

## A short Introduction to the Hidden Histories project and interviews

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### Abstract

This article offers a short introduction to the Hidden Histories project and to the five interviews that have been selected for publication here.

The project entitled “Hidden Histories: Computing and the Humanities c. 1949-1980” was a pilot project undertaken thanks to seed funding of 5000 euro from the University of Trier’s Historisch-Kulturwissenschaftliche Forschungszentrum (HKFZ) and with assistance from the UCL Centre for Digital Humanities. It aimed to gather and make available sources to enable the social, intellectual and cultural conditions that shaped the early take up of computing in the Humanities to be investigated. A key aim of the pilot was to investigate the appropriateness of Oral History as a methodology for capturing memories, observations and insights that are rarely recorded in the scholarly literature of the field. Accordingly, we carried out a number of pilot interviews in order to test our methodology and aims. Though outside the scope of this paper, another important aspect of our pilot project was the bibliographical research we undertook to identify a list of scholars active in the area of computing in the Humanities since the 1960s.

1

The five oral history interviews included in this issue were carried out with Willard McCarty, Geoffrey Rockwell, Harold Short, Ray Siemens and John Unsworth. This represents a pilot project which we hope to continue, both to cover a wider range of scholarly domains and also to address the gender imbalance evident in this first group of interviews. Interviews were conducted at Digital Humanities 2011 (Stanford University), at University College London, and via Skype. Though the pilot has now ended we are continuing work on this project and there are many other people whom we hope to interview in addition to the five interviews showcased here; these interviews will also be made freely available online. We present both sound files and transcripts of the five interviews that we have selected for publications. The transcripts have been lightly edited for clarity or, if relevant, to reflect edits that were made to the sound files to prevent some potentially sensitive or private information being exposed. Though the interviews were semi-structured they all had a common aim: to uncover aspects of the hidden histories of individuals, their backgrounds and motivations in order to recover a more nuanced picture of the origins and history of computing in the Humanities. Though questions do vary from interview to interview, depending on the responses of the interviewee, all interviews aimed to explore a set of core questions:

2

1. Please tell me about your earliest memory of encountering computing technology
2. Did you receive formal training in programming or computing?
3. How did you first get involved in what we now refer to as Digital Humanities?
4. Which people particularly influenced you and how?
5. What about scholars who were not using computers in their research, do you have some sense of what their views about humanities computing were?
6. What was your first engagement with the “conference community” and how did that come about?

A more comprehensive introduction to this project, and the state of the art knowledge of the history of computing in the Humanities is forthcoming in a corresponding issue of LLC ([Nyhan et al. 2012]). With a few notable exceptions (for

3

example, [Adamo 1994], [Hockey 2004], [McCarty 2003], and [Rockwell et al. 2011c]) the history of computing in the Humanities is a research topic that has received very little attention from either the digital humanities or humanities community; for example, no systematic, book-length treatment of its history has heretofore been published. We argue that our pilot project has demonstrated that oral history is an important and productive methodology in such research. In the past, the rigor and reliability of oral history has been criticised by scholars. Such histories were dismissed as trivial, unscientific, based on flawed memory and recollection rather than contemporary and authentic documentation and without long-term historical value [Ritchie 2003, 156].

Oral historians have countered these criticisms first by arguing for the reliability of oral testimony when collected under the right conditions by professionals, and when cross-referenced with other available sources. In turn, writers like Alessandro Portelli ([Portelli 2006]) and Luisa Passerini ([Passerini 1979]) advocated embracing the very subjectivity that made oral testimony different and special — examining the stories people tell and how they tell them, and the absences, falsehoods and silences in oral testimonies with regard to what this reveals about the construction and articulation of individual and collective memories of the past in the present (the past as it is remembered rather than the past as it was). This project has embraced this latter approach and whether in the transcripts of interviews or the subsequent analysis of them no attempt has been made to edit, silence or reconcile the occasionally conflicting views and memories that we uncovered. Providing a given project is methodically planned with clear objectives, the interviewers are well-prepared, knowledgeable and empathetic, and the whole process is conducted to high ethical standards in which questions of consent and ownership are thoroughly negotiated, oral history is a powerful and dynamic methodology for the recovery of rich histories which might otherwise be in danger of being lost or forgotten. The five oral history interviews presented here exemplify this. Not only do they constitute primary sources which can be used in the writing of a history of computing in the humanities but they offer new information and interpretations that cannot be gleaned from scholarly articles published elsewhere. For example, they contain a wealth of information and reflections on the varied entry routes into the field that have existed and on the interrelationship between myth and history in the narratives that digital humanities creates and tells about itself. Both of these issues are discussed further in [Nyhan et al. 2012].

Oral history thus offers the possibility of populating the hidden histories of individuals with real lives and backgrounds, of examining the motivations behind actions and is as relevant an approach to the recovery of the origins and history of an academic community or discipline as it is for a working-class community or disappearing occupation largely absent from the official records. By taking a prosopographical or collective biographical approach to community of practice histories, oral history enables the researcher to go beyond the familiar and the obvious to include the lesser known or overlooked, and to document not just the facts of immediate concern to the study in question but also the context which framed and underpinned those developments.

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