

## Submission to the Royal Society Expert Panel on Archives

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The Royal Society has taken on a formidable task in examining the current state of archives and libraries in Canada. These institutions and the activities that take place within them are not homogeneous, even within their separate spheres, and both have undergone significant change in the past decade. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that the Panel appears to be not only struggling to make sense of the current situation, but also lacks focus in seeing a path forward. This submission will focus on Archives, but an example from the library side illustrates the quandary. In Nova Scotia, the panel proffered co-location as a means of coming to grips with dwindling budgets and the perceived need to garner greater public recognition of the importance of libraries in society. Co-location, the panellists suggested, could help convince funders of the worth of libraries. However, some libraries have already instituted that solution and have seen none of the anticipated rewards.

Before suggesting solutions, it behooves the Panel to grasp the realities of 21<sup>st</sup> century archives. Doing so is not a simple assignment. The unclear picture of the present state of archives is a result of many factors; some of them deliberate diversions by leaders of key institutions in the field. Three of the critical determinants in understanding the situation of archives are:

- the expectations of a public conditioned by the simplicity and immediacy of Google and Wikipedia,
- the unprecedented influx of analog records at the same time as electronic records begin to descend on archives, and
- the obfuscation created by convergence.

### Public expectations related to Research

Google and Wikipedia have created the illusion of research being accomplished by the click of a mouse or a few key strokes. Many institutions, especially museums - the darling memory institution of the Federal Government - have propagated this concept to the point that it has become inherent to all Government thinking on how Canadians can experience their history. This simplification of historical resource discovery has had an offshoot that further clouds delivering true public access to documentary heritage – digitization. Even if the claims of the degree of availability of digital surrogates were true, which has been shown not to be the case, for archives to offer digital access to a wide audience without curatorial interaction would take many times the resources archives have ever had. There is an impression that just putting digital copies online meets the need of the general public. Nothing could farther from the truth. For digital content to be *understandable* and *navigable* on the web, context and precision are key. The general public seldom ventures beyond the first page of google results -- how are they going to negotiate large or complex finding aids or digital lists let alone discern the meaning or pertinence of one document over another? The most successful archival digital activities to date have taken three forms – virtual exhibits around a narrow topic and a limited number of documents, a large homogeneous group of records that would serve a specific albeit substantial audience, or a large volume

of documents that serve a very narrow and skilled target group. The development of each of these categories of web product has three characteristics in common. In each case, the work was dependent on previous arrangement and description work done several years or even decades before the project was undertaken. Two, substantial funding from outside the institution's regular budget was necessary. Three, the project crippled the institution from undertaking subsequent projects and/or maintaining other activities crucial to the institution's mandate. The LAC providing online access to the Attestation Papers is an apt example. This project took a significant investment in equipment and staffing, but once completed, after several years of missed deadlines, it met with universal appreciation. That is, until the realization sunk in by the users that what was presented online was but one page of a file and that to obtain a copy of the rest of the file meant up to a two year delay because LAC did not have the capacity to provide copies faster.

Due to the diversity of content and clientele, effective archival digital delivery of service or access is far more complicated than digitizing a book. For the public to receive satisfactory digital access to documentary heritage, access must be provided at least to the file level and navigational tools must enable exploration and searching. These are not small undertakings. If funding bodies are not going to recognize the costs of such providing such access, then archives must revert to fulfilling their core activities and the flow of content to the public and the many intermediary distributors of archival content will slow to a meager trickle.

### **Unprecedented rates of acquisition**

While the public's appetite for its documentary heritage has never been greater and the level of detail that the public expects is also at an apex, archives are receiving new acquisitions at an unprecedented rate. While archives exist to collect, preserve, and make available the archival record, archives' budgets have either remained the same or have even decreased over the past decade in both hard dollar figures and buying power. This scenario does not lend itself to satisfying user needs and makes it extremely difficult for archives to succeed in fulfilling their mandates. At the recent Archives Summit, Ian Wilson's metaphor of the car speeding along the 401 while the engine is simultaneously re-tooled captures the plight and complexity of archives trying to deal with modern records while the public and other records creators continue to transfer significant amounts of paper records, but it does not express the enormity. Remember, the 1960s saw the greatest proliferation of paper documentation then known in the history of the world and most of that documentation has yet to reach archives. The ageing population and the geographic dispersion of the next generation means that archives are offered far more high quality material than they have the capacity to process and make accessible any time soon. This situation leads to one of a number of reactions; none of which bode well for future access to our country's history. Archives are either going to stock pile such material and be unable to provide access; provide extremely superficial means of access causing users heightened costs to extract information, or archives will just stop accepting records.

Band-aid solutions to these circumstances have been employed now for many years. With analog documents, benign neglect can be a temporary, fallback position because little harm will come to the records. Electronic records do not afford such a luxury. The lack of understanding of the

contemporary archival condition is pervasive even among groups sympathetic to or accustomed to using archives. An illustration of this lack of awareness most recently occurred at the Archives Summit when a spokesperson from Canada's History naively stated there is time to address the challenge of born-digital records. This was later contradicted by another speaker, but the point is clear, just because you use or even depend on archives doesn't mean you understand the challenges or actually know much about what constitutes providing access to archival records. There is no question archives are the least understood category of memory institution and this confusion could have disastrous consequences in the digital age. Preserving digital records requires intervention much earlier in the document's life even as early as prior to creation, but archives are funded and staffed based on a paradigm of passive and responsive acquisition. Archives have made prodigious strides in the past decade in dealing with digital records but this has not been reflected in the funding made available to the archival community. Despite this disparity, archives have forged ahead. We have reached a point where there is no more elasticity in the system and the impending recoil will be a shock to all whose work is predicated on access to archives.

### **Convergence**

Another solution proffered in recent years to resolve the budgetary situation of memory institutions is convergence. The presumption of those making such suggestions is that savings will be had from combining administrative activities such as finance and human resources. Theoretically this can be true but the reality is that memory institutions for the most part have always operated on very meagre budgets and such cost savings have long been in place. When LAC was established from the former National Library and National Archives all of these central services had already been amalgamated. The only way to operate memory institutions with less money is to reduce staff and this has often been done by dropping specialization. This has been done from both the chicken and egg sides to rationalize such decisions. Either staff responsibilities are generalized so on paper anyone can acquire and provide access to content regardless of form or complexity and then right sizing or streamlining is undertaken or cuts are made and then staff are forced to assume work formerly done by specialists. Regardless, the result is researchers are going to experience a less skilled interface with the institution.

One of the long term problems such adjustments cause is that theory and standards are subverted. Rather than be transparent and admitting budgetary issues are the cause of the changes, attempts are made to develop new processes and concepts to vindicate the change. Of enduring concern is that some of the new mechanisms remain in place long after the change itself has been dismissed as misguided, which makes it even more difficult for an institution to rebound from an era of retrenchment. Once pragmatism distorts theory or standards it becomes a significant struggle to unravel the convoluted results. Such has been the situation at LAC for some time and it will take considerable effort to sort out the consequences set in place by convergence. The wider spread impact of such misdirection is that before the bloom is off the rose the structural changes at one institution are seen as something to be replicated elsewhere. Particularly damaging is the tendency for people analyzing archives to see museums as an entity to emulate. Although there are similarities, archives are intended to do very different things than museums. In fact, if archives were to operate like a museum,

one of the categories of users to suffer the most from such a shift would be museums. Many activities around the analysis of archives, libraries, and museums in the past decade have made a leap in logic that appears nonsensical when applied to other realms. A dentist and a medical doctor are both doctors, but I, and I expect you as well, want the one with the specialty needed at the time to be the one doing the work. In the business world, convergence means prosperity for some, but the end of the line for others.

## **Conclusion**

Where we find ourselves today has its origins over fifty years ago when the library community established itself as a profession in the eyes of Government, academia achieved a foothold in Government financing, and museums became ensconced within the Department of Canadian Heritage. Archives were late to the party and missed out on the best hors d'oeuvres. Thus, when a number of factors coalesced at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, it was almost inevitable that disaster would befall Federal funding to the archival community. Many groups disseminate Canada's history but if archives are going to be able to supply all those consumers and intermediary packagers of documentary history some dramatic shifts need to take place. The current circumstance of archives is like a Government that sets as a goal that milk should constitute a larger part of the public's diet. To do this the Government provides significant amounts of money to encourage the appetite for milk, citizens are provided free or subsidized milk, distributors of milk are funded to ensure they will carry milk, and the processors are rewarded to package and prepare the milk for consumption. However, the farmers are not given any incentive to produce more milk and do not have the money to buy more cows. Archives in this equation are the farmers producing the product everyone else needs for the goal to be achieved, but under the present model they cannot produce what is demanded of them.

The threat to the ongoing performance of the essential tasks of archives may not be truly realized until a portion of Canada's history is irreversibly lost. That it has come to this is regrettable, even irresponsible, but until a very simple realization occurs that is likely the case. Hundreds of millions of dollars spent by the Federal Government on SSHRC, Museums, and Commemorations cannot be sustained by an archives community facing monumental demands while clinging for survival contingent on volunteers. Such a system has created diminished capacity, which at a time of epoch change results in mediocrity at best and possible collapse. Unless there is intervention, what this generation leaves for future generations in the archival sense, will be a paltry inheritance.