

• Oral History as Journalism: The Voting Rights Act •

•Spring 2014•



J 334F (08155) (undergraduate)\*

**\*May be counted toward the University's cultural diversity flag requirement.**

**\*Fulfills the Communication and Culture requirement in the College of Communication.**

J 395 (08490) (graduate)

Class Meeting Times: TTH 12:30PM- 2:00PM

Class Location: CMA 4.150

Instructor: Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, Ph.D.

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Office: BMC3.380

Office hours: Wednesdays 1-3 p.m.

Also by appointment

• The University of Texas at Austin •

### **Course Description**

Journalism is a natural partner for oral history: from the need for background research before entering the interview, to all aspects of the interview itself, and finally to creating a journalistic treatment of the interview. There are significant differences, too.

In this class, you will learn about oral history practices, including recording, editing and developing a multimedia component. You will apply what you've learned to a brief oral history project on the Voting Rights Act. We will think deeply and critically about all aspects of the interview, including your role as the interviewer, your own background, how you ask questions, how to get the most out of your interview.

### **Goals**

You will learn new skills and build on skills you already have. You will also learn more about the period during which the Voting Rights Act was passed in 1965, and its various amendments and extensions, particularly the one in 1975. In essence, the topic is not only about the VRA itself, but also about the political changes of the times. We will also consider how the SCOTUS decision of 2013 might affect current and future electoral participation. You will develop a sharper sense of this broader story and find the best ways to get a true and honest understanding (and interview) about this topic.

The skills you will learn include:

- basic oral history techniques, including interviewing, creating an index, labeling all aspects of the interview
- how to find oral history archives pertaining to various topics
- how to research and prepare for an interview
- how to videotape your interview
- how to evoke the best interview responses possible, including lots of follow-ups
- how to digitize photos, including the differences between what is needed for the Web and what is needed for other publications
- how to write and edit a news story from your interview
- how to write field notes
- graduate students will learn how to write a deep analysis of their interview
- how to develop a short multi-media package that reflects an important aspect of the Voting Rights Act (an interview excerpt will suffice; extra credit for something more elaborate)

By the end of this class, you'll be prepared to coordinate and organize your own oral history project, or to contribute in a substantial way to existing projects. You'll understand the principles of legal and ethical considerations in oral history. You'll appreciate how oral history may affect a general historical understanding, as well as how it might affect individual interviewees' memories. Throughout the semester, we will analyze how our perspective as journalists may differ from that of other oral historians.

We will become acquainted with several uses of oral history: in research, exhibits, film and audio documentaries, multimedia presentations, plays. Your short multi-media presentations – ranging from simple short interview excerpts, to much more sophisticated developments – will be posted on the School of Journalism’s website, as well as on another one in development that will focus on the VRA. Stories from your interview will also be included on the Voces Oral History Project website.

### **Prerequisite for Undergraduate Students**

Journalism 310F and 311F with a grade of at least B in each.

### **Required Texts/Readings**

A coursepack will be available for purchase at Jenn’s Copy & Binding at 2518 Guadalupe Street, across the street from the BMC (512) 482-0779. There are questions included for each reading in the coursepack that you should be prepared to discuss in class.

Gary May, *Bending Toward Justice*, (Washington : Basic Books, 2013). Available as an electronic source through the University of Texas Libraries. When we start reading from it, please let me know if you run into any problems. Note: printing is finicky for Mac users; use Safari. These FAQs may be useful too: <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/indexes/titles.php?id=536>

There will also be other required readings assigned on Canvas – including a review of May’s book and some Congressional testimony from 1975 that reviewed changes resulting from the 1965 Act, and areas that still needed improvement.

### **Suggested Texts for Graduate Students**

Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes, eds. *Oral History and Public Memories* (Temple, 2008).

### **Required Supplies**

You will need an external hard-drive with a minimum of 32 gb to accommodate your photos, audio and video files. You will have access to temporary storage space on a school server, but you **must** also have your files stored on your external hard-drive, as well as on my own hard-drive. You’ll need your external hard-drive available at various times for class, toward the end of the semester. So expect to carry it with you.

### **Meets with**

This class includes both graduate and undergraduate students. Graduate students will have slightly different assignments and grade weights. Other than that, the expectations are the same: all are expected to contribute to discussion, etc.

### **Graduate Students**

Doctoral students will be required to write a deep analysis of their interview, for possible presentation at the Oral History Association conference in Madison, WI, in October 2014. You may also wish to submit to other conferences as well. Examples of interview analyses will be available, along with a grading sheet.

Professional masters students have a choice of either a deep interview analysis or a three-to-five-minute short documentary on a key aspect of the VRA. I'll work with you to key in on that topic, if you choose to do that.

### Universal Grading

In this class, we'll use a ten-point scale: 90.0–100=A, 80.0–89.9 =B, etc.

All assignments will have a grading form. *To the extent possible and desirable, you will also have access to examples of previous work.*

You will be graded thusly:

#### Grades for Graduate Students:

Group presentation on oral history websites	3 percent
Interview prep (background research, developing questions)	12 percent
Your interview (pre-interview form, recording, indexing, photo scans)	25 percent
Field Notes	5 percent
Interview analysis paper	25 percent
Story from your interview (will be peer-reviewed beforehand)	15 percent
Your multi-media segment	10 percent
Class participation	5 percent

#### Grades for Undergraduate Students

Group presentation on oral history websites	5 points
Interview prep (finding readings, developing questions)	10 percent
Your interview (recording, the indexing, photo scans)	20 percent
Story from your interview	20 percent
Rewrite of Story (after peer review)	15 percent
Field Notes	10 percent
Your multi-media segment	15 percent
Class participation	5 percent

### Attendance

We'll be covering much ground in short order so we need to make the most of our time. We will start punctually. Tardiness will be reflected in your attendance grade. If you can't be in class, for some serious extenuating circumstance, please let me know via email *beforehand*. An after-the-fact excuse is not acceptable. I circulate a sign-in sheet at the beginning of class. It's your responsibility to sign in. I will not sign you in if you forget to do it.

When you do miss a class, you will be required to submit a **3-page summary** over that day's readings. If no readings are assigned for that day, I will provide you with another reading to summarize.

If I attempt to contact you and you are uncommunicative, I will refer report this to the College of Communication's Dean of Students Office, as a safety precaution.

### **Guest Speakers**

We will interview some people during class, perhaps via Skype. We will be videotaping some of them, and they will be part of our brief oral history project. I welcome your participation in suggesting good possible speakers/interview subjects. *When we do have a guest speaker, you will be expected to write a 1-page summary of what they said – by the next class time -- and to participate in discussion. This counts as part of “class participation.”*

### **Who will you interview?**

Students are welcome to submit names of people they would like to interview. I also have a growing list of interview subjects. I will make those available early in the semester. If you choose to find your own, please note the criteria:

1. they must have been involved in some aspect of voting rights, either the original 1965 Act, or the extension and expansion in 1975, or any extensions after; OR they must have been involved in challenges to the VRA, including the 2013 SCOTUS decision.  
**OR**
2. they must have benefitted in some way from voting rights legislation, or court challenges, or the more general civil rights movement – this could be people elected to public office  
**AND**
3. you must be able to get to them and handle all the technical aspects of the interview. If your subject cancels *once*, you need a backup plan. We won't spin our wheels waiting for an interview that will never happen because the interview subject is too busy.

### **Out-of-town trips**

We are expecting, as of this writing, to do a class trip to Rosenberg, Texas, two hours east of Austin. This is in development. You are not required to go out of town. We will discuss this further in class.

### **Equipment**

You will have access to a variety of equipment to use for your interviews: laptops and portable scanners, video and still cameras, audio recorders, microphones and earphones for your work. Most of this will be available either on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor check-out of the BMC, or on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of the CMA.

### **Editing/Rewriting**

All of your writing assignments will be peer-reviewed before you submit them to me. We will also discuss them in class. Once you do submit your story, based on your interview, you will schedule a private side-by-side editing session with me.

### **Multimedia**

You will learn some basic audio editing, photo editing, video editing programs as part of class. Guest lecturers and your fellow classmates will help on this, as my own technical knowledge is fairly rudimentary. But there is **always** help if you encounter a technical problem.

### **Academic Honesty**

In journalism, the only thing we really have is our credibility and we can't do that without transparency and honesty. There is simply no excuse for turning in **anything** that is not your own work. Cutting and pasting from the Web, using someone else's words or ideas without attribution, fabricating—any kind of dishonesty: wrong, wrong, wrong. It's also wrong to do work in one class and submit it for a second class. All your work in this class, and, indeed, in journalism, must be original and yours. If you have any doubts about something you're doing or *thinking* about doing, let's talk. Better to be safe....

I will give an automatic F on any assignment in which I find evidence of dishonesty and I will report it to our department, college and university. You may be expelled from the journalism program.

There are University rules on the subject of plagiarism and academic dishonesty. Basically, the University and your instructors want you to do your own work. There's a wonderful Web page that explains the finer points at <http://www.utexas.edu/depts/dos/sjs/>

### **Enough Already!**

I want you to get out of this class as much as you can. This will be a safe, nurturing learning environment – it's not what you know *now* that will make the difference: it's how you build on what you learn here that will count years from now. That said, you will be held to high standards. If you need help to succeed in this class, let me know right away and we'll decide – together – what we can do.

How let's have some fun!

**Oral History as Journalism**  
**At-a-glance Class Schedule -- Deadlines**  
**As of January 8, 2014 (Subject to change on short notice)**

**Week 1-Intro to Oral History**

**Jan. 14:** Intros

**Jan. 16:** From Ritchie, Chapter 1 “What Makes OH Different?” pp 19-46 + notes pp261-266  
*Assign teams for website reviews*

**Week 2—The Interview -- Relationships between Interviewers and Interviewees**

**Jan. 21:** NOTE – 2 READINGS

Ritchie, Chapter 3, “Conducting Interviews” pp. 84-109 + notes pp. 268-270

David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai, “Introduction”; “Foreward”; “Afterward,” in  
*‘Vietnam’: A Portrait of its People at War*, (London: Tauris Park, 2009). pp. ix-xxxii and pp.  
203-210.

**Jan. 23:** NOTE TWO READINGS. Benefits to the interviewee and Ethics & Legalities

E. Culpepper Clark, “Reconstructing History: The Epitomizing Image,” in *Interactive Oral History Interviewing*, edited by Eva. M. McMahan and Kim Lacy Rogers, (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1994), pp 19-30.

Yow, Chapter 6, Legalities and Ethics, pp 121-156

**Week 3-- The Logistics & the Interview—\*\*\*\*\*ORAL HISTORY WEB PRESENTATION**

**Jan. 28—**Ritchie, Chapter 2, “Setting up an Oral History Project, pp. 47-83

In-class presentations of Websites.

**Jan. 30—**Yow, Chapter 4, “Interviewing Techniques,” pp 92-120

In-class presentations of Websites.

**Week 4-- The Voting Rights Act**

**Feb. 4-** -- Background, [Louis Menand](#), “The Color of Law: Voting rights and the Southern way of life,” *The New Yorker*, July 8, 2013.

**Feb . 6—**Gary May, Prologue, “The Most Powerful Instrument”; and Chapter 1, “Planting the First Seed”

**Week 5—VRA and equipment**

**Feb. 11—**May, Chapter 2, “An Ideal Place”; and Chapter 3, “Give Us the Ballot.”

**Feb. 13—**May, Chapter 4, “Nothing Can Stop Us”; and Chapter 5, “To the Promised Land.”

**Week 6—**

**Feb. 18—**May, Chapter 6, “The Die is Cast”; and Chapter 7, “Breaking Down Injustice.”

**Feb. 20—**May, Chapter 8, “Where the Votes Are”; and Chapter 9, “The Struggle of a Lifetime.”

**Week 7— Extending the VRA and the Hispanic Experience**

**Feb. 25**—The Latino Experience. NOTE 2 READINGS on Canvas.

Congressional Testimony and

John A. Garcia, “The Voting Rights Act and Hispanic Political Representation in the Southwest,” *Publius* (1986) 16 (4): 49-66.

**Recommended reading, esp. for graduate students:** Charles L. Cotrell and Jerry Polinard, “Effects of the Voting Rights Act in Texas: Perceptions of County Election Administrators,” *Publius*, Vol. 16, No. 4, (Autumn, 1986), pp. 67-80.

**Feb. 27**—The Interview Prep—Finding background research, developing your questions. Making sure not to ask leading questions, eliciting the most fruitful and meaningful answers

**Week 8—Learning your equipment and Interview Prep**

**March 4**— In-class set-ups of equipment, backdrops.

- Distributing names of people to be interviewed
- Finding background on your interview subject

**March 6**—No class. Work on developing your interview questions.

**Week 9—**

**March 11**—Spring Break

**March 13**-- Spring Break

**Week 10— Interview questions**

**March 18**— Interview questions due; bring 3 copies, one for me and two for your classmate team. In-class discussion of interview questions.

**March 20**—In-class discussion of interview questions.

**Week 11— The 2013 SCOTUS decision and its implication**

**March 25**— Guest speaker. Interview questions back to you, graded.

Ari Berman, “Texas Redistricting Fight Shows Why Voting Rights Act Still Needed.”

<http://www.thenation.com/blog/174652/texas-redistricting-fight-shows-why-voting-rights-act-still-needed>.

**March 27**—Short class. Details on:

Weekend of 29-30—Rosenberg, Texas

**Week 12— Find the essence of the interview**

**April 1**— post-mortem. Indexing your interview; writing field notes. (examples on Canvas)

**April 3**— Writing your story.

For grad students: Writing the deep analysis. (examples on Canvas)

**Week 13—**

**April 8**—Field notes due.

**April 10**—No class—Independent Work Session



**Week 14—**

**April 15—**Indexes due. First draft of story due for peer review.

**April 17—** Get back your peer review; discussion.

**Week 15—**

**April 22—** Learning to edit video for your multimedia piece.

Final draft of stories due. Sign up for side-by-side edits. (Grades available on final stories within 24 hours of edit)

**April 24—** In-class work session

**Week 16—**

**April 29—** In-class work session, including sending your interview subject back their story.

**May 1—**Last Class Day—Party!

**All final work due, noon, Monday, May 5**