

Born digital oral history: the multimodal digital oral history paradigm

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Oral history is a complex mediator of cultural memory. It is often filtered and articulated through accounts of personal, subjective recollection, yet it participates in a wider ‘cultural circuit’, where personal recollection can shape, and is shaped by external social and cultural processes, memories and events (see e.g. Summerfield 2016). Until recently, the main representational modality of oral history tended to be the human-generated transcript, often captured in a digital file. Recent and high-profile developments in AI research, involving, for example, foundation and reinforcement learning models, transformer blocks and neural networks are giving rise to a range of systems whose applications extend to oral history as much as any other domain. Next generation Automated Speech Recognition systems like that of OpenAI Whisper, offer, for some languages significantly improved accuracy levels. Yet they present new kinds of problems for oral history, creating born digital resources that may contain instances of hallucination ((openai/whisper and jongwook 2023). Via instances like ChatGPT, the possibility of entirely born digital, machine-generated oral histories has now arisen, even if so far research has focused on search and accession applications (e.g. Švec et al. 2024). In this paper, we will examine the issues of authority, ownership and verifiability, and other technical, legal and ethical challenges, that the born-digital turn in oral history poses. Furthermore, we will consider how the approach we have described as Multimodal Digital Oral History (MDOH) (Smyth, Nyhan and Flinn 2023), which seeks to actively engage with oral history artefacts in all their representational modalities: transcript, sound, waveform, metadata and more, might be extended to incorporate the issues raised here, likewise questioning whether the so-called ‘cultural circuit’ of oral history might now be extended to consider how oral history and born-digital technologies may co-constitute each other, in ongoing interchange, in the years to come

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