

**Association for Recorded Sound Collections (ARSC) &
International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA)
Joint Annual Conference
WHY COLLECT? THE PURPOSE OF AUDIO-VISUAL ARCHIVES
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**CPDOC's experience:
personal archives and oral history in Brazilian contemporary history**

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This is my first time in an IASA (or ARSC) conference, although the institution which I am representing, the Research and Documentation Center for Brazilian Contemporary History named CPDOC (www.cpdoc.fgv.br), situated in Rio de Janeiro, has been a IASA member since 1997. My intention here is to learn from you and to share with you my experience and my doubts (which are not few).

The technical possibilities and limits in archiving sound and images are not a field where I feel comfortable, since my studies have been taken on the Humanities (precisely on history, anthropology and literary theory), and not on sound engineering, computing or something similar. Perhaps this dilemma is not so rare among us: historians, social scientists, folclorists have to be, nowadays, more than ever updated in technical issues in order to preserve years of work in collecting documents. Since I think we are learning from each other, I would like to bring to discussion here a particular case of audiovisual archive in Brazilian contemporary history.

CPDOC, the research and documentation center in Brazilian history where I work, was founded in 1973. Its objectives were to preserve and to provide access to private documents concerning our contemporary history (we have nowadays more than 170 personal archives of public men, with almost two million documents) and to develop historical researches. Two years later, in 1975, the center began to record the first oral history interviews of its archive – which were among the first interviews conducted in Brazil that followed this methodology.

Remembering the main question of this conference, you can ask: in this case, Why collect? Why have we been collecting interviews about Brazilian contemporary history? At the beginning, the idea was to know more about the trajectory and the performance of Brazilian elites in the 20th century. In 1975 we were in the middle of a military dictatorship that had begun approximately 10 years before, in 1964, and remained until 1985. In that context, to interview members of the political and intellectual elite was seen as a way to understand the building of Brazilian state, and also the emergence of that dictatorship. The interviewees were civilian and military that had had relevant roles since the 20's and 30's, when there was an important shift in Brazilian social and political organization. With the

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interviews one searched to know more about their life trajectories, including family background, studies, socialization, relationships among groups, political and intellectual influences, conflicts and ways of conceiving the world and the country. Long life history interviews were, therefore, the most appropriate. This line of work has been conducted until the present time and today the CPDOC-FGV Oral History Program has the most important collection of interviews with Brazilian politicians, intellectuals, technocrats, military and diplomats, among others, not only with those who have had formal posts in the state but also with those who, outside the state, collaborated with it or were in opposition to it.

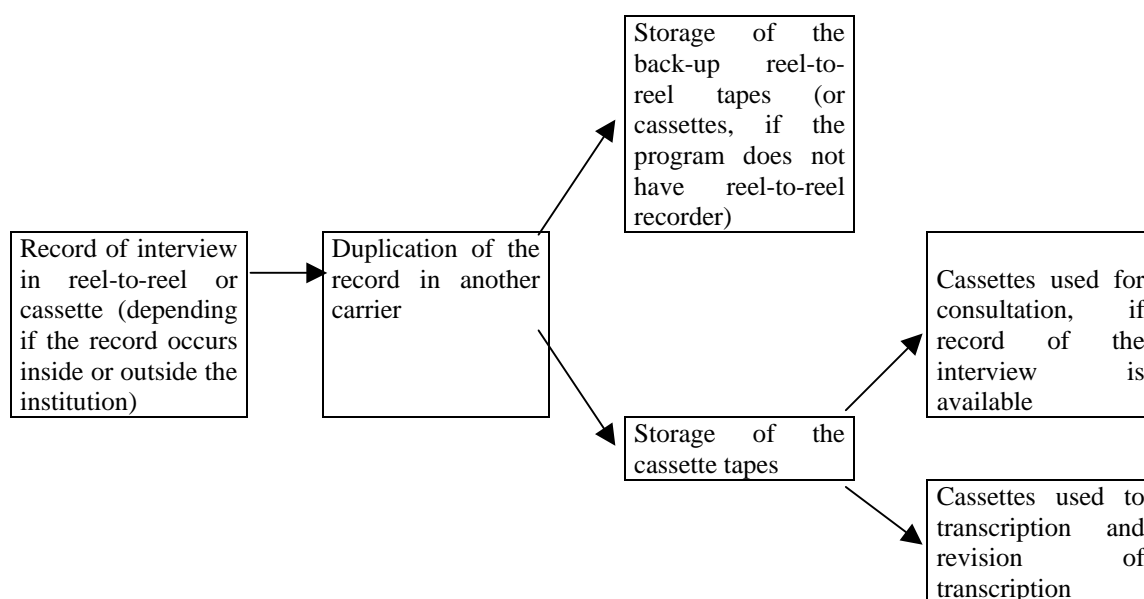
Besides the long life history interviews (and we have some of them really very long – the longest has approximately 90 hours!), several projects developed by CPDOC on specific events, circumstances or conjunctures of Brazilian contemporary history have been employing oral history methodology. As a result, we have several sets of interviews related to specific themes, like, for instance, histories of institutions or periods of government. The interviews in those cases are shorter – generally taken on one or two meetings from about two hours each – and we call them “thematic interviews” since they are mainly concerned with the involvement of the interviewee in the researched subject.

The whole CPDOC-FGV Oral History Program has today more than 4,000 recorded hours, corresponding to approximately 800 interviews, half of which are available for consultation. Besides these oral sources, CPDOC also preserves audio and audiovisual documents which are included in the personal archives – such as videos, films, discs and cassettes, with discourses, songs, documentaries, and radio and TV interviews.

What about the technical stand of these audio and audiovisual documents? In 1975, when the Oral History Program was founded, CPDOC was certainly up-to-date in regard to oral history methodology and technique, thanks to a course on the subject, given by North-American and Mexican specialists, with the support of Ford Foundation. The interviews were recorded on reel-to-reel (when done in the institution) and cassette (when done outside the institution) recorders. Each interview had two copies (one on reel-to-reel tapes, the other on cassette), which were stored in different places. Twice a year the magnetic tapes were fastforwarded in order to avoid adherences or other damages. In the 80’s, when oral history became better known, people from all over the country came to CPDOC to learn about the method and our researchers were invited to give courses in universities and institutions in different regions. The quest for information was so extended that we decided to publish a handbook on oral history – like many others that had been published in some countries, mainly in the USA.

It was around this period that I became a researcher at the CPDOC-FGV Oral History Program, precisely in 1985, when the program already had 10 years. With a graduation in History and a master degree in Anthropology, I could easily converge my interests to the interdisciplinary field of oral history. Having learned from the experience of my colleagues and from the practice itself, it fell to me to write the handbook on oral history, published in 1990. The book had a whole item concerning equipment and how to proceed with the recorded tapes. Of course there was no matter of digital carriers, nor were word-processors used to transcribe the interviews – everything was done on typewriters. However, we had no doubt that we were still up-to-date concerning the technique. It is amazing how things have been changing in the last 10 years!

To show the readers how to proceed with recorded tapes, the handbook included a diagram:



This is basically the way we are working with our oral history collection until today.

In the 90's a real boom of oral history occurred in Brazil. In 1994, at a national conference held in CPDOC, the Brazilian Oral History Association was founded. Its first president, Marieta de Moraes Ferreira, is now president of the International Oral History Association, founded in 1996 in Sweden, and CPDOC's director. The 250 participants from the 1994' meeting came from all the regions of the country, and for many of them oral history was a novelty, a very interesting methodology, which seemed to have no limits to be applied. Indeed, oral history has a wide appeal, due to the possibility to do a "living history". But in some cases, not really rare, the researchers risk to stand fascinated in the face of that possibility and do not care about the technical preservation of their oral sources. As a result, the cassettes are frequently lost or forgotten in drawers, inaccessible to other researchers. Most of the people who come to us to learn from our practice gasp at the complexity that is implied in the maintenance of an oral history program.

From the end of the 80's until now, other Brazilian institutions have developed solid programs, and we have been able to share our doubts and experiences. The Brazilian Oral History Association is now in its fourth administration and has organized other three national meetings. Since our country is as big as a continent, there are five regional boards in the Association, which also organize regional meetings. In November we will have the 4th Meeting from the South-East Region, in Rio de Janeiro, with around 120 papers to be presented. This actual hit of oral history in Brazil is certainly responsible for the wide participation of Brazilian researchers in the international meetings, specially since 1996.

Coordinator of CPDOC-FGV Oral History Program since 1996 – with an interruption from March 1998 to April 1999 –, I am in charge of preserving the entire collection as well as of making it available for consultation. In 1996 I began to study the technical alternatives to the magnetic tapes. Until then, the reel-to-reel tapes were considered safe enough as back-up copies of our collection, but since we could not find anymore reel-to-reel recorders on the market, we were too much dependent on the good operation of our own recorders. So, even handling the carriers with the necessary care (controlling temperature and humidity on their storage), we had to consider that it could become impossible to play them. At that time, I got in contact with the IASA and other institutions and I began to correspond with specialists. I

was looking for definite responses to the question: “To what carrier shall we transfer our collection in order to preserve it as long as possible?” And I have to admit that I am still searching the answer! – That’s why I am here, after all.

Some institutions in Brazil are already using digital technologies to record and preserve oral history interviews – mostly on CD-R and R-DAT. I was told by some specialists, such as Dietrich Schüller, that since our magnetic tapes are adequately stored and in a good standard, it would be better to wait until we can use digital mass storage systems, which will permit us to avoid the use of carriers as discs and tapes. I have also read about these mass storage systems in some papers and reports by Albrecht Haefner, Alan Ward and Stefan Hoffmann, among others.

In Brazil, CPDOC is still a reference center for other institutions – not only in oral history, but also in the study of Brazilian contemporary history and in the organization of personal archives. But today, when people ask us what the best technology to record and preserve interviews is, we have to say that we don’t know either. The best we can do is to share with them the references to texts, web sites and institutions which are discussing the technical alternatives.

I would like to finish by summarizing the main doubts we have concerning our audio and audiovisual archive:

a) Digitalization of the whole archive for its preservation - What will be the best (or the less worse) technology?

We have, at the moment:

- Audio - ca. 4,400 hours in reel-to-reel and cassette tapes;
- Video - ca. 60 hours in VHS or Betacam format collection,

Content of the archive:

- ca. 90% are oral history interviews
- ca. 10% are audio and audiovisual documents from our personal archives

b) Digitalization of parts of the archive for its divulgation. – What will be the best formats (audio and video) to divulgate edited parts of our interviews per Internet, CD-Roms or CDs, or...?

c) Digital records of new interviews. – What will be the best (or less worse) technology for recording interviews at the institution and outside it (in the house or office of the interviewee)?

The oral history handbook from CPDOC has sold out for more than 5 years and is one of the most requested book in our library. Since people cannot buy it, copies are made and sent to all the regions in Brazil. We strongly need to publish a new edition, but the chapter on record equipments and technical procedures has to be entirely revised. As in other institutions, regions and countries, we can say that there is a great demand for some degree of certainty in a world where one of the few things we can be sure of is that changes will not stop.