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Balance Point

How much do print backfiles matter?

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Abstract

As physical collections are increasingly pressed for space, libraries continue to look at practices such as weeding and off-site storage, coupled with services like on-demand article-level document delivery, as potential space solutions. As libraries discard long runs of print journals, though, what role do journal backfiles play going forward? When many see backfiles as space hogs, is there data that provides a compelling argument for keeping backfiles of journals, and, if so, how should those backfiles be handled and by whom? Incorporating information from an interview with Glenn Jaeger, owner of Absolute Backorder Service, interlibrary loan data from the University of Prince Edward Island, and examples from the literature, this Balance Point column looks at the role that print journal backfiles play in the library landscape.

Keywords

Journal backfiles; Absolute Backorder Service; University of Prince Edward Island

1. Introduction

At a time when budgets are tight and libraries look for every possible way to economize and make the most efficient use of the space they have, print journal backfiles can be viewed as space hogs - collections that are largely duplicated online and can be gotten rid of with little notice or regret. The literature is full of examples of libraries and organizations that have completed projects to clear out older runs of periodicals to make space either for monographic collections or other initiatives in the physical space. The Ekstrom Library at the University of Louisville (UL) recently undertook a weeding project that focused on journal content available via JSTOR, HathiTrust, and a few selected publishers. By discarding a significant number of volumes and transferring others to the Ekstrom Library's automated retrieval system, UL cleared 49% of the bound journal space, enabling the construction of a faculty learning lab (Goldberg & Sproles, 2018).

In another example, American University Library (AUL), finding itself cramped for space for books, cleared physical space in the library by transferring its entire bound journal collection to an off-site, high-density storage facility run by the Washington Research Library Consortium (WRLC), of which AUL is a member. Access to the print materials was provided through document delivery (Reeves & Schmidt, 2011). It is worth noting, though, that as part of the journal relocation project AUL created a visual arts collection made up of materials which were

not sent to off-site storage due to the limitations of the online version. “While steadily improving in quality, many faculty members still preferred the color reproduction in the print version of arts journals over the online version. Additionally, librarians expressed concern that not all images from print arts periodicals had the necessary copyright clearance to be included in the online version” (Reeves & Schmidt, 2011).

2. Interlibrary Loan Data

Increasingly interlibrary loan services play a role in providing access to journal content to which libraries do not have ready access. Reeves & Schmidt (2011) note that AUL’s borrowing from WRLC partners as well as borrowing from libraries outside the WRLC steadily increased over time. “ILLiad article requests via the SFX link resolver, in particular, demonstrate how the Library’s digital services facilitate electronic delivery of documents the Library does not own (Reeves & Schmidt, 2011).

Melissa Belvadi, user experience & collections librarian at the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI), used interlibrary loan to collect data on journal backfile use at UPEI’s Robertson Library. Belvadi’s data is based on the successful interlibrary loan requests at the University of Prince Edward Island over the course of a calendar year, since implementing UPEI’s new interlibrary loan web form. In that time period, the Robertson Library saw 4,592 requests, 77% of which were for articles, while the rest were for books and book chapters.

Belvadi analyzed the dataset by publication year and genre to determine if there were any patterns. “I think we may all have an expectation of a greater demand for older material in books

and chapters rather than in articles,” says Belvadi. However, the UPEI data indicate the opposite. By examining the publication years of the books and articles requested, Belvadi was able to determine the range of publication years (from the present backward) that accounted for 50% and 90% of the interlibrary loan requests at UPEI. For articles, materials published from 2011 to the present account for 50% of the requests, while items published from 1989 to the present account for 90%. However, for books and book chapters, items published from 2012 to the present account for 50% of the requests, and items published from 1993 to the present account for 90%. Belvadi’s data indicates that interlibrary loan requests for books tend to be for slightly more recently published materials than do the ILL requests for journal content.

When the data is viewed by the requestor's academic department, a more typical pattern emerges, but with a few surprises. Table 1 outlines the percentage of requests with a publication date older than 2000, listed by department. (Only those departments where the percentage was 25% or higher are listed.)

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Many of the departments requesting materials with publication dates prior to 2000 are in the humanities and social sciences, as might be expected. However, also appearing in the list are departments in the hard sciences, such as UPEI’s Atlantic Veterinary College, Chemistry, and Mathematical and Computational Sciences.

If libraries rely on interlibrary loan to provide access to backfile and archival journal content, though, what then happens to patron access to materials when interlibrary loan itself becomes too expensive to maintain? In mid-April 2019, it was announced by several libraries on Twitter that interlibrary loan services in the province of Ontario had been cut. Due to a 50% cut in the funding provided by the province to the Southern Ontario Library Service (SOLS), SOLS announced that its interlibrary loan delivery service, the service utilized by the public libraries in Ontario to share materials amongst themselves, was being discontinued effective April 26, 2019 (Franchetto, 2019). For many of the affected public libraries, the discontinuation of this provincially provided interlibrary loan service means that all interlibrary loan services will now cease.

3. Quality of Electronic Versions

Further complicating the strategy of removing print journals where an electronic version exists are known quality issues with electronic surrogates, “where there can be missing content (volume issues or pages), poor-quality images, and illegible text from poor-quality scans” (Ladd, 2018). In 2018, Ladd duplicated an investigation he originally conducted in 2010 to examine the quality of PDF documents as compared to their print equivalents. In the original 2010 study, Ladd compared a total of 2,633 PDF documents with their print equivalents and identified 198 of the PDF documents as failing. A PDF was “assessed as failing any time the print equivalent needed to be consulted in order to gain access to all of the item’s information” (Ladd, 2018). The original study further “noted that many of the quality related issues observed in the study could be resolved if the existing electronic surrogates were replaced with scans using higher resolution scanning technology and better quality control” (Ladd, 2018).

The current study re-examines each of the PDF documents that failed in the original study to determine whether there has been an improvement in the quality of the electronic surrogates. Of the failed PDFs, only 13.6% showed improvement from 2010 to 2017 (Ladd, 2018). “The data demonstrate clearly that there continues to be an issue with the quality of PDFs held in electronic journal backfiles” (Ladd, 2018).

The quality issues with electronic journal content are not restricted to poor quality PDF images. As Bracke and Martin point out, “electronic journals do not always duplicate the print exactly. For instance, advertisements or erratum may not be included or images may not be adequately reproduced” (Bracke & Martin, 2005).

4. What to Withdraw

Given the ongoing issues surrounding the quality of electronic versions, librarians are sometimes left with questions as to what can be safely withdrawn that will not leave their patrons and researchers wanting for access. The 2009 *What to withdraw* report released by Ithaka S+R provides good guidance, outlining the value of our print collections, journals with withdrawal potential, and recommending action steps (Schonfeld & Housewright, 2009).

The key characteristics for print journals that are ideally suited to be withdrawn, as outlined by the *What to withdraw* report, are.

- The electronic version has been digitized with high standards of quality.
- Errors are actively being corrected.
- Digital copies are reliably preserved.

- The journal is not image-intensive.
- Terms of provision are reliable.
- The materials are suitable for local withdrawal at all types of libraries.
- The time horizon for ensuring that some print copies are retained across the community is 20 years, during which libraries should collaborate in upgrading the quality of the digitized versions.
- There is a high level of assurance that at least one copy remains after the stated time horizon (Schonfeld & Housewright, 2009).

One of the ways in which the *What to withdraw* report is unique is the inclusion of a time element in the decision-making process. “[A]lthough there may be rationales for retaining some print copies, we do not assume that these print copies should be retained forever, but rather that minimum time horizons should be established for such retention (Schonfeld & Housewright, 2009). For example, in the case of journals archived in JSTOR, an archive that met the ideal scenario outlined above, the recommended time horizon for retaining the print across the library community was 20 years, whereas journals that were not ideally suited for withdrawal had a recommended time horizon for retention of 100 years in print (Schonfeld & Housewright, 2009).

It is important to note that it was not intended that every library should retain the print for 20 years. In fact, when the report was released in 2009, the authors focused on the titles in JSTOR as those with the most potential for immediate withdrawal, due to JSTOR’s leadership in digital preservation and high-quality digitization practices, among other reasons. The intention, as outlined by the report, was that the library community, as a whole, needs to commit to the

retention of the print for several reasons. As Roger Schonfeld explains, “To provide a system-wide analysis of the purpose of retaining print for preservation purposes, it is important to examine the needs of all libraries and their users collectively. Ithaka S+R’s analysis finds several rationales for retaining some copies of the print version: the need to fix scanning errors; insufficient reliability of the digital provider; inadequate preservation of the digitized versions; the presence of significant quantities of important non-textual material that may be poorly represented in digital form; and campus political considerations” (Schonfeld, 2011).

5. Absolute Backorder Service

On August 22, 2018, Glenn Jaeger posted a message to the SERIALST listserv announcing that Absolute Backorder Service, Inc. would cease all operations by the end of 2018. The announcement stated, “Absolute has re-invented itself several times by developing a multitude of new services which included disaster recovery programs, archiving, preservation and supplying comprehensive backfiles for digitization initiatives,” but, the email went on to add, that the company’s business model had been unable to sustain the reduced demand for print journals (Jaegar, 2018).

Absolute Backorder Service started in February 1996 as a back volume fulfillment service. Jaeger, owner and president of Absolute, acquired warehouses of journal backfiles by working with a broad spectrum of subscription vendors, publishers, and individual libraries. Through Absolute’s East Coast Exchange service, libraries could purchase single missing issues, locate a volume of a journal that had gone missing, or purchase a longer back run of a newly acquired title (G. Jaeger, personal communication, February 13, 2019).

While the company was supposed to close at the end of December, as of February 2019, Jaeger still had a few ongoing projects that enabled him to continue as a sole proprietor. Jaeger indicates that, while the East Coast Exchange and fulfillment have gone by the wayside domestically, there is still demand internationally for print journal backfiles, particularly in developing countries (G. Jaeger, personal communication, February 13, 2019).

For someone whose career has focused on the acquisition and preservation of the print, the print serials industry has, at times, been frustrating for Jaeger. He points out that, while librarianship is as a field moving and pushing the archiving and preservation piece forward, the ingestion and preservation of archival print journal material has gaps. “There is not a single entity proactively working to fill those gaps outside of their group. We have collections that aren’t complete. We are archiving only 10% of the titles out there, and the archives we have aren’t complete. There is so much that can be done that isn’t being done. Smaller libraries are weeding and discarding materials that could be used elsewhere,” says Jaeger (G. Jaeger, personal communication, February 13, 2019).

There are a few avenues for libraries to offer their weeded and discarded print journals to other institutions. Examples include the Duplicate Exchange Union (DEU), run by the Association for Library Collections & Technical Services (ALCTS), Backmed-Exchange, operated by the Medical Library Association (MLA), and the United States Book Exchange (USBE), a nonprofit organization that charges a fee per back issue. Both the DEU and Backmed-Exchange are operated via listservs, where libraries post both items they are offering up for exchange, as well

as items they would like to have (ALCTS, n.d.; MLA, n.d.). Offers on the DEU and Backmed-Exchange are posted and made available for a limited time, though, and, for Jaeger, who made a career in collecting and reselling backfile materials, it is frustrating to see how much journal material is offered for just 30 days and then disposed of. “Materials are being thrown out much faster than we can identify the needs for those materials elsewhere. We are not getting materials to where we need to to fill the gaps,” says Jaeger (G. Jaeger, personal communication, February 13, 2019).

6. Shared Print Management

Schonfeld, Ladd, and Jaeger all look to shared print management as a potential solution to the issue of individual libraries discarding long runs of print journals that may fulfill a need in the future. Ladd notes that “[s]ince there continues to be a need for the preservation of print for the foreseeable future, a collaborative approach would logically be the most cost effective, by sharing the cost of archiving amongst many institutions (Ladd, 2018).” Schonfeld indicates that when “well-digitized, digitally preserved, text-only journals are held in two page-verified print repository environments, other libraries can safely withdraw their print holdings if they so choose” (Schonfeld, 2011).

A number of institutions and consortia have embarked upon shared print initiatives in recent years, focusing on building shared repositories of print journal archives. In 2011, the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC), encompassing 11 schools across 5 states, began the development of its Shared Print Repository (SPR) to be held at Indiana University (IU) (Sandler et al., 2012). While the long term plan is for the SPR to include monographs, CIC focused

initially on print journal backfiles, seeking “to retain a print copy of all titles/volumes currently held by one or more member libraries for as long as needed to support the research and instructional needs of the [CIC] universities” (Sandler et al., 2012). Other examples of shared print repositories include the Western Regional Storage Trust (WEST), composed of 22 partner institutions in the western region of the United States (California Digital Library, 2018) and the Pennsylvania Academic Library Consortium (PALCI) shared print archive (Wiles-Young, Roysdon, & Barnett, 2012), to name just a few.

The purpose of a shared print archive is often two-fold, as repositories commit both to the preservation of the print format, as well as to providing access to the print content for the members or participants in the shared print archive. The two goals can be viewed as being in conflict with one another, though, as circulating the print format for use among libraries inherently puts the print volumes at risk for loss or damage. Glenn Jaeger feels there is enough surplus out there amongst the various shared print repositories to create dark and dim archives to protect print runs, while at the same time creating other less expensive warehousing operations to circulate copies for use. (G. Jaeger, personal communication, February 13, 2019). Even the terms, dark, dim, and light archives are debatable though. For example, “[f]or the purposes of the PALCI agreement, a *light archive* meant materials could be used by staff and library users, either onsite or offsite and that the materials could circulate according to library circulation policies. A *dark archive* meant that materials could be handled by staff, that library users could use the material on site, and that materials could be scanned or photocopied, but they could not be loaned to other libraries. Thus, in reality, PALCI’s light and dark archives are really more accurately described as ‘shades of gray’” (Wiles-Young, Roysdon, & Barnett, 2012). Jaeger’s

vision is to develop print distribution centers as urban/suburban renewal projects and utilize used materials handling equipment (shelving, forklifts, shipping components) from a multitude of suppliers. He estimates an 80% savings from the high density, dark archive model (G. Jaeger, personal communication, May 2, 2019).

In addition to navigating the challenges of preservation versus access in a shared print environment, there are even greater difficulties in terms of making sure the print is being archived at all. The Center for Research Libraries (CRL), a consortium of college, university and independent research libraries, announced in December 2016 a 10-year agenda for shared print, running through 2026. Bernard Reilly, president of CRL, indicated that part of this 10-year agenda was to “allocate resources in a sustained effort to shift the onus of preserving the ‘critical corpus’ of published serial literature from individual libraries to the collective” (Reilly, 2016). The reasoning behind this initiative, Reilly indicated was, in part, due to clear evidence “that the integrity of the vast, encyclopedic print serial collections built and long maintained by North American libraries is now in jeopardy. Pressure on libraries to reduce print holdings and reallocate space to other uses is intense and growing, increasing the likelihood that important materials will be lost in the process” (Reilly, 2016).

In November 2018, Reilly discussed the findings of a CRL analysis of the holdings of three major, validated JSTOR print archives (CRL’s own archive, the University of California, and Harvard University), indicating that the results call into question some of the basic assumptions about shared print (Reilly, 2018). “Our analysis found that not one of the three archives hold a complete set of JSTOR titles. The two ‘dim’ archives (Harvard’s is a ‘dark’ archive, i.e., off-

limits for use) are far from complete: California holds only 51%, and CRL 57%. Combined, California and CRL hold 63%. Harvard's archive, assembled from print copies digitized by JSTOR, is the most complete but at 88% still lags behind the ever-growing corpus of JSTOR material (Reilly, 2018). Data like this is troubling, not only because many libraries have weeded the titles in JSTOR based upon the assumption that they have been reliably archived, but, also, as Reilly explains, "the 4,200-title JSTOR corpus represents a minuscule fraction of the total number of serial titles held in print by major North American research libraries" (Reilly, 2018). Reilly estimates the size of the corpus of print serials worth preserving to be greater than 500,000 titles (Reilly, 2017).

CRL has built initiatives to help assess the current state of print archiving and shared print programs. The Print Archives and Preservation Registry (PAPR) system acts as a directory and database of shared print programs in North America. The searchable database displays the titles and holdings of print serials being archived at the participating programs (Center for Research Libraries, n.d.-b). Further, the PAPR database is part of the underlying infrastructure of a two-year grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded to CRL and OCLC to enable print serial retention commitments to be registered in WorldCat (Center for Research Libraries, n.d.-a)

7. Conclusion

The issues outlined here have no easy answers. As both budgets and space for physical collections have tightened, libraries often view their print journal backfiles as prime candidates for weeding, materials that can be discarded with little notice to make space for other institutional priorities. There are legitimate concerns, though, regarding the wholesale

withdrawal of print journal backfiles, evidenced through the data presented here. Interlibrary loan data from the University of Prince Edward Island demonstrates that patrons request older backfile content from journals through ILL more than we might anticipate. Studies have raised questions about the reliability and quality of electronic surrogates, as well as the completeness of shared print archives. Both Glenn Jaeger and Bernard Reilly are apprehensive that libraries are potentially discarding print journal volumes before those materials have been archived.

However, for those libraries whose print journal collections are competing for space with other collections, initiatives, or institutional priorities, the answer cannot simply be to stop weeding. The answer lies somewhere in institutional, consortial, and vendor cooperation towards a goal of shared print management not just for titles in JSTOR and from major publishers, but for the broad spectrum of journal content housed in libraries, both big and small.

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