PixStori: Digital Talking Pictures for a remote, photo-prompted and short oral history

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ABSTRACT: This research paper describes a hands-on experimentation with a mobile application for capturing "talking pictures" – the PixStori app – on historical research. The reflections are presented from the standpoint of a Digital Public History practitioner interested on the empirical and epistemological implications of the extensive use of technology in digital scholarship. The author shares a self-reflexive account on the experiment conducted during her research on Italian and Portuguese migrant memories in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. She argues for an exploration of a different modality of oral history by implementing the use of this app for gathering remote, photo-prompted and short oral history.
KEYWORDS: Oral History, Digital Public History, Memories, PixStori, Technology, Digital Scholarship

I.   INTRODUCTION

History, as we know, has happened in many different forms, but for a long time, the verbocentric narratives have been predominating, whereas in the written form, whereas in the spoken version. However, it is true that in the scientific realms of the discipline, the written word got a privileged role. It took a while for Oral History to acquire reliability among historians as a valid form of evidence or a trustable way to present history. It has also been introduced to the toolbox of colleagues from other areas of study, but within History, it had to – and still has, to some extent – to prove itself as a valuable resource for the "Making of History". And also, a "good enough" form to contest the almost unique command of written texts in the historio-*graphy*.[1]

The developments and controversies of this process have been discussed for almost 20 years now at international forums, conferences and workshops. This contribution, in its turn, will focus on the shift between written and spoken words and new possibilities brought by the digital age. For some years now, the continuous technological development has presented new recording gadgets and editing software that are ready to help historians to explore new ways to grasp and save for research use as much as possible of what happens in an interview setting. There are binaural microphones and 360º microphones that help to record conversations where video might not be available or not enough to capture the whole soundscape, sometimes so important to the context of the interview; the case, for instance, in methods like walking ethnography. The myriad of new recording technologies is challenging oral historians to re-imagine how to grasp and save (for future research use) what both orality and aurality bring to the historiographical operation. There are many issues to be explored on how image and sound recording can help historians on the matter. However, the following points of reflection will concentrate efforts on a specific and still under-explored aspect of Oral History practice itself. This text will briefly discuss recording equipment and techniques, but its core attention is on the recording/interviewing fashion, format and timing; the interviewing approach as a whole, from long to short form.

To develop the above-mentioned reflections, in the next pages, I will bring some reflections on the introduction to the app PixStori on a historian's toolbox. PixStori[2] is a mobile

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[1] This article has been written inspired by my hands-on experience with the app PixStori in my PhD research, first publicly shared in my participation at the panel *"Mosaic Oral History": Mobile Apps, Social Media, and Photo-prompted Alternatives to*

Long-Form Oral History Interviews, organised by Michael Frisch, in the XIXth International Oral History Conference (IOHA), held in 2016 in Bangalore, India.
[2] Available on Apple Store for iOS devices and, since 2018, a cloud-based platform, available on:

application developed by the oral historian Michael Frisch that allows users to create 'talking pictures' combining still photographs and audio recordings. After a few years of experimenting and reflecting on the use of the app for research proposal, Frisch argues for a new modality of oral history:

I have come to think of this as "Short Form Oral History," or even "Mosaic Oral History": this is the idea, as in a mosaic, that a broader story can be composed of very small "tiles" – in this case, tiles of memory, story, and reflection. (Frisch, 2020:309)

I was one of the Brazilian scholars who tested the app during its beta phase in the first years (2013-2014) of its development and, later on, experimented with it during my PhD research on migration memories in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. At the end of my PhD, the use of PixStori remained an isolated experiment due to a delay in the release of the app on other platforms than iOS (for iPhone and iPads); this limitation, however, does not invalidate the valid insights it generated in my research. Despite being based on a specific case study, Pixtori'sfeatures can undoubtedly be helpful and eye-opening for other researchers and their contexts. To demonstrate it, I will discuss how it changed my research in its questions, method and what I expected from its findings. Firstly, I will briefly describe my subject of research and explain why and how I decide to use such a mobile application in my research plan and practice.

II.   RESEARCH AND CONTEXT

My doctoral research was based on a digital public history project on Portuguese and Italian migration in Luxembourg which allow me to experiment with dozens of tools to set up a user-friendly crowdsourcing mechanism[3]. After some tests, the final concept and layout of the project assumed its shape with the active participation of migrant individuals as well as collaboration from the "computation experts" (designers and developers) who helped me to create the *Memorecord* platform – the mechanism and hub for the crowdsourced

material[4]. One of the priorities of the call for applications for the grant I got, was exactly the innovative aspect of the project, which for me was decisive in my moving from Brazil (my home country) to Luxembourg. I went to Luxembourg looking for the opportunity to experiment with tools and methods for digital scholarship; the playful, experimental aspect of my research was precisely what I was missing outside the "laboratory" atmosphere I met in Luxembourg. Although the historical subject of migration is far from being an original theme in the Grand Duchy, the methodological and theoretical framework to approach the memory of Italian and Portuguese migrants in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg had never been tested.

From the end of the 19th century to the present day, the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg has experienced large-scale immigration, with waves of different nationalities moving in across the time for diverse reasons and in diverse circumstances. With an extraordinary history of immigration, a very singular multicultural society emerged. In 2015, when I started my PhD, from a total population of 562,958 individuals, 258,679 were non-Luxembourgish residents, representing 45,9% of its population (Statec; Cefis, 2015)[5]. Among the top 5 foreign nationalities in the country, only Portugal and Italy are non-borderer countries (the others are France, Belgium and Germany), being Portugal the "biggest nation inside Luxembourg" (as I have heard from many Portuguese), with more than 90.000 inhabitants, and Italy, the third one, behind France, with more than 18.000.

This scenario makes Luxembourg the member with the highest proportion of migrants in the European Union. The country officially advertises its pride in being home to over 160 nationalities which cohabit in a 'harmonious' way (Hausemer 2008). Such a 'success story' of immigration (Fetzer 2011) and this particular society – multilingual, multifaceted and (apparently)

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[4] Memorecord – harvesting memories – available on https://memorecord.uni.lu. Last Access on 22 April 2022.

[5] Lëtzebuerg, 100%. Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques du Grand-Duché de Luxembourg; Centre d'étude de formation interculturelles et sociales, Luxembourg. 2015. Available here: http://cefis.lu/resources/Luxembourg-2015.pdf Last Access on 22 April 2022.

largely tolerant – fed the historical investigation I conducted in Luxembourg, at the crossroads of migration studies, digital public history and oral history.

Bearing in mind this context, the research objectives of my PhD were twofold: (1) To analyse the migration narratives of Italian and Portuguese migrants in Luxembourg from a 'history from below' standpoint (Thompson, 1964), and to perform a historical comparison between them; (2) To investigate, as a self-reflexive practise, the value of a methodology based on digital history and public history procedures, which comprises the use of new methodologies and technological operators to gather, criticise, and present historical sources.

Firstly, in bringing this subject to be analysed from the Digital History framework, I wanted to test the application of digital technologies in History, collating oral, digitaland public history methods and concepts with the current state of the art of migration studies in Luxembourg. Secondly, migration is not only a subject with high relevance to the Luxembourg nation-state but also a matter of master importance at a local, popular level. Following these research objectives, I experimented with tools and methods to prove their effectiveness to answer and create new questions, as well as raising concerns on new kinds of issues that would not arise otherwise. The epistemological character of the was perfectly fitting and a timely connection with C²DH's Digital History Hermeneutics doctoral training unity.

Therefore, by way of experimentation, one of the main outcomes of my doctoral project, besides the PhD thesis itself, was the shaping, together with the interested community, of what came to be the Memorecord platform – a platform for digital storytelling on migration in Luxembourg, aiming at sharing memories of different generations and communities online. The process of building and running this platform as an example of doing digital public history with the means of digital tools and technologies was the central empirical challenge of this project. The participatory design principle oriented the conceptualization of the platform, allowing me to test tools and strategies for actively engaging the public with the object of study; procedures which were inspired throughout the whole research process by the concept of *shared authority* (Frisch,1990). And here is where the PixStori mobile app became a structural part of my research plan.

III.   WHY USE PIXSTORI?

Surpassing official discourses about migration and the immigrant presence in Luxembourg implies a search for alternative sources. After a first explanatory search at the main archives in Luxembourg, I identified that the sources available would not be of much help for my intent to retrace migrant's narratives and look for something capable of giving me clues about their everyday lives across time. To access people's memories, and try to give them a historical interpretation, detached from the main narratives that resonate, more or less, with the account of national cohesion, I needed to look beyond what is on the boxes and shelves at archives and libraries. The question is not about refuting the discourse of the harmonious "living together", but to subvert the dominance of an established narrative, by adding new sources and introducing new narrators, looking for other perspectives. And, doing so, offering an alternative by taking into consideration aspects that have been left out in other interpretations. It is worthy to note that the majority of studies available are still deeply marked by ethnic and economic interpretations of the subject, with a remarkable influence of demography in the historiography itself. (Scuto, 2008)

Therefore, I decided to make use of three different sources of information, and oral history became one of the main components of my methodology: (1) the first-hand accounts of and/or interviews with Italian and Portuguese community members; (2) crowdsourced memories, captured online; and (3) to contrast the "subjective" narratives on migration to Luxembourg with more "objective" accounts, I will also look at European statistics available for Luxembourg (e.g. Statec, Eurostat, Eurobarometer and European Social Survey).

For the public history intent of this project, the core aspect of the sources selection was not exactly their category, but the fact that those could be interpreted as egodocuments. The process to get them [egodocuments] presupposes a different approach to the subject of study itself, as long as this kind of sources, "in which the researcher is faced with the 'I' (…)" (Dekker, 2002:14), is pretty subject-centred materials. In the initial definitions of egodocuments – according to Jacques Presser, who coined the neologism – autobiographies, memoirs, diaries and letters were the privileged forms of this type of document, and those were the types of texts he was interested in. He was highly interested in them because of their peculiar way to give access to the "Self" of a narrator, egodocuments, for him were "those documents in which an ego deliberately or

accidentally discloses or hides itself" (Presser *apud* Dekker, 2002:14), and it could be an interesting critical element for historians.

Those egodocuments, Rudolf Dekker observes, generally make the general public feel "close to the past" when reading them. And even if "that remains an illusion to the eyes of most historians, it is an important function of egodocuments" (Dekker, 2002:37). Despite the controversial character of this assumption, it retains a value for the public history approach. In my project, for instance, I explored it in relation to the community of migrants itself and the broader general public to which this thesis could be of interest at some point then or in the future. Making use of PixStori I wanted to test the co-generation of what we could call *audiovisualegodocuments*. The special capacity of making people feel close to the past was very promising: considering the userrelation with past, memory and history, seeing the egodocument creation as a bridging process between them and their past; as well as considering the egodocument appeal for creating a general interest in the stories to be told, to approximate and sensitise other people to those migrants' narratives.

I understand it as *an audiovisualegodocument* because it was generated by the project participants themselves, and not by me, or with my present intervention, such as in a long-form oral history interview. Unlike other written, spontaneous egodocuments – letters, diaries etc. – the PixStories I intend to work with will not be the unintentional type of historical source. Participation was motivated by my agency within the migrant community and, of course, was somehow framed by the shared imaginary of migration in the inner of each community, as well as at a national level. However, I saw in this mobile application an alternative way to dive into the world of those people, to enter their houses, to get to know parts of their life – objects, pictures, documents, places, persons [whatever element they would choose to tell a PixStori or a *talking picture* by the slogan of the app] – that I could not access in the same way in the long-form oral history interviews.

The possibility of letting the users of the app decide, freely, what they judge as important to be told was central for the research. So, even if the process was triggered by me and my contact with them in my fieldwork, I do believe there were specificities in this more autonomous form to go through oneself memories. For sure, my direct inquiry about what they think were elements available in contemporary life that could *link* them to the story of their move to Luxembourg would

influence their selections. But, this new kind of process can also be richly explored in unravelling the subject's agency.

IV.   HOW HAVE I PLANNED TO USE IT?

The working title of my research at the time I was experimenting with PixStory was *Shaping a digital memory platform on migration narratives: A public history project on Italian and Portuguese migration memories in Luxembourg.* As said before, the online platform was the core aspect of my experiment. The process of shaping it together with the community was decisive for the epistemological questions I had running in the background of the research. However, thinking about how to share their narratives I realised that making the oral history interviews available online would not be a simple task, and could bring some difficulties, related to the privacy of the engaged people.

At a certain point, I felt that interviewing people to share their whole account afterwards, publicly, could not be the best way to get in touch with them and let them feel comfortable to tell whatever they want and what they would be willing to share under the protection of anonymity. In certain cases, as the shared experience of oral historians has shown, the embarrassment and the restrictions of such a public exposition need to be overcome. However, after getting in touch with many people, I realised that simply going public online with entire long interviews could be too sensitive, especially in the specific case of the migration topic in Luxembourg for many reasons – shyness, social coercion, fear of exposing somebody else, etc.).

At this point, I thought that I would bring to the platform only more spontaneous and prompt forms of contributions and materials I could get in multimedia formats, separated from the moment of the long-form interviews I was carrying out. Another milestone in the development of my research was my involvement with the *Centerfor Documentation sur Les Migrations Humaines*[6] (CDMH) in the village of Dudelange. I became a volunteer collaborator of CDMH in October 2015. The activities I participated in at the *Centre Doc* were very important for the ongoing re-definitions of my research plan at the beginning of my PhD, as

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[6] The Documentation Centre for Human Migrations (CDMH) researches and organises exhibitions on the history of migrations, mainly in the context of Luxembourg and its neighbouring regions. http://cdmh.lu/ Last Access on 22 April 2022.

I could see first-hand how the relationship with the local community could be wholesome and decisive for the project. The CDMH was founded in 1995 and since then, it has been an important place of reunion and activities related to migration in Luxembourg, with an archive and a library, as well as exhibition rooms open to the public. It is a lively social space in Dudelange, a former steel industrial park, which attracted a strong immigration movement since the 19th Century. The vicinity and the close relation of the CDMH to the old *Usines*, as well as the *Quartier Italie*, and the people around, defined its aspiration to follow a *Museum Without Walls* philosophy, extending its activities over the surroundings and embracing the community.

Within some months in contact with the CDMH and its collaborators (other scholars, independent researchers, as well as ordinary people), I started to have a better understanding of what I had already found in literature: the key role of Dudelange in the immigration history of Luxembourg, but also realising how the village had become a sort of microcosm of what have happened in the migration (immigration and emigration) movements in the entire Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. At first, it received a great number of Italians (that is why we have the "Porte d'Italie", as well as the *Quartier*), and with time, it changed its population profile, receiving other immigrants until nowadays, when the majority of the population in the village as in the *Quartier Italie* itself is of Portuguese origins, being more heterogeneous than a century ago.

Then, in 2016 I started an open workshop called *RaccontezVotreHistoire* at the CDMH, welcoming migrants of all nationalities, every Saturday, for the whole year. In this workshop, people were invited to tell their life stories, with special attention to their migration experiences. That activity allowed me to have close contact with the community and, thanks to that, I could explain my research project and invite people to be involved in the experiment I conceived with the mobile app PixStori. Beyond those participants with whom I was conducting the long-form interviews, I proposed a crowdsourcing exercise with other individuals and families, which were invited to create, by themselves, a bunch of PixStories among their families (being free to choose to do it individually or collectively). They were invited to photograph anything available in their present life they retain as part of their migration memories and register on PixStori an audio comment on it. In other words, they were invited to create an audiovisualegodocument related to their story of moving to Luxembourg and/or other migration experiences they had before. The main subject of this PixStori, the photographed item and comment, did not receive any kind of restriction, as well as the length of the comments, was not limited. Thus, apart from the connection with the migration theme, participants were free to choose what they wanted to document in this *remote*, *photo-prompted* and *short* oral history mode.

The documented *thing* could be, for instance: a kind of enriched meta-document, a picture of a document (passport, renting contract, working papers) accompanied by an audio comment on it; or a picture of a picture, with the following audio on the characters or landscapes on it; it could be a personal object, like an old suitcase or some talisman which accompanied the person during the moving; places are also welcome, a special street, a house, a corner of a train station…wherever they felt like that had a connection with their past of moving. The same logic goes to the recorded audio, users could decide to record a song or a chat with someone about their old memories; it can also be a re-registration of a TV or radio program if perchance they have it and want to show and tell something about it.

The idea was to let the crowdsourcing run remotely while other initiatives of the project were being developed and implemented. My objective was to map, afterwards, the main types of elements they decided to share, to start a second stage of the experiment, classifying, accordingly to what they had shared, the possible types of PixStories to put online in a form of a collection of audiovisualegodocuments, with different possibilities of reading (i.e. personal objects, places, documents, songs etc.). Unfortunately, due to the technical limitations – the app being available only on iOS – I had to limit the experiment to a simple test to avoid creating bias in my collection. That is one of the reasons why, when we finally launched the open crowdsourcing campaign for Memorecord I did not request the use of PixStori, but let it open for people to share their memories on Instagram and Facebook; PixStori remained still an optional format.

PART OF CROWDSOURCING EXPERIMENT. PIXSTORI AS AN 'AUDIOVISUAL EGODOCUMENT'. PLAY ON: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PeAH-kkCTo&t=7s
PixStori recorded in Italian by Paola Cairo in the context of the Memorecord project.

In the example above, the journalist and Italian migrant, Paola Cairo, shares a picture of the PassaParola magazine – "the only Italian magazine dedicated to the Italian community in the Grand Duchy" – that she has created with her friend.

PART OF CROWDSOURCING EXPERIMENT. PIXSTORI AS AN 'AUDIOVISUAL EGODOCUMENT'. PLAY ON:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oxcgar0csl4
Pixstori recorded in Portuguese by Paulo Lobo in the context of the Memorecord project.

In the second example, the Portuguese migrant Paulo Lobo shared his memories of the old *Café du Cinéma*, which used to be next to an old cinema in the small town of Differdange. Today where it used to be the Cinema there is a gas station, but the coffee place was run by Portuguese owners, is still there, and reminds Lobo of his childhood when he used to go to the cinema with his brother. He shares that the "café" has a typical Portuguese ambience and, when there is good weather, people and kids are outside.

The two examples are simple and short, but they are powerful for two reasons. First, we have the input of their selection on the topic/theme they wanted to share something about. Secondly, we could agree that the content in their picture and recorded comment could never be brought up in a long-form interview. So, one can consider the possibility of meeting a surprise element in each new PixStori. Finally, this might be reason enough to experiment with this, since "part of the appeal of crowdsourced User Generated Content is finding something unexpected and new" (Lukyanenko et al. 2019, A10). Furthermore, as argued by public historian Serge Noiret, crowdsourcing and User Generated Content are the true *raison d'être* of Digital Public History (Noiret, 2022).

While those two were sharp examples of the short-form modality, there are still other possibilities in exploring the tool for slightly longer recordings too. Frisch has raised yet another interesting feature of PixStori in many circumstances at conferences and workshops given about the tool: the power of still photographs to elicit the storytelling. In the report, he wrote:

At its core is the notion that photographs, especially those that are chosen or taken by oneself, open a natural, open-ended story-telling oral history mode. People describe the photo, and then, "grounded but not bounded" by the image, they often "take off" to broad reflections. (Frisch, 2020:309)

A standing challenge at the end of the collection line was the analysis of all these audiovisualegodocuments, as well as the website activity (the crowdsourcing dynamic, the involvement of the public in commenting and sharing contents) and critics of it concerning my whole document corpora. For that purpose, I mobilised different interpretation techniques, combining those from the oral history practice, with an accurate digital source criticism (Fickers, 2012) in light of the contributions from the Public History field[7].

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[7] For more on the analysis process, see Lucchesi, Anita. *The historian's kitchen, or how to cook your memories?* In: "For a New Hermeneutics of Practice in Digital Public History: Thinkering with Memorecord.Uni.Lu." University of Luxembourg, Esch-sur-Alzette, Luxembourg, 2020. https://orbilu.uni.lu/handle/10993/45831.

V.   CONCLUSIONS

In the past century, history went "public", and gained, in some contexts, the controversial connotation of "applied history". Some decades later, it went "digital", overcoming a previous conception which restricted the use of computing technology only to the so-called, and criticised, "quantitative history". More recently, an increasingly technological development has brought us to the times of "digital culture", in which the changing technologies of memory, as well as the advent of the second generation of the World Wide Web (the Web 2.0, more open and interactive), have brought new rituals of memories, as well as a range of innovative forms of consuming and sharing history. Altogether, such a process, identified by some scholars as a "digital turn", has reshaped the means of approaching, generating, storing and sharing historical documentation and knowledge, reorganising the discipline of history towards more democratic ends (Noiret, Teabeau and Zaagsma, 2022).

This brief experience report on the hands-on experiment with participatory ways of gathering historical relevant material aimed to bring not only a reflection on the potentials of the shift from long-form oral history interviews to the short-forms and/or in a different format, made possible by PixStori, but also to propose a discussion on the heuristics value of looking at the specificity of the new Digital Public History practice to historiography. My attempt here was to argue that the technology we apply to historical methods is not *only* about machine work and displaying history online, as well as Public History does not mean the *sole* enlargement of audiences. I strongly believe that matching technology and participatory initiatives can favour the creation of different systems of collection and, hence, analysis for historical research, permeating all stages of the historiographical operation, since the conception of a problem/question, the source criticism, the writing process and the delivery of the resulted scholarship, the final presentation of it. What I believe is on point, is not a technological solutionism for historian's craft, but a search for some hybrid work, combining techniques and expertise from different areas, as well as for conjugation of our well-established know-how on the making of history accumulated in the "print era", our traditional skills and interpretation capacities with the potential of a diverse toolbox, making use of digital technologies.

Regarding this paper, for instance, thinking on the specific case of the audiovisualegodocuments/PixStories: we need to interrogate which are the contributions and the downsides of using this type of source in historical research. This sort of oral document, may sidestep the oral history established standards and help us to access another kind of fresh account, inviting us to grasp a portion of the past that can be differently presented in the selection, – the view – that people, as authors, decide to share. However, this is a *fragment* of something and can be immersed in fictional and passion tricks, typical of more literary and artistic forms of expression that can be confusing for historiography. But,PixStories, such as oral history interviews, at the same time, are present-centred and even if we can face some problems interpreting their content, they are still powerful means to get difficult access memories.

Therefore, why not take this model of remote, photo-prompted and short oral histories as an object of study elsewhere? In my case, for example, these audiovisualegodocumentshelped me to think about the public uses of the past, the multiple, plural types of historicity that diverse people experiment with across a wide range of material, which can connect them to the past, just as links to the past. But what about my colleagues working elsewhere on the history domains?

To conclude, I would like to think: If the past, as memory, comes to our mind not as a monolithic block, not as a unit, why should we only look for manners to access a whole account? What if we decide to free historiography from those exclusively *verbocentric* approaches and, at the same time, we ask Clio a little attention for those types of accounts that differ from the well-established humanist tradition of long texts, were they romances, treats or the classical though monographies? What if we decide to look after the fragments of remembrance, and the (apparently) disconnected, isolated pieces of stories, mixed stories in a network of other stories, as a subject to history? What if we decide to explore the random way that memories are stored the other way around, being playful with the irregular manners in which accounts can be exposed, accepting the unplanned way that stories, or parts of them, can be told? I hope to evoke some questioning exercises on such issues with these reflections, which came straightly from my doctoral studies and the experimental path toward what I found to be a new *hermeneutics of practice*, derived from the heuristics gesture of creative and playful experimentation, around the digital tools and methods. As argued in my thesis,

this specific hermeneutical approach may function as a *visibility broker*, assisting historians in the process of unveiling the unspoken and implicit aspects of historical inquiry in the digital age, such as accessing *the unexpected*by using new tools and methods such as PixStory and crowdsourcing. Hermeneutics of practice, hence, should facilitate the identification of the digital interferences we all can encounter or produce throughout our research processes and improve the researcher's readiness to face the new research conditions placed by the digital component.

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