

FACSIMILES FOR FUTURE ARCHIVES: FADING FAXES AND DIGITAL DIFFICULTIES

Christa Shusko*

*Department of Swedish, Faculty of Arts, Gothenburg University, Sweden,
christa.shusko@gmail.com*

(*Main presenter and corresponding author)

ABSTRACT

This project investigates the numerous challenges surrounding the preservation and potential digitization of faxes in the Birgitta Stenberg manuscript collection (KvinnSam, University of Gothenburg Library), while suggesting ways in which this case study may be instructive for other cultural heritage archives containing thermal paper documents or other similarly challenging materials. Thermal paper documents, which include faxes, are well-known to be physically unstable, with inevitable fading, discoloration, and embrittlement posing challenges for long-term content and material preservation. Thermal paper faxes, copies, and prints are widespread in KvinnSam manuscript collections dating from the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s. While most fax and printing processes now use more stable paper and printing techniques, thermal papers continue to be widely used for the printing of receipts, labels, and tickets. Archival guidelines for thermal paper documents, typically developed by governmental archives in the early 1990s, recommended creating archival copies on acid free paper—a process called preservation photocopying—and discarding the original unstable thermal paper documents. Yet these recommendations may not always be feasible when dealing with large quantities of faxes in archival collections, nor may they always be appropriate for cultural heritage materials which may seek to preserve not only the content of documents but also their material forms. With newer technologies, newer recommendations for thermal paper content preservation may include digitization, but digitization may bring additional challenges for an archival collection such as the one investigated here.

In Fall 2023, KvinnSam received project funding to begin to address the unstable faxes in their collections. While KvinnSam was aware of many of these thermal paper documents within their in their archival collections, existing staffing and funding limitations coupled with the sheer size of their ever-growing archival collections have meant that a full inventory of these documents as well as possible strategies for remediating them had not been previously investigated. The project funding enabled the fixed-term employment (January-March 2024) of a supplementary staff member (this author) to comprehensively inventory and create condition assessments of thermal paper documents within the Birgitta Stenberg collection (known to contain large quantities of faxes) and to develop actionable guidelines for handling thermal paper documents within KvinnSam's existing collections and future archival

accessions. These guidelines were developed following an extensive literature review focusing on thermal paper history, composition, and preservation, as well as engaging in collaborative dialogue with KvinnSam's archivists, the Gothenburg University conservator, and, to a lesser extent, the University Library Digitization Division.

Initially, the assumption of KvinnSam was that digitization might prove the best means by which the archival content of these documents could be preserved. However, a number of difficulties arose which called for the creation of guidelines that included digitization only as one possible approach among others, one that might be used in conjunction with more analog solutions such as preservation photocopying, for example. The difficulties of digitizing these documents include institutional financial limitations; the heterogeneous conditions and physical realities of these documents; the sheer quantity of these documents (7000+ pages) within a single collection; the need to balance the archival responsibility to preserve original documents as long as possible with the destructiveness of digitization (light exposure is particularly damaging to thermal paper documents); and the desire to maintain archival order (as these documents are often interspersed with nonthermal paper records). One of the most compelling arguments for digitization, that of access, is not currently applicable to this collection. While accessible for researchers on site, this collection has some access restrictions meaning that any digitized resources created could not be open access, conflicting with the common digitization drive to create such resources. Further, a number of issues external to this collection and to KvinnSam also arose when considering digitization. The Digitization Division at the Gothenburg University Library was attempting to manage a silverfish infestation during the period of this project, which made KvinnSam archivists somewhat disinclined to send archival materials to them until this issue was handled. The British Library cyberattack, which occurred in October 2023, made the Gothenburg University Library and KvinnSam concerned about the digital security and stability of its own digitized cultural heritage, particularly in the case of a collection with access restrictions which would require even more layers of digital security. Despite these difficulties, in the cases of some of the thermal paper documents in KvinnSam's collections, digitization may often prove invaluable for improving the readability of faded thermal paper documents. The high quality of digital images may also be better able to communicate the materiality of the original documents than may be possible with preservation photocopying, as in the case of uncut faxes which are not possible to reproduce physically without page breaks, for example. The guidelines developed thus recommended digital-analog approaches which can better support KvinnSam's archival imperatives.

While these guidelines and recommendations concerning archival faxes and thermal paper documents were developed specifically for KvinnSam's collections and archival realities, they may prove useful for other archival collections. The literature review undertaken for this project demonstrated a serious lacuna in research; the recommendations made, primarily by governmental archives in the 1990s, have not been updated. The assumption seems to be that, since fax communications have

largely given way to fully digital technologies like email, thermal no longer being generated and so are no longer a concern for archives. Yet cultural heritage manuscript collections rarely arrive to archives immediately after their creation, meaning that institutions may have received—and may continue to receive—these documents, sometimes in large quantities, many years and even decades after their creation. Undertaking new research in this area and collaborating with archives can assist in the development of actionable guidelines to help archives best leverage analog and digital solutions for the long-term preservation of these cultural heritage materials.

Keywords: Archival materials—Deterioration, Archival materials—Digitization, Facsimile transmission, Preservation of materials, Preservation photocopying