

# The imperative of preservation

Karl G Schmude, university librarian at the University of New England

In the past decade, the preservation of library materials has attracted increasing attention in Australia. Yet it has chiefly been in the non-tertiary library sphere — the National Library and the State Libraries — that preservation initiatives have occurred.

The reasons are not hard to find. Those libraries which house national and regional treasures and bear a recognised heritage responsibility have understandably been most active in developing programs to preserve their resources — by such means as the microfilming of newspapers and literary manuscripts. Such libraries also mount public exhibitions, and have been especially conscious of preservation needs in order to protect displayed materials against damage.

By contrast, tertiary libraries in Australia have been mainly influenced by the priorities of their parent institutions — which are immediate programs of teaching and research — and have found it difficult to gather the resources to devote to major preservation efforts.

They have, indeed, engaged in preservation activities — such as environmental controls and binding — but they have not, in the main, incorporated these measures into comprehensive programs of preservation.

The electronic revolution, however, is beginning to have a noticeable impact on the preservation sensitivities of tertiary libraries. Whereas print-based materials, at their most fragile, can be expected to last for some decades, electronic resources have a life-span measured — at best — only in years. Unless preservation issues are consciously taken into account at the time electronic resources are created, the information they incorporate is destined to disappear.

Ironically, therefore, tertiary libraries in Australia are now being forced by the advent of electronic information to address the broad needs of preservation — not only of electronic resources, but of print and other material as well.

The context within which such awareness is growing is that of access.

Library preservation, after all, is not mainly about the rescue of the rare and the antique: it is about generalised access — long-term access to the world of knowledge and cultural memory.

An important sign of libraries' attending to this challenge is the recent efforts of a cross-sectoral group which has been working on the Preservation of Australian Digital Information (PADI). Established after the Towards Federation 2001 Conference and funded by a number of grants, particularly from the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee's Electronic Publishing Working Group, PADI has developed a provisional set of preservation guidelines to assist libraries and other institutions in providing long-term access to electronic information.

Such background work helps to build the infrastructure of support for individual library efforts, especially for Australian tertiary libraries which do not, in the main, have a strong tradition of expertise or structured emphasis in broad preservation programs. ■



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