Michael Frisch

[Randforce Associates, LLC; University at Buffalo]

https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8057-7544

The Pontchartrain Park Pioneers and The Path to 'Indexing for Use(s)'

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I have been involved in oral history for many years, on many levels – as a practitioner, as a 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, almost all reflections on actual practice – *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 chord and helped crystallize a useful discourse driving both thought and practice over time.

Since then, I've been working in very different forms and modes, technologically and otherwise. But in terms of propelling sensibilities and ideas, it's been pretty much the same – variations, some dramatic, on themes at the heart of *A Shared Authority*. And very recently, unexpectedly and by coincidence, a collaborative opportunity led to an improvisation suggesting an entirely new dimension of multimedia and digital practice. I've been calling this 'Indexing for Use,' an approach that could not be more resonant with *A Shared Authority's* sensibility and invocations.

The collaborative invitation came from Dr. Clyde Robertson, director of the *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers Oral History Project* at the Southern University at New Orleans, Louisiana. The project has conducted oral histories of first-generation homeowners in a remarkable African American 'Suburb in the City' begun in the 1950s. Dr. Robertson had been working with software developer Zack Ellis and his platform TheirStory to manage the collection, and we were invited by Zack to help prepare transcriptions by refining the initial auto-transcription offered through the TheirStory platform.

In an article elsewhere in this Yearbook, Dr. Robertson and Jennifer Edwards introduce this important oral history project, including special emphasis on how its interviews were incorporated in educational curricula and the impact they had. My informal essay here is a complement, exploring what began as narrow transcription work – a new area for our office – evolved into a broader mark-up approach producing successive iterations – 'views' of the same material through different lenses – each of which proved almost instantly usable for sharing the project's work in different ways, including curricula but in other forms as well.

In previous work, my Randforce Associates consulting office had used then-new digital tools to index and make accessible the primary source in oral-history – the actual recordings. It was based on a software tool, Interclipper, developed in market research for quick tagging of passages from focus group recordings. We expanded uses of its ample platform to deploy multidimensional coding frames for precise cross-referencing, instant audio-video access, and media export across hours and hours of interviews.

In a 2010 summary of our Interclipper 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 explorable, OR selected material extracted for a specific purpose – a film, exhibit, 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. 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 that anybody in a community could enter to cook, collaboratively or on their own. 'A Shared Cookery,' so to speak.[1]

The Interclipper digital indexing at the core of our consulting was all about the recordings, and our work tended to fall into an implicit either/or posture on transcription: we approached the recording as the primary source, open to richer indexing than text transcription rarely indexed all, especially now with the alternative temptation of instant text keyword searching. Mapping and exploring, rather than the specific searching that requires knowing what you're looking for, seemed important 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-based metadata coding interfaces like Interclipper offered.

Since that Interclipper work, the digital landscape for oral history processing has been changing seismically in just the last few years, an earthquake throwing off two powerful aftershocks. First, automatic transcription is more and more available for instantly producing an initial transcription with up to 80–90% accuracy – a basis for then checking, correcting, and formatting into what we've come to call the 'transcript of record,' both reliably accurate and easily readable/browsable. Second, auto-transcription can provide embedded time-codes connecting the transcript and the recording at precise points – read, click, and hear/watch that precise moment in the interview. This opens a new world of time-code indexing – text-based access to the source recording – 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, due to merge later in 2023.

But this involves a paradox: the more comprehensive and accurate the auto-transcribing, the more it requires aggressive formatting, filled as it is with every speaker alternation around every utterance, and littered with time codes: in addition to correction reaching that last 10–20 per cent of accuracy, Intervention is

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1   M. Frisch, L. Douglas, *Between the Raw and the Cooked in Oral History: Notes from the Kitchen*, in D. Ritchie (ed.), *The Oral History Handbook*, New York 2010, pp. 333–348.

needed to make the literal, accurate transcription readable and browsable. We had just begun exploring this in TheirStory, when we were invited to help prepare the *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers* transcriptions using this platform.

Though similar processing could be done on a number of available platforms, the appeal of TheirStory for our work lies in its offering an enhanced mark-up capacity producing a series of parallel index iterations, processed in a smooth arc moved through with surprising efficiency and ease – taking just a little bit more time than would an accurate manual transcription from scratch. This capacity is supported by the unique Timecode Indexing Module (TIM) incorporated in the TheirStory processing back-end. It had been developed in part by Doug Lambert, former Randforce Director of Technology, as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Luxembourg's Center for Contemporary and Digital History (C2DH).

Experimenting with these features, we first refined/formatted the *Pontchartrain Park* raw auto-transcripts into 'transcripts of record' with a time code at the head of each sequential, corrected, readable paragraph. We then divided the interviews into content-driven 10–15 minute 'chapters' or units, presented in a 'table of contents' with brief content summaries describing the coverage in each unit. This then flowed into two indexes consolidating the speakers' words into 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. In each case, digests are wholly in the speaker's words, just compressed to reliably represent the fuller content. Finally, with the unit and story digests providing an overview of content flow and thematic distillations, we and the project could return 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 by students, producers, or visitors.

A particular satisfaction for me has been re-discovering the value of transcript digests, as compared to the externally written summaries other systems rely on. The unit digests end up at about 25–40 per cent 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. Digests, especially 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; it takes on new relevance, now as one 'view' within a complex of iterations, rather than only as an either/or alternative to a full transcript.

In our current practice, each of these views and iterations has distinct uses, and each is saved and 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.

As we worked with the *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers* interviews this complex of iterative views emerged as an improvisation. What helped us sense its potential as a broader modality for oral history collections was seeing how Dr. Robertson and his colleagues made almost instant use of EACH of the views 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 Unit Digests, consolidating each interview's content, were quickly edited into a book-length publication of all of the interviews in the program's on-line journal. The selected and thematically focused Story Digests are what were provided for ALL of the classroom oral history uses examined in the Robertson-Edwards article elsewhere in this Yearbook[2]. And the clip index is being actively used now in producing a video documentary and other multi-media presentations. As 'indexing for use,' or more accurately 'indexing for use(s),' the *Pontchartain Park Pioneers* project offers a highly suggestive 'proof of concept.'

The best way for readers to explore a new modality is to see for themselves: at www.rebrand.ly/RF-PPP we present a full demo of the various iterations of one interview from the Pontchartrain Park Pioneers, including its migration into an explorable on-line e-publication via OHMS and Aviary.

As a complement to Dr. Robertson and Ms. Edwards' full article, I have been speaking to what emerged in our *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers* collaboration, and how this helped support the public and educational uses developed for the project's historically quite important oral histories. I have also situated these developments in the longer arc of our own oral history practice in the 'digital kitchen' between the 'the raw and the cooked.' And I have suggested that, taken together, these recent improvisations may offer a 'proof of concept' for 'indexing for use(s)' in oral history. We are currently at work on subsequent projects customizing and applying the approach for indexing other collections for an even wider range of users, uses, and audiences.

That said, 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.

2   See in this issue: C. Robertson, J. Edwards, *Pontchartrain Park Pioneers:* An Oral History of New Orleans' Civil Rights Era Segregated Black 'Suburb in the City,' pp. 136–147.

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?"

I don't know either, but I can hazard the guess that this "something" may be tilting towards a paradigm shift broader than just the transformative impacts of technology, and broader than dramatic changes in a field once oriented to elite interviewing but now committed and responsive to communities unrepresented in the historical record itself, not to mention excluded from participation in its construction, interrogation, and interpretation.

It's not all that long since oral history's main purpose was to debrief important people who were writing fewer letters and doing all their business on the phone. At early oral history centers such as Columbia University's, recordings were routinely destroyed once they had been transcribed because they seemed manifestly beyond usability and, anyway, were not likely to survive intact for very long.

We've come a long way – or have we? From the very beginning, we have continued 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 equally reachable, all variously usable? What might oral history look like then, and what will we be able to do with it?