

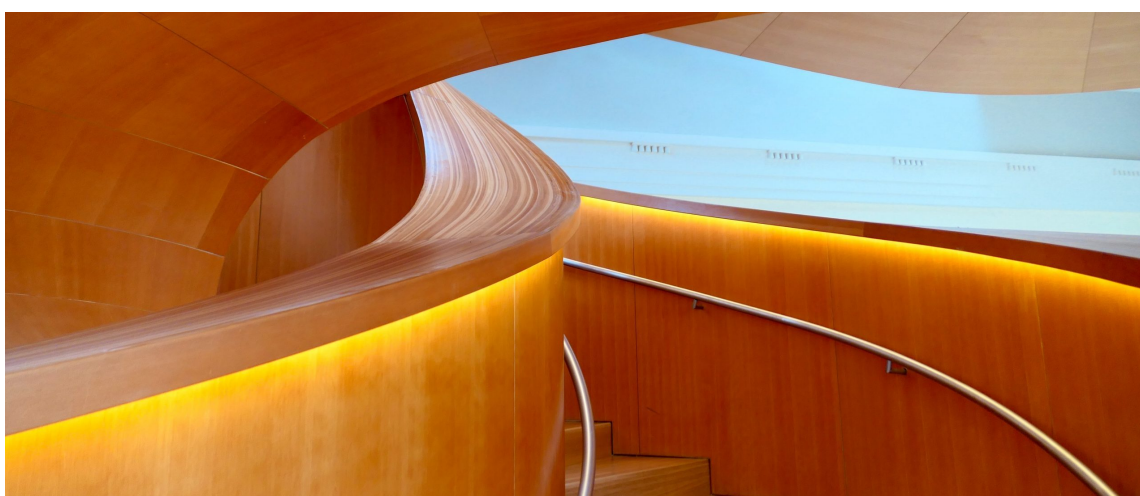
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Canada's National Heritage Digitization Strategy

by Caroline Winter | 11 February 2022 | English, Observations, Observations and Responses | 1 comment



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This observation was written by Caroline Winter and Jesse Thomas Kern, with thanks to Jonathan Bengtson for his feedback and contributions.

At a glance:

Title	The National Heritage Digitization Strategy (NHDS)
Creator	Libraries and Archives Canada
Publication Date	2016
Keywords	INKE Partner activities , collaboration , CRKN-RCDR

The [National Heritage Digitization Strategy \(NHDS\)](#) is part of a long history of digitizing cultural heritage materials that has been ongoing in the Canadian scholarly and heritage communities since at least the 1960s, moving in step with developments in digital technologies, including the world wide web. This history includes digitization strategies developed by the Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions (CIHM) and the [Canadian Association of Research Libraries \(CARL\)](#) starting in the 1970s, the digital libraries initiative of the 1990s, and the [Canadian Research Knowledge Network \(CRKN\)](#) and [Canadiana](#) in the 2000s.

[Internet Archive Canada](#) has provided open access to digitized material from Canadian institutions since

2004, when a scanning centre was established as a pilot project at the University of Toronto (Calamai 2007). The centre was expanded in 2006 and digitized nearly 350,000 texts in just a few years, with financial support from the University of Toronto, Internet Archive, Microsoft, and CRKN (Casey 2011). The scanning centre was downsized substantially in 2011, but to date, Internet Archive Canada has collaborated with more than 250 institutions (Internet Archive n.d.).

In 2014, the [Royal Society of Canada \(RSC\)](#) called for a national digitization program “to bring Canada’s cultural and scientific heritage into the digital era” (Beaudry 2014, p. 12). A 2015 [report by the Council of Canadian Academies \(CCA\)](#) about the digital future facing Canada’s memory institutions noted that “Canada is falling behind as the vast amounts of digital information created are at risk of being lost because many traditional tools are no longer adequate” (CCA 2015).

The NHDS

In 2016, Guy Berthiaume, the Librarian and Archivist of Canada, announced the launch of the NHDS, informed by the RSC and CCA reports as well as consultations with the [Canadian Council of Archives](#) (LAC 2016b). The NHDS established goals for its first 10 years, which include digitizing

- nearly all (90%) of heritage materials that were published before 1917
- half of all monographs that were published before 1940
- all scholarly journals published by Canadian universities before 2000
- all theses from Canadian universities before 2000
- all microfilm and microfiche from Canadian memory institutions
- a selection of highly significant audio and audio-visual materials
- all available historical maps
- all archival genealogical resources (LAC 2016a).

The NHDS was initially led by a Steering Committee and a Secretariat at [Library and Archives Canada \(LAC\)](#). In November 2020, it was [announced](#) that the NHDS Secretariat had been transferred to CRKN. (NHDS 2020). At that time, the NHDS Steering Committee was also reimagined as an [Advisory Committee](#) reporting to a new [Executive Committee](#) (NHDS 2021b).

NHDS Activities

In 2017, the NHDS conducted a pilot project called [Digitizing Newspapers](#), with funding from the Salamander Foundation (NHDS n.d.-b). With the support of the newspapers’ publishers and editors, issues of three Indigenous newspapers dating from 1976–2017 were digitized and made available online.

In 2018, The NHDS shared its [Content Strategy](#) and launched the [Digitizing Canadian Collections funding call](#), which offered up to \$100,000 to GLAM institutions to support their digitization projects (NHDS 2018a). It received more than 200 applications for funding, totalling \$10 million, a response that “helped to articulate the demand for a national digitization program” and funded [21 projects](#) (NHDS 2018b; 2018c).

Also in October 2018, the NHDS co-hosted the [Joint NHDS & CRKN Workshop on Documentary Heritage](#). At the [CRKN Access to Knowledge Conference](#) in 2019, CRKN and the NDHS held joint sessions on [digitization strategies in Canada](#), copyright, and [copyright and rights labelling](#). NDHS strategy update sessions were offered at the [2020](#) and [2021 CRKN Virtual Conferences](#).

NHDS has also developed several [resources](#), many in collaboration with its members, including [a report on the International Rights Statements Working Group](#), [recommendations for file formats for digital preservation](#) of various media, and [a set of best practices for digitization](#).

The NHDS Executive Committee is currently conducting a five-step [strategy planning process](#). Step 1 involved consultation, including a community survey and a series of community and stakeholder calls. In step 2, currently underway, the Executive and Advisory Committees and a Technical Working Group will

draw on the report from the consultations to identify goals, priorities, activities, and initiatives to include in the new strategic plan. In step 3, the Executive Committee will develop a draft strategic plan which, in step 4, will be shared with the community for consultation, feedback, and revision. In step 5, planned for 2022, the finalized plan will be shared (NHDS n.d.-c.).

NHDS in the Press

Many NHDS activities have been covered in the academic and popular press. For example, an [article from CTV News](#) highlights the digitization of the [Hudson's Bay Company Archives \(HBCA\)](#), which are now openly available as part of the Archives of Manitoba (Charron 2019). A [CBC News article](#) about how the pandemic led to increased digitization of global cultural heritage materials notes that the Canadian Government has supported digitization initiatives for years, including the NHDS, and that Canada's 2021 federal budget includes funding for digitizing heritage materials (Panetta 2021).

Several projects funded by the NHDS's Digitizing Canadian Collections funding call have also been covered in the press. A [University Affairs feature article](#) highlights the "massive push" by Canadian institutions including LAC and the NHDS to digitize cultural heritage materials, including the NHDS-funded project Healing and Education Through Digital Access (Thorkelson 2019). This is a partnership between the [Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre](#) and the [Algoma University Library](#) that digitized [records from the Shingwauk Residential School](#), a building that now houses Algoma University. Emphasizing the important role that memory institutions and library and archives professionals have to play in decolonization, the article notes that,

bringing this material into the public sphere has led to a whole new set of questions for professionals working in archives, librarians, museums and galleries [...] about what it means to share these items while also acknowledging the history of colonial violence that has allowed for the misappropriation, misuse and outright theft of material from Indigenous peoples (Thorkelson 2019).

This project was also covered in [SooToday](#), a local Sault Ste. Marie news site, and on [the blog of Feathers of Hope](#), an initiative for supporting and empowering First Nations youth in Ontario, highlighting the importance of this digitization project to the communities involved.

A piece from [CBC News](#) discusses the digitization of the [BC Gay and Lesbian Archives](#), also funded through the NHDS' Digitizing Canadian Collections funding call. This collection of thousands of photos, multimedia works, posters, and other materials collected by Ron Dutton over nearly four decades and donated to the [City of Vancouver Archives](#) in 2013 (Ghoussoub 2019).

[CBC News](#) also put the spotlight on the University of PEI's newspaper digitization project, funded through the same call. Through this project two nineteenth-century newspapers, including the first French newspaper in PEI, were digitized and added to [IslandNewspapers.ca](#) (Yarr 2019).

NHDS and the INKE Partnership

The transfer of the NHDS Secretariat to CRKN, an INKE partner, was the culmination of a longstanding partnership between the two organizations. Clare Appavoo, CRKN's Executive Director, has sat on NHDS' governing committees since its inception, and the digitization and preservation of Canadian documentary heritage is central to CRKN's work, as is evident in its [merger with Canadiana](#) in 2018 (Bengtson and Shepstone 2020; see also ["CRKN-RCRDR 2019-2024 Strategic Plan"](#) and ["Partner Response to CRKN-RCRDR 2019-2024 Strategic Plan"](#)).

CARL is another INKE partner with close ties to the NHDS. Among its recommendations for the 2018 federal budget was that the government "[i]nvest \$30M over the next five years (2018-2022) to support a coordinated national initiative to digitize Canada's rich documentary heritage, and to build the digital infrastructure required to make this material available to all Canadians" (2017, 1). CARL is currently represented at NHDS by Jonathan Bengtson (University of Victoria Libraries), who is Chair of its Executive

Committee (CARL n.d.).

Bengtson presented a talk titled “Five Years Makes All the Difference: Towards a Canadian National Heritage Digitization Strategy” during a featured panel at *Putting Open Social Scholarship into Practice*—the annual INKE Partnership gathering—in December 2021.

The NHDS and the Broader Academic Community

Canada’s digitization strategies are also a topic of interest for the broader academic community. In 2016, **Michael Geist** argued that “Canada’s inability to adopt a cohesive national digitization strategy has been an ongoing source of frustration and the subject of multiple studies which concluded that the country is falling behind.” He criticizes the NHDS for not doing enough, comparing its vision to an “abandoned library” with “most shelves barren with the exception of books that are over a hundred years old.” Comparing the NHDS to other national digitization strategies, Geist argues that the legal and financial barriers that are often cited are not as insurmountable as they seem, and that “a government-led initiative that brings together public and private resources is possible with the right champion” (Geist 2016).

Allana Mayer responded to Geist’s criticism by pointing out that the financial risks for libraries and archives of digitizing and distributing works that are potentially under copyright are prohibitive (see also “*The Extension of Canada’s General Term of Copyright under CUSMA (USMCA)*”), and that partnering with the private sector carries its own risks, such as the paywalling of public cultural heritage materials (2016). Mayer notes that the 2016 federal budget offered no increase to LAC funding, which was reduced by \$10 million from 2012–2015 (2016). Indeed, the NHDS’ revenues include donations only, and its work is done by volunteer members (NHDS n.d.-a).

Susan Brown’s “*Survival: Canadian Scholarship in a Digital Age*” also calls for robust national support for digitizing and preserving Canadian heritage materials, noting that, although the situation in Québec is less dire, “In English Canada, CARL, CRKN, and LAC struggle valiantly to coordinate something of a federal program without government support. Without vibrant and well-supported national archives, the record of both paper-based and digital Canadian culture will be spotty at best” (2018).

The NHDS and Open Scholarship

The guiding values of the NHDS align well with the Open Scholarship movement. Its vision is “a future in which digital access to Canada’s diverse documentary heritage is comprehensive, ubiquitous, and has a profound impact on Canadian culture, education, research and innovation” and principles include access, openness, collaboration, sustainability, and intellectual freedom (NHDS n.d.-a, p. 2–3).

On October 15, during the **NHDS update** session of the 2021 CRKN Virtual Conference, Bengtson and Carole Urbain reported on the results of the consultation undertaken as part of the strategic planning process. They noted that access was the biggest priority identified by the community and that smaller institutions and historical societies were particularly interested in infrastructure and best practices (CRKN 2021). Bengtson noted that other themes arising from the community consultation are also directly related to open scholarship, including preservation, resource sharing and coordination of work, standards creation, funding, and strengthening diversity. Overall, Bengtson and Urbain emphasized “breaking down barriers to engagement” with the broader community as an important theme for guiding the NHDS’ future activities.

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1 Comment



1.

John D Reid on February 11, 2022 at 8:11 pm

Many from the user community would agree with Michael Geist.

LAC has reduced digitization from 10.1 million images in 2017-18 continually, down to 2.2 million images in 2020-21. The result is shifting the burden to many local digitization initiatives, beyond those cited in the post, including for newspapers, and paywalling by the large commercial initiative of newspapers.com (Ancestry).

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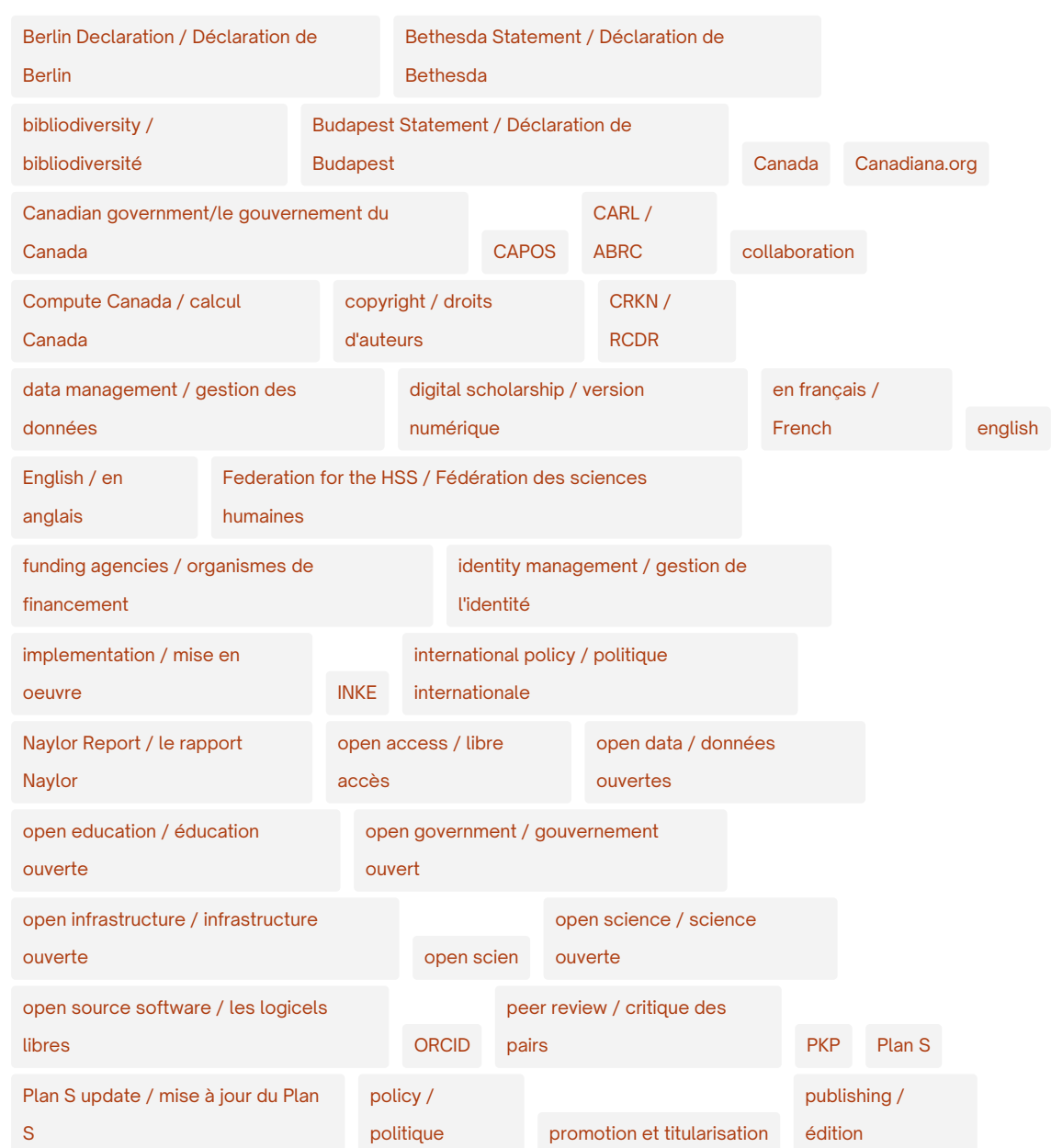
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