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## Let's Get Digital! Possibilities and Problems of Oral History in the Digital Age

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## Let's Get Digital! Possibilities and Problems of Oral History in the Digital Age<sup>\*</sup>

Clifford Kuhn

I am honored and delighted to address this conference. For in the world of oral history, archivists have never played a more central, prominent, and crucial role than they do today. A recent survey of Oral Historical Association members revealed that fully 20% of OHA list their principal place of employment as libraries or archives. In the past few months, I've had the pleasure of participating in an on-line chat sponsored by the Oral Section of SAA; attending the section's brown bag luncheon and sponsored session at SAA in New Orleans, taking part in another panel there; and observing the newly formed archives interest group within the Oral History Association – all marked by enormous enthusiasm, interest and creativity. Indeed, we're living in what might be called the "golden age" of oral history and archives.

Of course, the archive has always had a close connection with oral history, dating back to its inception as a formal practice with the founding of the Columbia University Oral History Research Program in 1948, which set the tone for oral history for decades. As part of Columbia founder Allen Nevins's attempt to legitimize the methodology within the academy, oral history interviews were to be grounded in extensive preparation, recorded, professionally preserved and described, and made available to researchers. Reflecting the archival origins of oral history, they also were to be accompanied by legal release forms. Furthermore, in Columbia's view, it was the transcript, rather than the tape recording, which was the final product emerging from an oral history interview. Like other archival documents, a transcript could be readily indexed or catalogued for use by researchers.

That largely was the relationship before the digital era. Today, in settings ranging from small repositories to massive collections like the Veterans History Project collection at the

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<sup>\*</sup> **Note from Editor:** Plenary address at the 2013 Tri-State Archivists Meeting, a joint meeting of the Society of Georgia Archivists, Society of North Carolina Archivists, and the South Carolina Archivists Association.

Library of Congress, archivists are actively interacting with both producers and consumers of oral history, as well as generating their own interviews, in a manner that is perhaps unprecedented in terms of both accessibility and possibility. The move away from analog recorders to laptops, smart phones and other readily available digital recording devices, along with the greatly increased access to and potential platforms for oral history interviews, has been both democratizing and transformative, even more so than when cassettes and video recorders began to supplant reel-to-reel recorders in the late 1960s. Intertwined with general cultural currents such as what one might call the “broadcast yourself” sensibility, as well as specific developments such as the StoryCorps phenomenon, technological advances have certainly contributed to the enormous popularity of oral history today. And archivists are right in the center of it all.

Not only has the proliferation of high quality and affordable audio and video recorders greatly facilitated the actual recording of interviews and thus extended oral history practice, but the digital revolution has impacted in complicated ways all aspects of the oral history process. From the collection, preservation, management, and description of oral history interviews, to their interpretation and presentation in diverse formats and media, to associated ethical and legal issues, we are in the midst of what Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, editors of *The Oral History Reader*, have called one of the four major paradigm shifts in the field since World War II.<sup>1</sup> As Michael Frisch and Douglas Lambert have recently written, “Almost every traditional assumption about the collecting, curation, and uses of oral history is collapsing in the digital age.”<sup>2</sup>

Today I’d like to spend the first half of my remarks discussing some ramifications of digital oral history for the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, “Introduction to Part I,” Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2006): 1, 8.

<sup>2</sup> Frisch, Michael with Douglas Lambert. “Mapping Approaches to Oral History Content Management in the Digital Age,” in *Oral History in the Digital Age*, ed. Doug Boyd, Steve Cohen, Brad Rakerd, and Dean Rehberger (Washington, DC: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2012), <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu/2012/07/mapping/>.

archival community, from the actual creation of a document to its usages and interpretations. The second half will be spent examining a specific collection which has connections to each of the states represented here. It is a very important collection, and is representative of many collections in that it has been severely underutilized in large part because it has never been digitized. So we'll engage in an exercise of the imagination, brainstorming, if you will, some of the myriad possibilities in which this collection might be utilized if it were in fact digitized, and accordingly how the archives might intersect with the process.

In order to address the often dizzying array of issues and choices involved with contemporary oral history, in 2010 a partnership including the Oral History Association (OHA), the American Folklore Society, and Michigan State University's MATRIX Center for the Humanities received a national leadership grant from the Institute for Library and Museum Services, entitled "Oral History in the Digital Age," or OHDA. OHDA sought to articulate current best practices in the collection, curation and dissemination of oral history interviews, in a dynamic manner geared for practitioners from a diversity of vantage points. Indeed, the catch-phrase for oral history for what form a project might take is "it depends" – it depends upon resources, objectives, and so forth. The resultant website launched in 2012 (<http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu>) provides a portal to hundreds of best practices documents; an interactive guide for selecting appropriate equipment; and a collection of seventy-five essays written by experts about all aspects of the oral history process, often drawing from exemplary case studies.

While it is impossible to explore in detail all of the areas treated in OHDA, I'm going to draw attention to several which I think warrant particular attention. The digital revolution has rekindled an interest in sound itself, in "aural history" as it were, while improved technology along with contemporary expectations have also contributed to a recent great increase in video oral history. OHDA offers numerous suggestions to optimize both audio and video recording quality, and examines some of the ramifications of video oral history, including privacy concerns. One consequence is a move away from reliance on the transcript alone, because the founding of the Columbia program the principal

document consulted by researchers, yet one that is costly and labor-intensive, and that only provides a pale representation of the spoken word. In recent years a variety of indexing and cataloguing systems have been developed which handle audio-visual materials. Mike Frisch and his associates at Randforce have broken full interviews into segments, then indexed the segments in a manner designed to lead to multiple possibilities of usage. Another pioneering effort is the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer System (OHMS) developed by Doug Boyd of the University of Kentucky, an open-source, web-based application which links indexes to audio, as well as to transcripts.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, at the archivist interest group last week at OHA, someone actually tweeted, “With regard to oral histories in archives, is the transcript just very ‘robust’ descriptive metadata?”

As OHDA illustrates, the digital revolution has impacted the curation of oral history interviews as much as their collection. Digitization has greatly enhanced access to numerous valuable yet underutilized oral history interviews and collections, especially as repositories have increasingly placed both transcripts and actual recordings online. Digital advances have brought much more than just greater user access, too. As archivists have developed increasingly sophisticated forms of describing, managing and indexing oral history interviews, they have significantly extended the possibilities of usage and interpretation.

Yet heightened availability of oral history in the digital environment has also raised a variety of concerns. Especially because many, perhaps most, online users access oral history interviews through Google, thus often bypassing disclaimers or any descriptive material provided by the hosting repository, decontextualization becomes a real possibility when oral history interviews are put online. Perhaps with undue apprehension, there are those in the oral history community who wonder if the knowledge that an interview will be posted online will have a chilling effect on how much a narrator divulges in an interview. The instantaneous, widespread accessibility of material on the internet raises the question of the impact of online publication on

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<sup>3</sup> Doug Boyd, “OHMS: Enhancing Access to Oral History for Free,” *Oral History Review* 40, no. 1 (2013): 95-106.

narrators and their communities, and elevates the specter of litigation around such issues as defamation, invasion of privacy, or third party damage. Accordingly, it has never been more imperative to put into practice the principle of informed consent before ever conducting an interview, whether or not required by an institutional review board, and to consult counsel at the outset of a project.

OHDA also addresses some of the myriad potential usages and applications of oral history in the digital era, and it also behooves archivists and others initiating oral history projects to deeply consider possible usages at the beginning, along with considerations about equipment, project budget, legal issues, preservation and access, cataloguing and metadata. Oral history has been central in the evolution of public humanities over the past two decades, not merely in the greater dissemination of historical knowledge, but in the collaborative interaction between professional historians and diverse constituencies, often through the engagement of digital tools. As manifested by a variety of projects-in-progress, such as the Southern Oral History Programs "Mapping the Long Women's Movement" initiative (<http://dhpress.org/mapping-the-long-womens-movement/>), the intersection of oral history and advanced digital mapping programs offers an especially fruitful and powerful collaborative possibility.

Digital oral history has begun to influence scholarship as well, if somewhat haltingly, as scholars have begun to consider the attributes and possibilities of digital oral historical sources in their work, to "think" and "author" digitally as it were. The accessibility of digitized oral history offers the possibility of high-powered searches to detect patterns or themes across large collections of oral history interviews, although to date it has been primarily linguists rather than historians who have availed themselves of such an approach. The Summer/Fall 2012 issue of the *Oral History Review* included two articles where oral/aural history was integral rather than supplemental to the central argument, thus requiring readers to listen as well as read through access to the online edition of the journal. The Winter/Spring 2013 issue amplified some of the essays originally composed for OHDA, while the Summer/Fall 2013 issue embedded video links for the first time.

To better illustrate some of the potential usages out there, let me turn now to a case study, a collection that has NOT been digitized yet one which has tremendous possibilities. It is the “Uprising of ’34” collection of close to 500 oral history interviews housed at Georgia State University Special Collections and Archives, describing the general textile strike of 1934 as well as mill village life, the Depression and New Deal, and other larger contexts in which the strike took place. The interviews were conducted for what became the award-winning film “The Uprising of ’34,” made by George Stoney and Judith Helfand, which had its origins in the mid-1980s in a consortium of trade unionists and historians interested in gathering and presenting material about one of the South’s most significant strikes, yet an incident which had been repressed in memory and omitted from most history texts.

I chose the Uprising collection to highlight for several reasons. There is a direct connection to each of the states represented here today. In its evolution, the film already had a long and complex relationship with the archives, and the filmmakers used it to actively and creatively engage with a variety of constituencies both during preproduction and after its completion. Finally, it epitomizes the underutilization of non-digitized collections, and the possibilities when greater access is made available.

In the 1970s and 1980s, interviewers for the University of North Carolina’s Southern Oral History Program (SOHP) engaged in a massive oral history project on industrialization in the Carolina Piedmont, which in many ways marked the genesis of Uprising. The makers of Uprising themselves conducted interviews in the three states, along with Alabama and Tennessee. One of the communities featured was Honea Path, South Carolina, where six workers were killed during the strike, and where the activities surrounding the film sparked a local effort to erect a memorial to the slain workers. Meanwhile, South Carolina public television originally banned the film, then only broadcast it three years later. And of course, the collection resides at the Southern Labor Archives at Georgia State.

Uprising was integrally involved with archives from its inception. When SOHP interviewers asked Piedmont textile workers about the strike, they were met, for the most part, with

silence. This silence in turn led researchers to search for relevant archival materials. What they found at the National Archives, in Record Group 398 of the National Recovery Administration (NRA), was a remarkable collection of letters that mill hands had written to Franklin Roosevelt and the NRA about the effects of the textile industry code adopted in 1933. These letters proved crucial in the award-winning book *Like a Family*, written by scholars at the University of North Carolina.

The filmmakers in turn utilized the letters in a number of ways. Along with other documents – photographs from the Bettman Archives and elsewhere, newsreel footage, lists of union locals, and labor board case files – the letters served to open doors, stir memories, and challenge received historical wisdom in numerous southern communities where the strike and its larger context had long been forgotten or repressed.

The letters also challenged the newsreel footage of the strike, obtained mainly from the Fox Movietone Collection at the University of South Carolina. True, the newsreel footage, like other documents, helped authenticate the strike and open up discussion in communities where it had occurred. Because of its visual power, it also led the filmmakers to seek narrators from places where newsreel footage had been shot. Yet the newsreels also contained considerable limitations. In particular, they tended to support the simplistic notion equating unions with strikes, violence, and mayhem, to the exclusion of showing the process of grassroots resistance and organizing that preceded the strike. As Judith Helfand has written, the filmmakers' greatest challenge was thus "to keep the newsreels from defining what is history." Accordingly, the filmmakers sought to find people actually featured in the newsreel footage, to find out "what times were like from their point of view, from the other side of the newsreel cameras."

To more address the fear that accompanied the strike and its aftermath, the filmmakers explored another key source, hundreds of grievances filed by the United Textile Workers (UTW) with the NRA, to reinstate workers who had been blacklisted. These case files provided rich narratives of the strike in numerous local situations. They served as surrogate telephone directories, enabling the filmmakers to track down union members



and leaders who had been dispersed from their communities in the wake of the strike. For instance, working directly from the blacklists found in the archives, the filmmakers were able to locate five members of one Knoxville, Tennessee local alone. For many workers, seeing the blacklists and the case files was accompanied by what Judith Helfand has called “a sense of awe”; the documents both validated their experience in the strike as being important enough to be preserved, and showed that the union hadn’t deserted them to the degree commonly believed.

From the outset, the filmmakers perceived history as an organizing tool to address concerns of the present and future as well as the past. To an extraordinary degree, they served as facilitators in countless workshops, senior centers, schools, trade union leadership development sessions, and other settings, where they used the documents themselves to help enable people to talk about long-suppressed events and feelings, and to foster discussion about history and memory, community and democracy.

For all of the outreach associated with *Uprising*, however, the interviews themselves, outside of what appeared in the film, have remained severely underutilized, like so many undigitized oral history collections. The roughly 500 interviews are organized by state and then by locality. Transcripts exist for a preponderance of interviews, though in part since the transcripts were done largely in service of film editing, they are not easily searchable. Despite its richness, research traffic in the collection has been light; only a handful of scholarly works cite the collection, which has also been employed in lesson plans developed at Georgia State. In short, the emphasis on the film itself and the fact that the interviews were never digitized has relegated to obscurity the 95% of the footage that wasn’t originally used.

Let us now imagine that the interviews had been digitized either at their inception or more recently. Moreover, let’s imagine that the interviews were reviewed and indexed, using a controlled vocabulary drawing from the indices of seminal works in the field, along with other terms addressing memory itself along with emotions, feelings and values. Let us further imagine that a system such as OHMS synched the index to both the audio and the transcripts. What might the possibilities be? How far and in what ways could the outreach and impact of the collection go?

Let's begin by examining possible usages using the collection by itself, without links to external collections or sources. Cross-referencing themes across interviews in the collection offers the potential for written essays or audio-visual mini-documentaries on any number of themes going many different directions at many different levels. These could address various historical topics: The effect of the boll weevil on Upcountry farmers, religion, recreation and community life in the mill villages, the nature and extent of paternalism, working conditions, the stretchout and the speed-up in textiles, the dispersal of key organizers in the aftermath of the strike, race relations, and the strike's legacy, among other topics. These treatments could also address *how* the narrators remembered, the metaphor of family used by so many mill workers, for instance, or the manner in which narrators brought up memories associated with shame or fear. Such shorter pieces – perfect assignments for students – could also utilize other interviews and primary documents in Special Collections, such as additional interviews and other materials pertaining to labor attorney Joe Jacobs, and also be in conversation with the relevant secondary literature.

Other usages using only the materials in the collection might include a website dedicated to the collection or an online exhibition. It could be similar to an on-line exhibition designed by scholars associated with *Like A Family*, but better because digital tools have improved in recent years. Topically, it might resemble a website about another southern textile strike, the 1914-15 strike at Atlanta's Fulton Bag and Cotton Mills, mounted by Special Collections at the Georgia Institute of Technology, though the oral history interviews would be central to the site. Oral history websites and online exhibitions should offer access to the interviews through a number of portals, searchable by geography, for instance, or by theme. Archivists and other creators might do well to consult a range of exemplary oral history-based websites such as the Illinois State Museum's award-winning Audio-Video Barn, or the Southern Foodways Alliance site.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ibiblio.org/sohp/laf/index.html>;  
[http://www.library.gatech.edu/fulton\\_bag/](http://www.library.gatech.edu/fulton_bag/); <http://avbarn.museum.state.il.us/>;  
<http://www.southernfoodways.org/oral-history/>.

Another online strategy might be to frame individual interviews online, linking audio and the transcript, and offering surrounding description, contextualization and complementary documents. For some of the Uprising interviews, there exists a direct link to other sources that might be utilized. The collection, for instance, includes an interview with a stringer for Fox Movietone News, who tells in his interview of the instructions he received concerning the subject matter he was to film and his point of view. This interview could be juxtaposed with the Movietone news footage. Similarly, the filmmakers interviewed Emma Zimmerman from near East Newnan, Georgia, who also appeared in some of the newsreel footage.

The interviews already have been used and could be further developed in lesson plans, connecting both to state social studies standards and to the newly rolled-out Common Core, which emphasizes student interaction with primary sources. Oral history interviews of course can be seen as texts which can be critically interrogated in terms of form, structure, meaning, themes, and evidence.

So far I've only discussed usage of the Uprising interviews more or less internally, as a self-contained entity. Once one links the collection to external sources, its outreach and impact becomes exponentially more powerful. There now exists the possibility to mine data across collections and to engage in content analysis from large numbers of interviews. More specifically, there are some people interviewed for Uprising – veteran organizer Eula McGill, radical Nanny Washburn and labor lawyer Joe Jacobs, for instance – who have been interviewed elsewhere. An examination of their collective interviews not only amplifies their observations about the past, but also offers the possibility for a longitudinal study of memory – to what degree did their recollections remain stable or transform over the years during which they told their stories?<sup>5</sup>

Another arena for extending the outreach of the Uprising Collection are the actual locations where narrators lived and where

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<sup>5</sup> Interviews with Eula McGill, Southern Oral History Program, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Interviews with Joe Jacobs, Georgia Government Documentation Project, Special Collections, Georgia State University; Interview with Nanny Washburn, WRFG Living Atlanta Collection, Atlanta History Center.

the strike took place. (Of course, people's memories are often the strongest and most vivid when attached to a specific place with all of its associations.) And here the possibilities are powerful and almost endless. The potential exists to link the interviews – linking in both directions – to local archives, museums, libraries, and public programs. One can imagine kiosks or on-line sites that really drill down into a local community combining the interviews with photographs and other documents and artifacts, along with maps presented with various degrees of sophistication. Or walking or driving tours where participants could download interview excerpts or other content. Perhaps community members themselves could take part in the digital indexing of the interviews, identifying what *they* felt was significant, and really challenging the manner in which knowledge is often disseminated.

Moving in an entirely different direction, another potential way to extend the outreach of the Uprising collection is to connect with other archival collections and entities which handle similar information – not only other labor archives and collections like the Southern Oral History Program but labor history museums such as the one in Paterson, New Jersey headed for many years by Sol Stetin, who had been with the United Textile Workers during the 1930s and who was interviewed for “Uprising.” The newly launched Digital Public Library of America should facilitate such connections; indeed, a search for “General Textile Strike” brought up twenty-four strike photographs taken by photo journalist Kenneth Rogers and housed at the Atlanta History Center.

The last possibility I'll mention is linkage of the interviews to such online reference sources as the New Georgia Encyclopedia (NGE), which literally receives over two million hits a month. It is easy to comb the NGE for instance, and find a range of subjects to which the Uprising interviews could be linked – from the boll weevil to mill villages to Georgia governor Eugene Talmadge. And once again, the interviews would have an impact well beyond the physical archives alone.

So, in conclusion, I challenge you in your capacity as the real brokers of oral history in the digital age to deeply engage with the oral history process at all stages of that process, including its legal, ethical and interpretative dimensions, and to be as creative

and imaginative as possible in considering the myriad ways in which oral history might be employed.

**Clifford Kuhn** is a specialist in twentieth-century southern history and in oral history. His publications include *Living Atlanta: An Oral History of the City, 1914-1948* and *Contesting the New South Order: The 1914-1915 Strike at Atlanta's Fulton Mills*. Kuhn has played a leading role in the field of oral history. He has served in numerous leadership capacities for the Oral History Association, the national professional organization in the field, including as president in 2000-2001. He has also been involved with numerous award-winning and highly acclaimed oral and public history efforts. In January 2013, he became the executive director of the Oral History Association.