Livestream Your Library:

Making Media Literacy Lessons Social

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic led a library marketing and communication team to question how they were doing everything. Brainstorming sessions and serendipitous technology discoveries led to a media-literacy focused livestream show produced by the team in concert with library faculty and staff from other departments. The result was two successful seasons of a show that brought scholars into conversation with librarians to demonstrate the ways in which expertise can and does lead to answers to questions, and how finding information is only the start of finding those answers— finding credible sources is critical. The show attempts to provide the tools necessary to make those distinctions.

Keywords: academic libraries, event planning, faculty outreach, campus engagement, technology, media literacy

Introduction

The spring semester of 2020 brought with it many challenges, but for a

small team of academic library faculty and staff at a research-intensive

institution, these challenges drove a great deal of creativity. The Marketing and Communications team decided early that fresh ideas were necessary to connect with our various audiences. The team quickly engaged in brainstorming and conversations about how to do virtual events and decided to pursue the possibility of producing a podcast. Around the same time, the libraries' Project Manager/ Producer discovered a product called StreamYard, which is a livestreaming platform. Upon convergence of the podcast idea and discovery of this product, more brainstorming ensued, and a livestream show, *For Your Reference*, was soon born.

The premise of the show hinged on media and information literacy in the hope of providing another outlet to teach students—and anyone else who might be watching—how to access and be critical consumers of information. The 2020-21 academic year served as the pilot season, during which three live episodes aired. The second season contained six episodes, three for each semester during the 2021-22 academic year. The show is predicated on a conversation between two guest scholars presenting a unique perspective on a timely topic, with librarians as guides to finding additional information and providing tips for ensuring the credibility of information.

Literature Review

Academic libraries have been experimenting with podcasting with varying degrees of institutional support. Smith et al. (2020) indicate that

strong campus partnerships and support from development and marketing leaders in the library were key to the success of their program *Calling: Earth.* Librarians have long been on the leading edge of experimenting with new technologies as means for reaching audiences and with new forms of information dissemination. Podcasting provides another avenue for audiences to hear from librarians without having to physically visit a library building, and librarians have discovered that creating and disseminating podcasts can be both easy and inexpensive (Smith et al., 2020).

The University of Utah's *Audio Studio* is an excellent example of a program through which librarians facilitate the creation of podcasts by students—providing a library environment in which students can learn about both media production as well as consumption (Nelson, 2020).
The creation of podcasts has proved to help students in social work develop their professional identity, see distinctions between structural and experiential issues in relation to social justice, and be critical and reflective in their practice (Ferrer et al., 2020). Indications are that podcasting can benefit students and educators at all levels of the educational enterprise as a teaching and learning opportunity. Besser et al. (2022) examine how educators in various academic settings engage students in the creation of podcasts as part of their instruction plans. An elementary school teacher transformed his classroom with a 10-episode podcast, garnered positive administrative attention, and won a grant

to present his experience at a national conference (Besser et al., 2022). A high school teacher shepherded a successful podcasting assignment that introduced her and her students to new software, allowing for opportunities for co-learning that were ultimately successful (Besser et al., 2022). At a teaching college, an instructor was able to provide room for students to learn and practice technical and soft skills while also allowing for variations in assessment of outcomes. In this case, the course delivery itself turned out to be an integral part of the learning process (Besser et al., 2022).

Podcast playlists indicate how on-demand, easily accessible tools and streaming can provide the basis for action and collective empathy in communities (Bensfield & Rogers, 2019). As Middleton (2016) notes, audio as a medium provides a basis for extending virtual and physical space and creating meaningful learning outcomes and more engaging educational opportunities. The project outlined here points to the ease of adding another element with a slight variation on the podcast format using livestream video. In the case of *For Your Reference,* the team intended use of the show as a medium for instruction that might typically happen in one-shot library sessions, but with added context. Since many podcasts are now relying on video, the team decided to embrace the livestream technology.

The Origin Story

Upon closing the doors to the public due to the COVID-19 pandemic, an academic library organization—known for keeping the doors to the main library open even when the entire campus is closed due to inclement weather—began to explore new ways of communicating about its services. The challenge was not ensuring that services were online—many of them had been to some degree for decades—but in making sure everyone was aware that they were available. Considering this an opportunity, the marketing team scanned the media environment in 2020 and decided to bring their media literacy expertise to venture into something altogether different.

A previous brainstorming session that led the team to consider sharing with the public lists of books, podcasts, tv shows, movies and other media that library staff were consuming left a mark on the team whiteboard, but also inspired the team to consider what it would mean to be creators rather than consumers of content. After considering a variety of formats, the idea of a livestream series came into view. Like all academic libraries, the team had to consider all the various audiences—students, prospective students, faculty, staff, parents, donors—the list is long. While keeping all those interests in mind was challenging, the team stumbled inadvertently into the decision for on-air talent thanks to a quirk of the pandemic. The increase in Zoom meetings gave faculty and staff time and opportunity to practice and become more comfortable on camera. From there, the team gathered to determine the

focus of the show, its structure, what technology was required, and a reasonable launch date. Additionally, they conducted a brainstorming session on the name of the show. Original ideas explored were *Express Your Shelf, Shelfless*, *Ashamed of Our Shelves*, *Reference This*, and *Shhhhh…* before finally landing on *For Your Reference*.

Show Structure

It was determined that the show would be broken down into various parts which would include a cold opening, an introduction, and three segments. The first segment, "Reviewer 2," invited scholars to discuss a topic centered in their expertise and served as the anchor for the show. The title of the segment, it should be noted, is based more on an academic inside joke than an invitation for an actual grudge match. In many academic disciplines, "reviewer 2" is known as the reviewer who either misunderstands the intent of your research entirely, or, worse, finds all the weak points in the armor of your argument and explains those weaknesses with extreme prejudice. The topic here informed the opening dialogue, sometimes the cold opening, and the following two segments. Following "Reviewer 2" is "Check This Out," a segment geared toward helping the audience generally be more media and information literate and was dedicated to teaching how to find credible information about the topic covered in "Reviewer 2." Finishing up the show is

"Stories from the Stacks," an opportunity to introduce a collection or artifact from Special Collections or Archives that was related to the rest of the show.

Reviewer 2

The impulse behind "Reviewer 2" was to provide the framework of an intriguing topic that could be carried into later segments to drive home the media literacy lesson of the episode. At the end of each "Reviewer 2" segment, the host read questions from the audience which were posted through social media for the guests to answer. Hosted by the Head of Marketing and Communication, the inaugural episode saw scholars Stephanie Martin and Allison Prasch examine the narratives that drive the voting behavior of evangelical Christians. As a political constituency, evangelicals are often portrayed as an implacable voting bloc animated solely by opposition to a progressive agenda. Martin's research indicated otherwise. Next up, Amy Young and Jennifer Mercieca joined the crew in Episode 2 to call for scholars to engage more directly with the public. "We don't engage with the public and then the public doesn't think that what we do has any value. And then—even worse than that—they are suspicious of us and our motives," Young said. They suggested that scholars should take more care to present their research in public spaces such as social media, podcasts, and interviews with the popular press. Finishing out the first season, Leandra Hernandez and Sarah De Los Santos Upton presented a conversation on the intersection of reproductive

justice and human rights at the US–Mexico border. Upton noted "reproductive justice goes beyond having autonomy over your own body. It's about families.... Reproductive justice also includes the right to parent your children in safe communities."

Season 2 expanded to six episodes. Episode 1 brought discussion of multi- and mixed-methods research with Nicole Allen and Jordan Allen from Utah State University and Utah Valley University, respectively. Nathan Kelley and Jana Morgan provided a lesson in how politicians actually ignore the problems that matter to peoples' lives—hint: it's about money—in Episode 2. To discuss archaeological explorations of ancient figurines, Erin Darby and Theo Kopestonsky join the crew for Episode 3. A lively discussion of the rhetoric surrounding the events of January 6th and whether they could legitimately be described as an insurrection came in Episode 4 with Jeremy Rogers and Lucas Logan. The season rounded out with discussions of history, storytelling, and mentoring with Stacey Patton in Episode 5, and how exploring the lived experience of marginalized communities can bring much richer context to theoretical discussions in scholarship with Justin Rudnick and Stevie Munz. The podcast's content covers many challenging topics, but aims to educate listeners in a manner that is easily accessible and engaging. For instance, Logan compares the January 6th events to the infamous Coachella festival describing it as "...Coachella at the White House." While

debatable in accuracy, many found humor in the statement as it helped with the sensemaking process.

Check This Out

As the segment was geared specifically toward media literacy, the host for "Check This Out" (CTO), was the Media Literacy Librarian. The goals were to explain how to find and evaluate sources on the guest scholars' topics, to share both subscription-based and publicly accessible information, to be authentic, to learn with the audience, and to exude a cool confidence about how to locate credible sources during a time when information was overwhelming for everyone. When first recording, a significant portion of the audience resided in East Tennessee and were from various socioeconomic backgrounds. Subsequently, the host tailored the content to demonstrate and outline actionable, accessible steps that would be instructive for information seekers regardless of their level of literacy. Different approaches were tried during the first season. In Episode 1, the host introduced the five components of media literacy and used props to explain. For this episode, the guest scholar also stayed for the "Check This Out" segment to answer questions about how she went about doing research in her field. The use of props was subsequently abandoned for this segment as the host decided they were too much of a distraction. Thus, the process of trial and error began: the host experimented with various formats to pinpoint the ideal segment structure and create

digestible steps to making media literacy accessible to the audience. The rest of Season 1 and part of Season 2 were dedicated to interviewing subject librarians and community practitioners who were practically or academically engaged with relevant resources related to the topic in "Reviewer 2"—a way to introduce any students in the target audience who might be listening to the librarian dedicated to their departmental major. In the second episode of Season 1 titled "The Intersection of Politics," the CTO host engaged in a conversation with an activist regarding the convergence of information literacy and activism. The aim was to connect practical, real-world steps involved in activism with the process of actively seeking knowledge to become an informed activist. The remainder of Episode 2 was a solo operation with the host focused on demonstrating specific resources available to the campus community and providing macro and micro information retrieval practices related to the topic of the episode.

Over the course of two seasons, the host reported that the on-air team has fallen into a good groove. Having started out bright-eyed but slightly terrified at getting her name—and also her face—out on the internet, the initial nerves had abated and she felt her voice had gotten louder and more confident. The host had been on the lookout for a service opportunity or project that would challenge her to start building out her media literacy instruction arsenal. Her experience was largely media production, but this

provided an opportunity to extend her skills and to also demonstrate the value of libraries to a broader public.

Stories from the Stacks

The third and final segment of the show, "Stories from the Stacks," was a lighthearted segment focusing on a variety of unique items or snippets in history from Special Collections and University Archives. The segment host changed from one season to the next which allowed the show to explore not only a number of Special Collections items, but also the journey of how an individual becomes a confident livestreaming show co-host. Learning through the process is an important piece in mastering how to prepare for each episode, how to engage the audience, and how to determine the style in which to present the artifact or moment in history.

Preparing for each episode varied based on the topic at hand, but generally remained the same. The amount of information on the topic or item and determining whether the show would benefit from an additional interviewee changed the way the segment should be approached. Even so, each episode required planning and research to develop a story that the audience found intriguing. It was also important to think about visual aids: for example, including URLs on screen when speaking about a collection that is available online and adding the link to the social media channel descriptions where it was shared. If talking about a specific time in history, sharing images from the

Archives helped keep viewers engaged. These were all critical to the success of the segment.

Wanting to keep viewers engaged from start to finish, this segment was designed so that the host had the chance to create a persona that is captivating for the audience. Personas ranged from a quirky detective discovering a historical artifact to just being themselves and telling a notable story. This style variation provided additional opportunities to invite guests—having an intriguing conversation with someone can help engage audience members for the entirety of the episode. There are also ways to create the same kind of atmosphere by oneself. Interviewing someone allowed for more flexibility in the script and gave the hosts a chance to feed off one another's energy, creating a more dynamic segment, but adding accountability to the outside partner to show up and participate in the conversation. Doing the segment independently allowed for freedom and autonomy in executing the research and planning of the segment, but it also meant extra work in ensuring there was enough material for the segment to logically make sense. With either style, one must keep in mind the time allotted for the segment to prepare accordingly. A variety of factors need to be considered for each episode, including lead time for researching the topic, the relevancy of the artifacts to the "Reviewer 2" topic, and who is available to potentially interview during the segment.

In Season 2, the segment explored fascinating artifacts and topics, and working with Special Collections and University Archives team members provided the opportunity for deeper dives into stories. Stories covered include the surprising U.S. Senator Estes Kefauver and his crime-fighting unit, the Kefauver Committee; the history behind the official university color scheme's connection to a daisy; and exploring the acquisition of the complete personal archive of internationally renowned modernist painter, Beauford Delaney, and its significance to the local community.

The Technology

A lesson learned as part of the process of pulling the show together was that if one attends a conference and notices something particularly well done, do not hesitate to ask the organizers about it. The Project Manager for the marketing team attended a virtual meeting of the local chapter of the American Marketing Association in 2020 and noticed that this event stood out as exceptionally well-produced after living for a while in a Zoom-based world. This is how the team discovered StreamYard. StreamYard is a service that allows users to record video and audio and either record in studio or livestream recordings over various social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube. A robust platform, it provides tools to edit video, create AI-generated clips for use in promoting videos, and more.

StreamYard's biggest plus, aside from the fact that there is a free version available to use, is that it makes it incredibly easy to stream to multiple social platforms at the same time. Examples are Twitch, Facebook, LinkedIn, and YouTube, but it is also possible to set up a custom real-time messaging protocol (RTMP) so that a link can be embedded on a dedicated page for the stream. This opportunity to reach multiple audiences across platforms is a distinct advantage. From the production side, StreamYard stands out for the ability to pull in live questions—through a moderator, which is key—from viewer comments on some of the channels. Custom tickers, animations, and various options for enhancing a broadcast are built-in with options to add your own. For guests, the experience is seamless. They click on a link and are brought into a backstage area, and the producer pulls them into the live broadcast when it is time. Post-event or stream, the platform packages the entire stream to repost and repurpose. Additionally, you can pull down audio files and repurpose your stream into a podcast. The creative options for content development on StreamYard are plentiful.

StreamYard stands out from competitors for the active learning community they have built around their product. They offer weekly open forums with the company founders for customers to ask questions of them directly, make feature recommendations, and more. The platform regularly— multiple times a week—brings in guest content creators, marketers, or tech

wizards to host streams offering creative examples of great content, ideas on how to stretch the platform's features, and even provide feedback on how to improve streams. The community of content creators and producers shares tips, tricks, and has even designed overlays and backgrounds free of charge. It is a collaborative, creative community. And finally, as noted, StreamYard offers a package that is free. Paid accounts afford access to more branding elements and a wider range of simulcast opportunities, but beginning to learn how the product can work is as easy as creating an account.

The software was one part of the technology equation. Tools and technology acquired during the pandemic helped navigate the online hybrid learning environment. Among the accessories that added to the production value were lighting kits, quality microphones, extra monitors, information warrior props, and more. By operating in a live setting, there was an opportunity to share expertise, tackle challenging subjects, and offer actionable insights to the audience, all within the span of an hour.

Scouting Talent

Talent scouting started easily enough by reaching out to scholars known to the team—on campus and off—to determine willingness and ability to participate. From there, the team got referrals from scholars who had done the show, some of whom recommended the show via their own social media, suggesting that the show was fun to do. In the future, the team plans to explore

grant opportunities that would provide a way to pay guests, allowing for the possibility for more well-known names in scholarship.

Scheduling/Scripting

The team would hold regular—biweekly—planning meetings during which general outlines of the show were scripted, including what joke to do in the cold open, what the discussion in introduction would entail, and what questions would be on hand to ask "Reviewer 2" guests. The team generally kept a list of questions in the event that the live audience did not provide any during the broadcast. Once the basic outline was ready, the script would be sent to all participants with a link to the specific studio for the broadcast and instructions for what to do on the night of the show. Hosts and guests would have access to adjust the script up to the time of broadcast. The script was mainly a guideline for the episode's overall structure, with hosts relying more or less on it based on their comfort level. All participants were asked to show up in the studio fifteen minutes early to ensure all technology was working properly so the show could go live promptly at 7 p.m.

The most challenging aspect of the show was simply scheduling. For the first season, while the team managed to schedule all shows at 7 p.m. on Thursday evenings, there was no set schedule ahead of time. For the second season, there were three episodes per academic semester, with each show streaming on the third Thursday of the month at 7 p.m. Near the end of the

second season, the team fell into a good rhythm of getting all the pieces of the show together further in advance. Meetings were scheduled with guest scholars in the weeks leading up to their episodes to ensure they were comfortable with the technology and how it worked differently than other systems. In some instances, the co-hosts and the producer were able to meet and have a mock run-through of the episode prior to going live.

Marketing

Given that the show was driven from the marketing team, it was simple enough to get on the marketing schedule. The show was promoted through the libraries' social media channels and through various campus newsletters—including the monthly newsletter that the libraries' produced—and the faculty and staff listserv where the team also encouraged faculty and staff to share on their own social media. The marketing team wrote articles for the libraries' blog, *Speaking Volumes*—first to outline what to expect for upcoming shows, and then follow up articles with a recap of each show with the YouTube video embedded for easy access. Naturally, the "Reviewer 2" segment guests reposted to their social media pages, inviting their followers to join the stream and participate as well.

Behind the Curtain

Among the various social media platforms, YouTube and Facebook continuously received the most interaction, with users tuning in from around

the world and the United States. No show received fewer than 100 views with the highest viewership exceeding 500 views. General feedback from viewers was positive, highlighting the convenience and real-time engagement that livestreaming offered and suggesting shorter segment lengths.

That's a Wrap

Overall, the show was and still is very much a success. Dedicated planning and research were critical to this positive outcome, but also the unforeseen changes that happened during and in-between seasons helped the team adapt quickly and have a backup plan ready to go. While most recommendations for creating a show such as this will transfer to multiple settings, there are some that cannot be predicted. For example, recommending staffing levels for initiatives such as this are nearly impossible given that they will vary wildly depending on the goal and intended outcomes of the project. However, the *For Your Reference* team has a list of four things to keep in mind for starting a livestream or podcast:

- First, find the right people. Whether it is a group or a solo endeavor, aim to create an engaging atmosphere that connects with your audience.

- Flesh out the idea. Define the end goal at the very beginning. Then, design a structure that incorporates who the audience will be, the length of the show or podcast, and the schedule or cadence of the episodes. While these steps cannot be overstated, the more granular pieces of the

show became clearer as the hosts continued with each episode and found their rhythm with each other.

- Find the right platform. Technology can make the show very easy or very difficult. It is important to find the right fit, and while that might not be StreamYard, make sure the platform chosen delivers the content effectively.

- Just do it. Planning and preparation can only go so far. Transitioning from the planning stage to the doing stage is ultimately just about being willing to go for it.

After a hiatus, *For Your Reference* relaunched in November of 2023 under different sponsorship.

Conclusion

Charlie Bennett (2022) noted that his show *Lost in the Stacks (LITS)* made him a better librarian and noted of the show that if "knowledge is information organized and contextualized, then *LITS* is a knowledge laboratory (Bennett, 2022, p.4). Much like Bennett, the *For Your Reference* crew enjoyed the messiness of learning as we went and made changes along the way. The team started out with a simple desire to get information out to audiences during a pandemic and learned new ways to communicate not only with our audience, but with each other. Podcasts are seeing a resurgence and technological advances such that there is, relatively speaking, very little expense involved in

creating a show like *For Your Reference* if the right people are involved. The information in this paper can inform interested users how to structure a podcast, recruit special guests, and incorporate technology with ease. Our experience provides insight into potential challenges and recommended strategies to support other's efforts in creative information literacy activities.

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