

Memorandum ¹

October 4, 2013

To: The Royal Society of Canada Expert Panel on 'The Status and Future of Canada's Libraries and Archives'²

From: Professor John Smart, PhD (Retired, Archives Technicians Program, Algonquin College)

Subject: Library and Archives Canada Needs Your Help

My best wishes to the panel as it undertakes its important work. I believe Library and Archives Canada deserves special attention from the panel. I write as a retired archivist and teaching professor in the archives field in response to the September 10, 2013 letter of Patricia Demers to the library and archives communities asking “to hear from Canadians generally about the value they place on libraries and archives...” I make two basic points only. First, Library and Archives Canada is in serious trouble and needs help. Second, the library and archives field in Canada are seriously overinvested, intellectually and financially, in digitization and it is time to examine the ways in which this overinvestment is harming services to researchers.

Library and Archives Canada has been embroiled in controversy for the past eighteen months with its 2012 staff and budget cuts, its 2013 near-police state Code of Conduct for employees and its leader’s sudden resignation on May 15 , 2013 over questions involving \$170,000 in expenses, including public pay for private Spanish lessons³. There are even rumours that the government may close

¹ This memorandum is based in part on a paper I presented at the Archives Association of Ontario Conference in Ottawa in May 2013 entitled “Retreating from a researcher-based culture: The case of Library and Archives Canada, 1967-2013”. Full text of that paper is available upon request.

² On the occasion of their meetings in Ottawa October 4-5, 2013

³ See “Library head Daniel Caron resigns as \$170,000 in expenses found” Teresa Smith, Ottawa Citizen, May 15, 2013 Viewed May 16, 2013.

395 Wellington, LAC's research headquarters in downtown Ottawa, and, perhaps, open a McArchives (with a drive-through window?) as part of the re-branded Canadian Museum of Civilization/Canadian History Museum across the river in Hull.

LAC these days has a record of mistreating its staff⁴, misunderstanding its legislated mandate, and following policies that are reducing its role in the heritage community. Its traditional role as the essential site for historical research in Canada is disappearing. Most important among LAC's mistaken policies is LAC management's overcommitment to a policy of digitization. Digitization is no panacea for the current problems of libraries and archives in Canada. Only a very small portion of the holdings of libraries and archives will ever be digitized. It is hoped that the RSC panel can put some needed focus on LAC's problems and make recommendations for repairing this important national cultural institution. The panel, in my opinion, should look particularly at the arrangements LAC appears to be making with outside organizations such as ancestry.ca and Canadiana

<http://www.ottawacitizen.com/news/Library+head+Daniel+Caron+resigns+expenses+found/8391614/story.html#ixzz2TSP3itNK>

⁴ A significant number of archivists at LAC were made to re-apply for their own jobs in 2012 and this pointless process dragged on for months with significant damage to morale. Although the article cited below talks about senior executives rather than working level federal public servants it is worth noting that on September 25, 2013 the Ottawa Citizen reported the results of a study of the deteriorating health of executives in the federal public service. The study, carried out by the Association for Professional Executives of the Public Service of Canada (APEX) found “deteriorating physical and psychological health among executives while raising worrisome questions about the organizational health of the departments and agencies they manage. Executives who report less commitment — more than half say they frequently think of leaving — can't help but eat into performance and productivity.” See “Depression among PS executives nearly doubles, new study finds. Senior bureaucrats report harassment, lack of recognition in workplace” By Kathryn May. Ottawa Citizen September 25, 2013, page A1. It is no stretch to conclude that lower level civil servants, including those at LAC, are also being made ill by their working conditions.

to have some of its holdings digitized and afterwards to be available primarily only through these organizations.⁵

Let us look at LAC's current budgetary situation. In May 2012 The Canadian Association of University Teachers pointed out:

On April 30, 2012, it was announced that LAC would lose approximately 20% of its staff -- a cut of 215 positions from 1065 to 850 staff.... Prior to the April 30 2012 cuts, staff levels had already declined by more than 48 full-time positions since 2004. LAC's annual budget is, in constant dollars, \$33-million less than it was in 1990. This is before the cuts announced in the 2012 budget. The 2012 federal budget has further reduced LAC's funding by \$3.5-million this year, \$6.6-million next year, and \$9.6-million in 2014-15, and each year thereafter. By 2014-15, adjusted for inflation, LAC's budget will be just 58% of what it was in 1990-91."⁶

Many of the policy changes announced by Library and Archives Canada in the past two years make research in the LAC headquarters building at 395 Wellington in Ottawa far more difficult. In 2012 Library and Archives Canada reported that 2,000 researchers (24,000 annually) visited 395 Wellington each month.⁷ In this same 2012 statement LAC announced its intention to bid farewell to the face-to-face researcher.

⁵ Professor Michael Geist of the Faculty of Law at the University of Ottawa has reviewed LAC's digitization contract with Canadiana and sees some problems with it. See "The untold story behind Canada's digitization plan: Geist", Toronto Star, 27 September 2013. Story viewed on http://www.thestar.com/business/tech_news/2013/09/27/the_untold_story_behind_canadas_digitization_plan_geist.html October 4, 2013.

⁶ The Canadian Association of University Teachers Save Library and Archives Canada campaign website, viewed January 13, 2013.

⁷ LAC website, LAC announcement May 2012 "... new approach to delivery services", viewed 8 September 2012.

“LAC’s goal is to shift its service model from a largely in-person approach to service to a largely unmediated (self-service) approach focused on enhanced virtual access to content and services.”⁸

LAC gave an indication of its thinking in this area a year earlier:

At one time, people usually needed to deal with documentary heritage institutions to gain access to information resources. In the digital environment, Canadians expect to gain access to these resources directly, immediately and without having to do so through someone else. This change provides opportunities and introduces challenges for both documentary heritage institutions and clients.⁹

The limits of the online archives

This memorandum is, in part, a reaction to two of the panel’s Framing Questions, numbers two and three, which appear in the section New Directions - Digitization of the Framing Questions document. They read as follows:

2. What role libraries and archives should take in the digitization, the dissemination and the long-term preservation of Canadian heritage (print publications and archives)?
3. What will be the function and future of a brick-and-mortar library or archives in a paperless future?

I fear that the panel may already be on the way to prejudicing its findings by framing these questions in this way. (No “paperless future” awaits us, for example.) I suspect that the directors of archives and libraries with whom the panel will meet will inevitably ask for more funding for digitization. I hope the panel is prepared to push back on this front. Digitization has become a panacea in the archives and library worlds and over-concentration on digitization has

⁸ idem

⁹ Library and Archives Canada 2010–2011 Departmental Performance Report Modernizing LAC for the Digital Age page 5 Viewed on <http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/dpr-rmr/2010-2011/inst/bal/bal-eng.pdf> May 26, 2013.

particularly harmed the world of Canadian archives beginning with Library and Archives Canada.

No one, certainly no researcher, and certainly not this researcher, wants to be without web access these days. But LAC's excessive love for digitization in recent years blinds us to the limits of and drawbacks of digitization in archives. Obviously many bright dedicated people in archives currently devote their careers to digitization when I think they should instead devote themselves to organizing and describing the mountains of analogue records archives already hold. The people who should be devoted to the acquisition and care of analogue records are more interested in making online archives. Mistakenly, they see digitization as the way to make analogue records available to potential millions of researchers. How can anyone argue that making a small percentage of our records available to the whole world over the Internet is better than looking after the thousands of researchers who annually make their way into our reading rooms? The question is often put - why should we not remake archives into something new different and 100% digital?

It is the concept of the 100% digital archives and the halo of ideas associated with the concept that are the problem. We cannot leave our analogue collections behind. The dissemination of archival holdings through new technologies goes back a long time in archives. It predates the computer age. Let's recall our historical use of microfilm and Xerox to make archival holdings more widely available to researchers. Our use of computer based technology to manage finding aids and other types of archival information useful to researchers also has a long history. (In its Annual Report for 1971-1972 the Public Archives of Canada is already talking about its use of electronic data processing (EDP) to produce finding aids for the Prime Minister's papers.¹⁰) With digitization, however, we have too often let the technology become its own objective. We are forgetting that digitization is supposed to benefit researchers. It is not meant to provide us with excitement.

We need to re-state to ourselves the importance of the original document as a good in itself. The classic argument in the art world is that of Walter Benjamin: "In even the most perfect reproduction, one thing is lacking: the here and now of the work of art - its unique existence in a particular place. It is this unique existence - and

¹⁰ Public Archives Annual Report 1971-1972, 3.

nothing else - that bears the mark of the history to which the work has been subject.” (Emphasis in the original.)¹¹

Although there is not an exact parallel with the situation of archives no one proposes that the great art galleries or museums of the world should be closed in favour of viewing their contents online. In those worlds seeing the original up close and face-to-face is still highly valued. The Louvre got 9.7 million visitors in 2012; the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York got 6.1 million; the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art got 218,558 visitors. Yet all stay open and encourage visitors to come. Why, when they could digitize all the art and put it online? No one would then have to visit any of those places.¹²

With a digital only archives what is lost is the ability of archivists personally to help researchers to shape and deepen their research. There is no sense of an intellectual partnership between archivist and researcher. It may not have happened always in the pre-digital past but such a partnership between archivist and researcher was always possible. Now - with researchers and archivists never meeting and specialist archivists disappearing - it can't happen anymore. Much is lost on both sides as a result.

This point must be emphasized. Current technologies will never enable archives to digitize more than a very small percentage of the records they hold. Digitization cannot be relied upon to make available to researchers the records they need. Based on LAC documents provided to them under a Freedom of Information request the Canadian Association of University Teachers estimated in September 2012 that approximately 0.5% of LAC holdings (both textual and non-textual) had

¹¹ “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility ” Second version, 1936 in Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media, edited by Michael Y. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2008, page 21. Benjamin was not opposed to technical reproduction of works of art but insisted on the primacy of the original work.

¹² “Newcomer Makes Splash in Museum Attendance”, New York Times, 30 March 2013, C2.

been digitized up to that time.¹³ (LAC told Treasury Board in 2011 that only 0.3 % of its collection was available online.¹⁴) Ian Wilson (former head of Library and Archives Canada) told the Globe and Mail in August 2012 that he thought that LAC would have only 1% of its holdings digitized by 2022.¹⁵ In September 2012 the Smithsonian reported that it had only digitized 1.3 million objects out of the 139 million objects it holds.¹⁶ The National Archives of the United Kingdom (which used to be the Public Records Office) says it has put online “over 5% of what we have...”¹⁷ To their credit, when their new building opened earlier this year, officials of the French national archives told Radio France International: “With some updates, the concept stays the same: physical documents stored for people to access.”¹⁸

We can, perhaps, compare the digital drive in the archives world to the current mania for online courses in the university world. Within the past few years a

¹³ CAUT website, section Save Library and Archives Canada September 2012 Campaign Update The real scoop on digitization at LAC viewed April 13, 2013.

¹⁴ Library and Archives Canada Departmental Performance Report 2009-2010 page 7. Viewed on <http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/dpr-rmr/2009-2010/inst/bal/bal-eng.pdf> May 23, 2013.

¹⁵ “Standing on guard for Canada's records”, James Bradshaw, Globe and Mail, Aug. 20 2012.

¹⁶ Digitization of Smithsonian Collections, article posted September 5, 2012 on the Smithsonian website, section Newsdesk, Newsroom of the Smithsonian, viewed April 14, 2013.

¹⁷ National Archives of the UK website, What's Online section, viewed April 10, 2013.

¹⁸ News story “Hollande opens new purpose-built centre for French national archives” By Sarah Elzas published February 11, 2013 on Radio France International English website, viewed April 11, 2013.

number of prestigious American universities have begun to offer free online courses via the Internet to anyone who wants to sign up for them.¹⁹ Offerings differ somewhat but in most cases students who complete one of these free online courses do not receive an academic credit for their work but may receive an email from the university acknowledging completion of the course. Some educators believe online courses of this type could revolutionize post-secondary education around the world, democratize it, make it affordable to all. Face-to-face teaching (like face-to-face archival research) would be made obsolete. MOOCs, (Massive Online Open Courses) as these courses are called, would obviate the need for physical libraries, classrooms, most tuition fees, and most professors. The Chronicle of Higher Education recently studied the first MOOC efforts and reported some results.²⁰ 72% of professors who had taught MOOCs did not think even students who successfully completed their MOOC should get formal academic credit for the course. (Though 79% of MOOC professors thought the courses “worth the hype.”) Other studies of MOOCs say that less than half the people who enrol in a MOOC even complete one lesson assignment. The MOOC drive is in its early stages but so far it seems that none of the hoped-for benefits have been realized.

In the present mania to digitize our archives, let's at least maintain some honesty with our researchers. Let's make it clearer to them how little we are able to put online and how much they still need to come to our archives to do research.²¹ And

¹⁹ The Massachusetts Institute of Technology made history in 2008 when it announced that it would post all its course materials online free. Anyone could follow an MIT course without being enrolled but would gain credits only for courses in which they were formally enrolled. The next year two Stanford University professors enrolled 120,000 students worldwide in a course on computer programming.

²⁰ See “The Minds Behind the MOOCs: The Professors Behind the MOOC Hype” The Chronicle of Higher Education Results of a February 2013 study. Viewed on The Chronicle website May 11, 2013. For more information on MOOCs see Nathan Heller, “Laptop U: Has the future of college moved online?”, The New Yorker, May 20, 2013, 80-91.

²¹ For an examination of the difficulties which ensue from an over-reliance on the Internet see Evgeny Morozov, To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism Public Affairs, New York, 2013. Morozov concludes

let's be more honest with ourselves. Digitizing archival holdings is neither simple nor cheap²². And digitization of a record is no guarantee of its permanent existence in digital form. There are numerous cases already of important banks of digitized records disappearing off the Internet.²³

Some Conclusions

I offer here some conclusions based on my research to date and on my experiences as an archivist, teacher, and researcher within the archival community.

1. Based on the evidence provided by its Annual Reports and its other statements and policy decisions, Library and Archives Canada has retreated significantly from what Canada's national archives used to value and promote as a research-based culture. This retreat began at least as early as

"... most Internet theorists venerate an imaginary god of their own creation and live in denial." page 357.

²² As some wise people said recently "... we are dealing with a lot of complexity when it comes to data." Judith Hurwitz, Alan Nugent, Fern Halper), Marcia Kaufman, Big Data For Dummies. John Wiley and Sons, Hoboken New Jersey, 2013, page 10. And "... the likelihood of errors increases as you add more data points." Viktor Mayer-Schonberger and Kenneth Cukier, Big Data: A Revolution That Will Transform How We Live, Work, and Think, Hodder and Company UK, 2013 page 33.

²³ See, for example, the news stories and arcan-1 objections which accompanied the Canadian federal government's "streamlining" and purging of federal government websites (including LAC's) which took place in the spring of 2013. On April 18, 2013 when LAC put up its new/revised website seventeen messages objecting went up on arcan-1. Some noted that listings previously on the LAC site had disappeared or were harder to find. See also "Social Media Networks Stripping Data from Your Digital Photos" David Riecks, leader of the Photo Metadata Project, on The Library of Congress website, The Signal: Digital Preservation, posted April 11, 2013, viewed April 13, 2013. For an intelligent discussion of one case illustrating the difficulty of dealing with digital conversions see the March 25, 2013 posting to arcan-1 of Ghislain Thibault of the Centre for Research into French-Canadian Culture/CRCCF of the University of Ottawa.

the 1990s and the drive to digitize, greatly accelerated in recent years, has increased the pace of this retreat. LAC has been quite frank about its withdrawal from in-person service to researchers. Ian Wilson told Treasury Board in 2008 "... resources were reallocated from areas of relatively lower priority, such as traditional in-person service levels, to areas of higher priority in line with its corporate priorities, such as increased investment in the digitization of its collection..."²⁴ It has to be acknowledged that digitization brings benefits to researchers but those benefits are limited. It might be noted, for example, that in 2010 only 72% of LAC's online users were satisfied with what LAC had up online.²⁵

2. Of course, researchers' practices and needs are changing on their own, independently of anything we do in the archives world.²⁶ But researchers are practical people. If archives move away from researchers, researchers will move away from archives, stage their own retreat, and find their sources elsewhere. Researchers go where the records are. As LAC closes down they just won't go there and Canada's national stories won't be told.
3. No one, certainly no researcher, and certainly not this researcher, wants to be without web access these days. For an illustration of the what is being achieved daily in online archives creations see Nouvelles du patrimoine documentaire - Documentary Heritage News, the weekly postings on arcan-1 by David Rajotte. See, too, the recent report by John D. Reid on Canada's Anglo-Celtic Connections on what is being done with genealogy

²⁴ Library and Archives Canada Departmental Performance Report 2007-2008 A Strategic Assessment of 2007-2008 page 9
www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/dpr-rmr/2007-2008/inst/bal/bal-eng.pdf Viewed May 24, 2013

²⁵ Library and Archives Canada Departmental Performance Report 2009-2010 Program Activity 1.3 page 26 . Viewed on
<http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/dpr-rmr/2009-2010/inst/bal/bal-eng.pdf> May 23, 2013. In 2009 the satisfaction rate was 64% and in 2008-2009 it was 62% . .

²⁶ See Roger C. Schonfeld & Jennifer Rutner, Supporting the Changing Research Practices of Historians Published December 07, 2012 Viewed on Zotero May 23, 2013. Thanks to Sara Allain's posts for pointing out this study.

records at Library and Archives Canada.²⁷ But the paper record still remains key to deep historical research²⁸ and LAC today is making such research more and more difficult.

4. Let's use digital for all we can in archives but, if we don't also stand up for paper and analogue records of all types they will certainly be lost. I fear that the Dr. Strangeloves of the bureaucratic world will close the archives buildings where such research is now done and incinerate the records held there in the name of the 100% digital archives future.
5. The problem with the Caron years at LAC was not primarily incompetence or gross personal spending. M. Caron was quite clear about his objectives in his reports and statements. His intention was to refashion LAC completely - to make it a smaller and less important institution, dispensing whatever services it could manage to researchers in a 100% digital manner. Closing the National Archival Development Program (NADP), reducing overall services to researchers, reducing staff and budget²⁹, ending Interlibrary Loan services (ILL) - none of these things mattered as they did not affect the digital future. With LAC we are seeing the hollowing out of a great Canadian cultural institution. It has already happened to the Science and

²⁷ John D. Reid, "Genealogy at Library and Archives Canada". Canada's Anglo-Celtic Connections, posted Monday, May 13, 2013. Viewed May 20, 2013..

²⁸ In 2007, the latest year for which I have been able to find figures, the average visitor to the LAC website saw eight "page views", hardly enough for deep research. See Library and Archives Canada 2009–2010 Report on Plans and Priorities. Figure 1: Growing Demand for LAC Web Content page 5. Viewed on www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/rpp/2009-2010/inst/bal/bal-eng.pdf? May 21, 2013.

²⁹ By 2015-2016 LAC's annual budget will have fallen to \$90 million, down from \$123 million in 2009-2010. Library and Archives Canada Report on Plans and Priorities (RPP) 2013-14 Departmental Spending Trend (This document is not paginated.) Viewed on <http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/about-us/report-plans-priorities/rpp-2013-2014/Pages/rpp-2013-14.aspx> June 3, 2013.

Technology Museum and to the Canadian Museum of Civilization. (It will be done as well to the CBC if the government thinks it can get away with it.) Those who defend LAC and its services to researchers are engaged in a battle of primary importance to Canadian culture. We should try hard not to lose it.

John Smart worked as an archivist at Library and Archives Canada for eighteen years and as a professor at Algonquin College in Ottawa for twenty years. He holds a PhD in History from Queen's University. (His 2004 doctoral thesis dealt with the early years of the computer industry in Ottawa.) In January 2013 he organized a panel held in Ottawa by the Archives Association of Ontario East chapter on the topic What We Have Lost: What We Stand to Lose: The Future of Archives and Archivists in Canada. In May 2013 he presented a paper "Retreating from a researcher-based culture: The case of Library and Archives Canada, 1967-2013" to the Archives Association of Ontario Conference in Ottawa. In February 2014 his paper "Will Library and Archives Canada still exist in 2017 and how much do we care?" will be presented to the Interrogating Access: Current and Future Directions for Scholarly Research and Communications in Canada Conference at Wilfrid Laurier University.

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