

From Platen Press to Pixels

Printer DEBORAH BARNETT, conservator NATASA KRSMANOVIC and archivist SIMON ROGERS describe how Toronto's John M. Kelly Library honoured Marshall McLuhan with an interactive chapbook.



Letterpress printer and chapbook publisher Deborah Barnett was hired to re-ignite the Kelly Library's print studio. (All images courtesy of the John M. Kelly Library)

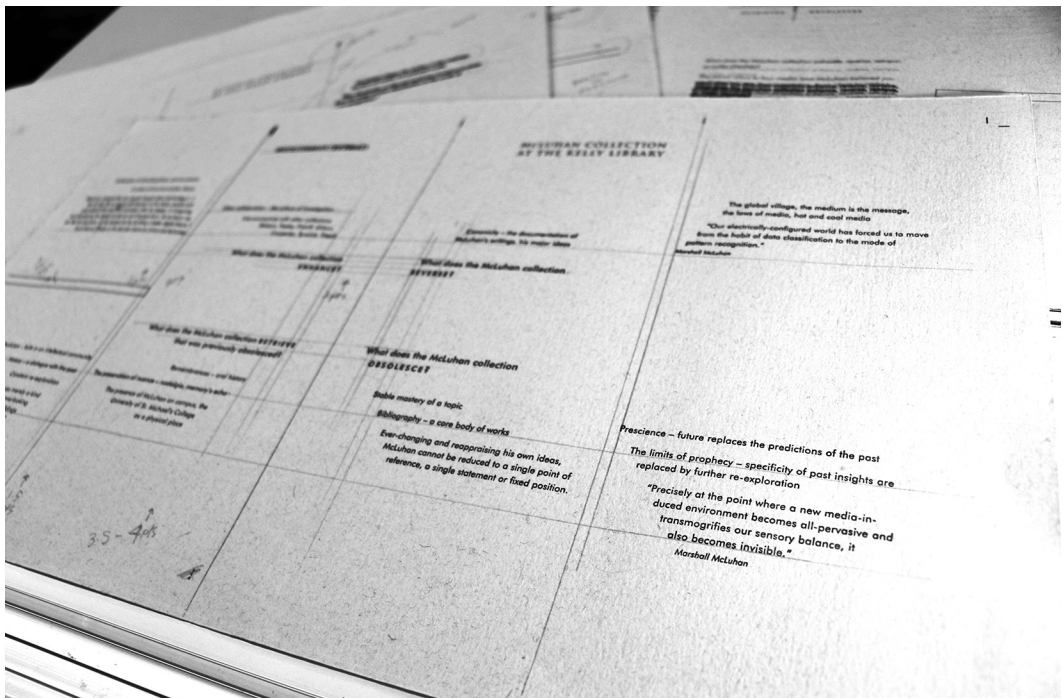
THE JOHN M. KELLY LIBRARY at the University of St. Michael's College in the University of Toronto is celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2019. Just as the library is a place where people are connected with ideas, we wanted to create a memorial object that could draw people into a creative and active project representative of the library's role in fostering new learning.

During the planning process for the anniversary in the summer of 2018, letterpress printer and chapbook publisher Deborah Barnett was hired to re-ignite the library's print studio. A fully equipped state-of-the-art conservation studio on the Kelly's third floor was being completed at the same time under the direction of conservator Natasa Krsmanovic.

Early in September, Deborah and Simon Rogers, special collections archivist for the

Kelly, met to discuss a potential first project for the print studio. Our idea was to demonstrate, using traditional chapbook format, the way that Marshall McLuhan's idea of a tetrad—a thought exercise consisting of four questions that he believed could be used to explore the effects of all media—worked. The idea was a culmination of thinking about McLuhan's ideas in the context of wanting to focus attention on the McLuhan collection at St. Michael's. The collection includes rare published material, ephemera and items from a variety of archival collections that highlight McLuhan's time and ongoing influence at the federated college, where he taught from the late 1940s until his death in 1980.

The idea of doing a chapbook that physically mirrored the four-part structure of McLuhan's tetrad seemed playful and creative, well-suited to



Sheets from A Tetrad (top), and the prospectus (bottom).

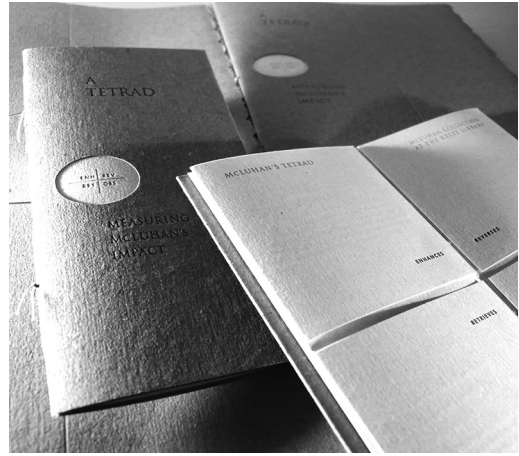


the originator, and a way of stimulating a deeper exploration and new ways of thinking about an idea, a concept or an object. The creation of a chapbook also tied into plans underway to launch the library's anniversary year with the Canadian Fine Press exhibit, which opened in January 2019 and gathered students, faculty, staff, friends and print enthusiasts together in recognition of the history of Canadian letterpress publishing, book design and rare books from across the University of Toronto's special library collections. The multi-site exhibition, which runs until summer 2019, includes displays at five other campus libraries as well as at the Kelly. The exhibit also highlighted the work of Glenn Goluska, a 1969 graduate of St. Michael's and an accomplished printer, typographer and designer.

The exhibit provided the perfect opportunity to honour the history of limited edition publishing in Canada, at a time when letterpress is

experiencing a vital renaissance in the book world. Together with college librarian Sheril Hook, we gathered a team of staff and students to produce just such a limited edition as those exhibited at University of Toronto's five participating repositories, offering each participant in the process direct experience of the challenges, excitement and accomplishment that making books, and passing along knowledge by so doing, generates. Our hope was to foster a better understanding of what it takes to produce such print productions historically, and how we can use these sumptuous *objets d'art* to generate ongoing enthusiasm for the book while connecting new media expressions to extend and circulate ideas via video and interactive media.

A Tetrad began with an intensely creative exchange over the concept and how the content, page-by-page, would garner attention and participation. We began with a quick, hand-torn



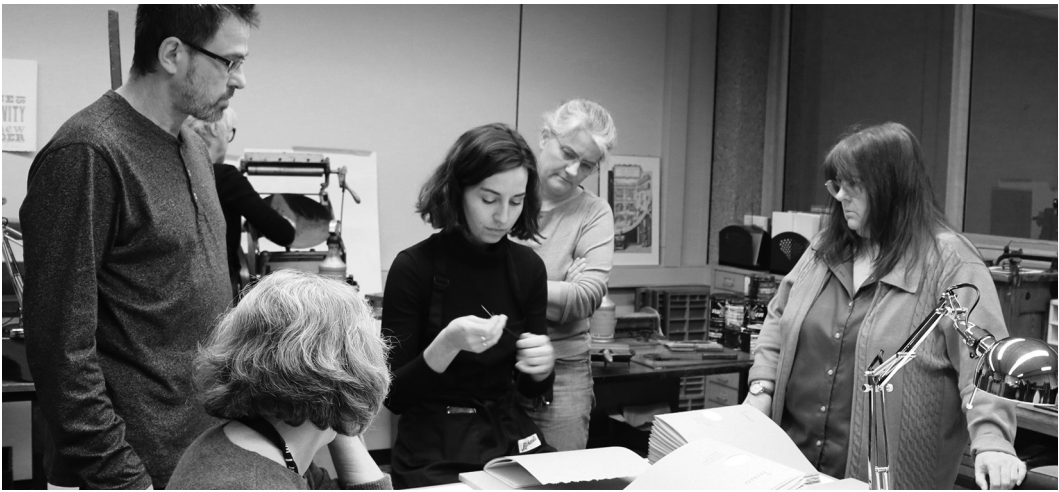
Production of A Tetrad was an exercise in experiential learning that engaged the hands and minds of staff and students alike.

physical set of pages, ordering them to provide for a die-cut centerfold which would open into a four paneled tetrad, with Simon writing the content and Deborah providing design. We saw the possibility, even then, of creating an interactive website where enthusiasts could contribute to a wider understanding of the McLuhan collection that we hoped the physical chapbook would stimulate. A large portion of the design and concept puzzle was the problem of explaining the question, “What on earth is a Tetrad?” The answer, being a kind of complicated participatory process, becomes clearer as the reader handles the chapbook or examines the corresponding website (<https://kellyexhibits.ca/tetrad>), and is drawn into engagement via multiple entry points.

In designing the book, Deborah worked with type from St. Michael’s style guide and reflected

the diagonal margins shown in samples from Marshall and Eric McLuhan’s *Laws of Media: The New Science* (1988), the book in which the idea of the tetrad was given its most elaborate expression. The digital files were circulated through several iterations, informed by staff and faculty input, and groomed for final output in the form of photopolymer plates that would be printed on the Kelly’s platen press, a mid-20th century Craftsmen Machinery Co. Jobber.

Natasa brought her background in material science and her expertise in handling rare books and print material to the production of *A Tetrad*. Age-old techniques were revisited to add new observations to the discourse of the art and structure of the book and its binding. With her input, we decided to produce both a pamphlet-stitched version of the chapbook and a



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Natasa Krsmanovic (centre) demonstrates the stitching required for binding the chapbook.

limited edition Coptic-stitched version. Staff and students assembled in the print studio before the Christmas holidays to hand-stitch the pamphlet edition, the process of which is viewable as a time lapse video on the Tetrad website. Assembling the chapbooks together as a community was an institutional learning experience in the tradition of letterpress book construction, from collation through to binding and even distribution. The scraps of paper left over from printing were reclaimed to make hand-sewn prospectuses.

With carefully considered soft linen thread chosen to merge with and hold the soft handmade papers selected from Papeterie Saint-Armand in Montreal, we produced 125 copies of the pamphlet-stitched chapbook, 25 copies with Coptic-stitched binding in a protective Mylar pocket, and 300 copies of the prospectus, outlining the attributes of the chapbook, the McLuhan collection, and St. Michael's Print Studio. We invited participation throughout the project from anybody and everybody we could corral. The effort, which included seven hours of group sewing, with nine participants, was a reminder of the physicality of printing and the work involved in such projects.

We believe in experiential learning at the Kelly, the aura around handcrafted editions, with attention to detail, pursuit of perfection, and a dedication to the sharing of ideas and the cultivation of knowledge. The project did not

end with the release of the chapbook. We invite all readers to contribute to the online version, to think about the role of print and the materiality of print, and to contribute to the ongoing conversation we hope the chapbook has started.

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 ~ Deborah Barnett is a Master's candidate at OCAD University and College Printer at the John M. Kelly Library. She approaches limited edition chapbook publishing with roots in visual art, professional graphic design and limited edition publishing. Her focus is on the exploration of innovative connections: traditional letterpress meets new media.

~ Natasa Krsmanovic is a book and paper conservator. She contributed to the design, hand-binding, and production of the chapbook, *A Tetrad*. Natasa's interests include historic book structures, artist's materials, and conservation advocacy.

~ Simon Rogers is special collections archivist at the John M. Kelly Library in the University of St. Michael's College, Toronto. This past winter he taught a course on material bibliography in the Book and Media Studies program at St. Michael's and co-curated the Canadian Fine Press exhibition. He has written previously on literature, music, architecture, archives and local historical matters.