

# Oral History Archives: Collection Management and Service Priorities

RHONDA L. NEUGEBAUER

The acquisition, preservation and dissemination of the records and knowledge of society are the basic functions of libraries and archival centers. For centuries, the printed word has been collected by librarians, bibliophiles, archivists and scholars. These groups have been fairly effective in making the collections available to the public through the preparation of card catalogs, book catalogs or indexes and listing of materials, and through the practice of circulation or lending of books and serials in paper format.

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Libraries have become proficient in organizing, classifying and describing printed works and offering them to their constituencies. But in the last few decades libraries have had to adjust to many new technologies which have produced information in new formats and have prompted new collection management strategies and priorities. The new formats include microforms, sound and video recordings on magnetic tapes and records, and machine readable data files which include electronic records and databases, and even electronic journals and books. This new era of electronic and magnetic information production and dissemination, dubbed the "Information Age" has ushered in new challenges and problems to the library and archival professions. The new technologies have allowed libraries and archives to collect, store and preserve massive amounts of information and this same technology has enabled communication of data at very high speeds to any location in the world with a phone line and computer. However, the issue of appropriate bibliographic control of this information as well as the issue of facilitating access for everyone to this information, have become increasingly problematic tasks for the information professionals in librarianship, and in archival and historical administration.

With such tremendous amounts of information now available in so many distinct formats, sound recording collection managers may have to contend for an appropriate institutional role for the sound recording archive amid competing library projects and services and the vast informational resources that a library or archive already owns. Sound recordings and the accompanying transcriptions of the recordings, as well as the indexes produced for subject access and the records of the actual interview, all present unique problems for librarians or archivists in their efforts to process, organize, catalog and preserve the oral record. Libraries and archives are now attempting to answer the questions these collections pose for their traditional institutional activities and for their primary constituencies.

This paper will explore the practical measures as well as the theoretical underpinnings involved in developing, organizing, and administering a sound recording archive. The technical routines that facilitate the use and administration of such a collection and the routines used in the overall processing and preservation of the collections, influence archival services and products and, hopefully, make the collections more understandable and more useful to researchers, journalists, local constituencies and the public at large.

## PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS

While attention to technique and routine is, of necessity, an internal priority, the relationship of the archive to the community of scholars and public it serves, is also of paramount importance. A strong relationship between the scholar community and the archivist/librarian should be built in order to make sure the collections are complete, are stored under proper conditions and are made easily accessible to future generations. A

relationship of mutual consultation and support should be developed, for it may guarantee the archive's work is not only one of processing and storing the oral record, but also one that links the creators of the recording/record to the users of that recorded information.

Sound recording archives have an important role to play in the documentation and creation of information for the study of society, community life, and cultural and national identity. As stewards of these collections, sound archivists and librarians, can facilitate the use of these collections in their communities through skilled collection management and archival administration, and through innovative dissemination and community outreach programs. The potential of sound archives, in terms of adding to our knowledge of events and the interpretation of those events, has not yet been fully explored. In addition to providing distinctly personal perspectives on historical events, oral history archives:

offer barely tapped and... still unknown benefits for our documentary heritage... they can provide access to unprecedented slices of communal memory, as well as redress for information lost through the ephemeral nature of electronic communication.<sup>1</sup>

In the simplest terms, a sound archive is an institution created to preserve, make available, and develop a documentary heritage through concentration on deliberately structured interviews and performances made by recording devices. Its theory must be an elastic one [taking into account contributions from social anthropology, folklore, linguistics, psychology, history and oral history], responding to new factors and incorporating concepts from numerous contributors.<sup>2</sup>

#### TECHNICAL PROCESSING IN THE ARCHIVES

Processing and the provision of bibliographic control should enhance access and retrievability, and should increase the value of the collected information for society. Once the sound recordings have been deposited in an archive or library, the objective of processing should be to make the materials readily available for use and to preserve the materials for the future. Collecting, processing and circulating guidelines may be unique to each archive, depending on the mission of the archival repository and the potential constituencies served, but in order to insure consis-

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1. Frederick Stielow, *The Management of Oral History Sound Archives*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1986, p. 11.

2. *Ibid.*, p.31.

tent standards and treatment, an in-house policies and procedures manual should be developed. This manual provides documentation for processing routines and can also serve as an orientation guide to the archives for library or archival directors, staff members and/or a board of trustees or advisers. This manual should include a mission statement of the archive as a means of introduction to the collection and to the activities of the archive. Subsequent sections of the manual may document filing rules, subject analysis and indexing guidelines, public access policies, ethical and legal positions, an emergency and disaster plan, preservation guidelines, reference services guidelines, and sample forms of all types (release forms, processing log forms, inventory forms, indexing and abstract workforms, and possibly a collection processing flowchart). A listing of the archival files of each distinct collection might also be included with explanatory scope notes about their content and usage. These files might include financial records, legal documents, general and internal correspondence, supplies and equipment inventories, and specific project files.<sup>3</sup>

International standardized routines for processing, cataloging and preserving oral testimony on magnetic tape do not exist. However, the ethical and obligatory responsibilities of collecting institutions were set forth in a series of guidelines published by the Oral History Association in 1968.

Unfortunately, these guidelines do not stipulate standardized routines for uniformity in indexing, cataloging or servicing an oral history collection.<sup>4</sup> They merely prescribe that the records be properly identified, indexed and preserved for use by the scholarly community.<sup>5</sup>

A review of the literature on oral history processing shows that institutions use various processing methods and provide very different levels of detail in their records, indexes and subject guides to their collections. Many archives involved in oral history projects transcribe all the tapes they receive as part of their processing routine and then circulate the transcribed text only. Other archives make several duplicates of their

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3. *Ibid.*, pp. 54, 56.

4. Eugene D. Carlisle, "Cataloging the Oral History Collection", In *A Guide for Oral History Programs*, (Eds. Richard D. Curtiss, Gary L. Shumway, Shirley E Stephenson), California: California State University, Fullerton and Southern California Local History Council, p. 78.

5. Oral History Association, *Goals and Guidelines Committee*, "Guidelines for Sponsoring Institutions", presented at the Third National Colloquium on Oral History, Lincoln, Nebraska, Nov. 25, 1968.

Frederick J. Stielow in his pioneering work, *The Management of Oral History Sound Archives*, provides a step-by-step guide to the processing of entire collections. He advocates detailed record-keeping on the movement of the collection through the processing flow and has designed forms for this purpose. Before adding a new collection, he cautions, an appraisal of the material should be done with regard to the value and physical condition of the collections and its place [in the overall] mission of the archive, the legal implications involved with offering public access, and the resources of the archive.

Given the importance of the initial stage of acquisition for control purposes, decisions about retention and level of detail in the processing should be decided immediately. Each collection should be accessioned in chronological order in an acquisition register. Once the material has been procured, the archive should assign a collection number, establish a file for the collection and reproduce the recordings for master and user copies. The master copy should then be stored under appropriate physical conditions and the duplicate copies should be used for the purposes of processing, lendings and circulation.<sup>7</sup>

Depending on the value of the collection, the financial and personnel resources of the archive, as well as the technological "exigences", Stielow explains that an archive may choose any of three levels of description: a) the collection-level description; b) the item-level description; and c) transcription-level description.<sup>8</sup>

#### a) Collection-level description

The collection-level description uses international bibliographic standards to provide full description and subject analysis for the collection of sound recordings. The catalog card or record listing the interviewee as the primary access point (the main entry), with the agency of origin, the interviewer and the specific project as secondary access points (added entries). Although subject headings may be assigned to each tape or recording, the typical subject classification (or assigning of subject-based call numbers) of the collection is not done. Rather, the collection is assigned a range of numbers which order the individual tapes within the specific collection. This prevents the scattering of the project tapes throughout the institutional holdings. Locally developed numbering schemes can adequately represent each unique item and can facilitate shelf

6. Stielow, *op cit.*, p. 59-60.

7. Stielow, *op cit.*, p. 61-81.

8. For a complete discussion of the levels of processing, please See Stielow, *op cit.*, p. 61-81.

arrangement of the items.

Rules for the descriptive practice of sound recordings have been published in the *Anglo-American Cataloging Rules* (2nd ed. revised).<sup>9</sup> Especially noteworthy is chapter six, "Sound Recordings". This chapter is comprised of rules for the body of the entry, the physical description of the item, the note area and the rules for adding access points (whether main entry or added entries). For subject access, it is most likely that a supplemental but tightly regulated thesaurus will have to be developed to increase the subject headings used for other library holdings. All subject vocabulary lists should be developed with an eye toward the implementation of automated records management and machine readable retrieval systems, and the communication and exchange of data to remote destinations. Using MARC (Machine Readable Cataloging) coding, which has emerged as an international standardized coding format for computerized information, is one means of accomplishing this. When a completed card set or automated record set of subject and name access points is interfiled in the general catalog, the collection-level description is complete.

#### b) Item-level description

Item level processing is a more complete level of description which provides extensive data on each interview or recorded session. With the appropriate advance contact and training, this level of description can be initiated by the interviewer, who would be best prepared to compile a detailed listing of the topics covered. Standardized forms to facilitate data entry and an initial (but flexible) vocabulary list or thesaurus, would be supplied by the archive. An in-depth outline and item index to the interviews can easily be produced by noting in one column the foot meter on the tape machine while in a parallel contents column noting the topics of discussion or subjects covered. Once the worksheet is completed, the information can be processed by typing detailed catalog entries in either a print or electronic environment.

#### c) Transcript-level description

The transcript can be viewed as an exhaustive description of a recording or it can be viewed as the final refinement of processing. With either perspective, the complete transcript is the final and most comprehensive level of description. The goals of transcription should produce a document that accurately represents the recording and is understandable by the reader.<sup>10</sup>

9. *Anglo-American Cataloging Rules*, 2nd ed. revised, Chicago: American Library Association, 1989.

10. Stielow, *op cit.*, p. 79.

Editing. Edit- exclude background noises, false starts, and some dialect peculiarities is advisable. And finally, the "transcript, typed on high-quality, acid-free paper, can be bound or placed in archival quality folders within archival boxes and arranged in a separate location in keeping with its classification number".<sup>11</sup>

William Moss, director of the Kennedy Library Oral History Program, in his classic work, *An Oral History Program Manual* elaborates on seven detailed steps for archives as well as researchers to facilitate the processing of an oral interview.<sup>12</sup> They are

1. tape identification and registration (interviewee's name and interview session number, date of interview session, length of interview session, number of cassettes, name of interviewer) includes attaching demographic data sheet on interviewee to recording;
2. transcription (the aim being an accurate and faithful representation in typescript of the dialogue that is recorded on tape);
3. staff review of draft transcripts;
4. negotiation and preparation of the legal agreement (clarifies the legal title and rights to the interview), release forms, etc.;
5. final typing;
6. accessioning, preservation and preparation of copies for research use (accessioning is the formal recording of the document among the inventory of holdings of a collecting institution).

Libraries or archives may choose to participate in all of these steps or may only be able to accomplish a few of these steps given their budget and the archival processing priorities. Participation in all of the steps requires a tremendous amount of time, staff and equipment, and the amount of time and staff available to devote to these activities may vary with each institution. Transcribing and reviewing are the most time-consuming, with the "cost" of transcribing and preparing the final interview document being about 40-45 hours to one hour of actual interview.

It is up to the archive within the institution to negotiate for time or for a budget to participate in these activities and to recruit employees with adequate skills to advance their processing objectives. Given the exorbitant costs of transcribing, some libraries and archives opt to save money by not providing complete transcription for

11. Stielow, op cit. p. 80.

12. William Moss, *An Oral History Program Manual*, New York: Praeger, 1974, p.

all interviews, but rather may provide subject indexes and guides to the collection in order to reduce processing costs.

There are other, less-exhaustive processing routines that a sound recording archivist/librarian might utilize as an alternative to complete transcription but which would still provide adequate name and subject access to the collection. Simply indexing a recording, for example, facilitates future access by providing a list of subject terms that describe the tape's content. Consultation of the index, then, would provide an accurate record of the various topics covered in the interview. Some proponents of indexing advise archives to produce not only indexed tapes, but also comprehensive subject indexes of all taped interviews. In this way, all subtopics can be identified by their foot location on each tape, and together with an index of all proper names, be keyed to the topical index.<sup>13</sup> Complete demographic information on all interviewees can also be listed in these indexes with details on interviewees' age, status in life, and qualifications, data on the circumstances of the interview as well as information on the conception and execution of the project, which may in itself provide important contextual background information for the researcher.

Through systematic processing, sound recorded interviews can be accessible in new ways and with the increase in the numbers of interviews available, detailed processing with subject access and indexing increases in importance. Indeed it will become essential because the difficulties of making the maximum valid use of oral evidence will grow as the number and range of interviews archives and available for use increases.<sup>14</sup>

Accurate and in-depth processing of the collection is crucial, for the type of records, indexes, and collection listings that are created during this step have a direct impact on the accessibility of the information contained in the collections as well as on the successful exploitation of the collection for personal, institutional or academic purposes.

#### LEGAL RELATIONSHIPS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Some of the materials collected as oral histories have restrictions requested by the donor or narrator for a number of reasons. Restrictions on use and/or publication of the manuscripts and tapes may be stipulated on the release or gift form

13. David Henige, *Oral Historiography*, New York: Longman, 1982, p. 126.

14. Henige, op cit., 126-127.

15. Stielow, op cit., p. 43.

and tapes may be stipulated on the release or gift form and the library or archives in charge of the materials must be aware of these restrictions and have the appropriate policies in place that permit access that is not injurious to the parties interviewed or persons discussed. All users should be provided with a copy of the rules of usage and must be prepared to observe such rules; archival center employees should be knowledgeable about the legal implications of their actions and should be prepared to consult with the appropriate legal authorities.

Stielow offers this advice:

The basic answer to the legal enigma is to move in good faith. Archivists should act in accordance with the sentiments of the academic world and democratic legislatures—sentiments that recognize the need to preserve information and the public's right of access to the same. Archivists as professionals should also act as though materials in their possession were subject to protection as privileged communication... The archivist's responsibility is to cloak himself or herself in a mantle of professional authority and, show proper intent. Such steps cannot be passive but must be actively proclaimed and visible. One's methods should include a written policy statement and constant attention to detail. In addition, the archivist should, as a matter of course, document his or her actions and secure the necessary legal instruments from donors, interviewees, interviewers and researchers.<sup>15</sup>

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Preparation for and protection from possible legal problems may not be appropriate in all archival contexts. However, depending on the legal status and institutional setting, the mission and objectives of the archival projects, and the professional ethics of the staff in charge of the project, the legal and ethical implications of all archival activities should be fully discussed and agreed to by all interested parties. Stielow recognizes that the curatorial duties of the archivist are an important societal safeguard for access to this information:

It is imperative that the socially responsible archivist recognizes the broader implications of knowledge in society. This recognition suggests conscious awareness of their duty to insure a documentary heritage, as well as knowledge of its positive and negative attributes.<sup>16</sup>

#### MICROCOMPUTER APPLICATIONS

Processing routines for sound recordings can be easily adapted to automated environments. Given the increasing accessibility to computer equipment and the ease of retrieval and malleability of computerized information, automated rou-

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16. Stielow, op cit., p. 50.

nes should be explored for their future application. Possibilities include wordprocessing, database management systems, spreadsheet programs and computerized catalogs and indexes. There are multitudinous advantages to automating the archival routines, including ease of use, flexibility, reliability, preservation and increased security of the data (when appropriate backup routines are consistently utilized), and increased administrative control. In addition, storage space requirements are reduced, and retrievability is enhanced, output can be varied in varied format, and networking capabilities can be added easily.

If computerized techniques are not possible immediately, then, making sure that manual routines are well-designed can make future changes much easier and less interruptive to the workflow.

#### CONSERVATION

One of the most important activities of an archive is the preservation of the recordings and all of the supplementary tools, such as indexes and catalogs, used to provide access to the original documents. During normal play conditions, abrasions to the tape can result from the tape transport system. Repeated damage of this type can and does affect the recording with each use, even within a controlled environment.<sup>17</sup> It is the duty of the archivists and librarians to anticipate damages and to act to ensure the least possible harm to the materials. There are some practical measures that prevent some of the damage. The physical environment where the tapes are stored must be dust-free with a constant temperature of 70F degrees (plus or minus 10 degrees) and a constant relative humidity of 45 percent (plus or minus 5 percent).<sup>18</sup> It is extremely important to avoid temperature fluctuations in the environment where the recordings are stored, collection content as well as instruction in the use of the archival holdings should be given priority. The potential community of researchers and other users must be informed of its existence and its possible importance to their research and to the study of the community or society. The archives managers can promote the collections through the media by writing articles, giving interviews and distributing informational brochures about the collection, archives services and publications. Information about the collections can also be published in popular and scholarly journals. Listings of the collection holdings or availability of the collection catalog can be announced in academic journals as well as the popular press. Archivists

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17. Stielow, op cit., p. 117.

18. Stielow, op cit., p. 109.

19. Stielow, op cit., p. 110, 117-118.

and librarians can also serve as consultants for local projects started by schools, community clubs, civic associations or by local and national interest groups. These groups' projects can then be deposited in the library assuring expanding community contacts and support while promoting more collection and dissemination activities which complement other activities in the archives. Archivists and librarians should be attentive to special informational needs that any segment of the community might have, given the cultural importance of the materials in the archives and their value to the community. Stielow urges proactive service to the community recognizing the unique attributes the archives have for creating and preserving cultural identity. He states:

The archivist and institution can play a larger cultural role in building a community's identity and sense of self-worth. More than a collection of information, the archive also represents a cultural monument and can serve as a museum of verbal impressions. (And) part of its role, for example, may and should extend to the production of displays and traveling exhibits.<sup>20</sup>

Another step in disseminating information about the collection to potential users is to provide for circulation and use of the collection. Preparation of duplicate copies of tapes and transcribed manuscripts and liberal loan policies facilitate more community involvement and acceptance of archival collecting efforts. The collections can also be made available through institutional channels such as inter-library loan activities with other libraries and archives, or by the exchange of duplicate or copied holdings with libraries that administer collections with complementary subject holdings.

In addition to making sure the collection has the widest possible local and national circulation through inter-institutional lending and exchange agreements, the collections can also be marketed and sold to other libraries, to the scholarly community, and to local organizations and individuals with an interest in the content of the recordings/ transcripts. Making copies of a collection's holdings and offering them for sale has important advantages. With the expansion of the audience, the collections become more visible to the community. As a result, the work of the institution in collecting, organizing, preparing and disseminating information may be recognized far outside local areas.

Another marketing technique would be to provide review copies of important tapes to scholars for review in academic journals. The exposure for the collection would be increased and the reviews

could accompany subject and name listings of the collection so that a wider community of scholars and readers could be made aware of the holding institution's collection.

Another project to consider would be full-scale reproduction and commercial distribution of the collection or its pertinent parts. There are micro-format publishers who have accomplished this with the massive New York Times Oral History Program, for example. This oral history program has succeeded in distributing their locally-generated materials to dozens of libraries. Now, the students, scholars and communities of each holding library have local access to one of the largest and oldest U.S. oral history collection projects. With similar intent, the Columbia University Oral History Office also has published a catalog of their collections, making it possible to quickly verify the subject content and scope of their collections.

## CONCLUSIONS

The administrators of these archives, librarians, archivists, technical assistants and other support staff make valuable contributions to the success of oral history collections through such diverse activities as acquisitions and appraisal, processing and production of indexes and catalogs of holdings, cataloging and subject analysis, conservation and protection of the primary materials, and the production of finding aids and guides which facilitate multi-purpose research use of the collections. These professionals can be instrumental in the acceptance and support of the collection by the community of users and the public at large. Efforts to integrate the collecting and preservation mission of the archives with community life may provide opportunities to develop new community relations and services, and, hence wider participation and involvement in the activities of the archive. In essence, the collections in the archives offer the community evidence about its history that might have been overlooked or unrecorded. And the documentation activities of the archive offer community members a way to participate in the rescue of their historical and ideological legacy. When communities view the archives as the repository for their collective cultural heritage, the institution gains important allies in the common objectives of preserving information about local events, perspectives, and traditions, and can better serve as a creative agent between the creator and the user of oral history.

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20. Stielow, p. 40.

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Rholand L. Neugebauer (Estados Unidos)

Especialista de America Latina y Bibliote-  
caria Referencista de la Universidad de Arizona.  
Autora de diversos trabajos así como de ponencias  
presentadas en eventos desarrollados en su  
país. Miembro de la American Library Association y  
de Latin American Studies Association, entre otras.