

# EXTENDING REACH WITH TECHNOLOGY

**SEATTLE OPERA'S MULTIPRONGED  
EXPERIMENT TO DEEPEN RELATIONSHIPS  
AND REACH NEW AUDIENCES**



**Bob Harlow**

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## PREFACE

This case study describes how Seattle Opera used digital and other technologies to connect with different audiences in new ways. It is part of a larger set of 10 case studies commissioned by The Wallace Foundation to explore arts organizations' efforts to reach new audiences and deepen relationships with their existing audiences. These in-depth reports lay out how the efforts were created and run, describe the results in detail, identify what helped the initiatives become successful, and show what got in the way of success. They add to a growing body of field-based research, providing specific examples of individual organizations' responses to unique circumstances. At the same time, each aspires to capture more-broadly applicable lessons about what works and what does not—and why—in building arts audiences.

The individual case studies are the products of multiple interviews with key staff and analysis of program elements, budgets, and planning documents. Unlike similar efforts, however, each draws from a multifaceted base of data and evidence collected over a period of several years, including ticket purchases, online activity, and participation in a broad array of programming, as well as qualitative and quantitative research undertaken by independent consultants and the organizations themselves to inform program development and to evaluate

results. That research was integral to each program, and of such importance that in 2015 The Wallace Foundation will publish a companion guide on using research to support audience building that draws from practices and examples employed across the 10 organizations.

Each case study in this series begins with a brief executive summary and a “scene-setter” describing an actual component of the program. That is followed by an overview of the environment within which the organization was operating, its audience-building challenges, and the program it built to address those challenges. Detail follows about strategy and tactics, and key decisions and adjustments made as the organization developed its approach and refined it in response to new information. Additional specifics are provided on how progress was measured and what results occurred, and an analysis highlighting elements that led to success follows.

Seattle Opera is part of a second round of case studies. The first round comprised four organizations, and this second round contains six. The 10 arts groups encompass variety in size, geography, and art form. Perhaps more importantly, each organization’s strategy and set of tactics are different, providing planning details and considerations across diverse programs and circumstances.

The experiences of the organizations as a whole reveal several recurring themes. When the first four case studies were published in 2012, we highlighted five general principles:

1. Market research can sharpen engagement-strategy development and execution.
2. Audiences are open to engaging in the arts in new and different ways.
3. Audience building is an ongoing endeavor, not a one-time initiative.

4. Audience-building efforts should be fully integrated into every element of an organization’s operations, not approached as a separate initiative or program.
5. Programs that emerge from a clear and well-supported organizational mission develop in environments in which they can thrive.

These themes are reinforced in the experiences of the six organizations in the second group of case studies and were more fully developed (alongside additional effective practices) in a recent Wallace Foundation publication, *The Road to Results: Effective Practices for Building Arts Audiences* (that report and other audience-building resources are available at <http://www.wallacefoundation.org>.)

While the individual reports provide details of particular strategies, the collective experience across the organizations also suggests that there is no one winning tactic, no killer promotion, no social media strategy that alone will help organizations build audiences in a sustainable way. Instead, successful audience building is an integrated and coordinated effort with several parts of an organization working together over several years’ time, more often than not in the face of very slow progress or setbacks. The Seattle Opera case illustrates the point nicely, as the close collaboration between the marketing, creative, and technical staffs was the key that unlocked the potential of the company’s expansion into digital and social media. The company moved from being unaccustomed to letting the public see what goes on behind the curtain to seeking out opportunities to do so, and inviting audience members to share their perspectives. Organizations may have to operate differently to find new ways to connect with audiences, but that does not mean they need to change who they are or what they produce. In fact, such a strategy may backfire, because an audience engagement initiative

that departs from an organization's mission or core values likely will not receive the broad and ongoing support needed to maintain it.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A great many individuals and organizations assisted us in our research, and we want to express our heartfelt appreciation. First, this work would not have been possible without the generous support of The Wallace Foundation. We would also like to express our appreciation for their guidance and support to The Wallace Foundation staff members Lucas Held, Ed Pauly, Jessica Schwartz, Daniel Windham, Will Miller, and Christine Yoon. Ann Stone of The Wallace Foundation was an important strategic advisor from the project's beginnings to its conclusions. As editor, Anne Field built a clear narrative out of a long multi-year initiative. Lucas Held and Sarosh Syed of The Wallace Foundation helped us refine the draft to bring greater clarity to both the text and the underlying analysis.

We are also grateful to Alvin Alexander Henry, Kristina Murti, and the Seattle Opera staff for their responsiveness and openness in sharing both insights and data. We were also fortunate to have received feedback on direction and an earlier draft of this work from Jim Hirsch of the Chicago Sinfonietta, Jo LaBrecque of Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts, and Sandra Bernhard of Houston Grand Opera. Of course, the final responsibility for the questions posed and conclusions drawn rests with us.

*Bob Harlow*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2008, Seattle Opera found itself in the same position as many arts organizations—feeling a sense of urgency and uncertainty about how best to make use of digital technologies to both deepen relationships with existing patrons and attract newcomers. While nothing suggested they were losing touch with audiences, staff members suspected that being absent from online spaces could erode the company's visibility. Moreover, digital technologies could provide ways to enhance and extend the experience of attending a live performance. But, while senior staff saw multiple opportunities for the organization, one of the leading opera companies in the United States, they resisted the pressure to try everything at once. Instead, they tested out technologies systematically in a series of four yearlong experiments. They began by tapping audience research and local expertise to identify the greatest opportunities, and then deployed audience surveys and analyzed web-based metrics to evaluate their individual efforts, regarding each one as an educational experiment with useful lessons for the organization.

They had an early hit with a series of videos taking audiences behind the scenes of their signature production of Wagner's *Ring* cycle, and recreated that success with an even broader public the following year to build interest in a newly commissioned work, *Amelia*. As they got a better understanding of what moved audiences, staff members refined their approach, focusing on using

technology to expose audiences to new and different dimensions of the company's activities. Every season had at least some winning engagement tools, driven in large part by their strategy of gathering intelligence before determining what applications to deploy. While the majority of the tools were most effective at enhancing the experiences of patrons who already had a deep connection with the company, an opera simulcast in the fourth year also brought in an audience of newcomers.

These were more than just a series of experiments; Seattle Opera transformed how it related to audience members, letting them in on the creative process and inviting their comments. Over the course of the four years, the company also found ways to satisfy internal concerns about exposing too much to the public and built broad support for the initiative inside the organization, as well as strong cross-departmental collaboration.

*It was just a series of online videos, but for devotees of Seattle Opera's Ring cycle, the five spots were like a little bit of heaven. Collectively called The Road to Valhalla, the 5- to 10-minute pieces were produced for the 2009 presentation of Wagner's masterpiece. A weeklong extravaganza with an international following, during which the company staged all four operas, it provided a unique and eye-opening behind-the-scenes look into the making of the season's production—everything from training the Rhine daughters to swim in the air, Peter Pan-like, to the construction of the ominous dragon, Fafner.*

*With rousing Wagnerian music in the background, viewers saw costume designers sewing, cutting, and shaping Brünnhilde's dresses and Hagen's leather tunic, just 2 of the production's 214 costumes. Marie Plette, who played Freia, showed off her booties, which bear some resemblance to Uggs, while relaying the importance of having effective footwear because so much of the production is spent climbing mountains. In another video, viewers saw day 12 of the more than two-week process of unloading the set, along with the three operators required to control the dragon's wings. Just a few years earlier, Seattle Opera's creative staff would not have considered revealing such behind-the-scenes magic before opening night. But now here they were, eager to share their crafts—and even some secrets—with an appreciative audience of Ring patrons.*

*The videos were far from the only experiment Seattle Opera attempted. Over a four-year period, the organization tried out everything from custom iPad applications to a simulcast of Madama Butterfly to, of course, social media. Some efforts, like The Road*



to Valhalla, were hits with the audience while others were less successful, but all were part of an ambitious effort to understand just how—and how much—technology can contribute to the enjoyment, understanding, and appreciation of opera by both novices and seasoned viewers alike.

## FIGURING OUT HOW TO CAPITALIZE ON TECHNOLOGY

In a world where technology increasingly is social, personal, and ubiquitous, Seattle Opera, like arts organizations everywhere, is struggling with a complex question: how to best use digital technologies not only to extend its reach, but also to engage the audience more deeply. In recent years, new technologies have created both opportunities and challenges for arts groups, with the changes having implications for everything from marketing, education, and fundraising to ticket sales and programming. Social media, in particular, has expanded the possibilities exponentially, transforming how arts groups interact with and build audiences. In a recent survey, 93 percent of arts organization senior staff said they use social media to help their groups reach broader audiences.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, although the possibilities are exciting, they can be equally as daunting, because they inevitably reshape expectations about how organizations should interact with the public and audiences can participate, as well as the roles of artists and staff.<sup>2</sup>

Seattle Opera, one of the leading opera companies in the United States, began feeling the pressure in 2007. Particularly in Seattle, communities were being created and information was

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1. Kristin Thomson, Kristen Purcell, and Lee Rainie, *Arts Organizations and Digital Technologies* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2013), <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2013/Arts-and-technology.aspx>, 39.

2. *Idem*.

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### SEATTLE OPERA AT A GLANCE

- Founded in 1963
- Mission: “Seattle Opera strives to produce musically extraordinary, theatrically compelling operas, employing uniformly high-quality casts, dramatically aware conductors, and innovative yet textually concerned directors and designers. By continuing our emphasis on the work of Richard Wagner and by achieving national and international recognition for the quality of all our programming, Seattle Opera commits itself to advancing the cultural life of the Pacific Northwest through education and performance.”
- Typically produces five operas of 7 to 8 performances each (approximately 35 to 40 performances per year) in the 2,900-seat McCaw Hall
  - The season usually runs from late August through May
  - Highlights include Wagner’s full four-part *Ring* cycle, produced in its entirety nearly every season between 1975 and 1987, and approximately every four years since then
- General Director (current)—Aidan Lang
- General Director (1983–2014)—Speight Jenkins
- Executive Director—Kelly Tweeddale
- Director of Marketing and Communications—Alvin Alexander Henry
- Associate Director of Marketing—Kristina Murti
- Operating budget—\$28 million (FY2014)
- Total annual audience: over 100,000

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increasingly managed using online and mobile technologies. Not adapting would risk the company becoming irrelevant in its own backyard. Nothing suggested that they were losing touch with the audience. But some staff members were concerned that, as

people became more accustomed to interacting with organizations online, a lack of web-based engagement opportunities would mean an increasingly large swath of people would become less connected to Seattle Opera. At the same time, it was unclear where the company should focus its efforts: exactly which audiences could be engaged in what ways, and whether any of these efforts would prove to be meaningful.

In spite of the pressures to try everything at once, and as soon as possible, the company opted to take a systematic approach grounded in a mix of real-life practice and expertise from the field that would maximize resources and learning. The long-term objective was to make effective technology-based engagement practices a part of the company’s ongoing operations. But the company wanted first to identify the most feasible tactics and then learn which would have the greatest impact. That meant gathering information from the field and through audience research. From that knowledge, the staff would design a series of efforts, all of which would be regarded as educational experiments with useful lessons for the organization, and adjust based on what they learned. The first step would be trying to learn as much as possible about the emerging landscape, opportunities, and opportunity costs.

Seattle Opera began tapping into the most savvy expertise available, assembling a task force that included company staff and board members, as well as professionals from local technology companies recruited specifically for this purpose—and motivated by their love of opera (see sidebar, *Tapping Local Expertise: The Technology Task Force*). The objective: to learn as

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**WHICH AUDIENCES  
COULD BE ENGAGED  
IN WHAT WAYS, AND  
WAS ANY OF IT REALLY  
MEANINGFUL?**

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## **TAPPING LOCAL EXPERTISE: THE TECHNOLOGY TASK FORCE**

As opera staff began exploring options for leveraging technology to engage audiences, they saw an opportunity to tap into local expertise and created a “technology task force” to identify and evaluate social media and technology applications. The task force’s first board member was a retired television executive, and early on he and an additional co-chair, who had experience working with technology companies, identified experts in Seattle who they thought might either want to sit on the task force or provide insights about trends. The group was rounded out with other board members (a total of eight), staff, and three outside technology professionals. Also included were representatives of two of the six collective bargaining unions that work with Seattle Opera, who were invited so they could understand the role that technology would play in emerging audience relationships.

First-year efforts focused on identifying and gathering information about new technologies and their potential to engage audiences. At monthly meetings, the task force discussed a different technology and its potential application at Seattle Opera, often with invited experts from the Seattle area (including such places as Microsoft, Facebook, and the University of Washington). At the end of the first year, the task force recommended what technologies to use and offered guidelines for evaluating their success.

The task force, which eventually became a standing board committee, continues to meet six times a year and provide a forum for exploring relevant technology developments and evaluating ongoing efforts. Four of the experts who have visited over the years became so engaged that they themselves joined the task force and later the board.

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One such board member is Technology Committee Co-Chair Paul Goodrich, a managing director at Madrona Venture Group, which specializes in funding early-stage tech firms. (Kelly Jo MacArthur, a technology and media executive, is the other co-chair.) He was invited first to present to the task force as a guest, and then to participate as a member. He later joined the Seattle Opera board of trustees. Goodrich says he enjoys the chance to participate in and affect Seattle Opera in a way that is “more than just financial.” (While Seattle Opera provides no compensation, it allows members the opportunity to see the inner workings of the company, a type of access rarely available to most people.) And, he believes the company takes his ideas and the work of the technology committee seriously. “One of the things that has been very rewarding for me,” he says, “is the management of Seattle Opera is very open-minded and very receptive and very progressive.” Seattle Opera doesn’t accept every recommendation, of course, but it does fully consider all of them. “If you have a management team who is not responsive or interested in listening, then your advisory board will not get engaged,” says Goodrich.

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much as possible before deciding what technologies to adopt. Over the course of nearly a year, the task force examined topics ranging from social media—at that point in its infancy—and various forms of e-mail distribution, photography, and digitized formatting, to the intricacies of capturing and disseminating intellectual property and using technology to create a commercial revenue stream.

In mid-2008 the task force delivered recommendations for the digital technologies they believed could help engage audiences, pinpointing those that were feasible in the short-term—the “low-hanging fruit” requiring only existing resources—and others needing longer to develop. The company

concluded that three of the most promising applications lay in using technology to (1) create virtual communities where audience members could interact with the company and each other, (2) provide opportunities for people to learn more about opera and Seattle Opera productions, and (3) make opera more accessible outside the opera hall. Staff believed that community and learning opportunities could extend and enhance the experience of attending a performance and that that, in turn, would help retention efforts. (In line with that thinking, in the RAND Corporation's *A New Framework for Building Participation in the Arts*, arts researchers Kevin F. McCarthy and Kimberly Jinnett concluded from a review of the research literature and scores of audience-building programs that an enhanced experience can lead current audiences to attend more often.) At the same time, staff also believed that making opera more accessible outside the opera hall had the potential to attract newcomers.

Seattle Opera's marketing staff designed a suite of tools from the task force recommendations and then sought the funds to deploy them. They applied for and received a four-year, \$750,000 Wallace Excellence Award from The Wallace Foundation. Each year, they produced technology-based engagement tools, complemented in some instances with in-person activities designed to give audience members new ways to experience the art form both inside and outside the opera house—for example, in workshops and discussions presented in partnership with museums, local businesses, and community organizations. They also conducted regular evaluations to identify the impact each tool had on particular audiences. Deployment was spread across three sub-initiatives at different times during the four years:

- **Storytelling through Technology:** In year one, Seattle Opera used its production of Wagner's four-opera *Ring* cycle—which it produces periodically for a following

that comes from Seattle and beyond—to develop virtual communities and explore different aspects of the *Ring* story. A *Ring*-specific interactive website shared the broader story of how the opera was produced and included forums for patrons and bloggers who wished to share commentary with the company and each other.

- **Community Connections through Technology:** In year two, the company used a mix of podcasts, in-person symposia, and interactive online experiences to introduce audiences to the story behind *Amelia*, its first commissioned work in decades.
- **Experiencing Place through Technology:** In years three and four, it used technology to bring opera to new places and spaces, including producing a free simulcast to introduce Seattle Opera to opera novices and to reconnect with audiences that had drifted away.

The initiatives were designed as separate efforts, but each year Seattle Opera used the lessons learned to build on the next year's activities, refining successful programs and retooling or jettisoning those that were less effective, as measured by survey research and online metrics. Seattle Opera saw the four years as an opportunity to create a "petri dish" in which some experiments would flourish and others would not, with each providing lessons that would inform the company's technology strategy moving forward. "We were all open to trying some things that wouldn't work," says Executive Director Kelly Tweeddale. "That's what it was for. It was as much to decide what we were not going to do as what we were going to do." A timeline of the four-year plan in Figure 1 shows periods of research, deployment, and evaluation across the four years.

The yearly sub-initiatives are detailed in the sections that follow. Each includes a description of the individual

**Figure 1. Seattle Opera's Four Yearlong Phases of Research, Deployment, and Evaluation**

## YEAR 1: STORYTELLING THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

### **February 2009: Research to Identify Engagement Opportunities**

In-house survey research with 803 *Ring* patrons to identify technology use and interest in content

### **July 2009: Research to Refine Tools**

Four focus groups to examine appeal of ideas and to refine proposed engagement tools

### **July–August 2009: Pre-*Ring* Opening Videos Released**

*The Road to Valhalla* and *Confessions of a First-Time Operagoer* video series released in weekly installments

### **August 2009: *Ring* Opening and Additional Engagement Tools**

Three full (four-opera) *Ring* cycles presented, with additional engagement tools including:

- Backstage video feed
- Share and Review Program
- Pre-performance podcasts
- Caption of the Day Contest
- Seattle Opera and the *Ring* on Twitter, blog, Facebook

### **September 2009: Evaluation Survey**

Survey of 1,934 Seattle Opera patrons, including 1,019 *Ring* patrons

## YEAR 2: COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

### **March–April 2010: Pre-*Amelia* Tools Launched**

- Blog updates (weekly in March, almost daily in April) about newly commissioned work, *Amelia*
- 7-part *The Making of Amelia* video series released in installments
- In-person discussions, lectures, and workshops

### **May 2010: *Amelia* Run**

*Amelia* opened, ran eight performances

### **June 2010: Evaluation Survey**

Survey of 1,955 Seattle Opera patrons, including 1,238 *Amelia* patrons

## YEAR 3: EXPLORING PLACE THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

### **Fall 2010–Summer 2011: Tools Developed and Launched**

Deployed touchscreen tables, Kindle application, and online videos for individual productions

## YEAR 4: EXPLORING PLACE THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

### **May 2012: Simulcast and Related Engagement Tools**

Simulcast of *Madama Butterfly* in sports arena, and supplemental engagement tools:

- Behind-the-scenes videos
- iPad application
- Radio simulcast of Q&A
- *Madama Butterfly* on Twitter, blog, Facebook

### **May 2012: Evaluation Survey**

Survey with 816 simulcast patrons

technology-based tools Seattle Opera developed and deployed; accompanying research identifies which innovations were used by different patron groups and with what impact. Year one also included background research with different audience groups to gauge their interest in engaging with Seattle Opera via a variety of in-person and technology-based techniques.

## **YEAR ONE: STORYTELLING THROUGH TECHNOLOGY, 2008–2009**

**T**he first year, Seattle Opera created stories around its production of the *Ring*, Wagner's four operas based on Norse and German epics. The company produces the complete *Ring* cycle every four years and has built a reputation that draws visitors from all over the world to performances, which often sell out well in advance. Seattle Opera saw the *Ring* cycle, considered to be one of opera's greatest stories, as an opportunity to use technology to tell the story of what happens off stage by going behind the scenes, as well as into the lives of operagoers, and by creating forums where *Ring* devotees and new attendees could interact with each other in virtual communities. Still, the work struck some at the organization as an odd choice for the company's first year; *Ring* patrons are an older audience, even for opera, leading skeptics to wonder whether this was the right audience for technology-based engagement. Audience research indicated it was worth doing.

### **1. IDENTIFYING OPPORTUNITIES**

**T**hree complete *Ring* cycles were scheduled to run in August 2009. By mid-2008, the technology task force had provided a long list of ideas for using technology to tell different stories.

To identify those with the greatest chance of success, marketing staff conducted an informal survey in mid-2009, sending e-mail invitations to 2,300 households of patrons whose e-mail addresses had been captured when purchasing tickets to *Ring* performances. Of those invited, 803 (or 35 percent) responded to a short series of questions about their online activities and the *Ring*-related content they would like to see.

The survey did detect an older audience—37 percent of respondents were at least age 66 (which makes them even older than opera audiences in general<sup>3</sup>), so Seattle Opera staff were surprised in mid-2009 to find that:

- 70 percent watched videos on YouTube at least once in a while
- Over 50 percent used an iPod, iTouch, or iPhone
- 35 percent downloaded podcasts at least occasionally
- 25 percent read blogs weekly, though less than 6 percent made comments on them
- 25 percent were on Facebook (while low by today's standards, that number is moderate for 2009, when Facebook penetration among U.S. adults was 27 percent<sup>4</sup>)

Videos held the most promise, because a large majority of *Ring* patrons reported watching YouTube and the medium seemed well suited to storytelling. Asked to indicate what content they preferred to see, respondents most often mentioned information from the artists and from the technical and production staff about what goes on behind the scenes as operas are prepared for the stage, as well as basic event information and scheduling. The research gave staff the confidence to pursue

3. According to the National Endowment for the Arts, 19 percent of opera attendees across the United States were 65 or older in 2008. See *2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 20.

4. *Facebook Reaches Majority of US Web Users*, <http://www.emarketer.com/Article/Facebook-Reaches-Majority-of-US-Web-Users/1008247>, accessed December 8, 2014.

technology with this audience, as well as important buy-in from the board.

## 2. VIDEOS TO BRING AUDIENCES BEHIND THE SCENES

**G**uided by the research findings, staff concluded there was great potential in using videos to deepen the audience's understanding of the process of creating opera and the perspectives of those involved in making it happen. But there was a hitch: the company wasn't accustomed to showing work in progress to the public. As a result, many artists and creative staffers felt considerable concern that showing a less-than-perfect product would remove some of the opera's mystique. After taking the time to work through those fears (see sidebar, *Becoming Comfortable with Lifting the Curtain*), the company developed *Road to Valhalla*, an online series showing the making of the *Ring* cycle in five separate 5- to 10-minute videos covering different musical and performance elements (see box, *Road to Valhalla* Video Series).

## 3. OTHER TECHNOLOGY-DRIVEN ENGAGEMENT TOOLS

**I**n addition to the video series, Seattle Opera developed other technology-driven engagement tools, including audio and visual media for diverse audiences, and tools designed to encourage interaction. They included:

- **Pre-performance podcasts** offering previews of the characters, story line, symbolism, and themes for each of the four operas in the *Ring* cycle
- ***Confessions of a First-Time Operagoer***, a video series following an opera novice as she learns about all that goes into producing the *Ring* cycle and then watches all four operas. Forty-nine people applied for the slot

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## ROAD TO VALHALLA VIDEO SERIES

The five videos featured artistic staff showing different production elements:

- *Rehearsals and Artists.* General Director Speight Jenkins interviewed the stage director and different cast members about the rehearsal process, and that footage was interspersed with performance clips.
- *Costumes.* Costume Shop Manager Susan Davis provided a tour of the costume shop and showed how the clothing was created, with assistance from a performer in costume.
- *Sets and Props.* Technical and Facilities Director Robert Schaub took cameras backstage to show sets being loaded and individual pieces under construction.
- *Special Effects.* Schaub took viewers backstage again to demonstrate the secrets behind such special effects as the Rhine daughters swimming in midair.
- *The Orchestra and Chorus.* General Director Jenkins discussed the music of the *Ring* with artistic staff, which was interspersed with clips of the orchestra, singers, and chorus in rehearsal.

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by uploading a video to Seattle Opera’s Facebook page or by appearing in person to be recorded at announced auditions; the winner was selected via public vote from a group of five finalists. An outside professional production company then created five three- to five-minute web videos hosted by the contest winner—an aspiring young actress and Seattle native—as she went backstage visiting different departments in various stages of preparation and rehearsal and also interviewed General Director Jenkins.

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## BECOMING COMFORTABLE WITH LIFTING THE CURTAIN

At the time when Seattle Opera set out to use video to share the process of creating opera with its audience, some large orchestras and opera companies had already started posting video interviews with artists and creative staff. But even those pioneers were hesitant to lift the curtain all the way by revealing work—from sets and special effects to costumes and actual rehearsals—as it was being prepared. As Tweeddale explains, “We’re very attuned to getting everything right.” The idea of showing anything to the public before it had reached a point of perfection was new and unnerving.

While the organization had always engaged the audience in dialogue about its work via symposia and pre- and post-performance events, it had controlled much of what the audience saw. Artists and production staff, in particular, required a hefty dose of convincing. After all, it was their work that would be shown in a potentially imperfect form, explains Director of Marketing and Communications Alvin Alexander Henry, whose team managed much of the video production. In addition, some were hesitant to give away the secrets behind those exquisite moments of surprise or a jaw-dropping special effect. Creating a grand spectacle takes hard work, and as Henry explains, directors “don’t want people attending the performance knowing how the walls open up or fly in or fly out.”

But building a comfort level would be critical to success. To do that, Tweeddale and Henry realized they needed to step back and see the work from the artistic and creative staffs’ perspective, and as a result, they made it much clearer where content would

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be posted, who would see it, and how the material would be framed for audiences. They also opened a dialogue about the concerns of artistic and creative staff so those issues could be addressed head-on, rather than silenced.

Getting a handle on those sensitivities was no easy task, particularly given the size and scope of opera, which involves multiple creative teams, each having its own set of concerns. As an example, Tweeddale describes apprehensions felt by the hair and makeup staff: “I think their concern was that a lot of times people think of them as just hairdressers and [people] putting on pretty makeup and not really craftspeople with a talent and expertise. So it was really important for us to get that talent and expertise across to raise their trust level.” Winning over costume designers brought a different set of considerations, according to Tweeddale: “If we wanted to show how a costume was made, which character were we going to choose, which artist? Who would feel comfortable, because they come in all sizes and shapes? And they’re very sensitive about that. There was a whole kind of learning curve about what was OK for the public and what wasn’t.”

Perhaps most important was explaining the “why” to technical, production, and artistic personnel. Marketing staff shared research revealing the overall interest in seeing behind the scenes and the ways videos could help strengthen audience members’ sense of connection to Seattle Opera by making them feel as if they were part of the process.

At the same time, staff promised not to reveal those elements the creative teams wanted kept secret. Henry emphasizes not only that success required getting buy-in from all parts of the organization, but also that this buy-in came with conditions: staff needed to ensure that creative needs would be met.

*(continued on next page)*

Another adjustment the organization had to make involved learning to welcome audience feedback in social media spaces. As staff members became increasingly accustomed to hearing the public response to the company’s posted digital content, they began to feel more confident of the audience’s ability to communicate and share information in a constructive way. As that trust has grown and interacting with the public has come to feel less risky, such exchanges have become firmly embedded in the organization’s culture. Tweeddale explains:

*The feedback that they’re going to give you is going to be meaningful. It’s going to be honest. And even if they’re going to say something that you don’t like, our experience has been [that] it’s been thoughtful. It’s been authentic. If it is actually mean-spirited, the audience itself will police that and you don’t have to actually come in and defend yourself. People will defend you.*

- **A video feed of between-act backstage activity.** Filmed during dress rehearsals, the videos featured such efforts as set changes and artists getting into costumes and makeup. These were edited on DVDs and projected on two monitors on each of the four levels of the McCaw Hall lobby during intermissions. The original concept was to run them as live feeds, but, fearing they might interfere with backstage preparations or show something not meant to be seen by the public, staff designed the videos merely to look live. Because they were being shown in lobbies, where there was bound to be background noise, they included no sound.
- **A Caption of the Day Contest** in which visitors to Seattle



**Figure 2. Scene from *Road to Valhalla*, *Special Effects***

© Bill Mohn

Opera’s blog could suggest a caption for a *Ring*-related photo on each day of the more than three weeks of the run. Each day’s winner received a *Ring*-related T-shirt.

- **A Share and Review Program** that allowed visitors to write a review or send videos to friends from the Seattle Opera website or from kiosks in the opera hall or Fisher Pavilion, an off-site cultural center hosting several *Ring*-related daytime events, such as symposia and pre-performance lectures.
- **The Seattle Opera blog**, which was turned over almost entirely to covering the *Ring* for four weeks before the first curtain and the three weeks during the cycle’s

run. Entries included posts from guest bloggers (including longtime subscribers and the “first-time operagoer”), links to production photos, all *Ring*-related videos, the pre-performance podcasts, and interviews with the stage director and principal performing artists.

The podcasts, *Road to Valhalla* series, and *Confessions of a First-Time Operagoer* videos were placed in a separate *Ring* section on the Seattle Opera website, which included subsections for the four operas. Each had an overview synopsis and a listing of artists and key creative staff, with links to their bios. The *Road to Valhalla* videos were released one by one between July 16 and August 3, in anticipation of the August 9 opening. *Confessions* videos were also released episodically between July 27 and August 3.

The media and blog entries were also published on Seattle Opera’s Facebook page and via Twitter, with posts and tweets made approximately once each day by marketing and communications staff in the weeks leading up to the performance. In addition, the content was sent via e-mail to *Ring* ticketholders and to other patrons in Seattle Opera’s database. The intention: not only to engage *Ring* attendees, but also to build interest and a following among non-*Ring* audiences.

#### **4. RESEARCH TO REFINE THE TOOLS**

**T**o further refine engagement tools, Seattle Opera tested ideas in four focus groups with patrons: younger (ages 25 to 44) and older (ages 45 to 60) subscribers and single-ticket

buyers who were also active Internet users.<sup>5</sup> Focus group participants echoed what the company had heard in its earlier patron survey: a strong interest in tactics that reveal what goes into making an opera. Accordingly, the staff shifted its focus to those tools. Henry sums up that key takeaway by saying, “People wanted to understand what went into putting a production together. They wanted to feel involved. We heard that loud and clear.”

Participants in the groups were asked to critique specific technology-based tactics the organization had developed with the technology task force, including:

- A clip from *Road to Valhalla*. Respondents found the “making of” experience to be both enjoyable and insightful. They also believed the video effectively delivered a behind-the-scenes experience despite being prerecorded.
- The Share and Review Program. Focus group respondents saw several prototype graphic slides, and said they would likely enjoy sharing their experience of particular opera scenes. They also expressed an interest in reading others’ reviews, but were considerably less enthusiastic about writing their own. Moreover, they said they would rather share a scene from their own computers at home than from kiosks in the opera house, believing that keyboards and screens would be out of place and detract from the experience of being in the opera hall.<sup>6</sup>

5. The focus groups had a budget of \$25,000 for the four groups, all-inclusive. Costs for conducting groups such as these will vary depending on city, number of groups, and the respondents being recruited. Seattle Opera was able to provide contact information for participants, helping to minimize recruiting costs.

6. These findings should be considered in light of the state of technology at the time. The focus group research was conducted in 2009, when only 25 percent of American adults were using mobile devices to go online. That number has more than doubled (to 63 percent in 2013, according to Pew Research Center’s Mobile Technology Fact Sheet,

As a result, when it came time to deploy, Seattle Opera ensured that the videos would be available online, but many of the kiosks destined for the opera hall would instead reside at an off-site space where a series of *Ring*-related lectures and symposia with Wagner scholars and artistic staff was taking place throughout the run of the *Ring*.

- A demonstration of the Caption of the Day Contest. Participants saw screenshots of a similar contest from an earlier Seattle Opera production. Reactions were less enthusiastic than for other tactics, with some respondents finding the idea amusing but saying they would likely not offer up captions themselves, although they might read others’ entries.
- A clip from *Confessions of a First-Time Operagoer*. Respondents had a range of reactions, but most saw it as more appropriate for less-savvy opera audiences.
- A short audio clip of the pre-performance podcasts. They were an appealing idea for those already using podcasts—a convenient way to “fill time.” Those unfamiliar with the medium were not sure how to access it, however, and preferred the *Road to Valhalla* videos to the podcasts’ audio-only format.

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**“PEOPLE WANTED TO UNDERSTAND WHAT WENT INTO PUTTING A PRODUCTION TOGETHER. WE HEARD THAT LOUD AND CLEAR.”**

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<http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/mobile-technology-fact-sheet>), so this tool could now potentially be reconfigured to allow audience members to share via their mobile devices instead of kiosks. We are grateful to Caleb Custer for this suggestion.

## 5. YEAR ONE RESULTS: BEHIND-THE-SCENES VIDEOS ARE POPULAR AND ENHANCE THE AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE

Seattle Opera presented three full cycles of the *Ring* to a nearly sold-out audience from 49 states and 24 foreign countries between August 9, 2009, and August 30, 2009. In addition, it hosted symposia with Wagner scholars and pre- and post-performance lectures and conversations, among other ancillary programs. And, of course, during that time, the opera deployed the technology-based engagement applications connected to the *Ring*, as described above. To gauge their effectiveness, Seattle Opera surveyed three discrete patron groups in September 2009, and a fourth group of prospective patrons, as follows:

- 1,019 *Ring* patrons: Those who purchased either a subscription to an August 2009 four-opera *Ring* cycle or one or more tickets to any of the single operas within it, even if they also had bought a subscription for the 2008–2009 season and/or single tickets to other operas outside of the *Ring*.
- 595 subscribers: Patrons purchasing a season subscription in 2008–2009, but no single tickets to or subscriptions for *Ring* opera performances.
- 320 single-ticket buyers: Patrons who in 2008–2009 purchased tickets, but did so outside of a subscription series or the *Ring* cycle. Those who bought single tickets as well as subscriptions were categorized as subscribers.
- 445 opera prospects: Mostly lapsed patrons, but also some individuals who had expressed interest in attending Seattle Opera for whom the company had contact information.

Further detail about how the survey was administered and

demographic and other differences across the patron groups are included in Appendix 1.

The surveys asked about awareness, use, and experience of the different technology-based tools. Table 1 below shows the percentage of *Ring* patrons who used a particular application, and the percentage of those employing each tool who said their experience was enhanced by trying it. These results are consistent with what Seattle Opera had heard in the focus groups and earlier research, suggesting audience members want both to see and understand what goes on behind the scenes. In fact, the two most popular and impactful tools by far were those that did just that: the backstage video feed and *Road to Valhalla* videos.

The last column of Table 1 shows the use of each tool by Seattle Opera prospects and patrons who saw productions other than the *Ring*. *Confessions of a First-Time Operagoer* was the engagement tool used most by those non-*Ring* attendees. Data from [seattleopera.org](http://seattleopera.org) reveal that, while *Road to Valhalla* videos were viewed 7,731 times from their launch through the end of the run (each view was on average five minutes, and there were more than 6,173 unique page views), *Confessions of a First-Time Operagoer* videos were watched 22,319 times (an average viewing of 2:58 each time). They had, however, relatively little impact; just 35 percent of non-*Ring* attendees said that watching the videos enhanced their experience and enjoyment of Seattle Opera.

As for other tools, the pre-performance podcasts also initially seemed to have the potential to deepen audience members' understanding of the *Ring*. But relatively few people used them, and they were seen as less interesting than the videos. In retrospect, that's not surprising in light of earlier focus group research suggesting some patrons were confused about how to access podcasts, did not use them often, and preferred a more

**Table 1. Use and Impact of Online Engagement Tools Connected to the *Ring***

Online Tools	% <i>Ring</i> Patrons Who Used Each Tool ( <i>n</i> = 947-965)	% <i>Ring</i> Patrons Using Who Say “Enhanced Experience/Enjoyment”	% Non- <i>Ring</i> Patrons and Prospects Who Used Each Tool ( <i>n</i> = 1,258-1,267)
Backstage video feed	54%	74%	0%
<i>The Road to Valhalla</i> online video series	34%	78%	5%
<i>Confessions of a First-Time Operagoer</i> video series	24%	40%	6%
Seattle Opera’s blog	19%	51%	4%
Caption of the Day Contest of <i>Ring</i> -related photos	11%	30%	3%
Seattle Opera’s presence on Facebook	10%	32%	5%
Pre-performance podcasts	9%	39%	3%
Share and Review Program	7%	37%	1%
Seattle Opera and the <i>Ring</i> on Twitter	3%	12%	1%

% *Ring* Patrons Using Who Say “Enhanced Experience/Enjoyment”: “What kind of impact did each have on your experience and enjoyment with Seattle Opera?” (Response options: detracted a great deal, detracted somewhat, neutral, enhanced somewhat, enhanced a great deal, N/A; % Saying “Enhanced Experience/Enjoyment” = % saying “enhanced somewhat” or “enhanced a great deal”) Non-*Ring* patrons are subscribers and single-ticket buyers

visual medium. Seattle Opera therefore phased these out, but in later years replaced them with previews that were lighter on discourse and heavier on musical excerpts.

The tools developed to encourage patron interaction—the Caption of the Day Contest and the Share and Review Program—were used by 1 in 9, or fewer, *Ring* patrons, again with a minority

saying they had much impact. The contest did, however, receive the most comments relative to other blog entries, with an average of 19 comments for each day (and a range of 9 to 34). The blog itself was moderately successful, with about 1 in 5 patrons saying they read the content, and half of those who did reporting that it enhanced their experience.

Social media was also little used, with just 10 percent of *Ring* patrons saying they followed Seattle Opera’s Facebook page and 3 percent reporting following its Twitter presence. At the time (2009), social media was just beginning to be used on a large scale,<sup>7</sup> so it would have been unlikely for usage rates to be

7. Facebook and Twitter penetration were 27 percent and 6 percent of the adult U.S. population, respectively. See *Facebook Reaches Majority of US Web Users*, <http://www.emarketer.com/Article/Facebook-Reaches-Majority-of-US-Web-Users/1008247>, accessed January 22, 2013.



**Figure 3. In *Road to Valhalla*, Costumes, Costume Manager Susan Davis Tours the Costume Shop**

much higher. Moreover, Seattle Opera, like other organizations, was only beginning to learn what content was appropriate and engaging, and users were just starting to look for information on those sites. Seattle Opera experimented more with these platforms in later years of the initiative.

## 6. INCREASED FOCUS ON TAKING AUDIENCES BEHIND THE SCENES

**W**ith a new understanding of the depth of patron interest in the process of making opera, as well as the impact of the “behind-the-scenes” backstage video feed and “making of” videos, Seattle Opera sharpened its focus in subsequent years on engagement initiatives involving self-directed learning. In particular, the staff set out to make behind-the-scenes videos a central component of their online engagement strategy (see sidebar, *Inexpensive Yet Prolific Video Production*). Facebook, Twitter, and other interactive media were still under consideration because they were growing platforms, but planning focused less on social media and more on determining the audiovisual content that would work best with particular operas.

### INEXPENSIVE YET PROLIFIC VIDEO PRODUCTION

Thanks to technological advances, Seattle Opera no longer needs television-scale production to make high-quality, high-definition (HD) videos. But its ability to produce the quantity and quality of video that it has is due in large part to the work of a very passionate volunteer. After a successful professional life in technology, retiree Bill Mohn has fashioned a second career for himself as a photographer, and more recently as a videographer for Seattle Opera. He produces much of the behind-the-scenes video using access unheard of for most opera fans—in rehearsals, with artists and staff, and behind the scenes. He uses video to take viewers with him, and thousands of Seattle Opera patrons have accepted the invitation.

Mohn has produced a large number of videos with minimal investment in equipment. For most behind-the-scenes videos, he uses just an HD camera and a wireless microphone. He does all his editing on a PC using Adobe Premiere, although shoots of dress rehearsals for use as trailers are slightly more elaborate, with additional wireless microphones and two extra HD cameras. (Seattle Opera’s neighbor, Pacific Northwest Ballet, has built a similar in-house capability to produce a large amount of professional-caliber video, a capability it estimated could be replicated for approximately \$5,000 to \$6,000: \$3,000 for a Mac computer with considerable processing power, \$2,000 for a versatile HD video camera with a good zoom and low aperture to capture high-quality footage in low-light performance settings, and \$500 for video editing software. Detail is provided in another report in this series, *Getting Past “It’s Not for People Like Us”: Pacific Northwest Ballet Builds a Following with Teens and Young Adults.*)

The behind-the-scenes videos are short format (5 to 10 minutes each), but each requires an involved effort. For the five *Road to Valhalla* videos, for example, Mohn shot on more than 20 separate days, beginning in May and running through August. That’s an average of four shoots per video, although there is considerable

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variation; for example, the costume shop video was captured in one shoot, while the chorus and orchestra pieces used a variety of different shoots and other sources.

Most of the behind-the-scenes videos employ two kinds of footage. The main part consists of one or more technical or production staff members giving viewers a glimpse of their craft. But to add context, Mohn shoots background material, such as relevant rehearsal scenes or other production elements, that he sprinkles throughout the main content. Mohn also often includes video from additional sources, such as archival footage from past productions.

Although he has scripted some voiceovers, Mohn prefers the more natural look and feel of unscripted material. To help move the story as it is being filmed, he usually is accompanied by a member of the marketing staff, who poses questions that are asked off camera and edited out.

Marketing staff typically help guide the process beforehand by providing department heads with a bulleted list of talking points designed to reveal the story behind the craft. For example, Costume Shop Manager Davis took viewers through the costume shop by walking them through the process of wardrobe production, from the original sketches to the making of the costume. Associate Director of Marketing Kristina Murti

says that viewers “got a real sense of what it’s like to go through the costume shop. That’s what we heard [in the research that] people wanted—they want to be exposed.”

To make sure they’re filming the content with the greatest potential impact, marketing staff members now discuss their ideas for highlighting the right elements at weekly web planning meetings. As Murti explains, “We have to use what’s given to us. Sometimes the costumes aren’t interesting. [Our production of] *Fidelio* is going to be street costumes. There’s not a lot going on there, so we’re definitely not going down the costume road.” As another example, a recent production of *Turandot* featured a children’s chorus, something few operas have. Henry saw an opportunity: “People love to watch children sing. We had a very articulate conductor who was great at demonstrating the production process by sitting at the piano and talking viewers through what they were listening to and the context.” The children’s chorus was featured prominently in the video.

If Mohn has any formula for putting together the behind-the-scenes videos, it’s less about communicating his own point of view and more about trying to capture the enthusiasm of the creative, technical, and production staff he films. “The people who work here are remarkably dedicated, animated, and excited about what they do. I’m just trying to get that across,” he says.

## YEAR TWO: COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS THROUGH TECHNOLOGY, 2009–2010

Year two of the technology initiative coincided with the premiere of Seattle Opera’s first commissioned work in 25 years, *Amelia*. The opera tells the story of a woman haunted by the disappearance of her father, a Navy pilot shot down in the Vietnam War when she was a child. New works are always a challenge to market because audiences are less inclined to take a chance on something unfamiliar, particularly with an art form as expensive as opera. Henry believed it would be essential to create interest in the production with both Seattle Opera’s core audience and potential new viewers. He and his team proposed two strategies to boost interest that would complement the company’s traditional e-mail and print advertising. One was to forge relationships with community groups having a potential connection to *Amelia* or its production. The other strategy built on lessons learned during the run of the *Ring* about online and video content: using technology to create interest in the opera and provide an audiovisual context to make audiences more familiar with the work.

### 1. EVENTS IN PARTNERSHIP WITH COMMUNITY GROUPS

Seattle Opera created several in-person events with organizations whose missions dovetailed with themes in *Amelia* and the process of creating new work. The events were held in

the two months before the May 8, 2010, *Amelia* debut, and all were streamed online. They included:

- Two panel discussions of approximately 90 minutes each with three Vietnam veteran pilots. The discussions were hosted in conjunction with Seattle’s Museum of Flight, one during mid-March and the other in mid-April. Seattle Opera board member and Vietnam War veteran Karl Ege moderated the first, and the executive director of a local arts and sciences foundation facilitated the second.
- A discussion series called *Creating Amelia* taking place at a local bookstore on three Mondays in April. The 60- to 90-minute discussions featured the *Amelia* creative team and were moderated by General Director Jenkins. They included:
  - Staging *Amelia*, with Jenkins and story author and stage director Stephen Wadsworth
  - Composing *Amelia*, with composer Daron Hagen and librettist Gardner McFall
  - Designing *Amelia*, with Set Designer Tom Lynch, Costume Shop Manager Davis, and Lighting Designer Duane Schuler
- A lecture titled “Autobiographical Writing: From Life to Text” given by librettist McFall at the Richard Hugo House, a center for local writers, in late April.

The panelists and moderators all participated on a volunteer basis. Seattle Opera estimates that approximately 75 people attended each event, and small but significant numbers of *Amelia* patrons reported streaming at least one occasion online. The survey results presented below provide greater detail.

For the run of *Amelia* itself, Seattle Opera again partnered with The Museum of Flight to produce a full-scale exhibit exploring the theme of “flight in one’s life” through historical



photographs, Vietnam War memorabilia, and *Amelia* set engineering sketches. Costs to Seattle Opera were minimal, including only the expenses for mounting sketches used in developing the show. The exhibit was displayed on all four lobby levels throughout the opera hall. Audience members could browse through the exhibit pre-curtain, during the intermission, or post-show, and also could take a guided cell phone tour (designed by The Museum of Flight) by calling a provided number on their mobile phones and getting access to prerecorded information about the items on view, just as they might use guided headset tours offered at museums. (About 135 of an audience of 15,672 people called in to the audio tour; many more looked at the exhibit without calling.)

## 2. BUILDING A CONTEXT FOR UNFAMILIAR WORK BY ENGAGING ONLINE

**M**arketing staff believed that, unlike the suite of engagement tools for the *Ring*, the applications for *Amelia*—for which the story and music would be new to all audience members—would need to do double duty: educate audience members about the work itself, while also building interest in the production.

In reaching out to different organizations, Henry found two common misconceptions about *Amelia*. First, many people assumed the production was about the aviator Amelia Earhart, and second, that it focused on the Vietnam War itself. This discovery only increased the urgency of not only generating interest, but also providing a vivid context for the opera. Inspired by the popularity of the *Road to Valhalla* videos, the staff created a similar seven-part series about the creation of *Amelia*.

The plan was that, like the *Road to Valhalla*, each video would focus on one aspect of the production and be hosted by a

department or production head. But the effort would be revved up, given the added challenge of building familiarity. Marketing staff created twice the audio and visual material they had for the *Ring*. In addition to showing how the work onstage was produced (completely from scratch), they also had another behind-the-scenes avenue to explore—the commission itself—and turned to the development of the book, libretto, and music as an additional way to create enthusiasm, convey the story line, and introduce its characters.

The seven-part “making of” series of three- to six-minute videos attempted to show the breadth and scope of bringing a new production to the opera stage, including everything from how photos and sketches became full costumes and technical and production staff created a Vietnamese village, to the construction of a full-scale aircraft replica (see box, *The Making of Amelia Video Series*).

Five additional videos of approximately three to five minutes each included conversations with Jenkins, McFall, and Wadsworth as they told the story of how the opera itself came into being, from the original commissioning of the work to developing the libretto and music. Portions of these conversations were also posted as audio clips. All video and audio pieces were organized in one section on [seattleopera.org](http://seattleopera.org), which became a source for everything *Amelia*, including an overview of the opera, a synopsis, a list of the artists and creative staff with links to bios, images of the work being performed on stage, and details about all *Amelia*-related events.

The *Amelia* section also linked to the Seattle Opera blog, with content that differed in both frequency and tone from material created for the *Ring*. First, entries were updated more often, with weekly posts in March 2010 and almost daily items in April 2010. The content included introductions to the cast

## THE MAKING OF AMELIA VIDEO SERIES

The seven videos featured artistic staff showing different production elements:

- *Costume Research and Design*, using photos, designs, and fabrics to reveal the process of costume development
- *Working with a New Score*, demonstrating computer technology that can aid in score preparation
- *A Set Designer's Vision*, presenting design sketches and models, along with set pieces, to show how a production set takes form
- *Creating a Village Scene*, showing set building from raw materials to the finished product
- *Taking Flight*, demonstrating construction of a full-scale-size aircraft for the set
- *The Rehearsal Process*, illustrating the scene staging effort, with several clips of the music in rehearsal
- *All Coming Together*, showing the production's evolution, including, for example, how sketches became backdrops and musical accompaniment transitioned from a single pianist in rehearsal to a full orchestra

members; information about how the opera was commissioned and developed; an FAQ explaining the opera's plot; three additional "What's *Amelia* About" posts focused on the themes of "Flight," "Parents and Kids," and "War"; links to videos as they were posted; several "Sharing Experiences" entries by guest bloggers attending *Amelia* (many of whom had connections to Vietnam and/or the Vietnam War); and a seven-part listener's



**Figure 4. In this scene from *The Making of Amelia: Taking Flight*, Master Scenic Carpenter Bruce Warshaw explains how his shop created a full-scale aircraft replica**

guide in which Jenkins pointed out highlights as he walked readers through *Amelia*'s six scenes.

Beginning March 15, approximately eight weeks before the opening, Seattle Opera began releasing the video series in weekly installments on [seattleopera.org](http://seattleopera.org). The company posted information and news about *Amelia* written by marketing and communications staff on Facebook and Twitter, typically twice daily, compared to once a day for the *Ring*. The videos had approximately 25,000 page views leading up to the opening, more than three times the level of the "making of" (*Road to Valhalla*) videos for the *Ring*. Moreover, as Seattle Opera created videos, posted blogs, and tweeted photos, single-ticket sales began to move, reaching 3,333—out of a total attendance of 15,762, including subscriptions—for *Amelia*'s eight performances, outpacing what the company had originally expected. (Because the company does not often produce contemporary work, let alone new

commissions, it had originally expected single-ticket sales of approximately 2,000, compared to 4,000 to 5,000 for its productions of traditional and better-known works.) *Amelia* ran for eight Wednesday and weekend performances through May 22, 2010.

### 3. YEAR TWO RESULTS: SURVEY SHOWS BEHIND-THE-SCENES VIDEOS AGAIN HAVE AN IMPACT

To measure the use and impact of online tools and in-person activities created for *Amelia*, Seattle Opera conducted an online survey just after its final performance. Invitations were sent to e-mail addresses in the company’s database, and the survey was fielded between May 28 and June 8, 2010. Questions focused on, among other issues, awareness of and participation in *Amelia*-related activities, as shown in Table 2. The survey brought responses from 1,238 patrons who had seen a performance (86 percent of whom had attended it as part of a subscription) and an additional 717 who had visited Seattle Opera in the 2009–2010 season but had not seen *Amelia*.

Not surprisingly given the ease of access, more *Amelia* patrons participated in the online than the in-person activities; 56 percent of *Amelia* patrons used at least one online tool, and 13 percent attended at least one event. Moreover, the online pursuits—particularly those providing a context for the new opera—had the greatest impact on the experience of watching *Amelia*, with approximately 80 percent or more of the opera’s patrons who viewed the “making of” videos or the content on Seattle Opera’s blog, Facebook, and Twitter saying the material enhanced their experience. At the same time, however, their usage rates were generally lower than for the *Ring*. Seattle

**Table 2. Use and Impact of Engagement Tools Connected to *Amelia***

	% <i>Amelia</i> Patrons Using (n = 1,238)	% Users Saying Use Enhanced Experience / Enjoyment	% Non- <i>Amelia</i> Patrons Using (n = 717)
<b>Online:</b>			
<i>Amelia</i> section of website	52%	85%	23%
<i>The Making of Amelia</i> video series	19%	89%	6%
<i>Amelia</i> content on Seattle Opera blog, Facebook, or Twitter	15%	84%	5%
Streaming video of <i>Creating Amelia: The Making of a New Opera</i>	10%	79%	5%
Streaming video of <i>Amelia</i> -related panel discussion	7%	61%	3%
<b>In-Person:</b>			
<i>Flight in One’s Life</i> exhibit at opera house	10%	68%	2%
<i>Creating Amelia: The Making of a New Opera</i> lecture series	4%	72%	1%
Book fair and libretto and score signing	3%	41%	1%
Memoir-writing workshop and poetry reading	2%	18%	1%
Panel discussion on the war	2%	70%	1%

% Users Saying Use Enhanced Experience/Enjoyment: “What kind of impact did each have on your experience and enjoyment with Seattle Opera?” (Response options: detracted a great deal, detracted somewhat, neutral, enhanced somewhat, enhanced a great deal, N/A; % Saying “Enhanced Experience/Enjoyment” = % saying “enhanced somewhat” or “enhanced a great deal”) Non-*Amelia* patrons are subscribers and single-ticket buyers who attended Seattle Opera in 2009–2010, but not *Amelia*

Opera’s “making of” series for the *Ring* was seen by 34 percent of audience members, but the comparable effort for *Amelia* was viewed by just 19 percent (extrapolating to the full audience,

that means 2,995 patrons watched at least one *The Making of Amelia* video).<sup>8</sup>

Attendance at in-person events was higher among audience members who had patronized Seattle Opera for 11 years or more—20 percent of them attended at least one in-person event—than among those who had been going to Seattle Opera for 10 years or less (just 10 percent attended at least one in-person event). This difference does not apply to the technology-driven events, and is consistent with the trend that in-person occasions usually are attended by a company’s most loyal supporters. Such events may, therefore, play a special role in deepening existing supporters’ relationships with the company.

Marketing staff members were somewhat disappointed by the number of live streams reported; 10 percent of *Amelia* patrons said they streamed one of the *Creating Amelia* events and 7 percent reported streaming at least one of the panel discussions. Still, while those numbers are low in comparison with the other engagement tools deployed by Seattle Opera, a recent compilation of data from several live theaters showed attendance at post-show discussions to be 7 percent.<sup>9</sup> With that as a reasonable benchmark, virtual attendance at the panel discussions was healthier than at first meets the eye. Extrapolating to the attendance numbers for *Amelia*, nearly 1,600 patrons streamed *Creating Amelia* and approximately 1,100 streamed one of the panel discussions. Although Seattle Opera doesn’t know how much of the live stream individuals viewed, the fact that many saw at least some of it and said doing so enhanced

8. The fact that the number of views for *Amelia* videos was more than three times that for the *Ring*, even with a smaller percentage of patrons viewing the videos, likely reflects the fact that *Amelia* had more video content and a broader patron base than the *Ring* (many *Ring* attendees attended multiple operas in the cycle).

9. Theater Bay Area, Alan Brown, and Rebecca Ratzkin, *Understanding the Intrinsic Impact of Live Theatre: Patterns of Audience Feedback across 18 Theatres and 58 Productions* (San Francisco: WolfBrown, 2012), 65.

**Table 3. Use and Awareness of Online Engagement Tools Connected to *Amelia***

	Used Online Tools		Aware of Online Tools	
	<i>Amelia</i> Single-Ticket Buyers	<i>Amelia</i> Subscribers	<i>Amelia</i> Single-Ticket Buyers	<i>Amelia</i> Subscribers
<i>Amelia</i> section of website	<b>70%</b>	47%	<b>85%</b>	74%
Making of <i>Amelia</i> video series	<b>31%</b>	16%	<b>55%</b>	42%
<i>Amelia</i> content on Seattle Opera blog, Facebook, or Twitter	<b>26%</b>	12%	<b>52%</b>	43%
Streaming video of <i>Creating Amelia: The Making of a New Opera</i>	<b>18%</b>	8%	42%	38%
Streaming video of <i>Amelia</i> -related panel discussion	<b>11%</b>	6%	41%	33%

Bold numbers are significantly higher than *Amelia* subscribers at 95% confidence

Note: Respondents include approximately 1,000 *Amelia* subscribers and 150 *Amelia* single-ticket buyers.

their experience suggests live streaming has the potential to be a low-cost way to expand the reach of in-person events.

The survey results also suggest the activities helped audiences become familiar with *Amelia*, achieving Henry’s objectives in marketing the new show. Forty-seven percent of single-ticket buyers said a driving reason they went to see the opera was their interest in the story line or themes, and 16 percent attended because they had participated in an *Amelia*-related event or activity; the top-mentioned reason (51 percent) was having an interest in contemporary works. Among those single-ticket buyers surveyed who attended performances at Seattle Opera during the 2009–2010 season but did not see *Amelia*, just 20 percent said they abstained because they didn’t know enough about it.

Table 3 shows a further breakdown of the online content usage data, as well as awareness of the material among audiences who saw *Amelia* on a single ticket or as part of a subscription including other Seattle Opera productions (“*Amelia* subscribers”). Those results reveal that single-ticket buyers not only were more aware of many of the online tools, but also that they used each one more than *Amelia* subscribers. While definitive conclusions can’t be drawn from this set of data—we don’t know which event caused the other—it is consistent with the supposition that the online tools helped prompt single-ticket purchases.

With further evidence of the power of behind-the-scenes material to strengthen audience engagement, Seattle Opera committed to continuing such efforts while still exploring other avenues.

## **YEAR THREE: EXPERIENCING PLACE THROUGH TECHNOLOGY, 2010–2011**

**D**uring the third year of the initiative, Seattle Opera experimented with additional in-person and technology-driven engagement tactics. Unlike the first two years, where a suite of activities was built around particular productions, in years three and four, the company developed several technology-based tools and used them across multiple productions. Many combined newer technologies with more established ones. But the opera staff produced considerably fewer tools so they could devote time and resources to their first-ever public opera simulcast, to be presented the following year.

### **1. TOUCHSCREEN TABLES**

**F**irst, working with Microsoft, they built large computer kiosk tables with touchscreen monitors that included over 1,000 archival images from Seattle Opera productions performed during its nearly 50-year history, organized by season and by show. The kiosks were designed on wheels, allowing them to be moved in and out of the opera hall for performances. The large (24 inch by 36 inch) surfaces let several patrons stand around the table and look through different sets of images at one time. Seattle Opera designed the tables to allow audience members to both revisit earlier experiences and learn about the company, on their

own or with other audience members. Four tables were debuted on two lobby levels during dress rehearsals of *The Barber of Seville*, *The Magic Flute*, and *Don Quixote*, three performances in total, and viewed by an estimated 750 patrons at those performances (approximately 250 per performance).

## 2. TAKING Q&A OUT OF THE OPERA HALL

**A**dditionally, Seattle Opera experimented with a live radio broadcast of the usual post-performance Q&A following the May 13, 2011, performance of *The Magic Flute*. The Q&A sessions, led by General Director Jenkins, are typically 45 minutes in length. Up until that time, Seattle Opera had a tradition of broadcasting one performance of each production as a live radio simulcast on Seattle classical music radio station KING. But Henry approached the station about keeping the broadcast open for an additional hour following the May 13 broadcast so the Q&A also could be simulcast to permit audience members tuning in to the simulcast and those who were driving home from the opera house to listen.

The audience was informed about the Q&A simulcast through notifications in e-mails and programs and on signs posted in the opera hall, in addition to an announcement made before the actual performance. Marketing staff ran a small post-show survey that revealed 11 percent (approximately 310) of the patrons in attendance tuned in to the broadcast following the performance, and two-thirds of them said it enhanced their experience. That's not counting those who tuned in to the simulcast itself and listened afterward—patrons whom Seattle Opera cannot track.

With that success in mind, Seattle Opera continued to broadcast the post-performance Q&As whenever radio simulcasts were held, and posted audio from one Q&A per production on [seattleopera.org](http://seattleopera.org) so audience members and website visitors could listen at any time. The broadcasts and postings continued until the Q&A was changed to a more interactive “talk back” forum in 2014; the new format asked for greater audience participation and therefore seemed less suited to a passive listening experience.

## 3. DESIGNING PRODUCTION GUIDES FOR KINDLE

**F**inally, Seattle Opera experimented with an interactive Kindle version of its *Spotlight Guide*, an educational booklet that accompanies every performance. Unlike programs, which contain an introduction by the general director, a story about the artists, and casting information, these guides are designed to be more in-depth and educational. Created by Seattle Opera's education department, they originally were sent only to subscribers and used with students.

Seattle Opera developed digital versions in a series of iterations. The first were Flash-based books that could be read on [seattleopera.org](http://seattleopera.org), with embedded music excerpts and videos. Then, with the production of *The Magic Flute* in May 2011, the opera developed its first e-reader *Spotlight Guide* for the Kindle platform. That proved to be more difficult than the staff had anticipated because, while they wanted to provide the guide at no cost, downloading free Kindle items requires more steps than paid selections. After receiving several e-mails asking how to get access to the free guide, Seattle Opera switched to a version with

a nominal price (99¢). The staff continued to develop variations for their six productions in the 2011–2012 season, but audience interest was low. Only 172 *Spotlight Guides* were downloaded for *The Magic Flute*.<sup>10</sup>

Shortly after, the iPad, which had been released a year earlier, began to gain in popularity. Recognizing that it offered more visual vibrancy than most versions of Kindle, Seattle Opera experimented with the platform. There were two additional benefits. First, the staff found it easier to integrate multimedia into the publication. Second, Seattle Opera had developed an iPad app through which audience members (or anyone who had the free app installed) could easily view the *Spotlight Guide* for a current or past production with a simple refresh of the application. The low use of Kindle and the benefits of the iPad led Seattle Opera to drop the former platform in favor of the latter. For recent productions, app downloads and refreshes have regularly been about 600 to 750, a more enthusiastic response than was seen with Kindle.

Seattle Opera, of course, has more resources than most opera companies. For that reason, it was able to tap its own staff front-end web developer and designer to create the iPad app in-house. He has the ability to create electronic versions of the *Spotlight Guide* by working directly from the digital file used for publishing the print edition, converting it to the iPad interface.

#### 4. BEHIND-THE-SCENES VIDEOS

**A**lthough not a scheduled part of its grant activity, Seattle Opera believed the “making of” videos were so successful

in both their use and impact that they should become a regular part of each production. During the 2010–2011 season, the company created a “making of” video to go behind the scenes of a different aspect of each of its productions. The videos were released in the weeks leading up to the opening night of each show. Five were made for a total of five productions, including:

- Costumes, for *The Magic Flute*, which was viewed 2,465 times
- Music, for *Tristan und Isolde*, which was viewed 2,526 times
- Sets, for *Lucia di Lammermoor*, which was viewed 2,121 times
- Wigs, for *The Barber of Seville*, which was viewed 3,162 times
- Sets, for *Don Quixote*, which was viewed 3,565 times

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10. At the time the Kindle platform was in its infancy. In early 2012, only an estimated 12 percent of U.S. adults owned a Kindle e-reader and another 3 percent had a Kindle Fire. Source: Lee Rainie et al., *The Rise of E-Reading* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2012), 32–34.

## **YEAR FOUR: ARENA SIMULCAST OF MADAMA BUTTERFLY, 2011–2012**

**D**uring its 2011–2012 season, the final year of grant activity, Seattle Opera extended the idea behind its year three plan to use technology to take opera outside of the hall. An external simulcast of *Madama Butterfly* would show the complete opera in a different context to thousands of Seattle residents. Presenting art outside of traditional venues generally has the potential to attract newcomers, many of whom decide to attend for reasons only tangentially connected to the performance itself, such as the opportunity to enjoy an unusual social occasion.<sup>11</sup> Such productions by opera companies have been around for some time; Houston Grand Opera held its first “Plazacast” outside of its opera house in 1995. Since then several large companies, such as San Francisco Opera, the Metropolitan Opera, and Washington National Opera, have offered their own simulcasts, as have many midsize companies.

But Seattle Opera felt undertaking a simulcast could accomplish something it hadn’t done before. While most of the technology applications developed so far had been designed with existing audiences in mind, staff believed the simulcast had the potential to attract audiences new to both Seattle Opera and the art form itself. That’s because the performance could interest those who might be curious, but were hesitant to pay the usually

11. Chris Walker and Kay Sherwood, *Participation in Arts and Culture: The Importance of Community Venues* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 2003).

steep price of an opera ticket or found the prospect of going to the opera house itself too intimidating. *Madama Butterfly* was deemed an ideal choice for the event, given its recognizable story line and broad appeal.

Seattle Opera held the event on Saturday, May 5, 2012, in Seattle’s KeyArena, a well-known multipurpose enclosed stadium that hosts entertainment and sporting events. The City of Seattle, which owns the space, donated it for the simulcast, although Seattle Opera paid to prepare the stadium for the event and for arena staff time. There was no charge for tickets, which for that production ranged from \$25 to \$241 at the opera house. To capture audience data, Seattle Opera encouraged those interested in attending to register ahead of time to obtain priority seating. In the end, over 3,000 made reservations for 8,300 tickets, the full capacity of KeyArena for that evening.<sup>12</sup>

Because Seattle Opera does not regularly produce high-definition (HD) broadcasts, it lacked the technology required to record and broadcast HD sound and video on a large scale. So the company hired an outside studio and an experienced opera simulcast producer to assist with the event. The performance was captured with seven HD cameras and projected from the opera hall, which was about 300 yards away, onto a 50-by-80-foot screen (usually used as a backdrop at the opera hall) at one end of the stadium.

The effort wasn’t cheap. All told, the budget for producing the event was \$500,000. To help defray the expense, Seattle Opera found additional sponsors. It also negotiated with all of the creative and artistic unions under contract to project the opera for that one evening free of royalties.

12. Full capacity for KeyArena is over 17,000, but for the opera simulcast, only the large lower bowl was open, and there was no seating in the area behind the projection screen, where a large curtain was placed to absorb sound and prevent echo.



## 1. PROMOTING THE SIMULCAST

Concerned that it might hurt subscription or single-ticket sales to the *Madama Butterfly* performance in the opera hall, Seattle Opera waited until April 2012 (the month before the simulcast) to begin marketing the event aggressively to the public and existing patrons. Subscribers and donors could register for tickets beginning on April 4, 2012, and registration opened to the general public on April 9. In addition to traditional print advertising in local media outlets and e-mail blasts to its patron database, the broadcast was heavily marketed and promoted in social media. The company's marketing staff identified influential arts bloggers and "tweeters" in the community by using tools such as Followerwonk and reached out to them directly, asking that they promote the event and become part of the company's "social press" for the broadcast. Thirty-eight influencers accepted the invitation, and they were invited to take a tour of the costume shop and McCaw Hall's backstage and to attend a dress rehearsal in the weeks leading up to the production.

The event itself was used to promote Seattle Opera as well. On the night of the broadcast, the social press sat in a designated "tweet suite" in KeyArena and used the hashtag #operaatkey, which audience members were also invited to employ. More than 500 tweets were made under that hashtag from 141 unique users. Many of those users had hundreds of followers on Twitter, and some had thousands. According to Twitter search tool Topsy ([www.topsy.com](http://www.topsy.com)), the potential impressions from #operaatkey tweets leading up to and right after the event were just over one million.

Seattle Opera also built interest in the simulcast by developing other online engagement tools and tactics, including:

- The Seattle Opera blog, which was turned over almost entirely to *Madama Butterfly* for the month leading up to the May 5 opening night and simulcast. Most of the content discussed the production itself rather than the simulcast, and included: entries on the opera's history, five text interviews with leading cast members, and links to videos that included behind-the-scenes looks (discussed in the next section) and features on soprano Patricia Racette (who performed the part of Cio-Cio-San, the female lead of *Madama Butterfly*) and Stage Director Peter Kazaras (also discussed in the next section).
- The *Madama Butterfly* section on the Seattle Opera website included a synopsis, cast information, production photographs, links to an audio preview and two musical excerpts, as well as links to behind-the-scenes and interview videos (discussed in the next section).
- The iPad application was available and updated to include a digital program with a synopsis, artist bios, historical context essays, and videos.

## 2. THE EVENING OF THE SIMULCAST

On the evening of the simulcast, the doors to KeyArena opened at 6:00 p.m. to allow priority seating for audience members who had registered in advance, and then to the full general public (with or without a ticket) at 6:30 p.m. for the 7:30 p.m. curtain—the first of this production's eight-show run. Seattle Opera had set up various pre-performance activities suitable even for those who had never experienced opera before in the lobbies and common areas to create a festive atmosphere and provide multiple ways for audience members to engage with



**Figure 5. Madama Butterfly Simulcast at KeyArena**

the company. These activities included a station where audience members could try on outfits from the costume shop, as well as demonstrations of such Japanese traditions as origami.

In the arena itself, pre-curtain, Looney Tunes' *What's Opera, Doc* was shown on the HD screen, along with a peek backstage into a dressing room via a behind-the-scenes video in which costume, hair, and makeup staff demonstrated the process of preparing a geisha for the stage. Additional pre-performance videos included a profile of the orchestra, a tour of the costume shop, and an introductory "What Is Opera" discussion that included clips of musicians, craftspeople, and cast members preparing an earlier production, *Don Pasquale*, for the stage. The idea was to give attendees a sense of the large scale and multidimensional scope of producing an opera. Before the performance began, General Director Jenkins greeted the audience at McCaw Hall and live onscreen at KeyArena. The performance itself ran for 2 hours and 45 minutes, including one 30-minute intermission.

During the intermission, two videos were projected at KeyArena to give audience members additional insight into the production: an interview with Racette and a welcome from Stage Director Kazaras, in which he introduced the principal artists through rehearsal clips. At the end of the performance, Jenkins led a Q&A at the opera hall; it was not shown at KeyArena, but was broadcast over KING radio, allowing those driving home from the simulcast to listen.

There were 11 pre-show and intermission videos in all (8 of which were produced by Videographer Mohn). In addition to being shown at the simulcast, they were posted earlier to the *Madama Butterfly* section on the Seattle Opera website and to the blog.

### **3. YEAR FOUR RESULTS: SIMULCAST ATTRACTS NEW, YOUNGER AUDIENCES**

**T**he simulcast was attended by a crowd of 5,126, or 62 percent of the capacity for the evening.<sup>13</sup> Just two weeks after the performance, the opera conducted an additional wave of audience research to determine who went to the simulcast, why, and what they thought of the experience. Invitations to take the survey were e-mailed to Seattle Opera patrons in the 2011–2012 season and 3,075 individuals who had not purchased tickets but had registered for the *Madama Butterfly* simulcast; only those who attended the simulcast were asked questions about it.

The survey revealed that the simulcast had attracted people with varying degrees of experience with Seattle Opera. There were three main categories:

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13. While 8,300 of the free tickets were spoken for, not everyone who signed up for a free ticket attended.

- Loyal patrons: Twenty-eight percent fell into this group of those who attended Seattle Opera at least once per year. They could be further broken down into 20 percent subscribers and 8 percent single-ticket buyers.
- Infrequent patrons: Thirty-nine percent attended Seattle Opera, but not every year. About half—19 percent of the total audience—had not attended in the past year.
- Newcomers: Twenty-seven percent of audience members had never attended a Seattle Opera performance, and most in this group were new to opera itself. Seventy-one percent (19 percent of the total audience) had not seen an opera anywhere in the past two years.

An additional 7 percent fell into an “other” category that did not fit these three larger groups.

Extrapolating from the above percentages to the total attendance of 5,126, 1,400 people who saw the simulcast had never before been to Seattle Opera, 1,000 had not attended within the past year, and an additional 1,000 had visited in the past year, but tended to do so infrequently.<sup>14</sup>

As shown in the first four columns in Table 4, the newcomers were younger than both the infrequent and loyal patrons—37 percent were younger than age 35. Newcomers and infrequent patrons also had a more diverse educational profile than loyal patrons, most of whom had a college degree and half had a graduate degree. The last two columns profile Seattle Opera subscribers and single-ticket buyers responding to the same survey questions in 2012 (some of them are included as

14. Although Seattle Opera data identified 3,075 simulcast patrons who signed up for tickets but were not on record as having *purchased* Seattle Opera tickets in the past year, that does not necessarily mean those patrons did not *attend* in the previous year; they could have attended with someone else who had bought the tickets, and the purchase would therefore be under that other person's name. Respondent classifications in the analyses are based on patrons' own descriptions of their attendance patterns, not the ticketing database.

**Table 4. Simulcast Audience and Seattle Opera Patron Demographics (2012 Audience Survey)**

	Simulcast Audience			Seattle Opera Patrons	
	Loyal Patrons (n = 222)	Infrequent Patrons (n = 308)	Newcomers (n = 213)	Subscribers (n = 1,697)	Single-Ticket Buyers (n = 1,104)
Age:					
Under 35	11%	19%	<b>37%</b>	7% <sup>a</sup>	13% <sup>b</sup>
35-54	35%	34%	35%	23% <sup>a</sup>	34%
55-64	19%	<b>28%</b>	20%	30% <sup>c</sup>	29% <sup>c</sup>
65+	<b>36%</b> <sup>d</sup>	<b>19%</b>	9%	40% <sup>d</sup>	24% <sup>e</sup>
Education:					
Some College or Less	11%	<b>20%</b>	<b>24%</b>	9% <sup>b</sup>	11% <sup>b</sup>
College Degree	26%	<b>34%</b>	<b>34%</b>	22% <sup>b</sup>	29%
Some Graduate Work	12%	9%	13%	12%	10%
Graduate or Postgraduate Degree	<b>50%</b> <sup>d</sup>	<b>38%</b>	29%	57% <sup>f</sup>	50% <sup>d</sup>

Bold numbers are significantly higher than other simulcast audience groups at 95% confidence

<sup>a</sup> Significantly lower than all simulcast audience groups

<sup>b</sup> Significantly lower than infrequent patrons and newcomers

<sup>c</sup> Significantly higher than loyal patrons and newcomers

<sup>d</sup> Significantly higher than infrequent patrons and newcomers

<sup>e</sup> Significantly lower than loyal patrons and higher than newcomers

<sup>f</sup> Significantly higher than all simulcast audience groups

loyal patrons in the simulcast audience), to allow comparisons to the simulcast audiences. In general, single-ticket buyers were older and more educated than the infrequent patrons and newcomers, and subscribers were older and more educated than all three simulcast audiences.

Factors prompting simulcast attendance are listed in Table 5. For newcomers and infrequent patrons, the largest motivating factor was that it was offered free of charge. Large numbers of newcomers also said they were interested in seeing

**Table 5. Factors Prompting Simulcast Attendance**

	Loyal Patrons (n = 206)	Infrequent Patrons (n = 305)	Newcomers (n = 213)
Factors motivating attendance:			
It was free	66%	<b>82%</b>	<b>88%</b>
Something unique and interesting	61%	69%	<b>78%</b>
Casual atmosphere	27%	34%	<b>47%</b>
I am a fan of the Seattle Opera, in general	<b>70%</b>	46% <sup>a</sup>	8%
I enjoy seeing operas, in general	<b>68%</b>	<b>64%</b>	32%
How learned about simulcast event:			
E-mail messages from Seattle Opera	<b>51%</b>	37% <sup>a</sup>	20%
Word of mouth from family, friends	23%	<b>37%</b>	<b>40%</b>
Newspaper	14%	17%	20%
Seattle Opera website	<b>27%</b>	11% <sup>a</sup>	5%
Other third-party websites	7%	<b>13%</b>	<b>14%</b>
Mailings	<b>16%</b>	6%	3%
Radio	7%	5%	7%
Other	15%	14%	17%

Bold numbers are significantly higher than other groups at 95% confidence

<sup>a</sup> Significantly higher than newcomers

something “unique and interesting.” Viewers across all three groups reported enjoying the simulcast; 79 percent of attendees said they enjoyed it a great deal (not shown in the table). Table 5 also shows how the different audience groups learned the simulcast would take place. Not surprisingly, loyal patrons were more likely to have heard about it via Seattle Opera itself, whereas infrequent patrons and newcomers tended to mention word of mouth and websites other than Seattle Opera’s.

Moreover, loyal patrons were more likely to use three of the five online engagement tools, as revealed in Table 6; they

also were, for the most part, more aware of these applications. While one could draw the conclusion that such tools may be more effective at deepening the engagement of existing audiences than attracting new audiences, that result is largely a function of greater awareness; using the tools had a similar impact across each audience group (therefore, these results for all patrons are combined in Table 7). The videos, in fact, were a hit with just about everyone, no matter their group. Ninety-one

**Table 6. Awareness and Use of Online Engagement Tools**

	Loyal Patrons (n = 207-212)	Infrequent Patrons (n = 295-298)	Newcomers (n = 210-213)
<i>Madama Butterfly</i> section on seattleopera.org:			
Aware of	<b>83%</b>	63%	59%
Accessed	<b>51%</b>	39%	41%
<i>Madama Butterfly</i> behind-the-scenes videos on seattleopera.org:			
Aware of	<b>70%</b>	48%	46%
Accessed	38% <sup>a</sup>	24%	29%
<i>Madama Butterfly</i> information on Seattle Opera blog, Facebook, or Twitter:			
Aware of	<b>62%</b>	37%	35%
Accessed	<b>40%</b>	19%	13%
Post-simulcast radio broadcast Q&A:			
Aware of	<b>64%</b>	39% <sup>b</sup>	30%
Accessed	<b>31%</b>	14%	12%
<i>Madama Butterfly</i> iPad application:			
Aware of	<b>33%</b>	19%	18%
Accessed	8%	5%	5%

Bold numbers are significantly higher than the other groups at 95% confidence

<sup>a</sup> Significantly higher than infrequent patrons

<sup>b</sup> Significantly higher than newcomers

**Table 7. Percent Saying Engagement Tool Enhanced Experience of Simulcast\***

<i>Madama Butterfly</i> behind-the-scenes videos on seattleopera.org (n = 209)	91%
Post-simulcast radio broadcast Q&A with general director (n = 130)	89%
<i>Madama Butterfly</i> information on Seattle Opera blog, Facebook, or Twitter (n = 125)	86%
<i>Madama Butterfly</i> section on seattleopera.org (n = 312)	84%
<i>Madama Butterfly</i> iPad application (n = 32)	59%

\* Responses were similar across the three attending groups, so their results are aggregated here; the one group difference is that more loyal patrons than newcomers said the radio Q&A enhanced their experience.

percent of those who saw them said they enhanced the simulcast experience. Audience members also enjoyed other online tools, with the exception, perhaps, of the iPad application, although the sample size is small since few patrons rated it.

Seattle Opera might have been able to motivate more newcomers and infrequent patrons to access the different online forums by making a special effort to publicize them. Five years prior, Steppenwolf Theatre Company, for example, began deploying a variety of auxiliary programs, including several in-person engagement tactics as well as online videos, essays, and artist interviews, to deepen patron involvement and encourage infrequent attendees to come to the theater more often. The tactic worked; in two years' time, the videos, photo galleries, podcasts, and blog received nearly 2 million page views, and after three years the number of single-ticket buyers who attended more than one production each season rose 61 percent.<sup>15</sup> But the popularity of these tools was likely boosted by Steppenwolf's separate, dedicated effort to promote them, including prominent printed

15. Bob Harlow et al., *Building Deeper Relationships: How Steppenwolf Theatre Company Is Turning Single-Ticket Buyers into Repeat Visitors* (New York, NY: Wallace Studies in Building Arts Audiences, 2011), <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/audience-development-for-the-arts/strategies-for-expanding-audiences/Pages/Wallace-Studies-in-Building-Arts-Audiences-Building-Deeper-Relationships.aspx>.

program announcements, lobby displays, and pre-performance e-mails.

Whether newcomers will return to Seattle Opera remains to be seen. As shown in Table 8, half said they would be interested in seeing a production at the opera house, and 19 percent said they planned on purchasing tickets for the next season. Twice as many infrequent patrons and four times as many loyal patrons said they would attend a performance in the next season. Of course, these are just stated intentions, but they provide a sense of the relative desire among the three groups to reengage with Seattle Opera.

**Table 8. Future Interest in Attending Seattle Opera**

	Loyal Patrons (n = 211)	Infrequent Patrons (n = 200)	Newcomers (n = 206)
Interest in attending Seattle Opera productions*			
At the opera house	<b>92%</b>	66% <sup>b</sup>	50%
Via simulcast at KeyArena or other local venue	60%	72% <sup>a</sup>	69%
Plan to purchase tickets for upcoming season:			
Yes	<b>83%</b>	40% <sup>b</sup>	19%
Not sure	11%	<b>38%</b>	<b>40%</b>
Probably/Definitely will not	7%	23% <sup>a</sup>	<b>40%</b>

Bold numbers are significantly higher than numbers for the other groups at 95% confidence.

\* Percent answering 6 or 7 on a scale where 1 = not interested and 7 = very interested

<sup>a</sup> Significantly higher than loyal patrons

<sup>b</sup> Significantly higher than newcomers

## FOUR-YEAR RESULTS SUMMARY

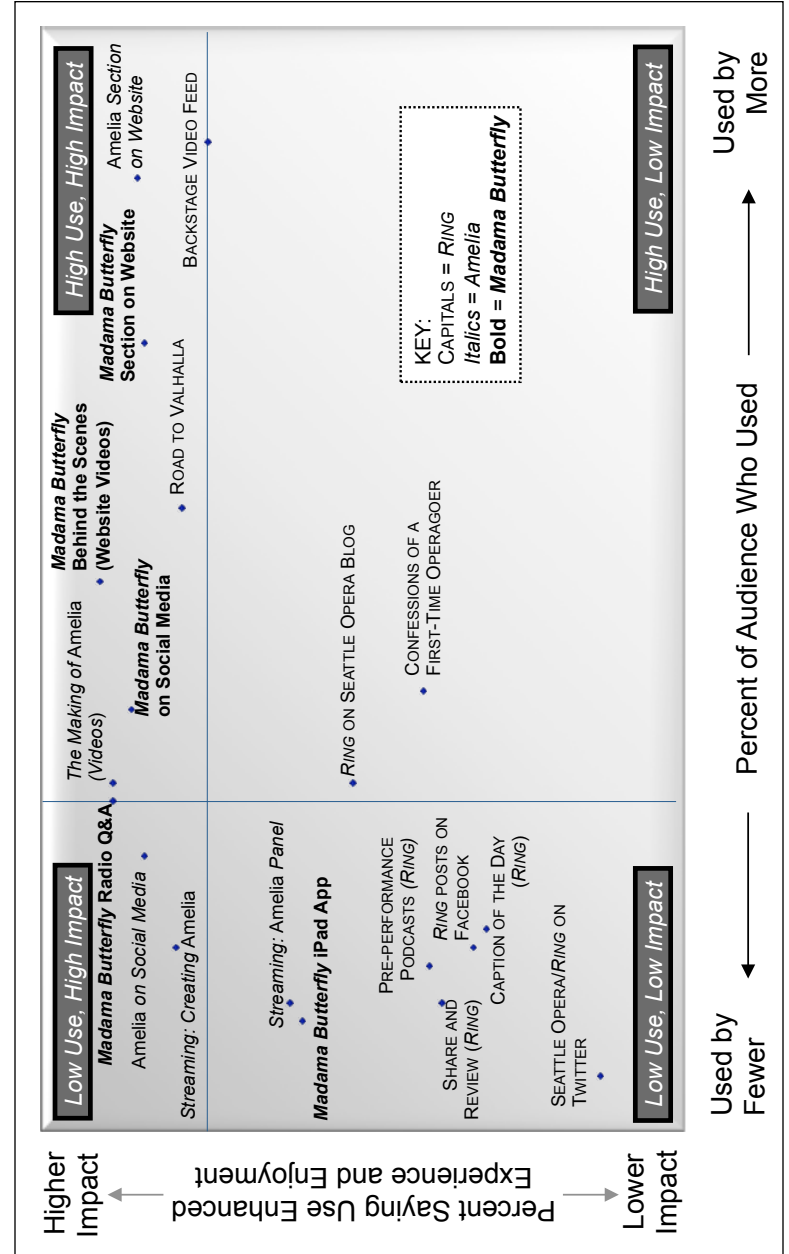
Seattle Opera began by asking how best to use technology to deepen the engagement of current patrons and reach out to new audiences. The funding it received provided the latitude to experiment with a variety of engagement tools involving in-person activities, technology, or both, and to identify how these applications could be used and what their impact would be across several types of audiences. Over the course of the four years, it met with some successes, while other initiatives failed to justify the effort and resources expended.

### 1. UNDERSTANDING WHAT WORKED

To highlight differences in the effectiveness of the different tools, Figure 6 plots their use and impact. Those used by more audience members are on the right-hand side, and those used by fewer are on the left. On the vertical axis, they are displayed in order of impact, with the tools that more operagoers say enhanced their experience at the top and those that least did so at the bottom.<sup>16</sup> The most effective tools—those that were used most and had the greatest impact—are in the upper-right quadrant. To signal how effectiveness and use shifted over time, the tools are placed in different fonts according to year of deployment, with *Ring* initiatives in all capital letters (Year 1), *Amelia*-related tactics in italics (Year 2), and tools to support the simulcast in bold (Year 4).

16. The axes are drawn at the median levels of use (18%) and impact (74%).

Figure 6. Use and Impact of Online Tools



Arranged in this way, several results stand out:

- Use grew over each season, from the *Ring* to *Amelia* and then *Madama Butterfly*. That growth was likely the result of two factors: First, Seattle Opera learned how to be more effective, with each year of implementation followed by evaluation research. Second, it takes time for audiences to get used to (and find) online content; they probably had a learning curve as well.
- As already stated, engagement tactics that took audiences behind the scenes were the most impactful.

**Videos.** Seattle Opera found that not just any videos would do. For example, the *Confessions of a First-Time Operagoer* series lacked behind-the-scenes detail, and although it was watched by a broader audience, it did not augment the experience for many viewers. Moreover the visual element of videos added an extra punch: Audio-only podcasts taking audiences behind the scenes were not as popular and enhanced the opera experience less. (Respondents in focus groups at the beginning of the initiative, described in “Research to Refine the Tools” on page 23, found that, because opera is such a visual art form, audio-only applications were not as compelling.) The company continues to produce these highly popular videos, and in fact, once it saw the level of audience interest and impact, the staff ended up creating many more of them during the grant period than originally had been planned.

**Written content.** Audiences also responded to the written content that took them inside productions. That, too, often had a visual element, with photographs or links to videos, and the company

developed more engaging content each year. Large majorities (approximately 85 percent) of those connecting with Seattle Opera on social media in the later years of the initiative—when more content bringing audiences behind the scenes was being delivered—said it enhanced their experience. In comparison, in the first year with less content, 51 percent, 32 percent, and 12 percent of viewers reading the blog, Facebook, and Twitter, respectively, said the same thing. Not surprisingly, these posts and tweets, as with the videos, were viewed more by those already engaged with Seattle Opera.

- Audiences were more likely to access Seattle Opera content on the website versus on social media. But the material had an equal impact no matter how people got to it.
- Interactive forums such as contests, reviewing, and sharing were used by fewer people and had less of an impact on audience members’ experience of Seattle Opera. Seattle Opera quickly dropped those forums. (Audience members can still interact on Seattle Opera’s Facebook page, where the focus continues to evolve; as of 2015, the page regularly includes playful posts and questions, in addition to posts about Seattle Opera productions and the broader world of opera, garnering hundreds and sometimes thousands of likes and comments from the page’s 40,000-plus fans.)

Some results lead to less definitive conclusions, because the tactics may be reconsidered as technology and habits around them have changed. The Kindle *Spotlight Guides* had some logistical issues (and the technology was in its early years), but seem to

have found a new home on the iPad platform. As for live streaming, Seattle Opera continues to watch as technology changes in ways that may make the approach more attractive to viewers. When the live streams were done back in May 2010, for example, most viewers were probably watching via PC, requiring them to stay in one place (seated behind a desk or table) to watch the feed. Marketing Director Henry suspects that people may not have had the patience to sit through a 90-minute panel discussion online. And with a market penetration at that time of only 3 percent, few people had tablets, which could have provided a more convenient viewing experience. Now that tablet usage has grown—it was 42 percent of U.S. adults by early 2014<sup>17</sup>—Seattle Opera could reconsider live streaming, according to Murti.

Seattle Opera's results need to be understood in the context of its audience of older, highly educated opera devotees. Learning-focused videos, for example, may not have the same appeal for other groups. In fact, Seattle Opera found that even within its usual audience, different segments responded differently to some tactics, such as *Confessions of a First-Time Operagoer*. Moreover, while the interactive tools appeared to fall flat with Seattle Opera's relatively older audience (nearly two-thirds are over age 55), younger viewers in particular may be more responsive to them. Research consistently shows that younger users of social media are much more interactive than older social media users. Younger Facebook users, for example, are several times more likely than older Facebook users to update their status, like content, and comment on others' posts and photos.<sup>18</sup>

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17. Pew Research Center, *Device Ownership Over Time*, <http://www.pewinternet.org/data-trend/mobile/device-ownership>, accessed May 15, 2014 (continually updated).

18. See, for example, Keith N. Hampton et al., *Social Networking Sites and Our Lives* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2011), <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Technology-and-social-networks.aspx>.

The idea for the videos came from research with existing audiences, so it's perhaps no surprise that those tactics were later used by and appealed to them. Soliciting its intended viewers' input gave the organization a solid direction for designing effective tactics. In fact, research with a different audience (or no research at all) probably would have taken Seattle Opera in another direction, and organizations looking to build successful engagement tools should recognize that their use and impact will likely vary across different audiences.

The table in Appendix 2 summarizes the results of the different tactics used by Seattle Opera, the resources required to deploy them, and the likely role these approaches will play in the company's future.

## **2. SIMULCAST: A HIGH-IMPACT BUT EXPENSIVE WAY TO REACH NEWCOMERS**

In general, tactics were mostly focused on existing audiences, with the exception of the simulcast itself (not shown in Figure 6). It brought many new audience members to Seattle Opera, in addition to attracting both frequent and occasional patrons. It also drew a younger audience, which is a challenge for most opera companies. Three things helped. First, the organization removed the price barrier. Younger audiences tend to be wary of costly, unfamiliar activities like opera<sup>19</sup>—and an extremely high 88 percent of newcomers said they were motivated by the low price point. Second, taking opera out of its usual context may have helped counter the perception that is commonly held by

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19. Bob Harlow and Tricia Heywood, *Getting Past "It's Not for People Like Us": Pacific Northwest Ballet Builds a Following with Teens and Young Adults* (New York, NY: Wallace Studies in Building Arts Audiences, 2015).



the uninitiated that opera is boring and stuffy. In fact, a large number (78 percent) were motivated to attend because it was “unique and interesting.” Holding the simulcast in a familiar arena also may have made the experience less intimidating: nearly half said the casual atmosphere attracted them.

It is probably unrealistic, however, to expect a single exposure to build a following.<sup>20</sup> While Seattle Opera has started to see a small amount of ticket purchases from follow-up marketing efforts, it does not regard the simulcast as a revenue generator. Tweeddale calls the effort a relationship-building tool more than anything else—a “welcome mat” that is the first step in engagement, one of many avenues used to encourage opera newbies to experience the art form, even if they don’t yet come to the theater.

Simulcasts may simply be too costly to become an ongoing tradition, as has been the case at some opera companies.<sup>21</sup> But Seattle Opera has applied the same principles that brought newcomers to the simulcast to other, more cost-effective ways for novices to experience the art form outside the performance space. That has meant providing a casual atmosphere, free admission, and a unique and interesting experience. For example, the company now regularly stages “open houses” for specific productions each year that attract hundreds of people—some

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20. Although data are not available on the extent to which first-time visitors return to opera, orchestras have analyzed this topic extensively. It is estimated that approximately 90 percent of first-time visitors to orchestral performances do not return. See, e.g., Oliver Wyman, *Turning First-Timers into Life-Timers: Addressing the True Drivers of Churn* (New York, NY: Oliver Wyman, 2008). Additional follow-up engagement strategies tailored to those first-time visitors can, however, increase that rate of return. See, for example, Rebecca Winzenried, “The Price Is Right,” *Symphony* 61 (2010), 52–56.

21. Other opera companies have shown it can take years for simulcasts to build enough momentum that they begin to generate significant revenue, and even then they may not offset upfront investment costs. They are still largely seen as ways to raise a company’s profile. See, e.g., Jeanette Borzo, “Opera Makes Free Simulcasts Pay Off,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 16, 2010.

operagoers, some the merely curious. These free events center on a theme connected to the production and take place on a Saturday afternoon in the opera hall’s multilevel lobby. Activities include contests, performances by local (non-opera) talent and by the opera singers in costume, and backstage tours.

## KEYS TO SUCCESS

**T**he company now interacts with audiences differently than it did when the initiative started. It began with a series of questions about how best to use digital technology, and ended up building expertise and capacity for doing so. The organization's culture has shifted as well, with the company moving from wariness to enthusiasm about letting the public see what goes on behind the curtain, and even inviting audience members to share their perspectives. Opera staff did, in Tweeddale's words, "a 180-degree turnaround and just took out every obstacle imaginable" between the public and Seattle Opera.

A number of factors boosted Seattle Opera's effectiveness.

### 1. A FOCUS ON LEARNING

**T**hroughout the initiative, staff ensured that the organization would learn from its different experiments. The company approached each year with a willingness not only to try new things, but also to make changes, and to use research to determine when such modifications were necessary. The fact that the tools the staff developed were used by more people and had greater impact over the years of the initiative is a testament to the organization's willingness to learn and adapt.

In fact, Seattle Opera's approach demonstrates many of the hallmarks of successful learning organizations—institutions

that are suited to adapting to change.<sup>22</sup> One of these distinctive features is concrete learning processes and practices based on generating, collecting, interpreting, and disseminating information. An important starting point was Seattle Opera's methodical approach to intelligence gathering aimed at understanding what technology opportunities existed and how the opera could deploy them. As the initiative moved forward, the staff had a forum—the regular meetings of the Technology Committee—in which they could share and discuss information, keeping these discussions at the forefront of the organization's activity.

Additional ingredients that helped them learn included:

**1. Experimental mindset to promote discovery.** The grant gave staff room to experiment and made them more comfortable with ambiguity about how a particular initiative might pan out. The one certainty was that they had to learn something they could build upon—or else reject it. In that sense, the funding itself was unusual and led the organization to think and act in a different way—prioritizing (and thereby enabling) discovery over immediate results. In Tweeddale's words: "It's very rare to get a grant that allows you to have the petri dish, allows you to do a lot of R&D experimentation, with the permission to fail on some of those things. And that changed, I think, our risk-taking ability."

**2. Audience research.** Ongoing research into and assessment of patron engagement and its impact gave Seattle Opera the ability to evaluate and improve tactics. Early findings suggested that audiences might be especially favorably inclined toward videos, particularly when they relayed behind-the-scenes content. That research

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22. See, for example, David A. Garvin, Amy C. Edmondson, and Francesca Gino, "Is Yours a Learning Organization?" *Harvard Business Review* 86 (2008), 109–116.

also suggested that certain tactics might interfere with patrons' experiences, such as those that would have been deployed in the opera hall itself during performances. And staff learned to shift resources away from interactive social media when surveys revealed considerably less interest in, engagement with, and impact from such tools. As they got

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**EVEN A SMALL, LOW-COST RESEARCH PROJECT CAN PROVIDE INVALUABLE GUIDANCE IF IT IS DESIGNED STRATEGICALLY.**

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a better understanding of what was effective, the staff modified their approach, focusing on self-directed and learning-oriented technology. Each year they had at least some winning engagement tools, driven in large part by their strategy of gathering intelligence before determining what applications to deploy.

The evaluation surveys and focus group research Seattle Opera used may be out of reach for many arts organizations, but the company also got considerable mileage from low-cost studies designed and administered in-house. The online survey that staff sent to *Ring* ticket buyers, for example, revealed not only the interest in behind-the-scenes content, but also the surprising use of technology platforms by older patrons. The results gave the engagement strategy clear (and, it turned out, spot-on) direction and were shared widely beyond the marketing staff and all the way to the board, garnering widespread support. The bottom line: Even a small, low-cost research project can provide invaluable guidance if it is designed strategically.

**3. Evaluation.** Marketing staff took a multifaceted approach to evaluation, monitoring several different indicators

of engagement for discussion at biweekly meetings that included not only the research, but also real-time data on downloads and video views. This approach enabled them to maximize effectiveness by reconsidering what wasn't working and doubling down on what was.

Such monitoring and evaluation necessitate no small commitment of staff time. While there were other metrics related to the videos that the organization could have analyzed, even a company of Seattle Opera's size couldn't spare the time. Staff recognized the potential to take on too much and made the process manageable by focusing on one set of metrics they could easily monitor and track.

## **2. INVOLVING THE BROADER ORGANIZATION EARLY ON**

**S**eattle Opera attempted from the beginning to involve all employees whose work would be touched by the technology initiative, believing that their buy-in and input would be critical to maximize success. Perhaps most importantly, early on, staff included the organization's unions in discussions of how to best use digital technology in engaging audiences. Those entities were especially vital stakeholders since unions representing artists often restrict what can be shared digitally, out of concern that their members will be barred from sharing in profits made from new content. To identify how marketing and creative teams could collaborate in a way that made everyone feel comfortable, Seattle Opera gave union representatives seats on the Technology Committee.

Involving unions early on ensured that their representatives understood the uses of and goals for digital content, and set the tone for continual give-and-take. Tweeddale explains the process:

*We had regular labor and management meetings with all of our unions. We talked about the kinds of things that we were going to do. And then we listened, rather than just wanting to convince them it was a good idea. A lot of times when they brought up barriers, we really had to listen and say, “OK, maybe there’s a different way to do this.”*

These early conversations helped avoid potential stumbling blocks. Says Tweeddale, “We kind of came into this very

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**EARLY ON, STAFF INCLUDED THE UNIONS IN DISCUSSIONS OF HOW TO BEST USE DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN ENGAGING AUDIENCES.**

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naïve, thinking, ‘Isn’t this great?’ and we expected everybody else to think it was great. And, there were a lot of our unions that at the end really thought the end product was great. But when they came in, it was more, ‘Oh, no, this is a whole world that we’re not comfortable with,’ and for a lot of the right reasons.”<sup>23</sup>

Seattle Opera’s strong relationships with its unions and the mutual understanding they developed ultimately made it easier to produce and share high-quality digital content, providing the company with a flexibility not all artistic organizations enjoy. Specifically, the unions agreed to allow the company to record full dress rehearsals or publish five minutes of continuous performance, and to waive royalty fees on the night of the simulcast. Tweeddale believes openness about the content’s use and responsiveness to union concerns were key to reaching those compromises.

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23. Jeffrey D. Ford and Laurie W. Ford point out that although resistance can be frustrating, it often comes from individuals with a unique understanding of the organization, and leaders can tap that perspective to deliver better results. See “Decoding Resistance to Change,” *Harvard Business Review* 87 (2009), 99–104.

As the technology initiative stretched further out and touched the work of individual artistic and creative staff members, it became necessary to expand those conversations. Henry emphasizes that any organization trying to use technology to engage audiences should identify (and involve) the broader group of individuals whose work might be affected in any way. Although initially reluctant to share work that was in various stages of completion and rehearsal, over time, artists and production staff came to embrace the idea. Tweeddale credits their success in building that collaboration to what she calls some “great advice” she got at the outset: to look at producing the videos from the artists’ perspective. That required having conversations sooner rather than later to identify where sensitivities might lie and what things they don’t want to give away, according to Tweeddale.

The expertise contributed by technical and creative staff early on also helped Seattle Opera make the most of its opportunities. After all, these are the individuals who understand most intimately what happens behind the scenes, the story lines that might be most interesting to share, and how to best showcase their work. Over time, creative and technical staff members have taken a more active role in the process. They now curate many of the videos, allowing the opera to take greater advantage of their expertise. They have also become drivers of the process. “Now people from the creative side actually come to us with ideas,” adds Murti.

## MOVING FORWARD

**S**eattle Opera came away with broader lessons about how to use technology to engage audiences. Perhaps the most important was one that staff had suspected all along—that technology is a means to an end, not an end in itself. And deploying technology wisely means understanding (1) what tools are likely to be accessed, (2) by whom, and (3) with what impact. They also found that the key to unlocking technology’s potential lay just as much in understanding internal culture and collaboration as it did in designing different tactics and understanding their effect. Reflecting on the four years, Tweeddale observes, “You can look at all of the things that we did and none of them was really spectacular or brilliant. But it was the building effects that each one of them had upon each other and the trust that we developed internally and externally.”

Staff members believe using technology to extend the opera’s reach is necessary to respond to shifts in how people want to interact with organizations. Tweeddale sees the company’s digital endeavors as allowing it to infiltrate and be present in the digitally dominated worlds of those who might not otherwise be interested in the company, opening the door to attracting new audiences. Henry suspects the organization might have paid a heavy price had it not developed technology-based engagement strategies and instead had essentially ignored changes going on around it: “The activities we produced during

the four years helped move the company into a different direction,” he says. “We had to change and move forward because the world around us is changing, and if we kept still, the company would be irrelevant.”

The tactics they developed successfully enhanced their audience’s experience and enjoyment of attending Seattle Opera performances. An important next step the organization has yet to take is measuring how much these efforts aid retention or bring newcomers to the opera hall. It may be difficult to know how soon the company will be able to see measurable results, because it takes time (certainly more than is required to watch several videos or even attend a simulcast) to build the level of affinity that leads to more visits. As difficult as these questions may be to examine, answering them seems necessary to help organizations evaluate their success and understand what they are committing to.

A related conversation about the financial payoff of the company’s new activities has begun. There’s no clear revenue pathway, which is perhaps not surprising given the generally elusive nature of digital technology and social media return on investment.<sup>24</sup> Staff members have begun examining relationships between visitors’ viewing of online content and their subsequent purchase transactions, in part because that connection is more straightforward to measure than broader relationship-development activities. At the same time, many at the company are wary of prioritizing areas because they have

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24. For example, a 2014 survey by Duke University’s Fuqua School of Business of 351 top marketers in the United States found that while companies were spending a significant amount on social media and most expected those budgets to increase, just 15 percent said they could demonstrate an impact on business results; another 40 percent said they had a qualitative (but not quantitative) sense of the impact, and the remaining 45 percent were unable to show the impact. Source: CMO Survey, “CMO Survey Report: Highlights and Insights,” August 2014, [http://cmosurvey.org/files/2014/09/The\\_CMO\\_Survey-Highlights\\_and\\_Insights-Aug-2014.pdf](http://cmosurvey.org/files/2014/09/The_CMO_Survey-Highlights_and_Insights-Aug-2014.pdf).

an immediate (and instantly measurable) financial payoff out of concern that that focus could detract from the organization's emphasis on using technology-based tactics to strengthen and build relationships, actions that are seen as keys to sustaining the organization in the long run. Director of Marketing Henry puts the matter this way: "When you broaden and deepen the scope of the organization, you also broaden and deepen people's relationships with the organization. As you cultivate more relationships, you increase a group of individuals who might want to buy tickets or participate in some other beneficial way."

## APPENDIX 1: YEAR ONE EVALUATION SURVEY METHOD AND PATRON GROUP DIFFERENCES

Invitations were e-mailed to all *Ring* patrons in Seattle Opera's ticket database along with a random sample of subscribers and single-ticket buyers, and a sample of opera prospects. Respondents who completed the survey were entered in a drawing for a dinner for two at an upscale restaurant inside the opera hall. Surveys were completed from September 9 to September 21, 2009, by the following groups:

- 2,381 *Ring* patrons were e-mailed surveys, and 1,019 responded (a response rate of 43 percent)
- 2,000 subscribers were e-mailed surveys, and 595 responded (a 30 percent response rate)
- 2,000 single-ticket buyers were e-mailed surveys, and 320 responded (a 16 percent response rate)
- 6,000 opera prospects were e-mailed surveys (most of them lapsed patrons, but also other individuals who had expressed an interest in attending but had not), and 445 responded (a 7 percent response rate)

Not surprisingly, survey responses revealed that the three patron groups had different demographic profiles, as displayed in the table below. The *Ring* patrons were more likely to come from outside the King County/Seattle area, with a full 38 percent from outside Washington state. *Ring* patrons were also older and more educated than the other groups, whereas single-ticket buyers tended to be younger and to report feeling less connected to Seattle Opera.

## Seattle Opera Patron Demographics

	Single-Ticket Buyers (n = 320)	Subscribers (n = 595)	Ring Patrons (n = 1,019)
Resident of:			
King County/Seattle	<b>66%</b>	<b>69%</b>	45%
Washington state outside King County	19%	<b>27%</b>	17%
Outside Washington state	15% <sup>b</sup>	4%	<b>38%</b>
Age:			
18–34	<b>18%</b>	7%	5%
35–54	28%	27%	23%
55–74	48%	55% <sup>a</sup>	<b>65%</b>
75+	6%	12% <sup>a</sup>	9%
Education:			
Less than college	9%	11% <sup>c</sup>	7%
College degree	29% <sup>c</sup>	25%	21%
Some graduate studies	12%	14%	11%
Graduate or postgraduate degree	49%	51%	<b>61%</b>
Attendance History:			
Attend multiple productions per year	17%	<b>79%</b>	59% <sup>a</sup>
Attend at least once per year	<b>23%</b>	5%	6%
Attend most years	<b>16%</b>	3%	6% <sup>b</sup>
Off and on: attend some years	<b>34%</b>	9%	11%
Only purchase <i>Ring</i> tickets	0%	0%	<b>12%</b>
Other	<b>12%</b>	5%	7%
Agree with the statement, “I feel a strong connection to Seattle Opera”	32%	<b>64%</b>	<b>64%</b>

Bold numbers indicate that the patron group statistic is significantly higher than the non-bold group statistics at 95% confidence

<sup>a</sup> Significantly higher than single-ticket buyers

<sup>b</sup> Significantly higher than subscribers

<sup>c</sup> Significantly higher than *Ring* patrons

## APPENDIX 2: ENGAGEMENT TACTIC RESULTS SUMMARY

YEAR 1		
Summary Appraisal	Resources	Future Investment
<b>Behind-the-scenes videos</b>		
High impact and low cost (financial—but requires a significant investment of volunteer and staff time). The most popular of all the tools. They are particularly likely to reach those with a deeper connection to Seattle Opera, but audiences at all levels say they augment the experience of the live performance. May also play a role in building audiences for new work, with a potential for driving ticket sales.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creating videos is time intensive; Seattle Opera had an in-house volunteer videographer.</li> <li>Marketing staff develop talking points for each video; artistic, technical, and production staff dedicate time to appear in videos and demonstrate production elements.</li> <li>Low equipment needs, including a wireless microphone, HD camera, editing software</li> </ul>	Repeated in years two, three, and four; now developed for all productions
<b>Multimedia sections on website for each production</b>		
Also popular with and likely to reach those already engaged, although used by newer and less engaged audiences to some extent	Requires web capability and staff time to build content, although that material can have multiple purposes in Facebook and Twitter posts, e-mail campaigns, and other digital distribution methods	Repeated in years two, three, and four; now developed for all productions
<b>Seattle Opera’s blog</b>		
Audience engagement built slowly; as Seattle Opera updated more frequently and included additional behind-the-scenes content, its use and impact increased.	Staff time; written mostly by marketing and communications personnel with contributions from guest bloggers. Artist and staff interviews were also conducted for posting on the blog.	Repeated in years two, three, and four; now developed year-round, and given over to each production leading up to and during its run

YEAR 1 (cont.)		
Summary Appraisal	Resources	Future Investment
<b>Facebook posts and content</b>		
Use built slowly, but Seattle Opera now has over 20,000 followers, skewed toward younger viewers (60% of followers are under age 45, compared to 21% of the audience overall). As content became designed less to promote interaction and more about sharing what was happening at the company on stage and behind the scenes, audiences reported greater impact.	Staff time; short entries, many with links to photos and other media, written by marketing and communications personnel	Repeated in years two, three, and four; updated daily or almost daily year-round, multiple times daily leading up to and during show runs
<b>Twitter posts</b>		
Engagement built slowly, but Seattle Opera now has over 12,000 followers, and also used Twitter to build buzz during simulcast	Staff time, but not intensive; short posts are written mostly by marketing and communications personnel	Repeated in years two, three, and four; as with Facebook, updated daily or almost daily year-round, more often leading up to and during production runs
<b>Backstage video</b>		
High impact for those who saw it (limited to performance attendees)	Time intensive in both setup and filming, as well as editing	Not pursued in favor of activities reaching a broader audience
<b>Pre-performance podcasts</b>		
Used by few, but the relatively small number who listened reported that the podcasts enhanced their experience	Education department staff members prepared a shorter version of their pre-performance lecture that was digitally recorded, with minimal editing in of short music excerpts	Discontinued after year two, although Seattle Opera still provides in-person pre-performance lectures and preview podcasts that showcase musical excerpts

YEAR 1 (cont.)		
Summary Appraisal	Resources	Future Investment
<b>Introductory video series (e.g., <i>Confessions of a First-Time Operagoer</i>)</b>		
Among the most popular with new audiences, the least frequently viewed and least meaningful for existing audiences	More expensive than other video series, as it was produced externally. Costs included professional production.	No immediate plans, but could continue in the future in a shorter format ( <i>Confessions</i> was originally produced in a series of five videos; management believes fewer videos would have a similar impact)
<b>Interactive activities such as Caption of the Day Contest</b>		
Touched a relatively small portion of the audience and had little impact	Minimal staff time. Audience members supplied the content in response to posted production photos.	Experimenting with some contests on Facebook, but less of a priority
<b>Share and Review Program</b>		
Little interest and use; some patrons liked the idea of sharing images, but were less inclined to leave reviews	Kiosks with computer terminals at off-site event space	Not being pursued
<b>YEAR 2</b>		
<b>Panel discussions on topics related to opera</b>		
Attendance very low, but impactful for those who attended. Attracted those who had a longer history with the company.	Staff time; since Seattle Opera put together panels of outside experts, that time included building relationships with other organizations	Not being pursued
<b>Lectures with artists and creative staff</b>		
Low attendance, but higher than at panel discussions (above); especially likely to attract patrons who had a longer history with Seattle Opera, and impactful for those who attended	Time of artists and creative staff (donated), as well as marketing staff time to organize the events	Will continue as a means of deepening engagement among Seattle Opera's strongest devotees



## YEAR 2 (cont.)

Summary Appraisal	Resources	Future Investment
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### Streaming video of panel discussions and lectures

<p>Like panel discussions and lectures, reached 7-10% of existing audience, who found them impactful</p>	<p>Broadcast suites are now available for less than \$5,000 (and decreasing in cost), used in conjunction with an HD video camera</p>	<p>Not being pursued</p>
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## YEAR 3

Summary Appraisal	Resources	Future investment
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### Kindle/iPad versions of *Spotlight Guides*

<p>Kindle was a difficult platform on which to provide free content. iPad offered greater multimedia capability and patrons could easily download the guides via a refresh of Seattle Opera app. Appear to be used by many, but impact is mixed.</p>	<p>iPad application developed in-house to allow users to get access to a digital version of the print <i>Spotlight Guides</i>. Seattle Opera's in-house web developer also creates <i>Spotlight Guides</i> working directly from the digital file used for publishing the print version.</p>	<p>Will continue on iPad; Seattle Opera will experiment with additional multimedia as technology allows</p>
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### Radio Q&A simulcast

<p>Popular (used by over 10% of in-house audience in addition to radio listeners); those who tune in say it enhances their experience</p>	<p>None, because it is added on to a radio simulcast, and listener-supported KING radio allocates the time following the simulcast</p>	<p>Just once per production (the evening of the performance simulcast). Discontinued when Q&amp;A was changed to a more interactive "talk back" forum in 2014; the new format asked for greater audience participation and therefore seemed less suited to a passive listening experience</p>
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## YEAR 4

Summary Appraisal	Resources	Future Investment
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### Opera simulcast

<p>Over 5,000 attended in person, including 1,400 newcomers and 2,000 infrequent patrons, who were younger than Seattle Opera patrons in general (37% of newcomers and 19% of infrequent patrons were under age 35). High-impact experience enjoyed by a large majority of all in attendance, but expensive.</p>	<p>Budget over \$500,000, driven largely by professional HD simulcast production (not available in-house); arena space was donated, but Seattle Opera paid for facility staff time and created videos and staffed activities for the event; other costs included marketing support; artists agreed to waive royalties for this one-time event</p>	<p>Seen as one way to begin the engagement cycle with newcomers and renew it with infrequent patrons as part of a suite of other tools. Seattle Opera is following up with new audiences who attended, but has no plans for another simulcast in the near future.</p>
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Bob Harlow, PhD**, is a social psychologist and statistician who develops research programs that help organizations more deeply understand their target audiences. He has partnered with marketing managers and senior executives at some of the world's largest companies and leading nonprofit organizations to develop brand, communications, and operations strategies. He has held senior and management positions at IBM and at market research consulting groups such as Yankelovich Partners, RONIN, and KRC, and currently leads Bob Harlow Research and Consulting, LLC, a market research consulting organization.

Bob has written hundreds of surveys and conducted hundreds of focus groups and interviews with broad audiences in 30 countries. He has more than a dozen scholarly publications in social psychology and research methods, and is the lead author of The Wallace Foundation publication series Wallace Studies in Building Arts Audiences. He has a PhD from Princeton University in social psychology and completed the postdoctoral program in quantitative analysis at New York University's Stern School of Business and Graduate School of Arts and Science.



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A companion guide, *Taking Out the Guesswork*, will also be published in 2015, with detailed examples of how the 10 organizations used research to more effectively attract and retain audiences.

The Wallace Foundation  
5 Penn Plaza, 7th Floor  
New York, NY 10001  
212.251.9700 Telephone  
info@wallacefoundation.org  
[www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org)

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