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A New Oral History Modality?

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As an oral historian who has long been used to conducting and working with traditional long interviews, I have recently been exploring a different approach, one that can open the doors to a broader imagination of how oral history is generated and collected and of the meanings it conveys. I have come to think of this as “Short Form Oral History,” or even “Mosaic Oral History”: this is the idea, as in a mosaic, that a broader story can be composed of very small “tiles” – in this case, tiles of memory, story, and reflection. This has been implemented in a number of projects, especially efforts to document COVID-19, which I address in this project report for the “Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej”.

My route to this approach emerged from working with colleagues to develop a cloud-based platform, PixStoriplus, that combines photos and brief voice recordings or texts. There has recently been considerable interest in how this can be used for very broad-based COVID-19 documentation projects; I was able to introduce this approach in a workshop for the International Federation for Public History that had over one hundred participants from fifteen different countries. There have been initial experiments along this line in the United States, India, China, Brazil, and other countries, including Poland, at the Wrocław center.

I suggest two linked dimensions that grow out of PixStori so that they can be deployable on many platforms and in a variety of ways. The first is the notion with which I began – imagining “short-form” oral history. An assumption that usually is not examined in oral history is that long interviews are somehow the natural and exclusive mode for serious work in academic, archival, or public history settings. But what if this is not necessarily the case? What happens if that unexamined assumption is suspended so that other possibilities can be glimpsed? I recently discussed this with a friend whose field is literature. He replied to my comments by saying, in effect: “What you’re implying is this: if oral history were a field like literature, the whole field seems to have assumed there is only one literary form: the novel,” which is to say the long interview. “But what about poetry?” he added. This is an intriguing parallel: poetry is wholly different than novels, yet nobody would deny that it conveys meaning and experience in its own distinct ways and that it is literature. Thus, one challenge is to explore how oral historical meaning can be embodied in and emerge from short, concentrated responses, often to an open-ended and stimulating prompt.

The second dimension suggested by PixStori is the power of a still photograph as a focused and concrete yet still evocative and open-ended prompt. At its core is the notion that photographs, especially those that are chosen or taken by oneself, open a natural, open-ended story-telling oral history mode. People describe the photo, and then, “grounded but not bounded” by the image, they often “take off” to broad reflections. This has surprising implications for reception and communication.

What seems to happen is that as long as the voice is heard, people keep looking at the still photograph – far longer and with more concentration than would ordinarily be the case. It seems that they actively engage with it, almost as if they are walking around it and seeing it in different ways. The reverse is also true: as long as they have the photo to focus on, viewers seem to listen and process the audio story with more engagement, audio attention alone being hard to sustain. Voice combined with a still image seems almost a new medium, especially in a world over-saturated with video, passively consumed because the motion drags viewers along a set path.

These photo-voice units become even more surprisingly meaningful in their concentrated short form for oral and public history, when they are brought together like tiny “tiles” in a mosaic to tell broader stories. This is easy to do because they are “born small,” modular units “ready to go” without needing to be chiseled out of long interviews; these units are easily coded, sorted, and combinable by themes – for a community, a nation, and perhaps especially for the comparative and cumulative documentation of a global pandemic affecting everyone’s lives. In this mode, it might be possible to collect thousands and thousands of such responses, which could then be sorted and categorized along many productive and revealing axes of inquiry and meaning.

This also has methodological implications for oral history, where interviewers often struggle to pose direct questions without over-determining the response to them or, conversely, letting the interview wander so open-endedly as to lose focus. Letting the prompt focus on the photo permits the respondent to decide what photo to use or take in response, and offers the agency to “story” it however they wish while retaining whatever broad focus was built into the photo request. One of the best examples is the second PixStori, whose URLs are included below. The prompt was simple: to provide a photo that expresses how one’s life has changed while “sheltered in place” because of COVID-19. In this case, an international student responded by deciding on her own to take a picture of her closet and “the clothes I may never wear again” because her life had come down to “day pajamas and night pajamas.” With that little joke, she springboards to the real story – anxiety about whether her graduate education would ever resume, her family being far away in China, and more. This is worth listening to: it is a kernel of oral history documentation, humor, emotion and life complexity, all in under two minutes.

Well beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, photo-responsive short-form oral histories can provide a compact core of image, story, reflection, and insight on the subjects’ own ground, on their own terms, and in their own words, which is close to the core of what any good oral history is about.¹

1 PixStori Examples, from various COVID-19 documentation projects: *My Daughters Visit!*, Reflections by Mother, 93, Buffalo, New York, <https://www.pixstoriplus.com/group-pYMo->

I would be very happy to hear from any readers of WRHM interested in photo/short-form possibilities generally. Please contact me at: mfrisch@buffalo.edu. Pix-Storiplus is free and open – sign up at www.pixstoriplus.com. All new registrants have a free “personal private group” set up by default for their use in experimenting with the platform, joined by family or friends if they wish. Those interested in use for projects can also contact me, and we can quickly set up dedicated project groups, free of charge.

[EipyErsEoEPMH/tiles/ZX2t5pqjSqpn7s4aS](https://www.pixstoriplus.com/tiles/ZX2t5pqjSqpn7s4aS) (accessed: 19.02.2021); *How COVID-19 has shaped my life while “sheltered in place”*, International Graduate Student, Buffalo, New York, <https://www.pixstoriplus.com/group-QdTJi7JEBMnJoEaKL/tiles/Bnr2uibiWqcAHxoYw> (accessed: 19.02.2021); *Ology Brewing Company’s Home Made Hand Sanitizer*, Tallahassee, Florida, <https://www.pixstoriplus.com/group-Pruq5herzKYsRTGiw/tiles/adPSo2v7zSDqpSugp> (accessed: 19.02.2021); *Pass Card*, Student project in Hangzhou, China, <https://www.pixstoriplus.com/tiles/myRQptqYHcdnTQKXe> (accessed: 19.02.2021); *My Dad has started growing flowers*, Student project in Hangzhou, China, <https://www.pixstoriplus.com/tiles/GvtFjdbBMysopbRTY> (accessed: 19.02.2021).