CREW: A Weeding Manual for Modern Libraries

Addendum on e-books

Revised and Updated by:

Jeanette Larson

Texas State Library and Archives Commission
Austin, Texas — 2012

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CREWing E-Books

They don't take up any shelf space and never get damaged, so why do we need to weed electronic books? The concept of weeding electronic books is very new. In fact, many librarians are taken aback by the idea that an e-book[1] might need to be weeded. As the costs for e-books are dropping (at least on the retail level), and more devices proliferate, demand for content is rapidly increasing. In 2011 the Association of American Publishers declared that the e-book format was the leader in all categories of trade publishing. The market is vastly expanding as more writers are able to self-publish in e-book format and e-book publishers proliferate. The format creates both challenges and opportunities for libraries even as much of the technology is ever changing. Regardless of where your library falls on the e-book spectrum, there is no getting past the reality that e-books are increasing in usage and popularity. In fact, some libraries report that on any day more than 75% of their e-book collection is in circulation. Some libraries have very small collections and want to hold onto every e-book possible to have some critical mass. But things are changing, and at some point good collection management will create the need to remove some electronic items from the collection.

Production and use of electronic materials--downloadable books, audio, and video--is a rapidly growing and continually evolving field. Depending on the sources that were used to acquire e-materials and the business model used by the vendor, it may not currently be possible to "discard" some items. Like the proverbial roach motel, the records for e-materials may check in to the library's integrated library system (ILS), but then never leave. Collections are growing to meet patron demand. It is relatively easy to add the 39,000+ titles from Project Gutenberg, but are all of those free titles relevant to your collection? Are outdated and irrelevant titles cluttering up the catalog and distracting patrons from locating needed items? The answer may be no for libraries that are just building a collection. However, larger public libraries and academic libraries with substantial e-book and downloadable audio materials are already considering how to cull items that are no longer needed.

The advice provided here is based on the volatile e-materials environment, recognizing that the field is redefining itself almost daily. Libraries that are just beginning to add e-materials and are happy to have everything they can possibly obtain may not imagine weeding. Other libraries are working on ways to add only desired records from major e-publishers like Project Gutenberg to the ILS. Some libraries are working with new vendors to purchase e-books in a manner more in line with how libraries select and acquire print books. And vendors, e-publishers, and libraries are working on new models that we cannot currently imagine. Whatever your situation, we can reasonably assume that the specific details on how libraries acquire e-materials, where the files are housed, and the mechanics of adding and removing MARC records from the catalog will change. However, the guidance on

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[1] The term e-book is used as a convenience but we are really talking about all forms of electronic, downloadable files.

how librarians make the intellectual decisions about what to weed should remain more stable.

Libraries are increasingly adding e-books and dealing with a variety of issues related to their acquisition and use such as:

- How much money should be spent on print books and how much on digital content?
- What formats are available for digital content and which are needed in the community?
- Is the library making an outright purchase of the electronic content or is it a license for a specific number of circulations or a period of time?
- Are the e-books included in the online catalog or do patrons go to a vendor database to find e-books?

In addition to issues of acquisition and use, there are also many issues surrounding the administration and management of e-book collections. We have varying degrees of control over many elements of e-book acquisition and management. Some of these aspects are also changing as competition develops within the industry and business models shift to match the needs of publishers and libraries. Whatever we are dealing with today, may very well change next month. How we acquire e-books has an impact on how we weed. Remember that libraries have spent decades building print collections and many years adding various physical media formats. As e-book collections grow, individual e-books will start to reach the limits of their usefulness. It will be just as important to weed e-books as it is the physical collection.

As with weeding physical items, there are two aspects involved in weeding e-books: the intellectual decision that is made regarding the content of the material and the mechanical steps required to remove the item from the library's collection. While librarians have a great deal of control over the first aspect, they may have little or no control of the second. Unlike when we weed physical books, it takes more than the decision to discard the item to actually get an e-book out of sight.

Weeding e-books involves:

1. Intellectual decisions about the content.

2. Mechanics of removing the weeded item from the collection.

With traditional book collections a major impetus for weeding is the need for shelf space. Clearly with e-books, the library's shelf space could be limitless; the e-books and downloadable audio and video materials take up no shelf space. Another major reason for discarding a physical book or other item is disrepair; it's shabby, worn, torn, has pages missing or just looks ugly. Again, e-books don't wear out in any of these ways so there is no "automatic weeding" due to condition. These items also don't get lost; so again, there is no regular attrition to trigger the decision whether the item will be replaced or removed from the catalog.

So why would you want to or need to weed e-books? Regardless of format, you weed in order to keep the collection current and relevant. Librarians weed to separate the wheat from the chaff. We know that patrons have limited patience for looking through large collections of irrelevant material in order to find what they want (recall the 'boutique' theory mentioned on page 32 of this manual). This holds true whether that patron is looking through hundreds of physical books or entering search terms that return hundreds of electronic possibilities, many of which are obscuring the truly relevant material. While an e-book is not taking up physical real estate on a shelf, it does take space on a computer somewhere. Depending on where the electronic file actually resides, it may also take up space on library servers. Even if the file resides in the cloud or on a vendor's server, those servers must be maintained by someone so there are costs, directly or indirectly, involved.

The electronic space used to store e-books may be a non-issue for your library with minimal cost. However, as more e-book records are included in the library's online catalog, we must consider what will show up in search results. Bringing back a list of items that displays a lot of older copyright dates is just as detrimental to the library's reputation and the patron's perception of the library's value as is having shelves that are filled with old, ugly, worn material. Patrons expect that the same care is taken in maintaining our e-book collections. We are wasting the patron's time if we make them sift through entries for e-books that will not serve their needs.

The two major reasons for weeding physical materials remain the two major reasons for weeding e-books:

1. Low use

2. Outdated content

Ideally, the criteria for weeding e-books were established at the same time that the criteria for acquiring them were developed. But of course, in the real world, that probably didn't happen. So take the time now to consider the criteria your library will use in deselecting e-books and other e-materials. If your library is still in the early stages of embracing e-books, you may make decisions now based more on the popularity of items and the interests of the early adopters in your community. You may be in a situation, such as in a consortium, where you have little or no power to weed unless most of the other parties in the consortium agree that the item is no longer useful. But as the use of e-books grows and as more e-books are added to the collection, business models will change. You will want to revisit the criteria and adopt criteria and procedures for weeding that are more similar to, rather than vastly different from, the way you weed physical formats.

Consider these broad points about weeding e-books and other e-materials:

- Is the copyright date for e-books included in the calculation of the collection's average copyright age? Older material that is no longer useful should be culled. Keep in mind that the release date for an e-book is not always the same as the copyright date. Some third party vendors can't readily provide the copyright date unless that information was provided by the original producer of the electronic item so you may need to do some research.
- The library's mission is to provide the best resources possible to meet patron's needs and expectations. Outdated material in e-book format is just as detrimental to the collection as are physical books that have incorrect information or information that is no longer accurate.
- While most e-books won't be weeded due to condition, there are some MUSTIE factors to consider. These are addressed below.
- Are multiple copies of an item available that are no longer needed? Perhaps copies of a very popular book were added when an e-book had a long reserve list or when a book was the subject of an "all city" reading program. Once this number of copies is no longer needed, some formats or versions may be weeded.
- Are there formats in the collection that are no longer compatible with the reading devices that patrons in your community are using? As the popularity of devices shift and new devices are created, some e-books in the collection may only be available in formats that are no longer used by your community. This happened with audio formats as libraries eliminated vinyl records and then audiocassettes; it may not be long before some libraries eliminate CDs in favor of all downloadable materials. It's reasonable to expect that there will be a shift in devices, much like the shakeout between VHS and Beta in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

> Accuracy of the information and the adequacy of the subject's coverage apply to e-book weeding decisions.
>
> Copyright is as important for e-books as for physical formats. Follow the same CREW formulas (starting on page 49) to remove outdated materials.

MUSTIE is the acronym for six negative factors that make books and other materials prime candidates for weeding. A few of these factors are noted as not relevant for e-books but most can be applied to them.

- **Misleading** (and/or factually inaccurate). Weed outdated editions and books that are no longer accurate. Pay special attention to areas where information has changed recently or where it changes rapidly, like in medicine and travel.

- **Ugly**: Not relevant to e-books.

- **Superseded** (by a truly new edition or by a much better book on the subject). Especially for reference materials, test guides, and travel manuals, weed older editions. Most public libraries don't need to keep older editions for research value.

- **Trivial** (of no discernible literary or scientific merit; usually of ephemeral interest at some time in the past). Weed older titles that were of fleeting interest or are about outdated popular culture.

- **Irrelevant** to the needs and interests of your community. Even e-books should be expected to circulate or be used online at least once every few years. Also weed self-published e-books that are not circulating.

- The material or information may be obtained expeditiously **Elsewhere**. Especially for items available at no cost, such as through Project Gutenberg, don't clutter the library catalog with material that is not being used or is out of date. On the other hand, you may decide to weed some physical copies of classic literature that are infrequently used if the books are available through a free e-book source like Project Gutenberg.

MUSTIE FACTORS

Misleading

Ugly

Superseded

Trivial

Irrelevant

Elsewhere available

Depending on where and how the e-books were acquired, weeding will primarily mean removing the item from the library's online catalog. If the library actually owns the electronic file, as opposed to paying for a subscription, the file may need to be deleted from a server somewhere. It is important to know your vendor's business model when you make purchases so that you also understand if, how, and when titles can be removed from the online catalog.

Items purchased as part of a bundle through vendors like Overdrive may require the help of that vendor to pull the item out of the bundle. If the items are licensed as part of a consortium agreement with other libraries, then you may not be able to weed from those items at all unless the other members agree to the decision.

Purchases made directly or indirectly through the publisher may automatically weed themselves after a set number of circulations, requiring the library to purchase an additional license if you want to retain the e-book. E-book vendors, and their business models, are rapidly changing; expect to see more options for the outright purchase of e-books in the future, along with more licensing for a specific period of time or number of circulations. If you have the option to do so, be cautious about adding MARC records for *every* e-book offered by a service (in essence acquiring that e-book by making it available to your patrons), especially those available through free,

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Subscription
Short term lease

public domain programs like Project Gutenberg; it may be very easy to add 39,000 e-books to the catalog but difficult to sort through and weed out the ones you don't want any longer. Programs are being developed that allow you to select the e-books you want to add to your catalog. Libraries are demanding more control over content from third party vendors, who often currently bundle content.

If they are available, use your integrated library system (ILS) to run reports on the e-books in the collection to help identify items that meet specific criteria for weeding consideration. Keep in mind that you may have to ask the third party vendor to run these reports for you for materials they provide. Also, they may not be able to run every type of report that you would like. For example, you may be able to get a report that shows items that have not circulated in a specific period of time (use the CREW guidelines for various Dewey areas) or that have creation dates before a certain date. You might also look at a list of titles for areas of the collection that need updating due to changes in information, like astronomy (weed books that still include Pluto as a planet) or travel guides (weed books that are more than three years old). The same kind of attention can be paid to areas of the collection that include materials that deal with fads (for example, does the collection really need that e-book on macramé or an e-book on a no longer popular diet?).

Finally, weed the e-book collection in conjunction with physical books. Some libraries may keep an e-book version of a classic or a formerly popular fiction title while weeding physical copies, freeing up shelf space for a title that is more frequently used.