

ABSTRACT

Codified Historical Method and Automated Life-Story Tools

Building a rubric to compare human oral history practice with Automated Biographical Elicitation and Re-tell (ABER) ·

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The history profession has reacted to the rise of AI by expressing a mix of admiration for its research potential and a deep concern that AI interpretation will rewrite history, literally. Social historians, and oral historians in particular, sit closest to this impact, because commercial tools now collect the ordinary lives these disciplines illuminate. Living-memoir platforms such as StoryWorth, Remonto, Autobiographer, and new applications for Ancestry use algorithmic question protocols or conversational AI to elicit an older adult's reminiscences, then reformulate them into an audience-sensitive narrative. I call this two-stage process Automated Biographical Elicitation and Re-tell (ABER) and describe its product as auto-autobiography. Commercially viable ABER substitutes for labor once performed by families themselves or, in disciplined form, by oral historians. The tools are cheap and tireless, lowering the cost of later-life review and potentially benefiting older adults and the families who inherit their stories. Why then do oral historians balk?

The broader question is how these tools differ from the parallel work of historians. Vendors and consumers alike call the product history. But historical inquiry, despite considerable internal debate about its actual methods, points toward specific ethics, values, and practices. My work seeks to codify each, develop the language in rubric form, to facilitate useful comparison of ABER and human-conducted practice.

That comparison is not straightforward. Prior to the development of commercial AI models, the history profession engaged in at least three relevant modern efforts to identify and define what makes its inquiry unique (NCHS 1996; AHA 2016; OHA 2018). These projects served differing purposes, from school standards to degree-program outcomes to practitioner guidance, and none was written to be compared against the new technology. The AHA's 2025 principles on AI address history education, not the elicitation of life stories. This project revisits the earlier efforts alongside

the language used by computer scientists designing systems for elicitation and re-telling, situating the two vocabularies in a form that can be shared and facilitating comparative evaluation. I then use the OHA's guidance on interview follow-up questioning, warning against superficial responses and naming candor as an ethical and methodological outcome, to assess rubric language.

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