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From .wav to .txt: why we still need transcripts in the digital age

by Alexander Freund

Abstract: Oral historians have debated whether and how to transcribe their interviews since the 1960s. New digital tools for indexing audio and video files appear to provide a powerful and exciting alternative to transcription. Despite such challenges, however, transcription continues to serve important purposes of long-term preservation, analysis and dissemination. After surveying the transcription controversy over the past half-century, I outline five arguments in favour of transcription. I argue that archiving transcripts is a political act that places our oral histories on equal footing with government-generated documents in state-run archives.

Key words: digitisation; archives; transcript; interview

Over the past twenty years, as oral history has moved into the digital age, the practice of transcribing oral history interviews has come under attack. While there has been criticism of the practice since the 1960s, more recent critics have offered digital alternatives to transcribing. In this article, I review the history of transcription in US and Canadian oral history practice since the 1940s and then discuss the new debate about transcribing oral history interviews in the digital age. I argue that, despite new forms of analysing and disseminating interview recordings, transcripts continue to be of great value for the long-term preservation, analysis and dissemination of our interviews.

A never-ending controversy: transcribing in an analogue world

When oral history was first established as a formal method at Columbia University's Oral History Research Office (OHRO) in 1948, the transcript reigned supreme. OHRO founder Allan Nevins and his colleagues had the recorded interviews transcribed, because the recording media used at the time were expensive (and therefore re-used) and fragile. Transcripts ensured the preservation of the interview. At Columbia, transcripts became the sole document of the interview. Bound volumes of transcribed and edited interviews were deposited at the university library. These 'memoirs' were considered the original documents. Thus the bound volume bore not the date of the interview but rather of the final edit as its date of creation.

Next to ensuring the long-term preservation of the interview, a second purpose of the transcription was to increase accuracy. After the initial transcription, researchers audited the interviews: they checked the transcript against the recording and entered corrections. The transcripts were then edited for further clarity. Such editing could be extensive, including changing the word order or deleting false starts. Sometimes, editing encompassed the rearrangement of the interview into a chronological or topical order. Indeed, Columbia's early practice was to delete all questions, '[turning] the dialogue of the interview into an autographical monologue'.[1] Such editing was another

reason why Nevins and his colleagues viewed the recordings as superfluous.[2]

In a further step, the narrators were given the opportunity to review and edit their transcripts. Such editing might add further information and comments as well as delete statements about which interviewees had second thoughts. According to Willa K Baum, who wrote perhaps the most widely used manual on transcribing and editing in the 1970s, this processing step allowed the narrator to 'correct and amplify what she said in the interview'.[3] Louis Starr, long-time director of the OHRO, took this further in 1977 when he argued that correction by 'the oral author (a more precise designation than subject, respondent, narrator, memoirist, or interviewee, all of which are also employed)' ensured 'a process that turns what might be dismissed as hearsay into a document that has much of the standing of a legal deposition'.[4] Such considerations to increase accuracy, improve detail and change the legal standing of the document outweighed 'the danger of the narrator's deleting important information'.[5]

The final memoir included a title page, preface, table of contents and index. It might also include additional materials, for example photocopies of personal documents and the narrator's photograph. While several versions of the transcript might be preserved, it was usually only the final copy that was made available to researchers. All of this processing could easily amount to dozens of hours of labour per recorded hour of interview. According to Baum, the average processing time for a sixty to ninety minute interview was sixty-three hours.[6] Thus, how much a transcript was edited depended on available funding – a major theme of writing for both Nevins and Starr.[7]

The shift towards systematic preservation of audio recordings began only in the 1960s, when reel-to-reel tape and, later, cassette tape, became more affordable. At the same time, there was a greater interest in the aural nature of recorded interviews. Archivists and historians alike began to sense the value of actually hearing the sound, tone and speech pattern of their interviewees. This shift was not easily accomplished, because by the 1960s, Columbia University's pragmatic policy had become gospel in the United States. When researchers began to question the destruction of recordings in 1962, Starr 'doubted the practicality of storing hundreds of hours of records that "would have to be indexed to be of much use, and that in itself would be pretty expensive."' [8] Most programmes in the United States and elsewhere were undeterred by such warnings and began to preserve the recordings.

Although original recordings were increasingly preserved, the practice of transcription continued. It was adopted by the major oral history programmes at presidential libraries, university libraries, archives and historical societies throughout the United States. By 1977, Starr could claim that seventy per cent of all oral history centres in the United States transcribed their interviews.[9] Indeed, many programmes had permanent transcribers on staff. By the 1970s, several manuals describing the transcription and editing process in great detail had been published. Among them, Willa K Baum's 1977 book *Transcribing and Editing Oral History* and the 1977 manual *Oral History: From Tape to Type* had circulated as earlier drafts around oral history programmes.[10] When the Oral History Association began to revise its Principles and Guidelines in 1979, it set up a 'Tape and Transcript Processing Task Force'.[11] There were vigorous debates about the best ways to transcribe and the preoccupation with transcription had assumed an almost obsessive quality.[12]

These early practices continue to be followed by most of the major oral history programmes in the United States today.[13] In the 2006 *Handbook of Oral History,* James E Fogerty categorically demanded: 'Every interview should be transcribed'.[14] By now, however, oral historians view the recordings and transcripts as two distinct sources. As Ritchie wrote in 2003:

> Tape and transcript are two types of records of the same interview. Archivists generally consider the tape, being the original and verbatim record, the primary document. Looked at another way, the tape records what was said, and the transcript represents the intended meaning of what was said. Even the most slavishly verbatim transcript is just an interpretation of the tape.[15]

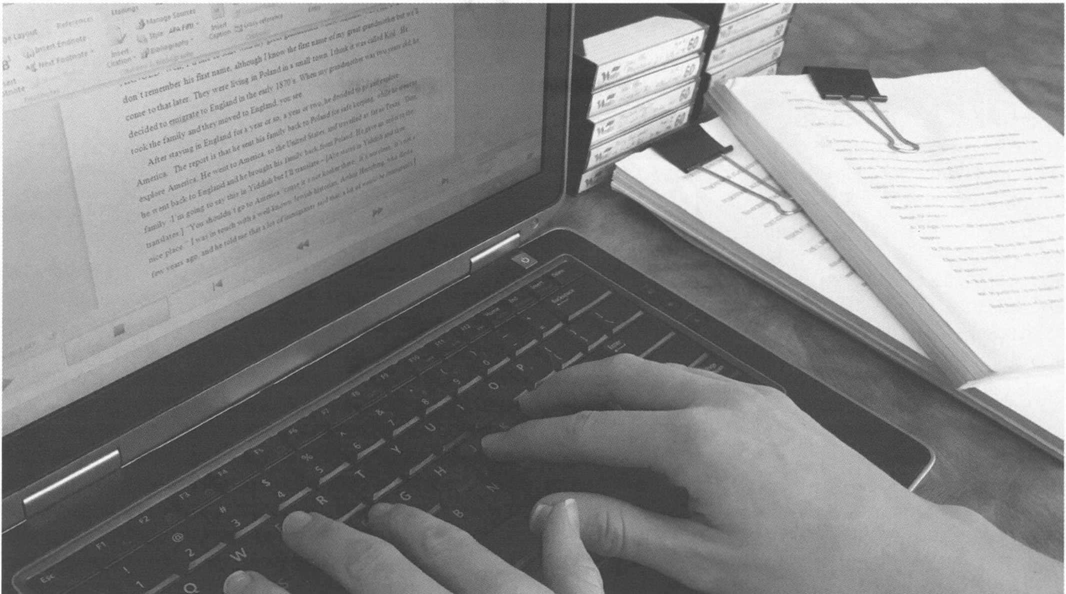
While some oral historians might disagree with Ritchie's assertion that transcripts represent the intended meaning better than the original recordings, Ritchie's statement nevertheless is an expression of the views held by the major oral history institutions in the United States, and it shapes the views of the many novice oral historians reading one of the most popular oral history manuals in the English language.

Early oral history practitioners listed a third reason for transcribing interviews, in addition to the preservation of the document and guarantee of accuracy: A transcript was more convenient to use than an audio tape and as a result it was the better way to disseminate the research. As Cullom Davis, Kathryn Back and Kay MacLean argued in 1977:

> Notwithstanding the proclamations of Marshall McLuhan and other prophets of the electronic era, we continue to live in the age of the printed word, which means that raw oral history tapes will gather dust. At Columbia University's Oral History Research Office, patron requests for transcripts reportedly exceed those for tapes by a ratio of one thousand to one. The serious oral historian must confront this stark fact and sooner or later assume the burden of transcribing.[16]

Willa Baum agreed that researchers do not use tapes that have not been transcribed. She also suggested a fourth reason for transcribing:

> Your project will have something to show for your efforts, as will your narrators. A shelf of neatly bound



Transcription is one of the main oral history skills taught at the University of Winnipeg's Oral History Centre. Photo: Kimberley Moore, Oral History Centre, The University of Winnipeg, 2016.

transcripts will be a source of pride to the project and the community. It is hard to work up much enthusiasm or funds on the basis of a stack of tapes.[17]

Educators added a fifth reason for transcribing. The high school teachers in the Foxfire project that began in the mid-1960s viewed the process of transcribing as an effective way to teach literacy. Similarly, university researchers could learn to do better interviews and begin an analysis of them if they transcribed their own interviews.[18] Manuals in the qualitative social sciences regularly advise that researchers transcribe their own interviews because it is one of the first steps in interview analysis.

Although many good reasons were put forward in favour of transcribing, not everyone followed Columbia's model of privileging the transcript. As Starr noted in 1977: 'For some local projects in the United States and Canada, and for most in Great Britain, the oral history process begins and ends with the tape'.[19] Within the British context, although Paul Thompson, Anthony Seldon, Joanna Pappworth and others counselled transcribing if at all possible, they admitted that this was seldom possible for projects on a shoestring budget.[20] Canadian practices were in fact more different from those in the USA than Starr suggested.[21] In Canada, archiving practices that developed in the first half of the twentieth century began with the archiving of folklorists' and radio reporters' audio recordings. There was a much greater emphasis on preserving the original recordings. Oral history interviews were rarely transcribed. According to Donald Ritchie, 'Canadian oral historians [...] adopted "aural history" and created impressive sound archives, often with no transcripts at all'.[22] This was reflected in Canadian "aural history" guides such as William Langlois' 1976 *Guide to Aural History Research*, which, according to David K Dunaway, 'emphasises listening to the tape recordings rather than reading transcripts of the interview; thus, Canadians have perhaps explored the historical soundscape more fully than other nations'.[23] Yet, even this guide explained how to transcribe and edit, albeit with the caution not to use transcripts without listening to the tapes.[24]

Despite broad consensus, the practice of transcribing was contested from early on. It was contested in two ways. First, one group of practitioners argued that interviews should not be transcribed in principle. With the rise of social history and availability of affordable reel-to-reel recorders and, later on, affordable cassette tape recorders, they viewed transcripts as the luxury of well-endowed institutions.[25] Unlike their US colleagues, Canadian archivists tended to privilege the aural artefact. Ritchie recounts: 'When the Oral History Association met in Canada in 1976, heated arguments erupted as to whether the tape or the transcript was the "real" oral history'.[26]

Others argued that transcription 'mutilated' or 'perverted' the spoken word.[27] Transcripts, these critics argued, could not be original documents, but only the faint copy of the original recordings. Transcripts were prone to mistakes, even if there was audit-editing. More importantly, transcripts could never 'translate' the complexity of meanings conveyed by the spoken word. David K Dunaway argued in 1984 that transcriptions were only 'a shallow reflection of a living, dynamic event'.[28] Ritchie notes: 'Similarly converting a practice to a principle, some oral historians rejected transcripts

as a distortion or corruption of the interview'.[29] To be accurate, they argued, every word, sound or false start should be put down on paper. Dennis Tedlock, writing in poetry form, argued that 'it is clear / that tape recordings are infinitely preferable / to texts taken down in dictation. / Dictation hopelessly distorts delivery / especially in the case of a narrative that does not have fixed wording'.[30]

Even the proponents of transcripts allowed that not every interview needed to be transcribed. Willa Baum counselled not to transcribe

> [i]nterviews on a single topic of very limited research value, perhaps the disputed municipal election of 1964, notorious for the chicanery involved but hardly world shaking in its outcome. By doing the recording, you have done your duty for the few researchers who will ever want to hear it. Index and catalog the tape collection and consider it a job adequately done.

She also advised not to transcribe interviews whose main value was their aural quality rather than their informational value. 'Interviews that come out badly for one reason or another' similarly were not worthy of transcription.[31]

A second and broader critique developed around the extent and the kind of editing involved in transcribing. Davis *et al* noted in 1977 that while programmes focusing on members of the elites might prepare highly polished 'but possibly lifeless' narratives, '[a]t the other extreme are programs which interview almost anyone willing to talk and amass a collection of memoirs that make enjoyable reading but may contain little of historical value.' Transcripts were verbatim attempts

> to recreate the speakers' dialects or accents and to reflect the sound and pace of the interview. Editors, being uncritical of the narrators' rhetoric, limit their work to a check on spelling and punctuation. The final transcripts of such programmes present the facts, but, far from conforming to academically or even commonly accepted patterns, they may be difficult to read.[32]

Davis *et al* viewed a middle-of-the-road approach as optimal: 'The ideal transcript is an accurate verbatim reflection of the interview's content, preserves as much of the quality of the interview and the individualities of the speakers as possible, and is easy to read and understand'.[33]

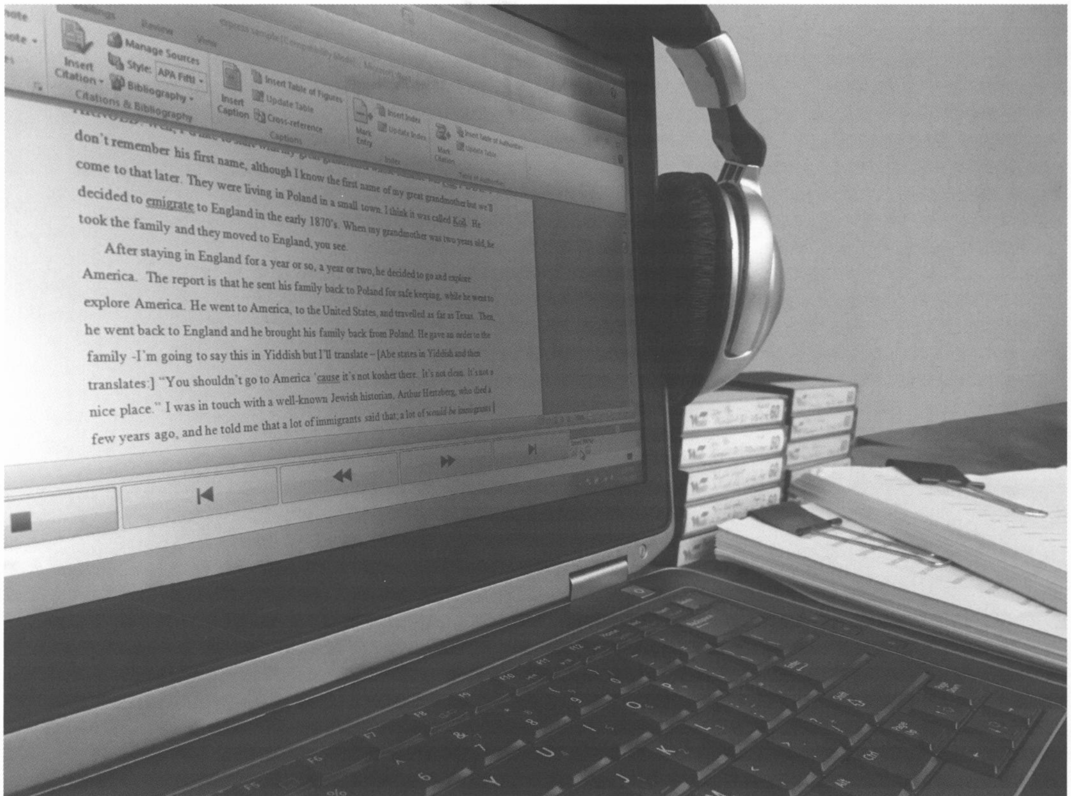
Other practitioners took issue with the practice of handing transcripts back to narrators for revision. Writing with Britain in mind, Paul Thompson described this in 1978 as a specifically US practice that 'weakens the authenticity of oral evidence in use'. He also argued that such corrections were the luxury of elite narrators who 'have the time and confidence for correcting a lengthy transcript' but to 'many others' this 'would simply be a worrying imposition'.[34] In 2006, former director at Columbia, Ronald J Grele, argued that this practice served mostly to protect the archivist rather than the interviewee. Any potentially embarrassing or even slanderous material was to be avoided.[35]

Paul Thompson and Alessandro Portelli shone light on a path others had not seen quite as clearly. Thompson argued as early as 1978 that the transcript was 'a literary form' that demanded of the transcriber 'a new kind of literary skill'. He was adamant, however, that oral sources – lest they become 'imaginative literature' – be treated like other archival sources, with any alterations clearly marked and attributed to the original speaker.[36] Portelli similarly viewed audio tape and transcript as two distinct artefacts. 'The transcript', he wrote in 1991,

> turns aural objects into visual ones, which inevitably implies changes and interpretation. The different efficacy of recordings, as compared to transcripts – for classroom purposes, for instance – can only be appreciated by direct experience. This is one reason why I believe it is unnecessary to give excessive attention to the quest for new and closer methods of transcription. Expecting the transcript to replace the tape for scientific purposes is equivalent to doing art criticism on reproductions, or literary criticism on translations. The most literal translation is hardly ever the best, and a truly faithful translation always implies a certain amount of invention. The same may be true for transcript of oral sources.[37]

Portelli agreed with other critics that preserving the spoken word in writing 'freezes their fluidity'. There was little need to worry about this, however, because we could not change it, '[b]ut we ought to be at least aware that this is what we do'.[38]

If both the audio recording and the transcription were distinct representations of an historical event (the interview), was it necessary to privilege one over the other? In sociolinguistics and narrative studies, scholars including Elliot G Mishler argued that it was time to move beyond a 'naïve realist' view toward an understanding of transcription 'as an interpretive practice' that was a fundamental part of research: 'Transcripts are our constructions and making them is one of our central research practices.' Transcribing was a form of listening; repeated listening led the researcher to discover new features and patterns in the talk. These discoveries, so Mishler suggests, shaped the transcription: 'How we arrange and rearrange the text in light of our discoveries is a process of testing, clarifying and deepening our understanding of what is happening in the discourse.' Transcribing an interview in different ways was thus a means to 'hear' the interview in different ways. Mishler then took this one step further to argue that how we listened, transcribed and heard was shaped by the researcher's/transcriber's position in society. In other words, when working from transcripts, we must not only consider the role of the interviewer, but also of the transcriber as significant in shaping the representation of discourse.[39] Carl Willmsen made a similar point in 2001



Tedious as it may seem, transcription is a political act that adds important voices to state archives. Photo: Kimberley Moore, Oral History Centre, The University of Winnipeg, 2016.

when he said that the editing of transcripts 'is embedded in the social relations of oral history production'.[40]

Some practitioners played around with the creative process of transcribing, using different forms of prose and poetry to transcribe spoken words. JA Prögler described the different types of transcript for diverse purposes. He began with a transcription devoid of almost all punctuation. In transcribing in this 'stream-of-consciousness' format, he was influenced by his reading of William Faulkner, William S Burroughs and James Joyce: 'In this pared-down style, typographic conventions do not hinder the visual flow, which can then draw the reader into the material by suggesting the informal continuity of an oral presentation'.[41] In four subsequent 'distillations', Prögler edited the transcript to achieve easy readability. He then worked from the original recording to edit the audio for radio production and compared the resulting transcript with the prose transcript produced for textual publication. Others explored poetic forms of transcription. Dennis Tedlock argued that if oral historians and other scholars 'are interested in the full meaning / of the spoken word / then they must stop treating oral narratives / as if they were reading prose / when in fact they are listening to dramatic poetry.' '**Poetry** is oral **history** / and oral **history** / is **poetry**', wrote Tedlock.[42] Alessandro Portelli argued that there may always be different ways of transcribing, depending on what one hears and what one wishes to stress: what may at first appear to be an oral poem could also be understood as an oral monument – an epigraph.[43]

Despite these different views on whether or how to transcribe, by the 1980s there was not only consensus that the transcript was an altogether different artefact and document than the audio recording, but that the transcript and the process of transcribing challenged oral historians in multiple ways. At the same time, however, despite all postmodern and poetic interventions, a naïve realist idea(l) of (factual) 'accuracy' in transcribing continued to dominate practice.

Revolution or disaster? Transcribing in the digital age

The rise of computer technology and the internet have been described by some as a 'digital revolution'. While most oral historians have been preoccupied with the shift from analogue to digital recording equipment, those studying the impact of digital technology on oral history have argued that the real impact is on the ways in which oral history is disseminated, used and preserved: 'The real [digital] revolution will be a change in consciousness about how oral history, as a historical resource, can be engaged and discovered more easily, more widely and effectively distributed, and ultimately, more responsibly preserved'.[44]

In the 1990s, oral historians were much less concerned with the transcription process. You either did it or not, but the guides, rules and models were there to follow. Computers had made transcribing and editing easier, because it was no longer necessary to re-type edited transcripts on typewriters.[45] As recordings became digitised and digital, it became easier to transcribe from uploaded audio files rather than more cumbersome cassette tapes. Digital recorders also often improved sound quality, easing the job of the transcriber. Most recently, some transcribers have used voice recognition software (VRS) for transcribing. VRS cannot directly transcribe interviews. Instead, the transcriber listens to the interview on headphones and then repeats the spoken words into a microphone connected to the computer. This relieves him/her of typing. For slow typists, it may also be a faster way of transcribing.[46] Those who have used the closed captioning option on YouTube or 'trained' their own VRS, however, know that we are far away from VRS that can transcribe interviews. Thus, none of these new technologies has changed transcription procedures in any significant, let alone revolutionary, way. Nor would automatic transcription do away with the necessary decisions about punctuation, what to leave in, how to edit, how to represent non-speech sounds, etc.

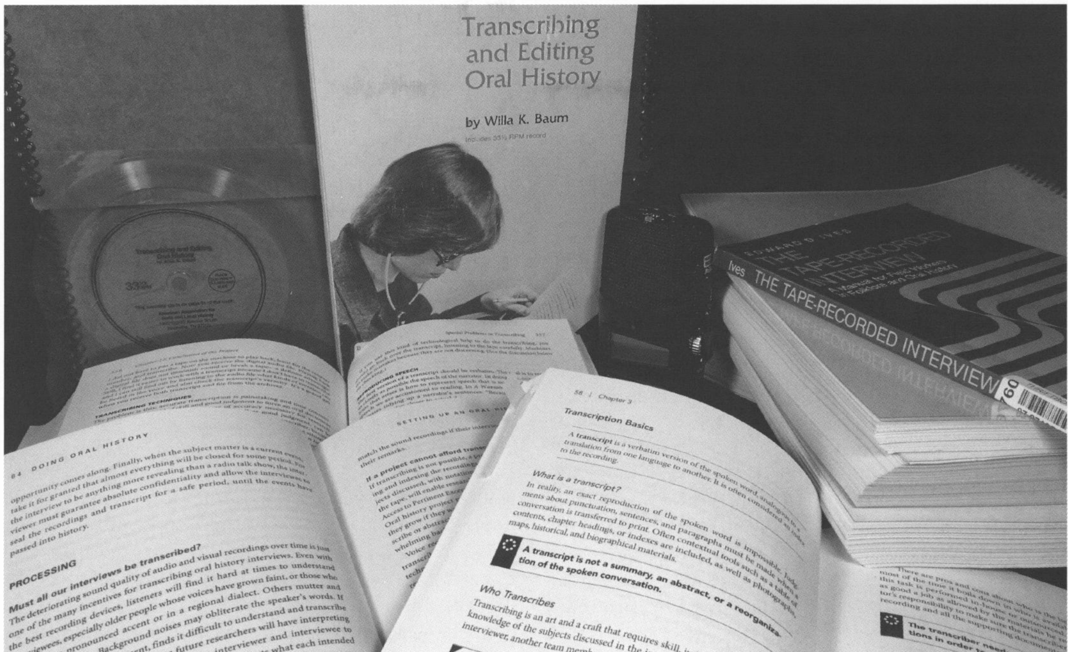
Since the start of the twenty-first century, oral historians have invested hope in digital solutions that circumvent the question of transcription. Indeed, much of the excitement is based on the belief that we can now finally turn to the aural and visual qualities of the oral history recordings, thus 'putting the oral back into oral history', as several proponents have argued.[47] They have also made the point that, rather than putting resources into transcripts that will languish in difficult-to-access physical archives, we should be developing the use of digital tools to make the original recordings directly accessible via digital media.[48] Yet, whether traditional transcript or digital enhancement, the further refinement of audio or video recordings always happens in text – be it in analogue or digital form.[49]

Most prominently, over the past decade, several large projects in North America have developed software for the digital cataloguing and indexing of audio and video files. Neither cataloguing nor indexing are new practices in oral history; from the beginning, Columbia and other archives catalogued their collections and indexed their interviews. It is also true of both analogue and digital indexing that while names and words provide a useful entry into sources, conceptual index entries allow for more complex searches. Whether analogue or digital, such conceptual indexing requires careful and skilled work. The indexer must be able to identify abstract themes that cannot be located through a simple word search. For example, names of people and places are easier to index than concepts such as 'gender relations', 'ethnic identity' or 'class conflict', which narrators may not express in as many words. Nevertheless, there are some differences that make digital indexes more powerful. Boolean searches allow for more complex search strategies. Databases enable quick searches through large numbers of interviews. A keyword search can take the user directly to the coded segment in the audio or video recording rather than the indexed place in the transcript. Eventually, online interviews may be indexed and tagged by users, making indexing an ongoing process.

Since the 1990s, the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, Michael Frisch's Randforce Associates, Concordia University's Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling and the Louie B Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky Libraries have each created powerful software – some free, some proprietary – that allows researchers to index their audio and video files and connect them with a range of other materials, including transcripts, summaries, biographies, metadata and photographs. Several programmes also segment the recordings, giving researchers access to specific parts of the recordings – at the admitted risk of de-contextualising the complete interview. Together, this software demonstrates that digital tools can make oral history interviews accessible in many new ways. They also show that they require just as much labour and expertise as the preparation of carefully edited transcripts.[50]

Digital tools for indexing large numbers of audio and video files help us to analyse small and large interview collections in new, more powerful and innovative ways than analogue logs, summaries and indexes.[51] But sole reliance on digital tools chains the oral history interview to the vagaries of the digital world – and, except for the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS) developed at the Nunn Center, all of the above projects forego transcription. Doug Boyd writes of digital archiving: 'Too many historical resources have disappeared because of format degradation or technologic obsolescence'.[52] While analogue media degrade gradually, digital files are prone to complete loss through data corruption. They can only be shielded from such catastrophic loss by creating multiple copies on several physically separate servers that continually check for the continued integrity of the files. Furthermore, data need to be continually migrated to new systems. Boyd therefore advises all projects to collaborate 'with well-funded archival institutions that have implemented a responsible digital preservation plan'.[53]

This is sage advice, but hardly practicable in many places, especially outside the United States. All major archives in Canada, for example, are state-funded. Now as in the past, they have been severely underfunded and that situation is only worsening. Likewise, their prime mandate has been to archive government documents. There is no guarantee that they will accept oral history collections, and if they do, those collections may well be pushed to the end of a long backlog. Boyd's advice provides little hope for a great many projects beyond the reach of well-funded archives. There is also no guarantee that any of the non-proprietary public digital tools are sustainable in the long run – both on the end of the developers and on the end of users, including archives. If we were to replace transcripts with the digital



Transcription has been a core practice of oral history in the United States and other countries since the 1940s. Photo: Kimberley Moore, Oral History Centre, The University of Winnipeg, 2016.

enhancement of audio and video files, I believe it is quite fair to imagine a scenario in 2050 where we will sit on a pile of digital junk that will be even less accessible and recoverable than cassette tapes from the 1970s or reel-to-reel tapes from the 1960s.

At the Oral History Centre at the University of Winnipeg, we have therefore decided to continue the practice of transcribing our interviews. Here is why. First, we believe that printed transcripts – which we admit are interpretations of the audio recordings – are the most reliable medium when it comes to long-term preservation. Acid-free paper can last centuries. Printed typescript can be accessed as long as people know how to read. There is little reason to believe that we will change alphabets anytime soon. Preservation of the record was the original purpose of transcribing, and it continues to be a valid argument. It still guides much of the practice in the United States, as Donald Ritchie noted in 2003.[54]

Second, transcripts continue to provide a fast way of accessing oral history interviews: 'Eyes can read easier than ears can hear'.[55] Under increasing pressures to publish ever more in ever-shorter timespans, researchers will continue to use transcripts rather than recordings. Even enthusiastic proponents of digital technologies for oral history admit: 'For now, a transcript, if accurately generated, is still the most efficient tool for locating specific information in a collection'.[56] Digital technologies enable us to use audio, video and transcripts in new ways that allow for ever-greater accessibility and more creative uses. They can enhance transcripts, but not replace them.

Third, transcripts make recordings accessible to a larger audience. A researcher listening to an interview that is fifty or two hundred years old – yes, we must think that far in advance – will be much guided by a transcript. Spoken language evolves and changes more quickly than written language. Transcripts can also help researchers with understanding local dialects and accents. There are other more immediate factors that compromise comprehension of recordings. Initial poor sound quality continues to be another valid reason for transcribing.[57] Transcripts change the way we engage with the interview as a source. This can have drawbacks and benefits, as Susan K Burton noted about her interviews with Japanese women in England. 'Japanese women tend to speak very quietly and in high-pitched voices, seeming to lack gravity. However, once I had transferred their words into a written transcript I was surprised to discover that they had voiced some very strong views'.[58] Thus, transcripts provide another perspective on the interview. Furthermore, transcripts can be translated into different languages and make interviews accessible to audiences not familiar with the original language.[59] In a project I am working on with refugees in Manitoba, for example, all non-English interviews (in Farsi, Karen and Spanish) are translated into English. These translations can be read while listening to the original audio recordings. Alternatively, having no transcription in a collection means that different users will transcribe the interview in different ways – ways that may misrepresent or embarrass interviewees. Thus, a transcript provides a standard for the written representation of the interview in text format

that is, ideally, informed by interviewee and interviewer. Finally, transcripts can aid people with hearing loss in better understanding audio recordings.[60]

Fourth, transcribing is the beginning of analysis and interpretation based on intense listening focused on making grammatical sense of a spoken dialogue. Even if a researcher does not transcribe the interview, reading a transcript alongside listening to the audio may indeed help her/him appreciate and understand the recording.[61]

Fifth, an archived transcript is a political statement. How so? In her elegant piece on transcription, Elinor A Mazé explained that 'in some cultures – especially but not exclusively in literate and bureaucratic ones – the creation of a printed document can convey an authority upon a narrative that it does not possess in spoken form.' She saw this effect of transcribing as a 'problem'. Others argued that turning spoken word into text was an act that suggested these products' 'imperishableness' (Ong) and documentary 'objectivity' (Portelli). Portelli argued that '[transcribed] words can be detached from their context and used independently of the original intention'.[62] Mazé agreed: 'There is no doubt [...] that the oral history interview, metamorphosed into a written transcript, a printed text, bound, deposited in a library or archive and catalogued, acquires an aura of imperishable authority that the extemporaneous interview event did not have'.[63] That is true. But what is wrong with this?

Let us position this act of oral history transcription in the larger political practice of transcribing other words that assume authority as a result: Hansard turns all words spoken in parliament in Britain, Canada and dozens of other countries into such an imperishable authority. Court stenographers turn all words spoken in court into transcripts. Police officers and social workers alike eternalise the spoken words of their witnesses and clients. In other words, state authorities use transcription and archiving as tools to enshrine their power. To place oral history transcripts alongside such authoritative documents is an act that makes a claim to the same devices – the transcript and the archives – used by the state. And by doing so, oral historians make a claim about the authority of their informants' stories. Yes, as historians we have to treat oral history transcripts with caution – as we should with all transcripts and other historical sources.

This is not to say that our fretting over transcription practices is useless. Far from it. The theoretical insights we have gained into the construction of transcriptions would serve all historians well who work with other forms of transcripts. Transcribing and archiving are political acts and as such a responsibility of oral historians. The impact will not be felt immediately, nor perhaps in twenty or fifty years. It may take two generations or more before our interviews are rediscovered.[64] By that time, if all that survives is the print copy of the transcript, it is much better than nothing. If the state ensures that politicians', judges' and police officers' words are still accessible to historians 200 years from now, then we must do everything in our power to ensure the same privilege for the words of our interviewees.

Conclusion

Costs of transcripts – as for digital indexing – can be prohibitive. The question, especially for smaller projects, is whether to do more interviews without transcription or fewer interviews with transcription. At the Oral History Centre in Winnipeg, we have often chosen the latter, commonly less-favoured option. Over the past years, several of our students and community groups have conducted small projects with only a few interviewees, but they always transcribed the interviews. To hold in your hand a DVD with a recording of your interview is one thing. To hold in your hands a bound book with your own words printed is a completely different experience. It is immediately accessible; no other technology is needed. And it will be accessible to grandchildren and great-grandchildren, long after they have forgotten what DVDs, PDFs and MP3s are.

At the same time, we have been privileged to work with colleagues at the Nunn Center for Oral History to implement OHMS as part of our archival strategy to make fully transcribed interviews more accessible to researchers. There is no question that digital tools like OHMS are powerful means to navigate interviews, connect them with other interviews and other documents, and use them to do in-depth analysis of individual interviews. The amount of time and expertise required to implement OHMS, however, is great.

We know that there are projects and researchers who need a certain number of interviews but cannot afford the transcription. In that case, we ask them to provide short interviewee biographies, interview summaries and metadata that allow us to enter basic information into our catalogue. Such information makes interviews accessible to other researchers. Each different document, whether project transcription, biography, interview summary, session summary or log, provides a different point of access for researchers.

Despite the excitement about digital technologies' promise to let oral historians return to orality and provide worldwide dissemination, we need to acknowledge that we are a text-based society. As much as we now listen to music and watch film, when it comes to learning, understanding and scientific discourse, we work in text and we will continue to do so. It is the fastest medium, the only one that does not require 'real time'. Despite all the talk about the aural and visual qualities of our recordings, we will continue to write about them, rather than producing radio features or video documentaries. We are far away from 'authoring in sound'.[65] This is not only a result of the medium, but also of the institutional structures within which many of us work. We are a long way away from colleagues appreciating a well-done interview as an academic achievement. Our colleagues won't listen to an hour-long audio or video production in order to assess our applications for grants or promotions. Many researchers don't use primary sources in audio or video format; they are even less likely to use secondary sources in audio or video format. While the new digital technologies allow easier access to audio and video recordings, the increas-

ing information flood forces users to process more and more information in ever-shorter time.[66]

As long as the scholarly, public and political discourse around oral history interviews takes place predominantly in written form – and there is little reason to believe this will change anytime soon – turning spoken into written words will be at the core of oral history practices. Transcribing – and our ongoing discussion of it – will help us remain critical of our sources and practices.

NOTES

1. Donald A Ritchie, 'Introduction: The evolution of oral history', in Donald A Ritchie (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp 3-19, (7).

2. Ritchie, 2011, p 7. In other fields, original recordings were viewed as valuable, for example in psychology and ethnography. See Alan Rosen, *The Wonder of Their Voices: The 1946 Holocaust Interviews of David Boder*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010 and Erika Brady, *A Spiral Way: How the Phonograph Changed Ethnography*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999.

3. Willa K Baum, *Transcribing and Editing Oral History*, Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1977, p 14.

4. Louis Starr, 'Oral History', in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Sciences*, vol 20, New York: Marcel Dekker, 1977, pp 440-463, reprinted in David K Dunaway and Willa K Baum (eds), *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, second edition, Walnut Creek: Altamira, 1996, pp 39-61, (42-43).

5. Baum, 1977, p 14.

6. Baum, 1977, p 18.

7. Cullom Davis, Kathryn Back and Kay MacLean, *Oral History: From Tape to Type*, Chicago: American Library Association, 1977, p 34; Donald A Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, second edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p 67; for comments on ensuring funding, see Allan Nevins, 'Oral history: How and why it was born', *Wilson Library Bulletin*, no 40, March 1966, pp 600-601 and Allan Nevins, 'The uses of oral history', *First Colloquium of the Oral History Association, Lake Arrowhead*, CA, 1966, both reprinted in Dunaway and Baum, 1996, pp 29-38; Starr, 1977.

8. Ritchie, 2011, p 7.

9. Starr, 1977, p 42.

10. Baum, 1977; Davis, Back and MacLean, 1977, p 4. See also Mary Jo Deering and Barbara Pomeroy with illustrations by Barbara Upston, *Transcribing Without Tears: A Guide to Transcribing and Editing Oral History Interviews*, Washington DC: George Washington University Library, 1976; Gary L Shumway and William G Hartley, *An Oral History Primer,* Salt Lake City: Primer Publications, 1973, was in its fifth printing by 1977. A good recent summary is Donna M DeBlasio, 'Transcribing Oral History', in Donna M DeBlasio, Charles F Ganzert, David H Mould, Stephen H Paschen and Howard L Sacks, *Catching Stories: A Practical Guide to Oral History*, Athens GA: Swallow Press, 2009, pp 104-114.

11. For a history of committees involved in developing OHA guidelines before 2009, see the untitled document accessed online at www.oralhistory.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/History-of-the-Evaluation-Guidelines.pdf, 7 February 2013.

12. This never reached the proportion evidenced in folklore, linguistics, psychology and other sciences that pay more attention to aural factors such as voice, tone, pitch, emphasis as well as mimicry and gestures. They often developed complex codes for describing such features. Ritchie, 2003, pp 67-68. For a survey of the development of oral history guides and the shift to transcribing in the 1970s, see David K Dunaway, 'Introduction: The inter-disciplinarity of oral history', in Dunaway and Baum, 1996, pp 7-22, (17-18).

13. Ritchie, 2003, p 67.

14. James E Fogerty, 'Oral history and archives: documenting context', in Thomas L Charlton, Lois E Myers and Rebecca Sharpless (eds), *Handbook of Oral History*, Lanham: Altamira, 2006, pp 207-36, (216).

15. Ritchie, 2003, p 66.

16. Davis, Back and MacLean, 1977, p 4.

17. Baum, 1977, p 15.

18. Ruth Martin, *Oral History in Social Work: Research, Assessment, and Intervention*, Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995, p 60; Ritchie, 2003, pp 70-71.

19. Starr, 1977, p 42.

20. Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978, pp 196-201; Anthony Seldon and Joanna Pappworth, *By Word of Mouth: 'Elite' Oral History*, London: Methuen, 1983, pp 87-88, 111-113.

21. On the history of oral history in Canada, see Alexander Freund, 'Oral history in Canada: a paradox', in Klaus-Dieter Ertler and Hartmut Lutz (eds), *Canada in Grainau: A Multidisciplinary Survey after 30 Years*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009, pp 305-335.

22. Ritchie, 2003, p 67. The Canadian Oral History Association clearly privileged the aural record over the transcript or summary in its 'Code of Ethics' that was part of its constitution and by-laws. Unpublished manuscript, no place, no date. I thank my colleague Janis Thiessen for this information.

23. Dunaway, 1996, p 18.

24. WJ (Bill) Langlois, Derek Reimer, Janet Cauthers and Allen Specht (eds), *A Guide to Aural History Research*, Victoria BC: Aural History, Provincial Archives of British Columbia, 1976, p 39.

25. Derek Reimer, David Mattison and Allen W Specht (eds), *Voices: A Guide to Oral History*, Victoria BC: Sound and Moving Image Division, Provincial Archives of British Columbia, 1984, p 47.

26. Ritchie, 2003, p 67.

27. Raphael Samuel, 'Perils of the transcript', *Oral History,* vol 1, no 2, 1971, pp 19-22; Ronald J Grele, 'Oral history as evidence', Charlton, Myers and Sharpless, 2006, pp 43-101, (78); Kate Moore, 'Perversion of the word: the role of transcripts in oral history', *Words and Silences: Bulletin of the International Oral History Association*, vol 1, no 1, 1997, pp 14-25.

28. David K Dunaway, 'Transcription: shadow or reality?', *Oral History Review* 12, 1984, pp 113-117, (117).

29. Ritchie, 2003, p 67.

30. Dennis Tedlock, 'Learning to listen: oral history as poetry', in Ronald J Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, second edition, Chicago: Precedent, 1985, pp 106-125, (122).

31. Baum, 1977, pp 15-16.

32. Davis, Back and MacLean, 1977, p 35.

33. Davis, Back and MacLean, 1977, p 35.

34. Thompson, 1978, pp 201-202.

35. Grele, 2006, p 46.

36. Thompson, 1978, pp 198, 201. Perhaps the first scholar to identify interview recordings as a new literary genre was David Boder, but his work was

largely overlooked until the 2000s. See Rosen, 2010, pp 216-226.
37. Alessandro Portelli, 'What makes oral history different', in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History,* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991, p 47.
38. Alessandro Portelli, '"The time of my life": functions of time in oral history', in Portelli, 1991, p 63.
39. Elliot G Mishler, 'Representing discourse: the rhetoric of transcription', *Journal of Narrative and Life History*, vol 1, no 4, 1991, pp 255-280, (255-256, 271, 277-278).
40. Carl Wilmsen, 'For the record: editing and the production of meaning in oral history', *Oral History Review*, vol 28, no 1, 2001, pp 65-85, (66).
41. JA Prögler, 'Choices in editing oral history: the distillation of Dr Hiller', *Oral History Review*, vol 19, nos 1-2 1991, pp 1-16, (3-4). For an ethnographer's perspective on how to transcribe interviews and how to use them, see Michael Agar, 'Transcript handling: an ethnographic strategy', *Oral History Review*, vol 15, no 1, 1987, pp 209-219.
42. Tedlock, 1985, p 123 (original emphasis).
43. Alessandro Portelli, 'Oral history as genre', in *The Battle of Valle Guilia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997, pp 20-23. According to Alan Rosen, David Boder 'consecrated' the transcripts of his interviews with displaced persons in Europe in 1946 by ending them with the Hebrew word hazak ('be strong') that also ends each of the five books of the Torah. Rosen, 2010, p 228.
44. Doug Boyd, 'Achieving the promise of oral history in the digital age', in Ritchie, 2011, pp 285-302, (286).
45. Fogerty, 2006, pp 216-17.
46. J Park and ZE Zeanah, 'An evaluation of voice recognition software for use in interview-based research: a research note', *Qualitative Research*, vol 5, no 2, 2005, pp 245-251; Jennifer L Matheson, 'The voice transcription technique: use of voice recognition software to transcribe digital interview data in qualitative research', *The Qualitative Report*, vol 12, no 4, 2007, pp 547-560. David Boder had used a similar practice for translating his interviews in the 1950s. He listened to an interview on one wire recorder and spoke the translation (from Russian, German, Yiddish and other languages) into a second wire recorder. Rosen, 2010, p 212.
47. Michael Frisch, 'Oral history and the digital revolution: toward a post-documentary sensibility', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, second edition, London: Routledge, 2006, pp 102-113.
48. The researchers that developed the Stories Matter software argue that 'digital oral history promises a move away from transcription'. Steven High and David Sworn, 'After the interview: the interpretive challenges of oral history video indexing', *Digital Studies/Le champ numérique*, vol 1, no 2, 2009; and they explain that the 'primary intent in presenting Stories Matter [software] is to encourage a shift away from the use of transcripts'. Erin Jessee, Stacey Zembrzycki and Steven High, 'Stories Matter: conceptual challenges in the development of oral history database building software', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, vol 12, no 1, 2010, Art. 1. Accessed online at http://nbnresolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs110119.
49. I am grateful to my colleague Kimberley Moore for fruitful discussions about the idea of text as a digital medium.
50. Alexander Freund, skype conversation with Karen Jungblut, VHF, 8 March 2013; The Randforce Associates LLC, Who We Are [web page]. Accessed online at www.randforce.com/company.asp, 8 March 2013); The Randforce Associates LLC, Home [web page]. Accessed online at www.randforce.com, 8 March 2013; The Randforce Associates LLC, Portfolio [web page]. Accessed online at www.randforce.com/Demo.asp, 8 March 2013; Doug [Douglas Lambert], 'Representation of recordings through annotation' [web page]. Accessed online at http://randforce.blogspot.ca/2012/12/representation-of-recordings-through.html, 8 March 2013); Frisch, 2006, pp 110, 113; on the Stories Matter software developed by Concordia's Oral History and Digital Storytelling Centre, see Stacey Zembrzycki, 'Bringing stories to life: using new media to disseminate and critically engage with oral history interviews', *Oral History*, vol 41, no 1, 2013, pp 98-107; High and Sworn, 2010.
51. In the 1970s, Edward Ives developed a catalogue and log as an alternative to transcripts, but abandoned it in the 1990s, because he and others 'got hung up on what to put in, what to leave out, and since material has to be transcribed before it is of much use anyway, I decided one's time would be better spent getting right to it.' Edward D Ives, *The Tape-Recorded Interview: A Manual For Fieldworkers in Folklore and Oral History*, second edition, Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995, p x.
52. Boyd, 2011, p 301.
53. Boyd, 2011, p 300.
54. Ritchie, 2003, p 64.
55. Ritchie, 2003, p 64.
56. Boyd, 2011, p 292.
57. Ritchie, 2003, p 64.
58. Susan K Burton, 'Issues in cross-cultural interviewing: Japanese women in England', in Perks and Thomson, 2006, pp 166-76, (172-3).
59. David Boder decided as early as 1945 to interview displaced persons in Europe in their original languages and then to translate their stories in order to inform an American audience about the experiences of the survivors of the Shoah and Second World War. Rosen, 2010, pp 52, 202-204.
60. For other aids, see Brad Rakerd, 'On making oral histories more accessible to persons with hearing loss', *Oral History* Review, vol 40, no 1, 2013, pp 67-74.
61. Boyd, 2011, pp 296-9.
62. Alessandro Portelli, 'The oral shape of the law: the "April 7 case"', in Portelli, 1991, p 260.
63. Elinor A Mazé, 'The uneasy page: transcribing and editing oral history', in Thomas L Charlton, Lois E Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless (eds), *Handbook of Oral History*, Lanham: Altamira, 2006, pp 237-271, (245-6).
64. On the increasing use of archived oral histories, see, for example, April Gallwey, 'The rewards of using archived oral histories in research: the case of the Millennium Memory Bank', *Oral History,* vol 41, no 1, 2013, pp 37-50; Malin Thor Tureby, 'To hear with the collection: the contextualisation and recontextualisation of archived interviews', *Oral History*, vol 41, no 2, 2013, pp 63-74.
65. Charles Hardy III, 'Authoring in sound: aural history, radio and the digital revolution', in Perks and Thomson, 2006, pp 393-405.
66. Good, 'Voice', 371.

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