

Research

Business

What's on

Learning

Visit

Cyber incident

More

Shop



Digital scholarship blog

Enabling innovative research with British Library digital collections

Main

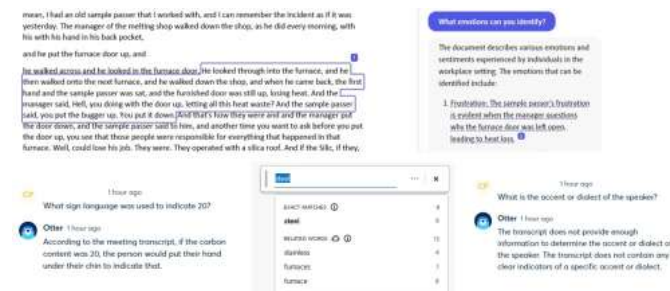
Previous post Next post

18 December 2024

The challenges of AI for oral history: theoretical and practical issues

Oral History Archivist Charlie Morgan provides examples of how AI-based tools integrated into workflows might affect oral historians' consideration of orality and silence in the second of two posts on a talk he gave with Digital Curator Mia Ridge at the 7th World Conference of the International Federation for Public History in Belval, Luxembourg. His first post proposed some key questions for oral historians thinking about AI, and shared an example automatic speech recognition (ASR) tools in practice.

While speech to text once seemed at the cutting edge of AI, software designers are now eager to include additional functions. Many incorporate their own chatbots or other AI 'helpers' and the same is true of 'standard' software. Below you can see what happened when I asked the chatbots in Otter and Adobe Acrobat some questions about other transcribed clips from the 'Lives in Steel' CD:



A composite image of chatbot responses to questions about transcribed clips

In Otter, the chatbot does well at answering a question on sign language but fails to identify the accent or dialect of the speaker. This is a good reminder of the limits of these models and how, without any contextual information, they cannot understand the interview beyond textual analysis. Oral historians in the UK have long understood interviews as fundamentally oral sources and current AI models risk taking us away from this.

In Adobe I tried asking a much more subjective question around emotion in the interview. While the chatbot does answer, it is again worth remembering the limits of this textual analysis, which, for example, could not identify crying, laughter or pitch change as emotion. It would also not understand the significance of any periods of silence. On our panel at the IFPH2024 conference in Luxembourg Dr Julianne Nyhan noted how periods of silence tend to lead speech-to-text models to 'hallucinate' so the advice is to take them out; the problem is that oral history has long theorised the meaning and importance of silence.

Alongside the chatbot, Adobe also includes a degree of semantic searching where a search for steel brings up related words. This in itself might be the biggest gift new technologies offer to catalogue searching (shown expertly in Placing the Holocaust) – helping us to move away from what Mia Ridge calls 'the tyranny of the keyword'.

However, the important thing is perhaps not how well these tools perform but the fact they exist in the first place. Oral historians and archivists who, for good reasons, are hesitant about integrating AI into their work might soon find it has happened anyway. For example, Zencast, the podcasting software we have used since 2020 for remote recordings, now has an in-built AI tool. Robust principles on the use of AI are essential then not just for new projects or software, but also for work we are already doing and software we are already using.

The rise of AI in oral history raises theoretical questions around orality and silence, but must also be considered in terms of practical workflows: Do participation and recording agreements need to be amended? How do we label AI generated metadata in catalogue records, and should we be labelling human generated metadata too? Do AI tools change the risks and rewards of making oral histories available online? We can only answer these questions through thoughtful critical engagement with the tools themselves.

