

Preservation Policy: A Challenging Task Both on a National and Local Level¹

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PRESERVATION - WHAT?

First of all we have to clarify the terms. What is preservation? In principle it includes everything which is needed to maintain the collections, e.g., the acquisitions and collections policy, preventive measures, active conservation, use of surrogates, physical facilities, etc. In principle every library should therefore have some kind of policy for preservation. In most cases the word „preservation”, however, is used in everyday speech as a synonym for conservation, which is why most libraries in Finland feel no need to discuss it. Collections in which they invest substantial amounts of money are obviously expected to take care of themselves.

In this connection I am making a distinction between preservation and conservation. By conservation I mean active treatment and preventive measures.

A POLICY - WHAT?

And what is a policy? The shortest way to describe a policy is a formula answering the questions „what, why and how”. It is a statement which announces what one wants to achieve, why it is necessary to achieve it and what one is going to do to achieve this „what”.

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In order to answer the question „what” we have to make up our minds; we must know what we want to do. I am afraid that the problems begin here. In too many cases our ideas about the ultimate goals are too fuzzy. If this is true, it is not surprising that so few real preservation policies have been formulated.

Both a policy and a strategy always mean a choice. In the preservation business in particular, choice is unavoidable because the needs greatly exceed the available resources. Until now we have mainly had our paper-based collections to take care of. That has itself been an overwhelming task. In the near future we will also have electronic publications. To preserve them permanently or to perpetuate them, as the experts at present seem to say, will require far greater effort.

A policy also requires that decision-makers, those who are in charge, be engaged in the business and not only those who are directly involved. In the first instance a policy is not a question of experts. It does not deal so much with technological questions as with questions about goals, responsibilities and, of course, financing.

HOW DO WE PRESERVE?

I have already mentioned two important aspects which characterize the present situation. The first was that there are so few policies which meet the requirements of a policy. The second was that the needs of active treatment are far greater than the resources available.

All of us, I am sure, feel that preservation, in every sense of the word, has not received as much attention as it deserves. We have not succeeded in convincing governments and other funding bodies of the necessity to invest in preservation. The only way seems to be to negotiate for money for individual practical measures and to produce good arguments for them. This is possibly the only language the decision-makers understand. Libraries and archives are not alone in this situation. In very few countries do governments have any stated policy for the preservation of the cultural heritage at large, including buildings, monuments, etc. The ultimate responsibility for developing a policy and pursuing it thus lies on the institutions which are in charge of those particular issues. It is their task to persuade government to allocate the resources required.

As to preservation needs, the climate is not very favourable in the library field either. The whole philosophy of librarianship has changed. It is more fashion-

able to advocate access to instead of ownership of collections. If collections are less important, why invest money and energy on preserving them? This trend also influences many paymasters, as for instance the universities, when they struggle with insufficient budgets. A powerful policy will therefore be needed to formulate an acceptable goal and to show how it can be achieved. But here we meet a new problem, which may be one of the reasons why the situation is as it is.

Do we, libraries and archives, really know what should be done and what the most urgent issues to be tackled are? Are we able to tell ourselves and our funding bodies what our priorities are? My impression is that we are not yet in the position to produce a blueprint of a comprehensive preservation policy, not for a whole country or for a single institution.

The main problems seem to be that

- governments and financing bodies have not committed themselves, and
- those responsible for the collections do not have a clear concept of what really should be done.

Because the ultimate responsibility for initiatives lies on the institutions and not on the government, we have to start our considerations with ourselves.

Since there will never be enough money to treat all our collections, selection has to be made. This must be based on several criteria, one of which, of course, is the importance of the collections, as difficult as this is to determine. In addition to such criteria, there are other factors which have to be taken into account and which may require rather tough decisions. I will give an example of problems of that type later. All these issues may be so wide-ranging as to paralyse the decision-making and jeopardize the whole idea of creating a policy.

The second point is that we do not necessarily know the condition of our collections well enough to be able to determine the order in which they should be treated and how. In many cases we do not even know that we do not know. The condition of the items should, however, be known before choosing the treatment methods.

The third point is that we do not exactly know how to treat the collections and the various materials. We still lack appropriate methods. Mass-deacidification methods, for instance, are still in their infancy. We have no guarantee of the results and there is no way of foreseeing what will happen in the long

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run to the material which has been treated. In Helsinki University Library, for instance, we have discovered that the issues connected with mass deacidification are much more complicated than has been believed. Differences in the condition and chemical quality of the paper in different publications are so great that they can not be treated in the same way by the same process. Differences are caused by the original quality, age, conditions of storage, etc. In addition to this there are, so far, no ways of strengthening the paper during the process. How can you persuade a government to invest in something the effects of which are uncertain or insufficient?

One of the unclear issues in many countries is who is in charge of what. To determine the players of the game would be an important first step. National libraries, of course, must take on the obligation to preserve the published cultural heritage of the nation. But who else has to be active? The answer varies from country to country. It also depends upon the question of why preservation is being carried out.

WHY TO PRESERVE?

If the preservation measures are appropriate, the results are basically the same in spite of the motivation and arguments about why we preserve. But for financing as well as setting priorities, motivation may have a great influence.

Preservationists primarily argue by referring to the needs for rescuing the cultural heritage for the future generations. This is, of course, our traditional view and this is also the task of many archives and all national libraries. When considering the rationale of legal deposit we argue for the need to preserve the published national heritage. The same argument is also valid for the legal deposit of electronic publications.

However, it is not always said that present generations and their decision-makers feel committed to the future needs. Leaving national libraries aside, most of the big libraries in the Nordic countries with major collections of historical material are maintained by universities. Because of the changes in the budget regime universities are no longer as proud of their big main libraries as they used to be. Instead they feel that the historical collections have become a burden which they no longer are prepared to pay for. It is difficult to say whether anybody was able to foresee all the consequences of the new budgeting policy.

Of course we have to ask why universities should invest in preservation at all. Archives in most cases have legal obligations to secure the permanence of their collections. Similar obligations very seldom apply to ordinary research libraries. The task of archiving is basically a duty of the national library or an obligation associated with legal deposit only. Even in that case only a limited number of legal deposit libraries have been given an archival function. What has been said here does not mean that libraries in principle may not want to preserve parts of their collections. Items in their collections with high cultural or market value for instance may motivate them to invest in preservation.

Previously, when accountability in the present sense of the word was not yet as important as today, short-term fixation on the current, heavily-used material was not the only yardstick by which the necessity of an activity was judged. Prestigious universities were interested in their national role and were, at least in principle, prepared to assume national responsibilities and to work for the future of the nation. Responsibility for the collections of the cultural heritage was a source of pride.

If universities are no longer in the position of accepting national responsibility, they should at least recognize the needs of their own future. Research and teaching at a university have to be based on a continuum of culture and knowledge. This continuum can be safeguarded only by documented evidence because we can not inherit knowledge and learning. What are the historical collections if not collections of this evidence? Seen from this angle, preservation has a role to play, being one of the means by which a library achieves the results it is expected to produce. Of course, it is hard to show the immediate benefits of preservation, because its impact can be compared to forestry. Very often the life-cycle is too long for us to harvest the fruit. Preservation is an investment of a special kind: its impact becomes apparent with much greater lag than most other investments. In other words, if a university wants to ensure its future role as an important research organization, it has to make sure that it has all the resources required at its disposal. In many cases, it will be too late to do anything if the necessary preservation measures have not been taken in time. If we call the traditional approach to preservation the preservationist's approach, this could be called the utilitarian approach, because it is basically motivated by the practical benefits it is assumed to produce.

To summarize: at least the following three aspects have to be mentioned as reasons to preserve:

- permanent archiving of the nation's cultural heritage

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- safeguarding the conditions of research and teaching in the future
- securing the financial value of the items.

WHOSE POLICY?

If a policy has to be comprehensive, written and formally approved, few national policies exist in Europe. Documented policies for individual libraries do not exist in great numbers either. Many libraries do follow certain principles or patterns but very seldom have they been written down as a comprehensive policy document and been put through a formal adoption procedure. I have to confess that this also applies to my own Library, although many of our principles have been laid down in writing and the goals have been set formally in connection with the annual work plans, also in writing. I will come back to these further on. Of course, there is still one more alternative: traditions which are interpreted by the preservation experts without the engagement of the top-level management of the library.

When we are speaking about a preservation policy we have to specify whose policy we mean, not merely what the policy covers.

A national policy, for instance, may be a government policy, but may also be an agreement between institutions only. Who will provide the resources, however, if the institutions themselves agree on the goals?

To have a real impact a policy must include both the goals and the resources. Without ensuring the necessary resources a policy will be merely a „letter of intent“. Resources can be provided by the government or by the individual institutions. The government can grant the resources for special programmes or to given institutions, such as the National Archives and the National Library.

To take Finland as an example, there is no clearly-defined national preservation policy. An attempt to create a national policy was made in 1985, but the Ministry of Education was not prepared to approve the proposal because it would have required additional funds. In practice, however, the Ministry of Education seems to follow certain principles. As to the libraries, the printed publications have to be collected on the basis of the Legal Deposit Act and the National Library has the task of archiving them. The same pattern will apply to electronic publications. The Ministry has been active in promoting the revision of the Legal Deposit Act and has already reserved resources for the National Library for that purpose. There is also a national reserve col-

lection, but to my knowledge no additional funding has been planned for it. In other words, the Ministry of Education has taken the necessary measures to ensure that the items of the country's own published cultural heritage are collected. The legal framework has been created and the practical responsibility given to the National Library, which is carrying out the task with the help of its annual budget, which, it is true, is rather limited.

A decision on archiving radio broadcasting and television programmes has still to be made. At present only films which are shown on television have to be deposited. The report which the Ministry commissioned about the revision of the legal deposit law contains a proposal to solve these problems as well. According to the report, the radio broadcasting and television programmes should also be archived by the National Library.

Because of the structure and history of the research library system in Finland, only a few libraries have important collections of old material. Large preservation programmes do not therefore exist in the university libraries, but a number of libraries have nevertheless invested in the maintenance of their collections. The cuts in their budgets, however, mean that today hardly anything is spent on treatment of their collections because they have to allocate their resources to the acquisition of new publications. It is the National Library therefore, which is obligated to take care of the national collections.

Quite obviously the Ministry also has accepted the policy of safeguarding the permanence of certain types of material with the help of surrogates. When the National Library's Centre for Microfilming and Conservation was set up in 1990 in the town of Mikkeli in the south-eastern part of Finland, the Ministry supported the arrangement. Of course, the Centre was continuing the work which had already been started at the beginning of the 1950's. The expenditure caused by microfilming has been accepted as part of the Library's annual budget.

Digitisation is not primarily a means of preservation but a new way to improve access. Protecting items from heavy use, however, indirectly assists preservation. The Finnish Council of University Libraries has prepared a policy document calling for special attention to permanent archiving of the digitized material and suggesting that a national centre for digitisation be established in the National Library's Centre for Microfilming and Conservation.

Very little has been said about the preservation of foreign publications in Finnish libraries. Obviously they are not a concern, provided that they are not of high economic value. Helsinki University Library is investigating ways to ensure the permanent existence of its legal deposit collections of pre-1917

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Russian literature. While it would be most unfortunate if the collections were destroyed by heavy use, it can be asked whether the Finnish National Library should invest in publications which are primarily the obligation of the country of origin.

The new issue is ensuring permanent access to the electronic journals and other resources which have been purchased through licences. These electronic resources, which are not legal deposit, have not necessarily been mounted on any server in our country and that may not happen in the future either. We are therefore not speaking about our own collections in the same way as before. But the crucial point is still how to ensure permanent access to publications the purchase of which has required major investment. This is a new and complicated issue which has to be taken seriously and which will require new solutions. They may perhaps emerge from joint arrangements with institutions in other countries.

WHY IS IT SO DIFFICULT TO ESTABLISH A POLICY? ONE EXAMPLE FROM REAL LIFE

Policy-making is difficult. In many cases it is easier to avoid it, even if it may cost a lot of money. In order to avoid criticizing any other library I will give you an example from my own Library, from real life, so to say.

One of the main tasks of the Library's Centre for Microfilming and Conservation in Mikkeli is to microfilm all current Finnish newspapers. In addition to a specified quantity we also have to achieve a sufficient quality. We must be sure that the contents of the newspapers will be saved for the future on microfilm if and when the print versions disappear. But, fifty years ago, when the Library started microfilming, our expertise was not good enough and we now have to refile the newspapers first processed. We have now discovered that it will no longer be possible to microfilm these particular newspapers once again, say, fifty years from now. These newspapers were printed in the second half of the nineteenth century and their paper is already too brittle.

The point is therefore that we know that the newspapers cannot be refilled and they are too brittle to be used in any other way either. Why should we invest large amounts of money in keeping these originals? The Library has a large repository where the old newspapers are stored and where every square metre costs money. This cost detracts from the Library's other activities.

But what would happen if we would start weeding out the original Finnish newspapers from the time of the national awakening? The answer is quite simply that it would be a national scandal to destroy newspapers in which the great names of the nation publicized their ideas during such a critical period of the country's history. It would be a scandal in spite of the fact that the news-papers are slowly destroying themselves because we do not have means to treat them. The only rational way would be to save only sample volumes and to treat them properly and discard everything else, thus saving a lot of money for other purposes.

I wonder whether we ever will have the courage to take this step instead of leaving the newspapers to their fate. I also wonder whether it would ever be possible to convince the general public, our users and the government of the necessity of such a step. In this case, when national feelings play so strong a role, saving money is not enough to make such a drastic move feasible.

This example may show that there are constraints of many kinds preventing library management from rational decision-making, at least for now. Nevertheless I have a strong feeling that our case has not yet been closed and that we must find a way to solve it rationally.

THE NATIONAL LIBRARY'S PRESERVATION POLICY

Helsinki University Library, the National Library of Finland, is the only institution in the country with the responsibility of preserving collections of the published national heritage. The law requires the Library to preserve Finnish printed publications of all types and the sound recordings received as legal deposit. In the near future legal deposit will also cover electronic publications of all types and possibly also radio and television programmes.

Other collections of Finnish material, such as manuscripts of cultural relevance, e.g., musical manuscripts and recorded sound before the legal deposit (1981) have equally to be kept for the future.

Parts of the Library's collections of foreign material which also constitute the cultural property of the nation require at least selective preservation and conservation, including:

- items from the old research collections
- legal deposit from Russia to 1917
- special collections, e.g., the Nordenskiöld Library

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- items of historical and economic value.

The way of handling collections can be divided into three categories: active treatment of new items, retrospective measures to treat the existing collections, and preventive measures. The focus has been shifted from retrospective measures to the treatment of the current intake. This protects the collections better and is cheaper in the long run.

1. Preservation of the current intake: all items receive the necessary treatment on their arrival, minimizing the need for retrospective measures:

- all current newspapers are microfilmed on arrival; no backlogs are allowed
- material (books, periodicals, brochures, etc.) which has to be protected will be boxed on arrival
- material which has to be bound will be bound on arrival

2. Retrospective measures concentrate on

- microfilming which in the near future may be combined with digitisation; at present more than 50 per cent of the Finnish archival collection is used on microfilm and the originals are kept untouched
- treating groups of material, such as
- the most important and unique material
- the most endangered material
- special groups such as recorded sound
- individual items from the foreign collections.

3. Preventive measures

- improving the storage conditions and the condition of the collections in general: e.g., new underground stacks have been built with optimal and stable conditions; the condition of the collections is surveyed regularly.

These principles constitute the framework within which the decisions are made. It goes without saying that choices have to be made because the needs exceed the resources.

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- 1 This presentation is an updated and edited version of a lecture which was given at the Preservation Management Summer School organized by the Nordiska vetenskapliga bibliotekarförbundet (NVBF) in Mikkeli, Finland, June 18.-22., 2000.

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