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A Jukebox Full of Stories

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Introduction to Project Jukebox

Many of us who are older grew up eating at diners that featured a music-playing machine called a "jukebox."[1] The jukebox contained stacks of vinyl records and a mechanical arm that would activate the record you chose to play. Push a button on the front to make your choice and then stand back and marvel at the way the arm moved to select and play your choice. Imagine now how this same technology might work with an archive of Oral History recordings. Next, imagine adding photographs, maps, videos, and text to accompany each recording. Then, consider the Internet and almost instantaneous search, find, and play abilities for hundreds of hours of recordings and associated materials. This is how Project Jukebox functions today. But the story behind Project Jukebox is not just about technology and what it allows us to do; it also involves a search for ways to preserve as much as possible of the experience of the actual oral events (that is, what you would have experienced by being present when the stories were told). We hope, therefore, that by detailing the history of Project Jukebox we can engender a larger discussion of the opportunities and limitations of technology. To this end, we begin with a description of the Project Jukebox collections and then describe how the program evolved as we sought ways to encourage comparative analysis of topics and themes, as well as ways to preserve how narrators construct and deliver narrative.

Today Project Jukebox (http://jukebox.uaf.edu/site7) is an online program of the Oral History Program at the Rasmuson Library, University of Alaska Fairbanks. It contains over 40 oral history collections featuring Alaskan topics. Each collection is organized around a general theme. For example, the theme could be people from a specific geographical area, such as a national park; it could be the history of an organization, such as the Mental Health Trust; it could be a current issue, such as climate change or dangerous ice conditions. Our choice of a thematic approach is different from some Oral History projects whose focus is more on outstanding or noteworthy individuals and their particular contributions to history and culture. This is not to say that the people we interview are less important; rather, it is to emphasize that they are chosen first for how their accounts contribute to an understanding of history and culture. The thematic

[1] Special thanks to my long-term colleague Karen Brewster, whose hard work has helped to build Project Jukebox. Thank you also to Leslie McCartney, the Curator of Oral History at the Rasmuson Library, for her careful review of an earlier draft of this paper. I alone accept all responsibilities for any inaccuracies that it may contain.

approach allows us to build a comparative base of observations on a place, subject, or event. At the interview level, the hope is that listeners will connect with the narrator as he or she offers an account; at the program level we hope they will experience the variety of perspectives on any given topic. The approach aims to give depth and variety of expression to the topics discussed.

There is a major difference between the standard history textbook and an interactive online collection of oral narratives as found in Project Jukebox, which is built on personal expressions and opinions as opposed to an analyzed and packaged message. Project Jukebox provides listeners/viewers with windows into how narrators construct and communicate meaning, how they relate what they have learned, what they experienced, how they justify past actions, and how they see their place in the events of history and life in Alaska.

In all of our projects, we can point to the value of the perspectives that narrators shared in the recordings, perspectives that would probably be lost in time as memories fade and tangible signs of the past degrade into the earth. This is certainly the case with some of the projects focused upon national park areas. For instance, the recordings from Yukon Charley Rivers National Preserve (http://jukebox.uaf.edu/YUCH) contain interviews and photos of the 1970s river people who are no longer living in the area. These were mostly young people who came to the area to live off the land. They made their living with few amenities and took pride in their subsistence skills. That piece of history, along with these individuals' lifestyle, culture, and goal of living as self-sustained a way of life as possible would be all but lost to us without the documentation done for this project. Project Jukebox gave us a platform to represent and reproduce in one place the narratives and images of that era.

Several of the Jukebox projects provide a baseline of information on environmental issues in Alaska. There are two jukeboxes on climate change (http://jukebox.uaf.edu/climatechange, http://jukebox.uaf.edu/stakeholders) and one on dangerous ice conditions on the Tanana River (http://jukebox.uaf.edu/dangerous). In the Stakeholders Climate Change Jukebox, interviewees talked about dried-up lakes, increased forest fires, melting permafrost, and unpredictable weather patterns that impacted their safe access to subsistence activities. While many of these conditions have been noted at a statewide and even national level, what is special about the local observations is that they are linked to a specific regional impact and the narrators' personal experiences dealing with the condition as they pursue necessary activities such as hunting, trapping, and woodcutting. It is not hard to imagine adding a new set of interviews to the site in ten years and then again at the 20-year mark in order to provide a comparative basis for discussion of these issues.

Projects such as the Mental Health Trust Project (http://jukebox.uaf.edu/mentalhealth) give personal perspectives and relay experiences with major events in the Alaska's history. This project documented the history of the state's treatment of mental illness. Interviewees painted vivid pictures of what it was like before statehood and the establishment of the Alaska Mental Health Enabling Act that brought many more services to citizens in need. The Project Jukebox site provides a touchstone for appreciating the growth of services and a chilling reminder of an earlier time when mental health was less well understood and the standard of care far less. For instance, John Malone, a former state trooper, described his experiences in the Aleutians in the early years when there was very limited if any support for the mentally ill before passage of the Act (http://jukebox.uaf.edu/site7/interviews/358, section 3):

> And I think it was on my second—my second trip to the Aleutians, and it used to take about ten days to two weeks to do the Aleutians. I was in Sand Point. And I think it was [the] Wakefield superintendent, the one who was running Wakefield Cannery at the time, wanted me to check out these two gentlemen who had arrived on the airplane and were living under an overturned boat on the shore. And so I did.
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> And they had been our very recent—recent, well, inmates, clients, patients from Morningside [a mental health facility in Oregon] that had been returned to the state. And the state had returned them to their last known address. . . .
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> So they were there by themselves. But the most unusual thing about them, I thought, at the time was that they both were carrying the same letters, written the same way, saying that—I called them the "Dear Mommy, Dear Daddy" letters, here I am—explaining who they were, where they had been, and . . . if they complied with the medications, they were going to be just well young men.

John Malone went on to champion the cause of mental health services. His story, in his own words, is a personal reminder of how an early experience in a remote part of Alaska influenced his commitment to work for services to address those in need.

History and Philosophy of Project Jukebox

In the past, interviews destined for public archives were often processed into the card catalog system and placed on the shelf where they waited for someone to discover them through a search of title or subject. Most recordings sat for years without use, but even when a particular tape had been located, the search for specific information contained within the tape itself was often laborious. Any comparative perspective required many hours, days, or even weeks of listening for information. Many scholars preferred the transcript; it was easier to work with than the recording. For some, the recordings were merely a source of illustration, color, or "texture," but little more—a sentiment maintained in part because recordings were so hard to access, but also because these scholars were after irrefutable facts rather than the opinions and range of personal experiences that color and texture our recollections as we attempt to make sense of the past.

The Project Jukebox team was fortunate to diverge from this rigid tradition, and we can trace the roots of our development, and eventually Project Jukebox itself, to an increasing appreciation for the contributions of folklorists and their concern for preserving the variety of ways in which narrative is constructed and performed in order to convey meaning. Our early exposure to the work of folklorists occurred during a period when we were producing life histories based on oral interviews and were sensitized to the difficulties of preserving a sense of the narrator's voice in the written text (Dundes 1964). These works became part of a publication series (through the University of Alaska Press) called "Oral Biographies" to emphasize our desire to preserve a sense of the subject's voice in written form. Barre Toelken, an occasional visitor to Alaska, was a major influence on our work. He opened our eyes to the multiple ways in

which stories are told, as well as their power and influence in our lives (Toelken 1996, 2003). Our interest in narrative analysis grew as we explored the tension between historical truth and personal meaning (Ives 1988; Santino 1991; Portelli 1997, 2003). Such scholarship influenced our work in life history research and made for fertile ground as we applied its lessons to Project Jukebox's development. The overarching challenge has been to find ways to make the online recording an experience that gives the listener/viewer the best understanding of the original sharing that took place when the recording was made. Project Jukebox allowed us a platform for presenting a range of perspectives on issues and events that illustrate how individuals recall the past and how considerations of context and audience play a part in what gets shared.

Project Jukebox was born in 1987 on a Thanksgiving Day camping trip when Felix Vogt suggested that he wanted to investigate digitization of audio recordings for his master's project at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF). We were particularly excited because we thought it might be a way to cut down on some of our labor costs, a pressing need since UAF was at that time going through a budget crisis and the Oral History Program was threatened with deep cuts and possible elimination. This was before the Internet, but we thought this effort might lead to an automated system for patrons to access and play recordings from stationary platforms in the library. The originals would never have to leave their safe and ordered place on the university library shelf, and no one would have to file and refile recordings.

Pioneering work on the initial grant was done by Dan Grahek, an information technology (IT) specialist and probably one of the first IT people to work on an Oral History project. Dan explained how a computer could access and play audio integrated with contextual material, such as photographs, maps, and texts. The linking of multimedia with the oral recordings was a huge leap for Oral History because it allowed us to give listeners/viewers background and supporting information that would enhance their visioning of the oral narrative; however, it was also viewed with suspicion by some in the library field who argued that oral recordings, like other archival records, should stand alone, with contextualization left to the listener. These detractors viewed our early attempts more as exhibits than as a collective repository of archival resources, and they argued that any interpretation detracted from the future user's experience with the recording. We argued just the opposite: an interview without context and background lacked key information for assessing content. We continued adding video clips and references to as many resources as we could in order to enhance the richness of the user's experience. Our argument then and now is that oral narrative is voiced and heard between people, and meaning is based on establishing a shared experience that allows the listener to imagine what the narrator is saying. The supporting material bolsters the potential for a base of shared experience. For instance, one of our programs featured climbing on Mt. McKinley in Denali National Park (http://jukebox.uaf.edu/denali). Climbers who wish to ascend the North Face must find a non-motorized way to get their supplies up on the mountain where they will begin the climb. The most enduring method has been to use dog teams to carry and stash supplies for the climbers. In several interviews to help listeners imagine what they were describing, we documented the routes and the conditions and illustrated the interviews with maps and photographs, often from the collections of the people we interviewed.

Right from the start, we wanted to make Project Jukebox an archival source for full audio rather than excerpts. It was our feeling that people accessing the record would want the whole

recording, not a preselected portion. We thought at the time that to do anything less was a disservice to the person providing the interview and was an abrogation of the library's role of preserving the recording and making the recordings publicly available. Today there are over 40 programs on Project Jukebox, and many of the programs have 20 or more recordings.

We also wanted users to listen to the interview as opposed to just reading a transcript. This was one of the reasons why we did not include transcripts in our early Jukeboxes. (There were also time and cost considerations.) We later added transcripts to our newer programs in response to the Americans with Disabilities Act, but in all of our Jukebox programs we use keyword outlines to help users get to specific parts of an interview. This practice was not only necessary from the standpoint of technology and playback limitations, but it also allowed listeners to search with ease for a topic and compare observations of two or more narrators on the subject. We saw the comparative record as a vital source for scholarship—not as a way to determine the "true story," but as a window into different perspectives on what happened and as a source for analyzing how speakers used narrative to describe what they had experienced. For instance, in the Stakeholders Climate Change Jukebox, when we asked Fred Thomas about climate change, he first voiced skepticism about warming trends, thought for a moment, and then pointed to the fact that the government was not fighting the forest fires as it used to years ago. He felt that this lack of firefighting was leading to destruction of the forest cover and thus contributing to erosion of the permafrost and draining of the lakes. To illustrate his point, he told the story of cutting moss to chink his house when he was a small boy (http://www.jukebox.uaf.edu/stakeholders/interviews, Fred Thomas, Fire Impact on Lakes):

> I remember when I was a kid, in August, September, me and the old man go below the house and cut wood, you see. And if I walked, [there's] moss among the trees. You do like that [lift the moss up a bit] and there's ice there, right underneath the moss, you see. Well, there's no more timber.
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> Everything is burnt down. All the covering, and of course, your permafrost is way—you know, is hardly any, it just keep thawing out.
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> So, after awhile . . . around the edges of the lake, you have no more banks. Chalkyitsik [Village] years ago, all the Black River, they trapped rats [muskrats] and they shot rats, too, in the spring of the year, and around Chalkyitsik, everybody used to get four or five hundred rats apiece, you know. Now, I don't think there's that many . . . and that, years ago, was the . . . main fur back then, you know.

We retell his account here to demonstrate how Thomas understood the causes of permafrost melting and draining of the lakes and how he explained these developments to us by describing his boyhood experiences. It is noteworthy that he does not claim, as many others have, that there are more forest fires now. In this way his interview forces us to pause with regard to a generally accepted assumption (that there are now more forest fires) as we make room in our thinking for the way by which he makes sense of changes in the land and the animals upon which his livelihood depends. As was the case with many of our other interviews on climate change, the informant relates the impact he sees to a subsistence activity, in this case fur trapping.

Thomas' account of changes is easily accessible thanks to modern search capabilities. If it had been given even a few years earlier, it might have been buried on a stand-alone station or on a library shelf, making comparison of his account with others far more difficult and therefore limiting our ability to understand both what people think happened and the variety of ways in which they explain cause and effect. The Internet gave us opportunities to expand access to the site and to provide greater search capability. We eagerly made the move. Our subsequent conversion to HTML format made it possible to link our various projects together through a single homepage and make them available on the Internet. Thanks to Google and other search engines that crawl the Internet, our programs were now searchable in multiple ways and could be articulated with the library's online catalog. For instance, one could search for a single topic across all the Jukeboxes, find recordings in the library catalog, and then access them through Project Jukebox. We were fortunate to get National Science Foundation support that allowed us to review the implications of web access with interviewees and community members before going live. Often the contacts were with the next of kin since many narrators had died. We found that people appreciated our efforts to review web access with them, as the process helped bring about the realization that their interview or that of a relative was important and being taken care of rather than lost in the deep recesses of the archives. It also allowed us to continue personal relationships with those individuals who had originally shared their stories with us. We had maintained that an interview is a form of personal sharing and that accordingly there is an agreement that the interview will be preserved and available under the conditions agreed upon at the time of the recording. We welcomed the opportunity to reconnect and explain internet access.

A great opportunity for Project Jukebox came at the 2007 International Oral History Association Conference in Sydney, Australia, where we met Dr. Robert Jansen of Turtlelane Studios and saw examples of how he was representing Oral History using Testimony Software. He demonstrated simultaneous synchronized access to video, transcripts, a table of contents, and photographs on a single screen. When one clicks a topic in the table of contents, the relevant section of video plays, the transcript scrolls along under the video player, and photos relevant to discussed topics or keywords change alongside as the person speaks. This simultaneous access was revolutionary to us and fit our goals of always wanting to provide more context and further historical connections for our interviews. The implication for Oral History is that one has multiple ways to experience the narrative all at once; there is a continual reminder of the interview setting that reinforces the narrative with supporting graphics keyed to the video/audio. While we are no longer using Testimony Software because of our library's IT limitations, we have attempted to continue some of the features in updated programs using Drupal 7 software. We have learned that technology offers opportunities, but there are always constraints and costs that need to be balanced with the desired outcome.

In all of this work our focus has been on the people who told their stories and kept the oral traditions alive in their retelling. Staying true to the narrators and their intent is an ultimate goal of Project Jukebox, but equally important is the need to be mindful of the listeners/viewers so as to facilitate an online experience where they can envision what was said and what it was like to be with the narrator when the story was told. Our message remains that technology merely provides the public venue to help preserve and present meaning; we must work to ensure that the programs being employed reflect for the public the meaning that was shared in the interviews

themselves. In retrospect and despite the difficulties and costs, we feel fortunate that technology has given us new ways to preserve and access a rich oral heritage.

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