Oral history archives: Time, space and agency in research environments for audiovisual research data

Expose Cord Pagenstecher for Data for History 2020 Conference, 1.3.2020

Audio-visual interviews play an important role not only in Holocaust research, but also in many other fields of contemporary history. Being produced by the interviewers together with the witnesses in a collaborative dialogue[1], they can be understood as genuine research data generated during the historian's research process. While survivors and their testimonies always have been prominent in public remembrance, the imminent end of the "era of the witness"[2] shifts our interest towards collections of their audio- or video-recorded narrations.[3]

In the last 20 years, several interview archives have begun to make these audio-visual research data accessible online. The paper will briefly present some of these research environments created at Freie Universität Berlin: Since 2006, the Center for Digital Systems (CeDiS)[4] has been hosting several major external collections like the Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive, the British Refugee Voices and the Fortunoff Video Archive,[5] Furthermore, CeDiS has also created new archives on Nazi Forced Labor and on the German occupation of Greece.[6] Currently, the team is producing interview collections about different topics like the Iron Curtain, the university history or a German-Chilean sect called Colonia Dignidad.[7] The software and data model of these projects are also being used for the largest German oral history archive at Fernuniversität Hagen.[8] Additionally, the CeDiS team is engaged in academic debates about oral history in the digital age.[9]

These oral history archives contain thousands of audio-visual life-story interviews. During their creation, several steps have been taken to follow the FAIR principles, while various problems still remain to be discussed.

Many interviews are still not findable; a cross-collection catalogue is missing. Sitting in-between different domains and disciplines, from qualitative social research to linguistics, from film archives to memorial museums, from anthropological fieldwork to trauma therapy etc., oral historians have not agreed on interoperable metadata standards nor on unified transcription guidelines.

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[1] Pagenstecher, Cord, Pfänder, Stefan, Hidden dialogues. Towards an interactional understanding of Oral History interviews, in: Oral History Meets Linguistics, ed. by Erich Kasten, Katja Roller, and Joshua Wilbur, Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Sibirien 2017, 185-207, http://www.siberian-studies.org/publications/orhili_E.html.

[2] Wieviorka, Annette, The Era of the Witness, Ithaca: Cornell UP 2006

[3] Leh, Almut: Vierzig Jahre Oral History in Deutschland. Betrag zu einer Gegenwartsdiagnose von Zeitzeugenarchiven am Beispiel des Archivs „Deutsches Gedächtnis", in: Westfälische Forschungen. Zeitschrift des LWL-Instituts für westfälische Regionalgeschichte, hg. v. Bernd Walter und Thomas Küster, 65/2015, 255-268. Knopp, S./Schulze, S./Eusterschulte, A. (Hg.): Videographierte Zeugenschaft. Ein interdisziplinärer Dialog, Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft 2016, 218–256.

[4] Digitale Interview-Sammlungen am Center für Digitale Systeme/Universitätsbibliothek, https://www.cedis.fu-berlin.de/dis.

[5] Das Visual History Archive an der Freien Universität Berlin, www.vha.fu-berlin.de, Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, https://fortunoff.aviaryplatform.com, Refugee Voices, www.refugeevoices.fu-berlin.de.

[6] Interview Archive Forced Labor 1939-1945, http://www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de/en, Memories of the Occupation in Greece, http://www.occupation-memories.org/en.

[7] Colonia Dignidad. Ein chilenisch-.deutsches Interview-Archiv, www.cdoh.net, Erlebte Geschichte. Ein Oral History-Projekt zur Dokumentation der Geschichte der Freien Universität Berlin, www.fu-berlin.de/sites/erlebte-geschichte, Eiserner Vorhang. Tödliche Fluchten und Rechtsbeugung, www.eiserner-vorhang.de.

[8] Archiv Deutsches Gedächtnis an der FernUniversität Hagen, deutsches-gedaechtnis.fernuni-hagen.de,

[9] Apostolopoulos, Nicolas and Pagenstecher, Cord (eds.), Erinnern an Zwangsarbeit: Zeitzeugen-Interviews in der digitalen Welt, Berlin: Metropol, 2013. Apostolopoulos, Nicolas / Barricelli, Michele / Koch, Gertrud on behalf of Stiftung „Erinnerung, Verantwortung und Zukunft" (EVZ): Preserving Survivors Memories. Digital Testimony Collections about Nazi Persecution: History, Education and Media, Berlin 2016. Pagenstecher, Cord, Digital Interview Collections at Freie Universität Berlin. Survivors' Testimonies as Research Data, in: Data Sharing, Holocaust Documentation and the Digital Humanities. Best Practices, Case Studies, Benefits. Proceedings of the EHRI Workshop in Venice, 29-30 June 2017, ed. by Laura Brazzo, Kepa J. Rodriguez, Umanistica Digitale, 4, 2019, https://umanisticadigitale.unibo.it/article/view/9043, Pagenstecher, Cord, Testimonies in Digital Environments. Comparing and (De-)contextualizing Interviews with Holocaust Survivor Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, in: Oral History. The Journal of the Oral History Society, 46 (2). 2018, 109-118.

In enhancing the accessibility of testimonies, digital platforms have to respect the narrators' privacy rights when dealing with sensitive biographical narrations. Indexation and full-text search make the long recordings searchable, but require the huge effort of manual transcriptions or suffer from the limited results of automatic speech recognition technology. Digital preservation strategies also have to deal with constantly changing technologies, standards and file formats in order to pursue an affordable sustainability.

Re-using interviews in a secondary analysis is not a very common practice: Oral historians have always focused on subjective experiences and biographical meaning. Given this tradition, and the limited resources in their projects, they usually have analysed individual interviews, often conducted by themselves. Nowadays, the rapid development of digital technologies has inspired the creation of large-scale interview collections that allow efficient searching, watching and listening, but also support quantitative and comparative approaches. These environments can enable a data-driven approach to interviews, detecting new and unexpected patterns of memory and narration. Their curation, however, rises some questions regarding the categories of time, space and agency.

Time: Obviously, the interpretation needs time-related metadata regarding the interview and the narrator's biographical dates. More important, however, is the inclusion of time-codes in the transcriptions. Within digital research environments, these timecodes allow for subtitling and full-text search. Thus, they support a close analysis of the audio-visual sources, including the multiple modalities captured in the video images and the audio track, instead of just reading their textual representation in the form of transcripts.

Space: The digital collections create virtual spaces spanning experiences, memories and narrations from different countries all over Europe and beyond, which allow comparative studies of larger interview corpora. While many research environments support the map-based visualization of space-related, albeit often uncertain or incomplete, metadata, the analysis of the multilingual content of these interview collections poses new challenges. Automatic and manual translations have proven useful, but difficult, given also the fact that many testimonies contain language mixes or are almost bilingual documents.

Agency: Oral history aims at giving voice to 'ordinary people', which have not left memoirs or other written sources. Being produced in a collaborative dialogue between interviewers and witnesses, the interviews always (should) focus on the narrators' agency for their life-story and its interpretation. This shared authorship characterizes the interviews and limits the modes of their datafication.

To understand literature, Franco Moretti has argued, we should stop reading books and apply distant reading methods instead.[10] But does that work for testimonies, too? Can we really understand human memory by aggregating and analysing massive amounts of audio-visual narrative data? Obviously, a survivor's life-story and its recorded narration are much more than just audio-visual research data.

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[10] Franco Moretti, Distant Reading, London: Verso 2013.