

A VISUAL DIMENSION TO ORAL HISTORY

by Don Page

"An historian's chief interest is in character and in circumstance. His concern is to discover the hopes, fears, anticipations and intentions of the individuals and nations he is writing about. His task is to reproduce as best he can the circumstances, problems and situations faced by another person in another time. He seeks insight and understanding that cannot be gained through application of sociological rules and general explanations."

In this description of the historians' craft by Donald Creighton lies the oral historians' *raison d'être* for they add another dimension to the understanding of the nuances of character and circumstance. While they have not hidden their products, they have disguised their methodology by not sharing their experiences with variations in taping techniques and what is relevant to this paper, their thoughts on the relative merits, use and interchange between audio and video production of a new primary source material for other historians. The emphasis on the discovery and use of primary source material by traditional historians has obfuscated the oral historians' creation of a new source, the significance of which is related to the date of the interview.

Unlike the pioneers in the oral history field who had to await the advancement of technology before integrating their audio and video materials, the modest oral history programme, begun as recently as 1971 by the Historical Division of the Department of External Affairs, always had both techniques at its disposal. While its experiences in the use of the two techniques are confined to the specialized field of recording the history of Canada's role in international relations, some of them may be instructive for developers of broader programmes.

External's oral history programme is aimed at uncovering the character of the actors and the circumstances surrounding events. For us, oral history is not a substitute for written records, since we create a quarter of a mile of original paperwork each year, but a means of filling gaps occasioned by the unmemored telephone conversation or meeting, understanding the significance of the written record and above all the means of eliciting opinions, impressions and feelings about persons, events, and decision-making options that contribute so much to understanding the real motives behind the decision-making process. Since someone once explained to diplomatic historians that "Diplomacy is doing and saying the nastiest things in the nicest ways" they have retained a healthy scepticism of the official written record. Moreover, the Canadian diplomat at home in the civil service must in accordance with custom remain virtually anonymous and while abroad must publicly defend as often as he can do so usefully the actions and conduct of his country and of his Government, therefore we can often discover the real diplomat and the real circumstances behind this perpetual diplomatic dialogue, only through oral history. What, then, can video contribute beyond audio techniques?

Experts in communication techniques and receptivity tell us that we communicate only 7% of our thoughts and intentions by words, 38% by the tone of voice and 55% by facial expressions, postures and gestures. In a structured interview

the percentage for word communication is undoubtedly higher but not so high as to warrant reliance solely on audio methods. The experience of this interviewer suggests that the interviewee more often remembers his emotions, and occasionally can reproduce them quite well, than the facts surrounding the events. The historical value of conscious and sub-conscious reproduction of emotions communicated on video tape will, of course, depend upon a variety of factors such as the time gap separating the issue under discussion and the time of the interview, relations between the interviewer and interviewee, the setting of the interview, and as has too often been forgotten, the present emotional state of the interviewee.

Recent management studies show that the performance of an employee is largely conditioned by the emotional state in which he left his preceding environment. Investigators were recently dumbfounded to learn that an experienced pilot could easily have avoided a crash that killed himself and all his passengers by executing a simple routine procedure that he had used before and only that morning had been briefed on. The source of the problem lay in a domestic quarrel earlier that morning that had left him emotionally incapable of responding to the briefing. Oral historians should expect no less from their subjects. Video tape is one way of capturing that transformed emotion that elicits emotional responses unrelated to the events or people being described. This interviewer well remembers the futility of interviewing a subject who was mentally preoccupied by an airline's loss of his baggage en route to the interview and a lady with a badly bruised hip who felt constrained to talk to me in spite of her obvious physical discomfort because I had travelled half-way across the continent to see her. Fortunately, in both cases, a subsequent interview was more rewarding. Video tape also captures that wry smile that precedes a response thereby confirming that old dictum that "actions speak louder than words". The transcript of one interview with a former Secretary of State for External Affairs provides a very polite account of his encounters with an American ambassador. It was only later over lunch that the story behind his facial contortions at the time of the interview gave way to the real story and his underlying motives and attitudes that beset his encounters with this ambassador. The reader of the historical record and transcript will find a picture that belies the truth whereas a video tape would give the viewer the same insight that led to further fruitful questioning in private. Video tape then, is a means of preserving for the eventual user the circumstances under which the interview took place. In this regard, one of the oversights of oral historians relying exclusively on audio methods, has been their failure to add an impressionistic description of the interviewee and interview at the end of each transcript or tape. Although there remains in this impressionistic description of the interview and interviewee the very distinct possibility of passing on to future researchers a misjudgement or a misinterpretation of the interviewee's emotional state and feelings, it does not outweigh the chance of gaining further insight that can always be measured against the researcher's own impression gained at the time of the screening. An interviewer creating the raw material for future historians should be no less suspect for his intentions and means than the interviewee attempting to elucidate or recreate the past. The interviewer's impressions, and for that matter the interviewee's impressions as well, can become one tool for evaluating the record in much the same way that commentators dissect the latest political pronouncement on television.

For well-known actors, such as a former Secretary of State for External Affairs whose actions or reminiscences have been captured by T.V. news clips or public affairs programmes, we use a short ten minute cassette as a means of adding flesh to a sometimes barren or dull transcript of a number of audio interviews. Our purpose is to produce an inexpensive visual introduction to the interviewee in a

way that the user of the transcript can feel more a part of the interview. The T.V. tape of a network news or other programme that may be available to the researcher is not considered part of our oral history programme since our tapes should contain more candid and frank accounts than the interviewee was prepared to divulge to his contemporary world. The T.V. tape is best seen as a valuable supplement for helping to establish for future users the physical condition, mental acuity, and personality characteristics of the subject. Even if the media interviewer does submit his subject to polite but relentless cross-questioning, he has quite different motivations than the oral historian that are reflected in the two distinct types of questioning.

For the majority of our diplomats who are less well-known in the public eye, a thirty minute video tape is used since we wish to capture more of his characteristics that would bring life into lengthy transcripts on secret and usually complicated diplomatic negotiations. At least by this means the user can gain some appreciation of the diplomat that is valid for the period during which the interviews took place. The video tape is made at the conclusion of the audio recordings, or at the conclusion of a segment thereof if the taping sessions are spread out over a long period of time, when the interviewer can select questions that would enable the interviewee in reply to project the various aspects of his personality. Since the use of video tape is confined to personality projection, no transcript is made of the interview. What emerges in the video session is a lively but often disjointed sweep through a wide range of related subjects. In this type of interview the interviewer is not concerned with eliciting information, since that has already been recorded, but in enabling the interviewee to project his personality and emotions that have a curious mixture of contemporary and historical relevance. Although the video is made at the conclusion of the taping sessions it should never be regarded as a wrap-up to the audio recordings. If an overview is deemed desirable, it should follow the format of earlier audio interviews where time can be taken for thoughtful responses.

The dilemma of deciding on the appropriate proportions between video and audio is now common to all directors of established oral history programmes. External settled on a selective video programme for a number of very practical reasons. Like other small programmes during a period of inflated costs and declining budgets, the cost-benefit analysis that flows from the disparity in costs between the two methods forced us into a selective use of video. At present we borrow or rent video equipment because the capital expenditure would have to be made at the expense of our ongoing taping programme. Through usage we have also discovered three other good reasons for its selective use.

Unlike audio, video does not have the same flexibility of location. Improvised studios are seldom conducive to good reproduction quality and this is particularly important because our interviewees are seldom located close to Ottawa. Moreover, since many of them are elderly, they prefer the home environment which is more adaptable to audio equipment. Often they are overly conscious of their failing physical appearance and become unduly worried about their camera image to the detriment of their capacity for mental recall. Unless the interviewees are used to extensive travelling, the best atmosphere for conducting the interview derives from sending the interviewer to the interviewee if at least minimal recording standards can be met on location.

For those interviewers who have experienced difficulties with interviewees who are nervous about any form of electronic recording device, their use of video

equipment merely compounds the problem. Interviewee consciousness of a telescope or glass eye intruder is an even more unnerving experience than a microphone. As a result they become more unsettled by the conspicuous pause that cannot be as easily erased or dubbed as on audio tape. The interviewee is usually happier to let a minor mistake slip by for later correction when it is only a question of voice as compared to voice and image. Because of the nature of our interviews, we often use outside experts in the subject area under discussion as interviewers. Although we brief and occasionally train these inexperienced interviewers in the techniques of interviewing by means of video or audio playbacks, we still find that the novice who often unconsciously responds to the atmosphere created by the awareness and movement of the two cameras is liable to become a performer more than an interviewer thereby losing control of the interview. Since experience has dictated that re-runs are seldom of the same quality, we prefer to maximize the chances of a good interview by commencing it on audio.

The third reason why we use selective video relates to our end market. Ours is neither the contemporary CBC library nor educational TV programming, though the Historical Division as part of the Public Affairs Bureau of the Department must retain this capacity for contemporary release of some historical tapes. Instead, our tapes and transcripts that are governed by the Government's 30-year rule on the release of classified materials, are resources for future historians who require the interviewees' recollections of policies, personalities and events. In this sense the tapes become a rather long-range scholarly contribution to a more complete understanding of a diplomat's career, influence, attitudes, motivating factors, and relations with his colleagues and associates. Because historians looking back on a period of history are more interested in transcripts than tapes, when they do not actually cover an event per se, video tape may be wasted if used merely to record memoirs which the interviewee has not or will not put on paper. Without any direct educational value being assigned to our tapes the exclusive use of video becomes questionable. For these reasons we have adopted the mixed or selective approach.

Even a selective video oral history programme requires all the meticulous preparations associated with audio plus a few more depending upon the subject since it tends to accentuate the human failings of the people interviewed. It will certainly not eliminate or even begin to remove the pitfalls associated with oral history by audio means. In short, we merely have all the failings of a reconstructed past in an artificial atmosphere.

As inventive sorts, oral historians will undoubtedly be tempted into video recording in response to fascinating advertising of its use in the media and educational fields of oral interviewing. Before succumbing to this temptation, the oral historian must ensure that the technique will in fact enable him to perform better the historian's craft. Like the marginal use of expensive computer technology the historian may find that the end purpose of using video does not justify the costs or the means, though it may enable him to keep up with the Joneses on his TV screen or other social scientists.

As a start, perhaps the wary oral historian might pose two questions. First, does the production of video tape produce a more friendly and candid atmosphere in which the interview can take place? If not, is the sacrifice of quality material worth it? Secondly, does the process evoke any more nearly, the complete and the contemporary impression that the oral historian is striving for? For what the experience of one practitioner is worth and because we exist in a period of diminishing dollars, the Historical Division of the Department of External Affairs has adopted a programme of selected use of video taping combined with a more complete audio record.