NINE HUNDRED POINTS OF LIGHT: THE CANADIAN COMMUNITY OF ARCHIVES

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Imagine for a moment, a night-sky view of Canada captured in the sweep of a satellite transiting so high above Earth that one sweep of the onboard camera captures the entire country. Then imagine everything below in absolute darkness, except for the points of light given off by each of Canada's archives. What would you see? Like beacons along the headlands, there would be at least 900 points of light, large and small, stretching in chains and clusters and isolated dots across this vast land of ours, from sea to sea to sea, and everywhere in between.

If we counted each point of light, how many would there actually be? We don't know for sure, largely because of the nature of Canadian archives, which is at best fluid and dynamic, bringing together many separate repositories based on geography, mandate, sponsors and themes. There are provincial and territorial archives; municipal archives; community archives (in the narrow meaning of the term 'community'); business, corporate and organizational archives; university, college or school archives; religious archives; and thematic archives focused on special interests such as ethnicity, culture, law, First Nations, medicine, the armed forces, the LGBT experience, and so on.

The situation is further compounded by the co-location and co-sponsorship of many archives – there are archives within museums, archives and 'history rooms' within libraries, documentation centres within universities, etc. As well, there are provincial, territorial and regional councils, and sometimes informal networks of archives, working together as larger communities focused on building visibility and leveraging resources. Lastly, there are archives so small or so isolated that they are scarcely known, except to those for whom they are important.

For the purposes of this exploration, how should we define 'community archives' and how many might there be? One approach is to use the Canadian Council of Archives as a lens. Founded in 1985, the council was structured as a 'community of communities,'

based on networking and collaborative undertakings shared by 13 provincial and territorial councils. A noteworthy outcome has been Archives Canada, the national online descriptive catalogue, with approx. 800 archives represented in its 2001 iteration. Add 15% for growth, continuing outliers and those with no online presence, and we can probably conclude that, broadly defined, this represents the spectrum of Canadian archival institutions, now at least 900 strong.

In order to capture a snapshot of this community in the second decade of the 21st century, 12 provincial and territorial councils contributed to a brief, very informal SWOT analysis. The expectation was that the broad strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats identified by each would, in general, be common to all. That assumption was correct.

For the purposes of this review, the perspective of Canada's larger, better-resourced archives has been largely muted, in favour of highlighting the starker realities faced by perhaps 90% of the country's 'other' archives, many or most of which operate on $150,000 or less annually.

STRENGTHS

The good news is that Canada's documentary heritage is alive and well, living in the vaults and on the shelves of archives everywhere in this country. Museums may have the artifacts and deploy them admirably to illustrate our history, but the primary sources – the evidence that fuels traditional and virtual exhibits, books, magazines and newspapers, community histories and community pride, family histories and community identity formation, scholarly and academic research, films and documentaries, theatre and music – is held in Canada's archives. The first and largest strength of the community is the sheer volume, variety and quality of these records. Increasingly, the materials best-suited for popular history, social media diffusion and citizen engagement are held close to the ground, in the country's smaller, community-based archives. As one advisor noted,

> *I have seen so many archival treasures in the small museums and organizations that I visit... [M]any important records do not make their way to the big institutions for all kinds of reasons – community pride or paranoia, the reduced capacities of the larger institutions themselves or often just the nature of the records as inactive but still essential records of municipalities or organizations.*

The political agenda for celebrating Canada 150 in 2017, for example, leads directly to these treasure-troves – and the stories of our country since 1867 will not be told properly without their inclusion.

The second great strength is the cadre of archivists who take pride in our nation's documentary heritage and are fiercely devoted to protecting it. Our colleagues in Quebec express this best: "Notre richesse : valeur patrimoniale, valeur d'information, valeur de témoignage, information et émotion, rappel significatif du passé, lien avec le présent, projection dans l'avenir… permet de mesurer le progrès, évoquer les étapes marquantes, comparer avec les objectifs fixés, etc."

The third great strength of the community is the Canadian Archival System, unique to this country and based on interlocking national, provincial and territorial councils. Those who have sheltered under this umbrella since 1985 have all benefitted. Many of Canada's archives, of course – regardless of size or situation – have always been strong contributors, demonstrating a resiliency built on long duration, sound leadership and reliable resource allocation. Others are more recent, often the children of Canada's Centennial Year, and display varying degrees of viability.

Strength in numbers has enabled several provincial and territorial councils to sponsor online descriptive catalogues, sometimes through regional collaboration, and all linked to the larger Archives Canada portal. Each catalogue promotes the holdings of participating member archives, providing a visibility and strength that most could not afford otherwise. In building these catalogues, councils have also developed and shared technical expertise and infrastructure with their members, particularly around metadata management and digitization.

Possibly the greatest strength of the provincial and territorial councils has been the professional advisory and training services offered by many, and designed to build capacity in core archival functions, standards and best practices. Along the way, individual archives have learned to work together; partnerships with other heritage organizations or related cultural industries, in order to

accomplish larger shared objectives, are also becoming increasingly common.

As well, archives in general are beginning to build visibility and new audiences through websites and the use of social media; outreach initiatives such as heritage fairs, heritage weeks and school programming are also creating, especially at the community level where it matters most, an awareness that archival resources are fundamental to telling Canada's stories, and that providing good stewardship for these resources is an important and complex responsibility.

WEAKNESSES

The bad news is that at all levels, Canadian archives are struggling to survive, remain visible, and prove their relevancy. By comparison, the museum community has been well taken care of in the last quarter-century and is, relatively speaking, thriving; the archival community has not and is not.

The most obvious weakness is evident now through the recent loss of federal funding and support, preceded by a long period of inertia and retrenchment. Support and recognition from provinces, territories, municipalities – and sometimes sponsoring bodies – has, for the most part, always been inconsistent, insufficient and unreliable. Simply put, Canadian archives collectively are neither large enough nor strong enough to attract political interest and will.

Chronic under-resourcing leads to a cascade of secondary weaknesses that further contribute to the fragility of the country's archives, individually and collectively. Geographic isolation plays a huge role in diminishing the collective voice of the community, and in undermining the potential of smaller, more remote archives, especially those serving Canada's First Nations. While no archives in the country is resourced sufficiently to fulfill its mandate, many struggle routinely from one year to the next without stable or reliable funding. Those located within larger entities like museums or corporate bodies, face competing institutional priorities, while the overall lack of adequate resources excludes many archives from larger projects or initiatives underway within their broader community.

Across a quarter-century of federal funding support, strengths were built up at the local level in appraisal, description, and preservation. Now there is a tendency to focus on description alone as the core function "most likely to succeed" – to the detriment of preservation and access; and indeed, to avoid the latter until everything is 'parfaitement décrit.'

While archives take collective pride in being stewards of Canada's documentary heritage, they are poor communicators of both their role and accomplishments. We are too modest, we don't promote ourselves enough, and collectively we exhibit a curious tendency to 'effacer derrière les créateurs.' With little time and fewer resources, many archives lack public and media relations strategies, while advocacy undertaken collectively to raise public awareness is virtually unknown. Consequently there is little public understanding of what archives are, or what archivists do. Lack of media exposure means even less public interest, and as a result, Canadian archives have been and remain seriously undervalued.

Isolation, chronic under-resourcing, the inward-looking nature of many archives, and now the extinction of federal funding have combined to create a vacuum across the community. At all levels, the infrastructure for communications and networking has either been weakened or broken. Provincial and territorial councils are experiencing difficulty in refreshing executive committees. Several councils have reduced advisory services and professional development and training; as a consequence, a decline in membership is now reported by some. Reduced access to training, combined with rapid staff turnover in archives unable to offer sustained employment, results in what one advisor has described as "constantly teaching kindergarten" to a revolving cast of volunteers and term employees, many of whom demonstrate only cursory interest at best in professional methodology.

Increasingly the defence mechanism, especially in smaller archives, has become complacency and acquiescence with the status quo – while at the same time many of them report 'apathy' in succession planning, volunteering, and employee engagement. We are fond of saying that the archival community in Canada is always facing some critical turning point or 'fork in the road' – but until now that intersection has always held the promise of opportunity and forward progression. The future now seems less certain.

OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the obstacles, the resiliency of Canada's archives is nothing short of remarkable. Initial shock over the abrupt termination of federal funding has worn off; the reality of altered circumstances has settled in; the world is different, but it has not ended. Archives have always been stubborn survivors and it is rare indeed for any one institution to admit defeat and close. Being community-based and community-focused, they are durable and adept at identifying and exploiting opportunities that might otherwise be overlooked or ignored.

New prospects build upon the community's long-standing strengths. The potential for constructing a truly national descriptive catalogue is first and foremost. Those jurisdictions currently lacking such a resource are vigorously pursuing ways and means to developing one, viewing this as an opportunity to reinvigorate member archives, establish a collaborative work culture, and provide meaningful professional development.

Partnerships are happening everywhere, not just with other archives, but with museums, museum associations, heritage organizations, the library community, the tourism industry, economic development agencies, and commercial interests. Publishers and film-makers are interested in the images and content which archives can provide. Internet mega-producers such as Ancestry.ca are eager for new data, in order to expand their customer base. Archives once reluctant to commercialize their holdings are now learning to develop innovative and well-managed licensing arrangements that provide new audiences and good stewardship for documentary heritage resources.

Partnerships with First Nations have the potential to raise the profile and visibility of Canadian archives, especially with various levels of government; in some jurisdictions, such collaborations are proving to be a potential source of contract work and a new revenue stream for councils, or employment opportunities for freelance archivists.

Broader collaboration with the cultural heritage sector has identified opportunities for sharing educational programs and delivering them in new, innovative ways. Various components of professional training and development are common across the sector and can be shared. A growing number of community colleges are offering courses in archival methodology; the old geographic isolation is being broken down by online curriculum delivery; and some jurisdictions are exploring the licensed use of curriculum products developed elsewhere by other councils or archival organizations.

Partnerships, collaboration, and increased stakeholder engagement have also alerted community archives to the value of collective action. Several jurisdictions are contemplating fresh approaches to provincial, territorial and municipal bodies – compiling metrics, demonstrating value, and seeking new or increased funding.

Lastly, archives across the country are excited by the potential of today's new technology – new platforms, larger audiences, new ways to share content – and are eager to participate. The Digital Age, with its interactive websites and portals, social media tools, open data and citizen engagement, is perhaps the greatest opportunity of all… and in its limitless potential, also poses a serious threat.

THREATS

The greatest threat, of course, is that chronic under-funding and under-resourcing will continue… and worsen. If archives cannot demonstrate visibility, value and relevance; if governments at all levels cannot be persuaded to assist; if federally-funded celebrations of Canadian history continue to ignore the role of archives in building national identity; if agencies such as SSHRCC will not fund preliminary descriptive work as key to enabling quality historical research; if corporate interests or philanthropic foundations cannot be persuaded… then the long slide into irrelevancy and obscurity will continue.

Without adequate access to advisory services, and professional training and development specific to archives, practice standards will inevitably decline. Nationally-based committee work for both descriptive and preservation standards is already threatened. Without a communications and networking infrastructure to encourage training and consultation, Canada's smaller archives will become increasingly isolated and dis-engaged, of value only to their own constituency – and even that value diminished in the welter of competing heritage interests.

The few surviving funding streams now in place to strengthen Canada's archives, individually or collectively, focus largely on short-term goals and are often driven by

the need to create revenue and demonstrate economic value. Such "of-the-moment" objectives run counter to the purely archival – some archives therefore refuse to participate in what they regard as commercial ventures – but this is the cost of doing business among today's ROI-based heritage industries such as cultural and heritage tourism.

Ignoring the core archival functions comes with risks. Needs assessments and gap analyses conducted recently in several jurisdictions have indicated that Canada's archives are running out of space; existing facilities frequently do not meet environmental storage standards or provide adequate physical security for holdings; and with the loss of federal funding, preservation management – the hallmark of good stewardship – is being abandoned everywhere. At the same time, perversely, archives are a growth industry: business is done, decisions are made, and records are created in unending cycles; archivists will always have work… and perhaps there will always be these challenges.

Convergence among the information professions and the movement toward interdisciplinary collaboration can also be seen as threatening, unless managed and communicated effectively, especially to funding agencies. If the role of archives is chronically misunderstood and undervalued, do we run the risk of being subsumed, our identity and integrity lost among museums, libraries and other information service providers? Does it matter anymore?

The rush to provide digital access is proving to be a 'double-edged sword,' both an immense opportunity and an immense threat to the archival community. The Digital Divide remains a significant impediment – no longer only an issue of broadband access, but now encompassing the inability of most mid-sized and smaller archives to invest in the technical infrastructure, resources and skills needed to become full participants in the Digital Age. For those who can participate, the headlong charge to providing digital access, preservation and management means that the conventional holdings are suffering; for most smaller or community-based archives, the reality remains that their collections are entirely analogue, and will be of minimal interest to anyone unless and until they are migrated to digital platforms.

Canadian archives are investing heavily in online catalogues, trusting that in combination with Archives Canada, these resources will make us "discoverable" and increase our profile; does this matter in an age when Google finds everything, anyway… and faster?

PRIORITIES

This is a daunting landscape. What should archives be, in the age of the Twitterverse and the Blogosphere? How can we work together best, from the smallest archives to the largest, to ensure we are good stewards, demonstrate value for money, and provide meaningful access to Canada's documentary heritage? How can we build awareness among Canadians that it's not "all about us" but that in the words of Sir Arthur Doughty, whom we like to quote, "Archives are the gift of one generation to another…"?

Canadian archives may not have solutions yet, but they do have short and medium-term priorities:

- attracting new and stable funding from all levels of government, especially provincial and territorial;
- identification of fundraising opportunities in the corporate private sector;
- a national archival catalogue incorporating provincial databases – quality descriptive records and transparent online access;
- a revitalized, robust organizational infrastructure that enables communications and networking within and across jurisdictions;
- diversified revenue streams through new partnerships and collaborations;
- professional best practices, national standards, and sound governance;
- better engagement of and support for First Nations;
- robust professional development and training programs;
- new approaches to collections management through cooperative acquisition strategies;

- digitization undertaken regionally, in partnership with larger archives, libraries and museums;
- cross-jurisdictional collaboration on preservation activities, including cooperative use of special equipment;
- outreach and public awareness initiatives that acknowledge changing audience needs, interests, and technological expectations; and
- building the public image of archives and raising their profile.

Are these priorities realistic and 'SMART'? Are they achievable? Do the 900 points of light still matter in a post-modern world? Only time will tell. In the end, what is at risk is best described on the website of the Provincial Archives of Alberta: "Archives are the memory of a society. They are the accumulated record of the lives and activities of individuals, businesses, associations and governments. They are the vital raw material of our histories. Without them we would have no record of our past, no understanding of our present, and no foundation for our future."