The Preservation Crisis and Beyond: A Recommendation to Microfilm the Textual Records of the Historical Archives Responsibility Centre at the Provincial Archives of Manitoba.
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Although little is known to the general public, archivists more than ever have a vital role to play in our information-driven society. The rapid influx of new information technologies seems to be superseding the importance of our textual based supports. These information technologies offer quick, efficient access to information by corporations, scholars and private individuals via computer networks that can be linked to any site in the world. Unfortunately, industries which are developing these information and communication networks are not greatly concerned about the preservation of the data that is surging through the wires. It is the archivist’s responsibility to put pressure on these industries to design software specifications that will instruct the computers to preserve important information. Archivists must also continue to work with government agencies and other organizations which utilize these information technologies to ensure that their official records (i.e. those that document their functions, structures, activities) are not accidentally erased or destroyed.

The challenge of preserving electronic media is a fairly recent one. It comes on top of other problems which have been vexing the archival library communities for the last several decades. One of the most important of these problems is the preservation crisis. The majority of the paper records stored in archives and those newly acquired were manufactured in the twentieth century. This is when published and unpublished works were printed on acidic paper. These papers are now both physically and chemically unstable. Regardless of being stored under environmentally controlled conditions they continue to deteriorate. There is a threat of a loss of information. Added to this are dwindling economic resources, increasing backlogs, volumes of new acquisitions, inadequate staff levels, and compromised storage space.

These problems are exacerbated by expectations that textual records will be "permanently" stored in the archives and by the fact that archivists and the public alike often share an emotional attachment to paper-based records. For example, archivists do not microfilm and dispose of textual records having informational value on a consistent basis. Archives prefer to refurbish facilities or build new ones. These initiatives are carried out to preserve archival textual records in their original physical form. But this is only a short-term solution.

Archivists need to challenge these traditional approaches and develop new strategies to address the preservation crisis more effectively. Many contributors to archival literature are of the opinion that we must begin to focus on the retention of the information contained in the record rather than on the retention of the original record. This thesis supports this view and suggests that we rethink the usefulness of preservation microfilm. Of all the information media, microfilm is the best technology to preserve and store our archival heritage. Microfilm also has the advantage of taking up less shelf space than more bulky paper counterparts. It has been demonstrated that full-scale microfilm operations are more cost-effective in the long run than the construction of new storage facilities.
This thesis advocates the implementation of large-scale proactive microfilming programmes. Conservation policies should mandate that records of informational value including those now under archival control and at the point of acquisition be promptly microfilmed and either returned to the donor or destroyed. Textual records having intrinsic value, our national treasures, should be microfilmed to provide a security copy and stored in the archives for the duration of their natural lives.

Commitment to such a programme by all levels of staff within an archives is critical. It is also critical that archivists demonstrate to resource allocators’ the important role that archives play not only now but for those generations to come. Resource allocators’ continued interest in archives will translate to a commitment to long-term investments. This will keep the programme going for the long-term. Careful planning must take place and soon before we lose a significant portion of our intellectual heritage.

Chapter one provides an overview of the preservation crisis. It points out that archival institutions will only survive if new and innovative strategies are developed and implemented.

Chapter two investigates some of the new computerized information technologies. They are different in nature and function from microfilm. Computerized information technologies are best utilized as an access technology. They do not, unlike preservation microfilm technology, have a long-term preservation and storage capability. It is of utmost importance that archivists understand the limitations of these new information technologies and continue to utilize a preservation medium that has been tried, tested, and standardized. At present, computerized information technologies do not have these qualifications.

Prior to any microfilming activity it is incumbent upon the archivist(s) to ascertain the physical condition of the records to be filmed, required treatment and/or repair, and their filmability. Chapter three, along with Appendices A and B, provide the results of two collection and condition surveys. These were conducted at the Provincial Archives of Manitoba (PAM) and focussed upon the textual holdings. It was found that even though none of the records actually crumbled when handled, a high proportion of documents (i.e. ephemera, photostats, scrapbooks, newspaper clippings, correspondence) are yellow, dark, discoloured, faded and in some cases brittle. This provides a good indication that they are deteriorating and that acid-migration is affecting the records adjacent to them. These records, however, are still filmable. Their present state makes a strong case for reformatting in order to capture the information before it is irretrievably lost.

Chapter four, along with Appendices C and D, lay out the associated costs for preparation, filming, and technical inspection should the records examined in the condition surveys undergo the filming process. At first glance, the total required expenditure may seem prohibitive, but with commitment and planning and setting of priorities a preservation microfilming programme can be managed successfully over many years. Despite the fact that PAM has a micrographics laboratory, little microfilming of these records has occurred. However, the fact that there is such a lab staffed by conservation professionals suggests that setting up an ongoing microfilming programme would be a feasible and straightforward activity. It would also be more cost-effective in the long run. The data acquired in this thesis although
limited in scope, can provide a general framework to aid other repositories in making more informed cost predictions for their own projects.

Chapter five conveys the findings of a major preservation conference held in Australia which examined whether preservation microfilm technology has a future especially when so many new computerized technologies are available. The answer at the conference was a resounding “Yes”. Preservation microfilm will continue to be the format of choice on which to preserve our paper-based cultural memory.