Descriptive Metadata For Oral History: What is Important to Know?

1. Oral History = Value + Utility
   - **Value**
     - First-hand stories help us understand the personal significance of life events
     - Oral sources reveal the multiple "truths" that coexist in historical inquiry
     - Individuals can speak for themselves without interpretive filters
   - **Utility for the Library/Archive**
     - Demonstrate that community voice matters
     - Teach the community about its diversity
     - Cultivate a non-proprietary and sustainable resource in personal experience
     - Invite a range of promotional, programming, collaborative, and creative opportunities
   - Transforming individual story into shared knowledge...

2. Why Not?
   - Libraries/Archives are not prepared to deal with the complex package of oral history
   - Challenges stem from two main sources
     - Gap between individuals who create and those who curate
     - Absence of metadata standards or guidelines for capturing data
   - At best, institutions try to make oral histories fit within systems not designed for narrative.
   - Most interviews do not make it into a repository
   - Of the sound recordings that do make it into a repository, more than 40% are not cataloged (Heritage Health Index, 2003)
   - Inability to deal with this format has its cost...
   - Community groups surrounding repositories believe that an institutional donation makes material less accessible, like sending it into a BLACK HOLE.

3. Out of Darkness Comes Light
   - The Colorado Voice Preserve: An infrastructure built around oral history, placing the needs of that format at the center of all thinking. Cornerstone is Maximum Accessibility...
   - An object must be discoverable
   - The object’s nature and content must be understandable
   - The object must be available to a user
   - The object must be usable
   - Preservation is meaningless if items being preserved can’t be used...

4. Oral Histories Are Made Accessible – How, or How Not?
   - Results from March 2012 Assessment in Colorado
   - 235 Respondents

   ![Organization Type](chart)
   - Library/Archive
   - University
   - Museum
   - Other

   ![Accessibility of Interviews](chart)
   - 23.5% Unavailable
   - 63.3% Available
   - 13.2% Unanswerable

   - Discoverable = existence is made known, is exposed, can be found
   - Available = can be reached; unrestricted
   - Usable = reformatted; presented in contemporary formats
   - Understandable = content described; nature, worth, quality can be grasped

5. Descriptive Metadata: What’s It All ABOUT?
   - Descriptive Metadata tackles the "aboutness" of an interview
   - Descriptive Metadata largely has been left to the discretion of collecting agencies
   - What do we need to know about a person, to understand his/her story?
   - What do we need to know about the setting of an interview?
   - What about the experience of shared creation between interviewer and narrator?

6. Linked Futures
   - **Oral History Core**
     1. Bring together "expert" perspectives associated with the creation, curation, and use of oral history
     2. Define oral history
     3. Respond to the question "What is Important to Know?"
     4. Determine essential elements, at minimal and optimal levels
     5. Develop templates for capturing the data
     6. Decide on best scheme for carrying, cataloging, and sharing the information
   - **Linked Open Data**
     - If you think about things like oral histories, or archives, those are very much related to people, and to places, and to time periods. And those are great links... I can’t think of anything that doesn’t really link well. Although, of course, when you get to things like sound... you’re going to have to have good metadata.

7. Reality is Imagination that has Become consensus
   - When enough people commit to the same picture, we will have a reality where individual story CAN become shared knowledge.

Cyns Nelson  •  cynsnelson@voicepreserve.org  •  www.voicepreserve.org