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What Not to Save: The Future of Ephemera

Librarians and archivists know how valuable ephemera can be to scholars, particularly cultural historians. In the John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, for example, you can find theater programs from the 1830's, daily railway timetables from the 1860's, or an 1848 pamphlet describing a panoramic painting of Niagara Falls. Unlike deliberately preserved documents that are deemed important at the time, ephemera are fragments that have survived more or less inadvertently. They function like a DNA sample of the culture they represent, helping those who study them to map larger social, political, or aesthetic trends. Much of their significance comes from the accident of their survival, which gives them an almost magical aura, as if they were fated to survive.

Ephemera could be described as items that are printed, but not deliberately "published," a distinction that makes them similar to some of the content that now appears in our email or on the web without a formal editorial structure. Unlike published texts that are filtered and vetted, items of ephemera are more or less spontaneous manifestations of cultural preoccupations. It is precisely that lack of intentionality that makes them valuable to scholars. Ephemera offer a snapshot of the past that seems to capture our forebears when they weren't looking. The quasi-accidental survival of documents that were not thought of as significant allows us to look beyond the recorded

history of important events to give close examination to the merely recreational or the quotidian.

If, according to Clay Shirky's paradigm, content can either be filtered, then published, or published, then filtered, ephemera falls into a category of its own, representing a cycle of production, use, quiet survival, eventual acquisition, and public access. This cycle involves different layers of filtering by different hands. At a time when media and communications are proliferating at a rate that already outstrips our capacity to absorb, let alone save, everything, the categorical ambiguity of ephemera is instructive. The continuing value of ephemera suggests that we should be attentive to the electronic detritus of our own era, and think about the pathways that it might follow into the future.

What is ephemera, and why is it valuable? Maurice Rickards' popular definition describes ephemera as "minor transient documents of everyday life" (Collecting Printed Ephemera, p. 7) The Library of Congress characterizes its ephemera collection as "primary-source items" that include "proclamations, advertisements, blank forms, programs, election tickets, catalogs, clippings, timetables, and menus," documents that "capture the everyday activities of ordinary people." An exhibition catalog for "Ephemera from the Age of Victoria" defines ephemera as "documents of everyday life intended for short-term use and disposal," a category that includes "printed and handwritten material… pamphlets, newspapers, calendars, greeting cards, posters, advertising novelties, packaging," and other "treasures rescued from the wastebasket." Ephemera are documents so brief and utilitarian that their production represents a convenience rather than a statement. The idea that these items have been "rescued" from

their intended fate reinforces the fortuitousness of their survival. These are items that were not intended to outlast their everyday use.

The objects catalogued in Maurice Rickards' Encyclopedia of Ephemera (2000) demonstrate the wide variety of paper items that survive from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, a variety that reflects the exponential growth of the printing industry. As new technology reduced costs and expanded possibilities, printing became more elaborate, more decorative, and more discretionary. The explosion of paper novelties of all kinds (greeting cards, bookmarks, fans, trade cards, advertising labels, programs) in the nineteenth century reflects the Victorians' pleasure in a new medium, much as the current proliferation of prefabricated electronic messages (e-cards, clip art, links, signature quotations, forwarded YouTube videos) reflects our culture's enjoyment of these newly available forms.

Many items of ephemera belong to the genre of items known as "keepsakes," whose name announces their intention to memorialize important events, such as coronations, parades, or public holidays. The enormous number of keepsakes produced in the nineteenth century speaks to a new hunger for some material instantiation of the excitement associated with significant social, political, or personal occasions. That same impulse to memorialize was surprisingly evident this year during the period surrounding the election and inauguration of Barack Obama. The day after the election, in the midst of numerous articles in the press announcing the death of newspapers, with all the "news" in the papers already known to them from television and the internet, Americans stood in long lines to buy copies of the New York Times, the Washington Post, and other major newspapers that recorded Obama's historic victory. Many publications were taken by

surprise at the almost quaint desire of Americans to capture the moment by acquiring a document that seemed to certify their own presence and participation in this moment of history. But The New Yorker, Time, and other magazines with election-themed covers also found themselves struggling to keep up with demand, and subsequently offered special commemorative reprints of their election issues. It was precisely their transitoriness, their status as a piece of the day's reality, that made these publications valuable. In spite of the enormous number of souvenir items associated with the inauguration that were available for purchase, people craved a routine, naturally occurring marker of the day, something that seemed real rather than manufactured.

The fact that people were drawn to print documentation of the inauguration demonstrates the importance of the material form of the information they provide. Many people watched the inauguration on the television or on the internet, and many more watched portions of it on internet news services or YouTube. But downloading the President's speech, or even one of the popular clips of the Obamas dancing at the first inaugural ball, clearly did not satisfy the need for some tangible "piece" of the occasion. Not only newspapers, but the printed novelties that form today's collections of ephemera served this purpose in the past. When improved typography made rapid changes in content easier, a booming market developed for printed souvenirs that often offered nothing but verification of a date and event. "Frost-fair papers," for example, were printed by itinerant printers who set up shop on the River Thames during one of the frost fairs that occurred when the river froze over. Papers from as far back as the frost of 1683-4 survive, noting the bearer's name, date, and "Printed on the Thames" (Rickards 154).

The inauguration keepsakes described above represent only a small fraction of possible contemporary ephemera, and are worth noting because they already feel archaic, seeming to stand on the threshold between a world of physical print and the paperless, or at least less-paper, future we are moving toward. The category of transaction recorded through traditional ephemera is precisely the category of transaction that has moved into electronic form most quickly. While there is still room for debate about the likelihood that substantial print publications will be fully superseded by electronic versions, it seems entirely clear that trivial publications are rapidly disappearing. As Nicholas Carr notes, many products and messages, such as tickets and greeting cards, are "shedding their physical embodiments and turning into pure information" (The Big Switch 122). Such routine paper communications as hotel booking confirmations are now sent electronically, and may or may not be printed by the recipient. This means that certain kinds of transactions may be recorded only through numbers or sums, without any sense of the specific form of interaction involved.

Yet such routine transactions can be very illuminating. For example, ephemera collections reveal that in the nineteenth century, merchants often returned change to customers in paper "change packets" that not only advertised the merchant's shop but sometimes carried other paid advertisements as well, telling us a great deal about the growth of consumer culture in the period. In Great Britain in the first half of the twentieth century, many tailors and haberdashers acknowledged very small amounts of change with in-kind tokens such as "change pin-paper," a wallet of pins printed with the name of the shopkeeper and a phrase such as "Farthing change with thanks" (Rickards, Encyclopedia 81). Today, monetary transactions large and small take place electronically,

leaving no such physical trace. Contemporary financial transactions will be, in most ways, more accurately recorded than in the past. Depending on the thoroughness of a bank's or store's records, future historians will likely know more the popularity of specific items, and the success of various pricing strategies. They will have more data. But they may well have less physical evidence of the feel and texture of commercial transactions.

Existing ephemera collections demonstrate an interesting blend of professional judgement and individual whimsy. No library houses an ephemera collection that grew organically over the time span represented by the objects it contains; these are items that by definition would not have seemed significant enough to merit acquisition and study at the time they appeared. And yet, somebody saved them, and compiled them into a collection with enough thematic coherence that it was eventually deemed worthy of acceptance by a library. In fact, most major collections of ephemera represent the individual interests and tastes of specific donors who may have spent a lifetime developing his or her own collection, before offering it to a university or public library. The John Johnson Collection of Printed Ephemera, for example, was compiled by John de Monins Johnson, Printer to the University at Oxford University Press from 1925 to 1946, who left his collection to the University. Like many special collections, ephemera collections reflect a process of acquisition that takes place first at an amateur level, then is ultimately validated by a professional curator who accepts the collection into the care of a university, museum, or other public institution.

What do these objects mean to us today, and to what degree is their usefulness related to their status as printed matter? A few decades ago, ephemera

was of interest primarily to historians of typography and the printing trade. (The world's only Centre for Ephemera Studies, at the University of Reading, is part of the Department of Typography and Graphic Communications). More recently, historians have used ephemera to uncover patterns in commercial and social interactions, or to illustrate thematic preoccupations of the period. It is now standard practice for a book on British imperialism, for example, to be illustrated with soap advertisements or cigarette wrappers depicting nationalist themes.

To use my own work as an example, I have recently completed a book project that makes extensive use of advertisements and programs relating to Victorian panoramas—enormous, 360-degree depictions of places that were an entertainment staple of the period. The John Johnson Collection houses several boxes of these, and studying them offers both quantitative and qualitative information about this phenomenon. The sheer number and variety of surviving programs conveys a clearer sense of the popularity of panoramas than is obtainable in more formal records of the period. Unless one were to read periodicals over a period of decades in search of reviews, it would be difficult to compile a list of the many panoramas exhibited in London between the 1820's and 1880's. But a survey of surviving advertisements and programs, though presumably not comprehensive, reveals panoramas of London, Paris, Cairo, Vienna, Hong Kong, Damascus, Benares, Cabul, Edinburgh, Rome, Berlin, Constantinople, Moscow, Delhi, Venice, Canton, Messina, Naples, Jerusalem, Nimrod, Calcutta, Florence, Geneva, Bombay, New York, Lima, Antwerp, and Dublin.

Equally important, however, are the clues these handbills and programs offer to the nature of these exhibits and the expectations generated in their audiences. The bold

typography is more consistent with what one sees in theatrical programs, for example, than what one might expect from an exhibit at the Royal Academy, suggesting that painted panoramas were classified more as entertainment than as art. The elaborate rhetoric of these ads suggests that panoramas were viewed as a substitute for real travel experience. A scenic view of a Swiss waterfall incorporating "the various changes of the day" is said, in an 1831 advertising handbill, to produce so "enchanting" an effect that spectators "cannot help fancying themselves imperceptibly transported into the very interior of the province of Switzerland; and that they are viewing in reality, the very identical spot, on which their admiration is so intensely fixed." (JJ Coll, Dioramas 3). An advertisement for a panorama of Niagara Falls assumes no distinction between the image and the reality: "Have You Seen Niagara Falls? If not, go now to Niagara Hall" (JJ Coll, Dioramas 2).

A number of panorama advertisements are clearly aimed at those who might intend to emigrate to America, New Zealand, or Australia, and are seeking concrete information about the colonies. An ad for the "Moving Panorama of a Voyage to Australia, with descriptive lecture by Mr. Prout," advertised in a handbill of 1853, claims that "the rapidity of steam conveyance [is] superseded" by the voyage of this "emigrant ship" (JJ Coll, Dioramas 1). These texts offer valuable information about Victorian attitudes towards travel, their interest in specific places, and intersections among different forms of artistic and theatrical representation.

In considering what these items of ephemera tell us that we cannot learn from other texts or visual art of the period, it seems clear that their material form affects our sense of their value. For the collector, their tangible, totemic presence as links to the past

is perhaps predominant. Private collectors pay for the privilege of being able to hold a piece of paper in their hands, and marvel at the fact that it has lasted over 150 years. As Joy Holland, a librarian at the Brooklyn Public Library, puts it, the fact that "you are touching an object—a ticket, a catalog…connects you to its former owner." Many aspects of the object's physical appearance—"its typeface, the texture of the paper, the style of illustration, the text itself"—contribute to its meaning (Brooklyn Public Library Blog Interview). A text may have scholarly or informational value, but its status as a tangible remnant is what commands a high price. The transformation of deaccessioned newspapers into souvenir pages, clippings, and advertisements, like the practice of stripping maps and illustrations from old manuscripts, reflects the sad reality that a coherent document is often less valuable than the individual scraps it may yield.   This suggests that its value as a material object supersedes its value as textual information**.**

If material form is a crucial aspect of ephemera, will there be digital ephemera in the future? Items in the John Johnson Collection are currently being digitized, making them far more accessible in the past. But images of ephemera are not the same as true ephemera, items that survive in their original form, retaining the aura of their original presentation. If the goal of studying paper ephemera is to in some ways reproduce the experience of a document's original users, then future ephemera would need to be studied in the format in which it is presented today. If, as seems likely, that format is digital, active steps must to be taken to ensure its survival.

The examples of ephemera noted above reveal a pleasure in the print medium that is similar to the pleasure today's media users take in exploiting the possibilities of new media. Our current environment is saturated with messages, advertisements, and other

forms of communication, and evolving methods of distribution encourage individual expression of content that would certainly have seemed trivial in the past. In fact, personal, individualized content has proven highly popular, whether in the form of blogs, playlists, or YouTube videos.

If ephemera is interesting precisely because it seems to have unintended value, revealing aspects of culture that were not consciously acknowledged by its original producers and recipients, then future ephemera will need to have been ignored and forgotten in our time. What is ignored or forgotten in a world where things seem to live forever on the internet? Future cultural historians will no doubt find much of interest. In fact, they might find too much of interest. In a culture that consciously resists the idea that anything is too trivial to be important, it seems likely that current communications will not disappear into a scrapbook or shoebox, but instead form a continuous stream of documentation that will make it harder to recover a sense of distance.

Historians have already recognized the value of collecting multiple forms of communication surrounding specific events, like the September 11 Digital Archive-- a collection of 150,000 items collected from private citizens, including e-mails, digital voice mails, BlackBerry communications and video clips created by George Mason University's Center for History and New Media and given to the Library of Congress. This kind of thematic cataloging of current material is different, however, from the random persistence that results in what we now call ephemera. And it presents its own challenges to the historian. As the late Roy Rosenzweig, creator of the Center for History and New Media, noted, success at preserving our digital cultural heritage will offer historians a "profound challenge": "what would it be like to write history when faced by

an essentially complete historical record?" (Rosenzweig 737) Rosenzweig called upon fellow historians to take some disciplinary responsibility for considering now what materials they might find useful in the future.

There are institutional systems in place for formal record-keeping, such as repositories of government documents, individual business archives, and collections maintained by nonprofit societies and research institutions. But the kind of private, almost incidental, collection that will offer cultural tidbits to future scholars are presumably residing on individual computers. It is hard to predict how many individuals will take their own electronic ephemera seriously enough to migrate it to new systems and keep it alive even for their own lifetimes. If they do, how many of their heirs will do the same? Collectors and librarians are already faced with the difficulties posed by the possession of "letters" and "manuscripts" of famous authors that exist only in electronic form. The John Updike materials donated to Harvard after Updike's death included floppy disks that will need to be transferred to something else in order to be read. Emory University owns several laptops and a Treo they received from Salman Rushdie (Kolowich 2009), which presumably will need to change format a few times between now and, say, 2109. Even preserving significant material will require a considerable investment of time and money; it is hard to imagine applying similar thought and resources to material we may not consider important.

What is the unimportant material that we currently discard? Perhaps an archive of one's spam filter or desktop recycle bin would capture the routine advertisements and invitations that might give future historians a feel for social trends of the present. But as communication and broadcast media continue to converge, substituting personalized or

targeted interaction in place of announcements, we may see the disappearance of formal, stable documents addressed to a general audience. In the future, communications seem likely to have a more specific context, which may make their broader cultural meaning harder to uncover.

Looking at the current explosion of interest in Twitter, one might ask, could tweets be the ephemera of the future? The future significance of tweets would depend on how many were saved, why, and by whom. The question of whether tweets constitute private communication, like letters, or public communication, like advertisements, is still up in the air. When Demi Moore recently answered a Twitter message from a suicidal correspondent, was she writing to that woman, or to the 400,000 other fans who were also tuned in? Was her tweet, "Hope you are joking," a personal message, or more like a public expression of concern? If she had responded unsympathetically, and a suicide had occurred, that distinction might have been relevant to questions of legal responsibility. Many businesses and institutions maintain a policy of purging backed-up email on a regular basis, not simply to save space, but to avoid the possibility of being asked to retrieve emails in connection with future lawsuits. Any tweets that survive in the future would probably need to be saved by individuals, or perhaps fan clubs may compile tweets of famous individuals. (Conversely, one might assume that extensive coverage in mainstream media means that Twitter's popularity has already peaked and will soon decline).

In the end, we can't underestimate the need for, and effect of, individual initiative in making some of these decisions. Much has been written already about the way in which internet culture privileges quantity over quality. The continued existence of media

products, whether blogs, videos, or other forms, is heavily dependent on their popularity as measured by visitors, clicks, or page views. The Google search algorithm that dominates the web is self-reinforcing, awarding higher status to sites or items that others have seen or recommended. Enlisting the aid of all users in defining or creating value is a very efficient way of sifting through vast amounts of information, and this data-driven approach may be even more necessary as the internet continues to grow. But as Randall Stross points out, Google's almost religious adherence to "the Algorithm" depends on a corollary belief that search results "should not be edited, adjusted, or touched in any way by human intervention," because "the only way to scale their systems to handle all of the world's information was by automating all processes" (66). This automated approach leaves little room for individual, idiosyncratic taste in assigning value.

The continuing value of what we call ephemera suggests that we need to let go of the past in order to rediscover it. Media, products, or communications that have evolved with us over time are less instructive than items that seem more firmly fixed in a particular historical moment. If a time arrives when everything can be "published," that is, made publically available, with or without some kind of formal filtering process, archivists will become the peer reviewers of the future, forced to decide what to retain or present among the enormous quantities of existing text and media. As Henry Lowood, Curator of Stanford University's History of Science and Technology and Film and Media Collections, puts it: "In the future, curation will be less about selection, and more about presentation of materials." There will be so much material to choose from, a high level of expertise will be needed to aid students and researchers in deciding what to retrieve and examine.

If our capacity to retain information becomes virtually infinite, the designers of search engines may be the ones who hold the power to shape our choices about what we see and interpret. We may find, paradoxically, that a wealth of information means that anything that does not meet an automated threshold of significance disappears from official view. Abandoned webpages will be available only through the efforts of individuals or groups who choose to maintain sites like the Internet Archive, the Museum of E-Failure, and Undead Media. Smaller nuggets of information that are not part of some pre-existing context or organizational structure may become invisible.

Clearly, my interests of a scholar of literature mean that I am placing a higher value on the individual text than might be the case if I was a historian, a sociologist, or an economist who uses data to map larger trends. But scholars in all disciplines should recognize that we need to be part of a conversation that has so far been confined primarily to librarians, archivists, and digital historians. The boundaries between these various forms of knowledge work are likely to grow blurrier in the future, as the distinction between in-class and out-of-class learning becomes more permeable, and we continue to expand our use of technology in the shared task of providing information to students and fellow scholars. Thinking about the different uses we make of items like ephemera may help guide decisions about what to save and what not to save. We need to ensure that small pieces of our digital cultural heritage do not all become subsumed into a giant field of data, but that some at least retain the original form, individual context, and aura that will make them meaningful in the future.

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