

IFPH 2024 – Paper Abstract for onsite presentation

Exploring uncertainty and laughter in oral histories – multimodal digital oral history approaches

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It has long been recognised that non-verbal and paralingual expressions represent important sense meaning markers within oral history testimonies but signs of these are invariably absent from the transcripts which have often been the tool which historians have used to access and analyse oral history interviews (Portelli 2006, Karpf 2014). In this paper we will explore how we can recognise markers of uncertainty and hesitation in oral history testimony. In particular we will explore how laughter can be used as an indication of uncertainty and subtle meaning making and we will do so by advocating for an approach we have described as Multimodal Digital Oral History or MDOH (Smyth, Nyhan and Flinn 2023).

For the last 25 years oral history recordings have largely been created and preserved digitally and recently large-scale retro-digitisation programmes (such as the UK British Library's Unlocking Our Sound Heritage) have started to make many previously hard to access pre-digital oral histories available to researchers online. Despite this, the digital paradigmatic shift in oral history predicted by some writers (Thomson 2007, Frisch 2006) has largely been confined to the creation, management and online dissemination of interviews rather than their digitally-mediated analysis, individually and at scale. In the last few years this has begun to change with a number of researchers in Europe and the US beginning to explore the possibilities of employing computational and digital humanities approaches and tools in oral history research (for instance Salah et al (2021) and Passanha (2022) and many of whom we featured in our 2022 MDOH seminar series <https://openlearnware.tu-darmstadt.de/collection/hdsm-multimodal-digital-humanities-ringvorlesung-417/>). Contributing to this new wave of research we have argued for a "Multimodal Digital Oral History turn" in the field of oral history which would allow the historic and current pre-eminence of the oral history transcript to be recalibrated by proposing an active engagement with the oral, aural and sonic affordances of both retro-digitised and born digital oral history collections, in all their modalities, transcript, sound, waveform and metadata. Moreover, MDOH calls for a re-orientation of the digital from passive to generative and self-reflexive in the human-machine study of spoken word recordings.

This paper will discuss what this means by using the case of laughter (an underexplored topic in the 'emotional turn' in oral history, (Panichelli-Batalla, 2020)) and markers of hesitation to demonstrate a research approach which seeks to analyse oral history at the level of the spectrogram or waveform as well as close listening and readings of the recording and the transcripts (including AI created transcripts). Overall this paper will ask what new possibilities to study the manifestation of memory and the meaning-making process in oral history we might open were we able to study those phenomena often excluded from transcripts – hesitations, infelicities of speech, non-verbal indications of emotion, changes in speed of utterance – both at the level of the individual interview and at scale. Likewise, how might we then be able to employ digital methods and tools, for example, network analysis, text mining and sentiment analysis, to oral history research and with epistemic cost to the tenets and ethical underpinnings of oral history?

Biographies

Andrew Flinn

Dr Andrew Flinn is a Reader in Archival Studies and Oral History and Vice Dean for Postgraduate Research in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University College London where he has been

teaching archive studies, oral history and public history since 2002. He is Deputy Principal Investigator on the Sloane Lab (one of the UK's Arts & Humanities Research Council's Towards a National Collection projects). He is also a trustee of National Life Stories at the British Library and chair of the UK and Ireland Community Archives and Heritage Group. His research interests include digital oral history, community-based archives, and archival activism and social justice. Recent publications include (with Fife & Nyhan) 'Documenting resistance, conflict and violence: a scoping review of the role of participatory digital platforms in the mobilisation of resistance' *Archival Science* (2023) and (with Smyth & Nyhan) 'Exploring the possibilities of Thomson's fourth paradigm transformation—The case for a multimodal approach to digital oral history?' in *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* (2023). He has also just edited and published (with Astrid von Rosen) the first English language edition of Sven Lindqvist's classic 1978 book *Dig Where You Stand* (Repeater Books 2023).

Julianne Nyhan

Prof. Dr. Julianne Nyhan is Chair of Humanities Data Science, TU Darmstadt, Germany and Professor of Digital Humanities, UCL, where she is PI of the Towards a National Collection-funded "The Sloane Lab: looking back to build future shared collections". She is an elected Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, UK and she has published widely on digital humanities, especially on the social and labour history of digital humanities and oral history. Her most recent book is: Nyhan, Julianne. *Hidden and Devalued Feminized Labour in the Digital Humanities: On the Index Thomisticus Project 1965-67*. Routledge, 2023. Other recent publications include (with Fife & Flinn) 'Documenting resistance, conflict and violence: a scoping review of the role of participatory digital platforms in the mobilisation of resistance' *Archival Science* (2023) and (with Smyth & Flinn) 'Exploring the possibilities of Thomson's fourth paradigm transformation—The case for a multimodal approach to digital oral history?' in *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities* (2023).