# From A Shared Authority to the Digital Kitchen, and Back

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This book's fascinating and provocative title raises some very large questions, draws on some very broad assumptions, and frames a very expansive field of inquiry. In the "thought piece" that I've been invited to contribute, I'd like to ground that inquiry in some concrete contexts, challenge some of the informing assumptions, and somewhat reframe the questions. In this manner, I hope to sketch a productive way to engage the excitingly centrifugal energies currently responding to and shaping what I'm not sure it's necessarily helpful to call our "user-generated world."

My remarks draw from experience that is in one sense exceptionally current. I am among those working in new digital modes to liberate oral history from constraints that until recently have, paradoxically, rendered the recordings that define the method largely unreachable and underutilized in all but a few corners of documentary and public history practice. Focused on content-management capacities to index audio and video recordings, this work speaks directly and resonantly to the broader practice and theory examined elsewhere in this volume.

But I have also been asked to take a long look backward, through the lens of A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History, the collected reflections on applied work in oral and public history that I published in 1990. Over some twenty years, the book has seemed to play a useful, or at least regularly visible, role in crystallizing discourse in these fields. Though I am not always sure how much it is actually read, it is gratifying that the title itself is so frequently referenced as a way to open critical space for considering oral and public history choices and their implications. And, indeed, it has been invoked in just that role to help frame the concerns of this

This being the case, let me begin with that book title and then springboard to comments on contemporary and emerging practice in what can seem a dramatically transformed world of oral and public history possibility. I will then

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volume as it was being planned.

conclude by circling back to A Shared Authority and resituating the crucial concerns of the present volume, arguing that "Letting Go" is not necessarily the answer, and, more to the point, that "Letting Go?" is perhaps not the most helpfully formulated question, here on the 21st century's mercurially advancing digital frontier.

### WHAT'S IN A WORD?

In 2000, the International Oral History Association's biennial meeting featured a panel on collaborative community projects, which generated considerable interest and many calls for a fuller treatment and publication. The result was a special forum section of The Oral History Review in 2003, under the title "Sharing Authority: Oral History and the Collaborative Process," for which I was asked to provide some commentary.2

This was a great honor, and of course it was deeply satisfying that a dia-28591a6021af91 logue I had helped to initiate was living on in so much richly imaginative and publicly significant new work, in areas far beyond anything I had been able to reach in my more limited earlier practice; I was privileged, in my comments, to celebrate the energies and engaged intentions represented by these practitioners. But it was somewhat more delicate to point out, in a sense also quite relevant to the present volume, that the forum's invocation of my book was missing if not "the" point, then at least "a" point worth noticing. This came down to a single word.

"Sharing Authority" was the forum title, with the syntactic implication that this represented something we should be doing and something the projects in their various ways were trying to do. Most invocations of my oft-quoted title have had this same feel—sharing authority is a good thing; let's do more of it. This same feeling animates the present volume's focus on "Letting Go," question mark notwithstanding.

But as I regularly point out in graduate seminars, authors give a great deal of thought to the title of their books. To start by interrogating the title carefully is never a bad approach to getting at an author's intention, whatever one ebrarwants to make of that critically. In this spirit, I asked readers of the Oral History Review forum to notice that the book had not been called "Sharing Authority," and to reflect on the difference between that term and "A Shared Authority."

The difference I had in mind was this: the construction "Sharing Authority" suggests this is something we do-that in some important sense "we" have authority, and that we need or ought to share it. "A Shared Authority," in contrast, suggests something that "is"—that in the nature of oral and public history, we are not the sole interpreters. Rather, the interpretive and meaning-making process is in fact shared by definition—it is inherent in the dialogic nature of an interview, and in how audiences receive and respond to exhibitions and public history interchanges in general. In this sense, we don't have authority to give away, really, to the extent we might assume. Thus I argued that we are called not so much to "share authority" as to respect and attend to this definitional quality. We need to recognize the already shared authority in the

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documents we generate and in the processes of public history engagement—a dialogic dimension, however implicit, through which "author-ship" is shared by definition, and hence interpretive "author-ity" as well. We need to act on that recognition.

The point is illustrated by a simple example from way back, one that ended up on the cutting room floor when assembling A Shared Authority. Early on, I was part of a team doing a humanities grant review of an in-process radio documentary series, a sequence of half-hour programs on race relations in the South. We were asked to evaluate a sample program about railroad workers. It was terrific, well researched and produced, with evocative detail all around. But there was one compositional aspect in its exemplary construction that seemed just a little bit "off."

The first half of the program featured interviews and discussion among black and white workers, and the second half consisted of a panel discussion among scholars with expertise in the areas of concern. Halfway through the brary program, you could almost hear the group of workers being let out one door of Studio A while the scholars filed in through another door and sat down in the still-warm seats to put everything in historical perspective.

My partner and I both noticed this, and had exactly the same reaction: might it not have been even more interesting to have these two groups talk with each other, bringing their different authority and perspectives together to explore the program's content and meaning for its listeners? The reason for doing this, we felt, was not some abstract political commitment, not some gesture to "share" authority. The reason was that the conversations already had so many points of connection, so many shared interpretive dimensions, however different the registers, not to mention the accents. Here history-making as an act was already shared, however implicitly, and the program could have generated even more power by recognizing and leveraging that quality through a more dialogic structure.

Such experience did much to shape my sense of oral and public history. a03011c12901d4This is not to mystify the distinction between vernacular understandings and professional scholarship, but rather to suggest the value of genuine dialogue between them, "experience" and "expertise" being words with a common root and an instructive resonance when you stop to think about it. We can imagine sharing authority more easily and more broadly if we recognize that interpretive "author-ship," and hence "author-ity," already share more than our usual approaches and postures let us recognize

# BEYOND RAW AND COOKED

Let me now jump forward to the digital work I first began in 2002, carrying me into what seemed dramatically different territory with very different challenges—a landscape that only gradually revealed itself to be presenting some of the same issues I had been wrestling with all along.

As some readers will know from other publications arising out of this work,

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I have been applying digital tools directly to audio and video documentation, part of an unfolding approach in many quarters to put the "oral" back into oral history.3 The goal is to make the actual recordings reachable and to re-center them as the defining primary source for oral history—for the archive, for the researcher, for "users," for public presentation, and for civic and community engagement. Like many people drawn into new technology and media, I wandered into this work almost accidentally. But through the domino effect of a sequence of small projects, it has become more and more central to my practice and to my thinking about oral and public history.

What drew me in deeper was the excitement of moving past what I came to call "the Deep Dark Secret" and "the Unexamined Assumption." The Deep Dark Secret was that while voices, faces, and embodied expression are at the core of what makes oral history compelling and why we are drawn to "do" it, until recently relatively few researchers have spent much time actually listen-28591a6021af9f ing to or watching the recorded oral histories; rather, text transcription has provided the basic ground for engagement. The Unexamined Assumption was that while almost nobody seriously contends that transcription is a "better" representation of an interview than the recording itself, its limits have been taken as the necessary price we pay-like some kind of portal admission fee—to circumvent the cumbersome intractability of recordings and the overwhelming demands of examining them in linear real time.

But digitization, combined with a wide range of new software tools, has dramatically loosened these constraints. Researchers can now move around in media sources fluidly and efficiently; text transcriptions need not be the only guides in exploring such media primary sources. Together, these developments have led me, along with many others, into a range of new modes for working with digital oral history media, with or without wholesale text transcription: we can annotate, mark, catalogue, index, and keyword-search digitized interview recordings, and export selected passages for flexible use, online and otherwise. This has been part of what is now an even broader explosion of interactively accessible audio and video, very often oral-based, that appears in ebrararchives, websites, social networks, museum and public history installations, digital multimedia publication formats, and "apps."

Perhaps because my background and orientation are anything but technical, doing this work has, for me, continued to speak more compellingly to the oral- and public-historical practice with which I was more familiar and to what this might be coming to mean in a new context. Moving into these new modes has helped me appreciate the extent to which traditional practice in oral history, especially, has long been governed by an implicitly dichotomous regime of "raw" and "cooked." We store relatively unmediated oral history collections in libraries and archives, as relatively "raw" source documents; even transcription is understood as a representation of this whole, original, "natural" oral history state. And we rely on scholars, documentary producers, exhibition curators, and the like to find and process things out of this raw mass,

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resulting in a well-cooked, receivable presentation of some kind—a film, a research article, an edited text documentary, an exhibit label or kiosk loop, a podcast, and more, all of which are the form in which oral history generally reaches broader communities of receivers or consumers.

The gap between the raw and the cooked is substantial, embodied in various problematic and productive tensions between the many poles holding up the public and oral history tent—between curators and designers, archivists and teachers, scholar "experts" and filmmakers, and so on. In this sense, one of the things that has excited me about the digital content-management work into which I have been drawn is its location smack in the middle: these new modes of access make the raw collection a legible and explorable hub, and in so doing make the framing and fabrication of usable cooked products more dispersed as a capacity and more open-ended, fluid, and continuous as a process.

Gradually, I have come to see how this way of understanding digital tareful work has echoes in the shared authority discussions that I had thought were brary behind me. Conventional oral history archives, both physically and in their intellectual organization, are uniquely forbidding and inaccessible for general users who might bring to them very particular (and informed) inquiries and curiosities. Likewise, conventional documentary films or museum exhibitions, even when informed by progressive politics and community concerns, could not be more "author-itarian": the film or exhibition represents an assembled construction and reduction. It is a singular, usually linear ordering and path through a mass of material—a story, but only one story out of the innumerable ones that might be found and told by others.

With this realization, I began thinking about how digital modes might help to overcome the dichotomy between knowledge creation and knowledge consumption. Even as our work still requires management of collections and attention to usable meanings and outputs, I came to see the possibility of new approaches to making meaning. This is what I've termed a "post-documentary sensibility," a stance directed less toward the either/or of collection stewardship and fixed outputs, and more toward the active in-between—a more creative, more open-ended, less linear, and hence a more sharable space. <sup>4</sup>

In a recent paper, my associate Doug Lambert and I played some with the image that the kitchen is where the raw becomes the cooked. Might it be productive to imagine the space for oral and public history practice through this metaphor? Professionals and "users" can together go "messin' in the kitchen," to quote an old blues song. We can find things in the cupboards and larders of oral history collections and mess around with the meanings we may find in them, seeing what, together, we can cook up for everyone who might come to be sitting out there in the dining room.<sup>5</sup>

# INDEXING AND EXPLORING

The audio-video content management work I have been discussing is being engaged in many converging approaches linking information technology

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and oral/public history. A number of aspects seem especially germane to the concerns I have been discussing here.

Among the greatest challenges of bringing audio and video into usable form in our imagined kitchen, especially in necessarily long-form oral history interviews, is that most collection-management systems are essentially cataloging tools. These systems are good at identifying documents and their location. But for media collections, there is little real utility in guiding users to a three-hour interview that they then have to explore on their own. Generally, the result is media collections that are not actively accessed at all, or are used with minimal effectiveness.

In print documentation, the traditional solution to the limits of catalogue access is the index: once we have a book in our hand, the index permits us to explore what's in it. Along with tables of contents, running heads, introductions, and the like, the index enables non-linear access to the content. Such 28591a6021af9f reading-management tools free us from having to start on page 1 and trudge through to the end: in this sense, at once obvious and surprising, they reveal the ancient book to be the original hypertext modality.

Much of the excitement in current work in oral history revolves around approximating such capacities in working with interview media, referencing and cross-referencing recordings within the expansive space of an interview, and tracing threads that run through different interviews in a collection. These capabilities are beginning to shift the center of practice from the back room of collection-management cataloging to the open, sharable space of the content-management kitchen I invoked—to the place where a broad "we" can explore material in fluid and instrumental modes, finding things of interest and making something new of them. Moving to the kitchen in this way is consistent with the broadened notion of user participation at the core of Letting Go's concern.

But there is an aspect of this shared meaning-making that somewhat qualifies or reconfigures our understanding of user engagement. Consider the generally unexamined assumption that searches and searching are the fundamental modes for engaging the vast information landscapes made available by digital technology. Google, of course, makes this seem utterly natural, since the most casual question yields instant and usually helpful informational returns. But searching is a significantly bounded notion, however powerfully the process can be deployed. Among other things, it presumes and requires a query, to which a response or responses can then be provided. However wide the field, searches are funnels. They select and focus information, changing the space of the field through every iteration and refinement, so as to generate a narrowing stream of responsive output.

But this is not the only way to imagine how we come to know and find value and meaning in an expanse of information. It is certainly not how most productive research and learning happens. For this, something closer to the notion of exploration is required—we may have some broad curiosity or

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objective, but we usually enter a landscape and need to be alive to what we may notice, discover, bump into, stumble across, pick up by mistake, and so on. Exploring, I think, is more interesting than searching, and it suggests a non-linear spatial imagination rather than a linear, funneled one: one inhabits a space that is being explored rather than simply forging a narrowing path through it. Lewis and Clark are more important because of what and how they explored than because they answered a search engine's request for the Pacific Ocean.

In this sense, what I find most exciting in new modes of engaging digital information is the unfolding capacity to present such explorable spaces in imaginative, expansive ways, and the deployment of tools for their fluid, non-directed navigation. Both oral history and a range of digital realms are focusing more on creative exploration than on the dutiful provision of answers that can only be as good as the questions. This trend contributes significantly 1 at 191 to the broader landscape of "letting go" and sharable authority that the essays brary in this book explore.

### THE LURE OF TEXT AND OTHER TEMPTATIONS

There are, however, some significant countercurrents through which the very power of digital technologies may be constraining what is most transformative in new digital capacities, exerting a sometimes truly reactionary influence. I will mention two that are consequential for oral and public history at the cusp of a new digital age: the role of transcription text, and the temptations of scale.

Digitization makes all information modes effectively the same and hence equally reachable through indexing and cross-referencing, there being no inherent difference between digitized text, sound, and image. Among many other implications, for oral history these tools bring within reach all of the content and meanings in interviews not easily captured in transcription. Now we can see, hear, study, and select nuances that are not readily representable in transcripts, and often not lexical at all. This is what it means to say that the orality of oral history is moving excitingly back into primacy.

At just this open-ended point, however, the traditional reliance on transcription is being reinforced by the ease and utility of instant searches of transcripts, not to mention the anticipation—always around the next corner—of voice recognition software able to produce adequate transcriptions with minimal effort. Ironically, transcription, an arguably outdated modality, is coming to seem more rather than less requisite, with enormous consequences in project cost and labor, because of the instantly enhanced access seemingly promised by searchable texts.

It is the temptations of scale that make the cost and inherent limitations of transcript-based access seem acceptable. A central archival tendency of late is to leverage the unbounded capacity of cyberspace to post large, complex collections to the Web so they can be instantly "accessible" by anyone, anywhere. The larger these collections are, however, the more difficult it is to imagine

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providing anything approaching meaningful access beyond the usual listing of interview-level descriptors and, perhaps, themes. More attractive is an increasingly practical route: linking transcriptions to audio or video files by timecodes, so that transcript searches instantly connect to a point in the recording.

This approach can be very helpful for users, and the approach is proving increasingly attractive for many libraries and archives. But it still offers a limited, and limiting, kind of access. Even accepting the practical value of searchable transcriptions and the loss of access to non-transcribed meaning beyond lexicality, the stubborn fact is that people in interviews do not say: "And now I will tell a story about the social construction of gender," or "about class consciousness." They just tell a story about their mother, or a strike—and in so doing they may not actually use the word "mother" or "strike."

Similarly restrictive is the reliance of these modes on searching, rather than on broader mapping of the interviews to permit meaningful exploration and 28591a6021af9f browsing. Considering that we are only beginning to understand how to make fifty hours of interviews explorable at a useful, instrumental level, it may not represent a very significant advance to put thousands of unmapped interviews online, even if accompanied by rudimentary text searches linked to media files. There is a sense in which arriving at the Port Authority Bus Terminal gives one access to the New York City-but without meaningful maps, routings, destination listings, and navigational capacity, not to mention resources, it's not clear what this abstract access can mean. Too many oral history websites, I'm afraid (and an increasing number given funding incentives to make collections accessible online), are closer to the Port Authority than to the Shared Authority I've advocated. Although new digital modes have the capacity to engage oral history users in open-ended, dialogic ways, for the reasons noted here this potential is at risk of being short-circuited by what otherwise seem significant advances in archival capacity.

In this sense, the often unexamined claims of large-scale online "access" makes me wonder whether the "user-generated" (or perhaps more accurately "user-driven") world has really moved all that far past the raw-cooked divide ebrarthat has been holding back a more meaningfully interactive, dialogic oral and public history. There is much to suggest that this and other currently fashionable digital interface enthusiasms may actually constitute a powerful undertow in the "user-generated" world.

Take, for instance, crowdsourcing and tag clouds, which are increasingly celebrated as both facilitators and expressions of interactive knowledge development, and a way to provide the kind of mapping overview I have been calling for. These can be very productive, powerful, and even inspiring in their capacity to circulate ideas and sustain communities of cumulative knowledge-building. But for online oral histories, the results have been much less impressive. I have seen many sites that offer, with manifest pride in their up-to-dateness, a user-generated tag cloud as the major resource for entering into and exploring the posted documents. While the tagging process may

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have been inclusive and exciting, the results are often strikingly the opposite: a screen filled with dense text, a random grab bag of whatever terms anyone offered, arranged alphabetically, which is perhaps the least helpful array imaginable unless you are looking for some very specific term. That use aside, consulting such a cloud list is like looking for a plumber in the (fast-disappearing) white pages.

The much-vaunted digital feature of the form, changing a term's font-size display to reflect the strength of user interest via "hits," provides what is frequently a highly misleading map generated by the limits of crowd psychology. A browsing user confronted with a forbidding wall of microscopic terms among which are three or four lifted into legible size will predictably click on one of those terms in order to find out "what's up." Over time, that term becomes much larger and attracts still more attention, none of which is necessarily informed by genuine user interest in the term. The resulting cloud 1 at 191 drifts out to sea, far from any credible claim to be a gauge of the information's brary significance for users.

I offer these as cautionary observations: new information modalities and capacities are not inherently solutions, and may indeed be part of a continuing problem; they may not help us move beyond the paradoxes of raw and cooked, leaving us still searching for how to create a genuinely active kitchen in which the act of history-making can be truly shared and dialogic in interactive ways. This dilemma remains whether the communities of interaction are localized and embodied or virtually assembled by participants across the trackless wastes of cyberia. The challenge of recognizing, finding, imagining, and enacting a 21st-century shared authority is, in this sense, a more complex and demanding challenge than designing the next app.

### KITCHEN TALK AND A SHARED AUTHORITY

I'd like to draw the threads of this essay together through some comments on two projects, one of them a major national effort known to almost everyone, and the other a very modest local project in which I'm a participant.

The well-known one is StoryCorps, the exceptionally high profile oral and public history project that is discussed extensively elsewhere in this volume. For many, StoryCorps probably comes closest to embodying the challenge this book poses—a mode of history-gathering and -sharing that has immense popular appeal, involving participants and reaching audiences that more formal oral and public historians can hardly imagine.

StoryCorps has proven very challenging to professional historians, and not just because of the mix of grudging respect, critical concern, and outright envy its phenomenal popularity can hardly avoid inspiring. There has also been estimable skepticism about the value and meaning of the kind of interviews collected and how these are being turned into public commodities, in the full range of meanings that term can have. This mix proved volatile when the StoryCorps founder, David Isay, presented a keynote address at the 2008

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annual meeting of the Oral History Association, and was stunned, as was much of the audience, by the barrage of sharply critical comments that erupted in the Q&A following his presentation.

Responsibility for this outcome was broadly shared: Isay had not really prepared a presentation for this audience, out of which points of convergence and difference could have been identified and usefully engaged. Rather, he offered what seemed his standard road-show overview of the project, its mission, and its accomplishments, complete with a large assortment of highlight clips, almost all of them propelled by the poignant emotion of vivid voices and stories that is the hallmark of StoryCorps programs. Whatever their value as radio "driveway moments," these examples proved counterproductive for many in the audience anxious to engage the important issues StoryCorps presents for oral history.

Not hearing these issues addressed in Isay's generic presentation, critics 28591a6021af9f raised them in what many (though not all) found a graceless assault from the floor. Most of the fireworks involved issues of professional authority—can or should StoryCorps really claim to be oral history at all, and if so (or if not) what does that tell us? Others saw in the emotional power of StoryCorps programming evidence of a highly problematic, manipulative, even voyeuristic sensibility even further removed from oral history standards. The result was an unpleasant and not very productive exchange, a great many hurt feelings all around, and a lingering feeling that a needed conversation between professional oral historians and a popular oral history movement, operating almost wholly outside of their professional realm, simply had not happened.

Some of these issues figure in the way the project has been discussed elsewhere in Letting Go?, and engaging them directly does not serve the purposes of this essay. But there is one aspect of the StoryCorps challenge that does. It was implicitly present in the discussion, and it has always been part of the mixture of fascination and frustration that make up my own response to the project. I'm struck by how, for all its "letting go" relevance, StoryCorps has been stuck—unnecessarily and not permanently, I hope—in precisely ebrarthe outdated raw vs. cooked dichotomy that I've identified as the classic fate of 20th-century oral history. This has been explicit in the conception and marketing of StoryCorps. It starts with "raw" in the extreme: interviews can be about anything; there is the populist promise that, once recorded, "your interview will be archived in the Library of Congress," as if a mass of some 30,000 interviews there were in any way a meaningfully accessible or usable resource. (As of today, they are not, despite extensive efforts beginning to be made in this direction.) And at the other end of the spectrum, we have the highly polished, well-crafted "cooked" reduction that appear on NPR every week, selected and refined for presentation by a superb producer and staff in the black box of the studio.

Here is one example of the great opportunity for a post-documentary sensibility, for how raw and cooked might meet in the kitchen: StoryCorps

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recorded hundreds of interviews in my home city of Buffalo several summers ago. Our public library would love to make them into an interactive resource, since the interviews contain so many threads of interest and history and local texture. StoryCorps would like this as well, but for now, here and elsewhere, that sharable open kitchen in which others could enter, explore, find, and use things in such a rich mass of documentation is a distant and unreachable dream. The current choices are narrow and binary: raw interviews in a distant archive with uneven metadata and almost no exploratory capacity, and highly polished extracts of a tiny, tiny, fraction of that rich documentation.

The reference to our public library offers a segue to my final example, one that suggests where a post-documentary, open-kitchen sensibility can lead in oral and public history. Recently, I was a small part of a successful effort organized by the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library to obtain a NEH Digital Humanities start-up grant. Called "Re-Collecting the Depression 1 at 91 and New Deal as a Civic Resource in Hard Times," the funded project is brary integrating digitized primary source collections, artifacts, manuscripts, oral histories, photographs, music, art, and site-specific field documentation into community-specific multimedia digital databases; as well, it is beginning to use these resources actively as a core for public programs.

Central to the grant proposal was a statement that could not speak more directly to the concerns animating this book: "While our project will include an interactive web presence, our defining goal is a different kind of interactivity: digital humanities content-management tools that enable the resources to directly support intensive civic discussion and reflection centered in public libraries throughout our community, exploring the links between this legacy [of the Depression] and current challenges. Though locally focused, our project will be a demonstration model of how digital humanities can help a public library mobilize collections to address the civic purposes central to its mission." I can't be sure, of course, but I think what put the grant proposal over the top in an exceptionally tough competition was this somewhat unexpected invocation of active, embodied, public dialogue between people brought together in social space—as something needed, of value, and supportable through innovative digital approaches.

This emphasis on the power of face-to-face dialogue cycles me back, with a kind of shock of recognition, to the perspective I first consolidated in A Shared Authority, as I reflected on a range of similarly concrete engagements and contexts. It suggests the surprising relevance of such dialogic notions in a "user-generated world" so often focused on isolated interactions between individuals and computer screens or smart phones and, through those, to other individuals in isolation, however socially networked they may seem to be on their screens. It suggests the continuing importance—even, or perhaps especially, in a digital age—of shifting our focus from the either/or of "letting go" vs. "holding on" to the both/and of shared authority, finding ways, in all the new modes expanding so rapidly, to enact an active dialogue between experience and expertise, between people working together to reach new understandings.

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- 4 Frisch, "Oral History and the Digital Revolution; Frisch, "Three Dimensions and More."
- 5 Michael Frisch and Douglas Lambert, "Beyond the Raw and the Cooked in Oral History: Notes from the Kitchen," in Donald A. Ritchie (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of Oral History (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 333–48.

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