EDITORIAL

The Death and Migration of Book Collections in Academic Libraries

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Dozens of newspaper and magazine articles have reported on the slow “death” of books in public and academic libraries. They describe declining book budgets, the withdrawal of once-treasured volumes, and the shifting of books to off-site locations to make more space for study areas and student services.

Most such articles fail to distinguish between four distinct practices: (1) acquiring fewer print books, (2) withdrawing books from the collection, (3) moving books to off-site storage, and (4) replacing print books with e-books. By educating the news media and the public about the differences between these four practices, we can help them understand the contextual factors that are not always apparent to those outside the library profession—the distinction between content and physical format, for instance. These four developments can also provide a framework for the consideration of trends that may bring book publishing and journal publishing into closer alignment.

Acquiring Fewer Print Books

The first practice, acquiring fewer print books, has one direct benefit: both space and funds can be diverted to other uses that may have a greater impact on teaching, learning, and research. The indirect benefits are less often recognized, however. A reduction in book acquisitions may lead to a greater emphasis on the library’s selection criteria, resulting in the selection of a smaller number of books that are better aligned with patrons’ needs. A carefully focused collection will likely bring greater precision in students’ book searches as well as a system-wide increase in the proportion of retrieved items (records or texts) that are relevant.3 If acquisitions funds are reallocated from books to journals, the emphasis of the collection may also shift from book-centric disciplines such as history and literature to the journal-centric STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and math) that have been identified as national priorities for secondary and higher education.3
The disadvantages of acquiring fewer books are readily apparent. Obviously, the quality of the collection will decline if funding drops below the minimum needed to acquire enough high-quality books in each subject area. Moreover, book collections are more economically sustainable than journal collections; because journal prices increase more rapidly than book prices, the inflation rate for the collection as a whole can be expected to rise if funds are diverted from books to journals. A shift from books to journals may also result in a collection that is harder for undergraduates to use—holdings that are less readable and more likely to demand prior knowledge of content and methods. Such a change may also reduce students’ exposure to content that is especially well suited to long-form exposition: instructional material, theoretical discussion, in-depth narrative, and extended argument.

**Withdrawing (Weeding) Books from the Collection**

The advantages and disadvantages of the second practice, withdrawing books from the collection, have been documented extensively in the LIS literature. The benefits include currency and factual correctness (reliability, from the patron’s perspective), readability in terms of writing style and formatting, better alignment of the collection with the curriculum, and the assurance that current selection standards are upheld throughout the entire collection. Other advantages include reduced risk of physical deterioration (due to mold, for instance), the opportunity for conservation treatment as part of the weeding process, improved perceptions of the collection’s utility (among students, in particular), and the potential for diversion of library space to more productive activities. We can add another advantage if the withdrawn books are offered for sale as individual titles: the matching of books with the readers who most value them.

The drawbacks of weeding include the inadvertent removal of important works, the potential use of weeding standards that are not well suited to the mission of the university, the possibility that reclaimed space will be used for less constructive activities, and the negative perceptions of stakeholders. The opinions of faculty are especially important, since their support may be needed for other library initiatives such as book selection and information literacy instruction. Even with clear communication and close collaboration, faculty may object to the principles underlying weeding (such as the idea that both additions and withdrawals can bring the collection into closer alignment with the curriculum), to the specific processes used to identify volumes for withdrawal, to the results of the weeding process (which may have a greater impact on some departments than on others), and to the final disposition of the weeded volumes.

**Moving Books to Off-Site Storage**

The first two practices—acquiring fewer books and withdrawing books from the collection—are consistent with the death metaphor that often appears in the media, since they do result in the “death” (loss) of books that would otherwise be included in the library collection. In contrast, the third and fourth practices—moving books to off-site storage and replacing print books with e-books—are more analogous to migration than to death. They are migrations from one location to another or from one format to another.
The primary advantage of moving books from the main stacks to off-site storage is that space is made available for other uses. As noted earlier, the new uses may be either more or less productive than the old ones. Although the removal of a book from the main stacks is sometimes equated to a cost savings—roughly $4.26 per book per year—no savings will be realized unless the vacated space is sold or rented to an agency outside the university and maintained from a non-university budget. The costs of off-site storage can be substantial, however. They include the initial expense of building, renting, or renovating the facility as well as the ongoing costs of maintenance, staffing, and transportation of books. Browsing is not possible in most off-site facilities, and access is more difficult due to the increased time and effort required for discovery and retrieval on the part of both library patrons and staff. Moreover, certain types of content, such as primary source materials and historical data, may be systematically de-emphasized unless the collection policy includes provisions to identify the most important older or lesser-used works and to ensure that they remain within the main collection.

Replacing Print Books with E-Books

“Replacing” print books with e-books may involve the actual replacement of one format with another—the conversion of print books to e-books through digitization or the purchase of e-books to replace withdrawn print volumes, for instance—but it more often involves a decision to prioritize e-books over print when acquiring new titles for the collection. Although the full implications of a switch from print to e-books are too numerous to list here, three advantages are immediately apparent: worldwide access; availability all day, seven days a week; and the gradual reclamation of library space that can be used for purposes other than book storage.

Several of the disadvantages associated with e-books are related to sustainability. For instance, the switch from ownership to leased access increases risk, since a single year’s inability to pay the subscription or maintenance fee can result in the loss of all content. More fundamentally, proprietary file formats and magnetic media both hinder the long-term preservation of digital content. File formats and e-readers can become outdated in just a few months, and there are at least 30 file formats and 30 e-book platforms/readers in current use. Many formats are specific to a particular platform, while others are supported by multiple platforms but vary in content and appearance from one platform to another.

The difficulties associated with students’ learning and retention are also significant. Most e-book interfaces encourage the reading of individual chapters rather than entire books, and students may less likely encounter complex arguments and extended discussion when they read only a single chapter. Onscreen reading poses further challenges. Based on their test performance, students learn more effectively when reading print than when reading onscreen. Moreover, e-reader use has been associated with changes in reading behavior such as superficial reading, slower reading, and a higher risk of distraction and fatigue. In several case studies, university students who were issued e-readers at the start of the school year discovered that the devices were largely incompatible with their study habits. Seven months after being issued e-readers with all their course readings, 64 percent of students at the University of Washington in Seattle no longer used them in their academic work.
Two general points are especially important when considering a switch from print books to e-books. First, the great potential of e-book technology is often constrained by economic, legal, and cultural factors. E-books might seem ideal for rapid interlibrary loan (ILL), for instance, but most license agreements place major restrictions on the extent to which e-books can be used to fulfill ILL requests. Second, the local impact of a switch to e-books depends on the institutional context. At a residential college where the library remains open 24/7, the difficulties associated with e-books (for example, license restrictions, unsupported file formats, cataloging problems, and idiosyncratic access mechanisms) may outweigh the benefits. At a nonresidential or multicampus college, the advantages may be greater than the disadvantages.

Other Migrations

Additional migrations can be identified. These are not primarily options or choices for libraries, but potential changes in scholarly communication practices—decisions made chiefly by authors, universities, and publishers. For instance, authors in the social sciences and humanities might increasingly choose to publish their work in journals rather than books. Although book publication is still the norm in many fields, this practice may be changing.13 Such a change would bring several advantages:

- It would foster a clearer distinction between scholarly and non-scholarly works, a distinction that is not always apparent with books. (Although we sometimes teach students that books are scholarly resources, most books—including many found in academic libraries—are not scholarly in any meaningful sense.)
- It would promote more consistent standards of peer review, since the review process used by most journals is more systematic and transparent than that used by book publishers. It would also lessen the impact of marketability (potential sales) on publication decisions and would foster the use of citation metrics and other tools that provide information about the scholarly impact of each contribution.14
- It might bring about more concise writing and reduce the extent to which authors report their findings in multiple venues. In particular, it might result in fewer books that consist of three or four previously published articles with connecting text and filler.
- It would make each paper more readily available than if it were published as a monograph, since average journal circulation is far higher than average book sales. Likewise, each contribution would benefit from better discovery and access methods—full indexing and abstracting at the “chapter” (article) level, along with the use of discipline-specific subject headings in specialized bibliographic databases.

Several disadvantages of the journal-centered publishing model can be traced to the online format of most journals. These difficulties include restrictive license terms, reliance on leased access, higher inflation rates for online resources than for books, and uncertainties regarding long-term preservation and support. Some of the problems associated with online publication are less troublesome for online journals than for e-books, however.15
As noted earlier, most journals provide only limited space for presenting long narratives, for developing complex ideas, and for the kinds of repetition and restatement that can help readers assimilate new material. Some of these problems might be avoided, however, if journals would routinely publish articles in the 60- to 100-page range. This is already the norm in some fields. In 2017, the full-length articles in the *Harvard Law Review* had an average length of 72 pages, for instance. Longer articles may gain greater acceptance as online-only journals (including many open access journals) remove the usual limits on page length.

A related development is publishers’ apparent willingness to publish more short books, either as e-books or through print-on-demand technology. Although several longstanding and well-known book series have been issued in this format, most have been limited to a single field or approach. (See, for example, Oxford’s Very Short Introductions and SAGE’s Quantitative Applications in the Social Sciences.) More recently, however, several publishers, including Springer and Palgrave, have begun to publish shorter books across a wide range of subject areas. This may be regarded as a migration from journals to books, a migration from full-length books to shorter books, or even as the birth of a new format.

**Supporting Positive Change**

Newspaper and magazines tend to present the four library practices described earlier in consistently negative terms—understandably so. After all, each can lead to problems that are likely to resonate with librarians and patrons. However, each practice also has the potential to bring benefits that are sometimes overlooked. The advantages may not outweigh the disadvantages, but we should be fully aware of them when planning library collections and services.

The perceived and actual impact of each change will vary with the context, of course, and with the priorities and perspectives of those who favor or oppose it. I would argue that (1) the acquisition of fewer books may be appropriate if it is accompanied by an evidence-based, mission-focused refinement of the library’s selection criteria; (2) the advantages of careful weeding are considerably greater than the disadvantages; (3) moving books to off-site storage has a negative impact on accessibility but generates corresponding benefits only when specific conditions are met; and (4) a switch to e-books would improve access at some libraries but not at others, and many of the problems associated with e-books have yet to be addressed.

The ideal publishing model for scholarly content would preserve the reasonable prices and ownership rights that promote sustainability in the print environment, capitalize on the potential for discovery and access inherent in online journals, uphold a straightforward and transparent peer-review process, and allow for works of varying lengths so that the important benefits of long-form publication are not lost. Some innovations in publishing are consistent with these goals; others are not. Although librarians have no direct control over authors and publishers, we can use our indirect authority—through collection policies and purchasing decisions, in particular—to support the development of information products consistent with the changes we would like to see. This can benefit our own universities and, more broadly, help support the integrity and sustainability of the scholarly communication system.
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Notes


15. The difficulties unique to e-books include the need to support multiple file formats; reliance on proprietary software; lack of standardization in license terms; the need to make annual payments for content that does not change over time; delayed publication; the absence of selection tools specific to e-books; limited availability of high-quality catalog