

Kissing Cousins: Journalism and Oral History

by Mark Feldstein

Abstract This article explores the similarities and differences between journalism and oral history. Where does one end and the other begin? What might each learn from the other? The author compares both print and broadcast journalism to oral history, examining issues of evidence, purpose, technique, empathy, and ethics. He writes that oral historians and journalists are like “kissing cousins,” related but separate, whose very similarities showcase their differences—and the ways each can improve their own discipline by borrowing techniques from the other. Specifically, the author argues that journalism would do well to emulate oral history’s exhaustive and nuanced approach to research evidence, especially its preservation of interview transcripts that allow public inspection and verification. Conversely, the oral historian should sometimes emulate the journalist’s more seasoned approach to interviewing—increasing the quantity of interviews and expanding the range of approaches, including use of adversarial encounters.

The slave narratives poured out with illiterate eloquence. One by one, more than a dozen African-American men told an interviewer what life had been like when they were field-hand

Mark Feldstein (B.A. Harvard, Ph.D. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) is associate professor of media and public affairs and director of the journalism oral history project at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. Before academia, he conducted literally thousands of interviews during a twenty-year career as an on-air correspondent at CNN, ABC News, and local television stations. His work has won nearly fifty journalism prizes, including two George Foster Peabody public service awards, the Columbia-DuPont baton for investigative reporting, the Edward R. Murrow broadcasting award, the Sigma Delta Chi bronze medal, and nine regional Emmys. He has also worked as a freelance writer for *Time*, *The Nation*, *The Washington Monthly*, and other magazines and newspapers.

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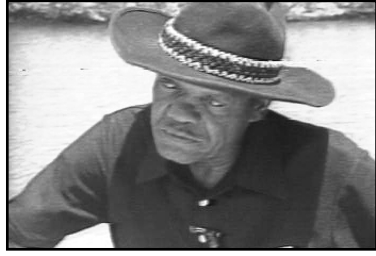
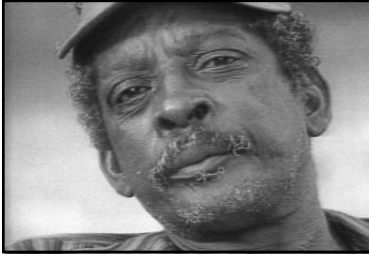
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Sixty-four-year-old James McWilliams (*left*) contracted tuberculosis and spat up blood in the fields where he was held as a farmworker slave. Blue-eyed Robert Lee Brown (*right*), named after the Confederate general, was interviewed in an old shack about his years as a slave.

slaves in the South. Sixty-four-year-old James McWilliams shook visibly as he described how he literally spat up blood working on one plantation, managing to escape thanks to an abolitionist nun who ran her own underground railroad. George McMahon—who still used his slave nickname, “Cisco”—remembered the time when he had been sold for cash from his master to his master’s father: “When his Daddy handed him the money, we had to do what his Daddy say do, ’cuz he done paid for ya.” Robert Lee Brown, a light-skinned African American with the blue eyes of an ancestor’s master, was named after the Confederate general. Interviewed in a small old shack that smelled of rancid lard, a staple of his impoverished diet, his speech was garbled with age and alcohol and emotion. “Mister,” he declared, fixing his interviewer a piercing look, then pointing to the sky visible through a hole in the roof, “*He* know I’m telling the truth. And I can swear it on seven stacks on Bibles. See, ’cuz I *been* there! And I know. I *know*!”

Despite the sweltering summer heat, the interviewer reported that a chill went down his spine as he listened to the slave narratives. It was an emotional experience on both sides. Some of the former slaves wept; others shouted; many seemed hardened to their core. Later, the interviewer wrote of his encounters with a passionate intensity, fueled by an angry self-righteousness, a crusading desire to describe the terrible injustices of slavery which he felt the world had ignored. Young and impressionable—white, middle class, and sheltered—the interviewer had graduated from college just three years earlier; finally, he felt, he was



George McMahon (*left*) had been a star player in the Negro Baseball League but ended up as a migrant farmworker slave. Len Gaston (*right*), a 63-year-old former farmworker slave, said his crewleader beat him with a rubber hose after he tried to escape from the migrant camp: “He whupped me with it. I couldn’t walk for ’bout two or three weeks.” (1982)

getting an education in life that had not been part of his bookish university curriculum.

But the compiler of these slave narratives was not James Agee, author of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, nor another oral historian from the 1930s. And the slaves were not ancient survivors from the Civil War. In fact, these interviews took place nearly a century after Emancipation. The subjects were migrant farmworkers during the 1980s who had been illegally held as slaves by their violent crew chief. The interviewer was not an oral historian but an investigative reporter—the author of this article.¹

Thus the forum here was not oral history but journalism. Yet the similarities raise some inevitable questions: What is the difference between oral history and journalism? Where does one end and the other begin? And what might each learn from the other?

* * *

“Journalism,” *Washington Post* publisher Philip Graham famously said, “is the first draft of history.” Historian Stanley Kutler, writing before the advent of the Internet and all-news

¹Mark Feldstein, “Prisoners of the Harvest,” WTSP-TV (St. Petersburg, Florida: July 1982), re-broadcast on ABC News Nightline (Aug. 1983).



Stump-legged Eddie Williams told the author that he was forced to work as a farmworker slave even though he had only one leg and had to hobble on a crutch. Tears welled in his eyes as he described how his crewleader used his crutch as a weapon to beat him if he didn't pick fruit quickly enough: "Dey broke my crutch." (1983)

cable television, defined news writing similarly: "history with a 5:00 P.M. deadline."² But if journalism is a kind of instant history, what is history itself, other than journalism delayed and interpreted?

At its most superficial level, of course, are the obvious similarities between journalism and oral history. "Both are concerned with recording information, both are concerned with accuracy, and both rely on the interview as the primary source

² Kutler also notes "Voltaire's dictum that history is a pack of tricks the living play upon the dead." He doesn't say so, but by inference that would make journalism a pack of tricks the living play upon themselves. Stanley I. Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate: The Last Crisis of Richard Nixon* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1990), 166, 615.

of information and credibility,” one writer has noted.³ The most visible difference between the two is time: “The journalist reports current events. The oral historian is more concerned with events long after they occurred.” While journalism often alters events while they are still happening, oral history can alter the interpretation of those events after they have occurred. Where journalism’s immediacy may allow for more accuracy in memory, oral history allows more depth, thoroughness, perspective, and (perhaps) honesty.⁴

But the difference between journalism and oral history is more than just a matter of time. Ultimately, the two have different purposes, different standards and norms, different techniques. Yet at the same time, similarities abound; both must grapple with parallel issues of empathy, ethics, and evidence. Like kissing cousins, with similar family roots and genetic material, they are related but separate; and each has much to teach the other.

* * *

The objective of both journalism and oral history is to record truth. But this lofty philosophical purpose is often as much a goal as a destination. In reality, both journalists and historians have more practical and proximate objectives. For the historian, writing history may mean not so much recording truth as much as trying to interpret what is left of the preserved part of the recorded part of the remembered part of what happened, to paraphrase the historian Louis Gottschalk.⁵ Journalists are

³ John R. Tisdale, “Observational Reporting as Oral History: How Journalists Interpreted the Death and Destruction of Hurricane Audrey,” *Oral History Review* 27/2 (Summer/Fall 2000): 44. Similarly, Paul Thompson’s description of oral history applies equally to journalism: “a history built around people” that “thrills life” into its subject. Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 23.

⁴ Tisdale, 42.

⁵ Or, to use the aphorism about oral history, “people talking here and now about the then and there.” As Louis Gottschalk explained in *Understanding History*, “Only a small part of what happened in the past was ever observed. . . . And only a part of what was observed in the past was remembered by those who observed it; only a part of what was remembered was recorded; only a part of what was recorded has survived; only a part of what has survived has come to historians’ attention; only a part of what has come to their attention is credible; only a part of what is credible has been grasped; and only a part of what has been grasped can be expounded or narrated by the historian.” Cited in Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), ix.

similarly constrained somewhere between their immediate goal of meeting the next deadline and their larger ambition to educate the citizenry.⁶

But even if journalists and historians are able to use interviews to record truth, a larger question remains: whose truth are they telling? “All history,” writes British historian Paul Thompson, “depends ultimately upon its social purpose.”⁷ For Thompson, oral history is not just a methodology but almost a kind of political cause—transforming the oral historian and history itself by empowering and preserving the world of the forgotten masses. “Since the nature of most existing records is to reflect the standpoint of authority,” Thompson writes, “it is not surprising that the judgment of history has more often than not vindicated the wisdom of the powers that be. Oral history by contrast makes a much fairer trial possible: witnesses can now also be called from the under-classes, the unprivileged, and the defeated. . . . In so doing, oral history has radical implication for the social message of history as a whole.”⁸

But Thompson, it seems to me, overstates his case because he mixes both ends (radical social history) and means (oral methodology) into his particular politico-historical brew. After all, oral history can be used to preserve the memories of

⁶Leonard Downie, Jr. and Robert G. Kaiser, *The News About the News: American Journalism in Peril* (New York: Knopf, 2002), 4, 6.

⁷For Thompson, who announces at the outset that his work “is written from a socialist perspective,” the purpose of history is quite different from mere truth-telling: “for the historian who wishes to work and write as a socialist, the task must be not simply to celebrate the working class as it is, but to raise its consciousness. . . . A history is required which leads to action: not to confirm, but to change the world.” Yet even Thompson acknowledges that oral history interviews have been “regularly used in a socially and politically conservative manner. . . . Oral history is not necessarily an instrument for change; it depends upon the spirit in which it is used. Nevertheless, oral history certainly can be a means for transforming both the content and the purpose of history. . . . History becomes, to put it simply, more democratic.” Thompson, 1, vi, 22, 3, 9.

⁸Thompson, 7. Similarly, another scholar wrote that “growing interest” in oral history “is in part a reaction to the undeniable fact that most conventional written history and oral tradition is elitist history, being largely the history of society’s winners as they choose that it be remembered.” Yet the same author also noted sardonically that “[t]he penchant for magnifying the novelty and usefulness of oral historical research—making its practice as much a movement as a scholarly activity—is characteristic of enthusiasms.” David Henige, *Oral Historiography* (London: Longman, 1982), 107, 3.

the wealthy and powerful just as readily as the poor and the powerless—as indeed has been the case in some collections devoted to the “Great Man” school of political or business history.⁹ Yet that doesn’t make the methodology of oral history intrinsically conservative any more than oral interviews of socialists makes the methodology intrinsically radical. By itself, the methodology is neutral; its effect depends (in part) on who is interviewed and how these interviews are used—its “social purpose,” to use Thompson’s phrase. While written records may indeed have something of a class bias—because education is required to be literate—oral history requires only that its subjects be alive and capable of speech.¹⁰ That may give a populist aura to oral history, but in reality it merely throws into relief

⁹ Modern oral history in the U.S. is generally traced to 1948, when Columbia University established its first oral history project under Prof. Allan Nevins, a former journalist. “Designed to collect the reminiscences of major figures in contemporary American public life,” one scholar wrote, “it served as a kind of oral appendix to the published memoirs of many of these people.” However, the growth of social history in the 1960s soon diversified oral history to the study of non-elites as well. Henige, 107; Trevor Lummis, *Listening to History: The Authenticity of Oral Evidence* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble Books, 1988), 17; and Allan Nevins, “Oral History: How and Why It was Born,” *Wilson Library Bulletin* 40 (March 1966): 600–1, republished in David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum, eds., *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History, 1984), 27. See also Eva M. McMahon, *Elite Oral History Discourse: A Study of Cooperation and Coherence* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1989); and Anthony Selden and Joanna Pappworth, *By Word of Mouth: “Elite” Oral History* (London: Methuen, 1983).

¹⁰ Political ideology aside, a more familiar debate continues about the reliability of oral history interviews. While traditional historians express concerns about the bias and fallibility of memory and prefer written records, oral history interviews offer several benefits often ignored by critics. “One advantage is that there can be no doubt as to its authorship,” one scholar has pointed out. “In government circles in Washington it is standard operation procedure that an important letter may be the work of many individuals except the one who signs it. . . . Another advantage of the oral history interview is that it is not a written document and often contains the freshness and candor which is more typical of direct conversation.” In contrast, written “[a]rchives are replete with self-serving documents, with edited and doctored diaries and memoranda written ‘for the record.’” Thomas Jefferson’s archival records of his slave Sally Hemmings, for example, ultimately proved less meaningful than the oral history recollections of her descendants, who passed down the important truth of their sexual relationship that Jefferson chose not to record—and would only be proved centuries later by DNA testing. Alice Hoffman, “Reliability and Validity in Oral History,” *Today’s Speech* 22 (Winter 1974): 23–7 as republished in Dunaway and Baum, 72.

the bias of written history. By itself oral history is no more liberal or conservative than the pen or any other tool in the historian's repertoire.¹¹

The same is also true for journalism. While polemicists argue whether news media coverage is slanted to the left or right, these debates are about ends.¹² But journalism's means—the oral interview—has no real political cast by itself. Some journalists, like I.F. Stone, have employed the interview for radical purposes.¹³ Just as history has expanded over the past few decades to include the “social history” of ordinary people as well as the chronicles of kings, so journalism in the United States has changed during the same period, reducing coverage of government hearings and official press conferences while increasing attention on average people and their concerns. The motivation for such “news you can use” is admittedly commercial, chasing after ever greater profits through increased ratings and

¹¹ Indeed, Trevor Lummis has argued that oral history can have conservative implications: “Because much working-class reminiscence is not particularly critical of the system—indeed, it often shows little overt concern with anything other than the personal— . . . [t]he oral testimonies [of] ordinary people [are often ones] of powerlessness and the necessity to accept ‘things as they were’ rather than to feel militant about things as they ‘might have been.’” Moreover, “the practice of recording interviews is not in itself a radical activity. It provides one-sided evidence of the lives of labour but not the movements of capital. It is a method which can provide very detailed accounts of wages, but is silent on the question of profits.” Lummis, 142, 144–6.

¹² Edward S. Herman & Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988); Eric Alterman, *What Liberal Media? The Truth About Bias and the News* (New York: Basic Books, 2003); and Bernard Goldberg, *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How The Media Distort the News* (New York: Perennial, 2003).

¹³ Despite his leftist bent, Stone actually preferred written documents as his principal source material—in part, perhaps, because his maverick politics prevented access to the elite policy makers Stone liked to criticize. In contrast, investigative journalist Bob Woodward has relied primarily on interviews, perhaps because his more establishment pedigree allows greater high-level contacts. Investigative reporters typically use both oral and written methodologies, but often prefer one or the other based largely on individual temperament. Andrew Patner, *I. F. Stone: A Portrait* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), *passim*; Leonard Downie, Jr., *The New Muckrakers* (Washington, D.C.: New Republic Book Co., 1976), chp. 1; Ken Metzler, *Newsgathering* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1979), 133; Stephen Hess, *The Washington Reporter* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1981), *passim*; and C.A. Tugle, Forest Carr, and Suzanne Huffman, *Broadcast News Handbook*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 66.

circulation; nonetheless, it has made news coverage more focused on ordinary people than it was in the past.¹⁴

But even while both journalists and oral historians use interviews as a means to pursue truth, they do not really have the same ultimate ends. Neither do police or psychiatrists or anthropologists—even though they, too, employ interviews and try to ascertain truth.¹⁵ Indeed, all of these different disciplines have different purposes. The psychiatrist seeks not just truth, but catharsis and healing; the policeman, contradictions and perhaps a confession; the anthropologist, a broad view of how a society operates. Similarly, while oral history's fundamental mission is to try to recapture the past, journalism cannot be divorced from the fact that it is ultimately a commercial vehicle for selling advertisements. However much official journalistic ethos may claim to value truth, the business dictates of increasingly corporate journalism inevitably alter what truths journalists are allowed to present and how they are presented.¹⁶

This difference in purpose frequently leads to differences in technique. At a minimum, the average, harried daily news reporter simply doesn't have the time—or the need—to conduct in-depth interviews the way an oral historian does. Such journalists, David K. Dunaway wrote, are

taught to conduct an interview on a moment's notice, under adverse circumstances, and to ferret out a story, overcoming the reluctance of the subject with a combination of bravado, cunning, and persistence. He or she reached the controversial points fast, evokes a show of emotions, and presents the material all in a short time. The professional oral historian, on the other hand . . . seeks historical detail in interviews, not emotional reactions; relying on the subject's cooperation and on lengthy research, the interview proceeds at a more gradual pace. . . . The final product

¹⁴ Melvin Mencher, *News Reporting and Writing*, 8th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2000), 71; and Carole Rich, *Writing and Reporting the News*, 4th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2003), 405–8, 465.

¹⁵ For an interesting comparison of oral history and anthropology, see Micaela Di Leonardo, "Oral History as Ethnographic Encounter," *Oral History Review* 15 (Spring 1987): 1–20.

¹⁶ See, for example, Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987) and Robert W. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communications Politics in Dubious Times* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999). For a contrary view, see Robert Samuelson, "The Myth of Big Media," *Newsweek* (Aug. 11, 2003).

of a thorough oral history session will be a narrator-approved transcript, deposited in a publicly accessible library or institution. . . . In [broadcast journalism] the end product is also a tape, but one composed of a series of interviews, edited, encapsulated, rearranged, and mixed together with sound effects, music, and sound ambience [*sic*]. . . . This highly crafted tape is often all that is preserved . . . and it is judged by immediate audience response and by the production values demonstrated—not by its value to future generations of scholars.¹⁷

To be sure, interviewing fundamentals are largely the same for journalists and oral historians. Both stress the importance of background research and careful preparation before an interview takes place;¹⁸ both try to make their subjects feel at ease and establish rapport by using verbal cues and body language to encourage, empathize, and show respect.¹⁹ Journalism and oral history manuals both emphasize beginning interviews gently, asking single but direct open-ended questions,²⁰ listening closely to ask appropriate follow-up questions, approaching topics from different angles, postponing sensitive questions,²¹ and ending on an upbeat note.²²

Similarly, both journalists and oral historians use photographs or walking tours to jog the memories of their subjects; both wrestle with how to minimize the distraction of tape recorders,

¹⁷ Dunaway and Blum, 337–9.

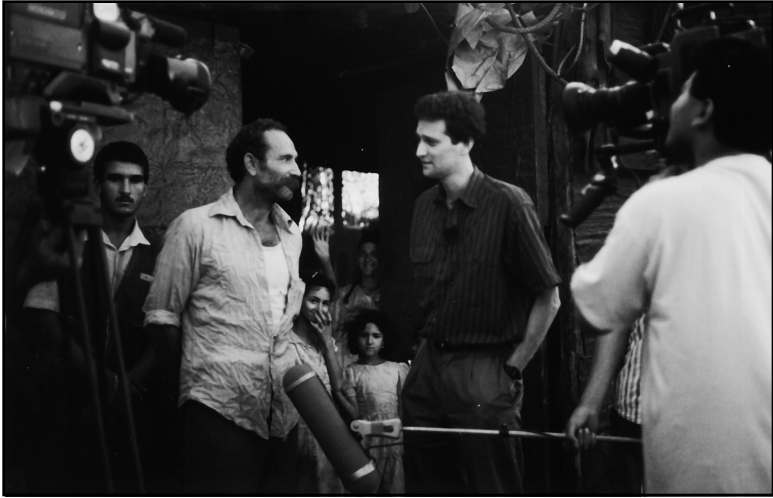
¹⁸ Thompson, 222.

¹⁹ “Accept a cup of tea if it is offered, and be prepared to chat about the family and photographs.” Thompson, 240. As for body language, the rules are somewhat different for broadcast journalists, who generally try to avoid nodding in agreement or other movements that might imply an editorial position. See also Charles T. Morrissey, “The Two-Sentence Format as an Interviewing Technique in Oral History Fieldwork,” *Oral History Review* 15 (Spring 1987): fn4.

²⁰ Morrissey, for example, stresses not to put words in the mouths of subjects (“don’t seek verification of preconclusions”) and to be clear by not ending questions with examples (otherwise “the respondent’s answer will address the examples instead of the question they are meant to illustrate”). Morrissey, 47, fn9. See also Akiba A. Cohen, *The Television News Interview* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1987).

²¹ Experienced interviewers, however, suggest that sensitive questions may be brought up earlier “when the interviewee helpfully alludes to the matter.” Morrissey, fn14.

²² “An interview which ends on a relaxed note is more likely to be remembered as pleasant, and lead on to another.” Thompson, 240. A confrontational investigative reporter once offered a less lofty reason for the same strategy: “You never know who is packing heat.” NBC correspondent Mark Nykanen to author (Phoenix, Arizona: Summer 1979).



Like an oral historian's tape recorder, a television journalist's lights and cameras are essential tools that can be distracting to interviewees. Author interviewing homeless Egyptian squatters for CNN at garbage dump in Cairo, 1991.

television lights, or simple note-taking.²³ Both are acutely aware how the exact wording of a question can utterly change the phrasing of an answer;²⁴ both debate how close to get to their subjects and whether youthful ignorance will extract more honesty than seasoned expertise.²⁵ And both entail elements of

²³ Thompson, 232. Investigative reporters are particularly leery of spooking sources by taking notes in front of them, as Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein explained in their classic *All the President's Men* (New York: Warner Books, 1974). The result of this strategy is that investigative reporters must then reconstruct their notes—and quotes—after the fact, diminishing reliability. Television journalists have a different approach, usually conducting a “pre-interview” to find out what the subject will say on-camera before the final interview is actually taped. In the final minutes before the taping begins, a television reporter will often make chit-chat to try to avoid discussing interview topics until the cameras are rolling; this approach best preserves spontaneity during the taped interview. Mencher, chp. 15.

²⁴ Clever journalists will often phrase their questions carefully to elicit a desired answer; whether this technique helps lead to truth, or manipulatively obscures it, is a matter of opinion. In addition, as Thompson points out, “interviewers carry into the interview both their own expectations and a social manner which affect their findings.” Thompson, 138–39.

²⁵ Thompson refers to this as the difference between an “outsider” and an “insider” conducting the interview: “The insider knows the way round, can be less easily fooled, understands the nuances, and starts with far more useful contacts and, hope-

performance—especially for broadcast journalists.²⁶ Above all else, both know that every interview is a unique, spontaneous interaction for which no pre-existing rules can be definitive.

In some ways, journalists and historians are similarly divided against themselves. While traditional historians and print journalists most value the written word, oral historians and broadcast journalists place more of a premium on spoken communication. In words that could well apply to television journalism as well as oral history, one scholar writes that “the recording is a far more reliable and accurate account of an encounter than a purely written record. All the exact words used are there as they were spoken; and added to them are social clues, the nuances of uncertainty, humor, or pretense, as well as the texture

fully, as an established person of good faith. . . . [T]he outsider can ask for the obvious to be explained; while the insider, who may in fact be misinformed in assuming the answer, does not ask for fear of seeming foolish. The outsider also keeps an advantage in being outside the local social network, more easily maintaining a position of neutrality, and so may be spoken to in true confidentiality, with less subsequent anxiety.” In journalism, CNN host Larry King takes pride in his non-traditional interviewing approach, cherishing his role as outsider to the point that he deliberately does not read the books of authors he will interview on his television show. King argues that this allows him to maintain a proper distance from the subject and bring to the interview an ignorant curiosity that reflects that of his audience. Thompson also points out how differences of race, sex, and class—as well as insider or outsider status—affect the content of interviews. Thompson, 140–41.

²⁶ Print journalists are not necessarily immune from issues of performance, either. *New Yorker* writer Janet Malcolm famously wrote that journalistic interviews are a kind of “confidence game” in which reporters act like chameleons, changing their colors to suit their audience. Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer* (New York: Knopf, 1990). Print journalist Bill Dedman, winner of the Pulitzer prize, has described the purpose of an interview as “getting people to tell you things they wouldn’t tell somebody else.” In both journalism and oral history, performance is affected by the interview location and the presence of other individuals. For the oral historian, “an interview at home will increase the pressure of ‘respectable’ home-centered ideals; an interview in a pub is more likely to emphasize dare-devilry and fun; and an interview in the workplace will introduce the influence of work conventions and attitudes.” For the television journalist, the interview location also provides visual reinforcement: a hospital backdrop reminds viewers of a physician’s medical expertise or a nightclub reinforces a bouncer’s unsavory demeanor. In both history and journalism, “[t]he presence of another person at the interview not only inhibits candour, but subtly pressurizes towards a socially acceptable testimony.” Yet reluctant subjects—from child abuse victims to whistleblowers—may be emboldened by being interviewed in a supportive group setting. Thompson, 142, 234; and James S. Ettema and Theodore Glasser, *Custodians of Conscience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 37. For discussion of another kind of interview performance, see Della Pollock, “Telling the Told: Performing Like a Family,” *Oral History Review* 18 (Fall 1990): 1–36.

of dialect.”²⁷ Oral history and broadcast journalism share an ability to communicate on multiple levels simultaneously—verbal, visual, and textual—as well as a corresponding power to reach more people, literate and illiterate alike.

Nonetheless, the interviewing techniques of journalists and oral historians differ in some crucial ways. For example, while oral historians are trained not to be flustered by silence during an interview,²⁸ journalists often abhor such a vacuum—whether they are print journalists operating under a tight deadline or live television interviewers for whom there is no greater sin than “dead” airtime. Similarly, oral historians are taught that “good interviewers never shine, only their interviews do.”²⁹ But journalists typically shun such monologue-like interviews as boring or inefficient uses of time; television especially encourages a two-way dialogue where the questions by the star correspondent (literally known as the “talent”) sometimes are valued more than the answers of the less famous interviewee.³⁰

Reportorial rudeness is often another big difference between journalists and historians.³¹ Partly it is a matter of mechanics: journalists conduct numerous interviews during a day and don’t have as much time for pleasantries. Partly it is a matter of culture: the non-profit world of academia is simply more genteel than a profit-conscious sharp-elbowed newsroom or a noisy news conference where voices literally must be raised to be heard. But often, journalistic aggression can be a deliberate—and sometimes highly effective—tactic for getting information.

²⁷ Thompson, 126.

²⁸ “[D]o not allow yourself to feel embarrassed by pauses,” Thompson says. “An interview is *not* a dialogue, or a conversation.” Italics in original. Thompson, 238.

²⁹ “Notes on Interviewing,” and “Ten Tips for Interviewers,” Southern Oral History Program, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, www.sohp.org/howto/guide.

³⁰ Robert L. Hilliard, *Writing for Television, Radio, and New Media* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000), 224. When I was an on-camera television correspondent, I would frequently ask questions that were deliberately redundant but which I felt helped reinforce a point my interviewee was making: *So what you’re saying is [summarize]? It’s as simple as that? Are you sure about that?* Such staged questions are not really needed by the oral historian.

³¹ Such rudeness is often more for public show than a measure of true feelings; witness the importance of the Washington reporter’s famous (often liquid) expense account lunch with sources, similar to Thompson’s suggestion that the oral historian provide the interviewee “an ample lunch with drink.” Thompson, 241.

Indeed, while oral historians rarely try to push unwilling subjects into interviews, some journalists simply do not take no for an answer. Investigative reporters especially can be experts at getting information by virtually any means necessary; they might cajole, flatter, trick, seduce, infiltrate, or bully. Only law-breaking and paying for information is proscribed, and even these strictures are occasionally set aside.³²

Unlike journalists, oral historians are coached to be gentle in their interviews.³³ According to oral historian Charles Morrissey, “[a]n adversary relationship might be fruitful in other types of interview situations—Mike Wallace on television’s ‘Sixty Minutes’ or a trial lawyer interrogating a witness in a courtroom trial, trying to undermine the credibility of a witness. But collegiality is effective in an oral history relationship if for no other reason than the fact that the witness in this exchange is not compelled to grant an interview.”³⁴ Of course, no one is compelled to give journalists an interview, either; but they have more power to exert pressure for interviews—and through adverse publicity punish those who do not cooperate—than do oral historians.

As a result, historians generally prefer a more indirect style of interviewing, especially on touchy topics. “Since money is the most sensitive subject in American culture,” Morrissey argues, “the worst way an interviewer can pose such a sensitive question would be a blunt and testy formulation like this: *Where did you get the money?* The answer might be a sharp rejoinder:

³² “The legendary Harry Romanoff, former city editor of the defunct *Chicago Daily American*, once managed to interview mass murderer Richard Speck’s mother by pretending to be Speck’s attorney,” two scholars wrote. “Stories abound about the reporter who calls the scene of some tragedy and tells the voice at the other end, ‘This is Coroner O’Bannion. How many dead ones you got?’ After a pause, according to the story, the voice replies, ‘No, *this* is Coroner O’Bannion. Who the hell are you?’ Often reporters use their own names but imply they are someone else: ‘This is Jones calling from headquarters. Who’d you arrest out there?’” David Anderson and Peter Benjaminson, *Investigative Reporting* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 109. See also Jack Anderson with James Boyd, *Confessions of a Muckraker* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1979), *passim*.

³³ “[I]t is particularly important not to contradict or argue with an informant,” Thompson argues. Thompson, 239.

³⁴ Morrissey, 45.

That's none of your business."³⁵ Morrissey advocates what he calls a "two step format," in which the first part of the question consists of a sympathetic statement ("It is understandable why you chose discretion over disclosure when that decision was announced") followed by the gently worded question ("but now that need no longer persists. What did cause that decision?").³⁶

To a seasoned journalist, however, such an approach is anathema—for a number of reasons. First, it violates norms of objectivity by expressing an opinion, implicitly or explicitly endorsing the interviewee's conduct. Second, it implies deference if not outright servility to public officials, with whom journalists believe they should have an equal relationship. Finally, by journalistic standards, "That's none of your business" is a perfectly acceptable answer, one that may be both more commercially entertaining to readers and viewers, and more enlightening in the truest sense of capturing the interviewee's real feelings.

Indeed, journalists often deliberately provoke or inflame their subjects. Mike Wallace, the CBS correspondent on "Sixty Minutes," compares interviewing to a battle; his razor-edged questions are his weapons of choice. Italian magazine reporter Oriana Fallaci sees interviews as drama; she deliberately insults and accuses her subjects to create an emotional reaction.³⁷ While questioning Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, for example,

³⁵ Morrissey, 51. But not all oral historians advocate neutral questioning. Temple University Prof. William Cutler III acknowledged that while questioners "should always try to know their biases and conceal them as far as possible," nonetheless sometimes "the leading question" can "improve the accuracy of any interview, including those done by oral historians." Cutler cited a public opinion study that found "the same people in a test group gave a comparably small number of distorted answers to both leading and straightforward inquiries." Cutler, "Accuracy in Oral History Interviewing," *Historical Methods Newsletter* 3 (June 1970): 1–7, republished in Dunaway and Baum, 82–3.

³⁶ Morrissey, 51. However, one danger of Morrissey's two-step approach is that it can easily lead to the interviewer's putting words in the subject's mouth.

³⁷ Other metaphors used by journalists for their interviews include "a dance at its best" (ABC's Diane Sawyer) and sex (there is "less foreplay" in "a one-night stand [than] a long-term affair," says writer Ken Auletta). Jack Huber and Dean Diggins, *Interviewing America's Top Interviewers: Nineteen Top Interviewers Tell All About What They Do* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1991), 180.

Fallaci called him a “tyrant” and pulled off the full-length veil that women were forced to wear in Iran.³⁸ “My interviews are *pieces de theatre*,” Fallaci says. “[M]y approach is that of a writer, of a novelist, of a playwright.”³⁹ Fallaci excoriates interviewers who use a more gentle approach: “[S]ince they are cowards, they start with ‘Do you love your mother? Does your mother love you? Do you like summer or winter? When they are at the door, ready to escape, they say, ‘Did you steal the money last night?’”⁴⁰

Obviously, Oriani Fallaci and Mike Wallace are extreme cases, quasi-entertainers in a world of commercial journalism where the lines between show business and news business are increasingly blurred. These extreme examples illustrate the increasing trend toward tabloid fare in much of contemporary journalism.⁴¹ Still, most journalists strive for neutrality.⁴² “The adversarial approach is good for the soul,” argues journalist Nick Pileggi, “but bad for the story.”⁴³ Yet while it may be tempting

³⁸ Khomeini fled until Fallaci put the *chador* back on her face. The Italian journalist was similarly provocative with Ethiopia’s elderly dictator Haile Selassie, who was notoriously sensitive about his age. Fallaci taunted him, saying, “You’re very old and you’re afraid of dying aren’t you?” Selassie started yelling and ended the interview but Fallaci was unrepentant: “I needed the vendetta, the revenge” against the dictator, she said. Fallaci, 23–27.

³⁹ Paradoxically, Fallaci notes that interviewing “has all the earmarks of honesty and can be the most dishonest thing on earth. Each time you read an interview, you should get a copy of the tape to see how things really went.” Fallaci, 22.

⁴⁰ Fallaci claims that if she could interview God, she would ask: “Given the fact that you are a bastard, because you have invented a life that dies, why did you give us death?” Fallaci, 15, 24. For more on Fallaci, see Santo L. Arico, *Oriana Fallaci: The Woman and the Myth* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1998).

⁴¹ See, for example, Downie and Kaiser, *passim*; and Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking, 1985), *passim*.

⁴² David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, *The American Journalist in the 1990s: U.S. News People at the End of an Era* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996), 137, 170.

⁴³ Huber, 7. During my own work as a journalist, I often found that despite the television interviewer’s customary antipathy to dead airtime, silence can elicit the most damning admissions of all. “I don’t charge extra for rats, they come free when I rent the property,” one slumlord eventually told me on-camera. Similarly, a negligent gynecologist responded to my silence by stating, “Oh, I’ve lacerated many women’s [*sic*] uteruses, this is no big deal.” Mark Feldstein, “See No Evil,” WTSP-TV (St. Petersburg, FL: March, 1981); and Mark Feldstein, “Investigation of Dr. Milan Vuitch,” WDVM-TV (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 1984).

to dismiss adversarial tactics merely as self-promoting theatrics that generate more heat than light, this confrontational style has led political leaders to blurt out embarrassing admissions that they undoubtedly would not have acknowledged in a more conventional interview.⁴⁴ While an adversarial approach would be disastrously inappropriate for social history interviews of, say, uneducated peasants, it can elicit from elites uniquely passionate, spontaneous truths that would otherwise never be unearthed. Sometimes fire's heat can also produce light.⁴⁵

* * *

In the same way that journalism and oral history both share similar techniques, so, too, do they share similar issues about empathy, ethics, and evidence. In both disciplines, empathy can be not just a tactic to improve interviewing results but a genuine by-product of the interviewing process. "I wanted to write about her," historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall explained of one of her subjects; "I also wanted to befriend her."⁴⁶ This dilemma is classic in journalism as well—how close can a reporter get to a source?—and is often centered around notions of objectivity. Sometimes, the *lack* of empathy—even loathing—toward a subject is what stands out, for both journalist and historian. Interviewers may also discover the truth of Hannah Arendt's classic characterization of evil as surprisingly banal.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ A classic example is a Fallaci interview with former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, whom she goaded into immodestly revealing that he fancied himself a "cowboy who leads the wagon train by riding ahead alone" on his horse. Huber, 29.

⁴⁵ Even Thompson seems to concede this point, but only in cases of politically incorrect interviewees: "Fascists and capitalists who knew which side I was on often gave me much more vivid and motivated accounts and explanations than if they had blandly assumed I shared their party or class line." But why should interviewees from the left be exempt from this more adversarial interviewing style? Thompson concedes that the famous "good cop/bad cop" style of interrogation—also used with great effectiveness by investigative journalists—has its usefulness in oral history: "This argumentative technique clearly depends on some sort of common membership of a social group, and partly on knowing exactly how far the challenge may be pressed." Thompson, 243–44.

⁴⁶ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Open Secrets: Memory, Imagination, and the Refashioning of Southern Identity," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (March 1998): 120.

⁴⁷ See, for example, Kathleen M. Blee, "Evidence, Empathy, and Ethics: Lessons from Oral Histories of the Klan," *Journal of American History* 80 (Sept. 1993): 596–606.



Both journalists and oral historians face issues of evidence, empathy, and ethics. Here the author interviews a retarded man who was sexually abused by his foster father and later died of AIDS.

As for ethics, journalists and academics tend to look at the subject differently.⁴⁸ For journalists, ethics is largely a matter of weighing which means can be used to achieve which ends: for example, is it acceptable to “bluff” a source into revealing something incriminating—telling a lie in order to uncover the truth?⁴⁹ For historians, ethical debates do not center on such issues of technique—which are generally much more straightforward—but on the interviewer’s relationship with the subject. Thus, academics worry about the often unequal status between interviewer and interviewee. “I felt guilty for ‘stealing’ informants’ private lives for my own gain,” one social scientist wrote, “and attempted to give something back by demonstrating how I valued these individuals and their narratives.”⁵⁰ Journalists are not

⁴⁸ Not completely, of course. One commonality: the debate about whether to “clean up” a subject’s ungrammatical quotes in transcripts, which are generally more accessible than original recordings. Here, the debate often centers on whether the accurate transcribing of vernacular is a form of elitist condescension. See Di Leonardo, 14.

⁴⁹ John Brady, *The Craft of Interviewing* (Cincinnati: Writer’s Digest Books, 1976), 94; and Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 107–22.

⁵⁰ Brady, 94. One academic even worried about the ethics of using President Richard Nixon’s White House tape recordings since they were made surreptitiously “in a

immune from this concern, but typically tend to view it less as an ethical issue than as a practical one; constrained by limits of time and space, reporters focus largely on what will help or hinder their news-gathering. “Tell them everything, the most personal details about yourself and your life,” journalist Richard Reeves coolly advises. “As human beings, [subjects] respond in kind, only their answers appear in print.”⁵¹ When journalists try to “give something back,” it is more often because of a calculated strategy than feelings of guilt; thus television producers hand out baseball caps and other trinkets to their more lowly interview subjects while investigative reporters swap confidential information with their elite sources.

Similarly, while journalists often joke that the range of their stories varies from “the White House to the outhouse,” oral historians approach the question of social mixing with much greater solemnity. “Information can bring together people from different social classes and age groups who would otherwise rarely meet, let alone get to know each other closely,” Thompson observes. “And through entering into the lives of their informants, they gain more understanding of values which they do not share, and often respect for the courage shown in lives much less privileged than their own.”⁵² Journalists, on the other hand, rarely wax poetic about this important aspect of their work; maybe they are more hardened—or simply less reflective—about it.⁵³

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manner that violates the code passed unanimously” by the Oral History Association. “Anguished objections to Nixon-as-historian are based on his violations of every tenet [*sic*] in [the OHA’s] *Goals and Guidelines*. . . . As users, we want them made available to the public. As producers, we can never approve of the methods used by the White House.” Such ethical fastidiousness, however well-intentioned, seems misplaced. What more reliable historical source could possibly exist than real-time recordings uncontaminated by subsequent sanitizing or memory failures? Such a unique historical treasure trove deserves to be embraced by historians and journalists alike. Amelia Fry, “Reflections on Ethics,” *Oral History Review* 3 (1975): 17–28, as republished in Dunaway and Blum, 151, 161.

⁵¹ Brady, 53–54.

⁵² Thompson, 12.

⁵³ Journalists rarely explain their methodology in any depth in articles or broadcasts. Some reporters have discussed their techniques in memoirs, but as a result have been criticized within the profession as being self-aggrandizing. These include Woodward and Bernstein, *All the President’s Men*; and Anderson and Boyd, *Confessions of a Muckraker*.

Perhaps the most important difference between journalists and historians is in their approach toward evidence. To be sure, both disciplines try to sift carefully through oral and written materials, evaluating whether individual anecdotes and stories symbolize larger trends and truths.⁵⁴ Both grapple with the quandary of whether to use anonymous or disguised sources, weighing whether the additional information gathered is worth the dangers such concealed evidence-gathering brings with it.⁵⁵ And both are characterized by practitioners who range the gamut from superb to shoddy.⁵⁶

But unlike journalism, where articles and broadcasts publicize only small portions of interviews, oral history often makes its interviews available for public inspection *in their entirety*. This is a crucial difference in two important respects. First, unlike journalism, where interview “sequences are edited, and shortened and intercut with other material,” oral history interviews “should be seen as the creation of an original document or artifact. Historians would not be pleased, on discovering an important written document for the first time, to find that pieces had been physically and irretrievably removed—so why accept

⁵⁴ See, for example, Samuel Schrager, “What is Social in Oral History?” *International Journal of Oral History* 4 (June 1983): 76–98.

⁵⁵ Journalists routinely denounce overuse of anonymous sources even as they engage in it on a daily basis. Similarly, while many oral historians (like Donald Ritchie) criticize anonymity, others (like Theodore Rosengarten) disguise their sources. Ritchie, 100; Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Avon Books, 1974). For a deconstruction of the journalistic abuse of anonymous sources in a fascinating case study, see Steven Brill, “Pressgate,” *Brill's Content* (Aug. 1998): 122–51. Anthropologists frequently disguise their sources but more unequivocally defend the practice as necessary to pry out “harmful or embarrassing facts. . . . The tradition of protecting informants' identities is . . . deeply and unselfconsciously part of anthropological training.” Di Leonardo, 5.

⁵⁶ By rigorous journalistic standards—an admitted oxymoron in many cases—some works of oral history can be viewed as wanting. For example, a close reading of Constance Curry's oral history of desegregation suggests that she repeats hearsay second-hand quotes without identifying them as such; restates her subjects' rendition of events as unqualified fact without attribution; and “cleans up” interview quotes so that subjects speak with seamless eloquence. Curry, *Silver Rights* (New York: Harcourt, 1995), 10, 30, 70, 87, *passim*. Jack Dougherty has also criticized Curry for failing to interview other families involved in desegregation, an omission Dougherty claims is a typical failing of oral history; however, this would once again seem more the failure of an individual practitioner than of oral history as a methodology. Dougherty, “From Anecdote to Analysis: Oral Interviews and New Scholarship in Educational History,” *Journal of American History* 86 (Sept. 1999): 712–23.

unqualified edited testimony?”⁵⁷ Second, by preserving the entirety of oral history interviews, other scholars can check the material for accuracy, context, and nuance.⁵⁸ Unlike journalism, oral history can be independently *verified*—a fundamental requirement of scientific inquiry.⁵⁹

This approach has a downside, of course; it is time-consuming, costly, and can easily lead to wasted effort. “With the appearance of the tape recorder, a monster with the appetite of a tapeworm, we now have, though its creature Oral History, an artificial survival of trivia of appalling proportions,” complained Barbara Tuchman, the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer of popular history. “[W]ith all sorts of people being invited merely to open their mouths, and ramble effortlessly and endlessly into a tape recorder, prodded daily by an acolyte of Oral History, a few veins of gold and a vast mass of trash are being preserved which would otherwise have gone to dust. We are drowning ourselves in unneeded information.”⁶⁰ Of course, what information turns out to be “unneeded” lies—like beauty—in the eye of the beholder. Perhaps future historians will mine oral history interviews and discover gold in what Tuchman dismissed as garbage. At least that possibility is preserved, thanks to oral history collections, for posterity.

* * *

Like kissing cousins, then, journalism and oral history are both related and separate. Their reliance on interviews leads to similar if not identical techniques; their interactions with human subjects raise similar issues of empathy and ethics. Yet the two disciplines operate in different spheres of time and ultimately

⁵⁷ Ken Howarth, *Oral History* (Gloucestershire, UK: Sutton Publishing, 1999), 8–9. British spelling is unchanged.

⁵⁸ “Availability for general research, reinterpretation, and verification defines oral history,” Ritchie writes. “By preserving the tapes and transcripts of their interviews, oral historians seek to leave as complete, candid, and reliable a record as possible.” Ritchie, 6.

⁵⁹ Not always, of course; oral histories of non-elites often cannot be verified by written documentation. However, by preserving the tapes and transcripts, at least the oral histories themselves can be authenticated.

⁶⁰ Oral history novices, Charles Morrissey observed wryly, often confuse the tape recorder and the vacuum cleaner. Dunaway and Blum, 76, 116.

have different ends. Their very differences of purpose highlight how each might learn from the other. However unlikely and commercially unnecessary, journalism would do well to emulate oral history's exhaustive and nuanced approach to research evidence—most especially its preservation of interview transcripts that allow public inspection and verification. Conversely, the oral historian would do well to emulate the journalist's more seasoned approach to interviewing—increasing the quantity of interviews and expanding the range of interviewing approaches, including use of adversarial encounters. Journalism and oral history will always be cousins, not twins; but their very similarities help showcase their unique differences.