

Prof. Demers --- I write further to the consolation on “The Status and Future of Canada’s Libraries and Archives.” I participated in the event that you held at Dalhousie University on 15 November 2013. I will organise my comments around the first three questions of your mandate.

1. To investigate what services Canadians, including Aboriginal Canadians and new Canadians, are currently receiving from libraries and archives. The services which I receive from Canadian archives have largely to do with access to records and, to a lesser extent, rights clearing for publication purposes. My experiences here have varied widely. I will draw attention to the two most telling.

I have done work in the Fonds Pierre Perrault, held at the Université Laval archives. This is a diverse collection which includes personal papers, correspondence, documents pertaining to the production of Perrault’s films and radio works, and audio recordings of those radio works. My experience at Laval in terms of access and publication support has been uniformly positive. A need for appointments is the only “gatekeeping” that takes place. On-site archivists know the collection and can help with some of its trickier points. They helped me make cassette-tape copies of audio material (which was on reel-to-reel tape); all I needed to do was sign to the effect that they were for research purposes only and would not be duplicated. When I did want to reproduce material from the Fonds in my book about cinema in the North Atlantic, they were very happy to make up the appropriate licenses for my and my publisher’s signature.

This is in vivid contrast to the archive of the National Film Board of Canada. The only way into the NFB’s archives is now through a FOIPP request. In addition to the fact that this locks out non-Canadian researchers (who are not entitled to make FOIPP requests), this makes serious research basically impossible. In essence, you have to know *exactly* what you’re looking for in order to find it. Presidents of the Film Studies Association of Canada have met with two different commissioners of the NFB (Jacques Bensimon and Tom Perlmutter), but the NFB has remained unwilling to harmonise their archive policies with those of the CBC. Access to the photo archive, especially for the purposes of publication, has long been exceedingly difficult (despite the fact that the photos which it contains were almost universally created for the purposes of promoting the films they document). The result of this, to my mind, has been a poisoning of a once fairly harmonious relationship between the NFB and the academic community. The academic community in Canada now largely views NFB officials as churlish in their insistence on prohibitively complex procedures. The NFB seems to largely view the academic community as overly demanding on their scarce resources.

2. To explore what Canadian society expects of libraries and archives in the 21st century. I trust it goes without saying that in my capacity as a university-based researcher, I expect more than this from Canada’s archives. I have heard a great deal of discussion about the ways in which access is being enhanced through digitisation efforts. I consider most of what I have heard to be simplistic technological utopianism, and I know I am not alone on that. My cynicism on this is driven by (1) my understanding of the incredible expense of these efforts and (2) my being deluged by constant complaints on the part of archivists about how funding is extremely scarce and that the only remedy for this is to decrease the availability of on-site access. My sense, to be blunt, is that there is money available to archival efforts, but it is being diverted in increasingly large proportions to digitalisation initiatives. It is particularly bothersome to me that this diversion is generally presented as a *fait accompli*, as an obvious matter of common sense not worth justifying or explaining in any meaningful way. I worry about the consequences of this digital shift for two reasons. One has to do with the inherent fragility of the media on which this material is being stored, and the degree to which the move to digitalisation means a future where constant format shifting will be accompanied by constant expense and will thus drain even more financial resources from the conservation of the objects themselves. The other, though, has to do with the inherently partial quality of these efforts. Archives are only very rarely digitising the *entirety* of their collections. If the future of access is, essentially, a future where what we can see is driven by what archivists decide warrants the expense of digitisation, then we are in for a very dark period indeed for historical research.

3. To identify the necessary changes in resources, structures, and competencies to ensure libraries and archives serve the Canadian public good in the 21st century. I think that ameliorating this situation will necessitate a fairly serious structural change, or at least a change of course. I do not think that devoting the lion's share of resources to digitalisation serves the Canadian public good. It very clearly serves the good of the Canadian IT sector, who benefit from the massive contracts and sales that follow from this set of priorities. There is also some evidence that this wholesale shift to digital strategies benefits the management class of Canadian archivists, who are able to publically claim that they are no longer defined by an elitist sense of who wants to use archives, that they have, in essence, thrown open their doors to everyone when in fact they generally have thrown open a very small portion of their collection and are allowing the rest to languish in a kind of purgatory. But I am not convinced that starving traditional on-site access to feed digitalisation serves the Canadian public good as a whole. I also do not appreciate hearing sceptics such as myself being cast as self-interestedly elitist out-of-touch Luddites. Digitalisation is not an inherent social good; a greater emphasis on digital formats does not inherently go hand in hand with greater access.

What I favour is a more balanced approach, free both of grouchy Luddites and pushy techno-utopians. I certainly experienced that at Université Laval. I also experienced this at the National Archives of Ireland. The staff I dealt with there were extremely well-informed about the collections and, during the customary interview needed to get a reader's card (the only form of gatekeeping I experienced) the duty archivist gave me very precise and useful advice for specific leads I might chase down. The reader's room certainly had the usual suspects of university-based researchers, but judging from the conversations that are so easily overheard in such spaces, it was clear that a number of people were there doing work pertaining to local or family history. Copies of documents were relatively easily secured; I put in a request and they appeared in the post two weeks later. The National Archives of Ireland has launched a number of ambitious digitalisation projects pertaining to topics of great public interest (the census of 1911, the Anglo-Irish Treaty, etc.), but there is no sense, at least from me, that this has had a major impact on their core services to researchers. My experience in the Bibliothèque nationale de Suisse's "Archives littéraires" was very similar. I'm sure there are countless other such examples worldwide. Canadian archives really could be using their limited resources in ways that are much less divisive and lead to real-long-term sustainability.

Please let me know if I can clarify anything. Best regards ---

Jerry White
Canada Research Chair in European Studies
Dalhousie University