**Three Dimensions and More: Oral History Beyond the Paradoxes of Method**

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**for**

**The Handbook of Emergent Methods**

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I.

New ideas and new tools are producing striking departures in our understanding of work in the field of oral history—how it is done, how this process is understood, and to what ends methods are directed.

But before we can talk about emergent methods in oral history, we need to appreciate the structure and power of some conventional understandings of method since the emergence of oral history as a self-conscious "field" in the middle of the 20th century. These conventions continue to characterize oral history despite—and in some provocative ways because of—what seem to be dramatic departures both in intellectual approach and technological capacities as we have turned the corner and taken off (or descended, as it can sometimes appear) into a rapidly changing 21st century world.

These conventions and the generally unexamined assumptions on which they rest are best understood less as obstacles on some otherwise clear path, and more as seemingly natural elements defining a complex landscape of practice within which practitioners have learned to move comfortably and for most purposes quite effectively, along the pathways the patterns of convention have created. By understanding the path-defining power of

these conventions more explicitly, we will be in a better position to appreciate how their recasting, or even removal, removes as well the constraints on method, leaving open a new landscape in which, explored and mapped through practice, new pathways are beginning to emerge.

I'll suggest three broad dimensions of limiting, path-defining convention, each of which embodies a highly consequential element of paradox. One is the paradox involved in how the ground of method is fundamentally conceived—what "doing" oral history has been assumed to involve. The second involves the paradox of orality—the difficulty oral history has had in confronting, or put more directly its success in ignoring and avoiding, the oral dimension that defines and names the field itself. The third paradox, a more recent development, involves technology: how some new capacities centered on digitization and the internet have tended to reinforce convention and turn methodological progress back on itself, as much as they have opened it up to new approaches and directions.

.i.

The first paradox emerges from a simple observation: most books, training programs, workshops, manuals, and methodological guides in oral history focus predominantly and in some cases exclusively on interviewing—organizing projects, planning and designing interviews, equipment and techniques for using it, interview skills and protocols, and all the related issues surrounding the generation and production of oral history documentation, and its preparation, usually through transcription, for whatever placement or use is to follow.

Because use and interpretation are necessarily context and inquiry specific, it has seemed sensible to focus more general training on the common elements of what any oral project must of necessity involve. If interviewing is what it's all about, then it is natural to see this as the central focus of methodology. The attention conventionally accorded interview transcription methodology is an extension of this focus—this is understood as part of what it means to generate interview documentation that can be readily used.

But relatively little attention is paid to the conditions supporting the use of these documents. Though such matters are readily acknowledged as central concerns of the oral historian, methodology for the management, organization, description, and approach to working with the results of interviewing is conventionally seen as a more particular research and context-driven concern. To the extent it involves more general considerations, it is conventionally imagined as something really "done", in terms of methodology, by librarians and archivists.

This interview-production profile may seem to have changed in recent years. It is certainly true that modern primers, guides, and handbooks have a very a different feel than the narrower "how-to" manuals and workshops of earlier years. They now routinely include complex discussions of memory, narrativity, subjectivity, and dialogic complexity in the interview process itself—in its generalized processual dynamics, and in the social and political relationships that construct this in particular ways. But in a sense such discussion is the exception that proves the rule: these matters are presented as foundational and theoretical, as orienting considerations to inform what we do, how we do it, and what we do with it. But they are not generally seen, or engaged, as fundamental elements of an operational methodology.

Now all this seems perfectly appropriate and straightforward—until it is realized how unusual these assumptions are in the context of historical methodology more generally. Methods courses and books in history, for instance, pay some attention to generating a documentary base—to searching, locating, and approaching source materials. But their center of gravity, the center of methodological concern, is in tools, concerns, protocols, caveats, and techniques for how historians work WITH documents. Notice the inversion of the assumptions noted above: in oral history it is the generation of primary sources that is assumed to be central, with method for engaging the documents seen as so particular and context- or inquiry- driven, as to be hard to treat in anything other than a very broad, introductory way. But in broader historical training it is the reverse: working "with" primary sources is the common dimension shared across contexts, and hence more usefully explored for diverse practitioners in greater methodological depth.

"Doing" history" has thus seemed, in methodological terms, to revolve around doing something with the primary and secondary sources brought into view, whereas "doing oral history" has had a converse center of gravity in the generation of primary sources, a very different point in the process. I'll argue presently that the collapse of this distinction into a more unitary and inclusive definition is, for oral history, a central axis of emergent methods in the field. But understanding what has sustained this paradox of methodological centering for so long, and what may be propelling its evaporation now, requires an appreciation of additional paradoxes, of which the paradox of orality is the most expansive and compelling.

ii.

The Deep Dark Secret of oral history is that nobody spends much time listening to or watching recorded and collected interview documents. There has simply been little serious interest in the primary audio or video interviews that literally define the field and that the method is organized to produce. This is not really a secret, of course. On reflection, everyone recognizes that the core audio-video dimension of oral history is notoriously underutilized. The nicely cataloged but rarely consulted shelves of audio and videocassettes in even the best media and oral history libraries are closer than most archivists want to admit to that shoebox of unviewed home-video camcorder cassettes in so many families - precious documentation that is inaccessible and generally unlistened to and unwatched. The content of these collections is rarely organized, much less indexed, in any depth, and the actual audio or video is generally not searchable or browsable in any useful way. As a result, the considerable potential of audio and video documents to support high-impact, vivid, thematic, and analytic engagement with meaningful issues, personalities, and contexts, is largely untapped.

We all know, as well, that in most uses of oral history the shift from voice to text is extensive and controlling. Oral history source materials have generally been approached, used, and represented through expensive and cumbersome transcription into text. Even when the enormous flattening of meaning inherent in text reduction is recognized, transcription has seemed quite literally essential - not only inevitable but something close to 'natural.' The assumption in this near-universal practice is that only in text can the material be efficiently and effectively engaged - text is easier to read, scan, browse, search and research, publish, display, and distribute. Audio or video documents, in contrast, inevitably have to be experienced in 'real time.' Even when there are any

guides, finding aids, indexes, or descriptions of the actual video or audio, these are likely to be in text disconnected from and not easily linked to the actual media, with particular points and passages cumbersome to locate for auditing or viewing.

The basic point could not be simpler: There are worlds of meaning that lie beyond words, and nobody pretends for a moment that the transcript is in any real sense a better representation of an interview than the voice itself. Meaning is carried and expressed in context and setting, in gesture, in tone, in body language, in pauses, in performed skills and movements. To the extent we are restricted to text and transcription, we will never locate such moments and meaning, much less have the chance to study, reflect on, learn from, and share them.

But we have, for decades if not centuries, operated under the sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, sometimes simply unexamined assumption that the gains from transformation into text - in everything from analytic access to ease of casual use and broader public sharing - are worth the price of lost meaning and texture rendered inaccessible. This proceeds from the core assumption that oral and film or video documents are next to impossible to work with as a dimension of oral history practice, especially when they involve extensive collections and broader groups of imagined users interested in the material.

As a result, the paradox of orality takes two forms that both reinforce and are reinforced by the primacy of interview-generation already discussed: methodological treatments generally engage audio and video as such only at the level of collecting, including constantly-updated discussions of digitization and new recording modalities, the choice between audio and video, and tools to assist transcription, whether involving

mechanical aides or the lure of voice recognition software. And there is usually discussion as well of the archival and preservation implications of choices in recording technology and storage media. But there has been relatively little attention given to the implications of these developments for what happens next—to "doing" historical work with oral history documents. The orality of oral history, that is, and its broader, literal embodiment via video recording, remain generally unreachable in conventional approaches to oral history method.

iii.

Before turning to exploring how technologies for working with audio and video documentation erode the foundation on which this situation rests, we need to consider a final dimension of paradox in which technology has had in some ways the opposite effect—supporting and reinforcing the most conventional assumptions about the text-based interview transcript as the fundamental destination of oral history method. Here I refer to the immense and readily accessible power to search and navigate through text documents once they have been digitally rendered through word processing or scanning. Anyone can now explore easily the thousands of pages of transcripts in even a modest oral history collection. With increasingly common access to document files via the Internet, it is no harder to instantly search millions of pages across interviews and collections on a national and international level.

There is much to be said about the power of text-search tools for historical work, though like any tools these can be mis-used easily. Every teacher is familiar with the novice student who reports "I found the five references to such and such a topic," and the

delicacy of helping such a student to understand that it is simply “five references” that have been found, it being in no way clear whether they represent the elephant’s tail, its ear, or the whole animal. The stunning power of Google and other search engines only magnifies this problem, because the better the engines are and the more well-trained we are at using them, the more likely it is that just about any quick search will yield some useful results—but this may be a far cry from a really adequate research exploration of what is available. And when the objects of searches are words or strings of words found across the transcripts housed in oral history collections, the dilemmas of search-engine reliance are in many ways compounded.

As a consequence, there is considerable concern, among teachers and librarians, that the contemporary search tools are producing a significant decline in research skills—the ability to work carefully, patiently, and skillfully with various levels of reference materials and all the tools they provide to explore a body of documentation at a level assuring that that needed information and ideas are not being overlooked. In the search-engine world it is simply too seductively easy to snag something on the run, rather than to learn the skill of angling for it with just the right fly or lure suited to the setting, the conditions, and the object sought. In this sense, then, otherwise exciting and immensely useful technology still constitutes a formidable challenge method must overcome

iv.

The focus on producing interviews rather than exploring them, the naturalized reliance on text over orality, and the deceptive power of digital searches of transcription—I suggest that these three limiting paradoxes in conventional oral history method are

connected, and mutually reinforcing to a very powerful extent. But by virtue of this very interdependency, the complex may be not nearly as solid as it has seemed: the loosening of any leg has the potential to render the whole stool unstable.

And in contemporary oral history practice, the wobble is indeed becoming very pronounced, owing especially to the loosening of the second and third legs of the stool I have described. New digital tools are offering powerful alternatives to the text-based linear search-engine approach to exploring information, and they are offering as well alternatives to text reliance itself based on new capacities to work directly with orality—with audio and video documentation as the primary source of oral history. And as these two legs of the stool take on new form, the third leg—the very locus and definition of oral history method—has to change as well if the three are to settle into a stable new form.

This is exactly what I think is starting to happen in oral history. And we can begin to appreciate it—to appreciate oral history's variation on the theme of emerging methods this volume is surveying—by exploring some of the changes in the relation between audio and video documentation, new technologies for mapping and navigating it, and the intellectual implications of this combination for oral historical work

## II.

Let me emphasize at the outset that I am not speaking here of presenting or displaying audio or video clips or excerpts from oral history interviews. Documentary has

been doing this for quite a long time now, and has come to seem as natural and inevitable as a destination for oral history in its audio or video primacy as the interview text transcript to which it is a kind of representational opposite. More recently both the tools and the capacity to make, circulate, and instantly consume such media extracts—whether in elaborate documentary compositions, loops in exhibit kiosks, or fragmented clips posted to and downloaded from the internet—have become so excitingly accessible as to transform this approach into a genuine media revolution whose implications are just beginning to be appreciated. Podcast Nation is a long way from the Cinemateque Documentaire or Ken Burns and The American Experience.

I shall have more to say about this near the end of the chapter, but for now it will suffice simply to distinguish documentary presentation from oral history method as such. Documentary, old or new, involves what we can do "with" the selections from the primary sources oral history creates. In contrast, the digital tools and approaches I am discussing here, though obviously not irrelevant to documentary, center more on the prior process of defining, locating, and extracting such materials in the first place from the vast body of recorded oral history documentation. My argument will be that these new capacities for working with primary sources imply and are beginning to propel a substantial reorientation in what it means to "do" oral history, which is to say, a considerably broadened conception of oral history method as such. Advancing this argument requires first some familiarity with the landscape in which all this is happening.

i.

The digital revolution has two simple but profound ground-level implications. First, digitization means that in crucial respects all information can be considered the same. In digital form, there is simply no difference between text, photographs, drawings and models, music, speech, and visual information: all can be expressed as digital information that can be organized, searched, extracted, and integrated with equal facility. And second, as every user of a CD or DVD knows, digitization means that any point in the data can be accessed instantly; one can move from point to point, anywhere in the data, without having to scroll or play forward or backward through the documentation in a linear way, as with tapes.

Both ideas are central to how digital technologies open new ways to work directly and easily with audio and video documents in their primary form. Oral history audio and video can now be placed in an environment in which specific passages of audio/video content can be linked to and reached via transcripts or, alternatively or in combination, various modes of annotation, cross-referencing tags, and other descriptive or analytic "meta-data." Interview passages are most often referenced through lexical content, but this is hardly a necessary condition: in many digital modes, it is as easy to tag and access passages for non-lexical content or qualities, whether these involve performance, context, or simply the for the palpable reality of affect through voice, tone, expression, body language, and the like.

By means of these reference tools, the audio video materials themselves can be searched, sorted, browsed, accessed, studied, and selected for use at a high level of specificity. Indeed, with many of the emerging tools users and researchers themselves can mark, assess, analyze, select, and export meaningful audio and video passages for a range

of customized research, presentational, and pedagogic uses. On this software frontier, audio and video documentation becomes as richly and easily accessible as a well-organized text-based reference book, and potentially far more easily usable.

Broadly speaking, the challenges in searching and exploring audio-video digital materials are less technical than they are intellectual and even philosophical. Technically, the objective is straightforward, though there are many evolving and competing ways of addressing it. Essentially, digital audio or video carries precise time stamps that mark the audio or video stream, like markers on a highway. Passages can be defined by identifying start and stop time codes for a particular passage or segment or even a word in a digital file, and a program can then go to and play such passages simply by locating the file and playing from start point to stop. When particular identifiers or combinations of identifiers have been associated with points in the data stream, the program can use these as filters for searching the audio video content in order to instantly locate and play the audio or video passages associated with those reference terms, whether these be subject headings, cross-reference codes, or words in a transcript.

The real test of these tools is the ability to bring the user to relevant material, and to permit this material to be explored efficiently and used easily. The analog of a well indexed reference book is helpful, but it is also somewhat deceptive since whatever the mode of access, audio or video are inherently less skimmable than a page of text—content has to be experienced more or less in real time. And this raises the bar on meaningful access: a search leading to thirty five passages each between two and four minutes long risks being impractical unless there are ways for the researcher to determine which ones are really worth the time it will take to review them. The underlying challenge of audio-

video access is thus the organization and practicality of the cross-referencing, and how this is connected to precise passages in the audio or video documentation-- how the optimal qualities of access are defined and refined, and then how these can best be served by software tools.

Approaches to meeting this challenge are many and varied, with many choices driven initially by scale and volume. The most dramatic and comprehensive approaches to working with oral history audio-video deal with very large collections, and seek to make them accessible at a meaningful level to the widest extent possible, increasingly through website access. Perhaps the most well known and most instructive example is the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, the massive Holocaust survivor oral history project initiated by film director Stephen Spielberg http://www.vhf.org/ . Confronting a body of documentation amounting to hundreds of thousands of hours, the Foundation has invested very extensively in technologies for organizing and navigating a colossal, multi-language archive. Its web site offer rich insights into what it has done and how, and the many ways in which this material is now open for exploration and use, much of it in video form.

Other illustrative award-winning large-scale projects include TheVirtual Oral/Aural History Archive at California State University, Long Beach, http://salticid.nmc.csulb.edu/cgi-bin/WebObjects/OralAural.woa/ , led by Sherna Berger Gluck, in which extensive audio interviews have been put on line in a uniquely interactive, highly searchable format, and the Kentucky Historical Society's Kentucky Oral History Commission, http://history.ky.gov/Programs/KOHC/index.htm , recipient

of a major Oral History Association award for its path breaking approach to turning a broad archival collection into an explorable on-line resource.

A different kind of digital resource is the imposing Alexander Street Press project Oral History Online, http://alexanderstreetpress.com/products/orhi.htm, offering a huge cross-collection union catalog of oral histories internationally, which even in its early form includes capacities to locate and access a considerable amount of audio documentation.

At the other end of this spectrum are tools for working closely with more discrete collections, by individual or team researchers, community projects, and the like. Here the interest is less likely to be with wholesale web-access for open-ended exploration, and more likely to involve user-driven hands-on engagement with particular bodies of material, often for very particular purposes.

The work I have been doing with via The Randforce Associates http://www.randforce.com stands closer to this pole. Using Interclipper, http://www.interclipper.com/ software developed initially for focus-group recording and analysis in the market-research industry, one of our small-scale projects, for example, involves a collection of African American childhood stories being cross-referenced for use in community and classroom settings. Another is a law school alumni association's oral history project seeking to document educational and legal change as well as to develop a "memory bank" useful in alumni relations and fundraising. A third involves qualitative analysis of a discrete collection of intensive interviews conducted for a social-science project assessing group dynamics. All of these examples involve discrete collections that

require descriptive and cross-referencing tailored to specific project content, needs, and intended uses.

Scale tends to drive choices in tools and approach as well. The larger and more diverse the collection, the more overwhelming and complex the task of cross-referencing, annotation, and indexing becomes. Large archival projects accordingly, have tended to rely on approaches that can be standardized - through controlled vocabulary thesauri and standardized subject-headings - to the greatest extent possible. Their finding and navigation tools have tended to rely on full-text searches of pre-existing transcripts, which then lead directly, via embedded time codes, to interview segments represented by audio or video files.

Many have been experimenting with various forms of automated mark-up and referencing by which artificial intelligence (AI) can process immense volumes of material, modeling the thought process of researchers so as to narrow dramatically the counterproductively large number of 'hits' that cruder word or term searches tend to produce, even when refined through Boolean query combinations familiar to search-engine users. Such AI approaches are also increasingly significant in video work, where vast bodies of material can be automatically organized by tagging schemes, some of which feature more sophisticated analysis of visual qualities such as shot changes and rendered searchable by GPS location, face recognition, or other visual content tags.

There have been relatively fewer oral history applications of tools from what in the business, media, and governmental world is known as 'digital asset management.' But the implications and potential uses of techniques developing there are substantial. The large-volume video analysis offered by Streamsage software

http://www.streamsage.com/index.htm is one good example; another is the Informedia Project at Carnegie Mellon University, http://www.informedia.cs.cmu.edu/ . In fact, The History Makers, Inc, http://www.thehistorymakers.com/ , an ambitious Chicago-based project documenting African American culture and history and our partner in the focused childhood story project noted above, is working with CMU's Informedia to build an accessible video archive of many thousands of hours of video life history interviews collected to date, with 1200 hours already indexed in a recently completed prototype.

Tools for smaller-scale work tend to share the characteristics of qualitative analysis approaches familiar in the social sciences. Well-known software like N6 (formerly Nud*Ist) http://www.qsr.com.au/products/productoverview/product_overview.htm and Ethnograph http://www.qualisresearch.com/ have for some time provided sophisticated software for mapping complex interview or other data through marking text with a range of researcher-driven observational, thematic, or categorical organizers, flexible and capacious database tools for helping meet age-old researcher needs to organize, sort, and rearrange information, whether reading notes or more structured research data. The Interclipper software I have been working with is one of the first tools to permit this kind of qualitative analysis of video and audio directly. It allows us to note and cross-reference - as easily as we cross-reference the place, names, or explicit content of a story - the emotional intensity, body language, thematic meaning, or pedagogic uses observable by watching the video of a narrator telling that story.

These descriptions of scale imply somewhat more general dimensions of approach that are worth clarifying as relatively independent variables, since they are found to

varying degrees and combinations even in similarly scaled projects. Current and emerging approaches to mapping and accessing audio or video documentation can be helpfully organized - as on a literal map - as choices arrayed along four intersecting axes or dimensions, which singly and in combination have significant methodological implications.

ii.

Drawing on a comfortably old-fashioned library frame of reference, a first dimension can be said to revolve around an axis with cataloging at one end and indexing at the other. Traditionally, the purpose of a catalog is to help you find a needed or relevant book, and the purpose of an index is to help locate content of interest within that book once you have found it. These are very different functions, but modern information tools are changing each and consequently narrowing the distance between them, opening up an intriguing middle ground.

No longer limited to the author plus one or two Library of Congress subject headings cards that could lead to a book referenced in traditional card catalogs, digital catalogs can reach more deeply into the content of books, identifying sources through multiple search tags, and varied combinations among tags, where there is material of interest even when this is not likely to be identified with the book's major subject-heading identifiers. Such catalogs offer greater power for describing materials precisely and in many diverse ways, and hence vastly amplify meaningful access. In doing this, however, such descriptors still necessary tend to be relatively general subject headings, and do not necessarily identify or connect to specific passages.

Indexes have always been different in this respect. For hundreds of years, indexing has offered flexible tools for identifying very precise content, and dimensions of meaning or abstract theme as well, with no privileging or narrowing of opportunities in the process: when the index of a book directs readers to page 312, they have access to the full text surrounding the identified point or passage.

The traditional book index, in this sense, is less a restrictive filter or funnel than it is a kind of hyper-textual alternative to linear reading, a way to explore the book in whole or part, driven by interest and inquiry, rather than by the linear sequence of presentation. Indexes offer a way to follow themes or threads as these weave through the volume as a whole. In confronting demanding academic or scholarly books, I've told my students for years, it's always a good idea to study the index, which can be seen as offering a quickly apprehended schematic overview of the book's central concerns and approach. These are made particularly vivid in the way master-idea headings jump out at the reader via the long indented lists of references and sub-references that only such headings (and not others less central to the argument or content) command.

Digitization is transforming the power of a traditional index as significantly as it is transforming subject-heading cataloguing, in that various terms and dimensions of terms can be so easily combined in any order to filter and search the contents. Additionally, in digital realms there is no inherent barrier to extending the concept of indexing from one book to a shelf of related books, or more, though this capacity has to date has been deployed more commonly in the mode of full-text searches than in the richer, more complex mode of content indexing as such.

In electronic form, such approaches become more and more powerful, as if the entire book or group of books were being re-indexed on demand, with its content displayed and organized through the lens of any combination of index terms. The ease of manipulation and navigation, and the analytic capacity these confer, is one reason why contemporary information tools have so dramatically advanced the power of fluid, relational approaches to information, as this means the same content can easily be explored from a variety of contrasting directions.

All of these considerations characterize emerging approaches to working with oral histories, most of which are located somewhere on the broad middle ground that blends indexing and cataloging, a zone very much supported by new information tools and capacities. The contours of this ground, and their implications for method, become clearer when we consider this mapping it in some other distinct dimensions of practice.

iii.

The shift of emphasis from cataloging to richer indexing suggests another dimensional axis for emerging practice: the distinction between content-driven mapping and exploration, and what might be called meaning-driven, analysis-driven, or inquiry-driven mapping and exploration.

Many archivists and librarians have traditionally assumed this distinction to be central, and controlling. It is the job of archivists to map content broadly, mainly by focusing on whole units such as collections, or perhaps specific interviews, rather than particular passages within documents. Archivists have generally been reluctant to

privilege any particular approach to meaning or inquiry, much less to incorporate it in their taxonomies. In a recent discussion on the H-Oral electronic oral history discussion forum, for example, an American archivist termed anything other than collection-or interview-level indexing to be 'ethically problematic':

As an archivist it's not my job to create new meaning, it is just to try to stabilize the meaning of a recording or document in relation to the larger grouping from which it comes - to maintain it as best as possible within the intellectual context of its creation and use. Making new meaning is the job of a researcher using the materials. [A. Kolovos, posting to H-Oral Discussion List, November 17, 2004]

This is an understandable posture in traditional archiving, but its limitations in dealing with oral history audio and video are manifest since, as noted earlier, without being able to get closer to passages of interest researchers simply will not be able to explore primary documentation given the time demanded by listening to or viewing recordings. This is exactly why most audio and video archives are so underutilized.

But the concept of referencing dimensions other than literal content is in no way a new or exotic one driven by media technology: indeed, it lies at the core of the most traditional indexing, as our previous discussion has suggested. When compared to the often unexamined assumptions informing reliance on the search engines and keywords that at the center of contemporary approaches to information, traditional indexing offers some instructive insights.

Most obviously, indexes are not limited to nominal terms or to explicit words or locutions, but can assign consistent terms that will group references to an event or place or person whatever the explicit term of reference may have been. For instance, interviewees

are unlikely always to refer to a particular strike with a consistent name, or with any name at all, when they are recalling anecdotes associated with it. But an indexer has no problem gathering these under one umbrella, to which those looking for alternative terms can easily be directed, rendering the index a far more subtle and flexible tool than a word search alone.

Indexes also can and do include referencing anything worth noting, from explicit nominal references to broader umbrella ideas to abstract themes, and as such an index is maximally responsive to a user or researcher's approach to analysis, in which particular avenues of inquiry not reducible to content alone are so likely to be the basis of cross-sectional searching and navigation. People in interviews do not say "And now I will tell a story about gender relations in farm work." They just tell a story—which an indexer can reference under whatever headings seem appropriate, from social relations, tools and technology, the business of farming, and so forth, so that a researcher interested in any of these will likely find their way to the story.

The distinction between content mapping and meaning mapping may have specific relevance to the promise of oral history, in that personal narratives are the ground informing broader reflection and analysis of everything from specific historical contexts to the dynamics of life course and personality to the workings of memory and narrativity.

So this relationship between content and meanings—and how it is embodied both in the design of exploratory tools and in their use in oral history practice—is worth noticing as a second dimension around which various emerging approaches to audio and video access can be arrayed.

iv.

A third dimension springs from the recognition that text transcriptions, even when not the “end,” remain very important and useful as a practical means for accessing the audio or video stream efficiently. In many cases, of course, they are already available as resources once it is determined to bring the original audio or video into use more actively. In others, it has generally been felt that transcripts and powerful word searches, for all their limits, provide the most efficient tools for moving around in media if they can be linked to the audio or video.

In many of the leading oral history projects and archives managing digital audio-video collections, this has been the predominant approach: general reliance on text as the route to more specific passages of audio and video data, through embedded time-coded links between transcription and particular portions of videos. Word-based searches speak to some of the archivists’ concerns in that they remain content-based, rather than driven by researcher-imposed themes, inquiries, or categories. And increasingly sophisticated word search tools move beyond the overly literal clumping of 'hits' and search “false positives”: context and proximity controls, for example, can help distinguish a search interested in 'bomb' and 'airplane' from one focused on 'bomb' and 'Broadway.'

But the limits of this approach are clearly the inverse of its strengths, which is why many approaches, including a number of those referenced above, have been seeking to transcend the limits of text for reaching dimensions of meaning or cross-referencing not explicit in the words of an interview, not to mention the potentially even broader range of content and meaning that is simply not lexical in any way.

In this regard, the degree and form of text-reliance in searching and organizing represents a third axis useful for organizing emerging approaches: At one end is near-total reliance on text, with all searches based on the words in transcripts synchronized seamlessly to the audio or video stream. At the other end is a near-total dispensing with transcription as unnecessary and unhelpful, in contrast to searching or navigation based on descriptive and analytic cross-referencing not mediated through interview transcripts. Most approaches are coming to be located somewhere in between these poles, with various combinations of transcript-based and transcript-independent cross-referencing.

v.

All of these considerations imply a final dimension by which emerging practices can be organized, though in a sense it offers a kind of summary axis consolidating the implications of the other spectra of variation we have surveyed.

Imagine a spectrum at one end of which is the essentially linear, funnel-like nature of search-engine queries, in which all possible references are treated similarly and the search is narrowed or particularized by restrictive or inclusive combinations that can zoom in on a more and more manageable group of 'hits.' At the other end of the spectrum is the multi-dimensional or multi-field approach of a database, in which any piece of data can be identified in an unlimited number of discrete fields for each of which a taxonomy of choices can be offered.

A neighborhood, for instance, can be identified as having a particular ethnic composition, a particular socio-economic status, an architectural character, a density level,

or a value of whatever variable might be of interest - it is the same neighborhood, but it can be identified in terms of its particular value in any of these variable fields. What can seem new and intimidating when terms like relational database are used has actually been quite common for a long time in common-sense usage. A cookbook might have a recipe for a Greek lamb stew indexed by ethnic origin, by type of dish, stew, and by both the general 'meat' and the specific 'lamb' - the variables are completely independent, and the book can be explored by initiating searches through any of them, in any order, which reveals how they are related and combined in the attributes of each recipe.

Such notions apply to meaning-mapping as well: In our childhood story project, for instance, a single anecdote related in an interview might be located by searching choices in a content field (say, the journey north); in a typology of biographical stories (say, leaving home or conflict with parents), or by a searching a menu of broader historical or cultural topics (say, the Great Migration). And unlike random searches that might combine such explicit terms, in these modes a richer exploration is possible—for instance, we could select all stories about conflict with parents sub-sorted by historical topic, or, alternatively, we could select all stories about the Great Migration sub-sorted by biographical theme. Either route would lead to our selected combination—leaving the South, conflict with parents, and the Great Migration -- but in getting there we would also have a chance to discover and explore a wide range of combinations we might never have thought to look for.

Taken together, our map of emergent approaches to working with audio-video materials involves four overlapping, interrelated, but conceptually and operationally distinct dimensions, or axes: 1) from cataloging to indexing, 2) from content-referencing to meaning or qualitative analysis referencing; 3) from text-transcript based audio or video access to direct or observational cross referencing of audio or video as such; and 4) from one-dimensional descriptions of a unit of data to a multi-dimensional, multi-field approach to data mapping.

I think it can safely be said that these distinctions are all very much in motion. Much of the 'action' in current software development for oral history involves seeking various ways in which the capacities of every approach can be combined and more effectively mobilized for working with the audio-video documentation at the heart of all oral history.

And what all of these approaches have in common, what defines the current and prospective development of the field in this regard, is that one way or the other, from large-scale archive to small community project to home and family collections, it is going to be more and more feasible to hear, see, browse, search, study, refine, select, export, and make use of audio and video extracts from oral histories directly - through engaging the primary documentation itself. In the future rapidly unfolding, this mode, rather than piles or even digital files of text transcription, will become the primary, preferred way to explore and use oral history. And that returns us to the problem with which this paper began - the implications of for method, operationally and conceptually, that flow from 'putting the oral back in oral history,' from this profound reorientation to the core orality, voice, and embodiment found in oral history documents.

III

At the current moment, many leading approaches to digital oral history collections in general, and to accessing their audio and video content in particular, remain closer to the first-mentioned end of each of these dimensions: they are closer to cataloging than indexing, they are more oriented to content-mapping than to meaning-mapping, they are generally more reliant on transcript-driven searches than non-transcript or observational referencing, and they seem more comfortable with rely more on to linear searches rather than relational database approaches to organization and navigation. These preferences are driven to a certain degree by scale, to an additional degree by the archival and library collection-management auspices of most of these projects, and to some extent as well by the state of current technology. But in oral history, they are driven perhaps more than anything else by cultural assumptions about research and practice that are not changing nearly as fast as the tools altering our relationship to audio and video data.

The challenge is much broader than oral history, of course. Changes in our relationship to audio and video in the broadest sense are manifest, wherever one turns in a media/internet culture recently drunk on the excitement of new capacities to access and manipulate audio and video. We engage a world of media at the click of a mouse. Cell phones, TVs, computers, and MP3 players are in the process of becoming more or less the same thing in terms of circulating and delivering media. And as a consequence, it is coming to seem, we confront the danger of drowning in an ocean of data—or, which is also more or less the same thing, falling into the most glancing relationship to complex

content through the superficial, instant-gratification consumption of brief clips in blogs or You-Tube and the like.

Once the excitement of this unlimited capacity to immerse ourselves in media peaks, I believe developing better ways of organizing and navigating content meaningfully will move to the center of attention, and not just in the mass-access world Google has created and will continue to dominate. Closer to home, the increasingly manifest need will be for customized approaches that more systematically and meaningfully combine mapping, exploration, and use in ways that respond to more particular needs and purposes.

For oral history, I believe that the most promising direction in this respect, the direction which emergent methods have both the need and capacity to develop, will be towards the opposite pole of each of the axes I have described: towards complex indexing, towards the mapping of meanings as well as content, towards alternatives to transcript word-searches, and, especially, towards multi-dimensional or multi-field cross-referencing in something closer to a relational data-base framework.

But oral historians are simply not yet comfortable thinking of their work in these terms, perhaps because of the field's grounding in traditional archiving, at the one end, and documentary production, at the other, a point to which I will return presently. And change will not be easy. Aside from the daunting technical, financial, and organizational demands of new approaches to collection management, and aside from the ways in which the appeal of inertia is actually increased, rather than diminished, by the intimidating scale of the challenge, I believe moving in this direction requires a deeper cultural and intellectual reorientation in the way oral historians define the nature of their work—

broadening the conception of method beyond its focus on interviewing, the point with which this chapter began.

Here again, the challenge is certainly more intellectual and cultural, in a disciplinary sense, than it is technological. And to a surprisingly encouraging degree, greater interdisciplinary experience and communication may do more than new tools alone to facilitate less inhibited movement in new directions for historians.

For the truth is one that will be readily apparent to readers of this volume in a way less likely to be the case for an oral history audience: the notions I have advanced are close to commonplace and self-evident in other fields, particularly the social sciences and the qualitative analysis methodologies developed there. The “other end” of the axes I have described, a direction in which I think oral historians will be moving, is the territory that has been most attractive in software development focused on researcher or user-driven qualitative analysis, or outside oral history in fields such as digital asset management or market research, as illustrated by some of the examples from my own practice previously discussed.

Social scientists are fully comfortable with the notion that the significance in data is not explicit or nominal, something to be navigated via the transcript, but rather something identified in response to an inquiry, and then coded for sorting and analysis as such. A social psychologist documenting and studying conflict in a playground may not need or want to know whether the kids began fighting over a pail or a ball—the project is more likely to be concerned with developing and applying a typology of conflict-initiating behaviors, and its coders are trained to apply these consistently to categorize a body of video documentation so it can be studied meaningfully.

In my own interdisciplinary practice, it has been striking to me how unnatural such an approach feels to historians. Our work with oral history digital indexing frequently involves helping clients develop cross-referencing taxonomies for their projects. We know the syntax and capacities of the software we use, and protocols for deploying it efficiently. But the client knows their material, and its intended uses. Bringing these together—which the clients generally expect will be a matter of technological training and tool acquisition—more generally turns out to be something closer to a good graduate seminar.

The basic concept is easily conveyed and understood, often through the cookbook metaphor introduced earlier: a given recipe may be Chinese, made of tofu, and Very Spicy. These are not either/or choices of descriptor, but rather dimensions of the same thing. And there could be many additional independent dimensions (cooking time, nutritional value, presence or absence of nuts or other allergens, with which any individual recipe could be described, and within which choices for organizing a cookbook database of 10,000 recipes could be organized.

But what does this mean for the anecdotes in a story? For a given project, if every passage of interest could be mapped in at least three independent domains (our software offers three fields with codes assigned from drop-down controlled vocabulary menus) then what ARE those dimensions? What are the independent dimensions of historical meaning and reference, for the project, equivalent to our cookbook's ethnicity (item: Chinese), composition (item: vegetarian/tofu), and spiciness (item: very hot)? And for each dimension identified, what is the project-specific optimal granularity for mapping that dimension: is Chinese/French/Italian sufficient, or should it be broken down to Mandarin, Hunan, Cantonese, etc.?

In doing this work, we are discovering how exciting it is to think about interviews in this way—to experiment with different kinds of lenses, at different refractions, all of which reveal the material into a distinctly different ways, and to then think about how these can be combined and manipulated to permit navigation and use in wonderfully expanded and fluid ways.

And so what began as an interest in particular tools for working with audio and video documentation directly, something previously unreachable, is evolving through practice into a fascination with the intellectual implications of this altered relationship to content: what it means to routinely approach historical testimony and narrative as inherently three-dimensional or more, an approach that, beyond offering new modes of exploration, permits new insights for questioning and interpreting what is being explored.

## IV

Let me draw some of these ideas together by considering their implications not only for collection management, research, and scholarship, but also for production, shifting focus at the end of this paper to documentary, broadly considered, which so often the "end" product of oral history, in terms of public representation. Having noted at the outset that this also seemed outside the realm of a methodology focused on interviewing, I want to note here a powerful, closing irony of sorts: that moving to a more multidimensional view of method permits the concept as a whole to become more unitary and encompassing, applicable to work in oral history from the initial interview to its final distillation and representation. The kind of general reorientation in method I am advancing

stands out in even sharper relief when considered against the backdrop of conventional assumptions about documentary.

i.

Documentary has been the mode in which oral history has most generally, and usefully, been mobilized for communicative, historical, and political purposes. And it has been in effect the long-standing solution of choice to the problem I have identified here. It has been the main resource for engaging and presenting those realms of meaning embodied in oral and embodied performance, the realms and dimensions that make our oral history collections valuable as such. Whatever the particular approach or format, documentary involves virtually by definition an exploration of a broader body of documentation in search of desired qualities or content, which leads in turn to some selection, arrangement, incorporation, and presentation of meaning grounded in that documentation, which takes the form of a presentation.

In documentary, of course, the 'naturalness' or inevitability of text transcription is not the unexamined core assumption, though neither is its opposite, the subordination of text, since the documentary approach can be similar whether the object is a film or a book such as Theodore Rosengarten's *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Knopf, 1974) or my own *Portraits in Steel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) in which oral histories were combined with Milton Rogovin's photographs so that images and text could represent parallel and resonant modes of documentary portraiture.

Rather, the central assumption in documentary is the inevitability and indeed - as I have argued elsewhere - the indispensability of editorial intervention, selection, shaping, arrangement, and even manipulation. Documents may be found, even if this is perhaps

less straightforward a matter than it can seem. But documentaries are not found - they are made, although it is also easy to avoid thinking carefully about what is involved in the process. Rather than mediating oral history through text, documentary requires the mediating of the oral history as a whole through some critical intelligence - the editor's, the artist's, the director's, the curator's, the producer's.

Put differently, if audio/video oral history content itself has characteristically been seen as 'raw' documentation almost impossible to search or navigate analytically, oral history documentation has become meaningful, sharable, and usable only when it is 'cooked' - in the form of a documentary selection or arrangement then served up to consumers. This 'cooking' has seemed as necessary, natural, and inevitable in documentary as text transcription has seemed in working with oral history collections. Whatever the uses, political content, community purpose, or artistic and expressive intent, documentary has always presumed this kind of culinary role.

But what happens if that assumption, too, can be dramatically recast, or discarded altogether, when the potential of new technological tools is fully unfolded? Let me suggest two lines of approach that describe what is, in fact, happening already, each of which speaks to this question.

One - the more obvious and visible to date - involves the crucial issue of access and privilege, where new modes are so dramatically democratizing access to the tools and processes of documentary production as to transform the approach profoundly. The most immediate and dramatic effect of new tools and techniques is to distribute widely the capacity for documentary production. The digital revolution has taken film from the darkroom and the movie studio into anyone's computer and elementary school classroom.

It is redistributing to students, families, teachers, artists, social scientists, and activists the capacity to manage and exploit extensive bodies of documentation, and to produce meaningful versions of it. All now have, easily at hand, exciting and increasingly affordable tools for consolidating and communicating the meanings they find in materials that matter to them, and for purposes that matter to them.

The radical simplification and distribution of what had been highly restricted skills and equipment is, in this sense, surely transforming what up to now has been the privilege of the documentary producer - a transformation with political implications that are as unbounded as they are straightforward. A wide-open door changes not only access, but the very nature of what takes place within, of what can be done, by whom and for what purposes.

However there is another implication of new technology that is far less obvious, but potentially even more powerful and transformative. Here I refer to the implicit challenge posed to the assumption of pathed linearity, an assumption embedded in documentary production.

Most documentaries, even experimental ones that challenge the form, are necessarily a selection out of a broader body of material. They represent a linear product: a path, through the material that embodies, supports, represents, or evokes a story being told, a point being made, a context or mood or texture being evoked and conveyed, This is the definitional difference between documentation and documentary. But it is precisely this distinction, as such, that new tools are subverting, in some potentially very exciting ways.

Almost all production in film and video now is taking place in such digital modes, and oral history editing is rapidly moving into this realm as well: it can safely be predicted that in ten years tape will not be used at all in any form, whether magnetic or DAT. There will be little use for and of CD-ROMs. All material will be in digital file formats for editing, and for recording as well, as witness the new generation of recorders that continue, quaintly, to look like tape recorders - but in actuality are small computers with enhanced audio and video recording capacity.

This digital transformation has only begun to be appreciated, even - perhaps especially - by those who work with these media routinely. Michael Haller, developer of the indexing software Interclipper, began as a documentary filmmaker, and he likes to observe that while everyone is now doing their editing and production in non-linear digital editing modes, they still approach what they are producing in linear, analog terms: as a documentary that will begin here and end there, telling its story through a sequential arrangement of whatever materials are selected and refined through the digital editing process, and leaving everything else behind, obscured in the archive or collection or left as outtakes from which the selection emerged. In this context, what would a contrasting method for documentary be like, one that proceeded from the fluid, flexible, multi-pathed non-linear access to core documentation?

ii.

The question is really the very same one we have been considering at the other end of the oral historical process. The domain of method expands excitingly when the body of audio and video documentation can be explored in a searchable and easily navigated

environment, a platform for the generation of paths and versions on a far more fluid, ongoing basis. In such modes, every search and inquiry can lead to a different focus, or material for a different story, and each one is as instantly and continually as accessible and easily constructed as any other.

The implications of this for documentary are as profound as for research with recorded interviews. To take a prosaic but instructive example, consider the family video collections that millions are now being encouraged to transform into little documentary movies. Ask whether instead of one, two, or even a file folder full of such pre-cast movies or web-pages of mpegs, it wouldn't be more interesting to imagine the material so organized and accessible that such a path could be instantly generated in response to any visiting relative, or a child's birthday, or a grandparent's funeral, or the sale of a house in the hometown, or whatever might be occasioning interest in the relevant resources found in the video record? Such a located selection could easily be displayed, saved, and worked into a presentational form, if it proved interesting. If not, it could be released to return to the database, awaiting some later inquiry or use.

Such notions apply to more complex settings and to more complex collections of documentation, wherein accessibility for very different dimensions of question, evaluation, and application would make an easily navigable map far more useful and interesting than a pre-selected itinerary. This is precisely what new modes offer, and as this is realized, so too is the potential to imagine documentary itself as a natural extension of such non-linear modes, rather than as a linear path and destination. The documentary impulse and intelligence becomes more responsive, contingent, and sharable.

This is not a new idea by any means, and in fact its ancient provenance offers yet another dimension in which new tools ought best be seen as permitting a return and rediscovery, rather than in invocation to invention. Any reference work is a compilation of answers awaiting questions - as, indeed, is any book, the instantly and fluidly navigable book being in this sense the mother of all hypertext instruments in contrast to the scrolls it so easily superseded centuries ago. In this very same sense, new tools need only mean that audio and video documentation can become a similarly liberating, flexible, resource for whatever questions and uses, situationally, are presented, and by whatever diversity of users.

iii

The implications of such a reorientation of our relation to documentary source material are suggestive, and potentially quite profound in practice. Beyond returning the power of 'voice' in oral history, digital indexing of audio and video thus speaks to intellectual and political questions central to oral history discourse. The much-touted democratic promise of oral history has been in fact usually been confronted by a variant of the raw-cooked choices noted above: restricted either to the 'input' into collections, or to the audience receipt of 'output.' In-between has been the author, the mediator, the documentary filmmaker, the TV or radio producer, the shapers of whatever is selected from those oral histories for representation in public forms, whether through films, exhibits, books, radio and TV documentaries, and the like.

But as have hoped to demonstrate here, new digital tools open the significant non-linear, fluidly multi-pathed ground between these poles. Because audio/video indexing

means the entire content can be usefully, intelligently, instrumentally searched and accessed at a rich level, it becomes a great deal more than a 'raw' collection. And the same tools providing that access permit anyone - continually - to 'cook' - to explore a collection and select and order meaningful materials.

Implicit in this approach are whole new modes of publication and public access. Imagine, for example, the value of producing a broadly distributed collections of richly mapped and thoroughly searchable interviews, music, and performance, or other field documentation, in which users might find and make their own meanings. In producing such a documentary source, with authorship would reside not in fixed path making but rather in the richness and openness of the mapping coordinates, codes, and finding tools offered to users.

Such modalities suggest something even more significant and potentially transformative in our relationship to audio and video documentation itself, a deeply and essentially non-linear orientation that I term a post-documentary sensibility. With accessible, meaningful, fluid, and non-privileged access to the content of oral history, the authority of the mediating intelligence or documentary authorship is displaced by a sharable, dialogic capacity to explore, select, order, and interpret. In this mode, the privilege of a fixed documentary version that necessarily marginalizes other meanings or stories in the material - - the very notion of document as starting point and documentary as product - is displaced by a notion of documentation and documentary as process - as an ongoing, contextually contingent, fluid construction of meaning.

As I have been emphasizing in a variety of ways, it really isn't about tools or technologies—it is about practice. Change in tools and technologies is a constant, but

changes in practice—in the most fundamental imagination of what we are doing and why—are not so inevitable, or easily predictable. It may be that the money and power behind the mass digitization of everything will overwhelm us, and that the kind of sensibilities I see as the greatest potential at this moment will end up as remote as all those subtle and fluid information skills collapsing before the incredible power of quick-'n-dirty search engines.

But I don't think so. A post-documentary sensibility in film is really nothing more than the post-interview sensibility I have been arguing as the most exciting emergent potential for oral history method. The two come together in a unitary conception of that middle ground—a many-dimensioned field in which active interrogation and exploration is a constant possibility, and in which this process stands at the very center of the notion of method itself. By making this possible with previously intractable audio and video documents, and by showing the power of this as a more general orientation and sensibility whatever the nature of the documents and the uses made of them, new digital tools and the rich landscape of practice they support are proving powerful resources in restoring one of the foundational appeals of oral history, and a worthy object of method: to open new dimensions of understanding and engagement through the broadly inclusive sharing and interrogation of memory.