

How can this story be saved? Minnesota Historical Society ponders newspaper preservation

By Mark Olson

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At a time when newspapers are struggling with their role in a new digital information age, there's a similar debate at the Minnesota Historical Society [1] (MHS).

Since territorial days, the society has been collecting and preserving area newspapers. And, for the past 60 years, this preservation has taken the form of plastic microfilm – lots of microfilm.

In fact, MHS purchased or created 800 spools of microfilm a year, covering about 400 Minnesota newspapers. Each roll includes hundreds or thousands of micro images of newspaper pages. Using a special machine, researchers can read them.

MHS, headquartered in St. Paul, operated a microfilm lab with a \$200,000 budget. Five workers (four full-time equivalent workers) copied almost every page of almost every small Minnesota newspaper, including the Chaska Herald.

Until June 30, 2009.

That's when the Minnesota Historical Society cut its budget and eliminated its microfilm lab, according to Robert Horton [2], MHS director of Library, Publications and Collections.

Newspapers, as required by law, continue to send copies to the state historical society. Meanwhile, MHS is considering a switch to digital newspaper preservation and hopes to have a plan in place by July 2010, the beginning of its next fiscal year.

However, how digital preservation takes place is still in discussion.

“We're in the process of developing a full plan, and the budget cuts forces us to make this decision faster than we ordinarily would have,” Horton said.

A changing world

“The institution has changed, society has changed and the way records, etc., anything collectable, has changed over time, so we have developed a whole variety of means and mechanisms and storage capacities and access means to deal with all the types of media people create,” Horton said.

Our culture has moved from “wax cylinders to 78s to long-playing records to cassettes to reel-to-reel and on and on,” Horton said. However, he added, “The transition to digital is actually a godsend in some ways.”

One of those ways is the ease people can research.

“Material online is available at any convenience, and you can search it,” Horton noted.

During the past few years, MHS has spearheaded a number of digital archives – from birth and death records to video clips covering 38 years of KSTP news footage [3].

MHS recently made its “Minnesota History [4]” magazines, dating back to 1915, available to anyone with a computer and Internet connection – a project that cost between \$10,000 and \$12,000, Horton said.

“That’s a pretty reasonable investment for the results people can get,” he said.

In 2007, MHS received a \$250,000 National Endowment of the Humanities grant to digitize the microfilm archives for two now-extinct Minnesota newspapers [5] – the Minneapolis Journal and the St. Paul Globe. The project allows digital access and a full search capability of 100,000 pages of material.

“What would take weeks using microfilm you can do in a minute,” he said.

And now, with another two-year grant, the museum is poised to digitize another 100,000 pages of 19th century newspapers from around the state, concentrating on regional newspapers and those that represent specific communities – Ojibwe newspapers, an African-American newspaper and four city newspapers from greater Minnesota.

The society is also working with the National Library of Sweden to fund a digitization project of its collection of Swedish-language publications. Swedish citizens have a deep interest in genealogy and the pioneer experience of its emigrants – many of whom ended up in Minnesota.

Newspapers now

But the society’s handful of newspaper digitization projects involve old archives. Most of MHS’s thousands of microfilm rolls won’t be digitized anytime soon. But they’re also not going away, Horton stressed.

“We certainly will preserve the microfilm. There’s no reason not to. It’s a pretty stable media and we have it and we have the storage facilities in place,” he said. MHS also plans to continue purchasing microfilm copies of the metro dailies and a group of regional newspapers from private businesses.

However, what about those smaller Minnesota newspapers stacking up from last June? What material will the society gather from those newspapers?

The key is trying to do “more with less,” Horton said. There are a few alternatives under discussion. For instance, the actual print newspaper could be digitally scanned – the most challenging option in terms of expense, Horton said.

Another choice involves gathering the digital copies of each page that newspapers send to the printing press. The Wisconsin Historical Society is currently involved in a test pilot with the Wisconsin Newspaper Association that would collect these digital pages from the year 2005. The test amounts between 650,000 and 700,000 page files, said Helmut Knies [6], collection development coordinator with the Wisconsin Historical Society.

However, the most “attractive looking” option is Web harvesting, which would take material from newspaper Web sites and online archives, Horton said. What could be part of the debate is that Web harvesting doesn’t necessarily pick up everything that was in the print edition of a newspaper. However, Horton argues, “neither microfilm nor print nor digital is 100 percent effective. There is no single solution,” he said.

He notes the importance of cataloging material only available online (such as blogs or videos) as well as material in the print edition of the newspaper.

“It’s just not an apple-to-apple comparison anymore,” he said.

Importance

Besides microfilm rolls at the MHS library, city and county libraries and historical societies purchase copies from MHS.

Stop by any historical society and a visitor will find a local historian or genealogist sitting at a small machine, spinning through roll after roll of microfilm. Besides family and local history, microfilmed newspapers are used for everything from legal to environmental research.

Wendy Petersen-Biorn, Carver County Historical Society [8] executive director, said she couldn’t remember the last time someone wasn’t using the museum library’s microfilm reader.

“People are in here all the time,” she said. “It’s a large collection and documents [county] newspapers from the very beginning. If we’re missing a year worth of microfilm, it’s going to hurt,” Petersen-Biorn said.

“So much of history written is not in books,” said Matt McMillan, publisher of the Hutchinson Leader and a Minnesota Newspaper Association Board member. But it can be found in newspapers – whether it’s the blow-by-blow of a city council meeting or the personal story of the victim of a tornado, McMillan said. “It’s research that shouldn’t be lost, because it’s part of the state’s history.”

“It’s a very popular resource that can be used for a variety of things – a variety of types of research,” Horton said. “Newspapers traditionally have been one of the most reliable sources of information.”

Microfilm vs. digital

Losing the microfilm option is worrisome to Kathleen Klehr, executive director of the Scott County Historical Society/Stans Museum [9]. “A switch to digitalization causes a big problem for us,” said Klehr, who noted that the society is set up to handle microfilm and only has a “hodge-podge of computers.”

Klehr noted that the museum already has a microfilm reader/printer that cost between \$8,000 and \$12,000. The museum doesn't have the funds to switch to digital technology, she said, whereas the society paid only \$20 for a year's worth of a newspaper on microfilm.

“Microfilm lasts a long time – a long time. So the other question is ‘How do you store it – the digital record, and how do you migrate it toward new technology and not lose any of the quality too,’” Klehr asked. “Who's going to store it, and how do you gain access? There's a lot of questions that haven't been answered.”

Knies said that the Wisconsin Historical Society, while pursuing digital preservation of newspapers, continues to microfilm its newspapers. When it comes to long-term preservation, “I don't think anything surpasses microfilm,” Knies said. Once the digital project became fully functioning, Wisconsin would create microfilm copies from the digital files, Knies said.

However, Horton believes digital preservation is a viable alternative.

“People think that the attraction of microfilm over digital content is it's a stable preservation medium,” Horton said. However, Horton argues that digital preservation has become “much more reliable.”

Peterson-Biorn has faith that the state society will solve the issue.

“We're not in a panic situation and I fully believe that MHS will come up with an alternative we can use. They're in, big time, the business of that, so I have to have confidence in them.”

One thing all historical societies appear to agree on is the importance of preserving newspapers.

“Preserving newspapers is essential,” Knies said. “Whether it's traditional newsprint or Web site preserving, the news is a core function of a historical society and a state library. We're trying to figure out how to do it in a digital era.”

“It's a good repository of a history of an area,” Klehr said. “We love our local newspapers.”

“What we have to keep in mind is the newspaper business is changing, and that's one thing we want to remain on top of – that newspapers are playing perhaps a slightly different role in the big scheme of things, but they still remain one of the most – the most – useful resource for a whole variety of research,” Horton said.

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Microfilm

The Minnesota Historical Society has collected newspapers since the state was still a territory. It began preserving newspapers on microfilm in 1948. The society made or purchased microfilm of 29 daily newspapers and 398 weekly newspapers. In its vast collection, the society has 68,956 rolls of microfilm.

Source: Minnesota Historical Society, 2006

Source URL:

<http://www.chaska Herald.com/news/history/how-can-story-be-saved-minnesota-historical-society-ponders-newspaper-preservation-112>

Links:

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- [3] <http://www.mnhs.org/collections/kstp/>
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