

Making sense of digital oral history - Workshop

Workshop proposal for the 6th DH Benelux Conference

Jakub Mlynář (Charles University, Czech Republic) – jakub.mlynar@ff.cuni.cz

Jakub Bronec (Université du Luxembourg, Luxembourg) – jakub.bronec@uni.lu

Key words: Visual history archive, Oral history, Genocides, online platforms

Over the past three decades, oral history (OH) has been deeply transformed by the advent of digital technologies. The digital turn leads to growing number of online OH databases, resulting from “process-oriented” projects (i.e., life story interviews conducted without specific research questions). Large amounts of such data have been deposited in archives, available not only for secondary analysis by researchers who did not participate in the initial data collection, but also for other social actors like teachers, educators, and documentarists. However, in order to use OH materials efficiently and meaningfully, it is important to understand how people make sense of such video recordings in social interaction. Fundamental questions thus emerge in regard to secondary analysis and practical utilization of archived audiovisual OH material, such as: What are the features of OH interview as a social object? What makes it meaningful and interpretable? How much do we need to know about the socially situated character of the interview in order to understand it properly? Is there “too little” or “too much” context in relation to OH? How do people make sense of OH interviews in social practice, and relate it to their broader historical knowledge?

In the workshop, we will grasp such far-reaching questions from a very empirical and practical perspective. It intends to realize these objectives by reaching out to scholars who are interested in cross-disciplinary approaches and work with interviews, oral history, and digitalized or digital qualitative data in general. As a vivid example, we will be using one of the largest digital archives of oral histories: the USC Shoah Foundation’s *Visual History Archive* (VHA, <https://sfi.usc.edu>). This digital database consists of more than 54,500 audio-visual recordings of oral history interviews. The majority of the interviews were collected between 1994 and 2000, mainly in the USA and Europe. Most of the interviews are in English, but more than 35 other languages are also represented in the VHA. More than 6,000 interviews from the VHA mention Belgium, Netherlands or Luxembourg. However, there is also the fast-growing collection of testimonies of genocides and violent acts worldwide. As part of the workshop, we will present new testimonies from Rwanda, Guatemala, Cambodia and Sudan, discussing their research and educational use. Testimonies from VHA, used in our workshop, are unedited video interviews in which genocide survivors and witnesses share their complete life stories. We will demonstrate how to find relevant interviews, as well as specific moments and information within each testimony. Combining theory and praxis, we will focus on secondary analysis of archival interviews, discussing their role in contemporary society, as well as interpretive issues. We will consider the educational opportunities and barriers.

The workshop is grounded in our experience with projects such as the *IWalk*, which aims to bring clips of the archival interviews directly to the narrated places (see Figure 1). It develops guided urban walks accompanied by digitally mediated clips of OH

interviews, proposing relocation of clips of the audio-visual testimonies into relevant urban spaces. In praxis, participants use digital devices to listen to short video fragments of the interviews at the very places where certain historical events happened: “People walking through the tours use tablet computers to watch clips of Holocaust survivors and witnesses telling personal stories about how the locations factored into their experiences.” (<https://sfi.usc.edu/education/iwalk>)



Figure 1. Test execution of an *IWalk* in Prague, 2013 (photos by Martin Šmok).

IWalk can be conceived as a project exploring the fundamental connection of memory and space. It is a project conducted in collaboration with the Czech NGO OpenEye. The Czech series of *IWalks*, including the ones in Prague, Uhersky Brod, Brno and Mlada Boleslav, was established with the financial support of the Foundation for Holocaust Victims. The Luxembourg series of *IWalks* will be covered by the University of Luxembourg. This series will be composed of two pioneering tours realized in Luxembourg city and in Esch-sur-Alzette. Its aims are: to describe the characteristics of two Jewish communities from diverse background; to develop critical and analytical thinking skills using various forms of documents; to determine the importance of place on identity; to develop empathy and respect for differences and the immigrant experience; to learn the meaning of certain Yiddish words and understand the linguistic layer of culture. Some broader questions involved in conceiving *IWalks* as specific mnemonic activities are: How is the “past” and “history” practically established and jointly maintained as an intersubjectively available phenomenon in social interaction? Which linguistic and embodied social practices are utilized to constitute the link between the place in the narrative (i.e., as described in the interview) and the place here-and-now (i.e., as experienced urban surroundings)?

In addition, we will also present the unique platform *IWitness* that allows users to watch and analyze a considerable number of the testimonies stored in the VHA. This online tool introduces the multi-perspective history of genocides. Uploaded activities built by teachers and scholars improve understanding of historical circumstances and current society. Activities in Dutch and French (as well as other languages) are already available in *IWitness*. The educational materials are concerned with a wide variety of

topics from historical reality (such as the famine in Ukraine in 1930s) to social phenomena (such as collective identity and stereotypes).

Time schedule of the workshop (optimally 2×3 hours; reschedule to 3 hours is possible). Nevertheless, the length of the workshop is flexible. Authors proceeded from the previous DH Benelux Conference.

- (1) 30 minutes: Introduction to the VHA in the context of digital oral history
- (2) 30 minutes: VHA search tools - people, places, experiences
- (3) 60 minutes: VHA and the history of Benelux
- (4) 60 minutes: VHA and the non-European social realities
- (5) 60 minutes: The past and the present - belated and unbelated testimonies
- (6) 30 minutes: *IWitness* - the e-learning platform of USC Shoah Foundation
- (7) 60 minutes: *IWalks* - connecting digital narratives with real places
- (8) 30 minutes: Conclusion and discussion