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The Audiovisual Dimension & the Digital Turn in Public History Practices

Abstract: The historical tale has always been more effective and engaging with the use of sounds and images than with the fixity of the written word. In a certain way, the audio/visual dimension allowed by the digital turn brings the tale back to its original fluidity, returning it to its original identity. As a tale made by sounds and images, the “story” must have its own styles, special effects, pauses, and rhythms, which have a decisive and primary importance related to its contents. The current digital revolution has emphasized this ability of the storytelling to influence, invoke and evocate and captivate by multiplying the ways and the tools in order to produce and publish audio-visual “stories” and increasing and modifying the impact force of the historical audiovisual narrative.

Keywords: audio, video, podcast, docufiction, storytelling

The historical tale has always been more effective and engaging with the use of sounds and images than with the fixity of the written word. In a certain way, the audio/visual dimension brings the tale back to its original fluidity, returning it to its original identity.¹ As a tale made by sounds and images, the “story” must have its own styles, special effects, pauses, and rhythms, which have a decisive and primary importance related to its contents. This is also true, of course, for the written text: just think of the different reactions that an essay, historical novel, or partially fictional text can incite in a reader. However, an audiovisual product has a greater ability to influence, invoke, evocate and captivate than the written word, even if it is an exciting novel. The current digital revolution has not changed this assumption; indeed, we can say that it has even emphasized it by sharing the production tools to a vast public. Subsequently, this has multiplied the ways of creation and publication, thus increasing and modifying the impact force of the historical audiovisual narrative.²

The most important innovations in the digital audio-video environment of the last twenty-five to thirty years can be identified, firstly, in the discovery of peculiar

1 Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (Routledge, 2013). I wish to thank Stefania Manni for the suggestions received for writing this essay.

2 Andrew Tolson, “A new authenticity? Communicative practices on YouTube,” in *Critical Discourse Studies* 7, no. 4 (2010), <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17405904.2010.511834>; Ann Gray and Erin Bell, *History on Television* (Routledge, 2013); Michelle Caswell, “Seeing Yourself in History: Community Archives and the Fight Against Symbolic Annihilation,” *The Public Historian* 36, no. 4 (2014): 26–37. <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2014.36.4.26>.

compression formats of audio-video files,³ which produced, as an obvious consequence, a generalized growth of the simplicity in using the tools for recording, post-producing, and publishing audio and video.

For what concerns the recording, if ten years ago, in order to make a good audio, you had to equip yourself with a decent microphone and, on the other front, to shoot a video it was absolutely necessary to own a quality camera; today these tools are basically optional, as they are integrated into other devices (smartphones, tablets) and their use depends exclusively on the degree of quality and professionalism of the products you want to create. Now there are several high quality versions of software, free or for a fee, to produce audio-video files, such as Audacity or Garage Band for audio, and Movie Maker, Imovie, Final Cut Pro, Adobe Premiere or Lightworks for video (the complete list is long and constantly changing). Each software shows different degrees of difficulty, but all allow a basic production with only a minimal learning curve. The reduced file weight and easiness of the production process has made it possible and useful to create publishing platforms where the user can place, share, and distribute histories in audio-video files, for instance City of Memory,⁴ My House of European History,⁵ or Storicorps.⁶ There are also initiatives that have created a particular “channel” on Youtube, such as the Italian Pinte di Storia.⁷

It is useless to examine these aspects individually, mainly because of the fast changing market that continuously enriches and modifies itself. It is far more important to consider this concept globally, focusing on the fact that the common user can now easily access the basic tools for creating, producing, and publishing audiovisual content, which has had and will continue to have far-reaching effects in the way stories are “told”. The new “storytellers” not only have “pen and paper”, but a set of tools to give voice and images back to their stories. Furthermore, the places where they can publish their own audio-video stories have multiplied and globalized: social networks (i.e. *Youtube*), thematic platforms (i.e. *Memoro*), personal blogs, and sites (i.e. *Historycast*).⁸

3 Riccardo Finocchi, *Ipermedia e Locative Media: Cronologia, semiotica, estetica* (Edizioni Nuova Cultura, 2016); Marco Furini, *Comunicazioni multimediali: Fondamenti di informatica per la produzione e la gestione di flussi audio-video nella rete Internet* (FrancoAngeli, 2018).

4 <http://www.cityofmemory.org/map/index.php#>, a repository for “all New York City’s stories”.

5 <https://my-european-history.ep.eu/myhouse/allStories>, a collaborative project incorporating our testimonies on Europe.

6 <https://storicorps.org/>, whose mission is “to preserve and share humanity’s stories in order to build connections between people and create a more just and compassionate world”.

7 <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCDRxSxN2je0AyZNeVVymHgQ>.

8 *Youtube* is a very well known video sharing social network, available at <https://www.youtube.com>; *Memoro* is an international non-profit archive which everyone can contribute to by using audio and video to collect the life experiences of people born before 1950, available at <http://www.memoro.org>; *Historycast* is a podcast on history that I made in 2006, available at <https://itunes.apple.com/it/podcast/historycast/id126956772?mt=2> and <http://historycast.org/>.

Audio or Video?

Regardless of the different “technical” skills that the two mediums require,⁹ the choice between audio or video content depends essentially on what aims our story wants to reach. Here is a summary of the main advantages and disadvantages of the two options:

Audio:

- Audio requires a high quality output, since the human ear cannot stand a distorted sound;
- An audio file is easier to produce than the post-production of a video file;
- Audio files are generally much lighter than video files, which facilitates their publication, sharing, and storage;
- Theoretically, there are no limits to the duration of an audio file. The format of the product must obviously be appropriate for the context of the story and the user, but a good historical audio tale can have a very long duration, even more than an hour. This is because audio can complement other activities, such as travel, sport, or manual labor, while it is impossible to watch a video while completing these activities;
- Dramatization of the audio is essential since the listener cannot read the words with the proper punctuation, or see the gestures or the images to integrate what he/she is listening to: everything is played on the tone of the voice, the sound, and the pauses.

Video:

- Although it is advisable to produce videos with good image quality, the interest for a certain visual content can compensate for non-optimal recordings (this situation does not occur for audio);
- Processing a video file implies greater technical skills than working on audio files;
- Video files “weigh” a lot, even if produced in low definition, so the producer has to carefully consider how to publish and where to store the large file;
- Video imposes a more active visual attention while watching the story, which does not allow multitasking with more challenging activities. This consequently requires a very careful reasoning on the format (duration and structure) of the product;

⁹ Walter Fischer, *Digital Video and Audio Broadcasting Technology: A Practical Engineering Guide* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2010).

- Video obviously involves a particular attention to non-verbal language: gestures and expressions, distance between people, clothing, and set design. This can be very challenging if we want to reconstruct a scene from the past.

In summary, building a half-hour historical video-documentary takes advanced skills, not only technical-digital ones, but competences related to screenwriting, scene creation, and the ability to direct and edit. If you don't pay enough attention to the rhythms and format of the video, the public will be unreceptive to the product and therefore the video would be unable to convey the message. On the other hand, audio grants much more freedom of movement and makes directing, screen-playing, and editing activities of minor importance for acceptance of the tale.

To exemplify the concept, let's look at the "taught" history in an educational environment. A one-hour video lesson, recorded with a fixed camera on the teacher-speaker, is a product that does not reach a great audience, while the simple audio-lesson-conference is able to fulfil this task. In Italy, in 1997, a TV channel was launched on satellite television to broadcast university lectures in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, University and Research. The format of the video lesson was completely "traditional": fixed camera on a teacher with a chair and a blackboard, but without any visible audience and with standard educational content.¹⁰ The service has been certainly useful, but the video products were unbearably boring for the general public. Nowadays, the UniNettuno formats are a little bit more varied and articulated; however, for a truly effective visual teaching product, you need a good staff, technologies, high competences, and funding. An example is the series of famous video lectures of the universities of MIT (i.e. *Physics I & II* by Walter Lewin¹¹) and Harvard (i.e. *Justice* by Michael Sandel¹²), whose teachers have become celebrities of the educational sector. The credits of each video demonstrate how much the producers needed the generous contribution of sponsors.¹³

In my personal experience, as a small producer of audio-lessons and founder of a podcast dedicated to history (*Historycast*¹⁴), the first recorded by an iPhone in the classroom, the second with a simple dynamic microphone in my bedroom, I can say that the audio is easy to produce and modify, allows ample room for experiments and solutions, and normally meets a good rating among listeners.¹⁵

¹⁰ UniNettuno: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/UniNettuno_University_TV and <https://www.uninetuno.tv>.

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCiEHVhv0SBMpP75JbzJShqw>.

¹² <http://justiceharvard.org/>.

¹³ Nowadays the panorama of platforms offering online courses and in particular MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) is wide and varied: Coursera (<https://www.coursera.org/>), EDX (<https://www.edx.org/>), Future Learn (<https://www.futurelearn.com/>), and Fun MOOC (<https://www.fun-mooc.fr/>).

¹⁴ See note 5. For the lessons see <https://itunes.apple.com/it/artist/università-di-pisa/1280874168?mt=2>.

¹⁵ Enrica Salvatori, "Hardcore History: Ovvero La Storia in Podcast," *Memoria e Ricerca* 17 (2009): 171–87.

But, despite the huge limitations of the video production, the digital world nowadays tends to foster more and more image-based stories and prefers the video to tell and spread tales. In this way we see a real hyper-production of videos that, given these premises, can only last a very short duration (five minutes on average) and have incisive content, conditions not always ideal for expressing the complexity of history.¹⁶

The Format

The audio or video historical products can have extremely different formats, depending on the context of publication, the intended audience, and distribution goals. Below there is a summary of the main formats that can be found on the web, related to the potential and the limitations of the historical communication they offer.

Original primary sources: original audio or video sources that can be collected and published in a platform, blog, ebook, or site in order to carry forward a project/historical message. They require a minimum post-production, but instead require an accurate description of their metadata.¹⁷ This section also includes journalistic or research interviews (e.g. a collection of oral sources) that entail a greater attention to the construction of the plot and editing. If the original audio or video source is not available, primary or secondary sources can be transformed into audio or audio-video content through acting.¹⁸

Following the primary sources in historical practice we find their reading and interpretation (i.e. *lectures, conferences, documentaries*). These products have in common the educational content and the eminently popularizing purposes, but they can assume very different formats, from a really simple structure (*lesson*) to an extremely complex and sophisticated plot, with the insertion of music, original or recited sources, interviews, and so on. If the format tends to replicate the lesson, it is strongly recommended to choose audio over video as the medium. If this is not possible for various reasons (i.e. a lesson in History of Art) then it is necessary to edit by alternating appropriate images with the framing of the speaker. In both cases, audio or video, the diction, the balance between speech and pauses, and the “dramatization” of the discourse are not secondary elements to make the product effectively communicated and therefore functional.

16 Michael Strangelove, *Watching YouTube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People*; Amit Agarwal, “What’s the Optimum Length of an Online Video,” in *Digital Inspiration* (February 17, 2011), <https://www.labnol.org/internet/optimum-length-of-video/18696/>.

17 See for example *The Black Media Archive*, a multimedia collection of speeches, interviews, movies and music about African-American History, <http://www.dubyakaygee.com/BMA/theBMA.html>.

18 See for example several speeches by Simon Bolivar, available on Youtube, such as *Discurso ante el Congreso de Angostura*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Kddt0RtqZg>.

At the top of the possible hierarchy of audio-video products related to history is the *docufiction*: here the content is always educational, but the storytelling is characterized by various styles, from the lesson to the novel, mixed in a new original object, whose quality derives from the abilities and the resources of the author/director. The MIT or Harvard lessons mentioned above, or the more famous and fitting example of *Last Stand of the 300*, the History Channel documentary by David Padrusch, broadcast in 2007 in direct criticism of the movie *300* by Zack Snyder, are extremely expensive and complex products.

The Broadcast/Publication

Depending on the outputs and their aims there may be more ways of publishing audios and videos online. It is possible to archive them in a database/collection, or periodically publish the contents to subscribers using RSS Feed (by podcast/channel), or organize contents in a site by creating a multimedia path (*storytelling*).

Database/Collection

This typology includes all the initiatives that promote the collection of historical audio and video contents with a common theme or feature. Prime examples include the *RAI-Teche Archive* or the *United Nations Audiovisual Library*,¹⁹ but also places where oral sources are collected, such as *Memoro – the Memory Bank* with video interviews of the elderly, *Mémoire orale* on the oral sources of Wallonia and Brussels,²⁰ the *Médiathèque en visualisation « fresque » – INA – Jalons* with hundreds of videos on a century of contemporary history for educational purposes,²¹ or *British Pathé*,²² the great collection of newsreels, documentaries, and footage produced from 1896 to 1976. The common characteristic of these collections, even in the extreme variety of realizations, is to become digital libraries of searchable audiovisual sources. Other uses through search engine/interface or thematic paths could be used to enrich explanatory texts and scientific essays. In this context, the attention of the public historian must be placed on two factors: the presence for each object of all metadata needed to contextualize the audio-video source (author, date, technique, context,

¹⁹ Rai-Teche: www.teche.rai.it/; UN Multimedia: <http://www.un.org/fr/multimedia/videolibrary.shtml>.

²⁰ *Memoro*: <http://www.memoro.org/>; *Mémoire orale*: <http://www.memoire-orale.be/index.php>.

²¹ <https://fresques.ina.fr/jalons/fresque>.

²² <https://www.britishpathe.com/>.

conservation, etc.) and the navigation interface that should, as much as possible, facilitate the research and the retrieval of data, as well as their possible analysis.

Podcast/Channel

This choice of publication is not suitable to directly broadcast primary or secondary sources, but is more useful for elaborate content: lectures, conferences, documentaries, and docufictions. The name *podcast* is a neologism born in 2004 from the fusion of two words: broadcast, the English term that indicates the broadcasting, and the commercial name iPod linked to the famous mp3 player of Apple.²³ At the base of the pure and simple podcast, as of the personalized “video channel”, there is the same mechanism that allows the user to subscribe to the service, usually for free, and then be automatically notified when a new episode is available. The podcast/channel modality allows the user to create his / her personal palimpsest, which can be activated at the time and in the circumstances that one wishes. It is a powerful and extremely widespread communication tool, in theory one of the most agile and functional solutions to implement distance learning, even if not always fully exploited by educational institutions, at least in the European context.²⁴ The podcast/channel of cultural and historical content is also an extremely useful tool for museums, libraries, archives, and cultural institutions that intend to take care of the community of their visitors, since it favors the periodic transmission of content on the importance of their collections, cycles of readings, seminars, and meetings.²⁵ The panorama of the podcasts is clearly growing and promises to have greater stability than that of independent podcasts. This growth, which clearly does not concern only History but several other disciplines, indicates that there is a growing demand for good information and culture from the public. I report among the best to my knowledge the various podcasts of History Hit network,²⁶ BBC’s Witness History,²⁷ and the Radio GDR Podcast.²⁸

23 Lionel Felix and Damien Stolarz, *Hands-On Guide to Video Blogging and Podcasting: Emerging Media Tools for Business Communication* (Taylor & Francis, 2013).

24 Enrica Salvatori, “Can You Graduate from MIT by Using iTunesU?” in *Mobile Science Learning*, edited by Enrique Canessa and M. Zennaro (Trieste: ICTP, 2012), 59.

25 Enrica Salvatori, “Hardcore History: Ovvero La Storia in Podcast,” *Memoria e Ricerca* 17 (2009): 171–87; Enrica Salvatori, “Listening to, Watching, Living and, Ultimately, Learning History. On and off the Web,” in *L’histoire Contemporaine à l’ère Numérique. Contemporary History in the Digital Age*, edited by Frédéric Clavert and Serge Noiret (Bruxelles, Bern, Berlin, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Oxford, Wien: Peter Lang, 2013), 331–346.

26 <https://www.historyhit.com/podcasts/>.

27 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p004t1hd>.

28 <https://radiogdr.com/category/podcast/>.

Unfortunately, institutional and academic podcasts are often made by people who are inexperienced in communication tools and recording techniques.²⁹ This results in a product that highlights an obvious contrast between the validity of the content and the poor quality of the podcasts. The direct consequence of this is a certain level of difficulty in listening; and if there are no listeners, there is no communication. On the other hand, the opposite can happen: a flawless technical production made by very skilled people in editing software, but who do not know, or superficially know, the method of the historian and who therefore cannot communicate the complexity and problematic nature of the historical talk. The consequence in this case is – paradoxically – even more negative than the previous one: the listeners/users are reached and connected with, but the message conveyed could be erroneous.

The podcast can be published independently or on dedicated platforms. The most famous is undoubtedly Apple's iTunes, but there are several, one different from the other, some even addressed to research in the cultural field, such as the podcast section of H-Net.³⁰ The audiovisual platform – among the best known being YouTube and Vimeo – has the advantages of being specialized in publishing audiovisual content and being made of essentially well made social networks, both of which considerably increase the potential audience of the audiovisual tale.

Storytelling/Site

This category includes all the publications in which the audiovisual content is only one medium inside a complex and articulated historical narration that can also include text, images, three-dimensional reconstruction, timeline, and data. In this case, each of the four formats of contents listed above can easily find its place. Indeed, they all can find an optimal collocation, when and if the structure of the digital historical tale (*storytelling*) is well thought out. In the multimedia story of the *Viareggio massacre of 2009*, made by the newspaper *Il Tirreno* and the IIT-CNR center,³¹ there are galleries of images, video interviews, journalistic reports, written sources, timelines, and three-dimensional reconstructions, all bound by a well written text. The storytelling, trivially the art of telling stories, is a term that appeared in the United States in the first half of the nineties in direct relation to the digital turn and refers to

²⁹ Such as UniNettuno channel mentioned above, but also the podcast of Luigi Gaudio about History, derived from his lectures to students (<https://www.spreaker.com/show/storia-medievale/>), or other podcasts not supported by adequate funding.

³⁰ <https://networks.h-net.org/h-podcast>.

³¹ Donatella Francesconi, "Viareggio: La Strage Che Viene Da Lontano," *Il Tirreno*, 2014. <http://static.repubblica.it/iltirreno/viareggio-la-strage-che-viene-da-lontano/>.

an activity that “uses very different types of narration, from the oral story done by the singers up to the digital storytelling, which practices the virtual immersion in multi-sensory universes based on screenplays”.³²

This technique is applied in different ways, from the simple to the extremely sophisticated one, in the most various sectors; it is based on the awareness that stories have the power to construct and reconstruct reality, and consists in the diffusion of intentionally targeted and expertly elaborated narratives. This is a real twist toward the narrative realm, to the writing of history that, coinciding with the explosion of the internet and with the progress of new information and communication technologies, has become widespread far beyond the boundaries of research, touching politics, education, psychology, and marketing.

Because of this peculiarity, the historian who uses (or analyzes) this communicative meta-medium must be profoundly and critically aware of all its implications, in order to guarantee that the verifiability of the sources and methodological rigor are always clearly perceived by the user.

Conclusion

With this quick review of the different ways in which digital video and audio can be used to tell histories, I hope to clearly demonstrate that the spectrum of possibilities for audio-video use in projects of Digital History or Digital Public History is extremely wide and we cannot suggest precise solutions that would be doomed to grow old in a rapidly changing world. Some overarching recommendations include: in projects that include the collection of spontaneously recorded stories from the public, it would be of use to pay close attention to the metadata and at the same time the navigation of the site, so as to facilitate the discovery, the study, and the sharing. If you prefer the dissemination of your own interpretation of history, that it is for educational or entertainment purposes or following other instances, it would be of use to pay close attention to the format, especially for videos, and, in any case, to choose the podcast solution with the release of RSS feeds to encourage the loyalty of the public.

However, whatever solution is adopted, it is very clear that in today’s world, an inextricable mixture of material and digital, real and virtual, it is unthinkable to promote a Digital Public History project using only one or two mediums and excluding the audio and video dimension. A digital public historian must therefore not

³² The original in Italian: “fa uso di tipi di narrazione molto diversi, dal racconto orale come lo praticavano i cantastorie fino al digital storytelling, che pratica l’immersione virtuale in universi multisensoriali basati su sceneggiature” (Christian Salmon, *Storytelling. La fabbrica delle storie* (Fazi, 2008)).

necessarily become an expert in the management of these media, but rather know their limits, potentials, and formats to be able to use and to understand them in an appropriate manner that optimizes on their use.

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