

Conserve them all my days

by Karl G. Schmude*

Many library administrators, especially in America, nourish the hope that optical disk technology will provide the principal means of preserving library materials — and in a compact format that will also curb the storage problem.

At this stage, however, the use of optical disk for conservation purposes is still experimental, and uncertainty surrounds the durability of the image (particularly of printed as against graphic materials).

At present the conservation medium most widely adopted is microfilm. Despite the lack of user enthusiasm for this format, which relates to the difficulty of manipulating it as well as the cost and poor quality of reproduction, microfilm is being increasingly enlisted as the best means of saving deteriorated materials.

Major projects of a cooperative kind are now underway — for example, among the member institutions of the Research Libraries Group (RLG) in the United States — to produce a microfilm version of parts of various collections. This activity is linked to a nationwide program of collection management, in that libraries are agreeing to engage in microfilm conversion projects in those subject areas where they possess recognised collection strengths. Thus, duplication of effort is minimised and progress is being made towards the conservation of the totality of bibliographical resources.

In time a similar program of collaboration is likely to be necessary among Australia's major libraries, possibly using ABN as the mechanism of communication and control just as RLG members rely on the Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) to regulate their conservation activities. By that stage optical disk may indeed have replaced microfilm as the main conservation medium. Nonetheless, many Australian libraries have growing collections of microfilm, particularly of newspaper runs, and may well desire access, as their own print collections decay, to the expanding body of microfilm masters in American libraries.

Attention is therefore needed to the conservation aspects of these resources. How should microfilm reels be stored? What kind of access should be granted to them and how should they be used? What is the best cleaning method?

Various overseas libraries have formulated guidelines to the housing, handling and care of microforms. Most of the information applies to microfiche as well as microfilm, but the latter is preferred for conservation purposes because of its higher resolution and greater compact storage. The guidelines typically cover such areas as environmental conditions, storage practices and handling methods.

A guide produced by one American academic library recently came to this writer's notice and contained the following kind of useful advice:

Lighting

General low intensity lighting is preferred, with use of ultra-violet filters if possible, and independently controlled task lighting at reader stations when possible.

Storage

Collections should be housed in fire-resistant, non-corrosive metal cabinets shielded from damp walls, sprinkler systems and other potential sources of water leaks. The lowest shelf or drawer should be at least six inches off the ground. Microfilm should be wound with moderate tension on plastic reels and secured with acid-free paper tape or ties (never rubber bands!). Reels should be stored in acid-free boxes to prevent the migration of acid to the film.

Reading Equipment

Machines should be cleaned at least weekly. Dust the screens, lens, glass plates/flats and rollers with a soft brush or lintless cloth.

Such guidelines are an important addition to any library's housekeeping policies. They are however, in the area of preventative maintenance rather than treatment, and do not obviate the need for libraries to consult the professional conservator when serious problems arise.

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