



# “It’s all their words, it’s just not necessarily all of the words”: Balancing Authenticity and Authority in Participatory Heritage Projects

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## ABSTRACT

Participatory heritage approaches have the potential to create more democratic forms of local history and a relational commons around this material. This paper presents an interview-based study with volunteers from a community oral history organisation, to explore their current working practices, particularly around editing and publishing material and to consider volunteers’ feelings and concerns around openness and control of archive material. From the interviews, tensions were found between the desire for openness and concerns around the need for structure, highlighting challenges to address for future work in designing systems for participatory local history projects.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → Interaction design; Interaction design process and methods; Participatory design; Collaborative and social computing; Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing.

## KEYWORDS

Authorised heritage discourse, Oral history, Interview study, Participation

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The use of digital tools to support community participation in the ongoing social process of heritage, and in so doing promote a sense of place and community (as advocated by Giaccardi [6]) remains an open challenge. In this paper we present the exploration phase of a larger project working with a community oral history organisation to explore design for participatory heritage.

Oral history is “participatory by definition” as historians are speaking directly to those involved [19] and technological developments have lowered barriers to participation by making it easier and cheaper to produce oral history projects [18], given this, oral history seems a useful practice when considering participatory heritage. The tendency of oral history to involve multiple and diverse perspectives supports the concept of heritage as a commons, especially when that commons consists of knowledge and memories rather than the management of physical resources. We all have a personal heritage narrative consisting of our memories and experiences or, as Larson highlights, “we all begin with a story” [9]. Therefore it makes sense that this body of heritage knowledge should be considered a commons and managed as such, although for this to happen there needs to be support for the social processes of making heritage [17] and managing the historical knowledge commons [4, 7, 11, 13].

Our research explored the editorial and archival practices of a community oral history organisation to understand the challenges involved in supporting the creation of a more open dialogue around the heritage material they collect and thus challenge the reproduction of what Smith terms the “Authorised Heritage Discourse” [17]. The organisation is a volunteer run oral history charity based in the North of England. The charity developed from a group formed at a local library in the late 1990s and is entirely volunteer run with no paid staff at present due to funding issues. The day-to-day running of the organisation is coordinated by a manager who is currently a volunteer but was previously an employee. The charity aims to collect recordings of memories about the area, especially those pertaining to everyday life, and make these publicly available via its website. The area where the charity is based has seen significant change during the late 20<sup>th</sup>/early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries with the closure of heavy industry and new housing developments. From early on the organisation sought to use the internet to disseminate the memories they collected and their website has recently been modernised with the intention of making it easier to use both for visitors and those managing it.

It became apparent in this study that there was a tension between the desire to create an archive that was open and contained different perspectives, so as to break through the standard historical narrative, and the need to have structures and control to ensure a useable archive rather than a chaotic free for all. This tension speaks to a key area of the commons in that any group seeking to manage and preserve something has to have a structure in order to function [7, 12, 17]. However, once structures are created it is difficult to find a way to accommodate everyone appropriately while



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avoiding chaos. This is a key challenge apparent in this study and is something important to address if participatory forms of heritage are to manage and curate heritage knowledge as a commons.

The rest of this paper outlines the background literature on oral history, the Authorised Heritage Discourse and heritage as a commons before detailing the methodology and findings from an interview-based study with a community oral history organisation. The discussion section considers the implications of the findings in respect to treating heritage knowledge as a commons which is managed through democratic, participatory projects. Future work is outlined in the conclusion.

## 2 BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Community Oral History

Oral history was initially concerned with utilising memories as an infallible historical source and oral historians sought to legitimise their work by taking a positivist, objectivist stance [2, 3]. Since the 1970s there has been a subjective turn, with oral history projects becoming less concerned with a single objective truth. As a result, oral history projects started to examine and uncover histories of groups traditionally not incorporated into the overarching national historical narrative [15–17, 19]. To achieve this community based projects have become common, with Thomson arguing that this is “the *mainstream* of British Oral History” [19]. Many of these are community driven, bottom-up projects often highlighting groups underrepresented in the historical narrative such as women, the working class, immigrants and other marginalised groups [19]. A frequent criticism of many bottom up oral history projects is they can easily slip into nostalgia and report a mythical sense of the ‘good old days’ [5, 16, 17]. Nostalgia, though, is not necessarily a negative as highlighting changes over time can connect the past and the present [5]. In this sense nostalgia can be seen as a facet of the social process by which heritage is created through both the things people choose to remember and the ways in which they remember them [6, 7, 17]. Related to the criticism of nostalgia is the criticism that many community-based oral history projects present an uncritical view of the past that only celebrates the community and fails to address negative aspects either as an unacknowledged reaction against change or a desire not to offend others [16, 19]. The need to find a space where contested views of the past can be expressed is a challenge not just for oral history projects but for all projects seeking to encompass a range of voices and perspectives on the past [3, 17, 19].

### 2.2 The Authorised Heritage Discourse

In uncovering ‘hidden histories’ of groups often excluded from mainstream historical narratives [16, 19] oral history is addressing a concern within heritage studies of what Smith terms the “Authorised Heritage Discourse” (AHD) [17]. AHD emphasises a single heritage narrative, constructed by experts, which informs the identity of the nation state [17]. As such there is little space for differing views, especially those that might be critical [17], and therefore many groups were excluded from this narrative [19]. By privileging experts’ views, AHD further restricts the space for different voices to be heard and creates “privileged stewards” of the past who are difficult to challenge [12, 14, 17]. More recently AHD has

been challenged, particularly amongst those who view heritage and its creation as a social process where understanding the past is a fluid result of the meanings people ascribe to things in their histories rather than seeing heritage values as fixed and unchanging [2, 12, 17]. This has led to greater emphasis on democratising heritage, and museums and other institutions have been encouraged to engage in community involvement, however, instead of working to address the power imbalances that disengage communities, many outreach projects simply encourage communities to engage with the dominant discourse and offer no space for challenge [17, 20]. Finding a structure for oral history projects, that allows for multiple and conflicting voices, is a key challenge in projects of this sort.

### 2.3 Heritage and the Commons

Heritage as a commons is the subject of recent work by Gould [8], Gonzalez [7] and Lekakis [10, 11]. If heritage is a “living practice” [6] with meaning created through social processes [7, 12, 17] it needs a social process to manage it. As a key focus of the commons are the social processes for organising and managing the common resources or knowledge [4, 7, 11, 13] it seems a useful strategy with which to consider participatory heritage. In this case it is a heritage knowledge commons which seeks to uncover and preserve peoples’ memories and stories of their past [8] that is being considered rather than the management of heritage sites which bring a different set of considerations and challenges in terms of funding and technical knowledge required [14].

### 2.4 Summary

The literature suggests that in principle oral history can be a useful tool for breaking the constraints of the AHD and enable other voices to be heard in the heritage narrative. This is due to the participatory nature of oral history as a discipline and the ease of which differing viewpoints can be collected giving oral history the possibility of being a very democratic form of historical enquiry. However our study suggests that while oral history can break through the authorised heritage discourse, projects need to be structured in a way that allows for this otherwise they risk reinforcing a form of AHD even if unintentionally.

## 3 METHODS

Four semi-structured, hour long, qualitative interviews were conducted with six interviewees, the areas of the organisation in which the interviewees are involved are listed in Table 1. The selection of participants for interview was guided by the organisation’s managing volunteer who helped ensure that those interviewed were involved in different aspects of the organisation and had volunteered for differing lengths of time. The topics covered varied between the interviews depending on the area that the interviewees were primarily involved in although there were several common questions across each interview particularly those concerned with the processes of the organisation and the workflow in collecting and disseminating material as it was useful to explore what different volunteers saw of these processes and gauge their understanding.

The interviews were audio recorded and fully transcribed. The transcripts were then anonymised with names and other identifiable information either changed or obscured. Following this the

**Table 1: Interviewee roles**

Volunteer Psuedonym	Role(s)
Anne	Manager, Trustee
Graham	Technical Team
Joan	Interviewer
Ken	Technical Team, Trustee
Linda	Interviewer, Transcriber
Mick	Interviewer, Presentations Team

anonymised transcripts were coded and analysed using Thematic Analysis techniques [1]. The coding used a combination of inductive and deductive approaches with an initial inductive round of coding before a second round of deductive coding was conducted guided by the key areas under consideration in this study of opening up dialogue and challenging the AHD.

## 4 FINDINGS

From the analysis three key themes were identified, Preserving Authenticity, Authority and the Archive and Towards Permissive Archive Technologies.

### 4.1 Preserving Authenticity

The importance of preserving memories in a way that keeps the authentic voice of the person who shared them was seen as important by the interviewees as they were keen to present the genuine stories rather than an interpreted version:

it’s the people telling their own stories rather than somebody else interpreting it. (Graham)

Maintaining the authenticity of voice when sharing memories was still felt to be important even when memories were edited for publication:

It’s all their words, it’s just not necessarily all of the words (Linda)

Although this also highlights a possible tension given the need to edit material so it can be presented coherently and accessibly while ensuring authenticity is not lost.

There was a sense that the organisation could uncover hidden histories by presenting the voices of those whose stories were missing from the historical account:

a lot of men in the area feel that shipyards have never had the personal workers voice expressed in a formal historical sense (Anne)

The importance of recording and preserving memories in a formal way to create a local history archive and that such an undertaking was valuable was highlighted:

People [...] realized that they were very valuable memories local history wise, social history wise (Anne)

preserving our local heritage for future generations (Linda)

The idea that what the organisation does represents a “formal historical” process is interesting given that they highly value being a grassroots, community organisation and this is something they feel enables people to engage with them:

because it’s ordinary it’s not presented by a history society or a university, it’s people meeting people and seeing material that they really enjoy looking at and they’re familiar with (Anne)

It would appear that while the grassroots nature of the organisation helps people to engage the fact that material is subject to a formal process and there is a structure for archiving and presenting memories gives legitimacy to the historical work of the organisation.

This legitimacy helps make those giving their memories feel that their voice is valuable as it is worth formally recording for posterity:

they see the value of the information they’ve got in their heads [...] It’s something that’s lost if it’s not captured and shared (Ken)

While the importance of authenticity in voice was highlighted, the interviewees were keen to note that what they were capturing were memories and as such material preserved was concerned with people’s feelings and personal experiences rather than being purely objective, historical fact

There are plenty of history books out there that are factual, but that’s not what we want. We want oral histories about capturing what it felt like [...] it’s people’s emotions and experiences. [...] That’s what you’re really trying to capture (Ken)

[manager] was saying, reminiscence matters, [...] yes, it’s not totally accurate, but [it’s] how people felt, the feeling of the area.(Mick)

### 4.2 Authority and the Archive

Making the memories available in a way that can be easily accessed was seen as an important aspect of what the organisation does:

the point of this is to share the memories, there’s not much point in taking the memories and storing them and locking them away (Graham)

Although for this to happen it was felt that the raw recordings needed processing. When asked about the processes that interviews undergo after being recorded the manager described this process as “*partly technical and partly social*” as interviews are subjected to technical processing to improve sound quality and transcripts are checked for typographical errors however, while master copies of recordings are kept privately

publicly there will be an element of editing (Anne)

Some of this editing relates to the ideas mentioned in the first theme about making material more accessible by turning oral history interviews into stories that could be published on the organisation’s website

we’ll try to use the interviewee’s words, but we might cut chunks out to make it more of a story (Linda)

But there was also concern with what content might be considered suitable for dissemination on the website

[. . .] is this right for our website [. . .] do we want to talk about this issue (Graham)

And how this might affect the organisation's good reputation, something it was felt was important in encouraging people to share their memories

one of the things [. . .] that helps us is our reputation because people know us because we've been around a while and they trust us (Anne)

Some of the decisions around what was appropriate to be made public involved fairly simple decisions about not publishing material that might be deemed libellous such as where interviewees had aired grievances about others. On other occasions decisions were more complicated with one interviewee recounting a time someone had told her about being raped and this had not been included in the published material as the volunteer did not think it was appropriate. The manager spoke about being guided by the Oral History Society's code of ethics around interviews and ensuring that the very personal is not shared publicly:

they're talking about very personal parts of their lives [. . .] ethically that's not what you want to go public (Anne)

When asked about the process for making these decisions those interviewed were unclear with one saying it was largely at an individual's discretion and others saying that a formal process was currently being developed:

we're trying to piece together that process [. . .] a more defined process that people can follow. (Ken)

Although there were concerns expressed about ensuring content was appropriate for the website there was also a sense that it was important that the organisation did not just present an uncritical, positive view of the past and it was important to acknowledge difficult times as these were part of people's experiences:

if they were made redundant, you're not going to say well I don't think we should talk about that, because that is part of their life (Anne)

### 4.3 Towards Permissive Archive Technologies

The volunteers interviewed were generally positive about the use of technology within the organisation seeing it as something that added to the work, although there was also a sense that technology must be subservient to the primary purpose of the organisation and not take over:

we don't want to be driven by technology we want to be enabled by technology, (Ken)

there's a place for the Internet and for our website [. . .] but I think equally important is the presentations where people can look and discuss. (Joan)

There was also a keen sense that as well as knowing how to use the technologies people needed to feel confident if they were to want to use them:

you still need technical knowledge and technical confidence (Graham)

However, there was an acknowledgement that this is something that can be learned and developed with interviewees expressing how they had gained technical skills and confidence through their involvement with the organisation. Although there were also concerns raised that the increased use of technology necessitated by the pandemic had been off-putting for some volunteers and that it would be a shame to lose people because of their reticence regarding technology:

hopefully the people we've lost [. . .] when things settle down, hopefully we will get them back on board because they have real skills in talking to people (Ken)

The interviewees also felt there was more the organisation could do with technology if they had the skills and awareness to do so:

we're not limited by technology, I think we're limited by our lack of understanding of what could be available (Graham)

Keeping control of what was published by the organisation was a concern and the need to ensure material "was right" before it was put online was seen as a limiting factor to getting more volunteers involved with the website and other technology:

you need to manage your website and even if we get more people on with the ability to edit the content we would normally set them up so they can edit the content but not publish it so that the actual final press of the button to publish is in the hands of just a few people. So we would obviously make sure it was right before it went live. (Ken)

There was sometimes a reticence to using technology especially where it was felt a particular technology might lead to negativity or abuse aimed at the organisation or those whose memories were being shared:

We didn't go on to social media for a long, long time because people behave differently on social media (Anne)

## 5 DISCUSSION

From the findings it is clear the organisation values its grassroots status and that this a key reason why people are happy to share their memories. There is also a sense that recording local history and voices is important and that there is value in uncovering local stories that may otherwise go untold. However, while the organisation professed to wanting to be open and capture the authentic voice of local people the memories were subjected to processing before being made public. This processing involved editorial decisions as to how to best present the material to make it accessible to those looking at it as well as decisions about what content was appropriate for the organisation to be publishing. There is a danger here that while elements of the AHD at a national level are being challenged, the processes of the organisation may end up producing a form of 'localised authorised heritage discourse'. In this sense of a localised authorised heritage discourse the grassroots organisation becomes the voice of authority and is imbued with the power to determine what and who is included or excluded from the history of the local area they are presenting.

It is perhaps somewhat inevitable that a form of authorised discourse will be developed in this context even though the organisation wants to challenge standard historical narratives and include those who are often excluded from the national discourse. There is a need for structure and processes for recording and archiving memories as a completely open system would be chaotic and unusable as an archive. The challenge for future work in this area is how to negotiate a way between the chaos of no structure while avoiding creating a structure that reinforces a particular narrative when undertaking participatory heritage projects. Inherent in this negotiation is exploring what the fears are around having a more open environment for capturing and sharing people's memories.

Being more open and allowing for dialogue in the processes by which memories are shared is an important factor to be designed into the social processes of managing a local history commons. Technology can have a role to play in supporting these processes as modern technological developments have been important in supporting the creation and management of knowledge commons [11, 13]. Using technology in and of itself does not make things more open however, as can be seen from the interviews where the organisation uses technology to share memories but ends up doing so in a way that creates a local form of AHD. This may occur in part because the technology being used in this case is a static website where information is published and can then be viewed by visitors but there is no space for interactivity by those accessing the site, restricting dialogue. The lack of interactivity reflects worries about how material is controlled and how people might engage with a more open platform in a way which might be inappropriate and damaging to the organisation and these concerns are something that need to be explored during any future design process. As acknowledged in the interviews the way technology is used or not used by the organisation often comes down to a lack of knowledge and confidence amongst the volunteers about technology, this suggests that if volunteers could be helped to explore the possibilities of technologies they may be able to find a structure and process that helps to make a more open platform without descending into a chaotic free for all.

## 6 CONCLUSION

As can be seen in this paper there are many opportunities in working towards an open participatory heritage that challenges the authorized heritage discourse (AHD) and allows for a multi-vocal history to be uncovered, however, this can only happen if projects are designed in a way that is structured to support such participatory inclusion. Without careful consideration of the structures and processes used for disseminating and editing the knowledge recorded, there is a danger that projects will create their own AHD which, while it may allow for different voices to the national narrative to be heard, nonetheless will result in some voices and stories being excluded. Addressing these challenges is the scope of future work in this area with co-design projects needed to explore how best to create more open local history platforms which allow for more discourse and differing viewpoints while avoiding a chaotic and unusable free for all. To help create these processes it will be important to understand further what the organisation's fears

are around having lighter control over material and to explore strategies for overcoming these.

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