

ORAL HISTORY AND ARCHIVES: KEYNOTE SPEECH TO THE
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We in the Public Archives of Canada are becoming increasingly conscious of the wide range and multifarious impact of what we often describe as the "media of record". The operational Divisions of the Archives Branch are built, for the most part, on the basis of media, and we can now claim that we have custody of all "media of record" from parchment to magnetic tape. However, this concept of administration by media requires closer examination for we obviously do not mean that we divide the custody of material according to the physical properties of the artifact. If this were so, we would have manuscripts and maps on parchment in one division, manuscripts, watercolours, public records and maps on paper in another, computer tape, videotape and sound recordings on magnetic tape in a third. This grouping may have some validity in the eyes of the conservators; it has none for the archivist. So he must consider what we mean by the "media of record" which results, for example, in separate operational Divisions for manuscripts from the private sector, Public Records and maps, to name three. Cannot all three be classed as "manuscripts" if they are originals? In one sense they can. Are we being muddle headed and inconsistent when we speak of "media of record"? I do not think so because on closer examination media of record are made up of some or all of four elements:

1. The base or "carrier" (clay, parchment, paper, etc.).
2. The material used to convey the message and carried by (1) above (pencil, ink, water colour, etc.).
3. The configuration of the above materials (writing, drawing, painting, etc.) which has always to be preserved.
4. The image of the configuration as perceived by the beholder.

Let us take some examples:

Clay tablets omit (2) because they bear impressions made by a stylus. So does the video-disc since it depends on perforations on mylar "read" by a laser beam. Live television omits all but (4) since the tube does not "carry" the message in the old sense and there are no identifiable materials having a permanent configuration.

By now you will be wondering when I shall get to the subject of this piece. It is now! The archivist is responsible for, and should fully understand, all four elements. The historian or any other user is generally concerned only with (4) and to a lesser degree with (2). How does this work for sound archives in terms of magnetic tape?

Element one is the mylar base,
element two the coating,
element three, the permanent magnetic configuration, and
element four, the sound "image".

In this case the user is entirely concerned with element four but the archivist must preserve elements one, two, in particular, three (the magnetic configuration) besides having a thorough understanding of the context and limitations of the sound "image", so that he may, in the words of Walter Bageot (from quite another context), "encourage, advise and warn" the researcher. These are onerous, demanding, and

wide ranging responsibilities and I would like for the remainder of my time to discuss the way in which the nature of the medium can affect the whole archival strategy towards oral history and other sound recordings.

In the Archives Branch of the Public Archives of Canada we are increasingly striving to develop a branch strategy, to articulate our work in terms of joint programs rather than the separate activity of each Division. On the other hand, the media integrity and professional disciplines of each Division must be entirely respected which leads to what I like to believe is a kind of highly productive tension. The programs on which we base our quarterly reports, our priorities and our forecasts are 1) Acquisition; 2) Custody and Conservation; 3) Reference and Public Service, and I would like therefore to consider sound recordings and oral history in the light of these thrusts.

Quite recently the Branch struck a Task Force on Acquisition Strategy to include all the media of record; since I do not wish to prejudice their findings my remarks should be treated simply as a personal expression of opinion at this time. The days of haphazard collecting policies and a vague kind of media symmetry are over, as archival repositories proliferate specialisms and as heritage resources at the provincial and regional level increase. For a repository with a declared emphasis, such as architectural records or business archives, oral history clearly fills a support role to close the gaps and flesh out the record; for the generalist archives at the Provincial and Federal level the problems are more complex. We have a mandate to operate on several fronts but to spread resources that thinly would be to achieve nothing. There must be priorities maintained for a reasonable length of time. The priorities of sound archives and oral history must be articulated within this overall plan. I cannot be very specific at this time since no such plan or strategy at present exists in the Public Archives of Canada, and any plan of this kind would require consultation with our colleagues in other repositories, but we can at least try to examine if not the subject areas, at least the types of material available to sound archives, which appear to be three:

- 1) sound programs prepared for broadcast in the public and private sector or produced in the course of other professional or commercial activity (such as the tapes of a journalist seeking material on contemporary events);
- 2) tapes created by oral historians and others seeking to flesh out the records of the past;
- 3) tapes created by the archivist for the same purpose.

For the archivist, I believe that the broadcast program and its associate documentation has the first priority since they are the product of a contemporary administrative process and the primary record of a public experience. This may seem a very sweeping statement that you will want to challenge but I believe that the archivist's role is first to appraise and preserve what has already been communicated by whatever medium. We should certainly be aware of gaps in the record and thereafter we have to consider alternatives which involve "oral history" in the sense of tape-recorded interviews. Incidentally, I believe further examination needs to be made of the assertion that the telephone has reduced the evidential weight of record in proportion as the typewriter increased its physical mass. In fact, I would suggest that there is now far more record of far better quality than in the past. Its location can always be improved by better filing systems and the remaining dross eliminated by good records management. The dictated memo stimulated by a telephone conversation, or a letter in response to correspondence can provide a much fuller expression when the author is freed from the shackles of writing and the phonetic

alphabet. The stenographer, in a limited sense, acts as a tape recorder, and is at times replaced by one. Admittedly replies are often more diffuse but they are also more finely shaded and offer information at a number of levels.

We should ponder how we in the public service use the telephone. How often do we engage in weighty conversations this way or reach weighty decisions? Our use is for the trivial to medium important transactions requiring quick decisions. The really important discussions are usually face to face as they always have been. The crucial deliberations will still be lost, as they always were, if the parties do not wish a record to be made. Although we are basically oral beings we have had in the past a built-in bias against the reliability of the spoken word as a result of our commitment to literacy and print technology. Any sound archivist knows this! (the pun is an oral device used to express two levels of meaning at once which is usually scorned by highly literate people trained in linear, serial and sequential communication).

Oral history should certainly be used to supplement the available record but its limitations should be recognized. First, to take "oral history" in the limited sense of the recorded interview, it provides limited information on a total happening which also involves facial expression and other body language, smell and the visual environment of the interviewee which may be additionally informative, if, for example, an old timer is being interviewed in his home surrounded by his family and possessions. The dynamics of the interpersonal exchange cannot be entirely conveyed. Perhaps we should consider more and more the use of videotape in this context as apparatus becomes cheaper and more portable. The enrichment for oral history could be as profound as that which resulted from the introduction of the portable tape recorder. This visual record corresponds to supporting documentation which archivists must seek and, if necessary, create. I believe that oral history would then become even more closely related to film archives and videotape, while sound archives would increasingly be restricted to early recordings and radio productions without benefit of videotape and those recordings relying on sound alone, simply as an art form in the tradition of son et lumière.

Should archivists be interviewers in oral history programs designed to fill the gaps? It depends on the nature of the existing evidence and documentation. If the gaps are clear-cut and specific, and the interviewee is a "self-starter" who knows the field well, this may be acceptable. But in general, the requirement for extensive background knowledge by subject precludes us. Our time may be better spent in other ways.

However, I believe that a word should be said in defence of those voluminous recordings of "old timers" who became the easy prey of archivists and oral history practitioners. For all their shortcomings in terms of hard information I believe they will one day be valued for the way ideas are expressed, for the way events were believed to have occurred and all kinds of myths were created. They will reveal areas of startling ignorance; they will at times be long on wisdom if short on chronological accuracy. If this is true then archivists should learn to defend these and other recordings in their collection, to argue for them and to convince researchers of their value by indicating both their strengths and weaknesses. We and our clientèle have to understand that interviews are often conducted with people who are either unused to, or dislike, the linear mode of reading and writing in which case their communication patterns will be diffused and conveyed at several levels at once. Their presentation may at first sight be muddled and confused but may nevertheless be remarkably perceptive. A public servant or politician on the other hand may be

adept at glib, linear presentations which for all their clarity reveal almost nothing. The accusation that in oral history a record is being created, and is therefore in a sense artificial, constantly needs rebuttal. The record is already there in the mind of the interviewee but the interviewer is a party to the transposition and shapes it through the questions being put. The portion of the entire record which is all that can be recorded from the mind and which is uttered or "outered" onto tape may be fragmentary but it is not generally a fake or a forgery.

In this context should be noted the work of Dr. Wilder Penfield of McGill University who has already demonstrated that the brain may store the total experience of an individual from which only a fragment can at present be retrieved. Under the stimulus of electrodes,

"The subject feels again the emotion which the situation originally produced in him, and he is aware of the same interpretations, true or false, which he himself gave to the experience in the first place. Thus, evoked recollection is not the exact photographic or phonographic reproduction of past scenes or events. It is reproduction of what the patient saw and heard and felt and understood."¹

This surely is the ultimate in retrieval which could one day produce a stream of tape-recorded consciousness to boggle the mind!

Unfortunately, our presently clouded vision of the past is rather different from the decision, action or opinion of the time which, if on record, would have given it an independent validity and existence (without a nod to posterity) from which the historian may conclude what he will. Recollection in tranquility, a corner stone of the Romantic Movement, certainly has its limitations, but is better than nothing.

Richard Lohead's perceptive article in the first issue of the Canadian Oral History Association Journal² contrasts the journalists' approach to oral history with that of the academic. The journalist seeks immediacy and thereby helps to reveal "the emotive life of a given epoch". This material is laid out like a mosaic in the manner of a newspaper page as he tries to convey a broad band of parallel incident and situation, of views (right or wrong and who's to judge?) held at the time. This kind of oral history is different from, but in no way secondary to, the academic's approach from a specific point of view to support a thesis or answer a specific question. The establishment by this means of apparent causes and effects can be as impressive as they are illusionary but in fairness academics are well aware of this danger. Until recently, most academics and journalists have seen the recorded interview as an intermediate phase expendable after a final transcript has been made and have thereby revealed their quite understandable literary bias. Increasingly, the tide of opinion seems to be turning towards the preservation of the tapes and this would seem to be the archivist's position if money is available.

So much for acquisition. Custody and conservation do not present the problems of other media dependant on a visual image, although the stability of magnetic configuration remains undetermined. With regard to reference and public service, there is an increasing requirement to standardize the finding aids and explore the MARC format in order that information, at least at the first level of public reference, may be automated and made available to researchers, irrespective of the media of record. The Archives Branch of the Public Archives of Canada also

has a Task Force on Information Control which is grappling with this problem. Sound Archives is making input here, along with other media, and you the archivists and oral history practitioners will be asked to help us devise systems which are compatible and acceptable nationally.

In their efforts to communicate the contents of their archives, archivists should also become familiar with the grammar and syntax of the media with which they work; why "documentary" record takes the form it does. The study of diplomatic, a highly respectable and learned discipline amongst medieval historians by which they analyse the changing nature and "common form" of official documents can be extended to all media of record since they are all produced for a purpose: to achieve a specific end with often a nice economy of means within the limitations of the media. An analysis of the evolution of the modern public record is an exercise in the study of diplomatic and so is the form and shape of oral interviews or sound recordings for public broadcast. The form of the content can be just as important as the content, as film study has amply demonstrated in the case of news-reels, documentaries and compilations. Only then can we effectively counter the criticism of the more traditional historians that the oral record is at best supplementary to the written record. Yet is the written or printed record necessarily more reliable or profound when produced for administrative purposes? Anyone who has worked in a bureaucracy would have reservations on that score. The fact is we have to fight the notion that the more traditional media are academically more respectable. Pre-literate society managed quite well without the phonetic alphabet and the printing press and we are learning, in a number of areas, to do the same.

Sound archives and oral history are often identified as textual records but that is because the archival profession encountered text first. We could on the other hand contend with more accuracy that textual records are in a sense merely transcripts of the brain, the mind and the voice, with all the limitations of manuscripts, and that sound archives are just one stage closer to the mind and heart of the creator. In the words of Marshall McLuhan, "the first printed works were visual aids to oral instruction".³ We should ponder on that as we perhaps move towards a post-literate society in which extensive reading could become the "optional extra" of the scholar.

NOTES

1. Thomas A. Harris, I'M OK - You're OK, New York 1973, p. 27.
2. Richard Lohead, "Three Approaches to Oral History: The Journalistic, The Academic, and the Archival", Canadian Oral History Association Journal Vol. 1, Ottawa 1976, pp. 5-12.
3. Marshall McLuhan, "Classroom without Walls", Explorations in Communication, an anthology, ed. by Edmund Carpenter and Marshal McLuhan, London, Jonathan Cape, 1970, p.1