



AMS Imaging
Australian Microfilm Services
230 Bank Street, South Melbourne, Vic 3205
Ph. (03) 9690 6800 Fax. (03) 9696 3865
ABN: 87 129 201 221
www.ams-imaging.com.au



SHOULD ENDANGERED BOOKS AND ARCHIVES BE FILMED OR DIGITISED?

This is a short excerpt from the final report of a working group of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Association), which was convened in November 1995, chaired by Dr Hartmut Weber of the State Archives Administration, Stuttgart, and translated by Andrew Medicott. The report was first available, in German, in the Autumn of 1996 on the Internet and was published in January 1997. In July 1997 the European Commission on Preservation and Access (CPA) published an English translation. The whole report is on :- <http://www.rlg.org/preserv/diginews> .

The reformatting of damaged or endangered books and archives is an effective and economic conservation measure. Moreover, in contrast to measures to preserve or restore originals, the transfer of information to age-resistant media can also serve the objective of wider and better access.

Image conversion of endangered archive or library material to other media, for protection or for the permanent replacement of the original medium threatened by deterioration, requires systems that produce, over very long periods of time and economically, the highest possible reproduction quality, availability and access. Compared with other modern information media, microfilm has the advantage that the material undergoes no fundamental technical transformation and is thus “future-proofed.” The analogue-stored information is directly accessible, with relatively little effort, to the human eye. Increasing national and international compatibility of microfilming systems ensures acceptance across national borders. Microforms can be economically created, duplicated, and distributed. Microfilm systems can be combined with electronic data processing (edp) access systems. But microfilm can also be efficiently digitised with microfilm scanners. This will become more economical as the reproduction quality and financial viability of digital access systems improve.

Microfilm is an analogue and age-resistant storage medium whose accessibility can be maintained with relatively few resources over long periods of time. Moreover, it remains available at all times for further processing in digital systems. Thus, it has a place in the digital media world. As a high- quality, intermediate storage medium, microfilm offers new and attractive methods and levels of access to books and archive material, with the help of digital access systems.

For the reasons given, it is advisable to film endangered material before digitising, rather than microfilming from the digital medium. There is a financial rationale for this even when the only concern is digitisation of material for new levels of access and use. Because microfilm is a long-term storage medium, it can minimise heavy expenditures for data migration and the frequent technical and organisational measures needed to preserve readability in new systems environments of material available only in digital form. Over the long-term, this justifies the resources invested in the preparation and handling of microfilm.

When an original is to be digitised directly, it is important to remember that the advantages of digital storage and processing must not be gained at the cost of reproduction quality, low durability, or lack of compatibility or “future proofing” of the information medium or of the hardware. A programme specifying the technical and organisational steps involved in periodic migration, which can be constantly refined, should be part of the system design. Here too, microfilm as a medium has a part to play. In principle, it is possible to transfer digital image data to microfilm. However, contrary to statements that sometimes appear in the professional literature, converting digitised data to microfilm, which can then be used as an analogue long-term storage medium, involves a notable reduction in quality. Microfilm produced in this way cannot now be used for digitisation with any guarantee of an acceptable result. Analogue and digital storage forms are thus not yet fully compatible.

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