

**Disparate Voices, Conflicting Responsibilities:  
Reflections on the History of Oral History and the Implications of the Digital Age**

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For the past 40 years, historians have been dedicated to recovering the histories of peoples whose stories were previously untold. As History expanded its focus beyond government, government leaders, and politics, the profession has been transformed. Oral history, the gathering and recording of interviews and memories, has been an essential ingredient of this democratization of the profession. Oral histories provided vital evidence to allow historians to move beyond the written records of elites and expand their focus to broader groups and to social and cultural history.

The digital revolution has opened up dramatic new opportunities in this process. As it is easier than ever to capture the actual voices of people, the oral record is being preserved and made accessible to historians and the broader public at a scale previously unimaginable. Oral history no longer needs to be the purview of the professional interviewer/scholar, oral testimony no longer needs to be transcribed to be preserved, oral histories are no longer locked away in transcripts in the special collections of libraries and archives. Despite the vast inequalities of ICT in the world today, the future is clearly one in which the disparate voices of peoples around the world can be heard freely and easily through the Internet by anyone for any purpose. This is democratization with a vengeance.

Not surprisingly, this revolutionary transformation opens up innumerable questions for the historian who works with oral evidence. Who owns the voices put on line? Who controls them? To what purposes can they be used? What establishes the authenticity of oral testimonies? How should they be framed?

To date, most of the scholarly discussion about this topic has focused on legalism. Who owns oral histories? Who has what rights to them? Arguments over human subjects' research and copyright often seem so daunting that they crowd out all other issues.

For the scholar who works with oral sources, legal questions only scratch the surface of the issue. What is at stake is the nature of the scholarly enterprise itself. What is the role of the oral historian? Is he or she an investigator, an interviewer, an ethnologist, an interpreter? Was the person providing information a testifier, a participant, an informant, a collaborator? What is the relationship of the scholar to oral history in this new age of democratization? What is the scholar's obligation to both the people they interview and to the scholarly enterprise? How much and what type of access to oral testimony should we provide?

Over the past several years, we have had the good fortune to be involved in diverse projects designed to open up access to oral history through the Internet. With funding from NEH, NSF, and USDE we have digitized and provided access to oral histories from the Flint sit-down strikes in the 1930s and the Studs Terkel interviews from the 30s-60s. We have worked on a wide variety of international projects collecting and digitizing oral histories in West Africa and South Africa. We are also digitizing and publishing on line oral interviews from, *The American Black Journal*, a pioneering African-American interview show on Detroit public television. As we are committed to providing access to the disparate voices of history, these projects increasingly have led us to ponder the more fundamental questions of working with oral sources in this new open environment. What precisely are the responsibilities of the digital oral historian and archivist to those whose voices have been recorded AND to the scholarly enterprise?

As historians, we were drawn back into looking at the history of oral history itself. What we discovered is that the most fundamental issues raised by the digital experience are not new ones, but rather reflect conundrums long at work within the profession that have not been fully elucidated or worked out. This paper thus looks back on the history of oral history as a doorway into the issues that we face today as oral historians in the digital age.

### **Three Moments in Oral History/Three Approaches to Doing Oral History**

The history of oral history in the United States is a vast and complex one. What we want to do in this paper is look briefly at three different approaches to oral history, locating these historically and exploring the implications of each approach for oral history in the digital age. We pay particular attention to how scholars have understood their purpose in collecting oral testimony, the nature of their samples and most important their self-described relationship with the people they were interviewing.

We are examining here examples which have implications for the use of materials in the digital age, so we are only concerned here with cases since the advent of portable recording devices. For the purposes of clarity, we intend to investigate three episodes in the use of oral testimony: the WPA interviews of the 1930s, 1950s social science attitudes towards interviewing, and some of the current ideas of social historians today, especially those concerned with the history of Africa. Each of these episodes provides different insights into the project of oral history, and as a whole they provide quite different issues for those of us who are in the business of digitizing and making available oral testimony through the web.

#### **Episode One: The Thirties**

Despite the ravages of the Depression, the 1930s was a boom time for oral history in the United States. Indeed, eager to study the effects of the depression on American life, both public and private institutions directly supported oral interviewing on a scale never before seen. During the New Deal, the federal government came to support oral history on a major scale for the first time. Early on, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration funded a small project created by Lawrence Reddick at Kentucky State University, which had employed twelve black college graduates to interview ex-slaves in Kentucky. The Federal Writers Project, funded as part of the WPA in 1935, saw enormous potential in making use of this idea on a national scale to employ young writers (especially African American writers) to conduct as comprehensive a record of the memories of ex-slaves as possible. From 1936-8, over 2300 former slaves were interviewed. Other programs of interviews gradually came across the New Deal transom and, without a great deal of attention, found federal support. W. Lloyd Warner, a Berkeley and Harvard-trained

anthropologist, had found support for a number of projects to interview Americans on issues of social status. The American Youth Commission had provided him with a small amount of support to study children and adolescents in New Orleans and Chicago, and Warner applied to the Writers Project to expand the Chicago program into a full-fledged study of the African-American community. He appointed Horace Cayton, to run the project, which was officially designated “the Negro in Illinois.” Cayton reported that over 8000 interviews were ultimately conducted, and these provided the raw material for ten books, most notably Cayton’s masterpiece, Black Metropolis, which he wrote in collaboration with another black graduate student, St. Clair Drake.

What were the assumptions about oral history which lay behind this wealth of interviewing and collecting which burst forth in the last half of the depression? Most important, for these scholars, their goal was that the sample size should be the universal set. The goal of the slave narrative project was to interview every ex-slave who could be identified. (Indeed, one of the myriad problems in using these materials is that many of the interviews were conducted with old people who, it turned out, had been born after 1865. Nonetheless, their discussions their understanding of slave folklore and their recollections of their parents adds richness and depth to the collection of interviews.) For most of the massive wave of interviewing in the Federal Writers Project, the purpose was to take down the words of the ex-slave, the circus performer, the Chicano migrant worker, and then, as quickly as possible, move on to the next subject.

It is clear, therefore, that these writers had a simple view of the people from whom they were gathering information. The most regularly used term (although by no means one which is used consistently) to label the interviewee is “informant.” In the view of the project directors as well as that of the interviewers, their business was to gather information. This was even more the case with the actual interviewers, who were briefly trained, if at all, in the art of the Interview. Many stay closely to the script, occasionally asking a question which the subject of the interview had already answered. Occasionally the interviewer seems engaged sufficiently to edge away from the set of questions provided by the project directors. This was particularly true in the slave narrative series, when long-time patterns of race relations in the south would emerge in the condescending tone the white interviewer would adopt with his or her interviewee. In most

instances, however, the interviewing model seems to have been the man-on-the-street interviews popular in newspapers of the era. Models were not being tested. Instead, the “informants” had served the project well if they simply answered the questions clearly and completely, without wandering too far from the sheet of questions held by the interviewer.

This approach to oral history continued long beyond the 1930s and remains a rich vein of work today.

At its best, in the hands of an interviewer like Studs Terkel, an interviewer who let his informants speak for themselves, this type of oral history produced a rich panoply of daily life. Terkel’s oral histories speak to the diversity of human experience and viewpoints. Taken together, his interviews on life in the thirties, on working and on WWII, provide an existential appreciation of Americans struggling to make their lives work. Terkel shaped the books that came out of his interviews, he excerpted what he sought to highlight, grouped interviews, emphasize themes, and frame individuals comments. In the end, however, the power of his oral histories and their usefulness for later historians in that he let his subjects speak for themselves. As with the Writers Project, Terkel preserved the entirety of his interviews and has made them available to future scholars. The on-line website, Studs Terkel, Conversations with America, provides all free on-line access to many of these interviews.

### **Episode Two: Social Science and the Interview**

Although the broad based, information-gathering approach to oral history continued unabated after the 1930s, in such projects as the Columbia Oral History Project and those undertaken by presidential libraries as well as in more recent large-scale projects aimed at Holocaust survivors and WWII veterans, a second strain began to emerge after World War II as historians began to absorb some of the ideas emerging from the social sciences. Such historians as Richard Hofstadter viewed the role of historians as, in part, using historical materials to test ideas which were being generated in psychology and sociology departments, such as his famous use of the idea of “status anxiety.” As historians in this generation thought about the testimony of actors in

the past, most considered the project of social history through the lens of structuralist and functionalist models of social development.

In 1956, the American Journal of Sociology devoted an entire issue to questions of what interviewing meant. Sociology, proclaimed Mark Benney and Everett Hughes, the two editors of this number of the journal, “has become the science of the interview...” Although they concede that there will still, inevitably, be some Writers Project-type interviews to large populations, they view the more focused interview as a much more important and more scientific project. These one-on-one exchanges are governed by conventions of “social rhetoric” which need to be explicated with some care. The performance aspects, the qualities of social interaction, the fiction of equality are all components of a successful interview. They note an increased emphasis in the post-war literature, for example, in establishing rapport with the subject.

Benney and Hughes want to distinguish between the performance acts of the interview, however, and the use of the evidence generated. However much a pose of equality is developed during the course of the interview, once it is over, the product of the interview is to be used by the scholar for his or her own purposes. Therefore, in subtle ways, the interview has to be conducted with a consciousness of its later utility. “Regarded as an information-gathering tool, the interview is designed to minimize the local, concrete, immediate circumstances of the particular encounter—including the respective personalities of the participants—and to emphasize only those aspects that can be kept general enough and demonstrable enough to be counted.”

Other writers in the journal, however, found this distinction between the act of interviewing and the object of the transcribed interview to be a difficult one to pull off in the real world. When Nicholas Von Hoffman and Sally Cassidy went to a black Pentecostal church in Chicago, they fully intended to behave as if they were converts. “At this stage of things we resembled no one so much as a detective or a spy.” They found themselves drawn in to real relationships, however, and worried about the problems of distance and detachment. Like fictional characters trying to cope with Star Trek’s prime directive, they found the strain of fictive lives and professional detachment “placed a grave strain on the research group’s members.”

As the so-called new social historians became an important component of the American profession in the 1950s and 1960s, they were carefully schooled in the quantitative and model-based approach to learning which undergirded much of the social sciences. As a consequence, unlike the sociologists and psychologists who could fit interviews into their world view, historians tended not to engage directly or indirectly in the use of oral testimony. A quick review of the articles published in the *Journal of American History* (and its predecessor, the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*) between 1945 and 1970 yields almost no articles which are significantly based on oral testimony. On even such obvious subjects as labor history, mainstream historians remained uncomfortable with the social science. It was only in the early 1970s that some historians tentatively began to make use of surveys and interviews. Even here, the more “qualitative” 1930s sources seemed much more familiar than did the social-science based interviews. Only in family history and to a lesser extent economic history did any history make significant use of the social science interviews.

In the last two decades, historians have lost their worries, if they ever had them, about using materials generated by social scientists in the structuralist-functionalist school. This has been especially true as historians writing in the *Journal of Social History*, the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* and *Representations* began to explore such issues as sexuality, non-government organizations such as women’s clubs, cultural assumptions about race and gender and resistance at the grass-roots level. For these scholars oral histories are not simply an accumulation of individual stories, but are more importantly a doorway to broader scholarly analysis of social and cultural history. Selectivity, Sampling, and generalizability are essential to the use of this oral evidence for the social science historian mines oral histories, not to tell the story of individual people, but rather to discover generalities.

### **Episode Three: Recent Views**

While social science interviewing has continued unabated, a third approach in the use of oral history might be dated to Jan Vansina’s declaration of partial independence from the *Annales* school in 1961. Vansina and his many supporters argued that African history made no sense if it excluded the voices of Africans, and a devotion to the written record, no matter how carefully

and imaginatively undertaken, could not recapture these missing voices. The remarkable development of African history in the last three decades is, in part at least, a product of this quest for alternate sources to written colonial records, and without question the most important of these is oral history. It is well understood at this conference that the project of African historians has resonance throughout the profession, and similar moves have taken place in virtually every field in our profession.

If the 1930s collectors had a view that all voices were in effect equal, and if the social science interviewers very carefully calculated the representative nature of their subject, the recent oral history projects seem to take a third approach. They seek out the “authentic” voices. That is, these scholars are specifically seeking certain points of view which can explain or sometimes fill in holes or replace misconceptions in the documentary record. This often requires historians to seek out the subjects of the inquiry, or their relatives, or even depend on folklore or recollection about those subjects. Indeed, these historians often require guidance from those whose words they are seeking as to what the real subject matter should be.

In doing this, recent oral historians are acutely sensitive to the “colonial problem” of the first wave of ethnography. As amateur and then professional ethnologists began to roam the globe in the early twentieth century, their often well-meaning embrace of cultures and traditions of the people they encountered invariably passed through the lens of their own cultural expectations. The complex tale of Margaret Mead and her conversations with the young women of Samoa is but one of hundreds of examples of the way in which the students of Franz Boaz at Columbia engaged in a cultural project which we now view with great skepticism. In order to avoid, or at least minimize, this trap, this new breed of oral historian understands their relationship with the his/her subjects very differently and seeks a very different method of discourse.

Our colleague Nwando Achebe rejects terms such as testifier, interviewee, subject or informant to describe what she sees as a much more complex relationship between herself and the people from whom she is learning. “As a feminist researcher,” she argues, “instead of merely paying lip service to the ideal of conducting research with and for women, I decided to employ strategies that were designed to put these aspirations into effect. First, I attempted to turn my project into a

collaborative effort. Consequently, my first order of business was to relinquish some control over the actual process of information gathering.” Authenticity is found through this collaboration and authorship is shared.

### **Implications for the Digital Age**

In the digital age, the questions which arise about the relationships between researchers, the people who are providing parts of their life histories, and those who are listening to those histories become ever more profound. The possibility, not only to widely distribute oral histories, but also to frame, interpret, re-interpret, segment, recombine, and use them at will problematizes the fundamental questions at the core of oral history.

For many, the promise of the Internet lies in open access. Open access to information is seen as a powerful democratizing force. Brewster Kahl, for example, whose business card reads “digital librarian,” has plotted a course for the Internet Archive that aims at providing free worldwide distribution of digital content to all. He aims to replicate and democratize the famed Alexandria library in the digital age by removing all barriers to on-line publication. Anyone with Internet Access can upload text, images, audio, video to the Internet Archive and anyone else can read, view, and listen to these materials. (Kahl, not surprisingly, is also hard at work to extend Internet access and remove barriers to its use.)

The Creative Commons, which works closely with the Internet Archive, is designed to allow those who produce content to govern its use. The Commons provides a wide variety of copyrights to govern the use of on-line materials. While these range from more to less restrictive, the dream underlying this effort is utopian. Information should be free. Access means more than just reading and viewing, it also means the ability to use and reuse. The creative aspirations of artists and musicians to recombine and re-interpret and present anew underlies this dream, but it is also a vision that speaks to the scholarly community. The Berlin Declaration, which has been endorsed by scholarly societies worldwide, for example, defines open access as “a free, irrevocable, worldwide, right of access to, and a license to copy, use, distribute, transmit and display the work publicly and to make and distribute derivative works, in any digital medium for

any responsible purpose, subject to proper attribution of authorship.” As both researchers and teachers, scholars seek the ability to build upon the work of others. The quotation and illustration are fundamental tools of the academe. Now, in the digital age, it is possible to extend this much farther. We increasingly have the ability to work with and have our students work with our cultural heritage as never before. There is no doubt that digital objects of today will be used, reused, repurposed and reimagined in ways and for reasons that we cannot begin to anticipate today.

At the core of History, on the other hand, is “context.” Historians locate knowledge in time, in place, in culture -- in context. Digital technology, however, loosens the bonds of context. One can craft a website as carefully as one crafts a book. On-line content can be ordered, structured, contextualized. But it is next to impossible to restrict use of that content, any and all attempts to do so, undermines the usefulness of on-line content and its accessibility through search engines and external links. Open access is about use and reuse.

This has significant implications for the three different approaches to oral history that we have discussed. It is least problematic for the encyclopedic efforts of oral interviewers. If the goal is to collect oral narratives that speak for themselves, stories that are additive and valuable in amongst themselves, then the ability to publish these on line is not particularly problematic, nor is the repurposing of these interviews. They are the raw materials of our cultural heritage and should be available for future scholars and the public to interpret, reinterpret, and use. The freedmen and women interviewed by the Federal Writers Project wanted their stories told. The interviewees, interviewers, and the scholarly community are all served by open access to these histories.

It is not nearly as clear how to translate the social science survey approach to the digital age. If the value of interviews lies in generalities rather than in the individual pieces of evidence, the Internet’s penchant for disaggregating is particularly problematic. Everyone agrees that oral interviews that are taken with the promise of anonymity cannot be made publicly available, but the problem goes deeper than this.

By definition, evidence gathered as part of the whole is out of context when broken down into individual pieces. Thus, to date, social science interviewing projects have not found their way on line, they remain in datasets controlled and utilized by scholars.

The most interesting and troubling questions arise from translating more recent sensibilities of collaborative oral history to the Internet. If the obligation of the oral historian is to tell a history as the subjects of that history see it and want it told, and if the subjects of that history are understood as “owning” their stories, then the intellectual freedom inherent in the on-line world is a threat. Thus, while the promise of the open access to knowledge that the Internet can offer is broadly embraced by African scholars, there has been much caution and reluctance to provide open access to the oral histories that abound in African studies. The fear of “misuse” of oral testimony can be paralyzing. This is the conundrum that we have faced again and again in our partnerships to bring African oral history on line.

The desire to ensure that voices are “authentic,” that oral history is fully collaborative, that the subjects of oral history tell their story as they would have it told was born of an effort to through off the blinders of colonialism and to open up scholarship. It is a bitter irony that this idealism to date has resulted in the exclusion of those voices from the Internet.

From my perspective, perhaps the most instructive story here is that of The Shoah Foundation’s interviews with Holocaust survivors. The Foundation’s oral history project is undoubtedly the largest to date. Over 52,000 interviews were conducted in 32 languages around the world. These were all digitized for long-term preservation and use. No subject is more sensitive than that of genocide and thus the project began with a deep concern that interviews would not be “misused.” The Foundation was determined to closely control their use and frame their presentation, so much so that they did not want transcripts to be made of the interviews, because they feared that transcripts could be taken out of context and convey incomplete stories. The very idea of providing free unlimited access to these interviews on the Internet sent shudders through the Foundation. Over the past five years, however, the project has undergone a metamorphosis. The interviewers discovered that they were overly sensitive and protective. Increasingly, those who were interviewed wanted their stories made public. By restricting access to this powerful

material, the Foundation has left a void that other voices, often less authentic and powerful voices filled. In a 180 degree reversal, the Shoah Foundation is now streaming testimony off of its website. The Foundation is ensuring that the voices of Holocaust survivors will be heard and again and again AND is allowing them to become the raw materials of history to be used and reused, interpreted and reinterpreted.

The technologies that we have developed at Michigan State for delivering on-line collections focus on expanding the meaning of Access. We are interested in not only preserving and presenting oral history collections, but on letting these materials be used. Our tools facilitate segmentation, annotation, and reuse of digital materials in complex digital objects. We want teachers to be able to teach with audio and video in all the rich ways that they teach with text. We want students to be able to engage in active learning using these materials. Our collections policies have focused on seeking out those voices that have been largely absent from history. Amongst our on-going projects are ones that involve workers histories and African-American histories in the US, women's stories in Mexico, a wide range of diverse oral history projects in West Africa, and the liberation struggle in South Africa.

The promise of the Internet is to the opportunity to correct imbalances in written sources and vastly expand whose history is told and how it is told. To do this, however, we need an understanding that digital materials cannot be locked away in typeset and presented in only one manner. Not only is this technologically a failure – as every attempt to do so is easily hacked and countered, but more important, this attempt to control access and use is intellectually a failure. It results in silencing the very voices that it wants to be heard. The voices that will be heard, listened to, understood, and worked with on line in the future are those that are most accessible – those that teachers can access, students can work with, and anyone can easily locate and play. In the end, bringing oral history on line involves surrendering some control and allowing them to become part of the market place of ideas and subject to the judgments of History.