

### Preservation

Nicholson Baker's book would not be so infuriating, if there were not so much about it that is right [1]. One wants to dismiss the misrepresentation of librarianship, the nearly willful ignorance of so much that librarians do, and the apparent lack of understanding of how many different kinds of libraries there are, all of them meeting a different mix of responsibilities. These mistakes that he makes are so egregious that one wants to dismiss the entire book, call him a misguided crackpot, and send him on his way.

That would be easier to do if it were not for the fact that for every page on which I scrawled angry notes in the margin about how he was misrepresenting the evidence, there would be another page, not too far distant, where I scribbled, "It's true. He's right." He is not right as often as he thinks he is, but he is right too often for me to ignore him.

While I am saddened by the number of reviews the book got that simply parrot the worst of his argument, there have been some good rebuttals written (particularly one by Barbara Quint [2]), and I am not going to go over all of the pros and cons here. Baker's book arrives at a time when the nature of the book is undergoing more scrutiny than at any time in the last 450 years, and I think some of the fundamental issues that he raises, even if they are not quite the issues that he is most concerned with, are worth considering.

The key concept underlying Baker's entire text is the notion that one cannot separate form from content. As he characterizes (and mischaracterizes) the plans and plots of the microform zealots, they clearly believed one could remove the "essence" of a book—the text itself, the words in their particular order—and the important part of the book

would be preserved. In the case of many monographs, bound in the traditional codex form, this is unremarkably true, although we all would recognize with regret the loss of the bindings, the craftsmanship of the type font, and the choices that were made to frame that text so carefully (or, equally revealing, so carelessly) in that particular physical form. Even the zealots understood that there was some loss. Ever the extremist, Baker is intolerant of *any* loss.

When Baker turns to newspapers, the correspondence between object and "text" becomes more problematic, and he makes a good case for how much was actually lost in the early microfilming of major newspapers. While his 20/20 hindsight dismissively ignores the difficulties of the choices made at the time, it is clear that the failure to understand that a microfilmed copy of a newspaper does not accurately represent everything that the newspaper itself contains led certain sectors of the library community to discard objects that we would be better off as a society and as a culture not to be without. While one does not need to malign the motives of the people involved in those projects, his claim that we should not have destroyed or discarded the originals as we did seems unassailable.

At the same time that I read Baker's book and scanned the Web for copies of reviews of it, I also kept track of messages appearing on an email discussion list for customers of Reed-Elsevier products [3]. The librarians there had a very Bakerish discussion, although they did not mention his name. It appeared that some of them were just beginning to come to grips with the variations between the content of Elsevier's print journals and the electronic doppelgangers of those

products that appear under the label of ScienceDirect. On a similar discussion list (populated by many of the same librarians), there were hot discussions going on about the extent to which the content in certain popular aggregated databases corresponded to the print products that they claimed to represent [4].

The fact that form and content are not easily separated is becoming more apparent every day, and the decisions that we are trying to make must confront that fact. For some years now, we have asked ourselves when we can replace print versions with their electronic counterparts. Certainly, we recognize that if publishers choose not to digitize all of the editorial content, no such replacement is possible. But what about advertising content? What happens to such content, if it is replaced with electronic Web advertising, which is a fundamentally different game than print-based advertising? Even with the best of intentions and the utmost skill, could there ever truly be exact correspondence between print and electronic?

When we start to think about the nature of an electronic article, electronic journal, or electronic book, particularly once it takes advantage of the interlinking features of the Web, there is something fundamentally different about it than if the same content were enshrined in print. And this brings Baker's concerns in from another angle—once one has created a wonderfully dynamic and brilliant Website that has real scholarly and historical value, how does one hold it together? How does one preserve it, particularly when some of its richness comes from sites that one links to but does not control?

For us, in the world of the health sciences, the seriousness can become a matter of life and death.

Think of an online textbook, and think of a young resident who consults it for a dosage. Think of a resulting malpractice case, and put yourself in the position of the lawyer trying to verify the source of the resident's course of action and finding that the particular text, at least in the version that the resident consulted, no longer exists anywhere. This is similar to the situation that Baker came across a couple of times because of the decisions that were made regarding disposal of apparently obsolete newsprint. But such losses are built into the electronic format. Newsprint is preserved by its nature—it is only in danger when we choose to do something. Electronic media are instable by nature, and they will disappear *unless* we choose to do something. But what is the right thing to choose to do?

I am writing this at the end of June. I am camped on the edge of a lake near the border of Oklahoma and Colorado that is so small it does not show up on any of my maps. I have a portable CD player, and Keith Jarrett is playing piano. I am sipping a good California wine, and I have written a letter to Lynn, my wife, on fine stationery with a good fountain pen. Every day I charge my laptop battery using my car's cigarette lighter jack, so that it is ready for me to write with when I make camp in the evening. (I notice that my Saturn came with a cigarette lighter jack but no cigarette lighter. Electric power for my appliances is standard—the cigarette lighter itself is now an option).

The bullfrogs bellow in the background. At the other end of the lake, a couple of local boys are fishing. The technology I am using on this trip spans centuries, from the wine-making craft, to the ink and nib of my fountain pen, to the nylon of my tent and the battery of my laptop that allows me to sit here and struggle with these thoughts. If I drove further down that county highway, I could see

cowboys, still riding horses. They would tether the horses to the back of the pickup truck, when they were ready to head back to the house. Then they would settle in with their loved ones and watch *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. The bullfrogs and the crickets would bellow and chitter in the background.

New technologies do not replace older technologies, and a microfilmed facsimile of the *New York Herald* is a poor thing indeed. Baker is right about that. The magnitude of the problem is perhaps worse than even he, in all his curmudgeonly disdain for us, may realize. He may have overstated the degree to which preservation of the artifact is our primary role, but certainly it is one of our roles. How are we going to fulfill it in this new age that is dawning?

When one studies the development of printing in Europe in the half century after Gutenberg, it can look astonishingly like the time that we are now in. Entrepreneurs start businesses, hoping to cash in on the new technology. Inventors begin to change the physical format of the book, adding title pages and paragraph markings. Philosophers argue over how much one can trust a printed book, because one has now distanced it from the author's hand. The very concept of author is changed. It is a tumultuous time, and it takes a good fifty years after Gutenberg prints his first Bible before we see an industry that we recognize as publishing, making books that we recognize as the same as our own.

If, as many have suggested, the electronic media and the invention of the Web are as significant as the development of the movable type printing press, how far are we now in the analogous fifty years? Clifford Lynch has just released a stimulating essay probing the question of what it *means* for something to be an electronic book [5]. He points out that in a world of electronic da-

tabases and encyclopedias that are ever changing, we may lose the ability to provide the kind of cultural and historical snapshot of an age that older editions of encyclopedias and dictionaries now give us. Where print once helped us to establish the past in a concrete way, in the electronic present, the world is continuously shifting.

Baker's plea to libraries and librarians is that they just leave things alone. The books and the newspapers will be all right, he claims, if we just quit messing with them. Perhaps. But the very nature of books and newspapers is changing. Leaving them alone is not an option. Baker is quite right that it is our responsibility, as librarians, to preserve the record of the culture. How we will fulfill that responsibility is very unclear.

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