

Contextualizing a Scandal: A Brief History of Library and Archives Canada

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By Danielle Robichaud

In his recent callout “[LAC: The scandal of the Archives](#)”, Allan Greer shared his experience conducting research over the course of several decades at what is today Library and Archives Canada (LAC). There, he outlines how a shift from user-centered public services and spaces, driven by the expertise of trained archivists, has impacted LAC’s ability to support the meaningful use of its research collections. In doing so, the disjointed state of LAC’s online records is singled out as a point of divide between then (a golden era of people focused spaces and services) and now (a good-luck-out-there era of “digitize it” consequences). Greer calls the state of LAC and its services scandalous.

To fully understand the extent to which his claim rings true, however, the context in which this situation arose must be made clear.

Library and Archives Canada was launched in 2004 when the National Library (est. 1953) and the National Archives (est. 1872) were merged.

“[Directions for Change](#)” (2006), which set out the institution’s future direction, presents a vision for “a vibrant, confident and highly relevant institution that contributes to the quality of life of Canadians and the effectiveness of the government of Canada.”^[1] Outlining the vision for “a new kind of knowledge institution”, the document lays the foundation upon which the “virtual dumpster” of online records Greer describes came to fruition. As a benefit of a blended organization, a focus on the improved accessibility of research collections makes sense, so does the positioning of technology as an essential component on the road ahead. What stands out, not because it is misguided but because it is the scaffolding around which the vision hinges, is a clear and intentional focus on the critical and interconnected contexts in which collections are cared for and the highly skilled staff who make that work possible. What is less clear, is how LAC veered off course.

Doing ~~its~~ our part to reduce the deficit

The problems Greer identifies aren’t strictly missteps with service delivery or getting things online. The decades since LAC’s formation have been defined by merciless cuts, which were foreshadowed in the merger itself. In a [case study](#) by Michelle Doucet, then Director General, Services, LAC’s founding is explained as a response to a resourcing shortage and

a technological shift that set the stage for a central repository of Canada's documentary heritage.

Since that time, technological shifts haven't let up, and the same is true for insufficient resourcing. In 2012 devastating cuts to government libraries and archives occurred, with LAC [losing 20% of its workforce](#). Responding to a [letter of concern submitted by the Association of Canadian Archivists](#) MP James Moore said that "like all federal organizations, LAC must do its part and contribute to the reduction of the deficit." Almost immediately, cracks began to show with [Moore himself requesting the reinstatement of the National Archival Development Program](#) and [LAC employees struggling to support the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#).



Canadian Forestry Corps in England: Tree Falling (LAC 3522857)

By 2021, cuts and a backlog of COVID-19 related research requests had eroded LAC's service standards to a shadow of what had been promised, with the [reading room open part-time and virtual research support requests taking months to complete](#). To top it off, LAC is legally required to maintain and therefore prioritize an [antiquated and completely broken freedom of information system](#). As a result, other resource-dependent functions like timely research consultation, contextualized digital collections, or proactive and forward-thinking archival services are relegated to the realm of expendability.^[2]

With unyielding and sustained cuts as a backdrop, it's not hard to guess why LAC has leaned so fully into online offerings that leave researchers to fend for themselves. Greer positions the absence of context, connections between collections, and supports that reflect the nuance of archival research as LAC being "determined to hide the results of their

past efforts from the eyes of researchers”. In actuality, what is unfolding is a predictable outcome of an impossible situation and the absence of an adequate number of trained professionals to provide anything better.

Socially and politically we are at a point in which the inescapable reach of neoliberalism has framed public services as resources prime for extraction. Public goods are being run like corporations rather than vital infrastructure with the power and responsibility to ensure Canadians thrive. Instead of expecting more for ourselves and others, ‘doing our part’ has been accepting less in our personal and professional lives. In the meantime, decades of so-called cost-saving measures have led to a [rampant housing crisis](#), [collapsing health care system](#), [bleak higher education outcomes](#), and [fascism as an appealing outlet for those wanting easy explanations for perceived threats to their livelihood](#).

Despite political claims that an ever-present glut of inefficient fat justifies cuts, freezes and closures, the truth is that fat serves a purpose.

From a biological standpoint, “[f]at helps give your body energy, protects your organs, supports cell growth, keeps cholesterol and blood pressure under control, and helps your body absorb vital nutrients. When you focus too much on cutting out all fat, you can actually deprive your body of what it needs most.” Applying this understanding to the public service and imagining alleged fat as, instead, adequate funding, people-focused services, functioning and reliable infrastructure, and the permanent hiring and retention of trained professionals to ensure the best possible outcome for government and the public it serves, it’s hard to buy into tired jargon about less being more. There comes a time when there’s no fat left to cut, and despite the promise of finding those elusive efficiencies, that time has long since passed: less is less, and it sucks.

Barriers or vital parts of the whole?

In “Directions for Change”, mediated access is highlighted as key to LAC’s future success in which the filtering of requests through self-serve access allows for more time “to provide custom, individual service to those who still need access to our staff expertise.” That sounds good, it sounds really good. Unfortunately, that vision was reliant on staff to make it possible. In their absence, the risks the document cautions against have come to fruition: digital content is siloed across websites and databases without sufficient cross-searchability, linking, context, coherence or order. [In a subsequent piece about LAC](#), Greer calls the organization’s search engine “clunky in the extreme” and fairly speculates the route cause is that it “combines so many disparate elements”. Information professionals trained in description, metadata, information management and search engine optimization

(and an understanding of why they are essential to accessible digital content) will recognize this situation as a telltale sign of [garbage in, garbage out](#).

Reflecting on post-merge changes, Doucet's case study points to the disconnect between trained professionals and the general public, namely that those with information-focused skillsets care about intellectual distinctions that end users do not. While she's right that professional standards like the [Rules for Archival Description](#) don't always resonate with end users, she misses the mark in concluding that that makes them closed and therefore outdated. Or that the seemingly persnickety commitment of archivists to professional hallmarks like [provenance](#), [respect des fonds](#) and [original order](#) serve as barriers rather than a critical part of the research process that upholds the integrity of historical records and empowers researchers to make the most of the collections they are working with.

Doucet concludes that one must look beyond these barriers for new ideas and include "customers" while doing so. Setting aside the framing of Canadians as customers, the assumption that professionals are unable or unwilling to include end users as part of their work is profoundly misguided. Identifying, getting to know, and meeting end users where they are is at the heart of what information professionals like archivists do on a daily basis.

In his critique, Greer is careful to explain that he doesn't blame LAC archivists for the current situation, and he's right to make that point clear. The problem isn't LAC archivists, it's that there aren't nearly enough of them.

At my most generous, I understand why online offerings have been used as a stopgap for access in the absence of proper resourcing. I also understand that 'open' will continue to be sold as a default net benefit because it's a useful distraction from the relentless hobbling of LAC as "[the continuing memory of the federal government and its institutions and as the guardian of Canada's distant past and recent history](#)."

In actuality, the assumption that because something is online it is by default 'open' fully undermines the possibility of ever meeting the vision laid out when LAC was founded: one that weaves technological advances with forward-thinking and people-focused approaches to service and scholarship. That vision assumed adequate funding and the expertise of a sufficient number of permanently staffed professionals with an intimate knowledge of LAC's collections and end users, and where they intersect. In their absence, records have been put online without meaningful supporting information, linking between collections or important intellectual frameworks, creating the very type of barriers 'open' was supposed to alleviate.

Sure, they might be 'open' because they're online but that openness only shines a light on a decades-in-the-making scandal that calls any subsequent visioning about LAC's future

immediately into question, given the existing track record that's openly available for all to see.

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[1] Released in 2022, Vision 2030 lays out an updated vision for LAC. My focus on the 2006 vision is intentional as a) it hasn't been achieved and b) [Allan Greer has zeroed on several issues](#) with the new plan.

[2] I have written previously about the work of trained archivists and their invaluable role in the archival research process. [Missed connections: looking for everything in the archives](#) appeared alongside other very good 2017 [Archives Theme Week](#) contributions.