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From “A Shared Authority” to “A Shared AI-thority”: A Paradigm Shift for Oral and Public History?

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I.

Let me begin by expressing my profound gratitude for the honor and privilege of the invitation to address this International Symposium at Osaka University. I was last in Japan in 2001, representing the US American Studies Association. And I previously lectured widely in Japan while serving as a Fulbright professor in neighboring Korea—which I am more than a little stunned to realize was a full fifty years ago! I am very, very thankful for this opportunity to return, and to resume a dialogue with Japanese colleagues.

The substance of my presentation will be very different than what I could speak to in those earlier visits. And yet—a paradox suggested by the title of my presentation—in many ways it is not so different at all. Similar questions, concerns, and sensibilities—in both old and very new frameworks—are “shared”—THE keyword for our symposium—across time and, as we will explore in the responses presented this afternoon, across cultural space as well. Let me begin with the “time” dimension.

I have been involved in oral history and public history for many years, on many levels—as practitioner, teacher, through publications, and ongoing involvement in the Oral History Association (US), the International Oral History Association, and the International Federation for Public History.

My early work was gathered in a 1990 essay collection, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. This has somehow survived as a landmark in the field—or at least its title has. As a kind of “meme”, *Shared Authority* seems to have struck a bell or chord that has crystallized a useful

discourse driving thought and practice over time. It has always seemed to me curious that the collection is often seen as a contribution to “theory”—since every essay involves reflections on highly concrete and applied projects of one kind or another. Happily, this may underscore the value of actual practice, a core strength of oral history—and how it drives and creates historical insight sharable more broadly.

Beyond being remembered at all, it is humbling that the book’s reflections may still be of use as oral and public historians consider “craft and meaning” as we move together through the “digital turn” in our field. In this presentation, I’ll reflect on how much my own practice has been propelled in very new ways, but informed—I discover after the fact and with considerable surprise—by instincts “present at the creation” of the shared authority addressed in an ancient book appearing thirty-five years ago!

In most discussions of Shared Authority, focus is on that provocative term “shared,” and the to-share verb at its root. This has often drifted into advocacy for “sharing”—as if “we” (academics, museums, organizations) have authority, and now we need somehow to distribute to or share it with “them,” usually some form of the public. But from an oral history perspective, it has always seemed to me more natural to understand the interview as shared pretty much by definition—a dialogic creation of meaning through a living conversation about the past that takes place in some present. That is: we don’t really have authority to share, or give away. Rather, we are called on to recognize and draw this shared dimension into oral historical interpretation and public history processes. Such notions were grounded in an international generation of oral historians in whose formidable shadow my own work emerged, practitioners like Alessandro Portelli, Luisa Passerini, Paul Thompson, and Ron Grele, among many others.

As “shared” will figure so much in our symposium’s discussions, let me draw attention to the other word in the title: Authority. In a bit of word-play in the book, I commented on the “author” embedded in that word, at least in English—I’ll be curious whether this resonance survives in translation! Whether it does or doesn’t linguistically, as a concept authoring can be understood as a generative source of authority. If we ask who is the ‘author’ of an oral history, for instance—well, that certainly can’t describe the interviewer, and it doesn’t quite describe the subject either, who is responding to (and sometimes resisting or re-directing or ignoring) an interviewer’s questions and curiosity and framing. So the authoring is shared by definition—a helpful clue to the processes

at the heart of the book’s title and its reflections on who has authority in, and over, representation of anyone’s history. That, in turn, speaks to the widening circles of reflection on what shared and sharing authority can mean in today’s expansive, inclusive digital practice.

II.

My own work in this dimension began some years ago with a focus on digital indexing of interviews and other a/v documents—mapping, exploring, and searching audio-video collections so their content and meanings could be more broadly Shared-- in any number of public-history ways. But in the last few years, Authoring has moved more and more to the center of a new dimension of digital oral history practice, in two forms:

One involves a web-app I have partnered in developing called PixStori, now available for free in the cloud as PixStoriplus-- a mode that invites and gathers audio responses to photographs, either self-uploaded image or those provided to prompt responses, or both. This is crowd-sourcing, but in most applications the crowd is a very particular community, family, or group being engaged. Here, community authoring is explicit: A photo-prompted or photo-response story-gathering mode can be more natural, spontaneous, and open-ended than the extended dialogue of a long-form oral history interview; it offers, individually and cumulatively, a kind of “short-form” oral history. And there’s something stunning and surprising about how deeply reflective, interpretive, and unpredictably associative are these photo-response recordings, even (or especially) within the provocative orbit of a short 1-2 minute “story-ing.”

New modes of authoring broaden the landscape of participatory dialogues, leading to a compositional approach in the art world in use for, well, many thousands of years: mosaic. I’ve come to think of short-form multimedia oral/public history documents as tiny “tiles” of memory and reflection that can be arranged to comprise a portrait of a family, community, organization, and so on. In this mode, compositional authoring broadens: a number of museums and field projects are inviting their communities to join first in contributing, but then, significantly, in curating-- selecting and arranging crowd-sourced photo-stories for publications, exhibits, community sharing, and collaborative documentaries.

The second mode involves developments in the processing and uses of more traditional long-form oral histories. In a 2010 summary of our practice to that point, my colleague Douglas Lambert and I located our work in playful yet serious terms: Conventional choices in oral and public history, we noted, could be reduced to “raw” or “cooked”—EITHER collections of data, often not transcribed but even if so, rarely very exploratory, OR selected material extracted for a specific purpose—a film, exhibit, research, website, and so on. In contrast, we located our work in the in-between space of “the kitchen”— where the raw can be cooked into anything, limited only by what’s in the pantry, spice rack, refrigerator, and freezer, and who the cooks are and what they want. We proposed that if legibly organized and with suggested recipes on hand if needed, or not, this could be imagined as an open restaurant kitchen, which anybody in a community could enter to cook, collaboratively or on their own. “A Shared Cookery,” so to speak. [Frisch and Lambert, 2010]

Our base for this work more than a decade ago was Interclipper, a remarkable offline tool for rich indexing and cross-referencing of the recordings directly, in effect an alternative to laborious transcription. It became obsolete in the rapidly-changing online world, though re-tooling is in process for open-source, cloud use. Our Interclipper work fell into an implicit either/or posture on transcription: we approached the recording as the primary source, open to richer indexing than the text transcription often not indexed all, especially now—ironically—given the alternative temptation of instant text keyword transcript searching. Alternatively, we were finding, mapping and exploring-- rather than the specific searching that requires knowing (or guessing) what you’re looking for—seemed crucial for broadening access, for sharing the capacity to engage and interact with oral history, and for the dialog that public history invites.

And mapping and exploring is what media-coding metadata interfaces like Interclipper offered. Its signal strength lay in offering a range of independent coding fields, each of which could be given a customized taxonomy, ranging from general to granular, with values in that field then assigned to any segment or passage in the collection. Each field could be either an independent or dependent variable, in any sequence of dependability, with the entire collection instantly sorted by every combination of variables and code assignments within them. Our shorthand name for this was “CVS.” This is the name of an American pharmacy chain, but here— facetiously but helpfully-- it stood for: Chinese, Vegetable, Spicy. That is, an ethnicity

field, an ingredient field, a taste-quality field, each with a custom taxonomy, and combinable in any order, depending on whether one was planning a Chinese banquet with both meat and vegetarian dishes with varied taste qualities, say, or a vegetarian banquet with dishes irrespective of ethnicity. Even a spiciness banquet with dishes from wherever, and made from whatever!

III.

Since that Interclipper work, in just the last few years the digital landscape for oral history processing has been changing seismically bringing new transcription capacities to the center of practice. If this is an earthquake, it has thrown off two powerful aftershocks:

First, automatic transcription can produce an initial transcription with up to 90% accuracy. And second, auto-transcription can provide embedded time-codes connecting transcript and recording at precise points—read, click, and hear/watch that precise moment in the interview. This opens a new world of text-based access to recordings for examination, extraction, and multimedia use. These features are now staples in online Oral History, and multimedia e-publication platforms such as the well-known OHMS and Aviary, recently merged in 2023.

But this involves a paradox: the more comprehensive and accurate the auto-transcribing, the more it requires aggressive correcting and formatting, filled as it is with every speaker utterance, every speaker change broken out, and time codes everywhere: in addition to needed correction reaching that last 10% of accuracy, editorial intervention is needed to make the transcription accurate AND, as a kind of translation from voice to text, understandably readable and browsable.

Very recently, unexpectedly and by coincidence, a collaborative opportunity led me and my colleagues to enter this new world—the world of ASR, automatic speech recognition, or what—in oral history terms--amounts to AI-Transcription.

Our opportunity came in the form of an invitation to process a collection of AI-transcriptions on a relatively new platform, TheirStory, from interviews conducted for an oral history of the Pontchartrain Park Pioneers, the first residents of a remarkable Black community development in New Orleans in the 1950s, a project directed by Dr. Clyde Robertson. TheirStory offered enhanced mark-up capacity supported by a back-

end Timecode Indexing Module (TIM) developed in part by Douglas Lambert, previously the Director of Technology on my Randforce Associates team, as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Luxembourg’s Center for Contemporary and Digital History (C2DH).

With these tools, we discovered, we could process the full transcription and move right on, in one smooth arc, to produce with surprising efficiency and ease a series of parallel text iterations as distinct indexes for the collection-- taking just a little bit more time than would have been required for an accurate manual transcription from scratch.

We first refined/formatted the Pontchartrain Park raw AI- transcripts into “transcripts of record” –the verbatim interview corrected and consolidated into more meaningfully readable and browsable paragraphs, usually covering 2-4 minutes, with a time code at the head of each paragraph. The contrast with the “full” AI-Transcript can be dramatic: in another project, we’ve recently been working on a long interview with a man whose work, extending over decades, moved grain from a ship’s hold to the distinctive Grain Elevators on Buffalo’s waterfront. His “grain scooper” interview documented this, but also featured a great deal of affectionate bickering between him and his wife of some fifty years, as she responded to his stories, often with different recollections or teasing remarks. With each interjection and exchange auto-broken out into separate paragraphs, this version, printed out, ran to some 130 pages almost impossible to browse or scan, much less easily read. The Transcript of Record, in contrast—with NO material deleted—delivered the same interview in sequential, consolidated browsable paragraphs in only 40 pages.

In the general process we’re now employing, the next steps involve dividing the interviews into content-driven 10–15-minute chapter-like “Units,” presented in a “table of contents” with brief content summaries describing the coverage in each unit. These then flow into distinct iterations rendering the speakers’ words as concise digests: “unit digests” of the all of the interview content, and then “story digests,” shorter thematically focused highlight passages selected collaboratively with the project. Finally, with the unit and story digests providing content flow and thematic distillations, we and the project returned to the full “transcript of record” to identify and mark, with in-out points, passages available for media export or verbatim quotation, with others as easily locatable and extractable by students, producers, or visitors.

The unit digests end up at about 25-40% of the full transcript of record with absolutely no loss of content or theme—it's just “squeezing out the water” to produce an accurate, readable, browsable distillation. The thematic “Story Digests” are especially useful for publication, as they are wholly in the speaker’s own words with the full original always available for checking or heightened attention, say, to the dynamics of a dialogic interview conversation.

Not at all coincidentally, developing this dimension brought me back to one of the more unusual chapters in *A Shared Authority*—a discussion of editing for publication presenting “before and after editing” cross-referenced versions of a “way-too-long-to-publish” interview in *Portraits in Steel* (1993)—my oral histories of Buffalo steelworkers after the shutdown of our community’s steel making facilities, presented together steelworker portraits by the internationally-renowned social documentary photographer, Milton Rogovin. The before-and-after example offers a way to test the editing choices made for the digests, and makes the point that ANY working with interviews requires, at some point, making informed and accountable editorial judgments.

This chapter takes on new relevance, now, as representing a “before”—just one “view” as an either/or alternative to a full transcript. But with new capacities, we can now easily produce a new “after”: a full spectrum of iterations, each with its own uses and value, each saved, each always accessible—nothing is “left on the cutting room floor.” They are all linked to each other and to the recording by time codes, and each can be coded or keyworded using a shared custom taxonomy or control-vocabulary thesaurus, and thus easily reached by search functions.

Such processes support new dimensions of shared authoring between oral historians and interview subjects and community participants—collaboratively considering the choices for usable theme-or story-specific digests or verbatim recording clips for multimedia use. We’ve come to think of all this as comprising a general, open-ended mode of “Indexing for Use(s).”

This complex of iterative views emerged as an improvisation as we worked with Dr. Robertson’s Pontchartrain Park Pioneers interviews. What helped us sense its potential as a broader modality for oral history was seeing how he and his colleagues made almost instant use of EACH of the iterations in different ways, and for different users and audiences. The raw auto-transcript and authoritative transcript of record

remain with the project as references, with the latter easily sharable as appropriate. The Table of Contents/ Unit Summaries opens the entire collection to exploration and browsing, with immediate and media access to any specific point on demand. The Unit Digests, consolidating each interview's content, were quickly edited into a book-length publication of the interviews in the collection, via an on-line journal. The selected and thematically focused Story Digests proved immediately usable in classroom presentations and discussions. The clip index is being used now to produce a video documentary and other multi-media presentations. Researchers coming to the collection report finding the various summaries and unit/story digests invaluable in providing orientation within and across interviews, from which they can then drill down to the transcript and the recordings themselves in search of very particular information not already spotlighted—a contrast to the usual alternative of a keyword bringing the searcher to a specific point within a long transcript—in effect, to a specific tree in the middle of a vast, pathless forest.

As “indexing for use,” or more accurately “indexing for use(s),” the Pontchartrain Park Pioneers project offers a highly suggestive “proof of concept” for an approach now being realized in a range of current projects. (See www.rebrand.ly/RF-PPP for a full demo of the various iterations of one interview from the Pontchartrain Park Pioneers, including as well its migration into an explorable on-line e-publication via OHMS and Aviary).

Our work has been just one vector in a field very much in motion from various directions and across many platforms, tools, and conceptual approaches. These are each and all challenging conventional assumptions about oral history from interviewing to archiving to transcription to indexing to media production to public sharing and involvement. It is a difficult to predict exactly what the field will look like in even five or ten years, not to mention fifty, and I won't even dare to speculate on what AI, the elephant sitting on the internet and smartphone, will add to the mix. We're all in the boat with Bob Dylan: “You know there's something happening here but you don't know what it is, do you Mr. Jones?”

IV.

I don't know either, for sure, but let me offer some refined guesses as a gloss on what I hope is my not-too-provocative or -enigmatic title, "From 'A Shared Authority' to 'A Shared AI-thority'—A paradigm shift for Oral and Public History?"

Each "shared" is a key, here. The original usage involved the interview itself as a conversation, a dialogue about meaning from very different vantages, and the importance of recognizing this in the documents that come down to us, text or media—the importance of listening for it, and, even more, for actively hearing it. My very first experience with oral history—coming from completely outside it—involved being asked to do a review of Studs Terkel's wonderful book, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*, which may be familiar to in Japan. What I discovered was the power of Terkel's attentive listening and engaged interview dialog, each with profound impact on the complex, nuanced interviews and often paradoxical interpretation his book offered. And how deeply this contrasted with the breathless, superficial, romantic readings of oral history celebrated on the paperback's cover "blurbs"—At Last! This is The Real History! This is the Way It Really Was—direct from The People!

The alternative Terkel provided, the same dialogic approach, the same centrality of listening and active hearing, is what I am discovering to be crucial and central in summarizing, digesting, clipping, and broadly "mapping" oral history content and meanings in the very new ways, with the very new tools and approaches described here. These require an active dialogue in reading, "hearing," and processing interviews, with real value--for students, community partners, and oral/public history practitioners—grounded in this process, if truly "shared."

To the extent that AI enhances this process—as it does by transcending the log-jam of transcription labor and costs, and with other enhancements likely to smooth the framing and deployment of coding taxonomies and thesauri, among other applications—it will be profoundly useful. But to the extent it substitutes for thoughtful and attentive listening by anyone seeking to engage the material actively, it risks being counterproductive and deeply problematic.

Avoiding an unproductive and limiting Either/Or, and finding an optimal Both/And balance point between—this is likely to be THE central challenge in bringing AI into Oral and Public History. We have GOT to look beyond—choose your image—

IBM Watson v. Kasparov in chess, or—Japanese friends may know this classic American folk song—John Henry v. the Steam Drill (from a true story about a contest between a black hand-tunneller and a machine: “John Henry said to his Captain, a Man ain’t nothin’ but a Man; but before I let that Steam Drill beat me down, I’ll die with a hammer in my hand.” He did, but only after winning the contest against the machine.

In this Either/or v. Both/And frame, it may help to revisit terms used earlier, and in our pre-AI Interclipper work, to describe conventional alternatives in oral and public history: the raw, the cooked, and in-between the kitchen where the raw gets cooked into a dish brought to the table. Add a playful addition to the metaphor suggested by AI: that the “kitchen” is not a fixed resource, since new appliances (e.g. food processors and beyond) transform capacities and possibilities in an instant—and in the AI world are doing so at breakneck speed.

Putting this more formally and respectfully: oral and public history have for most of their history been defined by either an archival sensibility or a documentary sensibility: collect, store, and organize the material for any possible use. Or, a specific user reaches in to find a specific something for fashioning a specific output: a film, an exhibit, a research article, a web-site post.

In-between, and largely unspoken to until recently, lies an instrumental sensibility—organizing the collection to serve those who want to do SOMETHING with the material, but in an ongoing, open-ended that can vary widely—over time and situation, and among what may be the very different needs and objectives of organizational users and the communities they engage.

I suggest this “something” is tilting towards a paradigm shift deeper than the transformative impacts of technology, and broader than dramatic changes in a field once oriented to elite interviewing but now responsive to communities unrepresented in the historical record itself, not to mention excluded from participation in its construction, interrogation, and interpretation.

The paradigm shift concept holds that it is not dramatic discoveries or inventions that are revolutionary—it is, rather, community-driven understandings that first lag behind, but finally—sometimes in a moment—catch up with the profoundly transformative implications of new discoveries or technologies. The revolution involves how this happens, and what difference it makes.

From the very beginning, oral historians have stubbornly tended to see the basic building-block elements of the field as independent and free-standing, however constellated and to what ends. Interviewing—by and for whom. Recordings. Transcriptions. Catalogs and Finding Aids. Search tools. Metadata. Indexing. Extracts for publication or in research or in documentary production. Exhibits and Community Responses. Crowdsourcing.

But what if we see them, each and all, as facets or views of the same oral history thing—all there, all the time, all reachable, all variously usable? What if multi-dimensional indexing—distinctly different fields or meaning and reference for the same coded statement—is applied to multi-dimensional content—across a range of different iterations of the same content, each with distinct uses, not to mention users and audiences? What might Shared and Sharing Authority in oral and public history look like then, and what will we be able to do with it?

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