Chapter 2
Why Oral History?

Abstract This chapter begins with an overview of the histories of oral history and its use within different branches of academic and public history. Focussing next on the study of communities, it briefly explores the contested, fuzzy and fluid meaning of the term 'community' before examining the application of oral history to community histories, including academic and professional communities. It discusses some of the ethical challenges at stake in this type of historical research, including the multifaceted relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, and the choice of which 'significant' lives are privileged to tell the story of the community (and therefore which significant lives and perspectives might be missing). Before outlining some of the issues surfaced by using oral history to document foundational stories of DH as a discipline, this chapter looks briefly at the use of oral history in some other analogous professional and academic settings. In conclusion, the chapter reflects on the suitability of oral history in telling these community stories by asking who owns these histories and how that ownership is manifested.

Introduction

> *The novelist David Lodge has defined history as 'the verdict of those who weren't there on those who were'. In the best dynamic of an interview, interviewees reverse the equation, trying to explain to those of us who weren't there how things really were.* (Ritchie 2014, p. 56)
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> *And the very act of the oral histories, in their long, slow, unfolding and the different qualities (long interviews, minimal interruption) enacts a different pattern of communication and exchange.* (Colton and Ward 2005, p. 106)

There are many starting points to consider and questions the historian must ask when seeking to piece together the history of a community. The historian must make choices about what is his or her relationship to these histories, how these histories are to be written, what sources are to be used and to what purpose. These choices have a more profound impact on how the histories are produced than historians often like to acknowledge. This chapter will examine the nature of oral history and its suitability for recovering the histories of the use of computers and associated technologies in the Humanities, the emergence of DH as a recognised academic discipline and the development of Digital Humanists as an academic community.

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History is more than an account of the past 'as it happened' – the past is remembered, understood and interpreted by a number of different actors including participants, witnesses and historians. Oral history does not shy away from these differences and multiple interpretations; rather, it allows the various memories and understandings to be explored and examined in detail. This chapter (and book) argues that such an approach is appropriate and even essential to charting the often disputed and disputatious histories of the establishment of new disciplines and the development of academic and professional communities.

In demonstrating this worth, this chapter will begin with an overview of the histories of oral history and its use within different branches of academic and public history. Oral history has not been without its opponents. Criticisms of oral history approaches have included the identification of potential biases, the reliance on memory and its reliability/unreliability, and the validity of individual accounts of the past, real or socially constructed. Oral historians have responded to these criticisms both by seeking to demonstrate how oral history can be subjected to the same checks and balances as other forms of historical analysis but also, and more importantly, by arguing that some of the supposed weaknesses or 'peculiarities' of oral history are not limitations at all. Instead the differing personal narratives and varying memories offer unrivalled opportunities to explore and understand communities and their relationship to the past; something that would simply not be possible when relying on other more traditional text-based historical sources. As suggested by the quotations which introduce this chapter, oral history can be the basis for a different type of history, more dynamic, more direct and sometimes confrontational, dependent on the relationship between the interviewer, the interviewee and the past, but creating a space where in Portelli's words (1997, p. viii) history is made to listen and take account of (but not necessarily accept uncritically) the perspectives of those who were there.

Focussing next on the study of communities, this chapter will briefly explore the contested, fuzzy and fluid meaning of the term 'community' before examining the application of oral history to community histories, including academic and professional communities. The chapter will discuss some of the ethical challenges at stake in this type of historical research, including the multifaceted relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, and the choice of which 'significant' lives are privilege to tell the story of the community (and therefore which significant lives and perspectives might be missing). Before outlining some of the issues surfaced by using oral history to document foundational stories of DH as a discipline, this chapter will look briefly at the use of oral history in some other analogous professional and academic settings. As discussed in the previous chapter, although there has been 70 or more years of using the computer and associated technologies in Humanities research inside and outside the academy, the story of that interaction has not yet been written in a comprehensive and rigorous fashion. This chapter makes the case that in these circumstances, when the histories have yet to be written, when many of the protagonists are still alive, and when the subject of those histories is memory, motivation, innovation and origins, that oral history is the perfect tool for documenting those histories, enabling those who were there to 'speak to history' and to those

who were not there. Of course, history, meaning making and historical interpretation does not stop at this point. For Portelli (2013, p. 284) 'good oral history…does not end with the turning off of the recorder, with the archiving of the document, or with the writing of the book', for the interviews that is just the beginning of their lives as sources for future research. The interviews are merely one source, one version of many versions which over the years can be revisited, tested against other sources, interpreted and reinterpreted. The presentation of the interviews in this book (and on the corresponding website) reflects this approach. These first-hand accounts represent a first draft of history, vital and dynamic, drawing on the accounts of key participants, but not yet the definitive, final history.

In employing oral history techniques to examine the use of the computer in Humanities research and DH's transition from the margins towards the academic mainstream, we have sought to critically investigate shared as well as divergent foundational narratives; the significance of certain individuals as innovators, revolutionaries and boundary crossers and the personal difficulties, resistance and criticisms they faced; the discussions as to the nature of discipline; and the extent to which DH was and is as inclusive, transformatory and collaborative as is claimed and whether, for instance, it has really been able to transcend barriers around gender within the academy.

In conclusion the chapter will reflect on the suitability of oral history in telling these community stories by asking who owns these histories and how that ownership is manifested. It is impossible not to draw parallels between DH and oral history. The similarity lies not only in the relationship to technology and its transformatory role but also in a shared rhetoric which stresses notions of radical challenge to existing scholarly approaches, a commitment to participatory and collaborative practice, and an interdisciplinary approach which operates inside and outside the academy (Boyd and Larson 2014, p. 10–13). In the 1970s, Paul Thompson wrote in his seminal account *The Voice of the Past* of the potential of oral history to transform both the 'content and purpose of history' in that 'it can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place' (2000, p. 3). In considering this, oral historians ask themselves whether their interviews tell us about what happened in the past, or whether they make sense of the past and subsequent lives from the vantage point of the present, and to what extent historians and researchers wish or are able to leave these interpretations in the hands of protagonists.

A Brief History of Modern Oral History

The origins of modern oral history are often traced back to the programme initiated by the North American journalist and oral historian Allen Nevins at Columbia University in 1948. Nevins' conception of oral history was in essence an archival one, aiming to record for posterity and the use of others the thoughts and memories of leading politicians, judges and businessmen, 'living Americans who have led

significant lives' (Nevins quoted in Sharpless 2007, p. 11). According to Nevins (1996, p. 37) interviews should be forensic and challenging encounters carried out by 'an earnest, courageous interviewer who has mastered a background of facts and who has the nerve to press his scalpel tactfully and with some knowledge of psychology into delicate tissues and even bleeding wounds'. Although the power dynamics involved in such elite interviewing mean that is unlikely that all these interviews were as testing as Nevins advocated, the characterisation of the interview as a rigorous examination was a vital if not always attainable element of this type of oral history practice. Programmes established at other US universities and at the Presidential libraries followed a similar pattern of elite subject interviews for archives and use by future researchers.

This early emphasis on such 'elite' histories draws attention to a fault line which runs though many subsequent divergences in oral history over how 'significance' in the lives of interviewees was to be determined and where in society this 'significance' was to be located. Of course, not all oral history interviews focused on the elites. In the United States the practice of capturing the voices and life stories of the less famous and less powerful associated with the approaches of the Chicago School of Urban Sociology and the New Deal era Federal Writers' Project in the first half of the twentieth century influenced the development of a more populist form of oral history alongside the recording of the memories of the 'movers and shakers' in society (Grele 1996, p. 64–65). In the United Kingdom and elsewhere in Europe (Scandinavia in particular) oral history grew in the 1960s and 1970s from its roots in local history and folklorist studies into a practice predominantly adopted by politically engaged historians associated with new social histories, labour history, the women's movement and other civil rights movements, seeking to challenge existing dominant historical narratives and 'recover' hidden histories. Rather than elite or expert witness histories which were so prevalent in the US, the dominant approach to oral history in the UK (and reflected in the conference and journal of the Oral History Society) was one associated with histories from below, of the underpowered as opposed to the powerful, the periphery rather than the centre and of popular 'community' oral histories (Smith 2014). Ken Plummer (2001, p. 29) arguing for the return of human agency to social science research ('critical humanism') via the use of life stories and narrative approaches to research memorably likened oral history to 'a global, fragmented social movement hell bent on tracking, retrieving, recording and archiving the multiple worlds of our recent past' that might otherwise be lost.

Like many advocates for DH, oral historians have claimed that the practice of oral history could result in more democratic and transformational scholarship and histories. Reflecting the strength of this strand of oral history, Paul Thompson wrote in the preface to the first edition of *The Voice of the Past* (2000, p. vi) that 'the richest possibilities for oral history lie within the development of a more socially conscious and democratic history'. In contrast to the US, this appears to have been the dominant perspective in the UK and Europe. With the exception of academic studies of high politics, sponsored history projects instigated to celebrate institutional anniversaries and the National Life Story (NLS) projects at the British Library, much of

UK oral history practice followed Thompson's model and perhaps lacked some of the variety and heterogeneity of the US practice (Perks 2010a, b). The best of these sought to merge both approaches, interviewing individuals from all walks of life within a framework of rigorous and critical questioning.

Some projects have aimed to study professional and academic communities. Since 1987 NLS (http://www.bl.uk/projects/national-life-stories) has obtained external funding for the collecting of life histories of people working in various occupations such architects, writers, lawyers, as well as of those working at all levels in the steel, electricity, oil, water and food industries, in the City, and the post office in addition to specific firms such as Tesco and Barings (http://www.bl.uk/projects/national-life-stories). Although NLS has not yet completed a study of an academic community, the large and significant Oral History of British Science (2009–2013) captured the lives of those working in science at every level and in universities, in government research centres and in commercial environments (http://www.bl.uk/voices-of-science). Other UK collections at the British Library and elsewhere which document similar communities of practice to DH practitioners include oral histories of universities and specific departments (the Open University, Oxford University, Manchester University, the Science Studies Unit at Edinburgh, British Antarctic Survey and the British Rocketry Oral History Programme), academic and professional fields (computing pioneers), professional groups (general practitioners, geriatricians, nurses, police officers, meteorologists, archivists and museum curators), Royal Colleges and Societies (Arts, Chemistry), and campaigners (medical and political activists) in addition to the long-running oral history witness seminar programme directed by Michael Kandiah at the Institute of Contemporary British History. More such oral histories, including those sponsored by academic and professional associations or membership bodies, may exist or at least have been created in the near past but they have left very little trace (Perks 2010b, p. 219). One also wonders how many of them got much further and deeper than the celebratory and the anecdotal, and attempted the more rigorous examination advocated by Nevins.

As suggested earlier, we are consistently struck by the extent to which the experience of oral historians mirrors that of Digital Humanists. Fittingly, in the context of our study of the application of computer technologies to Humanities research, the development and growth of oral history itself is closely identified with changes and developments in technology. There is a pleasing irony that in seeking to better understand the dynamics of the application of computers to Humanities research and the growth of DH, we have chosen oral history, an approach that has been in the past, and is now again in the process of being fundamentally changed, perhaps even transformed by technology. Modern oral history developed as recording devices capable of making high quality audio recordings became easier to transport and to use (from portable reel to reel and tape cassette recorders to the mobile solid-state digital recording devices of today) and available at prices that were not prohibitive. The production of the cassette tape recorder was critical to the expansion of oral history practice in the 1960s and 1970s. The ease of achieving high quality digital

recordings has been equally significant in terms of the recording process and the possibilities for dissemination and use since 2000 (Perks 2011; Thomson 2006).

For some commentators, web based access to digital (and digitised) oral histories offers the opportunity to stress the essential orality of oral history, freeing it from the tyranny of the transcript, emphasising the potentialities of aural rather than textual access to oral histories, and replacing some of the mediation ('intervention, selection, shaping, arrangement, and even manipulation') required to produce the documentary representation of the audio with a post-documentary sensibility (Frisch 2006, p. 110). There is no doubt that in the past the transcript (as in this volume) has been essential in unlocking the potential for use of oral history materials but digital formats, software developments and web based access to oral history materials do offer the opportunity to fundamentally reduce or even reverse the reliance on the transcript (Boyd and Larson 2014, p. 7–10). Others have suggested, however, that perhaps the distinctions between the transcript and the voice can be over-stated and if the social benefits of opening up the great wealth of oral history materials to the users of web are to be realised then a better understanding of how different people and cultures engage on an emotional level with audio materials, particularly voices, is required so that people accessing digital oral histories can be encouraged to listen carefully and deeply (Cohen 2013).

Challenges to Oral History: Valuing Difference

As the interviews in this volume illustrate, Digital Humanists often thought of themselves as 'explorers' and 'revolutionaries' who were upsetting and transforming traditional Humanities scholarship. Oral historians in the 1970s and 1980s expressed similar claims that their approach would open up new areas of historical study and would transform (make 'more democratic') the practice of scholarship and knowledge production itself (Thompson 2000, p. 8–9). Of course, again like the advocates of technology in the Humanities, oral history and its pioneers in the 1970s and 1980s were subjected to criticisms and condescension, especially in traditional academic circles. Beyond the primarily politically motivated criticism aimed at the focus and progressive purpose of much oral history, concerns were most frequently expressed over the reliability of the material collected by oral history interviews for use in historical research and the standard of the scholarship that the use of such material resulted in. Some critics argued that oral history resulted in the collection of trivia and others that it threatened to cause the study of history to become little more than the study of myths (Abrams 2010, p. 5–6). If oral history aimed to recover 'the past as it was', questions were asked as to whether the testimonies based upon retrospective memories of events (as opposed to documentary records produced contemporaneously and then authenticated and analysed through a professionally recognised method of 'objective' historical scholarship) could be relied on to be accurate. It was asked whether oral histories were not fatally compromised by the biases and uncertainties introduced by the interview process; and in the case of

collective, community-focussed projects whether the selection of interviewees would introduce an unrepresentative or overly homogeneous data collection sample into the studies.

Some oral historians countered these arguments by seeking to demonstrate the validity of oral testimony by subjecting it to rigorous cross-checking with other sources, arguing for the general accuracy of memory and its suitability as a source for historical evidence, importing methodologies from sociology and other social sciences regarding the selection and sampling of interviewees to ensure 'representativeness', and seeking to reduce the suggestion of bias introduced by the interviewer by developing neutral questions and replicable interview schedules (Abrams 2010, p. 5; Shopes 2014, p. 258–259). In arguing for the recognition of the partial and constructed nature of all historical sources (including archival records) and the reliability of oral testimony when so tested, oral historians sought to make the case that oral history interviews could be just as trustworthy as any other traditionally valued source when subjected to proper rigorous scholarly analysis and cross-checking in writing histories of the 'past as it was' (Thompson 2000, p. 50 & 272–274).

However, from the late 1970s some oral historians, themselves critics of populist oral history approaches and the possibility of recovering the 'past as it really was', began to suggest something more radical in advancing an oral history practice which rather than seeking to account for unreliability and contingency began instead to identify subjectivity, orality and memory as critical elements of oral history as a historical source (Abrams 2010, p. 6). Michael Frisch (1979) cautioned against both the 'more history' approach (merely submitting oral testimony to historical analysis just like other sources) and the 'no history' approach of more populist approaches which saw authenticity and truth in every testimony rendering historical analysis and scholarship redundant. Luisa Passerini (1979, p. 84) influentially argued against the transformation of 'the writing of history into a form of populism – that is to replace certain of the central tenets of scholarship with facile democratisation, and an open mind to demagogy.' Both argued instead that the real critical value and strength of oral history was in its difference, not in seeking to describe the past 'as it really was' ('mere reconstruction') but in being able to open up completely different areas of historical research such as representations of culture, not just through 'literal narrations but also the dimensions of memory, ideology and subconscious desires'. Passerini's (1979, p. 104) interest in critical consciousness and how that is expressed, finds expression through the examination of oral testimony and its inconsistencies not as an unreliable source but rather a unique window on subjectivity and the inter-connection and interaction between socialised attitudes and representations, and personal self-reflection and consciousness.

In what Thomson (2006, p. 53) refers to as the second paradigm transformation in oral history ('post-positivist approaches to memory and subjectivity'), rather than being a source of unreliability and lack of credibility, over the last 30 years oral historians have identified in the dialogic nature and inter-subjectivities of the interview, in the inconsistencies of memory and in the performance of the interview not weaknesses but strengths. This is what Alessandro Portelli (1981, p. 99–100)

described as 'the peculiarities of oral history' revealing 'not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did'. In particular from this perspective the inconsistencies and failures of memory become less a problem and instead the key to understanding how individuals make sense of the past in the present, and how their personal experiences and memories are constructed via the intersection and interaction with society, culture and ideology. In the context of applying oral history to the history of an emergent academic community and discipline, what oral history allows for is not just the description of individual lives working within DH but also the extent to which individuals use shared narratives to make sense of the past and their journey to the present, when these individual and collective narratives depart from each other or from what is known from other sources, and when collective narratives and memories contradict individual understanding. Questions we have explored in the interviews included here such as influences and early developments, the significance of building community, and the experience of hostility from other Humanities scholars offer an insight into individual experiences and meaning-making but also in the intra-community and cross-generational exchanges between interviewee and interviewer a strong sense of how the community understands its own memories and narratives.

Another recent criticism of oral history, its utility as an archival resource for re-use, is a subject which is of interest to all Humanities (and other) scholars who wish to use digital archives of research data for their own research. Following the 'archival turn' in their disciplines, Sociologists and other social science researchers have debated the extent to which other researchers' archived data can be useful in subsequent, possibly unrelated, research projects (Geiger et al. 2010). Unlike much social science qualitative interviewing, for instance, oral history is often archival in its nature and intention. Interviews are initially undertaken for an immediate research purpose but the recording is also being created with the aim of archiving it and making it available to others in the future. The concerns of sociologists and other social scientists over the reliability of archived qualitative data (particularly qualitative interviews) in terms of the difficulty (perhaps impossibility) of fully knowing the context and the relationship/s which frame the interview, have been extended to the consideration of oral history. The re-use of archived oral histories can throw up challenges to researchers, especially regarding issues of informed and valid consent for such use and the interpretation that is placed on those recordings. However for many, including the authors of this book, the depth and richness of historical data that would otherwise be lost makes it inconceivable not to consider utilising the archive while emphasising the importance of fully documenting and making visible to future researchers the context of the interview (Geiger et al. 2010; Bornat 2005).

With such issues in mind, in the abstract that precedes each interview we have specified the immediate context of the interview in terms of when, where and how it was conducted. Some interviewees asked for and were given the 'core questions' in advance; some did not and so answered in a more extemporaneous fashion. It is mentioned in the preamble if interviewees were given the core questions in advance of the interview. Other important contextual aspects, such as the relationship that

developed between the interviewer and interviewee during the course of the interview require a level of analysis that is not feasible to provide here (as Grele wrote, such interactions 'require … analysis of the social and psychological kind' (cited in Yow 2006 p.56)). Yet, the reader will detect various differences between the interviews that arose, at least in part, through the interplay of the many contextual factors that converged upon each interview. These range from practical issues, such as the interviewer's ever developing expertise in and comfort with the technique of oral history interviewing to the quality of the rapport that did or did not develop between interviewee and interviewer. Notwithstanding the wealth of recollections contained in the transcripts, a few interviews did intermittently display more of conversational quality than was perhaps desirable. Equally, a few interviews seem to occasionally suffer the lack of it. Relevant to such dynamics is the fact that the interviews included here are intra-community interviews that were conducted between peers. We discuss both the advantages and disadvantages of such 'insider interviewing' further below. Here, suffice it to say that in the transcripts we have done our utmost to preserve such contextual markers not only with future researchers in mind but also because they are important signals of the time, space and dynamic contexts that each interview unfolded in.

Studying Communities

As has been discussed, since its post-1945 origins, modern oral history's suitability for exploring and capturing lives of significance has been recognized. In contrast, community oral history, the dominant form of popular oral history practice over the last 30–40 years, has tended to look for and locate significance outside the elite sections of society typical of more conventional oral history (Thomson 2008). Although some community histories tend to be uncritical towards their subjects, this is by no means inevitable. Communities, whether defined by place, identity, interest, heritage, occupation, practice or some combination thereof can be well suited to a rigorous and productive application of oral history practice. A community or collective focus allows the interviewer to explore how and why individual and collective memories interact and to uncover what tacit knowledge underpins the community and is understood but frequently unacknowledged by members. It also allows the interviewer to explore how individuals and their communities share identities and histories which bind and include as well as construct identities and memories which restrict entry and exclude. The term 'community' is a notoriously vague and slippery word. While it is generally understood to have 'warm', positive connotations, when it is associated with marginalized and under-powered groups within society it can function as a device for 'othering' and further marginalization, or for overlooking or dismissing important differences and power relationships within social groups or communities (Shopes 2006; Waterton and Smith 2010; Kogan 2000).

Of course there is no reason why oral history could and should not be used to examine elite and professional communities. Although in the UK, at least, rigorous

academic oral histories of elite communities as opposed to the more common celebratory, anniversary history projects, have been comparatively rare, in the US such studies have always represented a significant strand of oral history practice. Business organizations and scientific or academic communities have frequently sponsored oral history projects, sometimes out of vanity, but more significantly to raise profile around an event or anniversary or to capture valuable corporate or disciplinary knowledge that might otherwise be lost (Perks 2010a). In a 2003 review of oral history projects of American science, Ronald Doel outlined the breadth of projects which represented thousands of interviews documenting, in rich and multifaceted ways, the development of different scientific communities inside and outside the universities (Doel 2003, p. 350). The varied approaches taken by these oral history projects over the years reflected important developments in oral history thinking and practice. They moved from a more limited approach (asking very focused questions, of a few key individuals, about very specific occupational and disciplinary matters) to a more holistic process, more interested in the life stories of the interviewees and the social and cultural context to the development of scientific ideas and discovery.

Adopting a life history approach, or at least a broader framing for community oral history projects, means that even if there is an emphasis on a particular aspect of the interviewee's life, occupation or academic discipline, that aspect can then be placed and better understood within a more expansive context. According to Doel (2003, p. 357) taking this approach to interviews with scientists results in 'important insights about disciplines and intellectual communities, all the while focusing on individual storytellers, their social and professional contexts and their world views'. Hilary Young's (2011) account of an oral history project about the Open University demonstrates how a project conceived as part of the 40th anniversary celebrations was conducted in a fashion that undercut easy positive assumptions about the university's history and instead explored tensions around working practices, regional identities and race. Another recent project in this vein is the NLS initiative an Oral History of British Science (OHBS 2009–2013). Like the more contemporary projects described by Doel, OHBS seeks to place a diverse cross-section of those whose lives are involved with science into a broader social and cultural context. In capturing 'the lives of scientists in detail alongside accounts of their work', OHBS has been able to document step-by-step descriptions of scientific processes as well as uncover the heavy demands of the scientific working life in the context of family lives; it has explored the masculine cultures of British science and the experience of women working in scientific occupations; and has provided evidence of the impact of childhood and education on the development of an interest in science (NLS 2014; Merchant 2013).

Although competition between academics is well established in the public mind, it has also been noted that academic disciplines and knowledge groupings often make for strong communities (communities of practice rather than communities of interest) which cut across other institutional loyalties and affiliations and exhibit solidarities and shared values in addition to criticism and competition (Kogan 2000, p. 211–213). The necessity for these solidarities and sense of community is perhaps

even stronger amongst those working within an emergent discipline such as DH, which is challenged by and is challenging to the status quo, than it would be for better established and generally more self-confident disciplines. The interviews in the volume express this sense of solidarity very strongly, by generally affirming the significance of the community and the support it gave to individuals. Most, but not all, of the interviewees recall some antagonism or even hostility from other Humanities scholars in the early days of their careers and engagements with technology. They contrasted the collaborative and supportive ethos in the emerging Humanities Computing and latterly DH communities with the more competitive and sometimes confrontational atmosphere in other disciplines. Peer review and the conference forum is not only about being judged by colleagues, it can also be about peers supporting each other to develop and strengthen their community and the interviews seem to suggest that this was how it operated in the early years of DH.

Emergent communities can be inclusive but in their evolutionary or even revolutionary fervor they can also exclude others that express different, non-consensual views. It is important to recognize the differences expressed in these interviews and within the community broadly on the role of technology and whether DH could be considered a discipline or was more a reconfiguration aided by technology of existing disciplines. The choice of interviewees is crucial here. Rather than only interviewing those with more orthodox and conventional views within the community, care has been taken to also include the stories and thoughts of those who have different perspectives (Nyhan et al. 2015, p. 75–78). Oral history has frequently been celebrated for playing a significant role in exploring such communities, being "an experiment in releasing 'empirical knowledge'" by making visible and vividly giving voice to their inter-relationships, identifying the shared myths, foundation stories, creeds, values and sacred stories that underpin the identity of imagined communities' (Perks 2010a, p. 42–43; Colton and Ward 2005, p. 96). One of the strengths of community-based oral history in particular is the focus on the collective as well as the individual, which enables the oral historian to identify and explore the community's shared history, the tacit knowledge and understandings the group retains as well as noting the significance of individual agency and divergences. However, this is only possible if the recruitment of interviewees is broad and inclusive, reflecting critical as well as positive voices (Young 2011, p. 97–98) and the interviewer is skilled and prepared thoroughly in advance. A common criticism aimed at many community-focused or institutional anniversary projects is that they tend to approach their interviews as individual and unconnected. Whereas more thoughtful and ultimately successfully realised projects, such as the oral history of the Open University and the interviews on the history of DH, are able to analyse their interviews collectively by asking 'critical questions about broad themes of social life that cut across individuals' experience' (Shopes 2006, p. 263) in addition to capturing more personally specific memories and perspectives.

Another danger of community-focused interviews and projects is the extent to which the interviewer is an insider or an outsider and what that means for the intersubjectivities of the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. As an outsider, the interviewer may find it difficult to be welcomed into the community, or

to have the knowledge or expertise necessary to ask the right questions. However, the opposite can also be true, with narrators opening up to a trusted outsider in a way they would not do to someone from within their community (Portelli 2013, p. 278–279). An insider may have the credentials to get the interviews and to understand the situation enough to ask the right questions, but as insiders they may not acknowledge the shared tacit knowledge between them, they might avoid difficult and sensitive topics, or identify too closely with the community to present that community in anything other than the most favourable light. If there are significant cultural, socio-economic and power differences, it does not mean that the interview will not be a success but it will almost certainly impact on the dialogue in some way and that difference ought to be located and understood. An insider seeking to interview a person much senior within an organization or discipline may find it difficult to ask challenging, critical questions. The senior figure may find it equally hard not to self-censor themselves, give superficial answers or depart from their pre-prepared answers in such circumstances (Abrams 2010, p. 161–162; Young 2011, p. 104). The interviews in this volume are conducted by insiders, for the most part by the first author who is a reasonably well established member of the DH community. In one sense, therefore, these are intra-community interviews between peers but they also offer the impact of cross-generational interviewing between pioneers in the discipline and the generation that is now seeing the discipline of DH strengthen and mature.

Life history and broad contextual approaches to interviewing can be tremendously valuable in identifying special and significant events in an individual's life and placing their choices and experiences within a wider context. However, much of the interest in individual lives comes from the coherence (and dissonance) between related interviews and of the critical analysis of the life stories collectively as well as individually. Linda Shopes argues that the frequent mismatch between community history and professional history approaches leads to unsatisfying results for both sides and suggests that successful projects come from the critical engagement with the intersections of individual lives, the identification of the historical problem which defines the community and the exploration of these problems through careful and targeted questions of the individual narrators (2006, p. 268–269).

The interviews in this volume seek to follow this suggestion by asking of each of its interviewees a series of challenging questions which focus not just on their individual lives but also on cross-cutting aspects of their experiences in academia as part of the emergent discipline of DH. As outlined in the previous chapter, all the interviews take a qualitative, semi-structured approach, adhering to a common broad outline of their career and engagement with technology. The interviews seek to illuminate the journey of DH and Digital Humanists from the margins to 'respectability' by asking questions about early memories of interacting with technology, their technical and computer education, their first involvement in DH research, their influences, attitudes of other humanities scholars to their use of technology, and their first engagement with the DH community. Among the questions that this

approach allow us to explore are what is DH? What are the discipline's foundation stories and origin myths? Who were the innovators and early adopters in the discipline but also what were the social, intellectual and creative contexts they operated within? We also explore, to varying degrees, the extent to which the revolutionary rhetoric of transformation and innovation, of collaborative working and inclusivity is real and to what extent this rhetoric masks deeper tensions and critical voices; and finally what, if any, were the spaces for women in these different workplaces and evolving spaces. Among the many important understandings revealed by these interviews are the multiple paths into DH that were taken and, arguably, how this is manifested in the diverse and contested understandings of the discipline that abound, even in terms of whether it is possible to characterise it as a separate discipline or subject area. Given the importance of myths and imperfect memory in modern oral history, the dissonance between many of the interviewees' memories of being 'the underdog' and struggling for recognition, with their present position as influential professors secure in their posts suggests to us that some of these shared origin stories of persecution have played a useful role as useful myths in building and sustaining the community on its journey to respectability (see Chap. 17).

In a recent volume on the subject of what the authors feel should be a fruitful and on-going relationship between oral history and DH, Doug Boyd and Mary Larson described what they feel are the similarities between the disciplines:

> To those who have long had a foot in both worlds, however, the connections are clear and abundant. In fact, three of the tenets oral historians hold most dear – collaboration, a democratic impulse, and public scholarship – are also three of the leading concerns often cited by digital humanists. Add to this the interdisciplinary (or multidisciplinary) nature of both methodologies, together with the importance of contextualization/curation, and one finds that the two camps have more in common than they would have to separate them. (Boyd and Larson 2014, p. 10)

This volume uses oral history and the interviews of the pioneers of using computers in the Humanities from around the world to explore the reality of many of these claimed tenets and disciplinary approaches within DH.

A Conclusion. Oral History and Communities: To Whom Does This History Belong?

Much oral history practice has stressed the importance, the primacy even, of the individual voice and experience. For the most part it has rejected social science norms of anonymity in favour of naming the narrator and acknowledging the interviewees' ownership and authority over their words. Under the conditions of properly negotiated informed consent, oral historians argue that the interview is jointly authored by the interviewer who has devised and asked the questions and the interviewee whose narrative we are interested in recording. The individual stories belong

to their narrator and that ownership and the significance of the voice is (most often) best attested to by naming that voice, thus 'anonymity [is generally considered] antithetical to the goals of oral history' (Larson 2013, p. 38). But how is this advocacy of valid consent, shared authority and ownership squared with the oral historian's frequent practice of asking for the assignment of the interviewee's copyright over the recording and the reserving the right to quote, contextualise and interpret the words, motivations and expressions of their narrators and interviewees? Some argue that the oral historian should not only make their existence and agency transparent in the testimony (demonstrating that the words and records created are part of a dialogic exchange in which the interviewer and interviewee both have responsibility) but should also extend the process of informed consent beyond the interview and the transcript, sharing authority for those acts of selection, interpretation and publication traditionally claimed as the responsibility of the historian alone (Abrams 2010, p. 166–167). If we are to claim that these stories truly belong to their narrators as much as to their interlocutors then surely we need to think about whether asking for copyright to be assigned away is consummate with that claim, and whether the best way to present these stories is not through the selection of 'juicy quotations' and interpretation but as is done in the rest of this book, via the presentation of the interviews in their full form (Geiger et al. 2010, p. 14 & 22). Larson (2013, p. 41). Others (Dougherty and Simpson 2012) have drawn attention to these apparent contradictions and the 'distress' they can cause, suggesting exploring use of Creative Commons licences as a possible solution. The approved publication of the full transcripts in this book under an open access licence, edited into a literary style (as opposed to a more natural verbatim style) to meet the concerns of some of the interviewees, and the availability of the recordings under a creative commons licence presents these interviews and the hidden histories they relate as a jointly constructed, jointed authored project between the interviewees and the interviewers.

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