

Facing collective amnesia

by Karl Schmude

An urgent problem is now threatening libraries throughout the world. Their collections, which are crucial for such diverse purposes as economic development, educational research and recreational pursuits, are in danger of disintegrating.

The problem is mainly due to one cause — the type of paper on which books have been printed for almost the past one-and-a-half centuries. Until the 1850s paper was produced from linen or cotton rags and proved to be relatively long-lasting. In the mid-19th century, however, the popular demand for paper and the commercial need for an economic method of production led to the use of mechanically ground wood pulp. Paper manufactured from wood pulp is highly acidic and therefore inherently unstable. It contains lignin — a major factor in causing paper to discolour and disintegrate. The useful lifespan of most 20th-century book papers has been estimated to be no more than a few decades.

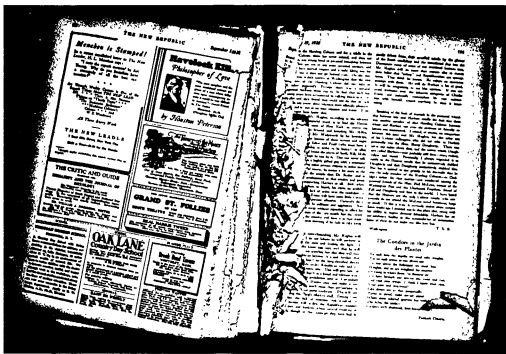


Photo: The deterioration of acid-based paper: a 1928 publication recently photographed in a major Australian library.

Libraries comprise an important part of the market for printed books and they are increasingly aware of the fragility of this material. The extent of deterioration of library collections is alarming. Surveys conducted at various major institutions — for example, in The Library of Congress, and at Yale and Stanford Universities — reveal that 26 per cent to 40 per cent of the books they hold are seriously embrittled and thus unavailable for normal use.

No comprehensive surveys of Australia's library collections have yet been undertaken but the preliminary findings of a recent study at the State Library of Victoria indicate a significant degree of deterioration of its collections.

Programs are now being developed with two main aims in mind — on the one hand, to improve the physical condition of library collections, especially by the process called 'mass deacidification' (which is designed to eliminate acid from the paper of published books and insert a buffer compound that will provide protection against future acid attack

from the environment); and on the other, to transfer the contents of existing books to another medium (such as microfilm or optical disk).

Books containing the acidic seeds of their own destruction continue to be produced by the millions, storing up problems for the future, failing to provide a permanent record of our times.

Co-operation needed

The existing problem — that of decaying book collections already assembled in libraries — is of vast proportions, but it is intensified by the continuing use of acid-based paper in book publishing. The key issue is how to preserve the books of the future, not simply those of the past. As one organisation that has studied book longevity has reported:

'Books containing the acidic seeds of their own destruction continue to be produced by the millions, storing up problems for the future, failing to provide a permanent record of our own times.'

If the future dimensions of the conservation problem are to be curbed there will need to be widespread adoption of paper which is of archival quality. This change to permanent paper does not relate to a narrowly perceived need for the long-term preservation of library collections.

In the first place, libraries are of critical importance to the future well-being of citizens since they provide the knowledge base of society. They contain the record of humanity — the accumulation of ideas and insights and discoveries on which social effort and progress are possible. The destruction of libraries would represent an immense cultural loss — a form of collective amnesia which would affect every member of society.

... libraries will be forced to devote an increasing share of their budgets to conservation

In the second place, printers and publishers have an economic interest in turning to paper of archival quality. So long as libraries are acquiring books with a short lifespan they will be forced to devote an increasing share of their budgets to conservation. These budgets are already severely strained by the combined impact of inflation and currency devaluation and there is scarcely any prospect of enlarged government funding. As a result, libraries will be compelled to balance the preservation of their collections against the expansion of those collections. In short, the choice will be between conservation and acquisition — and the funds for conservation are likely to come from acquisition budgets. This unpalatable choice will damage both libraries and the printing and publishing industries and can only be minimised in its effects by a bold decision to convert to the use of permanent paper.

A major advance in the adoption of long-lasting paper occurred in 1984 with the specification of an appropriate production standard.

This standard is likely to have a significant impact on the manufacture of paper in America and elsewhere as the need for archival-

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quality paper in publishing becomes more pressing and the realisation spreads that such paper can be produced without excessive cost — indeed, with the promise of savings.

Increasing use

Without doubt a growing number of paper mills are moving across to an archivally permanent product. Particularly in the USA, where stricter antipollution laws have been introduced to control acid effluent, there has developed a significant use of permanent paper — to the point where libraries now report that more than a quarter of their new book acquisitions are on acid-free paper and a large percentage of these are on paper that carries an alkaline reserve to maintain the pH factor at a satisfactory level.

As a survey of US book publishers in 1983 revealed, there is an increasing recognition of the need to move to permanent paper — at least for some books. Of course not every publication needs to be produced on paper of archival quality. While hard and fast distinctions are difficult to apply, certain categories of books can be identified which need not receive the protection of permanent paper — for example, work books, vanity publications, formula novels and various popular works (usually in paperback). By contrast, scholarly and scientific books, serious works of fiction and non-fiction, bibliographies, encyclopedias and other reference books, are examples of materials that ought to be published on permanent paper.

The responsibility lies primarily with publishers to make thoughtful decisions about the paper used in the printing of books for it is not only libraries that want 'permanent' books. As one American group comprising publishers and librarians has pointed out, book lovers of all kinds have a right to expect, when they buy an expensive art book or a children's book or a serious novel, that it will not disintegrate.

This is an edited excerpt from an article entitled 'Why we need Permanent Paper' published in Australian Lithographer, Printer and Packager Vol 18 No 106 Apr/May 1987. Karl Schmude, spoke recently at the LAA/AACOBS Permanent Paper seminar and writes a regular column, 'Conserve them all my days', for Incite.