

Oral History, Digital Technologies and Innovation: From Interview to Archive

Judy Hughes

Prominent United States oral historian, archivist and technology wiz Dr Doug Boyd knows how to record stories and also how to tell them. The Director of the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky Libraries is at the forefront of technological change in recording, archiving and accessing oral history and he has a story that needs to be heard.

In a workshop run by Oral History Victoria in May 2019, Boyd outlined some of the dramatic technological shifts in the oral history field and the potential consequences that range from ‘revolutionary’ to ‘scary’. Those who were privileged to attend were treated not only to the legendary Doug Boyd charm, but also to his news of the latest innovations in transcription, finding aids for oral history and online viewing platforms.

Boyd talked extensively of the system he developed for oral history management, the Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS), now used by 400 institutions in 40 countries. The OHMS system, which is based on freely-available, open-source software, provides an online working space for oral historians and archivists to index and search interview collections using controlled vocabularies and synchronised audio and video. The OHMS viewer, which is also free, provides a means of making those interviews accessible online or in a museum exhibition with the same searchability functionality. It is even possible to add GPS coordinates, hyperlinks and some multilingual features

to add further value. ‘So our oral histories are being used in these really fantastic ways and potentially I think have the ability to change public history ways of dealing with oral history,’ he said.

With a PhD in folklore, and a background as a musician, Boyd attributed his first job as an archivist to the fact that he ‘knew how to digitise and nobody else did and they knew that they needed that desperately’. After eight years as an archivist with the Kentucky Historical Society, he spent two years heading up a digital library with the University of Alabama and then returned to oral history with the Nunn Center in 2008. Since his appointment, the Nunn Center’s collection has grown from 6,000 interviews to 13,000, of which 4,000 are online.

From being focussed on accessibility and discoverability of oral history, however, Boyd revealed that he now had some concerns about the consequences of such rapid technological change. Those concerns about the vastly increased access to oral history interviews ranged from the potential to alter the interview process to putting at risk the interviewee’s privacy and physical safety. ‘I think this accelerated innovation and access, this widespread access that’s happening with oral history no matter what system you’re using... is going to change interviewing,’ he said. ‘I think people are going to be more guarded in what they say and I think people are going to self-censor more.’



Dr Doug Boyd (centre) took time out from his study visit to the National Library of Australia to travel to Melbourne for a workshop hosted by Oral History Victoria at Monash University. Images courtesy of Judy Hughes.



Boyd said one area in need of improvement was informed consent. There needed to be more thought about ‘what could go wrong’ when developing processes for handling oral history interviews. Further, he described oral history as a ‘goldmine for personal information’, which could be misused and also warned of the increasing sophistication of audio-editing software with the potential to have an online interview excerpt edited and re-posted online with a completely different context and meaning.

Scary stuff? Not totally. Boyd gave every oral historian hope when he declared that automated transcription services had reached a ‘tipping point’ with some so good they now represented a viable option for archives. His personal favourite was Temi, which he said was low cost, had good accuracy and a user-friendly online interface. This does not mean, however, that transcription using artificial intelligence is superior to the human version. Professional transcribers are still more accurate, but the online services are vastly cheaper and could be utilised as a means of searching the interview and preparing a highly accurate first draft of a transcript.

There was also some good news on the issue of misusing interviews. While there are obvious risks associated with online access, Boyd concluded that the fact that an oral history interview is accessible online means people can easily reference the original version. ‘The safest place for your interview is to actually be accessible online because there’s always gonna be a reference point from the archive as to what was actually said versus what somebody made you say.’

Boyd was in Australia for a four-month visit to work with Kevin Bradley, Assistant Director General: Australian Collections and Reader Services at the National Library of Australia, the architect of a very similar oral history management system to OHMS.

They are working together on ways to improve both systems.

For further information, visit:

Doug Boyd website - <https://dougboyd.org>

Louie B. Nunn Center, University of Kentucky - <http://libraries.uky.edu/nunncenter>

Oral History in the Digital Age - <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu>

OHMS (Oral History Metadata Synchronizer) - <http://ohda.matrix.msu.edu>