History of Microform Activity

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The history of microfilming operations in libraries has its origins in the development of predecessor programs that employed antecedent methods. (A statement of the obvious is always a safe beginning.) Certainly no one would deny that copying is a very old and time-honored method of acquisition. The institutional and private libraries assembled before the advent of printing could have acquired duplicates of works in other libraries by no other method than copying. Nevertheless this writer does not propose to begin his selective historical synthesis of microfilming operations by a recital of the wonders of the medieval scriptoria.

In the modern period manually produced transcripts of records and other manuscript materials, whether these transcripts were handwritten or typewritten, were the direct forebears of the great filming projects that were to start in the second quarter of the twentieth century. Transcripts, as everyone knows, were limited in use to producing copies that would enable a reader to exploit the text of an original otherwise inaccessible, or accessible only at very great expenditure of time, effort, and money. To a great extent photography in its first applications as a library tool was likewise an acquisitions tool. Its more economical successor, for a great many purposes, was photostat. This method, although not cheap, was inexpensive enough to permit its general use in replacing the original copy under a number of diverse circumstances: in lieu of interlibrary loan when only a small number of pages out of a bound volume was the desideratum; reproduction of manuscript or printed material so fragile or costly that a facsimile substitute was desirable for all but the exceptional uses and users; replacement of lost or mutilated pages (or even entire volumes) by a reproduction made from another exemplar; and, of course, acquisition of materials not available in original form.

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It was not until the advent of microfilm (which, for general discussion, may be placed in the third decade of this present century), however, that reproductions could not only do what they had done heretofore, but could also reduce space required in repositories, reduce costs (under varying sets of conditions and on the basis of varying criteria) in the custodial aspects of library management, eliminate binding of ephemeral materials by preserving—in fact, replacing—them in a new form, facilitate cooperative acquisitions by central storage of the master copy and wider distribution of film copies, and provide a new form of publication by reproduction of multiple, identical copies from a single conventional original. The last phase, as so often happens, nearly brings the theme to full circle. Microreproductions on an opaque base return the reproduction by photographic means—in this case, microfilm—to a paper format. The end product may be in microform as with microcard or microprint, or may be full scale as is the situation after reproduction by xerography.

From the foregoing it is clear that copying—a more specific term is purposely avoided here—has two facets as a library process. On one face we see the managerial responsibilities of a library, and on the other the functional features. It is the latter which have attracted the greater attention in the literature up to now. Perhaps this is due to the unglamorous nature of housekeeping no matter what its scale.

Before proceeding to the operational history of microreproduction, especially as it is reflected in selected examples of projects and enterprises, it is essential to add one word more on the genesis of the movement. In all probability no coincidence is involved in the fact that the same year, 1929, saw the “discovery” of microfilm and the interest of the Social Science Research Council in “initiating and participating in plans to discover, select, edit, publish, or otherwise reproduce basic data in the social sciences, which are difficult of access to students or likely to perish.”¹ This interest led to the establishment, in conjunction with the American Council of Learned Societies, of the Joint Committee on Materials for Research that sponsored the Manual on Methods of Reproducing Research Materials compiled by R. C. Binkley and published in 1936.

The internal or administrative uses of microforms have developed over the years but there have been no projects, no cooperative ventures, whose vicissitudes made history. It has been said that 1912 marks the beginning of the technological era in libraries. In that year the Library of Congress installed its first photostat machine.
Most university and large public libraries had them by the 1920's. Microfilm equipment was not generally available, however, until a considerably later date. For example, the photoduplication laboratory at the Library of Congress was not installed in its present scale until a gift from the Rockefeller Foundation in 1938 made it possible to embark on this "new" type of library venture. Another excellent illustration is in the New York Public Library.

Complicated and exceedingly expensive equipment for storage and retrieval of bibliographic information such as the Rapid Selector, has not, for obvious reasons, as yet been included in any library budget. On the other hand, simple devices, such as the Photoclerk, have gained considerable acceptance. Microfilm in lieu of interlibrary loans has not achieved its anticipated success because of human factors (people want books, not scrolls, if possible) and the surprising lack of essential equipment in many research libraries.

On the other hand, not a few sizable institutions appear to be subscribing to microfilm copies of such bulky items as newspapers, or else to be making their own copies in lieu of binding and retaining the unstable originals as long as possible. The controversies over relative costs in such matters, as well as over the suitability of converting some types of research-reference materials (notably that which is archival in nature) to microform still continues unabated.

On the domestic scene most of the projects, whether internal operations of a single institution bent on salvaging rapidly deteriorating properties, or cooperative acquisitions enterprises planned to increase the collections of several institutions at a substantial saving to each, have concerned themselves with newspapers. The third edition (1957) of Newspapers on Microfilm, for example, contains approximately 8,000 entries. This represents a growth—due in part, perhaps, to better reporting—of more than 50 per cent over the figures in the 1953 edition. The history of this colossus is necessarily the history of a number of independent and, especially in the earlier stages, uncoordinated efforts.

In more recent years several patterns, or modes of endeavor, have emerged. A number of newspaper publishers have started microfilming their back files, and The New York Times has offered a microfilm in lieu of its former rag-paper edition. Commercial microfilming companies offer for sale multiple copies of film files of hundreds of newspapers. These activities are reflected in the advertisements placed in professional and trade journals, and, since March 1951, in the re-
ports on them which appear from time to time in the Microfilming Clearing House Bulletin, an irregular appendix to the Library of Congress Information Bulletin.

Other plans have been organized by one or more libraries or professional groups to cover newspapers of a particular type. An outstanding example is the Harvard Microfilm Newspaper Project which was initiated a little more than twenty years ago with the objective of increasing the number of foreign newspapers generally available in the United States and of doing this at a cost which libraries could afford. The successor scheme, the Foreign Newspaper Microfilm Project sponsored by the Association of Research Libraries and executed at the Midwest Inter-Library Center, was started in 1956. This was predicated on the assumption that more could be accomplished at no greater cost if lending copies were provided from a central source rather than individually owned multiple copies stored at each of the cooperating institutions. Roughly 150 titles are available by this plan to more than fifty participating libraries. In preparation for the final discussions leading to the development of the plan, the Library of Congress compiled a 70-page brochure listing 1,219 titles rated in three orders of priority and providing coverage for the entire world. A six-page introduction discussed the criteria on the basis of which selections for microfilming should be made. This brochure, which was prepared as a working tool, is little known because it was distributed only to the members of the A.R.L. committee.

Another example, this time regional in interest, is the cooperative copying of certain Latin American newspapers, which was initiated in the 1950's at the instigation of the University of Texas and executed by the Photoduplication Service of the Library of Congress. Since January 1954 the University of Kentucky has been copying all Kentucky newspapers not otherwise being copied. In 1957 the University of Tennessee began systematic work on the newspapers of that state back to 1920. Statewide projects in one form or another now exist in a considerable number of states. The Canadian Library Association’s project for copying Canadian newspapers has been going on since 1951. Different in approach from any of the schemes just mentioned is the project that microfilmed some two hundred Negro newspapers. This project was sponsored by the Committee on Negro Studies of the American Council of Learned Societies and was carried out under the direction of Armistead Pride, director of the School of Journalism at Lincoln University over a period of several years.
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Somewhat similar to the newspaper projects, especially in their efforts to preserve material that is deteriorating, provide permanent copies that will not be prohibitively expensive in binding and storage costs, or to make available material scarce or little known, are the projects to microfilm or otherwise microreproduce periodicals or sets of official journals. These schemes are largely quite recent and are without exception, as far as this writer is aware, commercial. (Perhaps they should be denominated enterprises rather than projects, but the popular term is retained.) Examples are University Microfilms' "American Periodicals of the Eighteenth Century" and Readex Microprint Corporation's extensive series, which it began publishing in 1943, of the "Sessional Papers" of the House of Commons, 1731-1900. Extensive projects, largely, but not solely commercial, are also devoted to reprinting materials long unavailable or procurable only at prohibitive prices. Examples are Microcard Foundation's reprint of the Rolls Series, that is, the "Chronicles and Memorials of Great Britain . . . to Henry VIII," and the reproduction on microcards by the Lost Cause Press of E. M. Coulter's Travels in the Confederate States.

By far the most extensive, and perhaps expensive, domestic project is the joint endeavor of the University of North Carolina and the Library of Congress known as the State Records Microfilm Project and executed under the direction of W. S. Jenkins. Between the years 1941 and 1950, with interruptions due to the war, 160,000 feet of film were assembled containing the legislative proceedings of the American colonies, territories, and states along with statutory laws, constitutional, administrative, executive, court, and a few local records. This extensive operation was divided into three phases: first, a considerable period of planning and of travel to locate and copy the desiderata; secondly, the organization of the collection; thirdly, the preparation of the Guide, an 800-page volume in conventional format. Details of the project have been given at some length in several places. Unquestionably the most extensive internal operation that is intended for general use is that of the National Archives, which has been in continuous operation since 1941. The latest catalog (1953), lists 4,666 rolls of film, and the number now is approximately 9,500 reels.

One of the most far-reaching projects, and one that is both domestic and foreign in its operations, is that of the Genealogical Society of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints which has been going on for more than twenty years. The sheer quantity of material resulting from this concerted, carefully planned effort, with its large

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staff of editors, camera operators, and inspectors staggers the imagination. In 1952 the copying rate was two million pages per month, and the number of 100-foot reels of film already available to researchers had nearly reached 78,000. Although the author of one of the very few articles on the subject has written that “we can in truth and modesty say that we have on microfilm unquestionably the most extensive purely genealogical collection in America or in the world,” he goes on to say that “we feel that our program is really just at its beginning and that it must continue for years.”

The glamorous projects are those that take place abroad, and most especially those that have been executed in far distant lands or under exciting circumstances. The activities of the Library of Congress, carried out in cooperation with the American Schools of Oriental Research in Jerusalem and on Mt. Sinai, and the projects of the same library and other domestic and European institutions on Mt. Athos qualify and make the years 1949-53 the glamour years.

It was, however, “Project A”—the great copying project, so unimaginatively named, beginning necessarily with photostats and ending with microfilm—that introduced mass copying by fast and inexpensive means. This project, financed by J. D. Rockefeller, Jr. at a total cost of $490,000, and directed by S. F. Bemis, ran for seven years. In those years, 1927-34, nearly two and a half million manuscript pages were copied in Europe, Canada, and Mexico to become available to all at the Library of Congress. Who knows how much more might have been accomplished if the films had been retained as the end product instead of a medium from which enlargements (not too dissimilar to the familiar photostats) could be made?

When World War II threatened, the technique of microfilm already had been proved as an aid to scholarship. Accordingly, when the American Council of Learned Societies set up a committee, under the chairmanship of K. D. Metcalf, to plan a project whose dual purpose was to preserve from the hazards of war the content of valuable historical, scientific, and literary manuscripts in European repositories, and to provide American scholars with important materials for research, the only medium considered was microfilm. The subcommittee on selection of materials, whose chairman was H. H. Kellar, prepared consolidated want lists, on the basis of hundreds of reports submitted by scholars in many fields, for materials on the Continent as well as in the British Isles. The war moved too fast, however, and the project necessarily became known (correctly) as the British
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Manuscripts Project. Carried out under always difficult and sometimes hazardous circumstances, the project has brought to this country nearly five million pages of manuscript and, in a few instances, rare printed materials which are recorded on more than 2,600 reels of film. The Rockefeller Foundation made this possible with a grant of $130,000. The material is housed and serviced by the Library of Congress. A positive print of the complete series is located at the University of Michigan which prepared the catalog. The copying was done in 1941-45, the cataloging in 1944-48. A check list published in 1955 brought to a close this project which extended over a seven-year period.

A number of programs have been the direct result of World War II, specifically of the availability in Allied custody of extensive records of the German and the Japanese governments. In 1957, when American scholars learned that numerous records of the Japanese Army and Navy ministries and lesser numbers from other agencies were to be returned to Japan, they secured funds, largely from the Ford Foundation, for microfilming approximately 400,000 pages. A unique feature of the project was the presentation of a positive film copy to the National Diet Library in Japan. Greater in size, and much longer in duration is the project that microfilmed the archives of the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs between the years 1949-51. This work was done in Tokyo under the direction of G. W. Shaw and is the result of a cooperative effort between the Department of State and the Library of Congress. The records of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been extensively copied over a much longer period of time and by a variety of agencies, many of them non-governmental. The Department of State, in conjunction with the British and (at a later date) the French governments, began copying selected records in 1945 at various locations in Germany. Subsequently moved to London, the project continued over the years until the last of the records were returned to the government of West Germany in 1958. Several American universities, notably the University of California, have made extensive copies of records for the years 1867-1920 thereby complementing the official program for the years 1920-45.6,7

One of the earliest programs under sponsorship of a professional group, and one of the most durable under any sponsorship, was the Rotograph Project (later, of course, microfilm) of the Modern Language Association which existed for a little more than twenty-five
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years. This project aided a very considerable number of scholars to get into the United States small quantities—often individual manuscript works—of research materials essential to their own needs and for which they could claim exclusive use during the first year. The materials are deposited in and serviced by the Library of Congress.

In 1939 Brown University, through L. C. Wroth and H. B. Van Hoesen, directors of the John Carter Brown and John Hay libraries, respectively, conceived the scheme for microfilming selected titles in the Biblioteca Nacional de Santiago de Chile, the Biblioteca Nacional de Peru, other South American libraries, and in Mexico. After five years of effort which was beset by difficulties such as the destruction of the library in Peru before anything had been copied there and the onset of World War II which made film scarce and transportation complicated, the actual copying was brought to a close. Catalog cards were printed over a number of years by the Library of Congress, and the 2,339 titles are fully represented not only in Brown University’s check list but also in the Library of Congress’ published catalog. The great collection of transcripts, photostats, photographs, and microfilms assembled in the Bancroft Library of the University of California is an outstanding example of work done by a single university in a number of lands. The Preliminary Guide to the Microfilm Collection in the Bancroft Library, compiled by Mary A. Fisher in 1955, is the key to approximately two million exposures made in France, England, Mexico, The Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain.

The great “scoop” of the century, of course, is that of St. Louis University which, with the generous permission of the Vatican and the generous financial support of the Knights of Columbus, has microfilmed some 30,000 codices of the world-renowned Vatican Manuscript Library. Conceived early in 1950 by Father Lowrie Daly, S.J., of the history faculty in St. Louis, the plan was approved on December 23 of that same year by Dom Anselmo M. Albareda, Prefect of the Vatican Library, with the stipulation that this was to be the only depository in the western world. Financial support had not yet been secured, but at this point the Knights of Columbus offered their assistance. Through the Foundation for the Preservation of Historic Documents in the Vatican Library, the organization not only underwrote the cost of microfilming but cooperated in establishing at the university a permanent depository for the collection, which was to be provided with a full-time librarian and the equipment necessary to make it available to scholars. The negatives are stored in a specially
conditioned vault somewhere in the United States; one positive copy is held by the Vatican; and a second positive copy, which may be consulted only in St. Louis, is housed in the Vatican Microfilm Library. The copying was completed in June 1957. Because many hundreds of manuscript catalogs, indexes, inventories, as well as 250,000 cards from the card catalog of the manuscript department of the Vatican Library, have likewise been reproduced, the project brought to the United States not only an incomparable body of source material in many diverse disciplines, but has also provided American scholars with access to bibliographic tools of prime importance.²

It has been pointed out more than once, and doubtless it will be pointed out again and again, that a major desideratum in American microfilming activities is a coordinating plan. Proposals for elements of such a plan were embodied in Dan Lacy's paper, "Microfilming as a Major Acquisitions Tool: Policies, Plans, and Problems," which he read at the Midwinter Conference of the American Library Association in January 1949. A general plan was outlined by the present author in 1950 and again, from a different point of view, late in 1954 at the annual meeting of the American Documentation Institute. The international aspects of a general plan were outlined in the writer's paper entitled "International Cooperation to Preserve Historical Source Materials," wherein he cited the over-all plans, going back to 1947, of the American Historical Association's Committee on Documentary Reproduction, for copying essential research materials in many of the countries of the world, and likewise the plan, very little known, prepared by S. B. Child in 1946 to use reparations charged against Germany for extensive copying abroad.

Still another approach is found in the "Statement of Principles to Guide Large Scale Acquisition and Preservation of Library Materials on Microfilm" which was prepared by the A.L.A. Committee on Cooperative Microfilm Projects and published in several places about 1953. An interesting suggestion from abroad for general microfilming of research material by institutions in the United States was advanced by R. J. Hayes, director of the National Library of Ireland.³ His thesis, in overly simplified form, is this: Europe has the original source materials for the study of Western culture, and it has scholars capable of exploiting them, but it has no money; the United States has almost no original sources, but it does have money and it has scholars who could be weaned from technology to culture; therefore, the way to preserve and secure the exploitation of European resources is to encourage Americans to microfilm the maximum quantity of materials.
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located in European archives and libraries. That there has been no
general endorsement of this plan by Hayes' confreres on the Continent
will surprise no one.

Other plans, some more general in nature, some restricted or
specialized, were propounded at about the same time. In January
1955 a Conference on Problems of Acquisition, Preservation, and
Dissemination of Library Materials was convened at the Folger
Shakespeare Library in Washington with the financial assistance of
the Ford Foundation. One direct result of the cerebrations was the
establishment in 1956 of the Council on Library Resources, Inc. A
scheme limited to newspapers was advanced by A. J. Eaton,10 and in
1953 W. J. Wilson presented a detailed study which would lead to a
plan whereby the National Library of Medicine (then still the Armed
Forces Medical Library) could acquire on microfilm, so far as the
budget permitted, all genuinely medical literature of the fifteenth and
sixteenth centuries, together with selected materials from later cen-
turies. The principles embodied in the study were capable of a more
general application.

And planning continues. In 1954 Hayes, this time in his capacity
of delegate to the cultural committee of the Council of Europe, was
instigator of the plan for all national archives to microfilm their un-
published inventories and to exchange the films reciprocally as de-
sired.11 This scheme, even if carried out only to a limited extent, is
of great potential value to American researchers who may in the fu-
ture be enabled to consult thousands of finding aids otherwise un-
available. A grandiose scheme for copying and exploiting essential
documentation in Europe, 1200-1700, was proposed in 1955 by W. L.
Winter of the University of Connecticut, the details of which are set
forth in a processed memorandum.12

In 1956 the present author published his proposal for a universal
guide to the catalogs and inventories of the world's collections of
manuscripts and archives.13 A project resulting from this proposal
could be an end in itself; it could also be the indispensable point of
departure for future planning on the basis of information never be-
fore available in one place. Coordination, never yet achieved to the
desirable degree, is still recognized as a desideratum of great moment.

In the past few months, for example, the American Council of Learned
Societies called a small meeting of executive representatives from
several groups embracing diverse disciplines to study once again the
approaches to a coordinated effort in microfilming projects. Qui nihil
tentarit, nihil facit.
References


ADDITIONAL REFERENCES


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