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Collecting Oral Histories in Digital Formats

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"Digital technologies, although also machine dependent, have created multiple new pathways to interviews. Networked computing, Internet browsers, and search engines now ensure that interviews once fated for archival shelves and limited access through print publication can now be discovered in seconds and accessed globally." -Douglas A. Boyd and Charles Hardy, "Collecting in the Digital Age: An Overview"[1]

Photograph by Enrique Rosell

Introduction

The oral history format is a natural outgrowth of oral tradition, a format that has flourished for thousands of years, particularly among groups that were excluded from the written historical record. In the digital age, oral history is being both

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[1] Boyd, Douglas A., and Charles Hardy. "Collecting in the Digital Age: An Overview," in *Oral History in the Digital Age*, edited by Doug Boyd, Steve Cohen, Brad Rakerd, and Dean Rehberger. Washington, D.C.: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2012, http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/collecting-in-the-digital-age/

democratized in terms of access and presented with new choices and challenges. Today, an oral history can be collected on a camcorder or a smartphone with video capabilities; it can be stored in a digital repository or uploaded to YouTube. Indeed, the possibilities are endless. In this section of the manual, the logistics of collecting oral histories in digital formats are discussed, from the creation of a consent form, to recording audio and/or video, and finally archiving the oral history in an internal and/or public-facing digital repository. For information on best practices and trauma-informed techniques for conducting an oral history, please see relevant materials in the appendix.

Consent and Release Forms

To publish an oral history interview in any format, a form must be signed by the narrator (person being interviewed), specifying that they give their consent to be interviewed as well as releasing the digital content generated in the interview to be held and/or published by the collecting institution. Additionally, this form should serve as an educational tool to let the narrator know more about the interview process (if applicable) as well as their own rights related to that which they share.[2] For sample forms, please see the appendix of this manual.

Interview Consent and Release: Key Things to Remember

- The narrator and collector must mutually agree upon how the material is to be distributed and used. This may manifest in agreeing upon a Creative Commons or Rights Statement for third-party use, or even an agreed-upon period to restrict access to the interview.
- Consent and release forms should always be archived for future reference. For a digital archive, a digital consent form could be archived within the same record as the interview to which it corresponds, but not made publicly available.

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[2] The Wolfsonian Public Humanities Lab-FIU officially encourages that narrators maintain copyright over their own oral histories, and that forms signed by the narrator allow for them to opt out at any point of the oral history collecting and archiving process. Furthermore, we believe that consent and release forms should be written in such a way that narrators are informed of the rights they have over their own stories.

- If possible, try to be transparent on a consent and release form, letting the potential narrator know how their interview will be used and/or the purpose of a particular oral history gathering project.

Audio and Video Recording of Oral History

Oral history interviews should always collect audio and video on separate apparatuses. In other words, if one is recording an oral history interview on a camcorder, they should also be simultaneously recording sound through either a portable audio recorder or mics connected to a computer with an audio editing software like Audacity or Adobe Audition. The reasons for doing so are the following:

- A separate audio file serves as a **backup**; for example, if something were to happen to video captured by a camcorder, there would still be a usable audio file.
- Audio is a **cost-effective** method for gathering oral histories compared to video. This is mainly to do with the costs associated with long term digital storage. Video files tend to be significantly larger than audio files and thus more expensive to store; for example, an 8 minute and 17 second oral history recently recorded by the Wolfsonian Public Humanities Lab generated two files: an audio file and a video file. The audio file alone was 4 KB in size, while the edited video file was 534 MB (1 KB=.001 MB).

This is not to say that video-recorded oral histories are not valuable; many projects and institutions have preferred to collect oral histories in video formats due to their widespread public appeal and ability to capture a narrator's appearance and mannerisms as they are sharing their story.[3] **The 10-12 oral histories per partner collected in conjunction with the Community Data**

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[3] For more information on the advantages and disadvantages of audio vs. video oral histories, see this resource: Boyd, Douglas A. "Audio or Video for Recording Oral History: Questions, Decisions," in *Oral History in the Digital Age*, edited by Doug Boyd, Steve Cohen, Brad Rakerd, and Dean Rehberger. Washington, D.C.: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2012, http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/06/audio-or-video-for-recording-oral-history/

Curation Mellon-funded project were budgeted for long-term storage in dPanther as videos.

Digital File Formats for Oral Histories

Choosing widely used and recognized file formats is key for ensuring the long-term usability of digital item. For audio, the Broadcast Wave Format (filename extension is **.wav**) is recommended by the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives [(IASA 2009)](#). For video formats, widely used wrapper formats (that which binds audio and video together into one file) include **.mov** and **.avi**. Additionally, the encoding video file format (the video track that exists inside a wrapper file alongside an audio track) is crucial when selecting a camcorder; be on the lookout for widely used formats like **H.264, AVC, DV, MPEG-2, and MPEG-4**.

List of Technology for Collecting Oral Histories in Digital Formats[4]

Item Name and Image	Use
1. Portable Audio Recorder	Records audio of oral history interview. It should be placed relatively close to the interviewer and the narrator. The sound can be monitored directly from the apparatus via headphones, this is called Direct Monitoring. In contrast, Input Monitoring involves listening to audio through a computer that has the portable recorder connected via USB. In the latter,

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[4] This list reflects the original suggested items for partners from the Community Data Curation grant, and subsequently the most-purchased items by the partners.

	the headphones are connected to the computer itself.
2. Lavalier Microphone 	A lavalier microphone clips onto one's shirt and plugs into a transmitter, usually held or stored in a pocket for the duration of the interview. The receiver plugs into the camcorder via the microphone jack. The resulting video, which should be retrieved from the camcorder's SD card, will include the audio.
3. Camcorder 	A camcorder is used for recording video of an interview. While the camcorder picks up video, we still recommend using an external device (either the lavalier mics or an external audio recorder) to record audio separately for both preservation and sound quality purposes.

4. Computer with Audio Editing Software 	While there are many options for editing audio and video files, we recommend Adobe Premiere Pro. Most partners in the Community Data Curation grant opted to buy MacBook Pro computers with the Adobe Creative Cloud suite installed, which includes Adobe Premiere Pro. Free options for video editing include [Adobe Express](#) and iMovie (on Apple operating system only). A free option for audio editing only is [Audacity](#).
5. Headphones 	It is recommended that there is one person, usually the videographer, monitoring the sound via headphones for the duration of an interview.