

Oral History in the Digital Age
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the rationale and the processes for gathering, archiving and interpreting oral history interviews using digital technologies.

The argument is made that in our media-rich culture the simultaneous erosion of the written tradition of documenting local history adds a strong incentive for using the newest digital technology to preserve oral history interviews. A thorough definition of the oral history is presented. The paper offers a framework for planning, preparing and executing the oral history project within the context of a university service-learning course, with special emphasis on dealing with institutional research boards and the ethical considerations of dealing with human subjects. Interview techniques and editing the “crafted” oral history interview for digital consumption (versus archiving) are discussed.

The Oral History Association defines *oral history* as both a method of recording and preserving oral testimony, and the product of that process (Principles and Best Practices, 2009). In this discussion we will examine the rationale for creating the oral history product and the process of documenting oral history in the context of the twenty-first century university course.

Why oral history? According to oral historians, oral history was the “first kind of history” (Thompson, 1978). But with the transition to a text-based culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, written history became the “definitive” history, and oral history became “storytelling.”

Through the mid-twentieth century communities (cities, counties, and regions) regularly produced written histories. But for many small communities, the printed tradition has ended, probably the result of several contributing factors including higher costs of publication, lack of historical scholarship, a shrinking market for the written word, and competing media channels. As a result, the local written histories of many communities have not been updated since the early 20th century. Therefore, this paper suggests that the oral history as a more affordable, accessible, and desirable method of preserving local history.

Oral histories have traditionally been viewed as a supplement to the written or “official” history, because they offer the personal perspective. That is, the oral history answers the question, “How did historical events affect the individual?” Oral history provides the human context through which historical events take on meaning. The oral history interview often includes details and perspectives that can be found in no other source (Baylor University, 2011).

Oral history may be used to record aspects of our culture that are otherwise neglected through other more “legitimate” historical documents. For example, an oral history project was created to explain the details of waste removal and sanitation in New York City, from the perspectives of the people who perform the work (Nagel, 2011). Garbage and sewage are hardly topics for conventional written history. Therefore, such an oral history can provide insight into the unusual and unpleasant aspects of our lives, which are critical to the survival of the community.

More recently oral history has been seen as a method of documenting the history of minority populations, especially where the written tradition may not exist due to low literacy rates, lack of recognition, or marginalization by the dominant culture. By the 1990s oral historians were focusing on racial, ethnic and sexual minorities that had long been ignored by mainstream historiography (Smith, 2008).

Oral historians have argued that oral history, when done properly, is as valid a primary source for historical documentation as maps, photographs, newspapers and artifacts (Abraham, 2008).

Perhaps there is no better rationale for recording oral history than the fact that it is a culmination of a tradition of spoken history, wherein the conversion to the written form would not adequately capture the emotion, the subtlety, the nuance, or the true meaning of the story.

Some oral historians have suggested the “crafted oral history” as an alternative to the traditional model where the unedited recorded interviews are archived and preserved as historical records.

The crafted oral history focuses the interviews on specific topics, such as race, religion, education, entertainment and the like, or on significant historical events such as wars and natural disasters. The final product becomes something of a documentary on the topic (McKibben, 2005).

Through the crafted oral history we can begin to understand the accumulated significance of an event on the culture, on subcultures, or on segments of the population. That is, we begin to see how well documented events affected the lives of individuals.

In the twenty-first century, there are more reasons than ever to use the oral tradition to document history, and perhaps with some irony, oral history may be more important now than ever before. In our “information age,” we have seen a steady shift away from the written word. People are less likely to keep diaries and journals, send letters or memoranda, or keep written records and clippings of relevant events. Instead, we rely on emails, phone calls, social networking, or instant messages. These ephemeral forms of communication will not survive as historical documents for future generations to study (Paris, 2011).

One could argue that crafted oral history interviews are the ideal means of presenting history to a population of consumers who prefer audio and video content to the written word. Research shows that young people prefer to acquire their content through audio and video channels, and especially in short concise “clips” (Uyenco, Beth; Kingdon, Alex, 2010). In the present media-sharing culture, oral history may prove to be a better means of stimulating interest in history, and ultimately preserving our culture.

There is a growing body of research and evidence to reinforce the notion that applying new technologies to historical documentation may foster an interest in historical preservation that is otherwise absent. Sometimes unexpected outcomes of oral history projects involving students have been described as overcoming “historical amnesia” among students and rekindling interest in the oral tradition and “storytelling” (Naison).

Improvements in technology make capturing and editing oral history interviews so simple that it has become a component of many middle school, high school and university courses. Compiling local oral history interviews is particularly well-suited to the “service learning” strategy, as the project easily lends itself to established service learning pedagogy. The National Service Learning Clearinghouse defines service learning as “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (National Service Learning Clearinghouse, 2011).

While service learning courses are diverse and varied in their structure, approach, and content, there are some essential common elements incorporated in all: preparation, action and structured reflection (Furco & Billing, 2002). Partnering with a local historical society, museum, senior center, library or civic group to produce a crafted oral history project provides opportunities for students (in a media course) to apply skills acquired in the classroom to a real-life problem.

During the preparation phase of the project reported in this paper, students were asked to read a series of articles on the topics of oral history and service learning. The first two meetings of the class were devoted to discussions of service learning pedagogy and its component parts, and understanding the process of creating the crafted oral history.

Also during the preparation for the project, participants were required to undertake training in research ethics and proper techniques for dealing with human subjects. The goal being to ensure that interviewers/investigators acquire *informed consent* from interviewees. Informed consent is a legal doctrine that may have been derived from the 1947 *Nuremburg Code*, which laid down ten standards to which physicians must adhere when carrying out experiments on human subjects (Mitscherlich & Mielke, 1949).

Informed consent is defined by the American Psychological Association as telling participants clearly about:

1. the purpose of the research, expected duration, and procedures;
2. their right to decline to participate and to withdraw from the research once participation has begun;
3. the foreseeable consequences of declining or withdrawing;
4. reasonably foreseeable factors that may be expected to influence their willingness to participate such as potential risks, discomfort, or adverse effects;
5. any prospective research benefits;
6. limits of confidentiality;
7. incentives for participation; and

8. whom to contact for questions about the research and research participants' rights.”
(American Psychological Association, 2010)

In our case, we used the *Collaborative Institute Training Initiative*, to train our investigators to obtain informed consent (Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative, 2010). This process was completed at the direction of the University Institutional Research Board.

We asked all interviewees to sign a form demonstrating their informed consent regarding our oral history project. We also asked interviewees to sign a talent release form, which grants permission for the university/producer to use the interviews, photographs, images, and other information gathered during the project in a not-for-profit media production.

A critical element of the crafted oral history is focusing the topic, or defining the research question (Moyer, 1999). Effective oral history projects seek to bring a variety of personal perspectives to a common event or occurrence. For our project, we partnered with a local non-profit which is restoring a 19th century opera house. Our interviews were designed to elicit responses about the opera house, with the goal being a documentary on the role the opera house played in the community and its impact on local residents throughout its history.

Once the central research question is articulated, a series of questions can be developed that will guide the respondents to talk about their experiences and memories in relation to the selected topic. We refer to this process as “guided remembering.” (See Appendix A: Interview Questions) It is important to allow interviewees to freely talk about topics that they consider of interest, but interviewers must be prepared to “bring them back on topic.” Sometimes we must strike a

balance between what the interviewee wants to tell us and what we want to be told. We staged practice interviews with faculty and students as a means of refining interviewing skills.

Interviewers must also prepare for the oral history interview by conducting some historical research (Zamorski, 2009). Interviewers should be familiar with the local history of the community, and the significant events of the time period and region. This knowledge helps interviewers know when to ask direct questions about salient events, to ask follow-up questions, and to probe incongruous responses.

We concurrently trained interviewers on using the recording equipment. Improvements in digital technology now make the recording of oral history interviews easier and of higher quality than ever before. Digital audio and video recorders are now compact, lightweight, simple to operate, affordable and produce very high quality recordings with minimal expertise. Digital storage media have become more robust, higher capacity, smaller, and cheaper. And software-based editing tools are widely available (often at no cost as downloads), intuitive and powerful. It is possible for consumers to create high quality documentaries on their laptop computers, with a minimum amount of cost, preparation, and formal training.

We selected the *ZOOM H4™* recorder as our audio acquisition device as it is simple to operate and allows flexibility in file type, sampling rate, and bit rate. The *ZOOM H4™* allows users to capture using the built in stereo microphones, or using external microphones via the combination XLR/¼-inch input connectors. The *ZOOM H4™* can also be used as a microphone

preamp/interface for a computer, allowing audio to be captured directly to a laptop. (See Appendix B: *ZOOM H4™*)

[INSERT PHOTO OF ZOOM H4 ABOUT HERE.]

The sampling rate and bit rate for our recorded interviews were standardized at 44,100 KHz and 16-bit respectively, as these are consistent with Sony and Philips' *Red Book CD Standards*, established in 1982 (Philips Corporation, 2011). This, we concluded, would allow a good compromise between the quality of the recordings and file sizes, and it would make the recordings easily accessible by the widest audience.

Subjects were sought by first contacting local “senior service” agencies, “senior clubs” and organizations, senior housing facilities, and finally nursing homes. Conversations with key people at those locations helped identify interview candidates.

In our project, we soon developed a sense of urgency in collecting our interviews as we identified events and eras about which there were fewer recollections. It is quite literally true that with each passing day, there are fewer people who can recall how the Great Depression, World War II, or even the Korean conflict affected their lives. Thus our “triage” philosophy was to interview the oldest subjects first, or those who were identified as beginning to suffer from memory loss.

We contacted potential interviewees either by telephone or in person to fully explain our project and to solicit their participation. We confirmed times and locations for the interviews, making sure to confirm start and end times. We invited participants to bring any relevant documents or items that they felt helped illustrate their stories.

Recording the interviews required some on-site preparation. We sought a quiet location in the interviewee's home, apartment, room, or other suitable location. We especially sought locations away from street noise and interruptions. We often found an ideal location was the kitchen, where the table provided a surface for the recorder, desk-top microphone stands, notes, release and consent forms and other items that the respondent wanted to include.

At the request of some interviewees, we moved to "neutral ground." We made an arrangement with the local library to use a reading room when respondents were reluctant to invite us into their homes.

We digitally photographed all documents, items, and the interviewee. The experience in our project suggested that a simple lightweight document scanner would be a useful addition to the equipment taken to the interview location. A scanner would allow the capture of high quality images of relevant documents.

Of course, all cell phones were turned off – not just set to vibrate. A wireless telephone signals' interference can completely destroy a recording.

It is important to gauge the energy and stamina of the interviewee. There is a fatigue factor in oral history interviews (Ritchie, 2003). In fact, both interviewer and interviewee can be adversely affected by the stress of recalling and talking about unpleasant, embarrassing, or traumatic events. Often the best course of action is to stop the interview at the first signs of participants' fatigue, and schedule a follow-up session.

A core component of service learning pedagogy is structured reflection. Through reflection participants gain a better understanding of their own beliefs, values and opinions, and construct their own meaning and significance (Moon, 1999). Throughout our project, students were given opportunities for structured reflection: before doing fieldwork/interviews, after interviews, during editing, and after project completion.

Reflection activities involved both group discussions and journal keeping. Students were asked to consider specific questions or issues in their reflections. For example, "How did the interviewee react when asked to talk about a given topic?" "What do you think elicited that response?" "Which of the interviewees' memories seemed most vivid?" "What information surprised you most?" "How has our local social culture changed?" "How is your experience similar or different from that of the interviewee?"

Once the field recording is complete, the archiving and editing work can begin. We offered unedited copies of the interview recordings to our university library, the local public library, and the local historical society for archival purposes. These recordings are full resolution (44,100 Hz,

16-bit, .WAV) audio files saved to digital versatile disk (DVD) as data files. Image files of the interviewee, documents, and memorabilia were included on the disks as .JPG files and PDFs.

Sharing the materials with libraries, museums, and genealogical societies makes them available to a wide audience of researchers. Many such institutions make materials available online. The real importance of this collaboration is in the institutions' cataloging, indexing, and preservation of the materials.

For our project purposes, we extracted reminiscences from each interview that were relevant to the local theater. When interviewees talked about their memories and experiences connected to the theater, we copied them to a data set (file) from which we would select thematically related excerpts. For example, we grouped responses which addressed seeing movies at the theater, attending live events, the frequency of attendance, the costs of admission and concessions, the size of the crowds, local folklore about the building, dating at the theater and special events.

What unfolded was a story about how important the theater had been in the community and the lives of residents who lived there. That story is helping the theater in its financial development efforts. It provides strong evidence to outside funding agencies about the significance of the theater and the importance of preserving the historic structure. It makes a strong emotional appeal to private donors who share similar memories.

The final product was a video “slideshow” of historic images of the community and the theater, with sound clips from the interviews accented with period music. The video was exported in various formats for various uses, including posting on the Internet and burning to DVD.

Many of the students involved in the project anecdotally reported they had gained a new appreciation for the important role the theater had played in fostering a sense of community during the early part of the Twentieth Century.

Thus we considered our project a success in instilling in our students an understanding of the local history and culture, an appreciation and respect for the interviewees, and the central role the theater had played in local history. Moreover, we preserved the stories of many individuals and their perspectives on local historical events, and gave our students some valuable field production experience.

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Appendix A

Interview questions

1. What is your complete name?
2. What is your address and age?
3. How long have you lived in Morgan County?
4. Tell me about your childhood home.
5. Who were your neighbors?
6. What are your earliest recollections of Christmas?
 - a. Tree?
 - b. Gifts?
 - c. Weather?
 - d. Family?
 - e. Food?
7. Tell me about the school you attended.
 - a. School house?
 - b. Teachers?
 - c. School mates?
 - d. Getting to school?
8. What did you do on the weekends?
9. What did you do in the summers?
10. If your family had a radio, what did you listen to?
11. Tell me about going to the movies at the Opera House.
 - a. What was the first movie you remember seeing?
 - b. How much did it cost to attend?
 - c. What were the concessions you bought?
 - d. Where did you sit?
 - e. Who went with you?
 - f. How big were the crowds at the movies?
12. What live events do recall attending at the Opera House?

13. Where did your family shop for clothing and groceries?
 - a. What goods were delivered to your home?
 - b. What do you recall about those deliveries?
 - i. When were they made, who was the delivery driver, etc.?
 - c. What other deliveries were available?
14. What is your earliest memory of the county fair?
15. What do you recall about World War II and how it affected your life?
16. How often did you travel out of town?
17. Tell me about your earliest memories of telephone service in your community.

Appendix B



ZOOM H4