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Small yet Sustainable: eco-warriors of pen and paper

Sustainability has become one of those big topics that seem to have exploded into the mainstream social consciousness with more vigour and engagement than ever before. Since Greta Thunberg uttered her famous 'How Dare You' speech to the UN in 2019 the public has been galvanised into sustainable action. With the public putting pressure on different industry sectors, it is no surprise that the publishing industry has subsequently increased its dedication towards sustainability goals whilst also seeing this public interest reflected in book sales. Nature writing has actually improved in sales since 2019, up 15% in volume, and according to The Bookseller's Buyer's Guides, it is a particularly big seller among independent publishers (Keira O'Brien, "Nature writing rises as readers seek a comforting approach to the environment", 2022). One such independent nature publisher is Little Toller, a publisher located in West Dorset who has recently won the regional 2023 Small Press of the Year Award from the British Book Awards. They began in 2008 as an imprint of Dovecote Press and their singular stated purpose was to help revive forgotten and classic books about nature and English rural life (<https://www.littletoller.co.uk/about-us-2/>). However, with this great opportunity for nature publishers like Little Toller this also means they have greater visibility. Therefore, it is important that they ensure they have some sort of environmental plan in place and that they can show they are having a positive ecological impact. So naturally the question remains, what can independent publishers accomplish in the highly competitive marketplace when it comes to operating in an environmentally sustainable manner?

But that's enough of the wider details. To really understand what opportunities are available to Little Toller you must first get an understanding of the work which I completed for the company. Now for the most part my time with Little Toller constituted hours upon hours of dedicated research into a variety of different strategies and into the current state of sustainability in publishing. Research such as this is crucial to building a good foundation of knowledge since it is through this research that I was able to identify not only the immediate domestic market but also what was going on in the wider world of publishing. This body of research was a great asset in the end as it helped uncover what strategies were successful for publishers and what opportunities there were. It also helped me to identify two immediate competitors, namely Folde and Renard Press, which are both comparable to Little Toller in scale thus granting relevant insight into possible avenues Little Toller could explore. Ultimately, that was the intention of my research; I was aiming to see what current strategies

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worked and assess their relevance to Little Toller. Naturally, this research also included several meetings with key figures from the industry which were highly useful. These meetings granted me the opportunity not only to gain firsthand knowledge but also to engage with an established network of contacts who already had experience working towards environmental sustainability. Through these meetings, I met with one representative from Penguin RH which really opened the doors to the possibilities of sustainability in publishing – especially aspects I could not have considered. Most significant was the need to look towards other industries for examples, such as the fashion industry, and investigate ethical publishing as well since ethical resourcing can often help in contributing to environmental sustainability.

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Aside from these meetings, it was also deemed important by my contact at Little Toller that I visit the site of TJ Books. For context, TJ Books is a printing facility in Cornwall that supplies multiple businesses including Little Toller. Visiting their site was key to my research and was incredibly useful since not only did I see firsthand what strategies were being put in place down the production value chain but also gained practical knowledge on the exact processes behind book production. This was one of the most useful and important parts of the work placement since it gifted me with unique knowledge for a graduate emerging into the industry and presented a wonderful intersection between reality and theory. All this naturally culminated in one large final report that detailed not only what was done in my placement but specifically documented what my research had unveiled. This report represented a structured analysis of the global status of the publishing industry as well as a presentation of the apparent opportunities Little Toller could take advantage of as well as different strategies they could follow based on what information I could glean from my research. Much of what information I look at here is a direct follow on from that initial report.

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Presently, publishing in the UK has never been better when it comes to operating in an ecologically sustainable manner. Across the UK industry, we can see that the domestic marketplace is far ahead of the wider, international market in terms of legislation and the efforts of individual businesses. Take for example the situation unfolding in the US, where you have major, leading global brands having open discussions about what is to be done and yet there is very little action being taken. Speaking to one representative from HP, they stated that whilst publishers in the US have had many meetings and are willing to talk there is still very little

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engagement when it comes to creating solutions and solving the problems. So, what makes UK publishers different and how have they worked to improve their operations?

I mean when we look at the domestic market the big five publishing houses of the industry (Penguin RH, Simon & Schuster, Hachette Book Group, Macmillan Publishers, and HarperCollins) are universally putting great effort and expense into the reduction of emissions and clearly communicating a message of sustainability to their readers and shareholders. Almost all of them have created sustainability reports and plans for the future which they have made freely available for public access. They are promoting books focused on nature and the environment as well as the creation of new imprints such as the new imprint Penguin is working towards alongside Sir David Attenborough (*Penguin Sustainability Policy Spring 2022*, pg. 5).

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But the question remains, how has this actually influenced smaller publishers in the industry? After all, it is these numerous small publishers who are often considered the beating heart of the industry in the UK. What possible difference can they make? Well, for one the efforts of mainstream publishers are not isolated and are instead indicative of wider impacts across the industry from various small publishers. Keeping things relevant to the South-West I'd like to draw your attention to two other small publishers who are direct competitors to Little Toller. As discussed, there is Renard Press which ascribes to projects such as Ecologi to help replant lost trees and work to maintain a slimmer catalog of books in order to reduce wastage and send orders out in eco-friendly 'book wrap' (<https://renardpress.com/sustainability-policy/>). On the other hand, Folde uses a carbon calculator (Bezero) to help reduce their CO2 emissions from book production which made up 54% of their scope 3 emissions (<https://www.foldedorset.com/sustainability>). These are only some of the strategies implemented by these two businesses and are certainly achievable for Little Toller. Of course, this action is not limited simply to publishers but also the wider supply chain as seen with Henry Ling Ltd, a printing press based out of Dorchester whose efforts include sustainable energy sources such as utilising solar power and implementing different staff initiatives such as a cycle to work program (<https://www.henryling.co.uk/home.aspx?p=Environment>). Thus, demonstrating that making the industry more sustainable has reached concerns across the entire production value chain.

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What this all reveals are multiple avenues of approach that a small publisher such as Little Toller can pursue to be more sustainable and help the UK publishing industry meet these goals. The first such one is clear collaboration and communication within the industry, whereby

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publishers coordinate with each other to pool research and collect data and findings that help contribute to improving the entire industry. Already we are seeing action like this with the Book Chain collaborative project and the Independent Publishers Guild Book Journeys Project; both of which are collaborative projects between businesses to identify areas of the industry that need to improve sustainability goals. This idea of communication also extends beyond the sphere of business and onto how publishers can inform their readers as to what they are doing. Like the Big Five, many are now publishing their own sustainability reports thereby being open with the public regarding their ecological impact and efforts. This also provides a unique opportunity for publishers to try innovative communication strategies that also include what sort of books these publishers are putting out and highlighting such as dedicated imprints (which we previously saw with Penguin RH) or working alongside local industries (as seen with Folde) to name a few. Yet aside from communication, the largest opportunity comes from the need to reduce emissions, namely scope 1, scope 2, and scope 3 emissions. Whilst scope 1 and 2 emissions are significant most publishers identify scope 3 (which involves the indirect CO2 emissions such as transportation emissions) as being the largest source of carbon emissions. Therefore, it is necessary for independent publishers like Little Toller to find a way to reduce these emissions from not only themselves but also their printers and partners. One last opportunity stems from the waste produced during the printing and packing of a book. Through the production process, there will always be some manner of waste and whilst this is more the domain of printing companies like Henry Ling or TJ Books it is important for publishers to still be aware and suggest measures to limit waste.

Taking all this into consideration there are plenty of opportunities for a publisher like Little Toller and as evidenced by the effective and clearly displayed efforts of Renard Press and Folde, size is no limitation and with the emphasis on collaboration in the publishing industry Little Toller is not exactly operating in a vacuum. But I am sure it would be helpful to be more specific and take a more targeted approach to what Little Toller and other small publishers can do. Essentially my research and work identified six avenues of approach including production, personnel, facilities, digital media, communication, and transportation.

Starting with production this provides a great place where major changes can be implemented. Strategies can focus on facilitating packaging that continues to be sustainable by being reusable whilst reducing the amount of plastic used. Already TJ Books has been focusing on paper packaging and both Folde and Renard show using packaging made from paper and string tape

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is a workable strategy. Furthermore, there is a chance for companies to make use of systems like the Book Chain Project to track and ensure that the paper mills are FSC Certified and are supplying paper that is sustainably and ethically sourced. It would also be a great opportunity to expand the scope of research to also look at other production-related aspects such as ensuring office supplies are ISO 14001 Certified and if they are not then investigate alternatives since changes must permeate all aspects of a publishing house.

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Yet the production process would be nothing without the facilities to support it. Now small publishers will not have the resources like HarperCollins – who are constructing a new facility in Scotland with sustainability in mind (HarperCollins, *Our Sustainability Journey*, pg. 2). Instead, the focus should be on improving their current facilities. This can easily be achieved by developing strategies to responsibly manage waste such as keeping waste recycling processes internal to the company to reduce scope 3 emissions from transportation or otherwise find other uses for waste such as reusing paper offcuts and trimmings from production. The publishers themselves have the opportunity to make a difference by making use of LED lighting throughout the entirety of their facilities and offices to reduce Scope 2 emissions and many publishers are already engaged in this practice. Furthermore, Henry Ling proves renewable energy sources are a viable option for a long-term sustainability strategy as they power not only their own facility using solar power but also feed the excess back into the national grid. There are also long-term considerations for the addition of the Boxsizer technology used by Hachette to help make packaging more direct and feature less wasted space for void fill-in packaging. For those small publishers who have the budget, they can also install motion sensor technology for lighting to reduce passive energy consumption through lights left on. All in all, facilities are about reducing passive energy consumption and active energy consumption to reduce their carbon footprint.

And of course, you can never forget the personnel involved since their involvement can create a work environment that passively reflects an eco-friendly business policy. By encouraging staff and employees to take environmentally sustainable actions at work such as switching to browsers such as Ecosia (which plants trees the more you use the search engine) and by making it easier and more convenient for people to cycle to work (such as with Renard Press) creates an atmosphere of sustainable action. Nevertheless, some companies are taking these efforts a step further by producing an environmental information toolkit for members of staff that can

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help to inform them of ways they can also be more sustainable as individuals and encourage them to participate in more sustainable habits at home.

Whilst we consider the practical solutions, we must also look at how this is balanced with promotional material and the usage of book catalogues to convey intention and encourage readers to be more environmentally conscious. A good strategy used universally is simply creating a website page that provides detailed information pertaining to a sustainability strategy and the actions taken to become more sustainable. There is also an opportunity here to note emission targets and talk about any sustainability projects publishers are involved in; after all, there is a surprising variety of projects for businesses to participate in that can restore the environment. By being open about their sustainability actions they have a chance to show off the use of FSC-certified paper, ISO 14001-certified resources, sustainable inks and use of recycled materials, etc. Finally, in regard to promoting their efforts, small publishers can highlight catalogs of relevantly themed books on environmental sustainability from existing collections of literature in their backlog.

Building on this is the importance of communication within the industry which should be clear and aid in the support of publishers like Little Toller. Ideally, publishers should reach out along the supply chain to papermills and wholesalers to speak to them directly about their own climate impact and their sustainable methods of operation since communication, accountability and transparency are key to ensuring change in the industry (Courtney Ward, 2023). One such idea proposed that could work well is tracking one book through each stage of the production process from the reader and through to the exact plot of forest land it came from to ensure there is verifiable accountability. Moreover, Penguin RH has one imprint where they do something similar by including the sustainability information in the book's backmatter thus demonstrating how ideas like this could be executed.

Moreover, we must briefly take transportation into consideration. A good way to start would be to encourage the use of sustainable transportation methods for books that can reduce CO₂ emissions such as utilising sustainable distribution networks that limit scope 1 and 2 emissions. More options would be to gradually grow a fleet of electric vehicles to transport books and condense book orders to transport multiple different book orders in the same vehicle so there are no more vehicles in operation than necessary.

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Overall, these strategies are only suggestions gleaned from my own research and I am certain that with enough time and dedication, better-informed professionals will uncover much more effective strategies. As is very apparent through all of these strategies one of the biggest hurdles is funding, however proper government programs and legislation supporting sustainable programs can reap major benefits as we have already seen with efforts made in South America to encourage more environmentally sustainable practices such as Brazil's Bolsa Floresta which has seen smaller communities become educated and trained on sustainability via financial incentivisation which could work well if applied to the paper milling industry (*Pursuing a Green Economy*, 2022). Not to say small publishers should grow reliant on government support, but proper legislation can help guide and encourage small publishers to keep up the good work. After all, it has only been five years since Thunberg's speech, and it is important to ensure that these publishers maintain their current momentum and work with a long-term plan in mind.

To summarise all that I've put forward I would like to begin by addressing how my time with Little Toller gave me an in-depth understanding of the production process to which I had existing theoretical knowledge but no real practical knowledge. The opportunity to do real, practical work in the industry was fantastic since theory can only take you so far. Moreover, I came to learn more about sustainability in the publishing industry and how small and large publishers can take steps and measures to be more proactively sustainable. For these reasons, it is important for more students to do placements like this as it provided me with insight, knowledge, and research on a rapidly developing area of the market that has been active but not as well-documented or promoted to new graduates emerging into the industry – and these graduates are hungry, eager, and ready to get out there and get involved. Even better is that a placement like this gave insight into sustainability in book production, which constitutes some of the highest carbon footprint impacts in the industry. I suppose ultimately, publishing is like any other industry when it comes to sustainable action. The focus for small businesses is the same as the larger companies; it is on both repairing damage already done and taking steps to make sure the industry does as minimal amount of further harm as possible. Ideally with further research, more dedicated graduates educated about sustainability, and more publishers actively implementing environmentally sustainable strategies we can see the development of a bright and hopeful future and the core of it will be the dozens of small yet sustainable publishers who just keep going.

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