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The Forest, the Trees, the Bark, the Pith: The Circulation Rates of Works of Contemporary Literature in Ten Language Areas at the University of Oregon Libraries

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Introduction: Primary Texts

Contemporary literature represents a special class of materials purchased by selectors in the humanities at academic libraries. Proceeding as a matter of course, subject specialists responsible for collection development in the language fields in which their libraries collect regularly spend a fair portion of their discretionary budgets on primary texts—the novels, plays, poetry, essay collections, memoirs, autobiographies, creative nonfiction, and other genres—that are currently being published. The charge to purchase contemporary literary primary texts may be spelled out in a given library's collection development policy statements, but the reasons for doing so are usually not formulated. If pressed, most selectors would probably say that they collect contemporary literature to provide materials for scholarly study both present and future. Yet since in most cases the question is wide open about which contemporary authors might be the subject of intellectual interest in the future, this reason is not all that solid. Selectors may be guided by a variety of methods for determining what small subset of works out of the vast sea of contemporary production they purchase—prizes, reviews, reputation, preferred publishers, vendor recommendations, and so forth—but their choices are largely educated guesswork. One suspects that other reasons for libraries' acquisition of primary texts are also at work, though these, too, are rarely articulated: to support the intellectual community's presumed interest in current literature, to preserve the cultural record, and, more vaguely still, to meet a felt obligation to support the arts.

As many libraries are pressured by budgetary considerations to move from “just in case” to “just in time” purchasing models, the commitment to collect contemporary literature will probably remain at odds with an increasing pressure to restrict purchasing to meet immediate needs. Readers have generally evinced a decided preference for physical books for the sort of immersive, long-form reading that literary works demand, and in any case many works of contemporary literature are not available as e-books, the format most amenable to DDA purchasing programs.

For all of these reasons, collecting works of contemporary literature will continue to represent an exception to the trends in monograph acquisition in the academic library world.

The Project

This study examined the performance of works of contemporary literature at the University of Oregon's Knight Library, a mid-sized ARL member institution. It calculated the circulation rates for books in 10 major language areas in which the library actively collects current literary works in support of its degree-granting language programs: American, Chinese, English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Latin American, Russian, and Spanish. The object was to gain a better understanding of the performance of these works, that is, the extent to which they were being used by patrons of the library. While data that would allow for the determination of the exact proportions of expenditures on primary and secondary texts in the literary fields have not been kept (this is a desideratum for further research), selectors in these areas are known to spend a significant portion of their discretionary budgets on firm orders of contemporary literary works. Information about the usage rates of this important class of materials will help guide the selectors as they make their selections.

Literature Review

Primary texts have been invisible in the library literature of circulation studies; there have been no studies that look specifically at primary texts. Studies of circulation rates generally offer a conspectus of an entire collection (of monographic holdings), or focus on particular areas of a library's collection as examples of circulation patterns of the whole. In the LCC system the P-range, covering languages and literatures, typically comprises a high relative percentage of a library's total holdings—at the University of Oregon they make up roughly 10% of the collection—and a high number of circulations. Yet they do not typically exhibit the highest circulation rates. Given that these fields are known to

library science as being monographic-intensive, this is curious, even perplexing. One might conclude that the reason for this lies in the high publishing output in fields where the academic monograph reigns as the chief form of scholarly argument, so that even healthy rates of usage are spread out over the high volume of monographs published in the field. However, the large percentage of primary texts within the P-range is another, and very likely more important, reason for the discrepancy between the actual circulation of academic literary critical monographs and the expected circulation based on what is understood to be the central role of monographs for the research culture of these fields. It is reasonable to suppose that the large portion of primary texts in the P-range, including all of the formerly contemporary literature that the library has collected over the decades, as well as the numerous, multivolume editions of canonical authors that are likely to have been superseded by more recent critical editions, inflates the total number of books while suppressing the circulation rates of the P-range as a whole.

A big challenge of use studies is to know just what rates constitute strong use and what rates constitute weak use. Long ago, George Bonn (1974) proposed the idea of the “use factor,” which he defined as the percentage of books that have circulated at least once in a particular call number range divided by the percentage of the collection represented by the whole collection. The trick of this index is that it is relational, using the percentage of the whole represented by a given area of the collection as a sort of standard by which the circulation percentage of that area of the collection can be quantified and evaluated. The greater the percentage of the whole a particular call number range represents, the greater its circulation rate needs to be in order for it to generate a desired use factor of 1 or higher. In general, use studies count the number of books that have circulated and compare that figure to the number of books that have not circulated in a given LC call number range. As an index the “use factor” performs the same comparison and quantifies it in a meaningful way. However, this study did not use the “use factor” as a measure of collection performance, for two reasons: (1) it focused on a particular class of books (contemporary literary primary texts) that constitutes an extremely small subdivision of the call number range as a whole; and (2) a colleague of the author at the University of Oregon had already used the measure of the Circulation Turnover Rate or CTR in a comprehensive, subject-level analysis of the performance of all the LC call number ranges in the collection, and the author wanted to be able to compare his

results with those already obtained for the library. The drawback of this approach was that after deriving the CTRs for the various language areas, there was no clear standard against which they could be interpreted.

The study that most nearly addresses the main concerns of this one was conducted by Knievel, Wicht, and Silipigni Connaway (2006). Surveying the holdings in 25 subject areas at the University of Colorado at Boulder, they tabulated holdings, circulations, percentage of books that circulated, and “transaction per item” or what in this study is called the CTR. The transaction per item rate for the P classification (Language, Linguistics, and Literature) for the five-year period 1998–2002 was 5.0. As noted above, the LC P-range includes both primary and secondary works, as well as works on linguistics, a very broad swath of materials. It should be noted, too, that the transaction per item figure that Knievel et al. calculated is, in the case of the Ps in the UCB collection, for the 29.2% of the items that circulated at least once. The CTR for all of the Ps, both circulating and not, which the authors of the study did not calculate but which can be derived from the data they give, is 1.45.

Sarah Tudesco profiled the percentage of the French, German, and Italian collections at Yale that have circulated between 2003 and 2015. The results are available on Tableau Public at <https://public.tableau.com/profile/sarah.tudesco#!/> (note: “collections” is not defined but can be assumed to be language and literature collections, rather than books in other subject areas that happen to be written in one of these three languages). As one would expect, the figures are highest for the earliest years addressed by the study, since the more recently published and acquired books will have had less chance to circulate. For 2003, the first year for which data for the study were available, 21% of French, 17% of German, and 16% of the Italian books published in that year have circulated. Another significant result of the study is that the publication decades in which the highest percentages (30% for French, 23% for German, and 25% for Italian for the 1990s) of the volumes for these three languages circulated between 2002 and 2015 were the 1980s and 1990s. This gives support to humanities librarians’ oft-traded intuition that books in their fields may take considerably longer than those in other areas before attaining their peak circulation rates.

Method

For the purposes of this study, “contemporary” was defined as having been published within the last

20 years. This periodization had the advantage of coinciding with the time ranges of the LCC ranges, which for the literatures in question has designated a set of call numbers for 2001 to the present. Alma Analytics was used to obtain lists of all the books and their circulation amounts for all of the items in the targeted call number ranges. (Note: while the data do not distinguish between academic and community patrons in its circulation counts, it was an assumption of this study that the large majority of the circulations were initiated by the former group.) The data for each literary area were then imported into an Excel spreadsheet and sorted by publication date. Since the object of the study was to arrive at figures for the circulation rates of the primary texts in the different language areas, the entries for secondary works and translations were removed from the spreadsheets. These had to be identified optically, that is, by reading through all the items on the Excel spreadsheets. Secondary works are generally recognizable by their titles. When in doubt, the book in question was googled for a handy description. While the judgment calls made in this way may not have been entirely perfect, the possibility of error was judged to be acceptably small. In the initial pass through the data, works in translation were also removed from the spreadsheets, a somewhat laborious process because a title in English does not necessarily mean the language of the book is English. In many cases, the presence of the foreign-language original made it possible to recognize when an English-language title was a translation; but in cases of books with English-language titles with no corresponding foreign-language original on the spreadsheet, more information about the book had to be found in the library's catalog.

Using call numbers alone, however, was not sufficient to capture all the literary works published since 2001 and collected by the library, since LCC numbers are assigned to authors according to the date of their initial publication. For authors who published their first works before 2001, the call numbers of all subsequent works by that author reflect the date of the initial publication (thus ensuring that all of an author's creative works would be shelved together in libraries). To deal with this wrinkle, another search needed to be run. Alma Analytics allows one to specify both call number range (the LCC ranges corresponding to the period 1961–2000 were used) together with the "publication date" (2001–2019) in order to capture data for the works of the many authors collected by the library who began their literary careers prior to 2001. In this manner, a second

set of data for each language area turned out to be obtained, which was then subject to the same process of cleaning by the removal of secondary works and translations. This second data set, for authors who had initiated their careers before 2001, was ampler than the first one.

The data on both sets of cleaned-up spreadsheets were then tallied to arrive at the total number of books and total circulations. The numbers for the two spreadsheets for each language area were combined and the number of books and the number of circulations were calculated by means of the sum-function in Excel. Within each language area, the CTR for each publication year was calculated, as well as the aggregate figure for the time period under examination (2001–2019). Excel was used to prepare a table displaying the publication year, total number of holdings, total number of circulations, and the resulting CTR for each year for each language area (Appendix A). The bottom row of the table was used for the aggregate numbers (i.e., total number of books, circulations, and the CTR for the language area in the period 2001–2019).

The tables also included an experimental column giving the CTR-y, or CTR per year, which is arrived at by dividing the CTR for a given year by the number of years that have elapsed between the given year and the present. The rationale for introducing this measure was to account for the fact that the earlier a book had been published, the longer the time it had to amass circulations. In contradistinction to the CTR, which gives the circulation rate for the books published in a particular year over the span of time from that year to the present, the CTR-y averages that CTR over the number of years the books have had the opportunity to circulate. It was anticipated that the CTR-y would afford insight into the question of the extent to which the dramatically higher CTRs for the earlier years in the study were the effect of this time advantage. The CTR-y's did decline slightly in the years covered by the study, although the most recent 5–7 years in each language area are probably too close to the present to support meaningful judgments, since it may take that long for a literary work to "gain traction" with readers. As it turned out, the CTR-y curves (Appendix B) tended to be remarkably level and steady, which meant that the dramatically higher circulation numbers for the books in all language areas from the earlier years in the study were the effect of the greater time in which they had to accrue use. For example, the 81 German-language primary works published in 2001 and held by the University

of Oregon Libraries had by the time of the study generated 111 circulations for a CTR of 1.37. Yet when that number is divided by 19, the number of years in which the books published in 2001 had a chance to circulate, the resulting CTR-y is .07, which means that a book in that sector of the collection was circulated on average .07 times a year. In other words, in any given year a book from this sector has roughly a 1/14 chance of circulating. It is possible that many of the books in the earlier years of the study garnered most of their circulations in the years immediately following their year of publication and thereafter fell into relative disuse. Since the yearly circulation data for individual titles acquired before 2014 are not available, this hypothesis could not be tested.

After being tabulated, the data from each language area were displayed in two sets of graphs created in Tableau Public, the open source visualization software. The first set paired the number of books and the CTR (Appendix A), while the second paired the CTR and the CTR-y (Appendix B). These graphs render the trends in the data and the relationships between these trends readily apprehensible. All the graph trajectories for the CTR-y's are mostly flat, indicating that there have not been dramatic fluctuations in the circulation rates of the sectors of the collection covered by this study, but that they have proceeded at remarkably regular rates across all language areas.

Results

The CTRs for the original-language primary texts for each of the 10 areas investigated in this study are ranked from highest to lowest in Figure 1.

Literary Area	Prim Texts 2001–2019	Total Circs 2001–2019	CTR 2001–2019
Japanese	389	2,083	5.35
American	5,331	25,489	4.78
British	1,619	6,026	3.72
Chinese	733	1,579	2.15
Russian	2,934	4,366	1.49
Italian	254	307	1.21
French	207	240	1.16
Latin American	3,115	2,435	.78
German	814	547	.67
Spanish	468	298	.64

Figure 1. Number of primary texts, total circulations, and CTRs for 10 major language areas.

These data are telling. For starters, it is useful to think about what the numbers in the third column mean. To take the example from the Japanese literature, a CTR of 5.35 means that on average any given book in that portion of the collection will have circulated over 5 times in the 20-year period under consideration. Of course, that average is a statistical figment: some books will have circulated a good deal more than that, and others not at all.

It is no surprise that American and British literature have high CTRs since the potential community of readers of these texts is not limited by language competence. There is another way of looking at these figures, however. When one factors in the small size of the communities of readers of the other languages on the list, the circulation rates relative to those of the Anglophone countries suddenly seem much stronger. How many readers of Italian, for example, are in the University of Oregon community? Three hundred is a generous estimate. That would be about 1/90 of the total number of students, faculty, and staff, to speak nothing of the wider community with borrowing privileges, all potential readers of literature in English. Closely in line with this, that tiny subset generated a little more than 1/100 of the circulations achieved by the set of American literary works over the same time span. On the other hand, since there were far fewer Italian books (roughly 3% of the total number of volumes of American and British literature) purchased for the collection, that same small population of readers of Italian generated a CTR that shows a usage rate that is roughly a quarter of the rate of usage for American literature. In other words, although there are an estimated 90 times as many potential readers of books in English as there are of potential readers of books in Italian among the community of borrowers, the books in English circulated at a rate only 4 times greater than that achieved by the books in Italian.

Interestingly, of the three areas—French, Italian, and Japanese—in which the holdings are fewest, all have CTRs greater than 1. This could be taken to mean that focused collecting in these areas has paid off. It is also true that certain illustrious works in these areas, such as the novels of Elena Ferrante in Italian, have inflated the average circulation rate for the whole.

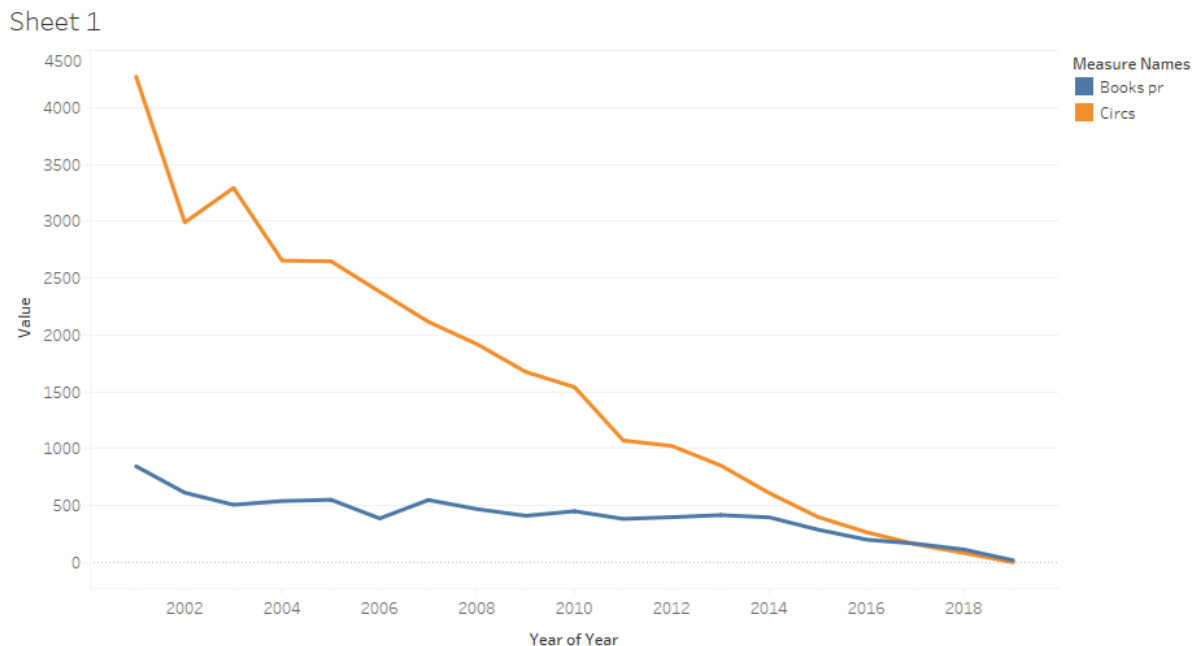
The results for Latin American literature present the opposite case. While the total number of books in this area of the collection is second only to American literature, the CTR is low relative to most of

the other literature areas in the study. At the same time, though, the total number of circulations is the fourth highest on the chart, indicating a decent appetite for Latin American fiction among the library's patrons. This use is spread inefficiently over a wide field of books, many of which are not pulling their weight. This would suggest that selection in this area needs to be more attuned to the interests of potential users. It should be mentioned in this regard, however, that the selector in the field had been making a conscious effort to collect rare and obscure materials that other libraries in the region might not have. The CTR provides a bald measure of use; but there are other ways in which a collection might have enduring value.

Two sets of graphs were prepared for each language area. The first shows the relationship between the number of books in the library's collection by publication date and the circulation amounts for those same books since 2001; the second shows the CTR for the books published by year and the CTR-y for the same books. Examples of these for the American Literature area are given in Figures 2 and 3 respectively (graphs are in Appendices).

The most conspicuous element of all the graphs is the steep decline in total number of books

purchased. With almost regular budget cuts over the last two decades, the library has not been able to fulfill its traditional if subsidiary responsibility to preserve the cultural record. The number of circulations has declined as well, although whether this is a function of the number of items in the collection or whether it is because newer items have had less time to generate circulations is hard to tell. It is probably both. Looking at the graph of the CTR and CTR-y for American literature (Figure 3), a similar decline in the CTR is evident, but, again, whether this is a function of quantity or time is hard to tell. The CTR-y does remain, however, fairly steady; and this would suggest that given time, the literary works more recently studied will accrue circulation numbers that are proportional to the amount of books collected. The steady increase in the number of circulations as one moves backward in time toward 2001, the last year included in the study, is tantalizing. It stands to reason that the works acquired earlier will have more circulations, but one would like to be able to see whether that dynamic obtains far back into the past, or levels off. If the CTR-y remains relatively constant—for American literature for the years covered by the study it mostly hovers between .3 and .4—then the older books would have to show ever higher circulation amounts in order to maintain it (since the higher number of circulations would be



The trends of Books pr and Circs for Year Year. Color shows details about Books pr and Circs. The data is filtered on Year Year, which excludes Null.

Figure 2. American literature: Holdings and circulations by publication date.



The trends of CTR and CTR year for Year Year. Color shows details about CTR and CTR year. The view is filtered on Year Year, which excludes Null.

Figure 3. American literature CTR and CTR-y by publication date.

divided by a greater number of years). However, one may speculate that there is a phase of currency for literary works, during which they accumulate most of their circulations and after which the circulation activity dies down in all but the most exceptional cases.

Discussion

What is a good CTR? There does not seem to be anything like an “industry standard” against which the individual CRTs can be measured. Indeed, searches in the library science literature did not return any discussions of this issue, probably because it is recognized that one’s interpretation of the CTR for a given portion of the collection will be case-dependent.

In the interest of giving a little more bite to the idea of the CTR, three possible points of reference were considered that could be used to orient an interpretation of the CTR of a given literature field. The first of these is the CTR for the whole of University of Oregon Libraries collections, which was calculated by the head of collections in 2017 to be 4.51. This provides some context of a general nature. The

Japanese and American literature sectors exceeded this rate, while all other sets of primary texts in

Figure 3 fell below it. It should be borne in mind, however, that primary texts are not scholarly works, but works of imaginative literature. Does the fact that those areas with the highest CTRs (Japanese, American, and English literature) cluster near the library-wide average show that in these cases this very different kind of library material is circulating quite well? Or, conversely, is the salient takeaway from the results presented in this study the observation that most of the national literatures fell short of circulation rates that obtain for the “average” book in the library?

The second possible comparator is the LC P-range itself. Again, as calculated by the head of collections in 2017, the CTR for this region of the collection, comprising 354,918 volumes, was 4.2. Thus, the vast swath of books represented by the P call numbers, making up nearly a tenth of the entire contents of University of Oregon holdings, and including both primary and secondary texts, manifests circulation rates close to that of the whole collection. The CTRs

for the strongest performing primary texts sets, Japanese, American, and British literature, are more or less in line with this figure, so that one can say that they are garnering a decent amount of usage. When one considers that the primary works in these areas are performing at the same rate as the secondary, scholarly works, whose monographs have undergone the rigors of the scholarly publication process and are expressly intended for an academic audience, in other words, the de facto audience constituted by the members of the university community, the CTRs for these literary areas may be considered even more impressive.

A third basis of comparison would be to use a CTR of 1.00 as a standard. This would be arbitrary, the number chosen for its tidiness rather than any particular relevance to the question at hand. Yet choosing a CTR of 1.00 as a benchmark helps put the actual CTRs derived in this study in perspective: a CTR of 1.00 is readily conceptualizable because it means that there are as many circulations as items in the given area of the collection. To put it another way, any figure north of that benchmark for a given literary area signifies that a given book on the shelf is more likely to have circulated than not, while any figure south means the opposite. By this readily graspable index of performance, the circulation rates for Chinese, Russian, Italian, and French literatures, while not soaring, may be considered respectable, especially when one considers the restricted numbers of potential readers in the academic community. By contrast, it could be pessimistically noted of the Latin American, German, and Spanish sectors that they hadn't generated as many circulations as books.

Further Research

While this study used the CTR as a measure of collection performance to build on the work of a colleague who had calculated the CTRs for all of the call number ranges of the entire collection, that index does not seem to be as illuminating as Bonn's "use factor," which ties circulation rate to percentage of collection in an immediately intelligible way. Recalculating the circulation figures using this measure would increase the scope of the study's findings, since the use factor coordinates the circulations and noncirculations for an area of the collection, which is the approach that most studies of use rates in the library have found most illuminating. The author is eager to revisit the data using this other method to gain more and perhaps better insight into the circulation dynamics in the areas studied.

Another way in which this study could be expanded is by the inclusion of the translations that had been winnowed out from the original data sets; in a time of declining enrollments in foreign languages, translations of significant foreign-language works constitute an important way in which this content can become known and be appreciated by the wider intellectual community. An examination of works in the original language and translations together would provide a better overall picture of the campus interest in international perspectives conveyed through recent literature.

Similarly, a further investigation of the data already collected on the usage rates of secondary texts is another way in which this study can be expanded in a subsequent iteration. While the percentage of secondary works in the contemporary period under study is rather small, an understanding of the distribution of primary and secondary works throughout the language divisions of the P-class would be extremely useful. Considering that the library has been buying contemporary literature for most of its existence, and that most of the authors thus collected are now forgotten and neglected, one may wonder whether the P-class, containing two very different kinds of books, literary works and scholarly treatments of literary works, may be saturated with little-used primary texts that lower the overall circulation rates of the various P-classes. This would be a hypothesis well worth testing.

Conclusion

The obvious practical payoff of a study of this nature is that it reveals the areas of the collection that are underperforming. Granted that circulation rates are not the sole factor in assessing the value of an area of collection, it is nevertheless the case that the data indicate that the German, Latin American, and Spanish collections are not performing well and would benefit from being selected more carefully. Particularly in the case of Latin American literature, selecting at the Knight Library would seem to need to be more targeted in order to justify the expenditure on so many volumes. Beyond this, the study was valuable in a philosophical way because it compelled the author to delve into the murky question of how to understand the meaning of the data he had collected. In the absence of a secure standard, the CTR is a performance measure that is itself unanchored. Reflection on the appropriateness of different measures of circulation activity and their usefulness was itself a benefit of the study. Furthermore, the close

study of the circulation patterns of this limited area of the collection led to a deeper understanding of the dual nature of a part of the collection divided between primary and secondary texts. This, in turn,

raises the question as to whether previous measures of the LC P-range in general have to some extent been distorted by their failure to observe the distinction and its consequenc

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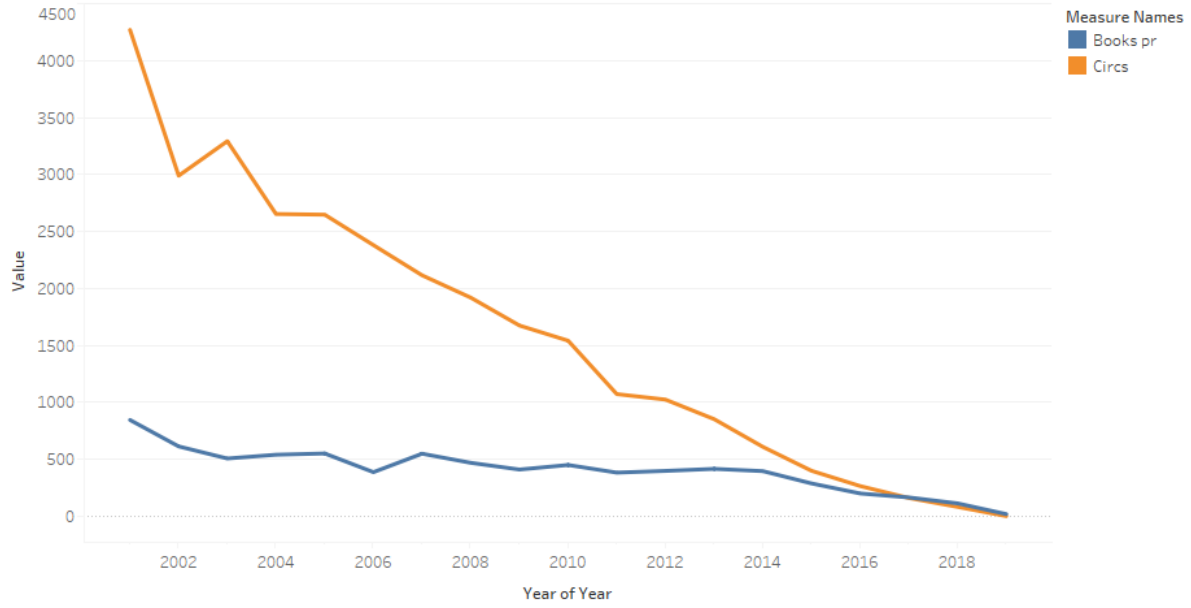
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Appendix A: Books, Circs by Year, 2001–2019

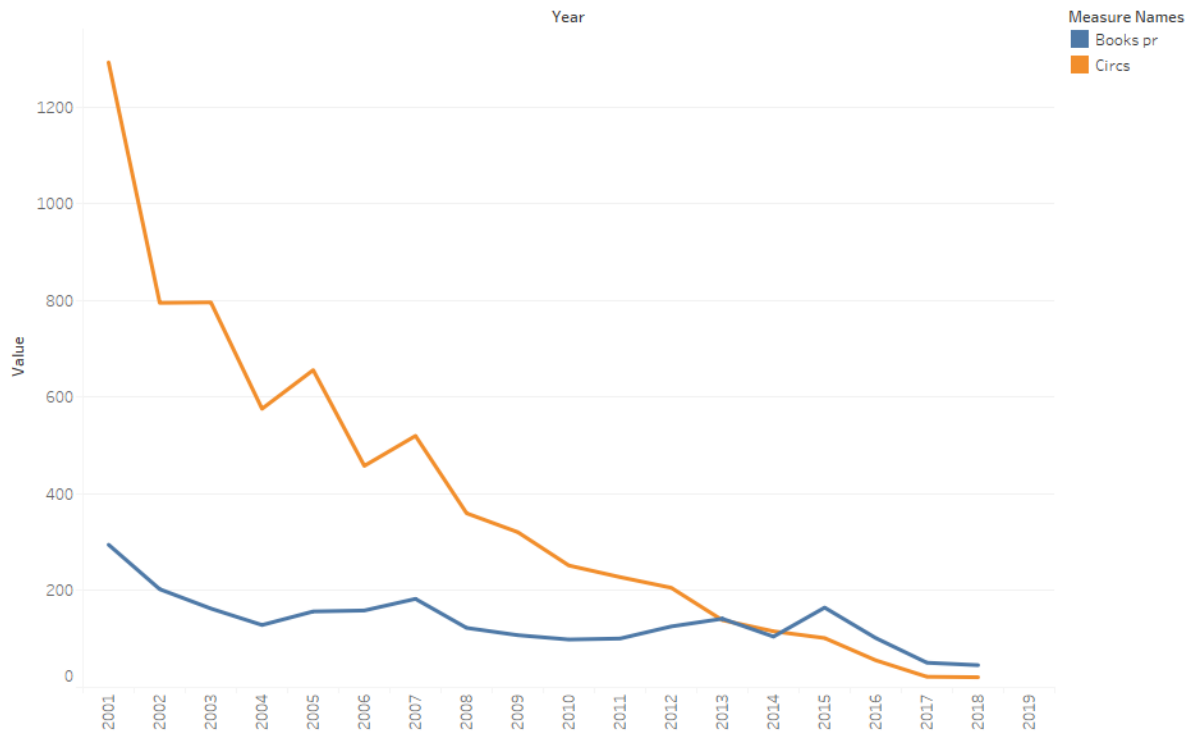
Sheet 1



The trends of Books pr and Circs for Year Year. Color shows details about Books pr and Circs. The data is filtered on Year Year, which excludes Null.

American

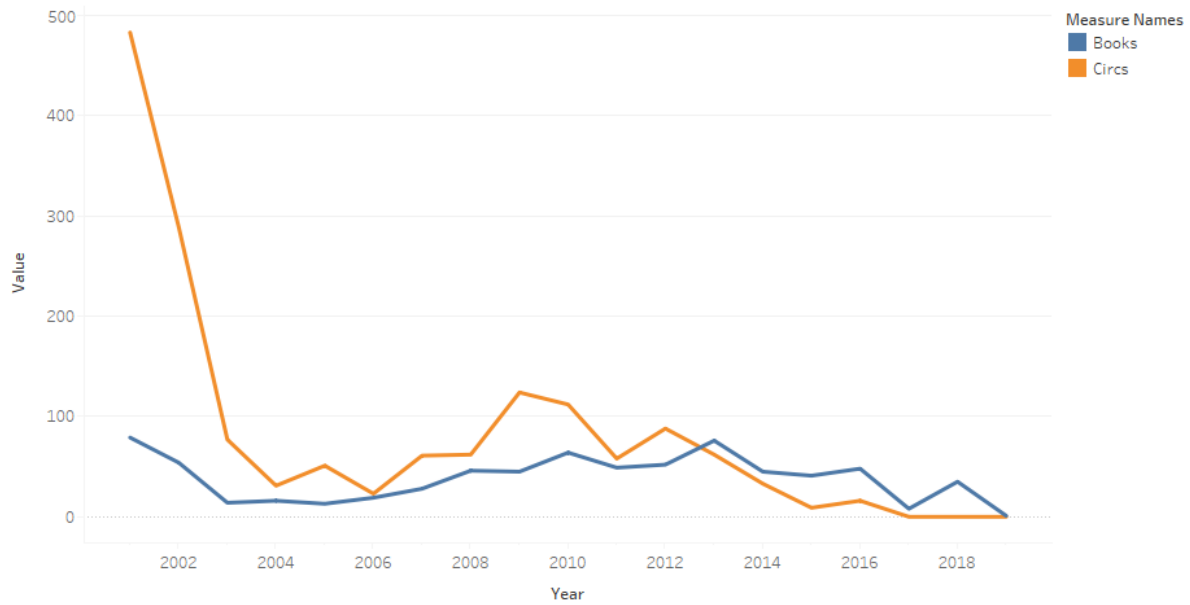
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The trends of Books pr and Circs for Year Year. Color shows details about Books pr and Circs. The view is filtered on Year Year, which excludes Null.

British

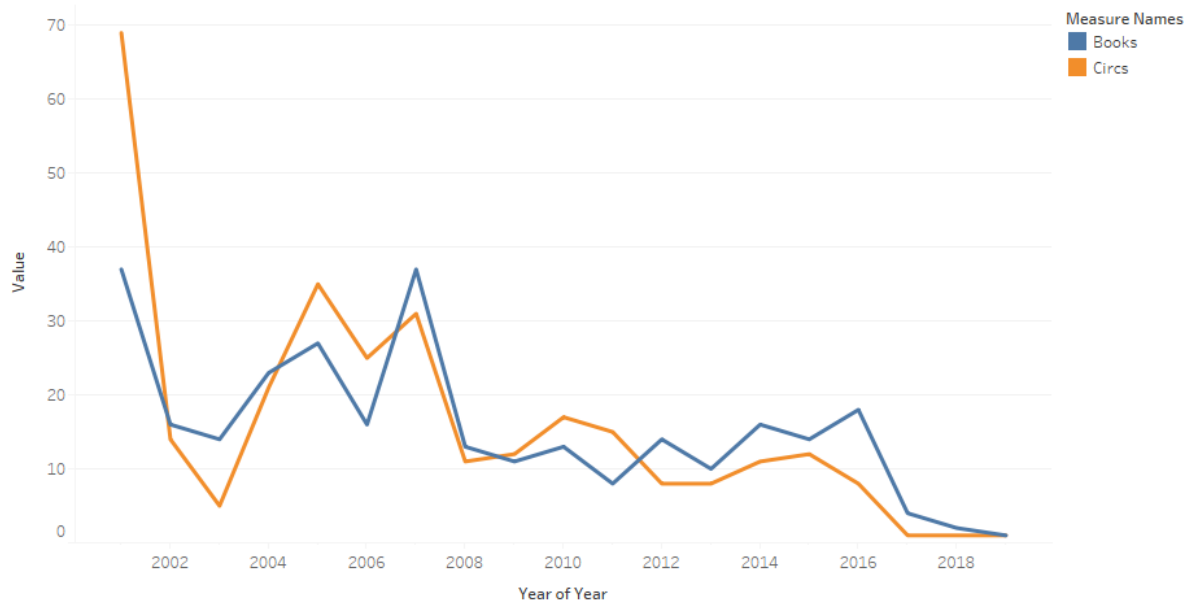
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The trends of Books and Circs for Year. Color shows details about Books and Circs.

Chinese

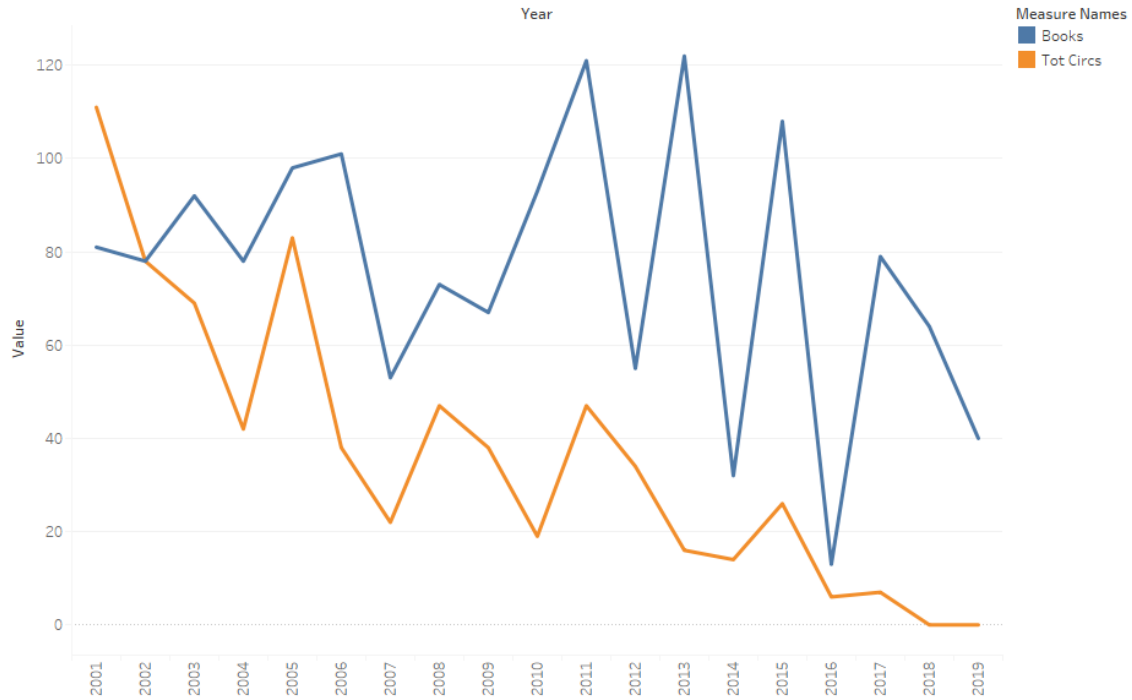
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The trends of Books and Circs for Year Year. Color shows details about Books and Circs.

French

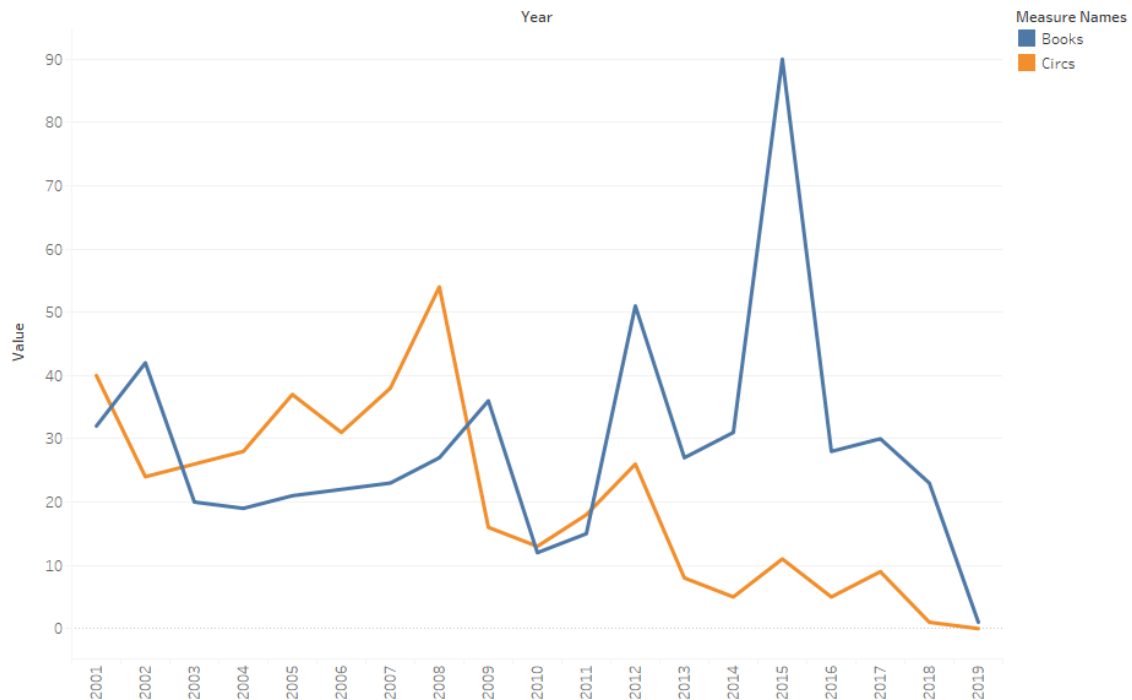
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The trends of Books and Tot Circs for Year Year. Color shows details about Books and Tot Circs. The view is filtered on Year Year, which excludes Null.

German

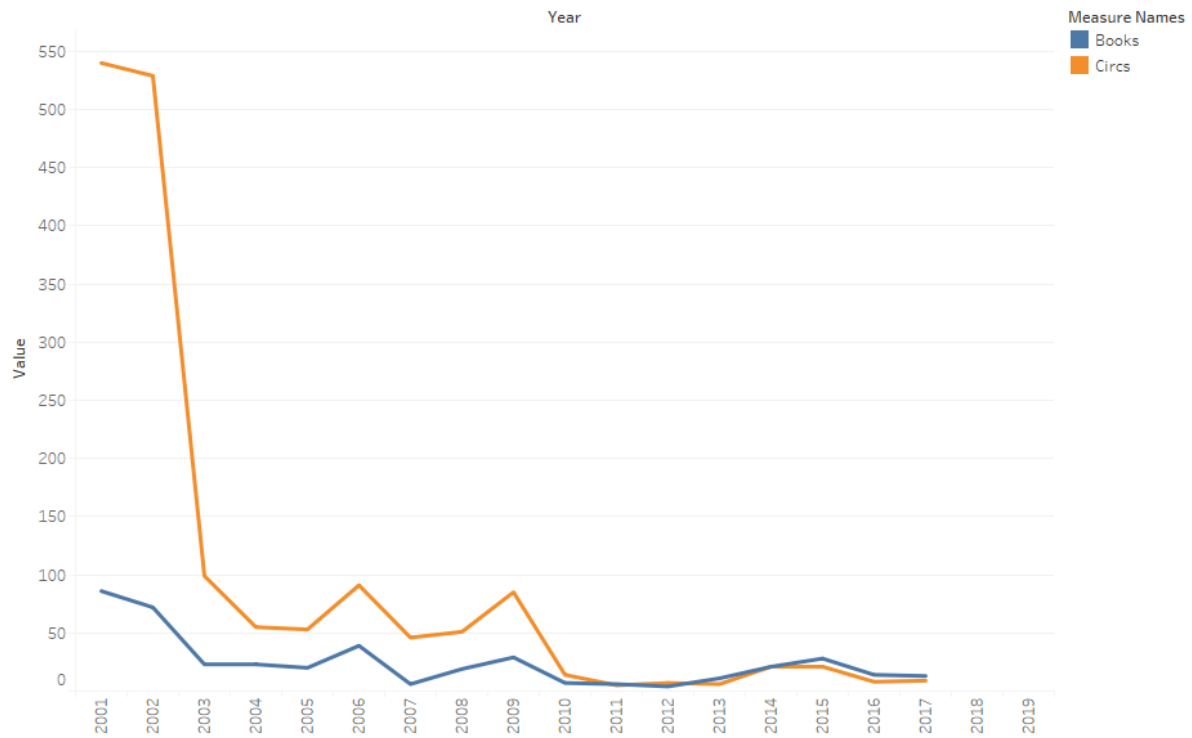
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The trends of Books and Circs for Year Year. Color shows details about Books and Circs. The view is filtered on Year Year, which excludes Null.

Italian

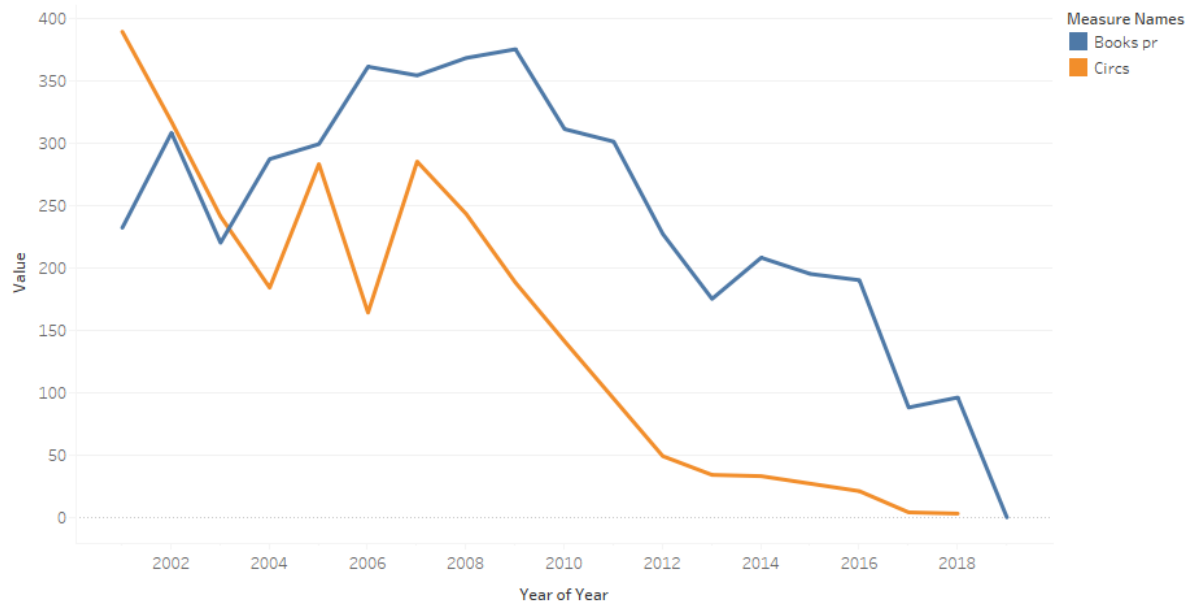
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The trends of Books and Circs for Year Year. Color shows details about Books and Circs. The view is filtered on Year Year, which excludes Null and 2000.

Japanese

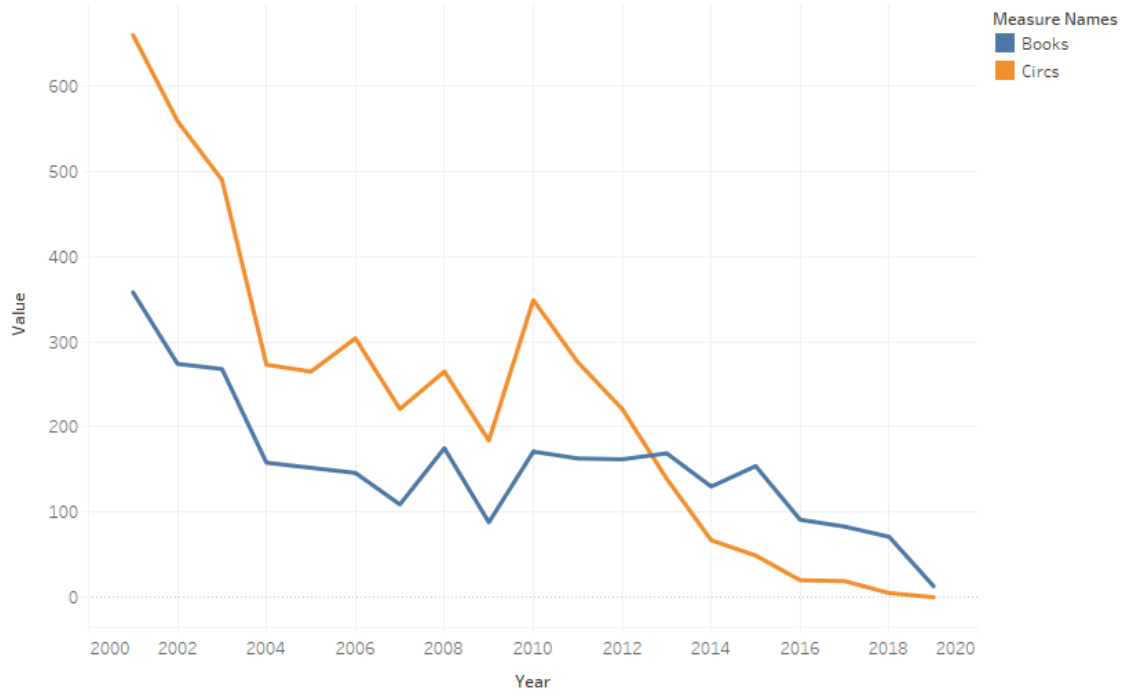
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The trends of Books pr and Circs for Year Year. Color shows details about Books pr and Circs. The data is filtered on Year Year, which excludes Null.

Latin American

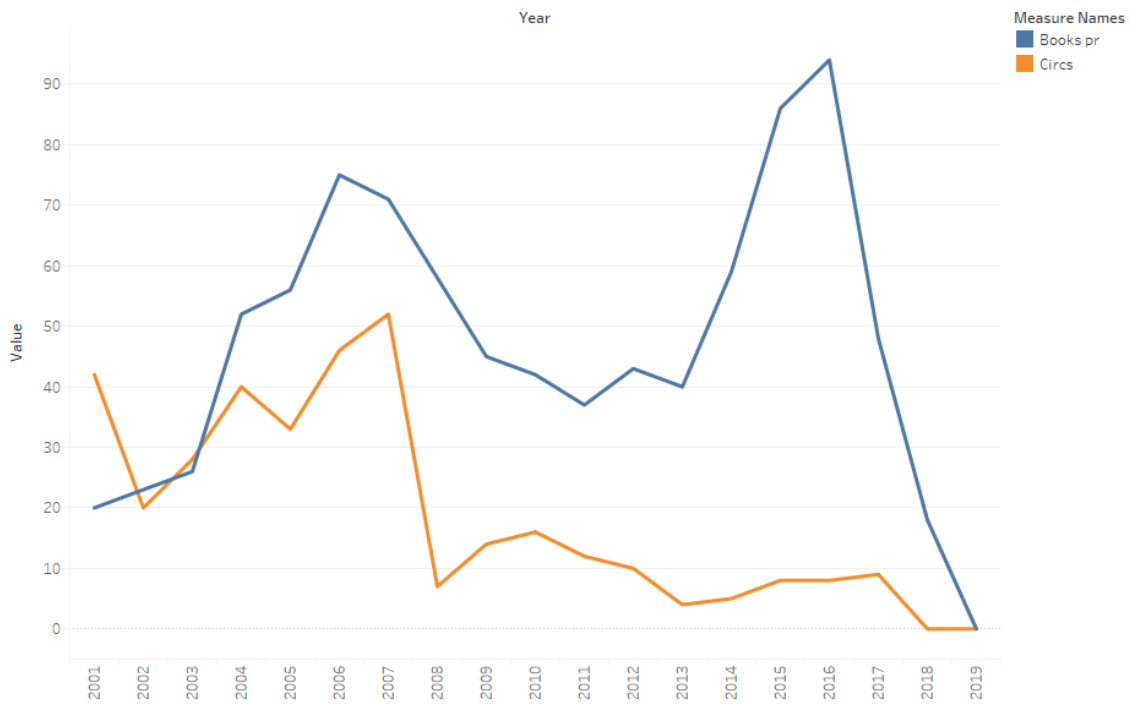
Sheet 1



The trends of Books and Circs for Year. Color shows details about Books and Circs.

Russian

Sheet 1

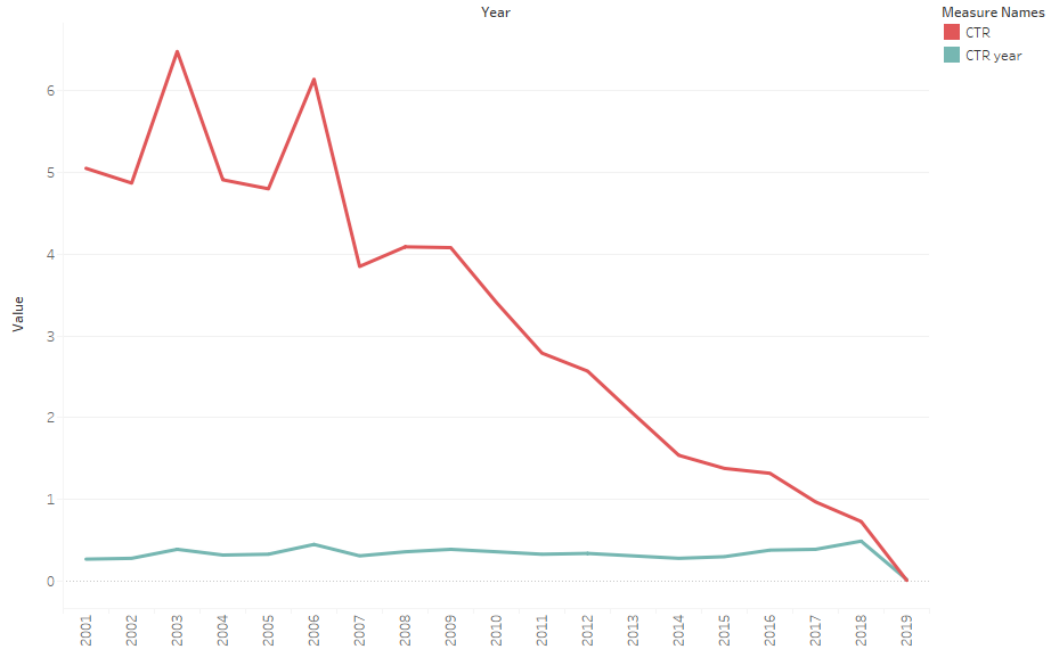


The trends of Books pr and Circs for Year Year. Color shows details about Books pr and Circs. The view is filtered on Year Year, which excludes Null.

Spanish

Appendix B: CTR/CTR-ys (2001–2019) for Literary Primary Texts

Sheet 2



The trends of CTR and CTR year for Year Year. Color shows details about CTR and CTR year. The view is filtered on Year Year, which excludes Null.

American

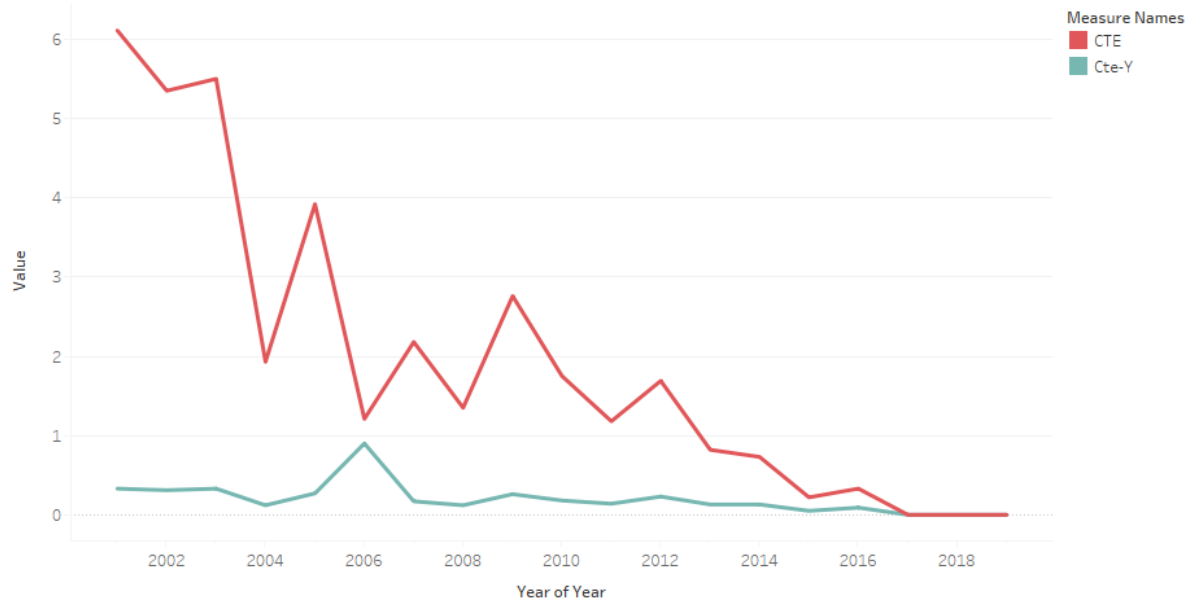
Sheet 2



The trends of CTE and CTE year for Year Year. Color shows details about CTE and CTE year. The view is filtered on Year Year, which excludes Null.

British

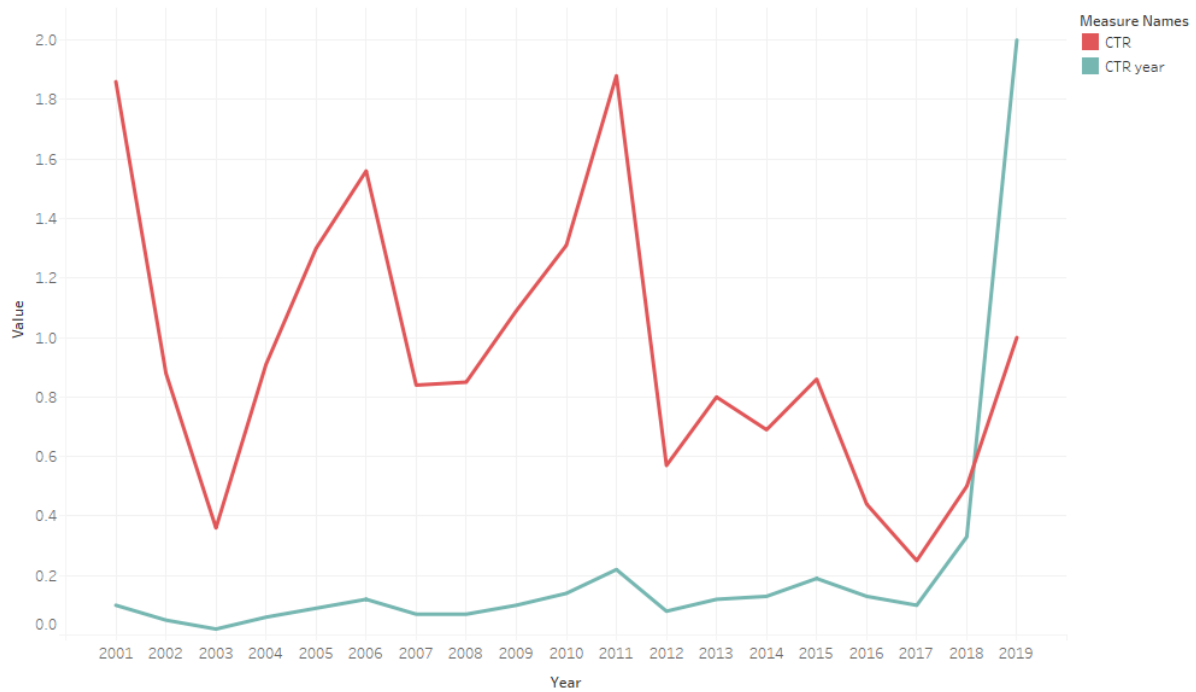
Sheet 2



The trends of CTE and Cte-Y for Year Year. Color shows details about CTE and Cte-Y.

Chinese

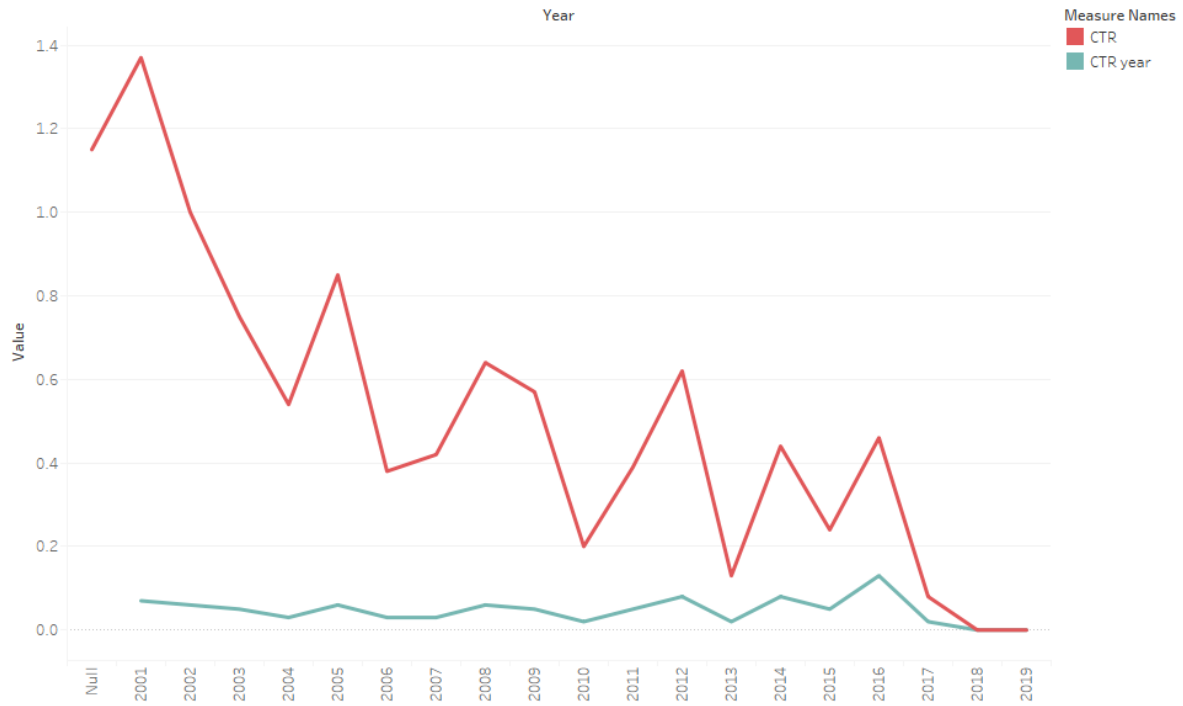
Sheet 2



The trends of CTR and CTR year for Year. Color shows details about CTR and CTR year.

French

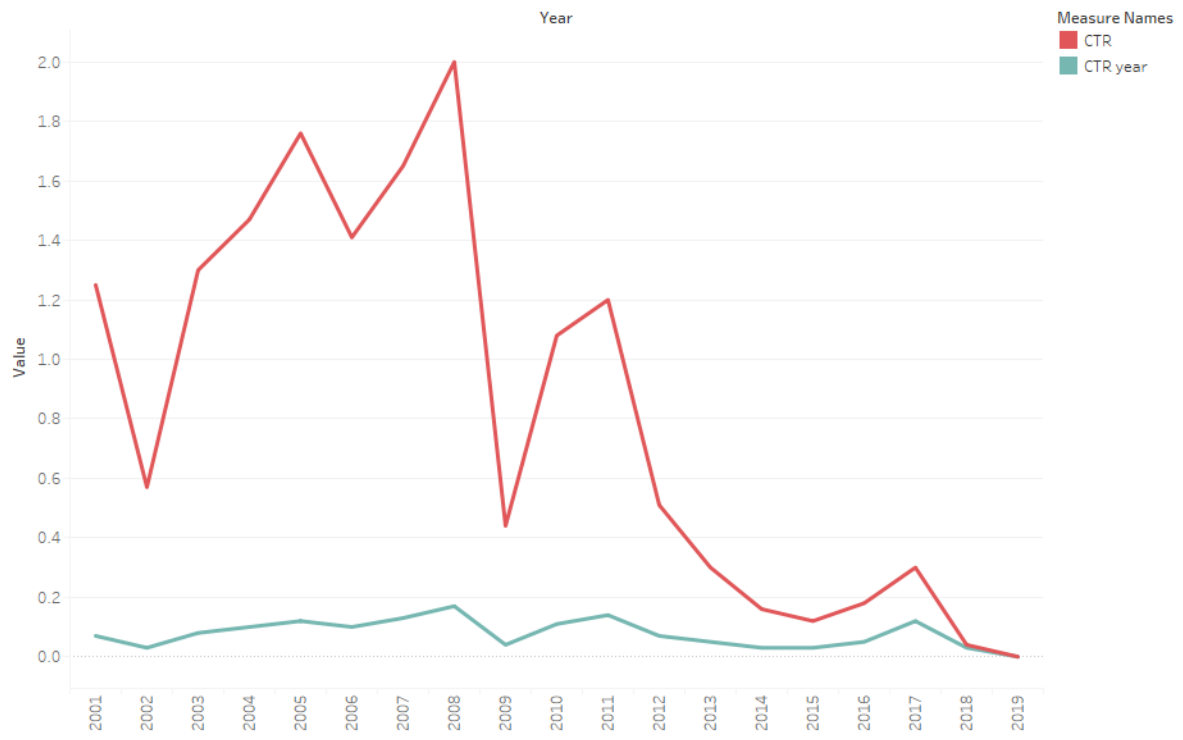
Sheet 2



The trends of CTR and CTR year for Year Year. Color shows details about CTR and CTR year.

German

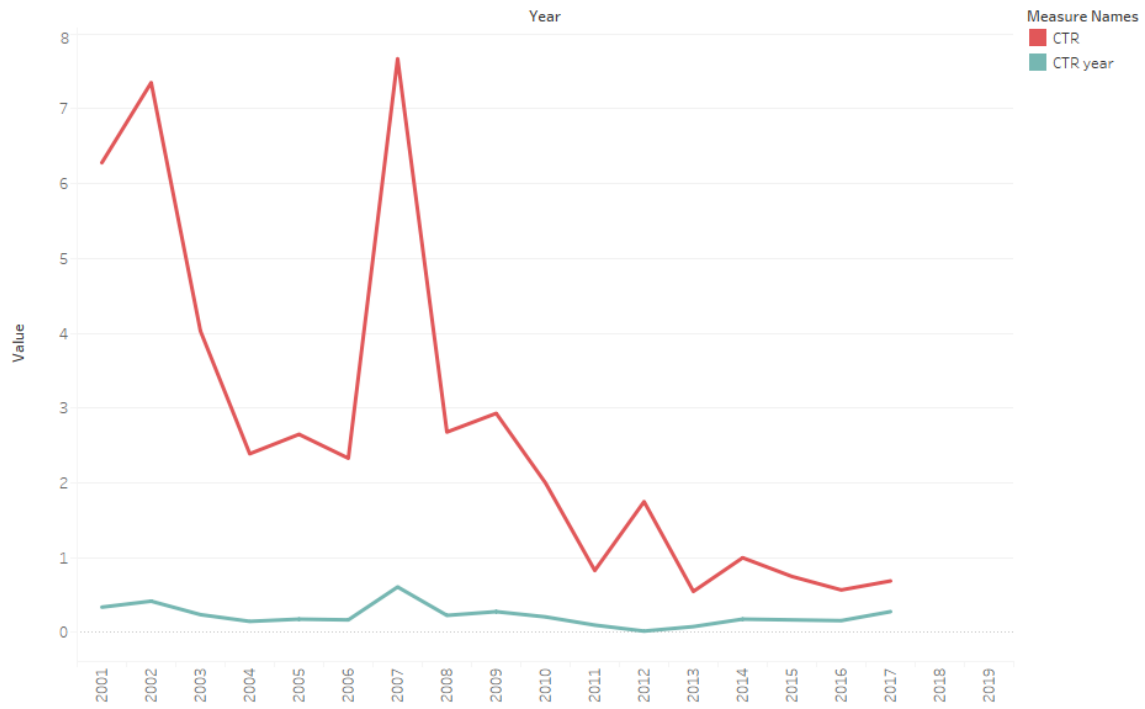
Sheet 2



The trends of CTR and CTR year for Year Year. Color shows details about CTR and CTR year. The view is filtered on Year Year, which excludes Null.

Italian

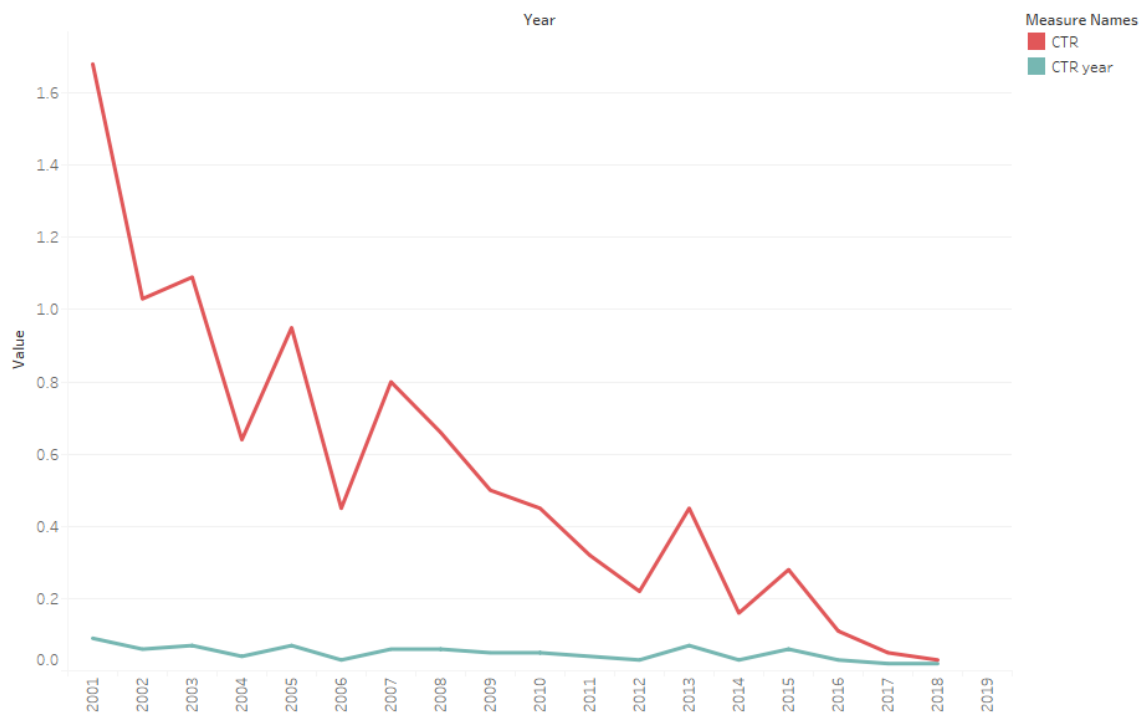
Sheet 2



The trends of CTR and CTR year for Year Year. Color shows details about CTR and CTR year. The view is filtered on Year Year, which excludes Null and 2000.

Japanese

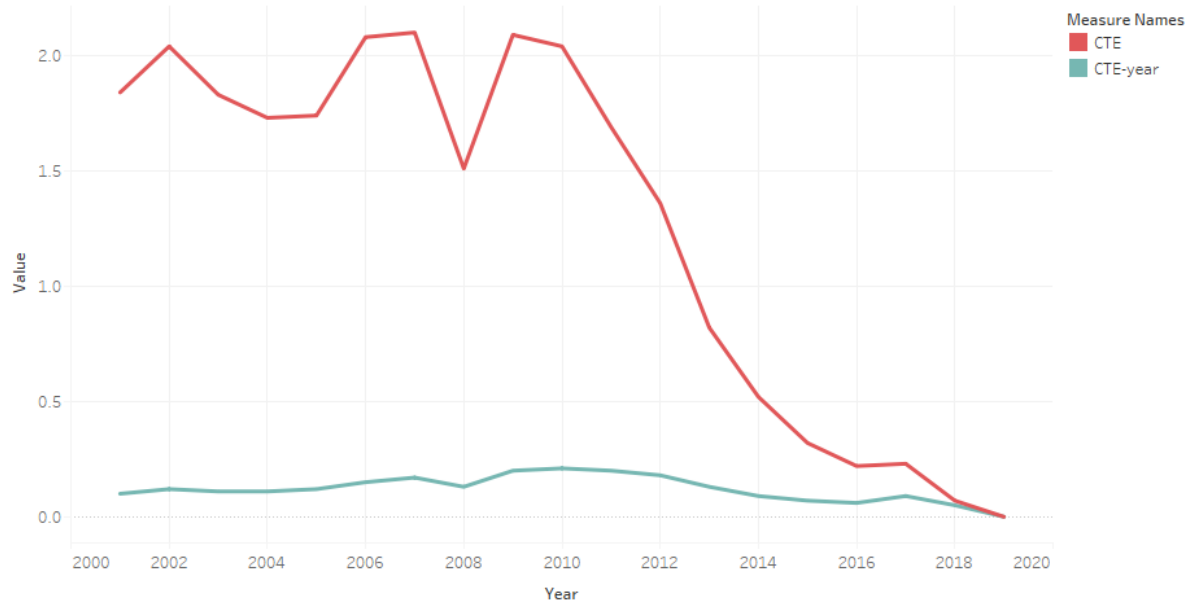
Sheet 2



The trends of CTR and CTR year for Year Year. Color shows details about CTR and CTR year. The view is filtered on Year Year, which excludes Null.

Latin American

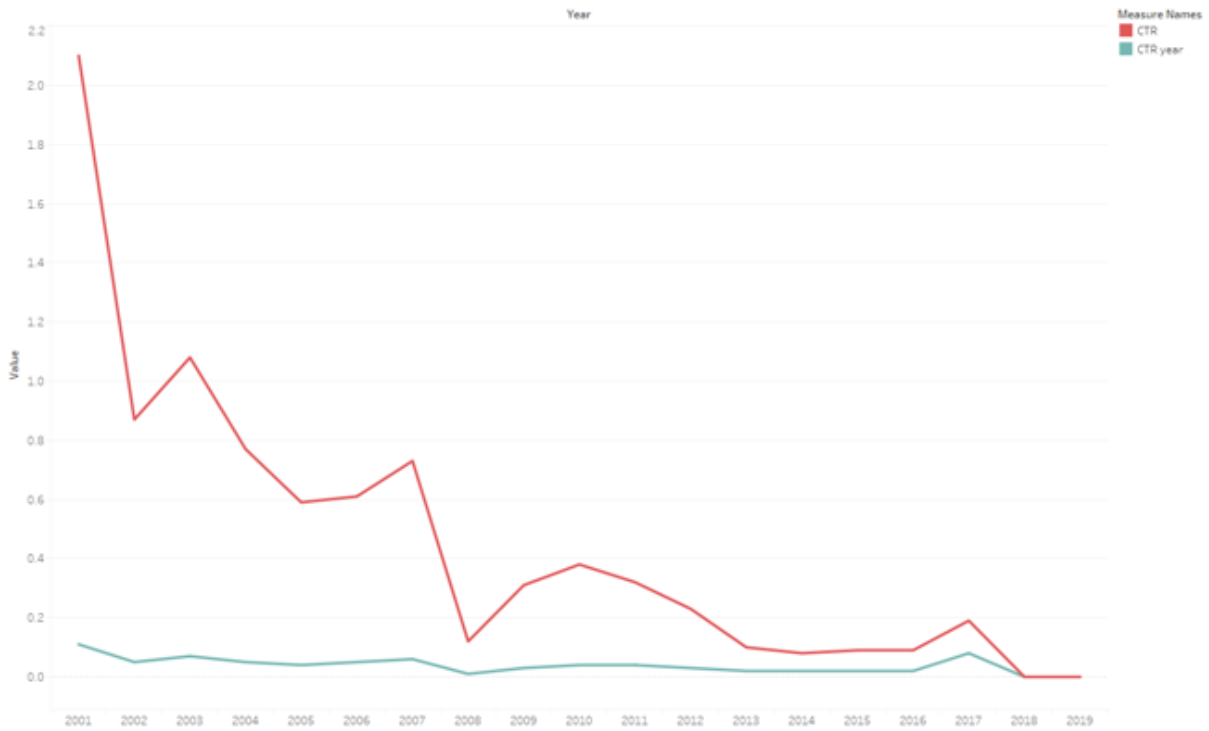
Sheet 2



The trends of CTE and CTE-year for Year. Color shows details about CTE and CTE-year.

Russian

Sheet 2



The trends of CTR and CTR year for Year Year. Color shows details about CTR and CTR year. The view is filtered on Year Year, which excludes Null.

Spanish