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

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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 executives. Also presented are the voices of native tribal leaders, space access and communication downwind of the test site. Working with controversial material, declassifying 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 tackling project marketing), with a focus on issues in converting oral history research for the online environment.

Project at a Glance
- University Libraries partnered with UNLV College of Liberal Arts (History and Sociology)
- Over 170 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 Guidelines 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
- Launched through print publications, internet, e-mail, and event to three participants

Major Challenges
- Oral histories present significant challenges in managing multiple versions of documents (PDF) Original interview (raw), transcription copy, edit by narrator, researcher’s annotation, edit for privacy or restricted info, edit for digital audio, final web presentation copy
- Technical Support: 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 search difficult.
- 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 what works? Variety of standards in digital libraries and presentation methods. Survey trends, identify patterns.
- Management of Resources: Resources-heavy project from start to finish (interviews, transcription, library resources and staff). What is practical for transitioning legacy oral history works? Variety of standards in digital libraries and presentation methods. Survey trends, identify patterns.
- Management of Resources: Resources-heavy project from start to finish (interviews, transcription, library resources and staff). What is practical for transitioning legacy oral history collections? Model for future projects.
- Value to Community: Local history has impact and oral history is 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: Cory Lampert, Digitization Projects Librarian, UNLV Libraries, cory.lampert@unlv.edu Nevada Test Site Oral History Project http://digital.library.unlv.edu/ntsohp/