

Oral History Today - Exploring Oral History Collections

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Oral History collections provide interesting insights on personal experiences of the recent past that cannot be found in traditional archives and written documents. Narrators are asked to recall their personal history so that it can be recorded, either with audio or video-equipment, and used as a source of knowledge. As recalling factual events and attributing meaning to them are intertwined in the narratives, collections as these can be equally relevant to historians, as to anthropologists and psychologists. Although the practice of consulting such archives is strongly rooted in Anglo-Saxon academic tradition, in the Netherlands it is a fairly new phenomenon. One of the obstacles is the limited access to the content. Discovery of material is difficult because collections are seldom integrated, but instead offer their own search tools. Moreover, some of the collections contain up to thousands of interviews, of which each can be several hours long. Consequently exploring and analysing this kind of material can be difficult and time-consuming.

In the Oral History Today (OHT) project (www.verteldverleden.org) a search portal was developed with the aim to alleviate these difficulties. In a previous project, several oral history collections were integrated enabling scholars to explore these collections using a single portal (Ordelman & De Jong, 2011). In the OHT project, we built upon this work by developing a search tool with a process of co-development (Kemman, Scagliola, De Jong, & Ordelman, 2013). Scholars and technology specialists collaborated closely in order to create a research environment that supports the information needs of scholars. Within the entire research process of scholars of discovering and investigating material, presenting research results and preserving research data (De Jong, Ordelman, & Scagliola, 2011) we focused on the initial stages of exploring archives and selecting relevant sources.

Due to the large number of interviews available and the even larger number of topics discussed in these interviews, we developed a visual search interface that provides overview and zooming facilities. Two visualisations were included to support visual exploration: word clouds and visual facets. The first, word clouds, provide a textual overview of topics present in either the entire archive, the search results returned, or of a specific interview. The second, visual facets, provides a visual overview of the search filters related to search results. Each search filter, e.g. to filter by spatial coverage as shown in figure 1, is represented with a bar showing all values of the filter with different colours. As such, the user can acquire an overview of the search results and interact visually with the search filters. In the future, we intend to expand the number of oral history collections available by helping archivists to expose their collections to the OHT index. Moreover, additional user research will be undertaken to learn more about how scholars explore oral history archives.