# Collaborative best practices[1]

## An Italian *Vademecum* on the conservation, the description, the use and the re-use of oral sources

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This paper describes the process of a two-year collaborative enterprise, aiming at offering both the Italian scientific communities and non-academic stakeholders a *Vademecum* dealing with the conservation, the description, the use and the re-use of oral sources. For the very first time, very different subjects worked together in order to solve long-standing structural problems related to oral sources through the dissemination of good practices, shared knowledge and cross-disciplinary approach to production, management, access and preservation of audio material produced within research projects.

*Cet article décrit le déroulement d'un projet collaboratif, qui a duré deux ans. Il visait à offrir aux communautés scientifiques italiennes ainsi qu'aux partenaires non académiques un vade-mecum traitant de la conservation, de la description, de l'utilisation et de la réutilisation des sources orales. Pour la toute première fois, des acteurs très différents ont travaillé ensemble afin de trouver des solutions à des problèmes structurels récurrents liés aux sources orales par la diffusion de bonnes pratiques, le partage des connaissances et une approche interdisciplinaire de la production, de la gestion, de l'accès et de la préservation du matériel audio produit dans le cadre de projets de recherche.*

### The thorny fragility of oral sources

Oral sources appear to be fragile objects, mainly if compared to other kind of historical sources (such as artifacts, written documents). Firstly, there is a 'definition fragility': the lexical forms 'oral source', 'audio(visual) records', 'audio(visual) archive' and 'oral archive' are labels used in an extensive and sometimes conflicting way, since 'oral source' is often referred to (and as synonym of) 'audiovisual document' and 'recording'. Additionally, an 'oral source' might be represented also by documents that are not recordings. At the same time, an 'audiovisual archive' may not refer or deal with oral sources: it can deal with movies, published music, theatre, performing arts. Conversely, an 'oral archive' may not be organized to collect and describe 'oral sources': it can be a collection of voice recordings not related to a research project aimed to produce 'oral sources'. Such semantic ambiguity has to be considered if we want to use this label with a reliable capability of identification. This capability is related to the material form of the document (diplomatica), which is not always in a one-to-one relationship with the content, or the so called 'informative unit' (Mulè 2003; Calamai *et al.* 2014; Stamuli 2020). Indeed, the 'definition fragility' can be linked to the 'material fragility': oral sources are often carried and stored in frail and obsolescent objects, that need very special preserving condition in order to be 'readable' and physically accessible.

Another aspect of such 'material fragility' is due to the perception of these objects as 'internal' and 'private' documents related to a specific stage of the research process: once transcriptions were published, the carriers were often reused and the audiovisual documents cancelled. Nowadays, this attitude is changing because a greater sensitivity to oral sources as historical documents is spreading among researchers and the general public. In this direction, huge efforts are made to 'order' and 'describe' audiovisual documents, although with uneven results: different fields of knowledge used rather different vocabulary and different approach in describing and cataloguing audiovisual documents, thus

entailing a 'description fragility' of oral sources that need to be figured out in order to make these sources fully accessible. Finally, the need to access and use oral sources reveal their 'legal fragility': changes in the privacy and copyright laws make these documents less easily stored and re-used if not combined with explicit permissions from the participants to the recordings.

## A 40-year history

The debate about archiving, describing, and re-using oral sources involved the Italian scientific community from the moment in which the voice recordings began to be practiced, but it started to be formalized in the 1980s. The bulletin "Fonti orali. Studi e ricerche" (1981-1988)—founded and directed by Luisa Passerini and then by Daniele Jalla—had a section dedicated to archives. In 1993, Giovanni Contini and Alfredo Martini wrote the first handbook dedicated to oral history in Italy and concluded it with a chapter about the conservation and consultation of oral sources (Contini and Martini 1993). In the volume, they identified a twofold responsibility: the first one refers to the researcher, who is the first archivist of the sources he/she produced; the second one refers to public institutions, who have the obligation to recognize oral sources as historical documents and intangible cultural heritage. In the early 1990s, several seminars about sound archives took place and there was a first national census of the institutes responsible for the conservation of oral sources, promoted by the Ufficio Centrale per i Beni Archivistici and the Institutes for the History of the Resistance (Barrera, Martini, Mulè 1993; Archivi sonori 1999).

Since then, however, the debate about oral source appeared to be in a decreasing phase, at the very moment when the era of the witness (Wieviorka 1998) broke out and the collections of interviews intensified, promoted by institutional and non-institutional subjects. In the last two decades, the awareness of the precariousness of magnetic tape recordings has also grown, and now there is an urgent need to safeguard the sound documents produced in the recent past, that is, what Cesare Bermani called "a forest of works with oral sources carried out in our country from the seventies onwards" (Bermani 1999: 62). The advent of digital recording and memory technologies has offered a possible solution, i.e. the migration of documents from analogical sources to digital media, but at the same time several unsolved questions related to the conservation, protection and possible re-use of sound archives arose and many research communities, institutions, and single researchers are expecting competent responses to their worries.

It is widely known that the interviews carried out widely between the 1970s and the 1990s lie in precarious conditions, often in the houses of individual researchers or in the offices of small-scale associations. Furthermore, the recordings were usually made on magnetic tapes, such as audio and video tapes, which today are considered the most exposed to deterioration, so much so that UNESCO recommended their rapid digitization (see IFAP Magnetic Tape Alert Project: https://en.unesco.org/news/magnetic-tape-alert-project-supported-ifap). At the same time, there are researchers who have collected interviews in digital format, from the 2000s onwards, and who are not in the position of preserving their audio materials in the long term, nor they know how to ensure searchability, interoperability, and re-use for a wider community of scholars and general users.

Given this general framework, we identify at least two main problems for which solutions will need to be found. The first one refers to the difficulty researchers have in separating themselves from their interviews, since such interviews are the result of a personal relationship and a trust pact between the interviewee and the interviewer. Moreover, oral history interviews often show a common political militancy and activism shared by the interviewee and interviewer. For all these reasons oral interviews must be handled with extreme accuracy and a sense of responsibility. The second issue refers to the lack of recognized centres able to accept, store and handle the interviews and all the so called 'accompanying materials' in safety, and to guarantee both their conservation and access in the most appropriate way.

With regard to the first point, it refers quintessentially to a deontological approach: the main task is borne by the scientific communities that must work to raise awareness among their members. The second issue appears to be much more complicated. At present, a national collection centre or a coordinated and consolidated network of repositories of the oral sources produced so far is missing in Italy. There are, of course, prestigious institutions, public and private, which guarantee selective conservation of particular collections of sound documents, such as the former Discoteca di Stato (now Istituto Centrale per i Beni Sonori e Audiovisivi – ICBSA), the Ernesto de Martino Institute (IEDM), the Central Institute of Archives (ICAR) and the National Central Library of Rome (BNCR). And there are also several conservation centres at a regional or a local level, such as the Lombardy Region Ethnography and Social History Archive (AESS), the Trentino Historical Museum (AST) and the Provincial Archive for Oral Tradition (APTO) at the Museum of the Uses and Customs of the Trentino People (MUCGT), the Archivio Vi.Vo project (Siena University, SABTOS, ILC-CNR, CLARIN-IT),

the Gianni Bosio Circle in Rome or some institutes for the history of the Resistance. However, the aforementioned centres show an irregular distribution on the national territory and do not act in a coordinated way by applying shared standards of preservation, description and access to sources. Moreover, they do not make 'critical mass' in such a way as to favour the spontaneous aggregation—we could say by gravitational force—of the many collections scattered throughout the territory. Finally, they are not able to bring in the necessary resources to give impetus to a national campaign to save oral documents at risk of consumption.

To attempt to solve these long-standing structural problems, some actions have recently been taken, in agreement with different appropriate associations and with the institutions in charge of conservation. In 2015, the Italian Association of Oral History (AISO) organized a conference (Buone pratiche di storia orale. Questioni etiche, deontologiche, giuridiche, Trento November 2015; this event was described in Bonomo, Casellato and Garruccio 2016, and in Casellato 2021) to present the document Good practices for oral history,[2] in which the issue of the conservation of sources was discussed and made the topic of a round table. The document, in fact, contains a paragraph specifically dedicated to the conservation of oral sources. It assumes that the production of an interview is not only a means of reaching the research objectives of a single scholar, but it has a value in itself, which empowers the researcher to keep it, in respect of the following subjects: the person who made her/his testimony, the social groups that participated in the research, the scientific community and scholars who may have access in the future to a source that is "unique and unrepeatable". Furthermore, the document recognizes that oral sources are part of a constellation of documents, the result of the entire research, which also includes accompanying materials that are fundamental for the correct understanding of the interviews themselves and that consequently must be preserved in a unitary way. Finally, the Good practices also suggest how to deal with interviews recorded in the past, that is, before the Italian privacy legislation entered into force. The AISO document arrives at the threshold of the archive, establishing that a handover takes place between the researcher and the conservation institute, that is, a transfer from the first to the second, together with the oral sources, also of the "duty to respect the limits on use and publication of the interview" established together with the person interviewed.

The round table involved scholars of different disciplines and representatives of some conservation institutes. In addition, it served to bring out the many knots that should have been faced, and it also made it possible to establish a first relationship between the Italian Association

**2**  https://www.aisoitalia.org/buone-pratiche/.

of Oral History (AISO) and the Italian Association of Speech Sciences (AISV), represented there by Silvia Calamai. Calamai, together with Pier Marco Bertinetto, directed the Grammo-foni project (Gra.fo) aimed at making a census, digitizing, cataloguing and transcribing sound material collected since the 1960s by scholars and amateurs of dialects and popular traditions in the area of Tuscany region (Calamai, Bertinetto 2014). In this capacity, they had established a solid collaboration with the Soprintendenza archivistica e bibliografica of Tuscany, represented first by Giovanni Contini and then by Maria Francesca Stamuli.

The partnership between AISV, AISO and Soprintendenza of Tuscany continued until a round table coordinated by Silvia Calamai on the topic Sound archives at the crossroads of phonetic sciences, humanities computing and digital heritage started another, demanding path (15th National congress of AISV, Arezzo, February 2019). The participants at the round table came from very different research fields and had very different roles, both at universities, research centres and national institutes and were as follows (in alphabetic order): Simonetta Buttò (Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo Unico delle biblioteche italiane e per le informazioni bibliografiche – ICCU), Alessandro Casellato (Associazione Italiana di Storia Orale), Laura Gavioli (national coordinator of AIM Centro Interuniversitario di Analisi dell'Interazione e della Mediazione – AIM), Barbara Gili Fivela (Associazione Italiana di Scienze della Voce), Sabina Magrini (Istituto Centrale per i Beni Sonori ed Audiovisivi), Piero Cavallari (Istituto Centrale per i Beni Sonori ed Audiovisivi), Monica Monachini (national coordinator of CLARIN-IT). Also a representative of PMI was invited (Maria Palmerini, Cedat85), in order to offer the point of view of an entreprise dealing with tools and technologies on automatic speech recognition. A detailed account of the event can be read in the Introduction at the volume edited by Piccardi, Ardolino, Calamai (2020).

On the impetus of AISV, AISO and the Soprintendenza of Tuscany, a national working table was set up aimed at defining a Vademecum on the conservation, description, use and re-use of oral sources. The group also consists of representatives of the main agencies of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities dealing with descriptive practices and standardization of document processing (Istituto Centrale per i Beni Sonori e Audiovisivi – ICBSA, Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo Unico – ICCU, Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione – ICCD, Istituto Centrale per gli Archivi – ICAR), together with representatives of the team headed by the National Institute Ferruccio Parri, of the Soprintendenza archivistica of Piedmont, of the CLARIN network and of the Computational Sonology Centre of the University of Padua.

The purpose of the 'table' is to make available to individual researchers and research groups some clear and essential indications on how to guarantee the conservation of oral sources, their correct archival description, and finally their use and re-use. In addition to the Vademecum, there should also be a list of specialized centres able to ensure correct digitization of sound documents and a national register of conservation centres available and equipped to accommodate archives of oral sources resulting from previous research. The process of collaborative writing is described in the following section.

### Towards the development of the Vademecum

In order to find an open and constructive procedure with respect to the writing process we decided to set up three different working groups, and each of them was guided by one of the initiators of the project (S. Calamai, A. Casellato, M.F. Stamuli). Each group was therefore supposed to produce a first draft of the guide according to the topic which will be described in the following lines. The first one-day official meeting took place on 20.05.2019 in Florence, in the premises of Soprintendenza Archivistica e Bibliografica della Toscana.

**Participants who contributed to the first workshop for the drafting of the vademecum on oral sources in Italy[3]**

The participants were the following:

AISO – Associazione Italiana di Storia Orale (Alessandro Casellato, Giovanni Contini)

AISV – Associazione Italiana di Scienze della Voce (Silvia Calamai, Duccio Piccardi)

ICAR – Istituto Centrale per gli Archivi (Stefano Vitali)

ICBSA – Istituto centrale per i beni sonori ed audiovisivi (Sabrina Magrini, Piero Cavallari)

ICCU – Istituto centrale per il catalogo unico delle biblioteche italiane e per le informazioni bibliografiche (Carla Scognamiglio)

ICCD – Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione, MiBAC (Roberta Tucci, Elena Musumeci)

Soprintendenza Archivistica e Bibliografica della Toscana (Maria Francesca Stamuli)

Soprintendenza Archivistica e Bibliografica del Piemonte e della Val d'Aosta (Diego Robotti)

CLARIN-IT (Monica Monachini, Silvia Calamai)

Sound and Music Computing Group Dip. di Ingegneria dell'Informazione Padova (Sergio Canazza, Antonio Rodà, Alessandro Russo, Niccolò Pretto)

ISTORETO Istituto piemontese per la storia della Resistenza e della società contemporanea – Istituto Ferruccio Parri (Elisa Salvalaggio)

ISEC Istituto per la Storia per l'Età Contemporanea– Istituto Ferruccio Parri (Sara Zanisi)

On that occasion it was firstly emphasized that research on oral archives appears to be conditioned by the field of knowledge of the researcher, while it should be addressed also on a problem-based approach, in order to innovatively challenge disciplinary boundaries. Secondly, a particular attention was devoted to the audience of the forthcoming Vademecum: not only scholarly communities and scientific societies but also individual researchers, small research bodies and cultural institutes.

We also presented the scope and the aims of such initiative and offered working definitions of 'oral source', 'oral archive', 'document', 'archive', 'collection', in order to lay the foundation for a shared vocabulary. Also addressing these non-obvious core terminological and semantic issues became a key part of the enterprise. The research questions raised in the first part of the meeting might be summarized as follows:

1. How and where should oral documents be preserved?
2. What are the best standards for long-term preservation, curation, and cataloguing?
3. How can oral archives be accessible and re-usable in the light of copyright, ownership, and privacy issues?

Following the different levels of fragility discussed at the beginning of the paper, we also presented a working plan, asked all the people to present their activities and their expectations for the initiative, and finally asked them to choose one of the three following working tables:

1. Conservation (physical formats, instruments, digitization technologies, digital platforms, repositories, data centres, conservation copy and access copy, metadata standards, software)
2. Description (metadata standards and models, granularity of the description, software)
3. Use and re-use (usability and access; privacy, ownership and copyright, GDPR, consent forms, transfer of rights)

The encounter was full of meaning and put on the agenda much-debated issues. Crucially, for the very first time, very different but equally relevant stakeholders worked together with a joint aim, that is, to offer clear workflows, shared knowledge and guidelines for people working for a variety of purposes with oral archives. The model we had in mind was the volume edited by Ginouvès and Gras in 2018: it represented a seminal example of a cross-disciplinary dialogue among different fields of knowledge and areas of expertise. At the same time, we aimed at

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Università Ca' Fcoscari
Venezia), Giovanni
Contini (Associazione
italiana di storia orale),
Luciano D'Aleo (Istituto
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Stamuli (Soprintendenza),
Roberta Tucci (Istituto
Centrale per il Catalogo e la
Documentazione).

producing a more practical guide, in order to offer answers and tools for people working with oral archives (in the way ELAR did[4]). Each discussion table was organized on the basis of the workflow adopted to offer services and solutions for the oral sources management by every participant to the *Vademecum* Group.

Each working group organised both meeting in presence and online.

The Preservation working group met first time in Padova in July 2019.[5] The proposals it produced were as follows:

1. Promotion of the correct preservation of oral/sound documents on analogue carriers adopting a conservative restoration, identification of a suitable environment for every single type of carrier, identification codes for each carrier and reference tables for the digital copies, a philological procedure of digitization;
2. preservation of the context of the documents: the oral/sound record must be preserved together with the documentation that the producer created during his research;
3. digitization of analogue oral/sound documents in specialized centres, in order to track the digitization workflow and to produce reliable conservative copies;
4. creation of a register of specialized digitization centres;
5. creation of a register of specialized conservation centres of both analogue and digitized copies. These centres would be able to store not only 'certified' copies, but also digital documents produced by every single researcher.

The Production and Description working group met first time in Florence in September 2019.[6] The group identified the oral source in a group of documents and information related to the recording of an event. All the documents together with all the information have to be 'packed' together through a document named "fieldwork sheet" or, when recorded, "announcement" (this label refers to the special segment of recording in which general information and consent are given). The "fieldwork sheet" refers to the minimum contextual dataset, to the list of produced documents, to all the technical data about their production, together with administrative and legal information (informed consent, information about the presence of sensitive data, notes about copyright, etc.). To facilitate these operations, the group has developed two small guides: i) a "file naming guide", with the aim to help the researcher to better organize the documentation as soon as it is produced; ii) a list of

standard formats referring to the different types of digital documents produced: in case of audio files, a .wav file codified in PCM to 96 kHz and 24bit; in case of video files, a H264 .mp4 file; in case of images, a .raw files set on the maximum resolution offered by the camera. In this respect, the "announcement" document aims at offering a model embedding a set of metadata in the recordings, mainly the "fieldwork sheet" data plus the informed consent.

The Use and Re-Use group met for the first time in January 2020 in Arezzo, facing the frequent asked questions related to the 'legal fragility'. In the following section the work carried out by the working table on use and re-use will be described in depth.

Since 2019 two public events were held. A pre-definite version of the Vademecum was presented online (the event was organised by the Istituto Centrale dei Beni sonori e Audiovisivi, Rome) on the International UNESCO Day of Audiovisual archives (27.10.2021). Public and private organisations, fundations, scientific associations, single scholars were therefore invited to participate in the public review process (until 15.01.2021). After that, several interventions were made on the text, taking into account suggestions and criticism. The final version of the Vademecum was presented in Rome, Italian Ministry of Culture on the International UNESCO Day of Audiovisual archives (27.10.2021). A detailed account of the event can be read (in Italian) at http://www.ilmondodegliarchivi.org/rubriche/in-italia/916-al-mic-la-presentazione-ufficiale-del-vademecum-per-il-trattamento-delle-fonti-orali. The full text can be accessed via https://www.aisv.it/, as well as on the websites of all the institutions involved.

## Legal fragility

Several authors, both from universities and State institutions,[7] produced a draft of the best practices dealing with the use and re-use of oral archives through a collaborative writing process that takes place both on- and off-line. The text, produced in the first part of 2020, aimed at offering guidelines dealing with ethical and legal issues occurring at three different points in the research process:

i.   Before fieldwork: how to properly collect oral sources;
ii.  After fieldwork: how to preserve and to whom to entrust oral sources;
iii. After fieldwork: how to promote the oral sources one has collected and how to promote and re-use oral sources collected by other researchers.

The document was divided into four sections. In the introductory section, the relevant Italian and European legislation was discussed. The ethical and legal group working under the umbrella of the European research infrastructure CLARIN was also presented, since it specifically deals with written and oral speech resources. In the second section ("Before fieldwork"), a description of all the legal tools required during fieldwork was provided. A particular attention was devoted to the informed consent form and to the Italian legislation on copyright, considering the peculiar legal status of an 'oral interview'.

The third part aimed at answering a question that all the researchers dealing with oral archives have in mind: where shall I store all my work? Who will care for my oral archives? This appears to be a particularly thorny issue since all the aspects dealing with long term preservation are not perceived with the same urgency by all the researchers, as the online survey made by Galatà and Calamai (2019) outlined. In particular, it was found that almost half of the resources listed in the survey (49.6%) was barely accessible. Only 9.2% of the resources were declared accessible and available, 4.6% were declared partially accessible, 35.1% were declared available upon request, 1.5% were declared available upon request and only for selected parts. Moreover, with respect to the question "Who is in charge of their long-term maintenance and preservation?", the answer receiving the highest number of responses was nobody (43%), followed by reference Institutes[8] (17%), reference Universities (16%), the owners/individuals themselves (15%). In addition, the survey showed that ethical and legal issues were addressed by the respondents only in 46% of the cases.

Given this context, a relevant space in the section is devoted to the presentation of the main legal instruments for the free provision, transfer, and licensing of oral archives to archives, libraries and other preservation institutions. The fourth part deals with the accessibility of oral archives and addresses examples of research repositories (such as Zenodo), and other online experiences (such as the Italian Ti racconto la storia) in order to offer some useful and successful stories about re-use of oral archives. The final part contains a documentary appendix with models of actions to take in case of donation, deposit agreements, disclaimers, and consent forms in the light of GDPR.

Each author has made available to the whole research group his/her own experience in the field. The composite nature of the team (academic researchers, independent researchers, bureaucrats) and the different areas of expertise involved (from archival sciences to linguistics

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**8** Under this label we grouped institutions such as Associations, Foundations, libraries and their archives.

and speech sciences, from information and communication technology to library science and digital humanities) have made it possible to produce a large documentary material, which at the end will be offered to a wider audience.

### The case of *Ci chiamavano matti* oral archive

Several case studies were discussed by the participants to the Use and Re-Use round table, in order to verify whether past experiences could be used as prima examples for other research groups dealing with different oral material but with the very same issues and open questions. A special attention was devoted to Ci chiamavano matti oral archive, since it appeared to have—de jure—the highest restrictions on its curation and dissemination. Ci chiamavano matti oral archive contains precisely the voices of thirty-seven patients collected in 1977 in the Arezzo psychiatric hospital (Bruzzone 1979, 2021). The oral recordings on which the book is based were believed to be lost forever. After a long and strenuous search the original tapes were found and donated to the Department of Educational Sciences, Human Sciences and Intercultural Communication of the University of Siena (UNISI) – Arezzo. Anna Maria Bruzzone Archive represents a unique case, not only because the interviews were recorded before the Italian Data Protection Code (IDPC) was issued, so that the informants were not asked to give their authorization for the dissemination of the recordings, but also because it contains extra-sensitive data and it testimonies the patients' miserable lives inside and outside the hospital and sheds light on the atrocity of their everyday condition by letting them speak for themselves.

The discovery of such archive took place a few years ago and the attempt of re-using Bruzzone's interviews for historical and linguistic purposes represented a challenging case study to set a "legal chain » for personal data processing, which can be summarized as follows. Through this process, the pre-existing cooperation with the Legal and Ethical Issues Committes of CLARIN infrastructure was strengthened.[9]

9  https://www.clarin.eu/governance/legal-issues-committee.

Firstly, the research group provided for the identification of the real names of the patients and for the matching with the pseudonyms, as attested in the edited volume (Bruzzone 1979, 2021). Secondly, the research group tried to go back to the interviewees, also engaging the network of all the people—physicians, nurses, social workers, ordinary citizens—involved in the recent history of the Psychiatric hospital. This reconstruction helped to investigate the possibility and feasibility to obtain detailed and clear informed consents, describing the aims, the

scope and the positive spill-over effects of the dissemination of such an oral archive. In a few cases the consent form was obtained by the right-holders. Therefore, some excerpts from the oral archive can be finally enjoyed by the research communities and the entire civil society (Calamai *et al.* 2018).

This kind of research experience proves that only a collaborative action among different field of expertise (legal experts, linguists, archivists, oral historians, digital humanists) might offer a reliable solution for the fruition of past oral archives. For such reason, the Italian Vademecum was created: in our mind, it represents a service that allows researchers and institutions to circulate the competence acquired in previous projects and greatly benefits from previous work.

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