

Descriptive Practices on a Human Scale: Lessons from the StoryCorps Archive

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Abstract:

Since 2003, StoryCorps has built a collection of born-digital audio conversations recorded with thousands of participants in hundreds of locations across the country. Each recording is conducted by a trained facilitator and every interview record contains extensive descriptive information. The role of StoryCorps' archive department is twofold: to train facilitators to record and catalog the interviews they conduct and to create and enforce rigorous standards for the description and preservation of interview materials, including interview information, audio and photographic assets, and paperwork. The StoryCorps collection currently contains over 70,000 interviews recorded using the traditional StoryCorps model and over 150,000 interviews recorded using the StoryCorps App, which launched in 2015.

StoryCorps' mission emphasizes preserving and sharing "humanity's stories." As a result, we have continuously had to adapt to keep up with a changing digital landscape, the challenges of a rapidly-growing collection forged from multiple content streams, and the ethical considerations inherent in making StoryCorps interviews accessible to a broader public.

This paper will discuss three areas where StoryCorps has made significant changes to existing policies and procedures in an effort to maintain a balance between consideration of data collection at scale and the needs and concerns of the human participants whose stories make up our archive. These areas of focus include the following: data infrastructure; descriptive practices; and ethical guidelines for collection and use.

As more institutions expand efforts to collect or digitize materials comprised of human voices and/or contemporary stories, this paper will present StoryCorps as a potential use case in the development of a shared paradigm for ethical, sustainable and scaleable practices.

About the Author:

Virginia Millington is the Recording & Archive Director at StoryCorps, an organization 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.