

Matthew Buckley

Lying eyes

The (misleading) perception of collections

“Your eyes can deceive you. Don’t trust them.”¹ Obi-wan Kenobi (Alec Guinness) tells this to Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) in one of my favorite films, *Star Wars: A New Hope*. The interesting observation about that line is most of the time you can trust what you see with your own eyes. However, there are those select occasions where things may be hidden or not quite as they seem.

As a collection development librarian, I help oversee and monitor our library’s print and electronic collections. One of the problems that I see (and sometimes hear about) through feedback is the physical appearance of our print collection. Row after row of books collected from decades ago containing shelf after shelf of faded spine labels. Honestly, this dilemma is not new. How do we strike a balance of changing formats while battling a visible perception of outdated materials and their impact on the perception of the library? Sure, weeding helps with some of this. However, without options to effectively rejuvenate the collection, all weeding would be doing is subtracting rather than supporting. Plus, some libraries including my own do not necessarily have easy remote storage options. There are also many other factors involved, including user preferences, allocation methods, usage data, collaborative collecting, and more.

For the better part of 25 years libraries have been dealing with the situation of how to handle, curate, and market monographic materials in two completely different formats: print and electronic. Some libraries with exceptionally large budgets can afford to collect large swaths of material in both. However, for many of us though that is not a reality. We prioritize areas and order what we can in print but with an appreciative eye toward ebooks, especially in the subject areas that change rapidly. Collecting is hard though because the future of book collecting in academic libraries is not crystal clear. Will we eventually reach the day when most libraries only have ebooks? Perhaps. Perhaps not.

This is a conundrum that becomes more complex when you combine budgetary constraints, changing (or hybrid) formats, and space limitations. One of the ironic downsides of a decent-size collection is more recent print items can become hard to find while browsing, especially if the collection is not heavily weeded. This leads to that common refrain I hear regarding appearance, browsability, and practicality. What might our students think if they browse the shelves and see a barrage of books from 20 or 30 years ago? This observed reality regarding an older physical appearance for most libraries, including mine, is misleading. We are getting new materials.

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This past year our library will have added several thousand new titles, including titles from the last few years. The difference is that most of them are electronic. Our library currently has more than 100,000 print items in the collection, but this is a drop in the bucket compared to ebooks. We have several hundred thousand ebooks, including thousands of new titles from the past several years as part of ebook subscriptions and other ebook selection plans. With finite budgets we cannot duplicate most purchases. This means the print collection must be strategic and targeted in nature. When we do buy print copies, they are usually faculty requests, select highly recommended course-related titles, or disciplines where the collection does not age as quickly (such as the humanities). Most of the growth in the monographic collection is among our ebook subscriptions and packages because of the flexibility and practicality they offer.

Most faculty and students will use our discovery layer and find these materials without too much trouble. From personal observation though, there is still a small but loyal subset of users who like to browse shelves to see what is available. There is also a general concern about what overall impact section after section of older materials has on the perception of the library as a modern facility of information and discovery? Plus, how do we effectively advertise, market, and communicate the hidden nature of digital materials in a real-life setting?

This is where libraries, including my own, need to do a more thorough and creative job of marketing and communication. Make sure all users, especially those in the building, are aware of the digital side of the collection. Some libraries have inserted collocated displays or QR codes as a way of highlighting the digital side of the collection.² Part of me also wonders if we should have touch-screen signage or TV monitors near the collection advertising all the materials that are unseen but easily accessible, such as ebooks and streaming videos.

As we continue down the path of digitalization and transition raises the interesting prospect of what the future of the monographic collection is and browsing in general. Honestly, I am still not sure. Will we continue to try and develop two formats where we try and keep a relevant and useful print collection while expanding electronic access, or will print eventually fade away? Either way, it is a challenging situation. And we should be prepared for all options—and opinions—perceived or not. //

Notes

1. *Star Wars: A New Hope*, directed by George Lucas (1977; Los Angeles, CA: 20th Century Fox, 2011), Blu Ray.

2. Natalia Tingle and Keith Teeter, “Browsing the Intangible: Does Visibility Lead to Increased Use?,” *Technical Services Quarterly* 35, no. 2 (2018): 164–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07317131.2018.1422884>; Melissa A. Ratajeski and Michelle A. Kraft, “Use of QR Codes to Promote E-books in Medical Libraries,” *Journal of Electronic Resources in Medical Libraries* 12, no. 1 (2015): 11–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15424065.2014.1002028>.