

Counterpoint

What to do with the Archives of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation?

At the 1981 Annual meetings of the Association of Canadian Archivists held in Halifax, Nova Scotia, 3-6 June, a session was held to discuss the preservation and use of the archives of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. The CBC was then in the process of trying to negotiate agreements with several public archives to preserve and make available for research some of its broadcast archives. Two of the addresses at that session, by Derek Reimer and Ernie Dick, are reproduced here. In January 1982, a meeting sponsored by the CBC and the Public Archives of Canada was held in Toronto to discuss the evolving plans for CBC regional broadcast materials. Josephine Langham's report of that meeting is included here as a companion piece to the addresses by Reimer and Dick. (Editor's note.)

The View From A Provincial Perspective

Before I get to the substance of my remarks, I would like to enter a couple of caveats. Even though I am going to explain the reasons for the Provincial Archives of British Columbia (PABC) having not entered into an archival agreement with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), this is not a reflection of PABC's assessment of the significance of the records of the CBC which is probably the most important cultural institution in Canada. Also, though I may sound critical of some aspects of CBC policy, I am not criticizing the archives or the archivists of the CBC, many of whom have done outstanding work for many years. This includes Robin Woods and the staff of CBC Program Archives (radio archives) and Program Resources (TV archives).

For some years now, it has been evident that the CBC has been unwilling or unable to manage, on a permanent basis, all of its archives. Their policy emerged in 1975 with an agreement with the Public Archives of Canada (PAC) for the management of program and program elements of television and early radio broadcasts. The arrangement was for the archives of the national network, more or less ignoring the broadcast archives of the regional production centres such as Vancouver, Regina and Halifax. This CBC policy of divesting itself of its archives has evolved into a policy of signing subsidiary agreements with large regional archives. To date, two of these have been signed, one with the Saskatchewan Archives Board and the other with the Public Archives of Nova Scotia. Several other similar agreements have been extensively discussed but not yet completed, with the PABC, the Provincial Archives of Alberta, The Glenbow-Alberta Institute and the Provincial Archives of Manitoba, to give four examples.

In addition, a number of agreements are in place for special subcollections of the CBC archives, notably with the Radio Drama Project of Concordia University for radio drama scripts and with York University Archives for TV drama scripts and related documents.

The PABC has been discussing a CBC transfer/deposit agreement since 1974, longer, I believe, than any other provincial archives. We remain, however, eight years later, the reluctant partner in this proposed marriage of convenience. Twice we have negotiated the apparently final wording of an agreement and twice as have backed away from the altar. The longer and harder we reflected, the more it seemed to us that the union was not made in heaven. Our serious misgivings about the CBC national strategy for its archives have four main components which are both theoretical and practical.

First, an important archival principle would be violated by our accepting the archives of CBC Vancouver, the physical, and more importantly, the intellectual dispersal of an integral body of records by the depositing of the CBC archives into many archives across the country without any way of reuniting the collection either physically or intellectually. Second, the arrangement which is proposed for CBC Vancouver, at least, would involve the separation of the broadcast records from the rest of the archives of the Pacific region. Now, while the "media" records, the films, the video tape recordings, and the sound recordings are certainly the most "sexy" part of the archives of the CBC, the administrative and policy records of the corporation should also be considered in this context. Third, the CBC is a federal crown corporation. We ask the question: Should a provincial archives with resources which are barely adequate to administer the archives of our sponsoring agency and our already existing collections be expected to undertake responsibility for the records of a federal agency? Fourth, there are no agreed upon archival standards for selection of CBC material by outside archives, nor are there any standards for documentation of this material.

While I suggested earlier that we might become the reluctant spouse in this proposed marriage, I am afraid that we can't claim virginity in the matter of CBC archives. We already hold two significant collections of CBC Vancouver material, the Imbert Orchard Collection, a collection of oral history and associated sound programs, as well as Imbert Orchard's papers, and the CBR (CBC Vancouver) collection of early sound recordings dating from about 1941 to 1955. Both of these acquisitions, however, were made as part of a "widows and orphans" program of cultural conservation. They needed homes to preserve them from apparent neglect and probably destruction. In fact, in one case, when the CBC was moving its Vancouver headquarters in 1975, we were given less than 48 hours notice to pick up a substantial collection of soft-cut original discs.

As is the case with many marriages of convenience, the partners are already laying the groundwork for divorce, and this is clearly the case with all the CBC agreements (proposed or contemplated) which I know of. Ownership of the supposed dowry, the actual CBC records themselves, is retained absolutely by the CBC. The various archives have custody of the records but not their ownership. To be fair to the CBC, the questions of property rights, including literary rights and copyright are extremely complex, and the CBC itself, often may not own copyright or literary property rights. Nevertheless, the agreements which have been signed so far and which have been contemplated or negotiated, but remain unsigned, may be terminated by either party on relatively short notice and on terms which are generally unsatisfactory to the archives. In the case of the CBC agreement with the Public Archives of Nova Scotia (PANS), the agreement may be cancelled on three months notice by either party and would result in the return to the CBC at the expense of PANS, all the material deposited by the CBC plus all copies of material made by the CBC or PANS. While I agree that good faith must be assumed in these matters, PANS could be left out in the cold. To me, these terms are unnecessarily Draconian.

However, the real Achilles' heel of the CBC diffusion of archives concerns the standards for documentation of the CBC collections. There are no widely accepted universal, codified standards for the documentation of archival material. Should the CBC eventually sign deposit materials with 20 archives across the country, it will almost certainly turn out that 20 different

standards of documentation will be used, all of which may have their own merits and developed independently for good and proper reasons. Furthermore, it is almost certain that none of these standards will be the same as that used by say, the CBC Program archives for the National radio network or any of the other CBC collections. There is some indication that the CBC expects that their standards will be adopted by archives receiving CBC material. In fact, the new PAC/CBC master agreement states specifically that the PAC and CBC will establish an agreed upon system of document control which will be consistent with the CBC's own cataloguing system. While I am not sure exactly what is meant by this statement, I can say that from the point-of-view of the PABC that the CBC (Pacific region) collection would only be considered as one, albeit very important, collection and that we would not be willing to change our documentation standards, simply to accommodate that one collection. This problem of documentation standards will fragment the archives of the CBC so that the CBC itself will find its archives difficult to use and other users of the CBC archives will not be able to reconstruct the record of the CBC. As archivists, we should be concerned to prevent this from happening.

Several of these concerns have been noted in the submission of the Association for the Study of Canadian Radio and Television to the Appelbaum-Hebert Commission. That brief stated that the major limitations of these archival agreements include the voluntary and selective nature of the arrangements and the fact that such agreements can be terminated on short notice by either party. Moreover, the criteria for selection involved are individual to each institution.

Given these concerns on the part of the PABC, what alternatives are available for the archives of CBC Vancouver? We see three options. First of all that the CBC would accept the direct responsibility for its own archives. Second, that the PAC would undertake the archives of regional production centres, such as Vancouver, in the same way that they have undertaken responsibility for the national networks and in the process, establish regional research offices in the regions at PAC regional records centres, such as the one in Burnaby, B.C. The third option would be for the CBC and/or the PAC to enter into a continuing cost-sharing agreement with the PABC whereby we would be "contracted" to maintain the archives of CBC Vancouver.

Let me briefly describe the pros and cons of these three options. There would clearly be benefits from the CBC expanding its existing archival program into the regions. First of all, the CBC is probably best able to judge which records should be kept in the same way that we accept that the various public archives are best able to judge which government records should be preserved. The institution of a corporation-wide policy of archives within the CBC would eliminate what Robin Woods has called "the principle of negative selection," that is, not selecting and preserving what is worthwhile according to some established set of values but rather being left with what has not been lost or destroyed, the flotsam and jetsam of the broadcasting machine. Furthermore, the CBC has the technical knowledge and equipment for the handling of broadcast quality film, video tape recordings and sound recordings, whereas the technical standards of archives may not be so exacting. In addition, the CBC's access to their own archives would be facilitated by eliminating the necessity of going to another institution to gain access to their own archives. Finally, the CBC could establish and enforce the documentation standards which they want over their *whole* archives.

On the negative side, there are at least two serious concerns. The first is that the CBC does not provide adequate public access to its archives. One of the necessary prerequisites would be public access to the CBC archives, and it is doubtful that it would be provided where the broadcast necessities of the CBC have to be met first and foremost. It is critical that non-CBC users be given adequate access. Secondly, I am concerned that the archives of the Pacific region might not remain in British Columbia but rather be transferred to central Canada. The obvious heavy potential users of the material, both CBC and other people who are interested in the CBC archives, would be left facing travel costs to Toronto or Ottawa.

The second alternative would be for the PAC to acquire the archives of the CBC region in the same manner in which they acquire the collections of the national network and of the head office of CBC. The major benefit would be that public access to the material would be assured. There would only be one archives involved and the collection could be maintained as a unit. A unified system of documentation for the archives, which may or may not be consistent with what the CBC desires, would be instituted and it would create another precedent for the archives of crown corporations being transferred to the PAC, the federal government being the parent corporation.

On the negative side I think there are two serious problems. One is that this solution would probably mean the transfer of records of primary interest to the regions to the PAC in Ottawa. Also of concern is the fact that there probably will be problems in loss of broadcast quality as a result of some copying operations of the archives.

The third possibility is for the PABC to acquire the archives of CBC Vancouver on a cost-sharing arrangement. Among the benefits would be that the public access would be assured. In addition, the archives would certainly remain in the region to which they are closely related, although parenthetically I would say that the CBC might not be so happy with the idea of its archives being removed from Vancouver and transferred to Victoria; Victoria does not look very far away from Vancouver when you are in Ottawa and look at a map, but it is an awkward trip as mainland users of PABC will attest. In addition, we would be able to "piggy-back" our other film and video archives programs on that of the CBC. I think it would give us a tremendous amount of momentum in continuing the development of our own moving image archives within the PABC.

On the negative side, however, there are several factors. In the first place, such an arrangement would violate established archival principles by fragmenting the physical collection of the archives of the CBC. We would have the problem of non-standard documentation. On a very practical level for us, we would have the problem of storage, manpower and equipment costs. For this reason alone the PABC, at the present time, is reluctant to consider taking on even a small part of the archives of CBC Vancouver. Finally, we would have the problem of the technical quality of copies which I mentioned previously.

It is still too soon to say for certain whether or not the PABC will enter into an archival agreement with the CBC. The decision of course is only partly mine to make and after all our waffling and equivocation the CBC may not even still be willing. I do hope, however, that our reluctance will give CBC some time to reconsider the overall strategy for their corporate archives and that other regional archives which have been offered portions of the CBC records will consider our reservations before they become participants in the dismemberment of what is perhaps Canada's most important cultural collection.

Derek Reimer, Head
Sound & Moving Image Division
Provincial Archives of British Columbia