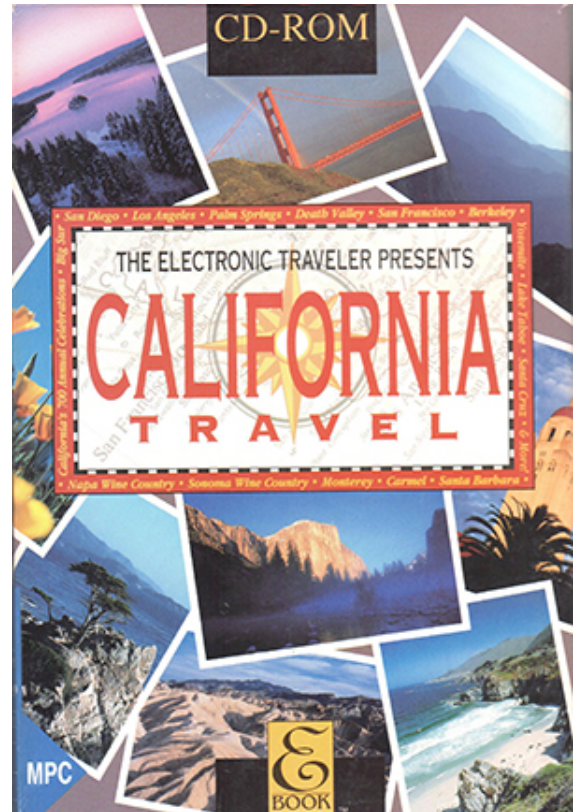
Moments in the Electronic Publishing Revolution: A Participant's Journey

Author's Note: The last update of this saga brought the story to 2016. The next update will carry forward to 2020 and thereafter.

By Lee Foster

As we head into the future, the publishing revolution emerging around us will celebrate "self-publishing" or "independent publishing," call it what you wish.

According to recent Nielsen data released at the Frankfurt Book Fair, self-publishing is now about 18% of all books published, up from 14% a year ago.



My cdrom "book" 1993

For me, this is a continuum of innovative activity in publishing that I have been involved in since 1980. In 2016, more and more Authors will want to control their editorial products. Technology now allows this. There are parallels in other areas, such as ordinary people becoming mini-hoteliers with their spare room through Airbnb and drivers with cars becoming cab companies in their spare time with Uber. Publishing of books/ebooks has also gone person-to-person, supported by the evolving technology.

I celebrate the current publishing revolution in my new book about the independent publishing process, titled *An Author's Perspective on Independent Publishing: Why Self-Publishing May Be Your Best Option*. The book can be seen on [Amazon](#) and on my [Amazon Author Page](#). After completing 14 books with traditional publishers, why did I switch to producing four books "independently" published or "indie"? Why do I now recommend this path for most authors? The book describes my best advice on the publishing of printed books (print-on-demand), ebooks, books-as-websites, audiobooks, and special opportunities open to indie publishers, such as Chinese translation and sales in China.

The purpose on this article is to recall some of my adventures in innovative publishing since 1980. This is not history for history's sake, but history presented to alert us to making a new, contemporary, and productive history for ourselves in 2016 and beyond in publishing. I present this also not for the benefit of Lee Foster's canonization, but to alert Everyman (updated now to Everyperson) to watch for and seize upon the innovative opportunities that will present themselves to us as aware individuals in 2016 and beyond.

I have been privileged to participate in many critical moments in the publishing revolutions since 1980. This is the story of special moments in my pilgrimage. Chaucer remains my main guru on this personal route to my Canterbury.

Here are moments in my electronic publishing path:

-1970s: The main inspiration for my delight in evolving technology was my father, Russell Gordon Foster.

He lived in the 1970s in his little "Electronic Cottage" on Lake Washington, near Mankato, Minnesota. He was always taking delight in the new technologies, both hardware and software. He had some of the first computers, some of the first word processing and calculation software, and one of the first portable telephones. His excitement about all this and his wonderment about where it was heading always engaged me. The marvel of human existence in our time is partly expressed in the rapid technological development all around us. This is a wondrous aspect of our modern life, and is celebrated in my travel literary book [*Travels in an American Imagination: The Spiritual Geography of Our Times*](#).

There were some humor details back there in the 1970s that it may be difficult to appreciate today. For example, one year in the late 1970s, I forget which year, I did a cross-country drive with my young family in my VW Camper to Minnesota and my dad's Electronic Cottage. My plan was do to do a writing/photography article on Yellowstone for one of my magazine clients. I arrived in Minnesota and had my tools at the ready, meaning my pen and paper and my portable typewriter with which I traveled.

Dad said, "Lee, go on the deck and see what I've got set up for you. It will change

your life.”

He rarely made such ambitious statements, so I did take notice. He had set on the deck of his lake cottage his newest purchase, which was one of the first Apple computers.

He said to me, “Lee, go ahead and keyboard in your Yellowstone article. Then we can do a print out.”

I did that, and hit the print button. This was remarkable. The printer printed out my article.

Then dad came out with a glass of chilled Chardonnay, still my preferred varietal, and said, “Now, Lee, take some time, relax, and edit your article, save it, and then do a new printout.”

That was a new concept. I edited the article, saved it, and hit the print button again. Out came the revised article. Light bulbs definitely went off in my thinking. This could greatly improve my productivity. However, I sensed still some imperfections in the current reality.

Then dad came out with another glass of chilled Chardonnay and this consoling message, “Lee, I know what you are thinking. You see a limitation. But guess what? By your visit next year, Apple has promised to introduce lower case letters. Won’t that be wonderful?”

-1980: I purchased one of the first Osborne computers, which was one of the first computers that had all the necessary components in a relatively portable or at least “luggable” package.



My Osborne Computer, 1980

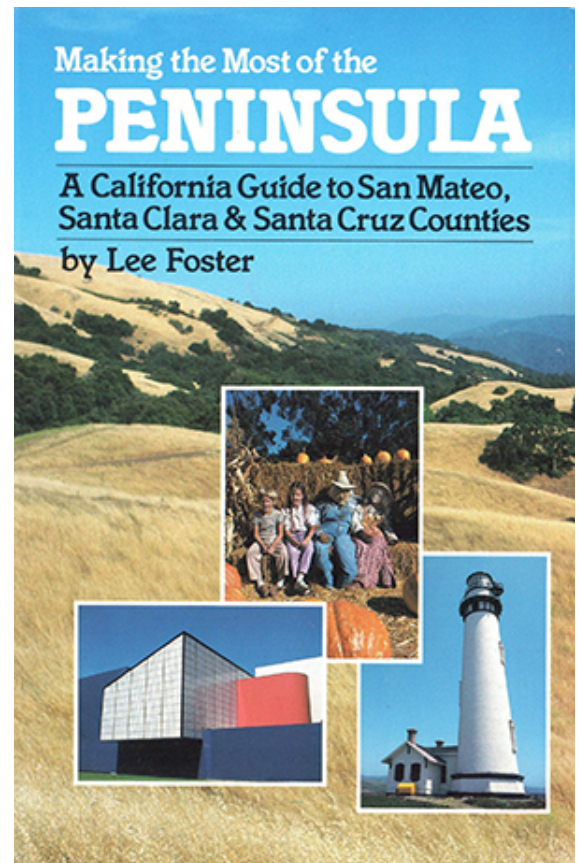
Prior to that time all recent books, including two books of my own, were written out one keystroke at a time on a typewriter. When the manuscript was marked up and revised, the entire document had to be typed out once again.

Sometimes we live by coincidence in a very small world. Adam Osborne happened to live just a few houses up the hill from me in Berkeley/Oakland.

I remember going to a technology show in San Francisco and finding many people hovering over a little suitcase-type device, called the Osborne. It seemed to have all the components one would need for a fully-functioning computer in a small portable package. In that respect it was superior to anything Apple then offered. I bought one of the first off the assembly line, a brown case Osborne, which I still have, and which is now a collectible.

Most of my colleagues viewed my enthusiasm about this with some suspicion. Had Foster lost it?

-1981: I published a travel guidebook that was one of the first books ever to be typeset from a computer disk.



One of the first books to be laid out from a computer disk

I soon had my Osborne hooked up to my IBM Selectric typewriter to give crisp printouts. But could the computer participate in publishing in another and higher level?

Could the book file also be a part of the production of a book? I became aware of a breaking technology with which a book could actually be laid out from a computer disk, if you put in the proper codes, and then printed out the book on a glossy typesetting paper.

At the time I was involved with Presidio Press for a guidebook, ironically, to the Silicon Valley region, titled [*Making the Most of the Peninsula*](#). A few collectible copies are available on Amazon. Doing the layout and typesetting of the book was quite expensive, about \$3,000 in 1981 dollars, mainly because the book had to be manually keyboarded in to the typesetting machine.

I made a proposal to Presidio, "What if I can get the book satisfactorily laid out and

typeset from my computer on the proper photographic typesetting paper? How about paying me half of the savings?"

Presidio liked the idea. Save the publisher \$1 and pay the savior only 50 cents. What was there not to like? Payment to be made only after Salvation is guaranteed.

The guy who had the new technology, and was functioning out of his garage in Los Altos, wanted to promote his expertise. He offered me his services for the cost of his materials, the photographic paper, which was trivial.

I put in the sweat equity of coding. I managed to get the entire book laid out and typeset to Presidio's specs. Presidio wrote me a check upon delivery for \$1,500 additional Author dollars. I was the Author with a "value added" function.

As another substantial benefit, the computer didn't inject any creative "new errors" in the manuscript, so Presidio and I didn't have to proof the book once again. Even the most skilled typesetters of the time sometimes introduced inadvertent errors.

-1983: I became the first travel writer to earn a dollar in the new online milieu, signing a contract with CompuServe to put all my travel writing online in their system, in return for a 10% royalty of their then "premium content" connect-time-sensitive fees. CompuServe sent me a monthly check for the next 18 years.

At the time, there were two online players, CompuServe and The Source. This was before AOL became prominent. I approached both CompuServe and The Source about putting my travel content on their system in return for a royalty fee. The Source was not interested. CompuServe was.

So I began uploading my travel articles, which CompuServe users could download at painfully slow "baud" rates. All was text only, of course. No graphics. When CompuServe moved to a fixed-fee per month, rather than connect-time charges for premium content, my agreement with them changed to a fee-per-month.

They called my western states U.S. article cluster *West Coast Travel*. Everything beyond the U.S. west became *Adventures in Travel*.

My final month in this 18-year relationship was in January 2001.

-1991: I had one of the first “books” to be sold on a computer disk, presented by a new software, hypertext markup language, or html.

In 1991 I was approached by a software company in Boston, called Boston Developers, with a proposal. They had seen my work on CompuServe and were aware that I had a lot of travel writing content digitally ready, especially covering California.

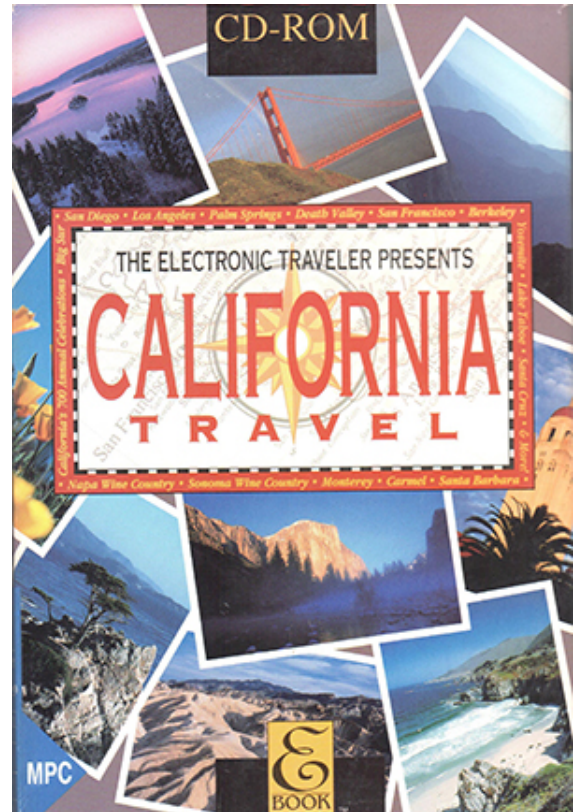
They were developing a new software that they called “hypertext markup language” or html. Their main customer at the time was Toshiba computers, which was selling about 1.25 million units a year. I happened to be using a Toshiba computer myself, at that point, so I was familiar with Toshiba.

Boston Developers said they were doing something revolutionary, which was to put the manual for the Toshiba computer in the box, not as a printed manual, but as a manual on a computer disk. The computer buyer would “read” the manual on the disk, in the computer, rather than as a printed book. As part of their deal, Toshiba was willing to put in each box a flyer from them about some other kind of “book” on a computer disk, run by their html software.

So they approached me about putting a *California Travel* disk together, with my content. I provided the text-only content. They did all the software presentation. We completed the project, and the flyer was put in the box of the 2.5 million Toshibas sold for two years. The *California Travel* disk product was for sale for \$19.95. I had negotiated to receive 10% of the sale as the content creator.

They got a reasonable return of buyers. Orders came in from Brazil and Japan and Europe because Toshiba was then a major worldwide computer supplier. The project was proof-of-concept. It was possible to create and sell a “book” on a computer disk, using their html software. This was an exciting breakthrough.

-1993: I had one of the first travel guides to be presented with a new technology, the CD-ROM. The “book” had a text and a thousand photos, something revolutionary, way beyond anything that could be offered in a printed book.



My cdrom “book” 1993

In 1993 another new technology emerged, the CD-ROM, or “compact disk read-only memory.” This was an innovation because of the huge amount of space on the medium. The limit of the lack of space in a printed book or on a computer disk was no longer a constraint. The CD-ROM had what seemed like infinite space on it. This meant that graphics, such as photos, could be added to a text in an abundant amount.

I was approached by a company called Ebook, one of the first consumer CD-ROM product developers, to use my California Travel writing with 1,000 of my California photos illustrating it. This was a congenial idea.

They would scan the photos and put them on the CD-ROM, tying the photos to the text. They had a ready and guaranteed market. In a deal with Radio Shack, they had a guaranteed sale of two units to each of the 5,000 Radio Shack stores. So they sold 10,000 units of the product at retail \$39.95 on the day of manufacture, and I had a 10% royalty.

The project was a success in the brief period, before the Internet became viable,

when CD-ROMs were all the rage. I still have some copies of the *California Travel CD-ROM* that they produced. This is now a collectible. The CD-ROM came in a jewel case. The jewel case was packaged inside a rather large cardboard box, with beautiful printing on the outside. It was felt that the CD-ROM was so slim and small that the consumer would be more inclined to buy a \$39.95 product if it was packaged in a fairly large cardboard box.

-1996: I developed one of the first viable and robust travel publishing websites on the World Wide Web. My site was and is www.fostertravel.com and now contains about 250 worldwide coverages of travel articles/photos. I had about 200 articles up by the end of 1996. The site was transformed in 2009 from an html site to become a modern WordPress site.



My website in 1996

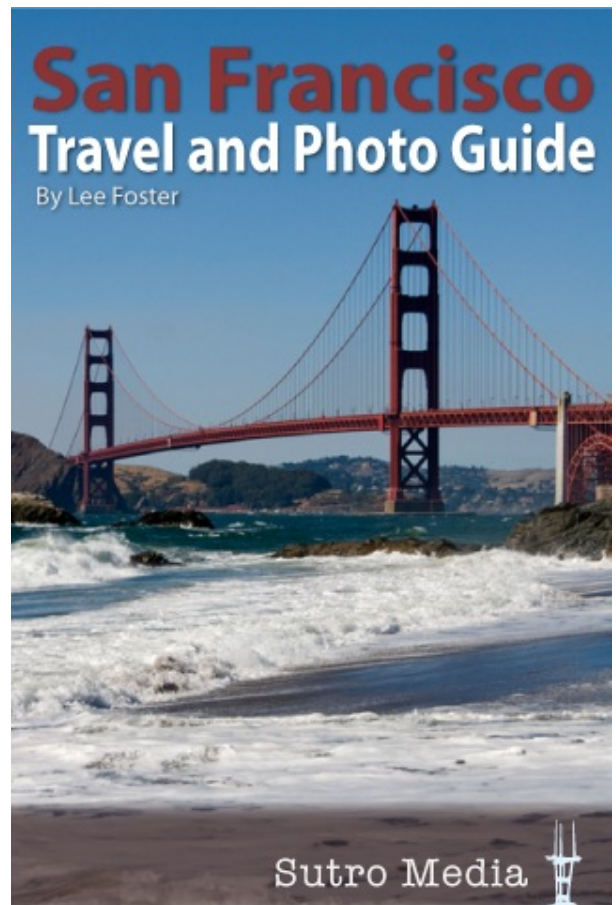
The Web took some time to catch on, partly because the commercial online systems provided a sense of community and an orderly presentation of available content.

You had to know where to find things on the Web in the era before sophisticated search engines. But always there were new sites coming on, and there has always been an excitement about what will be next for the Internet.

In the first years, words dominated. Then photography became prominent. Finally, video became possible. All this change has occurred in a short period.

-2009: Most recently, at the end of 2009, I was in the first wave of authors to have

my own travel apps published.



My travel app from 2009

My first title in the Apple iTunes App Store was *San Francisco Travel and Photo Guide* from Sutro Media. My app became a best seller in the app store. Apple declared it a Staff Favorite and it sold 1,000 units in the following month.

I later had three apps in the app store. The Sutro Travel App vision collapsed in late 2015 for 450 app Authors. This was idiosyncratic and had nothing to do with the app technology or the brilliant travel app content from a distinguished group of worldwide app Authors assembled. It had to do with disagreements between the two Sutro Media founders. This is [a long story](#), and keeps us alert to the human element and human cooperation needed for success in any technological revolution.

And now, as we move into 2016, I wonder what aspect of the revolution will catch our attention. Where will you and I be as this new world unfolds? We will continue to learn from each other, so keep me informed of your dreams and your progress (Lee

Foster, lee@fostertravel.com) and I will report further to you on the revolution from time to time as my exploration continues..