Federal Library Closures and the Harper Government’s “Monoculture of the Mind”

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Abstract

The library and scientific professions were taken by surprise by the Harper government in late 2013 when it shuttered seven out of eleven Fisheries and Oceans Canada libraries, consigning much of these collections to dumpsters. Official explanations that the closures were undertaken to save taxpayers' dollars and that collections would be digitized were poorly-received, particularly when a memo marked "secret" obtained by Postmedia emerged in December indicating that the only articulated collections activity was "culling". Critics and activists have been quick to conclude that the library closures are a part of a wider and longer-term strategy to suppress Canadian science. This article goes further, suggesting that the government's actions in suppressing scientific and indigenous worldviews indicate no worldview of its own, only a handful of narrowly-defined "values" that will be incommensurate with the challenges facing Canada.

Keywords

science libraries; public policy; epistemologies

The world’s oceans are in trouble. According to the 2012 State of the Oceans Report from Fisheries and Oceans Canada (more commonly referred to as DFO), Canada's marine environments are suffering from ecosystem shifts (changes to habitat and species distribution), hypoxia (a lack of oxygen) and acidification (which is deadly to shellfish and is linked to massive die-offs in B.C.'s scallop industry), all of which the Report attributes to climate change (Fisheries).

Yet, in spite of, because of, or, for all we know, without any regard for these emerging threats to Canada’s waters, the Harper government in late 2013 shuttered seven out of eleven DFO libraries, including the Freshwater Institute’s Eric Marshall Library at the University of Manitoba and the newly renovated St. Andrews Biological Station in St. Andrews, New Brunswick.
In its 2012 budget, the Conservative Government had announced that federal libraries in a number of areas — environment, transportation, immigration, infrastructure and science — would be consolidated or closed. Nonetheless, it still came as a shock to the library and scientific communities across the country when it was revealed that these seven DFO Libraries had, in dizzying haste, shut their doors and — official denials and explanations notwithstanding — consigned much of their collections to dumpsters.

The official explanation for the closures was difficult to believe: that, according to Gail Shea, Minister of Fisheries and Oceans, it "wasn't fair to the taxpayers" to fund libraries that so few members of the public actually visited. Shea should know that the libraries in question were never really intended for use by the general public, but rather by government scientists and other employees (Munro). The amount of money saved in the closures — $440,000 — is insignificant on a national budgetary scale, and, considering that many of the discarded documents represented publicly-funded research, the closures themselves can actually be seen as a waste of taxpayers' dollars. Furthermore, these explanations appeared even more cynically deceptive when a memo marked "secret" obtained by Postmedia emerged in December, clearly indicating that the only articulated collections activity was "culling" (Nikiforuk).

Canadians were reassured that service would be improved through wider online access, and that unique items would be digitized. But librarians knew this couldn't pass the smell test: digitization takes time to plan and implement and can't simply be wished into existence, particularly not in the apparent mad haste with which these libraries were dismantled, or when as much as 70 percent of the material in question would likely be ineligible for digitization due to copyright restrictions (Thorkelson).

Amid uncertainty and contradictory information, the coverage and opinions regarding the closures made it difficult to separate reality from hyperbole. A handful of erroneous details repeated online without verification — for example, that an irreplaceable 50-volume set of the HMS Challenger Report was destroyed, when in truth the original resides in the Natural History Museum in London, is widely duplicated in hundreds of libraries around the world and is digitized online — only added to the confusion (Greene). Yet, with so little information to go on, misinformation and misunderstandings were perhaps inevitable.

This is, in fact, what makes this story so doubly unsettling: not just that libraries could close with so little attention paid to conventional collection management and retention policies, but that the entire affair should be attended with such unconvincing official explanations from the government, and an odd and disturbing silence from the key players involved. With such limited information available, our profession responded as forcefully as it could: CLA issued its "Statement regarding Federal Government Library Consolidation and Closure" on February 18th 2014, citing this lack of consultation and transparency and
deviation from normal practice, and calling on the government to reveal in more
detail the nature of its long-term plans for digitization (Canadian Library
Association).

Normally, library consolidation wouldn’t be so controversial. After all, weeding
and collection consolidations are, on their own, standard practices in every library
sector and may well have been appropriate measures in this case. Maybe there
was a sound rationale for the culling that took place and steps taken to ensure
that unique items would be retained or made available online. The problem is that
we just don’t know, and there appears to be no way of knowing.

But we are not talking about a "normal" government here. As Chris Turner
documents in his furious 2013 book The War on Science, under Prime Minister
Stephen Harper, Canada has beaten a determined and belligerent retreat not just
from international science-based conventions concerning the environment but
from informed decision-making in particular and the Enlightenment in general. To
prevent any delay in or interruption to resource development, Harper has, in
Turner's view, willfully blinded the government — and the Canadian people — by
rendering us incapable of learning what might be happening to our country
(Turner).

At every possible stage of the scientific communication chain — from reducing
funding for basic research, to gutting the Census, to muzzling scientists, to
disbanding federally-funded organizations and now dismantling federal libraries
— the Harper government has sought to disrupt empirical information-gathering
and knowledge creation, replacing them instead with carefully-crafted and
approved "messaging." As political science doctoral candidate Stewart Prest
wrote in the Ottawa Citizen, the government has not only declared war on
expertise but is "undermin[ing] the very basis on which expertise is based"
(Prest).

To borrow from anti-globalization author and activist Vandana Shiva, the Harper
government is making "knowledge invisible by declaring it non-existent or
illegitimate" in order to ensure that "alternatives disappear by erasing and
destroying the reality which they attempt to represent" (Shiva). What is ironic
about the applicability of this observation from Shiva's Monocultures of the Mind
is that her critique was not meant to be a defence of Western science, but rather
it was a shot against its centuries-long imperial legacy of trampling over
indigenous knowledge systems and imposing a reductionist worldview on diverse
peoples while appropriating their resources. That Western science should be, in
its turn, repressed by the Harper Conservatives is singular and significant, for the
only worldview towards which this government has shown more antipathy than
they do science is that of Canada's First Peoples: Indigenous information
systems — the First Nations Statistical Institute and the National Aboriginal
Health Organization (NAHO) — also fell victim to 2012 budget cutbacks.
In other words, imposing a Harper Conservative "monoculture of the mind" necessitates opposing, undermining and ignoring two of humanity’s major epistemes and staking out a third mental arena which isn’t even a middle ground but something else entirely. What is proposed in the stead of Western and Indigenous empiricisms is an assemblage of conservative "values," consisting essentially of strict intergroup conformity, romantic militarism, a Manichean foreign policy, and instrumental rationality in the service of the petroleum industry.

These so-called "values" cannot — even charitably — be referred to as a worldview. They do not even represent a coherent ideology or conservative values as they are traditionally understood. They are merely the stuff of "branding." It is uncertain whether the Harper Conservatives themselves are aware of the nature of the project to which they have committed themselves, which is essentially to purposefully create an intellectual, ideological and moral vacuum. As such, it is doomed to failure, for a vacuum is something that cannot be abided by nature and politics alike.

As is the case with any monoculture, the dominant political environment that is presently being foisted upon Canada cannot endure, for it has no built-in diversity, internal cohesion or resilience. In rejecting not only the seminal civilizational imperative to generate, collect and store documents, but also established Western scientific methods and ancient Indigenous knowledge practices, our government is charting a course that will inevitably render it incapable of recognizing — let alone addressing — the challenges of our time.

To function in the real world, one must possess an actual worldview, an essential ingredient of which is an epistemology: a way of knowing. As Chris Turner and other science and environmental activists have argued, it is now clear that the Harper Government has not only rejected all standard ways of knowing, it is not in the least interested in knowing, when tightly-controlled messaging is all that it requires.

However, the real world doesn't work that way. Facts are not just stubborn things — some of them are actually threatening to the very project of civilization. Oceans growing more oxygen-starved, acidic and, since the Fukushima disaster, more radioactive will affect everyone and everything; oil sand toxins leaching into Alberta’s groundwater will not disappear if ignored, although the province’s glaciers just might as global temperatures increase. Facts cannot be persuaded by messaging, nor confined by it.

Facts require — and indeed insist upon — a response, and a country with inadequate data, diminished expertise, silenced scientists, denuded libraries and a fundamentally disrupted scholarly communication chain will be in a very poor position to do so.
Works Cited


