A Closer Look at Community Partnerships

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Abstract: This article charts the early planning stages of a community oral history and civil rights project designed for radio. Along with documenting the intricacies of a community partnership, it explores how the digital age complicates informed consent and challenges our ability to uphold access and use restrictions promised to narrators.

Keywords: civil rights era, community partnerships, digital age, ethics, informed consent and access, legal ownership

History runs deep in the small, storied town of Yellow Springs, Ohio. Arguably a champion of early racial and cultural diversity since its establishment, the village was a cultural nook in the conservative Ohio valley in post–World War II times. High-ranking blacks stationed at nearby Wright Patterson Air Force Base joined the community, many purchasing property during a time when access to home loans was very difficult. Blacks were leaders of the police force, the village council, and the public schools, prior to the social activism that marked the late 1960s. But Yellow Springs' racial diversity did not excuse the community from a rough-and-tumble time during the nationwide struggle for civil rights. The village witnessed its own downtown riot due to the continued refusal of a local barber to cut black hair. During the riot, an attending black police chief, county forces, and eager college youth amplified and added complexity to the already intense times. While still considered a haven of diversity by many, the village has become statistically whiter and more affluent over time, and its excellent public schools consistently and persistently bring about less excellent results for youth of color.

Under these circumstances, it came as no surprise that multiple community organizations were planning to interview community members about historical and contemporary diversity in Yellow Springs. One, the James A. McKee Group,

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founded by the village's first black police chief, was seeking to return to its roots. The products of an earlier series of interviews with community elders from the 1980s were thought to exist in a previous member's home, but the boxes of cassette tapes could not be located. Inspired by the ease of recording and sharing interviews with contemporary technology, the group's members sought to collect a contemporary series of interviews, recorded by volunteers at the local public access channel and broadcast as a series on television and online. The Yellow Springs Historical Society would help, and the Greene County African American Genealogy Study Group brought a connection to the county library system that could prove important as the project unfolded.

Meanwhile, WYSO Public Radio, whose roots and studios are in Yellow Springs, had just completed the work of an American Archive Pilot Project Grant from the Corporation of Public Broadcasting. WYSO was one of a few radio stations nationwide to receive funding based on its impressive civil rights–era holdings. These holdings included raw recordings of the riot in downtown Yellow Springs, Black Panther meetings held in Antioch College student spaces, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech on the mound at commencement in 1965. The pilot project allowed the station to hire an archivist, organize its collections, and build the foundations of a digital repository using the streamlined PB Core standards. WYSO designed a further partnership with the Greene County Public Library to bring some two hundred hours of newly digitized recordings into MARC records, making the audio accessible worldwide through a simple library search.

When the two groups learned of each other, WYSO was in the midst of an application to the local community foundation for a small grant to fund the purchase of six field recording kits, with plans to train a core of volunteers who would interview community elders. These first-person narratives would supplement the historical recordings now digitized in the WYSO Audio Archive. The first meeting between the various organizations that made up these two efforts brought a clear consensus: the groups would form a consortium and do this work together.

First Steps

Members representing each organization met together as a planning committee, and a WYSO graduate assistant (myself) was appointed to function as the project coordinator. The first question to arise was fairly straightforward: what was the goal of our interview project? The interests of those on the committee ranged from purely historical questions about what had happened in the community at a certain time to very contemporary questions about racial parity and how those of color experience living in the village now. The historically strong role of African American leaders in the community was a common thread

through everything the committee discussed, and there was certainty that the initiative should not focus on the African American perspective so exclusively that the role of white citizen activists during the Civil Rights Movement would be excluded.

These questions remained on the table for many months, only to be reexamined each time the committee met. As we dug deeper into how the interviews would be conducted, under what guidelines and standards, and within what timeline, a few things became apparent. We decided it would be wise to allow ourselves to consider the project in phases. This freed us up to make decisions about how to conduct the first phase of interviewing, without having to close ourselves off from possibility, growth, and new ideas.

The audio from key moments in Yellow Springs' history provided a taproot for the project's first phase focus and gave us cause to focus intensely on the village's civil rights milestones. As a result, the first phase interviewees revealed themselves: the many community members with direct experience of the struggle for civil rights who were now in their eighties. Each member of the planning committee nominated individuals they thought might have a perspective to share. These names were entered into a spreadsheet. We tracked which planning committee members nominated which community members in one column of our spreadsheet, and then we flagged those who were estimated to be 80 years of age or older. This first stage process found us with the names of 108 individuals, of which 20 to 40 were considered a priority for interviews because of their advanced age and multiple nominations.

Interview Methodology

We introduced the *Principles and Best Practices* document of the Oral History Association early in our process as the guiding standard for interview methodology in a community interview project. As most members were unfamiliar with the document, in some ways it led to more questions than it answered: Was there a right way and a wrong way to have conversations within our community? Would our interviews be conducted by historically well-versed volunteers in a structured attempt to glean historical information? We felt that we did want to better understand the village's history through these interviews—the archived historical audio would benefit from our effort. But what the group really wanted was to catch the character of the time. We came to the understanding that we wanted stories: memories of people and places that could no longer be experienced and a more nuanced understanding of a particular moment recorded a long time ago. In this way, we knew we were conducting a historically focused project.

On the other hand, we recognized that how things are in the present would soon be history. That is, if our narrators talked about contemporary issues

surrounding diversity and race relations in Yellow Springs, we would welcome those conversations. Contemporary times always color our view of the past, and we felt our collection of interviews would be stronger (with more context and nuance for future researchers) if we allowed for and encouraged conversation on the present state of life in Yellow Springs.

In the end, we decided to adopt a life story interview approach. Through the pre-interview consultation, our narrators would come to understand that they were participating in a project driven by an interest in the community's civil rights history. But the interviews would begin with reflection on each interviewee's origins and how they came to find themselves in Yellow Springs. Next, a focused set of questions developed by the planning committee would gird the center of each interview in an attempt to ensure depth and some consistency of topics across the interviews. Then the interviews would be allowed to float toward contemporary times and take a reflective turn. Toward the end, interviewers would ask questions about the implications of events or trends and create an opportunity for each interviewee to pause on any topic that seemed rich. In the digital age, interview length is only restricted by the size of a memory card; thus, we felt we could allow the breadth of each interview to unfold in an organic fashion, as long as we sought the depth we desired with focused questions that highlighted the historical timeline we sought to explore.

Ethics

As the project manager, I found myself continually navigating questions of ethics and best practice as we delved into designing our community project. I found the *Principles and Best Practices* of the Oral History Association to be an invaluable document for catalyzing the necessary conversations with my community partners, but I found this document to be sorely lacking when we pulled the edge of the rug up and began to consider the details and implications of choosing one approach over another. I consulted the older guidelines, the association's *Evaluation Guidelines*, and took some comfort in the more detailed recommendations for practice found therein. The older guidelines helped us navigate the relationship of the interviewer to the narrator and the responsibilities and obligations that are implicit to that relationship.

Where I felt our interviews might stretch beyond the practice of oral history, per se, I consulted other organizations' standards of practice as well. The *Statement of Ethical and Professional Responsibilities* of the American Association of Applied Anthropologists helped bring to light all of the constituent groups we should consider ourselves in service to, while the *Statement of the American Folklore Society On Research with Human Subjects* helped us locate our project within a sometimes controversial social inquiry tradition seeking to understand the experience of disenfranchised and disempowered groups. It became clear

that we needed much more than an abiding interest in our community's history to do right by this project. As the planning committee came to imagine the conversations we would be having with community members, the kind of care and concern we needed to devote to our project's foundations became clear.

Informed Consent and Access

Once we had collected a good number of interviews, we asked ourselves what we might do with the material. Our sense of the project's goals evolved over time and included implementing a digital archive tool to index themes within the interviews. (We would not seek to transcribe, as we considered audio to be the primary source for everything we would do.) We expected that we would produce an audio documentary or series for WYSO, that portions of the interviews would air on our local cable access channel, and that individual researchers or local documentary makers might be excited to access the community history for their own purposes. We considered that the trends in our history might be of interest outside the community and that there was a chance our project could highlight general trends in the Midwest. We also considered the possibility that a few key community members could be seen as archetypal in their personalities or the roles they played so as to generate interest in them as representative of a place and time.

With our speculative audience in mind (a potentially larger audience than we first thought), we began to imagine use scenarios. The first concern raised by planning committee members was one of economic rights. Could someone make a for-profit production out of the experience of our community, with no economic obligation to the participants? The second set of concerns to arise dealt with words and meaning being taken out of context and used in a spoof piece or Internet "mash-up" that could be made by someone hoping to stir up controversy. Throughout, we found we couldn't deny that we were mostly white organizations seeking to collect and disseminate the thoughts of mostly black community members. We would need to be sensitive to this reality. We decided that access would be open to anyone willing to come into the WYSO studios for a listen. There would be an access log and a signed permissible use statement. The only uses granted would be educational- or research-related, with any productions from the content being wholly nonprofit in nature.

But the realities of the digital age quickly swept in. As easily as digital sound can be played through computer speakers, a copy can be made and instantly distributed through multiple venues. With media-editing software intrinsic to most computers and many phones, the possibility that someone's words could be edited and reproduced is ever present. Even sharing news about the project through social media venues produces the chance of putting a narrator's words within earshot of someone they might not have conceived as a probable listener.

The basic truth we had to accept is that you simply cannot control access or dissemination in the digital age. You can set access restrictions, but you cannot promise potential narrators that you have the technological means to enforce those access restrictions. This latter point was especially important to those planning committee members who emphasized the power dynamics involved in interviewing a disadvantaged minority group. We proceeded with a sober take on our mission and our vision, with a deep and abiding commitment to honesty in our informed consent process.

Ownership and Legalities

Along with the question of who would have access to the recordings came additional questions. Whose interviews were they anyway? The initial desire around the planning committee table was that each organization—and the interviewers themselves—should have a copy of each interview that was "theirs." But as our legal rights and responsibilities became more apparent, the tone of the conversation shifted. It was no longer about who would get to hold a copy of the interviews. Instead, who would have the responsibility of upholding the legal agreement between the project, the interviewer, and the narrator? Who would be responsible for maintaining the interviews into perpetuity?

Oral history generally provides certain legal rights to both the interviewer and the narrator. Each has a copyright stake in the recorded conversation as it is an original co-creation. When interviews are collected and held by an archive, those rights are transferred to the archive, with certain conditions placed on what they will and will not allow for access and use. The planning committee had resources to access to begin navigating the legal process. WYSO was no stranger to the legalities surrounding contemporary and historic audio holdings. Having brought in StoryCorps for a regional project helped, as the station had its more detailed release form, with an implicit connection to radio, to consult. Also, our local community access channel had its own release forms central to their audiovisual archive. Those narrators who agreed for their interview to be both audio- and video-recorded would sign both organizations' release forms.

We drafted a document based on a basic oral history release form template with some added language about the forms of transmission and dissemination involved in radio both now and in the future. Like most release forms, the WYSO form allows for both the interviewer and the narrator to sign their copyright and permissions over to WYSO and its licensee. Often, the interviewer and the narrator retain copyright of their own copy of the interview. But the planning committee found that we would be unable to uphold our end of the informed consent agreement if the interviewers maintained their own copy that they could use and disseminate as they deemed fit. Instead, we conceived of each interviewer for the project to be in a work-for-hire situation; although serving as

volunteers, the interviewers were conducting interviews on behalf of the project and not as individual researchers. A work-for-hire form was drafted for inclusion in the interviewer training packet, stating that volunteer project interviewers hold no copyright but are welcome to access and use recordings per the agreement as described in the release.

The planning committee also wrestled with another question: what if a narrator agreed to participate in the project but wished to place some sort of access restriction on their recorded interview? Most often, these restrictions are in place for a certain period of time or until the narrator's death. While we respect the convention, the planning committee found that WYSO was not necessarily in a position to maintain individual restrictions and consents into perpetuity. It was the will of the planning committee to recommend someone with such needs to a larger repository.

The release form went to the WYSO/Antioch University attorney, resulting in a couple rounds of minor edits. This document is introduced and explained during the pre-interview conversation with a potential narrator. The five organizations dedicated to creating this project share the same access permissions as the general public. That is, the ownership of the interviews lies solely with the narrators, and their assignment of the legal obligation to use and maintain them according to the written agreement lies solely with WYSO as the archive for those interviews. The planning committee and the representative organizations then function as a meta-group, existing solely to facilitate the project and engage the community.

Conclusions

It is imperative to invest in the planning stage. A planning committee should include representatives from a broad demographic and community members who can contribute insight and sensitivity over a sustained period of time, long enough that the deeper questions can unfold as the layers of the onion are peeled back. A project that lacks a solid foundation is a project destined to create more problems than it seeks to explore.

The digital age complicates already complex issues that must be navigated and thoroughly addressed before moving out of the planning stage. Informed consent and access stipulations form a recursive loop, and lack of foresight in one creates serious restrictions in the other. Be careful what you promise, as technology can deftly disable your ability to control access and dissemination. Participants deserve to understand both the standards of practice a project chooses to uphold and the spectrum of possibility. Ownership and economic rights are serious concerns for many community members, sometimes especially so for those from historically disadvantaged groups. It takes time to unpack rights and responsibilities.

With five organizations sharing a simultaneous drive to conduct a community interview project, we thought we would be interviewing in one to two months time. Yet more than two years were spent building the training and outreach phase of our community project. There were losses during our delay. A few community members passed before we could seek to catch their story, heightening the already great sense of loss felt when a community loses an elder. Yet we go forward with some assurance that we understand the intricacies and nuances of collecting and sharing the life experience of our neighbors. We are prepared to uphold our duties to this good work but only because we spent the time necessary to understand its challenges.

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