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I Feel the Need, the Need to Weed! : Maintaining an E-book Collection

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Libraries and library collections are evolving. Formats are changing as technology advances, and physical libraries are expanding into an ever increasing digital world. Acquiring more materials in several different formats, including electronic brings on the issue of what to do with it all. Anyone, or any entity, that collects books in print or electronic format will eventually come to the realization that their space is finite. In order to acquire new materials they must either expand their space or do that horrible “four letter word”...weed. The word itself sends shivers down the backs of librarians everywhere. How can any self-respecting librarian get rid of precious materials? If money was no issue libraries everywhere would continue to build or acquire additional virtual storage space to avoid discarding something that may be valuable to some user sometime in the future.

Space, either physical or virtual, is not the only reason to remove materials from collections. Technology and science subject areas are advancing so rapidly that the information in those materials becomes outdated quickly. Should these be left on the shelf or in collections with incorrect information forever? This could be damaging for students who use them and are not aware they are outdated. It is unnecessary to keep all old editions of a work after new editions have been released; unless they are very rare items, older editions are outdated and take up precious shelf and virtual space. There are many issues that need to be taken into consideration when weeding. Having a good collection development and weeding policy is a must for all types of libraries. Researcher Ian McEwen (2012) advises that “weeding requires a small time commitment, some knowledge of what to look for, and a willingness to let go of the deadwood” (pp. 33-34). Despite the work involved, weeding is very beneficial to the health of a library’s collection.

Most libraries are hesitant to weed their collections, and it has been so for many years. John Berry (2013) in his article “The Weeding War” states that “careless weeding of library collections has been the source of tremendous misunderstanding, disruption, bad publicity, and all-too-frequently, the departure of library directors. [...] Weeding is controversial” (p. 10). Libraries must overcome the panic of throwing something away, and discard delicately to avoid a panic in their patrons. This is an ongoing issue, and the idea of more is better does not always hold true. Weeding is a necessary part of collection management and not only applies to print materials but also includes electronic books.

With advances in technology, formats of materials obtained by libraries are changing. Many items that were bought in print are now available in an electronic format. Electronic books, electronic journals, and streaming video are in increasingly high demand. Libraries are trying to keep up with demand for these items from the accelerating numbers of distance students or students who desire the accessibility and instant access these formats provide. Although many resources are being switched to, or only offered in, electronic format there will always be a place for print materials in libraries.

There are many advantages to electronic books: they take up no physical shelf space; they cannot wear out, nor can they be damaged, lost or stolen by patrons. They do not need to be re-shelved, are never overdue, and titles rarely go out of print. Peter Spitzform (2011) explains in his article “Patron-Driven Acquisition: Collecting as if Money and Space Mean Something” that an advantage to switching from print is that “electronic books may well help libraries manage their collections less expensively, and acquiring only those specific titles that patrons want, rather than purchasing all those that we think patrons might someday need, will certainly reduce the footprint of the print collections” (p. 22), slowing the expansion and aiding in creating space on the shelves.

E-books have been around since the 1970s, beginning with Project Gutenberg, but have only really grown in popularity in the last several years. Although Project Gutenberg was the first provider of e-books the term “electronic book” was coined earlier in 1968 by a professor at Brown University, Andries Van Dam. More libraries became aware of e-books and their capabilities in the late 1990’s with netLibrary launching their Internet-based e-book service, and in 2004 Google Books was released (Cheek and Hartel, 2012). Since then software applications, tablets and phones have made accessing e-books increasingly easier for users.

However, during this early startup of electronic books many libraries did not have the technology to allow users to access the e-book, because it, as well as the technology to access the e-books were very expensive. Platforms to view the e-books could also potentially add ongoing yearly maintenance fees to already strapped budgets. Some patrons resisted the technology, in part because they prefer the print materials. They were not true Luddites, but they found the platforms difficult to navigate, and prefer the simplicity of reading traditional books. There are also many subject areas that lend themselves better to print such as arts and architecture, leading publishers to publish more

in print and reducing the number of resources in electronic format in these areas as opposed to other subject areas.

E-books allow users to have instant access to materials in or outside the library 24/7. Currently, there are several avenues to obtaining e-books for libraries: libraries can purchase them through subscription services where they can get large collections of materials by subject matter, they can order single titles or implement a demand driven e-book acquisitions program. A Demand Driven Acquisitions (DDA) model or a Patron Driven Acquisitions (PDA) model are both e-book programs that provide large amounts of e-books without a huge upfront fee. Only the items that are used are paid for. The patrons choose an e-book and “check it out” or “borrow” it, and these are the only ones the library will pay for. It is a fantastic return on investment when every e-book purchased is assured to have at least one use, and it increases patron involvement in collection decisions. A comparative study by Kay Downey et al. (2014), about print books and DDA e-book acquisition and use discovered that there is “some evidence that suggests that user-selected resources have better long-term use than those selected by bibliographers,” and it is estimated that only around 40% of librarian selected print books have ever circulated (p. 140).

Input in selection for electronic or print materials from users appears to be a good plan for libraries. It will save money, insure use, and cut down on unwanted or possibly unused items. Patrons create a just-in-time model as opposed to the librarians collecting materials in a just-in-case model. “In the digital world, PDA of e-books allows for immediate access and shifts library funds from speculative buying to purchasing at point of need” (pp. 218), according to researchers Rebecca Schroeder and Tom Wright (2011) in their article “Electronic books: a call for effective business models.” Kay Downey et al. (2014) found that “studies [...] show that the circulation of the print collection is slowly declining, [...] and that] libraries are generally discovering that user-selected books, in print or e-book format, have better circulation rates than books acquired via the traditional approval method” (p. 144). However, there are some downsides to DDA programs, which include inconsistent pricing and purchasing models that are not very flexible. Despite those issues, DDA programs are becoming increasingly popular.

Although there is no physical book, preservation is still an issue with e-books. Portico, LOCKSS (Lots of Copies Keep Stuff Safe), and CLOCKSS (Controlled LOCKSS), can assist with digital preservation and can assist in preserving library purchased e-books. These systems also provide a platform to allow libraries to acquire single title e-books from vendors without having to purchase the vendor’s platform to be able to access it. According to Crosetto (2011), “[L]ibrarians and publishers must continue to work together to ensure that e-books can mesh with such systems. Innovation will prevail and, as a result, the formats and interfaces of e-books will change. The decisions made today will affect access to e-books in the future, so publishers and librarians must plan accordingly

to preserve e-book content in the best possible format” (p. 134).

As e-book collections grow, so does the need for a weeding policy. A literature review did not result in much information about weeding e-books. This could be for several reasons. Most likely is that DDA programs and e-books in general are just now really taking off, especially in small or underfunded libraries. Libraries and patrons are excited about all of the electronic books that they now have access to, or could have access to, and are instead focusing on how to build their collections. Some programs are still small at this time, but will grow in the foreseeable future. Libraries may not be thinking about future issues, but are concentrating on the here and now. At the moment, space may not be a concern and the material coming in is all current, but what happens 5-10 years down the road when these materials are no longer current or if libraries continue to suffer cuts in their materials budgets?

While many vendors of subscription services weed their own packages, it is particularly critical for libraries to weed single title e-book purchases and from their DDA programs, where large amounts of e-book records are loaded at one time. Many libraries choose to load bibliographic records into their Integrated Library System (ILS) to provide increased searchability and access, as well as to make use of the statistical features that the system provides. When weeding, this feature makes it easy to group and remove titles. The downside to having bibliographic records for e-books is that these records take up room in the ILS, and therefore room on the server. New servers, or increased server space, for these items could cost libraries thousands of dollars to purchase and additional monies to maintain. David A. Tyckoson (2014), an Associate Dean at Fresno State University, has found that “while weeding is viewed by most academic librarians as a common good, it is usually a process that is relegated to a secondary or tertiary priority in actual practice” (p. 66). During daily workflows this makes sense with other seemingly more important deadlines or tasks; however, the low priority given to weeding could be damaging the integrity of the e-book collection.

Large quantities of e-books clutter searches with an overabundance of results, many of which are old, outdated or contain wrong information. Librarian Alice Crosetto (2012) in her article “Weeding E-books” explains that “e-books are long overdue in being evaluated and weeded. [...] [O]utdated resources could contain nonrelevant, misleading, even potentially harmful information, especially in the areas of natural and health sciences. Providing the most relevant resources in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, collectively referred to as STEM, is paramount for all libraries, particularly academic and K-12” (pp. 95-96). Patrons become frustrated and overwhelmed by the amount of hits returned by their search, many of which may be irrelevant. They frequently choose among the top few results for ease, but may not be getting the information they really need or want. Linda W. Braun (2013) provided a thought provoking question in her research, stating:

“Imagine what happens to discoverability if e-collections aren’t weeded. How does a ...[user] find the most up-to-date or useful materials if there are items showing up in search and browse that aren’t useful...?” (p. 42-43) If libraries do not weed their e-book collections, the outdated and irrelevant resources will drastically decrease the findability of quality resources.

Libraries whose DDA programs contain large numbers of e-books provide a bigger pool for patrons to use, potentially increasing the number of loans and purchases the library would incur. Over time, this can drive up the expense of the DDA program. Projections by Karen S. Fischer et al. (2014) for DDA programs are predicting increases in use due to “growing user familiarity with e-books [...] the changing universe of titles available in the PDA program; a dynamic user base (new faculty, new students); and changing curricula” (p. 480). Libraries have less control of e-book titles contained in subscriptions because they are usually purchased in subject specific packages. However, removing e-books from the DDA program that are duplicated in any subscriptions would save libraries from unnecessary purchases.

Criteria for weeding e-books should be similar to those that should already be in place for print resources. While the physical condition is not an issue, the content is still applicable. Libraries should evaluate if patron needs have changed, and if some subject area use has decreased. These areas could potentially be weeded. How current should the collection be? It is easy to only collect the most current items in a DDA program, and just as easy to eliminate the older titles. Librarian Kay Downey (2013) advises that libraries will “need to formulate parameters for weeding DDA-eligible content. Factors such as older publication date and superseded editions may be targets for periodic weeding” (p. 99). Alice Crosetto (2012) emphasizes that “it is essential for libraries to learn from each vendor and to understand the purchasing model that may govern how e-book titles can eventually be weeded or made inaccessible” (p. 99). When setting up procedures for weeding, Alene E. Moroni (2014), author of “Weeding in a Digital Age”, suggests that “ebooks should be treated in the same way as physical collections, with guidelines for retention based on use, accuracy of information, and relevance to the patron [... libraries should strive for a] collection that enjoys high use, high demand, and high patron satisfaction.” Libraries may already have a weeding policy that can easily be applied to their e-book collection (pp. 26-28).

There are many ways to approach weeding of materials, a good example is the Texas State Library and Archives Commission, who has published a manual for weeding called *CREW: A Weeding Manual for Modern Libraries*,

written by Jeannette Larson and Belinda Boon (2012), and most recently updated by Larson in 2012. The Texas State Library and Archives Commission uses the CREW method to weed and has included a section specific to e-books. The term CREW means ‘Continuous Review, Evaluation, and Weeding’ (p. 11). When evaluating print materials they use the MUSTIE approach and adapt the relevant sections to e-books. “MUSTIE; Misleading, and/or factually inaccurate; Ugly, not applicable for ebooks; Superseded, by a truly new edition or by a much better book on the subject; Trivial, of no discernible literary or scientific merit; Irrelevant, to the needs and interests of your communication; Elsewhere, the material can be obtained expeditiously somewhere else” (pp. 52-53). The Texas State Library and Archives Commission also claim that “the two major reasons for weeding physical materials remain the two major reason for weeding e-books: 1. Low use 2. Outdated content” (p. 51).

As e-book numbers continue to climb in library collections, the need to weed will become more crucial. Keeping everything is not an option when virtual space and monies are limited, and it is inadvisable to keep large amounts of outdated and inaccurate materials that could be damaging to the integrity of researchers’ work. While e-book weeding may be time-consuming, it is an essential and much needed collection management duty that will ensure the quality of the libraries’ electronic book collections and allow for easier searching and better findability of quality e-books. Every library, whether they use the MUSTIE approach or have their own internal policy for weeding, should have a weeding policy for e-books in addition to the policy for print or other formats.

From the literature evaluated for this article, it was found that the general consensus of researchers who discussed weeding was that e-books too were a collection area that should be weeded in libraries. Use of e-books are increasing, as is the amount of e-books that libraries have in their catalogues. These ever increasing numbers of e-books like print books do need to be removed from libraries/catalogues for a variety of reasons, but mainly for the overall health of the collection. Larson and Boon state that “good collection management will create the need to remove some electronic items from collections” because the amount of e-books purchased are growing, and include possible outdated and irrelevant titles that clutter the catalog and distract “patrons from locating needed items” (p. 49). Collections at libraries that are just beginning to collect these e-books may not feel the need to weed quite yet, but larger libraries with larger collections should consider adding the weeding of e-books to their weeding policy.