Oral History – All Things Digital

Sound Recorders

The first thing to say about sound recorders is that cheap digital dictaphones or voice recorders will only produce adequate recordings and will not compare well with sound recorders such as those pictured below. While it is possible to get good results using a laptop computer and a good microphone - and at the start of 2014 it is also possible to buy high quality microphones that can be used with an iPhone - for most community groups the best choice is still a dedicated sound recorder.

Broadly speaking you will either use a recorder that isn't designed to work well with high quality microphones, such as the Tascam DR05 (left) or one that does work well with high quality microphones, such as this Zoom H4n (below right). Both recorders have good quality inbuilt microphones.

Most community groups prefer the smaller, cheaper, simpler-to-use recorders such as the Tascam, and in quiet conditions the internal microphones on these can create good recordings, but the formal advice is to use the more expensive recorders, such as the Zoom, with high quality external microphones.

The default setting for all these recorders is 'CD quality', which is 44.1Khz 16bit .wav files. If you have used digital scans or photographs the comparison is that compressed photos are .jpg and uncompressed are .tif. For sound the compressed version is .mpg (or many others) and the uncompressed version is .wav (or .aif for Mac). The '44.1Khz 16bit' refers to how much information is being sampled and how

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frequently - this can be adjusted on the sound recorder.

Using a large memory card (usually an SD card of some sort, like a camera) it is quite possible to record at higher quality and most archives recommend 48Khz 24bit or even 96Khz 24bit (although this can eat up your memory card quite quickly).

Use .wav files for your master recording and you can create .mp3 copies for use on the Internet if need be. A good quality recording will compress a lot before it starts to deteriorate significantly.

The guiding rule for all oral history is to make as good a recording as you can, and this means using a good sound recorder. The EMOHA guide to sound recorders is here - http://www.le.ac.uk/emoha/training/equipment/solid.html - and has links to photographs and reviews.

Microphones

Broadly, there are two options available for microphones. You can use a clip-on microphone that attaches to a lapel or to other clothing (often called a 'lavalier' microphone), or a hand held microphone that you would usually put in a small or large stand.

Lapel microphones are small and unobtrusive but they often brush against clothing and produce unwanted noise, so care is needed. Hand held microphones don't have this issue but they can be more obtrusive and, if you are using a stand, require more kit to be carried with you.

The quality of the microphone is as important as the sound recorder - probably more so. High quality microphones, whether lapel or hand held, cost upwards of £100. Microphones that cost around £35 often produce acceptable results although you will hear a difference between these and the more expensive models. Generally, hand held microphones produce better results than lapel microphones.

Examples of different microphones can be seen on the Inquit Audio website:

http://www.inquitaudio.co.uk/microphones/

Archiving the Recordings

Create a procedure for transferring the files from the recorder to a computer. Your sound recorder will connect to a computer just like a digital camera, or you can use a card reader. Make sure you copy and paste rather than 'move' the file off the recorder, and make sure the file plays on the computer before deleting the original. In fact, deleting the original should be the *last thing* you do having created CD or DVD copies and all the back-ups you think you will need.

For storage, remember the acronym LOCKSS – Lots Of Copies Keeps Stuff Safe. Assign useful names to the files, using numbers to link sound files to any digital documents such as photos or scans of letters, diaries etc. For example:

001_anon_sound_tk1

001_anon_sound_tk2

001_anon_photo_01

001_anon_letter_01

While large institutions are moving, or have moved, away from 'optical' storage, such as CDs and DVDs, to network storage that is backed up, this often isn't an option for a small group. It is possible to buy good quality hard drives that create back-ups for only a few hundred pounds but most groups still use a combination of computer, portable hard drive, and CD/DVD. Multiple copies stored in different locations provide a good, safe option.

Advice on care of CDs and DVDs is in this British Library document:

http://www.bl.uk/blpac/pdf/cd.pdf

You may want to catalogue your recordings in some way. If you don't have expertise in, or access to, electronic cataloguing systems a simple solution is to use Microsoft Excel to create a spreadsheet. The sort of information you should store is: the interviewee's personal and contact details; details about the date, place and circumstances of the interview; details of the sound recorder used and the quality of the recording; details about where the recording is being stored; any copyright issues or restrictions. Think about users of your archive in the future and what information will be useful for them.

Sound Editing Software

The Oral Historian's Digital Toolbox lists several free sound editing packages but probably the most popular software for community groups is Audacity. This software enables you to adjust the volume of recordings, edit parts out or rearrange them, and change the sound file from .wav to .mp3.

Audacity can be downloaded for free from: http://audacity.sourceforge.net/

Note: the only unusual aspect of Audacity is that you have to 'export' files rather than 'save' them. If you press 'save' you will be saving your work as an Audacity 'project' rather than as a usable sound file.

When editing sound, don't edit your master recording, use a copy. You can edit a .wav file as often as you like and the quality of the sound will not get worse (this isn't true for compressed formats like .mp3). If you want to put sound on the web you should create .mp3 files. Audacity gives you many options for the size and quality of the .mp3 file and the higher the bits per second (bps), the higher the quality of the sound, but the larger the size of the file. As a balance between quality and size people usually choose somewhere around 64bps.

Add metadata (cataloguing information) to the sound file using 'Open Metadata Editor' from the File menu. This information stays attached to the sound file and can be very useful if paperwork gets lost.

There are further notes about using Audacity on this website's podcast section - http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/history/outreach/besh/engaging/podcasts

For further information about useful software have a look at the Oral Historian's Digital Toolbox:

http://storytelling.concordia.ca/oralhistorianstoolbox/