THE CANADIAN ARCHIVAL SYSTEM TODAY: AN ANALYSIS

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The purpose of this background paper is to provide an overview of the Canadian Archival System in 2013, and to inspire the work and outputs of the 2014 Canadian Archives Summit event. Given the uses of archives within a democratic society, our interconnectedness as a community and the challenges we face, a consideration of our present state must include a consideration of the work we have done to this point – work, led mainly by volunteers, to identify needs and opportunities in our mission to preserve and make accessible Canada's documentary heritage, for Canadians.

An analysis of the Canadian archival system today is only as complete as the data we hold; the data we hold is only as robust as the system itself. The data reveals a community that has done much with relatively few resources, that relies upon the dedication of those working in, and for, archives – institutions whose collections are now seen as assets by those outside the community, at a time when financial support for the system is at an all-time low.

In preparing this backgrounder, I draw upon reports and planning documents produced by the Canadian Council of Archives, as well as the writings and reflections of Marion Beyea, former Provincial Archivist of New Brunswick; Shelley Sweeney, Head of Archives and Special Collections at the University of Manitoba; and Terry Eastwood, professor emeritus and founding instructor of UBC's Master of Archival Studies Program.

THE SYSTEM

In Canada, we speak of the "Canadian Archival System" – it has become a commonplace expression within our community such that we may take for granted its full meaning, or that those outside the archival community understand its use in this context. The Oxford EnglishDictionary's entry for "system" includes the following meanings:

An organized or connected group of objects

- A group of bodies moving about one another in space under some particular dynamical law;
- A set of organs or parts in an animal body of the same or similar structure, or subserving the same function;
- A group, set, or aggregate of things, natural or artificial, forming a connected or complex whole.

A set of principles, etc.; a scheme, method

- The set of correlated principles, ideas, or statements belonging to some department of knowledge or belief.

I hope this is definition will cause us to pause and reflect. Regarding our Canadian archival system, we are a complex whole, with shared functions; we share a set of principles. What affects one part, affects the whole. The Canadian archival system is the whole of the archival institutions, human resources, programs, and repositories in the country concerned with the preservation of the archival record – and to work as a complex whole, the system requires coordination.

CREATING THE SYSTEM

In 1985, the Canadian Council of Archives was formed to be that coordinating body for the system, to help identify collective concerns and initiatives, and a shared approach to advancing our ability to preserve and provide access to the documentary heritage of Canada. The CCA was established following the intensive period of research that began with T.H.B. Symons' report *To Know Ourselves: The Report on the Commission on Canadian Studies* (1975), the Consultative Group on Canadian Archives' report *Canadian Archives* also known as the "Wilson report" after Chair Ian Wilson (1980), and the report of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada's Advisory Committee on Archives (1984).

Many recommendations from these influential reports are as valuable today as ever. The Symons Report, sponsored by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, identified archival sources and archival institutions as the foundation of Canadian Studies, suggested a national network of archives, the importance of university education for archivists, and a cooperative approach to the acquisition and preservation of documentary heritage, including corporate records and the records of ethnic groups.

The Consultative Group's report surveyed archival associations, historical associations, the then-Dominion Archivist, provincial archivists, individual archivists, educators, creators of records, and the newly formed Association of Canadian Archivists. It encouraged: the establishment of in-house archives; permanent funding for archives by government or sponsoring body; coordination on acquisition (central acquisition v. regional acquisition); and government funds for a comprehensive archival system; inter-institutional projects/programs, services to benefit all. As Marion Beyea explains, the recommendation of infusion of federal and provincial funding was to: coordinate a national archival information system, share responsibility with provincial associations for providing smaller archives with access to consultants and specialized facilities, assist in the development of the archival profession, and establish a grants program for projects of national significance. The Wilson report also recommended the creation of a national association of archives.

The 1985 report from the SSHRC advisory committee made similar recommendations and statement – it noted the on-going importance of archival materials to research endeavours, it recommended the creation of an archival grants and services program to provide project grants, advisory services, technical assistance to help develop a modern national archival system. Uses of the proposed grant funding included: studies on archives development, research on new communications technologies, appraisal standards, continuing education, establishment and maintenance of a national database on archives, preparation of finding aids, development of specialized programs or experimental projects to improve aspects of the archival system, copying of at-risk records.

Beyea notes the provincial and territorial archivists played a key role in applying pressure to provincial and territorial ministers of heritage, who in turn encouraged the federal government to financially support the development of the Canadian archival system. In 1985, the Canadian Council of Archives was established… and in 1986 $1.8m was provided for the development of the archives across Canada and to fund a secretariat staff to administer the funds and activities. Following additional intense advocacy efforts, another $1m was provided to focus on aspects of preservation.

THE CANADIAN COUNCIL OF ARCHIVES

CCA's mandate was and remains the following:

- to identify national priorities;
- to make recommendations as to the Canadian Archival system's operation and financing;
- to develop and facilitate the implementation and management of programs to assist the archival community;
- to advise the National Archivist [Librarian and Archivist of Canada) on development of the system;
- to promote better communications between the various components of the Canadian system; and
- to communicate archival needs and concerns to decision-makers, researchers and the general public.

The system was created to be institutional-neutral, with a Federal institution that participated and financially enabled a grassroots national network across Canada. CCA's official membership consists of the following as stated in our current bylaws:

- Canada's over 800 archival institutions and programs, represented through the ten provincial and three territorial archives councils;
- Canada's two professional associations: Association des Archivists du Quebec (AAQ) and the Association of Canadian Archivists (ACA);
- the Bureau of Canadian Archivists, representing the two national professional associations;
- the Council of Provincial and Territorial Archivists (CPTA), representing the heads of the provincial and territorial institutions; and
- the National Archives (now Library and Archives Canada).

The CCA Board is elected from members in good standing of the provincial and territorial archives councils. This structure recognizes that archival needs at local levels are best represented and conveyed by the provincial and territorial councils: Councils coordinate archival affairs, administer regional funding programs, represent archival interests in the community, and provide education opportunities to those working in archives. Critical to the advancement of the systems, committees were formed to further the development of standards, including archival description, preservation, and understanding and advocacy of archival concerns with regards to Canadian copyright law.

EARLY PROGRAMS AND INITIATIVES FOR THE SYSTEM

Following its establishment, CCA initiated the National Needs Assessment, the most extensive survey and analysis of the state of Canadian archives to date. The 1989 National Needs Assessment Report revealed: Canadian archives were found to be: under-funded; under-resourced; deficient in training; burdened by significant backlogs; and in need of descriptive standards; with significant holdings of at-risk media. Funding programs were recommended for: backlog reduction; preservation activities; publications and related resources; continuing education. The need for a descriptive standard led to the development of the Rules for Archival Description by the Bureau of Canadian Archivists Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards and their media working groups. RAD was created in 1990, revised in 2008 and is maintained by the CCA's Canadian Committee on archival description.

The work undertaken to develop the Canadian archival system – by archival institutions, archives councils, individual professional archivists, archives staff members and volunteers, and stakeholders – has been impressive and successful. Beyea notes that in the first 10 years of national programs, there were 1,265 arrangement and description projects completed,

representing 34,468 linear metres of textual records, 3,941,289 photos, 159,794 maps and drawings, 68,028 sound recordings, and 36,353 moving images. RAD and associated training was implemented, preservation assessment, training and education offerings were provided regionally, and the first on-line database of archival descriptions was launched. The database was the BC Archival Union List or BCAUL. The national database of archival descriptions, ARCHIVESCANADA.ca eventually followed, as did other regional networks.

ASSESSING THE SYSTEM

Much important work was done in the early years, with a funding envelop of 2.8M (later reduced to 1.7M) – matched locally with cash and in-kind contributions. As Shelley Sweeney notes in "Lady Sings the Blues: the public funding of Archives, Libraries and Museums in Canada:" "money is certainly not all there is to policy… but most policy implementation would languish without it." Further, Sweeney reports, despite the success of securing funding for the development of the Canadian archival system, in 2008 archives received much lower levels of public funding in comparison to libraries and museums.

In 2003, CCA undertook a survey of Canadian archives. The report stated that since the development of the Canadian archival system and the 1989 report:

- the number of participating archival institutions had increased by 251%;
- provincial networks were available in 83% of the country;
- advisory services were available in 75% of the country;
- regular educational workshops were available in 75% of the country; and
- conservation services for archival materials or archival facility assessments were available in half of the country.

All of these services were between 78% to 100% dependent upon federal funding matched locally.

Further information:

- annual rates of acquisition had increased between 200% and 700%;
- for one-third of archives, 41% or more of these holdings remained unprocessed;
- the accession record was the typical level of processing for 36% of archives; and
- at the above accrual rates, available storage space would be exhausted in 1.08 years.

Regarding staffing in 2003 respondents stated that:

- 31% of institutions would see 100% of their staff reach 55-65 years of age by 2013 [emphasis mine]; and
- 43% of institutions woulds see 50% of their staff reach 55-65 years of age by 2013 [emphasis mine].

The majority of Canadian archives were operating under extraordinary budgetary constraints:

- 51% of institutions have an operating budget of $50,000 or less;
- 41% of institutions have a salary budget of $50,000 or less; and
- 64% of institutions have a discretionary budget of $10,000 or less.

The community unequivocally stated its support for the Canadian archival system it developed – decentralized, with a strong commitment to regional expertise, yet highly co-operative.

In 2009, CCA and LAC undertook a survey of at-risk media amongst institutions that had undertaken preservation assessments with community funding from 1999-2008. Respondents (30% of those contacted) indicated there was much headway yet to be made on conservation/re-housing/reformatting of: photographic materials, motion picture film, audiotape, and videotape. The primary reasons provided by respondents for not progressing with conservation measures were: lack of funds and other needs given higher priority.

At the time of the elimination of the National Archival Development Program (NADP) on April 30, 2012, planning for a new national needs assessment by CCA was well underway, with an anticipated data collection rollout for the early autumn of 2012. The work was to be guided by a steering committee that included volunteers from the community, including LAC. Assessment was to incorporate as much existing assessment information from provincial and territorial archives council as possible.

NATIONAL ARCHIVAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

The National Archival Development Program (NADP) was launched in 2006 (NADP replaced the original federal funding programs administered by the CCA), in the shadow of increased scrutiny over the administration of federal funding programs; NADP was renewed with Ministerial approval in 2011. Proposed projects needed to fall under one of the following objectives:

1. Increase access to Canada's archival heritage through the national catalogue;
2. Increase awareness and broaden use of Canada's archival heritage;
3. Increase the representation of Aboriginal peoples and under-represented ethno-cultural groups in Canada's archival heritage;
4. Increase the capacity of archival networks to undertake strategic and development activities; and
5. Increase the capacity of archival institutions to preserve Canada's archival heritage.

The program had increased reporting and evaluation responsibilities for the archival institutions and councils that received funding, including CCA. These reporting requirements and evaluations were developed at the direction of the Federal Treasury board through a collaborative process with LAC representatives and the CCA board. Although at times exhausting, this work resulted in precise application forms, renewed goals for the archival system, and extremely useful data from summative and formative evaluations regarding activities of archives in Canada. Hundreds of hours of volunteer time were spent in their development and subsequent data analysis. Some NADP stats from 2010/11:

- 89 projects completed;
- 590.66m of records described and made accessible to Canadians;
- 378,878 items digitized;
- 142 individuals employed;
- 70 institutions directly supported;
- 60 workshops given to 1,264 participants; and
- CCA advisors and conservators answered 5,636 expertise requests and made 186 site visits.

It is important to recognize that during this time of increased challenges and responsibilities came one of the more significant developments on the archival scene, the availability of the "free" open source multi-level archival description software AtoM and the Archivematica digital preservation system, developed by Artefactual Systems, of New Westminster, BC. Selected by the AABC to replace BCAUL, the provincial catalogue was re-launched in 2009 as MEMORYBC.ca. This software now supports the Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario, and Alberta databases; the Atlantic Provinces archives councils are in various stages of considering it for their networks; and it offers the Territories a sustainable solution for participation in the national network.

In spite of the challenges faced by the community, CCA anticipates a re-launch (much delayed due to competing priorities in light of available resources) of ArchivesCanada 2.0 on the AtoM platform in early 2014. The implementation of AtoM for the catalogues also inspired the work of CCA's Canadian Committee on Archival description for the revision of RAD (at present, funding elimination has necessitated that CCA committee work go on hiatus). True to the nature of our archival system, the cash and in-kind support for implementation and development of AtoM in Canada has come from many sources: council funds (including individual membership fees revenue) provincial governments, lottery funds, private foundations, CCA, NADP, LAC, and academic archives.

NOW

For many of us, the system's dependency (in most years) on a single federal program to leverage local resources was always in our minds. The cancellation of federal funding without a transition period occurred when some archives councils had not realized alternative service delivery models and revenue streams – or indeed, had ever gained sufficient resources to undertake research and development for new services.

Yet *Now* is a time of great opportunity – there is an ever-growing demand for access to unique local materials, for "open access" and "open data," – and the technology is available to support these initiatives. There are chances for archives to partner with other cultural institutions to make content available, to enrich new and emerging information resources, to educate users of archives, to collaborate on strategies for the preservation of digital and digitized information.

For the Canadian archival system, the pivot moment is here. Many parts of the system are struggling. To use an oft-repeated phrase, "it takes money to make money:" unless new sources of support for restructuring services can be accessed, a self-sustaining system open to archival institutions, small as well as large, may not be realized in the coming years. This comes at a time when the knowledge and information residing in the archival community is needed more than ever – by sponsoring bodies, by our sister professions, and by society generally.

Now unlike any time since the establishment of the Canadian archival system, we must recognize what we do well, identify what needs to change, secure the needed financial resources, and work together in the best interests of Canadians.