

Stephen Naron

ARCHIVES, ETHICS AND INFLUENCE: HOW THE FORTUNOFF VIDEO ARCHIVE'S METHODOLOGY SHAPES ITS COLLECTION'S CONTENT

The workshop that was the impetus for the papers in this volume was designed as a point of departure for a discussion of “best practices” related to the use of testimony in educational programs. This contribution is not an example of a specific educational initiative, or an attempt to suggest teaching outcomes that should be included as a set of best practices to measure the impact of an educational program, but rather a reflection on one collection, the *Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies (Fortunoff Archive)* at *Yale University*, which provides access to unedited testimonies, and therefore the raw archival materials that form the basis of these types of programs. The article will explore “best practices”, but primarily the practices the archive has developed iteratively over more than three decades. In doing so, it will address the following question posed at the workshop in January 2017: how does an archive like the *Fortunoff* shape and influence the content of the testimonies in its collection? We can attempt to answer this question by examining its mission, methodology and its roots in the survivor community, and by contrasting this with the work done by other archival institutions.

An archive as an institution has great power to shape its collection's content, and to frame and reframe that collection for its patrons. Scholarly literature at the turn of the century addressed the changing role of archives, or what one author called the “archival paradigm shift” (Cook 2001: 4). This shift reflects larger social and cultural changes that are most commonly associated with the emergence of what might best be referred to as the “postmodern turn”. We can define postmodern turn as a departure from the grand ideologies of the modern period to a set of “critical, strategic and rhetorical practices”

aimed at “destabilizing” modern concepts like “identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty.”¹¹ Prior to the postmodern turn, archivists often identified themselves as “passive guardians of an inherited legacy” (Ibid.). As late as 1947, Hilary Jenkinson, an influential English archivist at the Public Records Office, stated that archives:

“are not there because someone brought them together with the idea that they would be useful to students of the future, or to prove a point or illustrate a theory. They came together and reached their final arrangement by a natural process: a growth, you might say, as much an organism as a tree or an animal.” (1948: 4)

But the archival paradigm shift turned away from Jenkinson’s view, and countered with a recognition of a “tension within the central archival professional myth: enormous power and discretion over societal memory, deeply masked behind a public image of denial and self-effacement”, writes the Canadian archivist Tom Nesmith (2002: 32). The debate had already moved from an examination of “influence” to an actual discussion about “power”.

Often located within the confines of some larger historically-situated institution, the archive influences content and form through the development and application of an array of policies and methodologies, some based on national or international standards, others on proprietary and idiosyncratic local guidelines. An archive develops its own “culture” even a shared “foundational narrative”. It grows its content according to a more or less well-defined collection development strategy, which reflects its home institution’s culture or mission. The archive forms and molds its collection, and how it will be used by patrons, through choices concerning how to catalog and provide access to materials, and by privileging some materials over others, whether intentionally or unintentionally – by highlighting or exhibiting certain documents, or leaving other lower priority collections unprocessed, and therefore “hidden”.

Founded by Survivors: the Fortunoff Archive's History

At first glance, the Fortunoff Archive is no exception to any of the above. It is “embedded” in a larger institution to which it is bound, and from which it benefits: Yale University Library. With nearly 600 employees and more than 15m volumes, the library is defined as “the heart” of Yale University. And while Yale is the archive’s home, the archive didn’t begin as a Yale initiative. The archive’s roots are in the local survivor community, which in turn molds its policies and practices. By contrast, a collection like Yale University Archives has always been “part of Yale”, a unit within the university bureaucracy, and beholden to the ebb and flow of decisions taken at Yale, changes to administrative priorities, and the desire to document certain aspects of academic and student life on campus. The university archives contribute to the reproduction of the “idea of Yale”, over time, by providing researchers and students with the raw materials for historical inquiry, exhibits, and publications about the university. But the idea of Yale is not wholly fixed. Yale as an institution and the library’s *Department of Manuscripts and Archives* (MSSA) as the archival repository for that institution do change. Over the last 20 years, MSSA has adjusted its collection development policy to include the documentation of marginalized groups at Yale and beyond, including women, who were not admitted as undergraduates until 1969, and records of Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) organizations nationwide. These initiatives could be seen as a concrete example of Maurice Halbwachs’ (1992) theory of collective memory in action. The Yale communities’ values, interests, and demographics are changing, and in response, so is the manner in which the institution needs to remember itself. After all, Halbwachs writes that collective memory, and a collective’s understanding of its past, is not just the “retrieval of stored information, but the putting together of a claim about past states of affairs by means of a framework of shared cultural understanding” – and that “shared understanding” is fluid (Ibid.: 43). Richard Brown and Beth Davis-Brown (1998: 22) note: “Archives are the manufacturers of memory and not merely the guardians of it.” The Fortunoff Archive exemplifies this statement. It indeed does its own “manufacturing”.

Unlike traditional archives like *Yale University Archives*, which “inherits” and collects materials produced by others, such as offices and departments within Yale, the Fortunoff Archive has the unusual distinction of being an archive that produces itself. It produces itself in the sense that it records its own materials. This began in 1979 when the archive’s predecessor organization, known as the *Holocaust Survivors Film Project* (HSFP), was founded in New Haven, Connecticut. It was a grassroots effort of volunteers, including representatives from the survivor community like William Rosenberg, the head of the Labor Zionist organization *Farband* in New Haven. Rosenberg was president of the HSFP and not only encouraged survivors to participate but also raised significant funds for recordings. From the start, it was very much an effort by survivors for survivors. For example, Dori Laub, one of the co-founders of the project, who also served as an interviewer, was a child survivor from Czernowitz, formerly Romania. One of the first survivors to be recorded in 1979, Eva B. (HVT-1), also participated as an interviewer in a number of tapings afterwards. She wouldn’t be the last to exchange roles, to move from one side of the camera to the other. The organization involved survivors at every level, including fundraising, organizing tapings and meetings in their homes. This rootedness in the survivor community was crucial to the development of the archive’s methods and policies, and the form and use of the content in its collection.

The archive as an “archive” was born in 1981, when the HSFP deposited 183 testimonies at *Yale University Library*, thanks to the work of Geoffrey H. Hartman, a distinguished professor of literature and a survivor, and the support of the Yale president, A. Bartlett Giamatti. Testimonies were not only recorded in New Haven, but also sent to New Haven by affiliate projects. More than 30 affiliates were organized to conduct tapings in Europe, Israel, North America and South America beginning in the 1980s. The testimonies recorded by these projects were given to the *Fortunoff Archive*, which obligated itself to catalog, preserve, and make these testimonies accessible for use in teaching and research. Affiliate projects were an extension of the initial “collaborative effort” of volunteers, often survivors and children of survivors, trained by

representatives from the Fortunoff Archive, and embedded in their communities. In this manner, the archive not only “produced” itself, it “reproduced” itself.

The Tradition of Survivor Documentation

Although it is the longest sustained effort to record survivor testimony on video, it is important to acknowledge the larger story of survivor documentation. Despite the innovative use of video, still a relatively new medium in 1979 and a less expensive alternative to film, the Fortunoff Archive is just one node on a continuum of efforts to document the Holocaust. In the immediate postwar period, there were the historical commissions, many of which are explored in Laura Jockusch’s book *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe*. She writes:

“These initiatives of Jewish Holocaust documentation arose as grassroots movements impelled by the survivors’ own will and with no government backing [...] Out of fear that the Nazis’ effort to destroy all evidence of their murderous crimes would condemn the Jewish cataclysm to oblivion before its full scope was even known to the world.” (2012: 4)

This also motivated many of the wartime documentation efforts, such as Emanuel Ringelblum’s *Oyneg Shabes Archive* (see Kassow 2007). The historical commissions, Jockusch writes, captured some 18,000 written testimonies, and thousands of questionnaires (2012: 11).

Another important example of a postwar documentation project, employing audio recording, was the groundbreaking work of David P. Boder, a social psychologist at the University of Chicago. Boder traveled through several European countries in 1946 recording audio testimonies on a portable wire recorder in the field. Edited excerpts from these interviews were published in his book *I Did Not Interview the Dead* (1949). Despite differences of perspective or intention, all of these projects gave voice to the victims and witnesses of atrocities, and made important contributions to understanding the survivor perspective, as well as providing additional evidence ensuring the Germans

would fail in their effort to cover up what they had done, to hide their crimes, obfuscate their policies of destruction, or, as Yehuda Bauer wrote: “to murder the murder” (2002: 24).

Methodology: the Empathic Listener

The methodology employed at the Fortunoff Archive, and by its predecessor the HSFP, did not emerge fully formed from the head of one individual. Methodological development was a collective effort, and an iterative one – changed and codified over time. The application of the archive’s emerging best practices was imparted to affiliates via interviewer training sessions. The first local interviewer training was held in 1984 to expand taping in New Haven. The most difficult skill to teach future interviewers was the art of empathic listening. In *Testimony. Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Dori Laub briefly describes the ideal relationship between interviewer and interviewee in our testimonies. He calls it:

“a contract between two people, one of whom is going to engage in a narration of her trauma, through the unfolding of her life account. Implicitly, the listener says to the testifier: ‘For this limited time, throughout the duration of the testimony, I’ll be with you, all the way, as much as I can.’” (1992: 70)

The relationship of the interviewer, as empathic listener, to the interviewee can be described as similar to that between a student and a teacher. The witness is the expert in their life story, the teacher, and the interviewer the student.

The six-week interviewer training program also required interviewers-in-training to read Holocaust history and memoirs, attend lectures, and participate in sessions analyzing video testimonies with a focus on method, not content. As part of the training, the archive emphasized basic research skills as a means for interviewers to prepare for each recording session. The archive also developed some clear rules for behavior inside the studio: do not take notes, do not break eye contact, never look at your watch. Individuals

in the training class then observed several videotaping sessions from the control room, and only after that, participated in several taping sessions with an experienced partner.

Despite this training, there is still an inevitable amount of fluidity in the application of our best practices. Interviews recorded in France may differ from those recorded in the United States. Depending on the affiliate project, the cadre of volunteers, their backgrounds, personalities, knowledge of Holocaust history, and the impact of the surrounding cultural milieu. The goal of the archive's interview methodology has always been to build trust with the witness. That trust promotes the free flow of memory. We focus on the witness' story the way he or she would like to tell it, starting from their earliest memories. Immediately prior to the taping, interviewers tell the survivor that when the camera goes on, the interviewers will state the recording date, place, and their names, and then cue the witness to introduce herself, give her date of birth, her place of birth, and then begin telling her story from her earliest memories. By having the witness introduce himself or herself, ownership of the taping session is given to them.

The testimonies are often episodic rather than chronological. Memories invoke other memories. Interviewers have described feeling like they are listening to someone who is viewing a movie in their head and describing it. The only questions asked should be to clarify time and place, and should be phrased so that if the witness does not know the answer, the flow of memory is not stopped: "Do you happen to remember when this happened? Do you happen to remember the name of the camp?" etc. If too many questions are posed, the witness becomes passive and simply waits for the next question. The free association stops; the mental movie ceases to run, resulting in far less information and reflections.

Silences also play an important role. Laub describes the need for the interviewer to accept the silences that naturally occur when giving testimony. The interviewer must "*listen to and hear the silence* [...]" he must acknowledge and address that silence, even if that simply means respect – and knowing how to wait." (Ibid.: 58)

This emphasis on listening also informed the manner in which the content of the archive was processed after recording. Early on in the project, a decision was made not to produce transcripts of the testimony. There were a number of reasons for this, both practical and philosophical. The production of accurate full transcripts is a significant expense, even today, despite advances in voice recognition software. A recent estimate was US\$3m (€2.6m) to produce transcripts for the entire collection, more than 11,000 hours of video, recorded in over a dozen different countries in as many languages.

However, this expense was not the only reason behind forgoing transcripts. If transcripts were available, researchers might not watch the testimonies, but simply rely on the transcripts. After all, watching testimony takes considerable time. It is much quicker to skim a transcript. Another objection to transcription was that no transcript, no matter how good, would ever capture the full content, visual cues, tone of voice, the pregnant pauses, of a testimony. Misunderstandings would occur. Quotations might inadvertently be misrepresented. Without transcripts, the researcher would be obliged to listen to the testimonies in their original, unedited form – to hear the voice of the survivors who stepped forward, often at great emotional cost, to give testimony.

Another important example of our methodology, and a component of the Fortunoff Archive's "culture", was to allow time and space for reflection and critique of the work. Due to the nature of the project, its small scale, its cadre of dedicated volunteers, the project's participants were able to reflect on testimonies as they were conducted. As a group they discussed: what worked well? Or more importantly, what didn't work? The goal was always to be an empathic listener, always focusing on the survivor's agency. In fact, in the late 1980s, the archive invited survivors who had previously been recorded to return and discuss on camera their memories of giving testimony with interviewers like Dana Kline, Lawrence Langer and Dori Laub. A more dialogic format, the interviewers had viewed and reviewed the original testimonies, and in these "re-interviews" addressed subjects such as the testimony process itself, and the complexity of language and memory. These were testimonies about giving testimony, and examples of the reflective, critical approach

the project has taken from the beginning. The primary focus was on the survivor's experiences, and on making improvements that would facilitate the quite difficult process of giving testimony.

Making Testimonies Accessible

The concern for the survivor that permeates so many aspects of the archive's methodology even extends to how the materials are cataloged and made accessible. Cataloging, by its nature, is a standards-driven exercise. All libraries apply some standard rules of organization, description and controlled vocabularies. How could ethical considerations affect that? Just one example: no public-facing information containing references to our collection contains the surname of the survivor. Before the testimonies came to Yale, one of the survivors received threatening phone calls following a local broadcast of an HSFP documentary. That experience informed a decision to protect survivor anonymity by truncating the last name of any appearance of a survivor's name, in print or on screen.

Every testimony's listing in Yale's online public access catalog follows these rules as well, to ensure anonymity. This can complicate searching the collection for a specific individual. If you are looking for a specific Jack K., you might find it difficult to identify that particular Jack. It also can complicate efforts to identify and connect testimonies with recordings of the same survivor at other institutions. Nevertheless, there is a clear ethical consideration behind this policy. When researchers want to cite or screen testimony excerpts, they are required to request authorization to publish in advance. This provides the archive with the opportunity to contact the survivor, if they are still living, about the imminent appearance of a citation in print. This insures that a survivor will not open a book, enter a museum, or see a documentary that cites or uses images from their testimony without being informed in advance. While the archive has the legal right to allow use of these materials – as survivors sign a release form attributing copyright to the Fortunoff Archive – it is our ethical obligation to make a best effort to inform survivors of any public use of their testimony.

Now, with the collection completely digitized and available in a digital access system currently in production in Yale's manuscripts and archives reading room and partner sites worldwide, the Fortunoff Archive makes a best effort to be cautious and respectful. Testimonies are only available at designated workstations inside a monitored reading room at the partner site, which is usually a research center or library at an institution of higher learning. Researchers must register and request materials in advance before coming to the archive. The testimonies are not openly available online. Students can't watch testimony from the comfort of their dorm rooms. They have to make time to come to the archive, they have to focus and listen to testimony.

These policies might seem like an obstacle to wider discovery and use of the collection. Certainly, the restrictive access approach sets this digital archive apart from other library e-resources with which students are familiar. That might be true, but it is important to underscore the ethical considerations that are the basis for these policy decisions. Of course, these policies must be re-evaluated and adjusted over time. After all, what good is a policy based on the need to inform survivors, when survivors themselves are no longer alive?

Conclusion: the Fortunoff Archives' 'Partisan' Origin

Many aspects of the Fortunoff Archive's methodological approach and culture mark it as something distinct from what Hilary Jenkinson at the Public Records Office would have identified as an archetypical "archive". It did not "accumulate naturally", and was indeed "brought together" to specifically "illustrate" a point or theory. From its very inception, there was an innate rejection of an outmoded idea of archival neutrality. The founding spark for recording testimony was "partisan" in nature. The founders of the Fortunoff Archive intended to unambiguously take sides, to stand *with* the survivor.

For many of those involved with this project this was not just a symbolic display of solidarity, as they were members of the survivor community themselves. They were not there to study the survivors as some unknown phenomenon, but to join in an effort of "self-help", to provide a space where a "contract" between interviewer and interviewee could be formed, to give

survivors an opportunity to express their voice and their story the way they desired. In a sense, it was also “partisan” in its pursuit of a counter-narrative to popular cultural representations of the Holocaust – a desire to inform the public and posterity about how “things really were”.

Lastly, the reflective nature of the archive’s work, the critical re-examination of past work in an attempt to understand the nature of testimony, was a means to both improve the work of recording testimony, but also a way to understand how that work impacted on survivors. Yet, despite this critical spirit, it would be mistaken to see these policies as some cerebral expression of the “postmodern turn” and its impact on the work that archives do, rather it signifies a clear commitment to an ethical approach to the work of recording and using testimony and a deep concern for the survivors, before, during, and after the process of giving testimony.

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1 <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/postmodernism>, accessed 21 September 2017.