Speeches and statements
by **Daniel J. Caron**

Memory, Literacy and Democracy

Remarks made at the 150!Canada Conference

Library and Archives Canada
Bibliothèque et Archives Canada
Canada

Speeches and statements
by **Daniel J. Caron**

Memory, Literacy and Democracy

Remarks made at the 150!Canada Conference

March 11, 2010

Printed in Canada

ISBN 978-1-100-54045-0
Cat. no.: SB4-18/1-2011

Daniel J. Caron

Deputy Head and Librarian and Archivist of Canada and Chair, Heads of Federal Agencies

Daniel J. Caron joined the federal public service in 1982. In 2009, he was appointed Librarian and Archivist of Canada. One year later, he launched the modernization initiative to ensure that Library and Archives Canada could meet the multiple challenges of the digital environment. This initiative is a call for collaboration, epistemologically grounded institutional policies and policy driven decisions. In addition to his organizational experience, Mr. Caron is a seasoned author and speaker on public administration and issues related to information and memory both in Canada and abroad. Mr. Caron has also taught in several Canadian universities. He holds a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in Economics from the Université Laval, and obtained a doctorate in Applied Human Sciences from the Université de Montréal.

As we look forward to the 150th anniversary of Canada, my thoughts and reflections today extend beyond the fact that this commemoration will inevitably become a monumental "memory event" in the history of our country, and that Library and Archives Canada will likely play a prominent role in the preservation of its documentation, as was the case for the Winter Olympics that have just come to an end in Vancouver. This is implicit and well understood. Rather, my thoughts are more focused upon the development and continuing evolution of our public memory—and within the phenomena of the single commemorative moment or series of moments before us—upon the nature and constitution of the society that will signify and illuminate itself through public celebration.

By public memory, I mean the nature and constitution of our foundational "civic goods" (the original documents of our decisions and actions, and the knowledge in our books and other documentary media and artifacts), which are required within society to articulate, express and share common goals, assumptions, values and ethics; to provide individuals and groups with the capacities of social literacy necessary to enable their democratic participation within communities; and to ensure accountable public administration and responsible governance under the rule of law. In essence, I mean the continuing "civism" of our society expressed through the purposeful preservation of an associated public memory whose documentary context explores the dimensions of why we remember, what we remember, and how we remember together as individuals and communities over time.

I am wondering, therefore, how we will choose to remember ourselves as a society within the immediate circumstances of Canada at 150 as "acts of commemoration," as memory "elements" of a society reflecting and representing itself within the context of the commemorative moments, and as a civil society. I am also wondering

about the foundation of our public memory currently established and cast as "documentary heritage"; about its provenance and sources; about its nature and dimensions; about its authority, authenticity and utility; and about its continuing relevance to social literacy and democracy. I am wondering about all of this because the "public remembering environment" of information and knowledge resources has been completely transformed—in a very short space of time—and it has become infinitely more complex and challenging than it once was, even just 10 years ago.

This anniversary offers a moment of choice and opportunity to plan the future of our public memory, to fulfil our desire to commemorate, and to assure that we will have what is required to make this happen.

The new complexity of this environment is connected to two transformative phenomena. First, the landscape of "information resource" and memory development has almost entirely shifted from the controlled, ordered, formal experiences and limited relationships established within the physical space of official mediators, repositories and analogue communication to the uncontrolled, disordered, informal experiences and unlimited communications relativity of cyberspace permitted by the Web and networks. Second and more important in my view, is the coincidental and ongoing social merger of culture, technology and people. It is this merger—enabled by technology—which is beginning to sweep away many of our previously and collectively held principles, convictions and reference points about knowledge, perception, understanding, truth and meaning. I would even go so far as to suggest that these two phenomena are changing the very root conventions and sources of social interpretation, literacy, and ultimately, communal remembering.

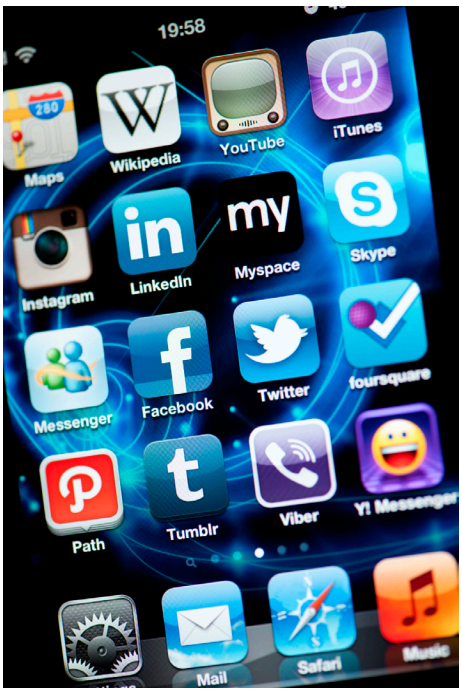
Consider some of the immediate impacts of the merger from an information resource perspective. New sources, producers and distributors of information content (e.g., Google, YouTube, Apple, Microsoft, Amazon, etc.) have emerged to exponentially expand the scale of documentary output and thereby the dimensions of public memory. Using the Web and networks within cyberspace, these forces have completely transformed the environment of public memory by (1) "commodifying" information resources for delivery to consumers on a previously unparalleled and unimagined scale, by (2) enabling the participation of consumers simultaneously in the creation and production of information resource content, and finally by (3) establishing new forms of intermediation through websites and social media. Liberated from the confines of analogue production, what

we now have is an unimaginably large, dynamic and congested digital information "marketspace."

Within this process of commercialization, corresponding advances in information and communications technologies are fundamentally changing the way people think about, understand, interpret, assign meaning to, create, use, produce, exchange, receive, store and provide information. They are changing the way people gain access—electronic and physical—to each other and to an enormous variety of information and services offered by business, government and local communities; they are enabling the opening and closing of new forms of personal, social and economic capacities, relationships and powers; and they are reinvigorating democratic processes by establishing new forms of interactive literacy that can transform relations between government and its citizens.

Yet I do not believe that this social merger is primarily a product of technological determinism. To me, the digital age is much more than an age of technology—which is simply a facilitating tool—but it is rather and pre-eminently an age of social transformation, wherein individuals, groups and organizations are socially "adapting" and "shaping" communications system technology to (1) permit a new kind of access to information, knowledge and literacy, and perhaps more importantly, to (2) enable the transformation of democratic society through reconfigured and redistributed information resources.

In the midst of this evolutionary merger and social transformation, information is also being transformed. On a global basis, the volume of its production is now beyond the measure of human analogy and simply represents a mathematical calculation; the sources of its production include anyone with access to cyberspace through any number of technology platforms, channels and devices. Indeed, the very distinctions of significance, authority, meaning and value



previously assigned to information resources based on their status or provenance have all largely become irrelevant to creators, producers, users and consumers of information.

In fact, memory is largely becoming a social function that is conceived within the production and consumption of "information resources" mediated through multiple inputs—and potentially multiple "implants"—and does not concern necessarily the nature, source or status of the informant, the information resource or the container. By our gestures, our actions, our written texts and our spoken words, we are all producers of cultural artifacts and, as a result, of potential traces in the collective memory. This will not change. What is different is the manner in which we treat them.

Memory development is increasingly becoming a machine-like hybrid and primarily an evolutionary matter of physiology wherein information resources are ingested, implanted, processed and repurposed within the human cerebral cortex. Ostensibly, this is the new social literacy of the 21st century—not reading, not writing, not arithmetic—but information resource processing. This is a "processing literacy" which potentially signals fundamental changes in the human condition, including the social patterns of how we learn, understand, assign meaning and remember.

What are the sources and places of public memory in this transformed universe? Where will we find the memory traces which increasingly take more varied forms? Between which walls, if there are to be walls? On which screens? Reflecting whose thinking? Whose behaviour? The values and ethics of which citizens? Where will these fragments of the past, which will enable us to build the basis of tomorrow, be placed?

Herein lies the conundrum: the simultaneous transformation of society, its information resources, its social awareness, its ethics and forms of social literacy, and its corresponding memory contexts. In this new hybrid environment, how will we remember together? What are the public memory tests of continuing relevance? What would constitute a value proposition or series of propositions for information resources in their potential conversion to public memory? For example, the diversity and multiplicity of contemporary information generators, producers, sources and containers provide unprecedented access to sources and "voices" either previously untapped or heretofore unheard, and permit the development of more representative and inclusive Canadian public memory across all social sectors. At the same time, the choices are practically unlimited, and the "choosing" becomes incrementally far more difficult and complicated. Who should make these choices?

My current sense of the public memory challenge is that this is an immediate matter for all of us to consider together as a collective social responsibility. The decisions about the constitution and preservation of the "civic goods" of public memory—especially those which provide the continuing foundation of our society, consensus, and democracy—are far too important to be simply and exclusively assigned to a small group of dedicated memory specialists. On the contrary, I believe the determination and preservation of public memory requires new forms of collaboration, deliberation, input and insight developing and emerging from all sectors and organizations within the broader interests and contexts of our communities. This public discourse can be facilitated by libraries, archives and museums, among others. I also fundamentally believe that we all need to re-learn how to document ourselves and our evolving society in all of its diversity, and how to remember together in a socially relevant, purposeful and potentially monumental manner.

And so today, as we begin to discuss Canada at 150, I invite you all to consider three memory issues evident to me within the context of our planned commemoration: how will Canadians want to remember this memory event, how we will want to remember the Canadian society celebrating itself through such an important rite of passage and, more fundamentally, how will Canada continuously build a socially representative and relevant public memory over time in all of its complexity?

Thank you

Video:
www.masslbp.com/
150canada_new/video.htm