DIGITIZATION AND DEMOCRATIZATION: KEEPING AN OPEN MIND ABOUT HOW WE PRESERVE AND SHARE OUR DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE

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Dr. Guy Berthiaume is a Canadian historian specializing in classical antiquity. He has been the Librarian and Archivist of Canada since June 2014. Previously, he was the chief executive officer of the Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec. In August 2015, he was elected to a four-year term as President of the Standing Committee of the National Libraries Section, International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, based in The Hague, Netherlands. He is also a member of the Evaluation Commission of the International Council on Archives. As the Librarian and Archivist of Canada, he is an ex-officio member of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada. In November 2018, Dr. Berthiaume gave the opening address at Technology, Memory and History, a Toronto forum organized by the Association for Canadian Studies in collaboration with Historica Canada. The following is a condensed version of Dr. Berthiaume's remarks.

I'd like to briefly talk to you about Library and Archives Canada and the confluence of the preservation of our shared history and heritage and the use of technology to do so.

Four and a half years ago, when I became the Librarian and Archivist of Canada, I committed myself to making LAC an institution that listens to its clients and its partners. And by listening — even just a little — it was easy to understand the impact and demand for technology that keeps up with societal demands in the sharing of our documentary heritage.

We live in an age of the immediate, where response time is expected to be instantaneous, and where attention spans are the length of a soundbite. In this kind of world, it is easy for us to lose sight of the past and to ignore the future. Only the present seems to matter, and that present is in constant flux.

This said, many of our recent initiatives at LAC only make sense if we keep in mind the tremendous democratization of knowledge we have seen in the wake of digitization. At one time, only graduate students, faculty and researchers were allowed to visit national libraries. These days, thanks to the Web, anyone and everyone — not only from our own country, but from anywhere in the world — has access to our collection. This has awakened an appetite for knowledge that we frankly find difficult to satisfy.

So how do we maintain a continuum of past, present and future? With solid, robust and trustworthy memory institutions. And that's what LAC is all about.

Let me give you a few examples of the way we use technology to engage Canadians.

Last year, 2017, was an important year for us, the year of the 150th anniversary of Canadian Confederation, and we took the opportunity to share the richness of our collection with our customers, partners and the general public.

One such new initiative included the National Heritage Digitization Strategy (NHDS), developed with major Canadian memory institutions: public libraries, academic libraries and archives, provincial archives, national associations of archivists, librarians, historians and museums. The idea is to coordinate our approach to digitizing the hundreds of collections found in Canada's memory institutions. Needless to say, a co-operative system such as the NHDS only makes sense if its members do their own digitization to feed into the platform.

For LAC, our greatest digitization initiative to date has been the digitization of our First World War personnel files. These files are a major resource for genealogy and historical research. It took us four years and in July 2018, we finished the work, in time for the 100th anniversary of the signing of the armistice. Over 620,000 files are now online, some 32 million images.

LAC is always looking for opportunities to find new ways of sharing our history and heritage. By working together, with technology, we can make a profound difference both in the way our past is understood and our future is informed.

In such a context, it is imperative to ask: what should be preserved?

Edd Wilder-James, a researcher at Google, underlines a popular attitude towards records and data. I quote: "When you can, keep everything."

Wilder-James is a specialist in machine learning. He needs big data, and lots of it. But big data is no longer the exclusive domain of computer scientists — *historians* are increasingly demanding it.

The challenge for archivists is that keeping everything is not realistic. Aside from the huge costs involved, a "keep everything" policy threatens to drown history by preventing the historians of the future from finding themselves in the mass of billions of documents.

Wilder-James might answer that we must have confidence in the fact that future generations will be able to invent software to sort big data and find what is relevant.

Be that as it may, I believe that this posture requires resources that no institution readily has. Not LAC, not the National Archives of the U.K., not the National Archives and Records Administration of the United States.

So what is the alternative? We can continue to be *open* to new technologies, learn about new tools for uncovering our past, and *listen* to our clients and partners about how to continue to make our documentary heritage useful for the present and the future.