

Archives and the Heritage Community



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Canada's History uses archival materials almost daily – in the magazines and books we publish, and through our Heritage Fairs program, whereby students across the country are discovering their local archives as the best source, finding that “Gee, I didn’t know that” story to get an advantage in the project competition. Increasingly, we are looking to build our own archives of stories collected from readers and the wider public. *Canada's Great War Album* (September 2014) features never-before-seen photographs, letters, and collections from Canadians about their family’s First World War experience. Our future focus will be putting it all together – connecting research, classroom, community, and personal experience. As part of the Canadian Great War Experience, students from across the country will research the men and women who served from their own communities. They will carry those identities to a five-day experiential learning event in Ottawa, where, among other things, they will simulate a day of regular army training, spend twenty-four hours in the trenches, and receive a service medal to be presented by the governor general at the Canadian War Memorial.

These initiatives and others yet to come are imaginative, providing education that is both vivid and immediate. They suggest how the archival record of war service can be integrated with a broader heritage experience. These lead to my two recommendations for the path forward: (1) archives need to engage Canadians, particularly young Canadians, in meaningful ways; and (2) building the archival system of the future requires new funding paradigms or priorities that support an investment in the marketing and promotion of the archives, as much as in the work of archives themselves.

As Tom Nesmith wrote in his background paper for this summit, “archives are not yet understood well enough and supported strongly enough by society.” Part of the reason for this is that archivists, indeed the entire heritage community, continue to operate mostly in the world of traditional media, whereas the popular world has moved far beyond it. In a 2009 research study we commissioned, we discovered that half of the historical community – museums, archives, community organizations – were infrequent users of online

new media, meaning they used it once a year or less. Put another way, they were twice as unlikely as Canadians overall to embrace these technologies in their work or personal life. Eighty percent of them said the lack of staff time and training was the main obstacle to increased use at work and that the best online resources would be ones that they could access from home. Home – where 50 percent of them go online once a year or less!

Now, I admit that the total number of users has likely increased considerably over the past five years. But I contend that there has probably been no narrowing of the gap between where everyday Canadians are and the historical community. Consider this: according to a 2012 study,¹ in these same five years, media use has increased from 6½ to nearly 7½ hours a day for children between the ages of 8 and 18. What's even more alarming is that children have become master multi-taskers, often using two or more media devices at the same time. Counting each device separately, these kids have found a way to cram a total of 10 hours and 45 minutes of media content into those 7½ hours. Whatever archive strategy we design, we are creating it for this digital-native generation. Will any of us be able to keep pace with them?

For me, the multimedia phenomenon most pertinent to our aspirations today is Me to We. Who knew that international development could be so cool? Tens of thousands of teenagers do volunteer work for the opportunity to listen to politicians, social activists, and a few rock stars in hockey arenas across the country! It is perhaps the best example (and one of only a few examples) where the cause, not the corporation, is leading what the corporate community is calling “social enterprise.” Companies are no longer in the business of selling stuff – they want to “engage their audience and create connected ecosystems that motivate behavior.”²

This is important for us to understand. In this fast-paced world, if you leave a void someone else is going to come along and fill it pretty quickly. Indeed a quick Google search of Canadian history websites returns over 525 million options. But none stand out. Similar to Jack Jedwab's survey findings,³ our own revealed that more and more people are turning to the Web when looking

- 1 Leah M. Lipsky and Ronald J. Iannotti, “Associations of Television Viewing with Eating Behaviors in the 2009 Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children Study,” *JAMA Pediatrics* 166, no. 5 (May 2012): 465–72, accessed 14 Aug. 2014, <http://archpedi.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=1151625>.
- 2 Tony Elischer, “FutureFit: New Ways to Think about Strategy and Fundraising,” THINK Consulting Solutions presentation 12 June 2013 in Winnipeg, hosted by Association of Fundraising Professionals, Manitoba Chapter.
- 3 Jack Jedwab, “Public Awareness and the Image of Archives,” *Canadian Issues/Thèmes canadiens: Towards a New Blueprint for Canada's Recorded Memory*, special edition (Spring 2014): 68–72. Jedwab reports on a 2013 Leger Marketing survey that revealed that when the population seeks information about the history of Canada 38 percent use Google and 17 percent use Wikipedia.

for information on Canadian history – with traditional resources such as encyclopedias and libraries having relatively limited use. (Archives, by the way, did not even get mentioned.) Fifty-three percent of respondents cited Wikipedia as the website they frequent the most when searching.

Apparently anyone can be a historian – and many are taking on that role. There are thousands of sites for historical digital collections emerging. The online forum “Remember How We Used to ...” looks charming, and is part of a fairly reputable platform called Historypin⁴ – at least until you realize that the forum is a project partnership between a data mining company and a local energy distributor looking for customer leads.

And what constitutes history is changing as well. When I first started working on the Heritage Minutes video series⁵ over twenty years ago, our team defined history as “things happening at least 30 years ago.” But online the pace of history is much faster: virtual monuments and archives are being erected almost as soon as events have taken place. But what you see most often is the personalization of history – “Whose history are we telling?” is something we ask ourselves all the time. Today on the web, you can personalize your news, shoes, dating sites, and genealogy – it really is all about “me.” Our digital solution, then, has to ensure that individuals can personalize their experience and put themselves into the story. They want to be a part of telling the story – whether that’s discovering it for themselves by wading through existing collections or putting their own records into the context of a wider story.

This runs counter to the traditional nature and current habits of archivists, as Nova Scotia Provincial Archivist Lois Yorke observed in her summit background paper.⁶ The focus is on description ... possibly to the detriment of preservation and access. Or as Luciana Duranti and Corrine Rogers commented in their paper, “The focus of the archival community on ‘memory’ and ‘evidence’ encourages the popular (mis)perception of archives as being concerned only with records of the past ... perpetuating the myth of the passive preserver.”⁷

We have to bring archives out of the past and demonstrate their relevance to the present and the future. I support Duranti and Rogers’ suggestion that the project of creating a Canadian archival cloud could be the rallying point for a campaign to demonstrate the value and significance of archives. It would also be a project that the current generation, so isolated from historical issues, could

4 Historypin, “Remember How We Used to...,” <http://www.historypin.com/project/15-remember/#!photos/gallery/>.

5 Historica Canada, Video: Heritage Minutes, https://www.historicacanada.ca/content/heritage-minutes/agnes-macphail?media_type=41.

6 Association of Canadian Archivists, Advocacy: Canadian Archives Summit, Resources, “Canadian Archives Summit,” <http://archivists.ca/content/resources-canadian-archives-summit>.

7 Ibid.

become engaged in and excited about. They know this world much better than any of us, creating a new place for history – their history, the future of history – that could well create a tipping point in the shifting of their perceptions of the past, present, and future.

So the question is one of financial capacity. Jack Jedwab's research determined that 27 percent of Canadians feel that archives should be solely funded by government.⁸ I know that, for many archives, private sector partnerships continue to be a source of malaise, but archives have to find a way through this because any successful endeavour is going to require significantly more resources than the government will be prepared to commit. Canadians are growing accustomed to having the private sector take a larger role in social causes, and if you look at Jedwab's statistics, more than two-thirds of Canadians have already indicated they expect an increasing role for the private sector in this area.

As I mentioned earlier, most corporations have already abandoned the business of selling products and services to make room for creating change and motivating behaviour. They are responding to another social trend – one of social belongingness and stratosphere. Perhaps to offset the massive personalization and customization of new media, increasingly consumers also want more connectedness, more meaning. Here's our opportunity. Over the coming five years, more than ever before, Canadian heritage, of which our archival history is such an essential part, is well positioned to be that social cause to support, to be a part of that change that needs to happen. It is through the detailed archival record: the census, immigration records, homestead files, school records, and countless letters and diaries that the individual becomes visible.

Putting that together requires a much more concerted investment to promote the purpose and work of the archives. It is no longer enough to just focus on doing the work of the archives itself; archivists need to invest in marketing and promoting those efforts. Otherwise you become like a product-centred company that produces the best thing in the world but fails because no one has ever heard of it. Canadians are concerned about the future of the past – but they need to hear from the archives what they can do about it, how they can make a difference. People and companies want to support solutions, not problems.

I know that the summit is intended to focus on ideas that are “realistic,” but this is our reality. This is the new digital world in which we live and work – and the place of history and archives is largely hidden. In this world, you have to think big, you have to be bold. We have to find our place in this world, or the gap between the present and the past will become so vast that the world of

8 Jedwab, “Public Awareness and the Image of Archives.”

history will be totally unrecognizable. The vision for the way forward cannot be incremental, even though we may have to create many steps to get there.

We have time on our side. Creating a future for history has the potential to become a movement, but we need to create that ecosystem, and it needs to reflect the digital-first world we now inhabit.



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