Main Street? Creating a digital oral history of urban decline.

By Penny Johnston

Abstract

This paper describes a digital oral history map in the making. It focuses on a map of memories and stories of North and South Main Streets in Cork city, Ireland, once the main thoroughfares of a medieval city. But times have changes and the thriving commercial life of the city has now shifted elsewhere. Nevertheless, until recently North and South Main Streets sustained a busy cohort of small businesses and local shoppers. Over the past two decades, however, the streets have witnessed a marked decline; the footpaths are quiet, several buildings are not being maintained, remaining traders are struggling.

The Cork Folklore Project (an oral history archive based in Cork city) set out to record an audio tribute to these streets as they were in the past, and to talk to current residents, traders and planners about how they feel about the area, where policy could be improved and where it has gone wrong in the past. The result is a richly textured collection of stories about a very small part of Cork city. Excerpts from these stories have been used to create a digital oral history map, with embedded audio, video, photographs and texts.

This paper explores the processes involved in the creation of the digital map, asking how we can engage critically at all stages of the development of digital humanities projects such as these to ensure that the work is not merely utopian, but also has impact and outreach in the real world.

1. Introduction

North and South Main Streets are the historic main streets of medieval Cork city, in Ireland. The early city was built on small islands of land in the middle of the River Lee, and North and South Main Streets were the primary route way connecting the islands to the bridges over the River Lee (at Castle Street and at the North and South Gate Bridges). A network of small narrow lanes linked the main streets to the surrounding city wall (Hurley 2002, xxii). Many of these old laneways survive and North and South Main Street retain the legacy of the medieval city in their names and in their layout. However, despite their names, they are no longer the main streets of Cork city. Engineering developments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries meant that new roads could be built over small channels of the River Lee and this created wider new streets that form the commercial centre of Cork today.

Seen from this distant perspective, it could be said that North and South Main Streets have been in decline for two hundred years, but until relatively recently these were busy streets, full of small businesses and local shoppers, despite the fact that the main focus of city life had shifted elsewhere. However, over the past two decades the streets have witnessed a marked decline; the footpaths are quiet, several buildings are not being maintained and many remaining traders are struggling. Since the bustling commercial life of the streets is still well within living memory, Cork Folklore Project set out to create an audio testament to life in these streets. The aim of this oral history of North and South Main Streets was to gather an archive of memories, to demonstrate what the streets were like in the past, but also to record how things have changed today, and how residents and traders perceive these changes.

As a complement to the oral histories, this author has been developing a digital oral history map that facilitates the online dissemination of the oral histories. This digital oral history project includes excerpts from oral history interviews that record memory and anecdote, emphasise the historic importance of the streets in the past and allows local stake-holders to identify some of the problems that they perceive today, as well as to make suggestions about their visions for the future of the streets.

In collecting and disseminating these oral histories it has been impossible to ignore the sense that North and South Main Streets, while still retaining a strong sense of community in places, are struggling to come to terms with, and to combat, urban decline. This paper ponders whether digital oral history projects can go beyond simple representation of the streets today and in the past, to inspire and serve as a catalyst for positive change in the future.

2. Background to the project

The Cork Folklore Project is a public oral history archive that has been collecting oral histories of everyday life in Cork city since 1996. It has now collected an archive of over 550 interviews and collection is ongoing. The collection focuses on the voices of everyday life, ordinary people, and their experiences of life in Cork city. Outputs from the Cork Folklore Project include books, magazines, radio programmes, films and websites/digital resources, as well as the oral history archive itself, which is available for consultation by appointment (http://www.ucc.ie/en/cfp/about/).

Cork Folklore Project's archive of oral histories about North and South Main Streets were originally recorded as part of a collaborative documentation project initiated by Cork Civic Trust. This collection has been used by the author to create a new digital oral history map of Cork city, a pilot digital mapping project that was set up as a means of testing new software. The ultimate aim is that this pilot project is the first step towards building a replacement for the old Cork Memory Map (http://www.ucc.ie/research/memorymap/), one of Cork Folklore Project's earliest digital initiatives that is now in need of an upgrade.

3. Creating the Digital Oral History Map

Omeka (http://omeka.org/) and Neatline (http://neatline.org/) were the software chosen for the creation of the new digital oral history map. These are open source software projects created by the Roy Rosenzweig Centre for History and New Media at George Mason University and the Scholars' Lab at the University of Virginia Library, respectively. Omeka is a platform that allows users to display archival material in an online gallery. Neatline is an image-based plugin that was developed to work with Omeka. From the perspective of the Cork Folklore Project and bearing in mind that the aim is to create a new digital oral history map, Neatline had several attractive features. These included a clean interface, the ability to work with online maps, the ease with which we can add new audio, text and image content, and the fact that each new entry gets its own URL (which means that it is easy to share and promote new entries on social media).

Neatline was specifically built to allow humanities researchers to explore the "geo-temporal dimensions" of their datasets and it is designed for scholars who wish to display interpretative, subjective stories, the anti-thesis of big data visualisation (Nowviskie et al. 2013, 692). In addition, the creators of Neatline indicate that the tool is one that can and should be used to build arguments

as you use it, with the process of working with the digital tools seen as integral to the process of research and interpretation: "method is a path to argument" (Nowviskie et al. 2013, 693). This philosophy suits the kind of digital oral history map that the Cork Folklore Project would like to build in the future, since the digital project can be created while the collection of oral histories is still ongoing.

The pilot digital oral history map of North and South Main Streets (Figure 1) is based on an Open Street Maps backdrop (© OpenStreetMap contributors). A series of audio excerpts, photographs and transcripts of the audio (all taken from the Cork Folklore Project archive), are pinned to relevant points on the map. This allows the user to browse audio stories associated with life in North and South Main Streets, now and in the past. This, like its predecessor the Cork Memory Map, is designed to explore interweaving narratives and stories associated with the landscape and "culturescape" of Cork city (see O'Carroll 2011, 184). In this way, the project explores meaning-making, identity, cultural heritage and local place-making through memory and narrative.

Figure 1: Screenshot of the digital oral history map of North and South Main Streets 25 Nov 2015
http://pennyjohnston.org/exhibits/neatline/show/north-and-south-main-streets

4. Point and purpose: why do digital oral history in situations of urban decline?

This digital oral history project was initially set up to investigate past and contemporary culture as manifested in North and South Main Streets. A theme of waning fortunes (i.e. a widespread sense that the streets were going through a period of decline, and a concomitant sense of sadness) emerged spontaneously as interviews with various narrators were collected. Decline was a recurring theme in the excerpts that were used in the digital oral history map. This has led the author to question the point and the purpose of creating this (and similar) digital oral history projects: are they simply meant to record a way of life of a community that will soon be lost to the past? Or is there a more positive and proactive reason to carry out this kind of research? Areas that are in decline are

often going through particularly difficult times of transition, they are places that can be seen from different perspective:

> "…where some people see ruins, others see homes that are situated within the painful processes of transformation" (Mah 2012, 11).

Talking about this process, about the past and the present, can have therapeutic effects:

> "If place attachment is a symbolic bond between people and place, this bond is often severed at times of sudden social or economic upheaval. People then attempt to recreate these attachments by remembering and talking about places where they have lived and worked. Narration is central to this process." (High and Lewis 2007, 92).

Oral histories that "re-create" former places of work, commerce and residence aim not merely to preserving a record of the past, but also to provide something that is more than just simply about memory and memorialisation. For example, a project to "rebuild" a demolished paper mill in Ontario, Canada did not simply intend to act as a place of memory, but also to provide a project that would be a "a site of interpretation of place identity and attachment as well" (High and Sworn 2009).[1]

Similarly, the digital oral history map of Cork's Main Streets was intended partly as an exercise in preservation (capturing stories about the life and lives of the streets in the past and descriptions of the streets today) with the results becoming a resource for communities, educators and researchers of the future. But the project also sought to explore ideas about community in these streets *now*, and to elicit ideas about what could be done in the future. One respondent (a planner) suggested that the overwhelming feeling that came from the traders on the streets was one of powerlessness, an inability to see beyond the decline of today, an uncertainty about what can be done to fix this.[2] Narrating these problems to outsiders (Cork Folklore Project researchers) allows these important stakeholders not only to lament times past but to talk their way towards a vision of the future. Narrative creation that focuses exclusively on the past can sometimes be negative: Hoberman (2001, 17) sees the drive to create narratives of the past as a way of explaining the present, while warning that this can sometimes lead to "nostalgic utopianism," an inability to look forward and instead looking back to a better day. If this kind of "uncritical celebration" is translated into the outputs from an oral history project, this can sometimes be too reductive, and is a particular danger where "…manufacturing local pride constitutes a project goal…" (Hurley 2006, 20).

Since some of the motivation for creating this digital oral history map was connected to promoting the heritage of the medieval streets of Cork (and perhaps also inspiring local pride), it is important to subject the project to several levels of evaluation and critical analysis, to avoid the traps of "nostalgic

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[1] The digital project includes a site where you can explore plans of the buildings, see images and hear voices describing the work that was carried out there in the past (http://storytelling.concordia.ca/high/sturgeon_falls). Last accessed 29 August 2015. At the time of writing (November 2015) this site was not accessible. Additional information about this project at http://storytelling.concordia.ca/projects/sturgeon-falls-mill-closing-project.

[2] From the Cork Folklore Project oral history archive. Catalogue no. CFP_SR00543, Erin O'Brien, 03.02.15. Excerpt from the transcript: "I was talking to a few of the traders over the weekend and they are really struggling with the rates, rates and parking are the two key issues and there's lots of vacancy…A lot of them are feeling, I don't know, powerless I think would be the word…There's lots of dereliction; there are lots of vacant buildings that are old and going to need a lot of work to do up. What's next?"

utopianism" (Hoberman 2001, 17) and "uncritical celebration" (Hurley 2006, 20). The Cork Folklore Project has always striven towards reflexive and critical practice with issues such as this that emerge from the organisation's everyday practice, maintaining "a critical engagement with the question of who our communities of contributors and resource users might be, and how they might be meaningfully represented, served and/or challenged" (O'Carroll 2013, 23).

5. Evaluating: responses to the digital project

Extensive evaluation using a wide range of stakeholders may be one way to avoid a trap of "uncritical celebration". This could be seen as akin to an extended peer-review, where the opinions and feedback sought are not merely from academics but from a much wider range of stakeholders. In terms of digital cultural heritage projects this could be feedback from, for example, contributors, from interested members of the public, from educators, as well as from experts.

The digital oral history about North and South Main Streets, still in its formative stages, is currently undergoing a phase of evaluation. The author has, to date, conducted a series of user feedback sessions demonstrating the site at an early stage of development and asking for feedback on the interface, choices of software used, issues around content (in particular use of images) and generally asking for thoughts and for suggestions about how to improve it. These sessions were conducted with members of staff from Cork Folklore Project. In this iterative stage of the project design, draft versions of the site were shown to staff members and they were asked to comment on what they saw. Participants were encouraged to make both positive and negative contributions, and asked for suggestions about what should be changed for the future. The sessions were usually carried out with two staff members, and with the author prompting by asking opinions on various aspects of the project (such as, "How will I deal with the bad language in this clip?" or "Do you think this feature highlighting themes works?"). All these sessions were recorded. Once a consensus was reached with staff members, the author made changes based on this feedback.

The initial responses by staff members were very positive, with almost all respondents commenting on how clear/clean the interface looked:

> *"...it works, and has a nice simple interface and it's quite clear" (MS)*

> *"I think it's very clear" (AB)*

> *"I mean, overall, it's a brilliant set up. You know, it's clear and... I love the map itself, it's really colourful" (SD)*

> *"It's really very good" (LMOS)*

The simplicity was also widely appreciated, in particular for staff who are nervous about using technology:

> *"Well I mean if I can play with it then basically a monkey can play with it because I'm not very good with...even, I don't use Facebook, I don't know how to get on it. It has to be that straightforward and simple for me to actually play with things." (TW)*

This positive impression was partly a contrast to the older Cork Folklore Project digital initiative, the Cork Memory Map (this has not been redesigned since 2011 and it is beset with technological problems):

> *"It's really, really so much better than our old Memory Map" (DC)*

> *"It's much cleaner and there's more ways to interact with it, and it's less glitchy, yeah." (MS)*

> *"You know what straight away, this is so much simpler than the Memory Map. You know, it's much clearer. If you could get the Memory Map into this exact same style that would be brilliant." (SD)*

The enthusiasm for the new interface and the somewhat unfavourable contrast with the old Cork Memory Map is only to be expected since interface *fashions* can change very quickly. The increasing frequency of mobile browsing has led to a widespread preference for simple, clean interfaces (ones that can be read on desktop/laptop monitors and on mobile devices).

Some staff also noted that creating a digital project in this way gave them a new perspective on the oral history material, even when they were very familiar with the interviews and the excerpts:

> *"Straight off though my general sense is that I really like it, it's, like both of us have done a good number of the interviews that are here….and, seeing it this way I'm going, 'God there's loads of really good stuff there,' so it's obviously bringing out good stuff about the material cos it's striking me even though I'm already familiar with it, so that seems like a strength." (MS)*

> *"And it's such a different way of accessing it, like, d'you know like when I was reading the excerpts this morning it was very much like in a book, which is nice as well but this just gives it a whole different perspective." (DC)*

All of these responses are very positive, but the project is still in its formative stages. It is now (December 2015) ready for the next stage of feedback, which will be a focus group, in which staff members, after browsing the new project in private, will come together to discuss their thoughts on the site, the material, and the way that it is presented. After this focus group (and once any additions and changes are made to the site based on the responses) the next stage is to show the site to the people who contributed to the oral history archive for this project, and to take their thoughts, concerns and suggestions into account before soliciting feedback from an online audience.

6. Future directions

Ultimately, the evaluation process that this project is subjected to will facilitate an assessment of how people see the benefits of digital cultural heritage work such as this (and digital oral history in particular). Such feedback may help address questions around whether this kind of work has wider benefits, going beyond simply preserving a record of times and places past (and passing). While Hoberman (2001, 18–20) warns that when nostalgia begins to take on a collective or communal function it can stop people from looking forward, he also notes that it can serve a positive function:

> *"…if departed glories – even if they never fully existed in the first place in any context other than talk – can be linked to the conditions of contemporary life, their memory can serve as a catalyst for a meaningful discourse…"* (Hoberman 2001, 39).

In effect, Hoberman argues that memories of past glories can be both negative and positive; in the negative they can serve to stop people looking forward, in the positive they can serve as a "powerful

imaginative construct" (Hoberman 2001, 39) that allows people to understand and to begin to change their present for the better.

It is perhaps for this reason that oral history has been discussed as a useful methodology that could become part of the planners' toolkit when tackling issues of regeneration and neighbourhood planning. Thomas (2004, 55) emphasises oral history as a tool for gathering information from and about people on the margins, and suggests that it can be "an extraordinary tool for empowerment". In addition, unearthing stories of not just how people have lived in the past, but in how they have struggled to keep their neighbourhood alive, often have motivating potential for future actions:

> "Stories of battle and triumph from the inner city – stories from people struggling to revive neighbourhoods abandoned by everyone else – allows us to analyse and to better understand as well as to more effectively plan for the future. Not incidentally, they also help us to admire the power of the human spirit" (Thomas 2004, 66).

This suggests that oral history and digital humanities projects about the past do not necessarily only provide a record of the past, they also serve as a way for people and communities to narrate their past(s) and to see a way towards negotiating a future. This could be the "emancipatory potential" of this kind of research and practice, something that "can be of socially redeeming value in ways that go beyond celebration" (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1988, 142). The hope is that this kind of work can offer a place or a community a "powerful imaginative construct" (Hoberman 2001, 39) through which people can begin to understand, and perhaps to change, their lives, situations, communities and localities for the better. North and South Main Streets are fascinating places with a central role in the heritage and the history of Cork city; in the long run the hope is that this digital oral history map and the oral history archive about the streets can contribute towards a positive imagining of the future for the medieval main streets of Cork.

Acknowledgements

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Author information

Name: Penny Johnston

Institution: Béaloideas/Department of Folklore and Ethnology, University College Cork

Email: ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

City/Country: Cork, Ireland