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Academic Map Library Weeding – Thoughts and Guidelines Developed from Two Experiences

Feature Article

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Abstract

While maps remain an important part of library work, there has been a dearth of scholarly discussion on weeding maps. Some authors have offered suggestions in particular contexts – notably in public libraries and U.S. depository libraries. This leaves significant room for further discussion for those outside of the U.S. context, and those with more general map libraries. Following a literature review and contextual information situating the author's involvement in the topic, a discussion of methods and appropriate considerations are offered for weeding map collections. These guidelines are offered in point form in the conclusion for ease of referral.

Introduction

Weeding, or de-selection is a common and well-established practice in library work. Maps, however, are intrinsically different in form and content than manuscripts, and thus cannot be considered by the same criteria (Dawson, 2015, pp. 4-5). While some rules for de-selection can be borrowed from the manuscript realm, considerations such as scale and projection – which lead to significant differences in geospatial message – as well as the use of map editions over time as a tool of research, mean maps contain a plethora of variables that can alter their uniqueness and significance, and which can influence their utility for ongoing use. There is currently a dearth of writing about map weeding, particularly in the academic library. As the author was previously

tasked with map weeding projects and found little guidance for this work, this paper seeks to offer the current information and some general guidelines to help other map librarians develop a weeding project.

Literature Review

De-selection of materials is a Core Competency of map librarianship, according to the American Library Association (ALA) Map and Geospatial Information Round Table (MAGIRT) (MAGERT, 2008, p. 7). However, concrete ideas and methods are not discussed in the Core Competence document. The Map Collection Management Discussion Group is limited to ALA members and does not provide forward-facing recommendations on weeding or de-selection in map libraries (see MAGIRT, 2007).

Mary Larsgaard, whose work as a map librarian led to her authoring *Map Librarianship: An Introduction*, offered little in the way of suggestions for weeding. The closest the text comes is a section on "Evaluation" as part of the chapter "Selection and Acquisition", but this does not deal with the process of de-selection – only the evaluation of materials generally for inclusion in the collection (Larsgaard, 1998, pp. 111-115). Notably, this lack is mentioned directly in Folkner and Aagard's *The Influence of the Online Availability of USGS Topographic Maps on Weeding Decisions in Academic Libraries* (2016), where they note "Literature on weeding map collections is scarce and focuses on using a collection development policy to determine criteria for withdrawal" (p. 67). As their article is specific to weeding USGS Topographic maps that are available online, it only offers partial guidelines for the general map librarian to work from. While these guidelines for USGS topographic maps could be extended to broader collections, the world of map librarianship is diverse. One might find suggestions related to online topographic maps not particularly relevant in considering a local hand-drawn map or a thematic or tourist map of a local region.

The most prominent article of worth in the area is Dawson's *Weeding the Map Collection: Observations and Advice* (2015). It was unfortunate that the author did not find this article prior to undertaking his own work; however, much of the advice given aligned with the eventual guidelines developed. Dawson gives full explanations, with short recommendations at the end of each section. To summarize: address the emotional labour of weeding; teamwork is good; maps are not books; have a policy; be flexible; weeding helps the retained collection; and celebrate completion. It must be noted that Dawson presents these much more eloquently than the paltry wordage given here. However, for the reader questioning why a further article on the topic is needed: Dawson's article is excellent but is limited to the reference librarian's perspective in a public library map collection in the United States. This author now adds to Dawson's work by presenting the perspective of an academic map librarian in Canada in functional and liaison roles. These different perspectives, then, can be taken by future map librarians in weeding to consider for their own practice and to build on this literature.

Dawson also points to Le's 1983 article *The Map Collection in a Small Academic Library: Scarborough College*. While this article is nearly 40 years old and from a time radically different in terms of information use and retention, it holds some useful suggestions. In particular, the importance of the library's audience is stressed (p. 13), and the need for clear, written collections policies, including de-selection, is highlighted (p.14). Le also suggests maps may be weeded if

superseded in a bound atlas (p. 14); this is something an individual librarian may wish to consider in terms of the functional value of the differences in map size and overall physical utility. However, this librarian would only use this particular guideline sparingly.

One other notable writing specific to map weeding is Valery King's chapter *Federal Maps and the Depository Library* (in Caro, 2018, pp. 101-118). King, like Folkner and Aagard, deals almost exclusively with maps produced by the United States Government, and which are made available online; further, King's article is focused on Depository Libraries; other libraries with other map collections, then, are not fully captured. Finally, King's directives are primarily a focused reflection of weeding by Depository Libraries generally: an item may be discarded if it has been superseded, if it has become dated or expired, or if there is an official online copy. The only major caveat given is that users should be considered prior to eliminating a map, and that online maps may not be a worthwhile substitute for a paper map.

One can expand to consult other literature on weeding, specifically in search of articles that may offer practices for non-standard materials. To this end, Michael W. Handis' *Practical Advice for Weeding in Small Academic Libraries* (2007) offers some standard options: circulation reports and physical state. The latter is a strong consideration in maps, though retaining even a poorly cared-for item may be necessary in cases of rarity. Circulation reports are a fraught discussion among books (Hendley, 2019); among maps, it is virtually useless, as Weihs and Howarth (1995) note that 41.2% of map collections are uncatalogued (p. 190), and even among those that are catalogued, only a subset are circulating. Folkner and Aagard note that less than 40% of their respondents measure usage of USGS topographic maps, often by counting maps left out (p. 72). Measuring circulation among maps is, at best, challenging and does not correctly capture actual usage. In his final thoughts, Handis (2007) draws a difference between college and research libraries, noting that preservation is not a role for the former, and interlibrary loan remains a valuable tool (p.87). However, in the case of maps, even the USGS does not have a complete inventory of the maps it has produced (Folkner & Aagard, 2016, p.67), and the zeal for weeding can lead to items disappearing. At this stage, any library with a map collection could be the sole holder of that particular map. This issue will be further discussed below.

White, in his Citation and Circulation Counts: Data Sources for Monograph De-selection in Research Library Collections (2017), notes that current methods of de-selection "overwhelmingly emphasize the importance of circulation counts and date-of-last-use in the weeding process" (p. 53). He argues that this fails to account for many influential items and likely future use, and that instead, citations should be a data source considered in de-selection decisions. This could be a point of consideration for map de-selection. However, citation of maps is not as common as one would hope (based on the author's experience, conversations with other map librarians, and the dearth of literature on the topic, although associations have developed standard citation formatting – see Wood, 2012).

In summary, the literature on map weeding remains scant, leaving current map librarians to individual professional judgment. As many map librarians have either come into the field by chance (Larsgaard, 1998, p. xvii), or libraries have not devoted proper resources to the maps collection (p. 286), it remains the case that further consideration of map weeding is needed. Despite this general lack of publishing about the topic, maps remain both a well-loved and desired collection in the library (Larsgaard notes approximately 1000 spatial data collections in the United

Stated and Canada, p. 306; see also Handren and Leahey, 2017, p. 253), and a collection to be placed in otherwise unused space by administrators (Larsgaard, 1998, p.286). This paper seeks to give the map librarian further guiding thoughts for weeding.

Contextual Information

As the Geospatial/GIS Librarian at Brock University, the author was tasked with a weeding project at the Map, Data and GIS Library (MDGL). As they were new to working as a librarian, and the paper map collection had been weeded within the past ten years, they suggested and were approved focusing on the monographs and atlases. The monographs could largely be treated as other monograph collections (e.g. remove "Yahoo Maps 2003 for Dummies"; keep "Getting to know ArcGIS Pro 2.8"); however, the atlases proved a grey area between maps and monographs. Ultimately, working through conceptual issues of the atlases allowed the author to develop an overall collection development policy for the MDGL, particularly focusing on the maps and atlases. Later in their career, the author was given oversight of the McGill University map collection. Prior to their tenure, this collection saw a radical de-selection, some details of which were related in personal communications by those present at the time. The collection also suffered a traumatic move and subsequently languished for some time before clean-up and care were undertaken by a long-standing librarian at the institution. The author later took over this care, and the needs of the collection alerted them to general needs for any proper collection management to happen. As the author has since taken a position elsewhere, the collection remains in a state of limbo, with the previous librarian providing care once more, subject to administrative respect and resource allocation.

Discussion

The map collection requires a place within the overall collections policy. A collections policy that does not explicitly include maps and geospatial information ignores a distinct portion of the collection and reflects a gap in the policy. Should amending the policy prove problematic, a separate map and geospatial collections policy should be drafted. It may be worth including all data as well, as these areas have some notable similarities.

It is crucial to any de-selection process to fully catalogue the collection. The true scope, and any specialization(s), within the collection, will not reveal themselves unless a thorough knowledge of the items within it are known. Rankin and Larsgaard (2014) note that "The first thing to do when planning a weeding project is to determine what part of your map collection gets used and what does not" (p. 18). This is difficult without knowledge of the overall collection, and when a collection extends beyond a few thousand items, assistance in that knowledge is needed. Therefore, the collection should be inventoried and catalogued. Decisions about what should be maintained – a specialization within the collection, for example – may be harmed by not knowing what exists prior to de-selection. Map librarians should take this as an opportunity to argue for resources for an inventory and cataloguing of the maps, which, as previously noted, may not have previously occurred. An argument could be made, as well, that an inventory could be done in tandem with the weeding process. This would slow the weeding work, but ultimately save time by going through the entire collection at once. At the end, a consideration of the items to be weeded in light of the inventory created should be undertaken before the weeded items are fully removed to ensure the items selected for de-selection are deselected selectively.

There are gaps in information about the production of national topographic map series in the United States (Folkner & Aagard, 2016, p.67) and Canada (Woods et al, 2016 and Brodeur et al., 2020). As Woods et al note, "Topographic maps are commonly used by researchers interested in examining changes over time (urban sprawl, transportation patterns, diminishing woodlots, shoreline erosion, etc.)…" (p. 11). In keeping with the previously mentioned inventory of the local map collection, a collective effort could be made to inventory all currently surviving topographic and thematic maps, especially as produced by government departments. In Canada, this work has been taken on by Handren and Leahey (2022). It should further never be assumed that a particular topographic map from a given year exists in another more extensive library or archive. As was evidenced by Nova Scotia libraries' Novanet, every collection contains unique items and brings value to the whole (Marshall, 1999, p. 131). Weeding of government-produced maps, then, requires extra care in ensuring that the map of the same place and published date exist elsewhere and that said elsewhere will retain their copy. Any maps to be weeded should be checked with the national archive's inventory and/or other map librarians.

Thematic maps produced by various organizations bear consideration as well. In particular, these maps depict not only data about a particular location at the time of production, but also social and cultural conceptions of that place. Consider the examples of Leonard Guelke's "It's Your World Toronto" map from 1980 and "The Newfoundland Centred World" map created by Clarence Brown and the Department of Geography from the Memorial University of Newfoundland (1977). Similarly, the number of maps omitting Prince Edward Island has led to Alan MacEachern's (2018) research and exhibition, while New Zealand's omittance has prompted a social media micro community (see www.reddit.com/r/MapsWithoutNZ) and tongue-in-cheek advertising featuring the Prime Minister (Guardian News, 2018), both of which denote current geopolitical sentiments of power and importance. Ultimately, given that maps run an extreme gamut from mass-produced to unique, it is essential to check on the availability of any map prior to weeding – an old tourist map may be the last findable one of its kind.

Materials particularly pertinent to the local culture should be preserved. As cultural institutions, it is incumbent upon libraries to reflect that locality, even if the item is not in use at the moment and the library has limited space. Large institutions often hold reputations for holding everything of value; however, less populated areas are often missed – trees lost in the forest. As an example, a 2022 search for "Shag Harbour" in the University of Toronto's library catalogue yielded 36 results, of which only 7 related to the area in question, and of those 7 all were articles from Canadian newspapers or magazines – a similar search of Dalhousie University's catalogue yielded 2295 results, including articles, books, images, government documents, and more. Extensive collections can also be more challenging to navigate (Dawson, 2015, p. 9), and a researcher may find more success in a locally-focused collection. Thus, the weeding process should be careful to retain items of local value.

Conclusion

A series of guidelines can be used to inform a weeding project:

1. Ensure a collection policy includes maps and geospatial information de-selection or that the institution has a collections policy specifically for the maps and geospatial collection.

2. Prepare an inventory/catalogue of all maps in the collection, and include them in the library's catalogue.
3. Consider the needs of local culture and historical preservation.
4. Consider the local user needs.
5. Consider the overall map and geospatial collection, including particular strengths – and if the collection is not catalogued, do so.
6. Determine if the map exists elsewhere. If not, ensure it is preserved, either locally or at an institution with the capacity to do so if necessary.
7. Consider the state of the map: is it damaged or degraded? If so, should it be removed (based on the other guidelines) or replaced?
8. Consider the emotional and artistic weight of the maps. Emotional and artistic value are part of an item's overall value and utility, though not everyone agrees.
9. Follow collection policy rules, but be flexible about them.

Ultimately, it is hoped that these guidelines prove useful to other uncertain map librarians who may find themselves faced with a weeding project. This article seeks to add an academic library's unique needs in map weeding to the public library perspective already delivered by Dawson; in the future, it is hoped that a special librarian and/or government librarian will further contribute to the discussion. Regardless, weeding of maps is a proposition fraught with pitfalls, and while it – like all weeding – must be undertaken (Koveleskie, 2014, p. 171), it must be done with great care, professional knowledge, and a deep understanding of the collection and the wider implications of the decisions made.

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