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One Step Beyond the Screen and Web**

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AUGMENTING THE VOICE OF ORAL HISTORY ONE STEP BEYOND THE SCREEN AND WEB

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The history telling that is oral history has limitations. The depth of detail found within individual stories can be limited by the research vessel, that is, the oral historian. The rapport between the interviewer and narrator may be stronger in one pair of partners than another, or a narrator or interviewer, however prepared for the interview may have an off day. Interviewers must be grounded both historically and theoretically to best engage in the active listening of the successful oral history interview, seeking small asides or seeming diversions which can subtly indicate areas the narrator wishes to open up to exploration. An untrained middle school student will gather a much different interview than a practiced oral historian or an experienced documentary filmmaker. The interview transcript and source audio/video offers its own unique set of problems, unrelated to the quality or depth of the interview. The transferral of what was an aural record into text presents issues with translation and interpretation: the tone of voice which indicates laughter, sadness, or sarcasm disappears in the textual artifact that is the transcript (Borland 1991; Portelli 1998).

A multimedia translation of the oral history in-

terview is one way to bridge that divide. Presenting the interview in the narrator's own voice avoids the translation issues found in a textual document. It offers both an aural and visual performance of the interview for the oral history audience. The multimedia project, depending upon its format, can also offer supplemental artifacts which can help the audience member to better understand the story and visualize it in his or her brain. Personal photographs, home movies, souvenirs and, of course, professionally-shot photographs or film don't supplant traditional academic analysis, but rather supplement it: an additional powerful venue for the story to become a part of the audience member's *mémoire involuntaire*, the stories which become lodged in our brain and create memories (Benjamin 1969).

This essay will use a specific case study from *Homefront Heroines: The WAVES of World War II* to investigate the various levels of translation which take place as a project moves from the unpublished oral history narration to a multi-platform (film, web, smartphone/tablet) public humanities publication. Through an exploration of the filmmaker's motivations, goals and shifting decisions, it offers an insight into the production

process and the choices which happen as a multimedia project evolves.

A “Platform Agnostic” Approach

While not necessarily a new concept (the term “platform agnostic” has been rumbling around the news industry since at least 2008, see Barr 2011), public humanities projects often don’t take full advantage of the creative potential of the merger of film and web technologies. The concept refers to media organizations, generally in news, who push content to a variety of formats and applications: print, television, web, smart phones/tablets (iPhone, Android, Blackberry), and social media (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.). It is a twist of a computing notion, where developers would produce products which could work across systems (a desktop management system which can run various operating systems, for instance, see Kennedy 2007).

This development poses challenges for documentary producers. In the past when a film like *Hoop Dreams* (1994) would experiment with multi-platform presentations, it would be in formats which were related to one another: *Hoop Dreams* was first released as a feature film, followed by VHS and cable television distribution. By contrast, the 2011 Academy Award-winning best documentary *Inside Job* had a theater and DVD release, but also offered audience members a digital download, a Facebook fan community, a detailed interactive website (including a link for “what can you do?” linking to the Facebook page and a larger community), and an option to share information about the film on a variety of sources such as email, Facebook, Twitter, Google Buzz, Yahoo, MySpace, Digg, StumbleUpon and Delicious (Sony Picture Classics 2010). The film was distributed by Sony Picture Classics, a division of Japanese media conglomerate Sony.

Homefront Heroines, an independent project lacking the backing of a multi-national corporation like Sony, was initially conceived as a multimedia project. It began as an oral history-based disserta-

tion in 2006,¹ with an eye toward an eventual documentary film and website. This isn’t simply a creative choice, but an imperative within the very structure of oral history. It is, as Ronald Grele notes, history telling, with the implication that the interviews shared would inform and transform the historical record (Grele 2006). Oral history, with its interviews with those excluded from the traditional narrative, is a method of recovering history, with an imperative that the history be told in a public forum beyond the archive (Okhiro 1996, 209. In this case, the public forum would be a multimedia project.

This choice opens up doors not available to the film- or video-based project. This is largely due to the temporal constraints of the documentary format. While it would be physically possible to create a film featuring all 52 women interviewed specifically for this project, the resulting project would demand a running time that would tax the patience of even the most passionate audience. When audio archival interviews with officers who died before the project was begun and a half dozen or so experts to provide historical and cultural context are added, the end project would likely be virtually unwatchable. So choices needed to be made.

The documentary film features original interviews with just nine WAVES, three archival audio interviews and four experts. A handful of short quotes from other WAVES interviewed appear in selected spots of the film as a Greek chorus of sorts, adding the “everywoman” perspective.

So what to do with those 44 women who were largely excised from the final film? The multimedia aspects of the project offer a home for their stories. They are prominently featured on the project website. Their stories are shared via the project Facebook page and YouTube channels, and promoted via our project blog (see

¹ The author interviewed 50 women for the original research between 2006 and 2008. An additional two women were added when the multimedia project began production in 2009. The women were found through the organization for female sea services veterans, WAVES National, and came from all parts of the country.

www.homefromtheroines.com,
www.hingesofhistory.com,
www.facebook.com/homefromtheroines.thewavesofwwiiv
www.youtube.com/taylorcatproductions,
<http://pinterest.com/hingesofhistory/waves-wwii/>, or the
 Twitter handle HmefrntHeroines). And even in the
 film, where their voices are largely absent, their
 perspectives and insights have shaped the film's fi-
 nal content, laying the groundwork for what would
 become the *Homefront Heroines* script and edited
 film.

Good Talkers, Unverifiable Stories

This particular project has been blessed with what
 in the world of television and documentary are de-
 scribed as "good talkers": women who could articu-
 latedly and vividly describe their experiences and
 provide insights. Borrowing from Michael Ra-
 binger, these women are "ordinary people living
 extraordinary lives" (Rabinger 2009, 476), who had
 the personal fortitude to share their story via a ca-
 mera for a documentary film. While the academic
 world might be find interest in trouble spots within
 an interview, from a dodged question to misunder-
 stood concepts (Portelli 1992, 26), in a documen-
 tary those trouble spots can detract from the final
 project. Instead, an ideal film subject is one who
 can speak articulately and confidently. Margaret
 was one of those talkers, eager, as she jokingly told
 me, for the film portion of the project to transform
 her into a "movie star." Margaret served as a yeo-
 man while in the Navy WAVES, or Women Ac-
 cepted for Volunteer Emergency Service. She was
 based in San Francisco during World War II and
 later wrote a self-published thinly-veiled fictional
 book based on on her Navy experiences. She felt,
 perhaps more strongly than any other woman I in-
 terviewed, that time was running out for the
 WAVES to tell their story. In Margaret's oral his-
 tory narrative there was a tension, which would be
 echoed by other women, between the reality of her
 military work and her conviction that the Navy
 WAVES played an important role in World War II.
 Margaret initially says that her work wasn't all that
 important, expressing disdain for her military job
 and assignment:

It was kind of a disappointment if you want to
 know the truth. I was stationed at the federal
 office building in downtown San Francisco.
 We lived in apartments like civilians. We
 didn't live in barracks or anything like that.
 We were free to come and go as we liked to.
 We lived the life of Riley. The job was too
 mediocre for me. I would have liked to been
 assigned something more thrilling but I was
 back in supply where it was all paperwork.

Margaret points out specifics of place which
 made her job so disappointing. They didn't live
 in barracks, with the restrictions of living under
 military authority, but were free to come and go
 as they pleased.

In other words, her experience of military
 space didn't fit with her preconceptions of it.
 Tim Edensor discusses the nature of "purified
 space," which has certain expected conformities
 and characteristics. Something which is "out-of-
 place" in such a space stands out as not belong-
 ing to the larger group. For Margaret, the puri-
 fied space of the military included wearing a
 uniform, living in barracks and following mili-
 tary rules. Part of Margaret's disappointment
 with her military experience is that it wasn't
 military enough: she lived in an apartment and
 had "the life of Riley." Her experience didn't
 conform with her sense of what the military
 space meant.

Compounding this, Margaret worked in a job
 which she felt was "mediocre." It, too, failed to
 live up to her expectations. So she had to look
 outside the workplace for the genuine military
 experience:

I think probably on interesting moment was
 we got to go out on the USS Missouri battle-
 ship before it got sent into the Pacific. A bus-
 load of us were taken out so we could tour the
 ship.

Margaret doesn't have photographs of herself
 aboard the USS Missouri. However, many
 groups of WAVES were taken aboard various
 ships for goodwill tours. The Navy Historical

Center's online art exhibit shows one group of WAVES dressed in their summer seersucker uniforms, touring aboard the USS Missouri when it was docked on the East Coast participating in its shakedown cruise (practice sailings where the ship's seaworthiness is tested). It's entirely possible that Margaret was a part of a similar tour group during the ship's final fittings in San Francisco in November and December of 1944.

Her story continues, moving into territory which is completely unverifiable.

I was on the deck and there were two seamen who were painting the deck gray. One of them handed me the paintbrush and said, "Here, paint some of this for luck." I said, "Sure" and ran it back and forth for several boards and I said, "OK, the USS Missouri will be the luckiest ship on the fleet." And it was, because it was where the surrender was signed with Japan.

Margaret's story inserts her directly and dramatically into history. The insertion is fascinating on a variety of levels. Repeatedly in military histories, it is mentioned naval men of the era embraced an age-old superstition, believing it was unlucky for women to be aboard ships. Yet Margaret says these two sailors not only asked her to paint the ship, but to paint it for luck, which in the retelling is done with a flourish that invites comparison with a papal blessing of an audience. Through her blessing, she foretells the ship's role in the ending of the war.

This isn't the end of the story, however. Margaret has linked herself to the peace treaty with Japan, but as a storyteller she wants reinforce to the listener that her personal role in the war was important:

Years later I came back and went on a tour of the ship. Where they signed the treaty on the ship and put the plaque was where I painted. The officer made a point to show it to me. It was kind of eerie and strange but it happened.

Not only did Margaret bring the ship luck, but the peace treaty was signed at the very spot where she brushed on a few strokes of paint on the deck. Far from being unlucky, her presence on the USS Mis-

souri brought luck to the sailors aboard, the country, and even, in the eyes of her generation, the entire civilized world.

This isn't the only tale which Margaret tells to position herself in history. She also says she witnessed the ceremony which gave birth to the United Nations. A treaty establishing the U.N. was signed in San Francisco in 1945, and Margaret recalls being one of a handful of people to get tickets to the event and to be in the room as the treaty was signed. Again, she has no memorabilia or anything to verify her presence, other than her memory.

What is the documentarian to make of this? Oral historian Alessandro Portelli describes a transformation of place and time in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, where a community's memory of an event relocated the killing of a worker four years later from when it actually occurred (as verified by newspaper coverage). Portelli used this event to demonstrate how errors in memory, or even willful misremembering, offer telling clues about an individual's sense of self and a group's collective identity (Portelli 1992, 26). In his argument, the truth of the story was less important than trying to understand why the story was being told. The oral historian could act as a curator of sorts, looking at numerous interviews and helping the audience to understand what the interviews meant as a whole.

Margaret's memories position her as a historical actor, demonstrating the importance of the work of the WAVES. Her memories, and the way she chooses to tell them, thus serve to counter the initial statement that they didn't do "anything important." Margaret uses her memories to actively work against what she saw as the monotony and boredom of her military job, and to demonstrate that the women were a crucial and necessary part of the World War II military structure. Without them the war wouldn't have turned out the same way. Other women offer a similar narrative structure (initially saying they did "nothing important" but later offering stories to counter that contention), but their individual stories largely lack the drama of Margaret's.

The oral history analysis provides a space for

this sort of interpretation.² That's not the case for a documentary film, which needs has a grounding the the truth of human experience. Rabiger (2009) defines the documentary as non-fiction storytelling with an organized story, characters and narrative tension, and a socially critical approach, i.e. raising awareness about an issue or demonstrating human values. Above all, the documentary is grounded in reality, a "portrait of real life, using real life as ... raw material, constructed by artists and technicians who make myriad decisions about what to tell to whom, and for what purpose" (Aufderheide 2007, 2).

So initially, as a filmmaker I opted to extract this memory from the film because of the lack of evidence to support it. If there were a photo of Margaret aboard the ship, or even a pass saved in her scrapbook to commemorate the visit my decision might have been different. But without those elements, I feared subjecting Margaret to at the very least questioning, and at worst public ridicule. She could seem like a fabulist, making up stories and appearing Forrest Gump-like in history as a way to aggrandize her own importance. The insight that can be provided within an academic analysis, explaining how the story, even if false, offers insights into the WAVES as a group, seemed to have no place in a documentary film.

Re-evaluating the Decision

I found other, more subtle ways to insert Margaret's contention that the WAVES were important into the film. One could argue that the whole project makes this argument, but within it I demonstrate the scope of their work: aside from yeomen and storekeepers (bookkeepers), WAVES trained pilots and gunners, decoded enemy messages in Naval intelligence, work in air traffic control, and developed sophisticated systems for forecasting weather. I used a story repeated frequently among WAVE officer oral histories, about the male commander who was initially incensed about being assigned a woman and who by the end of the war was wondering why he was being assigned men instead of WAVES. I

² For an analysis of how WAVES use their oral histories to position themselves within the historical record see:

found photographs and films which demonstrate the varied and important work the women were doing. This I felt offered the balance necessary: the removal of the "unproven" story while still including information which would convey what the story illustrated about the work of the WAVES.

But several filmmaking colleagues questioned why I removed Margaret's story for one key reason: it's a good story. It has passion. It's memorable. This specific story, in fact, is one of the reasons why I interviewed Margaret initially. Not only is it a good story, Margaret's telling of it has remained consistent since I first heard it in 2006. We've done five interviews to date, and in each one, she tells the story in a similar way. Minor details may change, but her telling of her experience aboard the U.S.S. Missouri has not.

Over winter and spring of 2011, my producer and I were working on a new version of the documentary script. At the same time, we were reading Laura Hildebrand's *Unbroken*. The story tells the tale of Louis Zamperini, a crew member of an Army Air Forces bomber that was shot down over the Pacific during World War II. Zamperini survived sharks, starvation, thousands of miles of open ocean in a life raft and a Japanese P.O.W. camp after the plane went down. The story begins with Zamperini and two of his crewmates adrift in a life raft. They hear a sound: pistons indicating the approach of a plane. Rescue was on its way:

Zamperini saw the profile of the crewmen, dark against the bright blueness. There was a terrific roaring sound. The water, and the rafts themselves, seemed to boil. It was machine gun fire. This was not an American rescue plane. It was a Japanese bomber. The men pitched themselves into the water and hung together under the rafts . . . Somewhere beneath . . . the sharks were done waiting. They bent their bodies in the water and swam toward the (men) under the raft (Hildebrand 2010, xviii).

"We need a story like this to start our film," my

producer told me. “ We need to grab the audience at the top. What do we have that I can put there?”

This was a challenge. For starters, there were no dramatic rescues or heroic battle actions that the WAVES faced. They weren’t on the front lines; their story is partially about the minutiae of the everyday, the nuts and bolts work necessary for military operations to happen. The women were speaking not to say that they made heroic efforts on the battlefield, but rather to say that their seemingly everyday and mundane work was vital to the war effort. And then I remembered Margaret’s story. I asked my producer what he thought about us using Margaret’s memory about the U.S.S. Missouri. We went back and forth for several days, weighing the pros and cons. And in the end we decided it was what we needed to start our script.

But this choice meant that we would need to carefully structure the film so as to not open up Margaret to any potential ridicule. We decided Margaret’s story would bookend the film. It would first appear at the beginning of the first act, before the title, where we would introduce Margaret’s story poetically, portraying her as a young WAVE who “with a flick of her wrist would change history.” The story would only be told in memory using the Navy photographs described above; we would never see her aboard the ship (see Video 1). The second time would be at the end of the film, at the beginning of Act Three, the section of the film which discusses the WAVES’ legacy. This time the story would be told from the deck of the U.S.S. Missouri. We would take Margaret back to the ship, now docked in Pearl Harbor, and let her show us where the fateful painting took place.

Video 1: Margaret Thorngate describes her experiences aboard the USS Missouri at the beginning of the film *Homefront Heroines* (Ryan, 2012).

Shooting took place in summer 2011. As Margaret boarded the ship, she was on a focused mission. My producer and our ship escorts could barely keep up with the nearly 90-year-old woman as she walked from stem to stern looking for the spots she remembered.

Philosopher Edward Casey talks about the im-

portance of space with both identity and memory. He dubs the concept *implacement*. It is characterized by specificity. “It is occasion-bound; or, more exactly, it binds actual occasions into unique collocations of space and time,” he writes. “It is to be somewhere in particular: a peculiar somewhere in space that situates the ‘somewhen’ in time. Whereabouts pin down whenabouts” (Casey 1993, 23, emphasis included). In the transitory nature of the contemporary world, he argues, we often lose these places and pine for their return.

Margaret’s actions aboard the ship demonstrate this *implacement* in action. The ship, for years off limits to civilians and even in its contemporary iteration as a museum physically separated from Margaret by a 3000-mile expanse of the Pacific Ocean, is one of these lost places. Upon her return to the U.S.S. Missouri, Margaret became a woman on a mission (see Video 2). She was determined to demonstrate to us exactly where her memory took place. She first found a section of the deck partially covered by a large overhang. She stopped, and recalled:

We had been touring the ship and it was about time to leave, and I came out here waiting for the group. And I saw these sailors over here and I wondered what they were doing. So I walked through here and they looked kind of cute, so I saw that they were painting the deck. Battleship grey. I don’t think they do that now. But when I got to about here I got talking to them, and one of them said, “How would you like to paint the ship for luck?”

As Margaret spoke, she walked us through the overhang, pausing a short distance from to the section of the ship where the plaque for the peace treaty was located. Finally, she walked over to the plaque, and read aloud the words commemorating the surrender with Japan, ending World War II.

This physical placement (of Margaret aboard the ship) not only helped to erase her personal quest for a lost space: it also enriched the story for the audience. By seeing Margaret on board

the ship, it offered evidence not present in her other interviews. She wasn't looking for the spot of the peace treaty plaque; she was looking for the specific location where she flirted with young sailors almost 90 years ago. The specificity of her memories and the missile-like focus she showed while trying to find the exact spot demonstrated that this wasn't her first visit to the Missouri. Instead, she was mining the depths of her memories to reclaim a part of her history, and demonstrate what happened and where.

Video 2: Margaret Thorngate visits the USS Missouri in Pearl Harbor, HI, in the last section of the film *Homefront Heroines* (Ryan, 2012).

Story "Place"ment

Oral history demands that the narratives need to be placed within the historical record, available for public consumption. The traditional method of doing this has been the book, with more "adventurous" oral historians opting for film, audio projects or even online archives (see Hardy and Portelli 1999, Field 1980, Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media and others 2011). Each of these endeavors is undoubtedly public, with often multiple points of access (film, dvd, web, etc.). But they still require an effort on the part of the audience, who is forced to seek out the output in some way (turning on a specific channel at a specific time, going to a theater, renting/purchasing a dvd, logging onto a web page).

But what if that model were transformed? New applications in smartphone technology offer a way to bring the story to the audience. Our project has been experimenting with a storytelling platform called TagWhat. The app (downloadable as an app for Android, Blackberry and iPhone devices) is kind of like a smartphone version of cable television, with a variety of channels on specific topics (sports, arts, history, etc.; see www.tagwhat.com). Individual stories are geotagged with specific locations, placing the stories virtually on a map. When a TagWhat user approaches a tagged location, the smartphone sends out a notification and the content is virtually pushed to the user (see Figure 1).

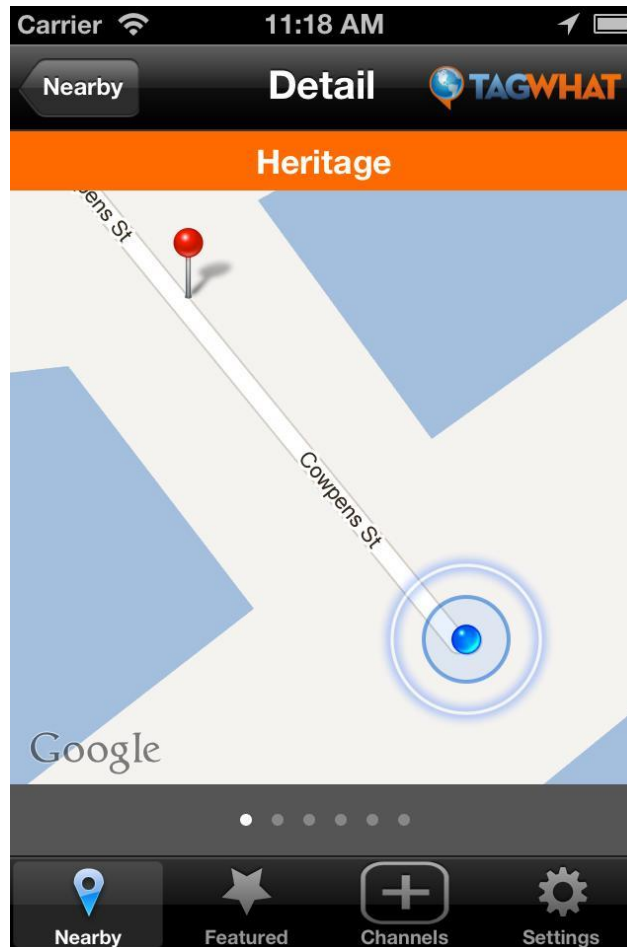


Figure 1: TagWhat notification signal that a tag is nearby; this one shows that a tag is at the location of the USS Missouri in Pearl Harbor, HI.

Wright and Hanson discuss the impact of social media on the publicity process, arguing that blogs and other user-generated content allow social media producers to become "opinion leaders" (borrowing from Lazarsfeld), facilitating two-way communication, encouraging "talk-back" from the audience, and allowing a space for minority viewpoints (Wright and Hinson, 2008). These platforms, as they note, "put the public back in public relations," offering real-time, often instant, two-way communications between practitioners and stakeholders (Wright and Hinson 2008, 19). TagWhat offers a new twist on this communication evolution. Not only is there two way communication, but the message

is literally placed within the publish sphere at the specific place where the event occurred.



Figure 2: Launch page for the TagWhat USS Missouri tag about the U.S. Navy WAVES.

This virtual placement of archival artifacts at a physical site transforms the notion of emplacement. What was initially described as an internalized and abstract sense of “having been there,” through geo-location morphs into the literal. The audience member sees the story at the location where it took place, becoming as much a part of the sense of place and “somewhen in time” as Margaret is.

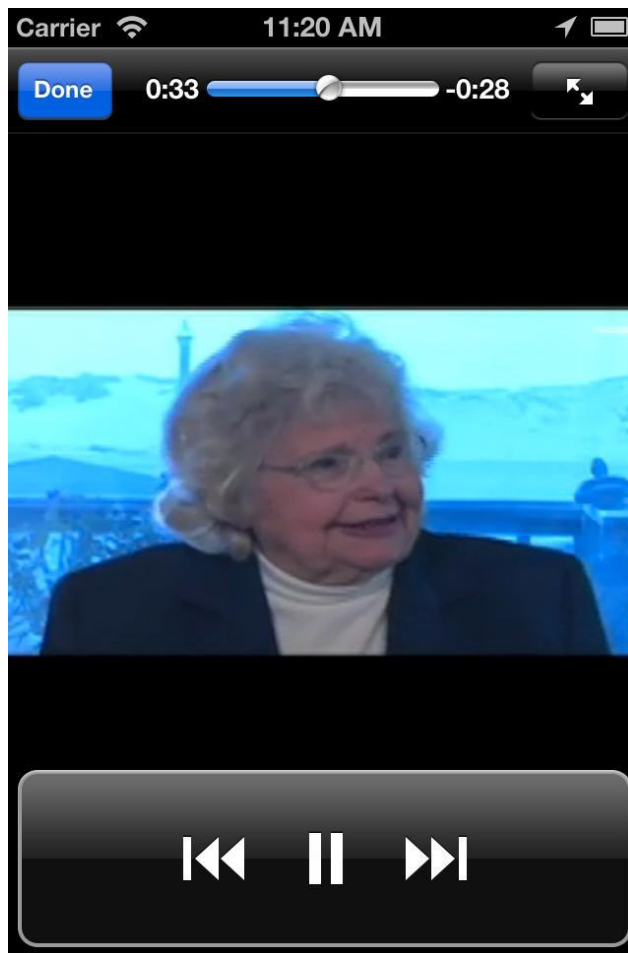


Figure 3: Video clip embedded in the TagWhat page, showing interview with Margaret about her experiences aboard the USS Missouri.

One Step Beyond

This storytelling transformation has the potential to be intensely unsettling for traditional media makers. Consider the trajectory of the news industry, whose embrace of a platform agnostic approach only came after it realized that the web (and later social media and smartphones) didn't post a threat to the industry, but rather offered news outlets another potential audience who largely ignored television or newspaper output. And while many documentary producers offer free streaming of films after an initial broadcast or cinema run, those sources are only scratching the surface of the potential of platform agnostic production (see <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/women-war-and-peace/>).

<http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/prohibition/>).



Japan Agrees to Peace

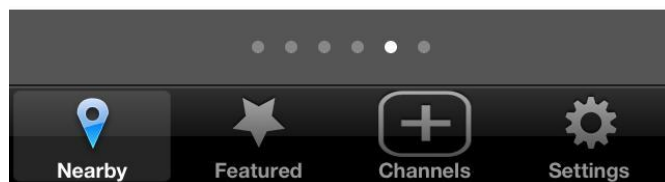


Figure 4: Photo page for the TagWhat USS Missouri tag about the U.S. Navy WAVES.

The film is still fetishized as the ultimate end product; other elements are merely supplements to that film.

Rather than making the platform fit the project, oral historians should consider how to transform the project to fit the platform. These experiments with multi-platform storytelling offer one way for scholars to leave a trace of their research with the audience - and in turn expect each audience member leave a trace of self behind in return. That is the true promise of a platform agnostic approach. The multitude of new and old media platforms offers a multitude of new storytelling options, allowing the filmmaker to enrich the story and not fret as much

about key elements which make it to the proverbial cutting room floor. By offering the audience multiple entry points, the oral historian can ensure that the project moves beyond a speciality audience and accesses hidden populations engaged by a project's topic, storytelling style, or location. Moving one step beyond the traditional ultimately provides a way to deepen and enrich the story being told.

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