

## FORUM

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## To the Editor:

Jessica Phillips, “In Defense of Preservation in the Age of MPLP,” *The American Archivist* 78 (Fall/Winter 2015): 470–87, paints a gloomy, if not downright catastrophic, picture of MPLP’s effect on the archival enterprise. In essence, she believes that “the strategies associated with MPLP may well endanger the very collections we are meant to protect through a systematic neglect of collections’ item-level needs” (p. 472). No one should be surprised that we disagree with Phillips both in her assessment of MPLP and in her level of alarm over what we recommend as the baseline level of conservation and preservation for archival analog collections. One example: in cautioning about the high cost of maintaining a robust storage environment, she ignores the high costs of item-level analysis and remedial conservation work (pp. 477–79).

We think Phillips trips into several more pitfalls common to many critics of MPLP. For example, she resorts to major oversimplifications, reducing MPLP to simple absolutes and largely missing the more important messages. The broadest oversimplification is Phillips’s assertion that we demonstrate blanket “negative attitudes toward preservation” (p. 472). In fact, we hold no negative attitudes toward preservation as such. Our negative attitudes are toward assumptions that certain remedial preservation activities—refoldering, removing clips and staples, photocopying newsprint onto nonacidic paper, and so on—are worth the enormous level of resources (mostly staff time, but also supplies) expended on them; enormous when compared to the benefits and in light of the opportunity costs.<sup>1</sup>

Phillips falls into the trap of using inflammatory and dismissive language about MPLP (while accusing us of the same sins in regard to preservation). “They discuss resources spent on preservation activities using terms like ‘squandered,’ ‘unconscionable,’ and ‘badly spent’” (p. 473). Yes, we do, and we stand by those descriptors. It is not the acts of preservation *per se*, it is the vast quantity of resources directed toward them. Our actual sentence using the term “unconscionable” is “An unconscionable fraction of our limited and—all too often—declining processing resources are being badly spent on this [refoldering] and other extremely labor intensive conservation actions” (p. 221).<sup>2</sup> Again, however, “unconscionable” both because of the resources diverted and because of the more demonstrable benefits foregone . . . *not* because of the application of preservation steps as such.

Phillips also treats preservation as an end in itself, rather than as a necessary foundational activity leading to use. She robustly berates us by stating we

claim “an archivist need not look at every tree to know the forest fairly well. . . . The forest, or archival collection, may look fine so long as we do not peer closely at any one tree. If we ignore the condition of the individual trees, we may not see until too late the disease or infestation that will destroy it and possibly the surrounding forest as well” (p. 483). In this implication that MPLP’s approach will ultimately result in the destruction of all items in a collection, Phillips alludes to the fact that acid in one item will, over time and under the right climate conditions, leach into items with which it is in contact.

Though she insists that personal perception (of acid leaching) is more important than the absence of professional studies about the full impact of foregoing preservation activities during processing, Phillips here ignores the fact that so many of us have also experienced instances where newsprint, for example, stored for seventy years in highly acidic wooden crates and folders inside a ramshackle barn has survived intact and without becoming embrittled. So, which anecdotal evidence should take precedence? Our question then remains: how much, if at all, does the observable fact of leaching acid shorten the lifespan of the item or those adjoining it?

(We were initially surprised to learn that Phillips had, in fact, identified at least three articles, 1972, 1996, and 2002, whose titles indicate that they might be studies of the effect of acidic leaching in collections—yet she refers to them solely in passing, in a footnote, number 61; not even the text in which the footnote is embedded explicitly alludes to these articles. We concluded that either the articles do not clearly or strongly support Phillips’s argument or that they were published in journals so obscure, at least to archivists, that it would be nearly impossible to use them to shore up her line of reasoning: *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, *Bulletin of the American Institute for Conservation*, and *Alkaline Paper Advocate*.)

Phillips’s article, at base, rests on the implicit assumption that no loss of a collection item is ever acceptable and that such loss can be prevented by ignoring the advice of MPLP. This misses the utilitarian emphasis of MPLP, which, ultimately, allows for some loss in exchange for even greater gains—gains in processing and, more importantly, in use. Because, ultimately, what good is preserving every item if our researchers cannot find or gain access to the many backlogged collections that will inevitably pile up while awaiting Phillips’s approach to preservation? We do believe use is more important than heroic preservation efforts when there are insufficient resources for both.

Respectfully,

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "Opportunity costs" represent the benefits one might have accrued if one had foregone the particular costs. For example, refoldering every collection may result in a small increment of extended item life but at the cost of never making headway on backlogs and thus preventing researchers from finding (much less using) many of one's collections.
- <sup>2</sup> Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *The American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2005): 208–63.