



DIGITAL ACCESS TO  
SCHOLARSHIP AT HARVARD  
DASH.HARVARD.EDU

HARVARD  
LIBRARY



# The Foreign Newspaper Microfilm Project, 1938-1955

## Citation

Weber, David C. 1956. The Foreign Newspaper Microfilm Project, 1938-1955. Harvard Library Bulletin X (2), Spring 1956: 275-281.

## Link

<https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37363493>

## Terms of use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material (LAA), as set forth at

<https://harvardwiki.atlassian.net/wiki/external/NGY5NDE4ZjgzNTc5NDQzMGIzZWZhMGFIOWI2M2EwYTg>

## Accessibility

<https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/digital-accessibility-policy>

## Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.  
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#)

# The Foreign Newspaper Microfilm Project, 1938-1955

FILM as a practical instrument for recording printed information in reduced form was developed during the 1920's. Commercial firms used an automatic photographing machine called the 'Check-O-Graph,' developed during the years 1922-26, which was improved and put on the market in 1928 as a 'Recordak.' The Library of Congress Project 'A' for copying materials relating to American history in European archives was greatly improved in early 1928 when its director found in Paris the Lemare camera outfit for making micro-reproductions; six of these outfits were essential to the success of this \$450,000 project. But, although Yale, the Hoover War Library, the Huntington Library, and Harvard had all done such handwork with Leicas and similar equipment, it was not until 1934 that fast and efficient cameras and projectors brought microphotography for libraries, and particularly for the filming of newspapers, into common acceptance.<sup>1</sup> With the development of reading equipment, by means of which the films could be read by projection rather than from enlarged paper copies, photography opened a whole new vista to the scholar.

The Eastman Kodak Company, after eight years of experience in using microphotography for bank checks and department store billing, had decided at the beginning of 1933 to promote the technique in another 'natural' field, that of libraries.<sup>2</sup> At this time, Keyes D. Metcalf was Chief of the Reference Department of the New York Public Library and, with other members of that library's staff, worked with the Recordak Corporation as their library interests began. Recordak's headquarters were in New York and they naturally came to the library for counsel as to the needs and problems of this field. Newspapers were

<sup>1</sup> The beginnings of microphotography at Harvard are told in 'The Photographic Department of the Harvard Library' by Charles L. Grace, *HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN*, IV (1950), 281-283.

<sup>2</sup> The thinking behind this venture and the reasons why a newspaper photographing machine was chosen for a start are stated by Charles Z. Case, 'Photographing Newspapers,' *Microphotography for Libraries* (Chicago, 1936), pp. 53-58.

the primary concern because of their bulk and their poor paper; for twenty years the New York Public Library had spent up to \$10,000 a year to mount papers on Japanese tissue. Experimentation began with reproductions of New York City newspapers, and in May 1934 the Library set up a microfilm reading room for newspapers, using sample Recordak projectors just completed. This was the first big success of microfilm in this field; it may truly be called a landmark in library history.

Mr Metcalf became Director of the Harvard University Library in September 1937. Three months later he wrote to Mr Lydenberg at the New York Public Library, Mr Raney at the University of Chicago Library, and Mr John K. Boeing of the Recordak Corporation informing them that 'there seems to be some possibility that Harvard will be in a position to go into the filming of newspapers on a fairly large scale.'<sup>3</sup> He had been encouraged by the Harvard faculty to undertake an expanded program in foreign newspapers, hitherto little collected at Harvard, and his experience in New York had given him the necessary technical background.

In December Mr Metcalf began discussions with David H. Stevens, Director for the Humanities of the Rockefeller Foundation, looking toward a cooperative microfilm project which would place on film fifty foreign papers representing different political views throughout the world. (The importance of this project may be seen from the fact that, at that time, only thirty to forty United States newspapers were being currently filmed.) Shortly thereafter letters were sent to fifty-two libraries to learn what newspapers they would be interested in purchasing currently on microfilm; thirty-two expressed a desire to subscribe and thereby share the cost of the 'master' negative. Mr Metcalf believed he was not unduly optimistic in feeling that a project of this kind was sure to grow in size and popularity as time went on.

The reasons for the plan, as stated by Mr Metcalf, were threefold:

1. To arrange a cooperative project with Harvard as the sponsor. The Harvard University Library has had too little to do with cooperative enterprises, and it is desirable for us to take charge of a project.

2. To make arrangements for the preservation of foreign newspapers in re-

<sup>3</sup> This excerpt from the letter of 13 December 1937 from Metcalf to Boeing, and all other letters here quoted, are taken from carbon copies of the correspondence of Mr Metcalf as Director of the Harvard University Library 1937-55 which is on file in the University Archives.

search libraries in the United States. One of the weakest spots in these libraries has been their failure to collect adequate files of this material.

3. To help push microphotography. While I am optimistic about its future, I have feared that the whole thing might, as President Conant has expressed it, bog down, due to the fact that we are in a vicious circle. Because there were so few projectors in their hands, libraries have not bought film; because there was so little film available, libraries have not bought projectors. The newspaper enterprise provides one very satisfactory way of breaking this vicious circle.<sup>4</sup>

The original plan to film fifty current files, and at the same time work back to the First World War, was reduced and revised during the spring of 1938. At first, one copy of each paper was to be purchased from the publisher; later it seemed desirable to obtain two copies; and it also soon became evident that a good proportion of the papers would present gift subscriptions as signifying recognition of the importance of such a project to themselves. Then, too, the scope and cost of the project was reduced, the back files being eliminated, since this was not essential to the promotion of microphotography. Commercial firms had to be used for the photographing instead of purchased newspaper cameras, since Recordak and the United States Government were using all eleven of the Eastman Microfile Recordaks and all four Rotary Newspaper Recordaks then in existence, and further manufacture was contemplated only after a period of development.

The funds which played a large part in enabling Mr Metcalf to proceed with the project, whether or not the Foundation subsidized it on a greater scale, came from a portion of the Nieman bequest for journalism that had become available late in 1937. When President Conant had asked Mr Metcalf's opinion as to how these funds might be used, the Librarian immediately thought of the newspaper project and suggested the appropriateness of a certain allotment of Nieman money for this purpose. The result was that on 3 January 1938 the Harvard Corporation agreed that up to \$5,000 a year would be given to the College Library for building up collections of books on journalism and of contemporary foreign newspapers on microfilm, the whole to be known as the 'Nieman Collection of Contemporary Journalism.' At the end of the war, the cost to the University of the Nieman Fellows was increasing rapidly; it was therefore decided during fiscal 1944-45 that a flat \$25,000 would be substituted for the annual Library allotments, the Library hoping to find some other means of

<sup>4</sup> Metcalf letter to Stevens, 16 May 1938, pp. 1-2.



supporting the purchase of positive film from the project before the Nieman funds ran out. The money came to an end in late 1952, the Harvard Library having acquired by that time just over \$50,000 worth of book and microfilm materials.

To return to 1938, Harvard had decided to proceed with certain newspapers and on April 15th had written to fifty newspapers inviting their cooperation. It was, however, to be enabled to initiate the project July 1st on a significant scale. For, on June 10th, the Rockefeller Foundation appropriated \$6,000 for expenses of microfilm copies of foreign newspaper files during the three-year period 1 July 1938 to 30 June 1941. It was understood that the project would be on a self-sustaining basis by the end of the three years through selling a sufficient number of positive copies, at a price to cover the cost of making the negatives.

By January 1939 thirty-seven papers were regularly filmed, with Harvard buying one copy of each film, and other libraries buying selections.<sup>6</sup> It should be added that the continued financing of the revolving fund had been based on the willingness of the Harvard College Library to spend up to \$3,000 of the Nieman money each year for purchase of positive film copies. This strong support became in later years a matter of principle; for the College Library paid for what it received at the same prices as did any other library in the country, and indeed it continued to buy one copy of every film from 1938 until the very end of the project in 1955, so that it would not appear to take advantage of the negative film — a potential danger to public relations inherent in the localization of such a project in a single library.

During the seventeen and a half years that the project existed, a total of sixty-two newspapers were filmed for all or part of the years 1938-55. And during this period a few significant changes bear mention. The most notable was the result of the Second World War, beginning in September 1939; for between then and May 1945 well over half of the newspapers were unavailable, and the revolving fund

<sup>6</sup> 'Harvard Project for Microfilming Foreign Newspapers,' *Journal of Documentary Reproduction*, II (1939), 41-43. The current list of titles was also printed in 'Foreign Papers Microfilmed,' by Frederick G. Kilgour, *Library Journal*, LXVI (1941), 319, and as *Microfilming Clearing House Bulletin*, No. 11, appended to the *Library of Congress Information Bulletin* of 22 October 1951. The issues of *Pravda* and *Izvestia* prior to July 1938 were a separate project transferred from the Russian Research Center and added to the newspaper microfilm project for the sake of convenience; a note on this appeared in HLB, IX (1955), 421-422.

went far into the red. After the war, relations were resumed with the twenty-three surviving papers, and coverage for other and additional countries, particularly in Asia, was arranged between 1946 and 1952.<sup>6</sup> Only in fiscal 1950-51 did the project get back on its financial feet.

Another major change stems in part from the building of the Lamont Library during 1948. Until then all master negative films had been held by the companies filming the papers — generally, a firm in the Boston area, or the Recordak Corporation in Rochester, New York, which was used whenever two copies of the paper could be obtained. (In such a case the two copies were interleaved for continuous feeding into a rotary camera.) In January 1949 all negative films were moved to Harvard and placed in the Lamont basement. Harvard began filming for the project in February 1950, partly because of this shift of film, and soon took over the greater part of the production of negatives and positives. Other reasons why Harvard assumed much of the filming were the expense of shipping to and from Rochester, certain matters of a technical nature, and the fact that the Harvard laboratory had, in 1946, added a second microfilm camera which was not always kept busy.

The pricing of microfilms is also worth noting. At first the film was sold at 12¢ per foot, or 8¢ if there were more than three subscribers (at first quoted as 1½¢ or 1¢ a frame), but the price became 12¢ and 10¢ on 1 January 1949, and then a standard 9¢ on 1 January 1953. In times of inflation, the project maintained this stability by improving its operation, despite the extra expenses involved in completing wartime files and reorganizing the project after the war.

The newspaper microfilm project operated by the Harvard College Library came to an end with the papers issued 31 December 1955. The reasons that prompted Harvard to terminate a project that had just blossomed into great success after ten years of adversity are many. First of all, one must remember the three primary functions underlying such a project: condensing of bulky materials, preserving perishable records, and building resources through reproducing and publishing rare or unobtainable material. But access to one copy of a film reproduction fulfills these purposes, unless a copy is actually needed at hand for heavy use. The Harvard project can be said to have been over-selling a relatively little-used product. Should libraries have more than

<sup>6</sup>This aspect was dealt with by Laurence Kipp, 'Microfilming Foreign Newspapers,' *HLB*, II (1948), 410-412.

two or three titles at hand so long as they can borrow others? Must a project urge a third or fourth library to buy a positive copy so that the high cost of the negative can be distributed among more purchasers of positive copies? Are there not some newspapers where only one copy available in the country would suffice? Can a project finance the addition of other desirable titles by doing the work on some other basis of financing than outright sale of copies?

As a result of such thinking, on 8 April 1952 the person then in charge of the project proposed an alternative subscription basis for those newspapers where large sales were not feasible. The proposal was to add a jointly-owned 'single-positive' arrangement to the existing method of outright sale. In other words, for certain newspapers it was thought that several libraries might agree to split the cost of the negative microfilm and a single positive copy, that copy to be jointly owned by all participants and to be available to the owners for borrowing. In late July, the project asked the New York Public Library, the Midwest Inter-Library Center, and the Library of Congress if they were interested, and the replies were such as to convince Mr Metcalf that the proposal had merit. Further, the end of support by the Nieman money left the College Library with a financial problem that would be solved by the new proposal. (Note should be made here that with the improvement of reading machines there is less danger of damage to the film and its inter-library loan is consequently less hazardous.)

The plan was submitted to the Association of Research Libraries for discussion at its meeting of 1 February 1953. The interest proved to be such that the A.R.L. set up a Committee on Cooperative Access to Foreign Newspapers with Herman Fussler of the University of Chicago Library as chairman. During the next two and a half years there was lengthy correspondence, ending in the important pronouncement of the A.R.L. Foreign Newspaper Microfilm Project, dated 22 July 1955. Meanwhile, in August 1954, Mr Metcalf made the plan even more attractive to potential subscribers by turning over to the A.R.L. the entire back file of approximately 375,000 feet of master negative microfilm, worth over \$50,000 and containing over 2,600,000 pages, as well as \$10,000 in the Rockefeller revolving fund, which had prospered in recent years — this with the approval of the Foundation.

The success of the A.R.L. project, which was initiated 1 January 1956, is now assured by a sufficient number of participants who subscribe an annual fee. The fee permits them to borrow a positive micro-



film from among some one hundred foreign newspapers which are being currently filmed and gives them the privilege of purchasing a positive copy outright, at bare cost of the positive, of any of the titles for which the A.R.L. owns the negative — as it now does for all the 1938-55 Harvard titles.<sup>7</sup>

In closing, it is fitting to mention those members of the Harvard College Library staff who, with Mr Metcalf's constant support and interest, directed the newspaper microfilm project. They are Frederick G. Kilgour, through 1941; Edwin E. Williams, from late 1941 through 1946; Elmer M. Grieder, Frank N. Jones, Laurence J. Kipp, and James W. Pirie, for portions of the next three and a half years of reorganization; and, since September 1950, the author of this article.

The Harvard newspaper microfilm project was the first large-scale newspaper project of its kind. Now, after seventeen and a half years, it has come to an end, not because it was unsuccessful, but because a better way has been found to achieve its objectives.<sup>8</sup>

DAVID C. WEBER

<sup>7</sup> A description of the A.R.L. project, by Herman H. Fussler, appeared as 'A New Pattern for Library Co-operation,' *Library Journal*, LXXXI (1956), 126-133.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that this transformation of Harvard's project, and indeed the project as a whole, fits in exactly with the 'Statement of Principles to Guide Large Scale Acquisition and Preservation of Library Materials on Microfilm,' which was prepared by the Committee on Cooperative Microfilm Projects of the American Library Association's Board on Resources, and was printed in *College and Research Libraries*, XIV (1953), 288-291, 302.



## List of Contributors

HARRY LEVIN, Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Harvard University

C. F. MAIN, Instructor in English, Rutgers University

GEORGES EDELEN, Instructor in English and in General Education, Harvard University

PHILIP HOFER, Lecturer on Fine Arts, Curator of Printing and Graphic Arts in the Harvard College Library, and Secretary of the William Hayes Fogg Art Museum

ARTHUR SHERBO, Assistant Professor of English, University of Illinois

CARL R. WOODRING, Associate Professor of English, University of Wisconsin

EARLE E. COLEMAN, Cataloguer, Longwood Library, Kennett Square, Pennsylvania

CARL F. STRAUCH, Professor of English, Lehigh University

EDGAR F. SHANNON, JR., Assistant Professor of English, Harvard University

W. H. BOND, Curator of Manuscripts in the Houghton Library, Harvard University

DAVID C. WEBER, Senior Assistant in the Harvard College Library