Bibliographical Practices in a Time of Transition: Concluding Remarks

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The intersection of bibliography and digital technology in Canada today creates crucial questions both for libraries and for the future of bibliography. How is digital technology transforming bibliographical practice? How to deal with the sudden proliferation of digital acquisitions? How can the worlds of academia, technology, government, and libraries themselves benefit from this new landscape and work together?

Several important points were raised by other presenters at this conference. This paper will reflect on the challenges faced by Library and Archives Canada (LAC) in the new digital environment, consider the impact of digital technology on bibliographical practices, and pose some questions for further thought.

One of my first jobs was to edit *Canadiana*, the national bibliography, at the National Library of Canada in the 1970s. *Canadiana* lists and describes a wide variety of publications produced in Canada or published elsewhere but of special interest or significance to Canada. These include books, periodicals, sound recordings, microforms, music scores, pamphlets, government documents, theses, educational kits, video recordings, and electronic documents. *Canadiana* was published in print between 1950 and 1991, and a microfiche product was produced in the 1980s. It appears online in the AMICUS database but does not exist as a distinct database. Since

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1996, *Canadiana* has also been made available annually on CD-ROM, which serves as a tangible form of the national bibliography.

I still remember how we glued catalogue cards on pages, very carefully in alphabetical order, and then un-glued and re-glued the same cards in Dewey order and in straight lines, so that the pages could be filmed and then printed as the national bibliography. It was painstaking work, but glorious fun. I was also involved in developing the first Canadian Machine-Readable Cataloguing (MARC) format in the early 1970s, which truly revolutionized the creation and dissemination of bibliographical information through bibliographies and other means. Since then, the pace of change has dramatically accelerated. For example, there is a college in Wisconsin which produces an annual "mindset list"¹ to assist faculty in understanding the wider social context in which the incoming class of students has been raised. For the graduating class of 2007, it noted:

- that "Ctrl + Alt + Del" is as basic as "ABC"; and
- that computers have always fit in their backpacks.

And for those students just starting their college life, it noted:

- that they are wireless, yet always connected;
- that text messaging is their email; and
- that "Google" has always been a verb.

Information Access and Control: A Major Shift

This example gives some indication of the types of change in the communications sphere that have taken place since the last National Conference on the State of Canadian Bibliography in 1992. In the realm of information access and control, the changes have been equally phenomenal. Major reference works appear only online. It is becoming increasingly difficult to find national bibliographies on CD-ROM, never mind on microfiche or in print. Most electronic publications are full-text searchable. The publishing world is shrinking through consolidation and mergers, yet self-publishers are growing in number. The content strategy of Google Scholar has sparked fierce debate while continuing to attract the collections of major libraries. The list goes on and on. In this constantly shifting landscape, are

1 Tom McBride and Ron Nief, "The Beloit College Mindset List," Beloit College, <http://www.beloit.edu/publicaffairs/mindset> (accessed 2 July 2008).

we, as information professionals, helping to navigate and chart new paths or are we rushing to keep up? Either way, we are committed to the journey.

Conference Highlights

The President of the Bibliographical Society of Canada, David McKnight, set the tone for the conference by emphasizing the fact that bibliographers today must look beyond the text and must have the understanding and ability to record digital materials in bibliographies.²

David Vander Meulen discussed the impact of computers on bibliographical analysis and acknowledged that the technology facilitates research but does not ensure the authenticity of texts. The evolution of computer hardware and software has consequences for the future of bibliographical study.³

Thomas Hickerson gave several examples of how related collections which are divided physically can be brought together through the use of digital technology. In his vision, the user is paramount in considerations of opportunities to improve access. The users have never understood the boundaries that exist in our professional and institutional practices. In addition, he emphasized the benefits of mergers and collaborative projects to address the lack of capacity that is common in many cultural institutions.⁴

Richard Landon took us on an excellent tour through the “fathers” of bibliographical studies, providing personal contexts for their activities (and we look forward to his tour through the “mothers” at the next national conference). He acknowledged that certain of our accepted bibliographical practices stem simply from the capacity of typewriters to produce certain characters, highlighting both the limitations and opportunities of available technology. He also

2 David McKnight, welcoming remarks (Fourth National Conference on the State of Canadian Bibliography, Montreal, 20–22 June 2007).

3 David L. Vander Meulen, “Thoughts on the Future of Bibliographical Analysis,” in “Bibliography and Book History in Canada: Views on the State of the Discipline,” ed. Eli MacLaren, special issue, *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada / Cahiers de la Société bibliographique du Canada* 46, no. 1 (2008): 17–34.

4 Thomas Hickerson, “Libraries, Archives and Museums: Opportunities and Synergies” (plenary address, Fourth National Conference on the State of Canadian Bibliography, Montreal, 20–22 June 2007).

identified the challenges of preserving and using computer technology over the long term as it evolves so quickly and becomes obsolete.⁵

Nick Mount strongly defended the need for bibliography and then suggested that the way to guarantee its survival as a discipline is to disband bibliographical societies and have bibliographers join more general societies in order to illustrate actively, to those not yet converted, why bibliography matters.⁶

In another session, we heard that the computer is transformative and can uncover new sources of information. But the research process involves evaluation of the information: human intervention, and not mechanization, is needed in order to ensure that information is interpreted in context. Usability is only one consideration in determining how proper research should be conducted.⁷

Ernie Ingles brought a very celebratory tone to the bibliographical activities of the past forty years and gave an excellent overview of the journey we are on to provide bibliographical information to Canadians whether it be in print, microform, or electronic file. I was struck by his theme – “to imagine.” There is so much we can do when we work together and imagine the possibilities.⁸

Library and Archives Canada: Continuing Support and New Directions

At LAC we continue to support bibliographical activities in a number of ways. For example, we are working on an agreement for the transfer and further development of the five databases produced by the project, *History of the Book in Canada / Histoire du livre et de l'imprimé au Canada*.⁹ This agreement reflects LAC's ongoing role

5 Richard Landon, “Bibliography and Humanities Scholarship” (plenary address, Fourth National Conference on the State of Canadian Bibliography, Montreal, 20–22 June 2007).

6 Nick Mount, “Wielding Bibliography,” in MacLaren, “Bibliography and Book History in Canada” (see note 3), 87–91.

7 Robert Cole and Chris Hackett, “Defining the Nature of ‘Research’ in the Online Environment” (Fourth National Conference on the State of Canadian Bibliography, Montreal, 20–22 June 2007).

8 Ernie Ingles, “From CIHM to Alouette: Canada’s Major National Bibliographical Projects” (plenary address, Fourth National Conference on the State of Canadian Bibliography, Montreal, 20–22 June 2007).

9 For more information on the databases, see Bertrum H. MacDonald, “Book-history Studies Come of Age: The Digital Legacy of History of the Book in Canada / Histoire du livre et de l'imprimé au Canada,” in MacLaren, “Bibliography and Book History in Canada” (see note 3), 55–78.

as the long-term repository for national bibliographical information. Through this transfer, we will foster on-going research about a major facet of our heritage. The third and final volume of *History of the Book in Canada / Histoire du livre et de l'imprimé au Canada* was launched at LAC in March 2007.

We are also reassuming responsibility for compiling entries for the international bibliography, Book History Online. In addition, we continue to provide support to individual scholars who are compiling outstanding bibliographical reference works, such as Ronald Cohen and Elizabeth Driver.¹⁰ In addition to the bibliographical support provided to individual researchers, LAC is also responsible for the production of a national bibliography.

At the three previous national conferences on the state of Canadian bibliography, much attention was given to the former National Library of Canada and its role in bibliographical activities, with particular emphasis on the national bibliography, *Canadiana*, and at the 1974 conference on the retrospective bibliography, *Canadiana 1867-1900*. The fundamental changes in the social and information environments mentioned earlier have had their impact here as well. Library and Archives Canada continues many of its established traditions but is forging a new direction for the future of our national documentary heritage.

Rethinking a National Bibliography

In terms of bibliographical activity and resource discovery, LAC is undergoing fundamental changes to take into account new forms of metadata and standards. LAC continues to assume responsibility for the production of a national bibliography, but the text of the legislation¹¹ is more subtle and allows some flexibility in how LAC should compile information resources.

In the current climate, with the increasing influx of digital material and LAC's strategic focus on access and partnerships, it is appropriate to reconsider the purpose of a national bibliography, as several countries are doing. There are several surveys that have been distributed in recent times related to the production of national

10 Ronald I. Cohen, *Bibliography of the Writings of Sir Winston Churchill*, 3 vols. (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2006); Elizabeth Driver, *Culinary Landmarks: A Bibliography of Canadian Cookbooks, 1825-1949* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

11 *Library and Archives Canada Act*, S.C. 2004, c.II, s. 8.1(c).

bibliographies around the world,¹² and an International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) committee is developing new guidelines for creating electronic national bibliographies. This level of activity confirms that there is still a tremendous interest in maintaining national bibliographical control of all types of material, but the ways to do this and the kind of information that is supplied are being revisited and rethought in light of the impact of the digital environment.

The tremendous increase in acquisitions of digital material, due in part to new mandated requirements for legal deposit of electronic publications in force since January 2007, is proving to be a major challenge for a national bibliographical agency like LAC. How can we continue to provide authoritative descriptions for material that is often ephemeral multimedia with the same or fewer resources?

Two Approaches to Description

There are two basic approaches to this problem. The first is simplification of description. We could selectively create more minimal-level records. We could describe aggregates or collections of items, such as is common in archival fonds descriptions, rather than describing individual items. We could add descriptive elements for a digital resource to the original record for the print source if it exists. This would represent a major change of policy for a national bibliographical agency, but it is becoming increasingly adopted by other libraries.

The second approach to addressing the challenge of describing huge amounts of digital material is to work with others – with partners. Agreements could be made with other repositories such as libraries, archives, and museums to assume the responsibility for providing descriptive information for parts of the national collection, perhaps for a particular format of material such as audio-visual, or in a specific geographic region. Metadata could also be supplied by information suppliers such as publishers, authors, and vendors.

In addition to these authoritative suppliers of information, there is increasing discussion around having users supply descriptive

12 International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), Bibliography Section, "Survey on the State of National Bibliographies in Africa," <http://www.ifla.org/VII/s12/index.htm#reports> (accessed 2 July 2008); *ibid.*, "Survey on the State of National Bibliographies in Asia"; *ibid.*, "Survey on the State of National Bibliographies in Latin America."

information. The world of Web 2.0, considered the second generation of the Web, features online collaboration and sharing among users. In this spirit, could we expect researchers, academics, and even the so-called ordinary Canadian to contribute information to an online national bibliography?

All of these options have implications, some serious, for the researcher, the user, and for the content provider, and we are currently evaluating the appropriate way forward to ensure that we can realistically provide the bibliographical information that is required by researchers and users.

Bibliography and Web 2.0

These are just a few of the questions being posed about the future direction of bibliographical activity in a digital age. Yet there are many more.

How can we harness the power of the Web and its communities of users to improve the bibliographical process? What can we anticipate for the future of bibliography? Should we be contemplating employing Web 2.0 tools to incorporate social-networking technologies into bibliographical pursuits? We could, for example, create wiki-bibliographies to invite user-generated content. Would this result in useful bibliographical entries, or would the bibliography end up looking more like the results of a book search on Amazon or Library Thing? Is there anyone out there blogging on this yet?

When the potential to add content to a bibliography is opened up to individuals who are unfamiliar with the range of bibliographical standards, how useful is their input? And is there an untapped pool of potential content generators out there who might want to participate in such a project?

Does bibliography, as a pursuit, need to be more accessible to a wider audience of potential users? To what purpose? And if we deem user-generated description a good thing to pursue, do we change the nature of bibliographical description to accomplish it? Or do we more actively promote existing bibliographical standards and develop more comprehensive user education?

There seems to be no agreement on whether the user, whoever that user is, should be the decisive factor for determining the kind of access that librarians and archivists provide to digital material. A much larger debate needs to take place around this issue.

National Considerations

In a recent address to the Online Computer Library Center, Inc. (OCLC) Members Council, James Neal, the head of the library at Columbia University, discussed the growing importance of the repository movement.¹³ Authors are depositing content in multiple virtual places, while still submitting works through traditional publishing channels. Repositories based on disciplines, institutions, consortia, individuals, communities, and images all attract increasing amounts of content. In fact, LAC and other libraries are promoting the establishment of a network of trusted digital repositories. How will bibliographers track and record these materials which will be dispersed throughout the country?

What about the need for collectors, institutions or individuals, to keep computer tools – and their accompanying user manuals – along with the digital content itself, over time? How will this be achieved and who will take responsibility?

What about the declining emphasis in academic training in bibliography in contrast with the burgeoning field of studies in book history and print culture? Where does the responsibility lie to address this discrepancy?

There are many questions to be discussed and debated. Based on the pertinent questions being raised about the impact of digital media on the discipline of bibliography, it seems obvious that we are in a time of transition, and it is healthy to question traditional practices. We will not necessarily discard accepted ways of doing things, but we should have the confidence to question our long-held beliefs and practices and make changes where necessary.

LAC is taking up the challenge and addressing many of these questions. We are working collectively, in partnership with both the public and private sector, to come up with new and innovative solutions. We have embraced digital technology with the intention of making maximum use of the new information environment and technology to increase access and reach more people. The bottom line

¹³ James Neal and Shannon Behrhorst, "Listen to the Tuesday afternoon presentation by James Neal and Shannon Behrhorst, Chair of RONDAC," (keynote address, OCLC meeting, February 2007), 58 min., 26 sec.; mp3; from OCLC, "Documentation from meetings October 2006–May 2007: OCLC Organizational Dissonance: The New Harmony," <http://www.oclc.org/us/en/memberscouncil/meetings/2007/default.htm> (accessed 2 July 2008).

is that we are in the midst of a profound social transformation, and what is driving this change is how we use and relate to information. How we handle bibliography and bibliographical practice in this time of change reflects our support for a much broader mandate – to create a new, seamless, and socially responsive kind of knowledge institution for the twenty-first century and beyond.

SOMMAIRE

Depuis le dernier colloque national sur la bibliographie canadienne, l'Internet s'est considérablement développé au point de modifier les façons de faire dans le monde de l'édition et de découvrir un nombre accru de documents publiés sur ce support. Ces changements posent des défis dans le domaine de la bibliographie telle qu'elle est pratiquée dans des institutions comme Bibliothèque et Archives Canada (BAC) qui, à titre de dépositaire national de biens culturels, a pour rôle d'acquérir et de décrire la totalité des publications dans sa sphère d'attribution. À l'heure actuelle, BAC mène à bien ces défis de plusieurs manières. Par exemple, une entente est en voie de prendre forme en vue de transférer à BAC les bases de données produites par le projet *History of Book in Canada / Histoire du livre et de l'imprimé au Canada*. BAC compile en outre les vedettes de la bibliographie internationale *Book History Online*. La pratique acquise dans le domaine de la bibliographie nationale connaît également des développements, lesquels sont suivis de près. Mais comment les bibliothèques peuvent-elles s'adapter devant le nombre toujours croissant de publications en ligne? Deux approches doivent être prises en considération : simplifier la description bibliographique de chaque document et trouver des partenaires disposés à entreprendre cette tâche. La récente évolution de l'Internet vers la production générée par l'utilisateur (Web 2.0) suscite l'intéressante question à savoir si les usagers peuvent commencer à collaborer à l'établissement des bibliographies nationales. Le débat ne fait que commencer vu que sur le plan de la communication de données nous sommes de toute évidence à la croisée des chemins.