Grantee Name

University of Southern California

Project Title

To support a series of experiments to develop new models for communicating about the arts

Project Progress and Successes

There are four projects covered by this grant. Because of the multiple projects, we have chosen to write about each -- successes, failures, lessons -- project by project, rather than successes for each, failures for each, etc.

1. Engine30
This project brought together 15 fellows -- journalists, designers, and software developers chosen from a pool of 257 applicants -- to Los Angeles for ten days (November 8-18, 2012) to work with 12 Master's students in journalism and create stories for a website we collectively created called Engine30 (www.engine30.org/new). This team worked collaboratively with three media partners -- the Los Angeles Times, KPCC public radio, and KCET public television, producing three projects - one attempting to measure the amount of arts education in Southern California over the past decade, a second exploring battles for who owns public space that we called Contested Spaces, and a third to see if we can use data sets to measure why some communities have arts activity and others do not.

We produced the Engine30 website, a student website called coLAb (http://www.colab.com), and our three media partners ran stories produced through Engine30. The way the projects were created broke new ground. Instead of being told linearly, the projects "atomized" their topics, using a combination of aggregation and many points of original reporting, data analysis and visualizations. One of the stories -- on arts education -- was central to a package of stories by partner KPCC. It got much attention in the arts education and arts policy community in LA, and inspired a similar story in the Washington Post several weeks later. One of the Contested Spaces stories -- on pop-up arts projects -- was picked up by KCET-TV and was made into a series. We should also note that this was the first time ever that our three media partners -- traditionally news rivals -- have worked together on any stories.

Engine30 was ambitious not just because of the projects we worked on producing but because of the range of participants and partners we gathered. One of the lessons of Engine29 (the project that preceded Engine30) was that we should expand our explorations of new arts journalism models beyond journalists. Innovation in communications about the arts can't just come from journalists; it has to involve others, including artists and non-journalists. We added designers and developers in hopes of bringing different non-journalistic approaches to telling stories.

Another way this project was complicated was the diversity of backgrounds of the participants. We had all-star elite fellows -- developers, designers and journalists, chosen competitively. We had veteran journalists -- our media partners, backed by their newsrooms, who used Engine30 as an experimental media lab. And we had graduate students who tended to be younger.

INSIGHTS, OBSERVATIONS, LESSONS, CHALLENGES & FAILURES
We learned more from this project than any of our previous projects. From that perspective it was a tremendous success. As a project however, it was a difficult and even unsatisfying experience in some respects. Our theory going into this project (building on success of

Engine29) was that gathering an all-star cast of designers, developers and journalists would result in new, highly-innovative ways of telling stories. The process for creating Engine30 stories was not to tell the participants what and how to create them. Instead, we created a working framework and articulated ambitious goals for outcomes. The purpose was to give participants room to be creative and experimental.

But we did not fully appreciate how different the cultures of the various participants are. Each group has its points of flexibility and rigidity. Those points don't necessarily intersect or line up in productive or collaborative ways. Experimentation meant something different for each group. In making the process goal-oriented rather than process-oriented (which we did to encourage unconventional thinking) we underestimated the interactions of culture between groups. In short, we didn't give them enough structure or limitations to define their interactions in productive ways.

By the third day each group had retreated into their most-conservative selves and the project nearly unraveled. Each group fought for control and collaborations broke down. Where the journalists needed flexibility from the designers, the process had been locked: the developers needed content from the journalists when the journalists were unwilling to release it; designers retreated to their table and locked their designs without consultation.

We spent the next seven days putting the project back together, and we produced a respectable result that resulted in some good stories. For example, we had hoped with the developers and designers to create some effective visualizations. The visualizations we made, however, while pretty, didn't break any new ground. Likewise, we hoped that some of the data projects would lead to interesting user interfaces that would allow visitors to the website to look "inside" the data in interesting ways. While we succeeded in giving users the ability to define data views for themselves (another one of our goals), the user interfaces were not attractive or simple enough. Finally, the stories themselves were imagined as pieces of a bigger whole, integrating into an in-depth and thoughtful exploration of their topics. While we produced some good stories, the integration of the stories into that deeper whole was incomplete.

What we learned from Engine30 was that we need to concentrate on making the process more concrete if we expand out beyond journalists. When we did the previous Engine projects, the culture of the newsroom was a commonality. We spent a lot of time talking about innovating in storytelling and the journalists would apply that on top of what they already knew (this is both good and bad). But without a shared sense of journalism, we needed to focus more clearly on a structure for making stories.

In addition, we tried to do in ten days what probably needed six months. It was an experiment that yielded abundant information that has subsequently been applied to subsequent projects.

2. Engine31/HumanaFest
This was our first pop-up newsroom Engine project outside Los Angeles. Press coverage of festivals such as The Humana Festival of New American Plays has become more and more spotty in recent years. The premise of Engine31 was to create a critical mass of coverage. We brought a dozen theatre journalists to Louisville to not only produce original reporting and critical analysis of HumanaFest (April 4-8, 2013), but to aggregate and give shape to whatever other coverage was being produced. The audience for this project was not so much people we hoped would come out to see the festival, but those who are interested in what happened at this festival and are interested in the plays. This then, is largely an audience after-the-fact.

We produced 65 stories for Engine31 -- in audio, visual and text. There is a big piece that tries to put HumanaFest in the context of the national regional theatre scene. There's a piece that takes a broad look at the work produced at this year's festival and tries to make sense of what it says as a set of plays. There's a piece that focuses on directors and the art of directing. There are numerous video and audio pieces capturing voices of the artists, playwrights, and directors who were there, talking about issues in contemporary theatre. There are features, blogs and news stories, and an audience-participation project, as well as aggregation of other media about HumanaFest. We made a partnership with the Louisville Courier-Journal newspaper and they carried stories from Engine31, and their arts critic spent the weekend working with the Engine31 team. We ran contests and interactivity projects for the audience during intermission, which proved exhilarating for the crowd and drew attention to Engine31. The site had about 12,000 visits during the festival, and another 20,000 in the months after.

This was the most comprehensive coverage of this year's Humana Festival. It will also be a valuable reference for anyone wanting to consider any of the work produced there in the 2014 festival. It also was an important step forward in developing our Engine series as a model for coverage of arts events. And it helped the city's local newspaper -- the Courier-Journal produce better and more coverage of the festival.

INSIGHTS, OBSERVATIONS, LESSONS, CHALLENGES & FAILURES
The pop-up newsroom Engine is a great way of gathering and producing journalism about a festival. It definitely improves coverage, both on the Engine and in local media, through partnerships. Bringing together theatre journalists from around the country broadens the point of view of critical coverage, and there's no question critical discourse about the festival is enriched.

We made a decision at the start not to focus on reviewing the festival, on the assumption that there would be plenty of critics there focused on reviewing. In retrospect, it's clear that most of those reviews were not very well done, and we would have greatly added to the coverage by producing high-quality reviews. But to do this effectively we would need to have arrived with our dozen journalists the third weekend of the festival and stayed through to the fourth and final weekend. Few journalists, especially critics, can commit that kind of time away form their respective jobs. Our team was an all-star team, including Michael Phillips of the Chicago Tribune, Steven Leigh Morrris of the L.A. Weekly, Anthony Byrnes of KCRW, National Public Radio in Santa Monica, Chris Klimek of Washington City Paper and Jenny Lawton of Studio 360.

Since this was our first time in Louisville, we spread the focus of our coverage to cast a wide net. Were we to do this project again, we would concentrate on fewer stories. The stories which got the most attention -- by far -- were the in-depth analysis pieces, and they are the stories we're most proud of. We should do more of this type.

We also didn't dig deeply enough into audience engagement. Engine31 was not designed as an experimental project in the sense of developing new story-telling forms (in the way, for example, Engine30 was). Instead, it was an attempt to create a critical mass of coverage around an event -- which we did. That said, the audience engagement piece of journalism is critical, and while we attempted a couple of interactive audience projects, we could have developed this more. We could have afforded to be more experimental.

3. Virtual Summit
In October 2013, we produced a virtual summit on new models for arts journalism. This

followed on our earlier National Summit on Arts Journalism at USC in the fall of 2009. The 2009 summit was a kind of scan of the state of innovation in arts journalism at the time. We identified and presented five innovative projects in arts journalism, we solicited nominations of innovative arts journalism projects and received 109 submissions, of which we chose and presented five, and we convened panels of arts journalism experts. All were presented at the Annenberg School for Journalism and Communication and streamed live on the web.

For the 2013 summit, rather than doing another scan of existing projects, we decided to focus firmly on the future. In collaboration with the Annenberg Innovation Lab, using their "Think and Do" process for developing and prototyping new ideas, we invited 64 leading journalists, artists, technologists, entrepreneurs and funders to spend a day focusing on new models and projects for arts journalism. What is the need for arts journalism now? What role ought it to play? What role could it play?

There was agreement across the participants that the state of journalism about the arts has been diminished over the past ten years. This is backed up by observations that space in the traditional press has been greatly diminished, arts journalism jobs in traditional publications have been eliminated, and that in some cities there is now little that passes for arts journalism. While blogs, social media and online publications have taken up some of the slack, the trend to lesser, less-informed arts coverage is unmistakable.

Participants at the summit were divided into teams, and those teams were repeatedly reshuffled during the day to encourage maximum interaction. First, teams of two identified essential qualities of arts journalism. Imagine a world without arts journalism. If you were going to now invent it, what would it look like? What features would it need to have? After one-on-one discussions, the pairs joined up with two other pairs each to form groups of six and come up with lists of essential features arts journalism ought to have. One dominant theme emerged: access and inclusiveness. The group was concerned that not everyone has access to the arts or to journalism about the arts. Partly this is an economic issue; who can afford connectivity. But access is also about language and medium. Are arts journalists doing their work in ways that everyone can understand or participate in? Does their work speak to a small group of experts or to a wider community?

A second concern is about sustainability. As in: we need arts journalism hitched to a business model that can support it. Again this is both an economic issue as well as a practice issue. Are arts journalists finding and building communities that resonate with their work?

After debating all of the ideas, participants chose five ideas to work on and try to develop projects from them. The five projects were:
i. Unlikeme.com: An app that helps you find culture you don't know about and that you might like or might want to try. We need ways to extend our taste that aren't just random, and this idea would encourage serendipity in our cultural encounters.
ii. A "ProPublica for the Arts": Serious reporting about the arts has shrunk as staff arts journalists have been cut from American newspapers. The age of Big Data holds out the promise of being able to dig deep into the ways the arts work. But without resources and expertise, that reporting isn't happening. What the arts need is a ProPublica for the arts, an organization that would compile and contextualize data on the arts, produce meaningful investigative reporting and vet research.
iii. A Multi-tiered Conversation System: Teams of reporters cover the same story from different angles, trying different tones, different media, different lengths and sizes, different means of marketing the story, at different times (preview, review, retrospective).
iv. Discoverability: Can You Find It/Can It Find You? Everyone has an interest in promoting

American creativity. If you believe that Americans are exceptional, it is creativity (in the form of entrepreneurship) that makes us exceptional. We need an app (or series of apps) that help connect us with creativity, wherever it is.
v. Slow Journalism: Journalism now is so focused on fast and short. We need more "slow." Give critics the opportunity to experience something over a long period of time. Have them go back again and again and again. Have them write (or make whatever media they make) again and again and again.

INSIGHTS, OBSERVATIONS, LESSONS, CHALLENGES & FAILURES
We gathered up members of a broad arts "eco-system" to consider the future of one very sick member -- arts journalism. While there was broad consensus about its parlous state, there was less so agreement about what was most needed to address it. Of all the features of arts journalism most wanted, the most-discussed with the entire group were accessibility and sustainability. Yet when it came time to design projects no one wanted to work on either. Was it because these issues were too hard to solve? Too amorphous to tackle?

Experiments in arts journalism with the aim of improving it have suffered from lack of imagination, lack of resources, and the absence of a systemic approach. Experiments have tended to be derivative, scattershot, and too stuck in traditional definitions. Things are now so bad we have even lost the language to begin addressing the issues. In short, where once there was agreement among journalists, artists and the broader culture about the roles and functions of good arts journalism, there is now none. The field has lost its community of practice.

While there's an amazing richness of experimentation and the flourishing of new voices is breathtaking, it's almost impossible to get traction for anything because there isn't a community of practice that provides a framework with which to evaluate it. This is largely the reason that there has been so little effective innovation in the ways we communicate about the arts.

A new community of practice around communicating culture has to be bigger than traditional journalism. Virtually every arts organization and many artists are becoming media organizations in their own right. It is changing them -- how they act, what they choose to do, even who they are. Cultural consumers are becoming the equivalent of their own media organizations, many with audiences through social media that exceed those of the arts organizations and artists in whom they're interested. Arts professionals have also become media organizations, often articulating and driving the most interesting ideas in the arts.

The point is that "arts journalism" is no longer contained within a traditional job description. Traditional arts journalists -- as much as they'd love to -- can no longer define the community of practice on their own because they're now a subset of a larger community.

Out of the virtual summit have emerged some new initiatives. One of the funders who participated that day subsequently commissioned a business plan for a "ProPublica for the Arts" -- a non-profit new organization focused on reporting on arts and culture in mold of ProPublica or GlobalPost. Such projects have risen -- The Pulitzer Prize-winning ProPublica to do investigative reporting, and GlobalPost to do international news -- as traditional news organizations have retreated. The serendipity app also sparked development efforts from another group of journalists present.

4. DanceMapLA
Visibility is power. The more visible a community, the more power it has. Los Angeles' dance

community is small, fragmented and dispersed, and because it is so spread out, it has difficulty attaining any kind of critical mass. While there is a lot of dance in LA County, community awareness of it is limited. Further, even among the dance community itself, there is little understanding of the size, scope and make-up of the community. Several attempts have been made to quantify and statistically describe the dance community, with limited success.

So what does dance in LA look like? Where does it happen? Who dances? And what do their lives look like? Who's talking about dance and what are they talking about?

DanceMapLA is our attempt to map dance in its many forms in Los Angeles and make the community more visible. We use "map" metaphorically. So from a physical where-does-dance-happen view, we have more than 200 places plotted on an interactive map -- dance schools, performance spaces, vendors, etc. Website users can add dance places to the map.

But we also have a "talk" page where visitors can go to see what's trending in topics in the dance world. We adapted Twitter bot code developed at the Nieman Journalism Lab at Harvard University to monitor and aggregate the stories in dance that are getting the most attention on Twitter. You can see stories from the past week or the past month. In this way you can "map" the stories that seem to be of most interest in the dance world.

Lastly, we are mapping dancers themselves. What does a dancer look like in LA? We collected data about commercial dancers in LA from the Screen Actors Guild. And we've adapted a dancer survey developed by DanceNYC and vetted with dozens of experts in the dance community in Los Angeles, which we will deploy in the fall of 2014. The survey asks demographic, financial and professional questions in an attempt to create a snapshot of what dancers look like statistically.

The website has been completed (www.dancemapla.com) and will launch in the fall of 2014 when the survey is deployed throughout Los Angeles. USC is working with dance organizations throughout the county to publicize and encourage participation in the survey.

INSIGHTS, OBSERVATIONS, LESSONS, CHALLENGES & FAILURES
The proposal for this project envisioned being able to create a map by collecting data that would show the range of dance activity in LA. In the beginning, we naively thought we could create a platform populated initially with generic data, and invite the dance community to begin adding their own data to create an interactive accurate-to-the-moment map which one could use to access information about dance in Los Angeles.

It became apparent as we started working on this that building a tool that the dance community would use, let alone find useful, was a challenge. We began by asking what information dancers and the organizations that serve them wanted to know. The short answer is that they wanted to know how to get funding for their work.

But beyond that, there were questions about the size of the dance community, how much dancers make, and where they could access resources. Getting "live" information -- like what people were talking about, where things were happening, and linking dance communities with places to talk were not high on the list.

We had set out to create a tool, but found that there was more interest in basic, largely static information. This didn't bode well for a site that people would use on a regular basis. On the other hand, maybe they might not know they wanted to see what the hot topics in the dance world are unless we showed them.

We found resources that we didn't want to duplicate. There are many places to find lists of dance events. And the LA County Arts Commission has built an excellent site that lists rehearsal spaces, for example.

Another challenge is that we had wanted to avoid creating another database. As we began research on this project, we found numerous resources on dance, and we had assumed that DanceMapLA would be a kind of aggregator or collector of other databases, a kind of one-stop shopping that made accessing them easier. And if we made it possible for the information to be updated through crowdsourcing, the information would stay current.

But it became obvious that the kind of demographic information we were looking for about dancers, for example, did not really exist, and if we wanted it, we would have to create it. Motivating the community to update information itself was another huge hurdle. And while there are plenty of websites about dance, there was nothing that monitored the topics that were of biggest concern to the dance community, so creating a tool that would do that would be necessary.

We collected the geographic dance resource listings by assigning USC graduate students to pour through every existing resource and verifying information. We believe this is the most comprehensive list of dance resources in LA County. There is a form on the page that users can use to submit additional resources to keep the map current.

We found NiemanLab's Fuego Twitter bot code, which monitors social media conversations and our developer adapted it to track what the dance community is talking about on Twitter. This is the only place that attempts to track dance conversations.

Our dance survey has been written and rewritten and vetted to collect information we can use in a statistical profile of the LA dance community. It is interactive, so users can see their results compared to everyone else who has taken the survey so far. We wanted to make the survey as easy and fun as possible to encourage participation. In partnership with the Dance Resource Center and more than a dozen other organizations in LA, we'll be mounting a campaign this fall to get dancers to take the survey. Users of the website will see up-to-the-minute live results.

Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project

Please see the "Project Progress and Success" section.

What was learned from these that might be of benefit to others?

One of the most important aspects of this grant was the ability to stage several projects and have them build one on the other. A big obstacle to innovation in media generally is that experiments have tended to be scattershot and ephemeral.

In arts journalism this is particularly problematic because journalism in the arts has never been a top priority in most general news publications, and as the media landscape began to change a decade ago, arts journalism took major hits. Thus, innovation in arts journalism has not been able to build on strength and robust traditional models.

It's difficult to be innovative out of the gate in one-shot projects. Because of lack of resources and absence of risk capital, experiments in arts journalism have been extremely limited. What experiments there have been have tended to be firmly rooted in (marginal) traditional models. And lessons learned through one-shot projects have tended to go

nowhere after projects were completed because the field did not have the resources to do so.

We learned as much from the obstacles in these projects as we did from their successes. This was by design. The DanceMapLA project, for example, was greatly informed by the data-gathering lessons learned in Engine30. The approach of simple interfaces, and video/image-based organization of DanceMapLA grew directly from Engine30 and 31.

The approach to developing better tools that we used in the National Arts Journalism Summit grew directly out of our difficulties in Engine30 in meshing cultures of developers, journalists and designers. Our Engine31 project at the Humana Festival of New American Plays explored on-the-fly organization of a pop-up newsroom and benefited from earlier pioneering attempts to create mobile newsrooms at theatre festivals in Los Angeles (Engine28.com).

Each project attempted to address issues we discovered while working on earlier projects. Each of these projects has strengths and weaknesses, and resulted in some excellent journalism. But more important (critically so) were the opportunities to take on difficult issues in the business of doing journalism and create successive experiments designed not simply to make great stories but to develop better systems and techniques for creating great journalism.

By nature of their experimental nature, the products of these experiments themselves are not as important as the knowledge gained and development of processes in innovating in arts journalism which will be explored in future projects. As a field, arts journalism is having difficulty innovating because of meager resources, mistaking new technology for innovation, and a lack of sustained risk-taking.

Mostly though, the field is suffering from a disintegration of a generally held sense of "common practice" that used to define professional excellence. The depletion of resources for quality arts journalism has resulted in a field that can no longer come to consensus about the definition of quality arts journalism. And until there are many more sustained, systematic experiments and field-wide discussions about standards, practices and innovation, it will be difficult to build new sustainable models for arts journalism.

Links to relevant website(s) and/or project publications, reports, etc.

www.engine30.org/new
www.engine31.org
www.dancemapla.org
www.ajsummit.org

If someone wishes to speak with your organization further about your project, would there be a willing contact? Y/N

If yes, please provide contact name and information for preferred method of contact (email, phone, etc).

Y - Sasha Anawalt: anawalt@usc.edu