Videotaped Oral Histories: Problems and Prospects

THOMAS L. CHARLTON

Abstract: Few people have considered the ramification of recording oral history interviews on videotape. By 1970 development of videotape, field cameras, and video recorders had made video recording available as a tool to historians. A video recording of an interview can help scholars observe and understand the environment and the nonverbal elements of the interview, including the interviewee's appearance and body language. Unfortunately, because of confusion and competition in the video industry, archivists and scholars must choose among many video formats of varying quality and applicability.

About the author: Thomas L. Charlton is Associate Professor of History and Director of the Institute for Oral History at Baylor University, in Waco, Texas. His principal fields of research and teaching are business history, Texas and Southwestern history, and oral history. Prior to 1970, he was a professor of history at San Antonio College. He holds the B.A. (Baylor University) and M.A. and Ph.D. (both from The University of Texas at Austin), all three degrees in American history. Active in the Oral History Association since 1970, he has served on and chaired several of its committees and presently is an elected member of the OHA Council. Since 1975, he has served as editor of the quarterly ***Oral History Association Newsletter****. He is a cofounder and the first president of the Texas Oral History Association. He has consulted, lectured, and written widely on oral history practice and is the author of* ***Oral History for Texans*** *(1981).*

PERHAPS IT IS MORE THAN COINCIDENCE that the history of video has closely paralleled the development of the modern research movement called oral history, as both have benefited from the introduction and adaptations of magnetic tape and recording devices. Most people associate video with the growth of television and home recording; few have considered its implications for historical research, oral or otherwise. The increasing ability to capture and preserve images for later analysis has gradually led scholars to accept the validity of nonwritten sources for the study of societies. The number of archivists who have considered historical documentation on videotape, however, is probably still very small.

The prospects for video in historians' hands are exhilarating; equally arresting, however, are the potential problems posed by indiscriminate use of video in historic preservation. Other problems for scholars stem from the seemingly chaotic state of the video industry.

Brad Jolly, in his recently published book *Videotaping Local History*, assumes that since historic preservationists are probably going to use video in their work (including oral history), they should endeavor to do so most effectively. Jolly's popular study hardly touches the more theoretical question: What is unique or special about historical documents in video form? The author, a true believer in videotaping virtually all types of historical activity, assumes oral historians—along with museum curators, archivists, librarians, and others concerned with collecting and preserving the primary sources of local history—to be potential adopters of video methods. Jolly races past the theoretical ramifications of video, positive or negative, and instead emphasizes instruction, i.e., practical ways in which the local museum, library, or historical society may apply video techniques to its work.[1]

A brief overview of the maturation of video may help the reader understand its lure for oral historians. On 1 May 1939, RCA-NBC introduced video to the public, televising the opening ceremonies of the New York World's Fair to a tiny, nearby viewing audience. This event touched off a communications revolution, first in development of television networks and local stations and then, by the mid-1950s, in the evolution of magnetic videotape for recording and preserving television programs. Developments in video intrigued humanists and social scientists, but their enthusiasm was tempered by their long love affairs with written documents. By the 1980s, tumbling prices on video hardware and software had enabled individuals and organizations to acquire compact, portable video cameras and matching recorders.

Television led the way in the explosion of video technology for uses other than broadcast and entertainment. The recording of videotapes, however, remained for many years the province of television networks and the fortunate few who risked large capital investments to make black-and-white reel-to-reel magnetic videotapes.

Much refinement in video has occurred since 1971. When manufacturers developed special video cameras and recorders for broadcasters, industrial and educational users were not long in joining their ranks. Small, lightweight cameras with both color and black-and-white capabilities were now able to transmit signals to videotape. Historic preserva-

[1]Brad Jolly, *Videotaping Local History* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1982) is probably of greatest value as a source of information about video technology, techniques for using video, use of video in interpreting historical exhibits, and the maintenance and care of videotapes. This book is also a consumer buying guide, but the equipment prices quoted are not current.

tionists found ways to apply the simpler video technology to their own areas of interest.

Among the many improvements in video, perhaps the most far-reaching has been the single-camera system, including a videotape recorder (VTR) and camera unit. The videotape cassette was merely an improvement over reel-to-reel video recording as manufacturers made smaller equipment and perfected storage formats. Like the film in a still camera, videotape in the VTR is the medium upon which images may be recorded and preserved. A major difference, however, is that videotape, like audiotape, may be reused.[2]

Historians, archivists, and librarians began to take greater notice of the potential impact of video on their own professions as special television newscasts and documentaries proliferated; thereafter, prospects for videotape collections in libraries and archives became brighter. Docudramas (television dramatic presentations based on historical events) further inspired those interested in applying the latest technology to the craft of history. Skeptical at first, many oral historians wondered if the intimacy of oral history and its desirable spontaneity might be sacrificed if obtrusive video equipment were present.[3] The VTR and the videotape cassette made possible the local historian's ultimate dream of employing video to record community subjects.

Historic preservationists have responded favorably to most of technology's innovations; a notable exception is their serious concern about the decline of reel-to-reel audio recording. Imaginative historians have sought ways to apply video technololgy to their craft; future-minded archivists and librarians now anticipate having large collections of historical data on magnetic tape (both audio and video) and are questioning the nature of the tapes. As humanists and social scientists using video move further into this new field, profound questions beckon those who would understand the essence of oral history on videotape. Consideration of the difficult methodological questions about the use of video is in order, as is an examination of the inescapable but seldom addressed legal and ethical questions. The overall direction of the recording industry may be an uncontrollable, disconcerting variable serious enough to call into question many of historians' applications of video.

The Advantages of Videotaping Oral History

Theoretical reasons abound for videotaping oral history interviews. Just as the wire and tape recorders of four decades ago liberated historians and archivists from their notepads and index cards in field research, modern portable video recording equipment promises to add new dimensions to oral history interviews. Early oral historians once waxed eloquent about the differences between the written word and the spoken word, which could be recorded electronically to be heard later by a researcher. For a while, the value of the *heard* oral history interview (referred to by some as *aural* history) received as much attention as the transcribed (typewritten, edited) interview with all its inevitable flaws and shortcomings. The human voice, oral historians and others have long asserted,

[2]Barry J. Fuller, Steve Kanaba, and Janyce Brisch-Kanaba, *Single-Camera Video Production* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1982), pp. 18–20. Highly technical, this work offers excellent information for newcomers to video. Also useful is Peter Lanzendorf, *The Videotaping Handbook* (New York: Harmony Books, 1983).

[3]Fuller, Kanaba, and Brisch-Kanaba, pp. 3–8.

carries meaning and traces of personality through the speech characteristics of cadence, timbre, inflection, and speech patterns (such as use of crutch sounds and words, false starts, idiosyncratic phrases and others). Researchers hearing some of the earliest mechanically recorded oral history interviews expressed surprise at the emphasis conveyed when they approached personal interviews as aural documents.

Preservation of the human voice through recording equipment was a major step forward for both the gatherers and users of historical interviews; equally intriguing was the preservation of the image of a person telling about the past he or she remembered firsthand. Perhaps a picture truly was worth a thousand words: Scholars might ponder the extent to which an electronically produced human image enhanced the value of an oral history audio recording. Videotaping interviews became an attractive research option with the possibility of meaning for researchers in interviewees' frowns and gesticulations when excitedly recalling life's turning points.[4]

Oral history's prospects in video form appear bright, if field historians, archivists, and researchers do not expect too much from either the video equipment or its resulting magnetic tapes. One should bear in mind that video is still evolving.

In focusing on how video can enhance and complement oral memoirs, perhaps the place to start is with the hardware associated with video work. Both video and audio recording devices now being employed by oral historians capture the human voice for later playback; but only the video camera, used with a video recorder, can "see" and document a portion of both the sights and sounds of an oral history interview. The visual appearance of an interview is composed of several contemporaneous elements: the physical setting of the interview, the nonverbal but human aspects of the interview within camera range, personality traits of the interviewee and interviewer observable in recorded moving pictures, and the almost inevitable tendency of people to gesticulate or demonstrate while speaking of their actions and feelings, even those of several decades past. Far more than human voices and words, then, it is the visual dimension that makes a videotaped oral history intriguing. These four aspects of the "look" of video oral history warrant further examination.

Documenting on videotape the setting of an oral history interview may seem excessive; but the success of many an interview has depended directly on its physical circumstances, such as the size and type of room, the physical proximity of the researcher and the interviewee, any distracting activity near the interview, and the props on a table or in the lap of the interviewee. These and other factors often influence the ambience of an oral history recording session. Videotape equipment gives the oral historian the ability to collect data in image form and preserve for later analysis at least a portion of the milieu which may have influenced the interview participants.

Videotaping all of the nonverbal behavior of the participants in an oral history interview is an impossible task, but the behavior that is videotaped can enhance a researcher's interpretation of the linguistic data contained on the

[4]Since their first formal meeting in the United States, oral historians have urged each other to "fortify oral history with visual history," according to librarian Louis Shores in "Directions for Oral History," *Oral History at Arrowhead: Proceedings of the First National Colloquium on Oral History*, edited by Elizabeth I. Dixon and James V. Mink (Los Angeles: Oral History Association, 1967), p. 41. Folklorist Edward D. Ives also recognized the potential value of video in *The Tape-Recorded Interview* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980), p. 59.

audiotape. Video's technical ability must not be overestimated or assumed to be comprehensive, however. Its two-dimensional image significantly limits video's capabilities. Neither can the video camera and VTR document precisely what an oral history interviewee is thinking or feeling when questioned about the past. Nonetheless, a person's body movements and facial expressions may offer important clues to correct interpretation of the responses to a researcher's questions. No audio recording has ever preserved an interviewee's wincing facial contortions; animated fingers punctuating statements by gesticulating and stabbing the air; folded arms, crossed legs, or clenched teeth, any of which may indicate negative or threatened feelings; or the smile and facial radiance of sheer joy as a narrator recalls his happiest life experiences. With a videotaped oral memoir, the scholar has a complex primary source to analyze and interpret. Revisionist schools of historians may rise and fall on their relative abilities to interpret both audio and video historical interviews as primary personal documents. In a hypothetical example, perhaps an interviewee's response to a particular question will be judged, on the basis of his eye twitch or lip biting as observed on the videotape, to be evasive. There may in fact have been little or no correlation between the interviewee's eye twitch or lip biting and his response to the question. If the respondent had no recollection at all of the event being reconstructed from memory, he or she may have exhibited embarrassment rather than defensiveness or hostility. This type of analysis may be practiced in the library or archives by tomorrow's scholar. At the very least, videotaped interviews will create opportunities for additional scholarly speculation about the true meaning of historical evidence.

Personality traits, factors related to but often separate from those described above, are so complex that no video recording can possibly provide a comprehensive picture of what it means to be human. Yet, in studying an oral memoir, the scholar often wishes he had video documents to help in evaluating an interviewee's psychological makeup. If a one-dimensional, still photograph can reveal aspects of personality, the potential of video in this regard is far greater. One's "manner of speaking" is revealed through far more than words; human communication is inescapably linked with personality. Surely, one might argue, the scholar should seek as complete a perspective as possible in evaluating each living source of history. Video recordings may reveal some, but not all, aspects of the personalities of the individuals who come within camera range. Such documents must still be corroborated with other data.

Videotaped oral memoirs may be worth all the trouble involved in obtaining them when they preserve people's demonstrations of their past actions and feelings. Oral history interviewees who have been, or are, craftsmen find video recording to be far superior to audio recording when they are asked to tell of their life experiences. The hands of the craftsman—constantly moving, drawing in the air, shaping imaginary objects, or simply revealing the toll of time—are best shown in pictures. Video can also be helpful in documenting the recollections of the Cajun French of Louisiana and other ethnic groups who share the cultural trait of "talking with their hands."

The soundtrack of the interview on videotape provides an advantage of a different type. Like audiotape, videotape records sound, and videotape may be equally (or better) suited for use in transcribing and editing oral history. These and other factors help explain why oral

historians worldwide are investigating the feasibility of videotaping their interviews.[5]

As improving technology enables oral historians to videotape interviews, prospects will rise substantially for even better video production in historical documentation. Digital sound recording, already on the market, promises to make obsolete every type of recording devised to date. Videodisks and even silicon chips may play important roles in the future of historical research. Further miniaturization of video cameras and recorders is almost certain. Picture quality will inevitably improve, as will the life expectancy of videotape. Market competition will place video within reach of most local oral historians. Why, then, do not more oral historians immediately employ video? If the video industry is here to stay, are there yet lurking about any serious pitfalls in videotaping oral history? An honest appraisal of this question leads inexorably to consideration of some of the inherent weaknesses of video and some of the tough problems that lie ahead for oral historians.

The Problems of Videotaping Oral History

An examination of the problems of applying video technology to oral history leads to both hypothetical and practical concerns. The state-of-the-art equipment now on the video market is complex and difficult to assess. Manufacturers have developed such a wide array of video recording machines and compatible magnetic tapes that local historians may have difficulty choosing among them. There are those who sincerely believe that the only type of video recording worth preservation and study is one on 3/4-inch magnetic tape, now available in cassettes. The video industry has convinced professional broadcasters and others that 3/4-inch tape is worth the relatively large capital investment needed to achieve proper videotaping of any activity, including oral history. Portable, high-quality 3/4-inch videotape cassette recorders and matched color cameras are available for use by historians. The resulting video documents, while rather expensive to produce, are usually of good quality, but they are not necessarily of broadcast quality.

Other proponents of video predict that the future of the medium is in 1/2-inch tape format cassette recording equipment. Since the advent of this smaller format of video recording in the mid-1970s, manufacturers have improved both cameras and video recorders so much that some television representatives predict that their journalists will adopt ½-inch format video for field work.

The industry has also come a long way in developing video cameras. For the public consumer, this translates into affordable video cameras. Home recording on 8-mm videotape is the latest format to entice consumers. No longer does video camera work require bright, studio-type lighting; video cameras can now photograph dimly lit subjects.

For the library, archival program, or local historical organization attempting to sort out the cornucopia of video equipment and products, manufacturers may have taken the development of video to excess. Few libraries, archives, and other repositories of historical collections will have budgets large enough to purchase and maintain video recorders/playback

[5]See Thomas L. Charlton, *Oral History for Texans* (Austin: Texas Historical Commission, 1981), pp. 54–55, for an earlier discussion of the advantages of video in oral history research. Ken Plummer, *Documents of Literature of a Humanistic Method* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 97, makes the brief but strong point that interviewing skills used in life-history research can be improved through study of videotapes of one's own interviews.

machines for as many as four or five different sizes of videotape. Costs for duplicating and processing all of these videotaped materials for public service may be prohibitive. Even if oral historians could limit their work to the formats of 3/4-inch or 1/2-inch videotape recording, achieving a standardized oral history collection in a repository might only be a dream.

To make matters worse for historic preservation work, manufacturers have shown little inclination toward standardizing video recording formats. At present, two formats of ½-inch videotape are offered. While Beta format by Sony was first on the market, Mitsubishi's VHS format has surpassed it in popularity. Several major appliance lines now offer both of these types of video equipment and tapes. For oral historians, this is most confusing; no one wants to videotape an oral history interview on Beta-format tape only to discover that the designated repository has only VHS playback equipment—or no equipment at all. This potential problem should cause oral historians, librarians, and archivists to consider common ground, understanding, and setting standards in the near future. Unfortunately, it may be too late; historians already are using video rigs of every conceivable type. Further complicating this situation is the fact that, to offer long-play capability, both Beta and VHS machines may now be purchased with motors that operate at various speeds. Thus, the *same* videotape may be used to record one, two, four, or sometimes six hours of interviews or programs. Such variety in the video industry may cause consternation among historians and archivists.

Even more profound problems exist for oral historians interested in videotaping interviews. An oral history interview results from the collaboration of both a researcher and an interviewee, or narrator. Why videotape one person and not the other during an interview? The integrity of the document may be compromised if only half of the interview "team" is photographed and recorded. To have as complete a video record as possible, perhaps more than one camera should photograph the interview. Ideally, one should focus on the interviewee, one on the interviewer, and one on both in the same picture.[6] Videotaped oral histories might make use of split-screen photography and display, showing interviewee and interviewer on the same video monitor. The practice of videotaping only part of the interview scene will probably frustrate meticulous scholars.[7] Problems are also inherent in situations in which multiple interviewees or multiple interviewers are present but not all are shown during

[6]W. Richard Whitaker, "Why Not Try Videotaping Oral History?," *The Oral History Review* 9 (1981): 115–124, urges oral historians to make each video interview "visually interesting," but to avoid excessive lens-zooming and physical movement by camera operators. Regrettably, Whitaker suggests that "After the interview is over, it is most important for editing to shoot reverse questions and cutaways" (p. 121). Reverse questions, he insists, should be constructed by having the interviewee and interviewer *reenact* the recording session—an ideal situation unlikely to be possible in most oral history field work outside a studio setting. Many archivists and scholars will also disagree with Whitaker's demands regarding the editing of videotaped interviews.

[7]Researchers in the field of hermeneutics are beginning to call for analysis of videotaped oral history interviews in split-screen presentations. For related arguments pertaining to interpreting the meaning of participants' speech in oral history interviews, see also two journal articles by E. Culpepper Clark, Michael J. Hyde, and Eva M. McMahan, "Communications in the Oral History Interview: Investigating Problems of Interpreting Oral Data," *International Journal of Oral History* 1 (February 1980): 28–40, and "Developing Communication," *Communication Education* 30 (July 1981): 238–244. John Schuchman, at Gallaudet College, has pioneered the use of split-screen videotaped oral history in the unique field of historical interview work with the deaf, as interviewers and interviewees communicate in sign language.

videotaped sessions.

Disconcerting to oral historians and archivists alike is the gradual loss of picture quality that occurs when a videotape is replayed. Loss of image and physical quality of tape are in direct proportion to the number of replays. Thus, duplication of video oral history interviews to provide public service copies and retention of the master video recordings to insure a preservation copy are imperative. Far less is known about the life expectancy of videotape than is known about the longevity of audiotape. Any deterioration of color or image quality in stored videotape will be disillusioning to scholars and a serious problem for archivists.

The video equipment itself may become obtrusive in oral history research. As small as current video field equipment is, it may never be totally inconspicuous, and it may preclude an atmosphere of intimacy between the participants. Some interviewees, conscious of the presence of the video equipment, may play to the camera, and thereby give affected performances. The same danger exists, of course, when only audio recording equipment is used, but the presence of video equipment may compound this problem. Not to be overlooked is the loss of privacy stemming from the presence of a video camera operator in an interview session. Alterations in the picture's composition caused by an overly zealous photographer may be disconcerting to scholars. The interviewee may become distracted by the equipment or operator and focus his attention on the recording process rather than on the interviewer and the questions of the day.

Videotaping oral history also has its ethical pitfalls. With video, "the eye of the camera never blinks," as journalist Dan Rather has so aptly put it, and that eye is capable of exhausting even the strongest of persons. An oral history interviewee whose recollections are being recorded by audio equipment need not be concerned about possibly looking tired, exhibiting poor posture, showing nervous or bored behavior, or feeling embarrassed by gestures, but these may become serious concerns when video devices are in use. What are the oral historian's ethical obligations to interviewees who might later be disappointed or embarrassed by what the video camera "saw," especially if it had little or no bearing on the factual or substantive data in the voice-recording part of the interview? Should videotapes be edited to remove (or restrict access to) images that might offend or discourage participation in oral history research? In what situation should the discreet oral historian forego videotaping an interview—that is, deliberately electing to leave the video hardware disengaged while proceeding with the audio recording of a person's memoirs? These are murky areas of ethical concern for thoughtful oral historians.[8]

Finally, oral historians are only now beginning to explore timidly the possible legal distinctions between audio and video recordings of historical interviews. Stated simply, the standard agreement forms signed by oral history interviewees and interviewers may not suffice for both audio and video recordings. It may not be enough for oral historians to rest their cases on the revised U.S. copyright law that went into effect in 1978. Video recordings—with images that can be distorted, deliberately or inadvertently, and a potential for tape editing vastly more complex than that normally associated with audiotapes—may lead to

[8]Charlton, *Oral History for Texans*, p. 55, contains additional caveats and disadvantages of employing video in oral history but concludes that the new vistas opened by video more than justify experimentation in this dynamic field.

legal proceedings fraught with danger for oral historians. To protect themselves from lawsuits, oral historians may need to prepare separate legal release forms for videotaped interviews. Whether legal differences exist between such recordings is a question primarily for the judiciary, not scholars or archivists.[9]

Oral historians are trying to make sense of the technical options before them and to use responsibly the best contributions of modern technology. To many, the unstandardized video equipment market appears to be in a state of chaos; oral historians and archivists alike would benefit if the recording industry reached a few agreements regarding formats of magnetic videotape. Oral historians, librarians, and archivists must resolve to achieve understanding, based on a working knowledge of what video recording can and cannot do for historic preservation. An oral historian's problems are serious enough in selecting and employing video equipment from the vast array of available options. Oral history research will probably continue to parallel changes in sound and picture recording technology, and a distant generation of archivists and researchers may have to replicate today's video machines just to be able to play 1980s-vintage videotapes. Today's oral historians should resolve to be competent and professional gatherers and preservers of the recollected past, hoping that technology will support and enhance, not hinder, their endeavors.

[9]Two useful recent articles related to the subject of oral history and copyright are Andrea S. Hirsch, "Copyrighting Conversations: Applying the 1976 Copyright Act to Interviews," *The American University Law Review* 31 (1982): 1071–1093, and John Neuenschwander, "Oral History and Copyright: An Uncertain Relationship," *Journal of College and University Law* 10, no. 2 (1983–84): 147–165. Neuenschwander, a practicing attorney as well as an experienced oral historian, is also the author of a forthcoming monograph on oral history and the law, to be published by the Oral History Association.