From Paper, to Microform, to Digital? LGBTI Serials at the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives

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Introduction

The year 2013 will mark the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the Canadian Gay Liberation Movement Archives, now known as the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA). Its growth and development have been impressive for an organization that is entirely community-based, and that receives no core funding. From its origin as a single filing cabinet in the office of the Body Politic newsmagazine, the CLGA has grown into a dynamic organization with a volunteer board of nine members, a full-time, paid, general manager, seventy volunteers (forty of whom are active regularly), and an annual budget of $138,000 Canadian (approximately 106,000 Euros).¹

Figure 1: CLGA, 34 Isabella Street, Toronto
Since 2009 the CLGA has been headquartered in a heritage house at 34 Isabella Street, in the heart of downtown Toronto’s large LGBTI community. The building is owned by the Archives, and has been renovated extensively. Although the house is at the heart of the CLGA’s activities, most of the archival accessions and collections are stored at a modern office building four blocks away, at 65 Wellesley Street East.

From its inception the CLGA was seen as a “total archive” and collected all manner of items related to or of potential research interest to LGBTI people, in Canada and internationally. It has archival accessions of the papers of individuals and organizations, a library, vertical files for ready reference, photographs, artwork, posters, moving images and audio collections, and artifacts such as banners, matchbooks,
and buttons. If the CLGA had been formed today, however, its focus would likely be different. It was easier in 1973 to be inclusive. There wasn’t as much to collect. Today, although the CLGA still collects internationally in several areas, it can only hope to form representative holdings, even for Canadiana, because of the explosion of LGBTI material that is available.

The LGBTI Serials Collection

The CLGA has always collected LGBTI serials internationally, and continues to do so. The collection has been curated since 1977 by Alan V. Miller. It grew rapidly, from 250 titles in 1977 to more than 600 titles with 5,400 individual issues by 1979. By 1981, the total had nearly doubled to 1,100 titles. It nearly doubled again by 1986, to 1,850 titles. As of May 15, 2012, there were more than 8,763 LGBTI serials titles at the CLGA, one of the largest accumulations in the world. A single title might be the most obscure, single-sheet, single-issue, mimeographed production. Or, it might be a high-end, slickly produced, multi-issue work. Some titles, such as The Advocate (Los Angeles), or Xtra! (Toronto), run to hundreds of issues. The LGBTI serials collection at the CLGA takes up considerable space, approximately 215 linear metres of shelving, and is kept in archival boxes mostly at 65 Wellesley Street East.

The collection is exceptionally strong for Canadian publications, by far the largest collection in existence. But it also has titles from more than fifty other countries, and in multiple languages. The earliest title dates from the 1930s, and although the CLGA has excellent representation of seminal LGBTI titles such as ONE, The Ladder, Arcadie, Der Kreis, Der Weg, and so on, the collection is heavily slanted to the period after 1969. Most of the titles in the collection are of local, as opposed to national or international, interest. Many represent the only surviving record of the activities of obscure local LGBTI groups or organizations. Erotic or frankly pornographic titles are collected as well.
One remarkable fact about the LGBTI serials collection at the CLGA is that it has been formed entirely through donations. There is no budget for serials acquisitions, and all of the holdings have been acquired either through direct donation from organizations and individuals, or through trade with publishers, other libraries and archives, and a few individuals. From its earliest days, the CLGA obtained serials that arrived at the Body Politic offices as exchange subscriptions. This tradition survives today, as Pink Triangle Press, the publisher of the Body Politic’s successor publication, Xtra!, regularly donates LGBTI serials that it has received in the mail to the CLGA. In 1985, the Archives sponsored the international conference “Sex and the State” in Toronto, after which it made a sustained effort to add to its
serials holdings by targeting publishers. Many smaller publishers were pleased to donate copies, although larger ones were more reluctant to provide free subscriptions. The CLGA has received many additional serials over the years that have been donated with the papers of individuals and organizations, or from individuals vacationing abroad. And, it has traded duplicate titles directly with other libraries and archives, most notably the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives (Los Angeles), the Human Sexuality Collection, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library (Ithaca, New York), and the Bibliothek, Schwules Museum (Berlin). Individual collectors, such as Hans Soetaert of Gent, Belgium, have also been keen to trade items.

Figure 4: A sampling of international LGBTI serials, from Oslo to Tokyo
A rapidly growing collection of this sort needs to have a system of bibliographic control and tracking from its inception. A manual, paper Kardex system was used at first, later replaced by an Inmagic DB/TextWorks database, which is still in place. The Kardex records were used to compile bibliographies of holdings such as *Lesbian Periodical Holdings in the Canadian Gay Archives* (1981), and, particularly, the major bibliography *Our Own Voices: A Directory of Lesbian and Gay Periodicals, 1890-1990, Including the Complete Holdings of the Canadian Gay Archives* (1991). The CLGA has had a website since 1997 (www.clga.ca), which includes a version of *Our Own Voices*. 
From Paper to Microfilm: Microfilming Projects at the CLGA

On several occasions, the CLGA has been able to arrange to microfilm some of its LGBTI serials holdings. Microfilming was undertaken as a way to ensure survival of fragile paper serials in a stable medium, and to allow for distribution and sale of the microfilmed serials, mostly to libraries and archives. For example, in the 1980s the CLGA loaned copies of Canadian lesbian-feminist periodicals to the Canadian Women’s Movement Archives to help complete a microfiche project. Also, beginning in the 1980s, Duncan McLaren of McLaren Micropublishing Limited, Toronto, secured permission to microfilm several titles from the CLGA’s holdings, and sell them through his company. These included Canada’s first periodical devoted to gay liberation, the *ASK Newsletter* (Vancouver, 1964), the *Body Politic* (Toronto, 1971–87) and its successor publications *Capital Xtra!* (Ottawa, 1993 +), *Xtra!* (Toronto, 1984 +), and *Xtra! West* (Vancouver, 1993 +), *Long Time Coming* (Montreal, 1973–76), Canada’s first lesbian-feminist newspaper, and the *Gay Studies Newsletter (GSN)* (Toronto and elsewhere, 1974–89). McLaren has been a long-time supporter of the CLGA, and has been especially interested in the preservation of LGBTI history. His microfilming was meticulous; he actually ironed the newspapers before filming them, to ensure that they would be absolutely flat in the image.

In 2005, the CLGA was fortunate to be approached by Primary Source Microfilm (PSM) of Woodbridge, Connecticut, to participate in its Gay Rights Movement series project. PSM has filmed and made available eleven series, ranging from the papers of pioneering gay rights groups (The Mattachine Society of New York [series 1], Gay Activists Alliance [series 2], ACT UP [series 3], National Gay and Lesbian Task Force [series 4], The Albany Trust [series 5], the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance Archives [series 6]) to collections of subject files and serials collected by archives (Lesbian Herstory Archives [series 7 and 10], GLBT Historical Society [series 8 and 9]). The CLGA’s contribution, *International Gay and Lesbian Periodicals and*
Newsletters, was number 11, the final series in PSM’s Gay Rights Movement project.¹⁰

Series 11 was a massive undertaking, and was supervised by Alan V. Miller at the CLGA’s end. In exchange for allowing PSM to digitally scan hundreds of titles from the CLGA’s collection, the CLGA in turn received a royalty on sales, one positive and one negative version of the finished microfilm set, and considerable publicity. Alan V. Miller provided lists from which the titles were chosen for inclusion by PSM. PSM also agreed to hire a volunteer from the CLGA part-time to pull the issues of the serials that were to be filmed, prepare them for shipping to a third-party site in Toronto (where the actual filming was done), and refile the issues when they were returned to the CLGA. The project took months to complete. International Gay and Lesbian Periodicals and Newsletters was released in 2006 in a set of 211 microfilm reels, accompanied with a printed (and later on-line) reel guide entitled International Periodicals and Newsletters from the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives.¹¹

An editorial note in the reel guide outlines the scope of the microfilm collection, as well as criteria for inclusion.¹² Series 11 includes a selection of materials from the CLGA’s collection published outside the United States, representing forty-five countries, a variety of languages, and dating from the 1950s to the present day. The reels are divided geographically:

Part 1: The Americas
   Section 1: Canada: Reels 1–87
   Section 2: Latin America and the Caribbean: Reels 87–91
Part 2: Europe: Reels 92–178
Part 3: Australia and New Zealand: Reels 179–207
Part 4: Asia, Africa, and the Middle East: Reels 208–211
Figure 6: PSM’s series 11, *International Periodicals and Newsletters from the CLGA*
According to the editorial note in the reel guide, selection for inclusion was based on four main criteria: relevancy (“relevance of the material to the history of gay and lesbian political and social activism around the globe”); rarity (publications were excluded if they are commonly found in libraries or if they appeared in other PSM series of gay publications. Material available free-of-charge on organizational websites was also excluded); research need (some materials were excluded if they were felt to have low research value, such as newsletters devoted mostly to commercial advertisements); and privacy (serials including confidential or personal material, such as newsletters of contact clubs, were excluded). Alan V. Miller was consulted on selection matters, although final decisions on inclusion were made by PSM.13

From Paper, to Microform, to Digital?

The CLGA has a large, growing collection of LGBTI serials in paper, and since 2006 has had a large collection of microfilm holdings as well. What are the chances of making this material available to researchers in digital form?

Today, researchers are used to using digital resources in their work. They expect to have access to digital resources, ideally for free or at a low access price. This is where we are presented with a dilemma. Information is generally not free, or inexpensive. PSM spent considerable resources to film all of the materials in its Gay Rights Movement series. This, combined with the size of the series, means that the price of purchasing the microform set is high. The list price for series 11 alone is currently $42,200 USD (about 32,600 EUR), or a standard price of $200 USD (about 154 EUR) per reel.14 This is not an unusual price for microfilm, but as a result only a few large academic and public libraries, archives, or similar institutions can afford to obtain large collections like this.15

When PSM undertook the Gay Rights Movement series project, it did not simply photograph the materials. It scanned them, and saved the files as 300 dpi JPEGS. This was the standard for scanning microfilm
back then; today PSM scans at 400 dpi.\textsuperscript{16} PSM has thousands and thousands of these digital images, and yet cannot offer them for access. According to Brian K. Smith, account executive, Gale Digital Services, PSM has discussed digital products for its Gay Rights Movement series at length, “... but nothing is even close to near .... [s]omething like this is years and years away (if ever).”\textsuperscript{17}

The problem, of course, relates to obtaining digital rights to make these publications available. Almost all of the publications in series 11, for example, are still protected by international copyright law, and will be for some time to come. PSM included the following note on copyright in the “Editorial Note” in its reel guide to series 11: “Many of the organizations included are defunct. Every attempt was made to contact copyright holders. If you have any information about one of these publications, please contact the publisher.”\textsuperscript{18} This statement suggests that although PSM did attempt to contact the publishers, likely by writing to their last known address, not all of them were contacted successfully, or actually gave permission to have their publications microfilmed. Just because a publisher or organization is defunct or cannot be located does not mean that its publications are in the public domain. Someone owns this intellectual property. PSM could argue, rightly in my opinion, that by microfilming these publications it has provided a valuable archival service and ensured that this content will survive in a stable format. And, due to their high price, these microform series are not widely distributed and the profit margin for PSM was low. Any copyright holders located after the fact could simply agree to the microfilming, or perhaps negotiate a small settlement.

Digital publication presents a larger challenge for clearing copyright permissions, as the potential for wider distribution (and potential profit) is higher. PSM has decided to err on the side of caution, and before it can in effect electronically republish these serials it must contact the copyright owners, who must agree to republication in digital form, whether for compensation or not.

One can imagine the time, effort, and expense involved in undertaking this sort of copyright clearance operation for hundreds of serials, and many thousands of individual articles, photographs, etc.
Even a large company like PSM can’t do it, and the potential costs likely make the whole idea commercially unfeasible. Even if a digital product based on these serials were available, it would be expensive to purchase outright or by subscription, and the market would likely be limited, again, to large libraries, archives, and similar institutions.¹⁹

**Conclusion**

So, where does this leave a small organization like the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives, and its digital aspirations? At this time, the CLGA certainly does not have the resources to do digitization projects on its own. It would face the same problems encountered by PSM. Perhaps small-scale digital projects done in collaboration might be possible, eventually. But, as so many international LGBTI serials titles have already been digitized by PSM, it may be best just to forget about doing this again on a large scale. We should all hope that someday PSM, its successor, or another company, will obtain digital rights to allow for the release of these files, or perhaps international copyright law will be relaxed to allow for easier digital reissue of orphaned works published by defunct companies or organizations, or written by unlocatable authors.

In the meantime, the CLGA intends to continue collecting as many paper LGBTI serials as possible. At this point it is certainly not unrealistic to aim for a collection of 10,000, and more, titles. The CLGA accepts gifts of LGBTI serials that it does not already have, and is keen to hear from organizations or individuals that may be interested in trading duplicate items. Please contact:

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Donald W. McLeod is a librarian, the acquisitions coordinator at the University of Toronto Libraries, and has been a volunteer at the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives for more than twenty-five years. He is the author or editor of several books and articles on Canadian gay history including *Lesbian and Gay Liberation in Canada: A Selected Annotated Chronology, 1964–1975* (1996), and its successor volume for 1976–1981, currently in preparation.

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1 The Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives is currently the largest independent, community-based LGBTI archive in the world. For more information on CLGA, see: http://www.clga.ca.
3 There is also an unsorted cataloguing backlog, which could add even more titles to the total. The only other collection of LBGTI serials that comes close to this in size is the one housed at the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archive in Los Angeles. The collection at ONE is of a comparable size, and perhaps slightly larger.
4 In accordance with Canadian and international law, the CLGA does not collect LGBTI serials that depict minors engaged in sexual activity.
6 The Archives registered as an Ontario corporation on March 31, 1980, and received registered charitable status in November 1981. The CLGA was the first LGBTI organization in Canada to receive charitable status from Revenue Canada. This status has allowed the CLGA to issue tax receipts for donations-in-kind made by Canadian citizens, and has been especially helpful in building the LGBTI serials holdings. See Miller, “The Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives,” v.
9 Primary Source Microfilm has since been renamed Primary Source Media (PSM) and is now a subsidiary of Cengage Learning.
10 There are no plans at present to add additional series to PSM’s Gay Rights Movement project. Brian K. Smith, account executive, Gale Digital Archives, e-mail message to Don McLeod, May 8, 2012. This information was confirmed by Smith with Robert Lester, project manager, Gale Digital Archives.
PSM filmed, but refused to include in series 11, the titles *Gai Pied Hebdo* (Paris) and *Du & Ich* (Hannover) due to legal concerns over the “youthfulness” of some of the male models presented there. Olga Virakhovaskaya, PSM acquisitions editor, e-mail message to Alan V. Miller, November 15, 2006.

PSM does offer substantial discounts, occasionally, and also discounts for bulk purchases.

I have been unable to determine how many copies of series 11 have been sold, although Brian K. Smith reports that at least twelve complete or partial copies of series 11 have been sold in North America. (Brian K. Smith, e-mail message to Don McLeod, May 15, 2012.) As of May 14, 2012, OCLC’s WorldCat listed only six locations, three of which are in Canada (University of British Columbia Library; University of Saskatchewan Library; University of Toronto Library); the other locations are Cornell University Library, Northern Illinois University Library, and Yale University Library. The University of Toronto Library has made a point of purchasing all eleven series of the Gay Rights Movement set; it and the University of Saskatchewan Library have the only complete sets in Canada.

Smith to McLeod, May 8, 2012. This information was confirmed by Smith with Robert Lester, project manager, Gale Digital Archives.


Purchase costs for electronic databases or collections can be quite expensive, particularly if they are subscription-based as opposed to outright purchases. For example, the University of Toronto Library subscribes to EBSCO’s online database *LGBT Life with Full Text*, an essential tool for LGBTI research that includes numerous full-text American journals and articles. The current subscription price is $8,000 USD (about 6,225 EUR) per year.