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Remaking the Printed Word in the Digital Age

Elaine Harrington

Abstract

This article describes collaborative activities between Special Collections and Digital Learning departments at UCC Library from January-May 2022 which was presented in a poster format at IFLA 2022, and since May 2022 activities building on that first tranche of work.

Keywords: *Special Collections, Academic Libraries, Digital Learning*

This article is based on a poster presented by Stephanie Chen and Elaine Harrington at the 87th International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions World Library Congress (IFLA WLIC), Dublin 26-28 July 2022.

Introduction

In 2013 John Overholt reflected on the 2012 American Library Association Rare Books & Manuscripts Section conference and summed up its themes and learnings in "Five Theses on the Future of Special Collections." The future of special collections is:

- ...distribution
- ...openness
- ...disintermediation
- ...transformation
- ...advocacy

Ten years later the theses are more relevant than ever and spurred me to consider what emerging technologies in a special collections' context would permit these theses to be.

In March 2022 Stephanie Chen, UCC Library's Digital Learning Specialist and I submitted to IFLA WLIC a poster proposal matching the 'connect' part of the theme 'Inspire, Engage, Enable, Connect, especially in uncertain times.' In our abstract we noted that access to physical spaces is not guaranteed and may be very restrictive but by having virtual/digital ways to access collections, UCC Library can provide both continued and increased access, during certain and uncertain times. Our [interactive poster](#) with [complementary website](#) highlighted a series of collaborative projects enhancing access to rare and unique library collection items using emerging technologies.

Creating a Poster

Despite having presented at over 25 seminars or conferences this was my first poster and it really required me to think, not for the first time, of Randy Bass (1999):

- Which learning outcome is the one thing that students would retain from this [poster] after leaving?
- Could I honestly say that I spent the most amount of time on this [poster] teaching to the goal I valued most?

Remaking the Printed Word in the Digital Age

During uncertain times, access to physical spaces is not guaranteed and may be very restrictive. By having virtual/digital ways to access collections, UCC Library can provide both continued and increased access, irrespective of unusual or unforeseen circumstances.

This poster highlights a collaborative project accelerated since 2020 to provide and enhance access to rare and unique library collection items using emerging technologies.

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#ColourOurCollections

#ColourOurCollections is an annual international colouring festival in February on social media where libraries, museums, archives and other cultural institutions share free colouring content featuring images from their collections.

UCC Library's *The Riverside* participated in 2022 to spread awareness and better engagement with our collections by inspiring creativity, sparking curiosity and as a means for bibliotherapy.

Historical Recipes in Scalar

Accessing a paper historic manuscript recipe book is limited to where it is held and when that repository is open. Using Scalar (an open source, web-based publishing platform) allowed us to make and visualise connections between different recipes, connections that are not so readily identifiable using paper manuscript recipe books.

Students created a digital interpretation of paper manuscript recipe books in 'Historical Recipes in the Digital Age', selecting and transcribing what were for them the most readable recipes.

PRESSBOOKS

Publications

Converting images & example of coloured image

Connections Visualisation

Genoa pastry recipe

360° Tour

UCC Library's Special Collections contains a significant body of Cork newspapers. Those from the 18th century are particularly valuable – in some cases, they are the only surviving copies. These newspapers contain advertisements – the main source of income for the printer.

As a way to bring the past into the present, a 360° tour of businesses advertised in *The Cork Journal* from 1769 and *The Cork Chronicle* from 1770-1772 was created. This tour shows the approximate locations of a variety of businesses.

Advertisement in The Cork Chronicle, 1771

Possible present day location

3D Scanning

3D scanning analyses a real-world object to collect data which can then be used to construct digital 3D models. UCC Library purchased an EinScan-SP desktop scanner and a selection of objects from Special Collections, such as date stamps, keys and parchment fragments were 3D scanned.

The scanner will be made available to University staff and students as a service to enhance research and experiential learning.

EinScan-SP 3D scanner

3D model of a date stamp

While the four examples use material from Special Collections, they serve as an example of what is possible. The digital tools and platforms used are not limited to unique and distinctive collections but can be applied to all types of collections and material.

Scan the QR code or visit libguides.ucc.ie/remaking to learn more and view a digital, interactive version of this poster.

Engagement

1,376 54 10 476 39 8

Firstly to entice the greatest number of people we focused on the printed word rather than 'book.' Content in the poster encompassed prints, maps, newspapers, objects that created the printed words and slightly cheating, a manuscript book. This I hoped would show that Special Collections is not limited to books alone and a wide range of items and material is available when using digital platforms/tools. Equally because I wished to maximise digital access to Special Collections four different digital platforms/tools were used with this wide range of material types. It was clear that balancing the static poster with the digital outputs of each project needed something extra and so an interactive version of the poster is also available. This interactive poster also comprises feedback from two student workers, Cara Long and David Leen, who participated in each project element.

I had initially thought of using volvelles (see [this example](#) from the J.Paul Getty Museum) where visitors to the poster could turn paper arrows to the chosen content. While that would have provided a whimsical interactive element it proved not practical in the timeframe present. However this visitor-selecting approach resulted in using a map and wayfinding markers instead. The background to the poster combines William Beauford's 1801 map of Cork with traditional Google map markers indicating each project. Doffing our digital hats to the original hard-copy sources where font selection is an integral part of the typographic process Stephanie selected the 19th century font 'Harrington' for the initial part of the title 'Remaking the Printed Word' and the 2008-created font 'Quicksand Light' for the last part of the title 'in the Digital Age.' In both content and style, the poster was a balance between hard-copy printed word and the digital age.

Entering a play in the middle of the third act

No work is created in a vacuum and describing the projects without their origin story is like entering a play in the middle of the third act. Each of these collaborative projects builds on existing work which is then developed in new ways.

#ColourOurCollections or #ColorOurCollections

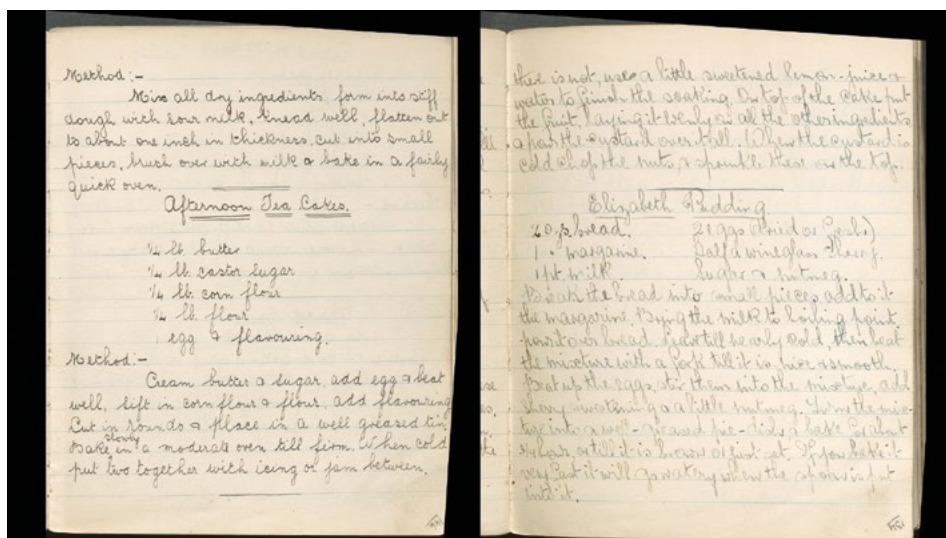
This began with a LibGuide page called *Play!* (created April 2020). *Play!* had both jigsaws and colouring sheets. The LibGuide page was accessed 65 times in the first month and 197 times April 2020-April 2022. #ColourOurCollections is an annual international colouring festival in February on social media where libraries, museums, archives and other cultural institutions share free colouring content featuring images from their collections. UCC Library's *The Riverside* participated in the February 2022 iteration to spread awareness and better engagement with our collections by inspiring creativity, sparking curiosity and as a means for bibliotherapy. As [Orla Breslin on Twitter](#) noted "I love seeing what you can do with digital collections." When there is so much online content available to us we do not know how possible users of our content may first meet that content. Maximising access to well-being resources by partnering with an internationally known provider was key: UCC Library's colouring book was accessed 122 times in the first four months it was live. In addition, Special Collections & Archives team [blogged](#) about the selection and creating process. Subsequently the reach of the colouring book was extended by creating a PressBooks version.



BL/CV/PolP/N/11, Special Collections, UCC Library.

Historical Recipe Books on Scalar

In 2019 Patrick O'Dwyer undertook Special Collections' work placement as part of a postgraduate history module 'Skills for Medieval Historians.' During the placement he created an Excel index for two 18th century manuscript recipe books and for a [blog post](#) selected and transcribed two of the recipes. Fast-forward to 2022 and rather than using WordPress we turned to Scalar, an open source, web-based publishing platform. This platform allowed us to visualise connections between the different recipes that are not so readily identifiable when using the paper manuscripts. However Cara, David and Kian O'Mahony, a student on placement, met with some of the same issues Patrick had met: reading the handwriting and understanding the terms used and they blogged about their difficulties in "[Reflection on the Use of Scalar.](#)" The students created a digital interpretation of the paper manuscript recipe book [Historical Recipes in the Digital Age](#) selecting what was for them the most readable recipes and transcribed those recipes, in addition to providing context to the production of such recipes. To maximise engagement with an international audience of bakers and mathematicians Emma Horgan, Archivist at UCC Library, and I made some of the recipes and blogged about our endeavours: "[Pi Day and Historical Recipes.](#)"



U295, Special Collections, UCC Library.

Using Historical Cork Newspapers

Across 2020-2021 Garret Cahill, Special Collections & Archives, created an Excel index to the content of selected 18th century paper newspapers. Until then there was no means to know what was included in each issue as the different titles are not available in any digitised format. Following this work John Rooney, Special Collections & Archives, created various visualisations including a [mapping of advertisements](#) in *The Cork Chronicle* and *The Corke Journal* across 1769-1772. Since December 2021 the mapping has had over 1500 views. As a means to bring the past into the present student workers, Cara and David, developed the mapping by using the approximate locations to create 360° tours of businesses mentioned in the original mapping. The resulting 360° tours contain transcriptions of the advertisements, summaries of the businesses and images of the advertisement entries in the newspapers.



Based on The Corke Chronicle, Special Collections, UCC Library

Creating 3D Objects

For a few years I had used a selection of 19th century Queen's College Cork objects for classes with Digital Humanities 2nd year and postgraduate students and in late 2019 started working on University College Dublin's Associate Professor Niamh Pattwell *Fragments* project. During the various lockdowns across 2020 there was limited access to these items which prompted me to consider other means to access the items. Stephanie used an EinScan-SP desktop 3D scanner to collect data which was then used to

construct digital 3D models. The 3D models were uploaded to SketchFab for viewing in a 3D environment but the scans could also be exported as mesh files that are compatible with 3D printing. The resulting scans, though imperfect, serve as an example of what is possible. Not only is the text on the fragment visible so too is the topography of the parchment fragment. 3D scans of these fragile items mean less handling is required but not at the expense of new or ongoing research. This innovative technique gives insight into the creation of manuscripts irrespective of the language of the manuscript fragment.



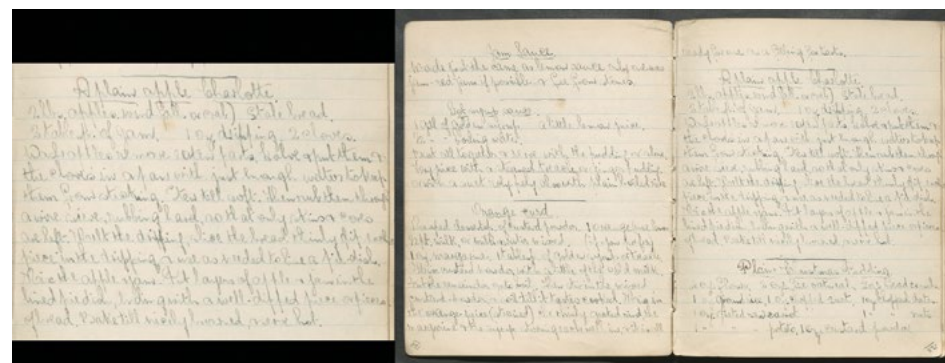
Parchment fragment in binding of G.2.1, Special Collections, UCC Library.

Reflections

What purpose did creating the poster for IFLA WLIC serve? UCC Library's unique and distinct collections reached the highest number of potential users in a short space of time. From the series of collaborative projects 'Remaking the Printed Word in the Digital Age' provided inspiration and learnings. We noted that while the four examples used material from Special Collections, they served as an example of what is possible. The digital tools and platforms used can be applied to all types of collections and material.

The different projects reminded me of work that needs to be done with respect to how we identify permissions for our collections. What are the limits and why? This series of projects were created by library staff but if they were created by non-library staff then a different set of permissions would apply. I believe if we wish to enhance access to our special collections, limiting barriers, where possible, and identifying items as public domain or a specific Creative Commons License is key. For some items there are a multiplicity of sources available to users. All things being equal, why would a user choose to work with one institution's collections if reusing another institution's collections is much easier?

With these digital projects we should always be mindful of what is omitted. For example with the recipes in *Historical Recipes in the Digital Age* part of the page rather than the whole page or the opening is shown. Did one recipe inspire another? It's hard to know when the body of work is presented in this way.



U295, Special Collections, UCC Library.

We should not lose sight of what digital access does not give help with when working with primary sources: all the student workers indicated that reading handwriting is difficult. Tools such as Transkribus can learn to read handwriting but only if that hand is available in sufficient quantity. Similarly new digital tools are not always easy to use or intuitive, no matter our level of familiarity with digital tools in general. With each new technology there is a learning curve and time to master that technology. Such time and effort must be factored into any new project.

Where to Next for Special Collections?

In January 2023 I presented a different perspective of the 'Remaking' poster at BOBCATSSS 2023: ['From Books to Bytes: Transforming Access to the Printed Word in the Digital Age.'](#) This hybrid conference took place at Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway, 25-27 January 2023. In February 2023 we participated in #ColourOurCollections with a Sustainable Development Goal themed colouring book based on Special Collections' [Life on Land: Birds & Trees from the 17th to the 21st Century](#) online exhibition. In March 2023 we'll return to the world of Pi/Pie: Stephanie, Emma and I aim to submit a blog post on our experiences of creating Irish historical recipes in digital and baking format for *The Recipes Project*. This project is a collaborative international research community that brings together and showcases interdisciplinary research on recipes across broad temporal and geographic spans. John Rooney will use Python to interrogate *The River-side's* Twitter archive. Special Collections & Archives team will start work on creating tutorials on reading handwriting using items from the collections through a means to disseminate

Software Used

- "Remaking the Printed Word in the Digital Age: Poster" <https://libguides.ucc.ie/remaking>
- Sketchfab: Models from Special Collections' Collections <https://sketchfab.com/schen>
- PressBook: #ColourOurCollections <https://ucclibrary.pressbooks.pub/colourourcollections/>
- Scalar: Historical Recipes in the Digital Age <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/historical-recipes-in-the-digital-age/index>.
- LibGuides: Visualising Cork Newspapers <https://libguides.ucc.ie/newspapers/corknewspapers>
- LibGuides: Life on Land: Trees and Birds from the 17th to 21st Centuries <https://libguides.ucc.ie/lifeonland>
- LibGuides: Play! <https://libguides.ucc.ie/speccollarchivesoutreach/play>
- #ColourOurCollections blog post series: <https://theriverside.ucc.ie/tag/colourourcollections-2/>
- HI6091: Work Placement in Special Collections (2019) <https://theriverside.ucc.ie/2019/08/27/hi6091-work-placement-in-special-collections-2019/>
- Pi Day and Historical Recipes <https://theriverside.ucc.ie/2022/03/14/pi-day-and-historical-recipes/>
- Reflection on the Use of Scalar: <https://theriverside.ucc.ie/2022/07/13/reflection-on-the-use-of-scalar/>

these tutorials has yet to be identified. I will continue to seek out the most appropriate digital tool/platform to enhance access to what Sarah Werner has termed 'the afterlives of books' (2019, p.118).

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