

# Digital Archives: What Researchers Need From Platforms

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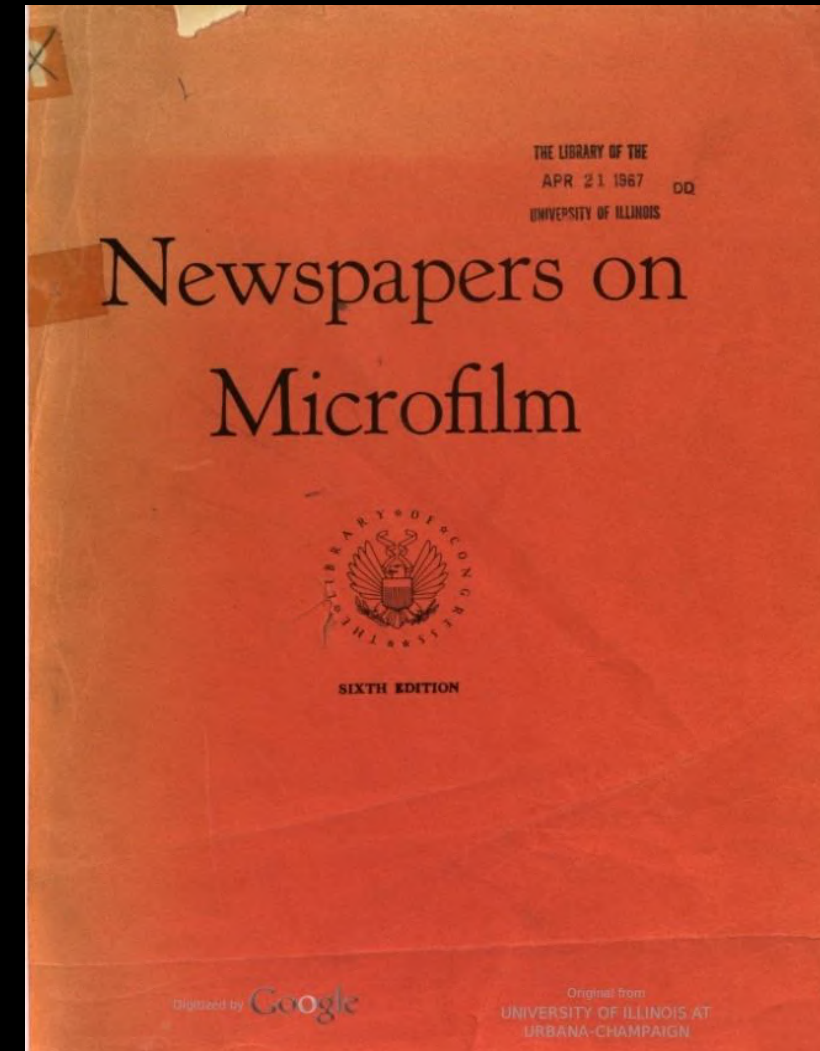
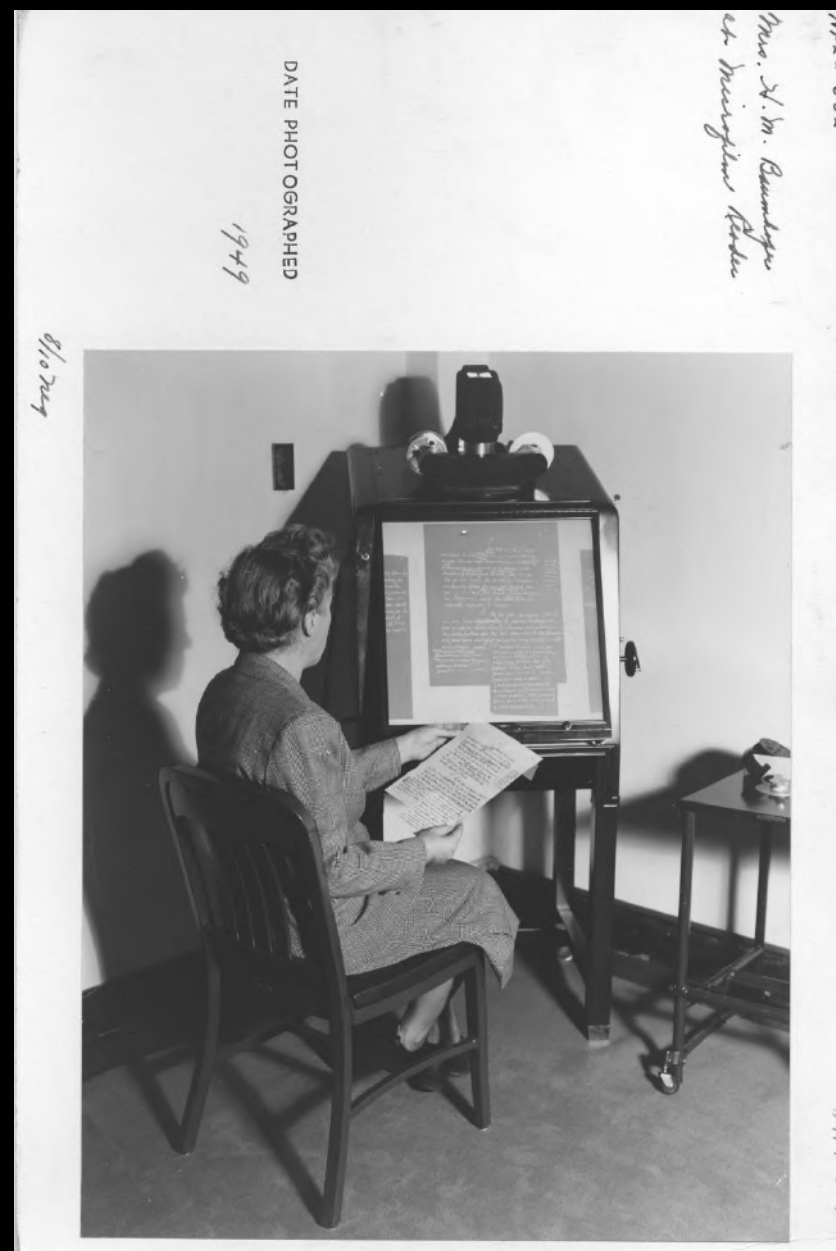
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## 1. The Question

- The digitization of historical materials has altered the landscape of scholarly research for the humanities and humanistic social sciences.
- Previously distant archives can be consulted and used as never before.
- But the experience of digital archives is distinct from that of physical archives.
- What features and functions of digital archives are most needed to support scholarly research?

## 2. Microfilm as Rehearsal for Digital

- Digitized historical collections derive mostly from earlier microfilm collections.
- Digitization represents a key break (e.g., an increase in physical access to the materials and the introduction of full-text search).
- Yet there are continuities between microfilm and digital, and elements of the microfilm genre that can inform digital platforms today.



## 3. Context

- Advanced researchers need to know the archival context of digitized materials.
- The microfilm guide provided contextual information: archival call numbers, scope and content notes, scholarly essays.
- But what if the provenance or other archival description is missing or the original order of materials obscured in the online environment?

## 4. Conclusion

- Digital archives already do much to convey context:
  - Source libraries are noted
  - Toggling between article and full-page views of newspapers is widely available
  - Multiple collections are brought together in single-search platforms, which spurs discovery
- Other features and functions would benefit researchers if found more consistently:
  - Ready online access to information in microfilm guides
  - Thorough archival call numbers from source libraries
  - Disambiguation of newspaper results

Image sources: "Photograph of Mrs. Hermine M. Baumhofer at Microfilm Reader," 1949, National Archives 64-NA-1-224; *Newspapers on Microfilm*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., Library of Congress, 1966, HathiTrust, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiug.30112063909466>. Text sources: D.J. Waters, *From Microfilm to Digital Imagery*, The Commission on Preservation and Access, 1991.