

PRINCIPLES IN EDITING ORAL HISTORY

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"Broadcasting Labour History"

by Howie Smith

I work as a carpenter nowadays, I don't usually address people on topics like this. I don't have a background in broadcasting but a background in what you might call labour propaganda, or call it labour education. I have done a lot of work for unions and I work with unions. I am very much for unions myself. I have done a lot of leaflet material, poster material, helping with educational campaigns, workshops, and I am a member of the Carpenters' Union.

What I would like to do today, basically, is not just to talk about editing broadcasting but to talk about the nature of what you deal with when you gather oral history labour material and want to broadcast it. I have divided it this way: I have to first deal with the media that I broadcast on. I am talking about the radio stations themselves and not about the technical apparatus, but the political apparatus. Then there are the interviewees which, to my mind, are workers: for labour history you need to interview workers. Then there is the interviewer, him or herself. What their job is, what their attitude has to be on points of agreements you have to make with the people that you are working with and with the media that you are negotiating with. Then there is the

audience, what your conception is of the audience. What the audience I think actually is, how they listen to the radio. And then there is the production itself. Whether that is a single voice intake for 3 minutes, a magazine program such as morning radio show on CBC or whether it is a documentary (half hour or an hour), music, or whatever. That production, basically, is the context that you are feeding material into to enable it to do the things that you want it to do as a broadcaster.

Now you listen to the radio when you are alone, basically. (I will talk later who the audience is.) You don't listen to a radio in a lighted room with 28 people which really makes difference.

When you present this material, you have to present it in a media outlook. Now, fortunately, we are dealing with radio here, and media licenses are considered licenses to print money in the business world. That is how they are seen. There is a lot of money involved, and there is a lot of power involved though not so much as there is involved in TV. But we are still dealing with the traditional power base, with people who are used to presenting positions which reflect the status quo. And if they do not reflect the status quo, they are always from people whom they consider to be in power positions. Thus you have statements about labour attributed to the "labour bosses," (which is a media term, certainly not a labour union term). You are dealing with a situation where, if you want to broadcast labour

history, often they will say: "Well, there are two sides to this, aren't there? There is the workers' side and there is the management's side." The position that I take is that the management's side has been represented to me for years: the workers' side rarely has. So I feel that it is about time that it should be pushed. That is my personal position, and I make that very clear, and I say that when I am doing broadcasting.

Now let's take a look at CBC's policy. CBC has a policy they call "balanced programming," a kind of "both sides now" approach. I will just give you an example, though it is not exactly labour history. We were doing a program for the "Morning Show" in Vancouver, and in the newspaper it came: There was a guy in North Vancouver whose dog died kind of mysteriously. The man was getting rashes, and his wife had chronic bronchitis. He surely had a lot of problems, and this seemed to coincide with the fiber glass plant next door. The guy had built his own house, had been there for 20, 25 years. The plant came in, had no restrictions to pumping out all the residues and bits of glass particles into the air. Now, we were following the story. It was a kind of human interest story to us, and it was an example of how little an individual's rights were compared to the right to make money even at the expense of the lives of people around. We interviewed the guy and we interviewed his doctor and they said they thought it was the fiber glass. But it could not be served, of course, until they did specific tests. We got hold of the company and the company said it was not their fault, but they were not going to say that on the air. We said, "Well, you know if you want to represent your position, you should, because we are going to go ahead." And they said: "We are not going to make any comment." And we said, "OK that is your prerogative." At this point, because of some political goings on at CBC, there was a hotshot in

the CBC management kind of watching the staff of this program to make sure that they did things in a balanced way. He said to us: "You cannot put this story on the air, we were planning basically to stop that series." There were some whines so he said: "Well, you are not representing the company's side." And we explained that we had contacted the company and that they refused to comment. He said: "No, you cannot unless you have the company on the air." This is an extreme example of this policy being applied: "You cannot do the story because it indicates that the company is at fault and they may not be, and then who are we to say that?" Well, what he was doing was applying this "balanced program" formula to essentially management's advantage in this case. If they won't comment, they can control it. And it is very frequent that that goes on. May be not that specific, but it does go on.

Co-op Radio is an example of community based stations. (It is a local broadcasting FM license here, for people who are not from Vancouver.) They have a policy that states in your license that you give access to people who did not have previous access to the media or do not have access to other medias. That makes a long list: old people, kids, women, labour. I helped to organize and co-produce the labour program there for two years and also did an awful lot of live broadcasting. At first we were roundly criticized for just taking labour's point of view. After 2 years of labour broadcasting, many journalists from the Sun and the Province used our broadcasts instead of going to conventions, because they knew they could really get what was going on. We did things like broadcasting the B.C. Fed Convention live, broadcasting labour rallies live. And then we also did magazine programs. Well, we had policies where we would not let one union say that union is a-ripping us off, trying to steal our members. We would let them represent only their own posi-

tion, and we did not pit them against management if it was not to their advantage. Basically they are in a negotiating position, and they did not want to hammer out things in public. We established a relationship with them. We had a good relationship.

We were the best labour program that I have ever heard on a radio station. I am not saying that because I was involved. I am just saying that because it was no holds barred programming for labour. They did not run a program: they were interviewed by us, that kind of program. Now that is the kind of labour programming I like. Most do the style of CBC programming. Occasionally you will have the opportunity to broadcast on local stations and they will do it if it's colorful, if it has local names. But otherwise there is very little opportunity. It is unfortunate.

Let's deal a little with the interviewees. I say that you should interview workers, but I don't think you should shy away from labour leaders who, to my mind, are remarkable workers who are sacrificing many things in their personal life for their beliefs. Very few of them make the kind of money that What's-his-name from the Teamsters' Union who is a senator who eats gold for breakfast, does. They don't. You are talking to workers, and they are there to talk to you for just one reason, because you are interested. And you are going to allow them to talk about their lives and probably the most important social events that shaped their lives and maybe their children's lives. Because you are interested, they will talk with you.

However, they have a right to know why you are there. And frequently they won't talk to you if you won't tell them. They might mumble a few things and say a few things but it will be bland and you will not get an understanding of what happened in the community, or what happened in that incident if you talk about, say, a 1912 coal strike or a riot or something like that. So I think

that you have to make a personal agreement with them and a political agreement with them. They have a right to know how the material is going to be used, and they have even a right to veto if they ask for it. They usually don't ask. Usually, if you talk with them and explain what your view of the situation is, why you are doing this. I go in and say I want to do a program on the 1912 coal strike because I go into high schools and a lot of kids don't understand anything about unions, anything about workers' rights. They make statements like "Plumbers make the same money as doctors." And they say "That's right, a lot of young people around here, don't even know what happened in our own community." And we go ahead. When they ask what my political affiliation is, I tell them. I won't tell you. If they, for example, belong to the Communist Party and they want to know why I don't belong to the Communist Party, I will have a discussion with them. But usually I will do it after. I just indicate to them that it is OK with me to discuss that. And I might say, "Well I have a different foreign policy, but I think their own labour movement is great," or something like that. I am clear with them. That is what I am trying to say. You cannot treat them as subjects, they are individuals whom you are going to have a conversation with, a controlled conversation, but a conversation.

Once you establish that kind of a relationship, all kinds of things happen. I went to talk with Ernie Dalskog who is probably the second in leadership under Harold Pritchett in organizing the IWA in this province. I went to talk with him for 2 hours, I stayed in his house for 3 days because after 2 hours I said "Well, I got to go Ernie," and he said: "Did you come here to hear about what happened or didn't you? There will be dinner in half an hour, and after that we can talk for about 3 hours, and then we will start again in the morning." And Ellen Greenwell was a woman

I interviewed who was 83 and who was a young woman during the Vancouver Island coal strike. And after I interviewed her, I produced a program and told her what it was going to be on. I happened to be in her house when it was being broadcast in Vancouver. She lives in Nanaimo. She was listening to it with her dentures out, her chin on the counter, turning every once in a while to her granddaughter, saying: "That's the way it was, I am telling you. Nobody else tells it like that." That's thrilling to get that kind of feedback. And those people will really extend themselves. You have to realize that their opinion of the media, especially if they have been in the labour movement, is usually lousy. The media had screwed them. You may not be a journalist, but if you have a tape recorder, then you are a journalist. You have a bit of a barrier to overcome.

The other thing is the equipment. I do not advocate hiding the equipment. I usually put the tape recorder near me. I think it breaks down a little bit of the mystique. I test it, play back. The other thing that I don't do is place the microphone to one side because you create a kind of triangle. They are talking to you into a microphone, things kind of drift over to the microphone, and you really want a conversation with people. So use the microphone in your hand. It is like punctuation, you move it toward them and indicate they are supposed to talk. You move it back, and they know they are supposed to shut up and you want to say something. If they motion to say something, you give them the microphone back. If things go wrong, you could say: "We should just back up a bit." And you can be a little naive. You cannot ask them to explain things 5 or 6 times because you want a good recording of it. Or you can be hard of hearing. So I say: "What did you just say," and he repeats it.

When you interview, your audience is very important. The audience originally is you, and that amounts to being naive.

The audience is even more naive than you. They don't know much about labour history, and they don't know much about this person. You owe the audience an orientation. You owe clearness to them, questions that they may have on their minds. Explanations. So when you do an interview, it is really good to know your audience. Is this going to be for a high school class? Is this to be on labour day or on a national radio show? Is it just for people who are not used to listening to other people and therefore run out of patience with things like stuttering? If you are thinking in those terms and are watching the equipment while doing the conversation, you are doing a good interview.

Now we come to the presentation. The person comes in a historical context. If they are talking about Ginger Goodwin and the labour organizers, you have to know that he worked in a mine and played soccer with the boys on Vancouver Island, connected with the Socialist Party in the Kootenays. You know that the labour unions at that time were opposed to conscription and so you can put together why Ginger Goodwin was shot. You may have to build that in or it may come in the interview. You have to realize that they may not know the historical context.

The other context you have to get across is the larger context. You can take several voices or you can mix them with music, and you can use other things from that period. You build the context so that people hear the kind of things that you think are important and are important for the people. There is one guy who told me about his teeth. He had lunch. He talked about his teeth being like rusty pieces of barbed wire. I must have worked for an hour and a half to get only a quarter of the stuttering in. It came out okay. The more you do in the line of cutting, the better you get at it, and the more you can see what can be done.

The other thing you have to provide in a presentation is continuity. You

have to bridge pieces of information, time changes, different voices coming up. And try to shake the listener up to listen. Also because people cannot concentrate for great lengths of time you can give him some rest with music, with other voices. The main thing though is to provide context.

If you can jump the hurdles that are inherent in the ownership of the media, if you can get yourself interested to do the work for very little money, the response you get from people writing letters is quite incredible. What is really remarkable is the opportunity to talk to a 90 year old miner and to reaffirm that the kinds of priorities and the kinds of work that is now being done by labour in B.C. bring the same experiences. It is not a question that labour is a history of classes in opposition. It has been from the beginning, and it still is. And the people you talk to, they are not necessarily Marxist or any brand of politics, but they all say the same things. It is amazing to go through that experience. I have not worked that long in my life to have had what I see as the benefits of their experiences. And that in itself is a reward. If you can communicate any of that in broadcasting, then you won out.

"Editing for Publication"

by Dennis Duffy

I have worked on the Sound Heritage Series for about 5 years now in various capacities, and I have been directly involved with 3 of the publications. To me, one of the great delights in recording an oral history interview when you are going to use it in a publication, comes at that moment of the interview when you realize you are getting exactly what you want. Unfortunately this does not happen often

enough. But there comes the moment when you have asked the right question about your favorite topic, and the person you talk to, relates an anecdote that is perfectly relevant and colorful and descriptive, and it is perhaps a little bit provocative or witty as well, and you just know that you are going to use this in your manuscript. So, that is one of the really exciting moments. But the big challenge comes when you see the anecdote in transcript, and it does not read as well as it sounds. So then you are faced with one of the problems of translating that wonderful story into print without ruining the whole thing in the process.

For me, the subject of editing enters the picture very early in the research project before I even start interviewing. As soon as I have an outline or plan about what I am going to write about, I begin to consciously exclude topics or themes that do not fit into that plan. This may mean not interviewing somebody, simply because I know I will not be able to use the material. However, this does not mean I will not change my plan or explore another topic when it happens to present itself during an interview. But I do find it necessary to really focus on covering the material I need, especially in the case of my book, Imagine Please, where so much of the material existed before I even started to work on it.

Another important point of the editing process is to read anything about the subject that you can put your hands on, and to re-read it frequently as you proceed. In the case of broadcasting, I found the two main published histories of radio in Canada to be invaluable in my research. I had them signed out from the library for almost a year, kept renewing them so that I could refer to them at my leisure. At the same time I found it important to read these volumes critically and avoid organizing my ideas along the same lines. Also, when I hear an interview or read in someone's paper something which is at variance with the

conventional wisdom as it appears in published history, quite often I find that the interviewee's version to be the true version and that the accepted wisdom along the years is not true.

Second: considerations about the interviews themselves. If the interviews are done by another person, it becomes particularly important to have an understanding of the interviewee's frame of reference. If books, photos, other materials are referred to in the course of the interview, you have to go and track down those books, photos themselves because there is nothing more frustrating than to hear in an interview: "Well, you know, he looked like that," or "He was kind of like so and so." On the other hand, if you are doing the interviewing yourself, it is very valuable to have a clear idea of the form your publication is going to take. For instance, I knew that I wanted to write a chapter of my book on the subject of radio drama. So I made efforts to obtain details and a variety of recollections on that subject. For this reason I did not ask hardly any questions about technical regulations, simply because I knew that my readers probably would not be interested in that subject. I am not. I saw this as being a very minor element of my book as compared to program content.

Transcription presents some problems. A few interviews in the case of my book were transcribed completely from beginning to end if an interview was found to be of consistent interest throughout. Another instance where you might want to transcribe the entire interview is when the interview was very much in the question and answer type. There would be one sentence here and one sentence there. In order to make any use of that type of material, the whole interview had to be transcribed, and then I would pick out a sentence here and a sentence there and put them together. So I ended up with maybe two paragraphs. We often go for selective transcription: when only certain segments of an interview

are of interest we will transcribe it selectively. This should be done by somebody who has a clear understanding of the subject and the kind of material that is wanted. Ideally, of course, you would want to do it yourself. In either case, whether you are doing selective transcription or a complete transcription, it is very important that the material be transcribed verbatim for the length of the excerpt of the interview. There is a tendency among some oral history users, notably journalists, to edit while they are transcribing. I heard somebody say once that their method was to play the tape back one sentence at a time and if the sentence was relevant, they would type it, not the others. But I think that that is very dangerous because what I found quite often, was that when I had gone over a section of verbatim transcript as a unit, the so-called digressions or irrelevancy became very important and one simply had to put them into context with minor editing. So you don't do any rearranging of the leading material until you have seen the whole transcript.

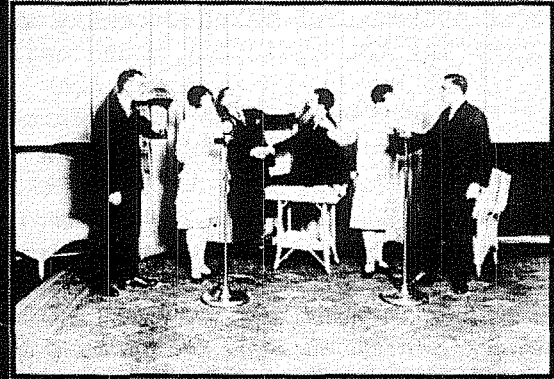
One thing that interests me is the ethical considerations involved in oral history. How much can you alter or reorganize the material and still call it oral history? At one extreme some people offer a verbatim presentation that is often stilted and difficult to read. At the other end there are books where interviews have been paraphrased to such a degree that they are no longer the interviewee's words. I will not quote examples of that either. But there are examples of that around, especially if you have access to the original recordings, and you discover that what appears in the book is not the author's version of what the person said.

In most Sound Heritage publications we delete the interviewer's questions and comments so that the interviewee's statements may stand on their own. In most cases they will stand on their own.

Sometimes it is necessary to insert a word or a phrase to make the interviewee's response a complete sentence. These are matters of pronoun reference, especially when people go on for several minutes saying "he," and you have to go back and find out who "he" is. Also, as often happens, a series of events is related out of chronological sequence. Everybody, I am sure, has been in a situation where someone says: "Well, and then we went down to the bar, and we had a couple of beers, but before that we had been to the bus depot." They are spontaneous but they are very frustrating because they are out of order. It is a simple matter to put the story back into a logical sequence with very little changing of words. And at this point if there is a digression that does not matter, you can cut it out. Of course, our guiding principle is that we don't change the wording if it changes the meaning. Sometimes it would be very convenient for the sake of readability to change a few words around. I think the last sentence in one chapter of Imagine Please reads to the effect of "Well, that was a different year and I don't think you can go back to it." And my editor wanted to change the phrase to "It was a different year and you can't go back to it." But if you think about it, that is not quite the same thing.

If the interviewee makes some important comments about one subject in different parts of an interview, you can combine those statements into one paragraph, thereby providing a more concise version of the subject. Which is quite valuable in a case where I interviewed John Avison. He was talking about Andrew Allan who directed radio drama out of Vancouver for a number of years, and he spoke on Andrew Allan a number of times in the interview. I also had an interview with somebody else and he spoke of Andrew Allan a number of times in the interview, and I had another interview with somebody else, and rather than trying to present those statements individually, I took them all together

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Early Radio Broadcasting in British Columbia

Dennis J. Duffy

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and put them into one paragraph. Basically they are all complete sentences: "Andrew was like this, Andrew was like that...." Some people might question the ethics of that, especially in the case of Avison where he was interviewed by me in January, and then in December of the same year he would be interviewed by somebody else, and another one in October, and I put all those statements about one person into one paragraph as if it all had been said at one time. But I do not think I am putting any words into anybody's mouth, it is always their own words. But we better be very careful about that kind of thing. We often delete words for the sake of brevity. Somebody goes about something in a round about way, so we delete words. But if we insert any words for qualifi-

cation like clarifying pronoun identification, we put the edited words into square brackets, as it is important not to put words into anybody's mouth.

The deeper importance of having a set editorial policy is to say what the policy is. There is a number of books of oral history published recently where the material has obviously been edited, but it is presented in a way that you don't know whether it has been edited or not. Extreme editing is not wrong per se, but it is important to say what you have done. So we always try to include a statement about the kind of policy we followed. "The interviews themselves have been edited extensively for publication. Sentences and paragraphs have been shortened and rearranged for the sake of brevity, clarity and readability. In a few instances relevant statements from different parts of the interview are separate interviews with the same person which have been combined. In every case however, care has been taken to insure that the printed version accurately represents the intention and character of the interviewee's comments." So I think it is very important to let the reader know what we have been doing. And as Lynne Bowen mentioned yesterday, if somebody wants to check up, if they want to refer to the original, the original (the tapes and transcripts) are always kept on file in the Archives.

Up to this point I have been talking about the process as it would apply to the single interview. There are a good number of sound programs where each interview is dealt with separately. And his or her words appear in separate units of text. I am thinking, for instance, of a very excellent book called Toil and Peaceful Life, an issue of the Sound Heritage Series printed several years ago. [It deals with] the lives of Doukhobors, and every section of the book deals with an individual separately. I am personally more interested in a style of editing where the interviews are combined, with 2 or more

interviewees providing a variety of perspectives about a single subject. In my sound program "Avalanche Mountain," for example, I combined a recorded eyewitness account of an avalanche in Rogers Pass with an excellent newspaper report about the same avalanche, and so the oral history account provides the personal sense of being there at the tragedy, while the language of the newspaper reporter gives the listener a sense of that period. I am switching back and forth between the eyewitness account and the newspaper account which is read by an actor. Imbert Orchard, in writing about the subject of editing oral history for radio, has compared this style of editing to the montage style of motion picture editing where you take 2 distinctly different shots and combine them, and a third entirely new concept comes out of that synthesis. Hopefully, a similar understanding will arise from juxtaposition of separate voices whether they appear on the printed page or on tape. To me this is the most exciting form of oral history. It is similar to impressionism, and it is very definitely interpretative oral history, but if it is done carefully, it can create a very compelling and readable form of oral history which is still faithful to the original accounts.

So far I have been talking about the organizing and arrangement of oral sources. And, of course, once you have this rough structure you can begin to shape and write the commentary. And that is the way I work. I will not write anything myself until I have got all the material together and organized in the rough way I am going to use it. The commentary that we use in Sound Heritage, at least as I use it, has several main purposes: It puts the oral sources into context of time and place; it links the oral excerpts topically into a logical narrative; it explains any esoteric parts of the oral material. For instance, in the radio book, we have been referring to DX all the time. In the commentary we explained what DX

means (it means distance, if anybody is interested). And if any oral excerpt is too confusing, I might just take that, and just paraphrase it in my own words and present it as commentary, rather than as oral history, to the effect that: "Mr. Avison told me that...." So you can summarize people's comments as commentary. From that point on, once you have the commentary and the oral excerpts together, essentially it becomes a process of editing and re-editing and writing and re-writing. The books that have been done by Sound Heritage tend to be submitted to the editor in first draft version and Charles Lillard, the editor, works with the author from that point on in shaping and re-shaping things. Quite frequently the book will change shape a great deal in that process between the first draft and when Charles puts his hands on it.

So these working principles are part of my approach towards editing oral history. However I was struck yesterday when we had the session, "Industry, Labour and the Professions in B.C.," that there are so many varieties of methodology in editing, and they all work, and they are all different. So

there is not really one way to do it. It is whatever seems to work. And this seems to work for me and it seems to be the general method we follow in the Series. I feel that editing is ultimately a very intuitive and individual process. And it involves a large amount of experimentation. What I do quite often is I have little bits of transcript and if anybody comes over to visit me while I am working on a book, what they will find is essentially a whole chapter spread out on the floor, little bits of paper (with all the windows closed so that nothing blows away), and just organizing things and putting them into different sentences and taping them on to pieces of cardboard and hanging them on the wall, and just juggling them around till you find a sequence that tells the story the way you want to. In my experience, in the Sound Heritage Series, the publications that use oral history tend to merge in the later draft stages into their final form. It is like the old adage about books of fiction, that fiction is not written, it is re-written. And that is very true of oral history as well.