REMOTELY USEFUL:

Practical Lessons For
Northern Community Archiving

Morgen Mills and Mark David Turner

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Cover photo by Mark David Turner depicting archival materials
from the Moravian mission in Nain, Nunatsiavut (Canada)

Published in collaboration with Brack and Brine

by

We work in the homelands of the Inuit and Innu. We acknowledge the privilege of working in partnership with our Indigenous colleagues, and we strive to uphold Indigenous sovereignty over Indigenous records as a primary guiding principle in all of our archival work.

—Morgen Mills and Mark David Turner

Contents

Introduction

Life is different in the North.[1] So is archiving. While many remote and rural archives face similar challenges from isolation and small population sizes, Northern archives also often operate across major cultural divides in their relationships with governments, parent organizations, funding agencies, and other partners based in the south. Northern spaces are often Indigenous spaces, and archives—particularly those that have not themselves emerged principally by way of Northern agency—must also negotiate the colonialism inherent in many archival systems. Northern communities are not uniform or homogenous, and community-based recordkeeping can involve negotiating between competing or conflicting interests.

Northern communities often prioritize ways of using records that institutional archives struggle to support or, in many cases, even to anticipate. Community and professional paradigms of recordkeeping and record-sharing often do not agree. Partly for that reason, we prefer the term *records repositories* in place of *archives*. Although archiving is a well-established professional field with many accomplishments and virtues, Northern organizations involved in the management of records may prefer to learn from archivists' experiences and innovations without necessarily duplicating their systems.

Remotely Useful: Practical Lessons for Northern Community Archiving is an attempt to negotiate between the archival field and the practical, day-to-day concerns of keeping community records in the North, as we and others have experienced them. This report offers approaches by which individuals and organizations in the North might care for their records. We are not professional archivists but see ourselves as archive-adjacent and are frequently moved by both admiration and skepticism toward the field, as it relates to the Northern world.

This guide is rooted in our own experiences and shaped by our "workshoppers," reviewers, sources, and interlocutors. Therefore, its examples and references are skewed toward the Canadian context and particularly toward Labrador, but we hope this guide will be relevant across the Canadian and American Norths. To the best of our knowledge, it is the first of its kind intended for Northern audiences. Although the guide has a

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[1] We use "North" to mean a specific but loosely defined set of places and cultures in the upper latitudes of Canada and the United States. Lower-case "south" refers mostly to the southern parts of these countries, but also extends to any place that is not either the North under discussion or an analogous circumpolar region.

published form, we also see it as a mutable, living document. This is only the beginning of a conversation, and we intend to revise and expand this document as that conversation unfolds.

AUDIENCES

Because Northern community archiving remains an emerging practice, part of our motivation for writing this report is to help strengthen that emerging community, which is made up of many types of readers we believe will benefit from *Remotely Useful*:

- People already managing records in Northern communities (e.g., heritage societies, church organizations, language committees, museums, community governments, land claims organizations, and others). For these readers, *Remotely Useful* may provide a practical guide for establishing or refining their repositories' operations, or at least some generative food for thought.

- Northern policymakers responsible for decisions concerning the management of records (e.g., elected officials, government workers). For these readers, *Remotely Useful* provides context for how records management can integrate into larger operational systems, why that integration is important, and where targeted supports can be directed. Records are not merely historical curiosities, but essential tools for community self-determination with real educational, economic, cultural, research, and political value.

- Policymakers, archivists, and data management specialists who work with Northern communities to support the development of Northern repositories. *Remotely Useful* aims to help these readers understand some of the ways in which Northern communities need and develop their own approaches to record management. This understanding may help them to position themselves as strategic allies, given their capacities to adapt archival practices, guidelines, and tools toward maximum usefulness for Northern ends.

We recognize there are also groups of readers who might *not* benefit from this report:

- People looking for exclusively Northern Indigenous-articulated recordkeeping practices. In our collective experience with Northern community archiving, we have worked extensively with and for Indigenous organizations that require archival approaches that interface with settler systems. Those experiences are reflected in this report.

- People working in contexts where existing policies concerning archives and records management are significant barriers to effective practice. We ourselves have worked extensively in contexts where policy either allows for some latitude concerning archives and records management or is simply absent. Those experiences are reflected in this report.
- People looking for information about Northern community archives in European or Asian contexts. We work primarily in the Northwest Atlantic. Those experiences are reflected in this report.

APPROACH

This report is presented as four lessons, which we have learned and are still learning, rather than lessons that we hope to impart. These lessons may also be used as modules for discussion or in group-based learning environments. We have tried to use nontechnical language, where possible.

Our central convictions are that:

1. The effective management of Northern records *in* the North is an important step in the expression of Northern sovereignty.
2. The best, most ethical, and practically strongest approaches to community recordkeeping all begin with the values and needs of the community itself.
3. Community members are the people best positioned to manage their communities' records, and content expertise is preferred over technical expertise.

Resources such as this guide are useful only if recordkeepers say they are, and only to the extent that recordkeepers want to use them. *Remotely Useful* is not intended to be theoretical, academic, aspirational, or idealistic, but rather to be practical, with recommendations that can be interpreted literally and implemented if they seem sensible. While we acknowledge the importance of long-term planning, our thought while preparing *Remotely Useful* has been that the benefits of any repository work should also be intuitive and compelling in the short term. A pragmatic approach ensures the value of repository work and incentivizes the tremendous dedication from community members that is required to keep new, small, or volunteer-dependent repositories going.

Everything herein, therefore, is intended to engage with immediate, practical questions about how Northern repositories can do the things that Northern communities want them to do. Generality is necessary in some places, because those goals are not uniform across communities or the repositories that serve them. *Remotely Useful* offers no overall

recommendations for how Northern repositories should set their goals or for what Northern recordkeepers should strive for, except that we encourage Northern institutions and communities to keep their own records, whenever possible. The potential benefits—such as community access and community-driven values—are tremendous, and in our opinion, they far outweigh the costs.

Lesson 1: First Principles (and Sticking to Them)

We see local community records repositories as indispensable to the North. Records are knowledge, knowledge is power, and that power belongs to communities themselves. Moreover, records are media for continuity, helping communities connect their pasts, presents, and futures.

Many people intuitively recognize the value of community records. Historical documents and photographs and recordings are often compelling in themselves. However, the first and most important lesson that we have learned and wish to share in this report is that the real point of caring for records is to equip the community with memory and information. Everything about a records repository should be designed with this intention in mind. To that end, this section explores some of the most direct and abiding connections between **purpose** and **practice.**

OVERVIEW

1.1	**Values**	The roots of a repository's institutional identity
1.2	**Mandates**	Written statements that document a repository's central purpose
1.3	**Principles as process**	Procedures and approaches to decision-making that foreground values and mandates
1.4	**Engaging community**	Community is the source of a repository's values, the basis for its mandate, and the guide for its decision-making
1.5	**Tips, cautions, and guidelines**	Principles might be (or might not be) simple, but their translation into practice is often complex
1.6	**Staying the course**	Records repositories operate on long time scales

1.1 VALUES

Values are specific to communities and cultures, and therefore to the repositories serving them. For many repositories, values precede mandates. For others, values may emerge further down the road. Either way, they provide essential guidance for understanding how and why to care for records and what to do with them (figure 1.1).

Fig. 1.1: Some ideas that we have encountered within Northern institutional values. Image generated by WorditOut.com.

Underlying all Northern institutional values is a foundational theme of **Northern sovereignty**, or the capacity to pursue and defend one's values. The advancement of Northern sovereignty is embedded in the mandates of Northern think tanks, advocacy organizations, and governments. The targeted advancement of Northern sovereignty is also implicit in the mandates of service-oriented organizations in the North. For their part, Northern repositories promote Northern sovereignty by facilitating meaningful access to records, which empowers a community in the following ways:

a. to tell its own story and pursue its own goals

b. to resist imposed stories and negotiate with outside forces (figure 1.2)

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Examples

The Arctic Institute: Center for Circumpolar Security Studies: "We envision a world in which the complex security issues facing the Arctic are identified, understood, and inclusively resolved" (The Arctic Institute n.d.).

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami: "Canadian Inuit prospering through unity and self-determination" (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami 2023).

Torngat Wildlife, Plants & Fisheries Secretariat: "Healthy ecosystems and communities with shared stewardship of wildlife, plants, and fisheries within Nunatsiavut" (Torngat Wildlife, Plants & Fisheries Secretariat 2022).

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Fig. 1.2: Sample vision statements of Northern institutions

1.2 MANDATES

Anyone collecting community records should have a good reason for doing so, and that reason should be borne in mind whenever important decisions are made. Institutional repositories especially benefit from written mandates for self-interpretation, communication with others, and maintaining a consistent focus over time.

When it comes to mandates for collecting community records, two starting points are clear:

- the community
- the records

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Examples

"**Them Days Incorporated** is dedicated to keeping the history of Labrador alive by documenting and preserving the 'old ways and early days' of Labrador" (Them Days n.d.).

"The **Northern BC Archives & Special Collections** acquires, preserves, and provides access to materials of permanent value that relate to the institutional history of UNBC and the culture and history of Northern British Columbia" (University of Northern British Columbia n.d.).

"The **Alaska State Archives** was established in 1970 in order to preserve permanently valuable government records that document Alaska's history and make these records available in a secure, professional, and responsible manner" (Alaska State Libraries, Archives & Museums 2021).

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Fig. 1.3: Sample mandates of Northern records repositories

The three quite different repositories in figure 1.3 are all concerned with:

serving their community   (Labrador, Northern British Columbia, Alaska)

↓

by caring for records of its past   ("old ways and early days," "history")

↓

so that the community can use them in the present and future   ("keeping alive," "access," "available," "permanently valuable")

This basic structure locates a repository in its place, culture, and community; defines its core actions; and provides the framework for both short-term function (caring for records) and long-term purpose (supporting community use of records).

1.3 PRINCIPLES AS PROCESS

Repositories of community records develop in many ways, and most are not intentional to begin with. Magazine publishers, for example, often wind up with archives of contributed or researched material, as in the cases of *Them Days* and *Inuit Art Quarterly*. Other institutions accept files from defunct organizations rather than see them discarded, and they eventually wind up with large collections. Inevitably, all institutions accrue records.

There are no fixed, universal procedures for establishing or reimagining a records repository, but the five basic questions below tend to arise in some order, and often repeatedly. All five questions require reference to values and mandates.

Question 1: Are These Records?

A record is not an object, but a discrete body of information intentionally conveyed through an object. Records can come in many forms, such as correspondence, photographs, home movies, sound recordings, ledgers, maps, and plans, to name a few. A records repository's primary task is to share that information with its community while creating a context in which that information can be shared in meaningful ways.

Question 2. Should We Keep the Records?

There are three main factors to consider: right, capacity, and desire.

Right   Are you the records' legal owner? Is someone else better qualified to keep them? Does the community even want them to be kept? Are they already being used effectively by the community anyway? Would a formal repository just interfere?

Right is often partial or conditional. Sometimes, when there is no other steward for important community records, the necessity of caring for them may confer a right or even an obligation, but only until a more suitable, local repository arises. A right to keep records may also be contingent on adopting certain forms of community governance or advisory oversight.

Capacity   Could a repository do justice to the records? That means keeping them safe, but also keeping track of them and working to make them accessible to the community. As with right, capacity may be relative—any capacity is better than none, and at the same time, there will never be enough.

For that reason, scale is also important. Realistically, it is often advisable to say yes to some records, and no to others. A repository might focus only on photographs, for example, or only on records from one village, while forwarding other records elsewhere. Or it might properly keep only some records, while temporarily storing others with minimal processing until another home can be found.

Finally, can you be reasonably sure that a proposed repository will endure? If not, where will the records go, and who will take care of them? Capacity is not only a short-term consideration.

Desire   This is in some ways the trickiest question, in part because it seems like the easiest. Is there sufficient desire, motivation, and determination at the personal, institutional, and community levels to care for the records and above all to make them available to the community? It is not enough merely to value old photographs, for example. Good community records repositories are not founded on the love of records, but on the love of sharing them and the community's desire to use them.

Question 3. Why Are We Doing This?

Understanding and expressing the rationale behind a records repository is essential. This is often best captured in a mandate or mission statement whose nature depends on many things, including the records themselves; the origins, values, and philosophy of the institution; the organization's position within the community; the community's priorities; expectations of records users; and relationships with other organizations in the community.

Often an organization exercises archival functions only as a small part of a broader operational mandate. In that case, the mission of the repository is likely to reflect the larger institution: church archives, medical archives, municipal archives, and academic archives are just a few examples.

Question 4. How Should We Do This?

Developing a repository's vision requires purposeful, high-level thinking, rather than the adoption of a prescribed method. Nuts and bolts can come later. There are many guides out there, including free publications from organizations such as the Archives Association of British Columbia (Glandt 2021) and commercially published books, such as those from the American Library Association (Millar 2017). Some repositories also publish their own manuals, as does the Government of the Northwest Territories (2017, *NWT Archives Operations Manual*), and these can be mined for ideas.

Before diving into detailed guides, consider the question in another form: "What should we be?" Recalling its mandate, above, Them Days does more to actively "keep the history of Labrador alive" through its publishing than through its archive, though the two are interconnected, and both aspects of the institution are widely acknowledged cultural treasures. The nonprofit organization's *how* was conceived in tandem with its *why*, and editor Aimee Chaulk also runs community events such as Culture Days, while keeping the institution up to date in a digital age of online stores, blogs, audiobooks, and social media—none of which feature prominently in procedural manuals for setting up an archive.

Question 5. Should We Collect More Records?

Years ago, Morgen asked Joan Ritcey, who was then head of the Centre for Newfoundland Studies at Memorial University, for advice on handling new accessions of "free" materials. Joan asked an incisive question in return (figure 1.4): "Will they be free like puppies or free like beer?"

What Is Free?		Free Like Puppies	Free Like Beer (or Lunch)
	benefits?	enduring and diverse	immediate and limited
	relationship?	rich and evolving	simple and fixed
	cost?	labor, money, facilities, total unknown	minimal and known
	responsibility?	long term	minimal and short term

Fig. 1.4: Records need not be collected merely because they are "free." We can only handle a puppy or two every fifteen years, but free lunches are welcome every day.

Above all, one must be mindful of the tendency to overvalue records for their own sake. To keep a record is to assert that it deserves attention, and the capacity for attention will always have limits.

A repository's commitment to making its records available should not be taken lightly. Some records are hard to care for, while others are hard to share effectively. Acquiring a collection of old 16 mm film reels, for example, means investing either in proper storage, projectors, and screens, or in wholesale digitization. Accepting a recent retiree's papers means going through them at some point, to sort, describe, and document their contents, at a minimum. It is entirely reasonable to require donors to do a lot of this work themselves before donating, but sometimes the value of the records may justify accepting materials even when they are not well organized.

1.4 ENGAGING COMMUNITY

Engagement is an ideal means of pursuing a repository's mandate of service to the community. For one thing, serving a community's interests requires input from its members. Moreover, enlisting community support is a great way to help get things done, as well as to test ideas. In general, if people can't or don't want to help you, then you're probably not on the best track. "People" can mean everyone from individuals and organizations to businesses and governments. Below are a few examples drawn from the many areas in which communities can often assist.

Material support:

• space to store records or to access, view, or display materials

• used equipment (e.g., cameras, players, and projectors for older AV formats)

• technical support, server space, or web hosting

Expertise:

- cultural expertise from Elders and other knowledge-holders
- language skills, especially for Indigenous and minority language communities
- contextual information about records, such as identifying people and places
- different interpretations and use cases for records

Strategic guidance:

- for developing policies and procedures
- for connecting with overlapping and intersecting interests
- for negotiating between conflicting interests
- for different community relationships to records and to your organization
- for determining who wants your content and how they might want to use it

Partnership:

- joint programming with cultural outlets, school boards, health organizations, land claims organizations, local governments, and more for engagement, promotion, or revenue
- pooling resources for funding applications
- sharing resources, space, or even personnel to realize some advantages of scale

1.5 TIPS, CAUTIONS, AND GUIDELINES

A few especially important rules are relevant for nearly all Northern repositories.

a. The whole point of a records repository is to serve its community, not its records or itself.

- Base every major decision on a consideration of community needs. How will this help connect people with information? Who will be interested, and why? If community members are not currently interested, might they become interested in the future?

- Community-level thinking should be a higher priority than institution-level thinking. Repositories should be team players: don't hog the ball, and always look for ways to set up others for success.

- Double-check mandates and methods with partners and neighbors, to ensure complementarity instead of overlap and collaboration instead of competition.

b. Recordkeepers have to be realistic; we cannot curate a community's entire heritage.

- Remember that neither records nor their keepers are neutral. Subjectivity is embedded in every aspect of records keeping.

- Be skeptical of approaches that summarize whole histories or cultures; no collection or overview is ever authoritative.

- Respect each record for itself, not merely as an individual part of a larger community history. Mind what Sámi professor Veli-Pekka Lehtola calls "small stories," appreciating the untidiness of community life and "the people living in the data" (Lehtola 2018).

- Tend to your own records first and avoid the distraction of records that exist elsewhere. The Labrador Institute of Northern Studies produced Richard Budgel's *A Survey of Labrador Material in Newfoundland and Labrador Archives* at great effort in 1985 but did not formalize its own collections for another 27 years.

c. Form must fit function.

- Be guided by prospective users of your records, not industry best practices. Whatever works, works.

- All work is important. The short and medium terms are just as important as the long term; grunt work that only promises future benefits may not be sustainable until that future arrives.

- Differentiate between indicators of collection development and development itself. While funding is often tied to quantitative measures, a simple test is usually a better gauge of progress: what do your users think?

- Try to manage programs rather than facilities; for small repositories, the latter are likely to be shared or controlled by others.

1.6 STAYING THE COURSE

Mandates help organizations to remember their purpose, and to avoid drift—or better still, to drift intentionally by regularly re-examining mandates and making purposeful adjustments. Caring for community records is a notoriously long-term undertaking, which means adapting to changes, preparing for contingencies, and maintaining balances.

Operations vs. governance	Small organizations tend to succeed when led by a few key long-term personnel who provide stability, continuous energy and passion, cumulative expertise, and consistency of vision and method. However, they also need to have a broad base of volunteers not only for direct support, but also for sustainability, accountability, and the very practical issues of succession planning and maintaining institutional memory.
Today vs. tomorrow	Records are tools for communication between time periods. Since we act in the present, we must listen to the past to serve our present purposes, while also speaking from the present to serve our future. Among other things, this means anticipating what information needs to be collected now, before it is lost, and what needs to be preserved for tomorrow, before it is forgotten.
Developing vs. sharing	Repositories seek to maximize the value of the records in their care by conserving the collection and developing it, whether in size, quality, or accessibility. However, at the same time, one must work to *realize* that value by ensuring its regular community use.

One means of coping with long time scales is to break them down into regular periods with set deliverables, such as publications, recurring events, seasonal goals or reports, even newsletters, that allow a repository to track its progress and reflect on itself. Another approach, sometimes necessitated by funding structures, is to organize the entire repository on a project-by-project basis, or even as a single project with an expiration date. Repositories do not need to be permanent, standing institutions as long as provision is made for the future stewardship and utility of their collections, perhaps by partnership with other, more enduring entities.

Lesson 2: One Size Fits Others

Conversations with Northern colleagues reveal that every repository is different. Small repositories, especially, cannot be everything to everyone. Each repository must prioritize some activities over others if it is to become what its community most wants and needs it to be. In that context, best practices emerge from a repository's own purposes and priorities, not from standards devised by professional authorities. This section dives deeper into four key areas of organizational development.

OVERVIEW

2.1 Intelligent design   Fitting the repository to present
                                    realities and projected futures

2.2 Partnering up   When and how

2.3 Funding   Operational vs. project-based

2.4 Professionalization   When is enough?

2.1 INTELLIGENT DESIGN

A small institution is not a scaled-down version of a large one. Large, state-run repositories such as Library and Archives Canada or the National Archives and Records Administration of the United States have precise mandates that focus on the preservation and access of certain types of records, and they maintain large staff rosters operating across multiple departments. These organizations have specialists in conservation, information technology, public engagement, accessions, description, research and reference assistance, and other areas. A small repository—especially one that is embedded within an organization whose primary mandate is broader than the keeping of records—cannot simply divide those functions among a few staff.

At the same time, small repositories need not be make-do institutions; they should not sacrifice the quality of their services just because they are small. Repositories associated with important cultural institutions or governments, for example, may rightly insist on professional, high-quality systems and outputs. Northern communities should be served no less well than communities anywhere else. However, such insistence requires compromise and a recognition of the advantages of small size, chief among them efficiency and autonomy.

One of the most frequent and important questions facing decision-makers in small repositories is whether to follow the precedents set by larger ones (or by other well-established small repositories), or to strike out in new directions. Such questions arise constantly, in every area of both operations and governance. Often the answer lies in the nature of the dilemma at hand. Is the problem a common one, or is it unique?

Intentionality

One of the most important differences between small and large repositories is that small repositories have greater need for intentionality and awareness. Every decision or action has a disproportionately greater consequence for the repository and its place within a community. Therefore, the institutional values and mandate must be constantly borne in mind.

Individuality

Large repositories tend to be alike, but every small repository is small in its own way. A large repository addresses sufficiently broad and numerous community needs that it makes sense to fully flesh out a robust institution that can be responsive over the long term. A small repository addresses comparatively specific community needs, so it apportions attention and resources in ways uniquely suited to its context. The nature of the repository should reflect the choices made to serve community ends. Therefore, the highest qualifications for a keeper of community records include an ability and commitment to learn about and embrace the community itself, as well as diverse sectors within that community.

Positionality

Repositories of any size may be independent and self-contained, but more often they emerge from pre-existing parent institutions. Few repositories begin with a blank slate, asking questions about how they should serve their communities; more often, a specific need for service gives rise to the idea for a repository in the first place.

The position of a repository determines many of its practices. Some, such as medical record keepers in hospitals and health authorities, are so deeply embedded in their fields that they bear little superficial resemblance to other repositories. Access and community use are very different things in such cases, when privacy is paramount, but the objectives are ultimately similar. Medical records are maintained not only to ensure continuous care for individual patients, but also as data sources for medical learning and public health—use cases that serve longer-term community interests.

In the North, formal and informal repositories affiliated with Indigenous governance institutions may have other responsibilities. Cultural heritage and even land claims may partially depend on the records in their care. Unless an organization is involved in the management of records that are legally restricted (e.g., health records and contemporary genealogical data for which restrictions vary from region to region), it is good practice to find a way for those represented in the repository's records to be involved with the repository's management.

2.2 PARTNERING UP: WHEN AND HOW

Like most activities within the realm of organizational development, when it comes to institutional partnerships, intentionality is everything.

Some partnerships are associative, meaning they are based on a generalized expression of goodwill and common interest. This can help build the community profiles of all parties and lay the groundwork for specific collaborations later on, but it can also create entanglements and precipitate conflicts.

It is often advisable to maintain standing relationships less formally. When multiple repositories serve the same or overlapping communities, for example, cooperation is almost certainly the best approach, allowing resources and responsibilities to be shared or allotted sensibly. Small repositories are also generally well-served to have long-term, standing relationships with larger ones, for the sake of access to expertise and resources. Most people working with records are excited to connect with one another, and quite apart from the practical advantages they offer, good relationships are beneficial in themselves. The absence of formal agreements provides room for changeability and freedom of association or dissociation, as circumstances evolve.

Formal partnerships are required mainly when transactions take place, when it is advisable or necessary to outline what each party agrees to provide to the other. These may be cash or in-kind contributions, such as staff hours, equipment, or office or storage space. Often, such partnerships require formal memoranda of understanding (MOU) or partnership agreements.

Any time records are transferred between facilities, a written agreement must be created. Small repositories share records for many reasons—from space shortages or building renovations to shared digitization projects to participation in joint research initiatives. Sometimes records are sent out for description or digitization or for comparison or potential unification with other materials thought to be from the same original source.

The exact degree of detail for these agreements should be determined by the capacity of the partnering organizations. If the partners have legal counsel, it makes sense for lawyers to develop such agreements. More likely, however, these agreements will be drawn up by people from the partnering organizations engaged in managing the records. As a baseline, we suggest that such agreements contain the following information:

    a. the names of the organizations involved in the agreement

    b. a contact person for each organization

    c. a brief statement of the nature of the partnership

    d. an indication of the length of the partnership

    e. a mechanism for review of the partnership

It is essential that all organizations involved effectively manage this documentation.

Terms and Conditions

Formal partnerships should be precisely delimited, both in duration and in value. Standing partnerships such as joint occupancy or rental agreements can be renewed annually or on other regular schedules, but most partnerships are best structured as individual projects with start dates, end dates, terms of reference, and budgets. This not only supports good recordkeeping and accountability, but it also aligns well with the expectations of many funders.

Care should be exercised with formalized but non-specific partnerships, particularly across sectors, as visions and mandates that seem perfectly compatible may turn out not to be so. Small repositories are often heavily dependent on community goodwill and public funding, both of which may be highly sensitive to local politics and real or perceived conflicts, however minor or benign they may seem.

2.3 FUNDING: OPERATIONAL VERSUS PROJECT-BASED

Operational funding is essential to a repository's sustainability. Some repositories rely on investment from parent or affiliated institutions, others on renewable core funding from government, others on private donations, and still others on independent revenue. Precisely how an organization generates operational funding will depend on its business model, so it is important for the model to reflect the repository's intended purpose and practice. This does not mean allocating large sums of money to the work of managing records. It means adjusting the model to account for targeted investment in different areas:

    a. identifying records

    b. inventorying and describing records

    c. digitizing records

    d. promoting community access to the records

Integrating records management into the business model is an important step to ensure that the repository meets its stated commitment to care for its records. When operational funding is not formalized, repositories tend to remain dormant.

Project funding is a separate issue. Many potential funders require evidence that operational funding for a repository is in place before they will consider applications for project-based funding. Many also do not provide funding for tasks they consider to be a part of day-to-day operations such as arranging or describing records. Unless your organization is pursuing a partnership model to access project-based funds, you would do well to establish operational funding first. There can be hidden capacity costs for project funding, which may affect your ability to develop your repository. Often, those hidden costs relate to the presumption that certain activities and materials are covered by operational funding.

2.4 PROFESSIONALIZATION: WHEN IS ENOUGH?

This guide has been developed with the conviction that many aspects of professional archival practice are irrelevant to small, Northern records repositories. However, it would be absurd to discount all the teachings and best practices developed by knowledgeable and dedicated archivists worldwide over many years. The question is not *whether* we should heed the professional consensus, but *how much* we should heed it. Without listening to everything we are told, how can we know when we have listened enough?

We want to professionalize enough to optimize our performance, but not so much that we get sidetracked into expending effort on lower-order priorities or become paralyzed when it is impossible to follow best practices. The key is to always remember that archival standards, and even the idea of a repository itself, are means to other ends.

A litmus test for "enough" is when you can make either or both of the following assessments:

    a. Further action would have no net benefit to your mandate (i.e., the cost of further efforts exceeds their benefits).

    b. Other activities would yield higher net benefit to your mandate (i.e., efforts in other areas are more important).

Following one opportunity may foreclose others. Imagine having to make a choice: you can rehouse a collection in archival boxes, buy a new server, host a series of modest community events, or employ a summer student or Elder to assist in the arrangement and description of records. Any of these choices may be correct, depending on context.

This approach can be applied to any area of archival practice. Below, we apply it to what we consider to be the central areas of practice for Northern records repositories:

    a. conservation

    b. arrangement and description

    c. content management

    d. training

    e. policies and procedures

    f. community access

Conservation

Few obligations are more important to a repository than keeping the community's records safe. But how safe is safe enough? Setting priorities is essential, although when we prioritize, we should also remember that items shunted to the bottom of the list are likely to be passed by.

The Canadian Council of Archives offers *Basic Conservation of Archival Materials* (Bureau of Canadian Archivists 2003) and the Canadian Conservation Institute has more specific and detailed guides. These documents are worth reading at least once, not only for their specific content, but also for the gravity and comprehensiveness of their approach.

A more direct approach is to consider what happens in the absence of conservation measures. Imagine random papers tucked in a box in somebody's attic for a few decades. These papers must survive any number of dangers, from the acute (mice, leaky roofs, house fires, being thrown out) to the chronic (being forgotten, heat, mold, damp). In the best case, they turn out mostly fine, just a bit yellowed and musty. But what else might happen to them?

In general, there are four classes of outcomes for records.

1. **Loss of information.** Records may be destroyed, thrown out, taken, or otherwise fatally compromised and unsalvageable. Ensuring the survival of information in a repository's care requires **disaster preparedness**. Gathering records in a single location with a custodian

is often the most basic level of conservation, but it also increases the risk of catastrophic damage to the whole collection from single, isolated events. Prevention and contingency planning are both important here, and unfortunately disaster preparedness is perhaps the single most easily put off aspect of recordkeeping, especially in small repositories where one person may be responsible for everything. But the prevention of one major disaster may be worth years of other labor. The Archives Association of British Columbia provides excellent resources to develop a disaster plan (Glandt 2021).

2. **Reduced interpretability.** Records may be sound, but fewer people are able to make sense of them. Sometimes, records will remain structurally sound as objects but become less interpretable because the community of users is diminished. This is especially a problem for Indigenous language materials.

3. **Reduced accessibility.** Records may be damaged. A loss of accessibility is a more common problem, especially with inherently fragile records. The key concern here is that the survival of the record as a physical object does not always mean survival of its content. This is especially a problem for formats whose information can only be read with equipment such as players or projectors, because their level of degradation may not be apparent until they are actually played. Digitization is an excellent tool to salvage such endangered information.

4. **Retained accessibility.** Records are worn but intact. Slow degradation is inevitable for all records, but large archives devote much attention to mitigation to retain as much accessibility as possible, for as long as possible. The conservation measures involved are often costly: acid-free folders, specialized boxes and shelving, climate control, and so on. Ironically, some of the control measures actually interfere with accessibility since they keep items more distant or more restricted from community-based users. Repositories must therefore balance long-term and short-term goals, the future and the present, preservation and access.

Arrangement and Description

The Society of American Archivists offers a manual of *Standards for Archival Description* (Walch and Matters 1994); the Canadian Council of Archives maintains an even more assertively titled set of *Rules for Archival Description* (Bureau of Canadian Archivists 2008). However, dogmatically adhering to these guidelines is not feasible or desirable for a small repository. The final line of the preface to the 1990 edition of *Rules for Archival Description* exhorts archivists to apply "practical experience," "sound theory," and ordinary "common sense." Good enough.

A system of description needs to be intelligible and comfortable for the people maintaining and using the repository. Some collections are not large enough for poor or inconsistent descriptions to seriously impact a record's future discoverability, at least not in ways that standards or rules could correct. There is always a tradeoff to be made between precision and efficiency, but when it comes to describing records, sensible exchange rates heavily favor efficiency. Simple systems of description tend to work best.

Content Management

Like all powerful tools, content management systems should be approached with caution. Most offer far more features than any small repository can use. Administering such a system becomes a task in itself, and even basic information entry may be complicated. Consider a data entry form with mandatory fields: a case of the system dictating to the recordkeeper, rather than the reverse.

Content management functions by capturing additional work up front in order to realize future advantages, like linking between bits of information to increase interconnectivity and reduce redundancies. But in contexts where time is limited and organizations are not necessarily well-established, or when the long-term goals and outlooks of the system are unknown, that trade-off is not always desirable.

Worse, content management systems can introduce a visual and intellectual clutter that impairs clarity of thinking. We start to see tools and to look for ways to use them, rather than looking for tools to solve our problems.
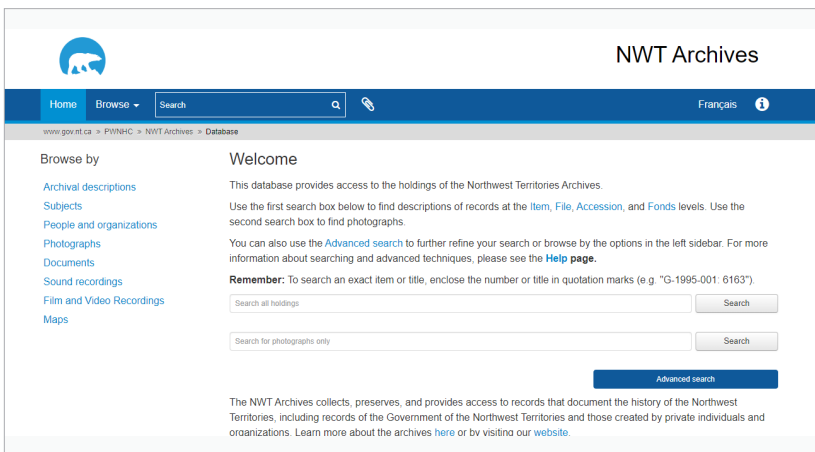

Fig. 2.1: The main landing page of the Access to Memory open-source archival description platform, run by the Northwest Territories Archives

Many institutional repositories can benefit from the organization and clear visual layout of a content management system like Access to Memory, as shown in figure 2.1. However, a content management system should be introduced only once you know exactly what you want it to do. When we are just starting a finding aid, we don't know what we want it to look like. How can we?

For instance, when Morgen first established the Labrador Campus Archive, she spent a great deal of time installing an open-source archival description platform called Archon, a predecessor of ArchivesSpace. This meant developing some specialized computer skills. Later she discovered that the Association of Newfoundland and Labrador Archives was organizing a loose-knit, province-wide collaboration based on another open-source system called Access to Memory, which would require less independent technical expertise. It did not take long before she realized that she was spending a lot more time on systems than on records. Eventually, she settled on a simple word processing document, which she regularly exported to a searchable PDF (Labrador Institute 2020). Once posted online, this document was trawled by search engines, and now the finding aid regularly comes up whenever one searches for an obscure Labrador historical topic on Google.

This is not the ideal solution for every small repository. It is underdeveloped, has no integration with digital records, might be difficult to convert into other formats, might be overly shaped to one person's idiosyncratic preferences, and has the air of an internal document. But it is highly functional, easy for users to search, easy to email to people, easy to cram full of information, requires minimal training to use or expand, contains no broken links, gives no baffling search results, and requires no technical maintenance or troubleshooting. For a fledgling archive run with the quarter-time attention of a single staff member who has minimal technical training, it is ideal. Further, simple solutions are often the least expensive; depending on the word processor you use, fees to access the software can be minimal or potentially folded into standing fees for internet.

Training

It is impossible to fully appreciate the value of training unless one has it. But training comes in many forms and includes activities such as:

- courses and seminars provided by professional archivists and archives organizations
- self-directed instruction in the form of LinkedIn learning and other web-based training
- professional networking

In general, the entire archival field is fundamentally about sharing information. Knowledge and communication are our objectives, methods, and tools. In that context, training is almost always worth the cost, especially since training opportunities in the North are not exactly abundant, and many of us work in relative isolation. The main exception is training on highly technical subjects: we don't study to be mechanics in order to fix our cars, and we shouldn't take IT courses in order to set up our institutional networks.

Policies and Procedures

Policies generally develop in two directions: top-down and bottom-up. The "top" should be the local community and whatever form of governance body is in place, whether a supervisor within a larger institution or a volunteer board of directors. The "bottom" is the day-to-day experience of those working in the repository. Most of the time, the top delivers the why and the bottom delivers the how. In the middle we have the task of connecting these two things and putting things into words.

Written policies, like written mandates, are invaluable, and it is well worth the effort to draft them properly. Practically speaking, that usually means copying from other institutions and then adapting the language to fit, but specific community circumstances or institutional experiences may call for unique policies. Such policies are usually best kept brief and declarative or referred to experts.

Procedures are another matter. Most policies are safeguards, while most procedures are helpful guidelines—much like the distinction in records conservation between disaster preparedness and good handling practices.

Procedures should be kept entirely pragmatic, and the involvement of governance bodies should be minimal. There are two key moments to refer to professional resources on procedures:

a. Before doing something important for the first time, it makes sense to read a few of the many readily available online guides on how to do it. Even when we have a clear idea of what to do and feel no specific need for advice, it's still useful to have good background information.

b. We should seek professional guidelines whenever we actively feel a need for a resource (e.g., when we need specific how-to or guidance information).

There is no need for an extensive in-house procedures manual, though it might be useful to spend a small amount of time developing brief guides

for very specific tasks, for the convenience of temporary workers (e.g., summer students or volunteers) and for eventual successors.

There is also no need for a standard external reference. It may help to think of the professional literature in the sense of the well-titled *AABC Archivist's Toolkit* created by the Archives Association of British Columbia (n.d.). When carrying a toolkit, we choose the tools we want when we need them. An even better concept might be a *tool library*, underscoring that while an enormous selection of tools may be available to us, as in the case of all the books in a library, we are only likely ever to use a limited number of them.

Community Access

How much should one restrict community access to records? Guidebooks tell us how to make records as *safe* as possible, but they cannot tell us when records are *secure* enough or help us to develop appropriate access permissions. Security and privacy protocols are most effectively developed with the mandate of your organization front of mind, and a good understanding of your records. If your organization is not in a position to implement security and privacy protocols that serve your mandate and the records themselves, there is a good chance your records might be best managed elsewhere.

Lesson 3: Digitizing Collections

A repository's two great tasks are to take care of its records and to share them with relevant communities. To achieve these tasks, digitization *appears* to be a no-brainer. Digital copies of physical records mean originals can be better conserved. Digital copies are easier to protect than originals from most hazards; they are easier to reproduce and distribute; and perhaps most importantly, they are easier for a wider number of users to access, either by searching or browsing.

Given these advantages, it's unsurprising that the primary strategy for nearly every twenty-first-century records repository is to digitize its collections *and* make them available online. This addresses both branches of the institutional mandate: **conservation** of records and provision of community **access**. It can also be an efficient and highly satisfying form of collection development.

We are not about to pump the brakes on digitization. However, our experiences and conversations have taught us many caveats. Digitization can be exceptionally valuable for any repository—small or large, in the North or elsewhere, but finding and retaining that value is rarely as simple as it first seems. Unlike repositories in the south, there are compelling reasons for Northern repositories to develop targeted digitization strategies that make selective use of digital records, especially for Indigenous organizations that provide language nests or Elders-in-residence programs, to name a few.

This section explores some of the key decision points in forming and following a digitization strategy.

OVERVIEW

3.1	**Digitization strategies**	Deciding when to digitize and how to begin
3.2	**What's the catch?**	Limitations and costs
3.3	**The follow-through**	Getting the most out of digital collections

3.1 DIGITIZATION STRATEGIES

Repositories will have to contend with digitization at some point. Physical records do have "best-before" dates. Digitization is a central feature in any conservation strategy, and most project-based funding opportunities

for archives prioritize the digitization of physical records. The imperative to digitize is unavoidable. Two elements remain within the repository's control, however:

- the role **physical records** play in the repository *after* they have been digitized

- how the repository goes about digitization; that is, the development and implementation of a **digitization strategy**

For Northern repositories, the first item is essential. It should factor into the development of any digitization strategy. Digitization is not the endpoint of a record's development, nor in many cases the end of its relevance as a physical object.

Any successful digitization strategy must be constructed with your repository's capacity in mind. Because capacity can change—new staff can bring new skill sets, or funding for capital purchases can provide you with technology to digitize records to different standards—we recommend that repositories approach digitization strategies as living documents that can be revisited as time and circumstances allow. Below we discuss in greater detail some of the key considerations in any digitization strategy.

Physical Records after Digitization

All physical records have inherent value as objects. This is obvious to anyone that has ever compared a digital record to its physical original. Consider a digitized photo album. It is possible to preserve the general order and arrangement of photos, but what about the album itself? Can the spine of the album be effectively digitized? If the photos are scanned within their respective pages, how do we capture annotations on the back of the photos? What about the sensory experiences of physically handling an object? The feel and smell of the album can be important, but they cannot be digitized. Digitization only allows us to transfer certain types of information, not everything.

The role that physical records play in your repository after digitization should be shaped by the repository's vision, its mandate, its community of users, and its capacity to facilitate access to both physical and electronic records. Many physical records spark special experiences. They represent opportunities to bring people together and therefore serve as important assets for in-person programming.

Purpose and Goals

Why are you digitizing your materials? Are you digitizing for conservation purposes only? Are you digitizing to make digital copies available online or in a content management system? Are you digitizing because you have

funding available for that reason? Do you have some records that are a higher priority for digitization than others? Being clear about your purpose and goals for digitization is essential because such clarity will guide many aspects of your decisions down the road.

"Digital" does not mean "online." A "digital collection" might be anything from a set of records on a single hard drive to a cloud-based repository with an associated, custom interactive web resource. At its core, the key functions of a well-developed digital collection are to support strong conservation of digital records and to allow internal users to access those records via digital finding aids and electronic filing systems. Accessibility to community users is another, separate element that requires a subsequent strategy of its own, usually involving a second transition, not from physical to digital, but from digital to online. The movement of digital records to an online platform can be as complex, though not usually as time-consuming, as the digitization of physical originals.

Technical Aspects

A digitization strategy does not have to be complex or use cutting-edge technologies. Technical standards for digitization itself change frequently. When it comes to the preservation of digital records, the pace of change is even greater. For many Northern repositories, staying at the cutting edge of technical standards is a distraction and detracts from activities that more directly serve institutional visions and mandates.

Any approach to the technical aspects of digitization should be framed around the question of **capacity**. What is your repository capable of doing? If a repository does not have the capacity to digitize at all, then it makes sense to direct effort toward securing project-based funding to digitize things, according to the repository's purposes and goals. More likely, however, the repository will have the capacity to digitize to a relatively high standard for some record types (e.g., unbound papers, photographs) but not others (e.g., VHS tapes, audiocassettes, glass slides). When developing your **digitization strategy**, it is important to be clear about the standards to which you intend to digitize the various media in your collections and how you plan to preserve those digitized records.

Figure 3.1 shows an example of a technical standards chart for a repository that has typical consumer-grade scanners but no capacity to digitize specialized media such as glass slides and VHS tapes. This technical standards chart follows the 3-2-1 Backup Rule: Keep *three* different copies of your information on *two* different media with *one* stored off-site. One copy of the data will serve as your **access copy**, followed by two additional **preservation copies**.

Media Type	Sample Equipment	Preservation Specifications	Preservation Storage	Access Specifications	Access Storage
document (typescript)	Canon MB2720	150 dpi pdf	two copies on preservation drives (one local and one remote backup)	150 dpi pdf	one copy on an access drive
document (manuscript or special)	Canon MB2720	600 dpi tiff, 24-bit uncompressed RGBT		200 dpi pdf	
photograph	Epson Perfection V600 Photo	600 dpi tiff, 48-bit uncompressed RGB		200 dpi jpg	
glass slide	(third-party vendor)	to be discussed with vendor		to be discussed with vendor	
VHS tape	(vendor)	to be discussed with vendor		to be discussed with vendor	

Fig. 3.1: Sample technical standards chart

When developing your own technical standards for digitization, you have access to many guides, including the following:

- *Digital Preservation File Format Recommendations* published by the National Heritage Digitization Strategy (Bieman and Vinh-Doyle 2019).
- *Technical Guidelines for Digitizing Archival Materials for Electronic Access* produced by the National Archives and Records Administration (Puglia, Reed, and Rhodes 2004).
- The *AABC Archivist's Toolkit* published by the Archives Association of British Columbia (n.d.).

Financial Aspects

Digitization need not be a costly activity. As suggested earlier, certain materials such as unbound paper and photographs can easily be scanned with consumer-grade equipment. If your organization already owns a printer capable of scanning, then depending on the age of the equipment, there is a good chance you can perform some digitization work without any additional investment.

It is a sound principle to invest in equipment that is easy to use and can serve multiple purposes. Printer/scanner/copiers are good investments for most organizations. Dedicated large format scanners are not. If possible, taking on some digitization in-house is a good idea, as it can help to finance further digitization work either by saving on vendor contracts or even by generating revenue from digitizing third-party items. Digitization funding generally requires that repositories demonstrate in-kind commitments, and undertaking your own digitization work allows you to establish a track record of just such commitment.

Nearly all digitization funding opportunities are **project-based** and restricted to digitizing a set number of records over a set time, which generally does not exceed two years. These opportunities are a good way for your repository to digitize records that require specialized services (e.g., 16 mm film or ¾" audio tape). In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of federal opportunities available in Canada. Many of those opportunities, such as the Documentary Heritage Communities Program, and Listen, Hear Our Voices, are administered by the Department of Canadian Heritage. Depending upon the focus of your organization, the Canada Council for the Arts and some provincial arts councils offer a range of Strategic Funds, some of which can be directed toward digitization work. As of 2021, CLIR has allowed Canadian applicants to lead projects funded through its Digitizing Hidden Collections: Amplifying Unheard Voices competition.

We are less familiar with American funding, but grants are offered by many federal institutions in the United States as well, such as the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the Grants for Arts Projects at the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Historical Publications & Records Commission, and the federally funded Basic Preservation Grants program of the National Film Preservation Foundation.

Personnel

Digitization is time-consuming, and even more so with older or more technically complex media. In-house digitization projects can be effectively scaled to engage existing personnel, and they often provide opportunities to develop in-house expertise. Unlike larger repositories, which tend to maintain a distinction between digitization archivists and descriptive or metadata archivists, small repositories are well-positioned to capitalize on one person undertaking the work of digitization and description, often together.

Scanning paper records is relatively fast work, and an efficient process leaves the person scanning with too little downtime to make more than the briefest notes of record contents. Audiocassettes and VHS tapes, in contrast, can only be digitized in real time, making the person digitizing the media a captive audience capable of generating good descriptions while the process takes place. In their combined work on the Labrador Campus's moving image collection undertaken while engaged in full-time positions, Mark and Morgen capitalized on this opportunity by first creating more robust descriptions for VHS tapes and ¾" U matic cassettes. Their long engagement with these materials led to the establishment of a free,

monthly film screening series called *Labrador/ians on Film*, which in turn resulted in a book called *Labrador Cinema* (Turner and Mills 2022).

Many **project-based funding** opportunities allow for the hiring of part-time or term-limited technicians, but unless you have a candidate or candidates in mind who have already demonstrated commitment to and interest in digitization, it is often a better use of funds to send materials out for digitization by a vendor. Labor ecosystems in the North are very different from those in the south. It is difficult to recruit people for part-time or term-limited work, especially in technical roles.

Time and Continuity

Digitizing and preserving digital records are ongoing activities. For as long as your repository acquires or creates new records, you will be engaged in the work of digitization. For as long as your repository maintains digital records, you will be engaged in the work of preserving them. Digitization tasks may become less cumbersome if viewed as inherent components of operating a repository.

A repository's ability to create continuity in these tasks requires a thoughtful **digitization strategy** that can be adjusted over time. This strategy is a vital link between your **vision, mandate,** and **infrastructure,** as well as **personnel** and the **external vendors** responsible for digitizing your records.

3.2 WHAT'S THE CATCH?

Although digitization has become fundamental to records repositories, it has its limits, and like all transformations, it can bring about unanticipated changes. Nothing in this section is intended to argue against digitizing records, but rather to provide additional considerations for repositories to keep in mind.

Limitations

Digital objects have many advantages over physical ones, and generally they are easier to conserve and make accessible. However, neither of these advantages is absolute, and both can lead to complacency. Digital records are far from immortal. Proper redundancies and backups help to make them less vulnerable to sudden loss, but these measures are not always implemented consistently, and they do not protect against all forms of user error. It is particularly important to check on backups periodically. Even simple things like a lapsed cloud service subscription or a disruption of ongoing synchronization processes can leave data without a backup,

and therefore vulnerable to ordinary disasters or hard drive failures. Such problems with backup services are usually easily fixed, but only once they have been identified, and it is very easy for personnel at small repositories to overlook them because of competing demands for their attention or lack of technical expertise.

Moreover, the "digit" in digitization does not mean that records will automatically be at users' fingertips. Digitization is an important step toward electronic accessibility, but other steps must follow. Throughout this process, metadata and tracking become increasingly tricky, but also increasingly important.

Under any description system, each record requires at least three kinds of basic information: some form of name, some note about what it is (format), and some indication of where it is kept and how to retrieve it (location). Normally, some form of control number or ID will be needed to help organize the records, either in physical shelving or in electronic databases. However, once a record exists in a second version (such as when it is digitized), the new version has a different format and location. Therefore, a distinction must be drawn between a record and the different versions of that record, and a new description must be made for each version, with all the same fields, plus a new field identifying the version type, and another one to link the versions to the source record. This leads to rapidly increasing complexity in finding aids (figure 3.2).

Original Finding Aid	one entry per record	**Record ID:** 001 **Name:** Sam's Letters **Format:** paper documents **Location:** collection 1, box 1	
Post-Digitization Internal Finding Aid	one entry for each record and one for each version of that record (here called "item")	**1** **Record ID:** 001 **Name:** Sam's Letters **Associated Item IDs:** 0001, 0002, 0003 **2** **Item ID:** 0001 **Name:** Sam's Letters **Type:** original **Format:** paper document **Location:** coll. 1, box 1 **Associated Record:** 001	**3** **Item ID:** 0002 **Item Name:** Sam's Letters **Type:** digital access copy **Format:** PDF **Location:** e:/sam/letters **Associated Record:** 001 **4** **Item ID:** 0003 **Item Name:** Sam's Letters **Type:** digital conservation copy **Format:** TIFF **Location:** e:/sam/letters **Associated Record:** 001

Online Finding Aid	*one entry for each record, including version information and possibly access links*	**Sam's Letters** Record #001 Associated Objects: #0001, Sam's Letters, paper document (contact for access information) #0002, Sam's Letters, PDF (click to download)

Fig. 3.2: A typical example, using simplified descriptions and showing how digitizing a record may mean expanding a finding aid from one entry with four fields to four entries with twenty fields total

The user-visible online finding aid may be simplified, but likely must differ significantly from the internal finding aid.

Changes

While a repository is fundamentally directed by its **values** and **mandate**, it is also to a large extent defined by its collections. When those collections change, the repository itself changes. When it comes to digitization, such change presents more opportunities than drawbacks, but changes must nonetheless be considered and managed.

One thing to consider is the physical collection, including those objects that have not been digitized. Because it is much easier to promote digital objects, it is also easy to neglect physical ones. Often a repository's digital holdings are only the tip of the iceberg, and depending upon the institution, the underwater majority of the collection attracts fewer visitors.

Digitization can also be such a powerful tool that it ushers in a *de facto* existential shift, prompting the question of whether your archive's value comes more from its unique records or from the unique access and curation that it provides to information. Either kind of value is worth pursuing, and some repositories serve their communities partially or primarily by providing access to information that is held elsewhere.

Partnerships between Northern and southern institutions can be especially beneficial in this light. Northern community members may be more likely to access records through a small, local institution than through a larger institution in the south. For example, many original photographs held by the Peary-MacMillan Arctic Museum at Bowdoin College in Maine are also made available to Labradorians through digital copies at the archives of Them Days and the Labrador Campus.

Such cases make clear the importance of considering an institution's control over its digital records. While disseminating records may be a goal

for community repositories in general, sensitivity to recorded people and cultures is required. Often, there is a paradox at play here: identifying the appropriate communities and individuals for consultation sometimes requires making records public for a time.

Finally, as with all initiatives, cost is always a factor. Digitization tends to be a high priority not only because it is so useful, but also because it is relatively inexpensive. Nonetheless, there is always opportunity cost in the redirection of funding, and some equipment costs may extend beyond the digitization process itself, such as network-attached storage and remote backup fees.

3.3 THE FOLLOW-THROUGH

Limitations or no limitations, digitization can significantly help a repository toward its goals. The key is to see it as part of a larger ongoing process of collection development and community engagement. At a more basic level than the digitization strategy, too, there may be room for less formal, collection-level development strategies.

For example, the Labrador Campus holds a collection of hundreds of digitized episodes of *Labradorimiut*, a culturally significant Inuttitut/ English television show produced by the OKâlaKatiget Society (OK) in Labrador for 28 years. The master tapes were originally stored in OK Society facilities, which burned down in 2005. Fortunately, copies of many of the episodes had already been acquired by other institutions, eventually to be collected and digitized by Mark during his PhD work in 2010–2011, with OK's permission. This was a large achievement involving inter-institutional partnership, funding, and digitization work, but there remained an opportunity to do more.

Recognizing the potential value of this resource, but also some of the remaining barriers to its accessibility, Morgen later hired a summer student from Nain, where OK is based, to watch each digitized tape and take detailed notes (**description**). The next year, a different student from Happy Valley-Goose Bay with more technical background and less familiarity with the cultural content used the descriptions to edit the footage so that each video corresponded to an individual episode (**arrangement**). This enabled Morgen to generate a finding aid. Ultimately, by combining the work of four people, each with unique and necessary skill sets, we were able to produce a collection of videos that a user might be able to conveniently consult (**access**).

Lesson 4: Computing Capacity

From the collections we keep to the connections we make, computers are becoming ever more involved in all aspects of a repository's work. Like most institutions, repositories use computers for countless everyday tasks and most of their communications. We also use computers to keep track of our records internally and to share them with communities externally. The records themselves often reside on computers. If we have uploaded them to a cloud service or backed them up remotely, they might even be stored on computers we have never seen, which are owned and operated by companies far away.

In such circumstances, it is important to get the most we can out of computer systems by optimizing our systems and optimizing our ability to use them. At the same time, computer systems have their own built-in structures, and perhaps more than any other tool, they tend to change our situations in unexpected ways, both short term and long term. Sometimes we find ourselves spending two hours fixing a printer driver or waiting for a Windows update to finish, and other times, we save days of data entry work by discovering a new way to use spreadsheet software.

Computers are key points of an ecosystem of technologies that only specially trained people are comfortable with navigating, troubleshooting, and keeping up to date. Familiar office machines such as printers and scanners can pose challenges of their own, but the ecosystem also includes servers and local area networks, back-up devices and power supplies and cables, Internet connections, and software programs of all kinds.

This section explores approaches for repositories seeking to get the most use out of computers with the least frustration and at controlled cost.

OVERVIEW

4.1	**People**	Adapting systems to people and preparing people for systems
4.2	**Software**	Choosing, acquiring, and installing software
4.3	**Hardware**	Choosing, acquiring, and installing hardware
4.4	**Sample strategy**	An example of a simple computing strategy
4.5	**The long haul**	Thinking ahead to keep systems running and up to date

4.1 PEOPLE

People *should* be at the center of any drive to develop computing capacity. Unfortunately, what tends to happen in many organizations is either:

a. A designated IT person, division, or external consultant determines the hardware and software requirements for the entire organization, leaving personnel to work with hardware and software assigned to them.

b. No one is responsible for IT, meaning the repository will determine and acquire its own hardware and software as needs arise.

Complicating matters for Northern repositories, the people who are often best positioned to manage collections tend to be content experts, not technical experts. Because of this, we suggest that emerging Northern repositories develop simple **computing strategies** identifying designated software and hardware for certain tasks. Such strategies should answer these questions:

• Who will be using the software and hardware? (e.g., staff, volunteers, community users)

• What do these people need to do? (e.g., describe records, share records via social media)

• What technical work can these people realistically do?

• What can these people realistically learn?

• How can the repository best draw upon the skill sets at hand using available software and hardware? (This is especially important for mobilizing the expertise of Elders, Indigenous language speakers, and traditional knowledge holders.)

An internally developed and appropriately scaled **computing strategy** will not only streamline your repository's workflow, but will also serve as an important tool to promote Northern sovereignty more broadly by ensuring continued community control over records and how they are handled.

4.2 SOFTWARE

Every repository needs software to perform basic functions such as communications, arrangement and description of records, management of electronic records, and, most likely, digital preservation and digitization. These representative functions are listed in order according to the increasing complexity of software required. Tasks such as communications and arrangement and description can be easily performed with built-in or open-access software. Tasks such as managing digital records,

digitization, and digital preservation tend to require additional software or subscriptions that can be more costly.

A key determinant in selecting your software will be internet speed and reliability. While new internet service providers are increasing both speed and reliability, consistent high-speed internet is not universal across the North. This complicates the use of web-based, free-to-use software such as Google Docs and Google Sheets.

Communications, Description, and Simple Arrangement

For emerging repositories, it is important for these tasks to integrate easily with one another. For Mac users, all these tasks can be performed for free with preloaded Apple software (Safari, Mail, Pages, Numbers). For PC users, some of these tasks can be performed with preloaded or easily downloadable software (Edge, Outlook, Wordpad) or open-source office software suites (LibreOffice), but most PC users will prefer to pay for the *de facto* industry standard Microsoft Office (Word, Excel, Access). Whichever configuration you choose, we recommend managing electronic files on a local or networked drive, rather than in online storage ("the cloud"). One of the major drawbacks to the Google suite is that the default arrangement for file management is via the web. Maintaining electronic files on local drives allows a repository to control access to these files, and many options remain available for sharing locally stored documents among users in different locations. Many organizations already have access to these types of software through existing purchases or subscriptions.

Advanced Arrangement and Digital Preservation

Along with a sector-wide push to digitize records has come the proliferation of Content Management Systems (CMS). Some open-source CMS options such as Omeka and Mukurtu are well suited to small repositories. Some proprietary systems are targeted to large institutions. Other platforms have the capacity to directly integrate digital preservation software as the open-source Access to Memory does with a program called Archivematica.

Whether it is open-source or proprietary, and whether it is user-maintained or maintained through an annual service agreement with outside experts, implementing a CMS requires significant amounts of time, and it should be a lower-order priority for emerging repositories. If you create and maintain your descriptive and arrangement data in a sound format, that data can be readily imported into any CMS. Among simple and comparatively easy-to-learn options, the most portable, forward-compatible approach is likely to use spreadsheets. Word processing

programs can allow the internal description to serve directly as a user-readable finding aid, but exporting the data will be more time-consuming should a CMS ever be implemented down the road.

Digitization

Software for digitization can be difficult to properly source, as the best choice tends to be dependent upon the activity (e.g., scanning photographs, digitally transferring audio cassettes) and the corresponding hardware required for the task (e.g., flatbed scanner, audio cassette player with USB out). A hardware purchase often includes an associated, proprietary software package. Whenever another software solution is needed, for any reason, consulting other repositories that do similar work is a good idea. Most of these programs are designed specifically for a narrow range of use cases, and fortunately most of them are easily and inexpensively acquired. In general, if a program can digitize to the output standards you have determined (see Lesson 3) and if it can be used by your staff, then it is likely sufficient.

4.3 HARDWARE

Software cannot be run without hardware. Unlike the previous section, in which software was discussed in terms of the required tasks, this section is organized according to categories of devices, namely core computing hardware, external devices, and digitization equipment.

Core Computing Hardware

By core computing hardware, we mean either a laptop or a basic desktop configuration (e.g., box, monitor, keyboard, mouse). Hardware changes rapidly, and while a system's expected lifespan varies according to several factors, in general, if you perform regular updates and use your machines mainly for communications, description, and simple arrangement functions, then core computing hardware tends to be optimally efficient for around five years.

While both PC and Mac devices have their benefits and drawbacks, emerging repositories can save a great deal of inconvenience and cost by using one format or the other, rather than a mixture of both. Incompatibilities between hardware require you to invest in a range of adaptive hardware and software and to spend disproportionate amounts of time in troubleshooting and developing capacity in managing system compatibilities.

External Devices

The most common external devices emerging repositories will have to integrate into their workflow are **external storage devices** (e.g., USB jump drives for temporary storage or transfer and RAID-configured drives for longer-term storage) and general-purpose **printer/scanner/copiers.** Dedicated image and transparency scanners capable of digitizing things like 35mm slides at high resolutions are another matter, considered in the following section on digitization equipment.

While external devices tend to be compatible with both Mac and PC machines, in practice some devices are explicitly designed to work with certain platforms. If, for example, a device connects to your core computing hardware via USB 3.0, that device will only connect directly with PC hardware. An adapter will be required to plug it into a Mac device. If a device connects with your computing hardware via USB-C or the similar looking Thunderbolt, it will connect directly with most Mac devices. An adapter may be required to connect USB-C devices to a PC. It is best to minimize the need for additional adaptors and third-party cables to connect your external device to your core computing hardware.

External drives are an important part of any repository's hardware, for data storage. Only program files and current working files should be hosted on office computers' default storage drives, to maximize the devices' performance and increase the security of the data. For ease and portability, we suggest purchasing drives that do not require external power sources. External drives tend to last three to five years, something any computing strategy should account for. Single drives are best suited to project use and are not appropriate for long-term storage, but small repositories can use them for that purpose by adhering to replacement schedules laid out in a computing strategy. When funding and opportunity allows, a RAID data storage system is a superior and worthwhile investment, as it has built-in redundancies against hard drive failure, as well as typically greater storage capacity. It also reduces the need for manually transferring data at scheduled intervals, which is impractical in the long run. Any repository conducting extensive digitization needs access to reliable storage for its digital records, and a RAID system is the standard in-house solution, with a remote backup also recommended. Installing such a setup requires some technical expertise, but as a matter of **disaster preparedness**, the hassle and expenditure is generally well worth it.

Printer/scanner/copiers are important devices for the day-to-day operations of most repositories (and most offices), and they are one piece of digitization equipment that all repositories would do well to have. Because

printer/scanner/copiers perform multiple tasks and are available for purchase at relatively modest price points, they are generally not capable of outputting high resolutions or scanning transparencies. We suggest purchasing printer/scanner/copiers that are capable of scanning images up to 600 dpi, which can be a high enough resolution for digitization in most cases. Used regularly, these machines tend to last about five years.

Digitization Hardware

Digitization hardware refers to machinery that allows you to convert **physical** or **analog records** not designed to be read by computers into **digital records** that can be conveniently stored, manipulated, and shared using computer systems. The most basic form of digitization hardware will allow you to connect a read-and-capture device directly to your computer through a common cable format. The digitization device reads the record and transmits information through a cable to the computer, which produces a digital surrogate of the original using specialized software. Common examples of such devices include **image scanners** and **audio cassette converters.**

Often, however, a digitization hardware setup is more elaborate and includes:

a. the device that was used to record or play the original media (e.g., VHS deck, ¾"-audio portapak, various formats of videocassette cameras)

b. analog cabling to transmit the signal from the playback device (e.g., RCA, S-Video, coaxial cable)

c. an intermediary device (these are often marketed as "converters") that converts the analog signal from the playback device into a digital signal for transmission to the computer

d. digital cabling to connect the intermediary device to a computer (e.g., USB 3.0, USB-C, Thunderbolt)

e. a computer

Like external devices, digitization hardware tends to be compatible with both Mac and PC systems in principle. In practice, however, the cables that connect **intermediary devices** often determine whether you are working on a Mac or a PC. Take for example, the ADVC 55, a relatively inexpensive video converter made by Canopus Grass Valley in the 2000s, which is readily available for sale secondhand. While this converter can receive RCA and s-video signals, the only way it can connect to a computer is with a FireWire 400 cable, technology that is specific to Mac and was discontinued several years ago. It is still possible to connect this device to more recent Mac computers, but several adapters are required to do so.

Connecting the device only gets you part of the way to a functioning setup. Once it is connected, these types of hardware often require you to invest in expensive and technical capture software as well.

When investing in digitization hardware, it is generally sound practice to invest only in technologies that can be easily integrated into your computing strategy and operated by your personnel without excessive additional training—and only when there is likely to be a large quantity of records to digitize in the relevant formats. For all other circumstances, there are plenty of vendors capable of doing the digitization work at a lower cost, and project funding is often available for the task.

4.4 SAMPLE COMPUTING STRATEGY

The sample **computing strategy** below is not complete but includes some key illustrative components. The imaginary organization has a small office space with one staff member and several volunteers, perhaps including an advisory board. It does not offer a computer terminal for public use and has not yet developed long-term plans for content management or more sophisticated data storage solutions, because it is still in its early growth stages and focusing on other priorities. The key element of a computing strategy is to lay out the logic behind the repository's computing practices, to ensure that they are consistent and make good sense. A small course correction at the strategy level can save a lot of work or frustration in the day to day, and having a written strategy also makes it much easier to seek external advice.

Computing Strategy Goals

1. to meet the repository's daily computing needs for general office tasks
2. to provide a user-friendly way to produce and enter descriptions of the repository's records
3. to support personnel to digitize documents and photographs from the repository's collections
4. to store data, including record descriptions and digital records
5. to provide workstations for conducting online community engagement and programming

Platform and Machines

Our repository works with Windows PCs. The manager uses one dedicated staff computer workstation, and laptops are supplied for on-site use by volunteers or temporary personnel to assist with repository tasks and projects.

Hardware Inventory

Item	Description	Purchase Date	Estimated Replacement	Location	Notes
Dell Inspiron 16 laptop #1	laptop for volunteers	April 1, 2020	April 1, 2025	manager's office	remains in facility
Dell Inspiron 16 laptop #2	laptop for volunteers	April 1, 2020	April 1, 2025	manager's office	remains in facility
Lenovo ThinkCentre Neo 30a Intel (24")	office desktop computer	November 1, 2022	November 1, 2027	manager's office	remains in facility
Lacie Rugged	external backup drive #1	April 1, 2020	No later than April 1, 2025. Check drive on April 1, 2023.	central filing cabinet	backup every 60 days
Lacie Rugged	external backup drive #2	April 1, 2020	No later than April 1, 2025. Check drive on April 1, 2023.	off-site storage	backup every 60 days
Epson Workforce Pro WF-4830	printer/ scanner/ copier	August 1, 2021	August 1, 2026	manager's office	extended warranty for remote maintenance support

Key Software

Item	Description	Purchase Date	Estimated Replacement	Location	Notes
Windows 11	operating system	April 1, 2020	per updates	all computers	
Microsoft Office 365	Word, Excel, Access	April 1, 2020	per updates	all computers	renews annually
Acrobat Pro	PDF editor and optical character recognition	April 1, 2020	per updates	laptops	renews annually
Audacity	audio capture software	April 1, 2020	per updates	all computers	open-source software (free)
Vuescan	scanning software	August 1, 2021	as per updates	laptops	packaged with printer
Irfanview	image file manipulation utility	April 1, 2020	as per updates	laptops	open source

Sample Tasks

Person	Task	Software	Hardware	Workflow and Notes
manager	office tasks, correspondence, administration	Microsoft Office	desktop	
any personnel	describing records	Microsoft Word/Excel	laptops	Files are to be saved locally and then backed up by manager at the end of each working day on external drive #1.
any personnel	recording descriptions from Elders and other experts	Audacity	laptops	Elders may opt for alternate workflow where staff record their recollections on external audio recorder or smartphone. Original audio should be backed up immediately on external drive #1.
any personnel	scanning documents and photographs	Vuescan scanning software, Acrobat Pro	laptops; Epson WorkForce Pro WF-4830	Scanner is connected to laptop via a USB cable. Images are saved on the laptop as 600 dpi TIFF files. Documents are processed using Acrobat for searchability. Files are named according to catalogue numbers. Files are backed up at the end of each working day on external drive #1.
any personnel	making access copies of digital records	Irfanview	laptops	TIFF files are copied and saved as reduced-size 200 dpi JPG files in Access folder on external drive #1.
volunteers	posting images on social media	Google Chrome web browser	laptops	Image files accessed from Access folder on external drive #1.

4.5 THE LONG HAUL

Computing strategies are meant to serve the **vision** and **mandate** of your repository. They are not ends unto themselves. Hardware and software are merely tools, and over the long term, all will eventually require replacement.

As your repository grows, so will your computing requirements. Keeping your computing strategy up to date will help you map those requirements and the ways in which you can fulfill them. In time, computing strategies will inevitably need to account for things such as:

a. **Repair and troubleshooting.** Some of this work will need to be done in house, while some assistance may come from knowledgeable community members, local vendors, and possibly remote vendors. It is a good idea to keep a record of who can do what.

b. **Training and skills development.** Everyone who works on arrangement and description in your repository must understand the tools they are using. There are many free video tutorials on YouTube for platforms like Excel and Word. Some public libraries also offer free use of LinkedIn Learning, which tends to provide more detailed tutorials. If your repository takes on digitization projects, it is important to receive training in the relevant activity (i.e., photo digitization, document scanning, audio digitization, and so on).

c. **Cloud-based services.** As internet speed and connectivity improve across the North, cloud-based services ranging from record storage to content management to simple word and data processing will become more practical. While we suggest that emerging repositories should avoid these types of services in the short to medium term, these cloud-based services will inevitably become a part of any fully developed computing strategy.

Tied as they are to the vision and mandate of your repository, computing strategies also represent opportunities to collaborate with your community.

A Conclusion

As we suggested in the introduction, we see *Remotely Useful* as a mutable, living document, and we intend to revise and expand this document as the conversation unfolds. Therefore, we want to begin our conclusion by acknowledging those readers we have not been able to serve. We ask for your patience and also for your input on how we can make future iterations of *Remotely Useful* work for you and your communities.

Across the broad scale and wide diversity of practice in Northern community archiving, records repositories are united by their centrality to Northern communities. No records repository can endure without goodwill, and most repositories are treasured by the communities they call home. They can and should support those communities in return, whether that means providing space for tradition keepers and Elders to share their knowledge, or for minority language speakers to speak their language, or to celebrate local culture generally.

Some readers of this report will likely notice that we have not gone down the rabbit hole of defining either "community" or "North." There is plenty to read on both fronts, and we make no suggestion as to whose definitions carry the most weight. We think it noteworthy, however, that time seems to unfold differently in Northern communities. In the North, our histories are close to the surface, and they inform everything we do. We suggested above that records are tools for communication between time periods. That is a fitting point to end on. Since we act in the present, we must listen to the past to serve our communities now, while also speaking from the present to serve our communities in the future.

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Acknowledgments

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Morgen and Mark are the co-founders and co-owners of Brack and Brine, a Northern consultancy, digitization service, and emerging publisher that works closely with several Northern records repositories, using the tagline "information and communication solutions for Labrador and the North." They have created this report to share and further develop their combined experiences of Northern community archiving in Labrador, which is a part of the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador.