



Archives Association of Ontario
Association des archives de l'Ontario

10 Morrow Avenue, Suite 202, Toronto, Ontario M6R 2J1 Tel: 416 538-1650 Fax: 416 489-1713 Email: aao@aao-archivists.ca

Royal Society of Canada Expert Panel,
The Status and Future of Canada's Libraries and Archives
Walter House
282 Somerset West
Ottawa ON K2P 0J6
Canada

Re: Archives Association of Ontario submission on challenges facing archives

Dear Panel Members:

We at the Archives of Association of Ontario (AAO) welcome the Expert Panel's interest in learning about the significant changes facing the national library and archives community. This letter outlines the AAO's services to that community as well as the challenges we and our members face. We hope that the crisis facing Canadian archives can be averted by the intervention of concerned citizens. The support of the Royal Society is especially appropriate given its mandate "to advance knowledge, encourage integrated interdisciplinary understandings and address issues that are critical to Canada and Canadians." Archives in their many forms are essential to these endeavors.

The Archives Association of Ontario

The Archives Association of Ontario is a network of archives and archivists providing programs, education, advocacy and shared knowledge to approximately 309 members in Ontario. AAO membership is composed of archival institutions, those working in archives, as well as volunteers, patrons, and supporters of archives. The AAO promotes archives as vital to the fair, transparent, and equitable operations of the Canadian and Ontario governments and society as a whole through our many services, such as:



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- Archeion^[1], a publicly accessible and Google-search optimized provincial database of archival descriptions. Archeion descriptions are also fed into ArchivesCanada[2], the national database of archival descriptions
- timely professional development workshops for varying levels of professional expertise
- the Ontario Archives Advisor programme which provides complimentary, direct advice and support to archives or proposed archives anywhere in Ontario on all topics related to archives management and preservation^[3].

The AAO serves both its members and Canadian users of archives. Access to Ontario archival descriptions is made available to Canadians through Archeion. AAO institutional members upload their archival descriptions to Archeion. Archeion descriptions are also Google-search optimized, increasing discoverability. Archeion includes a directory^[4] of institutions in Ontario, giving Canadians access to the only publicly accessible list of archives in Ontario. The Archeion database offers AAO member institutions not only a free platform on which to upload archival descriptions, but also possibilities for understanding how users are discovering their content online. For example, Archeion runs on open source software called AtoM. The AAO recently collaborated with Artefactual Systems, the developers behind AtoM, to create a user analytics feature. Through AAO funds and generous donations of AAO members, the AAO coordinated fundraising to allow Artefactual Systems to develop a user analytics feature. The user analytics feature will ensure that Archeion and over 250^[5] installations of AtoM around the world will benefit from increased understanding of users accessing archival descriptions in an online environment.

The AAO is a volunteer-led initiative and we are always seeking ways to promote our services to members and Canadians. We have recently implemented a communications strategy, which was kicked off by the initialization of social media accounts and a newly designed responsive, mobile-friendly website:

- <http://aao-archivists.ca/>
- https://twitter.com/AAO_tweet



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- <https://www.facebook.com/ArchivesAssociationOfOntario>
- <http://www.linkedin.com/company/archives-association-of-ontario>

We hope to increase publicity of the AAO through these avenues in the hopes that more Canadians will know of and understand the contributions that the AAO and our members make to library and archival services in Canada.

Challenges for the AAO and its Members

As related above, the AAO has fought to remain active and responsive despite the challenges we, along with our membership, face. We would like to convey the concerns of our members to you.

In 2012, the AAO undertook a survey of our members. Two questions included in the survey were:

- *What are the most pressing archival and documentary heritage issues facing your institution?*
- *What are the most pressing issues facing you as an individual working in archival field?*

Although archival institutions vary in size and scope, the concerns of our members notably coalesced in four areas: funding and resources, employment, digitization and electronic records, and public awareness. We broadly summarize our members' concerns here.

Funding and Resources

There is no escaping the sense of crisis that is pervading archival institutions. The dismay at the loss of the National Archival Development Program (NADP)^[6] — a small pool of federal funds — indicates not only how practiced archivists have become in making the most of very little, but also just how close to the line archives have been operating for some years.

The AAO's use of its portion of that funding was a model of efficient resource sharing. On three years of \$168,495 of annual funding, we supported a complementary suite of services available to the entire province. Our Archives Advisor, Preservation Consultant, and Archeion Coordinator were available to



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provide guidance in archival practice, preservation, and online descriptive presence to small archives that could not afford to hire staff for these purposes. Our Archeion database was (and continues to be) a superior online archival search and data management tool available to all archivists and researchers in Ontario. Numerous projects were completed through the NADP grants received by archival organizations and administered by the AAO.

In our 2012 survey results, fears about the effects of the NADP cuts were frequently expressed. And indeed, we are now hearing reports of the resultant cancelled projects and lost jobs. The cuts have also meant that AAO has been forced to eliminate its Preservation Consultant service and radically cut the available hours of the remaining two contract staff.

We believe, however, that the loss of the NADP should not blind us to the greater problem: in order to document change accurately and systematically, archives themselves need stability. An over-reliance on short-term grants makes it extremely difficult to plan for long-term decisions about staffing, intake, storage, preservation, conservation, advocacy and, ultimately, researcher access. While grants are useful for supporting discrete projects they are inappropriate for sustaining memory institutions with mandates to serve future generations.

The Canadian archival system needs more funding. Pending a funding source, coordinated administration of grant funding is already in existence through the Canadian Council of Archives and the provincial councils.

Employment

When our members indicated the need for more funds in order to fulfill basic functions, they most often cited funds for staffing. Unstable or disappearing funding has meant increasingly poor labour conditions. Many staff in Ontario archives find themselves uncertain from month to month both of their jobs and the future viability of the collections for which they feel professionally (and passionately) responsible.

Unpaid volunteers and interns are increasingly in demand to fulfill core roles. There is some concern about a resulting devaluation of the profession even though there is no shortage of committed and highly trained archives professionals.



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The era of the archivist who intimately knows his or her collection from long experience may soon be over. Many researchers know the boon that such experts represent to research; they also know this depth of knowledge cannot be replicated technologically. In Jennifer Rutner and Roger C. Schonfeld's December 2012 report, *Supporting the Changing Research Practices of Historians*, the study's participants highlighted their personal relationships with archivists as invaluable: "From the interviews it was clear that archivists' deep knowledge of the collections they work with and understanding of related collections is of tremendous value to historians working with primary sources... The archivist is seen as a partner in the discovery process."^[7]

At the recent Canadian Archives Summit on January 17th, there was a notable call to action for more collaboration from archives with partner organizations, such as Canada's History or SSHRC, to increase archives awareness amongst Canadians. Such collaboration requires people-power. It is not currently possible for most archives to take action in advocacy or collaboration while important collections remain inaccessible to researchers from lack of processing and reference staff in under-funded archives.

Digitization and Electronic Records

We should note that for archivists there is no "paperless future" because they are charged with preserving analogue records, many of which have artifactual value, into the future. As well, the ease of printing means that vast amounts of paper records are still created and must be appropriately handled.

However, archivists are more aware than perhaps any other professionals of both the need and the difficulty of preserving the digital materials of the late twentieth century onwards. Because of the unrelenting obsolescence of technological formats and devices and the corruptibility of electronic files, electronic data is the most fragile archivists have ever had to handle.

There are two broad challenges in the area of digital records: 1) The understandable demand from researchers to make analogue materials available digitally and online; 2) The largely unresolved question of how to select, capture, and preserve born-digital records. Many of our members cite a feeling of unpreparedness for dealing with both these challenges. Their discomfort is not because of an unwillingness to learn, or even lack of expertise, but rather a lack of resources.



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Digitization of analogue records is often hailed as a solution to the problem of providing access to relatively hard-to-reach materials, and incorrectly so. Physical access to records must be maintained along with discoverability. The process of digitization also involves a significant investment of time and resources in making the digital resources available to users, particularly in ensuring that they are adequately described and therefore discoverable. Additionally, these digital materials will themselves need to be managed into the future to ensure their long-term availability for research.

Digital preservation itself requires more resources, not fewer: more training; more collaboration; more time; more expensive equipment; more education for the creators of digital records; and more staff time invested into the curation of digital records to facilitate discovery. None of these conditions are congruent with budget and staffing reductions.

Public Awareness

Our members gladly report that in some ways the general public is more aware of historical archives than ever before, thanks to media exposure, online historical images and collections, and the burgeoning popularity of family history research. Nevertheless, they also report a lack of general awareness about the time and expertise needed to properly care for records and make them accessible, including retaining context, and providing suitable reference materials and services. Archivists who work within non-archival institutions find it especially challenging to make the importance of their roles understood.

In general, we are concerned that in an economic climate characterized by austerity, archives are increasingly becoming regarded as luxuries. They are not. Archives as historical repositories safeguard a sense of perspective that rescues us from the limited viewpoint of our own place and time. If this were not valuable enough, archives also preserve the evidence that grounds procedural, legal, and moral accountability and ultimately serves justice and public safety. As the raw material of knowledge, they form part of the intellectual infrastructure of democratic society.

Our hope is rooted in the fact that things were not always so bleak. Canada was at one time a leader in the archival field, in part because of its conviction that a public good deserved adequate funding. We know and respect the work that many of your Fellows have achieved with the help of the work of past and



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present archivists. As an association, we also know that there is strength in numbers. We would be honoured if, as public intellectuals, you would consider adding your voices to ours as supporters or members of Canada's archival networks.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to relate our concerns. We look forward to working with you to improve the foundations of knowledge and research in our province and our country.

Sincerely,

Kelli Babcock

AAO President, 2013-2014

On behalf of the AAO Board of Directors and AAO membership

[1] <http://www.archeion.ca/>

[2] <http://archivescanada.accesstomemory.org/>

[3] <http://aao-archivists.ca/archives-advisor>

[4] <http://www.archeion.ca/:repository/browse>

[5] https://www.ica-atom.org/doc/ICA-AtoM_users

[6] Gurney, Matt. Full Comment | National Post. N. p., 13 June 2013. Web.

<http://fullcomment.nationalpost.com/2013/06/10/matt-gurney-a-really-stupid-way-for-the-government-to-save-some-money/>

[7] Rutner, Jennifer, and Roger C. Schonfeld. "Supporting the Changing Research Practices of Historians." N. p., 10 Dec. 2012. <http://www.sr.ithaka.org/research-publications/supporting-changing-research-practices-historians>