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People Profile: Doug Boyd

Editor

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Hoops and Horses ...
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reading rooms, boxes of tapes and stacks of printed transcripts.

Oral history is a complex information package with separate components: audio/video, text, and metadata. A further complication is that the audio/video interview or its textual representation is usually rather lengthy. Although the different components of the interview (audio/video, transcripts, and metadata) are relational, they are mostly treated as separate items by the typical content delivery system. One can search text and metadata extensively, but when it comes to linking the text or metadata with the specific correlate embedded in the audio and video interview, the systems usually fall quite short of user expectations.

In my imagined “model” online oral history interface, I wanted the words of the transcript and metadata to interact with the words and concepts embedded in the recording. I wanted to explore a solution that presented this information package according to a series of rules I refer to as LESS: Logical, Effective, Simple and, most importantly, Scalable. This seemed essential as I contemplate access to an oral history collection of nearly 8,000 interviews approaching 30,000 hours of content.

UK Libraries’ Digital Programs had already begun experimenting with a system that inserts time markers in the transcript text. I worked with Eric Weig, Head of Digital Programs, to redesign an interface to search full text of transcripts and display time landmarks within the transcript. These landmarks in the transcript are hot-linked to provide access points to the correlating segments in the audio recording.

The new oral history interface empowers users to search and navigate within one minute of the search result in the corresponding audio file. Users can quickly navigate the audio, transcript and metadata, and both discover and pinpoint the specific textual or conceptual information they seek. (See Figure 1: New KDL Oral on page 26.)

History Interface

In addition to redesigning the user interface, we needed to dramatically redesign the process for preparing the interviews for online delivery utilizing embedded time landmarks in the new interface. We developed a custom software solution we call OHMS (Oral History Metadata gatherer and Synchronizer). OHMS guides the audio and text synchronization and additional metadata gathering, as well as serves as a project management tool for synchronizing and uploading the resultant interview. As the synchronizing process performed manually can be quite tedious and error prone, OHMS’ game-like quality and workflow enhance the experience and provide a more precisely synchronized end product. OHMS has made the process of time chunking the interviews more accurate and efficient as a Nunn Center employee can sync an hour-long interview now in approximately 12 minutes.

The Keightley project was the perfect project with which to debut the new oral history interface and to refine our OHMS workflow. The project was featured prominently on the front page of the sports section in the Lexington Herald Leader, and our radio segments won two statewide awards including an Associated Press Award for Best Sports Feature. Excerpts from Keightley’s interviews were featured at many University of Kentucky basketball games, the Keightley interviews were used online several thousands of times over the course of the basketball season and beyond. On each segment listeners heard, “The Bill Keightley Oral History project is available at the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History at the University of Kentucky Libraries and can be accessed online at http://www.kdl.kyvl.org.”

The high profile of the Bill Keightley project succeeded for the Nunn Center on many levels. However, the project benefited our larger library and archives efforts as well. The Keightley project opened the door to discussions with the UK Athletics and renewed interest in the development of a formal athletics archive. The UK Athletics gave $50,000 to digitize and make portions of their Athletics Archives holdings accessible online. Athletics programs, especially at schools like UK, have the financial ability to assist in both oral history and archival efforts that ultimately pay good dividends to athletics. Our modest oral history project on “Mr. Wildcat” has been used as major leverage to advance efforts the UK Libraries had been trying to accomplish for decades.

Oral history provides tremendous opportunities for an academic research library to collect crucial primary source materials for their special collections. But it can also be a tremendous tool for outreach and community engagement. The Nunn Center, a fairly nimble entity in the library system, has traditionally taken a proactive and intentional approach to oral history projects, recognizing gaps in the historical record and acting to construct relevant and historically important projects. The Nunn Center’s underlying principles have always involved strategically planning our projects, cultivating relationships and collaborations to successfully implement innovative projects, and recognizing opportunities.

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