

A Community-Centric Approach to Bilingual Metadata and Ethical Representations in Oral History

José J. Morales Benítez^{1,*}, Natalia Hernández Mejías^{1,†}, Jaquelina E. Alvarez^{1,†}, Ricia A. Chansky¹

¹ University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez, P.O. Box 9000, Mayaguez, PR 00681

Abstract

This poster describes the process a team of librarians followed to create and implement a metadata design for a newly established Oral History Lab. The design prioritizes dignified representations of interview participants and supports their autonomy by including them in the description of their stories. The poster also covers the ethical considerations that have guided the work.

Keywords

decolonial model, oral history, postcustodial archiving, bilingual metadata, demystifying metadata.

1. Introduction

In early 2022, a multidisciplinary collaboration was initiated at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayaguez (UPRM) involving the University Library, the English Department, and the Film Certificate Program. The goal was to create an Oral History Lab (OHL) dedicated to recording, preserving, and disseminating stories detailing the diverse experiences of residents of Puerto Rico. [1-3] The Lab would place special focus on how community members have navigated a series of stratified disasters that have affected the archipelago in recent years, including natural disasters, COVID-19, major political corruption scandals, and severe austerity measures. After starting out with oral history interviews conducted by students as part of courses and research projects, the OHL has expanded to the establishment of partnerships with various community and mutual aid organizations.

This poster describes the development and implementation of a metadata design for the new collection of oral histories that prioritizes dignified representations and the autonomy of interview participants, who take the lead in the description of their narratives and cultural materials. It also highlights the ethical frame work [4] that guides the OHL, which includes the following three core values: (1) Creation of bilingual content and metadata for broader access; (2) Respect for participants' preferences, needs, and priorities; (3) A postcustodial archiving approach that allows narrators and interviewers to retain control of their oral histories even after they have been disseminated through the collection.

* Corresponding author.

† These authors contributed equally.

✉ jose.morales55@upr.edu (J.J. Morales Benítez); natalia.hernandez@upr.edu (N. Hernández Mejías);

jaquelina.alvarez@upr.edu (J.E. Alvarez); ricia.chansky@upr.edu (R.A. Chansky)

📞 0000-0003-1777-7820 (J.J. Morales); 0009-0003-8468-8462 (N. Hernandez); 0000-0002-7300-0998 (J. Alvarez); 0000-0002-0321-7016 (R.Chansky)



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2. Metadata implementation in a decolonial work model

Following a decolonial work model and the ethical framework developed by the OHL, oral histories are created by UPRM students and community partners, who are encouraged to take ownership of the work and embrace the role of creators of new knowledge. [5-6] This has led to a richly diverse corpus of original primary source material. The librarians engaged in the creation of a metadata design that could produce detailed descriptions with active collaboration from interview participants while also supporting consistency and not being overly complicated. They also committed to incorporating bilingual descriptive metadata in English and Spanish, which was crucial to enhance the collection's accessibility and impact.

The librarians chose to base the metadata design on Dublin Core (DC), which was already implemented in the UPRM institutional repository. DC had proven to be an effective schema for the repository due to being highly structured but also flexible enough to adapt to many types of resources and content management platforms. The resulting metadata design has contributed significantly to the Lab's work and collaborations. Students grasp it without great difficulty, and community partners have been able to adapt it to fit their own projects. To demystify metadata for students and community partners, librarians created resources such as online tutorials, workshops, metadata manuals, and a metadata intake form. This was combined with more informal consultations and educational gatherings. A prime example was a metadata pizza party organized to collectively describe community materials.

3. Conclusion

When working with an oral history collection like the one being developed by the OHL, metadata considerations must not be disassociated from aspects relating to the humanity of the people who contribute their narratives. In an interconnected digital world populated by bots, web crawlers, and powerful search algorithms, and where web content can be decontextualized or transformed with relative ease, any person who agrees to have their story and identity appear in an online collection automatically becomes vulnerable. Therefore, the people and institutions with stewardship of these collections must do their best to protect them and represent them in a dignified, equitable, and respectful way. This is an essential component of building trust.

The OHL has taken on this responsibility by creating an ethical framework which incorporates post-custodial archiving and rolling consent. It has also addressed this crucial issue in its metadata practice. Bilingual descriptive metadata is employed to broaden access, administrative and rights metadata is stored to ensure that restrictions applied by participants are respected and their intellectual property over the narratives is recognized, and workflows have been designed to allow participants to create the descriptions and keywords which will accompany their oral histories. This last aspect is especially important to foster autonomy, leading to item descriptions that are genuine and fair.

The OHL will keep refining the metadata design and ethical framework it has developed as it continues to conduct its work and expand the collection. This ongoing process of learning and praxis will be guided by the OHL's fundamental objectives of elevating underrepresented voices and perspectives from the Puerto Rican community and contributing to the creation of a more democratic historical record.

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