

The Twain Shall Meet: 10 Years of Evolution and Innovation at Library and Archives Canada

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Abstract:

In 2004, Library and Archives Canada (LAC) became one of the first organizations in the world to integrate the services and functions of a national library and a national archives. The vision behind it was the creation of a new kind of knowledge organization, fully integrated, and able to respond to the information needs of the 21st century. LAC has been undergoing a steady redefinition ever since. From the initial stages of transformation (from 2002-2008), through a period focused internally on modernization and policy realignment (from 2009-2014), LAC has now emerged with a new focus, one which looks outward, with collaboration and access as the key drivers. The merger of the two organizations has presented unique opportunities and challenges; LAC has learned as much from the latter as it has the former. Charting unknown territory, LAC's approach to its key activities has evolved over time, from acquiring and managing records, to providing services, to developing hybrid professionals. The challenge, ultimately has been to find solutions which strike the right balance – integrating resources and skills, while recognizing the distinct nature of the professions and our collections. Along the way, LAC has had the opportunity to test a number of innovative approaches: from providing unified services, both in person and online; to acquiring information resources in a world where the distinctions between published and unpublished becomes ever more blurred; to establishing a coherent digital infrastructure and policy approach that integrates LAC's mandate to collect across three distinct areas (private, published and government).

Keywords: integration, libraries and archives, evolution and innovation

In 2004, Canada became one of the first countries in the world to combine its national library and its national archives.

Behind the creation of the new institution called Library and Archives Canada (LAC) there was the vision of a new kind of knowledge organization, fully integrated between two disciplines and equipped to respond to the information demands of the 21st century.

It was a bold idea. Revolutionary even.

Ian Wilson, one of the visionaries behind LAC and the first Librarian and Archivist of Canada, put it this way:

Canada is a dialogue between the past, present and future, and what we've done is to establish a new, national cultural institution, built on two great traditions, but hopefully *going into areas that neither institution could reach in the past.*

LAC has been going into these new areas ever since, gradually redefining itself as a result.

A new hybrid institution housing books, serials, images, art, documents, recorded sounds and objects in a single collection, offering seamless access, and involving the common work of two unique disciplines creates an environment that remains fascinating.

The initial idea was so ground-breaking that a new term had to be created: “documentary heritage”, an expression with enough scope to encompass everything such an organization could collect, preserve and share.

The adoption of the term “documentary heritage” turned out to be prophetic, as Canada’s collective memory would morph and twist into numerous shapes over the years, some of which would prove to be as fleeting and fragile as a tweet.

The early years: catalysts for change

From 2002 to 2009, LAC underwent a process of transformation. The aim was not simply to combine two functions but to create something new: an integrated knowledge-based institution for the 21st century and beyond.

LAC’s mandate reflected those of both the National Library and the National Archives, including the collection of our documentary heritage and the management of information within the federal government, but it widened the scope.

The most significant new aspect of the combined mandate was to make Canada’s documentary heritage known and more accessible to Canadians.

It was a promising marriage between two highly respected yet professionally distinct organizations.

The National Library had been created to serve Canadians and Canadian libraries in 1953.

The National Archives, founded in 1872, was responsible for government records, but also for private archives, as well as documentary art, photographs, maps, audio-visual materials, medals, and even globes.

Together, they had a mandate for collecting an unprecedented range of material, both published and unpublished, digital and analogue, public and private, and in all kinds of media.

But at the same time, there was a growing need to refine the role of LAC in a changing information environment, and a recognition that no single memory organization could manage all of this alone.

The new LAC sought out fresh ideas, new partners.

Staff, users and stakeholders in every province and territory were consulted in developing a guiding document called *Directions for Change*.

Its purpose was to move LAC from being a primarily analogue organization to one that was primarily digital, from being largely independent to one that worked increasingly with partners, and from an organization that was mostly operational to one that blended operations, policy, and the flexibility to enable other memory organizations to fulfil their mandates.

Under *Directions*, access was the primary driver, digital was recognized as the norm, and the key focus was on the client.

LAC responds

During the transformation years a great deal of work was undertaken at LAC to address the information needs of a new generation, hungry for content.

During this same period, documentary heritage content was experiencing its own metamorphosis, and so Legal Deposit was extended to include not only published materials, but electronic publications, geomatics, digital music and online newspapers.

A Digital Collection Development Policy was created to guide the selection of Canadian websites and e-publications, and LAC began sampling the Canadian Internet to get snapshots of websites to be preserved.

From its very conception, LAC was determined to integrate its core functions: this produced a common acquisition orientation for published and unpublished materials, a common preservation plan, and ‘catalytic initiatives’ to share metadata for all LAC holdings and integrate reference services. . There was also major investment in integrating systems, with a notable success in developing a common holdings management system for archival materials and bibliographic material in high density storage.

At LAC, both physical and virtual access are now unified: there is a single on-site reference service at 395 Wellington Street in Ottawa, and one website, offering a single point of access to materials across the organization.

LAC had gained significant momentum, but amalgamation was not an easy process. First of all, it meant the marriage of two very different cultures: library and archival.

For some who had worked in the National Library, it meant the erosion of a distinct public identity which had been many years in the making.

And for those in the National Archives, it meant a much greater emphasis on a standardization of practices and on public access to holdings.

The marriage had a bit of a rocky start. There were different ways of working, tools and standards, which meant there were arguments, growing pains, and on occasion, outright resentment.

Naturally there were territorial tensions, between private archives, government archives, and published heritage.

Both disciplines needed to think beyond their individual professional interests to the major lines of LAC's new mandate.

But as the organization was making progress on this front, the stage was set for another turning point in LAC's development.

Turning inward: facing cutbacks, modernizing policies

The years between 2009 and 2014 were not easy ones for LAC.

First, the organization experienced the budget cuts that affected all government departments and agencies, and lost almost one-fifth of its employees.

A number of longstanding programs were eliminated, including Inter Library Loan and the National Archival Development Program, which had provided modest funding to archives throughout the country.

Yet vital work was nevertheless going on at LAC, including the modernization of many of its systems and approaches.

It was a time of intense experimentation. Pathfinder projects were created to test new ideas by, for example, using digital technology to improve access to archived newspapers, and creating a collection plan for Aboriginal resources that would cut across all acquisition streams. Subsequently, ten modernization innovation initiatives addressed topics such as improving stakeholder engagement, enhancing access to its holdings and modernizing reprography to provide digital rather than paper copies to clients.

It was also a time of major improvements to infrastructure: a state of the art nitrate storage facility was opened, as was a major new storage centre focussed on LAC's preservation collection of published material and newspapers.

LAC also began a ten year strategy to preserve hundreds of thousands of hours of at-risk audio and video recordings – a project that is now in year seven.

Unprecedented online access to Canadian historical records was secured through a collaborative partnership between LAC and the online family history site, Ancestry.ca.

Preliminary negotiations began with OCLC to replace AMICUS, our catalogue for library holdings, with an updated system that could manage acquisitions, cataloguing, access, circulation and resource sharing.

LAC's capacity to preserve digital content went from a rate of 3 million images per month to 8 million images per month.

What characterized and defined this period was an attempt to use a common approach for acquisition, stewardship and access throughout LAC, one which applied to both archival (unpublished) and published materials. During this period LAC created the policies to support integration and to guide the organization into a digital future.

This was no small achievement. There were hundreds of individual policy instruments which came along with the merger, from both the National Library and the National Archives, and they each had different goals, different means of being achieved.

There was an enormous need to sort through them and create the policies which would reflect LAC as a holistic organization, aligned towards common goals.

For example, how would LAC make consistent acquisition decisions?

If access was the primary driver behind the new organization, how would it balance the myriad government laws and policies with both professional standards and client expectations?

For example, how would LAC's interpretation of the Official Languages laws, combined with government standards for online accessibility for the visually impaired, as well as privacy laws, affect its ability to put a handwritten letter from the 1950s online?

How could the organization possibly undertake mass digitization programs under such circumstances?

To answer these kinds of questions, LAC constructed a policy framework that would inform all of its efforts to document and preserve the nation's history.

This integration reflected a deliberate choice on the part of senior management, who could have gone in a very different direction.

For example, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, the provincial institution that also merged library and archives a year after LAC, chose to organize its operations according to professional distinctions.

Thus, they have a directorate for the public library, another for the national library and, a third for the national archives.

LAC, outward bound

By 2012, LAC's agenda continued to be driven by the process of modernization, to cope with the explosive growth of online information, the changing access needs of Canadians, and the need to align resources with those needs.

Long-term preservation of digital holdings and developing further a client-centered approach to access in the digital age surfaced as some of the key areas where work remained to be done.

A number of important lessons were learned during this period.

In terms of the digital/analogue worlds, LAC had discovered that they could co-exist, quite comfortably, side by side. One did not need to eclipse the other in order to survive.

For example, LAC integrated digital services into its orientation and reference services, so that help could be offered online, in person, by phone or in the mail.

LAC also realized that it was neither popular nor effective to expect professionals from the library or the archival disciplines to give up their individual identities.

They could work together, and yet differently, in a way that respected their individual strengths and that strengthened the organization as a whole.

By freeing them to work side by side, in a way that did not impose one set of professional practices on another, they were also free to learn from each other.

When I arrived as the new Librarian and Archivist of Canada, in June 2014, I signalled access and client needs as the major goals for LAC, recalling the original vision of transformation set back in 2002.

But I wanted to re-open the conversation about how LAC was going to achieve it, because, in my view, the way forward was even more collaborative than previously thought.

Four key commitments for LAC were introduced to help define and restore LAC's place in the documentary heritage community, ensuring that LAC would be an institution

- that is dedicated to serving its clients;
- at the leading edge of archival and library science;
- proactively involved with national and international partners in an open and inclusive way; and
- that has greater public visibility.

For all of this to happen, it was clear we needed ongoing debate and discussion, among as many partners as possible, from LAC staff to private citizens, from galleries, libraries, museums and archives to private sector and not-for-profit players, from governments to heritage associations, and beyond.

LAC is, by its very nature, a collaborative organization. It was designed to juxtapose the landscapes of two venerable disciplines, to integrate expertise and technology, and to offer a seamless kind of service to an increasingly seamless world. But in its first ten years, the comprehensive map of LAC had yet to be drawn.

Working in concert

LAC is one of the only organizations of its kind. By being both a national library and a national archives it has a unique opportunity to question the old ways of doing things, to find new routes to fulfil its mandate, and to mirror back the society we are busily documenting – one which is fluid, interconnected, spontaneous, and decidedly un-hierarchical.

This is no small challenge for a government agency. But it can be done, provided it is done together with our partners.

It means that we work with smaller groups, which have specialized needs, as well as larger networks, which bring these smaller groups together to paint a bigger canvas.

It means that we look beyond our traditional partnerships to those whose members are not librarians, archivists, or historians.

That we seek advice as broadly as possible, and involve individual citizens in our work.

That we recognize not only our role in preserving an accurate record of our culture, but that of a great many others.

And that we listen with respect, and respond with understanding.

There is no shortage of content; it is all around us. Private, published, and government, in our case.

But the process of how we make it available and accessible is something we need to think about collectively.

Seeking advice

If LAC is to take full advantage of its "dual citizenship," it needs to seek advice as broadly and as often as it can.

There are very few existing models of similar organizations to follow or learn from.

With this in mind, LAC took stock of two reports on the state of libraries and archives in Canada that were published last year and listened with interest to their conclusions before responding with action to their recommendations.

A report from the Royal Society of Canada was released in November, 2014. It was entitled "*The Future Now: Canada's Libraries, Archives, and Public Memory.*"

One of its major recommendations was the need for LAC to develop strategic, long term plans in consultation with our partners.

As a result, our next three-year plan, for 2016-2019, will be developed after we have consulted with our staff, our clients, and our stakeholders.

Public consultations have already begun, through town halls being held at various locations across Canada.

The Report also pointed out the need to align the library and archival cultures, to renew our role on the international scene, to actively participate in Canada's library and archival associations, and to work more closely with Government of Canada decision-makers.

As noted earlier in this paper, I am firmly committed to respecting the different nature of the two professional cultures, while ensuring that their roles complement each other, and have already broadened LAC's presence in a number of important networks both in Canada and abroad.

And during the past year in particular, LAC has been playing a key role in the federal open government initiative, introducing a new directive designed to make government records immediately accessible.

Indeed, our new directive establishes that, with a few exceptions, government records will be open for consultation from the time they are transferred to LAC.

We call this approach, “open by default”. That is, free of access restrictions, while respecting policy and legal requirements.

LAC is also engaged in ongoing discussions through the creation of a Stakeholder’s Forum, with its key partners in the library and archival communities, and with its staff, through organized open discussions held in a relaxed café-style setting.

The Royal Society's report also stated that: “a national digitization program, in coordination with memory institutions across the country, must be planned and funded to bring Canada’s cultural and scientific heritage into the digital era to ensure that we continue to understand the past and document the present as guides to future action.”

LAC will be developing a National Heritage Digitization Strategy with its partners, designed to focus the efforts of Canada’s memory institutions and to develop new opportunities among documentary heritage communities.

It will cover both published Canadian heritage, such as books and newspapers, and public and private Canadian archival collections, including documents, photographs and art.

The second report recently published had been commissioned by LAC from the Canadian Council of the Academies.

It is entitled *Leading in the Digital World: Opportunities for Canada’s Memory Institution* and it points out how the digital revolution has radically changed the relationship between memory institutions and the general public, and the need for memory institutions to develop ongoing permanent relationships with the public.

The report also pointed out to what extent it is essential – in keeping with best practices developed at the international level – that Canadian memory institutions work with the private sector on digitization initiatives.

For example, LAC's partnership with Canadiana.org has enabled the digitization of more than 35 million images from more than 20,000 reels of microfilm.

And thanks to an innovative partnership with Ancestry.ca, eight of LAC's collections, approximately seven hundred thousand images, have been digitized and made available on Ancestry.ca's website, including the 1921 census records, and records of those killed in action during World War Two.

Mirroring our world

History has always required memory institutions to respond to the unfolding of society itself, with all its shifts and unexpected consequences.

So it seems obvious that such institutions cannot stay the same, and that they must evolve in order to reflect the society they document.

LAC’s mandate has remained the same for over ten years. It is

- to preserve the documentary heritage of Canada for the benefit of present and future generations; and
- to serve as the continuing memory of the Government of Canada and its institutions.

I hope I have made it clear that the way this mandate is achieved has undergone a significant evolution, one that parallels the evolution of Canadian society itself.

Canadians are some of the most networked citizens in the world, and they have come to rely on the Web for information.

They also expect that government services will be available online.

In the area of social media alone, LAC has undergone a minor revolution.

LAC's website has become one of the most popular in the Government of Canada, with an average of 1.8 million visits a month. Its Flickr site has reached almost ten million views.

Government and public domain collections will soon be available through LAC's Web archives access portal, and as a founding member of the International Internet Preservation Consortium, LAC continues to work with more than 40 international memory institutions to improve Web archiving tools, standards and best practices.

Our unique status has allowed us to launch programs that support not only the library and archival communities, but all the communities involved in preserving our heritage, like the new Documentary Heritage Communities Program.

Listening to our clients has allowed us to focus our efforts where they are most valued, for example, a recent LAC web study revealed that the two top subjects of interest to Canadians were genealogy followed by records from the FWW.

We have already begun to digitize the complete service files from the First World War, all 640,000 of them, as well as other non-official documents, like memoirs, maps and photographs.

The work of digitizing the 32 million pages these files represent constitutes the biggest and most ambitious historical preservation project ever undertaken by LAC.

We've begun to renovate our major public space at 395 Wellington, in Canada's capital city. A cutting edge service will soon be available to replace AMICUS and the National Union Catalogue, which lists the holdings of LAC and those located at over 700 libraries across Canada, more than 30 million records of books, magazines, newspapers, government documents, theses, sound recordings, maps, electronic texts as well as items in Braille and large print.

Our archivists and librarians, working side by side, will continue to acquire, preserve and provide access to the past and changing record of current times, whatever form it comes in.

In short, LAC continues to reinvent itself, and to reflect the changing information landscape which surrounds it.

While it may not yet demonstrate a single, fixed identity, that is perhaps the point.

The changes in technology which affect how people create, share and use information are constantly in flux, challenging us to question the way we work, and the best way forward.

But like the best marriages, the partners rely on dialogue, flexibility, and trust, to weather the times together.