



## Environmental Oral History

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## PRAXIS

# Environmental Oral History

Danielle Endres

*From those involved in the emergence of the modern environmental movement in the United States to those engaged in contemporary environmental controversies, there is a wealth of people who participated in and experienced these historical moments in the story of environmentalism. The stories of these people can provide new perspectives and windows into environmental issues and controversies, which are often only documented through newspaper articles, public hearing transcripts, congressional hearings, and famous speeches. In this essay, I contend that the collection and analysis of oral histories is a useful endeavor for environmental communication scholars. While oral history is not completely new to communication scholars, its potential, especially for environmental communication, has not yet been reached. Not only can the collection of oral histories create a body of archival documents for contemporary and future generations, but analysis of oral histories may reveal new insights into the communicative dimensions of environmental controversies. In addition to arguing for the value of oral history, I offer practical suggestions for undertaking oral history projects.*

*Keywords: Oral History; Environmental Communication Methods; Public Scholarship*

Oral history is a longstanding, albeit sometimes controversial, tool in the repertoire of historians, folklorists, and increasingly scholars in other disciplines. Oral history is a form of interviewing that seeks to augment the written historical record with the inclusion of vernacular, traditionally excluded, and ordinary people who experienced the historical phenomenon in question. While skeptics of oral history indict its subjectivity and call into question the validity of memory,<sup>1</sup> proponents of oral history note its value as a way to gain insight into the complexity of experiences and interpretations of historical phenomena. According to Barbara Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan (2004),

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The modern practice of oral history, which evolved more than a half-century ago, has become a research technique used worldwide to collect and preserve otherwise undocumented information, often from the historically voiceless. In addition to preserving information about past times and places, often highlighting day-to-day lives of ordinary people, oral history collections also offer insight into the meaning narrators attach to those times and to their participation in bygone events, thus contributing new variegated strands to historians' efforts to weave tapestries about the past. (p. 84)

Oral history can range from life histories of particular individuals (e.g. Gaylord Nelson or a lesser known person) to targeted projects devoted to a particular topic (e.g. the first Earth Day), resulting in a variety of products including academic publications, new archives, public history installations, and family histories.

Oral history shares some similarities with qualitative interviewing, which is relatively common in environmental communication scholarship. Indeed, oral history might be classified as a type of qualitative interviewing. Yet, at least two characteristics of oral history differentiate it from traditional qualitative interviewing. First, the focus of oral history tends to include more attention to the life story of an interviewee than other modes of interviewing. This line of questioning involves more standardized biographical information, in addition to probing specific events or experiences in the interviewee's life. Second, what I see as a principal value in oral history is that it is archived for future researchers. Unlike qualitative interviews that most US Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) require be destroyed after the completion of research, oral history interviews are typically archived in collections at libraries or historical societies so that they may be accessible for future researchers and publics.<sup>2</sup>

From those involved in the emergence of the modern environmental movement in the United States to those engaged in contemporary environmental controversies, there is a wealth of people who participated in and experienced these historical moments in the story of environmentalism. The stories of these people can provide new perspectives and windows into environmental issues and controversies, which are often only documented through newspaper articles, public hearing transcripts, congressional hearings, and famous speeches. The untold stories of environmentalism lie in a diverse set of people's experiences, which may be told as reminiscences around a campfire but are rarely documented and archived. In this short essay, I contend that the collection and analysis of oral histories is a useful endeavor for environmental communication scholars. Not only can the collection of oral histories create a body of archival documents for contemporary and future generations, but the analysis of oral histories may reveal new insights into the communicative dimensions of environmental controversies.

I begin my argument with a brief review of past attempts by communication scholars to use or analyze oral history in research and pedagogy. While oral history is not completely new to communication scholars, its potential, especially for environmental communication, has not yet been reached. Next, I discuss the method of oral history and offer some practical advice for how to undertake the collection

and analysis of oral histories. In the final section of this essay, I outline several of the benefits and principles of oral history.

### **Oral History in Communication Scholarship**

Oral history has not widely been used by the field of communication. In a way, this is natural because communication scholars are not primarily historians or folklorists. Yet, communication studies often intersect with history or folklore in a variety of ways including the history of communication/media, rhetorical analysis of historical speeches (and associated historical situations), and museum/memorial studies. These linkages suggest that a form of historical collection and inquiry (oral history) may not be so foreign to communication studies, particularly in the current academic climate that encourages cross-disciplinary forms of research. Indeed, a collection of communication scholars see the value in oral history as a complement to communication research and teaching.

Within the realm of environmental communication, The Fernald Living History Project documents the stories of employees, residents, and other people involved with or impacted by the Fernald Uranium processing facility, which ended operations in 1989 and is now undergoing environmental remediation.<sup>3</sup> The project is the result of collaboration between the Department of Energy, Fernald-area residents and site workers, and the University of Cincinnati (under the lead of Steven Depoe). The project spurred the creation of the formation of a community organization—the Fernald Community Alliance—that not only runs the Fernald Living History Project but also runs several other projects related to the Fernald-area environment. The oral history project contains over one hundred interviews that document the various perspectives about an important part of the US nuclear weapons complex. According to concept creator, Steven Depoe (2001), the value of this and other oral history projects lies in the ability to record the “different perspectives or points of view or feelings about that event” for use by teachers, researchers, and future generations (p. 2). This project has already provided source material for several research projects (e.g. Barnes-Kloth et al., 1999a, b; Hamilton, 2004; Krupar, 2007) and is publicly accessible through both Fernald Community Alliance website (see footnote 3) and at the Fernald Public Environmental Information Center. Beyond the Fernald Living History Project, my review of communication literature that incorporates oral history reveals four areas in the field where oral history emerges: media history, rhetorical analysis, performance, and pedagogy.

First, media historians often rely on oral history collections for their research (e.g. Clark, 2004; Conway, 2007; Cressman & Swenson, 2007; Ryan, 2009). As historians, these scholars draw on oral history collections in combination with other archived historical documents to construct histories of various moments in the development of newspapers, broadcast journalism, radio, and other forms of media.

Second, several rhetorical scholars have undertaken rhetorical analysis of oral histories (e.g. Choi, 2008; Cloud, 1999; Waddell, 1990). Dana Cloud (1999), for

instance, highlights the significance of rhetorical analysis of oral histories for labor history and politics:

Rhetoricians should regard oral histories of the words and experiences of rank-and-file workers as rhetorical texts that reveal patterns of influence, strategy, and vernacular agency on the part of workers. The words of ordinary workers are rhetorical interventions into labor struggles and political issues in the present day, and it is the responsibility of rhetorical scholars and labor historians to bring these narratives to light and to try to understand their strategic importance. (p. 183)

While Cloud's comment applies specifically to analysis of the oral histories of workers, her larger point is that rhetorical analysis of oral histories can reveal vernacular rhetorical strategies that might not be present in more traditional rhetorical texts (e.g. public address, speeches). Like Cloud, most rhetoricians have used pre-existing oral history archives for their analyses. However, Suhi Choi (2008) collected and analyzed oral histories of survivors of the No Gun Ri event during the Korean War. As I will argue later in this essay, I see value not only in the analysis of oral history interviews, but more importantly in the *collection* of oral histories.

Third, performance scholars use pre-existing oral history archives or oral history interviews they have collected for performances and pedagogy (e.g. Pollack, 2005; Stucky, 1995; Vignes, 2008;). In their case, oral histories are often used and collected for the purpose of creating "oral history performance" on stage (Stucky, 1995, p. 1). In describing her performance about the communities affected by Hurricane Katrina, Danielle Vignes (2008) notes that: "Oral history cannot be held privately" (p. 346). In other words, the power of oral history comes in the preservation, telling, and re-telling of the stories of people's experiences. Performance scholars recognize that oral history acts as a valuable window into people's lives that can be useful in creating performances.

Finally, in addition to the use of oral history by rhetoricians and performance scholars, there is pedagogical value in the use of oral history in communication classes (e.g. Clark, Hyde, & McMahan, 1981; Stucky, 1995; Turner, 1985). For example, E. Culpepper Clark, Michael J. Hyde, and Eva M. McMahan (1981) argue that teaching students to collect oral histories is a "hermeneutical process" "because the interviewer and the interviewee in an oral history interview are involved primarily with interpreting a historical phenomenon" (p. 242). Stated differently, the use of oral history in a classroom can teach students not only that history has a hermeneutical dimension, but also how to engage in interpretive analysis.

### Methods and Issues in Oral History

In order to better understand how oral history can be a valuable research and pedagogical tool in environmental communication scholarship and praxis, it is important to begin by describing how to do oral history and addressing some methodological issues. Oral history is accessible as a form of research. According to Donald Ritchie (2003), "Oral history has always been multi-disciplinary. While many professional historians conduct oral history, a degree in history has never been a prerequisite for entering the field" (p. 25). The first step for entering the field of oral

history is to learn more about the method. Most university and college history departments offer a class in oral history. If taking a class is not possible, Valerie Yow's (2005) "Recording Oral History," Donald A. Ritchie's (2003) "Doing Oral History," and Barbara W. Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan's (2001) "The Oral History Manual" are excellent books that take the reader through all of the steps of developing an oral history project, explain the interviewing method, discuss how to analyze oral history interviews, highlight major scholarly debates in the field, and discuss the ethical considerations for oral history. The Oral History Association also has a superb website with a variety of resources for neophyte and expert oral historians.

Oral history is not a method to be taken on lightly. Just like any communication method, oral history is a rigorous methodology that must be learned. Oral history involves two steps: (1) collection of interviews and (2) analysis of interviews.<sup>4</sup> The first step is collection of oral history interviews, which has a set of guidelines and procedures for how to construct an interview protocol, navigating the role of the researcher, and negotiating the actual interview (e.g. Ritchie, 2003; Sommer & Quinlan, 2002; Yow, 2005). The second step is to analyze the oral history interviews. While oral history has traditionally been used by historians to construct a historical narrative according to the methodological standards of the discipline of history, Yow (2005) notes that oral history now draws from methods of analysis from various disciplines such as history, rhetoric, psychology, and sociology. The methods of analysis generally come from qualitative or humanistic traditions and include content analysis, rhetorical analysis, thematic analysis, and narrative analysis. Successful and rigorous oral history entails expertise in both the collection and the analysis steps. For example, my research uses rhetorical criticism as the analytical tool for analysis of oral history interviews. As a rhetorical critic, my expertise lies in the analysis of texts. When I decided to collect oral histories for rhetorical analysis, I had to develop an expertise in the collection of oral histories. Those with training in ethnography or qualitative inquiry will have a head start in learning how to collect and analyze oral history because of some of the similarities between the methods including the use of in-depth interviews, the use of grounded theory (i.e. Strauss & Glaser, 1967), and the use of qualitative methods of analysis. Because of these similarities, the oral history interview is sometimes categorized as a qualitative method instead of as an historical method (Yow, 2005).

The oral history method raises important ethical issues, especially with regard to power. While oral history is exempted by most IRBs, the Oral History Association maintains a set of Principles and Standards that should be followed in any oral history project (see Sommer & Quinlan, 2002, pp. 111–113). Power is one ethical issue with which oral historians often struggle. Ryan (2009) suggests that "in considering the interviewee as a narrator, the oral historian cedes sole authorial and interpretive control. The oral history interview becomes a project of shared authority, with narrator and oral historian equal contributors" (Ryan, 2009, p. 29). However, Valerie Yow (2005) disagrees with Ryan; although oral historians attempt to provide narrators with the power to help co-create the interview, "power in the relationship is not equal but tipped to favor the interviewer" (p. 136). For critical scholars seeking to highlight injustices or patterns of privilege, it is especially important to understand

this balance of power in both collecting and analyzing interviews. Selections of interviewees, questions, and interpretations of interviews may be colored by the researcher's opinion on the subject. While this is unavoidable, attention should be paid to being self-reflexive about one's own role in the project and about the risks and benefits for narrators.

### The Value of Oral History

Collection and analysis of oral history can be an important contribution to environmental communication scholarship, and communication scholarship more generally. In this section, I highlight some of the principles and benefits of oral history. In doing so, I make comparisons to qualitative and rhetorical research and highlight the specific benefits for environmental communication when relevant.

#### *Yielding Different Information*

Oral history interviews can tell us different things than we might obtain from a qualitative interview because of the focus on a narrator's life and experiences as an historical event (i.e. life history) or as related to a particular historical event (i.e. topic-based oral history). Oral histories are less focused on a series of information seeking questions by the interviewer than on asking probing, open-ended questions that let the narrator tell their story. Donald Ritchie (2003) highlights the role of the interviewer in an oral history: "an interviewer must always be prepared to abandon carefully prepared questions and follow the interviewee down unexpected paths, always helping the interviewee with questioning, guiding, coaxing, and challenging" (Ritchie, 2003, p. 29). Although some forms of qualitative interviewing focus on open-ended questions, oral history frames the interview as the narrator's story with limited interjection by an interviewer. Kathleen Ryan (2009) explains that oral history narrators use their stories to negotiate their roles within history. And Horatio Ramirez (2002) notes that an important element of successful oral history interviewing is to get to "the significance of the story people have given their time to tell" (p. 88). This form of interviewing not only allows the narrator more control over his/her narration, but also focuses either on a person's life or on a particular historical event from the context of a person's life. Drawing from Geertz' (1973) concept of "thick description," Portelli (1998) describes oral history as a "thick dialogue" that Ryan (2009) states "contrasts with the mere question and answer form of traditional interviews" (pp. 34–5).

The focus on the person's life beyond the topic of the oral history project allows for different information than is typically sought in a qualitative interview. My *Nuclear Technologies in the American West* oral history project seeks to document the stories of a variety of people who have been involved in nuclear controversies in the American West (e.g. nuclear testing at the Nevada Test Site or the Skull Valley nuclear waste storage controversy) toward the goal of documenting the stories and gathering texts for analysis for my larger project on the rhetoric of nuclearism in the American West. The structure of oral history interviews has yielded interesting and unexpected insights. In addition to soliciting a person's story of involvement with nuclear

technology or controversy, I discovered that many of these stories do not begin with a first job in the nuclear industry or a first anti-nuclear protest event, but rather begin with a foundational childhood event, a set of ethics instilled by one's role models, or a traumatic life event. For example, in my interviews with activists opposed to nuclear waste sites in Utah and Nevada, I have gained both a description of previously undocumented aspects of the movement and stories of how people became environmental activists. Similarly, oral history can complement existing environmental communication research. For example, Tema Milstein's (2008) qualitative study on the whale watching community reveals how humans talk about (or do not have the words to talk about) their experiences with whales on whale watching excursions. An oral history project could complement this study by collecting life stories of the people who work in the whale watching industry or conservation movement. Information from these people's stories could not only add to Milstein's analysis of how people talk about whale watching in the context of life stories as opposed to in the context of whale watching tourism, but could also contribute to understanding the development of beliefs about the ability of humans to communicate with animals. Because oral history focuses on a narrator's telling of their history, unexpected connections can be discovered that expand the picture of the event or person. While qualitative interviews certainly can yield unexpected results, oral history's unique focus on the context of the narrator's life differs from many qualitative interviews that ask only questions about the topic of the study.

Oral histories can also contribute a new form of text for rhetorical or discourse analysis that can tell researchers different things than traditional texts. For example, Christine Oravec's (1984) rhetorical analysis of the Hetch Hetchy controversy examines traditional texts such as speeches, pamphlets, and essays to understand the differences in the rhetorical strategies of preservationists and conservationists. An oral history of participants in the Hetch Hetchy controversy might reveal the personal stories of the preservationists and conservationists that could shed light on how they viewed the development and resolution of the controversy, how they developed and assessed their rhetorical strategies, and how they rhetorically constructed the memory of the controversy. In another example, Kevin DeLuca's (1999) book, *Image Politics*, relies on analysis of mediated image events in environmental social movements. An oral history project could reveal the pre-mediated story of the development of image events through the stories of people who staged the events.

In addition to collecting information about humans, oral history collections can also yield important information about the natural world and other than humans (though still through the lens of stories told by people). For example, the Fernald Living History Project reveals changes in rain patterns and water quality over time in the area surrounding the Fernald facility. Similarly, my oral history project has revealed changes in the landscape and ecology in areas with nuclear and toxic facilities. In one interview, a narrator spoke of the changes that occurred in rabbit populations in Nevada during the time of nuclear testing at the Nevada test site. She noted both declines in populations but also changes in the size of the thyroid gland in rabbits that were eaten by Western Shoshone subsistence hunters. Another narrator

recounted the story of how a chemical release at a nearby chemical weapons facility killed her father's sheep herd.<sup>5</sup> Oral history interviews can potentially document sources of local knowledge about plant and animal ecology or other environmental changes in particular places. In sum, oral history interviews provide potential for gathering different types of information than what can be gathered through rhetorical texts and other forms of interviewing.

### *Adding Vernacular Voices*

Oral history is grounded in a desire to add new, previously marginalized voices, to the historical record (Conquergood, 1983; Langellier, 1989; Perks, 1990; Ritchie, 2003; Sommer & Quinlan, 2002; Yow, 2005). Dwight Conquergood (1983) suggests that "much of the work in oral history and oral tradition is motivated in part by a need to rescue from invisibility, vast numbers of people" (p. 149). Indeed, oral history can document the "very stuff that rarely gets into any kind of public record" (Yow, 2005, p. 12). Implicit in this argument is a critique of relying solely on written texts or records. In the case of environmental issues and controversies, collecting oral histories can allow for the documentation of the perspectives of people who may be overlooked in traditional scientific or historical accounts of environmental movements and policy. For example, the University of Utah American West Center has undertaken a project to collect oral histories of Utah's environmentalists' stories, which could be marginalized in official, dominant versions of the history of environmentalism in Utah. In addition to the traditional view of vernacular communities as human communities, the notion of vernacular can be expanded to include nonhumans and the environment as spoken for by oral history narrators.

For rhetorical critics, the collection and analysis of oral histories is one response to Kent Ono and John Sloop's (1995) call for attention to local, vernacular discourse (as opposed to just speeches from dominant perspectives) as part of the critical rhetoric project (i.e. McKerrow, 1989). Ono and Sloop argue

if we limit our attention to such documents [of power] available to the widest possible audience, documents that shaped the "history" of our society, then we are missing out on, and writing "out of history," important texts that gird and influence local cultures first and then affect, through the sheer number of local communities, cultures at large. (p. 19)

Rhetorical criticism of vernacular discourse should focus on communities that have systematically been ignored through the analysis of newspapers, periodicals, radio broadcasts, pamphlets, everyday speech, orations given on the street, and so on. Some scholars use ethnographic practices to access vernacular discourse (e.g. Pezzullo, 2007). Oral history can also be an important source of vernacular discourse.

### *Critically Analyzing*

Ono and Sloop (1995) argue that the collection and description of vernacular discourse, while crucially important, is not enough. They argue that vernacular discourses must be subject to critical analysis. While Ono and Sloop specifically

advocate the use of “critical suspicion, the kind of suspicion that rhetoricians have always given to mainstream discourse” for analysis of vernacular discourses (p. 21), oral histories should not be limited to being analyzed by rhetorical scholars. As Valerie Yow (2005) suggests, oral history “enables the researcher to understand the meaning of artifacts in the lives of people” and “reveals the images and symbols people use to express feelings about their experiences and give them meaning” (p. 13). Moreover, “The tape recording of oral history preserves the speech patterns of the community” (Miller, 1983, p. 165). The study of symbols and meanings is central to communication research. Analysis of new texts may yield new advances in communication theory.

I am beginning to use critical rhetoric for analysis of the oral history interviews I have collected in the *Nuclear Technologies* project. As a critical rhetorician attending to power and privilege, the critique of vernacular discourse is a particularly useful approach because it is sensitive to power dynamics, marginalization, essentialism, and liberatory potential (Ono & Sloop, 1995). These issues are also discussed in oral history, one example being the conversation about shared authority (e.g. Frisch, 1989; Thomson, 2003).

#### *Documenting and Archiving*

As argued previously, I see immense value in oral history because it can be archived. Indeed, this is the major difference between oral history and traditional qualitative interviewing. Collecting an oral history instead of qualitative interviews can contribute to future research by making the documents (i.e. written transcripts, audio recordings, and/or video recordings) available in libraries, online archives, and research centers. Data can be freed from a future in locked file cabinets. This is valuable for multiple reasons. First, as Sommer and Quinlan (2002) suggest, “oral historians who embark on a project for a specific, short term purpose might be surprised to learn what a gold mine they’ve created for future historians who seek new insights into a specific time and place in the past” (p. 84). In other words, the documents are available for new interpretations, new themes to emerge, and even challenges to a researcher’s interpretation. Second, documenting oral histories can add to existing collections in a library or research center. For example, my *Nuclear Technologies* project augments an existing archive of nuclear materials at the library. Future researchers can have access to both the oral histories I conducted and these other documents. Finally, documenting oral histories may have benefits for the communities being interviewed (Frisch, 1989; Sommer & Quinlan, 2002). It is standard practice for a copy of the oral history to be provided to the narrator upon completion. This can provide a piece of personal history for environmental organizations or individuals. These benefits may not be achieved without the archiving of oral histories.

While there are undoubted benefits of the ability to archive oral history collections, critical scholars may object to the textualization of community discourses, particularly marginalized ones. As Ono and Sloop (1995) suggest, “caution must

be taken by respecting the ways in which communities, including marginal ones, are always ‘in transition,’ never fixed, never essentializable” (p. 26). In other words, they caution against vernacular texts being taken as representative for an entire community or being made into stable interpretations of a community. Some oral historians practicing shared authority and collaborative oral history grapple with how to work with communities to ensure that its members are represented in line with the community’s goal (e.g. Sitzia, 2003). Moreover, it is incumbent upon researchers (including future users of an oral history archive) to make decisions about how they want to represent oral histories in their scholarship, public projects, and archives. The oral historian should not necessarily be held accountable for how other scholars use the archive he/she created. I believe that the value of documenting is more important than these risks. The value of an archive is that the documents will always be available for more analysis and interpretation. Those who object to the way a scholar uses an oral history in an essentialist or otherwise problematic way can access the same archives to offer a different interpretation.

Another objection to archiving oral histories is that people may be unwilling to offer sensitive information or may paint a rosy picture of their life because they know their interview will be kept in an archive. An advantage of qualitative interviewing, in comparison, is that guaranteed anonymity and restricted access to interview transcripts may make an interviewee more comfortable about sharing sensitive information. While oral historians regularly discuss these risks, it is worth noting a few responses here. First, with regard to sensitive information, oral historians can offer safeguards to people worried about revealing secrets or damaging information. Standard oral history consent forms indicate that an oral history narrator can stipulate that their transcript remain un-archived until after death or a specific time frame. Similarly, the narrator can request that their interview remain anonymous. Second, with regard to selective memory, a good oral historian is trained to conduct both extensive background research and approach the interview with some skepticism. As such, the interviewer may ask for corroboration or documentation in response to a statement or story that raises questions. Third, oral historians are also trained to not take one story as the “Truth.” Analysis of oral history involves reviewing a variety of perspectives and stories on an event from their set of oral histories while also drawing from more traditional sources of information (Wheeler, 2004). Further, an oral historian is skeptical of any historical document that may present only one perspective of an event or person’s life. Ultimately, “by preserving the entirety of oral history interviews, other scholars can check the material for accuracy, context, and nuance” (Feldstein, 2004, p. 21).

### *Creating Public Scholarship*

A final value of collecting and analyzing oral histories is the potential for public scholarship and public history. “Both oral and public history have experimented with video tape, slide-tape, and even interactive videos, in museum exhibits, dramatic performances, and other applications” (Ritchie, 2003, p. 41). This allows research to

expand beyond the academy in accessible ways for public consumption. Oral history collections and research can be made public in a variety of ways including websites (such as the Nuclear Test Site Oral History Project<sup>6</sup> and the Fernald Living History Project), museum exhibits with interview excerpts paired with photos or art, public lectures that draw on analysis of oral histories, radio clips, and poster displays. Meg Brady's *YourStory* Project<sup>7</sup> centered at the University of Utah provides an excellent example of a public oral history project with a digital archive of interview excerpts, a series of short radio stories derived from *YourStory* interviews, and an exhibit. For environmental communication, public scholarship and public presentations of oral histories can be an important way to educate the public about various environmental issues, highlight the complexity and diversity of voices in environmental controversies, and incorporate the stories of "real people" into otherwise overly academic findings.

While this selection of principles and benefits of oral history has undoubtedly left out some significant topics and concerns (e.g. the fallibility of memory, subjectivity), it offers an initial set of arguments for further discussion among environmental communication scholars.

### **Conclusion: Oral History and the Environment**

There are several fruitful areas in which oral histories could be beneficial, informative, and contribute to both public and scholarly knowledge in environmental communication. Modeling the Utah Environmentalist project of the American West Center at the University of Utah, a researcher might collect an archive of local environmental activists. Beyond local environmentalism, projects could focus on collecting the stories of the first Earth Day participants and organizers. The collection of oral histories of environmental justice groups can document historically marginalized communities of color and their struggles with toxic pollution. Another arena for oral history could be to collect the stories of scientists involved in various environmental issues such as the Scott Polar Research Institute's oral history project on explorers and scientists that lived in the Arctic and Antarctic.<sup>8</sup> Finally, oral history can focus on documenting changes in landscape and ecology of particular places over time. Of course, any research attempting to create an oral history project should begin by researching what already exists and seek to fill in the historical record with a new topic or set of perspectives.

Overall, oral history can provide a new set of documents for the study of environmental communication. Oral history interviews document vernacular and oft-excluded communities and their communicative practices. As environmental crises and controversies often include the voices of activists and publics, collecting oral histories provides a way not only to access these individuals' stories for one's own research project, but also to preserve these stories for future generations to access. In addition to the value of collection and archiving of oral histories, the analysis of oral history has the potential to tell us new things about communication. In rhetorical criticism, Ono and Sloop (1995) indicate that the analysis of vernacular discourse has the potential to change the way we understand rhetoric and rhetorical criticism. For

other communication subfields, the analysis of oral history may yield similar potential. As an environmental communication scholar interested in praxis-based research (Endres, Sprain, & Peterson, 2008), I see additional value in the ability to use oral history collections and analysis to produce creative public scholarship and projects for the communities involved in an oral history project as well as the general public. Although this essay admittedly only touched on the value of and some of the major issues for oral history, it is my hope that it sparks further discussion and exploration of oral history in environmental communication research.

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### Notes

- [1] See Kirby (2008) for a review of some of the major "problems" with oral history research.
- [2] For an interesting discussion of the relationship between oral history and IRB, see Shopes (2007).
- [3] For more information of this project, see the following websites: <http://www.fernaldcommunityalliance.org/interviews.html>, and [http://www.lm.doe.gov/land/sites/oh/fernald\\_orig/50th/vf.htm](http://www.lm.doe.gov/land/sites/oh/fernald_orig/50th/vf.htm).
- [4] Depending on the project and researcher, these steps may happen sequentially or there may be overlap between the two steps.
- [5] Interviews by Kim Townsend (not yet catalogued) and Margene Bullcreek (interview numbers u-1864 and u-1865) in the Nuclear Technologies in the American West Oral History project.
- [6] For information on this project, see its website: <http://digital.library.unlv.edu/ntsohp/>
- [7] For information on this project, see its website: <http://www.yourstory.utah.edu/>
- [8] For information on this project see: <http://www.spri.cam.ac.uk/library/oralhistory/>

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