Attitudes of the Canadian Research Community toward Creating and Accessing Digitized Facsimile Collections of Historical Documents

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Abstract. A study commissioned by the Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions produced some interesting secondary findings about the attitudes of the Canadian research community towards digitized facsimile collections. In written responses to a questionnaire designed primarily to elicit advice about the subject content and focus of future projects, and in structured follow-up interviews, many respondents demonstrated a marked ambivalence towards the concept of digitized collections. Furthermore, if faced with a choice between fully searchable text and digitized facsimile images with traditional points of access (subject, author, title, etc.), there appears to be a preference for the latter means of access.

Key words: Canada, Canadian, digitization, microreproductions, research

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck.
the thing itself and not the myth

Adrienne Riche, from “Diving into the Wreck”

1. Introduction/Background

Facsimile production is by its nature about image reproduction. Particularly when dealing with historical documents, where the document as artefact can have immense scholarly significance, it is important to remember that what is being reproduced is not the text of a document, or even an edition of a document, but rather an image of a particular document at a particular point in time. A facsimile is – no matter what the medium containing it and regardless of whether it contains print, graphical material or some combination of the two – first and foremost an image. A digitized facsimile is no more or less than a digitized image.

The Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions (CIHM) is a major producer of facsimile collections of historical Canadian materials. Established in 1978 as a non-profit, co-operative organization, its stated mission is “to locate
early printed materials . . . to preserve their content on microfilm, and to make the resulting collections available to researchers in Canada and abroad.” The driving force behind the Institute’s founding was “to solve the dual problems of preservation and access,” for not only was deterioration of materials an urgent concern, as it is in many countries, but collections of Canadana were dispersed over a vast territory, leaving many materials inaccessible or unknown to researchers.1

By 1997, CIHM had amassed what are arguably the largest collections of historical Canadian materials in the world, next to the collections of the National Library of Canada. But it had reached a crossroads in two senses.

The first was a predictable dilemma it had grappled with in the past: as it neared the end of the third phase of its ongoing preservation and access effort, it was time to begin planning for the fourth. Previous phases had seen the filming of pre-1900 monographs (Phase One), pre-1900 annuals and periodicals (Phase Two), and Canadian monographs, 1900–1920 (Phase Three). The focus for the next phase had not been decided and was less self-evident than for some of the former. Preliminary investigation suggested at least three possible projects, with a strong rationale for each, and there was the real possibility that there were other worthy projects of equal or greater urgency and importance. The time was quickly drawing near when a decision on the direction of the next project was required.

The other issue was a technological one. To this point, microfilming to accepted (usually AIIM) standards to produce fiche had proved to be the most economical and reliable means of mass producing facsimile copies of standard format documents, especially where long term preservation needs were an overriding concern. At least in Canada, the major wide scale exceptions to this had been oversized materials, particularly newspapers, which tended to be produced on rolls of 35mm microfilm, which is far easier than 105 mm film for researchers to work with. Use of optical scanning, at least until recently, had not been used widely for the preservation and access of historical printed documents. Projects using this technology tended to be for contemporary materials, visual arts and/or museum materials, manuscript material, or for collections with a large proportion of graphical content. Although the question of digitizing CIHM materials, either retrospectively or in future projects, had certainly been the subject of intense discussion and consultation, concerns about the long-term viability of digital databases, the continued viability of existing and new technology, and economic concerns had all been factors militating against a large scale move in this direction, at least as far as CIHM and its stake-holders were concerned.

2. The Survey Project

As a means of solving the first dilemma – the issue of content for the next phase – CIHM’s Board of Directors commissioned a survey project to help determine the focus of CIHM activities in the future. Although CIHM has an excellent reputation (later confirmed by comments made by survey participants) for consulting with