

TRANSLATING RESILIENCE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TRAUMA REPRESENTATION IN DIGITAL ORAL HISTORIES AND TRADITIONAL PRINT MEDIA

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1. Introduction

The representation of trauma has long been a central concern in humanities, bridging psychology, literary theory, and history. Traditional print literature, while instrumental in documenting historical atrocity and individual suffering, often imposes structural conventions that 'sanitize' or linearize the traumatic experience to fit the requirements of narrative coherence (Caruth, 1996; LaCapra, 2001). Conversely, the advent of digital oral history archives provides a platform for raw, non-linear trauma narratives that resist such homogenization.

This article explores the ethical and structural implications of this shift, arguing that the digital archive functions not merely as a repository, but as a 'living' environment that alters how researchers and survivors engage with the act of testimony. By analyzing narrative fragmentation, temporal shifts, and the frequency of silence markers, this study contrasts the printed memoir—often mediated by editorial processes—with the transcribed digital oral history.

2. Theoretical Framework: Trauma and the Archive

Trauma studies has historically emphasized that trauma resists conventional narrative structures (Caruth, 1996). When individuals experience extreme violence or loss, memory often manifests through fragmented recollections, flashbacks, and significant lapses or 'silences' that signify the inability of language to capture the depth of the event (Langer, 1993; Felman & Laub, 1992). Traditional print media often attempts to reconstruct these fragments into a coherent chronological arc to facilitate reader understanding (Misri, 2014). However, as Luft and Subotić (2024) note, the ethics of archives require us to recognize the political and social contexts that determine how documents are stored, categorized, and made accessible.

Digital archives shift the focus from the finished product to the process of witnessing itself. The digital environment allows for the preservation of non-linear testimonies, where the 'silence'—the pause in speech—is treated as data rather than an error to be edited out.

3. Methodology: A Comparative Analysis

This study employs a comparative content and narrative analysis of two primary data sources: published survivor memoirs and transcriptions from digital oral history archives. We measure three distinct variables: 1) narrative fragmentation (the presence of non-sequiturs, sudden topic shifts, and memory loss expressions), 2) temporal shifts (the frequency of movement between pre-trauma, trauma, and post-trauma states), and 3) silence/pause markers (the frequency of ellipses or '...').

4. The Gap: Sanitation and Structural Constraints

Traditional literature operates under the necessity of the 'readable' text. The editorial process often seeks to build a 'therapeutic cure via resilience' (Sohail, 2026), which can inadvertently suppress the more chaotic aspects of trauma. The digital oral history, as exemplified by the Yale Fortunoff Video Archive or USC Shoah Foundation, prioritizes the preservation of the witness's singular voice (arXiv, 2026). While structured approaches exist in both, the digital archive's fluidity often allows for the 'early emergence of core themes' and topical fluidity that print media frequently organizes into chapters.

5. Discussion: Ethical Listening in the Digital Age

The move toward digital archives forces a reckoning with what we consider 'accurate' testimony. If the digital record preserves the pauses and the fragmentations that print removes, we must ask if the digital record is 'more accurate' or simply 'less processed.' The ethics of listening requires researchers to engage with the singularity of the survivor's voice rather than forcing it into a predetermined structure. As Bowe et al. (2025) suggest, supporting survivors to gain mastery over their own narratives, rather than having them mediated by an editor, is vital for interrupting the transmission of intergenerational trauma.

6. Conclusion

The translation of resilience from print to digital media is a fundamental shift in how we engage with human suffering. By moving away from the sanitized narrative of the traditional memoir, digital oral history archives invite us into a more complex, albeit challenging, encounter with the past. Future research must continue to bridge the gap between computational approaches to these archives and the ethical imperative to remain attuned to the 'haunting realities' recorded within them.

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