



CULTURAL CONVERSATIONS
Engaging Oral History

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Abstract

Oral history has a long tradition in human societies, capturing the stories of people, places and times, using the recollections and experience of witnesses. As an academic discipline, it has been fruitful in capturing the details of those important stories for analysis, feeding into historical and sociological research. Yet some academic researchers continue to regard oral history as not always factually accurate thus down playing its evidentiary value.

Our experience departs from this view. Oral history brings its own truth to our understanding of how a culture has been made. It brings the kind of texture that raw facts cannot supply. And it brings an emotional dimension only possible when someone speaks in their own voice of their own experience. This leads simply to the conclusion that these important oral histories should be published and enjoyed by the wider community and not just languish out of view.

Cultural Conversations is a collaboration involving artists, critics, authors, cinematographers, translators and IT experts, in building an online living archive of the stories of eminent Australian and South Korean visual artists.

The online archive is freely available to the international audience via bespoke technology developed by the Australia Centre for Oral History.

This paper will discuss the research leading up to the bespoke technology behind the Cultural Conversations collaboration, showing its support for multiple parallel synchronised channels of communication delivered through a standard web browser, delivering synchronised video, audio, images and text in a way that allows the user to select the channels most applicable to them at the time.

Our usage statistics, nearly 120,000 international visitors between April 2018 and March 2019, is indicative of the efficacy of our approach. In addition, the archive has been accessioned by the Pandora/Trove facility at the National Library of Australia as a significant Australian cultural web site.

Background

Cultural Conversations has developed technology for publishing an online archive of interviews with eminent Australian and South Korean creative individuals in the visual art. It is seen as a contemporary method for the production of primary historical sources of information as well as allowing the archiving and dissemination of information about eminent artists, those that have contributed significantly to the development of a culture. In this way, we support the communication between cultures and between generations. It represents a significant mechanism for future art historians to understand how and why these eminent creative individuals developed their art and the contributions they believe they have made to their culture, in their own words.

We utilise an oral history approach augmented by synchronising video, audio, images and text. The usefulness of this approach is affected by a number of factors:

- Oral history is often downplayed as a worthy method, yet "It brings the kind of texture that raw facts cannot supply." (McGillick, 2016)
- The efficacy of communication increases with the utilisation of multiple channels, such as sound, body movements, smell, etc.
- The removal of one of more channels puts more onus on the remaining channels to make up for the missing interaction and support the missing cues, cues that users require to remain engaged.
- Issues of communication and understanding are exacerbated by different perspectives of the various actors. (Macdonald, 1989)

The major concern with an oral history methodology is that each subject gives their own perspective based on their own experiences and thus there could be considerable conflict between subject experts either as a result of missing knowledge or conflicting opinions. See Compton & Jansen (1990) for a discussion of this in knowledge acquisition processes.

This was identified due to the lack of completeness in captured knowledge and was seen as the source of the brittleness associated with Knowledge Based Systems, their inability to explain their reasoning: they did not have the appropriate knowledge to provide understandable explanations to users. It became very clear that alternative sources of knowledge and experience were required and these were identified to include paper based material, video material and audio material. The problem then enlarges to selecting the most suitable format to respond to the user's needs. (Jansen & Robertson, 1989; Jansen & Ferrer, 1997)

This experience was applied to the Cultural Conversations project developments.

Of all these formats, video and audio represent the most user friendly. All human societies have an oral tradition for inter- and intra-generation communication. We are well versed in communicating using these media and have built up a rich communication channel that supports the communication of vast and complex knowledge.

“Oral tradition, also called orality, the first and still most widespread mode of human communication. Far more than “just talking,” oral tradition refers to a dynamic and highly diverse oral-aural medium for evolving, storing, and transmitting knowledge, art, and ideas. It is typically contrasted with literacy, with which it can and does interact in myriad ways, and also with literature, which it dwarfs in size, diversity, and social function.” (Foley, 2013)

Oral history is often critiqued as providing a perspective that can not be verified and hence can not be relied upon.

“Oral history may not always be factually accurate, but it brings its own truth to our understanding of how a culture has been made. It brings the kind of texture that raw facts cannot supply. And it brings an emotional dimension only possible when someone speaks in their own voice of their own experience.” (McGillick, 2016)

Yet it is a technique used in many academic and history disciplines (eg. VoCA, 2018; the National Library of Australia Oral History Collection <https://www.nla.gov.au/what-we-collect/oral-history-and-folklore>). Such collections are deemed primary source material for historic research (<https://library.ithaca.edu/sp/subjects/primary>).

Discussion

The project has researched into oral history publishing from several aspects, as described below.

* *The end user requirements of a published story*

We spent much time discussing what the requirements were of a published oral history, given the recent advances in technology.

Dorner (1993) has an interesting discussion on this topic in relation to early writing. In early writing, the author went out of their way to engage the reader with salutations as was the case in verbal discussion.

“...poets, novelists and essayists addressed us all cozily as “Dear Reader” or “Gentle Reader”. We felt valued as the author’s friend. We were engaged jointly, in an act of complicity...

Writers have always acknowledge that the “Dear Reader” was someone to woo. ...Novelists or essayists alike thought carefully about the level at which to address the reader.” (Dorner, 1993, pp6)

Manguel (1996) offers a fascinating insight into the history of reading. He discusses many aspects of reading that are applicable to the reading of digital content and his analysis offered much guiding to our research.

One of the main ideas coming from both of these sources is that of user engagement. Dorner describes that in this new mode of communication, great pains were made to engage the reader as if the author was still talking to them. Manguel similarly espouses engagement as a primary and necessary attribute for the reader to continue reading.

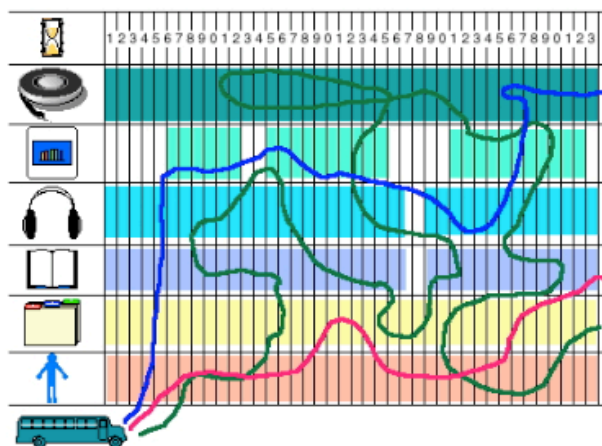
One aspect of engagement relates to user control. Users today increasingly demand to be in control of an interaction with an information service. So, we designed several mechanisms to facilitate user control, including different layouts or skins to present information in different ways, the use of a table of contents to allow the user to drive the interaction to where that want it to go at any time, an almost verbatim transcript that also indicates what is being said at any time and allows the user to drive the story to any place they want and accompanying images illustrating the story as appropriate.

* *The architecture of the story*

Once we had the background as to user requirements, we developed a simple file architecture and an XML schema, able to be used by any oral history developer to publish their oral history using our bespoke technology. This part of the research also settled on the notion that each story had to be free standing, no external dependencies, and thus able to be moved between collections as needed without requiring additional technical work.

We took this requirement further so that the technology implementation has no dependencies on third party technology, like JQUERY, etc. This ensures that our technology stands on its own and changes in such facilities do not impact on us. In fact this has meant that we have had almost no technology maintenance after the initial settling-in period. Our focus on standards-based technology is also predicted to assist in facilitating access well into the future and with digital archiving.

What was observed through the IntelliText (Jansen & Ferrer, 1997) and Dark Fibre Risk (Jansen & Robertson, 1989) projects was the requirement to utilise multiple channels to maximise the efficacy of the communication. Cultural Conversations embarked on developing an online environment which could provide flexible access to oral history material, coupled with appropriate alternative media such as images and text. The architecture was designed as multiple parallel synchronised channels of information.



Testimony Software - Parallel synchronized streams of media through which you can flexibly navigate.

The reliance on multiple channels brings its own issues. The channels must remain synchronised, they must not interfere with each other, they must have coherence. Most importantly, given our research, is that the user must be able to choose those channels that suit them at the time. They

want to be in charge of the interaction, they do not want to be forced into a mode mandated by the author or publisher.

Channel choice brings another issue, the removal of one of more channels puts more onus on the remaining channels to make up for the missing interaction and support the missing cues. The 'lost in hyperspace' phenomenon seen in the early days of hypermedia is a direct result of this (Otter & Johnson, 2000).

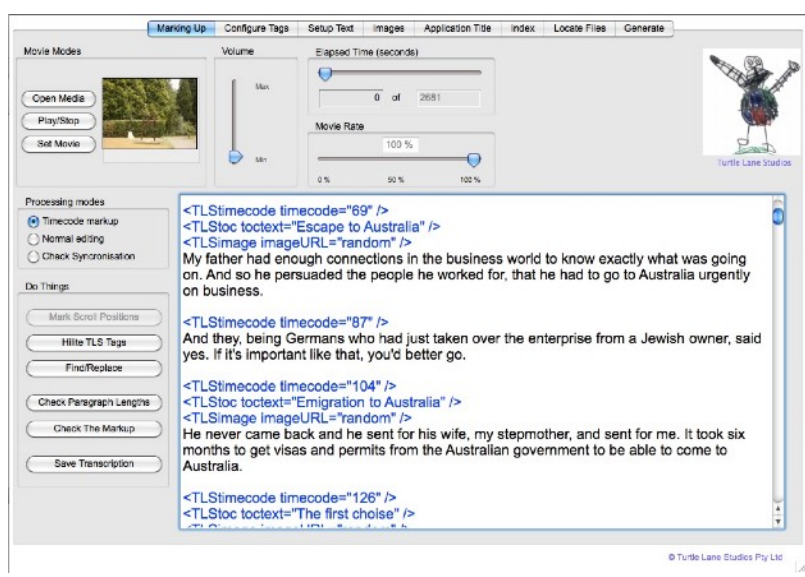
** The development of an Authoring Toolkit or Workbench*

The authoring toolkit, TLSTranscription, supports the whole authoring process, starting with the edited video of the interview, through to transcribing, marking up the content elements, adding images and a table of contents, to finally identifying the topics being discussed and creating the topic map of the interview and merging this topic map into the topic map of the collection.

TLSTranscription has a number of separate areas, defined by the various TABS in the interface, for providing the various content elements. The user can provide the required information at any time. Once all information has been provided, the user can use the *Generate* tab to automatically generate the various files required by the browser in their correct place. This way, the user does not require any knowledge of the underlying technology, for example, HTML5, CSS nor Javascript, to create publishable interviews. This has proved very beneficial with projects utilising students and non-technical staff to publish recorded interviews with little requirements for training.

TLSTranscription is controlled via an XML schema that defines the structure and layout of a transcription including the links facilitating the synchronisation between content elements. This schema ensures that all interviews follow the desired architecture.

There are two versions of TLSTranscription available, one for Windows and the second for Macintosh OSX.



TLSTranscription, the authoring toolkit. This image shows the main work area, allowing the transcription of the video/audio, synchronisation between the transcript and video/audio, and markup to insert image tags and table of contents tags.

* *The development of the browser seamlessly working across the various web browsers*

The browser, Testimony Software, provides the user interface to the interviews and the collection. It is a collection of standards-based technologies, HTML5 files, CSS files and JavaScript, to present the oral history through a conventional web browser. The browser ensures that once an interview is started, the content streams to the browser and remains synchronised throughout the interaction. Target browsers must be HTML5 compliant, thus ensuring correct operation across the widest number of operating systems, including Windows and Macintosh OS versions, as well as tablets and mobile phones. Our workflow produces the various compressed formats of video and audio files required for across platform delivery, including M4V, MP4, OGV, WEBM, MP3 and OGG.

The default format of an interview uses a four quadrant orientation: *top left*, the video and audio of the interview; *top right*, images highlighting topics of conversation; *bottom left*, the transcript, almost verbatim; and *bottom right*, the table of contents of the interview.

There are a number of skins available to allow the user to tailor the interface to their requirements.

- *Normal*, high engagement, the four quadrant interface depicted below.
- *Audio only*, similar to the normal interface but no video. This caters for lower connection speeds.
- *Text only*, transcript, images and table of contents only. This is a style often used by researchers who can search the text, can quickly enter and leave, etc.
- *Kiosk*, a skin allowing the playing of the interview in an endless loop. This has been successfully used in exhibition settings. This mode requires no input devices, once the interview starts to play, it just continues to play in an endless loop until turned off.
- *Image gallery*, the list of images used in the interview. Clicking on a thumbnail shows that image and caption in a larger format

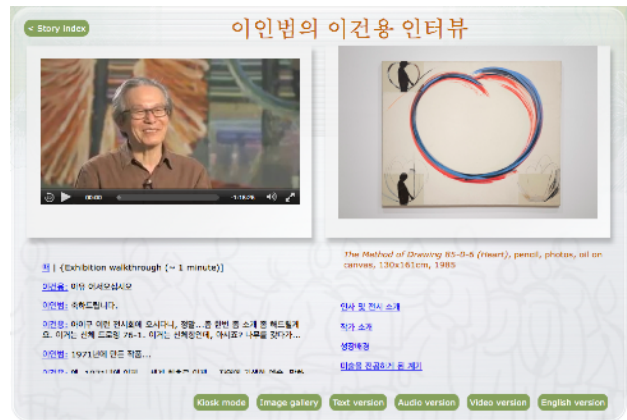
The following images show how an interview is seen through the browser interface, using the interview with South Korean artist, Lee Kun Yong. In this case, the interview is published in both English and Korean. The default interface publishes the video and audio of the interview, a full almost verbatim interview, a table of contents and images that illustrate topics being discussed, using the four quadrant layout as described above. These channels of information remain synchronised throughout the engagement. Users can drive the interview by clicking on any of the blue underlined hyperlinks. Doing so will position the interview to that time and also synchronise each quadrant to show the content it has been programmed to show. Clicking on any of the green buttons will either show a different skin, take the user to an alternate language layout, take to user back to the collection list of available interviews or show the interviews topic map.

We have explored the use of a serendipitous interface element: allowing access to any part of the interview for no particular reason. This is analogous to letting a book fall open to where it may. In the current version, this interface method can be replicated by sliding the movie/audio controller to any desired position.

It should be noted, however, that content synchronisation occurs at the paragraph level not the word or utterance level as is the case in other systems. This means that the other content elements appear out of sync until a new paragraph point is encountered. Paragraph points are numerous and thus such out of sync phases are usually short.



The interview in English



The interview in Korean



The image gallery

Our reasoning behind this is that users require a second or so to adapt to the new position. Immediately starting the playback at a word within a sentence maximises the chance that the reader will get 'lost' requiring a finite amount of time to re-orient themselves with where they are by which time the interview playback has already moved on. They usually remain in 'catch up' mode and evidence shows they quickly click away. Our mechanism allows them time to sync their thought processes. Our audience demand figure, see below, indicate the efficacy of our approach.

The usefulness of a serendipitous interface is questionable when compared to the table of contents or the hyperlinks available in the transcript at the start of every paragraph. These interface elements provide access by context and are considered more useful as such.

* *How to cater for multiple languages with minimal to no reworking of the content*

With our work involving South Korean subjects, it became obvious that a multi-language facility was required, enabling us to publish an oral history in the native language of the subject as well as English or, in fact, any other language. English remains the *lingua franca* today and thus allows for the greatest readership of such published material. However, for cultural reasons, we believe that publishing in the interview native language is also required. Our audience demand figures, see below, are evidence of the efficacy of this approach. From a publishing perspective, the only additional cost and work is that of translating into the desired target language(s). For an example, see the images above.

* *The Topic Map facility*

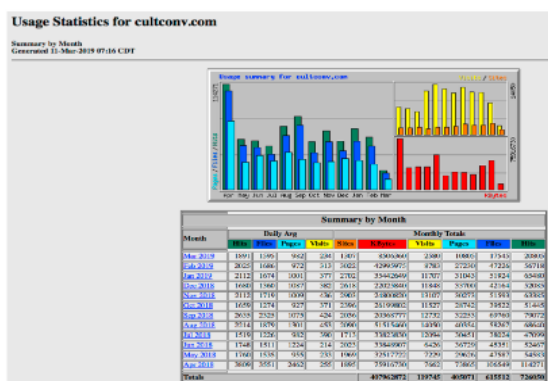
In addition to and to assist in inter and intra story navigation, we provide a Topic Map listing the names of all people, places, organisations and exhibitions mentioned in a recording. This topic map allows the user to see the things being talked about and to navigate to that part of the recording directly, thus putting them in control of the engagement. The topic maps of individual recordings are also merged into a topic map covering the whole collection thus providing access to other recordings discussing similar topics.



An interview's topic map

* *Audience demand*

The question of the efficacy of the interfaces and demand for our archive is often raised. Recent maintenance of the web site provided site usage statistics, nearly 120,000 unique visits to the collection between April 2018 and March 2019, from all around the world. This is indicative of the demand for our content and, to some extent, the acceptance of the interface. In addition, the web site has been accessioned by the National Library of Australia's Pandora project, a project collecting significant cultural web sites (<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/tep/152670>). Verbal feedback (personal communication) indicates appreciation of the interface elements and the quality of the content.



Audience demand figures for Cultural Conversations web site, April 2018 to March 2019

Other Approaches

Other approaches to publishing cultural content online do exist, including the Voices in Contemporary art (VoCa) project from New York, the Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong, the Asia Culture Centre in South Korea, the National Library of Australia's Oral History Branch and its Pandora/Trove project and Design and Arts Australia Online (DAAO). There are also many private or commercial projects run mainly by commercial galleries but these would appear to be mainly focussed on selling works from their artist stable.

Design and Art Australia Online (DAAAO, <https://www.daaao.org.au>) is an online listing of the details of Australian artists. It aims to be a database and e-research tool for art and design researchers. It has grown out of an earlier project, The Dictionary of Australian Artists Online. The database lists artists, their CV's and exhibition details where available. The completeness and veracity of the entry is questionable. The information is static unless someone has inserted links to alternate content. The content is textual based with some images for works. Cultural Conversations has an agreement to support links between us, linking our interviews to appropriate entries in the DAAO and vice versa. Our approach differs in that we choose only artists deemed as 'eminent' and publish interviews where they discuss their lives and works. A select committee, consisting of artists and non artists, makes the final selection based on recommendations.

Asia Art Archive (<https://aaa.org.hk/en>) is a project from Hong Kong, publishing an archive of Asian art content. They focus on Asian artists and publish videos, bibliographies, papers and presentations and datasets of selected artists. They have a collection program and also commission specific elements, such as DVD's and/or CD's of appropriate content. Cultural Conversations maintains links between interviewed artists and content available in this archive, through their search API. The collection strategy of this archive seems to be to collect as much as possible and then make it available as required through the web interface. Our approach differs in that we utilise different media and synchronise them to create a more engaging picture of the subject and our reliance on eminence as the main selection criterium.

Asia Culture Centre (<https://www.acc.go.kr/en>) in South Korea serves a similar purpose as the Asia Art Archive coupled with cultural exchange and collaboration. They too focus on Asian Art and the two collections overlap to a large degree. The collection is mainly paper based but they do support some digital content, mainly through videos related to specific artists in their collection. They provided a three month residency in 2017 to the author which resulted in the recording and publishing of an interview with Korean artist, Kang Un. The centre organises many events

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attracting local people to the center. They also have a busy residency program for both South Korean and international artists. We also link an interview to their content through the search API.

The National Library of Australia has an extensive oral history collection spanning many areas in Australian society, including arts and culture (<https://www.nla.gov.au/what-we-collect/oral-history-and-folklore>). They have a very active collection program recording oral histories, making extensive transcriptions linked to the audio recordings at the 'word' level. These recordings, privacy permitted, are made available through the NLA's online activities and in particular, through the Trove project. The organisation also accessions culturally significant Australian web sites as part of its collection activities. The Cultural Conversations archive was selected for accessioning by the NLA and made available through the Trove facility (<http://pandora.nla.gov.au/tep/152670>). The main difference between the NLA's approach and ours is the resolution on synchronisation, ours at the paragraph level, the NLA at the word level, and our synchronisation with a table of contents and inclusion of relevant images that highlight topics of conversation. Cultural Conversation considers synchronisation at the word level too fine, our experience is that users prefer to hear the context the word is spoken in and paragraph level synchronisation provides such a facility. The activity does not support a topic map feature providing a thematic element.

Voices of Contemporary Art (VOCA, <http://www.voca.network/voca-resources/>) publishes a list of interview resources, including video and audio interviews, books and publications. The main scope of this activity is to provide URL's to other resources, such as Cultural Conversations, listing twenty-eight activities in this area, mainly in the US (<http://www.voca.network/voca-resources/audio-video/>). They also have an active conference program regularly organising meetings to discuss important topics in the digital cultural area, such as archiving and preservation of time based media. They list Cultural Conversations amongst their known resources.

Conclusion

In this paper we have discussed the research behind the successful Cultural Conversations project, publishing an archive of interviews with eminent Australian and South Korean visual artists. We demonstrated the demand for this type of facility through the site usage statistics, nearly 120,000 visits between April 2018 and March 2019.

We discussed the architecture of the Cultural Conversations archive: multiple synchronised channels of information and putting the user in control of the interaction.

Although not explored in great details, the topic map facility is seen as a facility that will be expanded in the future, increasing its richness through supporting more topics and improving relationship typing between topic entries.

This project owes much to its collaborators who mostly gave their time and energy pro bono: Yvonne Boag, a founding director and member of the Australian and South Korean selection committees; Dr. Paul McGillick, a founding director, member of the Australian selection committee and chief interviewer; Cameron Glendinning, our director of photography in Sydney; Francois Saikaly, our director of photography in South Korea; Anders Wotzke, our director of photography in Adelaide; Adele Boag, our project manager and interviewer in Adelaide, Dr. Yoon Jin Sup; member

of the Korean selection committee and chief interviewer in South Korea; Dr. Peter Pinson (recently deceased), who was of immense support to the project, was a member of the Australian selection committee and undertook several of the Sydney interviews and Kim So Young (Stacey), our Korean transcriber/translator; and all the artists who have given their time and access to their life and world for free.

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