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A Survey of Microform Users

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A Survey of Microform Users

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Introduction

Microform technology has enjoyed a storied history that extends forward from the middle of the 19th Century. Reducing larger documents and placing their contents on card or film has proven to be an efficient way to store vast quantities of information on much smaller surfaces. Micro-technology provides a reliable and economical method for managing data, and it has stood the test of time.

Improbable claims have accompanied this development. Some enthusiasts once forecast that microfilm would replace paper and, therefore, the books in

the great libraries. Disaffected sufferers of reader fatigue have recoiled at having to contend with the bulky and often faulty machines that were required for reading microforms. In the mid-20th Century when the tiniest libraries acquired microfilm copies of the valuable *Papers of the Presidents*,¹ formerly only available for inspection in the original at the Library of Congress, they celebrated this coup. Yet information service workers at these libraries often encountered clients who would change topics rather than use micro sources. Someone observed that reels of microfilm represented not progress but *the reinvention*

of the scroll. Today some predict that digitization will replace microform technology. Computer-generation student inquirers often consider information available in print, in paper or on film, to be obsolete, and for them the only reliable information comes electronically. This is patently false, and extremely dangerous, considering that the Internet contains elements of an information flea market – a garage sale for ideas as well as a warehouse of valuable sources. Some observers have speculated that microforms are passé and dead.

Against a backdrop of conflicting testimony, managers of

information agencies must make decisions about the deployment of very scarce resources: space, staff, and money. There are no crystal balls available, but there are trends to observe, developments to expect, and problems to anticipate. There are examples of "best professional judgment" to consider and there is a record of the current scene to consult. This report attempts to provide a piece of the latter – a look at what is happening in the trenches.

What the Team Found Out Along the Way

The study team found a literature that is rich in case studies, and cautious about the future. We found pronouncements about 500 year life expectancy for microfilm,² and Internet searches that identified numerous firms involved in the business of micro-product manufacture, storage, and preservation. We also encountered findings that supported the notion that microfilming and digitalization are complimentary technologies, not necessarily competing ones.³ There appears to be some *drunkard's search-like* activity in cases where digitization projects are performed because *we can*. The drunkard lost his keys in the dark parking lot down the block, but he searches for them under a distant lamppost because that is where the light is. Abraham Kaplan warned years ago about the law of the instrument which posits that given a hammer, a small boy will decide that everything needs to be hammered.⁴

There is strong indication that courts of law are accepting

micrographic copies of original records as evidence, largely because micro-formats are judged to be more tamper-proof than digitized records.⁵ Whereas skeptics have for years intoned that no one likes to curl up before the fireplace with a mug of hot chocolate and a good microfiche, or that no one ever takes a microfilm reader to the beach, they now observe that there is an e-reader that competes with the traditional, printed-on-paper-that-one-can-feel, book.⁶ This pronouncement appears to describe a bright future for microtechnology: "Microtechnology has the advantages of taking up less space, using less construction material, and costing less money ..." ⁷ It is neither facetious nor inappropriate to point out in the year 2009 that it is very fortunate that the Evangelists, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and other greats did not commit their works to first generation PCs, or we might not have access to them today. Shelf-life and readability/accessibility considerations, plus the good fit that microforms have with many agency's archival requirements, forecast a continuing future for microproducts. Yet the team's survey reports that nearly sixty per cent (60 %) of responding agencies have to some extent replaced, substituted for, or discontinued the use of microforms.

A Word about User Behavior

Suppose it were generally agreed upon that the purpose of an information agency, whether it exists in cyberspace, The British Library, Princeton University, or

rural Indiana, is to preserve information and make it available to people who seek and need it. That would mean that the agency's primary mission is information transfer. The study team holds that the *to microfilm or to digitize* equation should include, in addition to obvious cost and feasibility considerations, user behavior, user need, and user preference. Certainly there are additional important questions, such as: What is possible? What can we afford? Client behavior and marketing issues should influence the decision processes.

What the Team Decided to Do

Our study team decided to take a knowledge management approach to the issue of "whether microforms." We aimed at two discoveries:

1. We wanted to uncover intelligence that managers could feed to their decision-making apparatuses;
2. We wanted to discover and communicate what people who deal with microforms know and do.

The team wanted to find out:

- Who acquire and manage microforms and which microforms?
- Do agencies discontinue microform acquisition and if so why?
- How has digitization affected decisions about the management of microforms?
- What about pricing?
- What about user satisfaction/ user dissatisfaction?
- Budgets for microform purchase: rising or falling?
- Do equipment issues surface?

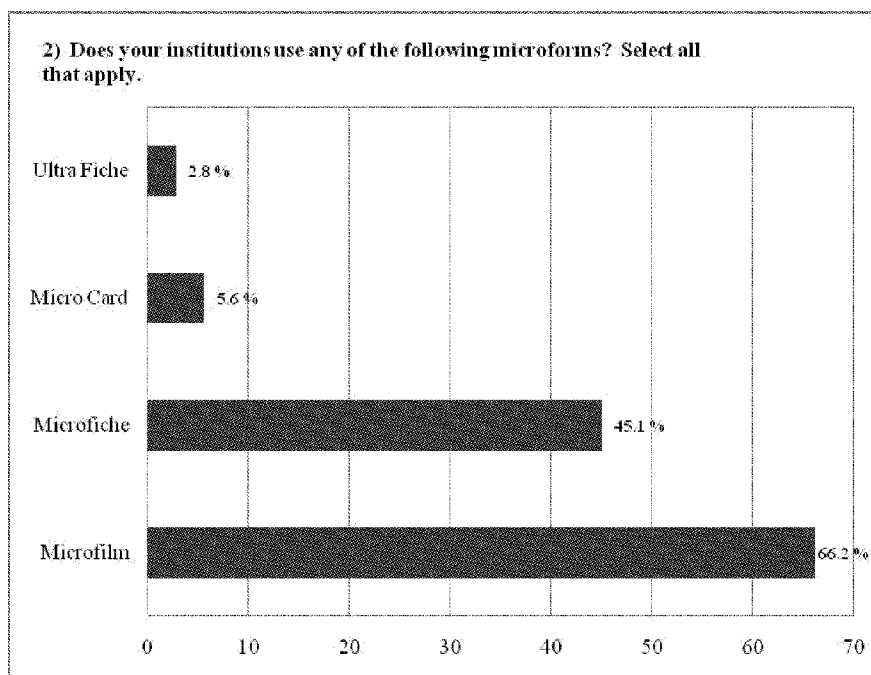


Figure 1: Survey question 2

How the Team Created and Conducted the Study

The team began the investigation by meeting and discussing their individual experiences with microform products and reading devices. To acquire a broad perspective on historical and technological issues, they each read the article on microforms in the *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*.⁸ They conducted a literature search, met again to discuss findings, and began to formulate questions about microform usage. The team decided that the best answers to the questions would come from the field, and so they decided to create a survey instrument and to ask their questions of managers of microform products.

In an effort to fine-tune the instrument, team members tested their questions, chiefly among information professionals pur-

posely selected for their expertise and experience with microform management. This led to considerable modification and streamlining of the questions, and especially to the effort to remove bias and *begging the question* contaminants. For example, there is no shortage of *microforms are dead and digitization is the way to go* sentiment in the literature. Publications also announce abundant claims for the viability of microform products. The team wanted to examine these claims, not reinforce them with leading questions.

The team decided to gather responses by phone interviews, constructed the final version of their instrument, and one member used online software to establish an electronic version of the survey. They established a script for administering the instrument, field-tested it and the

instrument for communicability and timing, and chose a sampling procedure.

Accordingly, the team decided to create a geographically stratified sample of libraries in the United States, Canada, and the U. S. Regions. They drew the sample from the American Library Association's *Directory of Libraries*, published in 2007.⁹ They chose an arbitrary number – 70 – for a desired number of responses and then drew a sample of 144 agencies that included a wide variety of types: public, academic, governmental, health, and military (but not school). One team member composed a spreadsheet containing director's name, library name, city, state, and phone number. Sections of the spreadsheet were assigned to team members who began their calls and sought either real time responses to the survey questions or agreement to complete the survey online. They gathered seventy-one responses during a five week period in November-December, 2007.

The team acknowledges limitations that readers of results should factor into their understanding of the project. Since there are thousands of information agencies in the population, seventy-one (71) respondents is hardly a massive number. Therefore, the team recommends a cautious approach to drawing conclusions from their findings. The team asserts two points:

1. The devised method works; the instrument is doable and the procedure yields useful responses;
2. The results reported here provide an accurate partial picture of current practice.

Some Survey Results and Analysis

Following a question asking respondents to enter an identification number, question 2 of the survey asked respondents if their institutions presently use specified microform types – microfilm, microfiche, micro card and/or ultra fiche. Of the 71 replies, 47, or 66.2 %, said that microfilm is presently used, while 32, or 45.1 %, utilize microfiche. Only four institutions use micro cards, while ultra fiche is used at only two (see Figure 1).

When asked what types of information are being stored on microforms, 39 respondents said newspapers are retained in various microform formats. Periodicals are maintained in microforms by 32 of the respondents, historical documents by 22 and government documents by 21.

Microfilm is the predominant type of microform used for newspapers, periodicals and historical documents, followed by microfiche. However for government documents, 14 respondents said these are stored in microfiche format while only 12 said they are stored in microfilm format.

The budget for microforms is holding steady at 23 of the replying institutions, or 43.4 %, and is increasing at four. However, 26 replies, or 49.1 %, indicated that their microforms budgets are decreasing (see Figure 2). Furthermore, 19 institutions said that they have wholly “replaced, substituted, or discontinued the use of microforms,” while another 19 said that they have at least partially done so (see Figure 3).

3) Is your budget for microform(s)

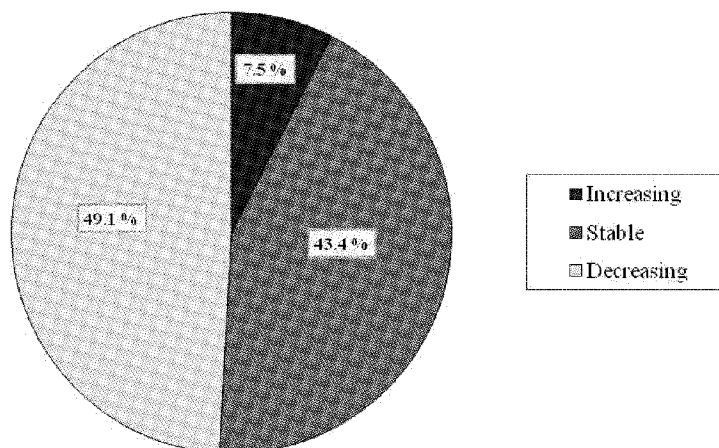


Figure 2: Survey question 3

5) Has your institution replaced, substituted, or discontinued the use of microform(s)?

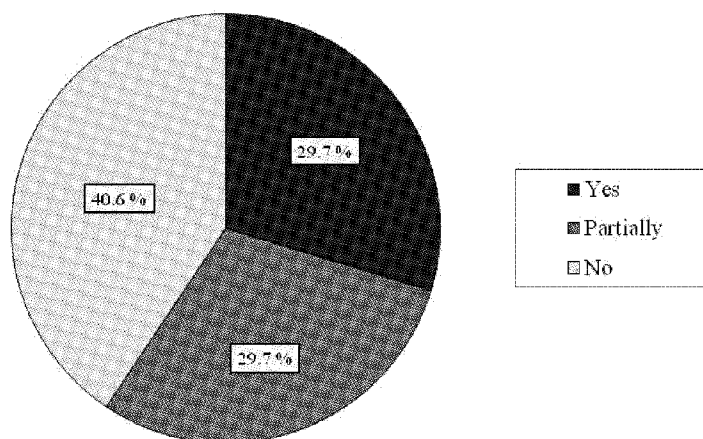


Figure 3: Survey question 5

What prompted these institutions to partly or entirely replace, substitute or discontinue the use of microforms? As Figure 4 shows, their primary motivators were costs.

Among respondents who said they scaled back or ended their

use of microfilm, 29, or almost 41 %, said that it was cost-related – either the cost of equipment, maintenance of their equipment, or the cost of the microfilm itself. Ten respondents, or 14.1 %, attributed the decision to lack of user satisfaction,

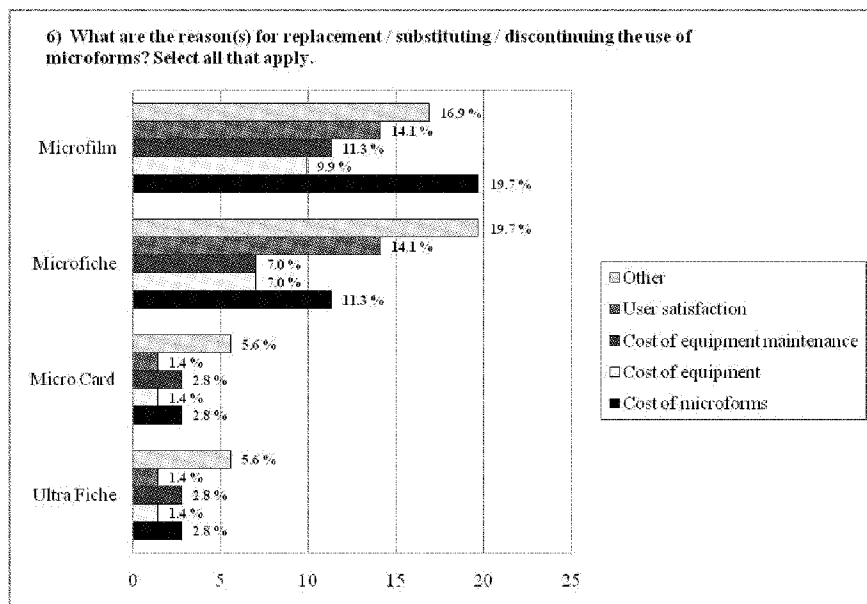


Figure 4: Survey question 6

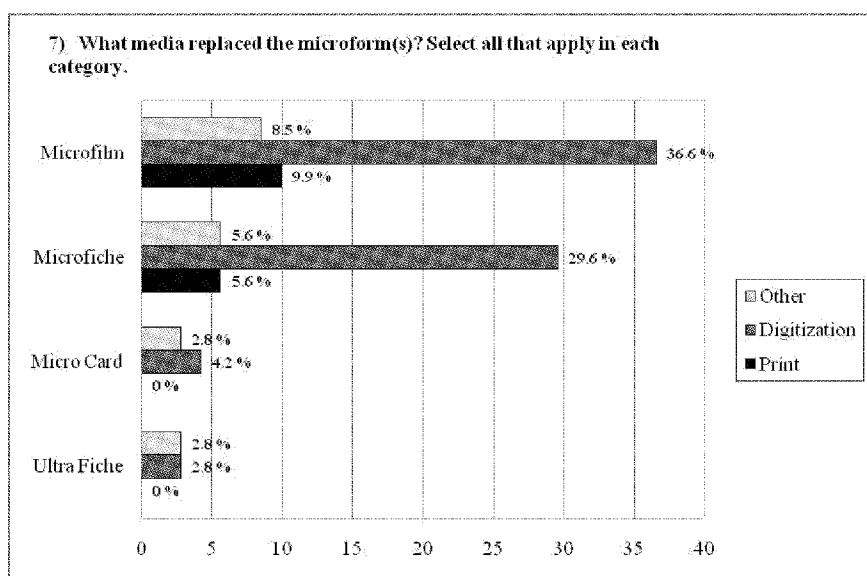


Figure 5: Survey question 7

while 12 respondents, or 16.9 %, said there were other reasons.

The findings were similar, though not as overwhelmingly cost-related, for microfiche, micro cards and ultra fiche. For microfiche, 18 respondents, or more than 25 %, attributed their decisions to costs, 10, or 14.1 %, to user satisfaction, and 14, or 19.7 % to other reasons.

Replies relative to micro cards and ultra fiche offered the same results: five cost-related decisions, one based on user satisfaction and four for other reasons.

So among the institutions that partially or fully replaced, substituted or discontinued the use of microforms, what media forms replaced them? Figure 5

illustrates the overwhelming preference for digitization and electronic media.

Among these institutions, 26, or 36.6 %, partly or fully replaced their microfilm collections with digital/electronic media, while 21, or 29.6 %, replaced microfiche with digital/electronic media. Among the four microform types, the number of print subscriptions that replaced the microforms was comparable to or exceeded by "other" in each instance.

Some Additional Comments Related to Uses for These Data and This Methodology

These findings represent only a snapshot of current practice, yet to the extent that they can describe what is happening in some information agencies, they can provide useful intelligence for decision-makers. It is clear that some microforms remain the storage method of choice for some documents in some agencies. It is equally clear that the move toward digitization is achieving momentum. What is not so clear is the answer to the question: *What should we do in our agency?* Managers who wish to discover what is going on with microforms in agencies similar to their own might ask the questions the team used in order to gain additional information for their decision-making. Figure 6 displays the types of agencies who responded to the survey questions reported here. The team reminds readers that the reported findings represent a snapshot of the total picture.

Again, the team suggests that decision makers might use the questions here to poll managers in similar kinds of agencies to gather data about microform acquisition and usage. For example, discovering what other corporate information agencies, especially those with like kinds of services and like kinds of clients, are doing with microcollections could prove helpful, especially if consortium or inter-agency borrowing arrangements exist.

Finally, the team collected a very interesting assortment of comments from respondents to this question: What future do you see for microforms? Here is a categorized tally of those responses (see Figures 7–9).

Appraisal of this Assortment of Categorized and Tallied Comments

These comments come from the trenches; they are the observations of managers, not ivory-tower investigators and not the authors of this article.

Because they are not connected to specific respondents, they represent a snapshot of the whole, not a statement about microform usage in categorized information agencies.

They mirror what the literature reports; some managers swear by microforms; and some managers swear at them. One team member spoke with Dennis Hawkes, Head of the Library of Congress Microform Reading Room, who told him: “The LOC has robust activity in its Reading Room, circulating 1,000 items per month,” and “The room is holding steady and the future is vibrant.” Contrast that with the

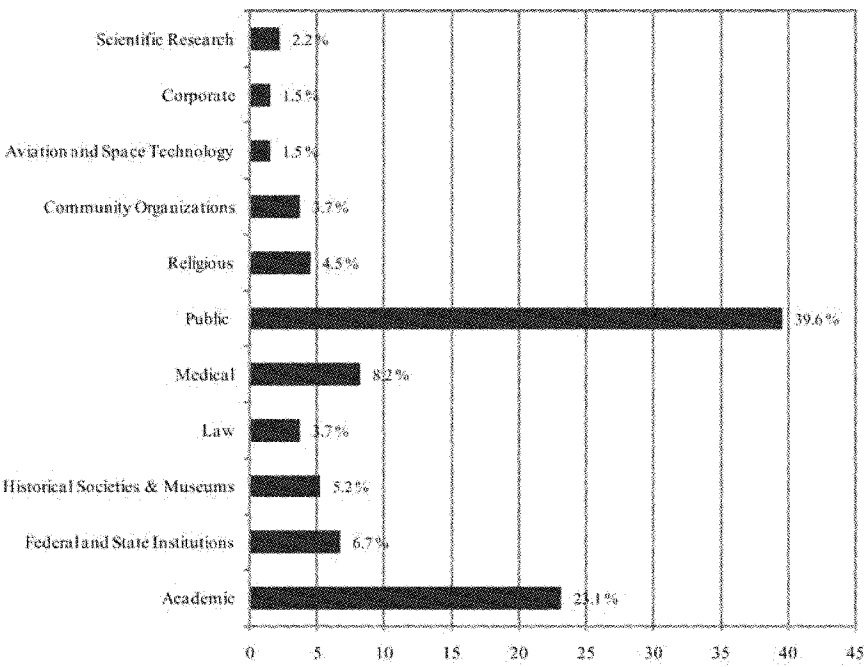


Figure 6: Institutional Breakdown of Sample

Summary of Commentary Received	No of Affirming Responses
Excellent future for items that do not lend themselves to digitization; more stable; reliable; bright for genealogy	10
We own vast array of titles in microform that equal 2 or 3 times the number found in [two popular databases] but without the \$100,000 price tag; use digital scanner	1
Microforms a post-Katrina must; we have a great vendor	1
Still a viable technology; see heavy use continuing; mostly for genealogy; no deletion problems as with some databases	7
Microforms for preservation and archival purposes; newspapers, records; historical research	5
Total	24

Figure 7: Considerable Future Use

Summary of Commentary Received	No of Affirming Responses
Our microfiche collection concerned with but one individual; usage related to him only	1
See no change; intend to maintain; probably will continue; still use what we have	7
May be necessary as a backup for digital; redundancy requirements; scrapbooks; newspapers	8
For scholarly research if electricity unavailable	1
Total	17

Figure 8: Some Future Use

Summary of Commentary Received	No of Affirming Responses
Very limited funds so have to purchase subscriptions on microfilm	1
Would not use micro if online format available; decreasing importance; considering giving away film census	6
We have discontinued but use what we have; use has declined; we subscribe to no microform	5
Microforms will be replaced by digital; preexisting microforms to be digitalized	14
Users hate it; don't use; very little use; see less and less future use; non use; on the way out; retention of little used material now prohibitive; small, unused microfiche collection; cumbersome; internet friendlier; equipment awful and expensive; hope to discard soon	16
No future; poor; minimal; bleak; microforms are dinosaurs; electronic formats should be completely replaced	9
We have some but no way to read it	1
Total	52

Figure 9: Little to No Future Use

we don't have any or we wish them away comments, and one gets a picture of the range of experience/attitude.

Of these 93 comments collected, 24 or 25.8 % speak to considerable future use. Some future use is indicated by 17 or 18.3 % of the respondents. Little to no future use is forecast in 52 or 55.9 % of the comments.

"It all depends" emerges as sound advice for decision-makers. The task is to discover exactly upon what it all depends.¹⁰ Before one decides to embrace, store in the annex, or jettison any or all of his or her microforms, one should find out what other similar kinds of information agencies are doing and why, systematically appraise the behavior of clients, not expect usage of microforms that are indexed or stored remotely and systematically lost to inquiry, and appraise marketing efforts to potential users.

The answers to questions raised by these observations are available to managers who will ask the questions. The questions, themselves, are available in this survey.

The team acknowledges the helpful contributions of Christine Angel and Robin Fogle Kurz who participated in survey construction and execution.

Endnotes

¹ Theodore Roosevelt, *Theodore Roosevelt Papers* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1967).

² Paul Negus, "The Future of Microfilm" (paper presented to the National Preservation Office, British Library, London, England, October 23, 2007). http://www.microfilm.com/pdf/future_of_

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³ M. S. Sridhar, "Are Microforms Dead?" *Journal of Information Management* 39 (2002): 139 – 52.

⁴ Abraham Kaplan, *The Conduct of Inquiry: Methodology for Behavioral Science* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co. 1964).

⁵ "Preservation Advice: Microfilming Information," [http://](http://www.scr.wa.gov.au/government/preservation-microfilm.asp)

www.scr.wa.gov.au/government/preservation-microfilm.asp (accessed November 23, 2007).

⁶ Steven Levy, "The Future of Reading," *Newsweek* 150 (2007): 56 – 64.

⁷ "Microtechnology," <http://science.jrank.org/pages/4321/Microtechnology.html> (accessed January 2, 2008).

⁸ *The Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science* (New York: Marcel Dekker, 1976).

⁹ *American Library Directory* (New York: Bowker, 2007).

¹⁰ Charles Curran and Lewis Miller, *Guide to Library and Information Agency Management* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc. 2005).