Promoting Local History Collections Through Online Media Partnerships

As a city that resists easy definition, the meaning of Los Angeles is the subject of a long-running conversation among scholars, critics, journalists, and other commentators seeking a more thorough understanding of the metropolis. In recent years, that conversation has moved online, allowing more voices to take part through blogs, social media, and new-media endeavors of more traditional news organizations.

At the University of Southern California (USC) Libraries, we were uniquely positioned to join this conversation. In addition to preserving and providing access to our own strong regional history collection, we serve as host institution for L.A. as Subject, an association of more than 250 libraries, museums, cultural organizations, private collectors, and official archives with collections related to the history of Southern California. Charged with expanding public awareness of these resources as well as their accessibility to the academic community, we realized that the collections—particularly those containing visual materials like photographs, drawings, and maps—could offer surprising, constructive, and unique contributions to the ongoing discourse on Los Angeles.

It also was clear that we would need to reach a much broader audience of academics, history enthusiasts, journalists, and others who study and write about Los Angeles, as the city is a vital subject of investigation in many disciplines other than regional history—including urban planning, border and immigration studies, film and television history, and Pacific Rim studies, to name a few. To expand awareness and informed use of our collections and those of L.A. as Subject members, we would need to reach beyond the standard print and online publications that we were already creating and the efforts that are now commonplace among academic libraries.

Our innovation was to partner directly with online media organizations, regularly producing original content that highlights our collections and those of L.A. as Subject. Since forging our first partnership in January 2011 with KCET-TV, a former PBS affiliate that had recently become the nation’s largest independent public television station, we have produced more than 110 original online stories that highlight L.A. as Subject member collections. We have also expanded our efforts to a new medium, video, and to a new media partner, Los Angeles magazine. By producing our own content, we maintain control over how materials from those collections are presented, ensuring that they are used in a responsible manner with proper credit given. Creating our own content also gives us the opportunity to spread an important message: that library collections are essential for creating context and enabling new discoveries about the history of our region.

Every week, we provide KCET with an online story that pairs original storytelling with images from L.A. as Subject member collections. Consulting with the librarians and archivists who maintain the collections, a USC Libraries staff writer gathers relevant images and, using those archival materials as a guide, crafts text that places the images in historical context. Each story, which appears as a post on KCET’s SoCal Focus blog, runs about 500 to 1,500 words and usually includes at least 10 archival images.
Our contributions at KCET have explored a wide range of historical topics. Some canvas L.A. as Subject member collections for images, using a specific person, place, event, or object as an organizing principle. One of our most popular posts, for example, featured historical photographs and postcards related to the palm tree (http://bit.ly/kcet-palms). Other stories highlight the role archival collections play in informing new scholarship, like a February 2012 post about how scientists used archival maps, photographs, and survey records to reconstruct the historical ecology of the Ballona Creek watershed (http://bit.ly/kcet-wetlands). Still others explore how these records of the past can find expression once again in the real world. In a February 2012 post, for instance, we explained how Walt Disney Imagineers used archival photographs to evoke the look of 1920s and 1930s Los Angeles inside the Disney California Adventure theme park (http://bit.ly/kcet-disney). Another post, from May 2011, detailed how Team Bondi production designers consulted archival materials while developing the L.A. Noire video game (http://bit.ly/kcet-noire).

The KCET collaboration has established L.A. as Subject as an active and visible participant in the public dialogue about Los Angeles. Website analytics, social media figures, and media coverage provide evidence that our contributions have successfully engaged the public while raising awareness of L.A. as Subject member collections. In 2012 alone, our stories received more than 260,000 page views and on a daily basis account for 2.5% to 15% of KCET’s site-wide traffic. Hundreds of Facebook users routinely share or like our contributions, and coverage of our stories often appears on other blogs and news websites. (A list of selected online media coverage appears below.)

Building on our success, we expanded our project to encompass new media and new partners:

• In summer 2012, we began producing with KCET a series of documentary videos—currently in post-production, as of January 2013—that will be distributed on the Web and possibly over KCET’s broadcast channel. Totaling about 30 minutes, the four documentary videos explore the history of incline railways in Southern California history, combining archival photographs, maps, and moving images with interviews and present-day footage. Archivists and librarians appear on-screen, explaining how archival images preserve the memory of incline railways that have long since vanished.

• In October 2012, we launched a new series with KCET’s Artbound website to showcase unique archival materials in the USC Libraries’ architectural collections. In our first two Artbound contributions, the head of our architecture and fine arts library presented drawings that provide insight into the creative process at architectural design studios and illustrate the evolution of architectural forms in the context of Southern California history.

• In late 2012, we forged a new partnership with Los Angeles magazine to provide weekly posts for the magazine’s City Think blog. Unlike our KCET contributions, these weekly blog posts feature a single archival image and highlight a very specific detail from Los Angeles history, such as an early traffic control device or an oil well in the middle of a major road.
URLs for online content

KCET contributions:  
http://kcet.org/laassubject

KCET Artbound contributions:  
http://www.kcet.org/arts/artbound/columnists/ruth-wallach/

Los Angeles magazine contributions:  
http://www.lamag.com/citythink/citythinkblog/author/nathan-masters

Selected online media coverage

BLDG BLOG (architecture and landscape blog):
http://bldgblog.blogspot.com/2012/10/version-control.html
• “We Can Move It For You Wholesale,” December 31, 2011.  
http://bldgblog.blogspot.com/2011/12/we-can-move-it-for-you-wholesale.html

Curbed Los Angeles (real estate blog):
http://la.curbed.com/archives/2012/09/how_ostrich_farms_became_a_thing_in_socal_in_the_late_1800s.php
http://la.curbed.com/archives/2012/12/las_very_first_public_transit_took_angelenos_to_the_bar_in_1873.php
• “Remembering WeHo's Railyard Roots on Its 27th Birthday,” December 5, 2011.  

LA Observed (media news blog):
• “Freeways before the Arroyo Seco Parkway,” August 16, 2012.  
http://www.laobserved.com/archive/2012/08/freeways_before_the_arroy.php

Planetizen (urban planning blog):
• “Freeway Construction Was the Real Carmageddon for L.A.'s Communities,” October 1, 2012.  
http://www.planetizen.com/node/58637
Principal participants

**Nathan Masters** has been a staff writer at the USC Libraries since July 2010 and currently serves as manager of academic events and programming communications. He writes the weekly stories, collects images, and produces the stories on the KCET websites.

**Hugh McHarg** has overseen the USC Libraries’ communications efforts since September 2006 and currently serves as associate dean for planning and communications. He provides editorial oversight and overall project leadership, editing each story and consulting with Masters on story ideas.

**Liza Posas** serves as the USC Libraries’ part-time L.A. as Subject coordinator, acting as a liaison between USC Libraries communications staff and L.A. as Subject member institutions and providing invaluable guidance on story ideas and project direction.

**Ruth Wallach** is the head of the USC Libraries’ Helen Topping Architecture and Fine Arts Library. She is also an authority on local architecture and public art, authoring the well-regarded Public Art in Los Angeles website (publicartinla.com). Wallach selected archival drawings from the USC Libraries’ architectural collections, digitized them, and prepared commentary about them for KCET’s Artbound website.

Mission statement of the USC Libraries

The USC Libraries actively support the discovery, creation, and preservation of knowledge. We develop collections and services that support and encourage the academic endeavors of faculty, students, and staff; build a community of critical consumers of information; and help develop engaged world citizens. Through these means, we contribute to the continued success of the University of Southern California.

–Published in *The Essential Library 2011-2013* ([http://www.usc.edu/libraries/essential/](http://www.usc.edu/libraries/essential/))
14 January 2013

Stanford University Libraries Advisory Council
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305

Dear Council Members,

I am writing to you on behalf of the membership of LA as Subject in support of the University of Southern California Libraries’ application for the Stanford Prize for Innovation in Research Libraries.

LA as Subject is a research alliance of more than 230 collections dedicated to collecting, preserving and improving access to the history and culture of Los Angeles and Southern California.

We support those who curate a diverse array of collections, both large and small, with opportunities to engage their users and potential users, share best practices, learn new technologies, and otherwise continue their professional development.

The University of Southern California Libraries plays an invaluable role as our host institution. Although LA as Subject has always operated as an independent network of libraries, archives, museums, historical societies, independent collections and individual collectors, the University has provided us critical support over many years.

The University Libraries host our web presence and play a key role in our social media outreach and other communications. They have been instrumental in facilitating countless meetings and our annual Archives Bazaar for the past seven years.

More recently, the University has launched new endeavors which help our organization reach out to many across Southern California and beyond who are curious about our local history and ask themselves (and us, and each other), “What is L.A.?”

I want to share with you our excitement about these projects. Over the past two years, the University Libraries have worked in conjunction with local public television station KCET to write and disseminate a weekly story for the network’s website.

After more than one hundred high-interest articles pointing to items found throughout our collections, this ongoing project continues to draw upon our rich local archival resources to illustrate numerous facets of our shared heritage.

It is my understanding that the LA as Subject/KCET collaboration routinely draws some of the highest traffic to the station’s website. Furthermore, the quality and
engaging writing style suits them for repurposing elsewhere via traditional and social media, strengthening their impact far beyond their initial publication.

LA as Subject members are extremely appreciative of the University Libraries’ support and welcome other collaborations on our behalf which are in the works. We look forward to partnering with them well into the future to collect, protect and share the stories of Los Angeles and Southern California far and wide.

Perhaps most importantly, the unwavering support of the University of Southern California has inspired our organization to revisit our own goals and activities in order to maximize the benefits of our relationship. We recently completed a three-year strategic plan which will engage our numerous members in further strengthening our partnerships with the University.

Some of the strategic directions outlined in our planning document include online exhibits, coordinated digitization, robust social media platforms and development of a research portal providing increased access to our collections’ primary resources.

We are so grateful to the University of Southern California Libraries for their dedication of resources and creativity in making history come alive in our media partnerships and in looking forward with us toward an exciting future.

From my vantage point, the University Libraries have done much more than demonstrate creativity in user outreach for one library. They have done so on behalf of hundreds of local collections and we are confident they will continue to do so well down the road.

I wholeheartedly support their consideration for the Stanford Prize for Innovation in Research Libraries.

Sincerely,

Kenn Bicknell
Executive Committee Chair, LA as Subject

Digital Resources Librarian
Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority
1 Gateway Plaza, 99-15-1
Los Angeles, CA 90012
January 15, 2013

Stanford University
Libraries Advisory Council

Dear Council members,

When KCET and L.A. as Subject agreed to collaborate in January 2011, the success that was to come would have shocked us. I suggested a simple premise – tie in archives to local news and events when possible – and they followed through by producing weekly stories woven together by high quality storytelling and visuals of Southern California’s past.

It instantly became a hit, not only helping KCET reach a large, new web audience, but spreading far and wide among Angelenos, whether it be on social media or on the most popular local blogs. It has been a pleasure to work with the L.A. as Subject team, each week furthering the understanding and connection to the place we call home.

If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at (747)201-5309.

Sincerely,

Zach Behrens
Editor-in-Chief of Blogs
KCET-TV