



Oral History Interviews in the AUC DAR Repository

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Oral narrative is a unique and valuable form of primary historical resource. Oral history interviews provide researchers the rare opportunity to learn about society, culture, and history from individuals' actual experiences. Details, such as tone, emotion, and sometimes even body language, express a distinct perspective of an event, person, or situation that can often be interpreted an infinite number of ways.¹ Such details help to reveal hidden information and fill gaps in the material historical record by providing a context and interpretation, complementing existing text, photographs, and other physical historical resources to create a comprehensive historical picture.²

While highly treasured, recordings of personal accounts are exceedingly difficult for researchers to discover, much less locate and obtain access. Digital and online technologies do, however, offer great promise to improve use of and access to oral history collections. Digital recording provides a more flexible high quality product, and digital files are inexpensive to store, and easier to preserve through migration from one format to the next.³

In addition to extending access to materials into the future by preserving them, digital formats also allow for many more versatile access options, including online availability. The potential for international exposure increases discoverability of materials, stimulates interest in oral history collections, and inspires other organizations to digitize and make available their collections. Interviews can be discovered through search engines, library catalogs, and web sites, and made available to researchers who could not otherwise obtain access to them because of physical or geographic constraints. Online retrieval systems that provide access to digital materials also provide researchers options to search and browse collections, and more easily identify related materials. These systems also benefit the curators of digital collections by semi-automating preservation and cataloging processes, helping create a more efficient workflow.⁴

However, widespread dissemination of oral history resources has yet to be realized. Many organizations face a number challenges when it comes to digitizing and making interviews available online, and it is easy to assume that valuable resources are not being used to the extent they could be because of researchers' inability to locate and access them.⁵ Conversion from analog to digital media is an expensive and time-consuming process, and becoming more so as equipment to handle analog media becomes obsolete. In many organizations recorded material makes up a very small portion of overall collections, and so is often given a low priority for processing. Also, lack of technical expertise to

develop an online access system and the support to maintain it is also a challenge for many oral history organizations.⁶

The Economic and Business History Research Center (EBHRC) at the American University in Cairo (AUC) recognized the benefits of making their oral history resources available online, and they have a distinct advantage over other organizations. Collection of oral histories is a significant activity of the Center, so processing their material is a very high priority, and much of their collection is already in digital form, having been digitally recorded or converted early on. As a result of their interest and circumstances, the EBHRC was asked to participate in a pilot project as part of the development of the AUC Digital Archive and Research (DAR) Repository to place their oral history interviews online, making them more visible and accessible. The AUC DAR Repository, implemented by University Academic Computing Technologies (UACT) and the Libraries and Learning Technologies, is intended to improve scholarly communication across campus, and make AUC's special research resources available to the global academic community. This collaborative effort between the EBHRC, the Libraries, and UACT has so far resulted in a prototype collection of digital oral histories online.⁷

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Fouad_Sultan-final.pdf	transcript	317.34 kB	Adobe PDF	View/Open
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As a "Trusted Digital Repository" the DAR Repository provides technical and organizational support and expertise to ensure long term preservation and maintenance of the EBHRC's digital oral history interviews.⁸ The platform on which the Repository is based, an open source software package originally developed by MIT and HP called DSpace⁹, is the most popular repository platform used in government and academic organizations. The user friendly interface and customizable features can accommodate

any researcher, whether they are looking for an individual interview, interviews on a particular subject, or specific information within a single interview.¹⁰ It offers a variety of search and browse options for researchers, such as keyword searching, and browsing by interviewee, subject, or date. Related items can also be associated in a variety of ways. For example, recordings and transcripts in different formats can be attached to the same interview record. An interview record can also be linked to related digital material evidence, such as photographs, letters, or other documentation.

The Repository takes full advantage of the online environment by adhering to established metadata standards and controlled vocabulary. Compliance with the widely accepted Dublin Core¹¹ metadata standard and Open Access Initiative-Protocol for Metadata Harvesting¹² allows the oral histories to be easily discovered within the repository itself, as well as incorporated into external systems like the AUC Library catalog. Also, by initiating Handle¹³ registration, each oral history record is assigned a unique permanent web address to enable retrieval via Internet search engines, and prevent broken links as web sites change or disappear.

Highly organized technical infrastructure and archiving policies surrounding the Repository facilitate long term preservation of the EBHRC's digital collections. Policies regarding preservation formats, migration schedules and procedures, and storage requirements are established to ensure access to the interviews for future generations of researchers. University technology offices provide reliable storage facilities and technical support to ensure that the system functions properly, and to customize aspects of the system to meet the specific needs and purposes of AUC's collections and researchers.

One of the most important aspects of the Repository is how the system allows the EBHRC to maintain institutional control over their collection.¹⁴ Instead of relinquishing control to an external entity to make the interviews more accessible, they are able to describe, store, and make them available internally, preserving the context within which the interviews were originally created and collected. Professional staff in the Center who are most familiar with the interview content and their researchers' needs compile the descriptive information, including interview summaries and keyword terms. Researchers from anywhere in the world can discover and locate the interviews available at the EBHRC, but access to the actual recordings and/or transcripts can be granted according to established policies. For example, access can be restricted in cases where online availability was not specifically addressed in intellectual property documentation. There is also concern that interviewees may be hesitant to discuss sensitive topics knowing that their words could be much more visible if available online.¹⁵ Access and use of material in such cases can be closely monitored when providing access through an institutional repository.

The resulting collection of oral history interviews and the process through which it was developed will act as a model for future digital archiving projects. It is an exceptional example of what is possible through intra-organizational collaborative efforts. Administrators of the Repository established an effective workflow, including training procedures and documentation, and refined the policy framework for the institutional repository. And the EBHRC is now able to make their one-of-a-kind oral history resources available to a wider user community, helping to raise the profile of AUC's research efforts. The DAR Repository program encourages other academic and research departments on campus to play

an active role in preservation and accessibility of their scholarly accomplishments and special digital resources.

ENDNOTES

¹ Stevens, Kimberly Weatherford, Bethany Latham. "Giving Voice to the Past: Digitizing Oral History." *OCLC Systems & Services*. 25.3 (2009): 212-220. *Emerld*. Web. 10 March 2010.

² Alexander, Ben. "Excluding Archival Silences: Oral History and Historical Absence." *Archival Science*. 6:1 (2006): 1-11. *SpringerLink*. Web. 10 March 2010.

³ Webb, Colin, Kevin Bradley. "Preserving Oral History Recordings." *Ariadne Magazine*. UKOLN, 14 March 1997. Web. 11 March 2010.

⁴ Evens, Tom, Laurence Hauttekeete. "Unlocking Audio: Towards an Online Repository of Spoken Word Collections in Flanders." *D-Lib Magazine*. May/June 2009. Web. 10 March 2010.

⁵ Committee on Oral History of the Society of American Archivists. "Oral History and Archivists: Some Questions to Ask." *The American Archivist*. 36:3 (1973): 361-365. Print.

⁶ Evens.

⁷ Economic and Business History Research Center Oral Histories Collection, <http://dar.aucegypt.edu:8080/jspui/handle/10526/89>.

⁸ Research Libraries Group. *Trusted Digital Repositories: Attributes and Responsibilities*. May 2002. Web. October 2009.

⁹ DSpace, <http://www.dspace.org/>.

¹⁰ Committee on Oral History of the Society of American Archivists.

¹¹ Dublin Core Metadata Initiative, <http://dublincore.org/>.

¹² Open Archives Initiative, <http://www.openarchives.org/pmh/>.

¹³ Handle System, <http://www.handle.net/>.

¹⁴ Evens.

¹⁵ Committee on Oral History of the Society of American Archivists.