Perspectives

Access to Oral History: A National Agenda

BRUCE H. BRUEMMER

Abstract: Access to oral history collections has suffered from the neglect of oral historians and archivists. The author advocates five items as the basis of a national agenda to improve bibliographic control and access to oral history interviews. Prominent among the recommendations are the establishment of MARC AMC records and interlibrary loan for interviews. This article was originally presented at the 1991 annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

About the author: Bruce H. Bruemmer is archivist for the Charles Babbage Institute, the Center for History of Information Processing located at the University of Minnesota, which holds the largest collection of oral histories relating to the history of computing.

TELEVISION, OF ALL PLACES, yielded a wonderful testimonial on oral history during public television's second airing of *I, Claudius*. In the eighth episode, after murdering every prospect to the emperor's throne (save her son), the aging Livia calls on Claudius to promise that he will do everything to make her a goddess after her death, thus saving her from eternal damnation for her voluminous sins. Emboldened by wine, the normally reticent Claudius seizes the opportunity and demands, "I'll do what I can on one small condition. There's so much I want to know. I'm a historian, and I want to know the truth. When people die, so much dies with them and [nothing remains but] pieces of paper that tell nothing but lies, lies, lies." To which Livia, perhaps anticipating the debate over the veracity of oral history, replies, "He wants to know the truth and he calls it a small condition."

Unfortunately, Claudius had no tape recorder, and his history was confounded by a prophecy that it would lie nineteen-hundred years before it was discovered. Given the state of access to modern oral history collections, one might wonder if they fell under the same prophecy. Some oral history projects, designed ostensibly to develop information about undocumented events, have given so little attention to access that one might be considered lucky to find them in only nineteen-hundred years. In an age in which even artifact curators are moving toward a standardized format for information exchange, oral history remains steadfast in its reliance on the published guide. Yet programs that produce guides are the exception; many simply have no organized control over their collection.

Oral historians hold a good deal of blame for this situation. In the United States, oral historians are producers, not curators. Most of their work is developed as a means to a final product, whether it be a book, an article, a motion picture, or a public relations device. Understandably, when the final product is completed, there is little incentive to follow up interviews with tedious editing, abstracting, and cataloging. One need only read the literature or attend oral history conferences to witness the predominance of the oral history producer. In the 1987 Oral History Association conference, three of thirty-six sessions focused on collection-management issues; in 1991, three of fifty-one sessions had this focus. By far most of the oral history literature produced to date gives precious little attention to developing access to oral history collections. Management issues usually center on the preservation of magnetic tape, rather than on its subsequent use. Again, this is because practitioners, not curators, are responsible for most of the extant oral history literature.

Archivists are also at fault for the lack of access—uniform or otherwise—to oral history collections. For those repositories where oral history is a small part of the total collection, oral histories tend to remain on the periphery of access and outreach priorities. They are like the occasional odd-sized document that is left on the accession shelf because it is difficult to catalog. There are no facts to back this assertion; it is based on the perception that most archivists keep oral history out of mind unless the collection is so large it cannot be ignored. Those who turn to archival literature for help will not be overwhelmed. The last U.S. book on the subject was Frederick J. Stielow's 1985 *The Management of Oral History Sound Archives,* which contains out-of-date information on microcomputer applications and unfortunate references to the "MARC-AMS" [sic] format.[1]

Why should archivists be concerned about access to oral history, when access to more traditional, textual records is equally as wanting? They should be concerned, first,

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[1]Frederick J. Stielow, *The Management of Oral History Sound Archives* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 70–73, 141.

because good oral history not only comple-
ments those textual records but is essential
to understanding the records that archivists
traditionally collect. An example is histor-
ical research conducted by the Charles
Babbage Institute (CBI) on the Defense
Advanced Research Projects Agency, in
which oral history serves to fill gaps in rel-
atively recent documentation and helps re-
searchers in negotiating their way through
the overwhelming quantity of paper rec-
ords. Such research would be impossible
to conclude if the staff relied only on tex-
tual sources; the nature of modern docu-
mentation demands oral history as a
component of historical research.[2] Second,
although many repositories already hold in-
terviews in their collections, they simply
have not provided access to them. Archi-
vists are at least obligated to have a plan
to develop access to a special format; oth-
erwise they should not acquire the format.
Third, oral history is such a good hook for
neophyte researchers that we should not ne-
glect it. Most undergraduate researchers are
lost the minute an archivist suggests they
wade through fifty cubic feet of records to
complete a four-page assignment that was
probably due last week. However, if of-

fered a forty-page transcript that not only
qualifies as a primary resource but also yields
some very juicy footnotes on a person di-
rectly involved in the topic at hand, stu-
dents just might stick around to see what
else constitutes the archives. In an age in
which secondary historical literature is
plentiful and readily accepted as the basis
of historical research, archivists need every
device to entice educated minds to the joy
of using primary sources.

Attracting Users to Oral History Collections

The typical means of attracting users to
oral history has been the published guide.
Most responsible institutions with a sizable
collection will produce a basic guide with
a paragraph description of each interview.
The guides are usually indexed and provide
fair to excellent access to the repository's
collections. The Charles Babbage Institute
produced such a guide. It is arranged by
interviewer, has an acceptable index, and
received critical acclaim, albeit from its one
published review. Five years after its pub-
lication it is now horribly out of date and
has exceeded its life even as a public re-
lations tool. In the meantime, at least 125
interviews have been added to the collec-
tion, and others that were restricted are now
open. Curators in similar circumstances have
two choices: Develop an appendix or pro-
duce a new guide. An appendix is an at-
tractive alternative because it uses the present
stock of the original guide. Ultimately,
however, appendixes to guides become
cumbersome to use. Although a new guide
is expensive to produce and consigns the
present guide to recycling, it offers a better
opportunity to market the collection and is
easier to use than appendixes or second
volumes. Both alternatives suffer from the
problem of distribution, especially in the
context of a guide to a single repository.
In CBI's case, a guide relating to the his-
tory of computing is too narrow to be car-

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[2]Oral history is proving itself immensely useful in
situations when there is too much textual documen-
tation. Donald A. Ritchie of the U.S. Senate Histor-
ical Office commented that while the quantity of
government records has increased, their historical value
has diminished. Although this is not news to any ar-
chivist who has compared government or business
records from the early part of the century with more
contemporary records, he further cites the growing
use of oral history in government. In Ritchie's words,
the "interviews, which altogether number in the tens
of thousands, provide oral road maps through the doc-
umentary thicket and also offer clues to missing ma-
terial." This suggests that oral history can be used to
get more out of paper documents by generating in-
formation about the bureaucracy that created them and
the conditions under which they were created, or by
making explicit the historical messages between the
lines. See Ritchie's article, "Scholars Plow Through
The Rapidly Accumulating Mass of Federal Paper,"
Chronicle of Higher Education 35 (November 2, 1988):
A44.

ried by a publisher, and a small archives can afford to give away only a limited number of free copies.

In general, regional and national guides offer a successful method of distributing collection information more widely. A number of national archival guides have proven useful in bringing researchers in touch with relevant collections. A topical guide with a national scope is automatically more attractive to publishers and is one way around the distribution problem. As horrendous as the *National Union Catalog: Manuscript Collections (NUCMC)* was to use, it was the only comprehensive national guide to manuscripts prior to the development of electronic databases, and most research libraries still subscribe to it. Yet, national guides to oral history have not fared especially well. A call by the Library of Congress for oral history entries in *NUCMC* has yielded few entries.[3] A Canadian national guide has been in the making since 1983, largely subverted by the lack of funds.[4] In 1991, Chadwyck-Healey sent a letter to oral history curators threatening to suspend publication of *Oral History Sources* unless more subscriptions were received.[5] Meckler's *Oral History Index* limits entries to name, date, a one-sentence description, and the location of each interview, hardly the last word in bibliographic detail.

To be successful, such publications require not only constant input from curators but also special inducements to participate. For example, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission encourages all recipients of processing grants to submit collection information to NUCMC.

No such incentives exist in the world of oral history. Furthermore, to be truly useful, guides must include adequate descriptive information that is updated regularly, a problem that users of NUCMC will find too familiar. In addition, the publication of updates to oral history guides is proving too expensive for most private publishers, and the products are less likely to be bought by research libraries, which are increasingly hampered by tight acquisition budgets.

In a world of computerized databases there ought to be a better way. Researchers should expect a high incidence of participation in national or regional bibliographic databases by oral history repositories that purport to be professional. Furthermore, users should be able to obtain, within thirty days, unrestricted interviews represented in these databases. Such goals cannot be achieved by using repository guides or even national compilations. They can be attained only through embracing a standard of computerized information exchange in tandem with a change in attitude toward access on the part of archivists and oral historians.

A National Agenda for Improved Access to Oral History Collections

To that end, I propose the adoption of a five-point national agenda:

1. Establishment of a USMARC Format for Archival and Manuscripts Control (AMC) record for each oral history as a minimum, fundamental description.
2. The creation of guidelines to provide consistency in MARC AMC oral history records, along with the communication of these guidelines to all manner of catalogers.
3. Establishment of an interlibrary loan program for oral history.
4. Investigation of new technology to enhance availability of information within oral histories.
5. Support of the goal of adequate ac-

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[3] "Announcement: NUCMC Solicits Oral History Entries," *International Journal of Oral History* 7 (February 1987): 75.

[4] Phone conversation with Richard Lochead, August 1991. He discusses guides in Canada in "Directions in Oral History in Canada," *Canadian Oral History Association Journal* 6 (1983–84): 3–6.

[5] Letter from Susan M. Q. Severtson to Bruce H. Bruemmer, 7 June 1991.

cess to oral history collections by the oral history community.

The MARC AMC record. The first item may elicit a yawn from most American archivists who, even though they may not trust in MARC AMC, at least recognize it as the de facto standard of information exchange. The format is not uniformly used for oral history, yet AMC is ideally suited to this format. Oral interviews are roughly similar in length, and their descriptions fall neatly within the constraints of most bibliographic databases. They are often unpublished and in varying formats, so they are more properly ensconced in the AMC format than in books or serials. AMC's linking field is the perfect device to connect individual interviews that form an oral history project. Even within the limitations of local systems such as NOTIS, oral interviews are unlikely to run up against record-length and subject-tracing maxima that are the bane of archives and manuscripts catalogers. AMC as a bibliographic resource is tailor made for oral history.

In terms of access, almost any bibliographic database offers more flexibility and usefulness than a published guide. Updates to collections need not wait until a second edition is published; information about interviews can be created or added as data become available. Once in MARC format, selected interviews or projects may be downloaded to produce more focused, published guides if needed. More important, the MARC record has become a necessity for those repositories that coexist with a library. Increasing numbers of library patrons regard the computer terminal as the sole gateway to a library's holdings, and an interview that is not online will be essentially out of mind. Even for those repositories existing outside of the library world, use of the AMC format eventually will enable them to participate in national bibliographic databases. Although Research Libraries Information Network (RLIN) and OCLC, the two current choices,

pose many problems for researchers interested in searching them, there is no more appropriate or cost-effective mechanism to serve as a national union list of oral history interviews.

If the way to enlightenment is so clear, why aren't we there? As stated earlier, the first problem relates to archivists' attitudes toward oral history—it remains on the periphery of their priorities. Second, retooling a cataloging system to adopt MARC AMC is not for the faint of heart. I spent my first four years at CBI convincing the University of Minnesota Libraries to grant me permission to catalog on RLIN and then on the local NOTIS database. I spent the next three years trying to extricate myself from the position of CBI's cataloger. Those with even a minimal oral history collection are unlikely to relish the idea of jumping into a reconversion project, even if they have the skills, time, and equipment to do it. Third, it is authority work, not field tagging for the AMC format, that devours time. The daunting part of cataloging comes with the time- and resource-consuming checking of names and subjects to ensure that they conform to relevant standards.

These are significant hurdles, but the failure to participate in bibliographic databases will continue to cheat researchers of the opportunity to use oral histories. The MARC record represents no more than the minimum description that should be required for all interviews accepted by repositories. In essence, it consists of author, title, abstract, and subject headings. A repository that cannot commit to that level of description should reassess its involvement with oral history. Of course, small programs without any professional support cannot be expected to adhere to such an agenda. But professional research repositories that accept oral history's value as a historical resource have an obligation to generate a reasonable level of access to their collections. The inability of some repositories to support fundamental access is no

reason to reduce control to the lowest common denominator. Many local historical societies cannot afford proper cataloging of archives and manuscripts collections, yet the professional norm remains MARC AMC. So should it be for oral history.

Institutions with significant oral history collections have already taken the step. Columbia, the Bancroft Library, Brigham Young, Louisiana State, and CBI are a few institutions that have been involved in cataloging oral history in RLIN. New York State, through its statewide survey, has added records reflecting oral history collections held by county, local, and business archives, all institutions that usually have no access to national databases or catalogers. One quickly notices the significant variance in cataloging practice for oral history in RLIN. In many cases, the differences are inconsequential, but some differences do produce confusing and inaccessible entries. Because many AMC catalogers model their own cataloging from records that exist on the database, past mistakes in cataloging are apt to propagate. If national databases are to reach their potential for oral history, now is the time to develop the second agenda item, guidelines to oral history cataloging.

Guidelines for consistent use of the MARC AMC record. As stated before, AMC is perfectly suited to oral history. There is no need for a special MARC format for oral history, only for more consistent application of existing cataloging rules. Steven L. Hensen's *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts* (Chicago: SAA, 1989) helps, but it is not (nor was it intended to be) a definitive manual for oral history cataloging. Some institutions have developed their own guidelines, but their existence does nothing to establish national guidelines. To help initiate such discussions, a group of Minnesota curators and some others have begun to discuss the development of a project aimed specifically at national guidelines for oral history cat-

aloging. Such deliberations need not be lengthy or difficult; all that is required is a meeting of the minds. Besides uniform guidelines, a project like this could produce a booklet designed to instruct catalogers unfamiliar with oral history or the AMC format. The booklet could be used by oral historians to direct the resources of library catalogers toward the oral history collection. This would give oral historians the tools to get out of the cataloging business, an area in which skills and time are routinely underestimated by noncatalogers.

Interlibrary loan of oral histories. The establishment of uniform MARC AMC records on national bibliographic databases makes possible the third agenda item, interlibrary loan of oral histories. The possibilities of increasing access through interlibrary loan are exciting, potentially allowing any researcher access to tapes or transcripts. Assuming that a MARC record is created, one impediment remains to lending oral histories: the proper handling of the materials. Archives have experimented little with the possibilities of interlibrary loan for archival material, largely because such loans require special handling and reference, something that most interlibrary operations are not equipped to handle. Perhaps the only consortium that has adopted guidelines for archival interlibrary loan is the Research Libraries Group (RLG). Even within RLG, most special collections curators insist that their access policy does not permit interlibrary loans of rare materials, and they opt out of the system. This is understandable; although RLG has written guidelines governing the handling of special materials, the guidelines do not necessarily impress interlibrary loan staff about the unique characteristics of archival materials. Those archivists who have loaned materials have witnessed at first hand the appreciation that some interlibrary-loan operations have for primary resources. Manuscripts sent through interlibrary loan by Louisiana State University were returned in

a used pizza container.[6] You may be able to "avoid the noid"[7] with Domino's, but evidently not with interlibrary loan.

Oral history, however, is better suited for interlibrary loan because it does not need to be shipped out in its original form. Tapes and transcripts can be copied, so if they are lost in the system it becomes an annoyance rather than a reason to withdraw from the interlibrary loan system. To work, however, such systems must accommodate a variety of oral history use policies, many of which have been fashioned to navigate through the vagaries of the copyright law. Typically, repositories do not allow wholesale copying of transcripts, and any repository that sends an interview through interlibrary loan must receive assurance that no copying will take place at the borrowing institution. The present system does not instill that trust. However, many repositories already are involved in an informal interarchival loan program; if archivists know a colleague they can trust in an area convenient to a researcher, then out the interview goes. But this informal system requires too much intervention by the archivist and researcher. Moreover, the formal interlibrary loan program already has a staff to conduct most of these mundane chores, and the budgets unquestioningly assigned to interlibrary loan operations are mammoth in comparison with special collections operations. If libraries could provide acceptable safeguards, archivists could harness this vast network and increase the use of oral history to a level unfathomable by today's standards.

Here, again, it is the archivist who must take the initiative by going to the library community with hat in hand to plead the cause of oral history loans or, perhaps, hammer in hand to demand equal treatment—whatever works best. A system might be possible whereby existing archival repositories could serve as retail centers that provide a reading-room environment for oral histories and the interlibrary loan offices would merely refer certain formats to participating archives. Archivists, too, could work to establish network guidelines that would ensure the proper handling of oral histories. An article by H. Thomas Hickerson and Anne R. Kenney on the loan of original materials underscores the importance of written and mutually binding procedures and statements of liability in an interlibrary loan program intended for special collections.[8] Archivists have distanced themselves from interlibrary loan, so it should come as no surprise that existing procedures have ignored the requirements of special collections. To correct this deficiency, archivists will need to meet librarians on their own turf. A good place to start would be the Rare Books and Manuscripts Society's Ad Hoc Committee on the Interlibrary Loan of Rare and Unique Materials, where there are sympathetic curators interested in working toward a solution that will allow the involvement of archives and manuscripts repositories.

Using new technology to improve access to oral history. The fourth agenda item is already under way; it has been undertaken by a handful of individuals interested in using new technology for better access to oral history. In this regard, access includes control over data within individual interviews. William Schneider and other staff members at the University of Alaska have developed Project Jukebox, a hypermedia application that combines transcript,

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[6]Story related by Robert S. Martin, archivist at Louisiana State University, at a meeting of the Archives, Manuscripts, and Special Collections (AMSC) Committee of the Research Libraries Group, 19–20 April 1991.

[7]"Avoid the Noid" is a trademark of Domino's Pizza.

[8]H. Thomas Hickerson and Anne R. Kenney, "Expanding Access: Loan of Original Materials in Special Collections," *Rare Books & Manuscripts Librarianship* 3 (Fall 1988): 116.

sound recording, graphics, and pictures. A user can actually scroll through a text while listening to an interview; skip some pages and have the sound recording automatically keep pace with the transcript; and also view photographs or pictures used in the interview. Admittedly, the primary weakness of this integrated access tool is its up-front cost; it demands technology out of reach by most programs. Moreover, the incredible amount of work and expense to maintain this system may spell its demise.

Technological improvements are not all circumscribed by a deep pocket, however. Since CBI began typing transcripts on a word processor, it has made the diskettes available to researchers who then can use software to search the text for keywords related to their research. For this reason, CBI has dispensed with the delusion of preparing indexes for each interview. Some off-the-shelf software packages provide researchers with a powerful indexing tool, assuming they have access to machine-readable text. More experiments with technology may provide heightened interest in oral history and greater access, and more should be initiated. Note, however, that these two examples require the production of a transcript, a requirement that many repositories are unable to fulfill.

The need for attitudinal changes by oral historians. All of the preceding agenda items depend on the proactive advocacy by archivists, but they will never be fully realized without a dramatic change in attitude by oral historians. The principal oral history association in Canada is dominated by curators, a reversal of the situation in the United States. But the Canadian organization has been no better than its American counterpart in developing access to oral history. Obviously it is not professional dominance that is important but the bridge between curators and oral historians. How

can archivists effect this in reality? We can engage oral historians. Attend their meetings. Convince them of the need for proper access. And get them involved in archival forums. Even in such a group as an ad hoc committee on cataloging guidelines, oral historians can add a valuable perspective on the types of work being produced and their use. Many not only are willing converts but have been involved in this area for a long time.

The conclusion of Robert Graves's book, *I, Claudius,* provides a suitable closing for this article. Caligula is assassinated and Rome must find a new emperor. The Praetorian guard proclaims Claudius emperor, partly to avoid another bloody purge but mostly to ensure their own power. As they parade the reluctant new emperor on their shoulders, Claudius thinks to himself:

So, I'm Emperor, am I? What nonsense! But at least I'll be able to make people read my books now. . . . I was thinking too, what opportunities I should have, as Emperor, for consulting the secret archives and finding out just what happened on this occasion or on that. How many twisted stories still remained to be straightened out! What a miraculous fate for a historian![9]

No doubt, modern-day researchers would love to have dictatorial powers over archivists. But no amount of power could compel archivists to reveal that which they do not know or control. As long as oral history access remains an afterthought, not even an emperor will be able to find, much less use, oral history.

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[9]Robert Graves, *I, Claudius* (New York: Harrison Smith and Robert Hags, Inc., 1934), 494.