

# Double Fold or Double Take? Book Memory and the Administration of Knowledge

TARA BRABAZON

School of Media, Communication and Culture, Murdoch University, Murdoch, Western Australia,  
Australia

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The year 2001 will be known for many destructive and highly visible public tragedies. However within the librarian discourse, it will be remembered for the controversies encircling the publication of Nicholson Baker's *Double Fold*. This article assesses the rationale, direction and scope of this book and resultant debate, showing what it reveals about li-

braries, librarians and the distinctions between information and knowledge. Yet the article also suggests that Baker did not extend his case for preservation far enough: to the realm of popular memory, popular culture and digital ephemera. Without attention to these matters, libraries will remain neglected cemeteries: the passionless cranium of the culture.

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## Prologue

My garage smells of naphthalene. Because I hang washing out to dry in the conjoined garage, my frocks smell of naphthalene. Because the car lives there, my car smells of naphthalene. The origin of – and rationale for – this piquant odour requires the telling of a story.

The advantage of teaching hundreds of students every year is that academics have the chance to meet thousands of family members and friends. By the time an academic has lived in a city for ten years, it is impossible to attend an aerobics class or go grocery shopping without meeting a former student, or the mother, girlfriend, boyfriend, son or daughter of a former student.

My friends and students know that I am obsessed by both books and the 1980s. Books on the 1980s are special favourites. The son of one of my favourite cultural studies students – who attended lectures with his mother during school holidays and 'sick days' from high school – has also become a friend and followed his mother's footsteps into

cultural studies. To pay for his education, he is working at one of Western Australia's University libraries as the jack-the-lad lifter, stacker, shifter and gofer. One day, his mother informed me that this library was disposing of the entire collection of *The West Australian*, the longest surviving state-based newspaper. Her son was responsible for putting these elegant volumes into the dumpster. However – if I desired – he would preserve a range of the 1980s collection for me, after he [did not] put them in the dumpster. Within weeks, carloads of eighties magic started to stockpile in my lounge room, making it difficult to move around the house. Plus, delicate and remarkable tomes from the world wars, twenties and thirties were added to the collection. The rest of *The West Australian's* run – those that were not pilfered from the dumpster – were simply destroyed.

Now a new problem befell me, and everyone who wanted to move through my home. How was I to store this material? I have a large house, and live alone. This may appear the solution to my problem. However, because of my prior col-

lecting habits, the house is full of groaning bookshelves featuring past hits of postcolonial theory, critical pedagogy, Marxist historiography, cultural studies, gender studies and Internet theory. The appropriated *West Australians* had no place in my house. The garage was a concern – would it preserve the materials?

The advantage of being in the first generation of family members to attend university means that I have parents who can accomplish useful, quantifiable tasks, like building, renovating, painting and fixing things. So a shelf was constructed, airtight boxes bought and naphthalene peppered throughout the structure. My father's cataloguing, while owing nothing to Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules and Library of Congress Subject Headings, is appropriate for the oasis of the eighties that now frames the garage. It was always going to be difficult for me to get married, as I have completely filled all the wardrobes of the aforementioned house with my clothes, leaving little space for spousal sartorial elegance. Now with the garage full of newspapers, it can (just) accommodate my car, with no space for a second. Oh dear, what a pity. No matter: I love these newspapers more than I could love a man anyway.

This is not an ideal situation, for my social life as well as the newspapers. But I smile every time I walk into the garage and smell the naphthalene. I hold something special – a vast collection of 1980s *West Australian*. As a shrine to big hair, Bond and Black Monday, it conveys a textured reading of the past not possible through microfilm. The information is on those reels, but there is something magical about feeling the paper, being branded by newsprint and – yes – inhaling that naphthalene.

### *Assault and battery*

This paper investigates the major library controversy of recent years: the debates encircling the publication of Nicholson Baker's *Double Fold: libraries and the assault on paper*. It has been a timely clash. Too often libraries are a forgotten part of the educational experience, being sidelined as an inelegant appendage, rather than the throbbing, bubbling cranium of schools, universities and civic life. My work directly confronts and questions the role and place of libraries in education and

learning broadly defined, and operates through two intertwined arguments. Firstly, Baker's controversy is monitored, revealing the profoundly contradictory imperatives confronting librarians, as either information professionals or knowledge managers. The second part excavates notions of information access, sketching the potentials and problems of digitisation for assembling popular memory.

Nicholson Baker's work has always offered challenges, being difficult to situate in fiction or non-fiction, and subverting overt, classifiable genre-based categories. He is a fine writer, swimming through language and reflexivity with a precision and purpose only seen in paid political announcements. His topics are rarely *significant* or *important*: his gaze is drawn to the banal, the negligible and the overlooked. He discovers beauty, pattern and purpose in the microcosmic minutia of the age. This fickleness is very attractive in our era of bland textbooks and predictable prose. His words massage the inelegancies of the age. From *Vox's* phone sex marathon to *Fermata's* office worker protagonist who can suspend time and undress women, Baker demonstrates what Laura Miller (2001) has termed "a passionate enthusiasm for the neglected flotsam and jetsam of every day life." *Double Fold* is therefore unusual, creating a controversy far beyond an attention to toe nail clippers.

Nicholson Baker is an activist by accident. He was infuriated by the actions of the San Francisco Public Library placing hundreds of thousands of books into landfill. The rationale for this destruction varies from the chemical (the acidic infirmity of paper) through to issues of the physical space occupied by the collection. Baker argues that throughout microfilming history newspapers and then books have been destroyed through the guillotining of their spines to quicken the filming process. This 'destroying to preserve' ethos has been a trait of successive the Librarians of Congress, particularly the incumbent, James Billington:

There's always a trade-off. The happiness and satisfaction of seeing the whole thing in the original is a short-lived privilege for today's audience. It's likely to be, in the real world, at the expense of the variety and richness of what future generations will be able to see in the microfilm version (Billington in Baker 2001, 36).

The language of economic rationalism – of efficiency, productivity and the real world – necessitates the reduction of primary source materials to questions of content. Microfilm is unable to capture colour printing or greyscale photography. The dismantling of library collections, particularly original bound newspapers and ‘brittle books’ to create microform editions is a destruction of both print and paper history. It also ignores the weaknesses of microfilm, with the polyester-based films permeable by fungal attack and silver-halide flaws. Baker argues, through the infamous double fold test, [1] that the degradation of books has been overstated. A more accurate judgment of value would be a focus on legibility.

Significantly though, *Double Fold* is not a damning treaty against digitisation. Actually, Baker argues that such a process has value for access and preservation. He recognizes that there is yet to be a standard resolution for the scanning of newspapers, [2] and – at this stage – more research must be conducted on the migration of data. Archives require the stable storage of information, which may not be accessed for many years. Refreshment, migration and software revision renders such archival practices unpredictable in their feasibility. Digitisation and convergent media are not his target. Baker attacks microfilming, believing that this process has actually prevented the effective presentation of the archival past through the Web. Poor quality digital scanning results from the migration of reels to bits and bytes. [3] As he states, “you can’t digitise something that has been sold off piecemeal or thrown away, after all” (2001, 16). He is not against technology, but remains resolutely passionate about reading. Looking through the viewfinder is no replacement for flicking through the pages of the past. Between 1968 and 1984, the Library of Congress destroyed 300,000 books, worth approximately US\$10 million (Sciolino 2001). Those who critique this practice have been described by Billington as “luddites” (Billington in Sciolino 2001). This is an easy judgment. Those who point out the problems with the directives of the powerful are invariably ridiculed as backward or blocking progress. Those who despise the actions of Billington describe him as part of a “cultural holocaust” (Dirda 2001, 15). Ironically, this Librarian of Congress not only headed the move to digitisation, but also started the American memory project to provide “the

memory for an inherently memory-less society” (Billington in Conaway 2000, 206). He obviously saw no contradiction in his policies.

Microfilming has altered the way in which history is researched and written. To read a newspaper is to gain a breadth and texture of daily events. As Malcolm Jones affirms, “when it comes to books and especially newspapers, nothing beats the original. Historians know this. Librarians, who are the curators of physical objects, ought to” (2001, 57). The subtle development of ideas and attitudes is difficult to track. To read microfilm is to look up only a specific citation or page as there is little pleasure to be discovered in the blinking parchiness of the research process. Indeed, in an Ontario Archive, a microfilm reader had an airsickness bag appended to it (Baker 2001, 40).

Baker has reminded us that books are both “physical artifacts” and “bowls of ideas” (2001, 224). There are so many debates about the book because there is no agreed notion of how its value is determined. Are the words all that matter? How significant is the cover, the illustrations or the grade of the paper? Is the book an object of art, or a site of popular memory? To prioritise access is to reduce the multiple meanings of the book. There is a chill factor, a sinewy tissue that connects readers to old books. Through holding and pondering such texts, readers learn about deep time and lasting ideas.

Destruction does not ensure access: it only inhibits flexibility. Similar arguments are made about Internet teaching. The content of the course is the imperative. The form of lectures is inconvenient, inflexible or inefficient. The web becomes a way to present the content of the course at the convenience of the student. There is little sense of the integral role of format, tone, texture and context in the learning experience. To emphasise content above form is to suggest that format is not actually part of the meaning structure. As the most basic of semiotics informs us – the signifier (form) and the signified (content) are inseparable. Both make up the sign. Both shape meaning. Carl Sessions Stepp contends that

newspapers are living originals. They have unique tactile intimacy, an exotic scent, a singular drawing-power keyed as much to their shape and feel as to their content. They are tangible artifacts, with innate historical and literary

value. Neither microfilm nor digitization, for all their archival benefit, can re-create the bond of touch to text. (2001, 61)

The difficulty in [over]stressing access is that librarians are not fortune-tellers. It is impossible to determine what material from the present will be pivotal to the interpretation of an epoch in the future. Use it or lose it should not be the basis for a mode of librarianship. That is why maintenance must be a node of consideration, rather than the unbridled rhetoric of access overcoming other concerns. The book is an artefact and text, not a container of words.

*Double Fold* propels a powerful, percussive narrative, provoking discussion and controversy. Baker thumps the lectern and dials a diatribe. He speaks from a position of passion, not as a professional librarian or archivist. What makes Baker's argument so convincing – even through its excesses and hyperbole – is that he is not only eccentric, but also prepared to put his money where his madness is. He actually bought – with his own currency – 4700 volumes of newspapers being sold and/or destroyed by the British library. He formed the American Newspaper Repository in 1999. Yet not every textual trace of a culture can be preserved, catalogued and made available indefinitely. To achieve this state would be the extreme resolution of Baker's position. His argument would be even more focused if he acknowledged the way that popular cultural, non-print based ephemera are often lost long before the demise of books and newspapers. The texture, light and bubbling enthusiasm of everyday life is removed from the official, preservable past of libraries. Only by preserving the comic, the feminine and the fan, will we reveal how the serious, masculine and intellectual have dominated our history. Through ephemera, there is a negotiation with the social normalities of a time. To enact this dialogue of power, fans reinscribe and reframe the material trashed as trivial and worthless by the dominant discourse. Without this ephemera being preserved, the fervent negotiations with power structures remains hidden. Even with these caveats – where Baker's case was not sufficiently far reaching – his analysis is controversial but well made. Invariably, some librarians were going to answer Baker's charges with aggression and pricked professional consciousness.

### *Dumpster discourse*

Libraries are one of the outstanding institutions of the last millennium. They are a site of reassuring continuity. Libraries once stored papyrus scrolls: librarians now assist users to scroll across computer screens. Nicholson Baker's prosecutorial thrust has raised serious questions about the function of the institution. Obviously this purpose is tethered to the history of reading, writing, communication and education. Libraries also provide a context, venue and discourse for the development of social relationships.

The Library of Alexandria is a testament to the power and tragedies of libraries. Set up by Ptolemy I in 300 BC as a temple to the Muses (Museion – which became Museum), the scholars working in this setting aimed to advance the arts and sciences, while distancing themselves from the mundane concerns of life. Through this cultural site, a community of writers, translators, editors, historians, geographers and mathematicians deliberated the problems of the era. The first librarian, Zenodotus of Ephesus, formed the authoritative text of both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Books were carefully catalogued and bibliographic details established. A tragedy adds a sting to the tale. Although the fire of 48 BC destroyed 400,000 rolls, it did not destroy the library. Neglect ended its rule of knowledge: with the great institution simply fading from influence and impact through a lack of use. Libraries contain memories – but both can so easily be lost.

The libraries of antiquity were for the benefit and use of kings. In medieval Europe, they were shared by king, pope and monastery. After industrialization, a new master was summoned: the economic foreman of work. The nineteenth century, besides being the era of explosive, but uneven development, was also the period of the municipal library. Emerging in the United States and Britain, by the middle of the century, the practice then moved to France. Being supported through taxation, books were loaned without cost to the user. The public libraries of Manchester (1852) and Boston (1854) opened as the embodiment of the principle. The concern with equity was pervasive. Frederick Kilgour confirmed that "the vast majority of the library users who borrowed these million volumes yearly were unable themselves to purchase the books they used"

(1998, 130). Clearly though, the standards used to select the books to be read remained elitist, and narrow. The public library movement, formed through both the establishment of schools of arts and mechanics' institutes, was a way for working class citizens to 'improve themselves.' It was also a way to add value to the workplace, creating a skilled worker. Marion Wilson recognized that,

Libraries supplied worthy texts and moral tracts, designed to make people better fit the world as the Victorian ruling classes wanted it to be. People were to better themselves, but only within their class distinction (2000, 81).

Similarly, the current focus on internet-based information is a political mechanism to block a critical reflection on knowledge, and a discussion of those socially excluded from the electronic revolution. To surf the web appears beneficial to education, but there are few questions raised as to who creates the web sites visited, and why they were built.

Different libraries have precise uses: from the corporate and academic to the public. There must be specificity to the collection and a determination of usefulness. The Library of Congress, founded in 1800, held a distinct purpose. Formed after a revolution and moulded by the Enlightenment values of reason, progress and knowledge, it was established to assist Congress with research to make laws. Popular culture was excluded from the collections of most of these early libraries. Therefore, as newspapers became cheaper through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, their place and function in the collection became significant in presenting an alternative history of politics, pleasure and power.

Throughout history, librarians have been situated at the margins of the society and discourse they serve. From the medieval monastery (where the needs of prayer dominated) through to the University sector with the stress on credentialing, librarians are not central to any institution. Libraries are the ideological bedrock that allows other discourses to be formed and naturalized. Because they are implicated and embedded in other institutions of power, it is difficult to spotlight libraries in discourse. That is why such wide-ranging interpretations circle – vulture-like – around the contemporary library. Baker's *Double Fold* caused librarians to respond defensively, and present their political rationale with overarching simplicity. For example, ponder this editorial,

written by Francine Fialkoff from the *Library Journal*.

Nicholson Baker doesn't get it. He didn't get it when he sensationalized libraries that were 'dumping' books along with the garbage. He didn't get it when he wrote about the conversion for card catalogs to OPACs. Now, he doesn't get it when he writes about the destruction of newspapers and books in the name of microfilming in his latest book, *Double Fold* ... However admirable his efforts to preserve newspapers and books and to ensure that original copies of every publication be retained, he doesn't understand – and perhaps never will – that the purpose of libraries is access ... Libraries aren't museums. Baker still doesn't get it (2001, 102).

Unfortunately, Fialkoff also does not get it. The ancient history of libraries and museums are both tethered to the Library of Alexandria – the temple for the muses. Preservation was part of the agenda. Also, for most of library histories, they have been exclusive institutions, carefully defending a static knowledge system through the ages. Even through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the aims of the library were not access, but a civilizing imperative for 'the masses.' Access cannot be a primary directive, because there is always the significant follow up question: access to what?

Problems of inequality and preservation are not only an issue for the contemporary library, but for all institutions negotiating the intricacies of post-Fordism. Information that is expansive in its social origins and carefully structured is necessary to ensure social justice. While the political function of data, information and knowledge has never been greater, librarians as a profession are facing what Herbert Schiller described as a "thorough privatization of the information function" (1996, 36). In this context, technology camouflages the socially regressive nature of education and democracy. Further, there is a profound necessity for librarians to focus their energies and training on the hardware, software and programming of information. The social nature of the profession, the crafting and grafting of an integrated palate of specialties, specificities and representations, has been deflected. The skills and knowledge of professional librarians are remarkable, and frequently underestimated and undermined. This situation is made worse through emphasizing technical skills over intellectual abilities. (Un-) fortunately, the consumer's requirements of libraries are narrow. In a 1998 survey conducted by

the American Library Association to discover what people wanted from a library, 81% of those appraised stated that they simply wanted to borrow books.

Ignoring such surveys, librarians are reinventing themselves as information resource centres, or myriad other such phrases. Michael Dirda believed that “it was a dark day for book lovers when libraries started calling themselves media learning centers” (2001, 15). Forgotten is that information is derived from the Latin *informare*, or the imposition of a form. The role of the powerful in the informatics age becomes clearer when remembering this origin. Acquisition budgets are decreasing, and more money is being swallowed to maintain database subscriptions. [4] Through all these challenges, there must be an affirmation that the creation of networked services is not a sufficient goal for the library. Access is not the answer. In fact, it is not even a question that begins to address the literacy required to interrogate, mobilize or understand database protocols and advanced search engines. The expertise of librarians can support new modes of reading, writing and communication, integrating and connecting discovery, searches, navigation and use of diverse resources. In this way, libraries remain institutions of the public sphere, an integral core to any conceptualisation of citizenship, civilization, knowledge and social justice. The earlier roles of the library are appended to new convergences of publishing, cataloguing and information aggregation. This is not a hybrid (digital and analogue) library: it is an integrated approach to print and electronic resources that does not instigate an ungainly graft onto 19<sup>th</sup> century models of space, time and information. Instead, it is a meta-library, an institution that reflexively ponders its aims, goals and purpose.

The expansion of the information economy – of librarians, archivists and information professionals – means that the map of the information industries is being constructed and corrected by many hands. There are many ways to theorise the information society: through occupational, spatial, historical, cultural or technological determinants. Just as the 1980s and the 1990s were a time of culture wars – politicised discussions about the nature of culture – Edward Shreeves discerns that the conflict on university campuses about the place of print and digital resources in the library

are “acquisitions culture wars” (2000, 877). The attendant debates about the function of computers and books in the informatics age provide a shrill, emotive edge to these discussions. Such debates revolve around notions of cultural value, and where the decreasing budget should be allocated: to digital or book-based knowledge systems. Obviously, this either/or option is highly inflammatory, and is avoided through Nicholson Baker’s *Double Fold*. He holds no difficulty with digitisation, but believes that a book or bound original should *also* be held.

The Baker controversy raises questions about the role of libraries – particularly research libraries – in public discourse. A good library is determined as much by what it excludes as what is incorporated into its collection. The history of a library is always a narrative of the knowledge that transcends it. Libraries must direct beyond their collection, linking past, present and future. The point of a library is to make available the sights, sounds and textures of an earlier age, for the purposes of the current reader. It is on this issue that Christine Cody believes “the libraries failed us” (2001). Yet they are not archives, which preserve a corporate or societal memory frequently focused on a very precise period, topic or organization. Libraries provide a record of a far wider information landscape. They hold not only content, but provide a context for information. While libraries are not archives, if the material is not preserved, then it cannot be read. Further, how is the citizenry to be encouraged to read the collection? Libraries must not be neglected cemeteries.

As yet, there is little agreement about the nature of the digital library: it may refer to document delivery, research training, database instruction, computer support, or network-based reference queries. In academic libraries, reference services are handling a mixed clientele, some with highly advanced technological proficiencies and others with more pressing training needs. If a digital library is the trope of the age, then it must be filled with content far beyond a scientific filter. Social, intellectual and political issues must attend the discursive party. Certainly, there are technical challenges. To develop an integrated system of documents, media and content, with standardized classification or use of meaningful metadata, and funding the continual migration of data through

changing hardware and software permutations, is a challenge. Without standard metadata, there is no way to ascertain the importance and relationship between diverse documents. If used well, they create concrete instructions about the nature of the information's content, and how it operates.

The Internet is a convenient, less time-consuming way to conduct research, if the user possesses the necessary equipment and literacies. The copying and distributing of digital information is fast, and the great of issue of storing library materials seems to be solved. However the surprises of research – the unexpected reference, the book next to the book on the shelf that we were retrieving – is far less common. The Internet is not a library: this is a dangerous metaphor. The characteristic of a library – the organization of knowledge into preservable categories – has hardly left a trace on the Internet. A search engine is not a catalogue of accessible holdings. Catalogues are not simply a collection of numbers, but a sequence of ideas. While such structures may appear a relic of the analogue age, they hold a social function – to enable users to search, gather and assess information. While the web may appear to remove the physicality of information, we are yet to make this leap conceptually. The main question to be confronted is how the information is to be deployed with responsibility.

Baker's anger was directed at what he saw as the destructive treatment of books and newspapers by librarians, those entrusted with their safekeeping. However, I want to stress that the situation is even more serious than he suggested. It is in the realm of digital materials that the greatest cultural losses will be sustained. Digital documents are much more difficult to preserve than paper. While the digital realm has created an explosion of information, sites and voices, it also possesses its own attendant, destructive silencer and destroyer: self-obsolescence. Every new piece of software and hardware steps over the broken bodies of files, images, peripherals and ideas that – with ruthless precision – have been lost and destroyed, rather than migrated or moved. Programming languages, storage formats and operating systems are made redundant – useless – alongside the documents, images and words written through the platforms. What language do we choose for preservation purposes: HTML, XML, SGML or CGI scripting? Every new Micro-

soft upgrade burns a digital Library of Alexandria. We accept the losses, the tragedies, as the nature of working in our long now. At its most significant, Brand showed that “science historians can read Galileo's technical correspondence from the 1590s but not Marvin Minsky's from the 1960s” (1999, 84). The replacement of hardware and the upgrades of software show that the maintenance of a digital database, let alone an archive, will be very expensive. Most web sites have the lifespan of an open bag of M&Ms, and treated with about as much social significance. Such an analysis is not technological determinism: the Internet did not increase the sense of speed, just as the printing press did not cause the reformation. Critics want to find rupture, discontinuity and difference. It is timely to recognize the ideological confluences between the analogue and digital, and the specific difficulties evoked through the maintenance of digital data. Baker has initiated a great service to intellectual culture. *Double Fold* has ensured a double take of library practices, and a re-evaluation of our expectations from information.

### Notes

1. The *Double Fold* test is derived from the MIT Fold Test, initiated by W.J. Barrow, who demonstrated that books were vulnerable when a strip of its pages were turned back and forth through 270 degrees, at the rate of 175 *Double Folds* per minute. For a discussion of this text, please refer to Baker (2001, 152–155)
2. There is also an error rate in digital scanning, averaging to three characters out of one hundred. For a discussion of the difficulties of accurate scanning of print-based texts, please refer to McDonald (2001, 49). Also there are qualitative issues to be discussed in relation to scanning. Most documents can be scanned at 200dpi, but for many texts – particularly those with sizeable image-based content – this standard is not sufficient.
3. As Baker argues (2001, 26), “Newspaper pages are the most difficult of all printed artifacts to photograph (or digitize) well: they are very large, narrow-margined, and filled with tiny type and finely detailed line drawings and photography.”
4. John Hamilton recognized this problem when he stated, “strapped to meet rising prices, research libraries spend more money to buy less. The ARL study found that serial expenditures doubled, while overall purchases declined 6 percent; book purchases declined 14 percent.” (2000, 239)

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