

Transcription in the Oral History Centre, Singapore: From the Analog Past to a Digital Future

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Abstract

Since 1979, the Oral History Centre (OHC) in Singapore has instituted multiple changes to its transcription policy and processes, from the presence of a transcribers' pool to the introduction of vendor outsourcing. In 2013, OHC began using and experimenting with new transcribing applications, with varying levels of success. Today, with the growing availability and accuracy of artificial intelligence-aided transcription, another new era of change is underway.

The first half of this presentation will look back on the various stages of OHC's transcription history, paying attention to how method often preceded thinking. Constraints imposed by the resources needed for transcribing, for instance, had downstream effects on expectations of what could and should be transcribed, which in turn was arguably rationalised into philosophical principles about the relationship between audio and text.

Using these insights, the presentation's second half will attempt to analyse present shifts. With the gradual dissolution of previous constraints, some of these philosophical principles have been readily abandoned. New (or reformulated) ethical problems take their place, though: How will increased content searchability alter potential interviewees' willingness to be interviewed? Who is to be responsible for the accuracy of information transcribed? And so on.

Foregrounding these issues does not mean that the digitalisation and automation of transcription processes should be abandoned. Rather, it should provoke all to enter the future with open eyes, ready to adapt new technologies based on deeper and firmer convictions.