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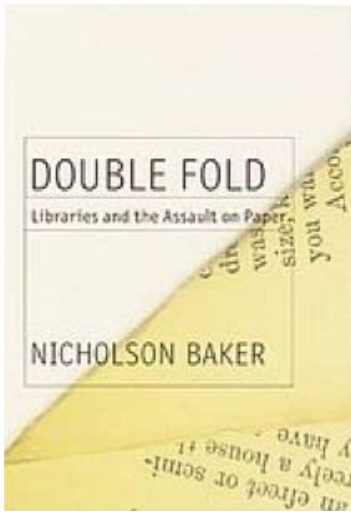
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Nicholson Baker Redux

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Do preservation methods really equal destruction, as Nicholson Baker would have it? Read for yourself and decide.
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It has been a decade since the publication of Nicholson Baker's *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper*, a work that heavily criticized library preservation practices and cast a dim light on the competence of library administration for their handling of America's print heritage. *Double Fold* was greatly acclaimed by the public at the time; it won the National Book Critics Award for Nonfiction in 2001. Newspaper and journal reviews lauded Baker's investigative look into the scandalous treatment of print materials by libraries. Baker's accusations brought interest and concern not only from journalists, but from the general public and library profession as well.

Concerned that the public increasingly perceived librarians as irresponsible, the library world felt an urgent responsibility to articulate a rejoinder countering Baker's accusations. The response that *Double Fold* demanded still plays a significant role in how libraries, archives, and other cultural heritage institutions provide access and preserve information today. This is particularly important as print continues to become, in many minds, obsolete. Regardless of format or medium upon which information resides, libraries have the continued responsibility of assessing community need and access, and providing resources (monetary as well as human), space, and preservation. The question is, a decade since the release of *Double Fold*, how are libraries managing the changes caused by the digital world?

Baker's Point

Nicholson Baker's jeremiad against libraries began with a series of articles published in *The New Yorker* covering two significant transitions for libraries and how they changed the management of information. The first was the transition of the card catalog from analog to an automated one. Baker's consternation toward automation included the fact that many libraries were disposing of the physical card catalogs. He believed that using the print version was easier than having to perform Boolean searching, that the cards contained more information, and the overall system was more intuitive. This is debatable.

The second transition was the removal and destruction of print collections, in particular 19th and early 20th century print runs of newspapers, which had been replaced by microfilm copies. When Baker discovered that the British Library was auctioning off runs of historical American newspapers such as the *Chicago Tribune*, and New York's *World* and *Herald Tribune*, he took it upon himself to save these papers from sale or even possible destruction. This is where Baker's story begins in *Double Fold*.

Much of Baker's research focuses on the destruction of print due to the conversion of content to microfilm. His commentary criticizes the reasons library professionals give for conversion: the problem of brittle paper and lack of shelving space. These two issues became the focus of Baker's assault on the preservation practices that libraries have used for decades. His solution: build huge warehouses for storage of all print ever published. Baker fears that due to the "convulsive lure" of technological innovations and the almost willy-nilly experimentation of these new technologies, librarians have not considered the consequences of using such technologies before being thoroughly tested or proved (Baker, 2001, p. 94). It must be noted, though quite obvious, that the creation of technologies in general depends entirely upon experimentation which will include failure and even sometimes disastrous results, but will ultimately lead to successes and continued improvements. In Baker's defense, he isn't opposed to new technology, just not at the expense of



print. He believes that a library's primary responsibility is the preservation of print. Hence, the warehouse solution to store both print and its preservation copy.

Baker continues to be a defender of print as expressed in his recent article titled "A New Page: Can the Kindle really improve on the book?" published in the August 3, 2009 issue of *The New Yorker*. He focuses on Amazon's Kindle2. Again, his biggest complaint surrounds the issue of technology replacing print. He thinks too many are willing to jump on the technology bandwagon without thinking about possible repercussions. Uneasiness toward technology and living in a digital world is prominent in Baker's arguments and writings. Baker's view is shared by a segment of the public. This is why Baker's arguments can be so emotionally compelling.

Librarians' Counterpoint

How did librarians respond to Baker's criticisms and accusations raised in *Double Fold*? The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and the Society of American Archivists (SAA) responded in kind to Baker's claims. In 2001, Shirley Baker, President of the ARL, composed two letters to the editors of the *New York Review* in order to "place Baker's arguments in context and to highlight the important issues at stake." Ms. Baker finishes her letter emphasizing:

Both [Nicholson] Baker's book and Darnton's review have served to bring the preservation of print artifacts to the attention of the public. We hope that the interest generated will result in heightened visibility for the many successes that libraries have had in preserving our culture and a better understanding of the complex challenges that libraries face in acquiring, providing access to, and preserving materials in ever more numerous formats, with limited resources.



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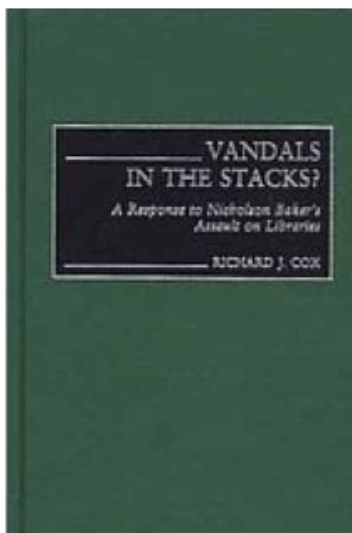
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The ARL also published a Q and A response on their Web site specifically addressing Nicholson Baker's attacks on preservation practices. The Society of American Archivists Council published a line item response to *Double Fold* acknowledging that Baker's arguments, though based on flawed analysis, raise issues that deserve attention, debate, and response within the information communities.

No one was more pronounced in his rebuttal to Baker than Richard J. Cox, Professor of School and Information Sciences and Archival Studies at the University of Pittsburgh. Cox's published response titled *Vandals in the Stacks? A Response to Nicholson Baker's Assault on Libraries* provides a point-by-point analysis of Baker's claims. One of Cox's worthiest points concerns the mission of libraries and archives and the public's perceptions of such. Baker's *Double Fold* focuses primarily on large research university libraries. This limited view into libraries is far from representational of libraries





Richard Cox places Baker's concerns in a larger context and answers why the "paper keepers" can't keep all the paper.

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or even archives. Cox (2002) expands upon this notion stating, ... libraries and archives have a much broader scope of concerns than the very *simple* [emphasis Cox] view of the world presented by Nicholson Baker. Archivists are concerned with the constantly evolving notions of records and their supporting technologies, the impact of these technologies on the reliability of records, whether a society immersed in nostalgia and memory will remember to value archival records, whether records will be used in effective ways or even at all, and the ethical challenges to managing increasingly complex and sensitive records. Librarians are concerned with how to provide access to the information in a wide diversity of print, digital, and other resources, censorship, threats to free speech and access to information, and the changing sensitivities to how information sources are seen and used. (p. 22)

The sheer enormity of the information universe must be taken into consideration. Librarians and archivists are trained in selection and collection building, including decisions about what *not* to include in collections.


This leads into one of Baker's most unfortunate misconceptions of what librarians do and the lack of understanding regarding the missions of libraries. Baker merely sees librarians and archivists as "paper-keepers" who have gotten away from their primary duty of so-called paper keeping (Cox, 2002, p. 150). Librarians and archivists are in the business of information and books are only one out of numerous means by which we access information. Print culture and its industries are products of changing technologies and are susceptible to decline in order to make room for new technologies in this instance digital. Our current culture is demanding information to be presented digitally. Baker wants to classify books as "physical artifacts, without exception, just as all books are bowls of ideas" (Baker, 2001, p. 224). But there is a significant difference between the understandings of what items represent as documentary sources versus their emotional appeal as artifacts (Cox, 2002, p. 61).

Determining the intrinsic value of an original item is what archivists and librarians do. Information in print form is an extraordinarily important part of archival and library collections and will continue to be due to the fact that print was for centuries one of the major means by which individuals communicated ideas and information. What libraries need to participate in is the promotion of technology education. It isn't about technical knowhow but "is about how the meanings of information and education change as new technologies intrude upon a culture, how the meanings of truth, law, and intelligence differ among oral cultures, writing cultures, printing cultures, and electronic cultures" (Cox, 2002, p. 120). Libraries and archives find themselves leveraging information from all of these cultures. The introduction and embracement of new technologies causes shifts in social, communication, and economic structures. Therefore, there is so much more to libraries than saving printed books and newspapers in perpetuity.

Debate Engaged

Are we fielding the same criticisms today due to increased digitization, the use of e-books, Google Books, JSTOR, and the creation of digital libraries? Are these misconceptions and rash assumptions that libraries continue to get rid of content that are irretrievable still prominent today? How do we get ourselves and the public to reflect upon what is really the future of information? Baker's attack on the profession

of Library and Information Science and its practices shouldn't be taken lightly even ten years later. Baker's oppositional voice is one that librarians and archivists should heed and use as a reminder when considering the true implications of our decisions. Though sensational and at times egregious, Baker's arguments do lend themselves to serious reflection and consideration.

Since the publication of *Double Fold*, preservation practices have improved, transparency for collection development has become more prominent in institutional mission statements, and great care and concern is taken for preserving and making accessible not only the print heritage but also the other means by which we access information. "The real matter is that we understand the nature of information and knowledge in our society" (Cox, 2002, p. 122). Books are but symbols of that knowledge. Unlike Baker's perception of libraries as being static warehouses for storing every publication ever printed forever and ever, libraries are dynamic places, both physical and digital, where information is acquired and distributed according to the community it serves. 

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