

International Symposium, "Our Professional Identities in a World Gone Digital"

Thank you Kelly for the introduction. I would like to welcome all of the speakers and participants in today's symposium on behalf of University of British Columbia and especially the Faculty of Arts. It's great to have visitors from the US and UK and across Canada. Welcome!

I would also like to extend my congratulations to the UBC Student Chapter of the Association of Canadian Archivists for organizing today's symposium. I've organized a couple of international conferences myself – and even though they were smaller than this one, I know just how much work it is behind the scenes to pull off a successful event like this.

I am definitely an outsider here in the sense that I am not an archivist or librarian. But as a scholar I am a client of the experts here today and the beneficiary of your expertise. My own research is on public policy, in particular environmental and health policy, which I've studied now for over two decades in five countries. And based on that experience, I can certainly attest to the importance of the subject of today's symposium.

Since I began my graduate studies twenty years ago, the world of public policy research has changed dramatically. From pouring over paper indexes of scholarly and newspaper articles, heavy volumes of Hansard one huge tome at a time, cardboard boxes of "gov pubs" where I could never find anything without the librarians on whom I relied so heavily, and my least favourite -- microfiche -- to nowadays finding decades-old newspapers, as well as government reports, laws and regulations, and position statements from multiple countries in seconds. It's a scholars dream.... sort of.

And the sort of is, I'm guessing, your mission. Paper used to seem so fragile and less-than-permanent, but compared to characters that flit across a screen it now seems like bricks and mortar. The reports and documents posted on government websites and the statements on websites often only in digital format themselves disappear with the next government, if not sooner – with minority governments that can be a year or two in Canada these days! I can't tell you how many times I've kicked myself for not saving a document I'd visited because next time I looked it wasn't there. And of course the same is true of citizens who seek to hold their governments accountable.

If archives are like public policy, I assume that many of the challenges you face are global, but that others are unique to the institutions and norms and politics of different countries around the globe. All the more reason to have an international symposium. We can put our heads together on the common problems and enrich each other with our diverse experiences.

So rest assured that although I'm by no stretch of the imagination an expert on archival and information studies, your professional work and research are tremendously important to me, to other social scientists, and to scholars in the humanities studying history and languages and culture. Indeed, your work is a critical foundation of our scholarly activity in this digital age. And it's not only important to scholars, but to our students and the broader society who rely on these repositories of our knowledge and culture, nowadays in digital format.

Again, my welcome to all of you have traveled to UBC for today's symposium, and I wish you the best for a productive and insightful symposium.