

If You Want to Go Far, Go Together: The Collaboration among the GLAM Community in Canada (2016–2019)

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1. Sunny Ways—Really?

In November 2014, a new, center-left federal government was unexpectedly elected in Canada. That election raised great hopes in the cultural community, as the newly elected Liberal Party had made reinvesting in culture one of its most significant election promises. Indeed, upon its formation, the new government kept its promise by announcing investments in culture that proved to be the largest in recent Canadian history: \$1.9 billion over the next five years (2015–2020).¹

However, memory institutions or GLAMs—galleries, libraries, archives, and museums—quickly became disillusioned: none of the new funding would be directed to them. It was going to be concentrated exclusively on direct assistance to artists (via the Canada Council) and on the government agencies responsible for putting culture “on screens”: CBC/Radio-Canada, the public broadcaster; Telefilm Canada; and the National Film Board. Moreover, to make its new directions even clearer, in the months that followed, the work initiated by the new government to provide Canada with a *Policy Framework* called *Creative Canada* completely ignored the realities of memory institutions. The final *Policy Framework* document released at the end of September 2017 did not include a single measure targeting GLAMs, and only 1 of the 38 pages of the report was devoted to them, mentioning the role they play “in preserving, interpreting and promoting Canada’s culture.”² Memory institutions—particularly libraries and archives—were presented as repositories for works created elsewhere and by others, with no significant impact on the development of cultural production.

2. Taking It to the Streets: The Ottawa Summit (2016)

Recognizing this new landscape, the heads of two of the most representative institutions of the Canadian GLAM community—Library and Archives Canada and the Canadian Museums Association—decided to hold a public event to raise awareness among their own stakeholders, as well as among decision-makers in the public and private sectors, about the relevance and importance of GLAM in the so-called cultural ecosystem. At this point in time, despite some significant local initiatives, notably in Victoria, British Columbia, and Halifax, Nova Scotia, the Canadian GLAM group as a whole had not yet worked together in a systematic and structured way. It should also be noted that, in the United States, initiatives supported by the Mellon Foundation had begun to emerge in previous years, but these were focused solely on collaboration among GLAMs in academia, whereas the Canadian public event was intended to encompass the entire sector.

It was felt by the organizers that an effective way to mark the territory would be to hold a major conference called a GLAM Summit, and to hold it in Ottawa, the country's capital, in order to give it maximum visibility. Thus, on December 6, 2016, on a cold Canadian winter's day, nearly 300 participants and some 30 speakers, a good number of them from outside Canada, met for the summit whose theme was: "Taking It to the Streets: Summit on the Value of Libraries, Archives and Museums in a Changing World."

The summit organizers asked this group to consider some tough questions, such as:

- In a society where digital access is everywhere, why should we build new libraries?
- Or, since virtual museums offer culture and history to people across the country and around the world—who needs the expense of bricks and mortar?
- And what about archives—can't you get everything you need from their own platforms, or those of Ancestry or Findmypast?

For those of us who spend countless hours with works of art, artifacts, books and archives, these questions might sound ridiculous. Yet, they are being asked on a daily basis, despite the fact that more people than ever are visiting galleries, libraries, archives, and museums. This counter-intuitive fact led the British Library to conclude in a recent document that:

The more screen-based our lives, it seems, the greater the perceived value of real human encounters and physical artefacts: activity in each realm feeds interest in the other.³

Following are some of the conclusions the summit participants reached in December 2016. First of all, and this was no surprise, GLAMs are not unfamiliar at all with the use of information technology and they have a very strong presence “on screens.” In fact, GLAMs are very often among the early adopters of new technologies. Participants were treated to many real-life examples of successful innovation in the GLAM community due to technology. But they were also reminded that technology is a source of both challenges and opportunities. On the challenges side, there is the need to find the resources to acquire technology, and to hire and train the people who know how to make the most of it. On the opportunities side, technology allows us to reach our users where they are, which is mostly online. But perhaps the

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greatest challenge—which is also the greatest opportunity—comes from the fact that the more people use the web to access our collections, the greater their appetite for visiting our actual physical spaces. Essentially, memory institutions cannot de-invest in their in-person services in order to invest in their virtual services. GLAMs have to do both.

Another conclusion reached at the Ottawa Summit was that memory institutions are increasingly playing new roles, despite the fact that the popular image of GLAMs remains that of institutions consisting of book and archive shelves and exhibition rooms. Examples of these new roles include providing comfortable spaces for people to gather, welcoming new immigrants and refugees, even providing high-speed internet access to those who need it. The importance of public spaces, whether a library or a gallery or a museum, is now only beginning to be widely understood and, throughout the world, millions of dollars are being invested in buildings that invite people in. Sometimes these spaces are called urban living rooms, or third spaces. There is a magic to these spaces: memory institutions, such as libraries and archives, represent not only safety, but freedom as well. Freedom to think and to question, to create and, of course, to disagree. And this freedom is at the heart of democratic societies.

During the Ottawa Summit, we also determined that one of the most misunderstood roles for GLAM institutions is the link between their activities and economic development. The need to “prove our value” is one subject that comes up a lot. We were reminded that a study made for the British Library by the firm Oxford Economics in 2013,⁴ did estimate that for every £1 of public funding the British Library receives annually, £4 and 90 pence was generated for the UK economy; and that five-to-one ratio proved to be similar in Canada, according to recent studies undertaken for the Toronto Public Library and the Ottawa Public Library.⁵ Unfortunately, while this value is well known by memory institutions themselves, it is virtually unknown by the political, economic, and media elites who spend very little time in GLAMs—especially libraries and archives—those who prefer to purchase rather than to borrow, and those whose economic status means that free services are not really necessary. Cultural consumption for this group means something very different from that of many library users. And yet these are often the people whom we need to reach in order to demonstrate our value.

The last conclusion from the December 2016 Summit that is worthy of being shared is about the role of memory institutions in the creative ecosystem.

During the summit, it was made clear that this role could not be reduced to the simple function

of collecting and preserving works. GLAMs have an important role to play at the very beginning of the creative chain, providing inspiration and material to artists of all disciplines—not just to authors and poets, but also to digital artists, musicians, painters, and directors. This is an area of rapid growth for memory institutions, until recently often seen as the final resting place for creative work, as opposed to a source of inspiration at the start of the creative process. Participants were surprised to learn just how much artists and creators rely on GLAMs. They were shown how material from GLAMs' collections takes on a second life through the creative interpretation of artists from all disciplines. Indeed, thanks to the summit, GLAMs were revealed as sources of inspiration, places where connections can be made, where collaboration can take place, where history can be understood, and where the future can be imagined.

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3. The Ottawa Declaration

At the end of the December 2016 GLAM Summit, the participants collectively adopted “The Ottawa Declaration,” a commitment to moving forward, based on a shared recognition of how much they had in common, and how great it would be to work together. They agreed to:

Increase collaboration between our institutions...to catalyze new partnerships that spark creativity and enhance engagement;

Develop innovative programs and services...that empower us to engage our publics; and

Enrich and expand access to our collections to ensure that our institutions contribute significantly to the public good and sustainable development.⁶

Leaving the summit, participants knew that they needed to keep the momentum going. So, a working group was created to put the Ottawa Declaration into action. The group was composed of eight members, with expertise from across the GLAM sector, and it had the mandate to flesh out the vision of the Ottawa Declaration, to explore and study how GLAMs bring value to Canadian society, and to take an active role in identifying areas where new partnerships could be developed.

The group's first task was to work on creating a template for a study on the value of the GLAMs. Of course, there had been studies on the value of libraries in the recent past, including the ones from the British Library, the Toronto Public Library, and the Ottawa Public Library mentioned above. But—to the best of the collective knowledge of the working group—there had never been a study on the value of the whole GLAM sector.

So, in order to scope what such a study should look like so that the reality of all types of memory institutions would be encompassed, the working group commissioned Brightsail Research Inc., in February 2018, to provide the basis for a national study. The Brightsail report was published at the end of March 2018 and it did confirm that “while there is a significant number of library value studies...to date no studies addressing the value of memory institutions as a multi-sector community have been done.”⁷ The Brightsail scoping exercise also revealed that there was a high degree of inconsistency in terms of data collected by GLAMs and concluded that a global value study would present a unique opportunity for the Canadian GLAM sector to innovate.

In the meantime, the co-chairs of the working group fundraised to get the funds needed to undertake the study. Thanks to generous donations from the McConnell Family Foundation, from Rosamund Ivy, and

from the Department of Canadian Heritage, they were able to proceed with a call for tenders to select a firm to conduct the study under the supervision of the working group. Oxford Economics, the same firm that carried out the pioneering study on the value of the British Library, was commissioned to undertake the study.

4. Taking It to the Next Level: The Toronto Summit (2018)

Also, to keep the momentum going, a second GLAM Summit was held on January, 30, 2018, at the Royal Ontario Museum, in Toronto. The summit was entitled “Taking It to Next Level” and it welcomed some 280 participants on yet another cold Canadian winter day. The summit focused on four topics that were seen as drivers as the sector moved forward:

- 1. Communities:** How can collaborative relationships among GLAMs benefit local communities, as well as provide greater opportunities for building links and fostering community identity?
- 2. Indigenous peoples:** How can GLAMs work more closely with Indigenous peoples to renew relationships that are based on mutual understanding and respect?
- 3. Private sector:** How can GLAMs work with the private sector to foster greater innovation?
- 4. Government priorities:** How can GLAMs work with various levels of government?

The need for a supporting foundational narrative that would demonstrate the value and the breadth of social and economic benefits of GLAMs emerged as the core conclusion of the second GLAM Summit. That narrative should show relevance, illustrate how GLAMs matter, and highlight what they have to offer to partners from other sectors of activity, such as the private sector, government, and not for profits.

5. Taking It to the People: The Montreal Summit (2019)

On May 13, 2019, the third and last, to date, GLAM Summit was held in Montreal. Once again over 280 participants from the whole sector showed up at the National Library and Archives of Quebec to further the Ottawa Declaration agenda. Placed under the theme “Taking It to the people,” the discussion focused in three areas:

- 1. Collaboration:** What are the benefits, challenges, and actionable strategies involved with collaborating within the GLAM sector and across sectors?
- 2. First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Nation:** How can GLAMs work more closely with Indigenous communities and individuals to renew relationships that are based on mutual understanding and respect?
- 3. Technology:** How can GLAMs collaborate with technology partners to improve user experience?

Over the course of the 2019 summit a number of cross-cutting themes emerged. First of those themes was the goal shared by representatives from GLAMs of reimagining traditional forms of collaboration. The second cross-cutting theme was that of bolstering GLAMs’ work as agents of social cohesion in a time of growing ideological fragmentation. Finally, another recurrent theme was the need for GLAMs to embrace agility as they find new ways to innovate. In addition to the panels and keynotes, the summit was also the occasion for representatives from Oxford Economics to present an overview of the initial findings of the value study they had been conducting over the last four months. The presentation was followed by interactive sessions during which the participants had the opportunity to offer their views on these findings.

6. A New Narrative for the GLAM Sector

As well, in Montreal, exchanges were held on the foundational elements for a narrative designed to support the GLAM sector in its

entirety. The goal of the narrative, placed under the theme “A Rapidly Changing World Needs GLAMs,” is to demonstrate the value and breadth of the social benefits of GLAMs. The narrative is built on four strong statements:

- 1. People turn to GLAMs for the credible and trusted information they want and need.** GLAMs remain the most trusted of public institutions.
- 2. People connect, experience, and write their stories together in and with GLAMs.** In a digital landscape, GLAMs are inclusive physical and virtual spaces where people connect with and understand each other.
- 3. GLAMs help Canada prosper and innovate.** GLAMs are economic engines that power smart, creative communities. They inspire entrepreneurs and artists and act as incubators for innovation and creativity of all kinds.
- 4. GLAMs make citizens and communities better.** They enrich lives and are foundational to personal and community growth and regeneration. They favor greater emotional awareness, compassion, resilience, and openness to ideas that differ from our own.

7. Value Study of GLAMs in Canada

Taking into account the conversations held at the Montreal Summit, Oxford Economics completed the *Value Study of GLAMs in Canada* in December 2019. Recognizing that GLAMs are much more than simply visitor attractions, the report aims to capture their fundamental role using a combination of quantitative value metrics and qualitative assessments of societal values. Therefore, the findings of the study are based on available data as well as a national survey of 2,045 Canadian residents. A range of economic techniques were used, in line with the diversity of activities GLAMs undertake.

The study estimates 150 million visits are made to Canadian GLAMs by members of the public each year. Online visits (websites, catalogs,

Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) were also taken into account, as well as the educational value of GLAMs and—the most innovative measure—the well-being effect of GLAMs usage. The model used by Oxford Economics suggests that the annual value to a Canadian GLAM user is equivalent to \$1,440 in improved well-being. To quote the study: “visiting GLAMs has the same wellbeing effect of receiving a monetary bonus of \$1,440 per annum.”⁸

Combining all components, the total gross value of GLAMs to Canada is \$11.7 billion per year (2019 Canadian dollars). Given that the operational expenditure needed to run GLAMs is estimated at \$3.0 billion, dividing the \$11.7 billion benefits by the \$3.0 billion costs gives a benefit-cost ratio of 3.9. In other words, for every dollar invested in GLAMs, society gets nearly four dollars in return. The authors of the study added “GLAMs perform very favourably when compared to other major social investments, such as transportation infrastructure.”⁹

8. More with More

At the time of writing (spring 2020), the Canadian GLAM sector is at the end of a first cycle of collective work. Thanks to the organization of three well-attended summits, the sector’s cohesion has progressed significantly over the past three years and the group has equipped itself with the two major tools it had identified as absolutely necessary: a narrative for the entire sector and a study on the value of GLAMs demonstrating the profitability of increased investments in memory institutions. Work is now poised to restart, focusing more on outreach, communications, and promotional activities. Building on the cohesion that the sector has developed in recent years, the sector is now looking at intensifying the dialogue with public and private decision-makers and the general public in order to highlight the contribution of GLAMs to our collective future.

During the Ottawa Summit of December 2016, Maureen Sawa, the CEO of the Greater Victoria Public Library, hit the nail on the head when she said that instead of looking at doing “more with less,” the

collective goal of Canadian GLAMs must be to do “more with more.” More collaborations, more partnerships, more public outreach, more relevance. Because it sums up all of the wonderful possibilities that working together can mean, I think it makes for a perfect mantra for the GLAM sector: *More with more*.

Endnotes

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