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Microform—Not extinct yet: Results of a long-term microform use study in the digital age

Dana M. Caudle [a,*], Cecilia M. Schmitz [a], Elizabeth J. Weisbrod [b]

[a] Cataloging and Metadata Librarian, Auburn University Libraries, 231 Mell Street, Auburn, AL 36849-5606, USA
[b] Music and Government Documents Librarian, Auburn University Libraries, 231 Mell Street, Auburn, AL 36849-5606, USA

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents results taken from 2008 to 2010 of an ongoing microform use study. The number of titles used is evenly distributed over time with microfilm being the most used format and newspapers accounting for half of all usage. When publications are available electronically, users may still use the microform version. This study illustrates how microform and electronic collections are complementary—electronic materials provide better access but microform is better for preservation. Users prefer electronic materials but will also use microform when there is no online version available or when the online version is not an exact copy of the original.

1. Introduction

Microform collections and departments are evolving. In the digital age, when administrators are seeking to repurpose their existing spaces, paying huge sums to license the digital content preferred by users, microform seems not only outdated but "as something akin to 'toxic assets.'" (Cheney, 2010, p. 66). After all, why allow unpopular collections that are minimally used as well as difficult to use take up valuable real estate which can be put to some better purpose. It seems inevitable that most microform will be sent to remote storage or even discarded. Yet microform is still a relevant format. Microform collections contain valuable research material not readily available electronically in a format that is ideal for long-term preservation. Before throwing out their microform collections, librarians need to assess which parts are the most useful and valuable, then find ways to make them more accessible to researchers. Long-term microform use studies are necessary to identify which parts of the collection users consider important. At Auburn University Libraries, we conducted just such a long-term use study to see what material is being used and utilized this data to make collection development and space decisions. Our results compare favorably to use studies done before the triumph of digital access and have several implications for the future of microform in general.

2. Literature review

Libraries acquired microform for reasons of space, economy, and preservation. Specifically, microform allowed libraries to affordably acquire large collections of primary source materials; replace paper journal and newspaper holdings to save space; preserve paper newspapers that were brittle and bulky; cost-effectively acquire government information and technical reports; and acquire materials not available in other formats (Cheney, 2010; Keogh, 2012; Manzo, 1997; Patterson, 1990; Sridhar, 2002; Veit, 1971). As a result, libraries now hold large collections of microform with a wide variety of different materials covering many subject disciplines (Cheney, 2010). In 2008, the mean number of microfilms in ARL Libraries was 4.7 million units (Association of Research Libraries, 2008). "Microform technology has enjoyed a storied history that extends forward from the middle of the 19th

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: caudlda@auburn.edu (D.M. Caudle), schmice@auburn.edu (C.M. Schmitz), weisbel@auburn.edu (E.J. Weisbrod).

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Century. Reducing larger documents and placing their contents on card or film has proven to be an efficient way to store vast quantities of information on much smaller surfaces. Micro-technology provides a reliable and economical method for managing data, and it has stood the test of time" (Naidoo et al., 2009, p. 64). Keogh (2012, p. 11) surveyed a number of libraries and found that 94% of respondents are still buying microform.

While libraries adopted microform for space and cost reasons, users resisted the medium (Sweetland, 1995). The inconvenience of having to use special equipment which is often poor, broken, or obsolete adds to their dissatisfaction with multiple formats and complicated arrangements, while the difficulty of locating individual items only contributes to this unpopularity (Cheney, 2010; Gabriel & Flesner, 1990; Manzo, 1997; McIntosh, 1987). Given a choice between print, electronic, and microform, users prefer online resources and consider microform their least favorite choice (Duff & Cherry, 2000; Keogh, 2012). However, people will use microform if it is the only format available for their research (Keogh, 2012) or it is the format they are accustomed to using (McBride & Behm, 2003). Some research has even indicated that users do not find microform inconvenient; are not put off by the technology; do not mind using microform; and even find the experience a positive one (Cheney, 2010; Cheney, Knapp, Alan, & Czapla, 2006; Freeland & Bailey, 2008; Gabriel & Flesner, 1990; McIntosh, 1987). "Researchers are likely more flexible and enduring then [*sic*] many librarians have given them credit for." (Cheney, 2010, p. 72). In fact, faculty value microform for its continuity and availability; considers it a backup to electronic versions; and continue to develop assignments which require their students to learn to use the format (Smith, 2009a).

Rosati (2006) documents the decline of print journal usage in favor of electronic access. Naidoo et al. (2009) surveyed a number of libraries finding that over half of the institutions studied partially or fully replaced microform in favor of electronic access, yet the others prefer to retain newspapers, periodicals, historic documents, and government documents in microform. Some librarians prefer to retain microform because "too many materials will never be available online" (Keogh, 2012; Manzo, 1997, p. 77). Sometimes, microform is the only version available and cannot be discarded until there is an electronic version (Freeland & Bailey, 2008; Keogh, 2012; Sridhar, 2002). Where identical online and microform collections exist, some libraries keep the microform because they cannot afford online access (Martin, 2007). In the case of the *New York Times*, one library chose to retain the microfilm version because the historic electronic version which duplicates the paper edition had missing images due to the Tasini decision[1] and because there was a four year time lag in the availability of content in the database (Smith, 2009a). A current full-text electronic version of the *New York Times* exists, but it does not include the images, ads, and similar content of the print version (Smith, 2009a).

Numerous researchers cite the drawbacks of some electronic journals, namely the exclusion of certain types of content found in the print version, poor quality of graphics, and lack of stable archives including publisher removal of content (Bracke & Martin, 2005; McKinzie, 2005; Monopoli, Nicholas, Georgiou, & Korfiati, 2002; Naidoo et al., 2009; Pazur & Konjevic, 2002; Rusch-Feja & Siebecky, 1999; Vishala & Bhandi, 2009). Full-text electronic databases often lack short articles and big tables (Orenstein, 1993). Many do not include classified, display, and supplemental advertisements; letters to the editor (except when written by famous people); lists of business stock quotations; announcements; meeting calendars; legal notices; indexes, filler material; photographs; cartoons; illustrations; as well as graphs and charts (Orenstein, 1993). They sometimes exclude short articles, editorials, obituaries, reviews, tables, and correction notices (Orenstein, 1993).

Full-text aggregator databases have other disadvantages. They differ from the print in terms of what they cover and in their currency. They are also more volatile in their coverage with journal titles added and removed all the time. Two separate studies done in 1999 and 2009 by one library demonstrated that full-text aggregator databases are not adequate replacements for journal subscriptions due to issues in currency and coverage—both in what's covered and the ever-changing nature of coverage (Sprague & Chambers, 2000; Thohira, Chambers, & Sprague, 2010). Graphics in some full-text electronic databases are also of poor quality, with tables, figures, maps, and photographs omitted and symbols for scientific formulas improperly rendered, unclear, or missing (Sprague & Chambers, 2000; Thohira et al., 2010). A PDF version of the article solves many of these problems, but they persist in databases with HTML articles (Thohira et al., 2010). Full-text electronic databases are also difficult to browse because of the difficulty of searching abbreviated, misleading, or clever titles (Stokes, 2007). Microform versions do not suffer from these problems because they are an exact copy of the entire print issue with all articles, other content, and graphics present (Freeland & Bailey, 2008).

Perhaps the biggest difficulties with digital content are preservation and archiving. Digital media exhibit a wide variety of technical problems such as continuously changing software, file formats, compression schemes, storage issues, and hardware (Howard, Winer, & Wagner, 1999; Library of Congress, Preservation Section, n.d.). In addition, varied institutional practices and developing standards do not make them a viable means of preserving content (Howard et al., 1999; Library of Congress, Preservation Section, n.d.; Mieczkowska & Pryor, 2002). However, as a preservation medium, properly stored microform has a life expectancy of up to 500 years, making this format an economical and reliable means of preservation (Breslawski, 2005; Howard et al., 1999; Library of Congress, Preservation Section, n.d.; Williams, 1996). "It is neither facetious nor inappropriate to point out in the year 2009 that it is very fortunate that the Evangelists, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and other greats did not commit their works to first generation PCs, or we might not have access to them today. Shelf-life and readability/accessibility considerations, plus the good fit that microforms have with many agency's archival requirements, forecast a continuing future for microproducts." (Naidoo et al., 2009, p. 65) In addition to being a reliable medium for preservation, archival copies in microform ensure that content will always be available because the library owns the content, unlike full-text electronic databases where the library loses

[1] In the Tasini lawsuit against the *New York Times*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that publishers must block or remove any licensed freelance work from their database if the publisher has not obtained explicit digital distribution rights (Smith, 2009a).