Debating “Discards”: A Response to Nicholson Baker

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In Nicholson Baker’s recent *New Yorker* article “Discards,” he characterizes as wicked, shortsighted, and anti-intellectual those who have discarded public card catalogs and replaced them with online catalogs.¹ He says the value of the card catalog is slighted when it is “tacitly understood” to be “merely a finding aid.” He believes that the card catalog is a much more efficient and accurate research tool than the online catalog and that it has a far-underrated value as a physical artifact worthy of research in its own right. He concedes that the cataloging backlogs of the 1970s required automation to eliminate them, and that one cannot expect a library to “maintain sequences of alphabetized cardboard for a collection that is growing, as some currently are, at a rate of five hundred items a day.” In a positive light, he admits that online catalogs are more wheelchair-accessible and provide Internet access to catalogs throughout the world.

CARD CATALOG SHORTCOMINGS
We who create catalogs can appreciate both the constructive criticism he provides on the current shortcomings of online catalogs, and his concern as an experienced user of both card and online catalogs. However, in addressing the flaws in his arguments, I must point out that most of our public card catalogs were not priceless archival treasures worthy of eternal preservation. They were excellent, functional-but-flawed finding tools, crippled in achieving their purposes by budget constrictions, the limitations of the *Library of Congress Subject Headings* list (*LCSH*), the confusion of nonintuitive or knowledge-based filing rules, human error, and vandalism. The catalogs, in their transition from card to online, are being recreated as much more effective finding aids—so effective, in fact, that restricting patron access to the online catalog until it is fully clean would be a disservice.

Card catalogs provided multiple access points for an item and easily integrated information about new books. Card catalogs generally pulled together books by an author well, although sometimes local filing rules split them apart again into separate files for an individual who functioned variously as an author, editor, or compiler. Card

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catalogs also grouped records by subject well, within the limitations of the two to three headings usually assigned to each title. Some libraries routinely assigned additional headings or enriched the description by a contents note, but the bigger the library (or the cataloging backlog), the greater the likelihood of accepting the few headings provided on Library of Congress (LC) cataloging copy, in order to make more items at least minimally accessible.

Research libraries using the LCSH list as a subject thesaurus (i.e., most research libraries) generally managed to create and file the “see” reference cards in the public card catalog. This task is not unmanageable; in the case of MOTION PICTURES, the cross references needed currently would be CINEMA see MOTION PICTURES; FILMS see MOTION PICTURES; MOVIES see MOTION PICTURES. The “see also” references were less frequently maintained in card catalogs. For MOTION PICTURES there are currently over three hundred narrower, broader, and related “see also” references listed in LCSH, ranging from 3-D FILMS through YOUTH IN MOTION PICTURES. Each of these has its own structure of related headings, which in a card environment leads to incredibly complex, labor-intensive work in constantly pulling, retyping, and refiling cards as new items are added to the catalog. The same maintenance activity occurs in reverse when the last heading in a file is removed, to prevent the notorious “blind reference.”

In many libraries, the expense of maintaining “see also” reference cards was so prohibitive that an alternative approach was used: that of emphasizing patron use of LCSH. With the subject heading linkages for narrowing or broadening a search available in this tool, the patron could easily flip from one page to another, locate a variety of possibly useful headings, and then pursue them in the card catalog. Instruction in use of LCSH was an integral part of classroom bibliographic instruction, and a starting point in much reference assistance of library users.

Although the filing scheme used in library card catalogs was generally alphabetical, users still had problems with the card files. Were all types of cards filed together, or were subjects in a separate file? Was the alphabetical order in use letter-by-letter (a cappella, ace, a priori) or word-by-word (a cappella, a priori, ace)? Abbreviations were filed as though spelled out in the language of the title, so Dr. [e.g., Doctor] Thompson's Practice precedes Dr. [Doktor] Mabuse der Spieler. The student of American history interested in Queen Anne's War could use the LCSH to find the exact heading UNITED STATES - HISTORY - QUEEN ANNE'S WAR, 1702-1713, but had to learn that in the card catalog it would be filed not alphabetically but chronologically, before UNITED STATES - HISTORY - KING GEORGE'S WAR, 1744-1748. Having absorbed that principle, when that same student begins research for a geology paper, which entry would file first, GEOLOGY, STRATIGRAPHIC - JURASSIC (long ago), or GEOLOGY, STRATIGRAPHIC - HOLOCENE (recent)? Granted, most of these filing problems became almost transparent, nonproblems to experienced users of the card catalog, but they presented very real difficulties to each newcomer.
The roles played by human error and vandalism in degrading the quality of the card catalog as a research tool were significant. Human error was shown in both typos and filing errors. A significant typo can lose a title equally well in card and online catalogs, as in *Conservation of Primates* versus *Conversation of Primates*. A filing error can lose a card permanently. Disgruntled or bored student filers have been known to drop cards down elevator shafts or to insert clumps of cards at the ends of drawers, sins which could be long undetected. The vandalism of the patron who pulls a card or tears off a call number corner rather than finding a pencil destroys access as thoroughly as the advocate of CREATIONISM who pulls all cards filed under EVOLUTION.

**THE DANGERS OF THE FROZEN CARD CATALOG**

In support of the card catalog over the online catalog, Baker says:

there is no equivalency [between the two types of catalog]. The unfortunate truth is that, in practice, existing frozen card catalogs, which just sit there doing no harm to anyone, are typically being replaced by local databases that are full of new errors (an early OCLC study found 1.4 errors per record input), are much harder to browse efficiently, are less rich in cross-references and subject headings, lack local character, do not group related titles and authors together particularly well, and are in many cases stripped of whole classes of specific historical information (e.g., the original price of the book, its acquisition date, its original cataloging date, its accession number, the original cataloger’s own initials, the record of any copies that have been withdrawn, and whether it was a gift or a purchase).

Baker claims that the card catalog is a more effective research tool than the online catalog, and that it is an artifact worthy of its own research and preservation. I contend that the online catalog is a much better research tool which has resolved many problems of the card catalog, though it still falls short of perfection. (Even Baker has "no doubt that the software will get better. That's the wonderful thing about software: it gets better.") Furthermore, I believe that most card catalogs lack value as research artifacts in their own right, that a frozen card catalog rather quickly becomes a liability, and that catalogers working as a group toward international bibliographic control have made a contribution far more valuable than that of any single card catalog’s physical or cross-reference structure.

A frozen card catalog, as an outdated guide to the collection, can indeed do considerable harm. One can drape the catalog in crepe and cover it with warning signs, but its very presence will trick some users into trying to rely on it. A catalog frozen in 1988 can lead a researcher to believe the library has no materials more recent than 1988 on FEMINISM, and no materials at all on the PERSIAN GULF WAR. This is particularly unkind to the more inexperienced users such as undergraduates required to
use recent research. The frozen card catalog can show withdrawn titles as part of the collection and it leaves relocated or reclassified materials in their old locations, leading users to futile searches or recall requests. Online catalogs are more current; even uncataloged new titles often show up in on-order files and, if retrospective conversion is not complete, it is at least ongoing. The researcher needing older materials may more often be sophisticated enough to seek librarian assistance. Given the inherently deceptive nature of a frozen card catalog, I would have to respond to Baker that the study tables or additional electronic tools filling the old card catalog space are far more helpful to the library user.

SHORTCOMINGS AND STRENGTHS OF THE ONLINE CATALOG

Baker says that the frozen card catalogs “are typically being replaced by local databases that are full of new errors.” The article mentioning the OCLC study is not cited, so it is unclear whether the errors affected access points, computer formatting, or minor typos in notes; some errors are worse than others. In any case, retrospective conversion has also reinstated to the collection items for which cards had been misfiled or lost from the catalogs, while upgrading headings which had become obsolete. An “early” OCLC study also cannot reflect the decades of expertise some libraries now have in creating high-quality machine-readable bibliographic records.

Two published studies have recently shown the online catalog to be more accurate than the card catalog. Gunnar Knutson at the University of Illinois at Chicago compared the accuracy of a new online catalog and existing card catalog in a 1990 article.2 His study showed the online catalog to have fewer serious retrieval errors than the card catalog, and found it “cleaner and more current than the card catalog even before extensive online maintenance was in effect.” Similar results were shown by a study at Texas A&M by Colleen Cook and Leila Payne, who concluded that librarians “can probably be assured that their automated files are more accurate than the paper files which they replaced.”3

Baker says that online catalogs are “less rich in cross references and subject headings.” While it is true that some systems lack online cross references, other libraries have loaded the entire LCSH online, providing more inclusive access than in their card catalogs. Furthermore, the new searching technique of using a keyword search in combination with subject heading displays has created a new type of cross-referencing. For instance, the subject RICE PAPER does not appear in LCSH, even as a cross-reference. Unsurprisingly, a subject search in MELVYL (the union catalog of the University of California system) for RICE PAPER had a zero result. A title word search for RICE PAPER, however, located 4 titles. A display of their subject headings shows that these materials are grouped under the subjects PAPER, HANDMADE (with forty titles) and JAPANESE PAPER (with nine more titles). In addition, the keyword search located two works whose titles included the fact that they were actually printed on rice paper, enriching the research with samples of the material in a way
impossible in the card catalog. This technique proves immensely valuable in researching topics which are either very small or very current and may not yet have a standardized LC subject heading. While bibliographic instruction and reference assistance still require reliance on LCSH to focus on the most applicable headings, keyword searching provides a flexible supplement.

The assertion that online catalogs have fewer subject headings due to losses during retrospective conversion is debatable. It is true that some older headings, especially locally added ones, were not input. However, the remaining headings were often updated and standardized through the authority work done in loading the online bibliographic file. Also, anecdotally, it seems that catalogers tend to feel more freedom in assigning supplemental headings, having been freed from the constraints of card space and filing, assuming that the automated system purchased has adequate memory.

Baker claims that online catalogs do not group related titles and authors together particularly well. When headings showed variation in the card catalog, one could group them together and let the mind's eye ignore the differences. If headings were not made uniform during retrospective conversion, those variations still exist and are more visible in computerized listings. Librarians are certainly aware of this and database cleanup is an ongoing, high-priority task in all libraries with automated catalogs. Newly cataloged materials generally have an increased level of authority checking, as rigidly accurate automated systems can create maintenance lists of headings which are new or incompatible with existing files.

Baker contends that the online subject catalog is much harder to browse efficiently, primarily due to the incredible "noise" of surplus, irrelevant hits. One person's "noise" could be another's serendipitous treasure, as with the earlier example of finding materials printed on rice paper. Some online catalogs allow a filtering of the "noise" in ways impossible in the card catalog, such as limiting the response to titles in English, or to works published in the last three years or in a specific year, or an add-on search to delete those having a particular unwanted subject aspect. Some catalogs have a summary format showing a dozen titles on one screen, which can be browsed faster than flipping through those same dozen cards.

One especially unfortunate aspect of Baker's article is that he relates problems he found in searches of very large databases and generalizes these problems to all online catalogs. Certainly there will be searching "noise" when dealing with the 30-million-record OCLC database or the nearly 8-million-title-record MELVYL union catalog. In April 1994, however, members of the Autocat electronic discussion group who replicated Baker's searches in local systems reported more reasonable, manageable results.

Access to the catalog can now include access to other databases, typically for periodical citations and abstracts. The efficiency in searching can be tremendous. A student can search through many years of an index with one search, which is sometimes the same search used in the online catalog, and can determine simultaneously which
articles the library holds, as compared to the old necessity of copying many citations in hope that the library might have a few of them.

CARD CATALOG AS ARTIFACT
Baker claims important secondary research uses for the card catalog as an artifact. He bemoans the loss of "specific historical information" such as original price and so on, and blames the loss on the removal of the public card catalog. Most libraries did not even record this in the public catalog; if kept at all, it appeared on less-available files such as a serials Kardex or a shelflist, often located far from public access. Kardex files have often been replaced by automated systems long before an online catalog became available at a library, and many libraries stopped adding such information to shelflist cards about the time they started OCLC card production, back in the 1970s or earlier. Baker claims that the drawers and cards can "offer clues to what books were in the library during different eras," such as whether a particular book was in the library during the period a researcher was developing a theory. Any assumptions would be on very shaky ground. There is no way of telling whether any book was really on the shelves, checked out or misshelved, nor whether the cards were correctly filed or lost. Further, even the presence of a book in a library at a given time is no guarantee that a particular researcher who worked there at that time actually used the book. Even the bands of dirt along the tops of the cards may be suspect; do they reflect ongoing heavy use, or short-term heavy use at one time in the catalog’s history? They do not at all reflect the use of collections by those researchers who browse the stacks rather than the catalog.

Baker compares the card catalog to a manuscript composed of millions of cards, and berates libraries for not keeping an archival version of the catalog. There might be a card catalog which should be preserved, just as a few book catalogs have been. But the card catalog might be better compared to the early drafts of authors. Some authors retain drafts which eventually end up in library archives where they prove fertile ground for scholars of a work’s evolution. The changes in each version show very direct, conscious decisions on the part of the author, though a critic may claim that parts of the earlier versions were better than the final creation. Other authors destroy early drafts as they go, feeling that the final result is the one on which their fate should be based, refusing others the chance to draw conclusions from unrefined, interim work. Still other contemporary authors creating on computers may overwrite each draft as they go, either from inertia or principle. The same processes are happening with card catalogs: some libraries cannot afford to keep them, and some consider it inappropriate to do so in their incompatibility with the online catalog. These changes in method of creation may be a real loss in hiding the evolution of a novel, but any conclusions about subject usage, scope of collections, or library policies that might be drawn from the old physical card catalog would be subject to unacceptably high levels of error and chance.
IS THE CATALOG BEING DESTROYED?

Baker comments on the pain of long-time catalogers at the destruction of the public card catalogs. Certainly there is a twinge at seeing the product of thousands of dollars and the work of hundreds of students and staff discarded. But the catalog is far more than its flawed, grimy, physical form; its true essence is migrating into another, stronger, and eventually more perfect entity. We can preserve the body, like Lenin’s, if we choose, but it soon becomes irrelevant and at worst an embarrassment.

Baker says finally that “the real reason to keep card catalogues is simply that they hold the irreplaceable intelligence of the librarians who worked on them.... [The] work of all those other people who spent every weekday thinking about the interconnectedness of the books around them.” Again, that is not lost, it has just changed form. Even without physical cross-reference cards, we are building our collections based on a thesaurus structure (usually LCSH), which is still being carefully applied. Also, we take pride in the unambiguous, correctly input description of library materials as unique, recognizable editions. These two efforts, in combination, allow the flexibility of keyword searching to be combined with careful grouping by subject, providing both a wide scope and a narrow focus, depending on the needs of the library user.

Baker’s lament did not tell librarians anything new about the ongoing need to clean and simplify online catalogs. Baker did libraries a disservice in alarming a literate public about a matter which even he admits is being improved constantly. There is nothing demeaning in considering the catalog to be a “mere” finding aid; that is, indeed, its reason for being.

NOTES


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