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Documentary Editing, Association for

1982

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Jeffrey, Thomas E., "Microform Editions of Documentary Collections: Where Do We Stand? And Where Do We Go From Here?" (1982). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. 174.
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Microform Editions of Documentary Collections: Where Do We Stand? And Where Do We Go From Here?

THOMAS E. JEFFREY*

In recent years documentary editors, plagued by soaring publication costs and diminishing sources of funding, have been moving away from the "complete works" concept of editing. Critics have pointed out that comprehensive multi-volume book editions have proven to be both expensive and time-consuming. Several large-scale projects that have already been in progress for over three decades are now expected to continue publishing well into the twenty-first century. Critics have also complained that the "indiscriminate inclusion of routine documents not only delays completion of projects but buries significant material beneath a deluge of documents of only marginal interest."¹

In response to this criticism the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and other grant-making agencies have been encouraging editors to publish highly selective book editions accompanied by more complete microform editions. Over the last two decades the NHPRC has endorsed more than 150 microform editing projects, has provided financial support to many of them, and has developed a set of guidelines and technical standards to guarantee the production and dissemination of durable, high-quality microforms.

The following essay is intended to serve as a brief introduction to the world of scholarly micropublishing. It will begin with a discussion of commercial micropublishers and the contributions they can make towards the publication of a high-quality microform edition. It will also allude to some recent developments in the micropublication of documentary collections, such as comprehensive microfiche editions and microfiche supplements to printed books, computer-generated microfiche, and selective (rather than comprehensive) microform editions. The essay will not include a technical discussion of microforms or a step-by-step description of how to prepare a collection of documents for filming. Information about these topics can be found in the works cited in the appended bibliography.

Fortunately for those editors who may be inexperienced in the esoterica of microforms, the advent of micrographics has spawned a new breed of scholarly publisher—the commercial micropublisher. Although these

publishers tended initially to concentrate on the reproduction of previously published material such as newspapers, periodicals, and out-of-print monographs, many have lately been expanding their publication lists to include collections of manuscripts and other primary material. The NHPRC has encouraged this development by advising potential grant applicants to investigate publication and distribution contracts with commercial micropublishers before applying for NHPRC funding.²

Micropublishers are not the only commercial companies engaged in the business of filming manuscript material. An archivist whose primary goal is the preparation of a few microform copies for internal use will usually contract with a microform "service company" to film his collection for a flat fee. On the other hand, an editor aspiring to disseminate the fruits of his labor to as wide an audience as possible, would do well to consider the unique advantage of contracting with a commercial micropublisher.

Unlike the average service company, a microform publisher possesses the ability to market as well as film the collection. Indeed, several large repositories with their own in-house microfilming facilities have recently negotiated contracts with commercial micropublishers to sell these internally-generated films, because of the superior publicity and sales networks that these micropublishers can offer. A microform publisher can provide an editorial project with many other services as well. Most important, if he is convinced of the salability of the collection, a micropublisher will generally agree to pay some or all the production costs of the microform edition and the printed guide, in return for whatever profits may result from the sale of the edition to research libraries and other purchasers. Most micropublishers will also agree to pay royalties after the sale of a certain number of copies and some may offer advances against royalties to help underwrite editorial expenses. In addition, an experienced micropublisher can offer the project editor valuable counsel about the preparation and arrangement of the collection, the format and contents of the printed guide, and the manner in which the index and other finding aids should be prepared.

For a microform edition to be of use to scholars, the filmed documents must, of course, be legible. Unfortunately, most documentary editors do not have the luxury of dealing with the high-contrast materials that microfil-

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mers call "clear copy." Instead, their documents are likely to be old, faded, discolored, and in varying stages of deterioration. Editors who deal with materials collected from other repositories must also confront the problem of poor-quality photocopies. In most cases, an experienced micropublisher should be able to produce a filmed image at least as readable as the original. Indeed, advanced camera techniques can sometimes result in the production of a microimage even more legible than the original.

An editor should not simply assume, however, that a particular micropublisher has the technical ability to generate a high-quality product. Although some microform publishers possess in-house filming capability, many others subcontract the actual filming to a service company. And occasionally even an experienced and reputable micropublisher manages to associate himself with an inexperienced or technically incompetent service company. For example, one microform edition recently issued by an established and respected micropublisher has been severely criticized for "the lack of care in applying the reproduction process to poor [quality] originals." Much of the filmed material was found to be illegible and, even worse, some of the documents were filmed in the wrong order, several of the microforms were reproduced backwards and inside out, and many of the frames were marred by blobs, splotches, and squiggles that probably resulted from dust spots and hairs on the camera lens!⁹

Before making a final decision about a micropublisher, the editor would do well to request a small number of serious contenders to generate a test film from a selection of documents posing a range of possible legibility problems. Besides providing the editor with a clearer idea of the technical competence of the various micropublishers (or their service companies), the test film can also provide each publisher with a better idea of the technical problems that he may expect to encounter in filming the editor's collection.

Second only to the ability of the micropublisher to produce a readable product is his ability to advertise and sell the microform edition to research libraries and other purchasers. The suitability of a micropublisher's publicity and sales network will depend on what the editor considers to be the potential market for his collection. If, for example, he envisages the market as international, he might not want to contract with a publisher who sells mainly to libraries on the East Coast.

Another important consideration is filming location. In order to minimize production costs and maximize quality control, micropublishers prefer to film in their own laboratory — or in the lab of their service company, if they subcontract the filming. Projects which work primarily with photocopies will normally be able to send their documents to the publisher's laboratory for filming. However, editors who deal primarily with original docu-

ments may find it impractical or undesirable to bring their materials to the publisher. In such cases, the publisher must be willing to set up his cameras and other equipment in the archive or repository where the documents are housed. He should also agree, in writing, to film retakes of defective images at the archive or repository.

A common denominator to many of the above criteria is the previous experience of the micropublisher in filming and distributing documentary collections. The ideal micropublisher, in short, is one whose publication list already includes several NHPRC-sponsored documentary editing projects, whose publications have been well received by reviewers, and who is respected by the project editors with whom he has previously worked.

One of the most important decisions confronting the editor of a microform edition is whether reel microfilm or four-by-six inch microfiche cards should be chosen as the publishing medium. Until the mid-1970s, conventional wisdom dictated that microfiche was totally unsuitable for the reproduction of manuscript collections.⁴ However, the publication of *The Microfiche Edition of the Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe* in 1976 demonstrated that the microfiche format could be successfully adapted to accommodate a substantial and heterogeneous collection of manuscript material. Since the successful completion of their pioneering project, three other NHPRC-sponsored projects have published microfiche editions of their collections—*The Isabella Beecher Hooker Papers* (1979), *The Correspondence of Lydia Maria Child* (1980), and *The Collected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family* (1980). The reviews have, by and large, been favorable. One critic, for example, has characterized the Child edition as "a model of microfiche production," while an even more ecstatic reviewer has described the Peale Family edition as "almost flawless in scope, format, and design."⁵

Despite the critical success of these fiche editions, documentary editors have not been rushing out to put their collections on microfiche. While microfiche has been rapidly supplanting traditional microfilm in the business, scientific, and technical worlds, 35 mm roll film remains the dominant medium in documentary editing. I should quickly add, however, that this is not merely a case of editors being slow to keep abreast of trends in the field of micrographics. Although the microfiche format possesses some very real advantages over reel microfilm, there are also countervailing disadvantages that make microfiche unsuitable for the publication of many documentary collections.

The main advantage of microfiche is the ease of access that the fiche format provides the researcher. With its eye-legible headers and its convenient grid format of rows and columns, microfiche allows the reader to move easily and quickly from an index entry to the frame where the filmed document is located, and spares him the frustra-

ration of continually cranking through yards of microfilm. Librarians also find microfiche more convenient to store than bulky roll film. For the most part, however, the advantages of fiche accrue to the reader of the microform edition—not to the editor and the publisher who share the responsibility of producing it.

From the editor's standpoint, a microfiche edition is much more expensive and time-consuming to produce than a comparable microfilm edition. This is partly because each frame of the microfiche must be "pre-programmed" — that is, mapped out in advance on "program sheets" prior to the actual filming. The task of refilming defective frames also becomes more complicated and costly, since normally an entire row (7-14 images) must be refilmed, even if only one of the images in that row is unacceptable.⁶

Microfiche is also a less flexible medium for documentary collections than reel microfilm. The fiche format is ideal for uniform-sized documents that measure less than 8½ by 11 inches and possess good contrast (e.g. black ink on white paper). This is one reason why fiche is so popular in the reproduction of modern business, technical, and scientific records. Unfortunately, not many editors have uniform-sized, high-contrast documents. Although the fiche format can accommodate a collection with a modest number of oversized and poor-quality documents (as exemplified by the successful publication of the Latrobe Papers and other fiche editions), editors should be aware that producing a microfiche edition is a far more risky and demanding venture than working with more conventional reel microfilm.

The NHPRC wisely recommends that "in general, any collection containing a significant number of items that exceed 8½ by 11 inches in size (especially in the vertical dimension) might best be preserved on 35mm reel microfilm, not microfiche.... Similarly, a collection containing numerous faint originals, negative prints, or poor-quality photocopies would benefit from the lower reduction ratios of 35mm reel microfilm. Because there are exceptions to even these simple rules of thumb, project directors should seek expert technical advice during early planning."⁷

Although it seems unlikely that microfiche will ever supplant microfilm as the principal medium for the micropublication of documentary collections, the fiche medium does offer some promising possibilities as a supplement to printed book editions. Lest readers be confused by terminology, I have been talking so far about *microform editions*—collections of documents on film or fiche that are published independently of whatever printed editions the project may be issuing. Microfiche supplements, on the other hand, form an integral part of the printed book edition and are generally distributed with and included in the purchase price of the book edition.

One editorial project that has pioneered in the innovative use of microfiche supplements is *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*. Volume two of the Ratification Papers contains a fiche supplement of approximately 2800 pages, while volume three contains supplementary fiche providing more than 1200 additional pages of documentation. The majority of the items reproduced in the fiche supplements are unannotated transcriptions of documents that were not selected for inclusion in the printed volumes. By means of an elaborate and extensive system of cross references, the reader is able to move easily from the printed documents to related material on the microfiche. The use of the fiche supplements has enabled the editors to publish a significantly larger number of documents than would have been possible had they stuck solely to conventional book publication. According to one of the editors, it has also substantially cut down the amount of editorial time spent in wrangling about whether or not a particular document should be selected for the printed volume, since the existence of the supplement guarantees that each document will appear somewhere in the edition.

As suggested earlier, the fiche medium is ideal for the reproduction of uniform-sized, high-contrast material—such as editorial transcriptions. Moreover, when the editor is working with transcriptions rather than original documents, he can avail himself of more advanced and less expensive technology than when he is dealing with a collection of fragile, odd-sized, marginal-quality manuscripts. The Ratification project, for example, was able to feed its transcriptions automatically into a "rotary" camera and thus generate the microfiche master in only a fraction of the time and expense that would have been required on a traditional "planetary" camera. An even more ambitious application of advanced microform technology is being contemplated by the editors of *The Henry Laurens Papers*, who are planning to use computer output microfiche (COM). Simply put, the documents will be transcribed on a word processor and electronically transferred onto a computer tape. The tape will drive a COM recorder, which will produce the microfiche master directly from the data stored on the tape, eliminating the traditional paper print entirely.⁸

One obvious disadvantage of the combined book/fiche editions is that few individual purchasers own a microfiche reader with which to view the supplementary fiche. Moreover, most libraries deem it necessary to remove the fiches from the printed volumes and file them separately in their microform reading rooms. Thus it is not always easy for readers to take advantage of the cross references that the editors have so assiduously implanted into the printed volumes. Another drawback to the microfiche supplement is that not every editorial project can afford to prepare transcriptions of all its documents.

The Thomas A. Edison Papers is one such project that

has neither the time nor the financial resources to transcribe more than a fraction of the documents in its collection. There are estimated to be almost 3.5 million pages of Edison-related material at the Edison National Historic Site in West Orange, New Jersey, as well as thousands of additional pages scattered in repositories and among private collectors throughout the world. As associate editor of the Edison project, I have been working with a team of editors to sort through the mass of documentation and select about 250,000-300,000 pages for publication in a selective microfilm edition.

A few of my colleagues on other projects have expressed skepticism about the desirability of departing from the more conventional concept of a comprehensive microform edition. Indeed, a well-known authority on the microfilming of manuscripts has cautioned that "selective filming is generally unsatisfactory. . . . The selection of specific items often involves value judgments—the filmed selections, therefore, tend to be subjective rather than objective, thus giving the user an imperfect or distorted picture of events . . . [Moreover,] archivists and historians alike will rarely agree on the same criteria of selection."⁹

The problem with this criticism is that it can be made with equal validity against selective book editions. Yet editors of book editions have been forced by economic constraints to become highly selective in their choice of documents to include in their publications. In the case of the Edison collection, an argument can be made that a comprehensive microform publication would be both prohibitively expensive and intellectually unmanageable. Assuming that 2500 pages could be accommodated on each microfilm reel, at least 1500 reels would be required to contain the entire collection. If each reel was marketed at a modest \$35.00, a library wishing to purchase the entire collection would have to spend more than \$50,000! Even large research libraries would find it difficult to justify the purchase of such an edition.

Moreover, not every document in the Edison collection is equally significant. Although the Edison Archive at West Orange contains hundreds of important laboratory notebooks documenting Edison's inventive activity, and many thousands of pages of valuable business records, there is also a considerable amount of material that is, at best, of marginal research value. For example, Edison—like all of us—received his share of unsolicited advertisements or "junk mail." He also amassed an incredible amount of fan mail, requests for loans and charitable contributions, letters from long-lost "cousins," inquiries about the purchase of his inventions, and solicitations for advice from would-be inventors. We will certainly want to film representative samples of all these kinds of documents. However, because of their voluminous and repetitive nature, we do not think that all of them warrant inclusion in the microfilm edition.

A few critics have recently taken editors to task for including so many marginal documents in their microform editions. They claim that, given the relatively high cost of microforms, the purchaser deserves something better than a collection full of shipping orders and bills of lading. For example, one reviewer has criticized the editor of *The Letters and Papers of Richard Rush* for deciding to film a comprehensive 29-reel microfilm edition. In the opinion of the reviewer, "the editor's decision to include everything to which Rush touched pen and ink clearly deflates the over-all worth of the product . . . since much [of the material] is pedestrian in the extreme . . . In this case as in the case of many large manuscript and archival collections, more unfortunately, is less . . . One must question whether the finished product is worth the price of admission."¹⁰

The editors of the Edison Papers are very concerned that our microfilm edition be "worth the price of admission." We would prefer to publish a highly selective edition that will be distributed widely than to issue a comprehensive edition that nobody can afford to buy. Moreover, the sheer size and complexity of the Edison collection has, in the past, made it difficult for scholars to take full advantage of the documentary resources. One researcher has aptly characterized the Edison Archive as "a scientific King Tut's tomb."¹¹ So far, however, researchers have merely skimmed the surface of this vast archive, and part of our task as editors will be to examine every document systematically and to identify what we consider to be the most valuable of these scientific "treasures."

We would be the first to agree, however, that the editor of a selective edition—whether it be on microform or in a printed volume—is obliged to make his criteria for selection as clear as possible to the reader. Nor are we so presumptuous as to assume that research interests will never change or that future editors and archivists may not want to film material that we have left out of our microfilm edition. We are, therefore, reorganizing the collection so that previously filmed material can be easily identified and new materials eventually added to the film edition. We are also endeavoring, through hundreds of cross references and explanatory "targets," to give the reader a clear idea of the kind and amount of material that has not been filmed. The microfilm edition of the Edison Papers will thus be more than a collection of filmed documents. It will also serve as an elaborate introduction to and finding aid for the documents in the larger archive.

Although predictions are always risky to make, it may be that the next decade will witness a movement away from the "complete works" concept of microform editions, just as the last decade has seen a trend towards more selective printed editions. Some projects have already rejected comprehensive microform editions in favor of microfiche supplements to their printed volumes, while

others are planning to publish selective rather than comprehensive microform editions. As publishing costs continue to rise and library budgets diminish, we can be sure

that documentary editors will continue to explore new ways of meeting the changing demands of the times.

Notes

1. National Historical Publications and Records Commission, *Annual Report for 1980* (Washington, 1981), p. 6.
2. NHPRC, *Microform Guidelines* (Washington, 1980), p.2.
3. D. Martin, Review of *The Isabella Beecher Hooker Papers*, *Microform Review* 10 (Spring 1981): 103-104.
4. See, for example, Albert H. Leisinger, Jr., *Microphotography for Archives* (Washington, 1968), pp. 4-6.
5. Robert H. Abzug, Review of *The Correspondence of Lydia Maria Child*, *Microform Review* 10 (Winter 1981): 42; Mark R. Yerburgh, Review of *The Collected Papers of Charles Willson Peale and His Family*, *ibid.* 10 (Summer 1981): 185.
6. The use of program sheets is discussed in Thomas E. Jeffrey, "The Papers of Benjamin Henry Latrobe: Problems and Possibilities of Editing Historical Documents on Microfiche," *The Journal of Micrographics* 10 (November 1976): 71-73.
7. NHPRC, *Microform Guidelines*, p. 6.
8. David R. Chesnutt, "Comprehensive Text Processing and the Papers of Henry Laurens," Association for Documentary Editing, *Newsletter* 2 (May 1980): 12-14.
9. Leisinger, *Microphotography for Archives*, p. 19.
10. Edward C. Oetting, Review of *The Letters and Papers of Richard Rush*, *Microform Review* 10 (Fall 1981): 295-296.
11. Robert Conot, *A Streak of Luck: The Life & Legend of Thomas Alva Edison* (New York, 1979), p. xvi.

Additional Readings

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