

# Reconceptualizing Preservation

by Benjamin F. Speller, Jr.

Many librarians believe that preservation means only saving the significant records of the past. Few, especially school and public librarians, have such records in their care. So it is understandable if they pay little attention to or view preservation as irrelevant. The misperception dates from preservation's emergence as a major issue over thirty years ago and, strangely enough, from its success.

Preservation began as a research library and archival concern. Two problems, preserving the intellectual content of millions of embrittled works and the conservation of items with artifactual value, dominated research and action agendas of the sixties, seventies, and eighties. They formed the popular image of preservation. The most successful publicity efforts — the film *Slow Fires*, for example — dealt with the potential loss of those records significant for the history of mankind.<sup>1</sup> The prospect of losing the past captured public attention and loosened funding agency purse strings. What began as mainly a United States effort to save the contents of research repositories is now an international undertaking.<sup>2</sup> For many in the library community, this noble endeavor is preservation.

This partial image is unfortunate, because the range of issues now addressed under the rubric of preservation is vital to all librarians both on the job and as tax-paying citizens. No longer focused solely on the enduring records of civilization, the field's content and usefulness has expanded enormously in recent years. Now preservation is both a management strategy and a program of care that enables *all* material to live out a useful life span, whether a Harlequin romance, a commercially released video, or a folder of Civil War letters. Preservation properly encompasses everything from air conditioning

systems to the use of post-it notes in books. It is both salvation techniques for civilization's enduring records and prudent, cost-conscious resource management that uses a library's budget as effectively as possible. Who among us can do without a disaster plan; can afford to bind materials badly; can let pests or mold destroy a collection; can afford to shorten collection life by bad repair materials and techniques? No one, of course.

Both definitions of preservation are relevant for North Carolina repositories. Most that hold records of lasting value have established, or are struggling to establish, programs that address those needs. State Archivist David Olson assesses North Carolina's achievements on behalf of enduring paper records elsewhere in this issue. Preservation as a sound management strategy concerns everyone, but is much more difficult to "sell" and implement. State and regional organizations, however, have begun to deal with these issues in recent years, especially through low-cost educational packages and publications that bring preservation to non-research libraries in ways that were not possible a decade ago. Articles on disaster planning and preser-

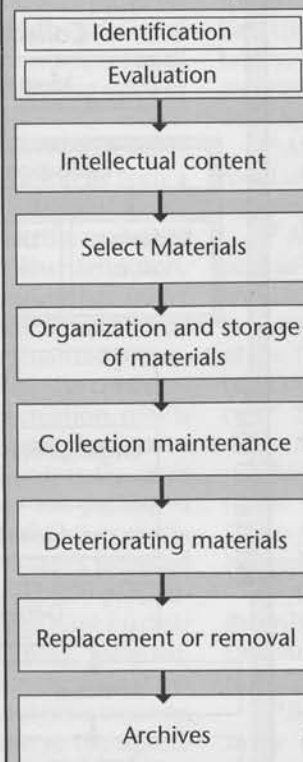
vation in public libraries and a preservation resource guide address the broader definition of preservation in this issue.

The world of information changes rapidly, and we are facing yet another conceptualization of preservation that increasingly will inform our planning and management. Historically, decisions relating to preservation of documentary materials have been made long after the information has been printed or recorded. (See Figure 1.) Now we are in a period of rapid

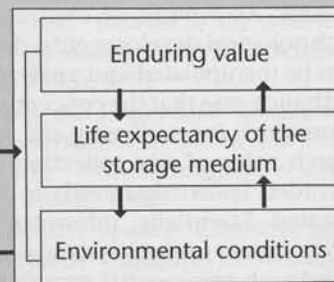
Figure 1

## Traditional Resource Use Model

### Collection Development



### Preservation



development of new technologies for recording and retrieving information in formats, mainly electronic, that are inherently unstable. The appraisal decisions on what should be saved over the long term increasingly will need to be made up front when knowledge is created. The process is intellectually identical to the assessment that

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archivists and librarians now make many years after the work's creation.

Reconceptualization of preservation is necessary because technological advances have made it possible to create records in quantities and qualities that can overwhelm the information management professions completely. From the perspective of effective resources exploitation,<sup>3</sup> the most challenging issue, according to Patricia Battin, President of the Commission on Preservation and Access, is dealing with rapidly produced and reproduced representations of human creativity in a time of shrinking financial resources and space to control and maintain properly an appropriate physical environment for records of these efforts.<sup>4</sup>

Decisions on selecting information of enduring value and establishing preservation priorities are becoming very difficult for information management professionals. As a result of electronic technological developments, data can be manipulated and analyzed with such ease that the conceptual framework for analyzing the research value of any collection of recorded knowledge needs to be restated. Essentially, information management professionals now are faced with exponential growth in the volume of collections, rapid

proliferation of new records formats, and an explosion in the definition of what constitutes meaningful information.

Moving preservation decisions up front provides a way of dealing with this complexity. (See Figure 2.) Information management professionals now are being encouraged to join with the creators of new knowledge to assess what is of enduring value so that the storage medium can be selected based on its life expectancy as well as how it can be used and manipulated.

Conceptually, what is of enduring value from the perspective of intellectual content is at significant variance with the life expectancy of the storage medium. Information managers from all professions need to separate issues relating to preservation of intellectual content from the concerns about the format in which records are produced and maintained. Given the need to provide a more realistic resources exploitation process within the framework of knowledge creation and preservation, the following basic principles for defining the distinction between enduring value and the life expectancy of the recording medium are useful.<sup>5</sup>

1. Preservation and all other aspects of information management are interdependent. Preservation cannot be con-

sidered in isolation from current information needs and future custodial responsibility.

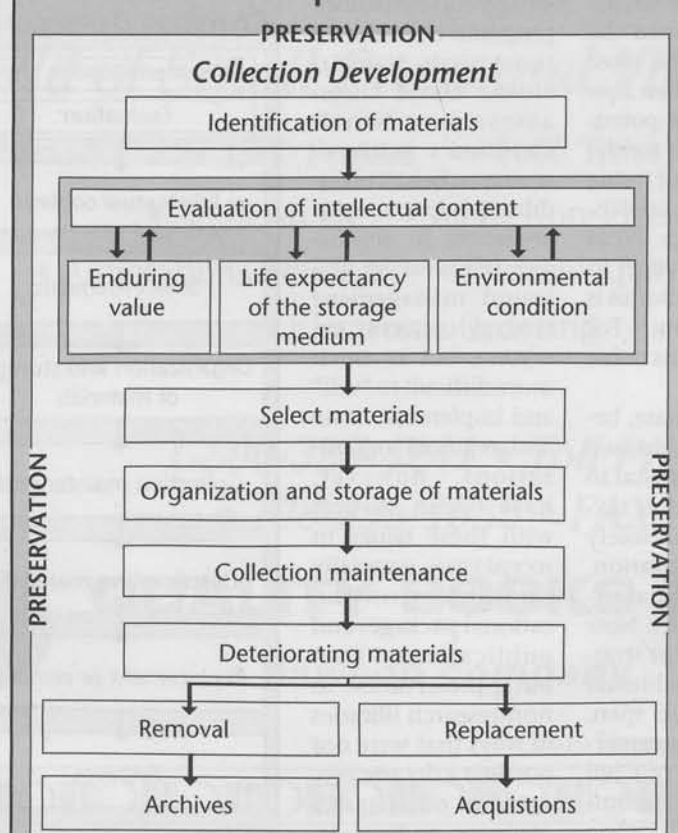
2. When materials are deemed of enduring value beyond normal information use, appropriate environment and ongoing maintenance should be given prime consideration. At this point the highly political concept of responsible custody should move to the forefront. Finding the best repositories to preserve the knowledge of enduring value to society should take precedence over all other considerations.
3. Universal representation of society's efforts should be a primary concern in all collection development programs. Information managers from all professions should work together to see that broad representation of the universe of documentation of society's achievements and efforts remains viable for future knowledge creation.
4. Because modern society's efforts and achievements are documented in published and unpublished records in a variety of media, information management professions must work together to coordinate the full range of decisions about collection development and maintenance so that knowledge is preserved as an integrated whole.

The integration of technologies and other global structural changes in society has resulted in the convergence of the

information management professions. In addition, the need for effective resource exploitation also has resulted in the emergence of preservation of knowledge as a major public policy issue in a democratic society. Indeed, all information professionals now are faced with a new formulation of the old problem of what should survive indefinitely, and in what format. Major resource allocators who provide support to these professions' missions increasingly expect that preservation—enduring value and life expectancy of recorded medium—will be given careful consideration at the beginning of the communication process.

As a means of ensuring vital state and national information, reconceptualizing preservation as effective resource exploitation should be a major focus of public policy. The public information resource policy should be undergirded by three issues: (1) materials as intellectual con-

**Figure 2**  
**Resource Exploitation Model**





tent; (2) intellectual access across geographical boundaries; and (3) implementation of a preservation process. A major current focus that should be put aside when considering enduring value of intellectual content is conservation of the recording format itself. There is a distinct difference between intellectual content and recording format. The recording format in many cases now is considered as important as intellectual content. We need a state, national, and international information policy that removes the current preservation focus from the materials themselves to recorded information or at least to recorded knowledge.

Information managers and resource allocators need to develop an international mechanism that offers an approach to electronic records management that can be applied commonly across all governmental and geographical boundaries. This mechanism should institutionalize a process of inventory management that ensures that preserved information is always stored in ways that are accessible by current technology.

Another set of major public policy issues surrounding the reconceptualization of preservation relates to control of intellectual property and fair treatment of copyright holders and users. Indeed, putting preservation at the front end of the scholarly communication process and considering the enduring value of recorded information for the common good of the public may eventually lead to its definition as real property. As real property, information would be considered from the perspective of the greater public good, thus putting it under the law of eminent domain. For example, a governmental entity could decide that existing, privately held intellectual property should be declared public information for the common good of future generations. In this instance, the decision would be that the privately held

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intellectual property should be preserved for future access without restrictions. At its discretion, the governmental entity would determine fair market value and compensate the private holders or owners of the intellectual property at its discretion.

This conceptualization of preservation, accelerated by the proliferation of electronic media, is not yet widely understood, let alone implemented. Yet, some progress is evident. Archival, library science, and information science literature offer examples of professional organizations and associations seeking common conceptual frameworks for the new developments in knowledge storage and retrieval.<sup>6</sup>

North Carolina's first attempt to define current and future preservation issues and activities is recorded in *A Long and Happy Life: Library and Records Preservation in North Carolina*, the report of the North Carolina Preservation Consortium (NCPC).<sup>7</sup> There librarians, archivists, and other information managers throughout the state conceptualize preservation as the sum total of activities undertaken to keep informational materials intact and accessible for use for the period of time they are needed. For NCPC, preservation is a significant public policy issue, since keepers and curators have a public trust to make recorded knowledge and information accessible for use as long as possible, in the best possible condition, by cost-effective methods.<sup>8</sup> This implies that responsible information managers — academic, public, school, and special librarians; archivists; records managers; information systems specialists; data administrators; and others — must consider preservation as a continuum from the beginning of the scholarly communication process until the determination of the enduring value of the resulting knowledge.

North Carolina is ahead of many states in its definition of preservation as both a public policy issue and a managed program of care calibrated to the useful life span of all materials. The definition, however, is only a beginning; many strategies and programs remain to be established. A reconceptualized preservation policy, with longevity concerns addressed at document creation, now is implemented formally only for certain state documents and university press monographs: i.e., they are published on permanent paper. Most other media used to document the state's recorded knowledge, especially rapidly proliferating electronic resources, have no clear preservation responsibility assigned, and preservation concerns do not yet inform their creation and maintenance. We have begun to preserve the significant past that already fills our repositories, but work remains to be done; and

both the past and present continue to arrive at loading docks and mail rooms in ever-increasing quantities. The usefulness of preservation to non-research repositories requires both further publicity and expanded programs for implementation.

How are we going to cope? National and international preservation strategies are most successful when they break up enormous problems into manageable segments and address them in priority order. They are most successful when concerned professionals collaborate on devising solutions, and each agrees to take on a portion of the responsibility for implementation. Hundreds of organizations and individuals across the state cooperated in the assessment that culminated in *A Long and Happy Life*. It is time to move on to the next stage of collaboration.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> *Slow Fires: On the Preservation of the Human Record* (Santa Monica, Cal.: American Film Foundation, 1987).
- <sup>2</sup> *Preserving the Intellectual Heritage: A Report of the Bellagio Conference, June 7-10, 1993* (Washington, D.C.: The Commission on Preservation and Access, 1993).
- <sup>3</sup> Due to significant global structural changes in society and the impact that these developments have and will continue to have on resource allocation, the concept of resource exploitation is used here to focus on the fact that resources are inevitably overused, even to the point of collapse or extinction. A discussion of resources exploitation from a scientific perspective is presented by Donald Ludwig, Ray Hilborn, and Carl Walters, "Uncertainty, Resource Exploitation, and Conservation: Lessons from History," *Science* 260 (April 2, 1993): 17, 36.
- <sup>4</sup> Alphonse F. Trezza, ed., *Issues for the New Decade: Today's Challenge, Tomorrow's Opportunity* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1992), 9.
- <sup>5</sup> An in-depth discussion of the conceptual issues relating to enduring value and life expectancy is presented in "The Preservation of Archival Materials: a Report of the Task Forces on Archival Selection of the Commission on Preservation and Access," *The Commission on Preservation and Access Newsletter*, 56 (May 1993): 2-5.
- <sup>6</sup> Special Section, "Archives and Electronic Records," *Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science*, 20 (October/November 1993): 9-20.
- <sup>7</sup> *A Long and Happy Life: Library and Records Preservation in North Carolina*. Durham, NC: North Carolina Preservation Consortium, 1991.
- <sup>8</sup> Benjamin F. Speller, "Executive Summary of North Carolina Preservation Consortium's Preservation Plan for North Carolina," November 6, 1991, p. 1.