



Evidence Summary

Academic Libraries Should Consider Deselection of Some Electronic Books

A Review of:

Waugh, M., Donlin, M., & Braunstein, S. (2015). Next-generation collection management: A case study of quality control and weeding e-books in an academic library. *Collection Management*, 40(1), 17-26. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01462679.2014.965864>

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Abstract

Objective – To describe and advocate for the development of a procedure to discard electronic books from an academic library collection.

Design – Case study.

Setting – Academic library in the United States of America.

Subjects – 514 electronic books purchased from NetLibrary, a subset of 52,000 NetLibrary titles collected by the investigating library 2001-2007.

Methods – The researchers examined a set of 514 electronic books in the health sciences and

medical field, specifically for qualities such as currency and content relevance. An anecdotal case with limited validity, the goal was to articulate why a particular set of electronic books failed to meet the investigating library's collection standards, and to remove these e-books.

Main Results – A set of 514 e-books published by ICON Health Publications were found to be mass-produced, and displayed other notable problems, including age over seven years, outdated or irrelevant content, quality issues, and inclusion in an older platform no longer favored for e-books. The ICON Health e-books were removed from the library collection and, with some difficulty, the items were also removed from the vendor platform. The authors recommended an e-book weeding

procedure that considers six potential problems: publication date; inclusion of defunct Internet links; mass production; low quality works by the same authors or publishers; e-book packages that appear to feature multiple low quality works; and e-books from early packages, which may have integration problems.

Conclusion – Electronic books may take up little physical space but libraries should not ignore them when making deselection decisions because their content may be inappropriate for a library or for the disciplines the library serves. The ICON Health Publications e-book package is an egregious example of low-quality e-book content that the authors discovered and subsequently removed from their collection, offering a set of recommendations based on the experience.

Commentary

A thought-provoking read for any practitioner considering the problem of e-book retention and deselection; the authors argued that e-books are candidates for discard, just like print material.

As the authors explained, a package of 514 e-books from ICON Health Publications came to their attention in 2013. Upon reviewing the titles in this set, the authors determined that the e-books were candidates for deselection because they were mass-produced, having been compiled by algorithm to create formulaic texts that shared similar wording, layout, and source citations. Each text shared similar templates, sources, and sentences. To illustrate this point, the authors listed sample titles, and included a table showing a side-by-side comparison of two texts from the collection. The authors omitted the total number of ICON texts they examined, leaving the reader to wonder if they drew their conclusions from a sample of e-books or from a review of every title in the package. In addition to mass-production, the authors identified other specific problems with the ICON Health titles: age greater than seven

years, outdated content, and low relevance to institutional collection priorities.

The authors described the unexpectedly difficult task of removing the e-books from the vendor platform so that their users did not continue to encounter the texts. This problem may interest many practitioners, though the article did not address whether or not this problem is common. The ICON Health package appeared to be a particularly egregious example of low quality e-book content, however, the authors did not compare it to other packages in their library's collection.

Many library professionals regularly encounter troublesome material and choose to discard it. However, the line between interesting anecdote and significant case is blurred by the authors' own account of how they discovered the ICON Health package and the recommendations they developed after weeding it. Though subject selection is as important to a case study as it is in empirical research, the authors stated clearly that the "case" was selected when it came to the attention of a group of librarians, who identified reasons to deselect the material and subsequently wrote recommendations based on the experience. The authors made logical arguments in favor of systematic weeding of library e-book collections, using the example of the ICON Health package to illustrate their point. They recommended e-book weeding procedures that librarians could apply in any e-book deselection process, but the article omitted discussion of how these procedures were replicated or modified in smaller or larger, more systematic efforts. The absence of replication, or at least re-application of the authors' recommendations, limits the validity of the authors' recommendations.

The Glynn's critical appraisal checklist (2006) was used to determine that this study lacked validity as a case study. The methodology was not clearly defined and the rationale for selecting the ICON Health package as the single subject was unclear. The authors' recommendations would be strengthened if they had drawn them from at least one additional case of e-books. In the absence of a

comparative approach, an explanation of how the authors have replicated their recommendations in other collection development decisions would have strengthened the report and aided library practitioners in applying the same procedure to their own collection development. Nonetheless, in the absence of robust literature about best practices for e-book selection and deselection, the authors' experience may be

instructive to many practitioners as they shape their e-book collections.

References

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