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**Canadian Historical Association Response
to Library and Archives Canada, Canadian Digital Information Strategy
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Introduction

The Canadian Historical Association is pleased to be asked to respond to the latest version of Library and Archives Canada's proposal for a Canadian Digital Information Strategy. For many members of the CHA, the lack of such a strategy is troubling. Without a carefully-crafted national policy on this matter, historians in the future will have inadequate archival sources to describe and analyze Canada's history, which is increasingly documented in digital formats.

This response will address the questions posed to the stakeholders who have participated in the consultation process. It reflects the views of the author and acknowledges the significant contribution made by Donald Fyson, Co-chair of the CHA's Internet Communications Committee.

1. Do you agree with the overall vision, scope, and challenges outlined in the strategy?

At a general level, the "vision," "opportunities for achieving this vision," "challenges" to its success, and "outcomes" (expand content, ensure preservation, maximize access and use) are well conceived, but there is much yet to do in articulating the substance of these generalities.

I would argue that general readers of such a report need to know more about the nature of the alleged "crisis" in managing digital resources. Historian Roy Rosenzweig in an influential "Forum Essay" in the June 2003 issue of the *American Historical Review* -- "Scarcity or Abundance? Preserving the Past in the Digital Era," 735-752) --noted: "Over the centuries, a complex (and imperfect) system for preserving the past has emerged. Digitization has unsettled that system of responsibility for preservation, and alternative system has not yet emerged. In the meantime, cultural and historical objects are being permanently lost." At this point I am being told by librarians and archivists that the "system" for preserving the digital past is vulnerable on a number of fronts: a) the life expectancy of digital media; b) obsolete hardware and software that make digital records unreadable; c) the difficulty of preserving interactive media with hypertextually linked pages that are subject to change and disappearance; d) determining authenticity, authorship, and integrity; e) digital copyright as it relates to archival storage; f) the problem of abundance; and f) deciding who has responsibility for data migration of historical records. In short, digitization has made it much easier to mobilize knowledge but not to preserve it for the use of future generations. Most of these problems are addressed in the report but they might be more clearly spelled out at the outset.

It is also not clear from this document how the new communications technologies might extend or contract the current mandate of Library and Archives Canada (LAC) or how new digital formats challenge Library and Archives Canada's current policies to serve as the archival repository of the nation. The document defines digital information very broadly – "material that is created, used, shared, accessed and preserved in a digital format" – while targetting the "public domain and civil society," "academic and research community," and "government and public sector" as priorities for a digital information strategy. Over the years, LAC and its predecessors have played a major role in selecting what documents to archive and in the minds of some historians are over-zealous in its sampling techniques of print collections. (The destruction of Pat Carney's papers relating to the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement comes to mind here.) Will the collection and sampling policies currently in place for massive paper collections still prevail in the digital world? Clearly the new information technologies offer ways of gathering evidence at a level never before anticipated – e-mail conversations and multi-player online games are mentioned – but do we really want to preserve this information?

The "distributed" approach to preservation suggested here is no doubt the only way to go in the so-called "Information Age," but LAC could (and we would argue should) claim a major role in advising Canadians everywhere on best practices, even to the level of the individual, whose digital resources are often as valuable as the public ones. In the early stages of my career, the Public Archives offered free of charge preservation services for family letters, to which I had sole access, in return for copies of the same (Nowlan Family letters); agreed to house the correspondence of a voluntary organization to which I belonged (The CHA's Hilda Neatby Prize Committee); and generally was the "go-to" organization on matters archival. Last week, I was working with my colleagues at the University of New Brunswick on how to think about e-mails as a resource to be archived. The best advice we could find came not from LAC but from the National Library of Australia (<http://www.nla.gov.au/padi/topics/47.html>). While the "crisis" in information gathering may not be as dire as is suggested in this report, it is the case that Canada has fallen well behind other developed countries in tackling the challenges posed by the new information technologies. This report fails to document the degree to which we have done so. To convince your stakeholders that the time is long overdue for a cohesive national digitization strategy, it would be helpful to discuss in more detail (as well as providing the very helpful list in Appendix II) what other countries are doing in this regard and where Canada might begin to show leadership on a global scale.

LAC's leadership is especially important given its collection strategies that in reality focus primarily on federal government documents. If LAC abandons the corporate sector (as indicated on page 10), there will be precious little business history written in the future. Similarly, the roles played by voluntary associations – the most basic democratic institutions in Canada's civil society – may be lost to future historical analysis if we do not define a clear strategy on how we might go about helping such organization to capture and share their digital records.

We are particularly alarmed at the idea expressed that "...the personal records and non-aggregated data including those gathered by governments, such as tax, health, and employment records are examples that fall outside of the scope of this Strategy" (10). Such sources (the Census most centrally) have been of fundamental interest to historians and especially to genealogists who rely on such data to be released for research purposes. We

would hope for more leadership from LAC in helping to bring well-received policies that prevailed in the print era safely through the digital revolution.

2. Are the Objectives and Actions in Part 2 the right ones? Which do you view as the most important and pressing?

We endorse the overall objective of ensuring that “Canada’s information assets and accumulated knowledge are in digital form”; that “Canadians have ongoing access to their country’s digital knowledge and information assets, and future generations will have evidence of contemporary intellectual, scientific and creative accomplishments”; and that “Canadians have optimal access to Canadian digital information important to their learning, business and work, leisure activities and cultural identity (14). Again, the devil is in the details.

Over the past decade, Canadian scholars have experienced troubling decreases and delays in access to information at LAC and elsewhere because of new legislation relating to copyright and privacy and because of new bureaucratic processes. We must be vigilant in ensuring that recommendation 1.3.2 (which calls for building “sound practices into Canadian funding programs that support the production of new digital content....”) and recommendation 2.2.6 (which calls for building “the requirement to archive to a digital repository, and support the costs of that process, into funding programs that produce digital content”) do not lead to bureaucratic restrictions that stifle innovation. Scholars have a wide range of data-gathering techniques, many of which are not suitable to uniform standards of data management or to compulsory data depositing. Scholars would not be well-served by constraints on the nature of researcher-created databases, such as requiring the use of particular types of software, or the adoption of a particular data structure.

We are concerned that this document pays little attention to issues of privacy, for example, in the potential preservation of emails or chat logs, which are often essentially private conversations. Public access to sensitive research data also raises alarm bells. While this issue will no doubt figure prominently as the strategy unfolds, more information needs to be provided here on the challenge that privacy poses to a national digitization strategy.

The strategy for inclusivity is also underdeveloped here. How do we preserve for future generations the under-represented voices of Aboriginal peoples, women, and minority Canadians? Does digitization offer new obstacles or opportunities to ensuring that we do not ignore these voices as we did in the age of print? If so, they might be explained.

3. What do you consider to be the critical next steps to advance the strategy? What role can you or your community play?

One of the critical steps in moving forward is copyright law, an issue that we are told the Canadian Digital Information Strategy is not designed to address (42). It is highly important for the success of any digitization strategy that legislation be passed that welcomes open access and that will enable the digitization of orphan works by not-for-profit institutions without a motive of gain. In recent years, the CHA was confronted with the copyright issue when it decided to digitize the back issues of its *Journal*. We developed a due diligence process for doing so, but we are deeply conscious of the difficulties that copyright legislation poses in archiving and making accessible Canada’s digital knowledge. As an organization that represents both creators and users of digital knowledge, the CHA sees both sides of the

open access and commercial interests struggle, but overall we have followed the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council in embracing open access in principle. It is difficult to imagine how a national digital information strategy can be developed without some leadership in this matter. The recent experience of the DND's Directorate of History and Heritage, which published some of its reports only to have them downloaded and sold for profit by a company in the United States, suggests some of the problems that open access creates.

It is also vitally important that processes be developed to create a national strategy that people involved in the consultations suggested be built on "provincial strategies, which in turn would take into account regional and local needs and priorities." As federal-provincial relations since 1867 suggests, this is dauntingly difficult to do but necessary in a country as decentred as Canada. Fortunately, a great many organizations mirror the federal system and can be enlisted in the cause.

With a membership of over 1200, the Canadian Historical Association represents professional historians in Canada. Through its website and history department list-serv, it can help to disseminate developments in LAC's digitization strategy and gather responses from some of LAC's most engaged stakeholders. The CHA recognizes the financial constraints under which LAC currently operates and that makes operationalizing a digitization strategy difficult, if not impossible. This situation should not discourage us but serve as a stimulus to the development of a detailed and compelling argument for increased funding to support such an important initiative that will benefit all Canadians.