



## EDITORIAL

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# Practical Witchcraft

## *A Collaboration between a Special Collections Library and a Public Library*

In a twenty-first century beset by political polarization and active disinformation campaigns, libraries are already leading the charge in emphasizing our institutions as inclusive spaces for learning and community. Further, many special collections are being newly charged with developing collections and services aimed at reparative and recovery work. Encouraging non-academic patrons to visit our premises and take advantage of unique resources is made difficult by communally known past histories of exclusion that must be dismantled. We argue that collaborations between public and

academic libraries can benefit both types of institutions by mutually reinforcing shared goals in advocacy, diversity, and public access to information.

The distinctions between academic and public libraries are significant, with a vast gulf between audiences, budgets, and functions. In small college towns where the population is made up entirely of either the university staff and students who are transplanted from elsewhere,

or the local community or “townies,” this separation can lead to tensions and disinformation regarding access and services. The problem is exacerbated by the complicated history of many special collections, which were created with the dual charges of protecting fragile materials and promoting access to them. Special collection libraries are intended to be repositories in which rare materials are able to age gracefully while still being accessible to interested individuals. In short, many patrons, both academic and public, have been led to believe that special collections are not “for” them.

### **The Complicated Past of Rare Book Libraries**

In his article on the inculcation of exclusivity in rare book libraries, Michael Garabedian (2006) notes that “To many people, the special collections library is comparable to a chic, four-star restaurant, their librarians the equivalent of snooty maître d’s who delight in turning away the poorer and less fashionably dressed customers at the door” (56). While this draws a picture that is lightly humorous to some, it nonetheless articulates a very real anxiety among patrons that must be acknowledged and mitigated. Daniel Traister (2000) wrote the following:

All of us know people who have been turned away from, had difficulties at, or experienced condescension, downright rudeness, or suspicion of their integrity, cleanliness, or general demeanor while trying to use . . . rare book and manuscript repositories. . . . Our theory too easily justifies a broad range of practices that, however well-intentioned they may be, prove in execution. . . to be mean-spirited, judgmental, exclusionary, hierarchical, and otiose (60–61).

These attitudes are a function of the training received by many librarians in the last century, as well as past cultures of gatekeeping that were previously

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promoted as morally and intellectually worthy. Writing in 1974, Gordon N. Ray reported colleagues who nonchalantly stated that “rare book libraries should not wash the feet of the poor” (133), conflating snobbery, public services, and incredibly messy religious imagery within a single statement of breathtaking hubris. The current generation of librarians, therefore, must directly confront our shared history of disciplinary injustice alongside our continual problems of work backlogs, understaffing, and diminishing resources.

Indeed, the histories of many special collections and rare book libraries in the United States revolve around promoting specific narratives of elitism and higher learning that benefitted these institutions in the past. William Joyce (1988) traced the history of special collections in higher education from the creation of limited libraries in the eighteenth century through to the “Treasure Rooms” of the early twentieth century. Early libraries segregated their materials, with rare and old materials more or less locked up and their use discouraged. When such items were displayed, they were done so conspicuously for admiration’s sake. “Though the artifacts collected might be ‘treasured’ as source material for scholarly research, no doubt their financial value—not to say prestige value or even elitism—was also duly recognized” (Joyce 1988, 25). Even today, the most popular question by new visitors to reading rooms is “What’s your most expensive book?” as if cultural value and monetary value were synonymous. Aside from a fundamental problem of literalized value of collections, it is clear that more work needs to be done to demystify special collections and their purpose. We need to bridge the gap of audiences, publics, and values to promote equity, scholarship, and social justice.

The first steps of this work have already been done. In 2003, Alice Schreyer identified the elements that make up the necessary shift special collections need to make in her essay “From Treasure House to Research Center.” While noting that special collections libraries must have reliable funding for support in personnel, space, and resources; an online presence with guidelines for access; and a place within the overall strategic plan of the institution, she adds that libraries should work “collaboratively with appropriate partners to build collections in emerging areas of scholarly interest, to enhance access to Special Collections, and to design the most effective, standards-based digitization projects” (Schreyer 2003).

In the current age of Zoom, we think that digital programming is a useful evolution from digitization projects. During the time of the COVID-19 pandemic when no one was going anywhere, many people could, at least, go online. There was a noticeable surge in interest in virtual programming that libraries at all levels hastened to meet as best they could. This is where, in our case, we found that rare books and public libraries could collaborate to meet the public exactly where they were: at home.

### **Developing Our Coven: Why it’s Valuable for Public Libraries to Collaborate with Academic Libraries**

Academic libraries tend to seem as though they are available merely for current students, faculty, scholars, and the like. This can be a damaging perception, especially for institutions that seek to make their knowledge available to any who wish to engage with it. If awareness of specialty libraries is limited in the student population, then it is even more so in the public sphere.

The world of academia has long been sequestered from the public, appearing to ostracize those of a different social or economic class. Many of the community members served by the Champaign Public Library (CPL) were completely unaware of the existence of the University of Illinois’ Rare Book & Manuscript Library (RBML) and even upon discovery, did not necessarily feel welcome

or inclined to visit. CPL was established in 1876 and has continued to serve a broad and diverse community, some of which are college students and some of which are permanent community members. The perception of academia as an insular body with no interest in making connections outside of the campus community is in direct opposition to the mission of the RBML, which was established in 1936 and stewards the largest public university collection of rare books and manuscripts in the United States.

The library sought to change this perception by enlisting knowledgeable scholars to present on a crowd-pleasing topic using a truly magical, in-depth collection. Thus, the History of Witchcraft webinar was developed. To us, the timing was integral in the success of this virtual event. We mixed sought-after expertise on the culturally hot topic of witchcraft with a twist of curatorial banter. To this we added a dash of technology flavored with Zoom, social media, and accessibility provided by internet access. Finally, we combined these ingredients with the suppression of activities outside the home due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The resulting product was a perfect elixir that accelerated this event into a successful collaboration between two seemingly disparate institutions.

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Rectifying the common misconception that academic libraries are solely for academics themselves is no easy feat. A great many patrons are lifelong members of their local public library, and this comfortable relationship leads to a willingness to place trust in the partnerships proffered by their library. With an abundance of free services and programs, public libraries can serve as a conduit to more specific knowledge from sources that seem altogether out of reach to the general population—thus making a partnership between the public library and the academic a natural one. With the combined power of the loyal patrons of the CPL, its social media connections, and the prowess of the stewards of the RBML’s

holdings, we were able to expose and connect with a cross-section of our community that was previously untapped.

According to our website, the holdings in the RBML are for everyone. So, why the disconnect? The ability to attend a university is inherently classist; therefore, the libraries within them seem unapproachable and pretentious. It is unlikely that this event would have garnered as much attention with such a wide range of viewership had it not benefitted from the public library’s reach.

For this event, we were able to tap into a wellspring of interest although our audience did not specifically request information about witchcraft. We learned more about the subject of witchcraft, but most importantly, we delved into RBML’s vast collections and explored items that are directly related to the topic. We were then able to synthesize our knowledge, combine it with the physical objects, and present it to a public audience. The viewer’s ability to see the pages for themselves and to watch the speakers touch and interact with the items created a tactile—even visceral—experience that is exceptionally difficult to achieve via computer screen. This unique confluence made the History of Witchcraft event exceptional at the time and continues to draw viewers to the presentation after the fact. The CPL simply cannot carry the sort of historically valuable materials to inspire the sort of interest and awe conjured up by these medieval manuscripts.

Libraries, whether they are public libraries or special collections libraries, have the same objective—to promote access and share knowledge. Overall,

RBML and the field at large seek to break down barriers and share knowledge without discrimination. Public libraries have long been known to have a similar objective, furthering the logic of a marriage between community-funded public libraries that patrons feel some real ownership of and academic libraries that are not perceived as so outwardly welcoming. One of the many reverberations caused by the pandemic has been a push to make all manner of information more widely accessible. The fact that access to archival and library materials had been so starkly limited, as well as the fact that portions of the public suddenly had additional free time and wanted to fill it with cultural pursuits or other entertainments while still subject to lockdown restrictions, spurred on the excitement and fervor for such an event.

### **It's Magic! How We Developed a Webinar. . . on Witchcraft**

With the goal of showcasing RBML's collection and increasing overall public awareness and interest in both libraries, Cait Coker, Ruthann Mowry (Miller), Tracy Allison, and Madeleine Wolske began organizing the collaborative event and developing the content of the webinar in August 2020. Halloween planning was on the horizon and, inspired by previous exhibitions as well as Coker and Mowry's backgrounds, Halloween became the focal point of the event. There were several obstacles that both RBML and CPL needed to overcome. The most pressing of these issues involved technology followed closely by the stumbling blocks associated with a first-time collaboration. In an effort to mitigate these two concerns, RBML and CPL opted to keep the event relatively informal and narrow its scope to just Western European witchcraft. It was determined that the material should be interesting and accessible to the broadest possible audience without sacrificing the quality of the content. As mentioned previously, there were strong feelings about disrupting the idea of special collections existing in a metaphorical ivory tower. The plan was to have a lecture followed by a fifteen-minute question-and-answer period that would be as user-friendly as possible and endeavor to avoid academic jargon.

The lecture presented foundational information on the history of Western European witchcraft up to the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum* in 1487, followed by specific case studies of trials in early modern England through 1700. In addition to historical context, the content was selected to have a broad appeal, a sprinkling of popular culture references, and plenty of images. The speakers were very upfront and transparent regarding the specific dates and regions that would be covered. It would have been ideal to include a broader range of material, but the speakers were limited by RBML's collections, their individual curatorial knowledge, and the bandwidth available between CPL and RBML.

In particular, one of the aims of the webinar was to emphasize displaying actual objects from RBML's collection rather than just PowerPoint slides. For RBML staff, this was especially important because it had been months since in-person activities had occurred and there was a certain amount of desperation and eagerness to showcase materials and promote interactions with them. With this in mind, the content of the lecture was shaped around items in RBML's collection that were visually interesting, appealed to an audience who may not have any specialized knowledge, and utilized speaker commentaries to contextualize and explicate them.

As mentioned earlier, one of the major concerns for the webinar was the use of technology that was new to both RBML and CPL. Aside from Zoom, RBML would be using a new document camera that would allow viewers to virtually "see" the objects. In a typical in-person class, an instructor could have twenty items out and open for the students. However, the document camera restricted

how many items could be handled, required object transitions, and limited the size of the items selected. To deal with this, the number of items selected was significantly reduced and only one person was responsible for operating the document camera. This meant the speakers could focus on the content rather than speeding through, the likelihood of technological mishaps would be reduced, and the speakers would not need to swap their (socially distanced) stations in the middle of a live webinar. Ultimately, the alterations allowed us to highlight the truly important aspects of the webinar—the books.

### **Picking our Spells: Learning to Zoom, Banter, and Making it Accessible**

CPL and RBML were facing an unprecedented fall semester and RBML had not yet ventured into the realm of virtual events. The plan was to use Zoom in conjunction with a document camera to simultaneously show the speakers as well as the material. CPL began arranging the logistics through their Zoom account and RBML began preparing and selecting the content. It was felt that CPL's experience with webinars and their easy access to a Zoom account would be an excellent convergence with the primary sources provided by RBML. The Zoom account allowed for one hundred registered participants, which was the expected level of response and consistent with typical levels of attendance for both libraries. The registration link was publicly released on a Wednesday and by that Friday, the event had reached the one hundred registered participant cap. Although the initial success of the event was exciting and unexpected, would it be possible to accommodate more participants? In order to manage the influx of interest, the event was transferred to the university's Zoom webinar account, which had a participant cap of five hundred. The transfer took place over a weekend, but by Monday morning, the event had reached capacity again. In the span of five days, the event had gone viral. Interactions quickly increased on the Facebook event page, which in turn racked up views and comments. Also, to our dismay, copycat pages popped up that were charging for our free event! According to Facebook, 2,424,178 individuals (as of January 15, 2021) from all over the world were/are interested in *The History of Witchcraft* and in the libraries organizing it. As of May 23, 2023, the recorded webinar had approximately 29,154 views on YouTube (Coker and Mowry 2020).

As comments poured in and the waitlist continued to expand, it became obvious that a new course of action was needed. The solution was to add a live stream component to the webinar. Simultaneously with the Zoom event, the webinar would be broadcast on CPL's YouTube channel and RBML's Facebook event page. This, of course, presented its own set of challenges—neither CPL nor RBML had any experience with live streaming, and October 2020 was a politically contentious period during which political trolls were known to show up and disrupt online events. The new priorities were to ensure a safe web environment for the audience, with additional staff and both libraries tasked with monitoring comments and managing the online presence. Meanwhile, the story of RBML and CPL's partnership on the event became a story onto itself, with articles appearing in local venues (Domal 2020, Heckel 2020, Shapiro 2021) and even a feature on an East Coast community news channel (PACTV 2020).

In many virtual settings, the audience does not have the same opportunities to engage with the material items as they do at in-person events, and there was a concern that this may be an issue. The impetus behind the webinar was not to alienate the audience, it was to promote the availability of special collections for everyone. Simply having a talking-heads style lecture that viewers watched was not the preferred route. One of the first steps to alleviate this was the use of the document camera and actual books. It was important to maintain a "live" feel

to the event; physically handling the books while talking helped. The content was workshopped until it was approachable for everyone. The speakers did not present themselves as all-knowing experts, but rather people sharing information with a group. The question-and-answer period was also extended to promote open conversation, which resulted in a fantastic discussion that lasted over an hour—longer than the actual lecture, which was about 45 minutes. Questions came from the Zoom audience, Facebook commenters, and people who were watching live via YouTube. A wide variety of people posed questions—both individuals curious to know more, and people knowledgeable enough to ask detailed questions. Participants ranged from colleagues, to local community members, and even international participants.

In addition to extending the time for the Q&A portion, Professors Coker and Mowry also engaged in what was termed “curatorial banter.” They were in the same room (socially distanced), which enabled them to have a more organic conversation. When people posed questions, viewers could witness Coker and Mowry talking to each other to see who wanted to answer or discussing which books to put on the document camera to aid in the answer. Most importantly, they were able to work together to create an easygoing atmosphere by answering questions with a smile, cracking jokes, and sharing each other’s enthusiasm for the material and audience questions. Essentially, the viewers were able to see that the curators really enjoyed their work and valued the content. In turn, this made a more open and engaging atmosphere that encouraged viewers to participate, ask questions, and join in the conversation.

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## **Executing the Spell: Managing Social Media and Zoom for the First Time**

Unfortunately, there is no magic spell that will guarantee a viral event. It must be a perfect storm of algorithmic luck, community interest, and pragmatic programming. After the event was posted to CPL and RBML’s social media accounts, it was shared by community interest groups, public libraries across the United States, and reported on by local and national news outlets. Professors who were planning to share the content with their students, and scholars who wanted a closer look at the manuscripts contacted CPL. Primarily the public’s interest was piqued through engagement on CPL’s event page. CPL’s Promotions Manager, Evelyn Shapiro, posted interactive questions and images from RBML’s collection, prompting approximately two hundred individuals to respond and interact per post on average. The goal was to take advantage of the engagement and interest around the webinar and ride the social media wave to reach a broader audience for the webinar. However, we still needed to balance entertaining content with promoting online resources. Questions and comments came in from around the world requesting access to materials. Witchcraft fans from Athens, Berlin, Calgary, and Istanbul participated. Individuals were encouraged to connect with their local libraries and were put in contact with RBML curators as needed. Due to the increase in awareness, CPL and RBML were each able to increase virtual traffic, even though both libraries were temporarily closed to the public.

One of the major frustrations involved with library programming is that although public libraries have the connections and resources to offer events that a great many people would find both interesting and edifying, creating

awareness around these events is difficult. The sheer number of avenues for engaging with the public and promoting events requires a significant amount of management and concerted effort, especially as it pertains to social media. For example, CPL promotes their events using a monthly emailed newsletter; an online event calendar; advertisements in local newspapers, radio, and television; promotional slideshows inside the library; and Facebook events and posts. Even if the same formula is used each time, it yields different results. Social media is a variable that cannot be fully predicted. The only aspect that can be controlled is what content is posted and when. It is impossible to know with certainty when patrons will see the posts, or if the events will go viral or be hidden by complicated and covert algorithms.

The CPL has a loyal contingent of patrons who peruse the events offered each month and attend those that appeal to them, but reaching out to and capturing the attention of those who are not regular patrons is a consistent library objective, an aim that has its fair share of difficulties. That is one part of what made the response to this particular event so surprising. We had a hunch that it would be a well-attended event because of the subject matter, but there was no predicting the level of fervor and response garnered. It was free to attend, and with the announcement of a livestream via Facebook and YouTube, there were no capacity limits. A patron sharing the event with others did not take a seat or opportunity from anyone else. Community members and beyond could therefore disseminate the event information with abandon.

### **Sharing & Tracking the Spell: The Aftereffects of a Successful Collaboration**

For both public libraries and special collection libraries, it is in their best interests to collaborate and foster relationships with outside entities. By combining the skills and reach of a public library and an academic library, events can reach a broader audience and more time can be spent on promoting visibility and access. It behooves public libraries, especially in college towns, to partner with academic libraries to increase engagement within the community and their audience, targeting that hard-to-reach eighteen- to thirty-year-old demographic. It also behooves academic and special collections libraries to gain an understanding of another organization's offerings, which can further bolster any activities that may be initiated.

The History of Witchcraft changed the way both RBML and CPL interact with the local community as well as a broader audience. This webinar was the first collaboration between CPL and RBML. While CPL had experience running virtual events, this was certainly the first time for both libraries that an event went viral. Due to the success of the witchcraft webinar, both RBML and CPL received a significant amount of positive press, both libraries have seen an uptick in social media accounts, and—possibly most importantly—RBML and CPL continue to collaborate, opening each other up to new communities. Ultimately, the witchcraft webinar serves to underline the positive outcomes that can be achieved when public and special collections libraries work together.

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