

Making sense of digital oral history (Workshop)

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Over the past three decades, oral history (OH) has been deeply transformed by the advent of digital technologies (Thomson, 2007). 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; see Freund, 2009). 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 (Bornat, 2003), 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 (Hajek & Dlouha, 2014). 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. We are 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. From historical narrative perspectives, we will critically introduce all kinds of narrators from Jewish survivors to liberators whose testimonies offer a wide range of possible historical reconstructions. To avoid an uncritical acceptance of individual accounts, it is necessary to dispose of romanticizing aura of eyewitnesses (Sabrow & Frei, 2012). We need to consider memory as a reconstructive process influenced by many factors, and possibly distorted by one’s social environment and current political situation. Several studies imply that oral historians show less insight into epistemological principles of history (Havekes et al., 2012). The workshop will exemplify some particular flaws made by interviewers and interviewees and will critically examine what these errors stem from. The fact that narrators have experienced the past themselves makes them so credible that researchers who interact with them in person find it hard to build up the distance needed for a critical approach to their accounts (Bertram et al., 2017).

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 OH 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 post-2000 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 practically 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 brings clips of the archival interviews directly to the narrated places (see Figure 1). In praxis, participants use digital devices to listen to short video fragments of the interviews at the very places where certain historical events happened (<https://sfi.usc.edu/education/iwalk>). Furthermore, we will also present the unique platform *IWitness* (<http://iwitness.usc.edu>) 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).



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

The workshop will be concluded by discussing persistent issues and topics that are related to educational and research use of digital OH in contemporary world. Given that educators and scholars will soon have to rely exclusively on archived video recordings of oral histories to access and present the narrated experiences of Holocaust survivors, these considerations seem timely. Michael Frisch noted that “[t]he Deep Dark Secret of oral history is that nobody spends much time listening to or watching recorded and collected interview documents. There has simply been little serious interest in the primary audio or video interviews that literally define the field and that the method is organized to produce.” (2008: 223). Our workshop directs attention towards this increasingly pressing issue and puts forward a number of its relevant aspects with concrete examples in the context of digital humanities.

Time schedule of the workshop (2 hours 45 minutes). Workshop capacity: 20–30 persons.
10:00–10:45: Introduction to the VHA in the context of digital oral history.
10:45–11:00: VHA search tools – people, places, experiences.
11:00–11:10: (Short break)
11:10–11:45: VHA and the history of Benelux (practical tasks).
11:45–12:20: VHA and the non-European social realities (practical tasks).
12:20–12:35: *IWitness* as the e-learning platform of USC Shoah Foundation, focus on Benelux.
12:35–12:45: Conclusion and discussion.

References

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