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What Price Oral History?

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Oral history, oral history
How do your programs grow?
With leaps and bounds of recorded sound
And Mylar tapes all in a row!

From modest beginnings less than twenty-five years ago, oral history's infinite potential has lured over 230 programs into its fold. The expansion of projects has been dramatic, and the field continues its rapid growth. It appears, however, that too often programs have been undertaken without adequate preparation, particularly in the area of finance. Who pays, when, for what, how and how much are valid considerations to be explored.

The problem of funding oral history is not new. Lyman Copeland Draper and Hubert Howe Bancroft, two nineteenth century historian-collectors who used oral history techniques to obtain historical information, found the costs, even then, to be burdensome.¹ Most, if not all, of the modern programs that have mushroomed since Allan Nevins' Oral History Experiment at Columbia University became a reality in 1948 have, at one time or another, experienced financial drought.

Although the published literature of oral history has expanded as the programs have increased, it has skirted the economic aspects of the business. In 1965, Donald Swain, an oral historian, commented that "Satisfactory published answers [regarding costs] are a singular omission in our professional literature."² Today, the

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situation is virtually unchanged. With few exceptions, the literature contains indefinite expressions such as "remarkably expensive," "very costly," and "highly prohibitive." These phrases are expressive, but tell nothing of the actual costs involved. What makes oral history the expensive discipline everyone concedes it to be?

Swain states that the basic technique employed by oral historians, that of interviewing, is a remarkably expensive method of doing research. "Not considering background research, but including time for preparation, travel, transcribing, and editing, the ratio of man-hours to actual interview time may be conservatively estimated at 40 to 1. In other words, an average of 40 hours will be required for every hour of taped interview. Translated into dollars, this means a large investment. One can expect to spend more than originally estimated for an adventure in oral history."3

There have been a few attempts to determine oral history costs, but the investigators found it difficult, if not impossible, to obtain meaningful data for any comparative analysis of unit costs. A 1965 report on the John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Project explained that the "National Archives combines oral history, manuscript collections and other functions to the point where it is impossible to isolate oral history costs. This is a functional and efficient system for the Presidential Libraries, but one which makes National Archives experience difficult to compare with that of Columbia and other centers."4

At the first National Colloquium on Oral History in September, 1966, Adelaide Tusler of the Oral History Program at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) distributed a survey questionnaire to participants, who represented established oral history programs, in an attempt to make certain comparisons. The survey revealed that the "majority of programs (29) could give no estimate of the finished product's cost; on the basis of few responses, it ranged from under $100 per hour of tape (11), to between $100 and $200 (3) and over $200 (1)."5

Another attempt was made to obtain unit costs the following year at the Second National Colloquium. A group meeting on financial problems reached a "general consensus ... that their cost of production ran somewhere
in the range of $6 to $9 per page of finished product. Louis M. Starr of the Columbia University Oral History Research Office estimates that one hour of tape is equal to approximately 27 pages of transcript. Even at the minimum rate of $6 per page, this would come to $162 per hour of processed tape; the maximum rate of $9 per page would produce a figure of $243. The "general consensus" reached by this group is illustrative of the cost variance characteristic among oral history programs.

To attempt both to ascertain the cost of establishing and maintaining an oral history program and to bring clarification to the economic problems involved, the author prepared and submitted a questionnaire to sixteen selected oral history programs. The majority were ongoing programs which had demonstrated high quality, some were projects recently initiated, while others had already been completed. The questionnaire was designed to elicit the following data:

1. a breakdown of the cost of the various operations involved in the interviewing and transcribing processes,

2. a comparison of total program costs in the first years of operation with the same expenditures in 1970,

3. the costs outside the interviewing and transcribing processes,

4. an examination of sources of funding, and

5. the practitioner's perception of the basic economic problems concomitant with oral history.

Ten questionnaires were returned (62.5%). But only seven respondents were able, or chose, to provide information. Unfortunately, both the manner in which the questions were interpreted and the small number of responses obtained precludes any detailed or meaningful analysis of each question. Despite this lack of comparable data, however, the responses do shed light on the economic problems associated with oral history and add to our knowledge of this difficult-to-pin-down area.
The lack of comparable data for unit costs, underscored in previous studies, received documented support from the data collected. The processing phase of oral history, i.e., transcription of the tape to the final typescript, is far from a fair-traded item. James V. Mink, Director of the UCLA Oral History Program, gave a rough estimate of $125-$150 total cost per hour of processed tape. The John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program reported its processing costs close to $100 per hour of tape, broken down as follows:

**Transcribing:**

13 hours of work per hour of tape, at $2.99/hr. $38.87

**Proofreading:**

9 hours of work per hour of tape, at $4.00/hr. 36.00

**Read for final typing:**

1 hour of work per hour of tape, at $4.00/hr. 4.00

**Final typing:**

5 hours of work per hour of tape, at $2.99/hr. 14.95

**Proofread after final typing:**

2 hours of work per hour of tape, at $2.99/hr. 5.98 TOTAL $99.80

Unfortunately, such a detailed breakdown of costs could not be obtained for most of the other projects. A former member of the Kennedy Program emphasized the difficulty in obtaining such data: "Costs of various oral history operations are difficult to estimate, but I have analyzed government sponsored projects which are costing approximately $500 per completed interview hour. Approximately $100 of this expense was directed toward processing, but often processing was falling far behind..."
interviewing pace."

This lack of cost accounting procedures for most programs makes it difficult, if not impossible, to arrive at any meaningful unit cost figures. Willa K. Baum, Director of the Regional Oral History Office at the University of California at Berkeley, admits that "our records are not kept in such a way as to render retrievable the information you request. I believe the diversity of our operation makes such a questionnaire more difficult than it will be to most offices; however, it points up the great problems in finding any way to compare unit costs on oral history."

Mrs. Baum's experience proved to be the rule rather than the exception. It seemed to be difficult, if not impossible, for most of the respondents to give more than rough estimates of unit costs. How can so many oral history programs continue in operation without knowledge of the costs of operation? Perhaps the answer lies in an honest comment from one respondent: "If accurate cost figures were available to administrators at several institutions of which I am aware, I expect that the oral history programs might be considerably cut back. It is a very expensive undertaking."

The logical question that follows is: where is the money spent? Administrative decisions determine where funds are allocated, what phases of a program reap the greatest benefits, and which parts must, therefore, scrimp along with inadequate financing. The comparisons between cost of interviewing and transcription within programs, as well as between programs, point again to the diversity of priorities in oral history endeavors.

The Annual Report of the Columbia Oral History Research Office for 1969-1970 showed an expenditure of over $57,000. Aside from $25,000 for administrative salaries, the largest portion--$12,300--went to the initial transcription of tapes. The expenses involved in the interviewing of subjects followed close behind at $10,500. Conversely, both the Cornell Program in Oral History and the John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program spend nearly twice as much money on interviewing of subjects as on transcription and editing of tapes. The costs for these two programs are as follows:
One respondent underscored the true meaning of these statistics, and questioned current priorities: "At the inception of a project, 95% of planning and financing seems directed toward interviewing. I have experienced great difficulty with several projects which I have advised, ever convincing those planning the work that processing will be very costly, often tedious, and a burden to be contended with long after the glamourous job of interviewing is completed. Too often, even after a project has been long in existence, policy is determined or heavily influenced by interviewers, and processing is still not adequately financed."

This conclusion was reinforced by responses to the questionnaire's items seeking to identify those phases of programs considered most, and least, adequately financed. Again, there was no consensus. Two programs (Kennedy Library and the Ohio Historical Society) indicated that the interviewing phase was most adequately financed; one (Cornell Program in Oral History) reported that salaries for administrators fell in this category; and one (Columbia's Oral History Research Office) stated that "none is adequately financed; would like more for every part of the process." Three did not respond to this question.

The Kennedy Library Program and the Ohio Historical Society responded that the processing phase needed more financial assistance, Cornell identified travel and employing interviewers as least adequately funded, while Columbia stated: "All phases need more financing, scrimping all along the line. Perhaps worst is lack of funding for in-depth preparation." Three again did not comment.

These results receive additional support from the Survey on the Status of Oral History in the Archival
Profession conducted by the Society of American Archivists' Committee on Oral History. In response to the item "Please indicate the three areas that are presenting the greatest problems for you," the 345 respondents checked the following most frequently:

1. Obtaining adequate financing - 104 (30%)
2. Establishment of an oral history program - 70 (20%)
3. Transcribing tapes and editing transcripts - 56 (16%).

The overriding economic problem, as evidenced by all the surveys, papers, reports and studies, is one of processing of tapes. This phase, for the majority of programs, seems to be oral history's Waterloo. The extent of this problem is documented in Oral History in the United States: A Directory, which shows, graphically, the growth of programs from 1965-1971, with their corresponding output:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1965</th>
<th>1971</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Projects</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projects Planned</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons Interviewed</td>
<td>not available</td>
<td>23,115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours Recorded</td>
<td>17,441</td>
<td>52,264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pages of Transcript</td>
<td>398,556</td>
<td>704,543</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Directory points out that "Less than half of all the known hours of tape recorded. . . .have been transcribed." And it adds, "Studies of the use of oral history over the last decade have shown time and time again that transcripts edited by the oral authors, rather than tapes, are what scholars want. Lack of funds for transcribing. . . .constitutes a major hindrance. . . .the fact [remains] that for all the interest it has generated, oral history remains critically underfinanced."13

An analysis of the programs in the 1971 Directory reveals that a majority have been foregoing transcription, either partially or fully. Though admittedly incomplete, the Directory statistics disclose that only 50 programs transcribe all, or nearly all, of their tapes, while the remaining 180 programs transcribe one-half or less. Significantly, 35 of these do no transcription at all.


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If oral history is a valid technique in an age of diminishing funds, if it is a needed additional source of documentation for modern man, if it is an enlightened answer to the deterioration of the informational quality of today’s written records, if it is worth the time, effort and money that have already been expended over the past twenty-five years, then an alternative to complete transcription must be developed, at least for most institutions.

One alternative is an Oral History Register. Admittedly, this is not a panacea. But it does offer a partial answer, a half-way measure between a full scale program of transcription and none at all.14

This oral history register would be similar to registers developed by archivists in processing manuscript and archival collections. It would include:

1. a brief biographical sketch of the subject, name of interviewer, date and place of interview;

2. technical data indicating type of tape, number of tracks, speed, length of interview, etc.; and

3. an index of the tape, with footage measurements indicating location of information on the tape.

For those institutions which cannot afford the luxury of transcription, a register would serve three purposes; (1) much of the considerable expense incurred by transcribing and editing of tapes would be eliminated; (2) search time for scholars would be cut, as they would be spared listening to an entire tape to find a few items of information; (3) a master tape from which any number of duplicates could be made would facilitate dissemination and interlibrary loan.

Objections will be voiced that scholars and researchers will not use tapes, that they are used to and prefer the written word. This argument is not entirely valid, since the age of multi-media is already upon us and we obtain information in a variety of forms, including computer printouts, punched tapes, and microforms of considerable variety themselves. What scholar or researcher
will refuse to listen to a tape if it is the only source for the information he is seeking? A further argument for transcribing is that the oral author should have the opportunity to edit, and editing tapes is not as easily accomplished as editing transcriptions. This may be true, but perhaps we lose a great deal by allowing memoirists to edit to their own satisfaction. Another objection is a technical one, that of rewinding the tapes every six months to prevent the development within the spools of magnetic fields that could adversely affect the recorded sound. This is a valid objection, but as one respondent to the questionnaire stated: "Perhaps this is a small price to pay for escaping from transcribing."

To the argument that oral history is not so much for today's researchers as for tomorrow's, one need only observe the demand on Columbia's collection. To put off transcribing indefinitely until finances are available seems a false economy and a great waste of valuable sources of information. Oral history's main, perhaps only, reason for being is to promote and encourage scholarly use. Excluding the major programs in the country, which disseminate their collections through catalogs, publicity, reports, inclusion in the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (as of 1971), and a recent exploration into micropublication, one wonders if the majority of institutions which list themselves as having oral history programs really care about the problem of dissemination. If they do, perhaps they will test the Oral History Register with the same courage Allan Nevins displayed when he inaugurated modern oral history, thereby securing for himself and others a place in the sun.


3 Ibid., 65. The Dulles Oral History Project at Princeton University echoed this sentiment, writing the author that "costs are always considerably higher than anticipated, especially for the editing of transcripts."


7 Ann Campbell (National Archives, San Francisco) to N. M., December 12, 1971.

8 Willa K. Baum to N. M., November 4, 1971.

9 Columbia's Oral History Research Office is able to give total yearly expenditures for processing, but it keeps unit costs confidential, believing that to reveal such figures in a fluctuating economy could haunt it during contract arrangements with a potential sponsor for a project. For an informative explanation of Columbia's percentage figures for income and expenditures, see Louis M. Starr, "Financing Oral History," Second National
10 Campbell to N.M., December 12, 1971. At least one program has suffered such a fate and ceased altogether.

11 Ibid. Wayne State University's Labor History Archives acknowledged that interviewing was considered the key activity, but processing the recorded interview constituted the bulk of its work.


14 Although tape indexing has been proposed in the literature, very few programs seem to have seriously considered it as an alternative. The University Archives of the University of Illinois has done some work in this area, even preparing an alphabetical index to one interview. For a model of how a tape index might appear, see William G. Tyrrell, "Tape-Recording Local History," Technical Leaflet 35 in History News, v. 21, no. 5 (May, 1955).