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This exploratory study examined the information-seeking and information-use behaviors of individuals who work with oral histories. Eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with scholars and archivists. The study identified a range of interrelated tasks that these users engage in, including: question formulation, discovery of collections, information-seeking within collections, working with tapes, working with transcripts, use of other primary source materials in conjunction with oral histories, the creation of original oral histories, note-taking, and analysis. Finally, this paper discusses the implications of these user behaviors for oral history repositories.

Headings:

Oral history

Information-seeking behavior

Sound archives

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE INFORMATION BEHAVIOR OF USERS OF
ORAL HISTORIES

by
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Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Background	3
Oral Histories in the Archives	3
Information Behavior of Historians	6
Methodology	14
Findings	16
Why Use Oral Histories?	16
Information-Seeking Practices	19
Information-Use Practices	27
Implications for Libraries and Archives	29
Conclusion	35
Works Cited	36
Appendix A: Interview Protocols	42

Introduction

Oral history makes a unique contribution to scholarship by filling gaps in the documentary record, offering insight into individual experiences of history, and capturing the power of the spoken word. These very merits entail particular challenges to description and access. Institutions that steward these materials already acknowledge their value, and are increasingly making them available by digitizing their collections and publishing descriptions, transcripts, and audio on the open Web. Danielson (2001) wrote, “faculty, students, and researchers increasingly want to use these materials in teaching to bring home the impact of people and events from the past and in scholarly production as primary sources” (para. 2).

As libraries and archives invest significant time, money, staff, and other resources in large-scale digitization of primary source material, they must give appropriate attention to the design of access systems that meet the needs of their users. While digitization significantly enhances the potential accessibility of these valuable primary source materials, many oral history collections offer minimal options for navigation and exploration. As Soergel et al. (2002) observed, the “revolutionary change in physical access has not been matched by corresponding improvements in intellectual access” (p. 1).

Oral history collections hold interest for faculty, graduate students, undergraduates, independent scholars; K-12 educators, genealogists, documentarians, and

the general public. They are used for a variety of purposes and in a range of academic disciplines, from anthropology, to history, to linguistics. Negotiating the priorities, concerns, behaviors, and preferences of these stakeholders is a necessary, but challenging aspect of hosting oral history collections online.

In her 2003 examination of how historians use primary source materials, Tibbo remarked,

With the revolution in description well underway, it is time to seek a transformation in access. Mounting finding aids, that is, providing networked access to them, does not make them ‘accessible,’ discoverable, or useful. Optimized ‘accessible access’ can only come with a thorough understanding of user needs and information-seeking behaviors (p. 11).

This study explores the information-seeking and information-use behaviors of scholars and archivists who work with oral histories. Developing a deeper understanding of the needs and behaviors of these stakeholders is essential in designing systems that enrich user experiences and enhance access to these valuable materials.

Background

Oral History in the Archives

Grele (2007) traces the origins of modern oral history practice in the United States to Alan Nevins and the Columbia University Oral History Research Office, firmly situating oral history as “archival practice.” Describing the archive at Columbia, Grele explained that “oral history interviews were to be collected to become the basis of the publication of more history books by people other than the people who gathered the interviews, and the individual oral history itself was to be treated as a book,” meaning that the audio would be transcribed, and the resulting manuscript edited and cataloged for inclusion in the repository (p. 35). In this context, concerns about indexing, ease of browsing, and the

rights of the authors (i.e., the narrators of the oral histories) led to the prevalence of the transcript as the primary point of access for researchers.

Researchers continue to rely heavily on transcripts for many of the same reasons, even though “current practice considers the *recording* the primary document” (MacKay, 2006, p. 22). The merits of recordings and limitations of transcripts have been widely explored (Frisch, 2006; Portelli, 2006). Jessee, Zembrzycki, & High (2010) succinctly explained that, “Ultimately, privileging transcripts over voices results in a significant loss of the meta-narrative meanings inherent in interviews at an early stage in the post-interview period.” Yet, researchers remain bound to transcripts given the time-consuming process of listening to tape (Grele, 1987). Current database systems have not met the challenge of providing both digestible and meaningful segmentation of audio files, or sufficiently granular metadata (De Jong, Oard, Heeren, & Ordelman, 2008, p. 5; Jessee et al., 2010). As early as 1979 Portelli urged oral historians to stop looking for better methods of transcription, and instead focus on improving access to the audio itself, yet archives are only beginning to heed this call (Portelli, 2006, p. 33).

Swain (2003) published a comprehensive overview of the scholarship surrounding the evolving role of oral histories in archives. The literature included in her analysis focuses on the challenges of working with material that was long considered too subjective for serious study by academics, that poses unique problems with copyright and permissions, and which may not be adequately described with traditional MARC cataloging or archival description. Despite these ongoing concerns, she remarked on “the general lack of scholarship by archivists and librarians in the last ten years concerning oral history’s implications for information professionals.” As Swain also observed, recent

literature on oral history archives tends to focus on the more technical issues of providing electronic access (p. 156).

La Barre and Tilley (2012) argued that a bibliographic record should ideally serve “as a sufficiently informative document surrogate that enables accurate assessments of relevance.” While De Jong et al. (2008) found that archives frequently provide rich description of oral histories at the item level, enhancing discovery beyond proper names and locations continues to challenge information professionals (p. 3). There has been considerable discussion in the archival literature about the difficulty of facilitating intellectual access to non-traditional media, including audio recordings. Grimsley & Wynne (2009) explained that, “Because oral histories resemble archival materials in some ways, but also share similarities with books and visual and/or sound recordings, they do not always fall neatly into most established standards familiar to catalogers and/or archivists.”

The nature of oral histories as spontaneous spoken performance creates significant obstacles to description. Oral histories frequently lack a traditional narrative or literary structure. Portelli (2004) wrote, “The novelty of the situation and the effort at diction accentuate a feature of all oral discourse--that of being a ‘text’ in the making, which includes its own drafts, preparatory materials and discarded attempts” (p. 24). Narrators digress, move fluidly in time and space, interrupt themselves, and do not adhere strictly to the questions asked by the interviewer. A bibliographic record based solely on the summary provided by the interviewer, or on the topics that took up the most time in the interview may exclude valuable themes, anecdotes, or contextual information.

Current metadata often precludes searches based on thematic content. The oral historian Michael Frisch (2006) observed that archivists traditionally “map content broadly” and shy away from providing description beyond the collection or interview level in the name of preserving objectivity (p. 107). He posited that, “Archivists have generally been reluctant to privilege any particular approach to meaning or inquiry, much less to incorporate it in their taxonomies.” However, as Frisch observes, this may severely limit the utility of large audiovisual collections given the impossibility of traditional browsing and skimming.

Users increasingly expect rapid, remote access to archival materials. Danielson (2001) argued that, for many users, “Sitting in an institution to listen to materials, not to mention waiting for them to be prepared, never enters their minds as a reasonable option” (para. 5). Citing Perks (1999), Swain (2003) concluded, “The twenty-first-century archives will provide access to its holdings through multimedia approaches involving ‘audio-visual recordings with maps, photographs, documents, transcripts and commentary.’” (p. 156).

Innovative approaches to natural language processing may facilitate these changes on a large scale. De Jong et al. (2008) provide a comprehensive introduction to current technology that might usefully be applied to digitized oral history tapes and transcripts to enable easier browsing, automated metadata creation and segmentation, and Soergel et al. (2002) discuss interface design for large oral history collections in the context of the Shoah Foundation’s archive of Holocaust testimonies.

Information Behavior of Historians

Studies on the information seeking behavior and information management practices of users of archives abound. They report on an array of uses of primary source materials and describe the outstanding needs of different communities. However, published research on users of oral histories in particular is scarce.

Case (1991a) describes historians as “. . . people who read, condense, collect, assimilate, transform, and synthesize written records of past times” (p. 63). Based on this functional definition, I contend that the information seeking behavior of historians serves as a productive framework for examining the behaviors of the respondents interviewed for this study, though they may not all self-identify as historians. This definition proves problematic in another respect, in that it confines non-textual material to the role of supplement to the written record. Increasingly, scholars accept that oral histories stand on their own as historical evidence.

Despite its limitations, Case’s definition has been reiterated in many subsequent treatments of the information behavior of historians, and helps to explain why they have proven such a fruitful population for study. Historians rely heavily on archives (indeed, their work depends on documents and artifacts); they work with a variety of source materials, from personal diaries, to photographs and films; and they form deep relationships with information professionals (primarily archivists).

Though many articles mention the lack of research on particular aspects of their information behavior (Duff & Johnson, 2002; Delgadillo & Lynch, 1999; Anderson, 2004), to date, historians have served as objects of study for research on information-seeking (in the library, in archives, and on-line); information needs; personal information management; and knowledge acquisition. They are routinely included in general

studies of the information behavior of both humanists (e.g., Wiberly, 1991) and social scientists (Hernon, 1984; Rhee, 2010). Their behavior has been studied using a variety of methodologies, including citation analysis (Graham, 2000); query analysis (Choi & Rasmussen, 2004), semi-structured interviews (Case, 1991a; Cole, 1998; Delgadillio & Lynch, 1999); task analysis (Toms & Duff, 2002); mail and web surveys (Anderson, 2004; Tibbo, 2003; Dalton & Charnigo, 2004; Duff, Craig, & Cherry, 2004a); and longitudinal studies (Andersen, 1998).

In this review, I identify the major characteristics and themes that have emerged from this body of work, focusing specifically on historians' discovery, organization, and use of primary source materials, while acknowledging that it is impossible to fully divorce this activity from their general information behavior.

In a much-cited report, Uva (1997) developed a five-stage model of the historian's research process: "(1) problem selection (including preliminary work and hypotheses), (2) detailed planning of data collection, (3) data collection, (4) analysis and interpretation of data, and (5) presentation of findings" (Andersen, 1998, p. 4). Though in practice this process is rarely if ever linear, Uva's stages have provided a fertile basis for subsequent studies, and his model offers a useful structure for discussion of the information behavior of historians as reported in the literature, and a valuable starting point for this study.

Problem selection has proven an elusive stage to study. Historians often begin their research with ill-defined problems or inadequacies in their knowledge or a vague sense of gaps in the scholarship in a particular area (Duff & Johnson, 2002). Belkin (1980) describes this mindset as an anomalous state of knowledge (ASK). Historians may

also find inspiration for research in the suggestions of a colleague or advisor, previous research they have undertaken, and current events (Orbach, 1991). Uva (1997), citing Rundell (1970) remarked that historians often proceed from sources to topics, rather than the other way around. Similarly, Orbach (1991) remarked that the thesis or hypothesis often develops only after the historian begins her research.

Perhaps more so for historians than other humanists, thorough planning is required for the data collection stage. The primary sources that historians rely so completely on for their work often exists in geographically dispersed repositories. Historians must therefore make travel arrangements, correspond with the repositories, and do any preparatory information gathering well in advance.

For historians, context is paramount. Duff & Johnson (2002) reported that historians begin by reading all the available secondary literature on an area before searching for primary sources. They also noted the importance of context when evaluating primary sources, writing, “. . . historians are systematic and purposeful in the way they go about building context, which enables them to find and interpret relevant material. Although the building of contextual knowledge is time-consuming, requiring broad searches through vast amounts of archival material, it appears to be an essential part of the historical method” (p. 488). They observed that historians preferred to use paper finding aids at the beginning of the research process because they felt they got a better sense of the whole collection by being able to see and flip through whole pages. The need for context relates to the desire for thoroughness. Historians consistently mentioned a fear of missing something and being faulted by colleagues, critics, and superiors for neglecting an important piece of evidence.

The data collection stage has generated the most discussion in the information science literature, as it forms the core of the historian's relationship with the repository and its resources. Historians consult an array of resources during this stage, from monographs and journals, to archival materials, to colleagues. They rely most heavily on primary source material, which they often seek out in archives and special collections (Duff & Johnson, 2002). Secondary sources such as monographs and journals remain crucial sources. Indeed, Dalton & Charnigo (2004) reported results from a survey and citation analysis that showed that the frequency of use of secondary literature has increased over the past several decades.

The literature routinely divides information seeking strategies into formal (e.g., print and electronic bibliographic tools) and informal (e.g., colleagues, footnotes). Anderson (2004) remarked that historians' information seeking behavior "is characterized by the use of a diverse range of retrieval methods, but a preference for one or two 'core' effective retrieval methods from a range of print, electronic, and informal methods" (p. 113).

As they work through the research process, relying on a combination of strategies, historians continually reevaluate and redefine their ideas, strategies, and hypotheses. This behavior is consistent with Bates' (1989) berry-picking model of information seeking.

In her large-scale survey of historians, Tibbo (2003) found that "traditional methodologies," remain prevalent. These methods include searching printed bibliographies, finding aids, repository guides, and the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, an irregularly updated volume.

When using formal strategies, such as searching a library catalog, historians cite name as the primary access point. Duff & Johnson (2002) noted, however, that date, place, and format are also heavily used. Subject access has become increasingly desirable, especially for social historians, who often study everyday people, whose names are not easily recognizable (Woodward, 2008; Orbach, 1991). Given the nature of archival arrangement and description, subject access has traditionally been difficult to provide. Tibbo (1994) wrote, “Sometimes finding aids will contain an index, but most access to archival materials has been through provenance systems rather than subject indexing. When indexing has taken place there has been little or no standardization of indexing practice or terminology among repositories” (p. 611). Anderson (2004) noted that archival materials themselves often become sources as “information in one set of records points to other related information, corroborating or contradictory evidence in other files, collections or archives” (p. 90). However, Duff & Johnson (2002) argued that, “Although historians often speak about the role of serendipity in their discovery of relevant material, there is strong evidence to suggest that this process is influenced less by serendipity and more by the deliberate tactics of the expert researcher.” (p. 494).

As Duff & Johnson (2002) observed, “Many studies have noted the preference of humanities scholars for informal channels to information over more systematic searches” (p. 474). Tibbo (2003) reported that 98 percent of the historians she surveyed located materials “by following leads and citations in printed sources,” confirming the findings of several previous studies that identified citation-chaining as a preferred method (Stieg, 1981; Stevens, 1997; Anderson, 2004; Dalton & Charnigo, 2004; Duff & Johnson, 2004). Anderson (2004) proposed an explanation for this preference, arguing that informal

leads often provide context and mediation. For example, historians can rapidly evaluate a source mentioned by a colleague or author based on what they know about that individual and his or her work and the context of the conversation or text. This process of evaluation becomes much more difficult and time-consuming when looking at a simple bibliographic record.

Colleagues are frequently described as important informal sources for historians. Talja (2002) found that “. . . historians enjoyed sharing tales of their detective work in finding original sources,” (p. 7) an example of what he calls social sharing. In addition to social sharing, Talja found that historians engage in directive sharing (i.e., between teacher and student or senior and junior colleagues). Dalton & Charnigo (2004) reported that more than half of the historians they surveyed “found talking to colleagues an occasion when information was serendipitously discovered and a few identified talking to colleagues as their most frequent way of discovering information for their search” (p. 415). Case (1991b) wrote that historians participate in an “invisible college,” that is, an informal information sharing network.

Historians cultivate close (though not always unproblematic) relationships with archivists. Rhee (2010) wrote that historians rely on archivists to monitor information, specifically keeping them abreast of new or unprocessed collections. In interviews, historians speak respectfully of archivists, and emphasize their importance in orienting them to collections. They regard archivists as the authoritative source on what the collection contains (Delgadillo & Lynch, 1999; Duff & Johnson, 2002).

Historians rely heavily on browsing, specifically scanning and monitoring. History students are trained to scan for names (Cole, 2000) and are encouraged by their

professors to practice browsing (Delgadillo & Lynch, 1999). Duff & Johnson (2004) explained that historians use scanning as a way to identify relationships. Describing the practice identified first reported by Cole, they wrote, “By ‘scan reading,’ they [historians] are then able to slice through new material and focus on that name whenever it appears in the text. Through this method, relationships between individual companies or persons and events become clear and patterns emerge” (p. 478). Though the primary source materials that they work most closely with rarely lend themselves to indexing, Dalton & Charnigo (2004) found that historians use indexes and bibliographies to monitor developments in their field. They wrote, “At a time when being informed about the literature is more important than ever, historians find it increasingly difficult to keep up with scholarship in their areas of specialization” (p. 415).

The emphasis on browsing also relates to the almost sacred concept of serendipity in the historian’s work. Rhee (2010) wrote that “Historians intentionally browse bookshelves and internet sources, trusting in serendipity” (n.p.), and Orbach (1991) found that historians described uncovering “hidden treasure” as one of the pleasures of historical research (Orbach, 1991). On a more practical level, Anderson (2004) explained that “The elements of browsing and serendipity provide historians with a means of identifying uncatalogued or poorly catalogued material and are the only ways historians might locate previously unused material” (p. 99).

Given the dispersed nature of their source material, historians often face barriers to access that differ from other scholars. Duff & Johnson (2004) noted that “many historians have experienced problems because access to sources was limited by geographic location or finding aids were lacking, or because of the fragile condition or

format of a source” (p. 16). One historian in their study even remarked that a protective archivist had become an obstacle in her work.

Rhee (2010) remarked that historians actually begin the process of organizing information during the data gathering stage. They continue this organization in the analysis and interpretation phase. Case (1991b) studied the information management practices of 20 academic historians. He found that historians organize materials first by physical characteristics like format, size, and age and only then by topic. They rely on associations, memory, and metaphor to categorize and retrieve relevant items from their collections and may trust their own recall rather than more formal retrieval processes to locate books, documents, even important passages. Finally, historians accumulate and surround themselves with their own collections of documents. Case wrote, “Part of what makes an intellectual workplace ‘effective’ is its very crowdedness: the goal of having important and frequently used things in view and close at hand” (p. 665).

Methodology

This study draws upon methodology described by La Barre & Tilley (2012), who studied the information behavior of individuals who work with folktales. Their study used task analysis to examine researchers’ behavior in discovering and using folktales.

Vakkari (2003) defines task analysis as a set of methodologies that allow researchers to “describe and evaluate the interactions between people and their (work) environments in terms of sequences of actions and cognitive processes” (as cited in La Barre & Tilley, 2012).

Eighteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of individuals who work with oral histories. Respondents included six faculty

members (in history, dance, and American studies); two doctoral students in history; a postdoctoral scholar in anthropology; an independent researcher; two archivists at academic institutions; two archivists at museums; a graduate student assistant at an oral history collection; a documentarian; an administrator with a state agency; and an editor at an academic press. The interviews, lasting approximately one hour, were conducted in-person or over the phone. In two cases, respondents who were unavailable for an interview filled out a written questionnaire. Respondents were recruited through the contacts of the Southern Oral History Collections as well as through the H-ORALHIST e-mail list.

The format of semi-structured interviews allowed for a nuanced discussion of individual users' behaviors and needs and a chance to explore the reasons and feelings behind decisions and practices. Soergel et al. (2002), used interviews with experts, in conjunction with a literature review, to "gain insights into who the potential users are, the ways in which they might seek to use the collection, and the resulting access requirements that must be supported." Questions for this study were drawn from La Barre & Tilley (2012) as well as from Soergel et al. (2002). La Barre & Tilley (2012) designed an interview instrument to prompt folklorists to describe the ways in which they work with folktales. Soergel et al. provided a list of general questions in their outline of a research agenda for oral history access.

This study used two interview protocols, one designed for individuals who use oral histories as primary source materials, and the other for those who curate or archive oral histories (see Appendix A). In many instances, these roles overlap, as in the case of several faculty members who coordinate projects to make their oral histories (originally

collected for personal projects) broadly available to the public. Several of the questions used in these protocols were drawn directly from La Barre & Tilley (2012).

Findings

This study was designed to explore the use of oral histories and the experiences of archivists and users with current electronic access systems. It addressed the following research questions:

1. *How do historians and other users locate and work with oral histories?*
2. *How can digital archives better serve the information-seeking and information-use needs of researchers?*

In addition to working with archived oral histories, the majority of the respondents in this study had experience creating their own. In many cases, they work predominantly with their own interviews and rely less heavily on archival collections. This section treats both oral histories collected by the respondents *and* archived oral histories created by others. Although these two sources present distinct challenges, including respondents' experiences with both provides a more complete picture of their information use. Furthermore, the ways in which the respondents collect and manage their own interviews has implications for archival practices.

This section comprises a preliminary analysis of the interviews. It addresses the goals of users of oral histories, their information-seeking behavior, and the ways in which they process and use the information they gather.

Why Use Oral Histories?

Interviewees described a range of goals when working with oral histories, and elaborated on the specific research questions for which they are most valuable.

To fill or address gaps in the historical record. Oral histories may constitute the only record of the experiences and perspectives of oppressed, marginalized, or underdocumented groups. Five of the oral historians in this study commented that they work with communities whose voices are not adequately represented in the documentary record. One faculty member described his impetus for starting a collection of oral histories as the “lack of documentation of dance community in general and the necessity to fill that gap in the historical record.” Another remarked that “Archives are critical for the existence of our fields of study [Women’s and Gender and Sexuality studies],” because of the scarcity of resources written *by* (rather than *about*) these communities. For another historian, her dissertation project emerged to “document the process of Latin Americans becoming North Carolinians, which is a process that is being largely overlooked because of language differences.”

To confirm, dispute, or supplement factual information in the written record. Oral historians contend with lingering skepticism about the factual accuracy of this source material. Nevertheless, these testimonies may be invaluable where no documentary evidence exists or where the accuracy of the written record is in question. Several informants confirmed Fogerty’s (1983) observation that “The blending of archival research with oral history may ... be crucial to complete understanding of information in the papers and is the only way to add information that the papers do not contain” (p. 150). One historian, who uses Holocaust survivor testimonies to shed light on events that took place at lesser known concentration camps, explained that historians have an imperative to, “get into issues of wrestling with accuracy through frail, traumatized human memory. And if we get enough of this stuff and work with it well

there's all sorts of things that we can recover that are otherwise forever lost." He uses these survivor testimonies in conjunction with written records to attempt to reconstruct events and confirm or dispute official accounts. He described his work as recreating something that would "otherwise be lost into the black hole" of history.

To gain insight into of the personal experiences, beliefs, and actions of individuals. The oral history scholar Alessandro Portelli remarked that "... oral history expresses the awareness of the historicity of personal experience and the individual's role in the history of society and public events..." (Portelli, 2004, p. 26). Respondents commented that oral sources "tend to be more about the personal side of things. So it'll be about how someone felt when something happened . . . or the significance of it in their lives." One respondent described how oral histories can provide insight into a "deeply affective experience that touches people in more complicated ways" than academic discourse often recognizes.

Respondents valued oral histories for their power to move audiences. One respondent commented that she always uses audio clips in her presentations because, "I think the clips add emotional impact. I think it brings it alive for people." Another remarked that scholars use "oral histories as an accent, as part of the texture, to lend immediacy to any historical story."

To explore the construction of narrative and memory. Respondents in this study focused more on the content than the form of oral history narratives. However, many acknowledged the value of hearing "people doing some of the interpretive work of the past," and several provided examples of projects that used oral histories as a basis for "looking at cognition and questions of narrative theory." One respondent, for

example, studied how the style of movement of dancers affected the structure of their personal narratives.

Information-Seeking Practices

This section addresses how respondents locate and interact with archived oral histories. The discussion is organized around seven interrelated tasks: question formulation, discovery of collections, information-seeking within collections, working with tapes, working with transcripts, use of other primary source materials in conjunction with oral histories, and the creation of original oral histories.

Question formulation. Respondents used oral histories to inform a range of research topics. Several respondents described projects that rely exclusively or predominantly on oral histories, while others use oral histories as just one among many primary sources. Similarly, Soergel et al. (2002) found that, “Some research projects will focus on oral histories as a major source of data, such as in tracing the lives of one or more individuals, requiring the use of many interviews. Other projects will simply utilize oral histories briefly to illustrate a point or and [*sic*] event” (p. 7).

Research questions may not always be clearly defined at the outset. One respondent described a project that began with the general purpose of comparing two oral history collections recorded in response to two significant historic events. The end result, a documentary, used audio clips from numerous interviews to weave a narrative. His team of researchers explored the collections until themes emerged. Several other respondents indicated that they had also used this grounded theory approach to research in oral history collections, especially when working with relatively small collections. The respondent who described his documentary project, for example, used one collection

that contained 13 hours of audio and one much larger corpus. For the smaller collection, his team listened to all 13 hours of recordings. For the larger collection, they selected interviews to analyze based primarily on the geographic location of the narrators, and then listened for compelling anecdotes and comparisons.

Other researchers come to collections with more thoroughly developed themes, or very specific interests. One respondent explained that while she often does general research in oral history collections when preparing lectures, her dissertation research has been more targeted. She described these searches as “looking for a specific piece of the puzzle.”

Discovering collections. Respondents found oral history collections through word of mouth, references in secondary sources, previous experience or familiarity with the collection, or while searching for other primary source materials. One doctoral student explained that she first identified archival collections that were likely to contain information relevant to her dissertation and then looked for oral histories as part of the broader research process.

Searching within collections. Several respondents described projects in which they examined entire oral history collections. More frequently respondents discussed a targeted research process that comprised a combination of orienting themselves within a collection, browsing, keyword searching, and cross-checking.

Orientation and establishing context. Nearly all of the respondents emphasized the need for a deep understanding of the circumstances in which interviews were created. One respondent commented, “When I listen to an oral history, you have to know why it was produced, why that interviewer asked the questions that they asked. And the only

way you know that is knowing the purpose and objective of their study.” Respondents consider the context of an interview as a crucial information source, inseparable from its content. One respondent remarked, “I analyze what was said along with the other conditions of the interview (when the interview was conducted, who was present, what types of questions were asked, the tone of the interviewee and interviewers).”

Some respondents use the collection-level description as a starting point for their research in a repository, using information such as the goals and scope of the project to narrow down which collections and interviews may hold relevant information.

Browsing. Respondents described browsing within oral collections, as well as scanning for relevant information within specific transcripts. Browsing is very important, especially for looking for general topics, ensuring thoroughness.

Keyword searching. Respondents described both satisfaction and frustration with keyword searching in the repositories they use. They most frequently reported searching for proper names (e.g., individuals, organizations) and geographic locations (e.g., states, towns, neighborhoods), but also conducted searches for themes (e.g., voting, civil rights, food) and time-period. The tendency to search for names and locations relates not only to established methodology, but to the features of oral history interviews and collections. Oral history projects are frequently developed around communities in a single location, and Allen (1984) wrote that narrators construct their stories around individuals involved in certain events, and frequently identify those individuals by name (p. 7).

When using keywords to search finding aids or lists of controlled subject terms, researchers expressed concerns about accuracy, consistency, and objectivity. One respondent feared that catalogers may not “have the background and judgment to make

those kinds of labelings that I could rest my professional reputation on.” He prefers less ambiguous keywords, such as locations and proper names, to topical or thematic terms. This preference also reflects a concern with comprehensiveness. Describing one research experience, he explained, “I don’t see how I as a scholar could have trusted someone to make threshold decisions that would determine which things I saw and which I didn’t.”

Subject terms also limit searching because they focus primarily on content. One respondent, who works with the dance community, described a need for metadata that documented “embodied expressions” or movement.

These concerns with accuracy, consistency, and comprehensiveness were echoed by one archivist, who described difficulty searching by certain types of metadata due to inadequate control. She explained, “Searching for someone using the ‘farm workers’ term, for example, is very frustrating because interview subjects could have been equally valid as ‘farm workers,’ ‘rangers,’ and ‘childhood memory’ all at once—but the field will hold only one term.”

Several respondents also noted that finding aids do not sufficiently document relationships between individuals who participate in or who are discussed in interviews. One respondent argued that current description does not prominently acknowledge the interviewer as a co-creator of the oral history and the “dialogic formulation of knowledge” that takes place during the interview.

One archivist described difficulty with, “mapping relationships between interviewees and interview subjects.” She gave the example of an interview with a woman relating a story about her grandparents, which “can become very confusing, because we’re not so much interested in the speaker as in the subjects.”

When using systems that allow keyword search of the full transcript, respondents reported feeling overwhelmed by the volume of relevant and irrelevant materials that result. One respondent commented, “If you type ‘immigration,’ any interview that tangentially relates to immigration would appear, even if someone used the word and the interview is unrelated to immigration.”

These searches entail a time-consuming process of sifting through all the potentially relevant results. One respondent expressed the need for “enough information to decide if the keyword is nominal, or real for the researcher’s particular purposes.” He scans the tape log of each search result to see where and how frequently the search term occurs, rejecting transcripts that include only passing mentions.

Finally, respondents also expressed a desire for keyword searches to recognize and differentiate of-ness and about-ness (i.e., oral histories that discuss immigrants versus oral histories narrated by immigrants).

Cross-checking and comparing. For several respondents, searching within a collection includes the task of cross-checking or comparing oral testimony. One respondent remarked that “reading a bunch of oral histories on a similar topic can provide some insight into ‘what really happened.’” Another described his efforts to “systematically compare different [oral histories] about the same event to work out what I thought I could use as an historian that I thought would be credible.”

Use of other primary source materials. Though debates about the validity of oral history as historical evidence have largely been resolved, complementary sources continue to play an essential role for those working with oral histories. Orbach (1991) confirmed that “researchers arrive at the repository with fully or partially formulated

queries, and they use the information they derive from archival material in conjunction with other types of sources” (p. 29). Respondents in this study use a range of primary and secondary source material to supplement or corroborate information they gather from oral histories. One respondent explained, “I treat oral histories as I would any other source I use. I question them. I weigh them against other sources.” Though many of the respondents use oral histories as their primary information source, at least one respondent said that he conducts the majority of his research in other archival and secondary sources before turning to oral histories.

Working with Audio Files. The oral history literature devotes considerable attention to the value of listening to recordings. Respondents reiterated the importance of having access to the audio files for a number of reasons, ranging from the nuances that are lost when spoken words are transferred to paper to the more practical matter of verifying the accuracy of the transcript. Many respondents said that when they identify a relevant interview, they listen to the entire recording, at least once if not more. Though they often only extract short segments for use, many respondents commented that listening to the entire recording allows them to “get a sense of who the person is,” how reliable a narrator’s testimony is, and the context of the anecdotes that they relate.

Listening to recordings enables a range of interpretive activities that become difficult or impossible when working with a transcript. One respondent commented, “A person in their tone of voice will emphasize something that really comes alive when you listen to it, but if you’re just looking at it on the page there are only so many ways to italicize or bold a certain word in a sentence.”

Finally, several respondents said that they need access to recordings because they use audio excerpts in their documentaries, lectures, audio tours, exhibits, and other products.

Respondents identified time as the main obstacle when working with recordings. Audio does not facilitate skimming and browsing, meaning that researchers must “listen in real time.” One respondent explained that, “Even if there is a tape log, I tend to be careful to listen to everything because I don’t want to go past the section I wish to hear.” While some respondents reported that they prefer to listen to entire interviews, others said that they tend to listen only to segments that they have identified as important when reading through the transcript. Some commented that this approach was not ideal, but a necessary response to time limitations and “listener fatigue.” One respondent remarked, “unfortunately, I think that these really long interviews that can be a beautiful process are maybe the ones that are least likely to be listened to.”

Recordings pose an unrelated problem for some researchers: sound quality. One respondent, who produces documentaries, remarked that many archived oral histories he found for one project were “completely unusable on the radio.” Locating usable audio entailed a time-consuming vetting process in which “You listen for fifteen seconds and say ‘forget that one’ and move on to the next one.”

Working with Transcripts. One respondent remarked, “I have to keep in mind that much of oral interviews can depend on the transcriptionist and editor rather than the interview itself. Sometimes words are omitted; pauses are ignored; dialect is cleaned up or exaggerated.” Respondents described many limitations of transcripts, but many also reported that they serve as the primary or only way they interact with oral histories.

Transcripts are easy to skim, enable keyword searches for particular names or places, can be easily printed and integrated into the researcher's personal collection, and allow easy copying and pasting of verbatim quotes. Several respondents expressed a desire to link text and audio, which would combine the ease of browsing and searching that a transcript offers with the depth and of analysis of listening to a recording. Their ideal system would allow them to search for a keyword in the transcript, and be directed to a specific paragraph in the text and the relevant audio segment.

Conducting Interviews. All of the scholars who participated in this study not only used archived oral histories, but have also collected their own. Indeed, several indicated that they rarely consult archived oral histories and rely primarily on their own interviews. Some of these respondents have had formal training in collection, transcription, and analysis and several mentioned that they follow interviewing and processing guidelines prepared by prominent oral history collections.

Respondents valued the dialogic nature of oral history interviewing, and the insight it gave them into their own research. One respondent asserted, "It opens up new questions when you talk to somebody and they're talking back to you. They get to help shape the types of questions you ask, how you think about your sources."

Two respondents had re-interviewed individuals after finding their oral histories in the archives. Re-interviewing allowed the respondents to focus on specific areas of interest for their research, and also to follow up on topics discussed in the original interview. Three respondents expressed frustration with interviewers who "haul back" narrators who they see as digressing. One respondent commented,

Sometimes I was essentially furious because [the narrator] would be edging around toward something very difficult to talk about ... and this bozo would yank

them out and force them back into the prescribed, coherent, logical story that was going to be the pabulum not the hard core of what they were trying to say.

Information-Use Practices

Respondents use oral histories in the creation of a variety of products, including (a) scholarly articles, (b) dissertations, (c) dance and musical performances, (d) visual art, (e) digital humanities projects, (f) scholarly and popular monograph, (g) documentaries and video shorts, (h) museum exhibits, (i) guided audio tours, (j) lectures, (k) teaching materials. This section will discuss how respondents describe the process of going from raw material to finished product.

Note-Taking. Respondents were asked to describe how they take notes when working with oral history recordings and transcripts. Their responses shed light on the types of information they find most valuable for incorporating into their work, and the ways they organize knowledge in their disciplines. In the first stages of their research, many respondents take notes on each relevant interview in a collection, and keep them organized by interview, often with a copy of or link to the transcript. Notes may serve as a more detailed tape log that facilitates the process of going back to the transcript or tape later. One respondent explained, “The notes initially are taken person by person. I want ... a summary of what they said and the order in which they said it. When I get to really key parts I slow down and take verbatim quotes.” Respondents said that they accompany verbatim quotes with a timestamp and a short summary or a few keywords that will remind them later what they want to use the quote for.

After taking notes on individual interviews, many respondents said they organize their notes by theme or topic. One respondent, who takes notes by hand, creates piles

of papers sorted by an event or topic “until he has umpteen piles divided by theme and referenced back to the original notes.”

Analytical work frequently takes place during the note-taking stage. One respondent commented that she will “take note of things that are repeated, things that are stressed, things that are emotionally charged, and so forth.” Another respondent, one of the few who did not keep separate notes on each interview, said she uses flip charts set up in her office to write notes by theme.

Analysis. Thompson (2000) identified four possibilities for analyzing oral histories: a single life-story narrative (biographical), a collection of stories, a narrative analysis (literary), and a reconstructive cross-analysis (p. 270). At least one respondent in this study described products that fit into each of these categories of analysis. The majority of respondents engage in reconstructive analysis, in which they attempt to piece together historical events through oral and written testimony. One respondent explained, “I’m trying to create a story that’s never been told. I’m trying to take the bits and pieces of different memories and trying to turn it into a dense, factually as accurate as possible story, bringing all these together.”

One crucial component of analysis is the selection of verbatim quotes. Respondents frequently said that they identify verbatim quotes during the note-taking process, and will go back to their notes when they begin writing. In a few instances, respondents indicated that they rely on their memory to locate relevant material within interviews. One historian described having “intellectual control mentally” over the oral histories he collected. Respondents use quotes judiciously. Many reported that they rely on quotes only when summary would be insufficient. As one respondent

commented, “The quote is simply there because it captures in language in a particularly evocative way what I’m trying to get across, what I think is important. It simply conveys more than if I’m writing a summary.” Two respondents used the word “texture” to express the value that oral histories add to their writing. One explained that he had assembled all of the factual content he needed for a book from other archival sources, but that the “chapters would have been flat and lacked ‘voices’” without the quotes he used from oral histories.

The majority of respondents said that they choose quotes no longer than a few sentences when preparing *written* materials, because they perceive that readers skip over long block quotes. One respondent also commented that she attempts a more “seamless” writing style where the oral history quotations are like “voices from across the room,” rather than illustrations to be plugged into an argument. On the other hand, one respondent reported frequent use of longer quotes in order to give her narrators “the authority to tell their own story.”

When using audio clips (for example in exhibits, lectures, and documentaries) respondents often use longer segments. For example, one respondent described a documentary he produced that did not use a narrator, instead relying exclusively on clips from oral histories to tell the story.

Implications for Libraries and Archives

Expand the audience for oral histories through outreach, collaboration, and digitization. Oral histories bring unheard voices into the archives. Respondents in this study emphasized that archives should actively and appropriately promote their collections and engage diverse audiences.

Those who had collected oral histories asserted that they hoped for use from both within and outside of their academic disciplines. As one respondent remarked,

I'm looking for as broad a use as possible . . . to get dance into a larger conversation. I'm not just looking people only in the dance community, who want to do scholarship on dance analysis. I am interested in that community, I'm part of that community, but I want people in anthropology, area studies, you name it.

Another emphasized the power of oral histories to engage students, arguing that "By creating this type of archive and exposing undergraduate students to it, then that's how you get students interested in it and expand the field."

Several oral historians and archivists explicitly mentioned that a primary audience is the communities who have contributed their oral histories. They want to actively engage with these communities to promote and ensure respectful use of their stories.

Archives would benefit from collaboration and cooperation with others to create a network of oral history repositories. One respondent, who coordinates an oral history archive, suggested that her project could serve as a hub for information on her area of interest. She explained that this approach would facilitate comparative work between collections.

Archives can also expand their audiences by investing in mass-digitization of audio and transcripts. Historians need a large corpus to sift through, not just a few selected excerpts. Several of the respondents in this study said that they had never been to the archives to listen to tapes, but relied solely on digitized material.

Leverage the digital environment to create novel display and discovery tools. The electronic environment allows for dynamic organization of collections; user participation in description; suggestion engines that recommend related items;

and aggregation of distributed content. Users would benefit from oral history archives that took advantage of these capabilities. For example, several users expressed interest in aggregating links to scholarly products that incorporate material from oral history collections. One respondent contended that these products are “another form of interpretation just like a transcript of the interview” and that he would like to see archives acknowledge “the chain of cultural production.”

Respondents also value the provenance model of arrangement and description. They rely on collection summaries to determine relevance and provide context. Describing a series of interviews in a collection, one respondent explained that each one deserved to be “seen through the lens” or the others. He commented, “The last thing I would want is for that triangulation to be lost, for the metadata to treat them as separate objects.”

Finally, several respondents currently or aspire to take a digital humanities approach to oral histories. They want to incorporate actual audio clips into texts and plot stories on interactive maps. Maps seem a natural fit for oral histories, given the importance of geography to both narrators and users. One respondent is currently working on a project that will chart Latino migration through interactive maps. She hopes to integrate oral histories into the project as a narrative structure that “takes you on a trip through resources.” Another described a dream discovery tool that would use interactive maps to display results. She explained, “Roanoke Rapids is the center of my dissertation . . . If I turned on my computer screen and there were seventy-two red dots around Roanoke Rapids and I could click those dots . . . that would be pretty cool.”

Invest in systems that facilitate browsing. Oral history archives should support browsing both in collections and within interviews. Danielson (2001) contends that archives should devote energy to creating “access tools to feature blunt pointers to general groups of records likely to include what the researcher is seeking” (n.p.), rather than presuming to direct users to a particular document. Ideal systems for oral histories would also allow users to browse within interviews, either through transcripts that link to audio or through novel technologies that facilitate skimming of audio files. Thompson (2000) advised that “the best cataloguing and indexing systems will tell the historian which parts of the collection will repay further investigation, and which will not” (p. 252). Given that oral histories tend to be quite lengthy and may meander through an entire life story, archives should develop tools that facilitate browsing within transcripts and tapes. This may mean providing segment-level metadata, improving relevance rankings for keyword search results, and linking text and audio.

Align description and metadata practices with information-seeking behavior.

Based on my conversations with users of oral histories, library professionals have not yet achieved the goal of creating bibliographic records that serve as “document surrogates.” Respondents discussed numerous limitations of description practices and metadata application. Frisch (2006) encourages oral history archives to move

- 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 linear search-engine tools to relational data-based mapping of audio and video documentation (p. 109).

These models allow richer searching and retrieval, especially in large collections of audiovisual material. Item-level and segment-level description (where possible) significantly aid information-seeking in these collections.

In addition, rich contextual description may be particularly important to enable respectful and instructive use of archived oral histories in the future. Women's history scholar Susan Armitage wrote, "I am concerned about our ability to use all these archived tapes if we can't historicize the narratives themselves, that is, the personal as well as social and historical conditions under which they were collected" (Armitage & Gluck, 2006, p. 80).

Increase transparency in documentation for digital collections. Historians value digital finding aids because they can learn about collections remotely. However, concerns remain about the comprehensiveness and authenticity of digital materials. Increased transparency about appraisal, curation, description, and digitization of these collections may help ease these anxieties.

Work with oral historians to address privacy, confidentiality, and ownership concerns. Publishing oral histories on the open web further complicates already fraught issues of privacy, confidentiality, and the narrator's control over his or her story.

Finally, archives should bear in mind their responsibility to the individuals whose stories they steward. One respondent in this study emphasized the need for a "sense of deference to life story" being related. Allen (1984) reminded historians that, while an oral history provides valuable source material for researchers, it also stands on its own. She wrote, "Cutting it up into pieces to fit into a preconceived research design may be necessary at some point, but the view of the past that emerges from the resulting

patchwork should not be regarded as the only or the most accurate version of history” (p. 12).

Respondents suggested that archives provide clear usage and citation guidelines for their oral histories, and encourage responsible use of their collections. Aggregating the scholarly and other products that draw from archived oral histories would also help narrators retain some control over their own stories. If these products were linked directly from the interview or collection, narrators could easily see how others have interpreted, repurposed, and presented their stories.

Conduct additional information behavior studies. Libraries and archives need to continue to understand and assess the needs of their users. The changing nature of much historical scholarship (e.g., the influence of digital humanities, interdisciplinary research, and increasing collaboration) as well as the ever-growing stores of electronically available materials warrants further study. Much of the literature on the information behavior of historians was produced before widespread adoption of information technology by scholars and libraries, and before the ubiquitous availability of online finding aids and digital collections. Thus, many studies touch on the implications of the digital shift, but few provide a detailed treatment of online information behavior of historians, and many of those that do are now significantly out of date.

One of the shortcomings of this study was the failure to locate users who relied heavily on collections of oral histories created by others. Quantitative and qualitative studies are needed to identify users and evaluate their needs. This study touched on some reasons that scholars choose to conduct their own interviews, but further study of the reasons that individuals choose *not* to use archived oral histories could also inform future

collection and access projects.

Conclusion

Scholars use oral histories to fill gaps in the historical record, dispute or confirm facts, understand personal experiences, and to understand the construction of memory. Respondents in this study described a range of information-seeking and information-use practices and elaborated on the particular challenges of working with oral histories. They rely heavily on browsing and keyword searches (primarily for locations and personal names), but discussed the limitations of both these methods for efficiently identifying relevant content. Their responses have many implications for archives and libraries that steward oral history collections. In particular, libraries and archives should investigate new discovery tools, especially those that facilitate browsing; provide access to large corpuses of digitized audio and transcripts; sync audio and transcripts; align descriptive practices to user behavior; and leverage the digital environment to create dynamic, linked collections of raw and contextual materials and products related to their oral history collections.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocols

Interview Protocol for Scholars/Researchers

Role of oral histories in the respondent's work

- Tell me about the role oral histories play in your academic or professional life.
What sort of work do you do in this area?
- If you use oral histories in multiple areas (e.g. teaching and research), how do these uses differ?
- Do you focus on the content or format of oral histories (or both)?
- How does your use of oral histories differ from your use of other primary source materials (e.g. correspondence, official records)?
- Do you rely on tapes, transcripts, or both? How do these uses differ?
- Have you had specific training or education related to oral histories? (How) do you teach students to locate and use oral histories?
- Are you aware of any patterns or trends in the way your peers use or think about oral histories?

Information-seeking practices

- Could you give a couple of examples of the kinds of information or resources that you've attempted to find recently?
- When do you go to oral histories? What types of questions are you trying to answer for which you think oral histories are a good resource?
- What "access points" do you find most effective for finding oral histories (names of persons or places, dates or periods, events, keywords, a particular topic, speaker role, etc.)? Which don't you find useful?

- Could you describe a particularly memorable information search? Memorable because it went well or was complex or frustrating?
- Do you have favorite tools or strategies that you rely on?
- What would the ideal tool look like that would support your information seeking needs related to oral histories?

Narrowing/selection process

- How do you locate salient passages in an oral history transcript (skimming, keyword searches, etc.)?

Information management

- How do you organize the information you collect from oral histories?
- How do you record and organize your notes (e.g. timelines)?
- Do you maintain a personal collection?

Interview Protocol for Archivists

Role of oral histories in your users' work

- Tell me about your repository.
 - What kinds of oral histories do you collect?
 - What kinds of users do you serve? Who uses your collections most heavily?
 - Does your archive actively collect oral histories?
- How are oral histories different from other primary source materials in terms of:
 - description and processing, retrieval, and use?
- Do your users:

- focus on the content or format of oral histories (or both)?
- use oral histories in conjunction with other resources in your collection?
- Have you had specific training or education related to oral histories? (How) do you teach students to locate and use oral histories?
- Are you aware of any patterns or trends in the way your peers use or think about oral histories?

Locating and retrieving information

- Could you give a couple of examples of the kinds of information or resources that you've helped users locate recently?
- Could you describe a particularly memorable information search? Memorable because it went well or was complex or frustrating?
- When do you advise users to go to oral histories?
- What types of questions are they trying to answer for which you think oral histories are a good resource?
- What “access points” does your repository find most effective for finding oral histories (names of persons or places, dates or periods, events, keywords, a particular topic, speaker role, etc.)?
 - Which don't you find useful?
 - What metadata would you add if you had unlimited time and resources?
- What would the ideal tool look like that would support the information seeking needs of your users?

Curating information

- Does your repository curate content?

- Describe how you select information for curated exhibits.
- In particular, how do you locate salient passages in oral history transcripts or tapes (skimming, keyword searches, etc.)?