

# The Future of Our Past: Inside the 2008 B.C. Digitization Symposium

By Glenn Drexhage.

Managing content is the big knowledge management issue of the 21st century – so said Ian Wilson, the Librarian and Archivist of Canada, during his keynote address at the inaugural B.C. Digitization Symposium in December 2008.

If so, then digitization will have a major role to play, and about 170 attendees came to UBC to discuss the challenges and opportunities.



A packed house listens to the Pan Canadian Panel at the First Nations House of Learning.

As recent developments indicate, digitization is becoming an increasingly important issue for libraries, archives, museums and other organizations dedicated to preserving and maintaining the rich histories of their communities.

For example, according to the B.C. Digitization Survey – presented at the symposium by UBC Archivist Chris Hives – nearly 52 per cent of 166 B.C. organizations that responded are now digitizing material.

The survey, which featured input from across the province, had other interesting outcomes. Without a doubt, photos are popular. Sixty-eight per cent of respondents are digitizing photographs, while 83 per cent would make this practice a top priority if funding were not an issue.

Unfortunately, it is. For those who have not begun to digitize collections, more than 72 per cent (the highest tally) said this was due in part to a lack of funding.

These are just a few of the findings to emerge from the survey. To view the entire document, please visit the B.C. Digitization Symposium program at <http://symposium.westbeyondthewest.ca/programme.php>

While the range of speakers, topics and professions were varied at the event, some common themes emerged – such as collaboration, partnerships, discoverability, access and sustainability (establishing ongoing programs rather than one-off projects).

Wilson kicked off the symposium at the Irving K. Barber Learning Centre on Monday evening, December 1, with an address that combined decades of insight with quick wit and a nod to the future.



Ian Wilson, Librarian and Archivist of Canada, delivering the keynote address.

The next morning, the proceedings began with a packed house listening to the pan-Canadian panel in the beautiful confines of the First Nations House of Learning on the UBC campus. Stories from Ontario, Manitoba and Alberta were relayed courtesy of Loren Fantin, the Director of Our Ontario; Karen Hunt, the Acting University Librarian at the University of Winnipeg; and Christina Wilson, Director of the Lois Hole Campus Alberta Digital Library.

Then the view from B.C. was on the agenda, thanks to Lara Wilson, President of the Archives Association of B.C.; Shelagh Flaherty, Director of Central Library and Reference Services from Vancouver Public Library; Irene Van Bavel, Heritage Information Analyst with the Canadian Heritage Information Network; and Lynn Copeland, University Librarian at Simon Fraser University.

Some of the most interesting comments came from the B.C. User Panel held in the afternoon. Penney Clark, an Associate Professor in UBC's Faculty of Education, spoke about how digitization allows research to happen, and again stressed the value of partnerships.

Brenda Smith, Chair of the Education and Planning Committees at the B.C. Historical Federation, explained how digitization is an important tool to enhance literacy. She also brought up the topic of partnerships and stressed the need to approach them with caution, particularly when they involve commercial interests.

John Lutz, an Associate Professor in the Department of History at the University of Victoria, had some particularly riveting comments. "History's too important to be boring," he noted, adding that technology is one of the tools that can make it resonate. While he lauded the digitization projects underway, he added that the various parties need to do a better job at promoting their efforts.

Table-discussion sessions rounded out an invigorating and successful day. Thank you to the partners whose support made this occasion possible: the Archives Association of British Columbia, the British Columbia Electronic Library Network, the British Columbia Teachers Federation, the Public Library Services Branch (Ministry of Education), the Royal British Columbia Museum, Simon Fraser University Library and the Irving K. Barber Learning Centre. And thank you also to the organizing committee, which featured many hard-working contributors from a wide range of sectors.

See you at next year's symposium!

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*Photographs by Jill Pittendrigh  
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