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### **Oral History and Online Publishing: Establishing and Managing the Oral History Forum d'histoire orale**

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## ORAL HISTORY AND ONLINE PUBLISHING: ESTABLISHING AND MANAGING THE ORAL HISTORY FORUM D'HISTOIRE ORALE

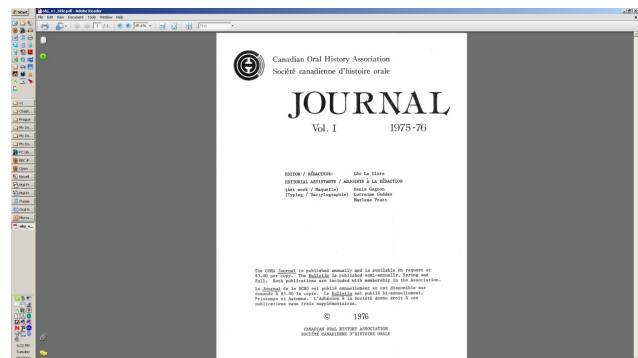
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In this article, I describe experiences with publishing an online oral history journal. In particular, I describe turning the journal of the Canadian Oral History Association into an electronic or ejournal ([www.oralhistoryforum.ca](http://www.oralhistoryforum.ca)). After some background information, I will first explain the editors' decision to publish online instead of in print and discuss some of the advantages of online publishing, especially in the field of oral history. I will then explain the technical requirements for online publishing and some of the challenges and disadvantages that make this process difficult. My presentation is especially directed at oral historians considering ejournal publishing.

### *Background*

The journal of the Canadian Oral History Association was founded in 1974 and renamed Oral History Forum d'histoire orale in 1995. From 1974 to 2006, it ran as a print journal and 26 volumes were published. During the 1970s and 1980s, most of the articles were short papers given at oral history conferences. During the 1990s, the journal increasingly became a publication of peer reviewed articles. Despite the improved quality, from the mid-1980s

on, the Canadian Oral History Association and its journal stagnated and even declined. While there had been annual conferences during the 1970s and 1980s, there were only a couple of meetings during the 1990s.<sup>1</sup>



**Screenshot 1:** From 2009, all back issues of the journal of the Canadian Oral History Association, later renamed Oral History Forum d'histoire oral, were made available as pdf files at [www.canoha.ca](http://www.canoha.ca).

In 2005, my colleague Nolan Reilly and I hosted the first national oral history conference in Canada in about one decade. At the end of this meeting, attended by some one hundred oral his-

torians, we were asked to take over responsibility for both the association and its journal. We agreed to do so and decided fairly quickly, in consultation with members at the meeting, to turn the Forum into an online journal.

Before publishing the first online issue of Forum, however, we did a few other things. We gave the association a new online home ([www.canoha.ca](http://www.canoha.ca)). We used this move to digitize two important resources of the Canadian Oral History Association. First, we turned the Guide to Oral History Collections into a keyword searchable online database. Second, we made all past issues of the journal available online, free of charge.

The first electronic volume of the Forum was published in 2008. In 2009, a regular volume as well as a special volume on “Oral History and the Family” was published. The editors signed an agreement with Ebscohost to disseminate the journal more widely. In 2010, the third volume and a special issue on “Oral History and the Environment” were published. At the beginning of 2010, the journal moved to Athabasca University Press, a Canadian academic press that specializes in online publishing. These developments have contributed to a growing number and higher quality of articles and other contributions, but also greater strains on the editorial team. Let me first turn to our decision to take the journal online.

#### *Advantages of an Online Journal*

The decision to go online was complex. It was shaped by considerations of material constraints, institutional capacities, and technical opportunities. Most of all, it was shaped by the assumption that oral history was ideally suited for an online journal.

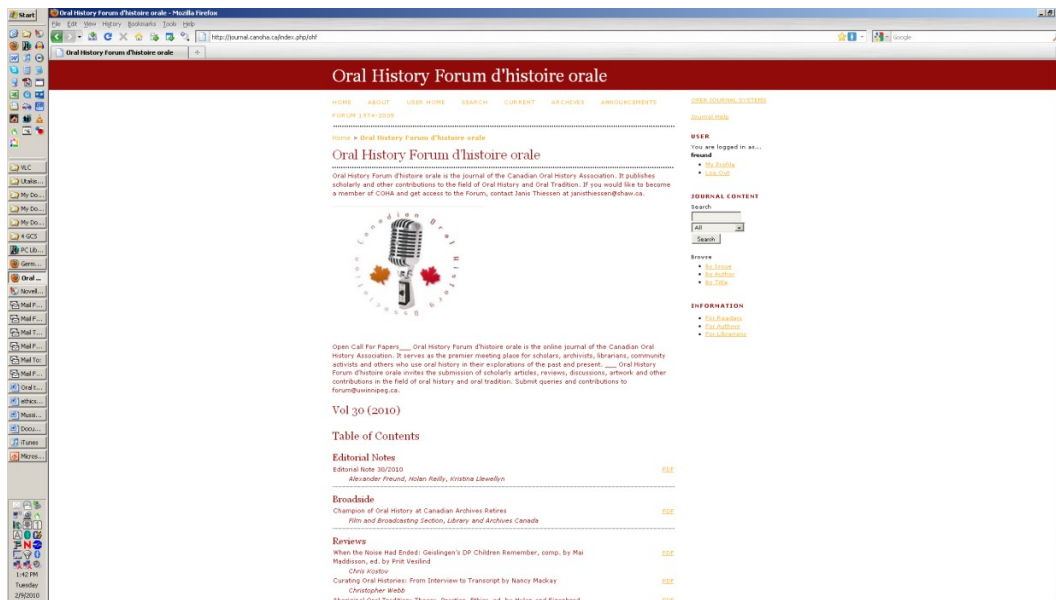
We knew from the beginning that one of the great advantages of online publishing is the immediacy of the Internet. Articles and other contributions can become immediately published after going through all editorial steps. There is no need to wait for all articles to be ready to go to print and there is no wait to get the journal printed. To explain what I mean, let me describe how publishing in our journal works.

Every year on the first of January, we open a new

volume. Thus, on 1 January 2009, we opened volume 29. Those contributions that passed through all editorial stages in 2009 became part of this volume. On 31st December of each year, we close the volume and on the next day, we open a new volume. Thus, we closed volume 29 on 31st December 2009 and opened volume 30 on the next day, January 1st, 2010. Thus, we publish one volume per year. Because we also publish special issues, we distinguish between our regular volume and the special issue that is published as part of that volume.

Special issues work in a way similar to the regular volume, but there are also differences. Special issues are guest edited. Guest editors will send out a call for papers and then work on the special issue throughout the year. It is up to them how they want to publish: they can either publish articles as they become available on a continual basis; that’s how we do it for the regular volume. Or they can publish all articles at once. However the guest editors choose to do it, there is a challenge for special issues that we do not face with the regular volume. As we know, timing is difficult and some papers may take more than a year to go through all editing steps. Thus, even after the year is over, there may still be articles coming in. When publishing in our regular volume, we would simply publish it in the volume that is currently open. But when publishing in a special issue, we will keep the issue open until all articles have been posted. To give you an example: The special issue on “Oral History and the Family” is part of volume 29 in 2009, because that is how guest editors had planned it. The editing of some articles took longer than expected. Thus, we decided to postpone the official launch of the special issue to the end of May 2010.

Another great advantage of online publishing in terms of the immediacy of the internet is that news can be published much more quickly than in print form. I am thinking here mostly of work-in-progress reports, oral historians in the news, and conference reports.



*Screenshot 2: The initial design of the online version of the Oral History Forum d'histoire orale.*



*Screenshot 3: The redesigned online appearance after moving the Oral History Forum d'histoire orale to Athabasca University Press in early 2010.*

The main reason why we wanted to go online was that online publishing offered new perspectives for publishing oral history. We were not so much interested in simply putting text-files online for everyone to read. From the beginning, we wanted to include image, audio, and video files – the kind of stuff that cannot be published in print. The model we had before our eyes and in our ears was “I Can

Almost See the Lights of Home ~ A Field Trip to Harlan County, Kentucky” — the wonderful “essay in sound” that Alessandro Portelli and Charles Hardy had created in 1999. We believed that authors would include images in their texts and link their articles to excerpts from their interviews. We also believed that they would post annotated audiovisual interviews online.

Eventually, there would be many essays-in-sound. If there is any field in the humanities and social sciences in which online publishing makes sense, we thought, it was oral history.

Thus, the most important advantage of publishing an oral history journal online is that it enables the publication of audio-visual material. As you can see in the case of the special issue on the family, we have published articles that are accompanied by audio and video clips. And as you can see from the regular volume, in the section "Oral History in the World," we have also published several interviews with oral historians. In this instance, the audio files are the main contributions while the texts are explanatory. None of these contributions are essays-in-sound, but they nevertheless take us one step closer to sharing our original sources with our readers.

At this point in the development of our journal, we can only publish in PDF-format. We personally do not have the technical capabilities (and we do not have the funds to pay our publisher) to either produce HTML-based contributions or to integrate audio and video into PDF-files. Thus, in the texts that use audio-visual files, there are references to the files that readers can download separately. It is not the most elegant solution, but it works, at least for now.

There were a few other reasons for us to take the journal online. With under one hundred members, the Canadian Oral History Association was (and currently still is) a small association with inadequate resources. We believed that online publishing was a way out of these material constraints.<sup>2</sup> Rather than spending a lot of money on printing 150 or so copies of the journal, all that was needed was a server, which our university provided. As we found out in the course of several years, much more was required (I will return to this below), but since we did not know that, it did not influence our decision.

Another consideration was related to our institution's capacities to support an online journal. The university was just in the process of setting up the required infrastructure and we were hopeful that it would be able to support online publication.

Unfortunately, the dreams were bigger than the budgets. Over the course of three years, we struggled to receive adequate technical support. We did receive some technical support, and the people helping us were very supportive and even worked outside of their regular work hours to help us run the journal. But it was never enough and we as editors had to do much technical work ourselves. This was extremely time-consuming, because we had to learn a new and complex software. It also meant that we did not have time to recruit authors for the journal or members for the association.

Finally, we took the journal online because we were introduced to software that allowed us, as inexperienced editors with few secretarial resources, to learn the basics of journal management and that gave us a tool to manage subscriptions, membership, and all stages of the editing process. I will talk more about this software, called OJS or Open Journal Systems, below.

#### *Technical Requirements and Challenges*

What then were the technical requirements to make our ideas into reality? Initially, we believed we should just put the journal on a regular website that we would ask someone to design. We would then simply post articles. Before moving forward on those plans, we learned about new software, OJS, designed specifically for academic online publishing. After consultations with our university library, we decided to use this software, in part because it was already used by another journal published at our university.

OJS was developed at the University of British Columbia in Canada. It is open code and free of charge. OJS was not simply a response to new possibilities in a digital world. More importantly, it was a response to the need for open access to both journals and the technology on which they rest. OJS is open software. Publishers can adapt it to their needs – something that is not possible with proprietary software. Felczak et al. argue "that non-proprietary forms of development make possible democratic interventions into

technical design by providing participants with an opportunity to define the direction and nature of this design such that it is representative of their interests and needs.” OJS and other non-proprietary software enable academic communities to fully develop their priorities and mandates, which includes “that scholarship, public participation, and citizenship are prioritized over the commodification of public knowledge [through commercial publishers].”<sup>3</sup> Open Access Journals are journals that are free of charge and available to everyone, immediately after publication. One of the objectives of open access is to ensure that readers of scientific research remain readers rather than being turned into “consumers of information commodities.”<sup>4</sup> As of December 2010, there were over 7,500 OJS journals worldwide in all disciplines.<sup>5</sup> OJS has become a major, non-commercial platform for academic online publishing. It is available in several dozen languages.

OJS is not the kind of software that you simply download to your personal computer and voila! you are ready to run an online journal. It requires a server. It requires technical staff who know the system or have the time to learn it. The software was developed with large journals in mind. Everything—from authors’ first inquiries via their submission of articles, the management of peer review and editing to finally publishing individual articles, an issue and a volume—is done (or at least can be done) within that system. It is a system with idiosyncratic terminology. It is a software, like any software, with bugs and dead ends. It is a software, unlike most of the software you have on your home or office computer, that makes even those people who have a good but lay understanding of computers suffer from anxiety attacks and massive amounts of frustration. It is, in other words, not the kind of software you can run or even use on your own. You really do need technical support.

If you do have that kind of support, OJS is excellent for online publishing. It is not perfect, far from it. But the software is constantly improved. It allows us to post a great diversity of files online. Next to PDF- or Word files, you can post video and audio files as well as spreadsheets, powerpoints,

images and other kinds of files. But the software does more than help you publish a journal. It also helps you manage your membership data. Every subscriber to your journal must sign in online. This immediately gives you a database with their email addresses. Within a matter of seconds, you can email every one of your subscribers. It is not only subscribers who can create accounts. Everyone can. Thus, you can also contact everyone else who is looking at the journal. This allows you to send out news, tables of contents, and new article alerts to large groups of people without having to juggle and continually update a separate email list.

Despite the possibilities opened up by OJS, there are also challenges that the software creates. Some of these have already been noted. Next to the technical support that is needed and the great problems created by the lack of appropriate support, we as editors also had to consider the idea of open access. Ideally, the Oral History Forum would be an open access journal. That would mean that no one would have to be a subscriber to access the journal. Unfortunately, however, online publishing is not cost-free. Our journal is too small to get any public funding and there are insufficient funds available from the university. As a result, we decided that membership in our association—which comes with a subscription to the journal—was still necessary. To make members maintain their membership and to attract new members we initially made the last two years of the volume open only to subscribers.<sup>6</sup>

Despite appearances, the step to open access publishing can only be taken if there are sufficient resources. While subscription-based publication is possible, the pressure to make the journal open access will grow—as will the desire of the editors to take this step. This means that alternative sources of funding must be developed. These can include private donations and public funds. They can and should also include continued membership revenue. For a small organization like the Canadian Oral History Association, however, the capacity to de-

velop benefits to members apart from the journal – such as discounts at conferences and newsletters – is very limited. I am happy to report that the Oral History Association has now secured the funds to make its journal fully open access from the beginning of 2012.

### *Conclusion*

If you decide to take your journal online, there are a few challenges to keep in mind: ensure sufficient technical support; ensure a continuing stream of revenue, especially as you consider open access publishing. If everything is in place, online publishing opens wonderful opportunities, especially for oral history.

The way we have begun to overcome some of the massive obstacles of the first few years is to hand the technical aspects over to a university press. Since January 2010, our journal is no longer published out of our university, but rather out of Athabasca University Press. AUP has specialized in online journal publishing on the OJS platform. It is a small press but aligned with larger presses, so that next to technical support, we also receive much better exposure and advertising.

For an annual and very affordable fee, the University Press hosts the journal, keeps the software updated, uploads all files, converts all audio and video files, does basic online layout of each

volume. The Press created a new archive of past issues. Previously, users would download a complete volume in the form of a non-searchable pdf-file. Now, all volumes can be keyword-searched on the journal's website. Users download individual articles as searchable pdf-files. For additional fees, the University Press also gives us access to editorial support, such as copyediting and design. All of this support gives us as editors the time to focus on editing.

Despite the challenges we met along the way, we are satisfied with our decision to take our journal online. We believe that as its profile rises, we will eventually be able to make it an open access journal. And as technology improves, authors and editors will find new ways to present their research.

Taking a journal online is, at least potentially, more than a technological development. It may also be a political development. The use of non-proprietary software such as OJS and the objective of open access further the oral history movement's goal of democratizing history.



### NOTES

1. On the history of oral history in Canada, see Alexander Freund, "Oral History in Canada: A Paradox," in Klaus-Dieter Ertler and Hartmut Lutz, eds., *Canada in Grainau: A Multidisciplinary Survey after 30 Years / Le Canada à Grainau: un survol multidisciplinaire 30 ans après* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2009), 305-335; published in Spanish translation "Historia oral en Canadá: una paradoja," transl. by Margara Averbach. *Historia, Voces y Memoria. Revista del Programa de Historia Oral. Facultad de Filosofa y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires*, No. 2 (2010).
2. Unlike Charles L. Klotzer, we did not believe that publishing a small journal online runs the risk of getting lost among countless online journals. See his editorial "The Shortcoming of Online Publishing," *St. Louis Journalism Review* 38/306 (June 2008): 5.
3. Michael Felczak; Richard Smith; Rowland Lorimer "Online Publishing, Technical Representation, and the Politics of Code: The Case of CJC Online," *Canadian Journal of Communication* 33/2 (2008): 271-289, 272.
4. Felczak et al., "Online Publishing," 277.
5. Public Knowledge Project, "A Sample of Journals Using Open Journal Systems" <http://pkp.sfu.ca/ojs-journals>.
6. Felczak et al., "Online Publishing," 286.