

Introduction

Access and Preservation : two diametrically opposed yet reconcilable missions

One of the essential goals of archival and library services is to facilitate access to the documents in their care, thus ensuring that cultural heritage is kept alive and can be an object of research and enrichment. Their other equally important mission is the preservation of the documents in their care so that cultural heritage may be passed on intact to future generations, since the future of a nation, a people or a community is unthinkable without knowledge of its past.

At first sight these two missions might seem irreconcilable. How can documents be made available without damaging them ? How can documents be preserved whilst being used ? To fulfill both of these missions successfully it is necessary to draw up a long-term preservation policy with the aims of preventing, stopping or slowing down the deterioration of the documents and which can, if necessary, improve the preservation conditions of collections or, at least, safeguard the content by creating surrogate documents.

Unfortunately, the condition of collections tends to deteriorate due to a combination of elements such as : inadequate and careless use and handling of the documents ; badly controlled environmental conditions ; and inappropriate storage. Moreover, many modern materials are less durable (e.g. paper and bindings manufactured after about 1850, manuscripts, photographs, audio and moving image documents).

A good preservation policy must guarantee access to the information and minimise document deterioration. Thus, preservation is a core responsibility of all archival and library services possessing documents of national heritage importance.

From document conservation towards a global approach to the preservation needs of collections

For a long time preservation was limited to the conservation and restoration of older, rare and precious documents. The attention of librarians and archivists was focused on this type of documents. Due to the high frequency of consultations and the violation of recommended preservation practices, the field of application of the conservation concept has been increased considerably. The new goal is the reduction of the need for major treatment on individual items in order to increase the number of items able to be treated.

Since the 1970s we have moved from merely estimating the extent of deterioration to instituting preservation programmes. Many surveys were carried out to evaluate the quantity of endangered documents. The results of these surveys were alarming and showed that millions of archival and library documents are endangered in the short or medium term, due to lack of preventive measures or adequate treatment. Most groups of documents and information carriers are suffering from decay problems. The documents include those on acid paper, on various types of film supports, on magnetic tapes.

Awareness of the extent of deterioration gave rise to the development of mass treatment methods for paper documents and international cooperation programmes. In 1986 the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) created the PAC (Preservation and Conservation) Core Programme. In 1988 the CPA (Commission on Preservation and Access) was founded, and a European Commission on Preservation and Access came into existence in 1994. In the archival domain the International Council of Archives (ICA), founded in 1948, has taken a leading role in raising awareness and developing widely accepted methods to preserve textual materials.

In the areas of sound and moving image documents, the Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film has been promoting the preservation of early films on cellulose nitrate base and, more recently, working to reduce the impact of the Vinegar Syndrome on safety film stocks. The Fédération Internationale des Archives de Télévision has been facing the problems of the increasingly swift obsolescence of formats. The International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives is using the results of a survey of audio collections to focus its research on the most highly endangered types of audio recordings.

UNESCO created the Memory of the World Programme in 1993 to support these initiatives to preserve and make accessible the rich documentary heritage of the world.

Today, preservation plays an increasingly important role among other archival and library services. In some cases it has led to the creation of Preservation Management directorates. Preservation is now considered as a responsibility of management at the highest level. All collections need a preservation programme. Preservation programmes are increasingly being allocated a budget representing a significant proportion of the establishment's total budget. Considerable efforts have been made to raise awareness of preservation issues among all personnel at all levels.

In this context, the term "preservation" is used to refer to the organisation and programming of all kind of activities regarding conservation of the collections in general. Conservation as a concept includes preventive conservation which aims to reduce risks of deterioration : environmental control ; regular maintenance and protection of the collections by using appropriate treatment, anti-theft devices and creating surrogate documents for heavily-used original documents.

From awareness of deterioration factors to integration of the preventive conservation concept

Not only it is necessary to have a thorough knowledge of document deterioration factors, it is also essential to know how to implement a coherent preservation programme able to exclude or diminish the risks of deterioration.

It is important, therefore, to integrate the preventive conservation concept at all stages of document processing : acquisition and initial processing, reproduction, placing in protective containers, shelving and delivery to users. First, one has to define the goals and priorities depending on the degree of deterioration, the frequency of use of the document and its value, then estimate the budget necessary for correct conservation and, finally, implement the conservation programme in a coherent way.

Although reducing the deterioration factors remains the ultimate aim, preventive conservation programmes should be adapted to each institution separately, in accordance with its needs. To ensure proper management of cultural heritage, the persons in charge of the collections sometimes have to take difficult decisions, due to the quality and quantity of the collections.

A coherent preventive conservation programme function needs to be implemented in stages. Inspection of the storage facilities and of the state of the collection gives an overview of the causes and consequences of deterioration. That makes it easier to rank risks in order of importance and helps to determine the priorities in risk prevention and/or treatment of damage.

Knowledge of the risks, damage and the measures to be taken helps to allocate a budget in accordance with the financial and human resources of each institution. It is preferable to define short, medium and long-term projects. Each preservation measure individually contributes to reducing risk and should be taken, even though the totality of the problems cannot be resolved at the same time.

Recommended practices should be followed : they are fundamental to good preservation of the collections. These practices and measures are presented in this CD-ROM, designed to be a working tool for all persons in charge of library or archival collections.

The CD-ROM includes six sections :

- environment issues and document preservation
- disaster preparedness in libraries and archives
- preservation of graphic documents
- preservation of photographic documents and films
- preservation of mechanical, magnetic and optical carriers
- preservation of electronic publications, electronic documents and virtual information

Each section was written by a specialist in the field. They define document types, deterioration factors and preventive measures. Some sections have synopsis.

Remedial measures are deliberately not considered here since they require the involvement of trained and experienced restorers.

Specific terms used are defined in the glossary. Hypertext links help to enhance the information on the CD-ROM by referring to other selected and constantly updated sites relevant to this field.

Each section includes a select bibliography and information on international standards already published or in preparation. These standards can be used as recommendations or specifications according to each case.

The sections are fully illustrated - the CD-ROM with 400 pictures helps to deepen our knowledge and can be used as a basis for preparation of a course or a conference.

Part of the content of the CD-ROM will also be made available on the websites of UNESCO (" Memory of the World ") and of the Ministry of Culture and Communication (" Sciences et Patrimoine culturel ").

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