

# Virtually . . . Everything 2020

## Generating and Housing Substantial and Engaging Online Programming

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**O**n March 17, 2020, the Free Library of Philadelphia closed its physical locations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although our buildings were closed, library workers continued to generate online content and promote the library's electronic services to the general public.

Like many institutions, we did not have a plan for a prolonged mass closure, and our system relied on the creativity and motivation of all staff to reach as many patrons as possible. The Special Collections Division of the Free Library quickly pivoted to respond to this change of service model and began to produce online content for our patrons via social media.

As Philadelphia's lockdown extended beyond the initially estimated time, Division Chief Janine Pollock acknowledged our hard work and challenged us to be mindful of the following points when creating online programming:

- Who will be burdened?
- Who benefits?
- Who will be better off?

Our initial sources of online distribution were limited to the various social media accounts of our collections, the Free Library's blog, and a handful of other outlets. As staff developed more materials, the issue of permanency became a concern because content generated for our social media was ephemeral. Programming posts were victims to "popularity" algorithms, and if content appeared in a notification feed, it would be buried within days, possibly hours. The Free Library's blog, while stable, is used to promote all library programming, not just Special Collections. Being mindful of our mandates, we resolved these issues by creating an online repository (<http://bit.ly/FunWithFLPSpecColl>). Our repository model can be readily adapted and may be a valuable

tool for library workers promoting virtual programs, such as storytimes, livestreams, and crafts.

### Who Will Be Burdened?

To allay issues of permanence, the Special Collections Division needed to develop this repository, creating a home that would gather online content produced by our division in one easy-to-find location for patron access. However, we had to do this without burdening our IT department with additional work.

After gathering links to previously released content, we considered publishing the list in a Google Doc, but this format had drawbacks. The document would be difficult to navigate, would not be visually appealing, and would grow cumbersome as links were added. Realizing these limitations, we brainstormed a list of specifications needed to make our repository successful:

- an inexpensive and user-friendly hosting platform
- a pleasing look and easy navigation
- frequent updates to encourage repeat viewings



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- the ability to track user numbers for library reports and statistics
- flexibility to adapt and expand as our requirements change

Our next step was exploring options to meet all of our needs. As our division relies on Google Drive to share files, Google Sites seemed like the logical tool. It was free, did not require a strong background in website design, and the customizable templates allowed us to create an on-brand look without having to start from the ground up.

The initial time investment was not insubstantial, but the end result is polished and can be easily updated. Additionally, the “burden” lies solely with Special Collections staff and does not inconvenience other departments of the Free Library.

## Who Benefits?

When the Free Library’s physical locations are open, the Special Collection Division hosts patrons of all ages. Our exhibitions and outreach are designed for everyone, from early elementary school to lifelong learners; our virtual programming had to have the same approach. We needed content with broad appeal that crossed a majority of age ranges while providing patrons the opportunity to tailor their experiences whenever possible. To do this, we had to use multiple delivery methods.

Our initial foray into new territory was through slideshows that juxtaposed items in our collection with playful text designed to distract patrons from the anxieties of the pandemic (<https://bit.ly/SCDSocialDistancingWrong>). These were popular, but it was difficult to find new and timely topics to cover using our materials. Looking to create something more interactive, we used Google Slides to create quizzes (<https://bit.ly/CLRCMatch>); this challenge was successful but incredibly labor-intensive and proved too onerous for continuous programming. In light of the interest shown in this initial game, we began exploring other freeware that would allow us to use items across our collections in nontraditional ways.

We used Flippity and its suite of freeware to create interactive content, such as matching games (<https://bit.ly/SCDMatching>) and memory games (<https://bit.ly/SCDMemory>). Jigsaw Planet, another free service, makes puzzles (<https://bit.ly/SCDPuzzles>) using artwork housed at the Free Library; the puzzles are customizable on the player’s side, allowing patrons to choose their own difficulty setting.

The repository is nimble so we can respond quickly to patron needs. When we realized that Pennsylvania’s mail-in primary ballots did not include an “I Voted” sticker, we created stickers to be shared online or printed and worn at home using artwork in our collections. The voting page (<https://bit.ly/FLPSpecCollVote>) proved surprisingly popular, generating one-third of the site’s traffic.

The second-most visited section, the video page (<https://bit.ly/FLPSpecCollVideos>), has shown significant growth as recorded live-streams, discussions, and hang-outs have been added, allowing patrons to view events long after they occurred. The repository also hosts material created from pre-COVID activities, including podcasts (<https://bit.ly/SCDPodcasts>) and #ColorOurCollections coloring pages (<https://bit.ly/flpcolorourcollections>).

By generating new online content and including pre-COVID materials, the repository grows organically with our community, and our patrons benefit from easy access to a wide range of ever-growing and reusable programming.

## Who Will Be Better Off?

The question of statistic-gathering arose quickly after we selected Google Sites to host the repository. In the past, our team used Bitly (<https://bit.ly>) to generate vanity URLs and track the number of clicks each custom URL received on social media. It was not a service we used regularly, but it was one in which we had a basic proficiency and was easily incorporated. Our belief was that the vanity URLs would generate data for only thirty days, a lifetime in the age of social media. In using Bitly more frequently, we discovered that our understanding was incorrect; free Bitly accounts will store thirty days of information but will keep recording for a rolling thirty-day period. By checking the links monthly and recording the data in a spreadsheet, we are able to get an accurate snapshot of the link’s performance across its entire lifetime.

Bitly is not our only analytical source; while exploring freeware, we found Google Analytics, a tool that integrates into Google Sites and provides a more robust look at the website’s viewers. Analytics requires a Gmail address, and access is limited to one account. The service provides visitor geographic locations and compares site usage across time. With Analytics, we can see how long patrons stay on each page of the repository and which pages attract the most attention. It also graphs data between customizable time frames (e.g., how our numbers from last month compare with our numbers from this month).

The information gathered from both Bitly and Google Analytics is not wholly surprising—we have more visits when social media accounts direct patrons to the repository. As we do this, the percentage of returning patrons increases. The Special Collections Division is better off because we have statistics that show patron engagement through the reach of our online programming. The data provides tangible proof of popular items, informing our efforts to create future online programming. The division also benefits from increased innovation among the staff as they devise additional content.

As of August 2020, the physical locations of the Free Library were in the early stages of reopening to the general public, but online engagement with our patrons has been continuous during the

COVID-19 pandemic. As Free Library workers rushed to generate substantial and engaging online programming, the Special Collections Division also strove to meet this demand.

Guided by the tenets of “Who will be burdened?,” “Who benefits?,” and “Who is better off?,” we built a sustainable and flexible home for content that can be accessed repeatedly by patrons of all ages and learning needs. Created with freeware and managed by Special Collections, the repository does not burden our IT department. The process has generated

opportunities for our staff to interact in new and exciting ways with patrons through the repository as programming needs evolve. The model is easily adapted for other groups and institutions and may be a beneficial tool for library workers looking to promote online content. Storytimes, livestreams, crafts, and other activities can all be integrated in a similar manner and by people with a range of technical skills. The strength of this system lies in the adaptability of the site and the creativity of library staff to find novel ways to serve patrons, making us all better off. &

## Sendak Set to Stream

The Maurice Sendak Foundation has entered into a multiyear agreement with the AppleTV+ streaming service to create new animated specials and series based on the stories and pictures of Maurice Sendak.

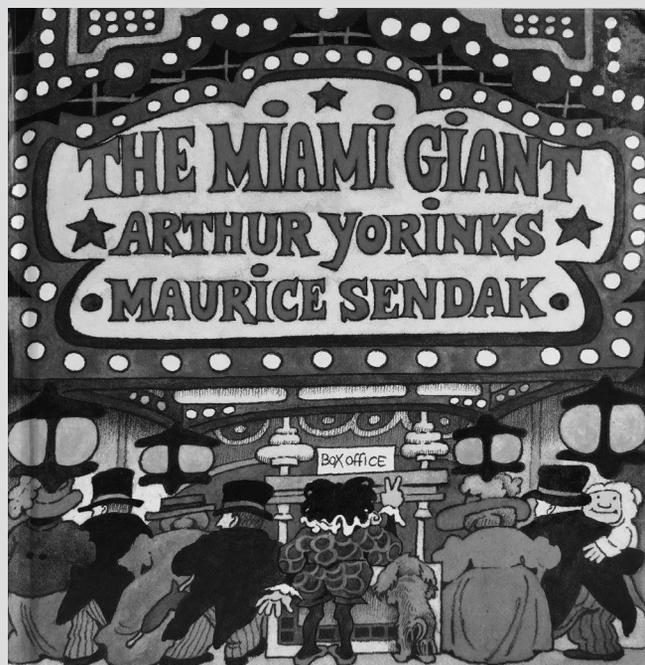
Lynn Caponera, president of The Maurice Sendak Foundation, said, “Though most know him through his iconic books, Sendak’s legacy also resides in theater, film, and TV, and this partnership with Apple will further the awareness of his unique genius.”

Arthur Yorinks, writer-director and longtime Sendak colleague, will oversee all Apple/Sendak projects through his Night Kitchen Studios.

Other franchises signed to landmark agreements for original kids’ programming on AppleTV+ include Peanuts (*Snoopy in Space*), Sesame Workshop (*Ghostwriter*), and the Jim Henson Company (*Fraggle Rock*).

Though plans are in the very early stages, Yorinks said in a July 2020 issue of *Publisher’s Weekly*, “We have our eye on a couple of projects to begin with . . . and part of the fun will be to explore Maurice’s work and figure out what’s suited to adaptation. He worked in so many styles that we know that when you see any project

come together it will not only be varied, but uniquely Sendakian.” &



*The Miami Giant* by Maurice Sendak and Arthur Yorinks, Harper, 1995.