

-REFLECTIONS ON ‘CONTENT CREATORS – THE DIGITAL FRONTIER’, THE A&SL ANNUAL SEMINAR 2013-

The 2013 Annual Seminar of the Academic & Special Libraries of the LAI, “Content creators – The digital frontier” was an opportunity for professionals involved in digital projects to get to grips with the issues involved in the creation of digital resources, and to reflect on the best ways to contribute to the new digital information landscape.

The seminar opened with keynote speaker Simon Tanner, Deputy Head of Department and Director of Digital Consulting in the [Department of Digital Humanities at King’s College London](#). His talk, entitled “To educate, enlighten and entertain – if you build it, will they come and help?” focused on the importance of creating digital content that was relevant to user audiences, as well as open, shareable and valuable in cultural, social, and financial terms. Simon opened his talk with the question: why should we ask our users to ‘come through our front door’ (i.e. find our institution’s website) instead of going to where our audiences are? He offered a tantalizing vision: entering a cathedral in Cracow and being able to access different types of information gathered into a single interface in the user’s mobile device. The information could include the cathedral’s guide in one’s own language; music from the cathedral’s choir; details of the cathedral’s ceiling that are invisible from the ground; the history of the area; contemporary news about the cathedral, etc. At present this is impossible to achieve, because the information is locked in separate websites which do not make their data freely available to other applications. This is not exclusively a financial issue, but also an issue of vision, of attitude to our users. Open data can uncover an entirely new landscape of information sharing and user participation in both content consumption and creation, and can engage users in a meaningful way, at a time when audience attention is a scarce commodity. Simon believes that public digital repositories have a mandate to ‘educate, enlighten and entertain’. Institutions contemplating new digital projects should study their intended audience; if possible involve the audience in the creation of the resource through “crowd sourcing”; and apply rigorous evaluation systems, such as the balanced value-impact model, to demonstrate both the financial, cultural and social value of any project. The challenge will be to decide whether a project’s value comes through its content and the infrastructure it creates, or the access it provides to rare and inaccessible materials.

Simon’s keynote lecture established a number of themes that were explored and expanded upon in the rest of the talks at this year’s seminar, including: the importance of open data; finding the right audience for a project; and demonstrating the value of a service.

Julia Barrett underlined the importance of open data and demonstrating the value of a service when she introduced the [UCD Digital Library](#), a repository

which took the initial work carried out by the Irish Virtual Research Library and Archive (IVRLA) and turned it from a static group of collections into a fully-fledged digital resource. The Library now has fifty-four collections online, including fifteen collections in [Europeana](#) and two collections in [ARTstor](#). It is currently in the process of implementing the Open Archives Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting (OAI-PMH), and working on making information available as linked data, with geospatial capabilities. By implementing international standards and making its data free to access, the Library provides value not only to the UCD research community, but also to the international scholarly community.

The theme of opening one's data to a target audience continued in the talk by Commandant Padraic Kennedy, Officer in charge of the [Military Archives of Ireland](#). Padraic introduced a number of digital projects in which the Military Archives are involved, including the [National Army Census for 12-13 November 1922](#), the [Bureau of Military History 1913-1922](#) and the Military Services Pension Files. These projects used social media platforms such as Flickr, which brought the digitised collections to a wider audience, often helping to identify personnel in photographs for which there was initially little information. Given that the Military Archive only has seating for 8 researchers, putting their collections online has given the public unprecedented access to information of enormous historical relevance for Ireland, which is regularly used not just by scholars of Irish history, but also by individuals whose family members may be represented in these records. Here, the cultural and social value of the collection is as relevant as its financial value.

The importance of identifying one's audience was exemplified in Niamh O'Sullivan's talk about the [Irish Blood Transfusion Service's](#) Digital Photo Archive. The talk explored how a small, internal photograph digitisation project, which primarily addressed the needs of the staff working at the IBTS, became a valuable resource, used alike by scholars external to the service and by local community organisations. The project is not only a means of documenting the history of the service, but also of contributing social value for a new audience outside the immediate community of users.

John Duffy, Sub-Librarian at the Law Library in Dublin, introduced the importance of adhering to internationally recognised data standards, by discussing two specific projects: the digitisation of the Employment Appeals Tribunal documents, and of the Garda Compensation Cases. John explained that, by using a markup language such as XML, migration of data from one software platform to another was made easier, allowing for interoperability, flexibility and transparency in content creation and dissemination.

Ailish Farragher addressed the issue of knowledge management and digitisation of resources in a law firm, where knowledge sharing is not the usual practice because specialist knowledge is a means to create revenue. The knowledge manager needs to demonstrate the value of sharing the company's knowledge by proving that it saves fee earners' time. In this case, understanding the needs of the target audience was paramount to the success of the digital project.

The talks by Karen Skelly and Michelle Dalton addressed the use of social media as a means of adding value for a particular community of users. Karen Skelly, of the [Irish Cancer Society](#), explored the importance of social media in promoting her charity's message. Creating a strong social media presence, including live online chats, had an enormous impact on the charity's community of users, helping it grow exponentially, with over 600,000 Facebook views in a few months. However, robust policies had to be developed in order to ensure that employees were following the charity's guidelines in their use of social media.

Michelle Dalton explored the relevance of social media in librarians' professional development, discussing the identity [@libfocus](#) on Twitter, and the monthly Twitter chats for librarians at #irelibchat, which have touched on subjects such as continuing professional development; performance measurement in libraries; information literacy; marketing; and publication of research by librarians.

On the whole, the seminar was a fantastic opportunity for those of us involved in digital resources to reflect on the value of our projects, their target audience, and the need to become involved in the global digital information landscape, which increasingly includes social media as a means of contacting our audience. In addition to the talks, the seminar was both useful and fun, given the opportunities it provided to connect with important vendors and exhibitors, and to socialise with one's peers in the world of libraries and archives. Overall feedback about the event was extremely positive.