Transcribing Handwritten Documents Using Artificial Intelligence



Presentation to the Canadian Research Knowledge Network (CRKN) Virtual Conference

Maxime Gohier, UQAR Rénald Lessard, BAnQ Jean-François Palomino, BAnQ



October 13, 2020

Presentation Plan

- Digitalization and dissemination within BAnQ
- The Digital New-France Project
- Technology for re-transcription and digital editions of handwritten documents
- BAnQ corpus as a trial project

BAnQ Mission

The purpose of the BAnQ is to collect, conserve and disseminate the documentary heritage of Quebec.

This heritage consists of millions of documents which are a testimony to the history and culture of the Quebecois.



The First Revolution: Digital Collection and Dissemination

• An effective way that helps BAnQ promote research of its collections and holdings



Digitization and Dissemination within BAnQ

 Digital services have continued to grow over the last 20 years



Insert here a graphic on the annual volume of digitized documents or page

Digitization and Dissemination within BAnQ

A variety of digitized, published and handwritten documents



LOUIS HÉMON

Digitization and Dissemination within BAnQ

 Digitization of several million files, disseminated through the BAnQ numérique and the Advitam catalogue

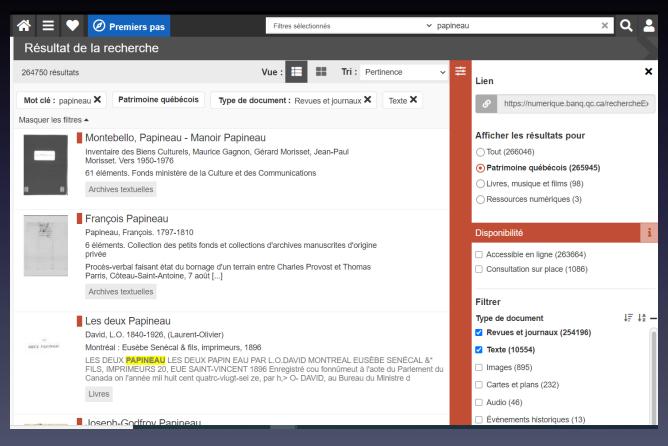




The Second Digital Revolution: Optimal Character Recognition (OCR)

Launch search using keyword "Papineau" in the BAnQ numérique: 264,750 results !

Huge research potential.



BAnQ is looking for potential partnerships to:

- Provide better visibility for institutions and their documentary corpus;
- Promote and facilitate research of collections and holdings;
- Promote better knowledge of the history and culture of Quebec, based on documents in BAnQ.



UQÀM LHPM Laboratoire d'histoire et de patrimoine de Montréal

THÉÂTRES ASSOCIÉS

{BnF



BAnQ is looking for potential partnerships



A partner to work with BAnQ in the next revolution of documentary research...

The Digital Revolution and Big Data

A worldwide movement

Gutenberg Project

 Since 1971 more than 53,000 books have been digitally transcribed

ICMH and Early Canadiana Online;

Canadiana.org

 Since 1999: 19 million Canadian print documents are available online

BAnQ numérique

 Since 2003: 5,873 journals; 5.3 million journal pages and Quebecois journals

GoogleBooks

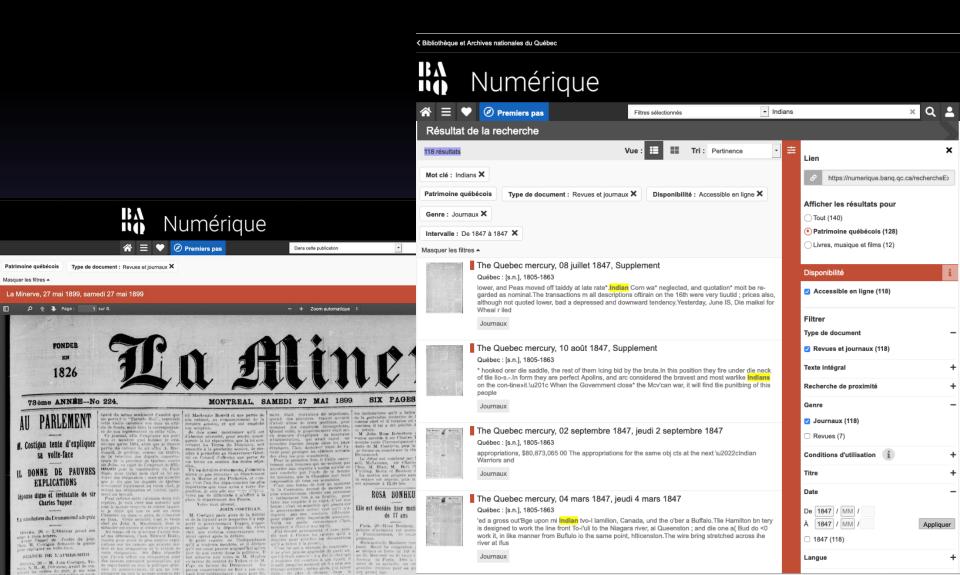
- Since 2004: 25 millions books have been scanned in every language
- Ngram Viewer



Journaux de l'Assemblée législative de la Province du Canada ... : [Journaux de l'Assemblée législative de la Province du Canada depuis le 28me jour de novembre 1844, jusqu'au 29me jour de mars, 1845, les deux jours inclus, et dans la huitième année du règne de notre souveraine dame la Reine Victoria : étant la première session du second Parlement provincial du Canada



The Digital Revolution

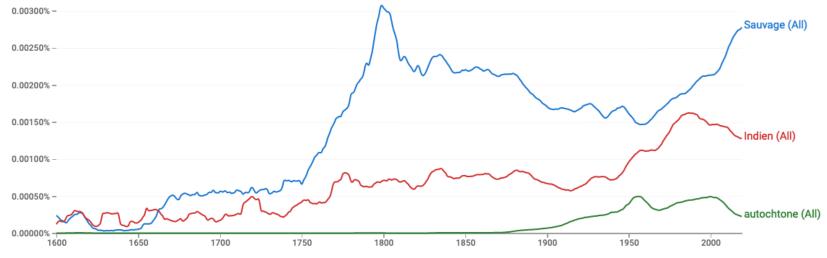


The Digital Revolution

Google Books Ngram Viewer

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(click on line/label for focus, right click to expand/contract wildcards)

Challenges of OCR

Relative quality of OCR: Creation of an "illusionary order"

Il nons dit ensuite que nous avous mai traduit le mot " the Indians" qui signifie, selon lui, les Indiens, et non les sauvages. Si l'écrivain du Transcript était plus famiher avec la langue française, il saurait que nous désignons plus souvent sous le nom " d'Indiens" les habitants des Indes, que les habitants des forets du nouveau monde où la civilisatien n'a pas encore penetre ; il saurait que le mot " sauvage" a deux acceptions en français. Il ne signifie pas toujours " féroces et barbares," puis qu'ou dit en français, " les sauvages civilises, les sauvages instruits, les sauvages du Sault St. Louis, les sauvages de St. Règis, les sauvages de St. François, &c." Mais on se sert presqu'invariablement de ce mot pour désigner les habitants primitifs de nos forets, les naturels du pays, toutes les peuplades sauvages, en un mot. Il nous sert

11 uous dit ensnile ue nous avnus mal Cruduit le mut ** the Indians? qui signitie, selon Ini, les Indiens, ex non les sauvages. Ni l'écrivain du Transcript était plus fummi-¶ per aveo a langue française, «1 sausait que ous d ignous plus avuveut xoux le nom « d'ludiens" les hubitante des ludes, que ¶ les habitants des tucets du nouveau moude où la civilisation n'a jus encore pénétré aurai que le mot a get deux ues ceptions en françai, I ue signilie pas ¶ toujours " féroeus et barbarue,*" pois qu' Jiten francais, * les sauvages ci vilises, jen auvages Fruits les ages du Sanit¶ o Lonis, les sauvages de SL [Reis Jon] guvages de St, François, Le."

Challenges of OCR

• More democratic access and document marginalization: the arduous task of working with manuscripts



Research Challenges Working with Handwritten Documents in the Digital Era

- Access to archives: democratization vs marginalization
- The need for paleographic expertise
- Data produced by researchers and archives is far from being uniform
- Variability of document types
- Sustainability of research data

Digital New-France: A Large-Scale Digital Publication Project

Goal:

 Develop technology tools which will allow researchers to pool their research data, thus facilitating consultation and digital processing, as well as the continuous enrichment of research.

Historical-Literary Approach: Document as Text and Object

The materiality of the document (structure, cursive, deletions, illustrations, etc.) provide information about the writing process and the historical nature of the document.

A Collaborative **and** Research Partnership Project

Goals:

- Ensure compatibility and inter-operability of digital data generated by researchers;
- Ensure sustainability of data: allow the possibility of ongoing correction and gradual enrichment;
- Ensure that access to open-source data is based on the respect for the mandates of various archival centres.

Collaborative and Partnership Approach

1- Develop a digital repository to share documentary research by scholars;

2- Develop working protocols to ensure the uniformity and compatibility of data produced;

3- Support archival institutions in their mission to facilitate accessibility and improvement of their collections using digital tools.

The Digital New-France Project: Digital Repository and Research Tool

- Scanned images of archive documents
- Automated transcription
- Collaborative working protocols
- Structural and textual tags (encryption)
- Expertise in paleography (permanent workshop on documentary analysis by Dominique Deslandres)
- Research and consultation interface (next step)

Partners

- Library and Archives Canada
- Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec
- Rare Books and Special Collections Library, University of Montreal
- Document and Archives Management Division, University of Montreal
- Museum of Civilization of Quebec
- READ Cooperative (Transkribus)

Others

- Archives nationales d'Outre-Mer (Aix-en-Provence)
- Abenaki Museum in Odanak

An Extensive Team... Destined to Grow

Management Team:

- Catherine Broué (UQAR)
- Maxime Gohier (UQAR)
- Léon Robichaud (Université de Sherbrooke)
- Jean-François Palomino (BAnQ)

Other Researchers:

- Mehdi Adda (UQAR)
- Alain Beaulieu (UQAM)
- Arnaud Bessières (Université Laurienne)
- Philippe Charland (Collège Kiuna)
- Colin Coates (Glendon College)
- Dominique Deslandres (Université de Montréal)
- Helen Dewar (Université de Montréal)
- Alexandre Dubé (Washington University)
- Gilles Havard (CNRS-EHESS)
- Daniella Kostroun (Indiana University)
- Jean-François Lozier (Université d'Ottawa)
- Marie-Christine Pioffet (York University)
- And many more to come...

Multiple Corpora

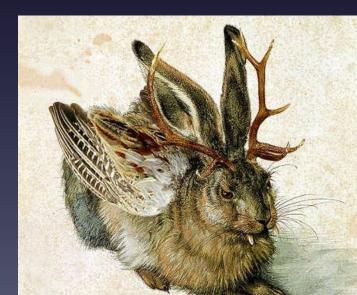
- Collections and minutes of French-Indigenous diplomatic encounters (Maxime Gohier)
- Reports on the exploration of Louisiana (Catherine Broué)
- Indigenous language dictionaries (Philippe Charland and Marie-Christine Pioffet)
- Geographical and toponymy maps (Jean-François Palomino)
- Land grids in Montreal (Dominique Deslandres)

Technology for the Digital Publication of Handwritten Documents

 The READ Cooperative (Recognition and Enrichment of Archival Documents) and Transkribus software
 XML-TEI mark-up language

Transkribus Software

- Text spatialization
- Handwritten Text Recognition (HTR)
- Mark-up language
- Research



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Transkribus Software and Functions

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Spatialization of Transcriptions Within the Image

Handwritten Text Recognition (HTR)

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Transcription-Enriched "Spatialized" PDF Files

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What is the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI)?



"XML-TEI provides a framework to represent everything we deem important about a text and not uniquely its appearance, so that software can process different characteristics that have been identified, thus generating new visualizations and new perspectives." (Lou Burnard, Qu'est-ce que la Text Encoding Initiative?, Marseille, OpenEdition Press, (n.d.) [en ligne:](généré le 04 novembre 2015), p. 10.

XML-TEI Mark-Up Language

- Identifying and indexing of identified entities (surnames, place names, ethnic names) and dates (numbered or text format);
- Identification and resolution of abbreviations;
- Identification of ambiguous passages and alternate proposals;
- Identification of structural components of text (paragraphs, page numbers, titles, signatures, etc.);
- Identification of non-textual entities (tables, graphs, illustrations, etc.);
- Identification of successive interventions regarding a document (additions and deletion of passages, changes to cursive style);
- Clarifications concerning material support and its state of conservation;

Structural tags are used to provide a summary of the form.

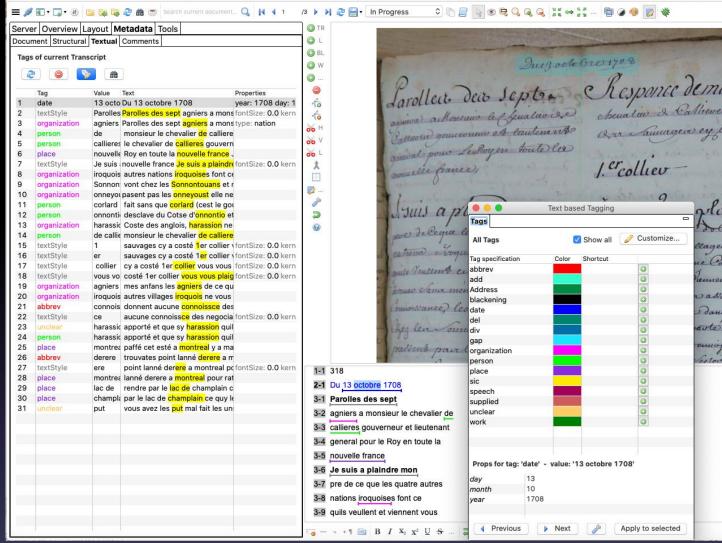
- Titles and subtitles
- Paragraphs
- Page numbers
- Signatures
- Legend
- Drawings
- Greeting or salutation
- etc.

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Identification and Description of Non-Textual Entities



Textual mark-ups are used to take into account the contents and to facilitate tracking.



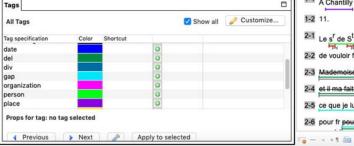
Easy-to-use, including:

- Copy-paste-click
- Tags and mark-ups can be personalized at all times

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Textual Mark-Ups are Used to Underscore the Writing Process and the Historical Authenticity of Documents

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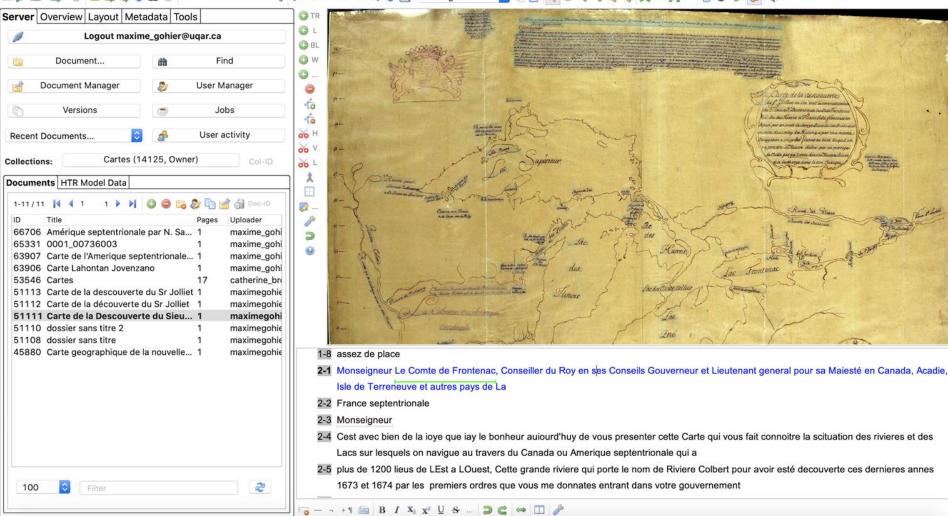
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The database consists of various corpora ensuring cross reference searches (ex. toponymy or terms derived from Aboriginal languages in the glossaries).





Old maps contain a great deal of text in which the search function is not normally available.

Collective Construction

- A collective decoding operation
- Open data format
 - Possibility of correcting and improving transcription
 - Use of mark-ups is potentially infinite
 - The open nature of TEI-Consortium (possibility of adding tags depending on the research interests)
- Transkribus and READ-Coop
 - Open software
 - Cooperative model: funding and cost of use
 - From training to technology
- The more researchers continue to participate, the greater will be the utility of the database.

The BAnQ Corpus Falls within scope of this Project

- Decrees issued by the Intendant of New-France (approximately 11,000 pages have already been scanned)
- Notary records (digital processing of these records is underway by Professor Dominique Deslandres)
- Geographical maps from New-France

Benefits for BAnQ

- BAnQ is active in a project that uses the most up-todate tools of artificial intelligence
- BAnQ then receives textual retranscriptions produced by handwritten language recognition and can use these texts within its search engines (BAnQ numérique and Advitam)

Questions Arising During Project

- What are the rules to manage and share retranscriptions between researchers and partners?
- What is an acceptable level of error in light of redissemination in the BAnQ search engines (BAnQ numérique and Advitam)?
- What corpora should have priority?
- What form will be used for a potential central repository for these retranscriptions using the sharing and dissemination tool specific to each partner institution?

The Floor is Yours...