
Together We Listen: Generating Accessible Oral Histories of NYC through Community Participatory Projects

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Abstract:

In late 2013, the New York Public Library launched an oral history project designed to capture neighborhood histories, generate programming opportunities for local communities, and create an accessible archive of oral histories. Through the Community Oral History Project, the library trains volunteer interviewers and pairs them with neighborhood residents who share their stories and experiences of the local area's distant and near pasts. These interviews capture a tales of an ever-changing New York, forming a unique oral history archive of first person accounts of life in the city from the mid 20th century to the present.

The interviews will form an important part of the research library's local history collection; they are currently archived in the library's digital repository, and are accessible through a dedicated portal. Via a collaborative, grant-funded project, the library has created a crowdsourced transcription verification tool that will allow us to further plumb the riches of the interviews, and to generate more use and interest in this expanding collection of oral histories. Programming, transcription tools, and all aspects of the oral history project are shared through social media platforms and blogs, generating interest and spreading the news in both structured and organic means, all of which have been quite successful in sustaining interest and increasing participation in the ongoing project and in the archive of stories.

Keywords: Oral History, Crowdsourcing, Transcription, Local History

Introduction

Three years ago, the New York Public Library, one of the busiest public library systems in the United States, launched a community-driven oral history project to celebrate and record the histories of its community members. This project reinforces the ties between the library and the community it serves and preserves the recorded histories in the library's archives. With over 88 branch libraries and 4 research libraries, the Library provides an abundance of services to our patrons: information services, contemporary and historical collections, computer access, community space, classes, exhibitions, and more. These collections and services attract patrons from all ages and walks of life, from toddlers to senior citizens, from the pre-K set to post-graduate and professional scholars; hundreds of thousands of researchers access our online databases, e-books, and digital holdings each year.

With such a broad range of communities and collections served, the New York Public Library's mission embraces expansiveness: "to inspire lifelong learning, advance knowledge, and strengthen our communities."¹ To meet this encompassing need, the branch and the research libraries have very different daily operations, particularly their reader services, and they acquire very different types of collections – from the popular novels and children's books of the branch libraries to the rich historical and archival holdings of the research libraries. Often the two types of libraries can seem worlds apart, with little interplay between the collections and limited meaningful collaboration among staff, so our mission statement serves us in keeping our strategic goals aligned as we plan for serving our patrons and building our collections.

Branch Libraries

In addition to providing core services such as access to collections and information, the branch libraries also seek to build upon their long-standing importance and centrality in the life of their neighborhoods. This is often achieved through a robust schedule of cultural, educational, and practical programming for all patrons – from infant lap time to book talks for seniors. Within this environment of strong community ties, the Community Oral History Project took root.

In late 2013, the Outreach Services department developed a neighborhood oral history project that would bring together community members to share their memories of life in Greenwich Village, a historic neighborhood with a rich past, at the Jefferson Market Library. The project, spearheaded by Alex Kelly, an oral historian and former community organizer, in collaboration with branch staff, enlisted and trained a team of volunteers in oral history practices, who then went on to interview local residents with strong ties to the neighborhood. It was a very popular program; and inspired by the success of the Greenwich Village project, Kelly decided to expand the program to other branches across the library system, giving rise to what would become known as the Community Oral History Project.

Research Libraries

The research libraries at the New York Public Library are dedicated to collecting, preserving, and providing access to historical materials for a general and scholarly audience. As with the branch libraries, the research divisions are also invested in engaging communities through the use and discussion of their collections. The Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, which houses the Humanities and Social Sciences collections, is home to the Irma and Paul Milstein Division of United States History, Local History and Genealogy - a central collection for researchers of the city's past. The Milstein Division receives nearly 17,000 visits each year; with researchers primarily involved in undergraduate through post-graduate level work, with genealogists, journalists, historians, novelists, and scholars filling out the registers.

With its deep historical and contemporary holdings, including visual, ephemeral, and some archival materials, the Milstein Division is invested in building collections that provide documentation of the city's history. This includes documentation that might be missing from the traditional published record, materials that might not otherwise be acquisitioned by scholarly institutions – such as ephemeral local history collections and first-hand accounts that bear witness to the changing face of city life.

The oral histories generated by the Community Oral History Project are exactly the type of primary sources that the Milstein Division welcomes: richly detailed accounts of life in the city's neighborhoods, descriptions of places and people that may no longer exist or have undergone significant change, or for which there is scant historical record. While the audio files themselves will be stored in the library's digital repository, the decision was made that intellectual stewardship of the oral history archives would be transferred from Outreach Services to the Milstein Division staff, who

¹ <http://www.nypl.org/help/about-nypl/mission>

will facilitate and promote the use of the oral histories in conjunction with the use of other primary source materials on city life.

This longstanding commitment to New York City residents and researchers, embodied in the Community Oral History Project and culminating in the development of an innovative and broadly applicable transcription tools, are the threads that weave together the work of the branches and research divisions of the New York Public Library system. Almost three years after its inception, the Library now has a fully functioning community-driven oral history program, with a large corpus of interviews accessible online through a dedicated website, and a suite of public annotation and transcription tools that have been developed around the program, tools that that will serve to expand access to other audio collections at the New York Public Library and elsewhere.

What follows is a discussion of the Community Oral History Project, its planning and execution, with an emphasis on community engagement and the use of social technology, particularly the innovative work of the Together We Listen project, to secure future accessibility and use of the oral histories.

Oral History and its relationship to the Library

Before embarking on a discussion of the New York Public Library's oral history program, the term "oral history," should be clarified. The Oral History Association defines it as "a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events."² Oral history collections can be found across the research library divisions; the majority of which were generated via traditional oral history programs, meaning that professional oral historians, with deep expertise and knowledge of their particular subject's field, conducted both the background research and the oral history interviews.

While the goals informing the work of the Community Oral History Project are the same as those of a traditional program, there are differences that should be noted, primarily stemming from the diffuse nature of the program and the non-professional status of the primary movers in its execution. That is, the Library's project, conceived as a community-driven program, does not utilize professionally trained oral historians to gather interviews, but local residents volunteering their time and whose qualifications as 'experts' in the subject matter is derived from their personal relationship to the community, its residents, and its history. The project, designed to build a set of accessible primary resources for the historical repository, is a community effort to collect and share memories that will inspire other residents to tell their stories, and to bring together people who are interested in exploring the changing city, its history and identity over the decades.

Community Oral History Project - Life Cycle

A useful framework for describing an oral history project is found in Barbara Sommer's outline of the Oral History Life Cycle, a process that encompasses five stages: Idea, Plan, Interview, Preservation, Access and Use.³ What follows here is a review of how the Community Oral History Project proceeds through this cycle, in an iterative fashion through the concurrently running neighborhood projects, with an emphasis on programming and the use of social technology to encourage public engagement with the project.

Stage 1 - Idea

The idea for the Community Oral History Project began with questioning what aspects of life in New York aren't being documented. As many cultural and historical organizations have realized, particularly in places undergoing rapid change, the daily interactions and transactions of city residents risk being left out of the historical record. This idea, that there is a gap in the library's historical collections that personal narratives could fill, was coupled with another challenge: how to engage with

² <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/do-oral-history/>

³ Barbara W. Sommer, *Practicing Oral History in Historical Organizations*. 33

the community members and local branch library patrons in a meaningful way to save these personal recollections of the city's past.

Stage 2 – Plan:

The plan for the Community Oral History Project needed to address the purpose and goals of the project, paint a picture of the overall landscape of the project design, and also provide an array of details in areas such as: funding, legal issues, and implementation. The plan is also shared with potential team members to secure participation and to obtain administrative and financial support. Certain aspects of the plan must allow project teams to address and accommodate the needs or habits of a particular community, as well as any technical or legal issues that arise. The key customizable aspects of the Community Oral History Project are: Purpose; Goals; Team; Technology; Evaluation, and Programming.

Purpose: Echoing the foundational idea as articulated in Stage 1, the purpose of the project is to create opportunities for local communities to share and celebrate local history through recording long-term residents' personal recollections. These recorded memories will later form part of the historical archive in the research library. This idea of "community," though initially conceived as a geographic area, expanded to encompass groups that share a particular experience beyond spatial proximity, with thematic tracks such as the Visible Lives project, which collected stories of people living with a disability in the city.⁴

Goals:⁵ The four main goals of the Community Oral History Project are:

- To connect libraries throughout the NYPL system to organizations and engaged individuals in their communities; expanding possibilities and best practices for community engagement
- To set a precedent for library systems around the world by using an original model for large scale, community-based oral history collection and sharing it as a resource
- To develop an audience for public programs around local history/community at NYPL's branch libraries
- To build the largest (in scope and volume), searchable collection of oral histories on New York City

Team: Sommer defines an ideal oral history team as incorporating "a number of people filling a number of roles to shepherd an oral history from idea to access."⁶ For each of the neighborhood projects, the Outreach Services department's oral history staff worked with two or more librarians at each branch location, who in turn solicited participation from local civic and cultural organizations and community members.

During the first oral history project at the Jefferson Market Library, two branch staff led the project under Alex Kelly's direction. As the project scaled up to multiple locations, Kelly encouraged staff at each branch to step into coordinating and programming roles; she remained a source for support and information on conducting oral histories and other project concerns, such as multi-branch programming and equipment issues. Librarians began to work more closely with volunteers, who were frequently enlisted in the project as more than just trained interviewers, but as collaborative partners offering feedback, assisting at events, writing blog posts, and providing general project support. Clearly, without a team of such dedicated and engaged volunteers, this project would not have gotten off the ground, or have been as successful in meeting its goals.

As the oral history project progressed from collection, to preservation, and into access, many other departments and library staff were brought on board: catalogers and metadata staff, digital preservationists, programmers, research librarians, and more. Each group had been brought in on

⁴ <http://oralhistory.nypl.org/neighborhoods/visible-lives>

⁵ The internal planning document lays out the Community Oral History Project's goals: Alexandra Kelly, "FY14 + FY15 Oral History Projects."

⁶ Sommer, 67

the project during the planning stages, to ensure buy-in and to facilitate scheduling, even if their roles were not realized until later in the project's life cycle.

Technology: The technological needs of the project had to satisfy two requirements. The first was that any recording equipment and digital experience and interaction had to be manageable by volunteers who would have a varying familiarity with recording equipment, annotation tools, and interfaces. Secondly, the oral history interviews had to be recorded in preservation quality audio files. This need, specifically in regard to the capturing of the audio files themselves, led the Oral History team to choose H1 Zoom recorders, which could save the interviews in preservation standard mp3 files at 320 kbps, for inclusion in the Oral History tool kits. These kits were distributed to participating branch libraries.

Evaluation: The establishment of evaluation tools and metrics is necessary for measuring project goals and facilitates the writing of progress reports and continuation requests. All recordkeeping for the project, beginning with planning documents, programming and outreach schedules; and continuing with gathering an array of statistics on interviews collected, shared, and accessed, is the responsibility of the Oral History team in the Outreach Services department.

For example, a typical community project might set the goal that, by the end of neighborhood project phase, which normally lasted a few months, a total of at least 40 interviews, averaging one hour in length each, would be collected. Branch staff, under Kelly's direction, would also set expectations about programming, social media outreach, and blogging – each of which would generate its own statistics on attendance, reach, and views. After the interviews were made public and annotation and transcription software built around them, metrics on hits, downloads, tasks completed and items transcribed, etc. could be gathered and shared as well, allowing for an examination of the project's reach and use and facilitating planning and adjustments.

Programming: One of the primary justifications for the development of the Community Oral History Project was to foster community engagement at neighborhood libraries. As such, programming and outreach were integrated into every stage of the project life cycle, both at the local level and system wide. Calls for participation form the earliest types of promotion of the neighborhood projects, leading to meetings for volunteers and oral history training sessions, followed by official project kick-off celebrations. Kick-off celebrations aim to be festive affairs, sometimes featuring music by local musicians, refreshments, and prominent local residents speaking about their own experiences. Highlights from the interviews collected are also effective kick-off materials.

Once a project is well underway and significant number of interviews have been gathered, specialized programming is developed based on trends or common themes that emerged from the oral histories. For example, one neighborhood library hosted an event called "Local Business, Local People, Local History: film and discussion regarding local history," which featured highlights from that community's oral history project as well as a screening of a local TV show about the neighborhood. The Mulberry Branch in the historic SoHo neighborhood developed free, locally organized walking tours in collaboration with other local and city historical and cultural organizations. Reaching out to community groups at the inception of the project is an essential step in the early stages. These relationships often infuse additional energy into public engagement and boost participation events. The Outreach Services department also connects with neighborhood news agencies, in print and online, to publicize the project and broadcast updates about calls for participation and other programming.

During the months when the local projects are active, and when the recorded files have started being submitted to the oral history team in the Outreach Services department, Alex Kelly selects excerpts to use as promotional material for the project. These highlight files are shared with the public via the library Soundcloud account and through blog posts written by Kelly and other oral

history team members.⁷ Volunteers and librarians also pen posts describing their experiences in interviewing subjects and encouraging others to get involved in capturing the history of their neighborhoods.

In the post-collection stage of the project, once the interviews have been made accessible on the Library's oral history website, another schedule of outreach and programming takes over. In this post-collection state of the project cycle, the library is primarily invested in achieving two goals: promoting the collection use and expanding access and discoverability of the recordings via a combination of crowdsourced and computer generated annotations and transcriptions. Though the work at this stage is distinct from that of the collection phases, the same methods of promotion and engagement are utilized: the Library's social media channels, such as Twitter, publicity via news sites, and blogging. Programming focuses on introducing and training the public on engaging with the histories through listening and adding data via the annotation and transcription tools.

The success of the Community Oral History Project is rooted in the enthusiasm generated by team members, which keeps the disparate group of volunteers invested and engaged throughout the process. The use of social media by the oral history team members, both those embedded in the daily operations of the project, as well as those only involved in one discreet stage of the project's life cycle, has proven to be key in keeping the project's momentum going and in generating continued interest in the work being done in the branches and in digital repository.

Stage 3 – Interview:

The third stage of the oral history process, what Sommer calls the “central stage of the oral history life cycle”, is the collection of the histories themselves.⁸ Once librarians at branch locations decide that there is sufficient interest among their community members to embark upon an oral history project, a coordinated outreach campaign is initiated. Librarians reach out to block associations, attend community board meetings, and contact local institutions that have a stake in community organizing and/or the preservation of the local historical record. This “outreach blast” lasts one or two months and serves to spread the word about the project, initiate collaborative relationships with local organizations, and recruit volunteer interviewers.

In the next step, branch librarians, under the direction of oral historian Alex Kelly, host project overview and interviewer training sessions. These two-hour-long training workshops introduce volunteers to the oral history field, and walk them through the project life cycle, from the idea and planning stages before the interviews and through the post-collection life of the interviews. During the workshops, volunteers are provided with an “Interviewer Handbook” which contains suggestions and guidelines on how to identify and contact potential storytellers, how to plan and structure the interview, and what to do after the recording is finished.⁹ The “Interviewer Handbook,” comes in a folder with other materials, such as the storyteller data sheet, which provides information on each narrator and attendant interview data, and the legal releases that are to be signed after the interview was conducted. The Outreach Services team also distributes “Neighborhood History Kits,” to the branches, which include the H1 Zoom recorders and other materials to support the interview process; these kits are available for the volunteer oral historians to take with them as they go out to meet with storytellers at a location of their choosing.

The narrators, or storytellers, are identified and contacted by the volunteer interviewers directly. The sole requirement for a person to be a narrator in the Community Oral History Project is residency in the selected area for 15-20 years. The community residents who have contributed their stories, given the requirements of the project, tended to be senior citizens - though this was not the case for more

⁷ “Voices of NYC.” <http://www.nypl.org/blog/2016/04/30/voices-of-nyc>

⁸ Sommer 35.

⁹ Each neighbourhood project received its own project documents, such as: “SoHo Stories: Our Neighborhood Oral History Project. Interviewer Handbook.” 2016.

thematic projects. Though no socio-economic data was collected on the participants, participants' demographics generally mirror that of their neighborhoods.

While some neighborhood projects included famous New Yorkers, such as former Mayor David Dinkins and other politicians, the purpose of the project was not to reach out to notable New Yorkers whose biographies and memories are already part of the historical record. Browsing through the oral histories, a researcher comes across an Irish-American recounting boyhood tales of playing basketball with Jim Carroll and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar; a legally blind man describing what it was like to be a new immigrant attending his high school for the first time, and an artist summarizing a half-century's worth of history of the apartment building she lived in for decades. The diversity and the richness of the stories recounted through the Community Oral History Project is dizzying and delightful, providing texture and poignancy to the historical record of the city.

Stage 4 – Preservation:

After the interviewers have collected a few interviews on their recorders and filled out the relevant data on their “storyteller data sheets” the materials are returned to the branch library and passed along to Outreach Services. The project now moves from the collection to the curation phase and Alex Kelly and her small staff begin the steps of ensuring preservation and future access to the collections. Each interview, recorded at preservation level audio quality, is saved to the library's digital storage on Amazon's Web Services Simple Storage Service (AWS S3). The Library's oral history team also saves copies of the files locally, with the oral histories from each community project being stored in a folder dedicated to all the records and documents associated with or generated by each project.

Stage 5 – Access and Use:

By launching the Community Oral History Project, the library has committed itself to the stewardship of the collection - not just to preserving the files in a secure repository, but also to ensuring their accessibility and use. As each community project draws to a close, these oral histories begin their association with the research library collections – specifically with the official public facing repository, the Milstein Division of U.S. History, Local History, and Genealogy. When oral histories join the archive, they become part of what Barbara Sommer calls “the vital collection of first person information – such as letters, diaries, maps, and organizational records – that serve as the basis for research.”¹⁰ While the oral history projects are in the collection phases, these files and the public engagement built around them are in the purview of the branch libraries, but as the project plan predicts, this growing body of personal narratives will be utilized primarily by researchers in the Milstein Division and the other research divisions.

The first step the library takes in providing access to the oral history interviews is to burn CDs for the branch libraries that generated the recordings. But as to be expected in the digital age, the oral histories do not get consigned to a library shelf, waiting passively for a reader, the Internet has changed all that, radically altering what is meant by access to collections. In fall 2014, The Library's created a website which serves as a portal to all of the oral histories that have been and will be collected by this project.¹¹ The audio files, nearly 800 of them to date, are accessible and browseable via the community project under which they were created, the storyteller's name, or by searching the metadata and summaries taken from the storyteller data collection sheet and added by the oral history team.

Shortly after the website's launch, programmers at the Library annotation tool that allows users to flag specific points in an interview where they hear names of places, people, dates, and events, and then add those terms to the public interface as searchable keywords. This annotation tool relies upon the participation of a diffuse group of people who are interested in the stories being told by our narrators, who are comfortable with the software, and who are generous with the time required for these tasks.

¹⁰ Sommer, 26

¹¹ “NYPL Community Oral History Project.” <http://oralhistory.nypl.org/>

This work has exposed more of the content of the histories, allowing the public to search for names and places within each story. For example, searchable keywords entered for oral histories from the Greenwich Village project included subjects: Jane Jacobs, Diane DiPrima, the Halloween Parade, the Stonewall Inn, and hundreds of other people, businesses, institutions, schools, and events. All of these transcribed keywords provide much needed entry points into the interviews that might otherwise be overlooked by researchers.

While the annotation feature, coupled with the original metadata, is an important tool in expanding discoverability of the collection's content, the Library took the opportunity to explore the possibility of opening up access to these audio files even more, through the full transcription of those recordings. Much like keyword searches, full transcripts lack the structural hierarchy and navigability of designated subject terms, but providing access to the full text and the data contained within those files is the preferred mode of access for researchers and historians who use these collections. Additionally, transcripts allow the library's project to be ADA compliant – particularly important with the library's first foray into thematic projects was the Visible Lives project, which documented the lives of people living with disabilities in New York City.

Yet, while full transcription of audio files is ideal, it is both time-consuming and expensive to achieve. To support this work, the NYPL Labs, a team dedicated to innovative approaches to digital library operations, applied for and received a grant, titled "Together We Listen."¹² This grant's goal is to develop a transcription tool that would allow users to edit computer-generated transcripts of oral history audio files. Part of this initiative, which comes with the promise of application to all audio files held by historical organizations, media companies, and more, has an embedded community engagement component in which the public is invited to correct and enrich transcripts using the transcript editor, developed by NYPL Labs.

This transcription tool was launched on the website in April 2016, living as a sub-site to the main oral history pages where users can listen to and annotate the oral histories.¹³ The transcription page walks the user through the transcription process and, as with many crowdsourcing platforms, allows the user to track their own progress on the collections. Two months after the launch, the statistics on the use of the tool were moderately encouraging– and speaks to the challenge of engaging the public in this type of intensive, time-consuming tasks. In the eight weeks after the tool was made public, 100 registered users had reviewed and edited about 30% of the computer-generated text, totaling just over 30 hours of oral histories now completely searchable.

One of the lessons the oral history team learned at this stage was that volunteers engaged in collecting local memories are generally not interested in the tasks of annotating and transcribing those remembrances, and that a different type of volunteer needed to be courted. While the two groups are not exclusive, much like the distinct user-bases of the branch and research libraries, a shift in tactics was required in garnering user participation in the curation stages of the life cycle. While the branch libraries did host events structured around transcribing the oral histories, they were not well-attended; and the oral history team found a slightly more fruitful approach to public engagement in targeted outreach to researchers, students, and professionals involved in the fields of oral and public history and the digital humanities. As with the early stages of the project, targeted use of social media and online content promotion were key in building interest around the project and its attendant tools. The oral history team and NYPL Labs, working with the Library's Volunteer Office, put out a call via social media channels, the flagship website, and a dedicated microsite, for the public to learn the ins and outs of the software and provide feedback on its development.

The final stage of the oral history life cycle is an ongoing one. For the oral histories to have meaning and lasting importance beyond the branch library's goal of temporary programming series, there must

¹² "Together We Listen." is a Knight Foundation Prototype grant which was awarded in the Fall 2015: <http://www.knightfoundation.org/grants/201551666/>

¹³ "NYPL Community Oral History Project Transcript Editor." <http://transcribe.oralhistory.nypl.org/>

be clear pathways to the recordings' content – this comes in the form of cataloging, descriptive metadata, and, moving forward, full-text transcripts. The journey is not complete with the transcription of the audio files either, a task which itself could take many years to be complete, as the Library investigates the possibilities of lined open data expose previously obscured connections among our historical collections across the library's holding and beyond our walls. Through this project, the New York Public Library has taken innovative strides through which the recorded memories of our citizens are transformed into easily discoverable primary source materials for generations of historians to come.

Summary and Conclusion

As the Community Oral History Project continues to launch new neighborhood programs across the city, the Library remains committed to the process as described in this paper and as outlined in the original project plan, a process that embodies a celebration of community history and ensures that these shared stories are preserved for researchers for generations to come. Advances in programming and technology – particularly the social web – have transformed the collection of these storytellers' memories, and afforded us opportunities to rapidly build momentum around community projects and discovery and accessibility tools. While the new technologies that have benefitted our programs also raise questions about oral history practices, the Library remains committed to working through privacy and ethical concerns that might be raised by full, public access to our patrons' personal memories.

Our journey in building one of the richest collections of oral histories of the city's history has only begun. Thanks to the work of dedicated individuals – oral historians like the Library's Alex Kelly, the NYPL Labs team, and our like-minded colleagues across the field of libraries, archives, and historical organizations – we have made significant progress since 2013. The Community Oral History Project, along with the accessibility work of the Together We Listen grant, ensures the continued collection and curation of these individual windows into our collective history that together will enrich our communities and our historical record.

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