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Curating Collective Collections: Silviculture in the Stacks, or, Lessons From Another Conservation Movement

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Curating Collective Collections — Silviculture in the Stacks, or, Lessons from another Conservation Movement

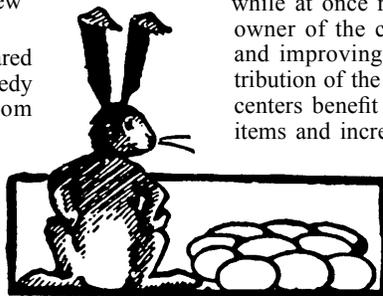
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Column Editor's Note: *I am particularly happy to present in this column a thought-provoking piece by **Jake Nadal** (<http://www.jacobnadal.com/>). Through his work as a preservationist, author and presenter, manager of a large cooperatively housed collection, and member of such groups as the **HathiTrust Shared Monographs Archive Planning Task Force** and **OCLC's Shared Print Advisory Council**, **Jake** has established himself as a leader in the shared print community. He offers here something of a manifesto for shared print, a set of suggestions grounded in assumptions about the several interests that come to bear on library collections and a risk-analysis that enables the library community to think more precisely about managing collections to meet those interests. **Jake's** work, when coupled with recent reports from **OCLC Research**, **Ithaka**, and others and the policy, operational- and business-model development attendant on the establishment of shared print agreements, maps the way from a very large aggregation of items to a collective collection. His tale of forests and trees by way of **Noah's** ark and operations research sketches a resource base that is at once usable by current readers and sustainable for generations of readers to come. — **BK***

Writing in *Against the Grain*, it seems apt to begin with a forestry metaphor. I grew up in the Northwest, on the border between the magnificent **Gifford Pinchot** National Forest and private timber lands, many of them wrecked by clear-cut logging, a practice that broke the ecosystems and economies around my hometown. **Pinchot** himself was not shy about the need to harvest lumber, but he advocated a forestry based on careful selection of trees to avoid the overharvesting that breaks forest systems. Similar lessons are pertinent to collection management. Shared print should mean something more than just clearing out the stacks in favor of copies held elsewhere, but we should not be shy about the need to take action on the oversupply of copies in our collections. To borrow **Pinchot's** formulation, shared print networks are how we are "wisely to use, protect, preserve, and renew" our resources.

There is some concern that shared print programs will lead to a tragedy of the commons, a phrase from **Garett Hardin's** essay on the exploitation of shared resources. In this case, the tragedy would be that too many libraries rush to discard, razing the old-growth wilderness of the stacks, while the book be-



comes an endangered species, only accessible to a selected few in closely held collections. This line of thought is as much the tragedy of the facile metaphor as the tragedy of the commons, though. Shared print programs are chiefly about the secondary forest, where many uses of a resource are managed with a view to sustainability and widespread benefits. In the National Forests, scientific research and outdoor recreation can be sustained alongside timber harvesting. In our libraries, the space and money to support emerging scholarly activities can coexist with opportunities for librarians to turn their attention from eking space out of crowded stacks and, instead, focus on curating a good habitat for browsing scholars.

Into the Woods

Hardin's essay was published in 1968, and research in ecology and economics since then has shown that tragedy is not an inevitable outcome for the commons. Indeed, many are sustainable and beneficial, though one of the most important lessons is that there are no panaceas for making cooperative efforts succeed. To paraphrase **Elinor Ostrom**, who received the **Nobel Prize** in Economics for her work on the commons, tragedies are averted when local stakeholders can meet face-to-face to build norms and encourage conformance. Librarians already do this through our rich assortment of consortia, state and regional affinity groups, and cooperative projects. No one region has the whole printed record, though, so without national cooperation there will be deep inequities in everyone's access to information. Outside of our existing affinity groups, we need a way to obligate some libraries to provide future access and to reward them for fulfilling that obligation. This is a job for money.

Imagine the effect of an annual subsidy paid out and divided among the libraries that hold a copy when the number extant falls in a certain risk category. For libraries drawing down, this sets a price and service expectation that can guide cost-benefit evaluations. The potential costs might serve to forestall withdrawals that would create scarcity. They might also serve as an incentive to transfer materials to shared print networks that lack them, averting scarcity while at once relieving the original owner of the costs of maintenance and improving the geographic distribution of the copies. Preservation centers benefit from adopting those items and increasing the amount of

material directly available to their local users. They may also receive financial support for the care of

scarcely held works but only in exchange for taking on the obligation to provide ongoing access to those works, a fair trade.

It would be good to see a number of financial models proposed, of course, and I would personally like to see some wild ones in the mix. Options markets for future access? Social impact bonds to build and maintain preservation centers? Tremendous resources are sunk into maintaining oversupplied collections, yet many readers are isolated from materials they want to use. Shared print management opens the way to solving this problem, making more materials available to more readers at a lower collective cost. We ought to explore the possibilities for managing this exchange of value and for regulating this way of doing collection management. That will, in turn, require better methods for deciding how many copies we need, where they ought to be located, and how access should be provided.

The best attempt at the optimal copies question comes from **Candace Yano's** Operations Research group at **UC Berkeley**, in **Ithaka's** serials-focused "What to Withdraw" study.¹ **Annie Peterson (Tulane)**, **Dawn Aveline (UCLA)**, and I explored the applicability of this model to monographs, and compared it to others, especially **Martin Weitzman's** biodiversity framework, the so-called "Noah's Ark Problem."² Our case study did not find any compelling reason that **Yano's** model would not work, but we need to convert that double negative into a genuine affirmative.³ Doing that calls for a team that brings together library-specific knowledge with expertise from allied areas such as economics, epidemiology, statistics, and operations research.

In the meantime, consider the following numbers. **OCLC Research** has estimated fifty to sixty million titles in North America, represented by just shy of a billion copies, so we might just touch twenty copies of each title on average.⁴ Using **Yano's** model with an annual loss rate of 1% yields a whopping 99.99% chance of having one copy intact in a century. There is some tremendous good news here. Libraries collectively hold many titles with far more than twenty copies, giving us plenty of potential to draw down to a level that still provides ample assurance of survival. Unfortunately, for every title held in hundreds of copies, there are many more that must fall below our risk threshold. Around sixteen copies, the odds of survival lose a decimal place and drop to 99.9% and at ten copies, 99%. Still good, but from there, the odds drop quickly: at nine copies, 98%; at eight, 97%; at seven, 96%; then 93%, 90%, 84%, 75%, 60% for two copies, and at one copy, 37%.

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Even as we develop better ways of calculating risk, it is important to recognize that our storage facilities already provide a hedge against the odds. For works that are already scarce, the starting number of copies is fixed, so survival depends on changing the other side of the equation. Preservation repositories are tools for doing just that. The chance of a lost item in these facilities approaches zero and because their environmental conditions slow paper decay, a century in a preservation repository is equivalent to just twenty or thirty years in the open stacks. The results are far better: if two copies are held in conventional stacks, there is at least a 60% chance that both will be lost a century from now, but move them to purpose-built storage facilities and there is a 99% chance that one will survive.

Well-Managed Second-Growth

Whatever holdings level we decide upon will have to be reached through build-up as well as drawn-down. A national plan cannot make quintessentially local decisions, like recognizing that a specific copy has a particular note from a former owner that sheds light on the history of reading in a certain place and time. Conversely, no single library collection can meet the demands of the entire nation and hedge against all the risks the future will hold.

Ironically, the social and economic value of the timber industry is bound up with the history of paper, a substance much in demand during the publishing and higher-education boom years of the 20th century. Those books are now the central concern of shared print efforts. Mass production means that all the copies of a title are largely identical and, because they were purchased directly into library collections, they do not tell us much about book culture at large. The great mass of our collections is a second-growth of secondary sources. Keeping any one of these workaday items requires the same resources as any rarity, so drawing-down our collective holdings can free up the space, staff attention, and funds that we need to support other services.⁵

We have ample incentives and opportunities to reduce the costs of an overstocked collection, but a meaningful number of copies must be kept for reasons beyond risk mitigation. Libraries are the only institutions that can document the history of book-making and printing,

and we hold the raw materials for studying the history of reading and the material culture of the book. The real answer to the optimal copies question is something we will have to find by orienteering, plotting our way between copies that are known to have artifactual value, copies that will be kept for their own sake, and copies of no particular individual distinction that we need to guard against loss and ensure easy access.

“They hated to see a tree cut down. So do I, and the chances are that you do too. But you cannot practice Forestry without it.” This is **Gifford Pinchot**, again, writing about the difficulty of reconciling the utilitarian value of forestry with his own affection for trees. I encounter this dilemma with books, as well. I hate to see one discarded, and the chances are that you do too, but I do not think that we can practice librarianship without it. Readers like books for many purposes, and there is everything right with libraries providing reading matter in the form that people prefer. But researchers are also calling on libraries to deliver new media and to support new scholarly practices, and there is everything right with libraries answering this call. I think the difference between mere success and real brilliance in shared print programs will be found in how we manage this change in the scholarly landscape. Done properly, our shared print programs will clear away the cruff, making it easier for scholars to find the books they need, and also removing the burdens that hold us back from exploring new prospects and adapting to new roles. 🐿

Endnotes

1. <http://www.sr.ithaka.org/research-publications/what-withdraw-print-collections-management-wake-digitization>
2. http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/weitzman/files/noahs_ark_problem.pdf
3. <http://www.jacobnadal.com/162> and forthcoming in *Shared Collections: Collaborative Stewardship*. Dawn Hale, editor. (ACLS Monographs, 2015)
4. See, for example: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/3336451.0009.208>.
5. This is profoundly important in technical services, where expert practitioners are often in short supply and where libraries have very limited funding available. Focusing our preservation librarians, conservators, and master catalogers on a shared collection lets a small community have measurable and meaningful impact.

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There are those who are sure that the print book will soon be history (**Reinier Gerritsen** had a display in New York City’s **Julie Saul Gallery** recently). But I would never convict the print book to extinction. Fun to see this series of photos taken by **Jordan G. Teicher** of every time he saw someone reading a book

on the subway. (posted on *Liblicense* by **Jim O’Donnell**).

http://www.slate.com/blogs/ behold/2015/01/09/reinier_gerritsen_photographs_readers_on_the_subway_in_his_series_the_last.html?wpsrc=sh_all_tab_tw_bot

Well, that’s all we have room for, but not to worry, our April print issue will be out before you know it. Also, I usually do Rumors online every Monday! www.against-the-grain.com 🐿



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