HUMANITIES KANSAS

RAPID REMEDIES:

GETTING CULTURAL NON-PROFIT STORIES UP AND OUT DURING COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging for businesses and organizations across the country and around the globe, and cultural non-profit organizations are no exception. According to the National Endowment for the Humanities, "museums and historic sites are reporting losses of $1 billion a month as education programs, exhibitions, festivals, and other events have been canceled" [1], and the National Humanities Alliance reports that museums, historic sites, and historical societies are "fac[ing] lay-offs and the possibility that they won't survive as organizations" due to the closures and cancellations resulting from COVID-19 [2] . And yet, the financial hardship faced by cultural non-profits is only half the problem. The other half is the public's loss of access to the important educational programming these organizations provide.

In order to remedy these issues, many cultural non-profits have turned to digital media to engage audiences and donors with the rich stories of history, art, politics, and culture that are their regular stock in trade. According to the Americans for the Arts, 72% of arts and cultural non-profits have made their cultural product available digitally as a direct result of COVID-19, and 69% of arts and cultural non-profits have increased their online presence through their website and social media in response to the virus [3]. But for organizations that have seldom or never engaged with their audiences digitally, the sudden shift to online programming can seem daunting.

This white paper is designed to assist cultural non-profits in their continued efforts to quickly and affordably create engaging online stories that fulfill their unique missions. Cultural non-profits can cost-effectively use online storytelling to show that, while COVID-19 may have introduced obstacles to programming-as-usual, the sector has the ingenuity, creativity, and passion to continue to benefit the public through innovative, thought-provoking, and meaningful digital work.

SECTION 1: PROJECT MODELS

In March of 2020, Humanities Kansas, Kansas's state humanities council, with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, started a new grant program to inspire non-profit organizations to develop "innovative ways to engage the public with the humanities when gatherings in person are impossible" [4]. By June, these "Quick Grants" had resulted in eighteen $500-$1,000 projects from humanities organizations across the state that were aimed at quickly and inexpensively generating born-digital programs that could engage audiences from the safety and comfort of their own homes.

Projects took a variety of digital formats, including:

- Streaming presentations—e.g., panel discussion, lectures, and historical re-enactments
- Digital exhibits, or curated collections of stories, artifacts, and keepsakes
- Web-based video series
- Podcasts
- Digitally-recorded and disseminated oral histories

In looking back at the most effective stories, a pattern emerged. Stories make the most impact when they adhere to the following outline:

1. Spark interest with a short but memorable title, quotation, or question.
2. Set the stage for new information by meeting audiences where they're at. What do most audiences currently think about your topic, content, or product?
3. Disrupt audience expectations with new information--an unexpected question, perspective, or fact.
4. Make the stakes of correctly understanding this new information clear. Why is this information important?
5. Conclude with a summary of the new information and its significance for your audience.

The most successful projects also invited audiences themselves to become part of the storytelling process.

EXAMPLES

The Museum of World Treasures

When the Museum of World Treasures, a history museum in Wichita, Kansas, was forced to close its doors earlier this year due to the pandemic, Kristin Martin, the Museum's Program Director, started imagining new possibilities for connecting home-bound Kansans with the wealth of history within their own reach. The resulting digital exhibit, called "Histories from Home," showcased stories and images submitted by Museum constituents in three main categories—Military Histories, Family Stories, and Creative Collections. Submitted keepsakes included a "Bubble Bank" used to save money to purchase war bonds during World War II, a Macedonian wedding dress from 1968, and a 2002 World Series Garrett Anderson bobble head doll. The stories that accompanied these keepsakes highlighted the wide diversity of Kansas residents' histories and memories, hopes and dreams.

The Boot Hill Museum

The Boot Hill Museum's YouTube video series, "New Connections to the Old West," gives audiences a chance to explore some of the Boot Hill Museum's collections, learn a little bit about what it takes to run and curate a historical Museum, and hear some of the best stories the old west has to offer--everything from the history of the Dodge City drugstore to the tale of Fred Harvey and his famous Harvey Girls. Most videos also include a way for families to get involved through a follow-up activity or craft so that they can be actively engaged in thinking about how history connects to their lives today. For example, in a video about the history of the butter mold, Associate Director Lyne Johnson engaged audiences by asking them to submit a picture of the butter molds some of them might have in their homes.

Hodgeman County Economic Development, Inc.

Lea Ann Seiler is the Director of Hodgeman County Economic Development, Inc., an organization committed to developing and promoting the socioeconomic viability of Hodgeman County, Kansas. This past spring, Seiler had an idea to offset the fear and anxiety that so many in Hodgeman County residents were experiencing as the pandemic dominated the news and economic instability loomed. Using her cellphone and a homemade sound booth made up of two speaker stands, binder clips, and a piece of egg crate foam, Seiler has created "We are Hodgeman Strong," an audio-journal of stories of resiliency from Hodgeman County residents. The great thing about an interview-focused podcast is that it gets residents in on the storytelling process and builds a sense of community among both area residents and a larger community of listeners.

The Ashland City Library

Earlier this spring, Cara Vanderree, Director of the Ashland City Library, took on a new project—she decided to capture and preserve the stories of Clark County, Kansas residents as they experienced life during a pandemic. Working closely with area historians, Vanderree created a list of twenty-five questions that would enable her to carry out oral history interviews with a range of local residents. The resulting interviews would be transcribed and published in the *Clark County Gazette* and the Ashland City Library website under the title, "Clark County's Response to COVID-19." So far, collected stories have included those of a hospital clerical worker, a veterinarian, a banker, and a cattle salesman, and they reveal the diversity of opinions Clark County residents have had on the pandemic as well as their changing ideas about the nation's response to it over time. The questions Seiler used in these oral interviews can be found here, and a sample media release form for use with interviewees can be found here.

PARTNERSHIPS

Robust partnerships were central to the success of all of these projects--most importantly, partnerships with humanities scholars, partnerships with creators, and partnerships with other non-profits.

HUMANITIES SCHOLARS

Partnerships with scholars from your area institute of higher education—whether that's a university, college, or community college—can provide highly specialized knowledge of humanities subject matter or connect you with a colleague who has the expertise you're looking for. For example, when the Ashland City Library started developing their oral history questionnaire, they knew it would be stronger if they had the insights of a professional historian. Their connections with area oral historians, Dr. Tai Edwards, Associate Professor of History at Johnson County Community College, and Destiny Lalicker, a graduate of Fort Hays State University, made it possible for them to quickly develop a questionnaire that ticked all the right boxes and that would be useful for historians in the future.

CREATORS

These partnerships enable organizations to translate information that is predominantly verbal into an enticing audio-visual experience. That said, a few tips on working with audio-visual creators from Quick Grantee Erika Nelson, artist and director of The Worlds Largest Things, Inc. "Artistic creators work best in a framework and not within a cage," said Nelson. Research the creator you are about to hire, make sure their past work fits the look and feel you want your project to embody, and provide your chosen creator(s) with a detailed and clear vision of what you want the end-product to achieve for audiences. Then, let go. It's now up to the audio-visual creator to take the creative leeway you've given them and make something that meets your big-picture goals—possibly in a way that never occurred to you.

OTHER NON-PROFITS

Even the most innovative and engaging programs are no good if they don't reach people. As the pandemic has kept people indoors and on their screens, the amount of digital content has skyrocketed, making competition for clicks and views intense. But instead of competing with your fellow non-profits, partner up and support each other. Make a concerted effort to like and follow the social media feeds of non-profits with missions similar or tangential to your own, and reach out to let their social media managers or communications professionals know that you've done so. Hopefully, they'll return the favor and a mutually-beneficial social media partnerships will be underway—replete with reciprocal tagging, re-posts, and shout-outs.

SECTION 2:
DIGITAL CREATION & DISSEMINATION

Developing digital programming can seem intimidating from both a skills- and a cost-perspective. Maybe you've never created digital content before and don't know how to get started. Alternately, the cost of digital content development can be daunting—especially in this financially-strapped moment. Humanities Kansas Quick Grantees found resources to help them overcome both of these obstacles. Here's a list:

Tools and Equipment:

- **Sm*art Phone***
  By far and away, the most common tool Quick Grantees used to create their projects was something you probably have in your pocket right now—your smart phone! Whether capturing video, recording audio, or posting directly to social media accounts the smart phone was a must-have tool for creating a plethora of different kinds of digital content.
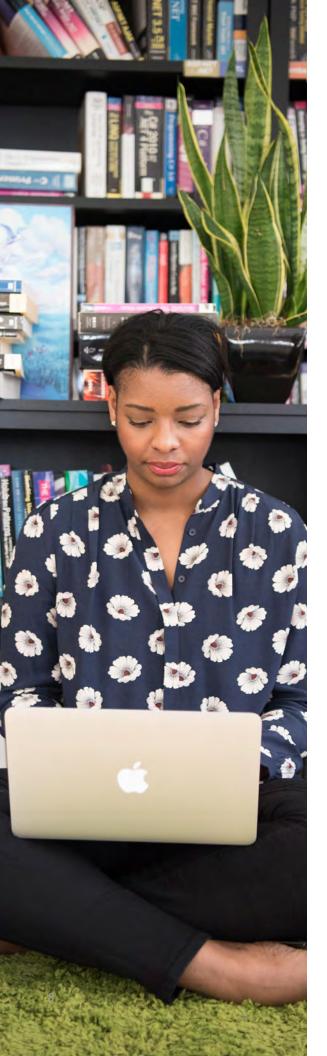- **S*mart Phone Tripod or Tripod Adapter***
  When you're shooting video of yourself, a tripod is your stand-in for a cameraman. Plus, it keeps the shot level and steady. For less than $10, The Acuvar 6.5" Flexible Tripod with Universal Mount lets you shoot video from almost anywhere and is light and easy to transport. Already have a nice tripod—just not for a smart phone? Get an adapter like the Vastar Universal Smartphone Tripod Adapter for just $15.
- **D*IY Smart Phone Steadicam***
  While many smart phones have now integrated optical stabilization into their camera app, if yours doesn't, it can make for some rocky video footage. This simple DIY Steadicam for Smartphones uses just a hammer, a screwdriver, and two rubber bands to make a cost-effective steadicam that will work in a pinch.
- **DIY Sound Booth**
  Time and again, our grantees reported that they had created their own sound booths in order to record clear, background-noise-free audio for podcasts and videos from their own homes. They were adamant that it was not only easy but inexpensive! Lea Ann Seiler with the "We are Hodgeman Strong!" podcast, used two speaker stands, two binder clips, and a piece of egg crate foam to make hers. There are so many "how-to" videos on creating a variety of sound booths at low cost on YouTube.com—just do a quick search and start exploring!

Software:

·**TechSoup**
One of the most popular resources reported by Quick Grantees is TechSoup, a technology solutions provider for non-profits that provides discounts on a variety of software packages and applications. Base-level membership is free, and includes access to donated software as well as access to community forums and free learning resources.

·**Adobe Creative Cloud**
With more than twenty different applications for creating audio-visual content on your computer—including PhotoShop, InDesign, Spark, and Acrobat Pro--an Adobe Creative Cloud for Teams license is $79.99 per month, but discounts are available through TechSoup. Each Adobe Creative Cloud license includes access to how-to tutorials for those who are just getting started with these software programs.

·**OpenShot**
OpenShot is a free, open-source video editor that enables everything simple and easy audio-video editing as well as titles, time effects, animation, and more. While Quick Grantees mentioned both Adobe Rush, which comes with the Adobe Creative Cloud license, and is known for its intuitive interface, and Blender, a free, open-source 3D modeling software program with video editing abilities, OpenShot is popular for bringing together the ease and cost-efficiency of both.

·**Anchor**
A free, one-stop shop for creating your own podcast, Anchor allows you to record interviews on your phone by sending a link to your interviewee. All your interviewee has to do is click to start recording a conversation with you! It also allows for simple audio editing, provides a library of music and sound effects, and provides a hosting service to make your podcast available to listeners across multiple platforms. And again, it's all totally free!

·**Padlet**
Padlet makes it easy to create a digital display of text- and image-based stories on your website. Padlet is what enabled the Museum of World Treasures to quickly and easily create its online exhibit, "History from Home." The basic license is free and comes with how-to tutorials.

·**Amberscript**
This automatic transcription software makes it easy to convert oral history interviews to text. The Ashland City Library used it to turn hours of audio-recordings into transcribed interviews they could post on their website and archive for posterity. The first 30-minutes of transcription is free.

·**Zoom**
It may well be THE software application of 2020.Enabling streaming, online presentations, panel discussions, and conferences, Zoom provides an easy way to bring people together virtually when they can't be together in person. Registrants can sign up to participate, watch the presentation from the comfort of their own homes, and ask questions via chat. By using a live captioning service, like Rev, Zoom can be made accessible for the hearing impaired. Presentations can be recorded and posted on social media who can't attend the live stream event.

Platforms:

Once your digital content is created, it's time to share it. While your website is a great start, social media provides the chance to connect widely with both those who already know about your organization and those who don't.

The Pew Research Center provides helpful insights into the reach and target audiences of top social media platforms. Their 2019 Social Media Use Survey demonstrates that YouTube and Facebook are by far the most popular social media platforms with US adults, with 73% of US adults using YouTube and 69% using Facebook. Instagram and Twitter, on the other hand, attract only 37% and 22% of US adults, respectively. So if you have limited time and resources, be smart about what social media platforms you choose to be active on.

Also, remember, age is key: 90% of 18-29 year-olds use social media, but only 40% of 65+year-olds use it [5]. Creating digital content is a great way to connect with audiences when you can't bring them together in-person, but some key demographics may be left out of your efforts. Be sure to continue to brain storm ways of connecting with older audiences that don't rely solely on social media platforms. For example, Humanities Kansas started a "Dial-a-Talk" program that enables households to schedule phone discussions with scholars about a variety of humanities topics during the pandemic when in-person lectures across the state are canceled.

Measuring the Results:

One of the most helpful things about digital content is that many digital platforms provide analytic data about audience response. Be sure to explore the analytic tools provided through Google, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter in order to better understand what kinds of posts are attracting your constituency and to pull statistical demographic data about your audience. In addition, take note of comments and responses to your posts. Both quantitative and anecdotal data are important for grant reports, donor updates, and sponsorship requests.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed numerous challenges to the cultural non-profit sector, but it has also provided an opportunity for non-profits to make use of online tools and digital storytelling to connect with their audiences in relatively easy, unexpectedly affordable, and meaningful ways. Hopefully, this document has provided project models and digital resources that can help your organization make the most of this unprecedented historical moment.

CITATIONS:

1. "NEH Receives $75 Million to Distribute to Cultural Institutions Affected by Coronavirus," The National Endowment for the Humanities, March 27th, 2020, https://www.neh.gov/news/neh-receives-75-million-distribute-cultural-institutions-affected-coronavirus.
2. Gurwitz, Beatrice. "Virtual Briefing: Local Cultural Organizations and the Covid-19 Pandemic," National Humanities Alliance, June 18th, 2020, https://www.nhalliance.org/virtual_briefing_local_cultural_organizations_and_the_covid_19_pandemic.
3. "The Economic Impact of the Coronavirus on the Arts and Culture Sector," Americans for the Arts, July 13th, 2020, https://www.americansforthearts.org/by-topic/disaster-preparedness/the-economic-impact-of-coronavirus-on-the-arts-and-culture-sector.
4. "New Opportunity: Quick Grants," Humanities Kansas, July 13th, 2020, https://www.humanitieskansas.org/grants-programs/new-opportunity-quick-grants
5. "Social Media Fact Sheet," Pew Research Center, June 12th, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/.

Humanities Kansas is an independent non-profit spearheading a movement of ideas to empower the people of Kansas to strengthen their communities and our democracy. Since 1972, our pioneering programming, grants, and partnerships have documented and shared stories to spark conversations and generate insights. Together with our partners and supporters, we inspire all Kansans to draw on history, literature, and culture to enrich their lives and serve the communities and state we all proudly call home.

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