

BCRLG Lecture Series: The role of local print collections in a digital age

By Megan Sorenson.

On March 6th, 2014, the BC Research Libraries Group presented the latest installment in its ongoing lecture series. This session's speaker was Rick Lugg from Sustainable Collection Services, a consulting firm that specializes in supporting data-driven deselection in libraries. He delivered a thought-provoking presentation on "Rethinking library resources: The role of print collections in a digital age" to a group of more than 30 librarians at SFU Vancouver, as well as a number of others who joined remotely via live webcast. The same presentation was given at the University of Victoria on the following day.

Lugg's talk covered the changing value of local print monograph collections, alternative and cooperative models that can help to alleviate some of the issues surrounding print holdings, and the role that data can play in informing prospective collection management decisions at individual and collective levels.

He began by outlining some of the trends that are prompting libraries to reconsider how they manage their print monograph collections, including declining usage statistics, demands upon limited library space, changing user preferences in regard to format, overall lifecycle costs of maintaining print titles, and the increasing focus on library services as well as collections. In the course of his work with many academic libraries, Lugg has found that the significant level of redundancy within and across most library collections means that it is possible to do some judicious pruning without compromising on access.

Acknowledging that emotional factors often come into play with deselection activities, Lugg made the case that better title-level data analysis can help libraries take a more evidence-based approach to these collection decisions. He noted that while circulation statistics provide some insight into how print collections are being used, a fuller picture requires data that reveals the level of collection

overlap. In particular, the ability to assess the proportion of unique or scarcely held titles in a collection allows individual libraries and consortia to determine a reasonable level of duplication.

Lugg also emphasized the importance of clearly distinguishing between the preservation and access functions of print monograph collections. By designating certain archival copies of a title that will be maintained to preserve the scholarly record and other service copies that will ensure quick and effective access for users, libraries are better able to identify surplus copies that could be removed from the collective holdings without negative effects.

He concluded by providing an overview of the current landscape of shared print monograph initiatives and by highlighting some of the risks and benefits of these types of collaborations. In addition to general logistical issues, Lugg discussed challenges around committing to maintaining scarcely held titles, negotiating the withdrawal of widely held items, and determining what should be managed at local, consortial, or even national levels. He was also quick to point out that data-driven decisions can always be undermined by poor data quality. At the same time, Lugg noted that shared print initiatives have great potential to ensure the integrity of collective holdings and to allow participating institutions to distribute more evenly the responsibilities for retention and withdrawal.

A lively discussion followed the presentation, touching on topics such as the relative costs of maintaining digital monographs, disciplinary differences around the use of print materials, issues with Canadian access to archived content in the HathiTrust Digital Library, and the challenges of shared print archiving across large geographic regions.

*Megan Sorenson is a Liaison Librarian at
Simon Fraser University.*