

## Against the Grain

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## Epistemology – The Tests of Time

T. Scott Plutchak

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# Epistemology — The Tests of Time

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I was so sure she'd been there having dinner with me. I remembered so clearly how she looked, what she'd ordered. But she was equally adamant she'd never been to that restaurant, certainly not with me, not that evening years back.

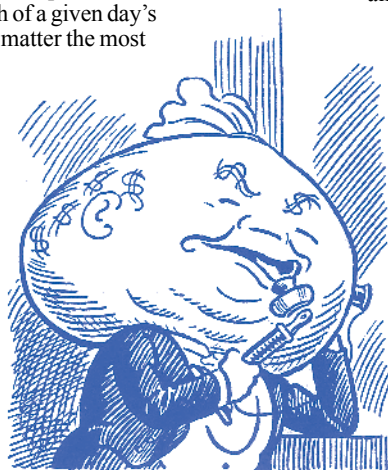
"I can prove it!" I've kept a daily log for over thirty years. There'd be evidence. But I was wrong. I'd been there alone. I'd written her a letter, described what she would have eaten if she'd been with me, imagined what she would've been wearing. Then I created a memory that was better than real. I guess love can do that to you.

Our memories are notoriously flawed, a fact that has fascinated me ever since I first came across the work of **Elizabeth Loftus** when I was a teenager. Oh, wait. Her first books didn't come out until I was in my early twenties. I just checked.

So I've learned not to trust my memories. I started keeping a journal around age fourteen (I think — that first notebook's in a box in the attic, so I can't easily dig it out to see the date). I keep five year diaries and the daily logs. Multiple ways to cross check what I remember happening against what I can document.

Our cultural memory is grievously flawed as well. This morning there's news of a candidate for U.S. Senator from Alabama ranting against the "homosexual activities" and "wife swap shows" on television destroying our country's moral core. He says we need shows that promote "the biblical principles on which our nation was founded."<sup>1</sup> Yesterday over lunch I read **Jill Lepore** emphatically pointing out in her book *These Truths* that the country "was not founded as a Christian nation." As she points out, "[t]he United States was founded during the most secular era in American history ... It is no accident that the Constitution does not mention God."<sup>2</sup> The candidate has cultural memory. **Lepore** has documentation. Lots of it. Which is stronger?

The documentation is unreliable. My diaries and logs are far from complete. How does any diarist know which of a given day's events will be the ones that matter the most when it comes to understanding a life in full? So it is with the stuff of history. "Most of what once existed is gone. Flesh decays, wood rots, walls fall, books burn. Nature takes one toll, malice another. History is the study of what remains, ... [M]ost of what historians study survives because it was purposely kept — placed in a box and carried up to the attic,



shelved in a library, stored in a museum, photographed or recorded, downloaded to a server — carefully preserved and even catalogued. All of it, together, the accidental and the intentional, ... is called the historical record, and it is maddeningly uneven, asymmetrical, and unfair."<sup>3</sup>

**Umberto Eco** and **Jean-Claude Carrière** make similar points in their charming dialogue *This Is Not The End of The Book*. **Eco** emphasizes, "...we are not even-handed with the cultural objects that we choose to preserve. For example, if you want to buy an original of one of the great comic strips it is horribly expensive, because they are so rare.... But why are they so rare? Simply because the newspapers that used to publish them threw the plates in the bin the moment the strip had been printed."<sup>4</sup> The successful printers of the incunabula age made their money from indulgences, playing cards, and pornography, almost none of which survives. Gutenberg's glorious bibles, which we've carefully preserved, bankrupted him.

**Carrière** adds, "... if you look carefully, a horrific proportion of our libraries is made up of books written by the utterly talentless, or by halfwits and crazy people. The great majority of the 300,000 scrolls kept in the Library of Alexandria are bound to have been complete rubbish."<sup>5</sup> We romanticize what's been lost.

We fetishize the documentation of the past. As written records have shifted to digital formats over the past three decades, there's been an endless drumbeat of dire warnings over what's being lost. The kinds of records — letters, for instance — that have been the basis of so many fine literary biographies simply aren't being written anymore. When I took up the position of Director of the **Lister Hill Library** in 1995, and wanted to trace the arc of certain key decisions made by my predecessors, there were binders of chronologically arranged memos for me to refer to. Within a year or two I abandoned the practice of writing and printing official memos. My communications became more informal, decisions traced and documented in emails.

What memos there were existed only in digital form. I worried that my successors wouldn't be able to trace my decision making in the same way. True enough — not in the same way. But my digital files still exist. And not just the official end products. Much more of the context has been saved than would've been the case with paper. Despite the use of the delete key, most of us do a poor job of organizing and prun-

ing our digital files. So I've got twenty years of my time at **Lister Hill** on a flash drive, ready to be mined. But what do I do with it?

When **UAB's** archivist, **Tim Pennycuff**, was assiduously trying to wrest the boxes of personal papers from the office of one of the previous university presidents, **Dr. McCallum** kept putting him off, saying that first he needed to do some weeding. "No, no!" we'd cry. "Let **Tim** do the sorting. He's the professional." We knew what **McCallum** wanted to expurgate. His was an era of deals and favors and bargains behind closed doors, scores kept and vendettas waged. What he'd eventually allow into the archives would be the "clean" record. The official account. Far from the whole truth.

That kind of cleansing is much more difficult now. (Using "deep fakes" to rewrite the historical record is an entirely different matter). There is a far more detailed record of the minutiae of the life of a typical Facebook user than could ever have been gathered for even a fairly prominent person of a hundred years ago. But who is charged with keeping it?

It's not that we lack the stuff; we lack the tools and systems and workflows to make sense of it all. Here's **Nicholas Carr**: "When we complain about information overload, what we're usually complaining about is ambient overload. This is an altogether different beast. Ambient overload doesn't involve needles in haystacks. It involves haystack-sized piles of needles. We experience ambient overload when we're surrounded by so much information that is of immediate interest to us that we feel overwhelmed by the neverending pressure of trying to keep up with it all."<sup>6</sup>

That digital stack of needles upends **Lepore's** comment about the historical record being mostly things "purposely kept." The archivist sorts and sifts a messy carton of a hodge-podge of corporate records, selects what they believe to be the most telling and relevant ones and catalogs and preserves them. Archival best practices were developed in the world of print because it wasn't practical, in any sense, to keep everything. But with a mass of digital records perhaps it isn't practical, in any sense, to do anything other than keep everything. Take this flash drive containing twenty years of my decision making. Sure, there's a lot of junk in there. But what would be the point of having a trained archivist sort through it, deleting everything that they decided isn't an essential part of the historical record? The sensible thing is to use the kinds of refreshing techniques that digital preservationists now have in hand to keep the whole corpus together and mine it for whatever insights and stories can be revealed. I used to tell skeptical administrators that the archivist's superpower wasn't knowing what to keep, it was knowing what to

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- Identify the data points you already collect and select those that would be the most useful.
- Explore ways to add useful data points you do not already collect, if possible.
- Start small and see if this will work locally to work out any issues before it becomes programmatic.
- Make sure you have support from library faculty and staff moving forward both to gather data and help with the assessment pieces. Larger institutions may need a dedicated position to provide support.
- If you use **Alma**, become familiar with generating reports in Analytics or make friends with the person in your library who does this. 🐼

### Endnote

1. Kelly, M. M. (2014). "Applying the Tiers of Assessment: A Holistic and Systematic Approach to Assessing Library Collections." *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 40(6), 585-591. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2014.10.002>.

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throw away. But the 21st century archivist needs to be a data and text miner rather than a careful selector.

When designing a data collection tool, one tries to imagine all of the questions one might want to ask of the data. You want to avoid the situation of coming up with a great question and realizing you can't address it because you didn't gather the right data in the right format at the start. Librarians and archivists and curators have made educated guesses over the centuries about what to preserve and what to discard. Those decisions, even more than the accidents of war and fire, have constrained the stories that historians can tell us about how we came to be.

In the last decades of the 20th century there was a great deal of justified anxiety over the preservation of digital formats. We've learned a lot since then. We understand redundancy and error-checking and transporting from older formats to new. The challenges aren't technological as much as they are social and organizational. Process.

The failure of the **Library of Congress's** project to establish an archive of all of Twitter is a cautionary tale of opportunity lost.<sup>7</sup> Although it was launched with great fanfare, **LOC** was never able to muster the resources that would've been required for it to live up to the hype. I'm sympathetic to the budgetary and technical challenges that the project presented, but saddened nonetheless at the decision to revert to print-world principles of selection. Now only those tweets "with historical significance" will make it to the archive. How can we know? We can't tell if something will endure through time if we don't keep it in the first place.

It's been the responsibility of the "memory institutions" — libraries, archives, museums — to maintain the historical record over centuries. That's shifting. Scholarly journal publishers are sharing responsibility for developing preservation programs and protocols that are beyond

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the capabilities of most libraries. Think **Portico**. **LOCKSS**. But these touch only a tiny fragment of what constitutes "the culture." The corporate behemoths that own the servers on which our digital culture resides haven't made long-term preservation a priority. Twitter and **LOC** took a stab at it. But it's going to take more robust partnerships, led by the experts in the memory institutions and funded by the corporations building the global infrastructure, to figure out who is going to be responsible for what and how it is all going to be paid for.

I hope they hurry. I need to know where to send that flash drive. 🐼

### Endnotes

1. **Koplowitz, Howard**. "John Merrill: 'Homosexual activities, wife swap shows' ruined TV." *Al.com*. July 15, 2019. <https://www.al.com/news/2019/07/john-merrill-homosexual-activities-wife-swap-shows-ruined-tv.html>
2. **Lepore, Jill**. *These Truths: A History of the United States*. W.W. Norton & Co., 2018. pp. 199-200.
3. **Lepore, Jill**. *These Truths. A History of the United States*. W.W. Norton & Co., 2018. p. 4.
4. **Eco, Umberto** and **Jean-Claude Carrière**, with **Jean-Philippe de Tonnac**. *This Is Not the End of the Book*. Northwestern University Press, 2012. p. 17.
5. **Eco, Umberto** and **Jean-Claude Carrière**, with **Jean-Philippe de Tonnac**. *This Is Not the End of the Book*. Northwestern University Press, 2012. p. 200.
6. **Carr, Nicholas**. "Situational overload and ambient overload." *Rough Type: Nicholas Carr's Blog*. March 7, 2011. <http://www.roughtype.com/?p=1464>.
7. **Daley, Jason**. "The Library of Congress Will Stop Archiving Twitter." *Smithsonian.com*. December 27, 2017. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/library-congress-will-stop-archiving-twitter-180967651/>.