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## RSC Expert Panel on the Future of Canada's Libraries and Archives

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Thu, Jan 2, 2014 at 4:40 PM

Hello, here is a copy of the panel presentation that I read at the Panel meeting on November 9, 2-4 pm, at the Alderney Gate Library in Dartmouth, NS.

My name is Heather Harkins. I am a Haligonian who will respond to the question: What role should libraries and archives take in the digitization, the dissemination and the long-term preservation of Canadian heritage (print publications and archives)?

Digitization can give libraries and archives the power to instantly share material with multiple users in different locations, providing an opportunity to study fragile material without repeatedly handling it. These benefits will contribute to an increase of digitization projects in Canada. However, as the nature of the material being accessed by users changes, so will the role played by libraries and archives.

Scientific testing indicates that when an object like a book or a reel of black and white film is placed in a temperature and humidity controlled facility, it will last for over five thousand years. Unfortunately, no digital format is guaranteed to last for ten years, let alone a hundred. The standards used in digital file formats are dictated by the commercial information technology industry, with closely guarded proprietary features and planned obsolescence incorporated into products to cultivate consumer dependence on private companies with no guaranteed future. It's a bit like the Wild West, and no one is quite sure who'll have the fastest draw next year. The situation calls for constant vigilance and swift responses to change, particularly since work that is born digital is entirely dependent on the whims of this technology.

As we move from the cold box of traditional library stacks and archival vaults to the hot box of computer servers, everything changes, including the role of libraries and archives. American archivist Hobert Thompson invented the best analogy for this changing role. He suggests that archivists and librarians must go from being gate-keepers (or crypt-keepers, for those with restricted access policies) to shepherds, interacting with our material as we lead it from format to format to format, keeping it safe and accessible over long stretches of time (ideally in a form as close as possible to the one envisioned by its creators). This process of shepherding collections demands a generous, on-going investment of time, energy, money, and education. Yet, it does not eliminate the need to care for original material with traditional investments of physical space, environmental conditions, maintenance and repair labour. Let's have a moment of silence for the poor devils who discarded shelves full of source material after encoding the contents on CD-ROM.

Shepherding our collections into the future is one of the two most important things libraries and archives can do to ensure the long-term preservation of our Canadian heritage. The second most important thing is to be open to the Canadian public. As institutional funding shrinks and becomes fragmented, libraries and archives need to listen to voices outside of the institutional framework who share their focus, and could contribute valuable resources, notably expertise and passion. Openness is key. Whenever possible, libraries and archives must take on the role of collaborators with individuals and small groups.

I will conclude my remarks by urging the panel to please remember moving images and recorded sound formats in your investigative work, because these media are an incredible part of our cultural, historic, and artistic heritage. Thank you.