

UC Berkeley

"Librarians Navigating Change" Oral History Project, UC Berkeley

Title

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“LIBRARIANS NAVIGATING CHANGE”

An Oral History Project

Ann Glusker, Librarian, UCB Library Social Sciences Division

LAUC-B Research Showcase, May 15, 2025

WHY THIS STUDY?

- I’ve been part of two qualitative research teams
- The interviews are rich, and the interviewees open and generous, but the content is not released after thematic analysis, so a lot is lost
- I wanted to learn oral history methodology, which is more collaborative than qualitative research, and also has a social justice focus
- When I came to Berkeley in 2019 I’d been a librarian for a decade but it was my first “traditional” liaison role... I had a year before everything changed, and have always wanted to hear more stories about librarianship (at Berkeley) in the before times!

WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY?

In *Doing Oral History*, Donald Ritchie explains, “Oral History collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews. An oral history interview generally consists of a *well-prepared interviewer questioning an interviewee and recording their exchange* in audio or video format.”

PROJECT GOAL:

The goal is to have a collection of oral history transcripts (in the end, 15) available in the UC eScholarship repository, for anyone who wants to know more about changes in librarianship over the past few decades, and at Berkeley specifically

From the invitation to participate in the LNC Project:

“Academic librarianship has undergone transformative changes since the COVID pandemic. But, *shifts in essential and fundamental ways of carrying out our professional responsibilities, priorities, and development are nothing new to us*. we are experienced at adjusting to waves of expansion, contraction, and transition of all kinds.

To investigate how we do this, I’m conducting an oral history project called “Librarians Navigating Change.” The eventual goal is to have a *collection of interviews*, all from librarians who work at or have recently worked at the UC Berkeley Library (for at least 10 years), available for anyone who wants to find out more about what the past 4 decades or so have been like here. I believe that *this is the time to capture stories* of our work lives and history, as libraries are increasingly under threat; yet again, we navigate change.

I would like to ask you to be one of the project’s narrators. This would include: 1) an initial pre-interview meeting to discuss your involvement, the process, and the questions and topics we’ll cover; 2) the interview itself (the only part that is recorded); and 3) your review of the resulting transcript, in order to approve it for depositing in the UC’s eScholarship repository. *This is an entirely collaborative process.*”

HOW TO DO AN ORAL HISTORY

Qualitative Methods Overview

Phenomenology

Case Studies

Grounded Theory

Narrative Inquiry

Oral History

Feminist Approaches

Action Research

Selections from Qualitative Research Methods guides, [Duquesne University](#), and [Duke University](#)

Surveys	Quickly and/or easily gets lots of information from people in a non threatening way	- easy to compare and analyze - administer to many people - can get lots of data - many sample questionnaires already exist	- worring can bias client's responses - impersonal - may need sampling expert - doesn't get full story
Interviews	- Understand someone's impressions or experiences - Learn more about answers to questionnaires	- get full range and depth of information - develops relationship with client - can be flexible with client	- can take ime - can be hard to analyze and compare - can be costly - interviewer can bias client's responses
Observation	Gather firsthand information about people, events, or programs	- view operations of a program as they are actually occurring - can adapt to events as they occur	- can be difficult to interpret seen behaviors - can be complex to categorize observations - can influence behaviors of program participants - can be expensive
Focus groups	Explore a topic in depth through group discussion	- quickly and reliably get common impressions - can be efficient way to get much range and depth of information in short time - can convey key information about programs	- can be hard to analyze responses - need good facilitator for safety and closure - difficult to schedule 6-8 people together
Case studies	Understand an experience or conduct comprehensive examination through cross	- depicts client's experience in program input, process and results - powerful means to portray program	- usually time consuming to collect, organize and describe - represents depth of information,

For more about qualitative research vs oral history, check out my Love Data Week presentation at uc-love-data-week.github.io

PROCESS:

- Interpretive Framing [*Central concepts, questions*]
- Narrator [*Interviewee*] Selection
- Invite Letter [*see slide above*]
- Planning and Communication with Narrators
- Research Preparation [*Library trends, UCB Library history and narrator backgrounds*]
- Recording Format [*Zoom, GoogleMeet, phone*]
- Interview Setting [*Remote*]
- Interview Etiquette [*Delightful*]
- Legal Release [*Substantial help from Scholarly Communications Office*]
- Transcription & Editing [*Aliceapp.ai*]
- Preservation [*eScholarship*]
- Interpretive Analysis [*I will create a glorified “Read Me” document, but not really interpretive*]
- Sharing the Results [*Update blog post*]

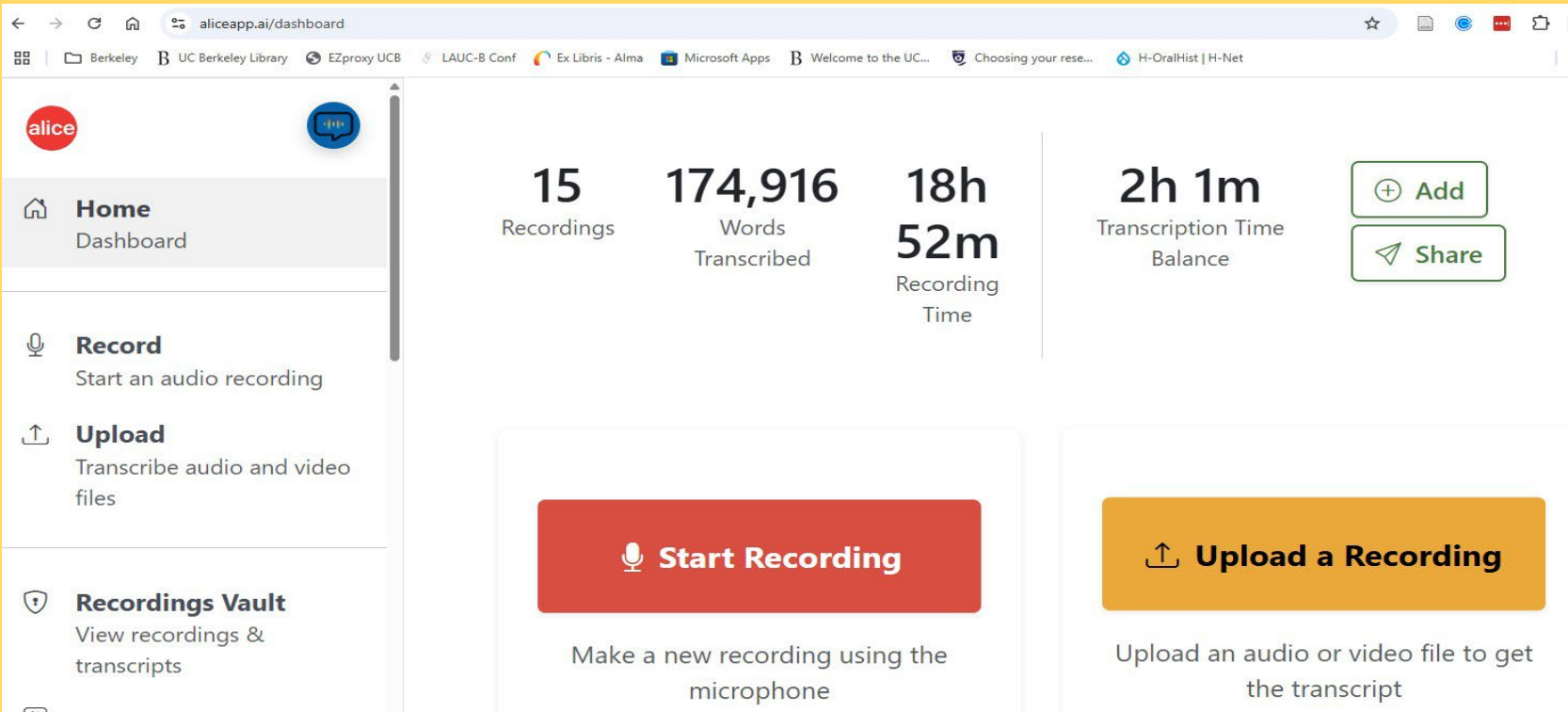
(List from UC Berkeley Oral History Center Training Handout www.lib.berkeley.edu/visit/bancroft/oral-history-center)

NOTES FROM MY EXPERIENCE:

- I ABSOLUTELY could not have done this without training. In 2024 I attended the UC Berkeley Oral History Center’s Intro (1-day) and Advanced (1-week) workshops.
- I learned a lot by attending the Oral History Association 2024 conference
- Mentorship, from UCB OHC’s Shanna Farrell, has been indispensable
- Like any project, add way more time than you think you need (for example, navigating creation of the narrator agreement took more time than expected)
- Keep a tracking log—you will thank yourself
- Tech failures are real and terrifying. Have multiple plans for crises (like Google Meet recording for when Zoom dies!)
- Transcription tool- remember privacy concerns (Aliceapp.ai is European)
- Consider doing a practice interview

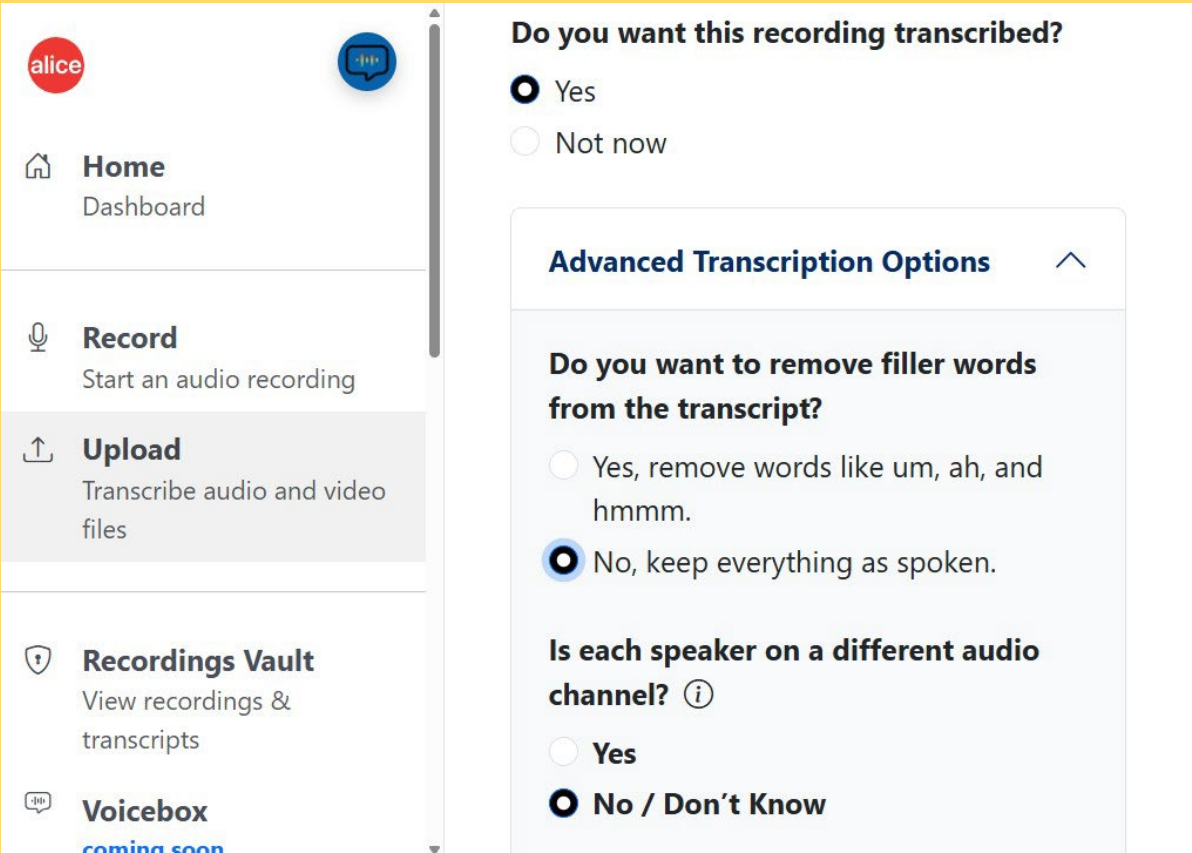
HOW IT'S GOING

This and below screenshot from Aliceapp.ai transcription platform



FUN FACTS!

- Asked 20 people, 15 said yes (tried to have diversity across roles, gender and race/ethnicity but wasn't always possible)
- Interviews took place online in the 5-week period April 7-May 9, 2025
- Selected the Aliceapp.ai tool for transcription; it adheres to European privacy rules, transcripts are produced using AI, but content is not ingested by AI
- Its use will save me about 4-5 hours per transcript, and transcription is EXPENSIVE; Alice charged me \$100 for 20 hours (future idea for others– LAUC grant)
- Also had to research and choose which transcription guidelines to follow—there's a very comprehensive set from the Smithsonian that I will use
- Interviews averaged about an hour and a quarter (this shorter “one-shot” format is not universally loved in the OH community—oral histories traditionally cover the narrator's entire lifespan, comprising multiple hours of interviews across multiple sessions--but it was the right format for this project)
- While the gold standard for narrator content is the audio file (it is *THE* OH content of record, and much more rich than a transcript), several narrators did not want to agree to audio upload, due to AI voice cloning, and I made the decision to not include audio in the final uploads, which will be transcript-only. Sad, but the times we live in.
- My participation percentage (the percent of the time I was speaking as opposed to the narrator speaking) ranged from 9% to 25%. I'm a little embarrassed by the 25% (it should be much lower) but it's too late now—good learning for the next project. 😊
- Oral history generally doesn't require an IRB– so refreshing!



QUESTION TOPICS:

- Career journey, personal history
- Review of years at Berkeley
- Biggest changes? Which were Berkeley-specific and which profession-specific challenges?
- What strategies if any did you use?
- Were there times you thought about leaving librarianship or Berkeley?
- What part did your position in the org structure play?
- Legacy- how would you like your work to be remembered?
- Advice for new librarians?

NEXT STEPS

- June-July:

Complete transcript first drafts, apply for eScholarship series space
- August:

Work with narrators to review, revise and approve transcripts for upload
- September:

Upload transcripts, create supplementary material, create Update blog post
- October:

Rest (and hopefully attend JASNA conference)

(Below: screenshot of a librarian-adjacent oral history in eScholarship)

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Temporarily a Librarian: Michael Keeble Buckland Oral History Interview

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FURTHER READING:

- Journal: *The Oral History Review*
- Doing Oral History*, by Donald Ritchie (2003)
- Oral History for the Qualitative Researcher: Choreographing the Story*, by Valerie Janesick
- Oral History at a Distance*, by Steven Sielaff
- Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research*, by Patricia Leavy (2011)
- Oral History Theory*, by Lynn Abrams (2010)
- Portelli, Alessandro. “What Makes Oral History Different?” In *Oral History, Oral Culture, and Italian Americans*, edited by Luisa del Guidice, pp. 21-30. Springer.

“In this important article from 1979, Portelli argues that orality, narrative form, subjectivity, memory, and the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee – all distinctive characteristics of oral history – should be considered oral history’s strengths, not weaknesses.”

- Poster:* [URL]
- Questions?* 3-4 PM GoogleMeet with Ann- hop on! (or email, glusker@berkeley.edu)
Video call link: <https://meet.google.com/fjw-huuz-tud>
Or dial: (US) +1 563-562-6636 PIN: 327 866 381#
- Heartfelt thanks to:* Susan Edwards for encouraging me to consider my next project; Shanna Farrell for amazing and generous oral historian mentorship; Michael Lange and Tim Vollmer for assistance with narrator agreement content; Chan Li and Angelica Valera-Martinez for presenting the poster and printing assistance; and also my wonderful narrators!