

As a throw-away item, newspapers are not produced from long-lasting materials. They can, however, be an important part of the historic record of events and social change.

The nature of newsprint

By the time they reach the public, newspapers have already begun to deteriorate. Mass-produced wood pulp is used to make the cheaper grade of paper known as newsprint, which is used to print newspapers, comic books, pamphlets, advertising leaflets and cheap fiction. It is popular because of its low cost and high absorbency, which is well suited to high-speed presses.

The main ingredient in newsprint is ground wood pulp made by grinding wood into small particles, softening it by boiling, and forming it into sheets. This process results in very short fibres and high levels of lignin. In growing trees, lignin binds cellulose fibres together, but in paper it rapidly discolours, oxidises in light and causes acids that degrade.

Chemical wood pulp contains less lignin and longer fibres that bind together better, but it is more expensive to produce. Most newsprint is made up of 60 to 80 per cent ground wood with chemical wood pulp for strength.

Preservation problems

There are many hazards to newsprint survival: excessive light soon turns it brown and brittle, heat accelerates breakdown of cellulose and too much moisture encourages mould, while too little causes brittleness. Undisturbed stacks of paper may harbour insect or rodent pests. Air pollution from vehicle exhaust or industrial gases, poor handling and inappropriate storage systems can also compromise newsprint.

Chemical instability from high lignin content and acidity, mechanical weakness and large format all add to the special problems of caring for newspapers.

Handling and storage

Suitable containers, good housekeeping and regular inspection of collections are important parts of a preservation policy.

Because newspapers demand large areas for storage and their bulk and brittleness make them difficult to transport and handle, public collections are increasingly making use of microforms. Photocopies provide an accessible format, while original copies are usually housed at another location.

Bound volumes should be stored horizontally with no more than three volumes per shelf. Loose issues can be stored in folders or a suitable flat container, large enough to avoid folding contents. Folds concentrate acidic reaction and cause mechanical stress. A single page or large cutting may be housed in an acid-free paper folder or transparent sleeve.

Chemically stable films such as uncoated polyester (DuPont Mylar Type D or ICI Melinex 516) polypropylene or polyethylene provide safe enclosures and offer limited protection from contaminants. Buffered paper or card on one side of an item will enhance this safeguard and provide physical support.

An experienced conservator should be consulted if repairs or other treatments are required.

Keeping newspaper cuttings

Scrapbooks have long been a popular form of assembling news cuttings, though subsequent re-organisation of contents can be difficult. Leaves and boards in cheap albums are usually of poor quality. Consult an art or specialty conservation supplier about suitable paper and methods of attachment. Write dates or other annotations with pencil; inks are more likely to fade or bleed.

Plastic sleeves in folders or display books are a good alternative to scrapbooks. Adhesive is not required, so it is easy to rearrange items. Look for chemically stable materials, not PVC, for both pockets and covers.

Book reviews or related articles are often kept inserted within the pages or end leaves of books. These cuttings soon discolour, become brittle and can transfer dark acidic stains to adjacent pages. A photocopy on archival paper is more appropriate.

Further information

Visit the Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials website for more information about commissioning a conservator.

For advice, please get in touch with our Ask a librarian service at www.slv.vic.gov.au/visit/ask-librarian.

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