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From Personal Narratives to Collective Memory: Spinning a Web from Oral History

De las narrativas personales a la memoria colectiva: tejiendo una red desde la historia oral

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Abstract

Ethnic oral histories are part of the collective memory of diaspora communities, whose geographic dispersion is reflected in the dispersion of their material, but also of minority populations, whose voice has usually been silenced in memory institutions.

With rare exceptions, the creation, transcription, and curation of these oral histories are a sequence of nearly monastic acts in isolated universes. Only in the minds of scholars, researchers and lay users who ultimately use archival or museum collections do the rich network of associations that were linguistically encoded long ago using the spoken word again become connected. Surely we can do better.

In this paper, we begin to explore the potential for enriching transcribed oral histories with a rich network of links, both to other oral histories and to other primary and secondary source materials. Toward this end, we have developed the *Oral History Annotation Assistant*, an interactive online tool, to support a manual process of linking specific passages in a transcript to external resources. As the diversity of online primary and secondary source materials continue to expand, the value and scope of such a tool will continue to grow.

We view this manual linking merely as the starting point for our process of building a set of tools that will help users and practitioners alike to draw connections that ultimately add value to archival or museum collections, and we are looking towards creating points of contact between oral histories and the Linked Open Data that underlies the so-called “semantic Web.” Eventually, while each oral history provides one path for unveiling memory, this kind of contextualization could

create a web of such paths, providing diverse points of contact, both in and out, thus helping to conceptualize individual narratives as an indispensable tool for historical research in our networked world.

Resumen

Las historias étnicas orales son parte de la memoria colectiva de comunidades diaspóricas, cuya dispersión geográfica se refleja en la dispersión de su material, como así también de poblaciones minoritarias, cuya voz ha sido usualmente silenciada en las instituciones de memoria.

Con raras excepciones, la creación, transcripción y preservación de estas historias orales que ocurren como una secuencia de actos casi monásticos en universos aislados. Sólo en las mentes de los estudiosos, investigadores y usuarios no profesionales que en última instancia usan las colecciones de archivos o museos, se establece nuevamente la rica red de asociaciones lingüísticamente codificadas hace mucho tiempo usando la palabra hablada. Seguramente podemos hacerlo mejor.

En este trabajo, comenzamos a explorar el potencial para enriquecer las historias orales transcriptas con una rica red de vínculos, tanto con otras historias orales como con otros materiales de fuentes primarias y secundarias. Con este fin, hemos desarrollado Oral History Annotation Assistant, una herramienta interactiva en línea, que permite un proceso manual de vinculación de pasajes específicos en una transcripción a recursos externos.

Vemos esta vinculación manual meramente como un punto de partida para nuestro proceso de construir un conjunto de herramientas que ayudarán a usuarios y profesionales a establecer conexiones que añadan valor a las colecciones de archivos o museos, y estamos considerando la creación de puntos de contacto entre historias orales y los Datos Abiertos Vinculados (Linked Open Data) que subyacen la llamada "Red Semántica". Con el tiempo, mientras que cada historia oral ofrece una vía para develar la memoria, este tipo de contextualización podría crear una red de vías, aportando diversos puntos de contacto, tanto de entrada como de salida, y ayudando a conceptualizar las narrativas individuales como una herramienta indispensable para la investigación histórica en nuestro mundo interconectado.

1. Introduction

In a puzzle, it is not the meaning of individual pieces that we seek to understand—after all, if not for the readily provided image on the box, we would not know where we are situated within that picture before putting all the pieces together. What our eyes follow are the indentations and projections on the pieces, seemingly imperceptible at times, but nevertheless trailblazing. Trying to recreate the history of diasporic or minority populations, a history usually told through official narratives of the state apparatuses (Althusser, 1970) or of community elites, resembles the process of putting together a puzzle. The importance of involving users in this process does not lie in the content per se, but in mining the ‘wisdom of the crowd’ for digging

pathways that connect dispersed and fragmented pieces of memory.

This paper analyzes the Oral History Annotation Assistant, an interactive online tool developed to support a manual process of linking specific passages in oral history transcripts to a rich network of resources, both to other oral histories and to other primary and secondary source materials. Because annotation is a primal scholarly activity common across all disciplines, literature on the subject is vast. Thus this paper is limited to examining annotating as a historical activity in archival oral history collections. It examines annotating oral histories in conjunction with ethnic populations and Library, Archives, and Museum (LAM) collections, not particularly delving into digital preservation issues.

The theoretical discussion in this paper is used to envision future directions for further developing the tool with particular reference to diasporic and minority populations. This is done through a set of Holocaust survivors' oral histories.

2. Background: The Oral History Annotation Assistant

2.1. Description

One challenge for potential consumers of oral history is that some of the entities and events that are referred to in an interview may not be familiar to the reader or listener. With the *Oral History Annotation Assistant*, we explore the potential for manually adding hypertext links from specific passages in the written transcript to external resources.

The idea for this prototype tool arose through discussions between the second author of this paper and Richard Cándida Smith, Director of the Regional Oral History Office at the University of California, Berkeley.

The essence of the idea is that a broad range of materials already exist to which specific passages in oral history interviews might be linked. We might think of the annotations that we add as helping to support the user's process of making sense of what they read and hear. Or we might think of the role of those links being to support discovery of related materials by, for example, thinking of the narrative structure of an oral history interview as defining one path among the many that are possible through a broader information space. A third possibility might be to think of the annotation system as a form or personal bookmarking, supporting a process by which readers and listeners construct new understanding by associating existing materials. In an effort to start with some concrete task, the first of those purposes was chosen as a basis for developing an initial prototype.

Parts of two oral history interviews from different collections (a NASA astronaut and a Library Science professor) were then hand annotated using Microsoft Excel as a prototyping platform. The basic approach was to divide the interview into segments, and then for each segment to identify related resources. Emergent coding was used to group those resources into the following categories (with percent of total links shown for one interview session when at least 10%, N=91): Wikipedia (24%), Web Sites (14%), Newspapers (14%), Primary Source Materials (13%), Books (11%), Nonprint media (10%), Magazines, Maps, Interviews, and Scholarly Publications. Figure 1 shows a snippet from this

process. Emergent coding of the motivation for making the links indicated two general types of reasons: elaboration (79%) and contextualization (21%).

2.2. Functionalities

Although Excel proved to be useful as an initial prototyping environment, a more capable platform was needed if we were to study how real annotators would actually perform this task. Davis Zeng and Nathaniel Young, Computer Science students at RMIT University in Melbourne Australia, took on the task of building a Web-based annotation system as part of a practical experience requirement for their degree program. The resulting system, the Oral History Annotation Assistant, shown in Figure 2, has the following capabilities:

a. Highlighting text causes that text to be copied to the query box, where it can be edited before the search is initiated.
b. Searches are performed in multiple sources simultaneously (in the prototype, Wikipedia, Google Books, Flickr images, Google Maps, and YouTube videos).
c. Icons (+) in the tabbed result sets allow the user to select resources that will be linked to from the highlighted (“anchor”) text.
d. An indirection page is used to support links to multiple resources from the same anchor text.
e. Links to any other resource can also be added by using copy and paste for a URL (the “Insert Link” function).

f. Icons (-) in the list of links for each interview can be used to easily delete any link after it has been made.

The Annotation Assistant system is implemented using a Web services architecture on a virtualized server at the University of Maryland (Young, 2010). The system is presently configured to parse interviews in the formats used by the NASA Johnson Space Center Oral History Program, the Texas Tech Vietnam War oral histories, and the UCLA National Visionary Leadership Program oral histories.

In order to test the tool's feasibility in the case of oral histories of ethnic populations, a new collection has been introduced, consisting of a set of transcribed oral histories of holocaust survivors provided by the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, D.C. A common Sephardic ancestry was the common denominator for individual oral histories included in this collection (see below for more details).

2.3. User studies

Two initial observational user studies have been conducted from which we have already gained some insight into what system refinements will be needed before larger scale user studies could be performed: one with five university teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL), and one with five faculty and students of history and anthropology from the University of Maryland. As an example of the new requirements that we have identified, we now know that ESL teachers would use resource types that we had not previously identified (e.g., slang dictionaries), suggesting

that some provisions for integration of new resources by end users might ultimately prove beneficial. History faculty found the tool particularly useful in a classroom setting, not only for oral histories, but also as a tool to add contextual information for undergraduates learning to conduct historical research, although there are limitations to be considered. As an example, a faculty member working in the area of conflict management felt that due to the potentially sensitive nature of some oral histories, a controlled access option would be desirable so that instructors could add some links for their own reference without their students being able to access those links.

A larger user study will be conducted in two stages: Firstly through the collaborative website of the Sephardi Mizrahi Studies Caucus of the Association of Jewish Studies.[1] The caucus' membership consists of scholars, researchers and students interested in or working in the field of Sephardi/Mizrahi studies, which roughly encompasses Jewish communities in the Balkans, the Middle East and North Africa, and their diaspora in the world. The oral history transcriptions provided by the US Holocaust Memorial Museum belong to Jews originating from these countries. Transcriptions of these oral histories will be uploaded in the "Projects" section of the collaborative site of the group and members of the caucus will be invited to annotate them. Members of the caucus can use Annotation Assistant either as individuals, or in a classroom setting, by involving their students in related projects.

[1] http://sephardimizrahistudies.org

Secondly, in order to better understand the potential of the tool, focused semi-structured interviews will be conducted with scholars and practitioners in the field (oral history curators, historians, and archivists).

3. Literature Review

Technical literature regarding content annotation deals mainly with the positioning of annotations within the original document, the interoperability of systems or their persistence over time (Sanderson & Van de Sompel, 2010). From technical point of view, oral history literature is mostly interested in the processes of recording the interview, storing the resulting audio, video, or textual file, transcribing audio or visual files, and presentation or oral history materials in exhibits.

Today the Web offers researchers new opportunities for direct involvement with resources. Jane Hunter offers a good overview of Web-based, collaborative annotation and tagging systems and how they interact with information and knowledge. She also examines the multiple roles of annotations and how they enable users to create, attach, modify, describe, organize, share, or delete information to online resources as individuals, or as communities (Hunter, 2009).

Web-based scholarship however presents novel challenges for preserving annotations over time: the fluidity and transiency of Web resources precludes notions of stability, robustness, and persistency of value-adding components such as annotations over time. Projects such as the Open Annotation Collaboration (OAC) see as problematic the

prevalent Digital Libraries (DL) architecture that tightly connects collections, DL toolkits for managing those collections, and annotations on managed objects. They promote a rethinking of the architectural foundations of the Web by supporting full, seamless integration of digital objects in the Web, instead of existing in isolated silos, and the sharing and interoperability of annotations across collections, formats, and applications (Sanderson & Van de Sompel, 2010; Cole, Hunter, Sanderson & Van de Sompel, 2010).

Archival literature increasingly has argued for better contextualization of archival holdings (Light & Hry, 2002; Yakel, Shaw & Reynolds, 2007; Anderson & Allen, 2009), while at other times it bespeaks of the often awkward relationship between archival institutions and user-contributed material (Evans, 2007). Digital humanities literature promotes better and wider scholarly collaboration and participation in knowledge production (Borgman, 2009).

Involving users in collaborative ways is a focal point in the oral history literature recently, by focusing on the ways new technologies democratize the practice of oral history, and make it widely available. Paul Thompson (2000) asserts that through oral history “the reconstruction of history itself becomes a much more widely collaborative process, in which non-professionals must play a critical part” (p. 12).

And while we speak about oral history as a practice, thousands and thousands of tapes lay unused in archives, but few of us are concerned with how memories contained in oral histories can become public (Hamilton & Shopes, 2008, p. ix). Michael Frisch (2008) argues that the use of new

technologies to publish and access oral histories (such as video or audio indexing) transforms oral histories into "documentary sources," where authorship does not reflect a predetermined path making, but the richness of user interaction (p. 237). Positioning Oral History in the postmodernist discourse, Valerie Janesick (2010) promotes an interactive approach, with the use of multiple technologies along with the written word to complete the storytelling. She sees these under the light of "acknowledging and celebrating subjectivity in order to reach new understanding of someone's lived experience" and as a "democratic project" (p. 10).[2]

4. Discussion

4.1. Memorializing Holocaust survivors' oral histories

An oral history is necessarily a fictitious rendering of "true" history (true according to one's own truth), where nothing is 'false.' In an oft-cited passage, Alessandro Portelli assesses that "there are no 'false' oral sources…. 'Untrue' statements are still psychologically 'true'," while "these previous errors sometimes reveal more than factually accurate accounts" (as cited in Thompson, 2000, p. 161). It is also a locus where the individual sheds their inhibitions, and, in doing so, reveals his or her true self and identity, as Slavoj Zizek (2007) comments on cyberspace interpreting the Lacanian aphorism that "the truth has the structure of a fiction." Fiction

[2] Valerie Janesick includes a good list of websites and resources for digital storytelling, history, and oral history on the Web (2010: 136-146, 215-218). Most resources consist of institutions or web applications hosting and presenting oral histories, rather than tools for doing oral history.

becomes our own truth when we try to reconstruct the fictitious by augmenting the transcribed text with our memories. Such links create pathways to personal, intimate fictions and truths.

Using Annotation Assistant to augment Holocaust survivors' testimonies presents various challenges. One of such challenge is looking at the past from the present. Noah Shenker (2010) questions the possibility of resuscitating "experientially charged testimonies of the Holocaust", when there are no more living witnesses. With 65 plus years now dividing us from the end of World War II, there will be a painfully inadequate number of survivors who would be able to add their episodic memories to the transcriptions (i.e., their memories of actually being part of the events).

Holocaust memory has been elaborately memorialized through a series of events: the silent pact among Nazi concentration camp guards and their victims that "nobody would ever believe that such things really happened"; the death of 6 million Jewish victims among 40 million victims on a continent in ashes numbed by the magnitude of each country's and individual's plight; the unavailability of, and distrust of, oral histories as a historical method; the variant national approaches to the whole notion of Holocaust (different for countries such as Germany or Poland who had witnessed it first-hand, or for the USA where the concentration of large post-war Jewish communities have shaped public discourse on the subject) (Gutman, Brown & Sodaro, 2010).

Holocaust memory is further memorialized in elaborate representation and exhibiting practices in cultural heritage

institutions. Shenker (2010) showcases the structuration of oral histories through highly mediated processes of framing, questioning, and thematic structuring of oral histories into normative, “usable” parts of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum’s permanent exhibition.

Our duty is to go beyond memorializing Holocaust survivors’ experiences and involve people in contextualizing their memories by providing linkages among them and to other external resources. The Oral History Annotation Assistant can help people externalize what exists in their memory and, as Derrida argues, it is through this externalization that individual memories and knowledge become physical Archives that can be memorized, and reproduced (Derrida, 1995). This externalization process can produce new public knowledge that previously existed as independent fragments that were “logically created, but never retrieved, brought together, and interpreted” (Swanson, 1986).

4.2. Annotating oral histories of ethnic populations

Historical texts are like palimpsests, ripe with interwoven, underlying contexts, wrought by people’s interaction, annotations and comments. While the finiteness and physicality of the printed text was a constraint up to recent decades, technology today makes it possible to connect dispersed, disparate material. The challenge today is to make users aware of museum, library, or archival holdings, and provide them with the tools and platforms to make connections among these holdings, transcending institutional silos. Users who know the material, and know where to look

for links can bring its intertextuality (the rich network of associations) to light.

According to the theory of intertextuality, firstly coined by philosopher and literary critic Julia Kristeva in 1966, the meaning of a text is shaped by other texts, and the way the reader makes sense of it in the process of reading. Hypertext can be seen as a form of intertextuality, since by providing links to other material it provides each reader with a web of possible, individual readings of the same text.

This is important in the case of the history of diasporic or minority populations. Such histories consist of a vast array of interwoven information that resides in the collective memory of a community. Minority histories were usually either silenced or presented in embellished ways in museums and archives and were in their majority part of grand metanarratives. Geographic, political, linguistic dispersion also affects the telling of this history and results in the breaking of the collective memory into individual memories that most often than not populate isolated universes.

As a metaphor, the theory of intertextuality helps us understand how the Oral History Annotation Assistant brings together such isolated universes. We perceive the tool as a scaffold that provides new, intertwined ways of exploring the history of minority and diasporic populations. We see annotations not only as information “about,” but as parts of a main text (a life story). Interwoven in the text, annotations affect its “structuration” (Kristeva, 1980), and form a web of connections.

Interweaving the individual and the collective in the same platform, the Oral History Annotation Assistant can also be

seen as a bridge between memory studies and oral history. Memory studies usually favor “broader social and cultural processes at work in remembrance,” while oral historians “privilege the individual narrator” (Hamilton & Shopes, 2008, p. xi).

Although empowering users to engage with external primary and secondary sources, the Oral History Annotation Assistant is not really a fundamental change to professional archival or historical practices. Engaging with external sources is actually the process of engaging with remembering and with reconstructing memory, and of how we make sense of history. This is crucial if we think how volatile history really is, even as it occurs. Despite the exhaustive efforts of archivists and curators, “material culture will always identify more historical absences than it will supply historical meanings” (Alexander, 2006).

The Oral History Annotation Assistant does not insert additional content inline, instead it simply creates hyperlinks to content that is hosted elsewhere. The links are added to a new HTML representation of the transcript, which can then be saved and uploaded to a server. In that sense, these are not “Web annotations” that do not modify the original web resource (Wikipedia, 2012).[3]

We usually tend to judge annotations according to who authored them. Scholarly annotations are usually deemed more valuable than those of lay people. The value of annotations however is two-fold: 1) In the *longue durée* of the historical process, even seemingly “unimportant” annotations (even comments that might exasperate us

[3] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_annotation.

today, such as “cool!” or “awesome!”) can eventually become parts of larger sets of data that will be troves of information for future historians or linguists, and 2) The value of annotations depends on the user/reader and how users will make new connections that will help enrich historical understanding. Through this dialectic process, the limits of the annotator and the user become blurred.

But what are the ethical implications of creating pathways among silent and silenced pieces of memory? What and for whom are we designing for? Anne Galloway phrases her concern about the creation of “ubiquitous machines of merciless memory” and argues for designing for a “collective remembering and forgetting” (Galloway, 2006). If memories are actively “forgotten” by interviewees as a process of healing and of overcoming traumas, then do tools such as Annotation Assistant undermine this process?

Defending the right to forget alongside remembering is crucial in the case of minority populations, since oral histories have been used as testimonies to bear witness to war atrocities and human rights violations. Oral historians have also worked with indigenous and native people trying to rectify past injustices by reconstructing the past through a multitude of diverse accounts.[4] In the case of minority and ethnic populations, oral histories can be seen as a starting point for the retelling of history: they offer a story, frozen in

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[4] But how relevant is this process to indigenous people? Modern discourse questions practices that might not hold the same importance for indigenous people as they do for us, since “a thousand accounts of the ‘truth’ will not alter the ‘fact’ that they are still marginal and do not possess the power to transform history into justice” (Smith, 1999, as cited in Wallace, 2011).

time, one-sided, even fictitious, conscribed into the Archives. In order to construct his or her story, the interviewee brings together their own knowledge (or perception of it), subconsciously linking events, persons, and things. It is these linkages that are valuable as they add various points of view in the story. Shared authority and authorship become an alternative to the dilemma of either the “hegemony of scholarly authority” or “the power of populist self-empowerment,” and offer a dialogue from “very different vantages” (Frisch, 1990: xxi-xxii).

Providing users with the opportunity to contribute different vantages alters their role. If the ‘subject’ in oral history is necessarily triangulated between past experience and the present context of remembering (Frisch,1990, p.188), the Oral History Annotation Assistant brings another dimension into play: the reader/user of the oral history as a quasi-ruthless remembering “machine.”

4.3. Crowdsourcing Oral History

Recently, novel platforms, such as Web 2.0 technologies in the initial stages of this trend, have enabled users to coalesce around communities of shared values and interests. Amateur enthusiasts have been repurposing digitized holdings of LAMs by juxtaposing seemingly unrelated, ‘unworthy’, or kitsch objects (especially ephemera) in unexpected, non-traditional way. With these objects, at their own time, and at their own expense, they create online ‘museums’ that many (especially in the LAM community) condescendingly view as mere digital ‘cabinets des curiosités’ (Terras, 2010). By disrupting the conventional

interpretive continuum of mainstream institutions, ‘users’ have become ‘prosumers’ (producers and consumers at the same time) revolutionizing the employment of what Shirky (2008) has called ‘cognitive surplus’.

By focusing on the empowering aspect of their contributions, users today transcend time and place: they are more interested in promoting interconnectedness, than normative narratives, and value applications that emphasize this. In line with people’s expectations today, and even if retrospectively so, the Oral History Annotation Assistant empowers users with the possibility to augment an existing transcription into a participatory and collaborative storytelling project.

The Oral History Annotation Assistant can be understood then as a platform where people create ‘exhibits’ of individual lives. Its advantage is that it capitalizes on already freely available Web data and LAM holdings. The existing gap between institutions and amateur enthusiasts is partly due to the assumption that if institutions—already poor in both human, as well as financial resources—are to ingest user-contributed material, they will have to assume ownership of questionable material. The Oral History Annotation Assistant facilitates the inclusion of contextual information by users without burdening the institution, since it links to material that is already fixed somewhere. Thus instead of focusing on the material itself, Oral History Annotation Assistant helps promote interaction, cooperation, and mutually beneficial relationships between institutions and people. Although the result is the modern equivalent of a ‘cabinet’ where dispersed, seemingly disparate, ‘curiosities’ are put together, these are not randomly placed material, but

are brought together with a concise life story as a guiding conceptual framework.

4.4. Transcription as a process of archivization

By juxtaposing pieces of knowledge we make history “from the bottom-up.” As philosopher Paul Ricoeur suggests, traditional historical research is a paradox. He surmises that only oral testimonies are true, living memories which get muted and neutralized in order to be turned into documents for archivization. Historians then have to work with such muted voices and proceed to make them again speak; in fact according to him “history truly begins only with the confrontation with and between testimonies” (Ricoeur & Antohi, 2005, p. 12).

Indeed, the relationship between oral history, archives, and history has been an uneasy one. Oral history gained momentum in the 60s and 70s when inexpensive and easy-to-use tape recorders became widely available. Oral histories, though, did not easily gain acceptance in historical research or archival science, since they did not reflect current discipline practices.

Describing the evolution of the relationship between oral history and archives, Ellen Swain (2003) assesses that well into the1970s oral histories were seen as complementing existing archival and library collections, not as sources in their own right. Based on biases and current professional practices archivists and librarians mistrusted its validity in accurately reflecting memory (p. 139). This changed in the 1970s, following the Oral History Association’s “coming of

age” during the same years and stellar rise in popularity in the 1990s.

Initially historians conducted oral histories of “important” people, but the social history movement in the 1960s and 1970s, and postmodernism, validated the broader use of oral history. It was towards the late 1970s that oral histories started being seen as historical resources in their own right—as contributing to the writing of history “from bottom up”, and promoting a personal voice in historical analysis. This was significant especially since historians were trying to research people who had been excluded from mainstream archives up to then.

Today, archivists and librarians no more argue on the validity of oral history. Now it is digitization of vast amounts of audio and video and digital preservation that is of concern. The existence though of new technologies might change what we can or want to collect, or what we want to add upon. Thus oral history embodies a dichotomy: Do oral histories exist because we have the technology to capture the spoken (technological determinism) or are oral history tools developed in order to satisfy our Western notion that something is “worth to be remembered” if it is included and inscribed into the archives (social construction of technology)?

The practice of transcribing oral histories for inclusion in archival, museum, or library collections forcibly, maybe even unnaturally, captures something that is transient (human speech) and renders it into formats that can be appropriated, preserved, and accessed. If we are in a position to debate on the value of oral histories in historical research today it is

because these have become tangible documents (be it in their transcribed, or recorded (audio or video form)) in their own right.

Today we value individual, and unique accounts of past events and lives. Traditionally though oral tradition has naturally and conventionally used scaffolding made out of mnemonic tools, such as repetition, familiarity, recurring patterns, associative wording. But these are practices that we frown upon today. After all rarity, in fact uniqueness, is what is being prized in memory institutions, and that is what we, as their users, have come to expect as the norm.

The way oral histories are consigned into the archives affects their orality. Because they are recorded, a practice that surmises literacy through the act of inscribing into a medium (audio, video, text), oral histories shun tropes and traditions used in the oral tradition (for example in epics), such as repetition. Contemporary archival principles however frown upon repetition. Traditional finding aids are composed under the assumption that collections are described at the higher level and information is not to be repeated as we go down from level to level. Such approaches of course go against the way oral tradition has always worked. By deliberately not repeating representative and important words, they also go against information retrieval principles in a digital world where “everything is miscellaneous,” i.e., where nothing is any more in specific, well-defined places (Weinberger, 2007; Schaffner, 2009; Light, 2008).

5. Making the case for the Oral History Annotation Assistant

The Oral History Annotation Assistant offers a collaborative, wiki-like environment built on the transcript itself. In a way, it promotes the idea of the deterritorialized Internet: It is about the "thing," not about the place or the institution. The Oral History Annotation Assistant creates a public platform whereby oral histories become public not through the mere act of being put on the Web, but of being an integral part of the Web through the process of outwards and inwards linkages.

The Oral History Annotation Assistant can also be used as a simple, in-house front-end tool for the presentation of history in cultural heritage settings (exhibitions in museums, archives, and museums). Without the use of specialized interfaces, and without the need for advanced computer knowledge, the institution can allow its visitors to interact with the raw material, i.e. the transcripts.

The Oral History Annotation Assistant can be of particular use for people with limited computer expertise. Teaching people how to use it is quite simple. Since search results are automatically provided, people can choose which ones to add. Reliability and authenticity is of course another issue. If the institution applying the Oral History Annotation Assistant wants to control the reliability of primary and secondary sources added, it can limit the search of the tool to particular, trusted (or otherwise preferred) websites, for example websites of other cultural institutions, universities, government agencies, etc.).

Because of its simplicity of use, the Oral History Annotation Assistant can be used in adult education or literacy groups,

community centers, retired communities, or old age homes, where older adults can use it without overwhelmed by complicated technology.

The Oral History Annotation Assistant could thus be used both as an informational tool (a tool for collecting information), but also as a recreational tool (a tool to provide recreation to people). By involving high-school students from adjacent schools in oral history research, the tool can also promote intergenerational relationships and understanding. As Thompson mentions, “the relationship between history and the community should not be one-sided in either direction, but rather a series of exchanges, …between educationists and their localities, between classes and generations” (Thompson, 2000, p. 23).

Because the tool links to other already existing resources (either web resources or digitized archival holdings that exist in other institutions), it requires minimal additional server storage capacity.

The Oral History Annotation Assistant gives us the opportunity to interact with transcripts. Summaries or shortened versions of oral histories (e.g., time-coded notes) can be useful but they can never substitute for the full transcript, since “even the best shortened version of an oral history is like an intelligent historian’s notes from an archive rather than the original documents” (Thompson, 2000, p. 259). By selecting material out of a full transcript for a summary, we preclude what future historians will ask and what will be significant for them.

Today researchers promote access not only for transcribing, but also for indexing directly on audio and video of oral

histories, rather than to the transcript. The application of digital tools directly to audio and video recordings of oral histories aims to "put the 'oral' back into oral history" and to redefine the actual recordings as the primary source for oral history (Frisch, 2011). A pattern that came up during our second pilot study was that people preferred the transcripts for research, because of the ease of search. Frisch however questions the fact that most researchers do not listen to or watch oral histories, but rely on other scholars, and exhibition curators to serve them a 'well-cooked' presentation of oral history. He also argues that although the ease of search makes oral histories instantly "accessible," the truth is that we sacrifice the non-lexical access to non-transcribed (and transcribe-able) meaning (ibid.).

6. Future directions

Although we can think of the Oral History Annotation Assistant as a system that is available for use today, a more valuable use for it may be as a prompt for envisioning what might be created in the future. Among this future potential we can see several possible directions:

a) Search relevant databases that provide APIs (for example, WorldCat[5] where a single-search can give users integrated access to results that include items from OCLC's FirstSearch, NetLibrary, Electronic Collections Online journals, ArchiveGrid and CAMIO).
b) Provide users with the possibility to go beyond existing primary and secondary sources, and add their own material (in the form either of comments or

[5] http://www.oclc.org/fr/fr/enews/2009/11/en_singlesearch.htm.

of material that they possess, such as photos or documents).

c) Better differentiate among categories of annotations and furthermore possibly facilitate an incremental visibility of material (i.e., users should be able to choose how much of what they want to see, e.g. are they interested in the official version of a story, or reader's comments).
d) Taking into consideration the multilingual nature of diasporic and minority communities, see how non-English material can be integrated.
e) Visually enhance the presentation of material and their linking in a way that stresses the idea of intertextuality, that everything is interconnected, and that in time inevitably annotations become canonical parts of a text.
f) Embed the capabilities of the Oral History Annotation Assistant into a broader set of Web authoring tools.
g) We can also find inspiration for extending the Oral History Annotation Assistant among challenges associated with collaborative semantic annotation and tagging systems that Hunter (2009) describes (p. 62-64):
h) Introduction of tags: Possible introduction of community-generated metadata, such as tags. Would this promote users' engagement with this material and the searchability/findability of material? Would approaches such suggesting tags (based on pre-existing or related tags in folksonomies) be useful? This would bring along a host of issues, no doubt (such as post-processing of tags—tag aggregation,

cleaning, assimilation—and tag adaptation—reflecting changes in terminology).

i) Editing of annotations: Should Annotation Assistance function à la Wikipedia, allowing users to edit each other's annotations, or should it expose all contributed links and annotations, thus promoting a more intertextual visualization of the transcript?

j) Interoperability: Sharing tagging and annotation systems with other oral history communities (especially ones dealing with testimonies, human rights, and genocides) might enrich cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary research.

k) Introducing semantic tagging into the Oral History Annotation Assistant would overcome the limitation of only providing a relationship (linkage) from a word or phrase in the transcription to a Web resource, while adding types of relationship would facilitate and promote reasoning and facilitating across the Semantic Web (Hunter, 2009: 4-59). Introducing Linked Open Data to oral histories through Annotation Assistant will open up oral histories to the web, will further their contextual richness, and will promote their use in historical research.

7. Conclusion

In some sense, oral history is a part of a conversation with no clear beginning and no definite end. If we think of the Oral History Annotation Assistant as contributing to the evolution of that conversation, then concluding does not seem appropriate.

Interview Content	Wikipedia	Web Sites	Newspapers	Magazines	Maps
Yes. I was always interested in airplanes, and happened to **live in New Jersey on the shore**, probably twenty miles from **Lakehurst Naval Air Station in New Jersey**. This was, of course, in the early days of World War II, and there were lots and lots of airplanes flying around, dog-fighting in the sky all the time. There were blimps around. In fact, Lakehurst was, not just in my life, but in my father's life, he actually snuck onto the property at Lakehurst and **watched the Hindenburg come in the day that it burned up**. So it was interesting stuff. In any case, the sky was always filled with airplanes. As a result, I used to identify all--"That's a [F6F] Hellcat. That's a--" I can't even remember. "An [TBM] Avenger," blah, blah, blah, you know. And then there were a couple of other things.	Hindenburg Disaster	Navy Lakehurst Historical Society	Hindenburg Explodes Over Lakehurst (Prescott Evening Courier)	Oh, the Humanity! (Time)	Manasquan, NJ

Figure 1. A passage from the initial Excel mockup.

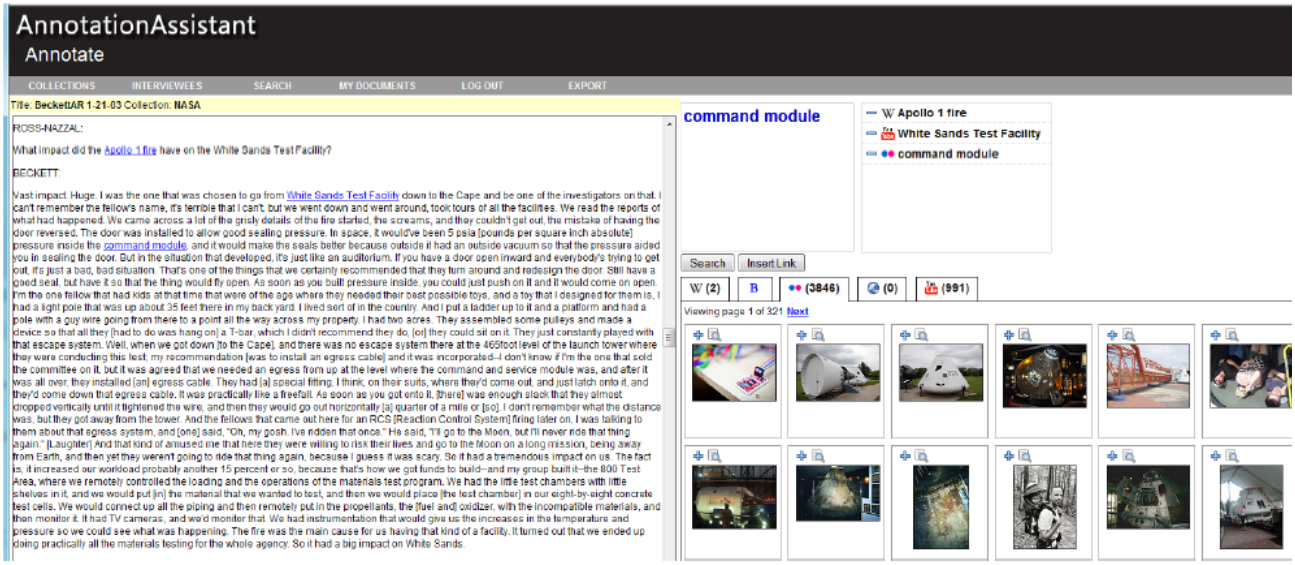

Figure 2. The Annotation Assistant user interface.

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