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Making the Case for the Use of the KSU Archives and Special Collections Through Interpretive Videos

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Making the case for the use of the KSU Archives and Special Collections through interpretive videos

As Outreach Archivist for the Museums, Archives and Rare Books Department at Kennesaw State University (KSU), one of the challenges I face is a lack of awareness of both the existence of our collections and the many potential research applications that archives and rare books provide. This series of short videos makes the case to potential users as to why we collect these materials and how they are useful and relevant to a variety of research interests. Each video pairs content from the Archives and Special Collections (including the Bentley Rare Book Museum) with expert interpretation provided by a KSU faculty member in a related field. The series is intended to serve as a proof of concept to prove the value of a video-based archival outreach initiative.

Videos disseminated online as a method of outreach have been increasingly explored by librarians over roughly the last decade (Martin, 2012; Saines, 2011; Thornton & Kaya, 2013; Weeks & Putnam-Davis, 2017). This may be attributable to the advent of social media and an increase in available online resources. Information professionals are increasingly capable of creating and maintaining online resources, and increasingly expected to do so by our user community. If users do not find the resources they seek online, they may conclude that the resources do not exist or are too difficult or time-consuming to find. Archives and special collections are nearly always non-circulating collections with closed stacks, meaning that extra effort is usually required from our researchers in the form of visiting a reading room (rather than checking materials out or using them online) and time spent searching through collections that may be large and complex. The challenge for archivists is to demonstrate that not only are these materials available for research, but worth the additional effort to access and utilize. The medium of video disseminated online presents an opportunity to both display our reading room as an accessible space and make the case for how our collections can support research that other resources (such as secondary sources or digital surrogates of primary resources) cannot.

The primary audience for this series is KSU undergraduate students. When confronted with conducting original primary source research for a project, students may find themselves at a loss of what to research, how, or where. These videos introduce the Archives and Special Collections as a physically and intellectually accessible resource and provide inspiration for potential research topics in different subject areas. Secondary audiences for these videos include faculty members and graduate students. A significant portion of our department's outreach is focused on instruction, in which we encourage instructors to bring students to the Archives for hands-on experiences with our collections. While we promote this service in other ways (emails, department presentations, social media, and word of mouth), we continue to look for new methods of outreach to make the case for instruction sessions. Instructors who encounter these videos may be inspired to seek out an instruction session, use these videos as an instruction tool or reading assignment, or utilize them for their personal research. If made available on a publicly accessible platform such as YouTube, these videos could also serve a broader audience including students and faculty at other universities and community members in Cobb County and surrounding counties.

Each video focuses on a specific theme relating to a resource, collection, or subject area represented in the KSU Archives and Special Collections, and is designed to answer the question

“What research opportunities does this item or collection provide?” My research for this project led me to consult works on documentary filmmaking, which in addition to storytelling often put forth an argument or thesis statement (Grindon, 2007; Mascaro, 2018; Nicholls, 2017). The information in my video series is not always related in the form of a story, but each video is intended to clearly articulate an argument for the use of these materials. A compelling story is a useful and often necessary device with which to draw the viewer in and make the case for the value of the resources presented.

The six videos in this collection were created from interviews conducted with three KSU faculty members. Erin Bahl of the KSU English Department examined the early 20th century illustrations of Arthur Rackham using two books from the Bentley Rare Book Museum, speaking to both the function of illustrations as part of a narrative work as well as her research interest in storytelling across media. The medium of video presents the user with a virtual tour of the item, accompanying Bahl’s description of why examining the physical structure of the original text can inform the study of storytelling over time, across communities, and across media. Randy Patton of the History Department discusses the Gordon, Wentzel, Kruse Collection in the context of his research for his recent book, “Lockheed, Atlanta, and the Struggle for Racial Integration.” His interview demonstrates how the resources in this collection tell the story of how a local aircraft manufacturing facility implemented an affirmative action program in the 1960s that served as a model for other companies across the country. Patton’s videos incorporate subject areas of civil rights, business and labor, 20th century economics, and the impact of national politics on local history. They demonstrate how primary resources reveal the contributions of individuals to these historically significant events, as well as the process by which these achievements were made. These include affidavits from local African-American workers sharing personal stories of Lockheed’s racial discrimination that would disqualify the company from federal contracts, the development of the affirmative action plan that would allow Lockheed to retain such contracts, and the further work of Lockheed executives to promote affirmative action programs to corporations across the country. LeeAnn Lands of the History Department uses the story of one woman told across several issues of a community newspaper (from the Cobb County Branch of the NAACP Records) to explain the history and significance of urban renewal programs in the United States. She makes the case that this newspaper (Cobb News) provides a resource to understanding the impact of federal housing programs on individual families as well as smaller to mid-size American cities, two areas that current historical scholarship has not significantly pursued. She also argues that Cobb News, which was created by and served the African American community of Cobb County, provides detailed coverage of an under-documented segment of the American South’s population which cannot be found in major newspapers of that time and place.

While other video projects I encountered in my research relied heavily on archivists and curators to interpret the historical significance and research value of the materials (Harry Ransom Center, n.d., New York Public Library, n.d.; US National Archives, n.d.), I sought out interpretation from KSU faculty for several reasons. These professors are often skilled lecturers and have devoted their career to studying this subject area and are able to provide a greater depth of knowledge than I could. Additionally, they serve as a stand-in for our potential user, having done research in this area themselves, possibly in the very collection about which they are speaking. Finally, an argument for the use of our materials presented by someone who is not employed by our department serves as an authoritative, external testimonial for the value of our

collections. The recruitment of instructors for participation in the videos also offers an opportunity for further outreach to our faculty, and may lead to ideas for assignments, research projects, or instruction sessions using archival materials.

I collaborated with each interviewee prior to filming to choose a compelling topic based on our collections and their research interests. During the interview, I prompted the interviewee with prepared questions that elicited responses about the materials' broad historical background, the story they tell, potential research applications, and the value of engaging with original primary documents. In addition, I filmed b-roll shots of the interviewee engaging with our materials, which sometimes inspired spontaneous observations. I recorded the interviews using a Canon HD video camera and tripod borrowed from KSU University Information Technology Services. I also digitized materials from the Archives for use in the video to provide examples to complement the discussion and visual interest for the viewer. Finally, I edited the interviews using Adobe Premiere Rush to create concise videos around a specific topic. While my original intent was to create videos one to two minutes in length, I discovered that different lengths of time were needed for each video based on the subject matter and flow of the interviews. My final cuts run between one and five minutes. These are the strongest, most compelling treatments of each topic and best fit the goals of the project. The videos that are too long for social media in their entirety could still be promoted there using a shortened clip. I also created closed captioning for the videos to ensure accessibility for users with hearing impairments.

These videos are intended to function as a proof of concept for my department (Museums, Archives and Rare Books), to demonstrate that such an outreach endeavor is feasible and worthwhile. The KSU Archives currently uses Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for outreach, and any of these platforms could support the dissemination of some version of these videos. Ultimately, I would like to create a library of videos demonstrating how our collections could support research and instruction relating to not only history and English but also art, geography, environmental history, political science, architecture, women and gender studies, and more fields for which they are currently underutilized or not used at all. While full versions of the videos could be hosted on our department website or KSU's Media Space, the platform of a YouTube channel would further enable users to browse videos in one place, choosing individual videos that interest them or viewing related videos in prepared playlists on a given topic or format (such as civil rights or the art of illustration).

The videos in this series create an interactive learning opportunity for potential users to engage with primary resources in the KSU Archives and Special Collections. In her interview, Dr. Bahl notes the difference between passively scrolling through Rackham's illustrations online and actively engaging with the original text, stating that it gives the user a different appreciation for the material and changes the experience of doing research. While exposing users and potential users to materials via images on social media can be valuable outreach, these videos represent the items as multidimensional, drawing the viewer into a more active engagement with the materials they feature. This interactivity is further supported by the presence of additional videos from which a user can choose based on their personal interests. This video series has the potential to increase awareness and use of the Archives and Special Collections by making the case for their existence and value to researchers.

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