

REPORT 2022 OF THE DAY FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

ON DIGITIZATION
STRATEGIES FOR ADAPTED
TO THE REALITIES OF
INDIGENOUS
ORGANIZATIONS



SUMMARY

Introduction

In an effort to develop a plan to guide the digitization, use, and preservation of their audiovisual collections, the team at La BRV initiated the process of drafting their «Digitization Strategy» by convening over thirty partners directly involved in preserving their heritage. This gathering took place in Wendake on November 11, 2022, as part of a «*Day of Reflection on Digitization Strategies Adapted to the Realities of Indigenous Organizations.*»

Indigenous Archives in Quebec: Getting to Know Each Other

There is no current state of affairs for the management of indigenous archives in Quebec, but together we realized that we were facing very similar challenges, despite cultural differences. A network is now forming. The intention is to recruit representatives from the nations so that people can get to know and support each other in their professional work, and seek the resources necessary for their full development.

Why We Do This Work

Archives are a site for learning skills, abilities and truths. Archives are a force for self-determination, and their control and development BY Indigenous people is a key element of decolonization. They support us in our pursuit of self-governance and justice. We keep archives to preserve and benefit from the material and immaterial culture of our communities. We do this work to maintain our connection to the land.

The Orality of Archives

Contrary to the clichéd image of the archivist alone with his documents, archive work is profoundly social, requiring interaction in oral culture and teamwork with all those who recognize the content of the documents. This stimulates our memories and nourishes our lives. By adapting archives to the oral culture and realities of our communities, we can make them more suitable for re-appropriation in today's oral culture.

Geographical Proximity and In-Person Meetings

The creation of archive sites in communities and under Indigenous governance aims to bring archives back into a geographical and cultural sphere that is closer to people as well as easier to access in every sense of the word. Physical proximity helps to exchange ideas, ensure direct and safe access to resources, share knowledge and increase the capacity of all players. They aim to turn archives into common spaces that help «restore the circle» in the community.

Inseparable Connection Between Language and the Land

The collections preserved in Indigenous archives include oral histories, audiovisual collections, manuscripts and other documents in ancestral languages. These documents are essential for knowing the voices and perspectives of each nation and community on its own stories, in its own dialect. Written and oral archives bear witness to the occupation and use of traditional lands.

Archive Keepers, Knowledge Keepers

Regarding the Western notion of «archivist», we distinguish that of cultural «knowledge keeper» from that of «Archive Keepers», both working in a collaborative mode. While archive keepers are familiar with the collections and know how to develop systems and methods to facilitate access to them, knowledge keepers are custodians of the histories and knowledge to interpret the archives. In either case, these custodians preserve and interpret archives on a human level.

Monumental Work

The task of managing Indigenous archives is a colossal one, requiring more investment than has been made to date. This work is essential and urgent to preserve cultural knowledge that is being or is at risk of being lost, so that it can continue to be passed onto future generations. It's a long process of dialogue, reappropriation and reaffirmation, and much remains to be done to index, transcribe and translate these rich histories.

According to Needs

Not only is it impossible to digitize and distribute everything, it would also be pointless. There needs to be prioritization. It is important for Indigenous organizations to develop their own criteria and procedures for selecting archives to preserve and digitize, those that correspond to their reality and mission. Our vitality depends on our archives, but we must avoid building a culture of memory accumulation, as Western culture tends to do.

Collaboration Among Organizations

Faced with the challenges and opportunities of Indigenous archives, collaboration is paramount. Increasingly, major non-Indigenous institutions are recognizing their responsibility to be proactive in disclosing collections sought by communities, while being open to working in partnership with them to improve relationships, share knowledge and discuss means of access and even repatriation. Collaboration with Indigenous nations is even more essential if archives are to serve communities.

Dynamic Archives

To develop practical, flexible and sustainable archive sites, we need to find ways of making them accessible and dynamic, in support of and in connection with our ever-changing living cultures. Archives come alive when many people are involved in their maintenance and use. The role of archive keepers is to make it easier for people to find what they're looking for, so that they can disseminate it themselves; the goal is then about putting archives within reach of those who want to use them.

Rights

The question of open access, often seen as an essential step forward, is not self-evident in the context of disseminating Indigenous cultural heritage. The current possibility of online dissemination calls for us to revisit the way in which Indigenous rights are prioritized in relation to archives, while taking into consideration potential harmful appropriations. A system that can restrict access to documents containing confidential or sensitive information is therefore to be preferred.

Governance

Indigenous archives support the self-determination of nations, and it is vital that we begin to shape our own archival strategies. This means working together to determine the means of access to our collections, and increasing the capacity of our communities to manage the systems that hold our records. In this sense, the location and control of archival servers has legal, political and territorial consequences.

Conclusion

Coming together to share these experiences has made us feel less alone, less isolated. The development of a national strategy bringing together the 11 nations and Indigenous organizations in Quebec would serve to support and augment efforts already underway in the communities. But above all, such a coalition, thanks to the strength of the group, would enable us to seek the resources we need, and to raise the funds required for sound management of our digital heritage in a safe and sustainable way.

