The Purpose of Libraries:

Double Fold and the Assault on Access.

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Librarians continuously face the challenge of organizing the daunting amount of information produced by past, present, and future generations in a way that patrons may readily retrieve it. An important part of succeeding in this challenge is deciding which texts to keep, and how to preserve them. However, some believe that librarians should sacrifice the ability to access information in order to preserve materials in their original format. In his well-publicized book, *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper*, Nicholson Baker supports this belief by suggesting that libraries are responsible for saving all books, newspapers, and journals in their physical state. Baker’s claims have led the public to mistrust librarians,¹ and have even caused some practicing within the field of library science to question their ultimate responsibilities.² Contrary to Baker’s premise in *Double Fold*, the primary purpose of libraries is to provide patrons quality access to information.

In *Double Fold*, Nicholson Baker mistakenly equates librarians with archivists, and thereby misinterprets the main role libraries play in society. Before readers even open Baker’s book, they read the misleading sentence on the back cover proclaiming that, “the ostensible purpose of a library is to preserve the printed word.”³ As far back as Chaucer, the word “library” described, “a place set apart to contain books for reading, study, or reference.”⁴ Richard Cox writes that Baker “stresses” the “archival role” of libraries.⁵ The Oxford English Dictionary defines “archive” as, “a place in which public records or other important historic documents are kept.”⁶ Baker highlights his confusion on this point when he harshly accuses “American librarians” of failing “to do the job we paid them to do,… taking reasonable

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⁵ Cox, Don't Fold Up: Responding to Nicholson Baker's Double Fold.
care of our communal newspaper collections.” Additionally he speaks of the Historic Newspaper Archives as “a ghastly anti-library” because they are selling old newspapers instead of storing them. It would be more accurate for *Double Fold* to rant against archivists from this point on, yet Baker continues demanding that no matter how the world changes around them, librarians are duty-bound to save “physical” copies of texts in their “collection forever,” a task that actually falls within the scope of an archivist.

*Double Fold* focuses excessively on the negative aspects of retrieving information through microfilm, and refers to the more contemporarily relevant topic of digitization as an afterthought. Baker persistently bemoans the inadequacy of microfilm. These references grow tiresome to the modern reader who expects the more current concern of digitization to receive greater or at least equal consideration as microfilm. Yet *Double Fold* refers to the problems with microfilm twice as much as it discusses digitization. In some of these references, the author inserts “digitization” in parentheses while complaining about microfilm—a mere side-note to his obsession with discrediting the now rather obsolete format of microfilm. Baker neglects to mention that digital documents are typically accessible to more patrons, and in some cases are of a better quality than their original format, which means they can help libraries extend their patron base and thus fulfill their role in society more effectively than in the past. Instead Baker bases his brief assault of digitization on the ineffectiveness of OCR text, and the “wastage and mutilation” of digitally scanned books. He ignores the larger issue that the digital

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8 Ibid., 20.
9 Ibid., 225.
10 Ibid., 46, 52, 285.
11 Ibid., 26.
12 Ibid., 251.
13 Ibid., 249.
world is often impermanent.¹⁴ This fact would have added a greater measure of significance to Baker’s argument than his repetitive diatribe against reproducing texts in order to save space.¹⁵ Again, Baker mistakes libraries for mass storage buildings meant to preserve mountains of paper rather than places dedicated to furthering the propagation of knowledge.

Practicing Baker’s recommended form of librarianship is not only impossible, but would inhibit libraries from serving their key purpose of providing access to information. The funds required to store every single original document as Baker suggests, do not exist.¹⁶ Furthermore, preserving even the most robust paper-based works requires decreasing access either by design or through the natural result of limiting the number of locations a document is available. Major research libraries that involve themselves in archival work are still primarily interested in helping people to utilize sources of information.¹⁷ Through digitization, this information can reach the greatest number of individuals in a format that is potentially of a higher quality and usefulness than its original formats. If Baker wishes to continue pursuing his research into library science, he must devote more of his time towards discussing digitization in future writing endeavors, and must correct his false assumption that the main role of libraries is to preserve original texts. Baker and his readers must learn that libraries are not “‘warehouses of little-used material,’” ¹⁸ but are the hubs of the intellectual process, where access comes before preservation.