

# STORIES MATTER

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Free, open source software built for oral historians by oral historians at the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling  
<http://storytelling.concordia.ca/storiesmatter>

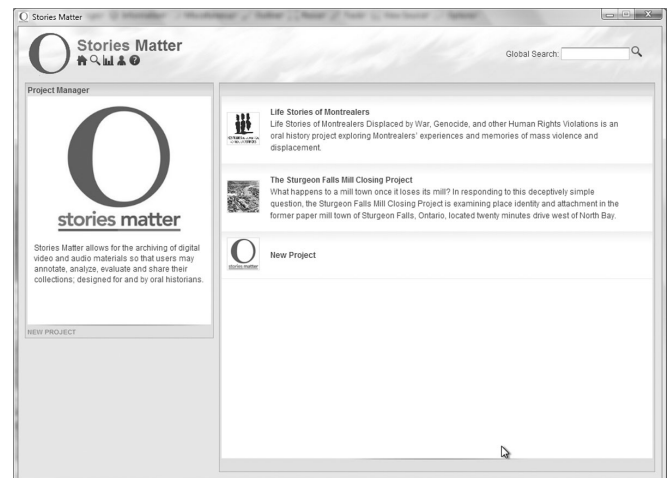


Concordia University's Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS), <http://storytelling.concordia.ca>, is currently developing new oral history database software, entitled Stories Matter. As Michael Frisch notes, "[the] Deep Dark Secret of oral history is that nobody spends much time listening to or watching recorded and collected interview documents."<sup>1</sup> Instead, oral historians tend to privilege transcripts over voices, losing the meanings inherent in their interviews. By returning the orality to oral history, Stories Matter will make it possible for oral historians to engage with their interviews and their collections in a more holistic way.

Stories Matter is free, open source software that is compatible with PC, Mac, and Linux operating systems. It will allow for the archiving of digital video and audio materials, enabling users to annotate, analyze, evaluate, and export materials as well as search and browse within and across single interviews or entire collections. In addition to a local version, the software will have an online version that will facilitate sharing and collaboration. Both versions of Stories Matter will operate in English and French, and they will have the capacity to support other languages at a later date. The local version of Stories Matter will be launched in March 2009 and the web-based version, for larger collaborative projects, will be available in summer 2009; you may download the software on COHDS' website: <http://storytelling.concordia.ca>.

Since COHDS' inception, its affiliates, led by Dr. Steven High, Canada Research Chair in Public History, have been experimenting with InterClipper, an audio-video documentation tool, and Vertov, a media annotating plug-in for Zotero, to access the realms of meaning that exist beyond the standard transcript. While these tools served as useful starting points, neither of them fully met the needs of oral historians. As a result, High initiated the Stories Matter project using funding

from the Canada Foundation for Innovation and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). High believed that oral historians ought to be embedded in the development process from the beginning and thus we came on board to not only assist the software engineer, Jacques Langlois, but also ensure that this software would be tailored to the requirements of our user base.



While Stories Matter promises to change the ways that we think about and do oral history, it also offers a rare glimpse into the interdisciplinary process of creating digital technologies. As oral historians, we have been particularly focused upon documenting the history of this project and ensuring that the final version of the software adheres to our ethical beliefs and methodological practices. The challenge for us has been transferring these beliefs and practices into a digital medium and conveying oral historians' particular needs to our software engineer. At times, our inexperience with computer program-

ming has complicated the development process. For example, we initially envisioned that the software would be able to import all types of audio and video files, making the transition from the original file to Stories Matter seamless. This proved to be unrealistic given the limited funding and time allotted to the project. Moreover, we have been tremendously focused on reflecting upon and documenting the project's process while Langlois has understandably been dedicated to delivering a product. Despite these varying interests, we have managed to have a number of healthy and fruitful interdisciplinary discussions that have pushed us to clarify our understanding of the software. We have experienced a steep learning curve as a result, but we are confident that Stories Matter will make an important and long-lasting contribution to the discipline.

In an attempt to both foster transparency and leave a historical record about this unique process, we have been publically reflecting on the project's evolution on its blog: <http://storytelling.concordia.ca/storiesmatter/>; we have also been documenting the behind-the-scenes process on Basecamp – project management software – which will form the basis of a virtual archive that will be made available to future researchers. At this stage, we are soliciting feedback from users. We welcome any comments, suggestions, and questions that you may have; please feel free to contact us through either the project's blog or email: [stories@alcor.concordia.ca](mailto:stories@alcor.concordia.ca).

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1. Michael Frisch, "Three Dimensions and More: Oral History Beyond the Paradoxes of Method," in Sharlene Nagy Hess-Biber and Patricia Leavy, eds., *Handbook of Emergent Methods* (New York: Guilford Press, 2008), 223.
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