

Variation among Copies of Titles Catalogued as Identical Should Inform Retention Decisions

Teper, J. H. (2019). Considering “sameness” of monographic holdings in shared print retention decisions. *Library Resources & Technical Services*, 63(1), 29-45.
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Evidence Summary

Variation among Copies of Titles Catalogued as Identical Should Inform Retention Decisions

A Review of:

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Abstract

Objective – To investigate the degree to which books catalogued using the same bibliographic record differ and to consider the implications of these differences for cooperative monographic print retention programs.

Design – Book condition survey.

Setting – Academic library consortium in the United States of America.

Subjects – 47 monographic titles, publication years 1851-1922, held by all consortium members and catalogued using the same respective OCLC record number. 625 out of a possible 705 circulating copies of these titles were available for item-level analysis via interlibrary loan.

Methods – Book condition surveys were completed for all items and the resulting sets of assessment data points were analyzed to reveal trends.

Main Results – 3.4% of items analyzed exhibited cataloguing errors (i.e., were catalogued using the wrong OCLC records), 56.8% retained their original bindings, 17.8% were marked to show previous ownership, 95.7% were complete with no missing content, 9.8% had no damage, and 18.9% had received identifiable preservation action.

Conclusion – Books catalogued using the same OCLC record demonstrated many differences when compared at the item level. These differences are important in light of shared print retention programs and highlight a need for inquiry into the number of copies that should be retained to minimize the loss of uniqueness in print materials.

Commentary

The study at hand responds to digitization initiatives and cooperative print retention programs that ensure the availability of a text to readers, as well as the pressure to use academic library spaces differently and weed non-unique content. Previous studies addressing the “sameness” of books have been conducted, notably by Stauffer (2016), who compared 10 copies of a single title, and Conway (2013), who investigated digital imaging errors in a 1,000-item sample from HathiTrust. This study is situated in the context of a large academic consortium with an existing shared print program and differs from studies conducted by the U.S. Center for Research Libraries, for example, in its focus on monographic, not serial, holdings.

Glynn’s 2006 critical appraisal tool will be used to evaluate methodology and presentation of the study at hand. The article is clearly written and logically organized. The literature review reveals that the author has engaged thoughtfully with relevant studies and understands complex relationships among cooperative retention programs, digitization, preservation, bibliographic and holdings data, and space reclamation. The survey design and methodology section, however, lacks detail and does not indicate how the survey instrument was conceived (“the author designed a survey,” p. 30). It would seem that

the survey was based on the Conway (2013) study, which measured several of the same data points, and that the author completed all surveys, but the reader should not have to speculate on either count. Although the author refers to “various manipulations of the collected data” (p. 32), the only calculation provided is for the probability of ensuring an item in good condition in this sample. Findings are grouped by institution and subject area, but no manipulations or statistical analysis beyond calculating percentages from aggregate data are provided.

The study achieves the objectives of measuring differences among books catalogued using the same bibliographic record and discussing some of the implications of these differences for cooperative print retention programs. This study contributes to library science literature and practice in two significant ways. First, it highlights the risk of relying exclusively on OCLC bibliographic and holdings data for retention and deselection decisions by revealing how inadequate they are for capturing item-level uniqueness. Second, the calculation for the probability of randomly ensuring an item in good condition, as well as the author’s call for further investigation into and refinement of this calculation, can help counteract the “last copy” approach to weeding and replace it with a more nuanced approach to ensuring that unique content persists in academic library collections. This study clearly illustrates the disconnect between “sameness” in shared bibliographic cataloguing utilities and item-level differences in library stacks.

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