CASE 21

Archiving Oral Histories at Columbia University Libraries

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CASE STUDY DATE: May 2022

ISSUE: This case study describes the formation and ongoing evolution of best practices for conducting oral history interviews and for creating an oral history archives. The methodology is based on the Columbia Center for Oral History Research (CCOHR) and Oral History Archives at Columbia (OHAC). This study outlines the types of records housed in an oral history archives and traces OHAC's preservation challenges with different media over the years. The study also describes OHRO's partnerships and resources that have allowed it to expand and considers the active role of interviewers and indexers in shaping oral history narratives.

KEYWORDS: Analog records
Audiovisual records
Born-digital content
Digital preservation
Interview
Oral history

Background and Institutional Context

This case study places into historical context the practice of conducting and collecting oral history interviews and the intersection of these activities with archival processes by documenting and critically assessing the evolution of Columbia University's Oral History Research Office (OHRO), today known as the Columbia Center for Oral History Research (CCOHR) and Oral History Archives at Columbia (OHAC). Allan Nevins founded OHRO in 1948. It is the oldest, and for years was the largest, institutional oral history archives in the United States. Over the decades, up to three full-time oral historians and as many as five graduate and undergraduate assistants per semester develop and use various formats, procedures, and workflows for processing, archiving, and creating the collection's front-facing access points. An examination of OHRO's history of oral history—a meta-history of sorts—as both an evolving field and methodology must be responsive to changing legal, technological, financial, and intellectual frameworks. This has not always been an agile process and, for that reason, the collection reaching and surviving beyond its seventieth birthday is an apt moment for critical assessment.

OHRO/CCOH-R's funding and organizational history is crucial to note given the number of oral history collections established nationally and internationally as activists, communities, scholars, researchers, historical societies, and associations continue to discover and innovate on oral history best practices. It is hoped that this case study contributes to documentation about creating and maintaining oral history archives—in essence an archives of the archives—through lessons learned and continued iteration in an evolving field.[1]

Important to acknowledge from the outset is that the OHRO has undergone at least three organizational transformations that negotiated the aforementioned legal, technological, financial, and intellectual shifts. Started in 1948, the Oral History Research Office was an independently funded unit at Columbia University. Over the years, directors' connections and considerable fundraising efforts informed the OHRO's collecting and interview practices, particularly in the early years of the emerging field. In 2001, director and oral historian Ron Grele retired, and Mary Marshall Clark, after a year-long search, was named director in June 2001. The Atlantic Philanthropies awarded Clark a grant for $1 million in 2010 to rebuild a

[1] The University of London–Egham-based Oral History Society is unique in its offering of an "Archival Management of Oral History Collections" course for archivists. In the United States, AVP consultancy offers oral history collection management services and online checklists for archives and libraries interested in becoming collecting repositories.

global center for Oral History, and at that time the Oral History Research Office was renamed the Columbia Center for Oral History Research (CCOH-R). Situated in the University's Distinctive Collections, oral history sits alongside more traditional special collections in the Rare Book & Manuscript Library. As Clark reminds us,

> Unlike many other oral history collections, the Columbia Center [for Oral History] was distinguished by the fact that the University did not award it an operational budget. This was true for OHRO's history until 2013 when the research interviewing and teaching functions of the Center were incorporated into [the University's] Arts and Sciences division.

She rightly notes that this entrepreneurial funding structure largely drove the OHRO/CCOHR's work, such that the directors of the Center were each responsible for its financial survival, enabling it to conduct and transcribe thousands of oral history interviews. This level of activity, however, did create a backlog that persists to this day, which this case study partially addresses.

This funding model gives some indication of the historic nature of the collections. Popular collections such as the Continental Can Group, the oral histories that contributed to a multi-volume history of the Ford Motor Company, and the Eisenhower Administration reflect the OHRO's focus on businesses and philanthropies in its early years. This model of oral historians-for-hire greatly influenced the growth of both the collections and best practices in an evolving field. As fields such as sociology and history took a New Left turn in the 1970s, similarly the OHRO focused, to some extent, on social movements, social change, and social issues-focused oral history collections, such as the Sheila Michaels civil rights organization oral history collection (1998–2005), Hemophilia oral history collection (1987–1998), and the Addicts Who Survived oral history collection (1978–1984). As opposed to in-house created collections, researchers donated these types of collections, resulting in ethical questions of consent, permissions, release forms, and copyright decades after donation. Earlier collections generating OHRO's income and staffing funds focused on supplementing the "Great Men" canon of oral history, but later evolved to contain community oral histories and use oral history as a lens into widely experienced cultural and historical events.

Today CCOH-R is housed in the Interdisciplinary Center for Innovative Theory and Empirics (INCITE) in Columbia's School of Arts and Sciences. CCOH-R also remains the central educational and programming hub by hosting the Oral History Master of Arts Program (OHMA), a biannual summer institute, a workshop series engaged

with the challenging issues of oral history training and practice, and one-day workshops on oral history theory and practice.

The archival arm, in an effort to emphasize for patrons the archival functions and use of oral histories as primary source materials, removed "Center" from its name in 2019 to become the Oral History Archives at Columbia (OHAC). OHAC, with one curator and one specialized archivist, stewards the acquisition, accessioning, cataloging, and preservation of thousands of oral history interviews resulting from decades of enthusiastic interviewing and acquisitions.[2]

This delineation of historical and institutional shifts is by no means a comprehensive or exhaustive accounting of OHRO/CCOH-R's role in seventy years of developing the field, training hundreds of students and scholars, and participating in the international spread of oral history methodology.[3] Columbia's model is but one indicator of the various approaches to the purpose and focus of an oral history archives. Oral history archives established since OHRO's founding developed their own best practices, with some taking structural cues from OHRO, but more importantly, innovating upon the Columbia model.

For clarity's sake, in the rest of this case study we will simply refer to the evolution of Columbia's oral history enterprise by its founding name, the Oral History Research Office (OHRO). The OHRO story is one of a burgeoning oral history movement. Columbia's method for dealing with all aspects of the management of an oral history archives through an evolving set of procedures was formalized and standardized amid changing legal, technological, financial, and intellectual frameworks. Critically documenting this history illuminates oral history's institutionalization as a form of scholarship contributing to "The Archives" as a structural and theoretical entity, as well as workflows and procedures beholden to archival science and labor.

Methodology and the Nature of Records

Archives, special collections, libraries, and, increasingly, community-based archives collect oral history interviews. Those engaged with oral history archives often

[2] Current collecting priorities and collections usage guidelines are on OHAC's online FAQ at https://library.columbia.edu/libraries/rbml/acquisition.html#oralhist.

[3] Researchers interested in constructing a comprehensive history should consult the Columbia University Oral History Research Office records (https://clio.columbia.edu/catalog/10898612) and the Oral History Research Office records, 1948–2010s (https://clio.columbia.edu/catalog/6177422).

create and manage oral history interviews and their attendant records. For example, archivists may design, direct, and conduct oral history projects for the institutions for which they work. Some manuscript librarians or curators devise ongoing programming to complement the collections and encourage use. These librarians and curators have direct responsibility for the creation of the very records that they will preserve, organize, manage, and present to the public.

Internal records are created and accumulate in the process of defining an oral history project. These records include memos indicating the initial conception of the project, any grant applications, and records of staffing and funding. Most importantly, they also include materials created in the research process for interviews. When someone agrees to be interviewed, it is expected that the interviewer will undertake research efforts prior to and during the interview process, producing a set of notes and a bibliography of works consulted, an interview outline, and a record of documents consulted and their location. This is best practice. The inclusion of these materials as auxiliary research materials made available to patrons has varied over time with no apparent pattern save for confidentiality concerns.

Records deemed "external" to the oral history collections include correspondence establishing the initial invitation to be interviewed. OHRO's long-standing practice was to send a cover letter spelling out the nature of the project, why the person was asked to participate in an interview, and a description of procedures that detailed the oral history process and expectations. The goal in the past was to produce a record indicating informed consent. This practice emerged out of the necessities of an elite program where public figures who might have rarefied ideas about research but also had access to legal advisers were interviewed. With the expansion of oral history work into fields of social and cultural history where potential interviewees may not be familiar with such processes, have access to legal advice, or, in some cases, be able to read or write, these practices were written down and explained verbally in greater detail. Even if a written record of consent could not be produced, it was important and is now a matter of law and/or institutional review to create some record indicating that one has fully explained the process. Additionally, a responsible set of records noted that the interview narrator fully understood their rights and the final dispositions of the interview. In other words, oral history ethics revolve around granting those we interview the right to review and even edit, or partially restrict, their interviews. University Institutional Review Boards (IRB) largely oversee ethics in all human subjects research in the United States, with the rare exception of Columbia University where oral histories are granted an exclusion

from review based on our reliance on an ethically stringent series of practices that allowed those we interview to place their own controls on both content and use.[4]

There are situations in which narrators may not be able to provide consent in the way we traditionally expect. There are several ways to deal with such situations, from negotiating with close family members or community liaisons who can speak legally and ethically on the narrator's behalf to recording an initial conversation in which these details are completely covered. No matter how one proceeds, records of interactions with potential narrators must be retained. If interviewing people about traumatic experiences, one may also reach out to mental health experts, who can provide potential narrators with the option of speaking to someone versed in trauma-informed practices.

The documentation we keep on such communications are records of provenance. They tell us of the origins of all the subsequent materials that will define our work. Thus, it is important to set forth a few distinctions. The ways in which we conduct ourselves in this initial stage may differ from social scientists or historians. As archivists, we must assume for the most part that the interview we produce will become public documents. Our interviews are rarely covered by agreements to offer and maintain anonymity. Even when conducting a project internal to an institution, we have to assume that at some time in the future someone other than the researcher and narrator will have access to the transcript and, in all probability, to the full text. The interviews will not be hidden in a cellar or attic after the publication of a book summarizing and interpreting the research results. In oral history, there is no "source monopoly," as Grele calls it.[5] Thus, it is critical that the archives maintains project records. Perhaps not every culture is as litigious as that of the United States, but in our case, we must be prepared if an interviewee sees or hears their interview quoted or cited in a manner that they perceive injurious or embarrassing and have at hand a record of our agreements. With increasing demands for publishing oral histories on the internet, even if copyright law permits it, oral history archives are governed by ethical considerations and charged with mitigating harm through tools such as takedown policies and notices of copyright infringement.

[4] In the introduction to its special issue on ethics in oral history, the editors of the *Oral History Review* note that as of 2019 "the U.S. federal government updated its regulations, no longer defining oral history as human subjects research," (*Oral History Review* 48, no. 2: 134).

[5] Personal conversation with Ron Grele, 19 October 2019.

A second and maybe even more important reason for maintaining records of provenance is to overcome the inherent bias in copyright law in favor of traditionally literate creators and publishers. Emerging from the Enlightenment in Europe, copyright's aim was to protect the individual rights of those two parties long enough for them to profit on their work. But those laws did not make accommodation for the rights of those who hold Indigenous knowledge, folklore, oral traditions, and/or aspects of communication where the rights may be those of a community or collective. In that sense, copyright is a form of colonization wherein it was quite possible for literate people to expropriate the product of non-elites—think of the use of folk tunes in classical symphonies, folk tales in novels, or the use of traditional medicine knowledge in modern pharmaceutical companies. By explicitly recognizing the rights of those we interview, we can implement local ideas of ownership and control over one's intellectual property.

Unfortunately, though, not many oral history projects produced and maintained clear records—Columbia included. There are several reasons given for this laxity: research records, it is argued, will never be useful to anyone else; making them public would be a violation of confidentiality; certain records could be potentially embarrassing to both parties of the interview; etc. At a time when more and more practitioners understand the interview as a joint creation and recognize the presence of the interviewer in the process, it is crucial that we keep these records. At one time, the interviewer was seen as removed emotionally and cognitively from the narrator. Practitioners argued that, if properly conducted and if all biases were eliminated, any one interviewer could produce as good an interview as any other. By this chain of reasoning, it was unimportant that we know much about the interviewer. This used to be an especially potent argument among archivists regarding our role as creators of records. However, today such passivity and overtures to neutrality are no longer possible, nor desirable, in oral history and archival science.

Key Challenges

Preservation Environment

From most perspectives, the heart of the oral history process is the interview. Although there are still situations where an interview involves note-taking, we will assume for this discussion that the interview includes some form of electronically recorded conversation. Over its long history, the OHRO experimented with a variety

of recording formats, each presenting its own unique drawbacks. Legend has it that historians recorded the first OHRO interviews on wire recording devices.[6]

Early in the OHRO's life, historians made recordings on reel-to-reel machines. We now have about three thousand hours of reel-to-reel recordings. Most of these tape reels are still in fair condition. When OHRO first started recording on reel-to-reel tape, it was possible to purchase equipment that recorded at variable speeds—1 7/8, 3 ¾, and 7 ½ rpm. Because reels were expensive at that time, OHRO staff decided to record at slower speeds, even though best practice suggested that a better recording could be obtained at higher speeds. In addition, it seems that different interviewers had a "favorite speed," so there was no standardization. In the mid-1970s, the whole field was standardized at 7 ½ rpm, and eventually the archives accessed inexpensive playback equipment available for recordings at slower speeds. In the 1970s, we made the transition slowly but surely to cassette recording, and we now have more than five thousand hours of material based on earlier efforts to transfer reel recordings to cassettes. Before becoming part of the Columbia University Libraries and having access to its Preservation Division, preservation advisors informed the OHRO that it is unwise to replay early cassette recordings. Columbia University Libraries now transfers analog files to digital ones before allowing anyone to listen to them, including OHRO staff.

In the early 1990s, we moved to digital recording, which still used analog formats as a medium of storage; first using the DAT format and then MiniDisc for a short period. DAT recording has virtually disappeared, along with the equipment to record in that format, and mini discs are no longer produced. Since 2003, our oral historian colleagues record solely on digital recorders. Today the preferred digital recorders store data to compact flash cards. Recordings are at the highest bit rate recorders possible, according to Library of Congress preservation standards.[7] After conducting the interview, our colleagues in collections management copy the master files to two preservation sites—a local, external hard drive and a Columbia University Libraries-secured server. In turn, the files on the server are ingested into an asset management system by the Libraries' Digital Preservation department.

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[6] The office word-of-mouth goes on to say that those wire recordings and equipment were donated to a proposed museum of recording artifacts, which was never built, and the wire spools were lost along the way. At least one former director attests to seeing the spools. However, among the earliest recordings in our files, some are on laminated paper. They are in such a state of decay that the next time they are played will be the last, and we have never had the funds to transfer them even if we could find a sound laboratory that has the proper equipment.

[7] Library of Congress, "Sustainability of Digital Formats," https://www.loc.gov/preservation/digital/formats/index.shtml.

After the master files have been safely backed up, compressed .mp3 derivatives are created for use in transcribing, audit-editing, and general inter-office review.

Cassettes were re-used throughout the 1960s as a cost-saving, if not sound, practice. However, by the early 1990s, recognizing the value of the original recordings, OHRO decided to retain the tape recordings. The recordings were labeled, their existence noted in a spreadsheet, and cassettes packed away in boxes in the library. OHRO staff would make cassettes available in special circumstances but few researchers ever asked to listen to the tapes. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, we received an increasing number of inquiries from filmmakers and videographers seeking to use portions of the recordings for their productions.

In the digital age, we published select interview transcripts and existing audio and video to the web. As discussed later, web publishing posed complicated legal and ethical problems, but it also meant that archivists needed to find methods to digitize analog recordings, migrate digital recordings in outdated formats, and re-index and re-catalog everything. Prior to the Carnegie Corporation of New York's grant-funded work, reformatting was a slow and uneven process totally dependent upon finances and OHRO staff resources, including time.[8] We now use a commercial archival and preservation studio for any reel-to-reel reformatting.

With analog reel-to-reel tape deteriorating and playback equipment becoming increasingly difficult to find, general preservation consensus is that digital reformatting is the way forward. The Columbia University Libraries (CUL) large-scale Audio and Moving Image (AMI) Preservation Project, funded by a $750,000 Andrew W. Mellon digital preservation grant, is the most demanding task facing the Oral History Archives at Columbia at this time. After a year-long pilot developing workflows and metadata standards across CUL units, including Preservation, Cataloging, Metadata, and Digital Scholarship, the pilot yielded the reformatting of four thousand oral history interviews that are being added to the CUL Digital Library Collections.[9] We selected the oral history collections as the pilot study test case because of the breadth of its analog media holdings, as well as the opportunity to work through the complex legal and ethical rights management issues present in

[8] "Mellon Foundation Awards Columbia University Libraries Grant to Preserve Unique Audio and Moving-Image Collections," Columbia University Libraries News, n.d., https://library.columbia.edu/about/news/libraries/2019/2019-12-04_Mellon_Foundation_Grant.html.

[9] Additional materials are added regularly to the Libraries' Digital Library Collection at https://dlc.library.columbia.edu/catalog?f%5Blib_repo_short_ssim%5D%5B%5D=Oral+History+Center. This process accelerated during the pandemic and subsequent lockdown from March 2020 to August 2021.

the collection. In the project's next phase, we hope that the majority of OHAC's oral history interviews will be reformatted with appropriate metadata added. The complexity of assessing restrictions will continue to determine access and reproduction availability, including digital audio copies and transcripts. We expect to complete the Mellon project in 2023.

Partners and Resources

Columbia's most important points of access are CLIO, Columbia's online catalog, which lists all available oral history interviews in our archives, and a newer Digital Library Collection, which is an online repository for transcripts and audio accessible to the Columbia University community and remote patrons. Cataloging the oral history collection in its early years was a process of creating descriptions of individual interviews and projects. These descriptions were then published in hardbound book editions along with a few subject areas, such as law or medicine. In the early 1980s, OHRO received a grant to create a database of the bound volumes, indexing roughly 3,500 of our then 5,000 interviews. OHRO was then unable to secure funding to complete the project or continue such cataloging. The experience was still useful, however, because oral history staff learned how to develop a common thesaurus for describing the oral history collection and to develop the facets necessary for such cataloging. This work was later incorporated into a specialized oral history portal, which provided the foundations for populating the library's general online catalog.

Indexing presented perennial problems. The OHRO typically indexed interviews by proper name only. Interviews did not have subject indexes, although at one time OHRO staff attempted to create these for transcripts. Proper name indexing proved somewhat useful for researchers, especially biographers, though indexes were most useful when there was consistency among knowledgeable staff and little turnover. Proper name indexes, however, especially in the shift to digital, offer few clues about interview contents. In an earlier attempt to publish interviews on the web, it was necessary to devise a Rube Goldberg–style table of contents to provide users with a better sense of interview content, as well as a set of terms to orient them to the specific place in the interview where a topic of interest may have been discussed.

Points of access for an oral history collection are in many ways no different than those for other records. They must be durable in the sense that they do not change too much in style and format over time, especially as web design and usability evolve. Choices made in creating oral history records should be documented to facilitate updates, migrations, and refreshing front-facing catalog records. They

must be constructed in familiar formats easily understood by researchers. Wherever possible they should adhere to a consistent language and set of descriptors, even if, like Library of Congress subject headings used in the United States, there are significant ideological problems.[10] And they should be general enough in the catalog to direct patrons to the collection and specific enough in the index to allow finely tuned searches and encourage browsing.

As metadata standards have evolved for several decades, oral history at Columbia created its own standards documenting both item-level and collection-level metadata. At its most basic level, the narrator name, the interviewer name, location of interview, date(s), general themes, transcript page numbers, and audio format were noted for individual or biographical interviews. Later a summary of themes discussed were added to analog records and eventually this information was transferred to the electronic card catalog record. OHRO metadata about collections varied as well, with some collections detailing general themes across all interviews and only listing narrator names; it would be up to the researcher to read the transcripts or listen to available audio to determine how certain individuals were connected to specific collections. Rarely, then and now, are finding aids produced for collections. In the case of a collection such as the Columbia Armenian Oral History Archive (1968–1977), project files indicate that a specially-funded project served as the impetus for using the finding aid format to fully describe both a collection and narrators in biographical scope materials.

With funds raised from the Atlantic Philanthropies from 2010 to 2012, the OHRO worked with Columbia University Libraries' Digital Library and Scholarly Technologies team to design an online portal to search and access oral history interviews. The portal provides researchers with a narrower window than the library-wide CLIO database and limits their archival search specifically to oral histories. For the first time, keywords and proper names were searchable via the portal. While a simple concept, this was revolutionary for the OHRO, opening up new opportunities for patrons to unearth material not as easily discoverable before the portal. The portal included oral history listings by project title and proper names and subjects.[11] The current iteration of the archives, situated in the libraries'

[10] An example would be reactions in the U.S. Congress to Dartmouth College students Óscar Rubén Cornejo Cásares and Melissa Padilla important, if unsuccessful, 2014 petition to change the subject heading to "undocumented," rather than "illegal" in reference to immigrants to the United States.

[11] Project titles were often quite creative, but lacked description that, to this day, make some of the oral history content a mystery. One example, the Arguing the World Collection, consists of more than eighty interviews conducted for a documentary of the same title that featured speakers discussing, "various strains of leftist thought, centrism, and neoconservatism."

structure, may be moving away from the dedicated portal system as the main catalog, CLIO, has grown more robust. Moreover, CLIO is the basis for the portal, which means the records contained therein are duplicates and, thus, unnecessary to maintain. The libraries in general are moving away from specialized portals to emphasize the breadth of the Special Collections within the greater research system.

Today, OHAC (as OHRO later became known) favors minimal processing and description of decades-old legacy collections with sparse information in project files on which to base metadata considerations. For newer, born-digital collections, OHAC has the opportunity to create detailed individual biographical notes, interview summaries, and collection-level summaries. It remains rare that we create finding aids for collections. Only in the later years of the CCOHR and OHAC were Library of Congress subject headings applied.

Analysis

Archiving oral histories provides unique challenges and opportunities for creative solutions. Because the interview information is located within a conversation, there can be—and often is—a great deal of repetition of story elements dispersed over the course of an interview. There is no consistent language, and people use different words for different meanings with ethnic, regional, class, or racial uniqueness. An indexer, with their own biases, often must interpret what is meant in each case. The indexer must decide whether to index the interviewer's questions. An interview is more than a repository of facts and descriptions of events. It is also often an exercise in identity, an expression of ideology and values, and a locus of metaphor and narrative power. In today's research, we can no longer assume that anyone using our work is interested solely in recreating the events of the past. Some of the most interesting forms of information encased in the dynamic of the interview are those that document culture and the political moment.

The complexity of these problems is not diminished by new technology. Our future program is clear; the path to follow may not be so. Whatever it is, it will be bound by our past policies and practices. Some will have to be discarded. Others may be so intrinsic to the field's methodological process that we would destroy what it is we seek to accomplish when we embark on oral history.