

Teaching New Media: A Class on the White House Tapes

By

Jeff Woods

In 2002, I taught a class on the White House tapes at Arkansas Tech University. My decision to teach the class had less to do with content than methodology. Over the years I had taught many classes covering post-World War II political and diplomatic history that incorporated “new media” audio and video resources along with traditional textual material, but I never devoted the time to non-textual sources that I would have liked. When a large number of the White House tapes became available on the internet, I took the opportunity to make a new medium the central focus of a class and see how students might learn from it.

The idea first took root while I was in graduate school in the early 1990s. Though portions of the White House tapes had been trickling out of the national archives and presidential libraries since the 1970s, the first systematic release of the Nixon, Kennedy, and Johnson tapes started while I was a student. For those of us studying Cold War history, the tapes offered a new source of information that might unlock the cutting edge interpretations that our dissertation committees wanted to see. It was also at the height of the dot com explosion. Video and audio were beginning the mass migration to digital formats. The internet was expanding, and e-mail had just become communication medium of choice. I was inspired by the potential that computers offered a new generation of contemporary historians, and took seriously the chance to expand the craft to incorporate recording and presentation mediums based in magnetic tape, film, electrons, and cathode ray tubes rather than just paper and ink.

Ohio University’s Contemporary History Institute (CHI), where I took graduate classes and worked, was an ideal place to explore new media. I had access to computers, some funding, and a group of professors and students who shared my interests. I took a job moderating discussions on the infant H-Diplo listserv, learned to code html, and volunteered to help maintain the CHI web site. In CHI lectures I was exposed to Chaos and Complexity Theorists’ use of computers in modeling complex adaptive systems and Rational Choice Theorists’ use of computers in modeling human decision making. With two of my classmates, Ray Haberski and Marc Selverstone, I eventually helped found The TimeStreams Group to attract investment capital for projects that digitized textual and non-textual sources, like the tapes, and developed computer simulations for use in history classrooms.

With the dot coms, The TimeStreams Group’s bubble burst in the late 1990s, but my desire to experiment with digital formats continued. At Arkansas Tech University, where I went to work in 2000, I helped found the Arkansas Digital History Institute (ADHI) to continue experimenting with new media. In building a foundation for ADHI, I proposed to teach experimental classes that demonstrated the impact that digital formats could have on the

historian's craft. In the fall semester of 2002, I was approved to teach an upper division undergraduate seminar focusing on the White House Tapes.

At the time I was using the Kennedy and Johnson tapes for my own research on Richard Russell. In addition my father, historian Randall Woods, was working on a biography of Lyndon Johnson and knew the LBJ tapes as well as anybody, and my friend and colleague from the TimeStreams Group, Marc Selverstone, had gone on to work on the Kennedy tapes at the University of Virginia's Miller Center. With their help and a quick review of the published literature making use of the tapes, I developed a syllabus.

That fall I had 10 students, and we met for an hour, three days a week, for fifteen weeks. Class meetings were a combination of lecture and discussion. In the lectures I outlined technology, transcription, and contextual issues for each set of tapes from the Franklin Roosevelt to the Reagan administrations, pausing from time to time to talk about a special group of tapes (the "smoking gun" discussions in the Watergate debacle, for example). Of course, given the hundreds of hours of conversations from the Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon collections, we spent more of our time focusing on those. Class discussions drew on reading and "listening" assignments I gave students each week. A textbook was difficult to find. I needed recordings of some key conversations with at least brief annotations. I ended up using John Prados's *The White House Tapes*. I also relied heavily on the internet as well as selected chapters and articles from books and journals. The National Archives web site, the Presidential Library web sites, and the Miller Center's collection of white house tape recordings online were absolutely invaluable. I taught the class with a computer rather than a chalk board. I had an LCD projector connected to a laptop from which I could access the course web site, download audio from the Miller Center, or play excerpts from the audio CDs that were included with the Prados book.

In the first six class periods, I talked extensively about technology, transcription and interpretation skills, and the tapes' duplication and release to the public by the National Archives and Presidential Libraries. I started with the basics, showing the students how to download conversations from the internet, listen to the recordings on computers, and find published transcripts and background material. I then compared the different standards researchers used in transcribing tapes, including problems involving inaudible phrases, speaker identification, obscure references, and quirky speech patterns. Other lectures were devoted to recording mechanics and reproduction technology. Recording sound onto Roosevelt and Eisenhower era wax disks was very different than recording onto Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon era magnetic tape. Each president had a different process for turning on and off their machines and there were the moral and legal implications involved in recording people without their knowledge or consent. There were differences between analog and digital recording devices and each had advantages and disadvantages. A great deal of raw sound is lost in the transfer to digital mediums and archivists disagree about the processes' value. Witness the disagreements between the Miller Center that reproduced tapes in a digital format in order to clean out background noise and the LBJ Library who insisted that magnetic tape reproductions were needed to preserve as

much of the original sound as possible. I also spent some lecture time talking about legal issues involved in the tapes' release. Watergate meant that the Nixon tapes were seized by the government and were thus processed and released much differently than the Kennedy and Johnson tapes that were originally part of the privately owned estates of those presidents. The tapes, of course, are also subject to a labyrinth of declassification procedures.

These basics out of the way, we started in on the tapes themselves. I selected groups of tapes on a particular topic like the Cuban Missile Crisis, Ole Miss Riots, or Decent Interval Strategy for lecture and discussion each week. We followed a roughly chronological order from the Roosevelt through the Reagan administrations. I would provide some basic background in lectures, about an hour a week, but students were required to read transcripts and supporting articles and listen to tapes in preparation for classroom discussions. The most common threads of debate throughout the semester involved challenges to previously conceived notions about the presidents and those around them. For example students who had conceived of John F. Kennedy as a vacillating or weak head of state found a calm and assertive leader in his conversations with advisors during the Cuban Missile Crisis and Ole Miss Riots. Students who thought of Lyndon Johnson as a power obsessed bully found a caring, thoughtful, emotional, even gentle man in his discussions with Jackie Kennedy after JFK's assassination as well as in his frequent expressions of frustration over the war in Vietnam. In Nixon they found an even more nervous and self-conscious man than they had expected. Nixon's insensitive remarks about Jews and his sometimes angry use of profanity changed many students' opinions about him. The seminar also seemed to frequently come back to the array of secondary characters. They were surprised that Richard Russell successfully manipulated and cajoled Lyndon Johnson as much as Johnson manipulated and cajoled Russell. They were aghast as Ross Barnett and James Eastland defend the white South against outside racial agitators. Jaws dropped at Henry Kissinger's callous opinions about the American withdrawal from Vietnam.

Students completed four projects during the semester. The first involved the transcription of a conversation and a short paper that discussed that conversation in historical context. The idea was to get the students used to working with the technology and making concrete connections to the tapes' significance in the historical record. The second assignment asked that students choose and interpret a series of conversations, seeking a pattern of thought or action revealed in them. Here I wanted to add a level of analysis and explore some techniques of biography. The third project was a more traditional paper that demanded an understanding of relevant historiographical debates. The students cited conversations that they thought provided some new insights or historical interpretations. The fourth and final project was the most adventurous. I asked students to storyboard and script a documentary film or multimedia web site that made use of a series of conversations. The students then had to "pitch" their idea to the class. Here, of course, I was embracing the vision set out by The TimeStreams Group and ADHI. I wanted students to explore the past through sight and sound and develop presentation methods that went beyond on the written word.

The students did as expected on the first three assignments. As with all undergraduates, they varied in their writing, research and analytical skills, but they performed well in accurately and honestly transcribing even poor quality conversations. They did not do as well as I expected on the final assignment. In class I provided the students with several examples of text, film and multimedia presentations that used the tapes. Together we read Beschloss, Prados, Zelikow, Kutler, and Doyle, saw PBS Frontline and American Experience programs, and dissected the Miller Center's virtual exhibits. They were free to mimic those, but I encouraged them to find even more creative ways to present the non-textual material. Other than one woman who actually incorporated dance into her presentation, the "pitches" the students made did not even aspire to match the examples they had seen and heard in class. Many of the web sites were laid out like pages in standard history textbooks with a narrative that block quoted transcriptions and occasionally brought up a map or photograph. The film storyboards showed little concern for the potential impact that the creative juxtaposition of sight, sound, and motion could have on an audience. Like the web sites, they seemed to be modeled after textbooks.

Despite the somewhat disappointing final projects, the class was a great success. Most importantly, from my perspective, the seminar took a step toward broadening the research and presentation methods that students are taught in history classrooms. The class directly addressed the need of contemporary historians to incorporate non-textual audio and video records in their work and embraced the new tools offered by digital platforms. The students seemed to appreciate this. Course evaluations suggested that they achieved a greater emotional connection with the historical characters they heard in the tapes and, in turn, found a greater appreciation for the historical actors' humanity. Hearing the people rather than just reading about them seems to have made a difference. They *empathized* and thus found the key to a greater understanding of history. Also the students expressed an appreciation for the uniqueness of the course. None had heard of a class like this one before and felt like they were getting a special educational experience. Plus the technology offered the bells and whistles they were more accustomed to in their lives outside of the classroom. They were clearly used to and good at taking a critical eye toward audio and video sources. The greater sense of empathy they claimed to have achieved seemed not to have compromised their objectivity. The main problem rested in the students finding ways to creatively express their new understanding of history. They were unprepared to take what they saw as entertainment mediums and use them in academic work. So used to thinking of the work of the historian in a particular way, they had a hard time conceiving of the library, internet, and tv screen as mutually reinforcing repositories of historical knowledge and wisdom. They were so accustomed to standard written essays, timelines, and linear cause and effect analyses that they defaulted to those techniques. Their final presentations thus failed to transfer to others the expressions of emotion, nuance, and empathy that they felt that they had gained in listening to the tapes. The new media generation was ironically better at expressing itself in words than in sounds or images. Students will increasingly need to find flexible, complex, and useful forms of communication that include the written word but also go beyond it. With broadband internet, youtube, podcasts, and the like already at hand, learning the tools of

non-textual expression will be essential if a new generation of scholars are to record and represent the history of their own lives in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.¹

¹ Though not in a formal setting like the White House Tapes class, over the past few years I have been working with small groups of students in digital editing techniques at ADHI. They have learned a little from me and much more on their own and have produced some very interesting short documentaries for the institute. You can see some of those films at <<http://adhi.atu.edu/>>. My syllabus for the White House Tapes class and links to some of the resources I used for it can be found at <<http://lfa.atu.edu/ssphil/people/ssjw/whitehouse/syl.htm>>.