

Eyewitness accounts of the Shoah in digital form: Risks and ethical limitations

“I felt like I could ask anything, because they’re not actually here.”

“Well, if they’d been here in person, we might not have asked it quite like that.”

These and similar statements were made by young people who, during our project days, interacted with the digital testimony of Anita Lasker-Wallfisch recorded by the USC Shoah Foundation and then were questioned about the experience. As Sanna Stegmaier and I had already shown in our concomitant study of the beta-test phase, considerations of the educational benefits can diverge greatly from those of moral-ethical issues that need to be addressed before this type of digitally mediated testimony can be passed on to future generations.¹

The technical conditions and historiographical implications for the interactive testimonies have already received superb in-depth treatment by Sanna Stegmaier in her dissertation.² This essay will now focus on the moral-ethical limitations. It is essential that we reflect critically on these limitations in order to prevent harm – to the Holocaust survivors, their families, the institutions that produce and exhibit the interactive displays, the users, and perhaps even the current culture of remembrance in society at large.

To grasp the problem, one need only sketch two entirely conceivable or already existing scenarios. What happens when a museum places this type of exhibit in an unsupervised setting and visitors with revisionist historical, antisemitic or racist intentions try out Hitler or Holocaust ‘jokes’ to see what answers are played back? The unmoderated and unsupervised settings for the first interactive testimonies in New York alarmed not only Stegmaier and me but also many of our colleagues.

1 Christina Brüning and Sanna Stegmaier, “‘Jetzt würde ich sie voll gern in echt treffen’: Das Projekt ‘Dimensions in Testimony’ der USC Shoah Foundation in der historischen Bildung,” in *Historisches Erzählen in Digitalien*, eds. Christina Brüning and Alexandra Krebs (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2024), 193–222.

2 Sanna Stegmaier, *Dimensions in Testimony: Hypertestimonial Holocaust Memory in the imminent Post-Witness and in the Hyperconnective Age*, forthcoming.

That intensified our interest in concomitant research on this new informational format.

To bring up another ethical-moral dilemma: how do we respond to a desire by schools or memorial sites for “conversations” with survivors of the Shoah in electronic form over in-person talks even though the respective survivors might still be alive and available? There can be many reasons for this, such as simplicity, cost, fascination with technical advances, or even the idea that pupils might have fewer reservations or anxieties than when interacting with eyewitnesses in real life. What does it mean for the survivors, also in emotional terms, to be in effect replaced by recordings of themselves while they are still here?

These and other challenges will be critically examined below, in order to raise awareness for ethical and moral issues associated with digital testimonies.

1. Setting and context

Considerations of this format’s (further) use and commercialization need to focus, in my view, on what in Germany are known as the *Persönlichkeitsrechte* (personal rights) of the eyewitnesses who share their valuable and impressive life stories.

Due to their advanced age and potentially lower affinity and familiarity with the relevant technology, many survivors do not have full control over the further use of their narratives. This applies especially if the testimonies are published without their consent or in different contexts. To give just one example: segments from the USC Shoah Foundation’s linear life-history interviews can be found on YouTube with an active comment function, allowing for revisionist and inappropriate comments which are in fact made. In addition, not every physical location is equally suitable for exhibiting these eyewitness testimonies.³ A museum of technology such as the one that beta-tested the first German-language product from the USC Shoah Foundation might be interested in the testimonies due to affinity with the modern digital format. Its visitors, however, might find themselves confused by the contexts. Use should only be approved after ensuring the best possible fit between the personnel, context and setting on the one hand and the content and educational framework on the other. Especially in light of the topic’s sensitive nature, the following rule should apply: no use is better than poor use. To what extent can either the on-site

3 Stegmaier and I have criticized this in “Jetzt würde ich sie voll gern in echt treffen,” 199.

use of interactive testimonies or their online dissemination be done in a respectful and responsible manner? Responsibility lies not only with the research historians and the teachers of history and political science, in my opinion. It is also borne by the foundations that produce the formats and the platforms that spread the content. Moreover, and this brings me to the second point, it is crucial to bring the survivors' children and grandchildren into the picture.

2. Intergenerational trauma

Moral considerations about the use of eyewitness testimonies in a digital age change considerably when we reflect not only on the teaching of history but also on intergenerational trauma and thereby include the experiences and perspectives of the survivors' children and grandchildren. These generations have a special relationship to their elders' memories, and it is essential to incorporate their wishes into how the survivors' accounts are used. By now some of the survivors have passed away or reached ages sufficiently advanced that it falls to their children to manage their legacies. As such, the generation after the Shoah now has to decide where, when, how and for whom their parents' interactive testimonies may be shown. It hardly needs be mentioned that conflicts with foundations or other institutions can easily arise.

It is also often the third generation that engages strongly with the stories and experiences of their grandparents. In some instances, parents simply do not communicate much about their past to the second generation, i.e. their children. This was different in the family of Anita Lasker-Wallfisch. Her daughter Maya is both very involved and highly knowledgeable. As a psychotherapist, she has not only studied and worked on transgenerational trauma, in this case the traumatic legacy of the Shoah, but also published on the topic.⁴ In addition, she and her mother have appeared together in films and interviews.⁵

One should understand that both children and grandchildren of the survivors not only bear a legacy of trauma, but also often feel responsible for preserving the memories of the older generation. In this context, digitized eyewitness reports can represent a burden and a challenge when legal or commercial questions arise about their use following the death of a beloved family member. Furthermore, the enthusiasm

4 Maya Lasker-Wallfisch, *Briefe aus Breslau: Meine Geschichte über drei Generationen* (Berlin: Insel Verlag, 2020); and *Ich schreib euch aus Berlin: Rückkehr in ein neues Zuhause* (Berlin: Insel Verlag, 2022).

5 See *The Commandant's Shadow*, directed by Daniela Völker (USA, 2024).

and openness which many survivors have brought to the interactive projects and which are repeatedly cited by foundations as justification for their work⁶ are not shared by all of their children and grandchildren. This can reflect the younger generations' greater awareness of how technology can be put to undesirable ends such as creating 'sensationalist material',⁷ falsifying sources, simplifying complexity, distorting content, and failing to accommodate the depth of lived experience. It is therefore essential to take the perspectives and concerns of the second and third generations seriously, ideally both during and after the production of digital interview formats.

3. Few voices

The considerable temporal and financial resources that go into producing one of these interactive testimonies, along with the physical and mental strain on the interviewee, explain why only a few survivors have been recorded in this form.⁸ Compared to the holdings of the Fortunoff Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University and even more so to the tens of thousands of life-story interviews in the Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive at the University of Southern California, interactive testimonies are still rare exceptions, with just a small number per language. As a result, the voices in this format are seldom experienced in a multiperspectival setting. Most are shown alone on a single project day, or together with one other like at the German Exile Archive in Frankfurt. This can give pupils the impression that the eyewitness is telling it 'like it really was'. They might forget that each story of survival derives from an inconceivable number of coincidences and fortunate happenstances. The story of Anita Lasker, who played the cello in the orchestra at Auschwitz, is not representative of everyday life in that concentration camp. The conditions of her life there differed in many ways from those of other inmates. But this is not clear to users who commence the interaction unguided or with little previous knowledge.

- 6 One example comes from former USC Shoah Foundation director Stephen Smith, who in interviews has described the pushback and skepticism directed at the project, although not from one group of people, namely the survivors who all responded with enthusiasm and wanted to participate. See "Letting future generations speak with Holocaust survivors", *60 Minutes* archive: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9tZnC4NGNg> (here minute 4; accessed 10 July 2025).
- 7 A survivor in Israel once referred to 'Holocaust pornography' which she wants no part of and therefore rejects any query about publishing her testimony online.
- 8 On the creation and execution of this type of interview, see the article in this volume by Björn Stockleben and Christian Zipfel.

As David Boder put it shortly after the war in his book *I Did Not Interview the Dead*,⁹ the millions of people murdered in the Shoah can no longer speak, and only the survivors can bear witness. This situation is becoming all the more acute as the number of voices decreases and the dominant narrative(s) consequently narrow as is currently the case with interactive testimonies. To convey the plurality of witness perspectives, also in the context of interactive testimonies, exhibitions need to be well curated or accompanied by strong educational support.

4. Simulated dialogue and the wish for authenticity

Ethical-moral considerations also arise with regard to the pupils who are learning from these interactive testimonies. Speech recognition software can facilitate something similar to a real dialogue and give users the sense of conversing with the eyewitness, even though as already shown, most pupils can distinguish very well between a dialogue with a real person and one simulated by technology.¹⁰ It is the technology that allows survivors' voices and experiences to be preserved and presented in markedly different ways than in the linear life-story interviews heretofore available from online archives.¹¹

Interactive forms of reception that simulate dialogues can be a valuable way of achieving educational aims because they can foster deeper and more emotional connections to the experiences of the survivors. However, the simulation of human interaction raises significant ethical concerns. The authenticity fictions sometimes staged in museums with replicas or similar scenes should always be viewed with a critical eye. This is especially the case when teaching or learning history, because the point of the past is that it has passed, and that it remains foreign to us, especially in connection with traumatic and genocidal violence.¹² Known in the field as historical alterity, this temporal 'otherness' is diminished or even obscured by the technology in favor of conversational situations that feel like they could be real. But to what

9 David P. Boder, *I Did Not Interview the Dead* (University of Illinois Press, 1949).

10 Brüning and Stegmaier, "Jetzt würde ich sie voll gern in echt treffen," 204–207.

11 Christina Brüning, *Holocaust Education in der heterogenen Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Wochenschau Verlag, 2018), 142.

12 On traumatic pasts and remembrance of genocidal violence, see the research project funded by the HMWK (Hessian Ministry of Higher Education, Research and the Arts) titled "Aus welchen Katastrophen lernen? Zum Zusammenhang von Genocide Education und Holocaust Education: Eine (trans-) nationale Metaanalyse von Studien zur Vermittlungspraxis weltweit," which is yielding works such as Paul Scheidt's forthcoming dissertation.

extent can simulated dialogues appropriately represent the survivors' experiences and perspectives? When users call up what are actually only brief, pre-recorded video sequences, respond to them, yet have the impression of interaction with the survivor, they lose the awareness – so crucial to media literacy and critical source reflection – that all they are facing is an algorithm-supplied answer. The challenge, which can hardly be mastered in any conceivable constellation, consists of refraining from creating the illusion of immediacy and (real) dialogue while maintaining the emotional value of empathic and active listening which the interactive testimonies unquestionably bring. This is one of the reasons why I would always favor an educational setting, ideally specifically history-oriented, in discussions of how to use this technology.

Conclusion: Ethics as a design mandate

With the editors of this volume having explicitly requested that I reflect on the ethical-moral limitations of interactive testimonies, the above considerations surely read more critically than the format itself deserves. The opportunities provided by interactive testimonies are beyond doubt: they offer low-threshold, emotive and dialogue-oriented access to memories of the Shoah. They thereby differ markedly from classical history lessons that often still rely heavily on books, texts and lectures. Moreover, every new form of technology in Germany, including railroads, cars, or now the volumetric capture of survivors' interviews, has always been met with skepticism.¹³ As such, this volume is also a contribution to ongoing research and reflection, which will help us make better use of what interactive testimonies can offer.

At the same time, the task or mandate here is not only to provide the technical conditions for these new informational formats, but also to design them in educationally, institutionally and ethically responsible ways. To do so, we require not only the right technical infrastructure but also and especially:

- firm educational and scholarly strategies that accompany and historically contextualize the use of interactive testimonies,
- transparent decisional processes with respect to personal rights and intergenerational perspectives,

13 See Christina Brüning, "Dreidimensionale Erziehung nach Auschwitz? Reflexionen über holographische Zeug_innen," in *Shoah: Ereignis und Erinnerung*, eds. Alina Bothe and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Berlin and Leipzig: Hentrich & Hentrich Verlag, 2019), 121–138.

- a pluralist landscape of remembrance in which singular testimonies do not appear as sole instances of truth, and
- ongoing dialogue between educators, survivors' family members, developers and users, that also enables and promotes concomitant scholarly research.

Interactive testimonies are no substitute for living memory or inter-personal communication but instead are an occasion to pursue new forms of responsible remembrance – in full awareness of the associated opportunities and limits. Ethical-moral reflection, therefore, is not an addendum to digitization but rather an integral component.

Literature

Boder, David P. *I Did Not Interview the Dead*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1949.

Brüning, Christina. "Dreidimensionale Erziehung nach Auschwitz? Reflexionen über holographische Zeug_innen." In *Shoah: Ereignis und Erinnerung*, edited by Alina Bothe and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, 121–138. Berlin and Leipzig: Hentrich & Hentrich Verlag, 2019.

Brüning, Christina. *Holocaust Education in der heterogenen Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Wochenschau Verlag, 2018.

Brüning, Christina and Sanna Stegmaier. "'Jetzt würde ich sie voll gern in echt treffen': Das Projekt 'Dimensions in Testimony' der USC Shoah Foundation in der historischen Bildung." In *Historisches Erzählen in Digitalien*, edited by Christina Brüning and Alexandra Krebs, 193–222. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2024.

Stegmaier, Sanna. *Dimensions in Testimony: Hypertestimonial Holocaust Memory in the imminent Post-Witness and in the Hyperconnective Age*. Dissertation submitted in 2024, forthcoming.

References

60 Minutes archive. "Letting future generations speak with Holocaust survivors." Aired 5 April 2020, online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9tZnC4NGNg>.

The Commandant's Shadow, directed by Daniela Völker. USA, 2024.

Lasker-Wallfisch, Maya. *Briefe aus Breslau: Meine Geschichte über drei Generationen*. Berlin: Insel Verlag, 2020.

Lasker-Wallfisch, Maya. *Ich schreib euch aus Berlin: Rückkehr in ein neues Zuhause*. Berlin: Insel Verlag, 2022.

Christina Brüning, professor of history education at the University of Marburg. Studied in Berlin, doctorate on Holocaust education and online archives with survivor testimonies. Research on political education, gender studies, postcolonial theory and countering antisemitism in teacher education. Multiple awards for innovative teacher education, together with Susann Gessner. Directed a study on beta-testing the first German-language interactive testimony from the USC Shoah Foundation together with Sanna Stegmaier, 2024.