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Cooperation or conflict? Merging documentary filmmaking and oral history practices in The Eastside Project

Ted Fisher and Don Allan Mitchell

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Abstract

Rigorous formal oral history practices have great academic and cultural value but tend to produce recordings rather than stories. Conversely, 'creative documentary' practices have reinvigorated traditional nonfiction film production but are often arbitrary in viewpoint and emphasis. Can using an open archive reconcile and re-energise these two practices? In 2022, we began filming video interviews for a new digital oral history archive at Delta State University in Cleveland, Mississippi. In this paper, we address essential conflicts between traditional oral history methodology and documentary filmmaking and how these practices can complement each other.

Keywords

participatory, filmmaking, segregation, race, Black

Rigorous formal oral history practices have great academic and cultural value but tend to produce recordings rather than stories. Conversely, 'creative documentary' practices have reinvigorated traditional nonfiction film production but are often arbitrary in viewpoint and emphasis. Can using an open archive reconcile and re-energise these two practices? In 2022, we began filming video interviews for a new digital oral history archive at Delta State University, a public university located in Cleveland, Mississippi.[1] The planned community-driven archive has a defined goal of documenting and preserving the legacy of Cleveland's historically-Black East Side High School, while also telling the story of Cleveland in the era of Jim Crow segregation and beyond.

East Side, which opened in 1957 and remained open until 2017, was an important focal point for Cleveland's Black community, exemplifying the pattern of Black schools being places of

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pride and centres of excellence in the American South of the 20th century. As Kristan McCullum so aptly writes,

The narrative of our national landscape contains the ghosts of slavery and Jim Crow that linger and haunt places and people who would rather forget. But within this narrative exists a will to remember through spaces that hold the memories of those who once moved and breathed and lived within them – Black Americans who found community in structures designed by – and in response to – segregation.[2]

Thus, the story of East Side tells the story of not only a small town in Mississippi, but also provides necessary context to America's ongoing reckoning with race, identity, and ethnicity.

The Eastside digital archive will eventually be available as an open educational resource. In the first phase of the project, we conducted 16 interviews, resulting in 30 hours of video. We followed protocols designed for gathering oral histories, and we became aware of where these processes conflicted with the aims of documentary film production.

In this paper, we address essential conflicts between traditional oral history methodology and documentary filmmaking, considering how these practices complemented each other, yet occasionally created obstacles to individual participation in the creation of the archive. We also reflect on two key lessons learned: that the theory and practice of oral history have evolved beyond the concepts we understood when we started the project, and that documentary and oral history methodologies have valuable approaches to offer each other.

Additionally, we will further define what it means to be a community-driven project, and what ethical standards and best practices must be in place to gain a community's trust. As the film and oral history archive are based at a small regional rural-serving public university, we will also discuss the practicalities of producing and preserving such a project with limited resources.

Willie Morris once said: 'To understand the world, you must first understand a place like Mississippi.' First we traveled a winding path through decades of filmmaking and oral history practice, a journey that took us to 1960s Newfoundland and First Nations Lands in Canada, two floors above the Bleecker Street Cinema in New York City's Greenwich Village, San Francisco, Eastern Tennessee in the 1970s and 1980s, and the University of Virginia in the present day.

Definitions for documentary and oral history methodologies

We began this paper with two claims: that established oral history practices sometimes produce recordings rather than stories, and that documentary filmmakers in storytelling mode inherently reflect a viewpoint even when aiming to produce ‘neutral’ nonfiction material. These assumptions are apparent to anyone who has read oral history transcripts or watched a contemporary documentary, but there is value in clarifying these expectations. One can imagine projects that reverse these results: an interviewer could structure questions in a way that tells a story without requiring an edit or a filmmaker could implement an editing strategy outside of traditional story structure. What, then, are the most accepted definitions for oral history and documentary practices?

Changes in technology have driven how these practices have developed and evolved. What we think of today as oral history’s main methodology depends on recording technologies, mainly audio in the past and increasingly video today. In *Doing Oral History*, Donald A. Ritchie presents a clear definition:

Oral History collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews. An oral history interview generally consists of a well-prepared interviewer questioning an interviewee and recording their exchange in audio or video format. Recordings of the interview are transcribed, summarized, or indexed and then placed in a library or archives.[3]

Ritchie’s emphasis on preparation and follow-up mark oral history practice as distinct from any simple gathering of family stories. An enthusiastic granddaughter with an iPhone could record her grandmother’s personal memories, but it is unlikely the recordings will be useful beyond family enjoyment. Without a systematic approach, it is doubtful any significance of the memories will be clear or that the material can be compared with other recordings in an archive.

A similar perspective on oral history methodology is found in Alissa Rae Funderburk’s *Oral History Handbook*, used at Jackson State University’s Margaret Walker Center.[4] The handbook reveals an expectation that audio of the interviewer’s questions will also be recorded, and that recording the interviewer is as important as recording the subject. This technological characteristic has been essential to traditional oral history practices, based on the idea that ‘the interview’ is an interaction and that the material could be presented without extensive editing. We have learned in our research and experience since beginning our project that contemporary oral history practices are less rigid in approach and format, and that today’s oral historians are more open to editing. Still, a documentary director interjecting questions that disrupt the pacing of an oral history recording – whether that session is viewed as a formal recording or a negotiation and exploration shared between subject and interviewer – is at odds with the expected workflow.

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Certainly, dismissing the importance of the role of interviewer (and therefore the interviewer's audio) would conflict with conventional oral history practice. Yet some documentarians discourage recording an interviewer at all, expecting that the subject's statements will be edited to stand alone. Subjects are often instructed to answer in complete sentences and told the interviewer's questions will not be heard. One reason for this is that the Question/Answer structure oral historians use can seem slow in pace when presented unedited, and unimportant comments are treated with the same weight as the most significant statements. The strictest traditional oral history approach also resists re-ordering a subject's account, a practice common in documentary production.

Recording an 'interview' is seen by oral historians working in traditional modes as creating a single audio file with the voices of subject and interviewer mixed together, but for professional documentarians there is an inclination to create isolated tracks of each voice. This practice provides editors with more options but requires a more complicated technical approach and equipment.

Oral historians generally desire subject and interviewer to be recorded at the same volume and with equal audio quality. The growth of podcasting has made this seem essential. Few practitioners, however, extend this into creating a session with multiple cameras because of the higher cost and the complexities of synchronising cameras.

Oral history's progression from notetaking to tape-based sound devices to digital audio recorders to smartphones seems at first an improvement in the democratisation of the field. Yet other changes are notable. One consequence is that the training and checkout process previously required for equipment use allowed some communication to non-experts about the aims and practices of professional researchers using oral history methodologies. Funderburk, for example, emphasises performance, something that is unlikely to be on the radar of a smartphone-equipped amateur:

The performance of oral history, the act of a narrator choosing their words, and speaking from a place of care and intent to an audience, is what we as oral historians can build from. We are actors in this play as well... Every choice that goes into the creation of an oral history, and especially the creation of a public-facing product from an oral history, is an act of performing meant to elicit a particular kind of response. Just like with any work of art, our work is meant to prompt, to enlighten, to bring awareness, or stimulate emotion. And, as such, we must be fully cognizant of our intent, each time we perform it.[5]

The most 'old-school' version of oral history, then, is defined by this prepared, structured encounter, characterised by the significant presence and control of the interviewer. The interview recording, even if it will be refined or shortened, is the end product. It might be added to an archive, but it is 'complete' once recorded and, often, transcribed. The evolving practice of oral history, of course, has moved on from this. For example, Anna Sheftel and

Stacey Zembrzycki advocate for the 'slow practice' of oral history, likening it to a cooking class: '...[I]n our view, there is no truly raw oral history, only degrees of cooked, or perhaps different methods and speeds of cooking.'[6] They point out that 'cooking' can include various steps in the oral history gathering process, from the questions chosen to 'when narrators choose what they will and will not tell us', and from the transcription process to the digital indexing of oral histories in databases. It is important to note Sheftel and Zembrzycki push back against the speed increases technology allows:

Technology seeks to move constantly onward and forget, while oral history wants to remember. And yet, as oral historians we have increasingly come to need and value technology.[7]

Technologies and methodologies

Our hope was to merge best practices from the documentary world and oral history traditions into the most effective balance for our project and archive. Documentary film production has, like oral history, been shaped by technological change. Some of this history, however, is convoluted and unexpected. In "A Handshake or a Kiss": The Legacy of George Stoney (1916-2012)', Brian Winston notes the importance of the relatively lightweight, mobile, and sound-synced 16mm motion picture cameras that facilitated the achievements of John Grierson's National Film Board in Canada:

While none have doubted the importance of the NFB, I still believe it has yet to receive proper recognition outside of Canada as one of documentary's crucial institutions... Its role in the development of 16mm sound technology and how to use it was decisive.[8]

The technologies that enabled this early-1960s period of documentary production emerged in a counter-intuitive manner. While 16mm film is a step backward in visual quality from 35mm film, the portability of these smaller, lighter cameras unlocked a new world for documentarians. Suddenly shoulder-mounted cameras could follow subjects anywhere – with synchronised sound. This allowed new documentary approaches to thrive. For our discussion of the relationship of oral history to documentary, this has many implications. Observational filmmaking methods (whether called Direct Cinema or Cinéma Vérité) were enabled, with a camera person and sound person following a participant or simply waiting in a corner of the room.

Regarding a division between traditional and observational approaches, Winston explains that Stoney's '... traditional approach to documentary became suspect and despised between the 1960s and 1980s – the decades of Direct Cinema's dominance, with its austere observational, supposedly non-intervention dogme'. Over time, Stoney shifted his approach to a more participatory practice. Stoney '... found himself at the center of a vibrant debate

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about the nature of documentary' when Colin Low's short films about Fogo Island initiated the design of a process for participatory documentary work. Winston explains:

Established NFB documentarist Colin Low had gone to Newfoundland in 1967 to direct a Griersonian social-victim film but instead found himself renegotiating the relationship between filmmaker and subject. Lending his talents to a fishing community on the offshore Fogo Island, Low made a filmed case on the islanders' behalf and at their direction designed specifically to stop an otherwise unresponsive provincial government from forcibly evicting them and depopulating the island.[9]

Winston attributes the impulse toward participatory production to technological change. If filmmakers can bring cameras into the subject's space and into events as they happen, then documenting a subject's experience is not simply remembering or preserving. The framing of the film can have a significant impact in the subject's world. Should the film's subject have more control? According to Winston, a split on this issue was present in divergent practices:

For the documentarist, the need for the rebalancing of power between filmmaker and subject was becoming ever more pressing because of the increased flexibility of the equipment. The Direct Cinema movement luxuriated in intrusion, but the fact that this might deepen ethical concerns was by no means obvious to filmmakers. Frederick Wiseman expressed the standard view at the time: 'I couldn't make a film which gave someone else the right to control the final print.' [10]

Though Wiseman had no interest in giving up control, a position broadly held among many documentary practitioners to the present day, Stoney and Low began to work out best practices for how that handover of control could be achieved. Winston explains:

Low, in elaborating what came to be called the 'Fogo Process,' was arguing, in effect, exactly the opposite, as Stoney would soon do as well: that the traditional documentary 'subjects' ought to be trained to make their own films by the professionals, not merely perform in front of their cameras...

Low's 'Fogo Process' can be used by filmmakers who may not know its history or Low's specific approach. Winston notes that for Stoney it was only one step toward where he thought the field must go:

In Canada, Stoney would follow his instincts to realize that the surrender of direct directorial control to his subjects was the only logical endpoint. As he was to tell Alan Rosenthal, he reached the conclusion that he had spent much of his life 'making films about doctors or teachers or preachers that these people should have made themselves.' [11]

The question of subjects directing their own films, however, was still significantly complicated by technological concerns. Winston describes the notable technical achievement of Stoney's NFB film *You Are on Indian Land* (Mort Ransen, NFB, Canada, 1969):

...[A] First Nations film crew had been trained as professional filmmakers, and *You Are on Indian Land* became the first Fogo Process documentary to result. Again, it was made in the dominant observational Direct Cinema mode to chronicle a protest that closed the road joining the United States and Canada via a bridge across the St. Lawrence, which traversed First Peoples' land. But the film was no mere news story...[I]t had a targeted audience: First Nations peoples never before had been addressed by a film made by their own. Both the Fogo films...were conventional in that they were made by film professionals. *You Are on Indian Land* was also made by professionals, but these were First Nations people especially trained for the job.[12]

While *You Are on Indian Land* proved the subjects of a film could create the film rather than 'perform' for a director outside their group, it was not followed by films with equal technical ambition. Training filmmakers to work at a professional level was possible, but the process was expensive, slow, and not applicable to all topics. Frederick Wiseman's films from this period were set in a high school, a hospital, a welfare office, and a juvenile court. It is hard to imagine training a crew of participants to film and edit these projects, or that they would necessarily want to.

Advancements in video production technology, however, offered hope for community-based efforts. With the 1965 introduction of the Sony Portapak, videotape offered a recording medium that was raw, inexact, and more demanding than hobbyist equipment but less capable than professional tools. Yet it proved good enough, for those inspired, to make significant work at a manageable cost. Winston notes that:

The Portapak was the key. People could be trained to use a 16mm ArriflexBL or an Éclair – that had been proved at the NFB – but the technology was forbidding and prohibitively expensive. Portapaks were neither: they were accessible and comparatively cheap; and their efficacy in the hands of 'amateurs' for the purposes of social communication had also been proved at the board.[13]

Deirdre Boyle writes, in *Subject to Change: Guerrilla Television Revisited*, that it was George Stoney who promoted efforts to build new and more influential models of production that allowed – and emphasised – participation. Boyle writes:

A U.S. mecca for early community video was established in 1971 when George Stoney...joined with Red Burns in founding the Alternative Media Center at New York University. The Center became a training ground for community video activists and an important lobby for public access to cable TV.[14]

As this developed, however, another split became evident. Boyle finds that 'guerrilla television' and 'grassroots video' proved to be:

...different species of video activity... Guerrilla television producers professed an interest in community video, but they were generally far more interested in developing the video medium and getting tapes aired than in serving a localized constituency. Grassroots video, by stressing the participation of community members in making their own electronic information, was less concerned with polished 'products' than with animating the 'process' of social change.[15]

Guerrilla television moved quickly toward the use of traditional television techniques and style. Grassroots production, however, emphasised subject participation. Boyle reveals this contrast, telling us first about the efforts of the San Francisco organisation TVTV:

The group knew they did not want voice-overs and cutaways. They edited what worked without stopping to think why, borrowing more from twenty years of watching television (especially commercials) than from any knowledge of film or documentaries.[16]

In contrast, Ted Carpenter applied open interview techniques for subjects in Eastern Tennessee:

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Carpenter always began by playing a tape. People would see someone just like themselves talking about familiar issues, things that they had been struggling with alone. ... Meanwhile, Carpenter would have set up his equipment unobtrusively, and when the tape had ended, he would switch into the record mode and simply say, 'Now, why don't you talk about this too.' [17]

Carpenter made the most of the immediacy of video:

Instead of looking through the camera eyepiece while recording someone, he held the camera in his lap, occasionally glancing at the TV to check on the picture. As a result, people felt they were talking to a person, not a camera, and felt at ease instead of intimidated by a detached cameraperson. Carpenter was convinced that the camera operator had to be a participant, not just an observer. Another cardinal rule was playing back the interviews immediately, which gave people an opportunity for self-criticism and self evaluation. 'When people can see themselves ... they get a greater sense of their own and other people's involvement,' he later told a reporter. [18]

The split between guerrilla and grassroots television grew. Guerrilla groups had access to editing gear and explored the possibilities. Grassroots recordings, however, were generally treated by practitioners as oral history interviews were. 'At first there was no editing of the tapes, partly because editing was anathema', Boyle explains. 'The other reason was more practical: there was little or no editing equipment available in the early days of portable video.' [19]

Is it fair to consider grassroots video as a form of oral history practice? The distinction between the editing demonstrated in traditional film documentary practice and the raw tapes made by Ted Carpenter would indicate this – so does the level of control the subjects had in choosing what to discuss on camera. As important as Stoney's role in participatory documentary was, complex approaches to negotiated subject participation had already been explored in films like *Chronique d'un été* (Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch, 1961). Various approaches have been explored since. Of course, while technological advances allow filmmakers to put digital cameras directly into the hands of documentary subjects – consider 2005 Academy Award winner *Born Into Brothels: Calcutta's Red Light Kids* (Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman) – editorial control often remains with the filmmakers.

Back to Mississippi: The nature of open archives

From Fogo Island and other locales, we now return where we started this article: Cleveland, Mississippi, with a brief foray to the grounds of the University of Virginia. A consistent theme in debates over Mississippi's history is the idea of 'owning' the narrative. At the root of this ownership argument is the deep historical distrust between white and Black Mississippians, based on decades of institutional white supremacy. As a local example, recent debates in the Mississippi Delta have focused on the exploitation of Black blues musicians and their legacies by the recording industry in the mid-to-late twentieth century. [20] This profound distrust as well as efforts to undo years of damage informed our decision to frame the Eastside Project archive as an open digital archive with full access granted to the Eastside community

for all who seek it. Both authors of this paper are white, male college professors who acknowledge that our lived experiences, albeit as residents of the same town, have certainly been different than those of our narrators. Additionally, one author was raised in Mississippi, and the other in California, giving us different perspectives on race and American identity.

In our conversations with local Eastside community leaders, our emphasis of the open nature of the archive helped break down some of the community suspicion of our project, which was further complicated by the housing of the archive at a historically white institution of higher learning. However, once interview subjects understood that the internet allowed access to the archive from around the world, and that Delta State was making no claim to the Eastside's history, our project was able to attract some community support. While we wanted to preserve memories of the school as a community resource, we also endeavoured to contextualise the narrators' stories within the larger history of the civil rights movement and the problematic history of school segregation in Mississippi.

Once the website is launched, Creative Commons licensing will allow for use of the filmed oral histories for similar projects and for access to the interviews by anyone in the Eastside community with an internet connection. We agree with Sheftel and Zembrzycki that the internet is not 'a panacea for all our accessibility woes'.^[21] However, in rural Mississippi, access to libraries can be quite limited, and being able to view an archive online is a step towards equal access. The near-universal presence of smartphones makes online archives more accessible than any place-bound library or archive. Because the Eastside Project will exist as an open archive under a Creative Commons license, it will also create opportunities for innovative interpretations of oral history. Students will have access to the archives for use in their own film and sound production projects, such as those modelled in the creative collaboration between oral historians and documentarians Alessandro Portelli and Charles Hardy III.^[22] Specific policies on materials access are still in development, but it is expected the recordings will primarily be available to students, researchers, and community members.

Genesis and planning of 'The Eastside Project'

In spring 2019, one of the authors was approached regarding a film that East Side High School alumnus and former NBA player Johnny O'Bryant wanted to produce about his hometown of Cleveland, Mississippi and the consolidation of East Side and Cleveland High Schools.^[23] Because O'Bryant's school was closing, he desired to preserve a record of the traditions and pageantry of East Side, as well as to tell the story of the consolidation, all in the compressed format of a one-hour documentary film.^[24] After long conversations and some convincing, the author agreed to be interviewed for the film.

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The author provided historical information about the Delta, a 19-county region in Northwest Mississippi whose rich alluvial floodplain has shaped Mississippi's history and culture, and by extension America's history and culture. He also provided information about the local community and Jim Crow segregation, which was why East Side High School existed in the first place: as a school for African-Americans who were unable to attend Cleveland High School, the public high school for white students, until the full integration of schools in Mississippi in 1970. Unlike most Southern communities that desegregated by merging Black and white schools, East Side remained open, even though promises of equitable funding from the local school district never came to fruition.

East Side High School was a community rallying point for the Eastside community – a series of Black neighbourhoods in Cleveland, Mississippi.[25] Its alumni are well-organised and passionate about their former school, so when the two public schools were finally merged at the order of a federal district judge in 2017, there was much controversy and debate that continues to have ramifications in Cleveland today.[26]

In the autumn of 2021, the author asked permission to screen O'Bryant's film in Cleveland, and through the support of the Mississippi Humanities Council the film made its Mississippi debut in March 2022. Documentaries screened on Delta State's campus attract small audiences. However, on the day of the screening, over 600 Eastside community members showed up and an unofficial East Side reunion took place, as school cheers and the singing of the school song filled the auditorium. Via post-event survey forms, the enthusiastic audience expressed the desire to see more of their stories told.

After reflection, the author involved with the East Side High film approached the other author of this paper, a documentarian, about a collaboration filming oral histories for a digital archive. Through the funding and support of the Mississippi Delta National Heritage Area, the Eastside Project was born.

As we began our process, our first job was to locate models of success in the field of oral history. We came across the article '(Re)locating Sites of Memory in Appalachia Through Black Spaces and Stories' in *Black Perspectives*, a journal of the African American Intellectual History Society.[27] This article, by Kristan McCullum (then at the University of Virginia), centered around the creation of a community-based oral history archive telling the story of a Jim Crow-era Black school in McCullum's hometown of Jenkins, Kentucky. This was similar to our project in scope. We reached out to McCullum, who agreed to serve as a consultant and assistant director for the project, as we were candid about our limited experience collecting oral histories.

Another resource for us was the Teachers in the Movement project at the University of Virginia, for which McCullum has done extensive work. She grounded us in the principles of ethical oral history collecting and how to foster the community-based nature of our much smaller-in-scale oral history collection. She recommended Irving Siedman's *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*[28] to us, as well as Antionette Errante's essay 'But Sometimes You're Not Part of the Story: Oral Histories and Ways of Remembering and Telling'.[29] She also helped devise many of the questions we asked during our oral history interviews, emphasising the local civil rights history of Cleveland and the day-to-day operations of East Side High School. In addition, McCullum trained our chief interviewer to ask more open-ended questions, while avoiding leading questions of a more journalistic nature.

Oral history protocols used in The East Side Project

Central to our process was the idea of educating our oral history narrators on an easy-to-understand definition of 'informed consent'. We spent a significant amount of time explaining its connections to our work and answering our narrators' questions. At the root of our explanation was that we were asking the permission of our oral history narrators to help them preserve their stories, and through an intake interview, emails, and personal phone calls, we attempted to establish a level of trust. We reiterated that ultimately, the stories recorded were their personal property, and not the property of any library or university. We emphasised that all narrators had the right to refuse the inclusion of their interviews in the archive. We tried to repeat this idea several times in our interactions as part of our attempts to practice the 'shared authority' advocated by Michael Frisch and others.[30]

While we understand that no archive is completely open and neutral, we have tried to centre the marginalised voices in the Cleveland community, a goal Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook describe as such:

The point is for archivists to (re)search thoroughly for the missing voices, for the complexity of the human or organizational functional activities under study during appraisal, description, or outreach activities, so that archives can acquire and reflect multiple voices, and not, by default, only the voices of the powerful.[31]

Scope and methodology of The East Side Project recordings

The initial Eastside Project video recordings include sixteen interviews gathered in sessions from 17 October 2022 to 21 April 2023. The technical approach for these interviews was to

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provide a level of redundancy – two camera angles, audio recorded both on camera and with a synchronised external recorder – and to design the interviews so they would be useful to documentarians working from the archive in the future.

Each interview was filmed with two cameras. The shots were framed so they would fit together nicely, and so either could be used successfully in a documentary film. The cameras were set to record video quality matching the current technical requirements for Netflix productions. This was an ambitious standard, requiring significant data storage. It could be considered overkill from the standpoint of creating interviews for an oral history record. From the standpoint of a documentary archive, however, this material will meet professional broadcast standards into the future.

Additional synchronised audio was recorded on an external device so the material could be recorded in 32-bit float audio format – a safeguard against any mistakes in setting audio gain levels, as the crew for the project was made up of undergraduate students in rotating technical positions. It was recognised that errors were possible. The interview subjects wore a quality lavalier microphone, and a professional-quality shotgun microphone was placed at eighteen inches from the subject.

The interviews were filmed with two students running cameras, another in charge of sound, and others setting up the lighting and microphones. The interview subject was lit with a large softbox as a main light, and a carefully placed reflector to add fill light to the subject's shadow side. Audio was recorded as described above, but another quality shotgun microphone was placed on a stand to record the interviewer. The team attempted to isolate the voices of the subject and interviewer, but the highly-sensitive microphones picked up both voices since no isolation booths were used.

Synergies discovered in the project

The preceding technical discussion provides a high level of detail, because an 'acceptable' setup for oral history recordings can result in material not entirely useful for future documentary production. Conversely, a typical documentary interview would probably not please an oral history purist trying to create an archive recording. We believe that the merging of documentary and oral history practices will require a respect for both the archival nature of the material and its production value. Thus, our Eastside Project process forced us to engage with the goal of creating material that would be useful for both methodologies. The first discovery made was that there is value in this goal. Existing practices in both fields set one up for lazy choices that made sense in the past, but that ignore emerging possibilities offered by technological advancements and the current expansion of

nonfiction practices seen in audio storytelling and desktop documentaries. Media can be multipurpose, multidisciplinary, and multiformat.

From this goal several techniques emerged as useful. For example, recent improvements to the standard editing software packages – Adobe Premiere, DaVinci Resolve, and others – have revolutionised transcript creation and usage. During our project, we saw the accuracy of transcripts created in Resolve outstrip our expectations and found that the software allowed for expanded uses of these transcripts. We can now search a transcript and find the exact video frame where a word is said; we can quickly use these transcripts to create subtitles; we can even edit based on transcript text. Video editors are just beginning to fully embrace new capabilities, and we expect many oral historians are not yet aware of the power and speed available in these tools.

A second area where contemporary documentary practice can benefit oral historians is in the use of new audio formats. Documentarians often face sudden changes in audio levels, and they have embraced recorders that allow the use of 32-bit float formats. This new technology allows post-production adjustment of audio that would otherwise distort or be too quiet. While pointing a microphone in the wrong direction would still be a disaster, devices using 32-bit float recording formats eliminate the need to ride the gain throughout an interview, or to worry that a subject shouting or singing will overload a recording. Documentarians have quickly learned this lesson, and there is no downside in it for oral history uses. Manufacturers have begun adding this capability in all types of mid-level recorders. It solves a common problem, allowing an oral historian to keep their focus on the subject.

Two concerns are worth noting. First, 32-bit float format recordings are approximately 1/3 larger, creating an increase of a project's overall storage requirement. The second concern is more significant: this approach adds technical complexity. The practice of dual-system audio recording can be complicated on set, requiring a synchronisation method or the use of timecode, and the use of 32-bit float format demands more attention in post-production work.

One unexpected benefit from the adoption of 32-bit float format: new devices have become available that may prove useful to one-person-crew oral historians. Since the format is forgiving of improperly set audio levels – corrections can be made in post-production with no loss in quality – new tools aimed at YouTubers, podcasters, and prosumer video producers have been introduced. An oral historian with a modest budget could purchase two 32-bit-float format lavalier recorders or wireless microphones, wear one and put the other on the interview subject, and achieve high-quality isolated tracks with gear that fits in a coat pocket.

Yet a key question remains: are 32-bit float formats appropriate within archival preservation best practices? The answer becomes clear when we consider how files are gathered, preserved, and archived. Exported video files do not maintain 32-bit float format audio. If one exports a video file for online distribution – for example for YouTube or Vimeo – the exported video file uses 24-bit audio format. This is also true for video files prepared for broadcast or considered a digital master. Editing software recognises and uses 32-bit float format, but it is still considered beyond what is broadcast or streamed.

Therefore, the question shifts to whether a project will archive all gathered files or if it will preserve only finished video or audio files. The same problem exists in video work where log formats (for example, the Eastside Project used Panasonic V-Log format video) are recorded on a professional film set but are not directly broadcast. The files preserve quality but require post-production work for distribution. In an audio-only project, it is possible to create files that have no requirement for post-production. A 24-bit audio file could be recorded and directly distributed. Professional video, however, now requires files that absolutely depend on post-production. Netflix's production guidelines make using log files a requirement, so a documentarian working in that mode already expects that decisions about long-term archiving are necessary.

Beyond these technical areas, the most important synergy found in our project concerns the design, control, and augmentation of the interview process. Documentarians can learn a great deal from the preparation process oral historians use. The systematic subject preparation oral historians practice could benefit most documentary interview sessions as well. This formality, resisted by many documentarians, was observed to improve the mindset, thoughtfulness, and comfort of most of the participants in The Eastside Project. Where a documentary producer may see the preparation for an interview as something to be done as quickly as possible, the efforts made from the Eastside Project interviewers to create a shared, participatory project demonstrated an unmistakable benefit. The participants approached their engagement with the questions in a different way, with a shared interest in telling the story they knew and valued. Some of the interviews went over an hour, without the typical discomfort long documentary interviews tend to create. There was no sense of an interrogation or of all control coming from the interviewer. The interviewers were seen more as facilitating a process of reflection, recalling memories, stories, and personal impressions.

Challenges discovered in the project

A key practice found in documentary interviewing involves adapting the way documentarians seek important bits and pieces in their interview questions. That is, where oral historians ask a question and hope the answer will clearly delineate a story, documentary makers know the material will depend on an edit they ask questions that provide building blocks in a story.

A documentarian tends to think of key moments in a chain of events, then asks questions that clarify these story points or essential moments. It should be noted that the video crew for *The Eastside Project* – including faculty and students well-versed in standard documentary production – expressed a desire to ask a few specific follow-up questions as some of the sessions were ending. We chose to resist this generally, however, and defer to the creation of the interview recording as a standalone document. In a documentary-specific project, it is very likely that subjects would have been asked to restate some of their answers, and that some questions would have been added.

The question structure of *The Eastside Project* made a round of extra questions unworkable, however. Each participant was asked the same closing question at the end of the session, and it was the team's consensus that this let the sessions end on a positive note that would be disturbed by other types of questions. This concession to the oral history process can be seen as a slight loss of material for the documentary process, but the thoroughness of the interview footage gathered provides a wealth of content.

In our experience, this is the most innate challenge when documentary and oral history practices meet: cooperation is possible, but not always in obvious ways. The prepared questions and formal structures of oral history push out the documentarian's impulse to follow along to wherever a subject's thoughts may go. Conversely, the gaps left by free-flowing documentary interviews create problems with the recording-as-artifact for which oral historians aim. An open archive can reconcile these two practices.

Reconciliation through open archive functionality

Video archives contain more than viewers can comfortably watch, and the use of search capabilities, content summaries, and edited materials are all potentially workable strategies against overwhelming collections of material. Documentary projects drawn from an archive can make sense both as valuable cultural production (documentary makers create films from the material) but also as a public resource available for a wide range of uses. Applying a distillation process to huge collections of material through documentary filmmaking

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practices could have unexpected benefits. In the same way the end notes of an article in an academic journal can lead to further research, a well-developed film can add value to a raw collection.

In the Eastside Project, we are at the point of developing the functionality of these search, metadata, and user interface features. It is important to note that this aspect of the open archive is outside of the scope of our initial grant funding. What we have learned in the project now shows us how to best use the material gathered. Implementing that will be the next challenge.

Our thinking has been informed by a conscious effort not to repeat the sins of Mississippi's past. Older archives in the state were created not only to preserve a one-sided white supremacist version of history, but also, in some cases, to protect the architects of Mississippi's segregationist past.[32] What those architects set into stone in the last century still has ramifications in our current day, especially in towns like Cleveland. We maintain that the stories of our narrators and their experiences on the Eastside are worth preserving for future generations. Regardless of whether it is the stories of the day-to-day indignities of Jim Crow segregation and racism in a small Southern town, or the stories of the traditions and resilience of a beloved community school, we feel that the perspectives of our narrators have value far beyond our isolated corner of Mississippi.

Thus, even small community-based oral history archives in Mississippi have a responsibility to future historians, students, families, and community members. Countering the tendency to tell only one side of the story requires a new approach, one that embraces 'collaborative, democratic and humanistic approaches' for which Sheftel and Zembrzycki advocate.[33] Openness is not only a theoretical concept, it is an everyday practice. The hard work of deep listening and purposeful community engagement is well worth the effort.

Importantly, it is only in open archives that the main problem the field of documentary faces today can be resolved. Colin Low and George Stoney demonstrated a process attempting to escape the extractive nature of documentary film production. Stories, history, and video material of individual lives are all prone to being seen as exploitable commodities, often in a zero-sum game where the preservation of culture loses out to the economics of intellectual property or, at times, a purposeful misinterpretation of history. If making an archive open can serve as a counter to the field's worst offenses, or protect those exploited by documentary, healthier and more productive ways of working can grow.

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Notes

- [1] Davis-Green 2022.
- [2] McCullum, *Black Perspectives*.
- [3] Ritchie 2019, p. 1.
- [4] Funderburk 2021.
- [5] *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- [6] Sheftel & Zembrzycki 2017.
- [7] *Ibid.*, p. 112.
- [8] Winston 2014.
- [9] *Ibid.*
- [10] *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- [11] *Ibid.*
- [12] *Ibid.*
- [13] *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- [14] *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- [15] *Ibid.*
- [16] *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- [17] *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- [18] *Ibid.*
- [19] *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- [20] Springer 2007.
- [21] Sheftel & Zembrzycki 2017, p. 107.
- [22] Hardy 2014.

- [23] Brown 2016.
- [24] *Educational Divide: The Story of East Side High*, directed by David Ross, Johnny O'Bryant III, and Eric Elston, (2022, ArtLife Studio and Noir Ceasar Entertainment LLC).
- [25] The school was known as East Side High School while the general area of town is often referred to as The Eastside.
- [26] *Cowan v. Bolivar County Board of Education*, NO. 2:65-CV-00031-DMB (N.D. Miss. Aug. 16, 2016).
- [27] McCullum, *Black Perspectives*.
- [28] Siedman 2006.
- [29] Errante 2000.
- [30] Frisch 1990.
- [31] Schwartz & Cook 2002.
- [32] Sack 1998.
- [33] Sheftel & Zembrzycki 2017, p. 98.