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Bibliographic Access at Library and Archives Canada: the digital challenge

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At Library and Archives Canada (LAC), as with many other cultural agencies around the world, new challenges in bibliographic access arrive daily, and current challenges are being redefined just as quickly. It is a time of great upheaval in description, and one of the main challenges is to discern with some wisdom what nuggets of value from earlier times must be retained, and what elements can be discarded. This judgement call is often difficult, contentious and fraught with risk. As we know, the great libraries of the world carry an enormous legacy of bibliographic descriptions representing the world's literature in all its forms. This is a precious cargo that we must take great care to preserve. Yet we may need to jettison some pieces, in order to make room for the description needs of new types of publishing, especially in digital form, and new kinds of users.

Challenges

I have identified eight major challenges facing Library and Archives Canada today, many of them interrelated and interactive.

1. Digital - finding ways to describe the enormous quantities of digital publications, and maintaining a balance between describing digital publications and those in traditional formats.
2. Technology – finding ways to exploit technology to the fullest to present our descriptive data to the world in ways that provide more powerful search and access capacity, and are more user-friendly and integrative.

3. Resource discovery - a shift in focus from the need to identify, list or describe publications, to the need to render them accessible in some way, such as through full-text indexing and searching. In other words, a shift from creating a comprehensive and unambiguous listing such as a national bibliography, to a role of enabling users to experience serendipitous “resource discovery”, through a variety of search mechanisms which interact dynamically.
4. Cost-effectiveness – creation of standardized bibliographic data has never been more expensive, at a time when there is some questioning of the effectiveness of bibliographic description in connecting users with documents.
5. Collaboration – the growing interest in finding and using help from others in creating descriptions, to enhance the information and to reduce cost.
6. Personalization of data – increasing interest in making use of non-standard data, sometimes personal or anecdotal data, to enhance descriptions.
7. Standards / interoperability / sharing infrastructure – there is a continuing value and need for standards and standardized data to enable interoperability and sharing of data, and an increasing momentum towards more sharing. Standards are expensive. Resource Description and Access (RDA) will arrive soon.
8. Integration - of descriptions for published and archival materials.

I will go into a little more detail on the first of these challenges, the shift to digital, as well as the last challenge mentioned, integration of published and archival description. Other challenges also come into play under the digital rubric, for example, the need to exploit technology more fully to provide a serendipitous resource discovery experience for the user at lower cost.

Digital Challenge

LAC has stated in its “Directions for Change” (2006) http://intranet.lac-bac.ca/transformation/transformationStructure/fallWorkingGroups/directions_e.asp that “LAC must consciously, proactively seek to understand the impact of digital and adapt itself to the new reality.” To do this, “digital must be viewed as mainstream business”. In its “Strategic Choices” document (2006), LAC states that “LAC will adjust all of its activities to adapt to the needs and benefit from the opportunities of the digital information environment.” This is an enormous challenge, one that will guide our thinking for several years.

LAC benefits from legal deposit provisions of the Library and Archives of Canada act to acquire Canadian publications, and acquires publications of interest to Canada by other means. This publishing is manifest increasingly in digital form, but continues as well in more traditional formats, such as printed text, sound recordings, maps, microforms etc. A

key challenge for LAC is to find a balance between describing publications in traditional formats and finding ways to describe the enormous quantities of digital publications.

Description Policy for Digital Publications

In 2006, LAC developed a new policy on the cataloguing of digital publications, called Description Policy for Digital Publications. This policy proposes a radical departure from traditional approaches to describing publications. In a nutshell, because of the enormous quantity of digital documents, and the pragmatic need for partnership and collaboration in their description, this policy proposes an array of access solutions:

1 Basic Access - Basic access to all LAC digital publications will be provided through full-text indexing and searching. Ideally, this search capability should be made available to users through a public interface that features a high quality, sophisticated search engine able to rank results for users in a meaningful way.

2 Supplementary Access via Metadata - Supplementary access will be provided through metadata. However, the creation of metadata will be done in the most cost-effective manner, using a continuum of possible means:

2.1 First choice: metadata supplied by others : publishers, other libraries, other institutions, authors, students etc.. Descriptions would be used more or less “as is”, as long as they can be made MARC-like.

2.2 Second choice: metadata automatically generated or extracted from digital publications themselves. This form of artificial intelligence has not yet been fully explored; may require further study.

2.3 Third choice: descriptions created by LAC staff for acquisitions purposes. These records are normally sufficient to identify an item, but do not usually include access enhancements such as subject headings, classification numbers, associated name authority records. Acquisition records may also be created using metadata supplied by others or automatically generated.

2.4 Last choice: full bibliographic descriptions created to international standards (MARC, AACR, ISBD), with enhanced access such as bilingual subject headings, Dewey and LC classification, authoritative headings, all applicable notes, etc.

This choice is the most expensive option, and would be reserved for those relatively few titles carefully selected from the mass of digital titles for special treatment. By providing a standard bibliographic description, LAC would highlight the document, giving it greater prominence and accessibility.

When will we use the “full bibliographic record” option? Our proposed criteria for deciding which publications will get the full access treatment are:

- Those titles that document seminal or topical events, episodes, incidents, experiences in Canada (examples: elections, SARS crisis, natural disasters etc.).
- Titles intended for a special or priority collection within LAC, as defined by the Collection Development Policy.
- Titles that are intended for use as research or reference tools.
- Titles for which an LAC staff member has requested a full bibliographic record.
- Titles that fall under special bibliographic programs such as Cataloguing in Publication (CIP).

These criteria remain general, as they have not yet been refined by experience.

3. Access to Digitized Titles – Digitized titles have been drawn in most cases from the LAC collection for reproduction. In many cases, a good quality bibliographic record exists for the original item. This Resource Description for Digital Publications Policy proposes that the digitized version simply be added to the existing record for the original. This single record approach is not consistent with the need for separate records for each format, as required by standard cataloguing rules, and with the usual requirements of a national bibliography. However, LAC sees this as a cost-effective approach that creates significant benefits for the end user in creating a simplified bibliographic record and a streamlined “one-stop” user search experience.

Implementation of the Policy

This policy has been partially implemented, as opportunities arise. For example, the Government of Canada Web Archive <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/webarchives/index-e.html> is a collection of ongoing periodic Web harvests of Government of Canada websites, with access provided through full-text searching and some authority control for names of government departments. These Websites have not been individually catalogued.

Another example of the policy in action is in describing digitized monographs from the LAC collection. LAC is adding the URL for the digitized version of the title to the existing bibliographic record for the printed original title. This single record approach will allow users quick and effective access to publications by means of good quality metadata, while minimizing cost.

Other opportunities for fuller implementation of the policy will arise in the context of LAC’s Trusted Digital Repository and associated systems.

Published and Archival : Integrated Access Challenge

The eighth of the challenges LAC faces in providing access to its collections is that of integrating access to LAC’s published and archival collections. With the 2004 merger of the National Library of Canada and the National Archives of Canada, Library and Archives Canada is faced with a golden opportunity to explore ways to bring the

published and archival collections to the attention of users in a unified, seamless, integrative way. Each of these institutions had a long history and established systems and methods for providing access to its collections. We have just scratched the surface of the challenge of bringing these together for the user in a seamless and fruitful way. While we have a Federated Search capability functioning on top of the separate description databases for archival and published material, much more work can be done. The shift to digital is new ground for both published and unpublished sectors, so is perhaps a good place to start in providing this seamless access.

Conclusion

I have outlined very briefly some of the challenges LAC faces in providing access to its collections. Many of these will require diligent and persistent effort to find effective solutions and to put them into place. Many of these challenges are shared by other national libraries, archives and cultural institutions. Many are shared by libraries of all kinds within Canada and North America, and indeed worldwide. The great advantage of libraries around the world, the grand tradition of collaboration, will be our saving grace as the world of description shifts beneath us. Let us trust that this time of upheaval in description will allow the emergence of new, better ways to organize the world of information resources, with a renewed and vibrant role for libraries and archives.