The State of Microtext Publications

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It is well over a hundred years since the first practical applications of microfilm were realized; microphotography as a means of publication was first proposed as early as 1853. While nothing came of this early proposal at the time, today microphotography plays an increasingly important role in building library resources. This relatively new medium raises for the librarian questions which are both intellectual—the content of the material filmed, and practical—the quality of the filming from a bibliographical and technical viewpoint as well as the cost to acquire, process, and service.

While its most common use has been the single copy to order, today almost every mail delivery brings a new proposal for the transfer to microform of some material—books, documents, manuscripts and the like—which is then offered for sale, either in whole or in part as microfilm, microcard, or microprint. These publishing projects generally involve large bodies of material whose publication is directed toward the preserving or the assembling and disseminating of a corpus of hitherto scattered material which may or may not be legitimately related.

Because of the growing multiplicity of these projects, we ought to consider their value in terms of the contribution they make to research; their relation to the collecting policy and budgetary limitations of each library; and the direction such projects could take in the future. After brief comment on these points this article will discuss more particularly certain technical problems and hidden costs.

The first obligation of any library is to the community it serves and which supports it. Its collecting policies must be designed to meet the demands of this primary responsibility. A university library must be prepared, not only to maintain its existing collections, but to expand them in accord with the needs of the faculties it serves. The growing enrollment in our colleges and universities, of which we are now ex-

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periencing just the beginning, poses an immediate problem for the librarian: more students mean more books. Further, the library must be prepared to acquire and service the necessary resources for new areas of study and research. The world has suddenly become larger, both physically and intellectually. For years Africa and many parts of Asia were considered mere colonial appanages of Europe and not worth study. Today the emergent nationalism on those continents has provoked a scholarly as well as a political response, and libraries have no choice but to adjust to this situation. Similarly, the realization that Russia is a power with which we must learn to live has resulted in a claim on the library to provide the material essential for an understanding of this major force in world affairs.

Every research library is faced with the problem of paper deterioration. With one or two notable exceptions, little has been done to apply microphotography to a situation which yearly sees volume after volume reduced to not much more than shards of paper. Unless something is done to preserve these books, the day may come when the systematic study of, say, nineteenth and twentieth century French or German literature, will be impossible because the material for such a study no longer exists. With regard to Latin American publications the situation is even worse, while it is impossible to view the current publications of India, the Middle East, and Africa with anything but despair for their survival. Mere acquisition of these materials will discharge only a part of our responsibility; we must actively seek means for their preservation.

All of these responsibilities must be assumed within the limits of fixed budgets constantly placed in a state of imbalance by increasing costs. The librarian, if he is to exercise proper stewardship over the funds provided for his use, must examine very critically any project requiring the expenditure of a large sum of money. Microtext publications must compete actively with books and manuscripts for each dollar of the book budget. Many requirements of scholarly research can be met only by the use of the book or manuscript itself. There are frequent opportunities to purchase large collections of significant material or important manuscripts, and it can be cogently argued that many of these acquisitions represent a far more significant addition to the library resources of the country than would the support of several of the current and proposed microtext publication projects.

There is one primary question that should be asked of any microtext publication: "Is this really necessary?" An honest answer in many
cases must be no. Consider, for example, one of the earliest of the microform publishing projects, the *Short Title Catalogue on Microfilm*. Here we have a body of material on a variety of subjects and of unequal merit, related only in point of language, or place of origin and of having been published within an arbitrarily defined period of time.

One can question the value of publishing such a collection on microfilm. This material has been controlled bibliographically with locations established for each item. The needs of any library could, and to some extent still must, be met by using single copy orders. Although the S.T.C. Microfilm Project has been going on for over twenty years, Harvard, and other libraries now subscribing to it, undoubtedly have had to resort to single copy orders for items not yet filmed. Since the project is approximately at the half-way mark, this condition is going to obtain for several years to come.

An even stronger case against this project can be made when one considers that perhaps the most frequent scholarly use of S.T.C. items is for textual criticism. The existence of the project to film all S.T.C. titles is of no advantage in meeting the requirements of this research. Collation of all known copies is necessary if the scholar is to do a thorough piece of work; and unless he is prepared to travel to each library listed as owning a copy of the book he is working on, he will order microfilm.

A more egregious example can be found in a recent proposal which is unlikely to be acted upon; but it does represent a kind of thinking which from time to time gains currency. An English librarian has suggested that the whole of the works listed in the current edition of Winchell be microfilmed. “This would mean,” he says, “that a complete reference library could be planted in the smallest county branch in Britain and thus make the basic resources of a great city reference library available to a market town population of ten thousand or so.” He goes on to say, “Naturally books do not alone make a reference library: the staff of the branch would need some training to enable them to exploit such a tool properly. But the great difficulty of providing a full town service to a country area would largely be solved: and this without obliging the county to build costly extensions to their branches or to employ large numbers of extra staff. In introducing such an adjunct a number of new problems would undoubtedly arise, but none that a capable librarian could not deal with.”

It is difficult to find any justification for such a project. No small
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town library could use all the books listed in Winchell if it had them. For those few it would use, it would soon find that microfilm is of all forms the most inconvenient and unsuitable in which to use dictionaries, bibliographies, check-lists, encyclopedias, and the like which comprise such a large part of the Winchell listings. It is unrealistic to think that such a collection deposited in every library serving a population of ten thousand, or even a hundred thousand, would contribute appreciably to the needs of the community. The all important question of where the money to acquire and service such a collection would come from is for obvious reasons not touched on.

Closer at home, R. R. Shaw has described, perhaps half in jest, the entire Lamont Library Collection in terms of five hundred boxes of microprint occupying eighteen linear feet of shelf space. From these examples we can derive two principles which ought to guide us in the use of microtext as a form of publication. We should avoid supporting microtext publication where the single-copy-to-order can be used effectively and where there is no compelling reason such as preservation for transferring to microprint. Secondly, we should avoid using microtext publication to distort the function of the library. The size and content of the library should be governed largely by the public it serves and not by the fact that duplication on a vast scale is now possible.

It is tempting to project into the future the line of thought behind such proposals as the microfilming of the contents of Winchell. After Winchell, why not the contents of the English Catalogue, the Catalogue of Printed Books in the British Museum, and so on?

This is essentially a matter of maintaining a proper perspective. To equip a library with tools too elaborate for its needs or too difficult for it to use effectively is to do it a disservice; to create a research library where none is called for is wasteful and extravagant. There would be no more justification for this than there would be for Harvard's attempting to acquire on microfilm the contents of the Bibliothèque Nationale. Indeed, it is the existence of national libraries, archival repositories, and large research collections that enables each librarian to cultivate his own garden and not worry about trying to grow exotic fruits which he knows thrive best in their native environment.

Furthermore, travel provides benefits both to the scholar who undertakes it and to the librarian whose domain the scholar quits for research abroad. Working on the spot, the scholar, through personal
contact, may turn up leads to hitherto unsuspected sources of which he would never learn working from microfilm alone. For the university librarian, there is not only the feeling of sheer relief at having Professor X out of his hair for a summer or a year, but also the possibility that Professor X may return more tolerant of the minor inconveniences of his own library after experiencing some of the major inconveniences found in many foreign libraries.

At the same time Professor X very frequently performs a valuable service for the library. Because of his knowledge and his contacts and because he is on the spot he often enables the library to make desirable acquisitions which it would be unable to get through its regular channels.

Microtext publications are generally expensive to purchase and, in the case of microfilm, always expensive to process and service; therefore particular attention should be paid to their actual usability in terms of format and bibliographic control and to their ultimate full cost.

We should ask about any proposed microtext publication if the format to be used is the most suitable one for the material to be reproduced. Ideally the publisher of microtext should be able to publish in the form that is best suited to his subject matter. Unfortunately he is too often committed to the use and propagation of a particular medium which may, but equally may not, be the best one for his subject. If the format is not dictated by the subject matter, the librarian should keep in mind that the cost of processing and servicing microfilm is greater than for other types of microtext.

Perhaps the greatest weakness of current and past microtext publications has been their lack of adequate bibliographic control. Librarians have the right to expect that the elementary canons of bibliography which govern ordinary book publishing should also be applied to microtext publication. No book publisher would think of trying to publish without a competent editorial staff. For some strange reason sponsors of microtext publications, and this includes libraries, so far have felt that little or no editorial work was necessary once the material to be filmed had been assembled. As a result we have reels of film containing disparate items lacking a table of contents or even an elementary title page. We have reels of film of related material with nothing to show on any reel that it belongs to a larger publication or where it belongs in the sequence of the whole publication. Frequently the all important information about the location of the original is lacking.
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There are, of course, microtext publications which combine technical excellence with admirable bibliographic control. Outstanding in this respect are the Adams Family Papers, published under the sponsorship of the Massachusetts Historical Society, and Facts on Film, published by the Southern Education Reporting Service. Any microtext publication which fails to meet the standards exemplified in these two publications must be considered unsatisfactory.

Unfortunately, control in general has ranged from the merely inadequate to a chaotic lack of any control at all. That this latter condition does exist is obvious to anyone who has ever tried to catalog or use the Codex Topographicus Pompeianus of Tatiana Warsher.

Finally, but of not inconsiderable concern to any library, is the question of cost. The usual method of pricing is to set a flat price to be paid either in a single payment or as a subscription over a given period of time. This has the advantage of giving the library actual possession of the material at a fixed cost. This cost may be, however, beyond the means of the library. The S.T.C. on microfilm, for instance, will cost ultimately more than $20,000, and, although the payments will have been spread over a period of years, such an investment is beyond the means of all but a few libraries.

An alternate method of pricing and one particularly suited to projects with no fixed terminal date is the cooperative plan of the Association of Research Libraries Foreign Newspaper Microfilm Project where, by paying a moderate annual fee the subscribing library has access to a large body of material the outright purchase of which would be beyond its means. The chief disadvantage of this plan is that the subscribing library receives no equity in the material filmed and may find its use of such material insufficient to justify this continuing annual expense. In the case of the Newspaper Microfilm Project, it is generally agreed that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

The initial cost is never the ultimate one. Microfilm, if it is to be preserved, requires storage conditions with controlled temperature and humidity. Cataloging microfilm is an expensive process and if there is insufficient bibliographic control, this cost may skyrocket. If the film has been poorly produced, there is the added cost of filming and splicing in targets together with adequate leader and trailer.

Microtext publication is at present on an extremely haphazard basis; frequently the first intimation a library has of actual or projected publication is a prospectus soliciting purchase or subscription. This has long been standard practice in book publishing but the same con-
ditions do not as yet exist in publishing in microform. It is up to the libraries to take a more active role in determining what material it is most important to transfer to microform. Librarians should take the lead in establishing criteria for future microtext publication. This would require close cooperation with scholars to determine the value, in terms of scholarly research, of any transfer to microform; with publishers to insure adequate bibliographic control and to work out equitable solutions to problems of cost and distribution; and with photographic experts who would bring their specialized knowledge to bear on the technical problems. In this connection an encouraging development which will be watched with great interest is the establishment of the American Library Association Subcommittee on Micropublishing Projects.

We need more information about what individual libraries have done in the past and what they would like to see done in the future. Generally speaking, we know practically nothing of acquisitions in microform by other libraries, with the result that an unnecessary amount of time is sometimes spent in trying to get from abroad a film which is already in this country. Prompt reporting of microtext acquisitions particularly of master negatives, to the National Union Catalog should be encouraged, while it is to be hoped that the Subcommittee on Micropublishing Projects will act as a clearinghouse in the dissemination of news concerning suggested projects.

We need to pay more attention to the technical quality of microtext. For this we need trained specialists. We need to disabuse ourselves of the idea that transfer to microtext automatically insures preservation. Unless stored and used under optimum conditions film may deteriorate to the point where it is unusable. Excess dampness or dryness, dust, scratches, and generally careless use are constant hazards against which we must guard. Unless collation is very carefully done, preservation may be an illusion. Pages can be skipped in filming; filming may be done in such a manner that pages are unreadable. If the original has been discarded in the belief that it has been preserved on film, irretrievable loss may occur.

We can now look back on a quarter of a century of steadily increasing applications of microphotography to library problems. It has been a quarter of a century of accomplishment in which librarians can justifiably take pride. Crumbling files of newspapers have not only been preserved but reduced to manageable size in terms of the shelf space they occupy. Thanks to microfilm, the contents of libraries
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and archives throughout the western world have been made more readily available to scholars working in their own studies or libraries. Recently the development of two processes, the Haloid Xerox-Copyflo printer and the Pennybooks of G. K. Hall offer interesting new possibilities in the preservation and publication of material no longer available for purchase in its original form.

We have in microform publication a technique of inestimable value, but one whose full potential can be realized only by the imposition of rigid standards of selection and technical performance. This has not been done in the past; failure to do so in the future will be an inexcusable dereliction of duty on the part of American libraries.

References


Additional References