Oral History in the Video Age

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Abstract: This article examines the role of oral history in a cultural and technical context increasingly dominated by digital video. The author reflects on new opportunities for video oral history, especially regarding access, audience engagement, and innovative partnerships. These opportunities call for new forms of engagement with the academy, with partners beyond the academy, and with the vast and teeming crowd that is the modern digital public.

Keywords: digital video, open-source software, social media

Picture an airplane flight across an ocean at night: as the sky darkens, dinner is served, and then the most noticeable thing about the plane is that almost everyone is sitting lit by the video screens in front of them. In many ways we are the passengers on this plane, relying no longer on speech or the printed page but on the screen and its moving images for much of the information we are receiving about our world.

This essay discusses the challenges confronting oral history in what is now, in effect, the video age, an age when the vast majority of digital communications feature the moving image. The essay recommends that we amp up to meet the video world head on and that, in the process, we learn from the experiences of video makers and funders, especially those active in public media. These lessons would urge us to explore new forms of engagement with the academy, with partners beyond the academy, and with the vast and teeming crowd that is the modern digital public.

In Video Veritas

The number crunchers tell us that video will account for the vast majority (86 percent) of global consumer Internet traffic by the year 2016, and that by 2016 the amount of video crisscrossing the worldwide web just in an average month would take one person six million years to watch (and, really, who has...
that much time?). The larger point (if that’s conceivable) is that most people today (and even more by 2016) access (and will be accessing) digital information through a device that features a screen: a user interface, in other words, that is built for video, a screen that is in the hands of everyone. Quite a remarkable development, if you think about it, just 100 or 150 years after the advent of cinema.

Historians who have wrestled with Carl Becker’s address from the 1930s—one in which he reminded the profession of its “ancient and honorable company of wise men of the tribe, of bards and story-tellers and minstrels, of soothsayers and priests,” where every man, as he put it, has been and will always be “his own historian”—now must contend with constituents who not only will access history through a screen but who have the facility and ability to record material for posterity through their phones, laptops, desktops, and cameras. One might (indeed, one should) contend that this is good news. The scrutiny to which the historical profession will be put extends to multiple dimensions of sight and sound. The literate reader of Becker’s time has become a fluent auditor and a capable producer as well, a bard and priest of his own. Everyone now is not only his own historian (or “something more than his own historian,” as Becker put it), but his own oral historian, too, equipped with the technology to record his interviews almost at all times.

If teachers and students are appreciating the work of oral historians through a screen and are capable of making what used to be called rich media as well, then the field should endeavor to produce oral history with the full complement of means at its disposal, including video cameras, whenever and wherever that is cost- and resource-effective. Oral history, in a word, should become, quite naturally, video history. True, much as musicians might not want to produce video to accompany their music, so oral historians similarly might not feel compelled to record moving images as they record sound. But for relevance alone, the modern oral historian might at least consider deploying video technology, not simply to compete for attention in the screen and video age but also to record as many dimensions of the human/interviewee experience as possible for posterity. As Becker said, “Berate him as we will for not reading our books, Mr. Everyman is stronger than we are, and sooner or later we must adapt our knowledge to his


necessities. Otherwise he will leave us to our own devices, leave us it may be to cultivate a species of dry professional arrogance growing out of the thin soil of antiquarian research. Such research, valuable not in itself but for some ulterior purpose, will be of little import except in so far as it is transmuted into common knowledge.”

Deeper Engagement

Today, the creation of common knowledge goes far beyond a passive and ever-expanding access to knowledge, invaluable as such access may be. As a Mellon Foundation-funded report for the American Council of Learned Societies predicted in 2006, the growing number of digital natives in and out of academia who use “aggregations of text, image, video, sound, and metadata” also want “tools that support and enable discovery, visualization, and analysis of patterns; tools that facilitate collaboration; an infrastructure for authorship that supports remixing, recontextualization, and commentary—in sum, tools that turn access into insight and interpretation.”

The tools for oral history to contribute its share of discovery, visualization, and analysis are growing. While apps for mobile devices are still in their infancy (although they are growing in number: the Southern Foodways Alliance at the University of Mississippi has a good one, as does the Center for Public History + Digital Humanities at Cleveland State University), communities of educators, producers, and funders are coming together to develop software and methods of working that are of primary value in contributing new means of insight and interpretation.

Popcorn, a JavaScript application being developed by the Mozilla Foundation and others, is facilitating annotation and citation of sound and moving-image assets to match the affordances of the scholarly footnote in text and is enriching illustrations to the point of permitting users to navigate through time and place—and to connect not only to scholarly assets on the web but to real-time journalistic assets and live social media as well. Oral history has begun

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to explore this technology, but much more might be done. User interfaces for oral history collections online that might display maps, essays, photos, and even links to other oral history collections, would connect users to a variety of relevant assets and make oral history more visually stimulating.

Another open-source technology, Mediathread, developed by Columbia University’s Center for New Media Teaching and Learning, is facilitating research and scholarship by making the web itself (with assets like YouTube, ARTstor, the WGBH Archive, and the Hathitrust) into one giant textbook. Imposing an “analysis platform” over text, image, sound, and moving-picture assets, this extraordinary tool permits multimedia annotation on web assets (which beats underlining Beowulf, as I did in 1978) and also facilitates collaboration and publication within the .edu domain or in more public environments. At the University of Kentucky, OHMS (the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer) is being developed with similar ambitions: to link curated oral histories to the web and the world in ways that enable their findability and analysis. Oral history curators ought to strive to have their assets included in new experiments with MediaThread, OHMS, and other such tools in development.

Indeed, as we digitize our collective media, the hundreds of thousands of full-length feature films, the millions of television shows, the tens of millions of recorded songs, the tens of millions of books, and the billions of web pages together fuel what is a growing enormous electronic database/textbook. Futurologist and Wired magazine co-founder Kevin Kelly calls it an electronic mind. And because the main inputs this collective intelligence possesses today are what Kelly calls its eyes and ears (billions of phones, microphones, and cameras recording our sounds and visions), oral historians are in a critical place to render our planet more sentient as we go.


“MediaThread: Introduction,” Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning (CNMTL), Columbia University, December 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7KjzRG8zYYo. This project grew out of an IMLS-funded grant to Columbia to build bridges between public media assets at WGBH in Boston and teaching practices in Morningside Heights.


Kevin Kelly, What Technology Wants (New York: Viking/Penguin, 2010). Technologists especially, but many of us one way or the other, are aware that we are connecting to one another in new ways through our screens, speakers, wires, and spectra. This is point of the highest-grossing film of all time, Avatar. Set in the future, the Na’avi people plug into and connect with the sounds of the past to heal and enlighten themselves.
Apart from new tools, there are modern platforms and homes to social media. Owners of online platforms (Google and YouTube; Yahoo and Flickr; Apple and iTunes; and the investors behind Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, among others) encourage us to post our assets and engage with these platforms, but few hold as much promise as Wikipedia does—owned, as it is, by no one, where everyone can be an editor—to facilitate a more open, democratic, and educational discourse. Wikipedia has opened its doors to sound and the moving image, with open-source video players and codecs developed to the point that sound and moving footage can now be integrated into Wikipedia articles. For example, Wikipedia articles on Isaac Newton’s laws of motion are being illustrated with video cleared by MIT and its physics professor Walter Lewin, edited as short media illustrations. This, too, is the next frontier for oral history. Imagine not just Wikipedia’s main article on oral history (sorely in need of updating) carrying sound clips but also articles about all kinds of topics (segregation, farming, coal mining) featuring excerpts of authoritative oral testimonies (with links back to their source).  

New Partnerships

The thought of connecting oral history’s treasury of assets, cataloged as they have been for the Oral History in the Digital Age Project (http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/) and elsewhere, with the creative forces behind Wikipedia leads one to ponder the potential of the field if its collections were marketed more effectively and offered up to other professions, even within the discipline of history. What Becker called “the thin soil of antiquarian research” alone could be a teeming and colorful garden, if its keepers recognized how many essays in the online journals of the field could be pollinated by sound clips from libraries like University of Kentucky’s or UNC-Chapel Hill’s. The Journal of American History and the American Historical Review should feature articles with audio from related oral history collections, not as special “digital projects” but as a matter of course. Anyone aware of the vivid voices and sounds of the American labor movement should wonder why oral history collections from Wayne State University, as well as other repositories, don’t regularly illustrate Labor, the journal of working-class history published by Duke University Press.

More broadly (and keeping with Becker), those seeking to transmute into common knowledge (another of Becker’s phrases) the work of oral history over the decades would benefit from forging partnerships more systematically with...
cousins of the discipline: journalists, say, or public media producers whose reach into academic collections is not yet as deep as it might be. Newspapers, national and local, regularly publish photo galleries online on holidays such as July 4th, but the web leapfrogged this potential years ago. Offering readers galleries of spoken-word interviews about the holiday would make enormous sense. While public radio has been creative about deploying historical sounds in much of its programming, the websites and even the programs of public television have underwhelmed; that’s a problem that’s easy to fix. Perhaps what oral history needs is an agent or broker or representative, linking its assets, which are free for the most part, to the rest of the professional and authoritative web.

**Conclusion**

As young people learn about the world and society on a rectangular screen, the values they attribute to any one medium are flat. Images, moving images, text and sound all become equivalent to one another, and soon text may lose the privileged status it has held over the past six hundred years. The differences in media are evaporating, such that pictures of austere judges in front of rows of law books and hanging diplomas may be no longer be biblio- or text-centric in nature—perhaps there will be a lonely iPad hanging in the background. And the next Isaac Newton or Karl Marx may just as likely be doing his research in film and sound archives as in the reading rooms of the British Library or the Bodleian.

That film and sound assets are coming to govern our information intake may, on balance, be a good thing. As it happens, most of the people who are alive on the planet today believe that the creator of the universe has written a book, and most of them are animated one way or another by a literal reading of key parts of it. These key parts often embrace ostensibly God-given commandments to be violently intolerant. Philosopher Sam Harris reminds us that this literally literal reading of text—indeed, the sanctity we give to text—might represent “ignorance at its most rococo.” Imagine, as Harris does, a world in which generations of human beings had come to believe that God had produced certain films, or for that matter had coded particular pieces of software. Imagine a future, as Harris does, in which millions of our descendants were threatening and even murdering each other over rival interpretations of movies like “Star Wars” or operating systems like Mac OS X.12

When, on our night flight, information that is audiovisual in nature makes the world less reliant on text for knowledge, and when even more of us have the ability to express ourselves in audiovisual media, perhaps we will be able

to explore more new avenues like these. By engaging systematically with new technologies, new publics, and new partners, oral history as a profession has a huge role to play in what may well be our next big hit: the new Enlightenment.

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