

So You Want Your Oral Histories Used? Bridging the Gap Between Oral Histories, Librarians, and Patrons

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Abstract:

Practicing oral historians understand that it is not only necessary to collect the first-hand accounts and recollections of individuals, and make them accessible in an appropriate repository, but to also have these primary resources used. The purpose of this study was primarily to determine the familiarity and/or use of oral histories as a reference source by librarians. A secondary inquiry within this study was to learn where and how librarians learn about new and/or old reference sources and how they want new resources marketed to them, so that they may incorporate them into their arsenal of resources.

Keywords: oral history, library science, library research, reference sources

Introduction

Librarians often have an arsenal of resources they look to as they try to assist patrons and researchers with their information needs. As an oral historian who studies library and information science, I have noticed that oral histories tend to be disregarded by, or not even on the radar of, librarians who recommend information resources to patrons. Oral histories can be hidden away, in special collections or local history sections of libraries, collecting dust on a shelf, not catalogued, and therefore undiscoverable. Oral histories often come in a variety of formats and media, which may make them inaccessible if specific technology is needed to play them. Often oral histories are not only recordings, but have associated with them an audio log or transcript, photographs, or ephemera. This plurality of content types can make them hard to catalog and identify in library materials catalogs.

Oral historians want people to use the interviews we collect, and librarians want to provide patrons with a wide variety of resources to fulfil their information needs. Since I have a foot in both the oral history and the library worlds, I sought to determine what librarians know

about oral history as an information resource. In order to better promote oral history, I was also interested in how librarians discover and locate new resources and add them to their regular arsenal of go-to resources. Where do librarians look for new or different resources? How do librarians want information about new resources presented to them? By understanding what librarians know about oral history and how they learn and want to learn about resources, oral historians can increase the usage of oral histories overall.

Literature Review

When I approached the library literature to determine what has been done in regards to marketing and promoting resources to librarians the landscape is filled with everything that a librarian/libraries should do to market their resources and services to patrons, but finding how to market to a librarian would be more difficult. After consulting a librarian it was suggested that thinking about who markets to librarians might be more fruitful, for example vendors who want librarians to purchase their products. This is not to say that trying to promote oral history collections to librarians is the same as a vendor promoting resources. Library and Information Science (LIS) literature on reference coursework was also explored to gain insight on how librarians might initially learn about resources. Finally the oral history literature was consulted to see if and how libraries and the role librarian's play was discussed.

From the vendor aspect, Carson points out that libraries and vendors recognize a mutual dependency on each other, which "means that we need to think carefully about our relationships and how to improve them" (Carson, 2006). It is important for oral historians to understand that libraries are not only the repository for these materials, but can also serve as the promoter and disseminator of them too. Similarly, Coe talks about the importance of customer relations through a book vendor's perspective, and discusses the importance of understanding your customer. It is important for oral historians to not only understand the end-user of their work, but also the library and archive worlds too. He states "book vendors need staff who can understand the jargon and technical language of librarianship; who read the same journals and newsletters and visit the same web sites as librarians..." (Coe, 2006). Having a better understanding of the library jargon could help build relationships between oral historians and librarians.

Another inquiry was to look at where librarians get their training, which usually comes from their coursework in library school and on-the-job training. Bossaller and Adkins examined students' and practitioners' attitudes towards a variety of reference sources. They address "information overload." They report, "the accessibility of print and online sources influenced students' use of these sources" (Bossaller, 2011). Time was also a major factor on what sources they preferred, which is important for oral historians and oral history collections to understand—how easily accessible are the oral histories to navigate? Of note in their work is that "both academic and public librarians preferred to use fee-based databases over print or web resources," which may be problematic since most oral histories are not discoverable in this manner, but this does shed light on a potential obstacle in getting oral histories more on the radar of librarians (Bossaller, 2011). Additionally, Adkins and Erdelez found that students "rely on Google to answer practice reference questions rather than exploring print sources" (Adkins, 2006). More emphasis is placed on electronic sources over print sources, possibly due to its "proliferation and accessibility" in reference instruction (Adkins, 2006). What is important to extrapolate from this is library students and practitioners prefer the ease of discoverability through electronic means.

The oral history literature discusses libraries and archives, which is understandable since most projects end up in these institutions. The majority of the discussion tends to focus on preservation, outreach, publicity, discoverability, and the stewardship of oral histories (Ritchie, 2015; DeBlasio et al, 2009; Wilton, 2011; Sommer & Quinlan, 2009; Yow, 2005; Sommer, 2015; Larson, 2014; and Baum, 1996). Yow discusses the importance of talking with curators on ways to publicize oral histories. She also discusses an interdisciplinary directory for oral history that ceased in 1990, and an oral history index available today via paid subscription. Of note, Yow talks about the importance for oral historians to speak at state and local historical associations and at other professional meetings to publicize projects and collections (Yow, 2005). Baum specifically addresses the role that librarians play in oral history in regards to creation, curating, consuming, and counselling for projects. She also states, “the librarian can make a vital difference in the quantity and quality of use of oral history materials by serving as a broker between creator and consumer of oral history” (Baum, 1996). Although the literature connects oral histories to libraries and archives not all of them specifically address the role that librarians and archivists play, or could play, in the dissemination of oral histories as a resource as much as Baum does.

Method

My research questions were first, what do librarians know about oral histories as a reference source, and second, how do librarians find out about new reference sources? A third research question was how librarians would suggest oral histories be advertised to them as a resource? I chose a survey method because I wanted to get feedback from a number of librarians. In order to answer the first research question, my survey included questions about whether respondents were familiar with oral histories, had they ever used one, and whether or not their library had any in their collection. Respondents were then asked whether they were comfortable locating oral histories, if they had ever recommended an oral history interview to a patron, how likely they would be to recommend them, and why they would not recommend them. To answer my second research question, respondents were asked closed-ended questions on where they look to find new reference sources, how often they look for new sources, and then an open-ended question on where they specifically look for new sources. An open-ended question was asked on how librarians suggest oral historians and libraries who have oral histories advertise these resources to answer the third research question.

The online survey was created using the Qualtrics software program. After pilot testing, I posted an electronic call to complete the survey through the Missouri Library Association’s listserv. I also posted the call to the listservs maintained by the University of Missouri School of Information Science & Learning Technologies and the H-OralHist listserv. I also distributed it via e-mail to several librarians in different libraries that I was personally acquainted with, and encouraged them to share the survey in hopes of gaining more completed surveys. Additionally, I created business cards to direct people to the survey. I distributed those cards at the American Library Association’s Annual Conference in Las Vegas, Nevada, in 2014. The majority of the cards were distributed on Friday as attendees waited for the exhibition hall to open. This provided ample opportunity to address a wide variety of librarians and alert them to this graduate school study.

Results

Survey results were received from 162 participants. Survey respondents represented 35 United States, with two respondents from outside the U.S. As shown in Table 1, participants worked in a variety of library settings.

Table 1

Type of Library Where Survey Respondents Work

Library Type	Percentage	Number of Respondents
Academic	44%	71
Public	27%	43
Other	11%	17
Special	6%	9
Not currently in a library	4%	7
Library Science student	3%	5
K-12 School Library	2%	4
Government Library	1%	2
Private Library	1%	2
Corporate Library	1%	1

Respondents were asked how many years of work experience they had in a library. Responses are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Respondents Work Experience in a Library

Library Experience	Percentage	Number of Respondents
0-5 years	39%	63
6-10 years	20%	32
11-16 years	19%	30
17 or more years	22%	35

Are librarians familiar with oral histories?

Of the 162 responses, 94% (152) were familiar with oral histories, and 60% (98) had used an oral history for their own research or personal enjoyment. About half of the respondents reported that their library had oral histories in their collection, while 21% (34) did not know if their libraries had them. When asked whether or not respondents had ever recommended an oral history interview to a patron 46% (75) said they had, while 54% (87) had not.

When asked how comfortable they were at finding oral histories on a specific topic, 38% (62) responded “not really,” 36% (59) responded “yes, somewhat,” 15% (24) responded “not at all,” and 10% (17) responded “yes, very.”

Respondents were asked whether there was any reason that they would not recommend an oral history interview. Their answers (95) were consolidated and categorized into similar or like responses. Some individuals gave multiple responses, so their answers were marked in multiple categories. The most common response comprising 27% (16) of respondents said that oral histories are not available, they did not know how to find or cite them, they were not familiar with them or they are hard to find. The second most common theme from respondents was that 19% (18) stated that the format was not easily accessed, it was not physically accessible in the library, it was not online, not catalogued, or not transcribed. Depending on what the topic and time period of information being requested, along with what kind of evidence was appropriate accounted for 18% (17) of responses. Respondents who said that there was no reason accounted for 17% (16) and the resource did not come to mind accounted for 13% (12) of participants.

How do librarians find new reference sources?

From a closed-ended choice of responses, participants were asked where they look to find new types of reference sources. Websites were the number one answer, representing 88% (135) of responses, while colleagues were the second most common response, representing 84% (129) of the answers. Journals were third with 79% (121), conference presentations accounted for 73% (111) of answers, blogs for 55% (84), and books represented 51% (78) of responses.

Respondents were asked how often they look for new types of reference sources to better serve their patrons. "Less than once a month" was the number one answer, comprising 27% (43) of responses. "Two to three times a month" was the second most common response for 25% (39), and "once a month" was the third, representing 25% (39) of answers.

Respondents were asked to write in specific sources they used to learn about new reference sources, and 73 respondents did. Their answers were coded by hand, and grouped into similar categories for analysis. If a respondent gave multiple responses that were in the same category, for example, if they listed multiple journals, their answers were only marked once for that category. The majority 64% (47) of respondents said they look towards professional journals and magazines, and library-related newsletters. Professional organizations were cited by 30% (22) of respondents. Tied at 25% (18) each were listservs and other Internet sources, which represented a wide variety of websites. The fifth most popular source was blogs, listed by 22% (16) of the respondents.

Survey respondents were asked how they would suggest oral historians and/or libraries that have oral histories advertise these resources to them. Information sessions directed towards librarians, for example workshops, programs, conference presentations, and webinars were cited by the largest percentage 32% (30) of respondents. Doing anything to promote the collection was cited by 29% (27) as being helpful. Suggestions included holding public events, doing targeted promotions during archives month, create a listening booth, writing news articles, or getting them on the radio like StoryCorps. Tied for the third most popular answers at 27% (25) each were to have the interviews more discoverable by incorporating/cataloging them into web directories, digital libraries, databases, the Digital Public Library of American (DPLA), the library's integrated library system (ILS), WorldCat, LibGuides, consortia resources, or meta-catalogs. It was also suggested that oral historians/librarians should write articles highlighting oral history resources and collections

for library trade publications, journals, and related magazines. Social media was the fourth most common response given by 26% (24) of people.

Discussion

I began this project asking what librarians know about oral histories. It is a good sign for oral historians and institutions that have oral histories that 94% of respondents had at least some familiarity with them. Having such a large percentage of people at least familiar with the resource will make efforts to raise awareness of oral histories as an information source, and increase their use, easier.

The task at hand, then, is to move people from awareness to action. That action would ideally take the form of librarians actually recommending oral histories to patrons more often. Almost half of respondents reported that their institution had oral histories in their collection, and an even greater percentage said they had at some point used an oral history for their own research or personal enjoyment. The high number of individuals in the survey who have used them could correlate to the large number of people who identified themselves as being familiar with StoryCorps, but this is only speculation. Even though these statistics seem promising it should be noted that over half (54%) of people said that they had never recommended an oral history to a patron, so there is a wide margin for improvement in the promotion and use of oral histories. Understanding why such a large percentage of librarians are aware of them and have used them personally, but do not recommend them is a key area to explore and understand when trying to increase the use and promotion of oral histories.

This project reveals some of the existing barriers that prevent librarians from recommending oral histories. It is understandable if a librarian would not recommend an oral history if it was not appropriate for the topic and/or time period for which information is sought. Although there are thousands of years of oral tradition, the same cannot be said about oral histories, so this is one area in which oral historians and institutions should not focus their attention on.

However, there are other issues that can be resolved. Respondents (27%) said that they do not recommend oral histories because they do not know how or it is too hard to find them, or that there were not any available for a particular subject need. The key themes here are discoverability – in terms of finding records for oral histories on library materials databases – and accessibility – in terms of all patrons being able to use oral histories easily and conveniently.

Discoverability is key to increasing the use of any resource. Oral histories cannot be treated as “other” and put aside. They must be treated like all other materials in a library that need to be discoverable and accessible. Although they may be difficult to catalog, because there is no recognized standard for cataloging oral histories, it is imperative that oral histories be cataloged and discoverable in an LIS (Library Information System), finding aid, directory, etc. One key to fixing the cataloging issue is for there to be a recognized cataloging standard that is adopted and used both oral historians and libraries. Currently, there is a working group of individuals, both oral historians and librarians, in the Oral History Association who are working on trying to create a cataloging standard. Once the oral history field adopts a standard the field then needs to pursue libraries/catalogers to formally recognize and adopt the standard as well. It is important that oral historians understand how librarians classify and catalog materials so that together they can improve the overall discoverability of oral histories, and make them easier for librarians to find them and recommend them. Once oral

histories are more discoverable, it is then imperative that they are accessible either physically in a library or available electronically.

I also asked how librarians learn about new reference sources, and results showed that librarians look towards a variety of sources like websites, colleagues, journals, conference presentations, blogs, and books. Although it is helpful to see the types of places that librarians look for new sources, these categories are still very broad. Respondents named some specific trade journals, magazines, and newsletters, including *Choice* magazine, *School Library Journal*, *American Libraries* magazine, *Library Journal*, and *Publisher's Weekly* to name a few. Professional organizations were the second most popular place where librarians look to for new sources, and specifically at library organizations like the American Library Association, Public Library Association, Association of College & Research Libraries, Reference & User Services Association, College & Research Libraries, the Library of Congress, state library associations, and subject specific groups.

What is important for oral historians to note is that librarians are looking to their own professional organizations. Oral historians should be conscious of this and work to have their oral histories discussed and presented in library-oriented arenas as well, especially when their work coincides with documented library interests. Sharing by subject interest also applies to library listservs, which were the third most common resource that librarians look. If there are subject-specific listservs that coincide with an oral history collection you hold it is imperative that the content be shared in these arenas where there is already a built in audience. Besides listservs, blogs were also cited 22% of the time by participants. Common responses included the Young Adult & Library Services Association blog, the Outreach Librarian blog, and the INALJ blog. The only blog mentioned that specifically related to history was the American Historical Association blog, AHA Today.

Oral historians are going to have to delve into the library world to create more awareness and usage of their oral histories. Librarian survey participants were asked how they would suggest oral historians and/or librarians who have oral histories advertise these resources to them. The majority (32%) wanted various information sessions and programs directed at librarians, like workshops, conference presentations, or webinars. Oral historians should consider attending and presenting at library conferences, giving workshops and webinars geared towards librarians, and providing informational sessions.

Doing “anything” to promote oral history and oral history collections was cited as the second (29%) most popular way to reach out to librarians and patrons. Anything to draw attention to the collection is better than doing nothing. Specific examples given included holding public events that incorporate oral histories, create a listening booth in your library where people could see/hear oral history interviews, advertise the collection in anyway, but especially during archives month or other appropriate months based on the content. Additionally, create advertising materials such as posters that can be hung in the library or bookmarks that can direct people to oral history collections/special collections, write news articles that incorporate oral history interviews, and try to get more oral histories interviews on the radio, like StoryCorps does. Similar to radio, podcasts are also popular, and again, if there is already a popular podcast that relates to the content in your collection see about being a guest and/or sharing your content with the creator to help bring more awareness to your oral histories. Be as specific and targeted as you can be when trying to increase the use of your oral history collections.

Other suggestions to raise awareness of oral histories among librarians include having oral historians or librarians write feature articles that could be published in library journals and magazines. Respondents suggested articles could be placed in *Choice*, *American Libraries*, *Special Libraries Journal* or *Library Journal*. Additionally, survey respondents suggested cataloging oral histories and having them available in a library's LIS system, digital library, making the records available in OCLC, DPLA, or other consortia resources or meta-catalogs, or creating web directories or Lib Guides that also incorporate them.

Social media was another common suggestion as a way to increase the awareness of oral histories. Specifically as it relates to Twitter, it was suggested that as a field, oral historians and the institutions that house oral histories should collectively work together to use a dedicated hashtag, for example #oralhistory, with all of their tweets so. Facebook groups and blogs are additional avenues that can be used. Again, targeted outreach is key, so oral historians and institutions who have subject specific collections should reach out to relevant groups to share their holdings. This too can be applied to listservs, which were cited by 20% of respondents as a way to promote and oral history collections, especially subject specific listservs.

With so much information available to people today, it is easy for an entire resource share like oral histories to be lost in a sea of information. People may work in silos, but librarians and oral historians can build bridges between those silos to share information and resources. It is clear that librarians are aware of oral histories, so the focus of any efforts should be on moving people from awareness to action. Librarians love providing the best possible resources to meet the information needs of their patrons. The key to increase the awareness and ultimate use of oral histories is for oral historians and librarians to increase their discoverability, promote collections, and provide information sessions targeted directly to librarians. By increasing the knowledge of librarians of oral histories as a resource the likelier that they will be suggested more to patrons, and therefore potentially increase their overall use.

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