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Digitized History

One of the great themes in this digital age is the dream of perfect reproducibility, the ability to create generation after generation of digital copies with no loss of information. Binary code has also become the Esperanto of equivalence, translating music, words and images into a common, readily manipulated language. It has dissolved the fundamental differences between text and illustration. The time when photographs by Jacob Riis, the journalist and social reformer, had to be turned into wood engravings in order to be printed in The New York Tribune seems almost as distant as the time, only a few years ago, when copiers and printers were entirely different machines, when combining text and illustration meant an exacting outing with scissors and paste and a bottle of Wite-Out.

But digital technology can perfectly replicate only what is already digital. At home, you can now turn out exact copies of existing CD recordings. But even in the best digital recordings of live performance there is a loss of grain, of substance. You can scan a photograph or the pages of a book, but the original remains tangibly different, if only because it was printed on different stock with inks of different composition. There may be only the ghost of a difference between the original and the copy, but these are the ghosts that matter. In the texture of old paper or the warmth of old ink, there lurks something irreducibly rich, a kind of information that cannot be detached from the stuff itself.

Meanwhile, stuff itself is in serious trouble. Consider the fate of the Bettmann archive, which began as a collection of images recorded on film smuggled out of Nazi Germany by Otto Bettmann and grew into a collection of 17 million historic photographs, now in the possession of Bill Gates. When Mr. Gates bought the archive, the plan was to digitize all its images. But the time it will take to digitize those pictures has proved to be longer than many of the pictures themselves will last, unless they are properly stored. As a result, the archive is destined for archival refrigeration 220 feet below ground in a limestone mine not far from Pittsburgh.

From a curatorial standpoint, the decision to place 17 million photographs into protracted cryogenic hibernation is exactly the right one. It is also a sensible hedge against the shifting technology of digitization. But it has the unwelcome disadvantage of hiding away from us a more nuanced vision of history, a vision that is more expansive, more ambiguous than the endless replication of the quarter-million Bettmann images that were digitized before this decision was made.

At least those originals will be preserved. According to Nicholson Baker, old newspapers have not been so lucky. In his chilling new book, "Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper," Mr. Baker chronicles the dire effects of the ideology of replication. With an ill-founded distrust of aging paper, librarians in the past half-century have microfilmed most of the old newspapers in their collections and then discarded the originals, as if there were no difference between a coil of microfilm, itself vulnerable to deterioration, and a properly bound volume of, say, The New York Tribune in the days when Riis was its police reporter.

It is easy enough to point to the inadequacies of microfilm and to argue that new digital technologies will produce copies of higher quality. But, as Mr. Baker argues, when all the newspaper originals have been destroyed, the only recourse is to make a digital copy of a microfilm. The growing urge to digitize and then discard the books in libraries is also based on the ideology of replication. There is nothing wrong with digitizing books and newspapers as long as it never becomes a pretext to destroy the originals. They are the real matter of which real history is made.

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