



the Hollings Center  
*for international dialogue*

**Dialogue Snapshot**  
***Oral History in the Middle East and Central Asia***  
**February 8-11, 2012**

How can we deploy oral history more globally to sustainably foster partnerships and exchanges of ideas across international and cultural boundaries? How can digital technology make oral history more of a public resource in the Middle East, Central Asia and the United States? What are the benefits and limitations of using memory to diagnose and troubleshoot political problems? What role does oral history play in conflict/post-conflict settings and what dilemmas do practitioners face in such settings?

To address these and other questions, the Hollings Center for International Dialogue convened a three-day Higher Education Dialogue in February 2012 entitled *Oral History in the Middle East and Central Asia*. Held in Istanbul, Turkey the dialogue brought together a diverse group of participants from Afghanistan, Iraq, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey and the United States. The participants represented a wide variety of professional backgrounds, among these educators, institute directors, academics, documentary filmmakers, museum curators, government officials and civil society leaders [see participant list at end]. Although participants came to the table from different backgrounds, country settings and varying levels of experience in oral history, they were united by their common interest in the field.

*“I don’t feel comfortable splitting oral history issues in the US and UK from those in the Middle East. I am not ready to divide them. I would like to bridge the gap.” Leyla Neyzi, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Sabancı University*

This dialogue snapshot highlights a number of the themes that were discussed during the three-day meeting. The goal of the meeting was not to reach consensus on how to practice oral history; rather, it was conceived as an opportunity for participants to share their ideas and experience and to explore partnerships. Four intersecting themes ran throughout the dialogue sessions.

- *Crossing borders, going global:* Oral history has only realized a small part of its global potential. There is lots of room for new partnerships and exchanges.
- *The diverse uses of oral history:* Oral history methods have many uses—from challenging written history to diagnosing political problems. Although dialogue participants did not see the purpose of oral history in the same way, it was remarkable to note how similar and compatible their methods are.

- *Working in conflict settings:* A number of participants work in settings that have experienced political violence and war. While each setting is necessarily unique, participants exchanged fruitful ideas about interviewing in conflict areas.
- *Technology as burden and benefit:* Advances in technology make it easier to disseminate oral history projects. But these advances mean that practitioners must now make critical ethical and archiving decisions at the outset of their projects.

### **Crossing (Cultural, Institutional & International) Borders**

Across many Arab states, there has been a renaissance in oral history with an eye towards documenting stories of revolution and socio-political transition. In Afghanistan, interview-based projects are recording untold stories about the experience of recent decades of war. In Turkey, universities are deepening oral history programs spurred on by growing numbers of students and researchers interested in the study of living memory. In the United States, oral history has become a highly diversified and interdisciplinary field; it has expanded outside academia as think tanks, philanthropic organizations and government institutions seek to document their institutional history through narrative-based interviews. Yet the growth spurt in oral history has only tapped part of its global potential as those who use oral history are divided by international borders as well as cultural and professional boundaries.

The dialogue sought to bridge these various divisions and help participants forge new links on a number of levels. Perhaps most importantly, the dialogue brought together participants from different professions and disciplines. For example, during the three-day event, filmmakers had the opportunity to exchange views with development experts, academics had the opportunity to talk to museum directors and so on. Participants discussed how oral history could be subject to more global dialogue, when the field itself is so much about contextual, regional particularities.



*A historian, archaeologist and documentary filmmaker discuss interview methods (Photo by David Trilling)*

As the dialogue's participants came from diverse backgrounds and levels of experience with oral history, it was necessary to establish a baseline. One of the ways participants did this was by engaging in an interactive exercise. The exercise asked participants to imagine that a student was going to embark on an oral history project for the first time. In the course of one dialogue session, participants had to come up with the essentials that the student should know in preparing for field work, conducting interviews and the aftermath. The exercise was an excellent way for participants to break the ice and establish a common ground. While the exercise was not without disagreement, it was remarkable to see how much complementarity there was across participants from diverse countries and professional backgrounds. The results of the exercise appear in Table 1 (page 6).

### **To What End? The Many Uses of Oral History**

Oral history is the collection of narratives and data through interviews of human subjects. It engages the direct experiences, observation and stories of individuals to generate records and narratives that are

not documented by written sources or that differ from the written record. This bare-bones definition, however, says precious little about the substantive outcomes and different uses of oral history-based projects. Most participants expressed value in oral history far beyond filling historical gaps; rather the goal for some is to provide an alternative to nationalist history, for others it is to promote social justice by documenting untold stories and for others it is a way to diagnose political dilemmas.

One of the unique aspects of the dialogue was that it brought together expert oral historians with international affairs experts who are interested in the policy-related benefits of oral history. One participant described her interest in oral history as diagnostically-driven; that is, to use extensive narrative interviews with policymakers and government officials in Africa and Asia to understand why they deliver public services well in some contexts but not others. Other participants noted that oral history interviews can be invaluable in tracing decision-making processes in large institutions such as the U.S. Department of State and the United Nations. The United Nations Intellectual History Project is one such example where oral history can both document the stories of individuals while also tracing the genesis and progress of major policy ideas.

Disagreement ensued on whether interview techniques for such projects are compatible with traditional oral history interviewing. However, it is clear that interest in diagnostic uses of oral history is likely to grow in the future and lead to greater partnerships between select communities of oral historians and policymakers.

### **The Conflict/Post-Conflict Environment**

In both plenary and breakout sessions, participants had intensive discussions on the practice of oral history in conflict and post-conflict environments. These discussions bridged various phases of interview-based projects and included preparatory work, the interview and field work stage as well as project outcomes such as archiving and publication. In these discussions, participants debated issues of ethics and security that affect both the interviewers and interviewees.

In one session, participants posed the following question: How do you build trust and gain access to populations that have been ravaged by political conflict and violence? One Turkish participant noted that it may be essential to use interviewers who are from that community as they are likely to speak the “language” of the interview subjects. Another participant disagreed and noted that being an insider can actually hinder access. Communities that have seen conflict may be more willing to share particularly painful and traumatic stories with outsiders. In this way, they give voice to their lives and experiences without the embarrassment of telling the story to someone who is inside community. Another Turkish participant agreed with this point but noted that getting access as an outsider means spending months building contacts and having informal conversations with potential interview subjects.

A couple participants noted that the issue of trust between a society and its government may be equally critical to successful oral history projects as is trust between interviewer and interviewee. One participant familiar with oral history in Iraq noted, “People don’t trust the government just because Saddam is gone. They might trust you [as interviewer] but if the interviews become public they might be harmed.” Another participant agreed noting that many oral history interviews took place in Iraq only once interviewees were guaranteed anonymity and assured that they would not have to sign release forms (such forms are usually standard practice so that interviews can be archived). This led to debate where one historian argued that doing oral history projects with anonymous attribution is anathema. A compromise solution may be to use pseudonyms and suppress the list of actual names. Another

participant noted the sharp contrast between contexts of high-level political violence and fractured government authority—like Iraq—and contexts like Saudi Arabia where government control is high and where official permissions and letters of introduction are required to conduct projects.

Participants noted that many oral history projects in conflict/post-conflict settings tend to bring out the painful and traumatic experiences of communities and individuals who lived through war and dislocation. While the idea of promoting a form of restorative justice through untold stories is important, a participant from Tajikistan contributed a particularly thought-provoking story. A European organization came to Tajikistan with the intention of funding an oral history project to document women’s experiences during the Tajik civil war which took place in the 1990s. The organization was particularly interested in documenting women’s stories of wartime rape with the idea of promoting restorative justice. This project was never realized to a great extent because Tajik civil society organizations feared that the project would retraumatize victims without having thought through a longer-term outcome.

The discussions of conflict/post-conflict contexts were also filled with upbeat moments. One Afghan participant described an oral history project that was designed to document the stories of educators who taught during Afghanistan’s civil war. These stories were highly inspirational, but they also triggered political debates in Afghanistan over new textbooks. The new texts have been designed to skip over the past 30 years of Afghan history, which some officials have deemed as too divisive and traumatizing. Two other participants introduced their video project, which documents efforts to preserve Afghanistan’s archaeological heritage during the civil war and the Taliban period.



*Can oral history promote justice? (Photo by George Gavrilis)*

[\[Click here to learn more about this project\]](#).

## **The Technology Juggernaut**

One of the recurring themes throughout the dialogue was the role of technology, which is creating great opportunities and challenges for those whose work intersects with oral history. These discussions covered new technologies in audio and video, software for archiving and indexing interviews as well as the use of the internet to disseminate interview-based projects. The internet has remarkably broadened access. One oral historian who oversees an interview archive noted, “we used to brag about having 500 researchers visit per year, but now that many interviews are online we get 10,000 visits every month.”

Some participants emphasized the opportunities that digital technology has created for oral historians. The internet and digital recording advances allow almost any location in the world to become a global node for oral history. One participant discussed a West Bank town that is interested in collecting narratives from the global Palestinian diaspora and posting them on a unified website. Another participant discussed a project in California that promotes the history of Salinas Chinatown, a multi-ethnic, working-class community that has suffered from severe decline. With the cooperation of the community, this project has placed video and audio interviews on Google Maps in which residents

narrate in their own words the history of their storied community, block-by-block and building-by-building. Participants noted that such projects could easily be deployed in places as diverse as historic Mardin (Turkey) and Kabul (Afghanistan).

Technology also offers a solution to what some call “the transcript problem.” Those who conduct oral history interviews with audio and video face the dilemma of whether or not to transcribe the recording. There is a lively debate on this issue in the field. Some practitioners consider the transcript an essential part of the historical record especially if a secondary project such as a book or researcher archive is to be created. Others consider the recording sacrosanct and see transcribing interviews problematic. As one participant noted, an interviewee’s tone and their non-verbal nuances (such as prolonged silences) can be lost in a transcript. Moreover transcription is expensive and not feasible for projects with limited budgets. In some cases it can cost hundreds of dollars to transcribe a single lengthy interview.

Recent advances in software allow those who work with interviews to sidestep the transcript problem. One software [OHMS: Oral History Metadata Synchronizer] offers a user-friendly way for audio and video interviews to be indexed so that researchers can search files by key words and phrases and jump to that part of the audio recording. This process requires project managers to put time and thought into creating a detailed index, but this requires much less effort than generating full transcripts of interviews.

*“From the moment you hit record, you become the curator” – Doug Boyd, Director, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History*

Yet these digital advances also come with a number of challenges. Some of these are ethical. For example, participants who work in extremely sensitive contexts noted that their interview subjects and even entire communities can experience backlash when interviews go online. Indeed, interviews that go online can get indexed by Google in minutes. There was a particularly interesting difference of opinion on the preservation issue. An American participant suggested that it is optimal to keep six back-up copies of every interview, while participants who worked in Iraq and Afghanistan worried that keeping six copies in different places increases the chances that highly sensitive, closed interviews will be made public.

Other technology-related problems hinge on sustainability and preservation. Video—an increasingly popular medium for interview-based projects—is a preservation nightmare that requires massive storage capacity and also contains 25 different proprietary elements, which may prevent a user from being able to watch that video. One participant commented, “putting interviews on a website is not an archival solution. If a website is taken down, the project disappears.”

**Table 1: Essential components of oral history projects. Compiled interactively by participants.**

PREPARATION	INTERVIEW	AFTERMATH
Do extensive preparatory research on your topic. Know the context very well. Learning key dates, important historical contexts and names of places will help.	It's usually better to go to the interview with a list of topics in your head rather than pre-scripted questions. A piece of paper in your hand might be distracting or distancing.	Immediately after the interview, go to a comfortable place where you can journal your impressions, feelings and things that happened at the interview. If you delay doing this, details will get lost.
Remember that background/theoretical knowledge is important and helpful but oral history can only be learned through practice. Listen to other interviews.	Choice of location / site is important. It should be a safe, comfortable space. Try to make sure you will not be interrupted.	Transcribe the interview and identify keywords.
Be aware of your position and limitations as the researcher. Your nationality, background and a number of such factors may influence how you are received by the interviewee.	The most important thing is to be a good listener. Listen closely and ask good follow-up questions. Make eye contact with the interviewee. Pay attention to your posture and body language.	Keep your relationships with your interviewees alive. Inform the interviewees about the end product(s).
Make technology/archiving decisions at the outset. Some people are intimidated by cameras; some people may change their behavior when they are being recorded.	To open up the interviewee and help the thought process, ask who/what/where/when/why/how questions.	Plan how you will use and make accessible the oral history materials you collected.
Communicate your purpose clearly to your interviewees: Inform the interviewee about protections, confidentiality and anonymity; specify the outputs of your research; be honest about your motivation, interest and aim.	Don't feel uncomfortable during silences. Silences might mean the interviewee is trying to simply remember or that he/she is having an emotional moment.	Always remember: collecting someone's life story is a privilege.
It is ok to be intimidated before an oral history interview. Choosing your first question may be the most difficult thing.	Try not to interrupt the interviewee. Be "actively passive". Reassure the interviewee you are listening closely.	
	In some settings it's difficult to get women to talk to men. Some researchers overcome this by having a third person at the interview.	
	Keep in mind that the interviewee might consciously or subconsciously censor his/her account/story. Awareness of this fact is important.	

## **Dialogue Participants**

**Shaharзад Akbar**, Partner and Chief Operating Officer, QARA Consulting Inc., Afghanistan  
**Abdullah Alaskar**, Majlis Ash-shura member, Saudi Arabia  
**Haifa Reda Jamal Al-Lail**, President, Effat College, Saudi Arabia  
**Anan Ameri**, Director, Arab American National Museum, US  
**Ramazan Aras**, Chair and Assistant Professor, Anthropology Dept, Mardin Artuklu University, Turkey  
**Rina Benmayor**, Professor of Oral History, Literature and Latina/o Studies at California State University, Monterey Bay, US  
**Douglas Boyd**, Director, Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, US  
**Mary Marshall Clark**, Director, Columbia Center for Oral History, US  
**Richard Detweiler**, President, The Great Lakes Colleges Association, US  
**George Gavrilis**, Executive Director, Hollings Center for International Dialogue, US  
**Zuhra Halimova**, Executive Director, Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation, Tajikistan  
**Aiyaz Husain**, Department of State, Office of the Historian, US  
**Sitki Karadeniz**, Research Assistant, Sociology Department, Mardin Artuklu University, Turkey  
**Mujib Mashal**, Journalist, *Al Jazeera English*, Qatar  
**Joanie Meharry**, M.A. candidate in international and comparative legal studies, School of Oriental and African Studies, UK  
**S. Mohammad Mohaqqueq**, Consultant Lecturer, Kabul University, Afghanistan  
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**Leyla Neyzi**, Professor, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Sabancı University, Turkey  
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The Hollings Center for International Dialogue is a non-profit, non-governmental organization dedicated to fostering dialogue between the United States and countries with predominantly Muslim populations in the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Eurasia and Europe. In pursuit of its mission, the Hollings Center convenes dialogue conferences that generate new thinking on important international issues and deepen channels of communication across opinion leaders and experts. The Hollings Center is headquartered in Washington, D.C. and maintains a representative office in Istanbul, Turkey. Its core programs take place in Istanbul—a city whose historic role as a crossroads makes it an ideal venue for multinational dialogue.

To learn more about the Hollings Center’s mission, history and funding:

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