Preservation in the Future Tense

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While preserving recorded information and ensuring the transmission of knowledge from one generation to another is an ancient cultural activity, as a field within library and archival science, preservation is only a few decades old. It began primarily as item-level repair and conservation, deriving its original professional traditions and physical techniques in large part from the museum world. To the importance in that world of the repair and conservation of individual pieces deemed to be of special value as artifacts, preservation in libraries has added the significance of the archival value of the object as bearer of historical evidence. In a very short time, preservation has developed into a critically important part of managing a library's most precious assets, its collection. Paradoxically, dedicated as it is to mitigating the deleterious effects of aging, preservation has rapidly become, along with computer applications, one of the most forward-looking fields in the library and archival profession.

The goal of any preservation program is to ensure long-term, ready access to the information resources of an institution. As those resources grow and change, so does the expertise needed to manage them. Given the rate of change in both the growth and the use of most library and archival collections, the primary characteristic of any preservation strategy today must be to adapt quickly to the unknown, a curious challenge to a profession that has drawn many of its best people because of their attraction to the past and its artifacts. Trusted for their skills in assessing retrospectively what age, handling, and adverse environmental conditions have done to hamper access to information resources in the present, preservation specialists are now frequently called upon to think prospectively about what time will do to the exceedingly fragile media of the twentieth century--nitrate and acetate film, 78s and LPs, Betamax and VHS videotapes, and, of course, the even more evanescent computer files created in formats that may be superseded within 24 months. How

can we help prepare those in training *today* for long-term careers in a profession undergoing such dramatic and continual shifts? How can we help prepare future preservation experts for an entirely unpredictable future?

One of the hurdles preservation specialists must leap successfully into the next century, where we want them to land on their feet, is conceptual. Traditional repair and conservation duties aside, preservation librarians and administrators are forced increasingly to look beyond objects themselves, to information that is stored on fragile media, like magnetic tape, or is not stored on media at all but exists as disaggregated bits of data on computer hard drives. In the short span of time that preservation and conservation have existed as a separate department in most research libraries, specialists have made tremendous advances in the care and security of a library's chief assets, its collections, by focusing on collections care and on preventive care. Preservation administrators have conceptualized and put into place global strategies for ensuring long-term access to collections. Collections-care programs, binding services, preservation reformatting, paper deacidification, the improvement of environmental conditions, the instruction of staff and users about the proper care and handling of items, the non-invasive tagging of items for security purposes, disaster preparedness and recovery planning--these are among the core elements of any basic comprehensive preservation program, and they exist in a truly impressive number of research libraries already.

But as new means of creating and recording information proliferate at the end of this century, custodians of major collections face increasingly difficult questions of how much information to preserve, and how best to ensure ready access to the fraction of all recorded information that will survive for several more centuries. The skills and judgment developed in preservation professionals--the ability to discover the original form of an object and the intent of its creator, and to prolong the life of the object or return the object as nearly as possible to its state at the time of its creation--are precisely the same skill sets that are needed for the future, albeit practiced in a radically different context.

Just as book conservators should learn as much as possible over the course of their careers about how books have been produced and consumed over the centuries, and as film archivists need to know as much as possible about the original production and exhibition of films, so must preservation experts of the present and future master the creation and dissemination of digital information. In the future, a fully staffed preservation department will reflect the hybrid nature of a library's holdings, with staff having, or having access to, the necessary expertise to handle a variety of media. This means that we need to be training both experts in specific media--moving-image and recorded-sound archivists as well as book conservators--and experts in

managing a flexible staff and changing technologies. Over time, this will lead inevitably to a convergence of the library and archival preservation communities, as more and more libraries will hold non-print materials on a routine basis, and audio-visual items will be so omnipresent that one can no longer speak of them in a meaningful way as "special collections."

More important, however, from the conceptual point of view is the need for preservation experts to develop a keen understanding of the context in which non-object based information is used, in order to ensure capture of all the vital data necessary to meaningful retrieval. When all data are recorded as 0's and 1's, there is, essentially, no object that exists outside of the act of retrieval. The demand for access creates the "object," that is, the act of retrieval precipitates the temporary reassembling of 0's and 1's into a meaningful sequence that can be decoded by software and hardware. A digital art-exhibition catalog, digital comic books, or digital pornography all present themselves as the same, all are literally indistinguishable one from another during the storage, unlike, say, a book on a shelf.

Our traditional understanding of preservation and access to texts (an understanding that is, of course, as yet only a few decades old) breaks down under this new form of recording and retrieving. Time and temporality assume new roles in this world, and there are few professionals in libraries and archives better equipped to think creatively and productively about what that means than preservation experts, whose job it is to ensure continuity and integrity over time and in the face of time.

Preservation is, as yet, a small but capacious profession that encompasses experts in a bewildering variety of media, which carry an increasingly diverse load of information. The challenge of the future tense for preservation professionals is to continue to look beyond the object to the medium, and beyond the medium to the creator and the user, and embrace responsibility for long-term custody of all forms of recorded information to ensure continued access to them. The challenge for library and archival managers is to understand the changing nature of their institutions' assets and provide the appropriate training and support for the staff who are charged with the survival of those assets. This means consulting with preservation staff before making decisions about, for example, acquiring collections that have long-term storage and retrieval implications or selecting and handling collections slated for digital reformatting. It means integrating preservation considerations into the selection of computer hardware and software throughout the information infrastructure of an institution. And it means, above all, ensuring that this group of asset managers will have opportunities for the continuing education, including travel to professional conferences, that is essential to keep abreast of changing technologies and their applications.

Given the financial investment that information resources represent in libraries and archives, and the critical role that preservation experts play in ensuring their continuing robustness and productivity, to do less would be to place those assets at unacceptable risk.