6-28-2008

Controversy, Code Names, and Cultural Memory: Building the Nevada Test Site Oral History Project Digital Collection

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I have felt strongly for years, ever since I got really involved with nuclear testing, particularly after I went to the Laboratory... that the things that we did out there... things that we did out on the test site, kept us out of a war."

— Brian Gough, WND board member and Nevada Test Site Group director at Nevada Test Site

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Abstract
This poster highlights the Nevada Test Site Oral History Project (NTSOHP), a digitization collaboration dedicated to documenting, preserving, and disseminating the stories of persons affiliated with and impacted by forty years of U.S. Cold War nuclear weapons testing.

The project is a partnership between the UNLV University Libraries, the director of the NTSOHP campus, and community partners to create an online searchable, digital oral history collection from the collected oral history research. Project participants include scientists, miners, military officers, contractors and corporate employees. Also present are the voices of native tribal leaders,peace activists and community downwind of the test site. Working with controversial material, deciphering military code names, and negotiating government acronyms were all unique challenges to the project.

This poster also presents practical digital projects solutions (such as managing cross-campus communication, quality control for complex metadata creation, troubleshooting online document display, and tracking project marketing), with a focus on issues in configuring oral history research for the online environment.

Digital Library Creation Process

• Document package: created from: Title Page, Copyright Statement, Table of Contents, edited transcript, Index, and Appendices of images/related documents to form display PDF.
• Metadata: created from “pieces” and using data dictionary for project.
• Controlled vocabulary included: LC Name Authority, LC Thesaurus for Graphic Materials, Getty Thesaurus of Geographic Names, U.S. Nuclear Tests List, and Local Subjects.
• Created vocabulary lists and Acronym and Cross References for quality control.
• Acquired additional files: audio, thumbnail images for display and uploaded completed files (PDF, thumbnail images, and linked to audio)
• Batch uploaded: items into CONTENTdm, reviewed and approved items in collection.
• Partnered on design and layout of web site and CONTENTdm interface.
• Tested and re-worked with feedback (multiple iterations), browser issues.
• Soft launch to library and then event launch. Publicity and outreach with Library External Relations.

Major Challenges
• Iterations: Oral histories present significant challenges in managing multiple versions of documents (PDF’s) Original interview (raw), transcription copy, edited by narrator, researcher’s annotation, edit for privacy or restricted info, edit for privacy or restricted info, edit for academic cloning, final web presentation copy.
• Technical Subject Matter: Large number of government acronyms, code names for locations and test sites, slang or vernacular, large number of agencies with name changes over the years. Highly technical scientific subject matter made for consensus. Distinct cultures may collide: historians, librarians, IT staff all have different approaches.
• Control and Collaboration: Partnerships require good project management: boundaries and roles, timelines and deadlines, avoid territorialism by working for consensus. Distinct cultures may collide: historians, librarians, IT staff all have different approaches.
• Diverse Communities and Sensitivity: Whose story is it? Intensely personal, representative but not comprehensive. Weak areas will exist; not a definitive history. (Controversial topic with many viewpoints; all legitimate!)

Solutions and Lessons Learned
• Collaboration: Establishing good working relationships was key to the success of the project. A remarkable number of people were involved in various stages. Define the core roles and identify problem areas early in process. Use project management techniques (communication tools (chat), timelines) to control workflow and keep on schedule.
• Online Document Display: Anticipate challenges and iterations in developing a display that makes “most” of the people happy “most” of the time. Aim high by looking at examples and getting ideas and then evaluate strengths at your institution.
• Search and Browse: Audience is global; tendency can be to narrow user experience. Model for future projects.

UNLV Library Key Staff
• Cory Lampert, Digitization Projects Librarian
• Danielle Brito, Digital Imaging Librarian
• Jordan Brown, Development Coordinator

University Libraries partnered with UNLV College of Liberal Arts (History and Sociology)
• Over 150 participants: 135 hours of interviews (digital audio, transcribed text, images and related documents and video)
• Research design approved by UNLV’s Institutional Review Board and followed Evaluation Guide-

lines of the Oral History Association
• Collection built in CONTENTdm digital collection management software
• Metadata created with controlled vocabulary and library standards
• Full text indexing enabled for searching; transcripts provided in PDF format for output
• Multimedia delivered via streaming audio with custom embedded player
• Custom web interface to display metadata, audio player and PDF side by side.
• Launch marketed through print publications, listserv, e-mail, and event to thank participants.

Project at a Glance

Future Research

• Oral History Digitization Landscape: Where are we and where do we want to go? Not a lot of “best practices” for oral history digitization projects. Software, resources lead to different solutions. Multiple formats (text, audio, video, images).
• Management of Resources: Resource-heavy project from start to finish. Libraries, transcription, library resources and staff. What is practical for transitioning legacy oral history collections? Model for future projects.
• User needs: Local history has impact and oral history is a powerful medium to present multiple viewpoints. Identify how users want to access and use oral history collections. Collect evaluation and assessment data.

For more information:
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Nevada Test Site Oral History Project
digital.library.unlv.edu/ntshp