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What Do We Keep, and Who Decides? Nicholson Baker's "Double Fold" Ten Years On

by **T. Scott Plutchak** (Director, Lister Hill Library of the Health Sciences, University of Alabama at Birmingham)

The bartender shook his head in amazement, "It's so cool to see somebody writing a real letter with a fountain pen!"

"Even cooler when I tell you that I'm writing it to the woman that I've been married to for fifteen years."

I told him about my letter-writing habits — the boxes of letters that **Lynn** has from me. And that I've been writing letters to **Josie** since she was a year and a half old. Her Mom puts them in a box in the closet. I figure she'll read them when she's ten or so.

When he brought my check he said, "I'm buying you a glass of wine. You made my week. I text my son all the time, but the texts just disappear. But those letters! Your wife, your grand-daughter, they'll have those forever. I'm going to write my son a letter."

We live in the time of ephemera. History disappearing with the days of the week.

When I wrote about **Nicholson Baker's** *Double Fold* a decade ago, I said that he'd be more infuriating if he didn't make so many good points.¹ The situation is even more dire now.

Double Fold's subtitle is *Libraries and the Assault on Paper*.² **Baker** presented an overview of the microfilming and de-acidification projects of the latter decades of the twentieth century and concluded that librarians were grievously negligent in abdicating responsibility for preserving paper artifacts in their original form. He claimed that the "brittle book crisis" was a scam and that far too much was destroyed via microfilming to justify whatever benefits those projects achieved.

He was scathing in his critique of librarians, and the library community naturally reacted with an abrasive defensiveness. (A useful summary of librarian and other reviewers' reactions was published by **Ellen McCurdy** in *The Abbey Newsletter*.³) That's a shame, because it made it easy to focus on his misrepresentations of librarians and librarianship and ignore the very real problem that was the core of his book — that much of value, particularly with regard to newspapers, was being lost under the preservation policies that the library community developed in the second half of the twentieth century. **Baker's** investigations eventually led to his creation of the *American Newspaper Repository* which he stocked by purchasing, from the **British Library**, a massive collection of American newspapers that had been slated for destruction. Ironically perhaps, in 2004 the collection was acquired by **Duke University** and is now housed in its Rare Book, Manuscripts, and Special Collections Library.

Part of the underlying quarrel between **Baker** and the librarians came from differing views of what precisely the preservation responsibility of librarians amounts to. In a 2008 article describing his experiences with **Wikipedia**, **Baker** refers to himself as an "in-

clusionist" — the term for a **Wikipedia** editor who believes that everything describable is fair game for inclusion in the encyclopedia.⁴ This sense of everything having potential use, and therefore equally worthy of preservation, underlies **Baker's** outrage at the preservation practices of libraries.

But many librarians take what they would consider to be a more practical view — all things are *not* equal and all printed artifacts are not equally worthy of preservation. Archivists know this well — the intellectual core of their profession is figuring out which records and artifacts need to be kept to provide a reasonably true historical picture of a particular institution. "Selection" is one of the core skills of traditional librarians.

That being said, few librarians would question the notion that preservation, at some level, has been a key concern for the library profession. This does not mean that all librarians or all libraries have an equivalent responsibility, and there may be debate about the underlying ground of that responsibility, but the general assumption that libraries exist, in part, to preserve the cultural and intellectual record has been fairly uncontroversial. **Baker** and his critics didn't disagree about the importance of preservation or about librarians having a responsibility for it — they differed on the scope and tactics that such a responsibility required.

Ten years on, as the shift into a digital age continues, the questions of preservation and who has responsibility for it have become more acute. **Baker** argued that the best way to preserve paper was simply to store it in a proper environment and do as little to it as possible. The mistake that librarians made with microfilming and de-acidification was in trying to *do* something when nothing was needed.

In the digital world, unfortunately, we know that *something* needs to be done. We just haven't figured out what that is or whose responsibility it ought to be.

The **Chicago Collaborative** is one organization that has contemplated the preservation roles and responsibilities of librarians, publishers, and third parties. It was founded several years ago as a working group of librarians, publishers, and editors "to promote open communication and education among the primary stakeholders in the scholarly scientific communication area."⁵ Mindful of the heated arguments surrounding open access, the founding members (myself among them) sought to create a forum in which to discuss issues and concerns shared among the participants and to learn from the differing perspectives. Since May 2008, the group has held twice-yearly meetings, and

each time, concerns about preservation and archiving surface as one of the key issues. While there is strong agreement that preserving the scholarly record is of paramount importance, there is no consensus about how best to do it and where the responsibilities lie.

In an effort to gain clarity on these issues, the **Chicago Collaborative** invited a number of individuals to participate in an informal discussion at its November 2010 meeting. Guests included representatives from the **National Library of Medicine**, **Portico**, **CLOCKSS**, the **Association of Research Libraries**, and the **American Association of Universities**.

The discussion was facilitated by **Clifford Lynch**, Executive Director of the **Coalition for Networked Information**. An executive summary of the discussion is available on the **Chicago Collaborative Website**.⁶

The wide-ranging discussion covered problems and opportunities associated with the long-term preservation of e-journals, underlying research data, and "everything else" (e.g., teaching materials, multimedia materials, grey literature, etc.). The group came to no conclusions, although we did gain a better, if still incomplete, understanding of how the guests' organizations view their particular roles.

In the print world, the library profession assumed a preservation role almost by default — they had the stuff. And while all librarians did not share the same level of responsibility, the assumption was that everything that was worth preserving was being preserved in some library somewhere. Publishers focused on getting the next issue and volume out and were typically unconcerned about long-term preservation. Many do not have or maintain complete runs of their publications. **Baker's** book brought sharp relief to the inner conflicts and contradictions about how those roles actually played out, but the debates were still contained within that broad frame.

In the digital world, the situation is very different indeed. Libraries no longer own much of the information that they provide access to. Increasingly, we speak of working "in the cloud" as if all these bytes are simply drifting in the ether. And yet, they do have a real existence somewhere. As **James Gleick** points out in his book *The Information*, the cloud's "physical aspect could not be less cloudlike. Server farms proliferate in unmarked brick buildings and steel complexes, with smoked windows or no windows, miles of hollow floors, diesel generators, cooling towers, seven-foot intake fans, and aluminum chimney stacks."⁷ Publishers contract with third-party vendors to support the infrastructure, and many of the

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people working for those publishers have no idea where those servers are housed. Who is responsible for insuring their integrity and their long-term preservation?

The organizations on the November guest list of the **Chicago Collaborative** meeting worry about this. The technical solutions developed by **CLOCKSS**, **Portico**, and the **National Library of Medicine** represent very different ways of thinking about how preservation efforts should be funded, managed, and carried out. I came away from the meeting feeling that, although we have tremendous opportunities to preserve more content than ever before, the risks of losing more than history can bear are just as great. The consensus among the participants was that this is a critical time and we have not arrived at clear technical or organizational solutions. The more experimentation, the better.

What does this mean, then, for the role of librarians? Surely, the importance of maintaining a stake in the cultural memory of society remains one of our professional values. But it is also clear that, as with so many things in the digital world, this is not an area that we can effectively deal with on our own. The publishing community has a greater stake and default responsibility than ever before. The rise of institutional repositories provides opportunities for preserving kinds of content that, if preserved at all in the past, tended to be relatively inaccessible.

In *The Book in the Renaissance*, **Andrew Pettegree** points out that our view of the early days of printing is skewed by our focus on what got preserved in libraries, and that tended to be materials that were expensive and relatively little used.⁸ Publishers didn't make money printing those big beautiful bibles — they made money printing indulgences, broadsides, playing cards, inexpensive teaching materials, and, of course, pornography. Little of this kind of material is still extant. **Nicholson Baker** may blame the politics behind the de-acidification and microfilming projects, but the real culprit is, and has always been, the devil of selection. We have never been able to preserve everything, and the choices that we make of what to preserve and how well to preserve determine the lens through which we view history.

There's the opportunity — with digital storage being cheap, can we preserve everything? **Baker's** inclusionist predilections could be served. Practically speaking, though, we are not. We are still at the very beginnings of sorting out the what and the who and the how. On my optimistic days, I believe that we will figure this out and that we'll develop robust and successful preservation programs that rely on the collaborative efforts of librarians, publishers, scholars, and a variety of institutions, some still to be invented. But, because we haven't yet figured out how to effectively deal with preservation in the digital age, a significant portion of the kinds of documentation that historians rely on has already been lost, and the historians of the 22nd century will have a difficult time getting a clear picture of the beginnings of the 21st.

against the grain people profile

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T. Scott Plutchak

BORN AND LIVED: Born in Kaukauna, WI, lived in a couple of other places in Wisconsin, then Washington, DC, then St. Louis before coming to Birmingham.

EARLY LIFE: Played guitar in coffeehouses in high school & college, got a BA in philosophy which perfectly prepared me to spend a couple of years driving a forklift in a candle factory.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: MA in library science from **UW-Oshkosh**, post-grad fellowship at the **National Library of Medicine**, associate director and then director of the **St. Louis University Health Sciences Library**, director at **Lister Hill** since 1995. Editor of the *Journal of the Medical Library Association* from 1999-2005. Various other offices with the **Medical Library Association** including Board of Directors 2006-2009. Variety of other association activities. Service on a number of library advisory boards. Over the past ten years increasingly involved in issues surrounding scholarly publishing and the publisher/librarian nexus.

FAMILY: Wife **Lynn**, step-daughter **Marian**, and 6-year old granddaughter **Josie** who teaches me things on a daily basis.

IN MY SPARE TIME: Reading, listening to music, making music.

FAVORITE BOOKS: *Ulysses*, *Kavalier & Clay*, *Through the Children's Gate*, anything by **Jim Harrison**, anything by **Seamus Heaney** — I could go on.

PET PEEVES: Whiners and people who make ideological pronouncements in the absence of facts.

PHILOSOPHY: "Skepticism is the chastity of the intellect" — **Santayana**

MOST MEMORABLE CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Serving on the Scholarly Publishing Roundtable, whose recommendations (delivered to Congress and the White House in early 2010) have been incorporated into the **America COMPETES Act** and will hopefully play a role in establishing balanced and effective public access policies to peer-reviewed literature funded by U.S. government agencies.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: I have never had five-year goals.

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: For academic libraries, the building will be a place for students to gather and collaborate, but the work of librarians will happen mostly outside of the building. Librarians will be very involved in data curation activities. An increasing proportion of scholarly material will be open access but the subscription model will still be dominant. Data- and text-mining tools will play a much more important role. Most academic publishing will be electronic, although print will continue to play an important niche role. We will still be struggling with copyright, licensing, access models, and funding. 🐷



I hope my bartender maintains his enthusiasm and begins to write letters to his son. I hope that one day the letters end up in a library or archive. If he uses good paper and a decent fountain pen, the letters will be in fine shape. They won't tell the full story of his relationship with his son, of course. We'd need the text messages for that as well, and those will probably be gone.

It's become a truism that nothing ever really disappears from the Internet. So we're supposed to be careful with our angry emails and our less than discrete **Facebook** postings and tweets. But will they really last? Will they be findable and useful? Who's to say? 🐷

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