

Naturals with a Microphone: Oral History and the Librarian Skillset

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Introduction

In 1938, Allen Nevins, a historian at Columbia University with a background in journalism, documented the need “to obtain, from the lips and papers of living Americans, a fuller record of their participation in the political, economic, and cultural life of the last sixty years.”¹ He began interviewing historically significant figures and in 1948, established the Oral History Research Office, the first archive devoted to interviews. By the 1960s, reel to reel tape recorders were commercially available and this research methodology became more widespread.² The Oral History Association was established in 1966 and Columbia University hosted the Second Oral History Colloquium in November of 1967.³

Martha Jane K Zachert, an Associate Professor at the Florida State University-Tallahassee Library School, attended this meeting and came home full of ideas on how librarians could engage with the burgeoning movement. She predicted five ways that oral history would impact the work of academic librarians in a short article titled “The Implications of Oral History for Librarians.”⁴ The very first implication was that librarians would become interviewers.

“Oral history, for a library, is a way of *creating* primary source materials in contrast to its time-honored responsibility of *acquiring* them. For the librarian, then, building an oral archive becomes a unique opportunity for a creative intellectual contribution.”⁵ The remaining four implications she listed covered our roles in technical services, but if librarians failed to establish interview programs, “a rare creative opportunity will escape [us].”⁶

Zachert’s description of oral history as a “rare creative opportunity” foreshadows the work of scholars such as Michael Frisch, who coined the phrase “shared authority” to describe the relationship between interviewer and interviewee.⁷ Oral historians decide on the content and scope of their projects, organize the interviews, lead the conversations, and set the terms for exhibition. Alessandro Portelli claims that the “final result of the interview is the product of both the narrator and the researcher.”⁸ Zachert was excited by the prospect of librarians playing such an active role in contributing to the historical record.

Forty-nine years have passed since the Second Colloquium, however, and our contributions to the practice have largely remained in that “time-honored” arena of preservation and access.⁹ It is time to recognize and celebrate librarians’ front line skills in public service and collections that we deploy as the primary investigators in oral history programs. The reference interview is not diametrically different from the oral history interview; collecting conversations calls on the same code of ethics when acquiring physical or digital resources. Public service librarians possess the knowledge, skills, and abilities of any competent interviewer.

This paper is an autoethnography of my oral history project, the TechBC Memory Project undertaken in 2014 and 2015.¹⁰ I will relate my experience to Alessandro Portelli’s reflections on interviewing and Leah Rosenblum Emary’s research on librarian fieldworkers. American Library Association documents on reference and collection development provide further context on our training and ethos. Recognizing our skills could be a

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first step toward greater engagement in the methodology as we continue to position ourselves as scholars—not merely supporters—of digital humanities in our institutions.¹¹

Oral History and Librarians

Donald Ritchie states that oral history requires two distinct actions: first, the interview; second, the deposit in a repository. “[A] well-prepared interviewer question[s] an interviewee and record[s] their exchange in audio or video format. Recordings of the interview are transcribed, summarized, or indexed and then placed in a library or archives.”¹² Notable contributions from the LIS community largely involve oral history’s “back end.” Marion Matters published *The Oral History Cataloging Manual* in 1995; Susan Wynne provided workflow guidance to oral history collections for academic librarians.¹³ Nancy MacKay updated oral history curation to the digital era and among public historians.¹⁴

That said, the literature confirms that librarians have been primary investigators of several oral history projects. Tami Albin’s 2010 chapter in *Serving LGBTIQ Library and Archives Users: Essays on Outreach, Service, Collections and Access* is a lively account of her oral history of the Kansas LGBTIQ community that explores her dual identity as a librarian and oral historian.¹⁵ Bynog and Zhao reported on their oral history of Fondren Library staff at Rice University, and the Medical Library Association has been active in oral history collection since the late 1970s.¹⁶ Librarians have also been the subject of oral history projects; A. Arro Smith completed a doctorate on oral histories of end-of-career librarians, recently published as a monograph by the American Library Association.¹⁷

Autoethnography

No librarian has yet applied autoethnography to the oral history interview process. This method “seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno).”¹⁸ Canadian academic librarians have previously used autoethnography to analyze their experiences as members of faculty associations and as information seekers, and describe how their professional identities and their practice altered as a result.¹⁹

Autoethnography was the best fit for recounting and examining my oral history project. The personal narrative was essential in order to provide context. But autoethnography goes further: as sociologist Mary Patrice Erdmans argues: “[i]n order for the self-centered narrative to be more than egocentric navel gazing, it has to be purposeful.... The personal narrative is not a-scholarly by virtue of being about the self; the self can be grist for academic discourse when it is connected to larger processes or takes us to new places.”²⁰ While descriptive accounts of oral history projects are helpful to newcomers to the field, this paper will incorporate further analysis of the librarian skillset as it pertains to the interview process.

The TechBC Memory Project: Background and Execution

I spent the first fifteen years of my career in a public library, then secured a position as an academic librarian at the Surrey branch of Simon Fraser University in 2009. SFU Surrey is a stunning mixed use facility that has won architectural design awards,²¹ in an unlikely location: built atop what was once a failing shopping mall in a low income neighbourhood.²²

How this facility came into existence is a convoluted and complex tale that has largely been forgotten. It was originally intended to be the home of The Technical University of British Columbia, the brainchild of a left leaning government that fell from power in 2001. TechBC operated for three years innovating the traditional university experience with a technology-based curriculum, multidisciplinary academic programming,

and blended learning. A newly elected neoliberal government forcibly merged TechBC with Simon Fraser University in 2002. Neither the government nor Simon Fraser University have ever formally credited the accomplishments of the TechBC community for their foundational work in building SFU Surrey. John Trueman documented TechBC's establishment and the events surrounding its closure.²³ Newspaper articles captured the drama of its final days.²⁴ SFU Archives preserved official records such as meeting minutes and reports. But nobody had heretofore looked at TechBC's legacy and the impact the institution had on its workforce, its students, and its neighbourhood.

In 2013, SFU Library initiated a professional development program that encouraged its liaison librarians to spend ten percent of their time working on special projects. My subject background is in English Literature, and the narrative aspect of the TechBC story had always appealed to me. It is the story of the rise and fall of a small startup university that attempted to be different. Milan Kundera's *The book of laughter and forgetting* taught me to resist political victors from having the final say in the historical record.²⁵ I was determined that the TechBC story not be forgotten.

After receiving assurance that I could deposit my interviews in SFU's institutional repository, I took this opportunity to propose an oral history of TechBC. I wanted to create a unique open digital collection as well as pay homage to those who had such a large impact on my workplace and its neighbourhood. This project would be a means for me to acquire experience in qualitative research methods, the research ethics process, and research data management.

I harboured doubts that the Library would approve a project that did not tie closely to professional practice, but was pleasantly surprised when my proposal was accepted. As a self-taught oral historian, however, I felt insecure. I consulted Donald Ritchie's *Doing Oral History* and Donna Marie DeBlasio's *Catching Stories: a practical guide to oral history*²⁶ for insight into oral history skills and technique. I listened to interviews in open digital collections. While I was aware that some faculty members at my university were experienced with oral history, I was not comfortable asking for guidance. I did not want to add to their already heavy teaching, research, and service workload, and faculty are under no obligation to supervise or mentor librarians.

I applied for and obtained approval from SFU's Research Ethics Board (REB). I found this process helpful, as the REB requires thorough documentation regarding the researcher's study details and ensures participants' informed consent. Securing REB approval boosted my confidence. I borrowed recording equipment on long term loan and conducted my first interview with a colleague who worked in the library at TechBC.²⁷ I was extremely nervous, and feel that this interview contains a few awkward moments, but thereafter, my performance anxiety diminished substantially. After editing the audio recording to remove background noise, I created an interview record and uploaded it with the audio file to our IR.

After interviewing my colleague, I sent out a general recruitment notice to the Surrey staff email list. I was surprised and encouraged to hear from dozens of people within days, and became very busy scheduling, conducting, and uploading interviews. During this process, the TechBC network opened up to me. Almost every narrator gave me advice on others to interview; one quarter of my sample were recruited via the "snowball" method. I conducted thirty interviews in total: a mix of students, administrators, staff, and faculty members. I also interviewed the CEO of the TechBC Corporation, one member of the Board of Governors, and a former cabinet minister of the government which established the University.

I spent about ten months interviewing. My semi-structured questions followed a simple narrative structure: I asked interviewees how they came to TechBC, what type of work they were doing, and their experiences of its closure. I also asked them to reflect on the institution's legacy. With experience, I grew more confident and the

more people I interviewed, the better I understood both the institution and interviewing conventions. I honed my questions and active listening skills.²⁸

Toward the end of the project, I began a process of self reflection. I had received positive feedback about the interviews: at the end of one session, the narrator said, “I think you’ve covered an excellent set of questions.”²⁹ Another wrote me an email saying, “I very much appreciate you undertaking this project.... Your non-verbal behavior was warm, accepting, and encouraging. As a Psychologist (somewhat lapsed) I think that if you ever want to give up the Library gig, you may want to explore that avenue!”³⁰

Furthermore, my Summit records were being regularly accessed; each of them had been viewed hundreds of times.³¹ I applied for and was awarded an eight-month study leave to upgrade the metadata and analyze the interviews, as well as a grant for transcriptions and indexing assistance. Meanwhile, though, I felt that there was more to the success of the project than simply following Donald Ritchie and Donna Marie DeBlasio’s advice on how to conduct an oral history. As a librarian with twenty-one years of experience, what did I bring to the field?

Analysis and Reflection

My self reflection process began with Alessandro Portelli, one of oral history’s preeminent scholars. I had the great fortune of attending his presentations at the University of Winnipeg in the fall of 2015. Responding to critics who questioned the credibility of memories,³² he argued “[t]he importance of oral testimony may lie not in its adherence to fact, but rather in its departure from it, as imagination, symbolism and desire emerge.”³³ Portelli thus changed the conversation surrounding oral history from facts to meaning. Oral history supplements physical and textual primary sources, and provides insight on how the population experienced and understood historical events.

Portelli has a literature and law background. His reassures those without History PhDs that the field is both multidisciplinary and inclusive:

I would like to make some remarks on the fact that I stumbled inadvertently onto the whole thing: the stories, their meaning, the need for an ad hoc approach. I was not a professional historian (or a professional “anything,” at the time) testing my training against some research problem. On the contrary, it was the discovery of the problem which caused me to train myself as accurately as I could in oral history and half a dozen other related fields.³⁴

I strongly identified with Portelli’s inadvertent stumbling. I similarly discovered a complex, underreported story and decided that oral history was the best methodology to draw attention to the institution and explore its nuance. My approach to the project from an inductive, non-theoretical framework turns out to have been one of its strengths. Reflecting on his interviews with Kentucky miners, Portelli believes “people talk to me because I listen to them: I don’t have much to tell them, and therefore I am not trying to “influence” them, but only try to “gather a little knowledge and a few stories.”³⁵ Conducting oral history interviews with the intent to answer a research question can be detrimental to its outcome.

Portelli’s phrase “gather...a few stories” echoes the work librarians do in collections. The ALA Library Bill of Rights and its first two tenants are especially relevant for oral historians:

I. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.

*II. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.*³⁶

The *Library Bill of Rights* justifies the collection of oral history projects as a resource type, for they document the stories, perspectives, and intentions of community members themselves.

Oral history and social justice are closely entwined, however, and occasionally conversations take a turn that contradicts a scholar's theoretical application or moral purpose. Feminist oral historians Katherine Anderson and Dana Jack caution that "the scholar's search for generalizations [undermines] the interviewer's need to attend to an individual's experience."³⁷ Sociologist Pam Sugiman, who interviewed survivors of Japanese internment camps, recounts her issues with one survivor who refuted the need for redress.³⁸ While librarians are not immune from ethical quandaries, our ethos defaults to freedom of expression. In my interviews, I was energized and intrigued by the diverse array of perspectives and opinions offered on TechBC's closure...but I also acknowledge my institutional history is on the lesser end of a spectrum of historically significant conflicts.

Portelli provides a phrase I found immensely helpful in furthering my research on librarians as oral historians: "field work."³⁹ I had conducted numerous unsuccessful literature searches looking for resources that explored the concept of librarians engaging with people outside the library. Had I taken even one anthropology course during my undergraduate degree, I might have identified my interviews as a type of ethnological fieldwork. Where my searches combining the terms "librarians" and ("outreach" or "oral history") failed, once I combined "librarians" and "fieldwork," I discovered Leah Rosenblum Emary's article "Librarians are already in the field: how and why to begin ethnographic fieldwork."⁴⁰

Emary champions ethnography as a means of gaining insight into the user experience in academic libraries, and argues that librarians are perfectly positioned to conduct this work. Ethnography is "a mode of deriving knowledge about particular, local worlds through direct engagement with their peoples and ways of life."⁴¹ In reading Emary, I recognized that I had conducted ethnographic interviews of those immersed in the TechBC culture: I had asked interviewees to recount their experiences at this unique institution.⁴² She notes that librarian-ethnographers are particularly adept at building rapport and translating cultures.

Ethnographic research requires rapport between the researcher and participant, which means that both parties are "approaching the project with the same goals and with a great deal of trust. The more trust that exists between the researcher and the participant, the more likely it is that information will flow."⁴³ On reflection, several factors lined up to develop rapport from the outset and thus facilitate recruitment. First, REB approval lent credence to the project for the academic audience. My familiar name at the Surrey campus also helped: I had worked there five years and was well known to the community. Finally, I believe I capitalized on SFU Library's good reputation within the institution, and possibly even the profession's "trustworthy librarian" stereotype.

Decades of public service built rapport during the interview itself. My training was based on ALA's Behavioral Guidelines for Reference and Information Services and the first three guidelines—Approachability, Interest, and Listening/Inquiring—transfer seamlessly to the setting in oral history interviews.⁴⁴ For Approachability, I simply wore my "reference persona" at all times, which is a friendly and amicable demeanor, putting my interviewees at ease as much as possible. With respect to Interest and Listening/Inquiring, the entire interview was based on my intent to record their memories. I maintained a balance of keeping myself out of their stories, but interjected and probed when conversationally appropriate.

Emary also describes how librarians' "insider-outsider" status is conducive for ethnographic fieldwork. "Academic librarians occupy a unique position in higher education, neither wholly academic nor wholly adminis-

trative.”⁴⁵ I am an “insider” in so far as I understand how SFU Surrey functions and have built relationships with colleagues in academic and administrative positions. But I inhabit neutral territory within the institution and have regular contact with newcomers who have trouble navigating both the library and the university. I have developed skills in translating these systems to outsiders, and used this knowledge in the interview by asking mainly “big picture” questions phrased in plain language. My interviewees took my cue and responded with a lack of jargon. Moreover, I was not a TechBC employee; I was not there during the initial excitement of its establishment, nor its turbulent closure. According to Emary, “[a] certain amount of foreignness is good because it helps a researcher to see things with fresh eyes, to not just accept certain things as universal truths, and to ask ‘stupid questions.’”⁴⁶ Had I been a TechBC employee, asking questions about what happened would have felt absurd to both parties.

Alessandro Portelli and Leah Emary provide evidence that my experience as an academic librarian, coupled with training in oral history technique, ensured I was well equipped to quickly develop oral history interviewing skills. I had not recognized how dominant a role my reference and collections background played as an oral historian. Incidentally, Martha Zachert never doubted our abilities: “research librarians have a near-intuitive rapport with other individuals that comes from long and intensive public service.”⁴⁷ I am happy to have proved her right.

Limitations/Further Possibilities in Oral History for Librarians

This paper does not examine why librarians have not engaged in oral history to our fullest potential; the paucity of librarians taking the lead on oral history projects mirrors the overall dearth of research and development in academic libraries that James Neal decries.⁴⁸ Hoffmann, Berg and Koufogiannakis have examined the factors that positively influence librarian research, namely: education and experience, professional commitment to research, mentoring, time, and access to and use of resources.⁴⁹ Their research is a step toward ameliorating struggles academic librarians have in launching and completing research programs, including oral history.

I would like to see an increase in collections similar to Tammy Albin’s of the Kansas LGBTIQ community, an oral history whose focus is not institutional history.⁵⁰ Where else are we “insider-outsiders”? Librarians should seize opportunities to engage in community based oral history, and document their efforts in the oral history or LIS literature. I am heartened to see A Avro Smith complete the research lifecycle with analysis and dissemination of his oral history.⁵¹ With adequate institutional support and resources—essentially, release time to read and write—librarians who conduct interviews should also report on the themes emerging from their data.

Conclusion

Fifty years ago, Martha Zachert was immersed in physical rather than digital collections; her essay refers to legacy media such as tape recordings. Substitute newer technology for the old, however, and Zachert’s ideas remain sound. The digital era brings new challenges and opportunities to oral historians, but librarians are well positioned to rise to them. MIT’s widely praised *The Future of Libraries* report articulates the profession’s aspirations for locally-produced digital scholarship that is accessible on a global scale.⁵² Oral history research falls within the purview of the open access and open data movements, and initiatives in digital humanities and community engagement.

After I completed my interviews, I went on study leave to improve their accessibility. I discovered first hand that every hour of audio requires approximately eight hours of labour to transcribe, edit, index, and summarize. I now realize why most of this work falls to librarians: we have the technical skills and we care about metadata and preservation. Scholars in academic departments are primarily concerned with analysis and dissemination.⁵³

But just because we are good at the “back end,” doesn’t mean we should forfeit the opportunity to be involved at the “front end” as well. Oral history takes outreach and collection development to entirely new levels. Deep conversations build strong relationships. Oral history provides future researchers with primary sources that document how we live and perceive the world today. Librarians can and should fully engage.

Notes

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4. Martha Jane K. Zachert, “The Implications of Oral History for Librarians,” *College & Research Libraries* 29, no. 2 (March 1, 1968): 101–3, doi:10.5860/crl_29_02_101.
5. *Ibid.*, 102.
6. *Ibid.*, 102.
7. Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990).
8. Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 1998), 72.
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27. An Olympus Digital Voice Recorder VN-702PC, an Audio Technica AT10a omnidirectional microphone, and a microphone stand
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30. Tim Rahilly, "TechBC Interview," December 17, 2014.
31. For example, Andrew Petter's interview (<http://summit.sfu.ca/item/15049>) had been downloaded 581 times between April 29, 2015 and November 14, 2016. Brian Haubrick (<http://summit.sfu.ca/item/15001>) : 487 downloads. Jane Fee (<http://summit.sfu.ca/item/14612>): 307. Alice Mansell (<http://summit.sfu.ca/item/15839>) : 446
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34. Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, N.Y: SUNY Press, 1991), x.
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43. Emary, "Librarians Are Already," 17.
44. American Library Association, "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers," *Reference & User Services Association (RUSA)*, September 29, 2008, <http://www.ala.org/rusa/resources/guidelines/guidelinesbehavioral>.
45. Emary, "Librarians Are Already," 141.
46. *Ibid.*, 142.
47. Zachert, "Implications," 102.
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