The 21st-century networked user expects information to be accessible in a more or less seamless way, whatever its physical source. One example of a project that is beginning to provide such access is the Scottish Cultural Resources Access Network (SCRAN) — a multimedia resource base for the study and celebration of Scottish human history and material culture.

The keepers of our communal memory, whether in record offices, book-stacks or cabinets of curiosities, have always sought to document the collections in their care. Initially, perhaps, the main aim of this was inventory control, as curators sought to record such information as the provenance, condition and, especially, the current location, of every item. Before long, this aim of accountability would have been supplemented by that of disclosure, as collections sought to make known what treasures they contained. Disclosure of the existence and whereabouts of any item will, of course, create a demand for access to that item, or delivery of a surrogate for it.

Every institution from each of the curatorial domains of museums, archives and libraries is placed somewhere along this spectrum from inventory to delivery, depending on the nature and medium of the resources they collect. Museums aim to attract, engage and educate visitors through the display of a portion of their collections, and provide for those objects a mass of interpretative documentation including captions and contextual material. The greater part of a museum’s collections are likely to be in store, however, and unlikely to have been afforded more than enumerative documentation.

Archives contain aggregations of unique materials for which collection-level documentation is provided, typically in the form of finding aids. Libraries collect published material that exists in multiple copies, and have therefore benefited from a long tradition of shared cataloguing and well-developed standards of item-level documentation.

The scholars and researchers who have until recently been the main users of such resources have had to understand and work within the various structures and vocabularies of different domains and institutions. Such distinctions are deemed less tolerable in an age of online information, however. The networked user expects information to be accessible in a more or less seamless way, whatever its physical source. One example of the sort of service that is beginning to provide such access is SCRAN (Royan, 2000b).

SCRAN
SCRAN is a good Scots word for ‘food’. Related meanings range from ‘a collection of miscellaneous provisions’ to ‘empowerment’. Each of these definitions seems appropriate for a project that is bringing together a multiplicity of resources to provide food for thought; but SCRAN is in fact an acronym, a crouton on the alphabet soup of Information Technology — the Scottish Cultural Resources Access Network.

SCRAN is a 5-year, £15-million project to build a networked multimedia resource base for the study and celebration of human history and material culture, largely from the libraries, museums, archives and built heritage of Scotland (Royan, 1999). SCRAN already provides access to a multimedia resource base of 80,000 images, sound and movie clips and virtual reality objects; this will have risen to 120,000 by August 2001. SCRAN is also a metadata repository, holding information about information: pointers to 400,000 objects (1 million by August 2001) in some 350 memory institutions large and small, based on the Dublin Core set of metadata elements.1

These metadata are derived, more or less programmatically, from the documentation systems of each contributing organization, and normalized to conform with the SCRAN basic record standard. In the longer term, these basic records are intended to provide a link to corresponding records in contributing institutions’ documentation systems so that the user will be able, at the click of a button, to ‘drill down’ to retrieve information too extensive, or too volatile, to be held on SCRAN itself.

Approximately 25 percent of these records will also point to a multimedia object on the SCRAN resource base, and each of these records is also enriched with a caption of up to three paragraphs, each up to 40 words long, written at the intellectual level of the intelligent lay reader.

Full-text information and thumbnail versions of the multimedia are freely available to the public on the SCRAN resource base (Fig. 1).2 Users in educational institutions licensed to SCRAN can additionally download screen-size images plus playable movie and sound clips and virtual reality objects, copyright cleared for educational use (see Royan, 2000a).

Information retrieval
These materials may be identified and retrieved by a variety of access mechanisms. Quick Search is effectively a full-text
search across all fields of each record. Although this search supports quite a sophisticated syntax, with Boolean Logic, internal and right-hand truncation, proximity operators, field limitation and nesting, most users enter a single word as the search argument, or perhaps a couple, with an implied ‘AND’ between them.

Assisted Search gathers groups of fields together to help the user answer questions like ‘who?’, ‘what?’, ‘where?’ and ‘when?’ without needing to know the SCrán record structure; user surveys have indicated an interest in broadly differentiating between items made of flint, found in Flint or donated by Mrs Flint! Ideally the contents of such fields should be members of a controlled vocabulary, but with so many different contributors, enforcement of a particular flavour of authority control did not seem practicable. Use has, however, been made of the ‘schemes’ facility in Dublin Core, so that it is possible to identify whether a particular term is a member of the Art and Architecture Thesaurus, say, or a Library of Congress Subject Heading. Work is in progress to devise ways of utilizing this sort of information to provide more supportive methods of end-user searching in future.

Curriculum Navigator presents the user with a navigable version of the school curriculum of their choice (e.g. English Key Stage 3, Scottish Standard Grade, etc.) and then suggests ‘virtual resource packs’ pre-selected to support a given curriculum need.

Pathfinders are brief narrative introductions to popular topics (people, places, events, ideas) illustrated by links to records in the resource base (Fig. 2). Most of the current SCrán access mechanisms are strongly text-based, but a new generation of interfaces in an
advanced stage of development will give graphical ‘point-and-click’ access: processions of historic characters, timescales and maps. The SCRAN approach only works if built on a foundation of appropriate and accurate documentation. But we are determined to live up to our motto:

Access is our middle name

Notes
1. The Dublin Core Home Page can be accessed at: http://mirrored.ukoln.ac.uk/dc/
2. The SCRAN resource base is available at: http://www.scran.ac.uk

References


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The index belligerent

*The Dunciad* is a long (1754-line) satirical poem on Dullness, written by Alexander Pope and first published in 1728. It includes an eccentric critical apparatus by an invented critic: 11 pages of preface and prelims, copious footnotes, nine pages of appendices, a two-page ‘Index of persons celebrated in this poem’ and a five-page ‘Index of matters contained in this poem and notes’ (18th-century-speak for indexes of names and subjects?). The second index is to this book and also *The Testimonies of Authors concerning our Poet and his Works*, published by Pope under the name of Martinus Scriblerus.

The indexes are alphabetized by first letter only, all entries beginning with the same letter simply being subsumed in the same section, not further ordered by alphabetical sequence. I and J appear together (as, in order, Index-Learning, Journals, Jus, Impudence), and U and V (as, Verbal, Venice, University, UPTON). Here are some entries from the second index, showing how the attacks in the poem and *Testimonies* upon Pope’s critics, regarded as bitter enemies, are there carried through and reinforced. They remain in the original order of their appearance. Capitals and square brackets are as in the original; double parentheses indicate editorial interpolations.

Angrer, one of the characteristics of Mr Dennis’s critical writings
- Affirmation, another
  [To which are added by Mr Theobald, Ill-nature, Spite, Revenge]
BLACKMORE (Sir Richard), his Impiety and Irreligion, proved by Mr Dennis
- His abuse of Mr Dryden and Mr Pope
Bray, a word much beloved by Sir Richard
Book-sellers, how they run for a Poet
Baillis, how poets run from them
CIBBER, Hero of the Poem, his Character. not absolutely stupid. . . . His folly heightened with Frenzy . . . He was once thought to have wrote a reasonable Play . . . Finally subsides in the lap of Dullness, where he rests to all eternity ((an entry of 41 lines, run-on))

CUR (Edm.), his Panegyric
- Tost in a Blanket and whipped
- Pillory’d
DENNIS (John), his Character of himself . . .
- His mortal fear of Mr Pope, founded on Mr Curl’s assurances
- His accusations of Sir R. Blackmore
- As no Protestant
- As no Poet
Ears, some people advised how to preserve them
FALSEHOODS told of our Author in Print.
- Of his taking verses from James Moore
- And of his intending to abuse Bishop Burnet
((8 more subentries here))
Good nature of our author; Instances of it in this work
GILDON (Charles), abused our Author in many things
- Printed against Jesus Christ
Madness, of what sort Mr Dennis’s was, according to Plato
- according to himself
- how allied to Dullness
Pope (Mr), [his Life] . . .
- His Death threatened by Dr Smedley, but afterwards advised to hang himself or cut his throat. To be hunted down like a wild beast, by Mr Theobald. unless hanged for Treason, on information of Pasquin, Mr Dennis, Mr Curl, and Concanen
Personal abuses not to be endured, in the opinion of Mr Dennis, Theobald, Curl &c.
Personal abuses on our Author, by Mr Dennis, Gildon, &c.
- By Mr Theobald – By Mr Ralph – By Mr Welsted – By Mr Cooke – By Mr Concanen – By Sir Richard
- Blackmore – By Edw. Ward – and their Brethren
Personages of others. Mr Theobald of Mr Dennis for his poverty. Dr Dennis of Mr Theobald for his livelihood by the Stage, and the Law. [5 more instances]
Profaneness not to be endured in our Author, but very allowable in Shakespeare (sic)
The reference to ‘index-learning’ leads to Book I of *The Dunciad*, line 279 [sic, only], the first line of the couplet oft-quoted in our circles:

How Index-learning turns no student pale,
Yet holds the eel of science by the tail.

Hazel K. Bell, Hatfield