DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 314 093 IR 053 044

TITLE Selection for Preservation of Research Library Materials.
INSTITUTION Commission on Preservation and Access, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Aug 89
NOTE 5p.; For a related report, see IR 053 031 and IR 053 042-043.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Archives; *Evaluation Criteria; *Evaluation Methods; Library Cooperation; Library Expenditures; Library Services; Microreproduction; Paper (Material); *Preservation; Program Descriptions; Technological Advancement
IDENTIFIERS Paper Deacidification

ABSTRACT

Intended to stimulate further thinking on the part of the community of scholars who must have a voice in selection strategies, this report addresses: (1) the distinction between preservation (saving the content of a brittle book) and conservation (saving the original item); (2) differences in the needs and objectives of preservation across the several fields of scholarship; (3) approaches to selection (the "great collections approach" which assesses the relative strength of the collection by classification, or the use of an existing scholarly bibliography or a highly specialized sub-society for small segments of a field); and (4) factors affecting the choice of the approach (urgency of preservation of the intellectual estate of the nation, the issue of cost, and the willingness of libraries to collaborate). Criteria mentioned for the selection of materials to be preserved include the rarity, uniqueness, and special features of the item, such as illustrations, photographs, and/or typography, and the feasibility and cost effectiveness of available technologies. It is noted that the preservation problem is most pressing in the arts and humanities, and that the choices of what to preserve or conserve are the most difficult in these areas. It is concluded that, although the future characteristics of a national preservation program are unclear, it is clear that scholars and librarians must become more involved in the process; it must be explained to a generally sympathetic public and legislature; and ways of doing the job better must be developed. (SD)

COMMISSION ON PRESERVATION AND ACCESS

REPORT

AUGUST 1989

SELECTION FOR PRESERVATION OF RESEARCH LIBRARY MATERIALS

Librarians and scholars are vitally interested in developing strategies and establishing priorities for choosing which materials to preserve when not everything can be saved. This report is intended to stimulate further thinking on the part of the community of scholars who must have a voice in selection strategies.

INTRODUCTION

There are more library books and journals in need of preservation today than can possibly be saved before they crumble and disappear. Accordingly, we cannot afford to spend resources on the preservation of materials that are unimportant. Choices must be made, and made with the best available advice as to the future scholarly value of the information to be saved.

The problem of brittle books arises from the acidic paper on which most books and journals were printed from 1860 to 1920, and the temperature and humidity conditions under which these volumes have been stored. About 30 million books in U.S. libraries are, sooner or later, doomed to turn brown, brittle, and unusable. The problem is a national, not a local one, and only a concerted national effort has any hope of rescuing our cultural heritage. Libraries must cooperate in lending their salvageable volumes to the task, and the federal government is the only possible source of sufficient funding. The result must therefore be a national collection, accessible to all scholars.

SOME DISTINCTIONS

In this paper, "preservation" is used to mean saving the *content* of a brittle book, whether through a gross transformation such as microfilming its pages, encoding its languages electronically, or reprinting it. "Conserving" or "restoring" the original item refers to attempts to save the *physical artifact* as well. The choice of mode may depend upon the rarity, uniqueness or special features (e.g., illustrations, typography) of the item, as well as upon the feasibility and cost of the technology employed. For the greatest part of the problem, microfilming appears *currently* to be the preferable mode of storage for preservation, although replication in other media from the storage microfilm may be preferable for use.

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The Commission on Preservation and Access was established in 1986 to foster and support collaboration among libraries and allied organizations in order to ensure the preservation of the published and documentary record in all formats and to provide enhanced access to scholarly information.

The Commission is accessible via ALANET (ALA2624) and BITNET (CPA@GWUVM, SITTS@GWUVM), and by FAX (202) 483-6410.

Manuscripts and archives also cry out for preservation or conservation, but present different problems than scholarly monographs and serials do. The latter are better known, defined, and classified than archives are, and constitute a somewhat more manageable problem because they are kept in well-ordered fashion in large collections that offer better accessibility for purposes of preservation. Printed works also serve a larger constituency than most archives do and their relative uniformity (compared to archival materials) makes them easier to process on a mass scale. Finally, the existing bibliographic network for printed works can be used advantageously in selecting items to be preserved and in minimizing duplication of effort among preservation projects. In view of the urgency of the preservation task, printed works seem the best place to begin. Success in this area will pave the way for further support in others.

Disciplinary Differences

The needs and objectives of preservation vary widely across the several fields of scholarship. Literary and historical studies make much greater use of monographs, diaries and memoirs than the physical and biological sciences, where greater reliance is placed on journal articles and conference reports.

Correspondingly, in those areas of scholarship that focus on the movement and transformation of ideas; changes in the text of novels, plays, and poems; and connections among the cultural products of different eras and different places, there is often a demand for more extensive preservation—of each of the variant editions of a text, or each of several reproductions of a work of art. Such studies of stylistic or substantive variation are concerned with the changes or differences themselves in a work or a genre that is nominally the "same." The need for multiple versions is not merely scholarly scrupulosity. Furthermore, in some subjects the preserved collection should knowingly include secondary, "inferior" or "popular" material, for scholars sometimes want to know everything that was being said about a subject even by tendentious or inaccurate writers.

Students of history (in any area) present a particular problem for a preservation strategy, for their scholarly mills can grind any kind of written or pictorial matter into historical grain. In principle, there is no topic, no place, no people, no event or sequence of events about which an historical account cannot be written. While the most trivial and frivolous topics are ruled out by the canons of scholarship, there is nonetheless a vast body of material whose preservation can be justified on the theory that someday someone will want to trace the historical changes in it or relate them to another body of material. Given such amplitude of potential resources, a strategy of selective sampling from some bodies of material—war veterans' memoirs for example—is justified. Such caveats do not necessarily apply to the product of historical analysis, however, for the accomplished history of any topic, place, sequence of events, and so forth may be justified as a portion of the cultural record of the society in which it existed.

On the other hand, in the disciplines that accumulate knowledge by discovery of new data and revision of established principles, such as the physical and life sciences, the opposite is generally true. Working scientists are usually interested in the latest version of a book or the latest number of a journal. Great effort goes into updating, revising, and keeping current. Active investigators and teachers of science generally believe that most essential knowledge from the past is, for their purposes, adequately represented in text books, handbooks, and reference works. The earlier (and usually inaccurate or mistaken) theories, observations or inferences are discarded to the historian of science, not cherished for their current usefulness.

It appears, therefore, that the preservation problem is most pressing in the arts and humanities and, correspondingly for the reason cited, the choices of what to preserve or conserve are the most difficult.

Approaches to Selection

Ideally, a selection strategy would invoke the most informed and prescient scholarly opinion about the future importance of each individual publication. There is neither labor enough nor time to make such a title-by-title approach feasible, however, even in a limited area, as a group of classicists, working collaboratively to preserve a mere 20,000 volumes, discovered. Some less fine-grained strategy is necessary, and a couple suggest themselves.

One is a "great collections" approach that begins with an evaluation of the relative strength of collections by classification--e.g., the Research Libraries Group conspectus. This inquiry produced a ranking of comprehensiveness of various libraries in specific subject areas—e.g., American history, philosophy, linguistics, medieval English literature. Collections identified as "comprehensive" could be microfilmed in their entirety. Indeed, it could be persuasively argued that since such collections had been identified, they should be the first to be filmed, in their entireties, for preservation. It is often more efficient to preserve all the material in a particular category than to deliberate lengthily about the relative importance of specific titles.

The wisdom of a "great collections" approach is usually apparent to scholars, once they have become familiar enough with the parameters of the preservation problem to appreciate the magnitude of effort required and the urgency of the task. Such consciousness-raising is essential, furthermore, to the success of the preservation initiative, which cannot succeed without the understanding support of the academic community. A distinct effort of a particular sort needs to be made in this connection. Scholars are ordinarily not familiar with the strength of library collections outside their own special fields, and indeed, may not be able to evaluate confidently the strength of collections outside their own university's. Further, many scholars have become accustomed to a title-by-title approach through a lifetime of judicious discrimination among individual authors, specific topics, stringently defined periods and other punctate features of their intellectual arenas of work. They may initially resist what they perceive as a sweeping indiscriminateness of the "great collections" approach.

The scholarly community can be of great help in clarifying the requirements of research, advising on which materials are of little or no use, and which are essential for an academic discipline. Scholars can help to make the judgment as to whether to preserve all of the items in a particular category or to choose a representative sample when there is great homogeneity of content among separate items—e.g., memoirs of war veterans, Victorian moral philosophical tracts, self-help books.

Another approach, suitable for small segments of a scholarly field, is the use of an existing scholarly bibliography that presumably identifies the most significant work in, say, British empiricist philosophy or Indic philology during a particular era when materials are known to be at greatest risk of embrittlement. Alternatively, an individual scholar or group of scholarly specialists can draw up lists of authors whose work is considered important.

A variation of this approach involves enlisting the aid of the highly specialized sub-societies that can be found in most scholarly fields. For example, more than a dozen specialized interest groups in philosophy cover a range of topics: the Leibniz Society and the Medieval and Renaissance Philosophical Society, for example. Members of such highly specialized groups can bring a particular perspective to bear upon a bibliography of the larger scholarly discipline and make judgments about its contents—or construct their own specialized lists.

In the latter approaches, whatever the source of the bibliography or the category of material, it constitutes simply the first step in selection, and must be followed by bibliographic cross-checking (e.g., through OCLC or RLG records) to determine whether a preserved version of the item either exists or is planned. Thirdly, a cooperative source, usually a university library, must be located to lend the item for the preservation process.

It is important to inform scholars about the need for preservation as well as the constraints—financial, logistic and temporal—that surround the process and equally important to involve them in making decisions about preservation. Scholars' understanding of the process that is developed for deciding what to preserve and its credibility are essential for overcoming resistance and for generating support. This need is particularly acute in view of the apparent necessity to choose a preservation process—microfilming—that has a bad name in the academic community generally. Technically imperfect, carelessly executed microfilming has made even more unwelcome a medium that is greatly disdained in comparison to the familiarity and convenience of the bound book. A little direct experience handling the crumbling pages that can be found in any library, however, is a powerfully convincing argument in favor of preservation now—but the path toward that goal needs to be explored and discovered collaboratively on the part of librarians and scholars in order to reach it.

Factors Affecting Choice of an Approach

The urgency of preservation of the intellectual estate of the nation demands that the task be done expeditiously, while its vastness requires that it be done economically. Both of these dimensions urge that the strategies chosen be as simple and straightforward as possible, manageable by a wide variety of libraries, a broad spectrum of scholarship and a large assortment of materials. In an ideal world, unlimited resources and vast amounts of time would allow item-by-item selection on the part of scholars, exquisitely careful bibliographic checking by librarians, and restoration of the conserved (as well as preserved) work to the shelves of its lending institution. In the real world, all of these features must be compromised.

The issue of cost is crucial, given the vast quantity of deteriorating paper in libraries, and the cost of selection cannot be allowed to consume a disproportionate share of the total cost of preservation. As noted above, there are opportunities for economies in the logistics of preservation, and there clearly are economies of scale. Scholarly judgment is of the utmost importance in identifying important bodies of material, but it may be wiser as well as more economic not to attempt item-by-item selection but to sweep all of the items in a particular category/collection into the preservation process. Similarly, if the machine-searchable bibliographic networks of the country do not evidence the existence of a duplicate preserved item, that may be signal enough to include the item in the preservation process, even though we know that not all of the collections of all libraries are included in that database.

An important logistic issue concerns the willingness of libraries to collaborate by lending portions of their collection to a preservation process. The evidence of willing cooperation is, to date, immense. Yet there are signs that there may be resistance, especially on the part of faculty, to a collaboration that involves sacrifice of a volume or its non-return to the shelves of the university library. While librarians may be ready to recognize that, in order to retain scholarly content, it is reasonable to "destroy" a physical object before it self-destructs, faculty sometimes mourn or even rage. Such postures could have a distinct bearing upon selection for preservation.

The national program of preservation does not have a well-marked road ahead to travel, but the direction it must take is clear enough. Enough at-risk literature has been identified to justify an immediately increased effort to preserve it, and this effort will teach us much about the task. We do not know exactly what to do step-by-step, but we know what needs to be done: enlarge the involvement of scholars and librarians in the process, explain it to a generally sympathetic public and legislature, and learn as we go how to do the job better.

For more information on selection for preservation and the Commission Scholarly Advisory Committees, see *Commission Newsletters* No. 4, September 1988, page 2; No. 6, November 1988, page 1; No. 7, December 1988, page 3; No. 9, February 1989, page 2; No. 11, April 1989, page 2; No. 12, May 1989, page 4; No. 13, June 1989, page 1.

Scholarly Advisory Committees, composed of scholars and librarians, are charged with the following tasks: to consider preservation selection criteria in light of the needs of the various academic disciplines; to advise on priorities and program directions within each discipline; and to act as liaison groups with the academic disciplines. Disciplines currently represented are history, art history, philosophy, and modern language and literature.