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Introduction

An important part of our paper heritage is threatened by acidification, which may cause the loss of essential information. Since the last decades of the 20th century a number of countries have been trying to turn the tide by setting up large-scale mass preservation projects. These are important projects indeed, because they concern our cultural heritage, our history and our identity.

The techniques mostly used are: deacidification, improvement of the conditions under which originals are kept, microfilming and digitisation. Deacidification and better conditions merely slow down the process of decay. Microfilming and digitisation do not in themselves tackle the deterioration of originals; it has to be taken for granted that paper does decay. With microfilming and digitisation, the aim is to preserve information. These methods are best applied for a cost-effective approach on a large scale. Both approaches do not preclude one another. On the contrary, a combination of slowing down the process of decay of the originals together with substitution offers the best guarantees.

Microfilming has been applied to create surrogates of paper originals since the thirties of the last century. Modern polyester-based microfilm has proved a stable medium, which can be kept over a long period. It requires little maintenance and can be retrieved with few technical aids. A drawback is that microfilms always need to be consulted on site and that it only offers a copy of the original.

Digitising is a relatively new process, which appears to offer infinite possibilities. Digital surrogates are user friendly, have location-independent access and offer a range of possibilities for further development. However, digital media are unstable, for hard- and software change rapidly. Its complex technology needs constant adaptation to these changes. At this moment, there is not yet a practicable solution to this problem. Neither can the authenticity of digital surrogates be guaranteed adequately.

In mass preservation projects it is important that the advantages of both these methods are applied with optimum effect. A number of aspects need careful consideration: what exactly do we want, for whom are we doing this, what are the technical, economical and practical implications of the choices we make? And if we do make choices, for scanning, for microfilming or both, we need to provide optimum quality. The reasons for this are twofold: firstly, if we deprive scholars of the originals and lock these away, we must make sure that the surrogates are nearly identical to the originals. Secondly, we need to face the fact that the originals, in spite of all our efforts, finally will be lost. So, future generations need to be able to read and consult our surrogates, as they will no longer be able to fall back on the originals.

Because of the current state of affairs regarding the shelf life of digital media, digitising is as yet not considered an adequate form of substitution. Still, it would be rather shortsighted to transfer paper documents to microform only, when digitising would offer much more possibilities, particularly much easier access to users. A combination of both methods, the so-called hybrid method, at this moment seems to be the best solution. But technique is developing continuously. So new choices have to be made constantly, priorities need to be established, and these have to be well considered. Which proves the essence of good guardianship of our cultural heritage: to deal properly with objectives, financial means and technical possibilities.

The conference held at The Hague on 14-15 April 2003, organised by LIBER Preservation Division in cooperation with the European Commission on Preservation and Access (ECPA) and the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, the National Library of The Netherlands, focused on these issues. There were papers on choices and principles in creating surrogates for preservation purposes, analog or digital, on quality control, on new technical developments, on organising large-scale microfilming and digitising projects and on international coordination of mass-preservation efforts.

This issue of LIBER Quarterly presents these papers, as well as the recommendations, which were the result of the conference. Apart from the plenary sessions the conference also included workshops by KB-Staff on quality management of the microfilming and digitisation projects Metamorfoze and The Memory of the Netherlands. Furthermore there were presentations and demonstrations of new technical developments by companies involved in preservation microfilming and digitisation. These are not included in this issue of LIBER Quarterly, but information can be found on the website of the conference: www.kb.nl/coop/liber.

As a follow-up of the conference a report will be published by the European Commission on Preservation and Access (ECPA) and Metamorfoze, discussing the relationship between microfilming and digitisation in a preservation context. This report may also serve as a guideline for making choices and setting priorities, now and in the near future.

WEB SITES REFERRED TO IN THE TEXT

The European Commission on Preservation and Access (ECPA).
http://www.knaw.nl/ecpa/

Koninklijke Bibliotheek. http://www.kb.nl/

LIBER Preservation Division. http://www.kb.dk/guests/intl/liber/division/preserv/

Microfilming and Digitisation for Preservation. http://www.kb.nl/coop/liber/
Metamorfoze. http://www.kb.nl/coop/metamorfoze/home.html
The Memory of the Netherlands. http://www.geheugenvannederland.nl/