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Studying All Those “Tiny Little Tea Leaves:” The Future of Microforms in a Complex Technological Environment

Mark R. Yerburgh

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Studying All Those "Tiny Little Tea Leaves:" The Future of Microforms in a Complex Technological Environment

by Mark R. Yerburgh

In this essay, the author discusses his thoughts on the future of microforms in a high tech world, and reaches the conclusion that microforms can, and will, hold their own in this environment.

- Microforms for libraries have matured and there is cause for optimism.¹
- Recent developments in computerized information storage and retrieval suggest an imminent decline in the use of microforms.²

Whenever I write an article, regardless of topic, I always believe that it will be my final effort—the last hurrah. And then, invariably, the germ of a new idea slowly migrates up from somewhere far below and gradually approaches the unmarked border that separates the subconscious from the conscious. When that single germ develops into a genuine infection, prior intentions are abandoned and I begin to prepare yet another “final” article.

The creative process is as elusive a subject as the one which will be addressed in the following pages. The viability and survivability of microforms in a turbulent, constantly changing environment is a topic that deserves more coverage than it has received to date. Almost by definition, meaningful discussion is extraordinarily challenging. One must take great pains to avoid substituting personal preferences for clear analysis; ideological axes have no place in this dialog. The ideal candidate to undertake an assignment of this nature simply doesn't exist. He or she would have to represent a rigorous combination of librarian, computer expert, microforms specialist, economist, publisher, design engineer, and fool. Meeting only the first and last of these prerequisites, I would be seriously deranged to suspect that my thoughts were definitive.

So this is primarily an attempt to stimulate further discussion and exploration. My perspective is that of the academic librarian, one whose ultimate interest is information itself, not format or medium or mode of transmission. Yet whatever our professional perspectives, we must speak our piece or run the risk of resting in peace. Though certainly not professing to be the Jeanne Dixon of microforms,

I do maintain that microforms can enjoy a legitimate long-range future. That future will be a healthy one, however, only if we can imaginatively come to grips with the fact that their potential has always stood in advance of our abilities to maximize that potential. Without an impartial, non-sectarian awareness of how microforms, with all their strengths and weaknesses, fit into the emerging technological/informational scheme of things, we may unwittingly condemn them to become an archaic curiosity—a backwater sideshow replete with bearded ladies and human pretzels who perform in the shadows if, in fact, they perform at all.

At a time when CD-ROM, electronic publishing, and full text databases have become the rage, even though the excitement is based more on promise and potential than on actual performance, it is little wonder that microforms are not now a subject of particular interest or scrutiny. But they should be—especially now, in an informational climate that threatens to make them the orphans of the storm.

In terms of the library setting, there is nothing particularly complicated or glamorous about microforms. Curiously though, even in our society which venerates razzle-dazzle, technological breakthrough, and unremitting progress (whatever that is), the simplicity of microforms may represent a hidden strength. Certainly their utilization requires no deep, theoretical knowledge base and though both their technology and use have increased over the decades—sometimes dramatically—one would be hard-pressed to discern a microforms “revolution.” The medium's best decade, the 1970s, was in many respects a grim one; the easy educational monies of the 1960s created a healthy pre-revolutionary momentum but the 1970s were economically bleak and also represented the decade in which other emerging technologies began to show signs of true revolutionary patterns. Partially because of these factors, ultrafiche—perhaps the greatest microforms innovation of all—proved to be pretty much of a bust during that same period. If one considers, too, that microforms serve the needs of librarians far better than they serve the needs of library users, that

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