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### **Comments on the Canadian Digital Information Strategy**

This feedback reflects the review of the Canadian Digital Information Strategy discussion document by the Director and senior staff at McGill University Archives.

We encourage the development of this strategy, and acknowledge the excellent work that is reflected in the discussion document. This is a timely topic, and it is essential that it be advanced as soon as possible. We need to move beyond project-based, interpretive digitization initiatives, and we recognize the need for strategic developments in preservation and access to digital information.

There are some observations and constructive criticisms to offer concerning the discussion document. There are two perspectives that are not adequately developed in the current document. The first is cultural expression, broadly including arts, culture, and heritage as their legacy component. The second is archival practice. These inform the feedback provided below.

- A digital information strategy is one component of strategies for access to information and cultural production in general.
  - This document fosters the underlying assumption that all information must be digital or be available in digitized form. Despite the predominance of information accessed online (particularly by youth, and as expressed on p.15), there are still reasons to respect information in non-digital formats, and still occasions when access through those formats is the most appropriate means.
  - As we become more “information literate” and more aware of the impact of electronic formats and the online environment on how we “read”/receive/interpret information, we will begin to differentiate and seek the most productive format and most appropriate environment. Not everything needs to be digitized in order to “exist”.
  - The very term “digital information” may be restrictive in this context, and it may be more productive to discuss “digital creation” and “knowledge in digital form”. Although pages 8-9 indicate the strategy takes a broad reading, it does not deliver this in the subsequent pages.
- The strategy document is weighed towards a library and information perspective, at the expense of some particular interests that emerge from the archival perspective.
  - access: The discussion on page 16 on preservation and access needs rewriting. Essential concepts are compressed here, and need to be “unpacked” if this section is to make sense to a multi-disciplinary audience, and if it is to respect and include archival interests.
  - mediation:  
The digital strategy makes numerous references to “digital collections”, because that is reflective of how banks of digitized records are largely presented and

accessed in the online environment. Published materials, virtual exhibits and digital collections are the primary presentation methods.

Libraries present their holdings in “collections”, and through cataloguing and classification systems that are culturally-based and not meaning-neutral. Online exhibitions are curated groupings that reflect the conventions and presentation styles of the moment.

Digital information and search engine access offer opportunities for transcending these presentation mechanisms. On page 31, the curatorship competency is well-expressed, and can equally be applied in other areas of the strategy. A new hybridity in custodial and curatorial practice is needed, and it should draw upon the strengths of our many practices (museum, library, archive and information management).

The strength of the archive is in its provenance and time link, its comprehensiveness, and clear expression of what criteria were applied in making archival appraisal decisions. The “fonds” as a less mediated means of presenting archival records, should be equally relevant in the context of this strategy. Digitizing complete fonds, and providing online access to these complete records, will more closely reflect archival access principles.

This will enable users to understand the records from the context of the creator of the fonds and from its own time period. It will also empower users to interpret the information content from their own perspective.

This issue of level of mediation, and explicit/transparent selection and presentation criteria should be a key component of the diversity discussion on page 22.

Funding programs to strengthen extent of legacy digital content (1.1.1 p.17) should include a correction factor to ensure that complete fonds (like those in previous microfilm initiatives) are digitized and made available.

- selection: As stressed on page 26, selection criteria need to be articulated. Archival appraisal should be a key component, and archivists have developed selection methodologies that can be equally effective for digital records.
- The cultural and heritage aspects are not adequately represented in this document.
  - On page 10, consider adding a 5<sup>th</sup> type of content category. Culture and creation is lost under “public domain and civil society”. The presence of digital content will increase in the area of arts and culture, and cultural industry, so it should be addressed more integrally in this strategy.
  - On page 2, Vision, the “economy” is foregrounded; culture should be there as well.
  - On page 12, Key Assumptions, the strategy should recognize that cultural expression (resulting in cultural identity) will increasingly take digital form. This merits separation from societal goals.
  - On page 4, cultural production and cultural identity are missing in the preamble text on Strengthening Content. This is about more than the economy, and contributes directly to cultural diversity.
  - “Arts” should be added to Goal number 2: To promote the development of strong digital content arts and industries.
- Information literacy, and specifically digital information literacy, is a key part of Challenge #3 (p.12) to maximize access and use.

This should be an informed use based firmly in information literacy. And information literacy should be a key outcome of a viable strategy, linked to the role of access to information in a democratic society.

- Some further thought should be given to the communities/collectivities that will comprise productive entities for digitization strategies.
  - On page 17, Action 1.1.2 recommends provincial strategies. However, other sector-specific and discipline-specific approaches to networks may be equally productive.
  - On page 27, the reference to Trusted Digital Repositories may prove to be extremely effective. Point 2.2 provides a good model for three sector groupings. Much like museum, archive and library institutions, as well as their related custodial practices, have evolved to respond to particular interests, we may well see a similar differentiation evolve in the area of the digital repository. Universities may be key sites.
- The rights issue is complex, and should be addressed to reflect more of this complexity if the strategy is to include stakeholders in the arts and cultural industries, as well as a new generation of online creators.
  - This document merits a more nuanced discussion of the policy issues as they pertain to rights.
  - Cultural approaches to rights are changing in some sectors, with new patterns of communication among youth, and new modes of creation and sharing that include the commons, collaboration, sampling and mashing.
  - If this strategy is to be forward-looking and inclusive, the assumptions behind intellectual property and commodification will need to be recognized, explored, and possibly challenged.
- As a community, we will need to establish a more compelling rhetoric to advance this issue. While we appreciate the content and intentions expressed in the “framework for action”, the challenges need a more dynamic and motivating rhetoric to be engaging.
- Illustrations
  - Any document issued by this initiative should be a model for citation, and respect for authorship. The names of the photographers/artists are markedly absent, as well as any titles that may be essential to identifying the works.
  - The selection of illustrations should receive peer review. On page 26, are fingerprints on vinyl good practice?