

Stanley, Maree. "Queensland Speaks': The Case for Digital Listening", *The Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, No. 32, 2010, pp.24-27

Abstract

This paper gives an overview of the Queensland Speaks oral history project currently being undertaken at the University of Queensland. This paper argues the merit of leaving the Queensland Speaks project as an oral record rather than providing a transcription. I examine the current literature and argue the case for audio digital accessibility. The novel aspect of the project is the opportunity to interview both government ministers and the senior public servants who worked for them. The project concentrates on Queensland governance between 1965 and 1999.

Overview of the Project

The Centre for the Government of Queensland within the University of Queensland is currently conducting the Queensland (Qld) Speaks oral history project as part of several history projects; including the Queensland Historical Atlas (with the Queensland Museum), Queensland Places and Queensland's Past Online. Qld Speaks is supported by funding from the Queensland Department of the Premier and Cabinet. The project seeks to record Ministers and senior public servants about public policy and political life. The aim of the Qld Speaks oral history project is to produce a lasting oral resource of key state and senior public servants involved in Queensland governmental decision making. The project seeks to capture voices on policy making and create an oral record of reflections on governance during this time. During the interview the project will be collecting contextual biographical information of Qld State politicians and senior public servants. This is the first time that a major oral history project has interviewed both politicians and senior public servants about the same events. It is anticipated that the project's audience will include scholars who will use the interviews to analyse political life and decision making and will also provide interest and information for the general public. The project will interview approximately sixty people and the website will be launched late 2010, with completion of the interviews by the end of 2011.

Research Methodology

The project will host semi-structured interviews of approximately one to two hours in length, at a location of the interviewee's choosing. Recording equipment recommended by the National Library has been chosen and the project will adopt their methods for indexing the interviews. While the project will be recording information on the whole of life experiences most questions focus on policy decisions in relation to the political environment within the given time.

Interview Briefs

Interviewers have been selected because they have a high level of knowledge and practical experience within the Qld government. Short briefs are prepared on each interviewee by the research assistant to provide a historical context to guide the semi-structured interview. The preparation of these briefs is made possible by the resources available on the internet and from Who's Who¹. The interview briefs provide the interviewer with a list of key historical decisions the interviewee was most likely involved in. As one of the major aims of this project is to identify relationships between ministers and senior public servants, the project is currently developing a relationship map detailing key working relationships that evolved between them.

Ethical Considerations

The purpose and usage of the oral interviews is discussed with the interviewees prior to recording and each interviewee is asked to sign a copyright agreement allowing both the interview and interview index to be published on the website. A hard copy and electronic copy of this agreement between the interviewee and the project is kept on file to be referred to when necessary and ensure interviewee specifications are complied with. The oral history material will have a variety of uses for scholars; in particular the interviews can be used to study policy and decision making through the reflections and memories of senior public servants and ministers during this time. The project has ethics clearance through the University of Qld.

Technological impacts on Queensland Speaks

Those familiar with the long standing discourse surrounding transcription will recognise the various arguments used to claim that transcribing the oral interview is necessary to ensure utility of the interview. During the design phase a conscious decision was made for the data to remain an oral resource, or in other terms the project would not transcribe any of the recordings, and in the following paragraphs I provide the rationale for doing so. This rationale will have varying degrees of usefulness to other oral history projects but is included here to extend the debate.

As someone who is relatively new to the oral history field I have been reading the literature on research methodology in order to better understand the project design. Through this reading I have determined that there are three valid reasons researchers give for transcribing the oral history interview in full, the first being access to the data, the second being storage of the data and the third being the opportunity for the interviewee to check the interview.

In *Catching Stories, A Practical Guide to Oral History*, published in 2009, Donna M. DeBlasio² writes that an interview transcription makes the interviews more accessible to people outside of the project and asserts that a written transcript is easier to access than an oral interview. She also points out that the interviewee can review the transcript and make corrections if needed and a paper copy remains accessible and is not subjective to technological change. Although a very recent publication, DeBlasio strongly asserts that transcribing the interview is a necessity if the oral history project is to be accessed. “The fact remains, however, that choosing not to transcribe at all is a good way to ensure that relatively few people will use the oral history collection.”³ In the last chapter of the book there is a remarkably short section which introduces the internet where DeBlasio makes a small concession to technology while assuming the dominant position that a written transcript is superior to an audio recording. “With other new technologies such as podcasts, oral histories can reach whole new audiences who might not necessarily read a transcript.....”⁴ and later “Making oral history transcripts available online provides a valuable service, especially for researchers”⁵.

So despite a very brief allusion to the possibilities of web technology within the field of oral history, DeBlasio still argues strongly for full transcription of the oral recording.

The practice of legitimising the oral history record as a valid data source by converting the oral record into a written one leads many writers to debate whether the written transcript can be classed as a primary source of information and also casts a shadow on the reliability of the document as a true reflection of what was said and just as importantly how it was said. Many of the authors that I reviewed to write this article discussed this as part of the consideration to transcribe.⁶

DeBlasio acknowledges the debate, “Indeed, some large oral history archives regard the transcript as the primary document, while others regard the recorded interview the primary document”.⁷ Further argument to the subjective nature of transcribing “...good transcribers will determine what is essentially to keep and what may possibly be eliminated”⁸. Many of the objections uncovered during the literature review are negated through the implementation of an interview indexing procedure which enables access and provides a word summary allowing digital access of the data without taking away from the richness and individuality of the interviewee’s account of their life and events in it.

In 2005, Valerie Yow published the second edition of *Recording Oral History, A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences*. In the section described as “sharing stories”, Yow discusses in detail how the “tapes” should be stored in library archives to ensure the material is of use to a broader range of people.⁹ While there is small mention of the online oral history listings index by Alexander Street Press, *Oral History Online*¹⁰, Yow concentrates on ensuring that tapes are archived correctly, “By depositing the collection of *tapes* (emphasis added) in a library or in archives, you can make sure your research continues to be useful even though your own work has come to an end”.¹¹

In reflecting on the impact technology may have on the oral history world in the future, Donald Ritchie (1999)¹² concluded that the internet will enable researchers to access information quickly through transcripts posted on the world wide web. What was not envisioned was the emergence of technologies such as multimedia players which enable quick and efficient access to the audio recording as an alternative to the written transcript. This enables a much greater proportion of people to access oral history interviews from their own homes without the need to drive to a local library or update their home computers to great expense. This of course also removes some of the negative aspects of transcription such as the high cost of transcribing and the possibility of inadvertently changing what was meant by the interviewee. In 2005 Yow writes “The so-called digital divide still exists; many people still do not have access to computers or networks, especially in rural and sparsely populated regions. For these people, the issue of accessibility...of the oral history is still unresolved”¹³. People in remote areas have similar problems with access to transcripts in libraries as described by Valerie Yow who recalls the time saved when libraries sent “photocopies of the transcripts when I could neither travel miles to listen to the tapes nor afford the cost of having a tape collection duplicated for me”.¹⁴ I argue that internet access in remote areas is continually improving and has most likely improved in the last five years since Yow’s book was published. For much of the population advances in technology mean we no longer need rely on a photocopier, a tape or indeed the post but more and more we are able to listen to audio on home computers or MP3 players with a simple click of a button.

I argue that the advancement of technology such as the use of multimedia (i.e. podcasting) alleviates many of the issues and concerns regarding accessibility, usage and storage of oral history interviews. Technology needs to be embedded into methodological design so that it is at the forefront of design decisions, embedded within the whole of the project.

Technological considerations are supported by writers such as Mazé, Shopes and Enyon, who have written on the possibilities technology may have for oral history projects.

In *The Handbook for Oral History*, published in 2006, Mazé¹⁵ writes that “Many oral historians share with enthusiasm the view expressed by Linda Shopes and Bret Enyon, among others, concerning the potential of electronic media and the Internet, “for restoring orality (sic) to oral history”¹⁶. In his article, *Participating in the Past*, Paul Longley writes that digital technology is “liberating oral history....by bringing it into the everyday world where it can be heard, questioned, freely interpreted and freely shared”¹⁷. He comments that digital media has removed many of the issues regarding storage of material but warns that technology will have its own issues such as the need for new skills in information technology for oral historians. Through the University of Queensland, the project is fortunate to have access to a wide range of resources including up to date archival and retrieval systems for digital technology.

To further ensure that the Qld Speaks oral interviews are accessible to our intended audience we are providing a summary index of the interview, enabling the website visitors to search across all the interview indexes if they are interested in a particular topic. These indexes follow the National Library protocol and give listeners the opportunity to search specific topics of interest and listen to part of the interview if they choose. We imagine these interests to span disciplines and so we have ensured that our keyword list is inclusive of events, themes, people and places. Indexing is described by Gluck (1996) as “the easiest and least expensive method to develop a running summary of each tape”¹⁸ For our purposes the index of the interview goes beyond this description and ensures quick and efficient access to relevant parts of the oral interviews with the option of easily accessing the interview in full if needed. Mazé acknowledges the technology as beneficial, but writes of the index as an addition to the transcript, rather than a replacement. “Another common addition to oral history transcripts is an index. This may simply (sic) index of names and concepts in the transcript itself, or it may be a list of or include references to timed locations in the audio recording. The latter sort of references are greatly enhanced in digital media, of course; digitization (sic) allows nearly instant linkage between transcript and audio as well as access through the Web, on local networks, on compact disc, or through any number of other digital means”¹⁹. The Qld Speaks interview indexes provide a searchable list of keywords and a timed breakdown of the recording enabling smaller areas of the recording to be searched and accessed electronically.

It is important to note that those indexing the interview in our project need political, historical and geographical knowledge in order to identify accurately what needs to be summarised and included in the keyword list.

Conclusion

The project has had a very positive response to initial requests for interview and we began indexing these first interviews in January 2010. The Qld Speaks website will be launched later in 2010 and the project looks forward to sharing these oral accounts of political and bureaucratic life with the public where we have been given permission by the interviewees to do so. Members of the project team are currently working on the design of the website to ensure that the information is presented in such a way as to appeal to its intended audience and provide access to oral memories in a manner which is interesting and easy to use. For many new technologies allow quick access to oral history online and through MP3 downloads. This has the additional benefit of cutting costs of full transcriptions services and alleviating some of the reliability and validity issues associated with written transcripts. Rapid technological change has superseded old ideas about oral history and while some of the recent publications did mention technological advancements, these were mainly given as examples of enhancement of existing oral history practice rather than illuminating the possibilities for innovative project design. The use of technology to enable an oral interview to be utilised as an oral resource is likely to be realised if the use of technology is embedded within the design of the project.

Notes

¹ Leanne Sullivan (ed.), *Who's Who in Australia*, Crown Content Pty Ltd, Australia, 2010.

² Donna M. Deblasio, Transcribing Oral History in Donna M. Deblasio, Charles F. Ganzert, David H. Mould, Stephen H. Paschen and Howard L. Sacks, *Catching Stories A Practical Guide to Oral History* Swallow Press, Athens, 2009, pp. 104-14.

³ Donna M. Deblasio, Transcribing Oral History in Donna M. Deblasio, Charles F. Ganzert, David H. Mould, Stephen H. Paschen and Howard L. Sacks, *Catching Stories A Practical Guide to Oral History* Swallow Press, Athens, 2009, pp. 104-14, p. 105.

⁴ Donna M. Deblasio, Transcribing Oral History in Donna M. Deblasio, Charles F. Ganzert, David H. Mould, Stephen H. Paschen and Howard L. Sacks, *Catching Stories A Practical Guide to Oral History* Swallow Press, Athens, 2009, pp. 104-14, p. 208.

⁵ Donna M. Deblasio, Transcribing Oral History in Donna M. Deblasio, Charles F. Ganzert, David H. Mould, Stephen H. Paschen and Howard L. Sacks, *Catching Stories A Practical Guide to Oral History* Swallow Press Athens, 2009, pp. 104-14, p. 208.

⁶ Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences Second Edition*, AltaMira Press CA, 2005, p. 330.
David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baun, *Oral History An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, Altamira Press, 1996.

Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers and Rebecca Sharpless, *Handbook of Oral History* AltaMira Press, Oxford UK, 2006.

Donna M. Deblasio, Transcribing Oral History in Donna M. Deblasio, Charles F. Ganzert, David H. Mould, Stephen H. Paschen and Howard L. Sacks, *Catching Stories A Practical Guide to Oral History* Swallow Press Athens, 2009, pp. 104-14, p. 106.

⁷ Donna M. Deblasio, Transcribing Oral History in Donna M. Deblasio, Charles F. Ganzert, David H. Mould, Stephen H. Paschen and Howard L. Sacks, *Catching Stories A Practical Guide to Oral History* Swallow Press Athens, 2009, pp. 104-14, p. 106.

⁹ Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences Second Edition*, AltaMira Press CA, 2005, p. 330.

¹⁰ Alexander Street Press, Oral History Online www.alexanderstreet.com cited in Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences Second Edition*, AltaMira Press CA, 2005.

¹¹ Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences Second Edition*, AltaMira Press CA, 2005, p. 330.

¹² Donald Ritchie, Roundtable Comments Reflections on Oral History in the New Millennium: Roundtable Comments, *The Oral History Review*, Oxford University Press on behalf of the Oral History Association, Vol 26, No 2 (Summer-Autumn 1999) pp 1-27.

¹³ Elinor A Mazé, The Uneasy Page: Transcribing and Editing Oral History in Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers and Rebecca Sharpless, *Handbook of Oral History* AltaMira Press, Oxford UK, 2006, pp. 237-71 p. 263.

¹⁴ Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences Second Edition*, AltaMira Press CA, 2005, p. 315.

¹⁵ Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers and Rebecca Sharpless, *Handbook of Oral History* AltaMira Press, Oxford UK, 2006.

¹⁶ Linda Shopes, History Matters: Making Sense of Evidence, "Making Sense of Oral History, George Mason University, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/mse/oral/online.html> (accessed December 3, 2004) cited in Elinor A. Mazé, The Uneasy Page: Transcribing and Editing Oral History in Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers and Rebecca Sharpless, *Handbook of Oral History* AltaMira Press, Oxford UK, 2006, pp. 237-71.

¹⁷ Arthur, Paul Longley, 2008. *Participating in the Past Recording Lives in Digital Environments* Cultural Studies Review, Vol. 14, No. 1 p187-201, p. 187.

¹⁸ Sherna Gluck, 1996, What's So Special About Women? in David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baun, *Oral History An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, Altamira Press, 1996, pp. 215-30, p228.

¹⁹ Elinor A Mazé, The Uneasy Page: Transcribing and Editing Oral History in Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers and Rebecca Sharpless, *Handbook of Oral History* AltaMira Press, Oxford UK, 2006, pp. 237-71 p 265.