
“The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up”

The Art of Decluttering and Organizing Library Collections

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ABSTRACT “The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up” recalls Marie Kondo’s 2014 influential book of the same name,¹ from which we took our inspiration. The panelists discussed how “tidying up” parts of their collections, while in some ways a daunting process, is nevertheless a worthwhile and important endeavor for libraries. Each panelist included a summary of what part of the collection needed tidying, how they undertook the process, and what were the results of the process. The parts of the library collection considered in this presentation specifically were periodical subscriptions, reference works, and standing orders for book series.

Periodical Subscriptions

By Michelle Spomer

WHAT NEEDED TIDYING?

Pittsburgh Theological Seminary has been interested in renovating the library for quite some time, and the pursuit of this has had a few starts and stops over the years. In 2014, a new renovation committee was formed. This committee engaged an architectural firm out of Boston (Perry, Dean, Rogers) to create a preliminary design for the renovation. This firm produced a report in the summer of 2015, at which point the new seminary president, Dr. David Esterline, put a halt to the process in order to hire a library director. I became the library director in early 2016, and hit the ground running with the renovation process. Thankfully,

the report produced by Perry, Dean, Rogers provided much of the groundwork needed for a design, so I didn't have to start from scratch. In part of this report, it was recommended that 2,500 linear feet of materials should be permanently relocated outside of the library in order to create additional space for the design. It didn't seem sustainable to me to maintain a separate collection outside of the library, and I also knew that the collection had not gone through any significant weeding in the last several years, if ever. I decided that I would try to completely withdraw 2,500 linear feet of materials from the collection.

In the fall of 2016, it was determined that we would not continue the renovation process with Perry, Dean, Rogers, and that we would instead hire a local architect. LGA Partners became the new architectural firm, and they began working on a new design, using some of the data in the Perry, Dean, Rogers report as a starting point. Even though we went with a new firm and had them create a new design, it was clear that removing 2,500 linear feet of materials would still be advantageous in meeting some of the goals of the renovation (more space, more light, more lounge/study areas). I began working with my staff to identify and remove the "low-hanging fruit" from the collection. This mainly consisted of duplicate copies in the circulating collection, dated reference works, and print journals. For the purposes of this panel, I will focus on the process of deselecting journals.

WHAT WAS THE PROCESS?

A little over a year is not a lot of time to plan for and then implement the removal of 2,500 linear feet of materials. Here is a timeline and overview of the main aspects of the deselection process:

- **March 2016** Criteria were created for removing duplicate copies from the circulating collection.
- **June 2016** Criteria were created for journal deselection.
- **July 2016** A list of journal titles that we had both in JSTOR and in print was created. Faculty were asked for input (e.g., were there titles they wanted to keep in print even though they were duplicated in JSTOR?).

- **October 2016** A list of current print subscriptions was given to the faculty for input (i.e., Which titles were they interested in? Did it matter if they were in print or online?).
- **March 2017** A list of non-current print journals was created.
- **June 2017** The deselection process was completed (just in time for us to start moving everything out of the library building).

The journal deselection process had several phases. First, I wanted to see how much overlap we had between our print titles (both current and non-current) and our online titles. Since the JSTOR platform provides perpetual access to purchased journal collections, print titles that are duplicated in JSTOR would be good candidates for withdrawal. After consulting with faculty (by providing them with a checklist of journal titles), several print journals were deselected that were included in our JSTOR collections. A similar process was followed with the current print subscriptions—faculty were consulted, and several more print journals were either completely deselected or moved to an online-only subscription.

The last phase of journal deselection considered only non-current journal titles that were not in JSTOR. For these journals, we used one or more of the following criteria to determine what should be done:

- Is it relevant to Reformed/Presbyterian/Methodist traditions?
- Is it relevant to curriculum/research needs?
- Is it an incomplete run (≤ 10 volumes/issues)?
- Is it available in full-text in ATLAS or Academic Search Premier?
- Are there ≥ 100 US libraries that own this journal?
- Is it available in HathiTrust or Internet Archive?
- What is the physical condition?

WHAT WERE THE RESULTS?

Given the amount of time we had, our deselection process was successful. We were able to remove 2,621 linear feet of library materials, including the “low-hanging fruit” of duplicate book copies, obsolete reference works (encyclopedia sets, biographical dictionaries, etc.), and print journals. I am satisfied with the result now, but know that we may discover down the road things we should have done differently.

Reference Works

By Suzanne Estelle-Holmer

WHAT NEEDED TIDYING?

Judging from my reading and experience talking with other librarians, weeding is a task that frequently creates anxiety and doubt and is avoided until necessary. Many of us have inherited collections that we haven't created, and we aren't familiar with the principles that guided selection decisions. Especially in academic libraries, where outdated materials are often kept for use in future research, it can be difficult to decide whether to withdraw outdated materials or send them to storage (if available). Usually there's an exigency or need that forces us to undertake a major de-selection project.

This presentation will document the weeding of a large reference collection that was carried out at the Yale Divinity Library during the summer months of 2017. The Divinity Library is part of the larger Yale University Library and is fortunate to have access to a library storage facility where rarely used or outdated materials can be stored and retrieved. Despite this, there frequently are limits on the number of volumes that can be sent in one year, and items from the general collections often took precedence. On occasion, some obvious items like print indexes and other outmoded formats were removed, but on the whole my attempts at weeding the reference collection had been half-hearted.

During Spring 2017 there was renewed urgency to reduce the size of the reference collection. The dean had funds to completely refurbish the Trowbridge Reference Room and restore it to its historic grandeur. He was eager to start the work as soon as possible so that it would be ready for the start of the next academic year. It was decided that everything would be overhauled: carpeting, light fixtures, and furnishings, were all removed. In addition, all the books would need to be removed from the shelves in order to repaint the built-in shelves. Metal shelving, which had been used to extend shelving capacity, was removed, thus reducing the number of volumes that could be housed by roughly 1,000. This meant that as books were removed from the bookcases and put on book trucks, I would then have the opportunity to examine and evaluate every volume in the collection! Marie

Kondo's advice to "place every item of clothing in the house on the floor"² seems relevant here.

WHAT WAS THE PROCESS?

The reference collection was composed of three sections, each of which was shelved separately. On the highest shelves, accessible only by ladder, was an extensive collection of North American and European denominational directories and yearbooks. Before the Internet, these were valuable sources for addresses and biographical information. Now this information is readily available on denominational web sites. We decided to send most of these volumes to the shelving facility and in many cases cancelled our subscriptions. The only directories we now house in the reference collection are current issues for the main denominations represented at YDS.

The second discrete "collection" in the Reference Room was LC Subject Class Z, including book history, library science, bibliographies (general and subject), library catalogs, and publishing. At some point in the past, a decision was made to house all Zs in the reference room and to make them non-circulating. The range and completeness of Yale's collection of theological bibliographies and printed library catalogs has long been a strength of the Divinity library, but many of these volumes were rarely consulted and took a large amount of room on the shelves. Weeding this portion of the collection caused me the most indecision and angst. Many of these works are the record of unique collections and publication history. It was hard to face the fact that most would have to go into storage. The one consolation was that they would circulate and still be available for research.

The third section comprised general reference works relating to philosophy, theology, biblical studies, practical theology, and history of Christianity. For this collection, books were removed and reshelved on temporary shelving. I soon discovered, however, that it was easiest to work from a book truck and to evaluate each book individually. This enabled me to check our catalog for other copies in the library system and to gauge the uniqueness of the work. Since we had no circulation or shelving data for the books (we don't discharge reference volumes on tables or book trucks), I had to depend on my observation and knowledge of how the collection was used. In the process, I developed the following criteria:

QUESTIONS:

- How much dust is on the book? A thick layer of dust generally indicates lack of use.
- Is the content outdated? The approach or context in which information is presented can be an indicator, as well as the publication date.
- Is the work available in electronic format? This may not always be a reason to remove the print volumes from the reference collection. Some researchers may prefer to use print. However, for works that support theological studies, like music or art history encyclopedias, it may be advisable to withdraw the print.
- Was the topic once trendy and now outdated? This is especially true of subject bibliographies and dated monographs (that somehow had been added to the reference collection many years ago).
- Reference works in supporting disciplines (music, art history, sociology, psychology, etc.), especially if available elsewhere on campus.
- Is there too much on the same topic? Try to achieve a manageable collection of works on a topic.

After deciding which books would remain in the reference room and which would be moved to storage or withdrawn, books were transferred to technical services. There they were searched against the Yale University Library catalog to determine if the title was already housed in storage, or if not, if it should be moved there. We were fortunate to have an already established workflow for sending close to 2,000 to 5,000 volumes to storage every summer.

WHAT WERE THE RESULTS?

In my opinion, the project was an enormous success. I was able to reduce the size of the reference collection by close to 2,500 volumes. The shelves are now more orderly and attractive. There is adequate room on each shelf for growth. The call number sequence in the room is easy to follow so that students can identify and locate what they need. Important works stand out on the shelves, and resources are getting more use than in the past. Subject areas are more scalable; instead of twenty books on a subject, there now are five or six. Another

benefit is that I am better able to note gaps or assess areas where the collection could be expanded. Best of all, after a full academic year, there have been no complaints from faculty or students that favorite books are missing!

Standing Orders

By Amy Limpitlaw

WHAT NEEDED TIDYING?

Like many libraries, the Theology Library at the Boston University School of Theology has numerous standing orders. Standing orders are typically agreements set up with publishers or vendors so that whenever a new title is published within a particular series, the title will be sent automatically to the library for purchase. The advantage of using a standing order is that it saves staff time by eliminating the need to select and order each title in the series individually. Another advantage is that the library is assured that it won't miss receiving all the titles in the series. The disadvantage of using a standing order is that the library may receive some individual titles that do not fit the library's collection plan.

Over a number of years, it became clear to me that our standing orders needed considerable tidying. Every so often, I would notice that we had recently received a title that had little relevance or connection to our collection goals. When I investigated further, I discovered that there had been little to no circulation for many of these titles, and some of them had been quite expensive. Moreover, I discovered that many of the titles received in print on standing order were already available through one of the university's e-book collections. It became increasingly clear that we were simply wasting money purchasing books that were already available electronically, were quite expensive, and/or were of little relevance to our collection goals.

WHAT WAS THE PROCESS?

The process of tidying up our standing orders involved first, figuring out what standing orders we had and which were current. I quickly

discovered that our records were a mess. For some standings orders, we had a record in the catalog for the standing order itself, but for others for which we were currently receiving titles, we had no record at all. We also had no history of when or why the standing order had been set up in the first place. I had no way of knowing if a particular standing order had been set up at the request of a particular faculty member who possibly had retired years ago. And there were also records for standing orders for series which seemed to no longer be in publication.

The process, then, initially involved a fair amount of detective work, including occasionally contacting publishers to find out if a series was simply on pause or if it had completed its publication. Once we had a sense of which series were still active, the question became one of making the decision whether or not to continue the standing order for the series, as well as whether or not to set up new standing orders for other series. Questions asked during this process were as follows:

- Are the titles within the series already held by another Boston University library or duplicated by one of BU's e-book collections?
- Are the titles easily available from other libraries in our local consortia—Boston Theological Institute (BTI) and Boston Library Consortium (BLC)?
- For series for which we already had a standing order, what has been the circulation for individual titles?
- How much do individual titles within the series cost, on average?

WHAT WERE THE RESULTS?

While the process took a considerable amount of time and effort on the part of the staff, in the end it seemed worthwhile. We were able to determine that sixty of our standing orders were inactive. We also learned that four standing orders were for series that had been continued under a new name. We ended up canceling fifty standing orders, and decided to continue sixty-three standing orders that had already been set up. As for new standing orders, this part of the process is currently ongoing, and involves soliciting faculty input about book

series in their disciplines. So far we have added eight new standing orders. Finally, the tidying up has resulted in much more accurate record-keeping as we have been able to update the records in our catalog to accurately reflect the series we are receiving on standing order and the individual titles received.

Some important lessons were learned in the process as well. One is that librarians should think very carefully before setting up a standing order, to make sure that the library really needs to receive all the titles within the series. In most cases, titles within a book series can always be purchased individually, and sometimes this makes more sense. It is also important to solicit faculty input on the important series within their disciplines. And it is a good idea to periodically check what you are already receiving on standing order to make sure the series and individual titles still fit within your collection goals and are not being duplicated elsewhere (by e-book packages, for example). You also want to keep an eye out to see if a series has completed publication. I would recommend taking the time to periodically review and “tidy up” your standing orders every three-to-five years. And most importantly, keep notes on your standing orders—on when and why they were set up and when and why they were canceled. This will help for future planning and decision-making.

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NOTES

- 1 Marie Kondo, *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2014).
- 2 Kondo, 66.