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# Selecting Books for Review: Survey Data Summaries and Conclusions

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In order to understand how topic bias may be manifesting in book reviews, our research team felt it was important to gain an understanding of how publications select the books they review. Our hope was that having a better sense of this process would help us identify where topic bias may be creeping in and who might have the power to address it.

As such, we designed a survey that was intended to give us insight into the book selection process. We sent the survey out to the 97 publications that CWILA and VIDA review each year in their annual counts. We received responses from 29 of these publications. Of these responses, 21 came from Canadian publications, 7 from American publications, and 1 from a European publication. 6 of these publications are larger publications (meaning they have over 10,000 Facebook followers) while the other 24 are smaller publications.

Regarding methodology, each of the survey questions asked were open answer, not multiple choice. One of our researchers grouped answers together into appropriate categories for analysis, meaning the answer categories are subject to researcher bias.

The following is a summary of the survey responses and some conclusions that can be drawn from them.

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## Who Has The Power of Selection?

We asked survey respondents: who decides which books get reviewed at your publication? (This section features only 28 responses, not 29, as one of the publications was an individually managed blog.)

### Who Selects Books for Review

<u>Primary Decision-Makers</u>	<u># of Respondents Selected</u>	<u>% of Total Publications</u>
Section Editors	9	32.1
Reviewers	6	21.4
Combination of editorial staff	6	21.4
Editors in Chief	4	12.3
Staff and reviewers	3	10.7

These responses indicate primary decision-makers for the selection process. When further asked if anyone else has influence over the selection, of the 13 respondents who initially indicated a non-collaborative process (i.e., only one person makes the decision), 7 indicated that there were indeed other staff participating in the process. Thus, in total, only **6/28 respondents** (less than a quarter), have non-collaborative selection processes.

### Key Takeaways

1. Given that section editors seem to be the most common deciders, it would follow that, if topic bias is occurring at the level of book selection, advocates should target section editors
2. Reviewers do also seem to play a significant role in the decision, and three quarters of respondents indicated that the process is collaborative. Topic bias advocacy should thus eventually targeting reviewers and other editorial staff as well
3. Only one publication mentioned the book publishers themselves playing a role in influencing books reviewed; it follows that advocates should focus on publication staff, not publishing companies
4. There was no discernable pattern of larger publications having different processes from smaller ones

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## Do you keep track of reviews?

We also asked respondents whether they keep track of all the books they review and receive for review each year.

### Keeping Track of Books Reviewed

<u>Response</u>	<u># of Responses</u>	<u>% of Total Publications</u>
Yes, We Keep Track	16	55.2
No, We Don't	10	34.5
Yes, But Informally	3	10.3

### Keeping Track of Books Received for Review

<u>Response</u>	<u># of Responses</u>	<u>% of Total Publications</u>
Yes, We Keep Track	11	38.3
No, We Don't	17	58.6
N/A	1	3.4

### Key Takeaways

1. A (small) majority of publications track the books they review. Advocates could design a tool that will easily allow publications to self-assess on topic bias using the data they already collect
2. Given that so many publications already do track the books they review, it is reasonable to assume that, if given a tool to do so, other publications would be open to self-tracking as well. Advocates should perhaps thus create a streamlined tool that allows publications to both keep track of the books they review and self-assess
3. Only a third of publications keep track of books received for review, and none of the larger publications are amongst this group. However, it would likely still be valuable to create a tool that assesses topic bias in books received as well as books reviewed, so that advocates and publications themselves (those that do track books received) can assess whether topic bias is occurring at the level of selection (i.e., if topic bias is worse for books reviewed than overall books received)

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## How Do You Decide What Books to Review?

Finally, we asked a series of questions about the process and criteria for selecting books to review. Here are the results:

Do you have a standardized selection process?

<u>Response</u>	<u># of respondents</u>	<u>% of total publications</u>
Yes	5	17.2
No	20	69.0
More or less	4	13.8

Do you take into account genre or themes when deciding which books to review?  
If so, how?

<u>Response</u>	<u># of respondents</u>	<u>% of total publications</u>
No	9	31
Yes – we only review certain genres	9	31
Yes – we try to maintain a balance of genres	5	17.2
Yes – we have separate sections for separate genres	3	10.3
Yes – no explanation	3	10.3
Yes – we look for themes that match the theme of our publication	2	6.7

Do you take into account the identity of the author (i.e., are they a woman, a person of colour etc) when deciding which books to review? If so, how?

Response	# of respondents	% of total publications
No	10	34.5
Yes – we look for authors from specific marginalized groups (i.e. women, authors of colour, queer authors etc)	6	20.7
Yes – we “diversity” in authors	3	10.3
Yes – no explanation	3	10.3
We care about diversity, but quality takes precedence	2	6.7
We only look at gender if we notice an imbalance	2	6.7
We only look at identity if we can’t decide between two books and need a tiebreaker	1	3.4
Sometimes	1	3.4
Yes – we track gender for CWILA	1	3.4

How do publications take into account identity? Each of the following methods was mentioned by one publication, unless otherwise indicated:

- Reading bio statements (mentioned twice)
- Looking authors up online
- Tracking gender of authors reviewed and reviewers
- Discussing demographic breakdowns of authors at meetings of editorial staff

### What criteria determine whether or not a book gets reviewed?

Criteria	# of mentions by respondents	% of publications looking for this criteria
Interest of reviewer	9	31
Diversity of authors	7	24.1
Geographic location of author (i.e. local, Canadian)	6	20.7
Popular or important book/author	5	17.2
Less covered book/author	5	17.2
Size of publisher	5	17.2
Book seems 'well written' or 'interesting'	5	17.2
Significant/interesting subject matter	4	13.8
Subject matter relates to publication theme	4	13.8
Diversity of genres	3	10.3

### Key Takeaways

1. Publications do not have standardized selection processes, which means biases can easily creep in without editors noticing. A self-assessment tool would at least cause publications to be cognizant of these biases
2. Two thirds of publications value having a diverse range of authors represented in their reviews section; one quarter of publications actively include diversity as part of their selection process – in fact, it was the second most named criteria across the range of publications. This indicates that at least a quarter of publications may be open to addressing topic bias in their publication using concrete means, such as a self-assessment tool
3. Of the 6 larger publications surveyed, none listed diversity as a criteria, and only 2 responded affirmatively when asked whether they take identity into consideration. Larger publications, then, may be less open to combatting topic bias

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## Next Steps

1. Further research should be conducted on the types of publications exhibiting topic bias; the data presented here would become much more meaningful if, for example, advocates also knew whether
  - Publications that track their books reviewed and/or received exhibit more topic bias than those that don't
  - Large publications exhibit more topic bias than small publications
  - Publications that actively include diversity as a selection criteria exhibit more topic bias than those that don't
2. Given that section editors and reviewers seem to hold the most sway over books selected for review, research on topic bias and tools to combat it should be disseminated primarily to those two targets
3. As previously indicated, advocates should develop a self-assessment tool that allows publications to track authors and genres/themes of books received and books reviewed throughout the year and then self-assess for topic bias using that data; this tool may not only help publications be more cognizant of topic bias, but also provide data confirming that topic bias occurs at the level of selecting books for review