

## Handout 4: History of Oral History

### Session: What is Oral History?

Though oral history may be new to you, oral history is in fact one of the oldest forms of conducting historical research. Indeed, it is considered both the oldest and the newest method of historical investigation. This aspect of oral history is a useful way to distinguish it from other related fields, such as oral traditions and journalism.

#### Part One:

When did oral history begin? Why is it considered the oldest form of conducting historical research?

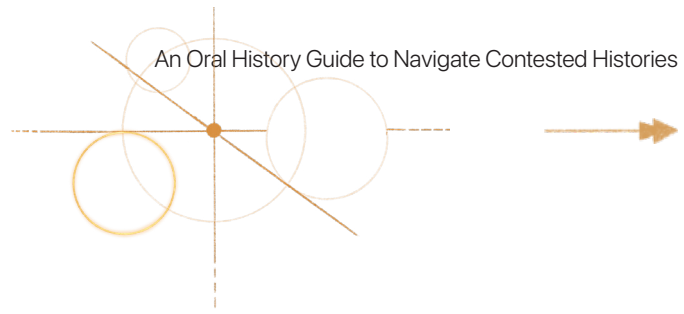
Some date the practice of oral history back to the ancient Greek classical historians, Herodotus and Thucydides, who collected verbal, eye-witness accounts to write their histories. Herodotus, the “Father of History,” wrote his book *Histories* on the Greco-Persian Wars of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. based on his travels from Athens to Egypt, Tyre, and Babylon with the Greek naval fleet when he collected testimonies that he then organized into his historical narrative. He was also known as a master storyteller because he often read his work aloud at public festivals, capturing the imagination of his listeners, including the young Thucydides who was in his audience. Thucydides then took Herodotus’s investigative method to a new level in his historical work, by combining accounts of both eye-witness recollections through oral testimony and written sources to write his authoritative history of the Peloponnesian Wars. Though both Herodotus and Thucydides used verbal, eye-witness accounts to write their histories, they did not have the technology to record the voices of those interviewed. **As a result, although their interviewing method is similar to oral history, their product is closer to journalism in the sense that they did not preserve the sources upon which their writings were based.**

*How did oral history evolve?*

Oral history as a field of study emerged in the 1940s with the invention of the tape recorder. Testimony literally became **aural**. Oral history as we know it today came about towards the end of WWII with the invention of the portable tape recorder. The tape recorder gave oral testimony an aural form while freeing up the historian from the need to take notes.

In the 1950s and 1960s, oral history became associated with a more democratized representation of the past that challenged the traditional and sometimes authoritarian single master narrative. This theoretical shift in the field of oral history focused on collecting and recording everyday voices and experiences of ordinary people in what became known as the New Social History Movement. The emphasis here was to capture history from below as opposed to history from above told from perspectives and positions of authority. For example, histories of the so-called “great men” of history abound: George Washington of the United States Revolution, Vladimir Lenin of the Russian Revolution, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk of the Republic of Turkey, or Egyptian leader Gamal Abdul Nasser are so often credited with determining the forces of history. In the context of understanding the past from the bottom up, oral history seeks to give voice to the lives of ordinary people by focusing on how people’s lives changed as a result of the historical events, such as the Russian or Egyptian Revolutions.





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Given today's massive technological advances, especially in digital technology, oral history is even more accessible and documentable. The proliferation of smartphones has made capturing and disseminating video recordings to wide audiences as simple as swiping or tapping a screen. Just think of recordings of cute baby moments, a family celebration, or a sports event. With live radio broadcasting on the wane, many of us listen to podcasts or watch online videos for news updates or to learn new information, for instance in the form of online learning or distance learning. Imagine how much more accessible technology makes oral history, so that multiple voices, multiple experiences, and multiple histories can be heard. Imagine how you can change history by combining oral history with present-day technology.

### Part Two: Oral History, Journalism and Oral Traditions

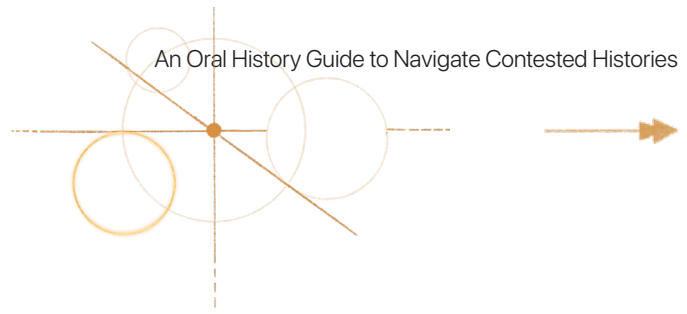
What are oral traditions? What is the difference between oral traditions and Oral History?

Oral History is also often described as being the oldest form of historical research because of its association with *oral traditions*. But again, there are significant distinctions that set these fields apart. Oral traditions are based on the passing down of songs, poetry, myths, legends, customs, and folklore in general through generations, and these traditions are often shared orally in a community or social setting. There are many examples in the Arab world, such as the *Hakawati* and *Arabian Nights*. One of the most important references in Islam is the *Hadith*, which includes the sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad and on which Islamic law, or *Sharia*, is based. The word *Hadith* in Arabic translates roughly to mean discussion, sayings, and descriptive narrative. Because the *Hadiths* of the Prophet Muhammad were not immediately recorded in writing but were transmitted orally from one generation to the next, the accuracy of what was said and remembered creates a very important tradition of debate in Islamic theology and is the basis of the five different schools (interpretations) of Sharia. This is referred to as *Hadith studies*, which classifies *Hadiths* based on their accuracy and other criteria.

This also applies to the Bible in Christianity, as the four gospels were written after decades of oral transmission. There are also numerous examples of oral traditions in different African cultures, where history and culture are passed down through stories and/or song, and transmitted to the young giving them a sense of belonging, identity, and community.

Oral traditions are collective and community based. A song, ballad, myth, or epic poem are all part of a collective memory of a particular cultural and social group. In this sense, its authorship is a collective one. Oral traditions are collective and stable; they are associated with knowledge and traditions passed down from one generation to the next. In comparison, oral history is specific to an individual by name (unless anonymity is requested), voice, and experience, and is specific to a moment in time in which that voice is recorded in an interview. An oral history is as unique as the person it represents and is documented through the interview. An oral history is fixed in time, defined in context, and individual in voice.





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*Oral History and Journalism – What’s the difference?*

Both oral history and journalism involve the acts of interviewing and recording eye-witness accounts. Journalism is often defined as the *first draft of history*. But some significant differences between journalism and oral history are that journalists don’t always record their interviews, while oral historians *a/ways* record their interviews. Journalists don’t always reveal their sources, while oral historians typically do name their sources, unless sources request anonymity or need to be protected because of the subject under discussion. And finally, journalists don’t necessarily keep their recordings once their articles are written, while oral historians conduct and record the interview in order to preserve it. In fact, preserving the recorded interview fulfills the purpose of creating the oral history in the first place. Preservation begins by safeguarding the recordings, advances to making them useful and accessible, and culminates with their dissemination to share them in creative ways with others.

