

# Valuable, fragile or popular: when copying is important

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What does the future hold? How will it differ from the present and the past? What are our cultural institutions, and in particular the National Library of Australia (NLA), doing to ensure that our descendants will have the materials to try to answer these questions? This brief article discusses some of our strategies for providing long-term access to the National Library collections.

## The role of libraries

Australian cultural institutions are responsible for maintaining a record of Australian society. Future generations will be able to learn about what we were doing in 2006 through the information that will be contained within these institutions. Of course, it isn't enough to just collect the material. Cultural institutions must ensure that the material is stored and made accessible in ways that do not damage it, so that it will be available for a long time.

Libraries don't only collect books. Library collections also consist of paintings, photographs, statues, objects, manuscript material, sound recordings, floppy discs, DVDs and CDs, maps, newspapers and microform. All of these collection items are made from materials that will degrade over time, some faster than others.

In order to preserve library collections for future generations, the NLA implements a range of collection management activities. These activities include prioritising the collections so that we know which are the most important and where we should focus our preservation resources, storing the material inside boxes and containers for protection and ensuring the storage environment is stable, safe and secure.

## Access

Safe storage of the collections is only half the story. The NLA aims to provide easy access to its collections and tries to do this in ways that do not damage the original material. The most basic way we help people find items they want is by maintaining a catalogue of the Library's collections. 'Finding aids' are produced for collections so that researchers can identify which bits of the collection they want to access without having to handle the material itself. These management strategies reduce the amount of handling that the collection receives.

Traditional materials are at our mercy as we read and handle them. The very act of touching paper materials causes them to become more brittle, and increases the likelihood that information will be lost. Some parts of our collections are more popular than others, and some more fragile. The NLA has an extensive reformatting program where these valuable, fragile or popular collections are microfilmed or digitised. This preservation strategy preserves the original material while still providing access to the information.

When using reformatting as a preservation strategy, it is essential that the original material and the copy are both maintained for as long as possible. The aim is to ensure that the copy is a true representation of the original, and has been produced in such a way that it will outlive the original. The two most common reformatting methods are microform (microfilm and microfiche) and digitisation. We use both these strategies at the National Library.

## Microform

Microform, which includes both microfilm and microfiche, has been an accepted preservation reformatting medium for

decades and, if produced according to preservation standards, has a life expectancy of over 500 years. Three generations of microform must be produced in order to meet preservation standards. The original camera film is known as the first-generation master. The first copy made from this film is the second-generation master. The third-generation, or user copy, is made from the second-generation master. Whenever the third-generation wears out from use, a new film is produced from the second-generation master. The first-generation master is only used if the second-generation master wears out. The creation of preservation-quality microform is controlled by various standards that examine every aspect of filming, from preparation of the original item through to processing the film and quality checking it against the original.

The NLA carries out microfilming of its newspaper collection as part of the National Plan for Australian Newspapers (<http://www.nla.gov.au/nplan/>). The Library also holds extensive microform collections of manuscripts, serials, government gazettes, electoral rolls and many other publications. Purchases of microform from other institutions allows access to collections that are not held by the Library.

## The digital age

The coming of the digital age, and the ease of creating digital scans, has enabled the Library to provide even wider access to its collections. Items from the collection can be digitised and made available to anyone who has access to the internet. Whilst there are many standards controlling the creation of preservation microfilm, there are currently few formal standards that address digitisation as a preservation strategy.

The principles of reformatting remain the same for digitisation as they do for microform. Items from the collection are digitised to a high resolution and the original file remains the master. Manipulated copies, viewing copies and thumbnails are all created from this master. The digital objects are kept in secure storage that is refreshed regularly to maintain the integrity of the files. Creation information for the digital object is recorded, and this metadata is maintained in the NLA's catalogue.

## Access into the future

Reformatting is a valuable preservation strategy that is used to enable access to collection items that may be too fragile, or too valuable, to be handled by users. It allows us to access the information that a collection item contains without the risks of damaging the item during that use. Reformatting also gives us the opportunity access this information remotely. Users do not need to be in the same place as the original collection item, and in fact may be using the collection in the comfort of their own homes via the internet.

Microform and digitisation are both valid preservation strategies that are being used by libraries around the world to provide access to collection material. It is likely that we will see less microform being produced in the future because people demand instant, on-line access to Library materials. No-one likes using microfilm! Libraries will soon need to decide whether to stop microfilming and embrace digitisation as the accepted preservation reformatting strategy. The challenge is to ensure that digital copies of physical collection material meet the basic preservation requirements of a reformatting strategy. That is, will they last longer than the original item? \*