DEMOCRATISING ACCESS? THE INTERFACE OF NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND ARCHIVED LIFE STORIES

Discussion

Andrew Flinn with Doug Boyd, Charlie Morgan and Julianne Nyhan

Following Charlie Morgan's introductory presentation, we provide an edited transcript of a panel discussion reflecting on some of the themes and issues to be considered when archiving life histories and making them accessible to researchers in the digital age. The panellists were Doug Boyd (director of the Louie B Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky), Andrew Flinn (reader in archival studies and oral history, UCL and chair of the discussion), Charlie Morgan (oral history archivist at the British Library) and Julianne Nyhan (professor of humanities data science and methodology at the Technical University Darmstadt and professor of digital humanities at UCL). Topics discussed include: use and re-use of life histories, ethics and informed consent, the benefits and challenges of new and emerging digital tools and technologies for archiving and analysing life-history interviews, sensitivity reviews, multi-modal digital oral history, automated transcription, and artificial intelligence and oral history.

Keywords: life stories; archives; access; automation; data protection

Andrew Flinn: [As chair of this panel discussion] I want to begin by picking up something from Charlie's introduction relating to archivists and interpreting consent. On the question of collections that have been created with one particular focus, and consent for their use has been obtained with that particular focus in mind, and then using that consent for all possible and multiple uses: is that something that we need to think about, how consent is actually phrased and understood?

Charlie Morgan: We have no idea what people are going to use material for, especially in the future when none of us will be working at the [British] Library. I think we do try to explain this in information sheets that are given to interviewees, and in the conversations that take place between the interviewer and the interviewee. And this is a continual process and there can be a continuous discussion with the interviewers and interviewees, and they can change the access restrictions to their interviews, deciding to redact sections of it and open other sections. Letting interviewees know that this is something that can take place is an important part of the archival practice.

Doug Boyd: In some ways I think consent is the easy part because we can change our phrasing and make our phrasings more future-focussed, but it is the *informed* consent that I think is where we are really failing right now. Trying to explain to an interviewee today how their interview may be used ten or fifteen years from now, I think is extremely problematic as we just do not know and technology is moving extremely fast now.

Andrew Flinn: And there is the contradiction that the archivist who will be managing the access will not have been the person holding the conversation and the negotiations with the interviewees. Julianne, you do not approach these questions primarily from an archival perspective but

Charlie Morgan, Andrew Flinn, Julianne Nyhan and Doug Boyd

as a researcher. What do you understand about the benefits and challenges around the life history approach?

Julianne Nyhan: So when I was preparing for this panel, I looked back at Lynn Abram's *Oral History Theory* and was really struck by the passage:

> This book proceeds on the assumption that in oral history research, practice and theory – doing and interpreting – are intertwined. […] Oral history practice then demands that one thinks about theory; indeed it is the practice, the doing of oral history, that leads to theoretical innovation.[1]

So, notwithstanding some of the differences that this symposium has discussed between oral history and life history, I was taken with this because I come from a digital humanities background and one of the main stories that we tell about digital humanities is that it is a discipline where we produce knowledge through making. Much of the work we do is making digital artefacts as scholarly interventions and scholarly conversations. There is a very pleasing symmetry here in this commitment to practice and to the interrelationship between theory and practice and it suggests that whatever the difficulties of life history archiving, there is also much potential for rich interdisciplinary exchanges arising out of the practical work of archiving.

Andrew Flinn: Let us now move on to the consideration of digital environments in which the archiving, access and analysis of life history interviews take place. What from each of your different perspectives do you think is the potential of these different platforms, technologies and tools that are now emerging for archiving and accessing life histories?

Charlie Morgan: When I put this presentation together, I made this distinction between tools for the researcher and tools for the archivist, but throughout today and speaking to other people I have begun to think: actually, are they so separate? And especially those analytical tools that you could use to look at interviews at scale, to group ways of speaking, what people are talking about, topics, in order to conduct your research. I was thinking could we not also apply that as archivists? Because we are always thinking about what the gaps are in the collections: what have we not got interviews on? And this is quite hard to do, because any kind of audit you are doing is on the basis of your own assumptions around what the gaps are, and mostly you do not know because, not to get into known knowns and unknown knowns, but effectively you do not always know what the gaps are unless you are looking for them. So some of these research tools could be applied by the archivist to look at their own collections to think about areas where you have not got material. But the way that I normally think about this issue is focussing on what takes a really long time to do in the archive, what is really hard to do and what would be easier if there was something to do it. And the truth is that for most archives and most archivists we are recording more interviews than we can deal with, we are recording more interviews than there are archivists to properly catalogue and to make available. And so rather than naming particular tools, it would be looking at the workflow of the archivist and saying what parts of it could be done more effectively, so to deal with the immense archives or backlogs of oral histories around the country and the world. This is not a specific answer

but thinking about where you could start looking for these tools.

Andrew Flinn: In that context is there anything you can say about sensitivity review and issues around privacy – an area for which there has been a lot of research in the archival world and possibly a lot of potential, but also some doubt about how effective that might be?

Charlie Morgan: Yes, I mentioned the potential of automating sensitivity reviews not because I necessarily agree with it. I think it is one use you could have for new AI technologies in the archive, but it is also quite a dangerous one. There has been a lot of writing about how there are biases encoded in AI and in what it looks for. So there are probably ways of using AI to identify sensitive material and I have tried various language processing tools on summaries that are already publicly available to find anything sensitive, and it has partially worked. But really it is not looking at it in the whole context. When we look for sensitivities at the Library we go back and we consider who was speaking in this interview, what is the passage of time since the interview, what are they doing now in their life: all these things not currently in the tools. The question with all of this is how much human checking do you implement into the process in order to check what you have got? I think that while there is a lot of promise in these technologies, the risk is when you take out any aspect of quality checking. I do not think anyone in the archives world is actually suggesting that at the moment, but that is the fear.

Julianne Nyhan: The potential is of course multifaceted and complex, because everything that I might mention now is a potential – I can of course go back and problematise – but we might say that the potential is in terms of the contextualisation of the interview. So, for example, when we are especially interested in studying the cultural context of the interview, then technologies like linked open data can help us to understand more automatically about people, places and entities mentioned. We can look at various digital methods that might, in conjunction with close reading and listening, help us to find new ways into the interviews. For example, topic modelling (a computational approach to automatically identifying topics and themes within a body of text) might help with some of the issues that you were talking about. We have been working on this idea of a multimodal oral history in which we try to re-address the dominance of the textual transcript and to ask what could we do with a closer engagement with the sonic affordance of the interview, so with the actual aural recording, and of how technologies could help us to think about this anew.[2]

I might also say something that interests me very much in the digital context is in oral history this past–present junction is often spoken about, so this idea of the significance of a memory being recalled in a present time, place and space, and how that past–present junction then shapes what is recalled. So when we talk about digital technologies we have all these discourses that swirl around us, imagined futures, perfect futures, and often, as one of my colleagues pointed out, 'imperfect' humans who will be helped by these digital technologies. There are of course also these concerns that we have been talking about with this loss of control, the unpredictability and so on. So what fascinates me very much is a digital history, a digital oral history, not only thinking about how methods can open this up, but also how this might impact the meaning-making encounter so that in the digital oral history we might think then of this past, present and future triad, and that it may help us to think about the construction and performance of self in specifically digitally inflected spaces and imagined futures.

Doug Boyd: If I were Al Thomson I would – oh, so many things – if I were Al Thomson I would think about the paradigm article that he wrote.[3] We approach this paradigm from an archive perspective with this idea that it has been about discovery, trying to solve the discovery challenges when we are taking in too many things and how to create the metadata that is going to make it discoverable. And I am not even talking about putting it all online, I am just talking about getting a short description and some keywords, something so that it creates the potential for use. But I've thinking about this a lot with OHMS [Oral History Metadata Synchronizer: www.oralhistoryonline.org], the software system that I created that is being used a lot of places. Six hundred institutions in sixty-two different countries now, which is really cool. It has transformed access to our collections and what we choose to put online. There has been lots of critique about that. Alexander Freund raised the idea of when an interview goes online it is different, and I think that that difference is so great because access to our collections has been transformed and democratised in so many ways. But with AI, there are going to be people creating tools which will automate the whole thing. It is going to go from interview to internet very quickly, very efficiently, without human intervention, there is no doubt. And suddenly OHMS looks like the old-school platform it is, because the content is created by humans, it is completely human mediated, and that feels good in this moment.

I fully anticipate using some of these automating tools. I have got a whole process specified out now and it is going to use speech recognition, it is going to extract keywords, it is going to perform sentiment analysis as well as sensitivity checks and potentially auto-summarise. But all of that is perceived as a first pass, that is all going to be something that a human will go through before anything is made accessible. So I think from that perspective I really embrace it, but I think as we move into this next paradigm we are going to solve the access problem. I recently did a test on the speech recognition platform, Whisper, and it outperformed the human transcription in my test. I did a word-for-word analysis and from an accuracy standpoint the machine was more [accurate] than the [human transcriber]. We paid double for that transcript to ensure that that transcript would be of the highest quality because I did not have the staff to go back through that particular set of interviews and the machine still beat it. And that really was a moment for me where I realised we are going to

come to a point where this dream of having transcripts for every interview is very possible in the nearer future. And so we are going to move on from this paradigm, back to Al Thomson, from discovery to analysis. We are going to start to see the advent of incredible tools for understanding the information that is in these interviews and we are going to start to talk more about usage of the word 'data' [in the context of oral history] because I think we should acknowledge that once these [interviews] go into the archive, the researchers are thinking about this as data. It may be uncomfortable to think about it that way, but it is true.

Andrew Flinn: Can I put that to you, Julianne, thinking about collections as data, particularly in the context here of thinking about oral history and life history interviews as data. We will move on to thinking about what maybe some of the ethical and other challenges of that approach – but thinking first about what is possible. What do you see on the horizon for the analysis of this kind of material as data?

Julianne Nyhan: It is very difficult to say, I think, because you are absolutely right, in some areas it is shocking how far advanced things are with ASR and so on, how far things are charging ahead. But in a broader sense I still question the extent to which many digital methods are actually sophisticated enough to aid human historians and the analyses that they might want to do of life history and oral history records. So many methods in digital humanities, for example, have mostly been tested on literary texts. The types of things that we might be especially interested in when we are analysing an oral history record, the truth of the telling rather than the telling of the truth, and everything that goes with this – what is communicated, what is not communicated, changes in pattern of speech, and so on. Many digital methods are still quite positivist, so yes, we will be able to detect that x number of words occur here and they occur in this distribution across the text and so on, but what about when we want to look at omission or metaphor or absence or elusion. Those methods are still less developed, and this seems to me to be very, very important work. So when we were talking earlier in this conference about a global life history and a global oral history and we were talking about the inflections and different areas that this might involve, it seems that this digital oral history, life history work, should be another very important inflection whereby we should be trying out these methods on oral history collections and then reporting back. Even in some work that we have been doing looking at ASR, for example, and I was very impressed that the particular ASR we were using dealt very well with my Irish accent, which is in itself progress in this field. But we immediately noted that the 'um um um um', the little infelicities which can be quite meaningful in an oral history context, were being completely erased by the ASR. And I thought from a digital hermeneutics perspective, what the oral history field can feed back in by looking at the assumptions of some of these technologies and showing where these assumptions break or do not meet the desires of sophisticated historical and qualitative research, that is important, and I think that is a contribution for the field as long as it will still be possible in our entirely data-driven future.

Charlie Morgan: I absolutely agree with that and one way I try to think about it is to consider what were we trying to do with oral history in the first place. We were interested in people's life stories and we were interested in the way they speak and the way they remember, and so then it is about putting that question first. Go to the tools and say how can we use them to look at this question. Because I totally agree that this very positivist approach is what a lot of people are looking at but I also think this forms the critique of it, that the idea is okay, this is all they can ever do, they can only ever look on the level of the textual or only on the level of data. And the reason I said we do not know is because I do not believe that is all that can be done. I think there are these interesting ways of looking at sound, looking at the sonic. I mentioned aurality before because we are then getting back to a crucial bit of oral history. If we look at the critiques of archived oral histories before, if we go all the way back, people said they could not listen to the interviews and they had to go to the archive and it was too hard. Now we are putting them online and now we are really worried about that. We made all these transcripts because researchers said we did not have enough documentation and now we are worried that no-one is listening to the actual interviews. So I think sometimes we can be victims of what we want, but also it requires us to go back to our practice and ask what do we want from our practice and these tools, and look at it that way.

Andrew Flinn: Before we move on to look at this with a more critical lens and identify some of those problems, I want to continue with what are we excited about, maybe by giving examples of tools or approaches that you are really enthusiastic about at the moment. And then we can also talk about what we are worried about.

Doug Boyd: Oh, so many things. The idea that we can implement a system this year that will help us catch up with accessioning and eliminate the backlog. We brought in about 2,200 interviews last year and our collection is now 18,000 interviews. Last year was a bit of an outlier but we have been averaging about 1,200 new interviews a year and it seems like growth is accelerating and the need is great there for the archive. So from a platform standpoint, from a capability standpoint, I am very excited about the ability to at least bring these interviews in and do some basic description. Again, human-mediated description, but utilising these tools, the best of these tools, I think, for creating that. So that is happening and I am really, really excited about that.

Andrew Flinn: Julianne?

Julianne Nyhan: So I have no idea whether this idea or sense of excitement is even vaguely realistic or grounded in reality, but I feel great excitement about Large

Language Models (LLMs, capable of automated text and language generation) and the extent to which oral history collections could be used to improve LLMs or even contest some of the tendencies we currently see. So if we hear over and over that we get so much racism, sexism and despicable language out of these Large Language Models because of the data sets they have been trained on, which are scraped from the Internet. So my thoughts are if we think of the digital oral history corpora resulting from your work, from the British Library, to what extent can we use all of this work to recentre previously hidden or marginalised voices who have been restored to the historical records through oral history, and then also use this in a contesting or an activist manner to then challenge some of what we are getting from these LLMs. I have no idea how realistic that would be, but that would be hugely exciting and again testimony to how current and how important this work is.

Andrew Flinn: I suppose that would depend, and there is probably a big 'if' here, on the extent to which that oral history corpus was diverse and different from the other sources that are presently being drawn on, and I guess that would be both an aspiration but also a question. Otherwise we could be just re-inscribing the same biases.

Charlie Morgan: Speaking as the archivist, the things that I do find most exciting are some of the tools that are probably being used more by the researcher. I have looked at various AI sentiment analysis tools that give you indications of what is being spoken about in the interview and I think it could be really interesting for navigating these large interviews, especially getting us away from this reliance on textual metadata. I should say I have used very few of these tools here, because we have not passed them with data protection at the Library yet. I suppose that is a point in itself, that large institutions like the one I work for are probably playing catch-up on this, that we have not been using these tools, and for some good reasons. But I think some of them are very exciting and interesting. I mean we can get on to the worries, but really we are doing things that we did not think were possible before, and it does enable us to look at corpora of interviews at a much larger scale, to look for trends and topics throughout them, which I think is very interesting.

Doug Boyd: Next month we start on a grant to add those capabilities to OHMS. The idea is that the user will actually be able to create data visualisations from the interviews, organise the place names on a map, perform the named entity recognition, and that kind of thing. So it really is moving in that direction and that is exciting.

Andrew Flinn: And especially if in that way it can enable the user to do those things, and we are not talking about technologies that require significant expertise to use but you can actually build them into systems to do that. Then that would shift from being concerned with access to being concerned with analysis? And maybe that is the democratisation part there.

Charlie Morgan: Sure, but that does get back to my point before, because I am not sure how people we interviewed in the 1980s and 1990s would feel about us using their interviews for large sentiment analysis and language models. So it is an interesting question of democracy because a lot of them are dead, we cannot go back to ask them what they think about it. And also the concept of democracy in the oral history might change over the life of the life story, because it does change at various times, not just through technology but also our relationship to the interviewee and the wider context of society.

Andrew Flinn: So if we take that as a starting point, we should now look at this with perhaps a more critical lens. We have been intentionally positive about what these technologies may bring. We heard earlier from Alexander Freund about avoiding, or at least accounting for, the data grab by technology and surveillance companies in this arena. So what do we think are the critical challenges that we face in this area?

Doug Boyd: To bring it back to the life story approach, I think the big concern obviously is privacy. In each oral history interview there could be a thousand data points that can be triangulated for some purpose (and when I say interview I am saying in each interview session, not a fifteen-hour interview series), and so when you create that series, the number of data points that you are creating that can be harvested, interpreted and analysed is massive. And that is concerning. I am not saying do not take the life history approach, but when we think about it as data for one person, that is a significant consideration.

Charlie Morgan: It was interesting this morning, Alexander Freud saying that oral historians are normally very enthusiastic about technology. I feel like it is normally the other way around.

Doug Boyd: I agree. I agree.

Charlie Morgan: Every time I go to an oral history event everyone is terrified of technology and its implications. And perhaps you do need a few people arguing the other side of the case. I mean there are obviously massive concerns around ownership and data use. I think if we get back to the life story, the other concern has always been that if researchers are using technology to analyse specific data points in the interview and extract them, how does that relate to our idea that we see value in the complete life story and the contextualisation of that section or part of the story within the wider interview? But again, that is not necessarily a new problem; there has always been an issue that researchers might want to come in to find specific sections and might not be interested in the rest of the interview. So I do not know whether this is just something that would happen at a larger scale or whether that is a new challenge for life stories.

Andrew Flinn: Thinking about both those points, what might be the possible impact of these kind of privacy

issues on people's willingness to first, be interviewed, and secondly, on what basis they will allow their collections to be made available. Are these problems that you foresee?

Doug Boyd: Yes. I do fear that the interview will change. You think about social media and the evolution of that. In the beginning we all just put everything out there and now you see these very tightly curated presentations of yourself, and I think there is going to be more consciousness towards that in an interview. Now the life history interview is more effective in breaking that down a little bit to try to get more information and get somebody necessarily out of their bullet points and out of a performance of that, which is a good thing for history's sake, but if they do not want the data out there, we have to respect that. And so I am worried about the life history form. Will the form change because of this hyper level of access?

Charlie Morgan: I agree that is a concern. But two points. One is I get far more messages from people who have been interviewed asking why their interview is not online yet, as opposed to why it is online, so I do not think we should underestimate the extent to which people are still being interviewed for oral history interviews because they want it on the record and they want it available as far as possible. Second, I think it also relates to ongoing processes of redaction and closures and a lot of this does come back to these initial conversations with the interviewee. And I do think people are still being open in the interviews if you build up trust over a life story process, but it is certainly true people might get more wary about putting things online. I mean one concern we had a few years ago was that you start a life story interview by saying what school did you go to, what road did you grow up on, what was your first pet, and these are all the questions you use for your secret questions for when you forgot your password. So could you just mine them and find everyone's passwords this way? And going back to what I said earlier about interviews from the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, I think another interesting thing is tracking interviews from the early 2000s onwards when people were first aware of the Internet compared to interviews now. Because I think if you look at the general history of the Web there was at first this mass optimism around the Internet, that it would free us from government control. People are a lot more critical now about the Internet, of both government and technology companies, and so I wonder if maybe this is a more interesting change to look at rather than going back to the period before we had the Internet.

Andrew Flinn: And what about that point, Julianne? Machine learning, Large Language Models, and their contribution to the data harvesting and surveillance society. What is your view on those issues?

Julianne Nyhan: It is almost impossible to know right now, isn't it? I mean the most recent iteration of ChatGPT, am I correct in saying they are not fully revealing their training set any more, the sources of that? So, yes, I think the need to think about a positive response from our community, for example, in what I mentioned in terms of thinking about how oral history could then be engaged in active data contestation, I think the need for this work and the responsibility for this work will become even greater. When someone signs the consent form, they sign the consent form with a certain understanding of the authority and responsibility of the oral historian and that it is possible for them to meet those promises. But in the digital environment, even with take-down requests, there is no control over where this has been copied and duplicated and circulated under other processes. This speaks to the kind of honesty that is going to be needed in communicating how limited our powers will be in this kind of environment, and also that so much of it can be unpredictable, I hope in a positive way, but it is important to be realistic as well.

Andrew Flinn: A conversation that we had before around the idea of analysis at scale and considering life history and its origins in the individual, the individual voice and the individual story: what do you think are some of the challenges about then looking at this very individual material at scale? Are there ethical or methodical challenges there?

Julianne Nyhan: I think there are certainly going to be methodical challenges, and there might be a sense of some questions that were thought closed having to be reopened. So it was mentioned this morning how in oral history that the sociological sampling representative type approach does not tend to be the focus; the focus might instead be on diversity. If we are going to do data-driven quantitative research then the statistical reliability of the sample and all of these types of questions will need to be thought through again. So obviously oral historians will need to work closer with statisticians and data scientists. On the one hand, it seems so fascinating to think about questions that we could ask at scale across multiple interviews and trace ideas and concepts, but on the other hand, continuing to value the special thing that oral history does in terms of focussing on the individual and the individual experience, albeit in a cultural context and contextualisation. Again, I wonder about the kind of epistemological consequences about big data or data-driven interventions into that specificity and intellectual commitment of the field.

Doug Boyd: I think that says it all; that reflects my concerns as well.

Andrew Flinn: And I suppose there is a possibility of combining that deep listening and close-reading approach with something more computational, which is something we have been looking at, isn't it?

Julianne Nyhan: Exactly. And hopefully that might be a very productive way to have this iteration of scale but also quantitative, qualitative and so on.

Charlie Morgan: I think it is really good to move away

from thinking about it as an either/or question. Because especially for the archivist, we always move between these two things. The interview is a one-on-one very intimate thing, but anyone who has ever worked with us on a collection will know we collect and catalogue metadata in a spreadsheet that can be many rows long. We catalogue at scale, but then if we're doing sensitivity review, maybe we will review a lot of documents, but we will look at each interview on an individual basis. The researcher might use a catalogue to ask about collections at scale, but then they will go to interviews and move to deep listening. I think it is possible to move between the two and I think we have always done that. So in that sense I am sceptical of people who say if we go for data approaches we lose all this individual focus, because we have always had mass approaches to oral history and we have still been able to maintain the intimate nature of the individual interview.

Doug Boyd: You asked about what we were worried about. My greatest fear is the deep fake technologies that are so easy [and accessible to create]. I think that [Deep Fakes] can become an existential threat to oral history as a form. The ability to [sample and then synthesise] someone's voice, type out the content [you want the fake to say], just like on a word processor, is horrifying. As we think about archives and we think about life story, this idea of the role of the archivist becoming now some sort of arbiter of authenticity as well as everything else. What we have been doing is preserving and providing access and I think a lot of places will create interviews that they are archiving, so they are sending people out in the field, that is easy. But when you are getting these collections that have been donated that seem so rare and quite possibly might not be real, that is something that I think we want to be aware of. There are some exciting developments in that area, such as the content authenticity initiative, the Coalition for Content Provenance and Authenticity. The new camera that I just purchased, the Sony A7 IV, has a cryptographic signature for every photograph I take if I want that enabled, which is kind of cool. But our audio recorders do not have that, our video cameras do not have that, and I think that is something that will hopefully move into that area, but that is going to be a challenge for us to really think about.

Charlie Morgan: Two questions on that. One is, are not most deep fakes of people who are quite well known and there is enough audio of them to use? And if we are thinking about oral histories, which are often the only time someone is interviewed, is there enough to go on to make these? Can you make deep fake history from below?

Doug Boyd: Audio is really easy. Video is not as easy. But I think the magic number that I was hearing was forty minutes: if you have forty minutes of someone you can really create a comprehensive deep fake of that person.

Charlie Morgan: The other point I was going to make is that really then we are getting back to the kind of key things about being a historian: source analysis, who created it, where did it come from, what is it. So again, we are kind of back to our original practice.

Andrew Flinn: Following on from that then, my last question goes back to the final points of Charlie's presentation on the role of the archivist or the historian as gatekeeper for this material. For the last twenty years within the archival studies field we have been encouraging archives to become more open and for archivists not to place so much emphasis on the gatekeeper role, but what do we think? Archivist as benevolent dictator: is that the role that we are suggesting in this environment?

Charlie Morgan: I do not know, I am biased. I am an archivist. But Julianne, what do you think?

Julianne Nyhan: Maybe. It seems too easy, in a way, that if this would solve it we might have thought of it sooner. Okay, for now I guess you are getting my vote for archivist as a benevolent dictator.

Andrew Flinn: But something more interventionist, this seems to suggest the re-statement of a really important role there.

Doug Boyd: Another perspective would be, though, what is an archivist? Why do we need an archivist? If you can take your collection and you can put your collection through these tools and get transcripts and you can even host a repository yourself and there are tools now where you can really truly enhance access to your personal oral history collection in better ways than major funded institutions. There is this perception of 'I'm putting it online and it's archived online' and it will be taken care of after I am gone. I have major problems with that but I think pushing against that is hard. Charlie, you said that your requests are more frequently about when is my interview going to go online and I am anxious about those calls. There is the perception that I conducted an interview three months ago and why can I not hear it. And that is something which it is possible in this scenario to bypass the archivist.

Charlie Morgan: I will make an argument for why we need an archivist. I do still think there is a role for the archivist in this process. I think especially with oral history and life story projects, which involve often well-thought-out project ideas about who was interviewed, who was not interviewed, the type of questions, who the people involved were, and all that information is stored in the archive. And we find it hard to provide all that contextual information online, but I think it is even harder once you take it away from the archive. And so yes, there is the gatekeeper role but I prefer the mediator or something in between.

Doug Boyd: And for the record, I was not advocating that scenario, because I am in full agreement with you on that.

Julianne Nyhan: As you already mentioned Charlie, oral history has always been a technologically mediated disci-

pline, if not a digitally mediated discipline, and it would be very, very positive if in having these discussions it prompted us to do some more consideration of the impact of technology over the *longue durée* on the practice of the oral historian and the life history endeavour.

Doug Boyd: One of the things that I really appreciate now in the paradigm that we are currently in, is that I feel the historians or the practitioners who are conducting the oral histories, the archivists and the digital humanists who are doing [some of] the work of re-use [and analysis], I feel we are closer than we have ever been, more integrated than we have ever been, and those conversations are happening. One of the fastest growing sectors in the US of membership in the Oral History Association are the archivists, and the archives conversations ten years ago were not nearly as robust as the one we are having now, and that seems to me an exciting trend.

Charlie Morgan: My final point will be that often those three people are the same person. I think this archivist/researcher dichotomy I have made throughout does not always hold up. Archivists do research, archivists are interviewers, and there is a lot of overlap.

Mary Stewart [Lead Curator of Oral History at the British Library and Director of National Life Stories]: Thank you for such a fascinating panel and it is no surprise that we organised it to have a real focus on archives because National Life Stories is based at the British Library. But I am also aware that in the Oral History Society conference last week and other discussions over the last couple of months, I have heard people talk about ChatGPT who have never gone near it and will never go near it. For all of us working as oral history practitioners where we are interacting with projects and interviewees, having discussions like this is so useful because we need to really understand from people who are using these computational tools that we might not be doing ourselves, so we can have those interpersonal discussions better and not be so frightened of this because this world is here and we need to interact with it. We managed when we went digital, we managed when the Internet turned up, so we are going to be able to manage now, but we are going to be able to best serve our projects and our interviewees and those people then working in the archives to unpick those projects and make them available if we start having more of these discussions about what these tools might be and might do. So, if I was able to organise another day of discussions then I would perhaps have you demonstrate some of the tools so we could really see them in action so we are not so frightened of them. Because actually, in terms of the data world oral history data's quite small compared to some of the massive data sets out there and people still are really interested in hearing people's stories, and even though those big tools might be available, they are still going to be interested in them.

Charlie Morgan: I absolutely agree, Mary. I guess my final comment is, we have a whole practice in oral history, we have a practice, we have a methodology, we have ethics, none of that has changed, we are just applying it to the new world we are in. To paraphrase, oral historians make oral history but not in circumstances of their choosing, and these are the circumstances, so let's do oral history.

Julianne Nyhan: I would just say what we already know: how important oral history and life history is and that we should be at the AI, data science and computer science table reflecting our experiences and knowledge and feedback from what we learn as we implement these tools, methods and so on in the oral history context.

Doug Boyd: This is a great time to be having this conversation, because I think oral history is more popular than it has ever been and there are more disciplines across the academy that are conducting interviews. The majority of our partners at my centre are different community partners that we are working with. So having these conversations is, for me, really more exciting and hopeful than fearful because what we are doing is catching on and that is exciting to watch. As a folklorist, which is my background and training, I am constantly thinking about the balance of tradition and innovation, and there is going to be tensions between those two things and there is going to be the way we always did things and the new ways of bringing things in, and that balance is going to shift. We are in a period of change right now but I find it terribly exciting.

NOTES

1. Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, London: Routledge, 2010, p 1.
2. Hannah K Smyth, Julianne Nyhan, Andrew Flinn, 'Exploring the possibilities of Thomson's fourth paradigm transformation: the case for a multimodal approach to digital oral history?' *Digital Scholarship in the Humanities*, vol 38, no 2, June 2023, pp 720-36.
3. Alistair Thomson, 'Four paradigm transformations in oral history', *Oral History Review*, vol 34, no 1, 2007, pp 49-70.

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