

You may be reading this across a fold of paper, or you may be squinting at an electronic screen. Two centuries ago, the former would have seemed almost as futuristic as the latter. Wood-based paper wasn't successfully patented until 1845, after inventors had cooked straw, boiled banana peels, crushed walnut shells and dried seaweed. The coinage "pulp fiction" followed once it became clear that the new technology produced pages more brittle than those manufactured from costlier linen rags. By the dawn of the digital age, W. J. T. Mitchell could dismiss books as "tree flakes encased in dead cow".

Unlike those cows, however, paper remains in robust health. One reason is that it combines apparently irreconcilable properties—durability (it outlasts papyrus and floppy disks alike), portability (a precondition of modern postal systems) and foldability (one of Nicholas A. Basbanes's most engrossing chapters concerns origami). That trio allowed it to displace other writing surfaces that were fragile, unwieldy or both: clay, stone, papyrus, parchment, metal, bark, bones and even seashells.

And inscription is just the beginning. Basbanes points out that during the Second World War, the same long paper-making tradition that allowed Japan to devise bomb-bearing paper balloons rendered its cities

# Hold or fold

LEAH PRICE

---

Nicholas A. Basbanes

ON PAPER

The everything of its two-thousand-year history  
448pp. Knopf. \$35.  
978 0 307 26642 2

---

uniquely vulnerable to incendiary bombs: more civilians died in the blazes spread by paper windows and screens than from either of the nuclear strikes on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Meanwhile, generals were deciding how much toilet paper to issue to soldiers: the British got three sheets a day, American GIs twenty-two.

Whereas Archimedes was reduced to scratching mathematical formulas in his own oiled skin, today anyone with \$35 to spare can walk out of a bookstore with Basbanes's stack of hefty, creamy sheets. *On Paper's* 448 pages are weighed down by quotations from mission statements (Kimberly-Clark's, the Digital Public Library of America's), posed portraits of CEOs and library directors, and Basbanes's tic of introducing his sources as "eminent",

"noted", or "highly respected". But a slimmer volume might not have done justice to paper's travels from its beginnings in China some time before the first century BC, east to Korea and Japan and then west to Samarkand, Baghdad, Cairo, Islamic Spain and Christian Europe. All roads eventually lead to paper's role in US history, from the 1765 Stamp Act to Confederate newspapers printed on the back of wall-paper, to a final chapter memorializing the charred memos and missing person flyers that drifted through Lower Manhattan after September 11, 2001.

In the decade since then, Silicon Valley has touted the paperless office as the answer to deforestation. Basbanes's rejoinder is that paper, made for centuries from old clothes, was one of the first industrial products to incorporate recycled materials. More famous for its digital spying, the US's National Security Agency processes plenty of old-fashioned paper, to judge from the hundred million documents it pulps every year before turning them over to manufacturers of pizza boxes and egg cartons. Paper and computers may not be polar opposites so much as conjoined twins. Paper

punchcards were integral to the first calculating machines, and the twentieth-century spread of personal computers and printers increased consumption of the paper that they were originally expected to render obsolete.

Just after Basbanes's book appeared, two corporations began vying for rights to market their respective iPhone apps under the name of "Paper". One facilitated sketching, the other managed newsfeeds. Their tug of war over a metaphor reminds us what a central role paper has played in artistic creation and political communication alike. Also too late to be mentioned by Basbanes: a BBC presenter was recently caught on camera brandishing a stack of A4 paper which he seemed to have mistaken for his iPad. Perhaps he was acting out the now fading idiom that makes "reading the paper" synonymous with "reading the news". For the moment, at least, paper remains the standard to which digital media can only aspire.