People Profile: Betty Kelly

Editor

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Once you’ve acquired electronic coverage of a journal title by a reliable provider like JSTOR or Project Muse, what does your collection development policy tell you to do with your old bound periodical titles? Do you toss them, cart them off to the landfill, or sell them on eBay?

I’ve a simple solution. Hang on to them. Keep them all.

Now, don’t misunderstand me. I am just as appreciative of the marvels of PDF as the next librarian. Few things can rival the textual beauty of the modern full-text PDF article. Fully searchable and readily available, it comes downloadable, reproducible, and transferable. And if such wonders are not astonishing enough, one can now in many full-text products browse full runs of a journal or access all parts of a periodical issue just as they originally appeared. It is an amazing technology by anyone’s reckoning.

Indeed, it is these extraordinary properties of PDF that give us such remarkable flexibility with journals. In some instances, the capacity of replicating articles exactly as they appear in a journal means librarians can now dispense with purchasing a periodical title altogether. You have access, so there is no need to shelf and bind paper issues. Project Muse, for instance, will give you full archival and current access. Forget the cumbersome binding and the tiresless re-shelving. You’ve the convenience of fully-searchable, full-text Web access.

These wonders of PDF also give librarians my earlier-mentioned option — the possibility of tossing previously-purchased journal runs altogether. And why shouldn’t we? Both Project Muse and JSTOR guarantee archival rights. That means complete ownership. You don’t lease. You don’t pay for online access. You buy the digital journal outright, just as in the case of a conventional hard copy subscription.

The upshot to all of this is that a good many libraries are seizing the opportunity and throwing out the old hard copy issues. The print bound volumes are off to the landfill, destined for the recycling bin, or auctioned on eBay. It is now standard practice at a good many institutions for librarians to de-accession any and everything in print that JSTOR and Project Muse cover. Sometimes it is a question of economy. Housing comes at a high price, and librarians are nothing if not parsimonious and rigorously efficient. More often it is a case of space. We value shelf space, and we can never get enough of it. Most of our collections are expanding — a situation that means you’ve less space today than you had yesterday — a dismal calculation if there ever was one.

But before you discard your JSTOR or Project Muse hard copy titles, succumb to the arguments for space and time savings, give the matter some thought. There are four very good reasons why you should hang on to old hard-copy full text journal runs.

First of all, full-access vendors often don’t cover everything that is included in a journal. The whole journal isn’t always there. The scanner’s and technicians often exclude or fail to include book advertisements, conference announcements, and the journal’s masthead, not to mention supplements and collaborative material. JSTOR is especially good about including everything between the covers of a given journal issue. Others are less so. Project Muse, for instance, omitted an important 1996 supplement to American Quarterly, a supplement that is part of many library’s bound print collections.

Second, digital archiving may not be forever. I know, the vendors promise archival access, complete ownership. I don’t doubt their sincerity for a minute, but I wonder in the long run about their ability to deliver. Their guarantees in the final analysis are just as solid as a good many others — sound as a dollar, as reliable as Social Security. For the fact of the matter is, no matter how sincere a vendor may promise unailing fidelity, the reliability of their promises rests ultimately on the solvency of a company or the permanence of a not-for-profit entity — a reliability linked to the stability of the market, the quality of their management or even the ethics of their lawyers.

Thirdly, there is the law of unexpected consequences. No one would have ever anticipated, for instance, that Duke University Press would withdraw a number of their titles from Project Muse. Nor would anyone have expected the New England Journal of Medicine to pull its holdings from several major aggregates full-text databases. The unpredictability of all this suggests that ceding on the side of caution may be at least prudent, if not downright advisable.

Indeed this dimension of uncertainty may explain my fourth reason for holding on to the hard copy. Many faculty are uncomfortable with tossing back runs, even when we’ve assurances of full archival retrieval. Kevin M. Guthrie, president of JSTOR, reports in a 2002 article that in a professional survey most faculty agree that “regardless of what happens with electronic archiving it will always be crucial for libraries to maintain hard-copy archives.” Are faculty then more conservative than librarians, more skeptical about the publishing process, or more wedded to the tangible printed product?

I don’t know, but I do regard faculty as major stake holders in the academic environment.

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