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Canadiana
by CRKN | par RCDR

CANADIANA USER INTERVIEWS REPORT

CRKN RCDR

Canadian Research Knowledge Network

Réseau canadien de documentation pour la recherche

Canadiana User Interviews Report

Table of Contents

Part 1: Introduction and Background 2

Part 2: Interview Insights by User Group 3

- Genealogical Researchers 3
- GLAM Professionals (English) 4
- GLAM Professionals (French) 4
- Interested Citizens 4
- Post-Secondary Researchers—Computational Methods 5
- Post-Secondary Researchers—Traditional Methods 5
- Professional Researchers 6
- Students 6

Part 3: Next Steps and Conclusion 7

Part 1: Introduction and Background

In November 2023, CRKN launched the Canadiana User Survey to provide staff with high-level insights into the users of the Canadiana Collections and Infrastructure. This simple, three-question survey resulted in 13,230 respondents over approximately six months, with 1,038 respondents providing their email address for follow-up user testing and engagement opportunities. This survey data helped CRKN establish a baseline understanding of Canadiana users, and outcomes were published in the Canadiana User Survey Report in 2025. However, as the survey was limited in scope, we recognized the need for further engagement with users to inform our future development work and to validate work done to date.

To fulfill this goal, CRKN staff members conducted a series of virtual group interviews with Canadiana users. Group interviews, or focus groups, are a valuable methodological tool in the development of user personas, which are frameworks used in qualitative research and user-centered design contexts to better understand the needs and motivations of various users of a tool or service.

During the group interviews, structured discussions were moderated by a staff facilitator. Participants were encouraged to share their attitudes, behaviours, needs, and goals related to the Canadiana platform and related portals hosted by CRKN (Héritage, the Library of Parliament's Canadian Parliamentary Historical Resources portal, the Global Affairs Canada Digital Library, and the Natural Resources Canada portal). By analyzing the qualitative data generated from these interactions, we have identified common themes, patterns, and outliers among participants.

Format

To plan for the interviews, CRKN first identified a set of user groups determined according to demographic data collected during the user survey. In total, eight groups were identified:

- Genealogical Researcher
- GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums) Professional
- Interested Citizen (i.e., general public)
- Post-Secondary Researcher–Computational Methods (i.e. scholars who use computational methods to access and analyze large-scale datasets, for example, "distant reading" methods)
- Post-Secondary Researcher–Traditional Methods (i.e. scholars typically working in the social sciences and humanities who use qualitative or "close reading" methods to analyze and interpret research materials)
- Professional Researcher (i.e. outside academia)
- Student
- Teacher

Recruitment for the user interviews began in February 2025 and included contacting individuals who provided their email address as part of the Canadiana User Survey, as well as direct outreach to potential participants identified by staff and CRKN committee members. A pre-screener form was sent to these potential participants to confirm interest, to let participants self-select into an interview group, to confirm their language preference, and to allow participants to state that they were at least 18 years of age.

Once enough participants had been recruited for a given user group, CRKN staff polled for their availability, and Zoom meeting invitations were sent out for the confirmed date. A letter of information was sent to each interview group to explain the interview process and how CRKN would use the data obtained, as well as a copy of the interview questions, which were unique to each group. Each interview was scheduled for 120 minutes to allow for ample discussion time, although most sessions averaged approximately 90 minutes. Interviews were held from June 2025 to May 2026.

Group Composition

Standard practice in the user experience design sector is to include seven individuals in each group interview. The interviews CRKN conducted ranged from two to six participants each, with 31 participants total, including three who provided written responses as they were unable to attend the scheduled interview. While CRKN attempted to recruit at least seven participants for each interview, staff proceeded with scheduling interviews when efforts to recruit additional participants were unsuccessful, and additional delays would prevent the broader initiative from advancing. Notably, no interview was held with the Teacher user group due to recruitment and capacity challenges. CRKN will do further outreach to teachers following the launch of our planned major platform upgrade in early 2027.

Seven interviews were conducted in English, and two were conducted in French (English and French interviews were held with GLAM Professionals, and the interview with Post-Secondary Researchers, Computational Methods was held in French only). Each interview included one staff member to facilitate and one staff member to take notes, and sessions were recorded with the consent of participants for data analysis purposes.

While several interview groups had strong representation from a variety of users, recruitment for other groups was more challenging. As mentioned, recruitment difficulties prevented CRKN from holding an interview with teachers, and scheduling challenges affected the interviews with Post-Secondary Researchers and Students. Additionally, we were unable to recruit a high number of francophone participants. As CRKN continues to build relationships with these groups, we hope that future engagement opportunities will include more robust representation.

Part 2: Interview Insights by User Group

CRKN staff used Microsoft Copilot to generate a portion of the text in Part 2 of this report. First, anonymized transcripts of each interview were summarized using Copilot. These summaries were reviewed and edited by CRKN staff for accuracy. CRKN staff then condensed these summaries with Copilot to create the individual paragraphs below. This text was once again verified by CRKN staff members.

Strengths, weaknesses, and interview quotations were identified by staff without the use of AI. Quotations have been edited for length and clarity.

Genealogical Researchers

Number of participants: 4

Genealogists view Canadiana and especially Héritage as invaluable repositories containing unique records unavailable elsewhere. Their workflows depend heavily on browsing large image collections, conducting complex searches, and navigating historical variations in names, places, and languages. They strongly advocated for additional search features such as Soundex searching and advanced filters, as well as gallery views, stable links, citation generators, and improved indexing. Unlike many professional researchers, genealogists expressed somewhat greater openness to profiles, collaborative transcription, and community contributions, although they also stressed the importance of maintaining accuracy and preserving control over sensitive family information. They suggested that CRKN could focus on digitization and preservation while partnering with established genealogy platforms for specialized tools, rather than developing the tools in-house.

Strengths: This group included participants who researched non-Western genealogy and twentieth century topics, representing a greater diversity of research areas.

Weaknesses: This group did not include a researcher in Indigenous genealogy, an area which has significant impacts in Canada.

Key quote: "It is good to see other people's edits. [...] Especially with the volunteer transcriptions that have been done over the years, it's valuable having somebody who's a member of that family who can go, 'Whoa! That wasn't their name,' or who's a member of that specific cultural group, because we see a lot of issues with names being mis-transcribed. That type of collaboration is great to see."

GLAM Professionals (English)

Number of participants: 6 (one written response)

GLAM professionals use Canadiana as both researchers and liaisons who support students, researchers, and public users. They emphasized the need for better metadata, improved search functionality, clearer archival context, and stronger explanations of the differences between Canadiana, Héritage, and related platforms. They frequently highlighted challenges around collection-level discovery, provenance, and user onboarding. While they appreciated the value of digitized collections, they stressed that users often struggle to understand how materials fit within broader archival structures. Improved outreach materials, educational supports, crowdsourced transcription efforts, and greater coordination across Canadian heritage infrastructures were additional themes in the discussion.

Strengths: Participants represented both large and small institutions across three provinces.

Weaknesses: This interview included just one librarian.

Key quote: "Sometimes I'll get feedback from liaison librarians who are like, not another database. Why would I tell a researcher or faculty or student to use this database? So, a really concise sales pitch that helps you understand what the stuff is in both [collections] can be helpful."

GLAM Professionals (French)

Number of participants: 2

French-speaking GLAM professionals shared many concerns with their English-language counterparts, focusing particularly on the lack of archival context, inconsistent search functionality, weak filtering options, and the disconnect between Héritage and the Library and Archives Canada catalogue. They emphasized the importance of showing relationships between documents, series, and fonds, and advocated for federated search approaches that would reduce fragmentation across Canadiana, Héritage, Library and Archives Canada, and other repositories. They also called for clearer communication regarding institutional mandates, educational guides, and improved support for researchers navigating complex historical collections.

Strengths: This group included one archivist and one librarian, providing a balance of perspectives.

Weaknesses: This group was very small and only included participants from large institutions.

Key quote: "One feature that is currently missing from Canadiana, or at least not as prominent, is the ability to search for content based on specific themes. This could be useful for people in the educational sector who want to develop teaching materials. And to be able to search by criteria, such as usage rights or even the public domain, and then retrieve only documents in the public domain, could also be useful for certain types of researchers."

Interested Citizens

Number of participants: 4 (one written response)

Interested citizens are passionate heritage enthusiasts who use Canadiana extensively for personal and creative projects. They value the platform's content but experience significant difficulties with navigation, search clarity, and

understanding collection scope. Unlike many other user groups, they expressed strong interest in personalized accounts, community features, annotation tools, and opportunities to connect with fellow researchers. They also emphasized outreach, public awareness, and the preservation of vulnerable materials such as oral histories, local newspapers, photographs, and audiovisual collections.

Strengths: Participants were all highly engaged users of Canadiana with a variety of backgrounds, including filmmaking and historic sites.

Weaknesses: Since Interested Citizens are a broad user category, a larger number of participants would have improved our understanding of this group.

Key quote: "I would say that I don't know what's worth looking at until I am actually looking at it... The visual part for me is important, because the more I can see what I'm looking at, that makes me continue to dig."

Post-Secondary Researchers—Computational Methods

Number of participants: 3

Computational Post-Secondary Researchers view Canadiana and Héritage as valuable sources of large-scale historical data that can support text mining, machine learning, and other digital scholarship methods. While they acknowledged limitations in optical character recognition (OCR) accuracy, transcription quality, and metadata completeness, they emphasized that imperfect data remains highly usable for computational research and that increased access is often more valuable than waiting for complete accuracy. These users expressed interest in practical, low-cost tools that could enhance both collections and user interaction, while also advocating for greater transparency regarding the technical infrastructure, data provenance, and processing workflows that underpin the platforms. They highlighted the importance of balancing open access with appropriate safeguards against misuse, while supporting mechanisms that allow users to contribute knowledge and improve collections through traceable, auditable processes. Overall, Computational Post-Secondary Researchers viewed digital collections as dynamic research assets that will continue to gain value as new analytical methods and technologies emerge.

Strengths: Participants were familiar with one another's workflows, leading to a particularly engaging discussion.

Weaknesses: Due to scheduling difficulties, this group was very small.

Key quote: "Research data is a living entity because it is subject to continuous enrichment. So, how do we manage everyone's contribution? I would say that, when it comes to data production, the ideal solution would be to have a data traceability system."

Post-Secondary Researchers—Traditional Methods

Number of participants: 3 (one written response)

Traditional Post-Secondary Researchers value Canadiana primarily for access to digitized historical sources that support close reading, archival research, linguistic analysis, and other humanities-based methodologies. Their priorities focus on improving discovery and interpretation through richer metadata, and clearer connections between related records, people, organizations, places, and collections. These users emphasized the importance of context, provenance, and file-level access, noting that microfilm-based organizational structures can make research more difficult. They viewed transcriptions and OCR as valuable tools for discovery but stressed that original source images must remain available and that transparency about transcription quality is essential. Researchers also expressed interest in practical features that support scholarly workflows, including stable links, citation generators, downloadable metadata, saved collections, and research-management tools. While generally open to the use of AI for improving search and metadata creation, they emphasized that automated outputs should complement rather than replace human expertise and archival authority.

Strengths: This group included a linguist, a historian, and an educational researcher, representing a variety of research areas.

Weaknesses: Due to scheduling difficulties, this group was very small.

Key quote: “I think what we would be looking for in an archival context is subject headings, in terms of broader themes or areas that those records are touching on. Sometimes a file that I'm looking for is titled wildly different than what's actually in it, which means that you're excluding it when you should be including it.”

Professional Researchers

Number of participants: 6

Professional Researchers outside academia depend on Canadiana and Héritage for intensive, high-impact research. Their priorities focus on access to high-quality records, rich metadata, finding aids, accession notes, reliable OCR or intelligent character recognition (ICR), and better navigation through large archival collections. They value interoperability, stable links, and the ability to download files, more than interface personalization. These users are often highly experienced researchers who build their own workflows and tools, and they emphasized the importance of contextual archival information, information on the scope of digital collections, and information about source institutions and provenance.

Strengths: Participants represented a wide range of research sectors, including Indigenous claims research, genealogy, art history, and community history.

Weaknesses: The genealogical researcher participant might have aligned more closely with the Genealogist group, rather than with this group.

Key quote: “It would be great if it was possible to download the [OCR] text file for some of those really large files where you're finding yourself having to return again and again. Especially because there may be downstream parsing and other projects that could be possible if you had that information at the ready."

Students

Number of participants: 3

Student researchers see Canadiana as a uniquely valuable source for Canadian content that is often difficult to discover through larger international databases. Their primary concerns centered on search quality, OCR accuracy, and the challenge of navigating large collections without specialized knowledge. Students strongly supported practical improvements such as search-term highlighting, OCR confidence indicators, tables of contents, research guides, and enhanced metadata. They were generally skeptical of emerging technologies (e.g. AI, machine learning, virtual or augmented reality), and preferred investment in search, metadata, and usability improvements over experimental features. They viewed collaboration tools as optional rather than essential and preferred simple workflows supported by stable links and exportable citations.

Strengths: Though the sample size was small, there was a range of program type and level of degree completion represented.

Weaknesses: All students were from the same university.

Key quote: “Canadian materials tend to be underrepresented in [standard research] databases, in my experience. The main goal I have when coming to a database like Canadiana, and the main benefit of it, is being able to access Canadian materials.”

Key Similarities Across User Groups

Despite their different backgrounds and goals, the interview groups demonstrated remarkable consistency in their priorities. Nearly all users emphasized the importance of stronger search functionality, richer metadata, better OCR/ICR performance, clearer navigation through large collections, improved filtering options, and greater clarity about what content exists and where it originates. Users consistently valued access to content above new platform features, often stating that even imperfect digitization is preferable to no digital access at all. Confusion about the relationship between Canadiana, Héritage, Library and Archives Canada, and other partner platforms appeared across nearly every user group, as did requests for stronger contextual information, finding aids, and guidance materials.

Key Differences Between User Groups

The primary differences emerged around collaboration, personalization, and advanced workflows. Professional Researchers and Students generally preferred improvements to content access, metadata, and search over social or personalized features. Interested Citizens showed the strongest interest in user profiles, annotations, and community-building tools. Genealogists occupied a middle ground, supporting collaborative transcription and profiles when they enhanced research efficiency, while remaining cautious about open editing of sensitive information. Computational Post-Secondary and Professional Researchers were more focused on metadata quality, OCR availability, and interoperability, whereas Interested Citizens placed greater emphasis on discovery, outreach, and preservation of underrepresented materials. GLAM Professionals, meanwhile, were uniquely concerned with user education and helping others navigate the platforms effectively.

Part 3: Next Steps and Conclusion

With the interviews complete as of May 2026, CRKN staff began analyzing the data to sort and prioritize insights. This analysis incorporated multiple steps:

- Using an inductive approach, staff undertook a close reading of the group interview notes and transcripts to identify patterns and actionable insights.
- Next, staff transferred insights to a digital whiteboard, where they were clustered based on the part of the interface or user workflow they corresponded to.
- Staff assigned each cluster a code, with each code quantified based on the number of the insights within it as well as its perceived impact on users.
- High-level solutions were identified for each coded cluster. These solutions were further broken down by those that have already been implemented as part of CRKN's platform development work, and those that represent future development opportunities.
- An effort-impact matrix was created and applied to each proposed solution, with priority based upon the placement of each solution within the matrix:
    - Priority 1: Quick Wins (High Impact, Low Effort)
    - Priority 2: Major Projects (High Impact, High Effort)
    - Priority 3: Fill-Ins (Low Impact, Low Effort)
    - Priority 4: Thankless Tasks (Low Impact, High Effort)

With this stage of the work now complete, we will next move forward to:

- Implementing the solutions in priority order.
- Developing processes for logging and triaging future user feedback (for example, feedback received through informal email communications or user support requests).
- Developing an anonymized, coded dataset to create user personas and journey maps for Canadiana.
- Connecting with the Teacher user group through an information session which will take advantage of the updated Canadiana platform, introducing teachers to the new interface while gathering feedback.

- Integrate the dataset and findings into CRKN's *Open Science Infrastructure for Canad(ian)a: Digital Collections of the Future* project to better support innovative research in the Canadiana Collections and Infrastructure.

Connecting with Canadiana users through virtual group interviews has been an invaluable tool to not only garner actionable feedback on how to improve Canadiana, but also to strengthen CRKN's relationship with the people who rely on it. Moreover, this work has also helped us give back to users by providing them a chance to speak directly to CRKN about Canadiana—many interview participants expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to share candid feedback and ask questions.

By building relationships with Canadiana users and proactively implementing their feedback in infrastructure development, CRKN is advancing our strategic goals to Drive the Evolution of Open Knowledge and to Innovate and Collaborate for a Sustainable Future, while ensuring the Canadiana Collections and Infrastructure continue to grow and serve researcher needs. We look forward to the benefits that ongoing user engagement will bring, both to Canadiana and to research innovation.

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