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Curating Collective Collections--Shared Print and the Book as Artifact Part 2

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Curating Collective Collections — Shared Print and the Book as Artifact Part 2



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Editor's Note: In the February 2016 (v.28#1, p. 73) installment of this column, I ran a piece by **Mike Garabedian** in which he made a case for considering the proximity of the volume to its as-published state as a criterion for retention in shared print agreements. In this column, he reports the results of a survey that he performed to gather evidence in the stacks of several Southern California academic libraries about the condition of volumes as he defines it. Whether you agree with **Mike** about applying his definition of condition in making retention decisions, his work is useful in the more general argument about making retention commitments in the absence of in-stack verification. Along with the work that CI-CCI (Central Iowa Collaborative Collections Initiative) reported in this column in v.26#6 and the work that **EAST** has undertaken with a grant from the **Andrew W. Mellon Foundation** (I hope to publish a report from **EAST** in the fall of 2016), **Mike's** findings about presence on the shelf and usable physical condition suggest that in the absence of at-shelf verification any given volume is 98-99% likely to be on the shelf and usable. That finding, if borne out by **EAST** and by the **University of Virginia** libraries under grant from **CLIR** (see this column in v.27#5 by **Prof. Andrew Stauffer**), will help the shared print community better shape programs in the future. — **BK**

Introduction

In the February 2016 (v.28#1) installment of this column I argued that the condition of circulating books in academic libraries should be used as a “criterion when we consider which copies we should retain and which we should deselect to create shared print collections.” I suggested this idea probably isn’t too controversial to the extent that most librarians probably prefer to retain those book-copies whose boards aren’t falling off, for example, or whose pages haven’t been ravaged by any of the various enemies of books. However, I also made a somewhat more polemical proposal, arguing that because the books in any shared print collection “will have to be all things to future researchers, including researchers interested in books as primary documents and artifacts,” general collections librarians ought to expand their definition of *condition* such that it aligns more closely with what their colleagues in special collections have in mind when they use this term. In short, if we’re going to get rid of a bunch of duplicates, I argued, we ought to make certain that the one(s) we keep for posterity are the most “artificially complete” copies in a group, by which I meant those copies closest to a book’s as-published state.

As I noted last time, the polemical aspect of using condition so defined as a criterion for retention and deselection has little to do with this notion as a theory — indeed, all things being equal, who wouldn’t want to retain only the “best,” most artificially complete copies? — and nearly everything to do with putting it into practice. Currently no catalog records for items in circulating collections effectively include condition metadata, and in the main general collections librarians have neither the tools nor a standard vocabulary to describe condition. Thus, if condition were to be considered as a criterion for shared print, then librarians would have to develop tools to assess and procedures to record condition, and then actually deploy these tools and procedures. In the minds of practitioners unused to thinking about the value of print books’ being located in anything beyond the information they contain, the idea of spending time and money to figure out which copy among several is in the best shape is a controversial notion that hardly seems worth it — and perhaps especially not in an era of ever-strained and shrinking library budgets.

Convinced that identifying the most artificially significant items in our custody in fact might be a more workable, less expensive prop-

osition than some might think, in summer 2014 I developed and then undertook a multi-collection condition analysis in order to understand better the time and labor this kind of validation might entail. In this column I describe this survey and its outcomes.

Definitions, methods, and sample

For the first part of my pilot project I needed not only to define the physical attributes condition validation would include, but also to undertake the more difficult tasks of developing the procedures by which condition would be assessed and recorded. For the second part, I actually put these procedures into practice by assessing the condition of mutually-held copies at several member libraries within the **State-wide California Electronic Library Consortium (SCELC)**. With the artifact-focused view I have described previously, I developed my project’s survey instrument, seeking to gather information not only about completeness of and damage to mutually-held book-copies in **SCELC** member library collections, but also about key artifactual elements of these items. I sought above all to keep my apparatus complex enough to capture significant artifactual information, but simple enough for work study students to deploy, and short enough to make analysis efficient and cost-effective. To help shape my questions I looked to some of the well-known published condition surveys undertaken in circulating collections at **Yale**, the **University of Illinois**, and **Syracuse** in the mid- and late-1980s; more recent surveys from the **Universities of Kansas** and **Southern Mississippi**; and a condition survey apparatus employed by the preservation unit at the **University of California at Los Angeles**.¹

In part because my goals of hypothetical deselection of mutually held copies for shared print were different than the goals in previous surveys (i.e., extrapolating conditions about entire collections, and prioritizing volumes in a single collection for preservation) without exception the survey instruments in these studies comprised far too many questions. However, the responses in the published studies informed my ultimate apparatus, which represents a kind of stripped down version of these more complex surveys. See <http://tinyurl.com/conditionsurvey> to view the instrument itself.

It is beyond my scope here to describe the survey instrument in detail, but it bears noting that leveraging Google Forms to design a survey instrument that fed directly into a Web-based database, in addition to using barcodes as unique identifiers, made the process of data collection and analysis far easier and more efficient. Scanning barcodes rather than inputting this information manually (or inputting another kind of unique identifier like call number, title, author, or imprint information) saved significant time. It also allowed me to draw out information about book-copies from existing ILS item records, and to manipulate this data for the purposes of comparing mutually held titles.

From an existing dataset of **OCLC** holdings at **SCELC** member libraries, I derived a convenience sample of nearly 42,000 titles at **Whittier College** (my home institution) published before 2010 and held at two or more other **SCELC** libraries within 25 miles.² To generate statistically significant results, I wanted a final sample of around 4,000; and because the seven institutions I selected hold the 42,000 titles to varying degrees, I sorted items into categories based on the number of libraries in which they appear (3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8). I sought to examine titles from each category in equal amounts, requiring the sample to include approximately 667 items per category. This evenly distributed final sample was achieved by sorting the existing sample of available titles at the selected institutions by imprint date followed by call number, and then selecting every *n*th title in each category, where *n* was determined by dividing the total number of

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titles in each category by the number needed to result in the examination of 667 items, i.e.,

Number of SCEL libraries that own	Titles count	Copies count
8	87	696
7	94	658
6	112	672
5	134	670
4	168	672
3	223	669
Total	818	4037

Following a first survey conducted at my institution, I visited the remaining seven SCEL libraries between July 14 and 27, 2014, armed with a laptop, barcode scanner, and a list of books to examine. At each institution I located each duplicate copy in the stacks, scanned its barcode, examined the book to record the data in my form, then re-shelved the item before moving on to the next title.

After data collection, from the survey results spreadsheets I isolated the barcodes for the items I scanned at each institution. I then emailed these barcodes back to staff at each of the eight survey institutions, where systems librarians used review files to associate the correct author, title, and OCLC number with the barcodes, as well as the circulation data for these items, and then exported this information into a text file which they sent back to me. Next, I imported this information into the survey results spreadsheets from Google Forms and aggregated all the survey results in one spreadsheet. Arranging the data by OCLC number resulted in groupings of mutually held copies whose conditions could be easily compared.

Into the Stacks

In total I examined 3,429 book-copies, spending two days at six libraries and one day at two, where the average time to find and examine mutually-held book-copies was 90 seconds, or around 40 books per hour (I excluded Loyola Marymount University from this calculation because the staff there pulled duplicates prior to my arrival, making the average time to examine copies just 30 seconds). The majority of book-copies I was not able to verify (i.e., unable to locate in the stacks) were checked out to patrons, or as in the case of Azusa Pacific University, in the midst of a relocation. After examining and recording the conditions of these 3,429 copies, I compared mutually-held titles in my aggregate spreadsheet. I think three findings are worth sharing:

First, as figure 1 shows, I discovered that the vast majority of the copies I examined are in what general collection librarians might call “good shape.” Only 2% of all books I examined had external conditions I regarded as poor, and only 1% of all books I examined had poor internal conditions (e.g., the egregiously coffee-stained and highlighted). In other words, if our concern is merely with the so-called intrinsic value of a book as a packaging for text, 98% of all the books I looked at could be candidates for use in a shared print repository.

Second, as indicated by figure 2, there was a correlation between the frequency a copy circulates and the extent to which it is damaged — though perhaps not as strong a correlation as some might imagine.

Third, and to my mind most importantly, when I plotted total copies against those copies that had what I designated artifactual (or what I have called “paratextual”) value (i.e., original dust-jackets, original paperback binding, or facsimile paperback binding), then grouped by “total copies,” a clear trend emerged (traced in figure 3): Overall, 31% of the copies in the groupings have artifactual value. Thus, statistically speaking, if in the sample group a title existed in less than three copies, any random deselection had the potential to remove artifactually valuable copies from the shared print collective.

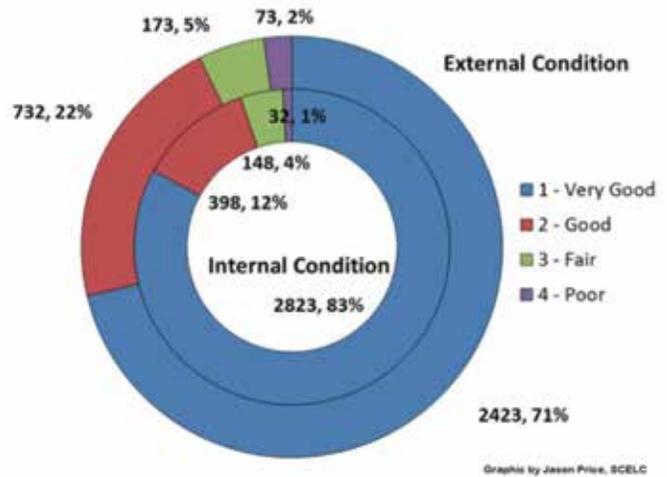


Figure 1 (also available at <http://tinyurl.com/p4jt9pn>)

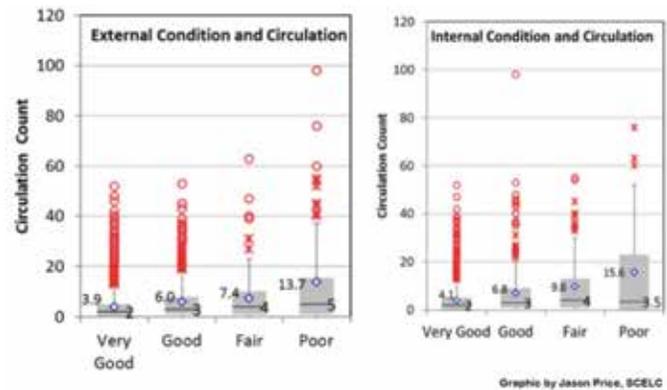


Figure 2 (also available at <http://tinyurl.com/oe25rg>)

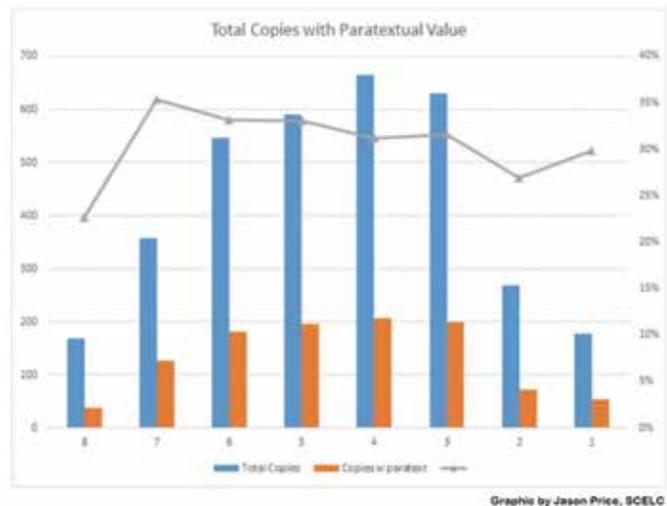


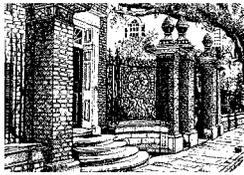
Figure 3 (also available at <http://tinyurl.com/ps6s8qd>)

Before I undertook the condition survey project, by far the question I heard most often from practitioners was some version of this rhetorical one: “Do you really think it’s worth it to spend all the time and energy and money it would take to figure out whether one duplicate has a dust-jacket when another copy doesn’t?” I still maintain — as I did before starting — that ultimately librarians must decide for themselves whether it will be worthwhile to locate and retain these volumes. In the previous installment of this column I attempted to argue why I think

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librarians looking into entering shared print agreements should indeed be paying attention to the artifactual condition of the books in their custody, and using condition as a criterion for retention and deselection. In this installment I hope to have shown how condition validation need not be the time-consuming nor complicated process some practitioners might presume upon an initial consideration.

This is not to suggest that a condition survey similar to my project would be free. For example, presuming a work study student earning \$10 per hour proceeds at the rate I did (i.e., 40 books/hour), then labor-wise, each book examined in a given collection would cost a library \$0.25 (and of course, this figure increases somewhat when we factor the time required for professionals or paraprofessionals to aggregate, analyze, and/or record this data in the item records within an integrated library system).³ Undoubtedly for some practitioners considering a shared print agreement in the hopes of deselection duplicate copies as a cost-saving measure, even spending \$0.25 per book would be too expensive a proposition.

However, presuming the sample institutions/collections utilized for my project are more typical than not, then we might look to one finding in particular as a way to increase the chances that in any grouping of duplicates we retain *some* artifactually significant copies without having to do a copy-by-copy analysis. Again, in my findings, if in a sample group a title existed in less than three copies, any random deselection had the potential to remove artifactually valuable copies from the collective. Thus if in my hypothetical grouping/scenario, participating libraries agreed to save at least three copies in each grouping with more than three duplicate book-copies (call it "random selection"), statistically speaking, it is likely that one of the retained copies would be artifactually significant in one way or another. Of course this approach isn't a guaranteed one, but for practitioners interested in preservation but constrained by costs, it could represent a middle way forward. 🍀

Endnotes

1. See Robin Gay Walker, Jane Greenfield, and John Fox, "The Yale Survey: A Large-Scale Study of the Book Deterioration in the Yale University Library," *College & Research Libraries* 46:2 (1985); Tina Chrzastowski, David A. Cobb, and Nancy Davis, "Library Collection Deterioration: A Study at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign," *College & Research Libraries* 50:5 (1989); Randall Bond, Mary De Carlo, Elizabeth Henes, and Eileen Snyder, "Preservation Study at the Syracuse University Libraries," *College & Research Libraries* 48:2 (1987); Robert A. Mead and Brian J. Baird, "Preservation Concerns for Law Libraries: Results from the Condition Survey of the University of Kansas Law Library," *Law Library Journal* 95:1 (2003); Scott David Reinke, "Condition Survey of the Circulating Collection: Joseph Anderson Cook Memorial Library, University Of Southern Mississippi," *SLIS Connecting* 1:2 (2012); and Jacob Nadal, "Developing a Preservation Program for the UCLA Library," *Archival Products News* 16:11 (2009) as well as Nadal's "From Survey to Audit," a presentation for the Preservation Administration Discussion Group at ALA Annual 2010, and whose slides are viewable at <http://www.jacobnadal.com/82>.

2. For this portion I had significant help from USC Associate Dean for Collections John McDonald and SCELCL Program Manager Jason Price. For a map of the collections I visited and surveyed, see <http://tinyurl.com/kjos29w>.

3. In this project I neither included nor attempted to calculate costs associated with post-survey tasks. However, it is worth noting that as Wardman Library Systems Librarian Nick Velkavrh has demonstrated, once condition data is aggregated into a spreadsheet, within most ILSs and utilizing load/import tables, it would be a relatively routine matter for a systems librarian or cataloger to import this information and map particular data elements onto a predetermined MARC field within the catalog records of surveyed books.