Project Vietnam: Three Years of Multimedia Analysis

Speakers: CCNMTL Senior Program Specialist Mark Phillipson, CCNMTL Educational Technologist Maria Janelli; Columbia Teachers College Professors Margaret Crocco and William Gaudelli; Columbia East Asian Languages and Cultures Lecturer James Lap; and Korea Foundation Associate Professor of Korean Studies in the Social Sciences at Columbia University Charles Armstrong.

Summary: CCNMTL's Maria Janelli and Mark Phillipson gave an overview of Project Vietnam, the result of a 3-year collaboration with WGBH Boston Public Television and the University of Massachusetts-Boston to digitize and disseminate primary source material from the 1983 documentary *Vietnam: A Television History*. The professors then each gave presentations on their use of Project Vietnam for teaching and research.

<u>The Presentation</u>

Maria Janelli began the seminar by briefly introducing the day's speakers, some of CCNMTL's faculty partners on Project Vietnam. She then gave an overview of this three-and-a-half-year collaborative project. She explained that in 1983 WGBH, Boston's Public Television Station, co-produced what went on to become the most successful documentary PBS had ever presented, a thirteen episode series entitled *Vietnam: A Television History*.

The creators of *Vietnam: a Television History* left behind a huge archive of unused footage, including b-roll material, and lengthy un-televised interviews. Maria explained that in 2008 WGBH received an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant of $710,000 (which they matched) for a three-year effort to reconstruct and preserve these archival materials, which in some cases were beginning to decay. They aimed to digitize the original material; obtain the rights to make this valuable footage available to the public via Open Vault, WGBH's online archive; and create innovative educational applications for the material through a collaboration with CCNMTL.

Maria explained that CCNMTL has now been immersed in the project since 2008, having launched the initial phase of the project in 2009. They began by approaching faculty with lists and descriptions of some of the material in the archive and asking them if and how they might be able to incorporate such footage into their teaching. Since they could not yet see the actual footage, this required a leap of faith from their faculty partners. The CCNMTL team concluded that they could make the archive useable to professors through a combination of existing and new tools they would build especially for this project.

She then introduced the faculty partners who had incorporated Project Vietnam into their courses. Associate Professor of Korean Studies Charles Armstrong had used the archive to teach his course on Vietnam, which he has since renamed, "The Vietnam War: History, Media, Memory" in which students used the multimedia materials in class discussions and in their final term papers. Filmmaker and Journalism School Associate Professor June Cross incorporated the raw video into her course on documentary filmmaking. East Asian Languages and Cultures Lecturer James Lap used interview footage from the archive in his elementary and intermediate Vietnamese language courses to familiarize students with the three major dialects spoken in Vietnam. His students not only listened to the interviews, they also uploaded audio files of themselves speaking Vietnamese. And Drs. Margaret Crocco and William (Bill) Gaudelli, Teachers College Professors of Social Studies and Social Studies and Education, respectively, created an intensive summer course called "Vietnam Now" aimed at helping secondary school teachers prepare innovative multimedia curricula for teaching about the Vietnam War.

Maria explained that part of CCNMTL's challenge was that the faculty had diverse but overlapping needs: while they all wanted students to be able to search and tag material from the archive, some additionally wanted to incorporate Vietnam related material from outside the archive, including mainstream films and songs of the period; others wanted students to be able to upload audio files.

Here Mark Phillipson stepped in to give a quick tour of the Project Vietnam multimedia learning tool CCNMTL developed to meet the faculty's needs. He began by introducing the WGBH representatives who had come down from Boston for the occasion, Karen Colbron and Karen Cariani.

Mark explained that the first big decision they had to make was whether to build a tool for student analysis on top of the online library and research tool WGBH had already built (which had extensive tools for analysis, tagging and searching already) or to take a different approach. He reiterated Maria's point that different faculty members had different needs, and not all of these were universally relevant: should they make four copies of the WGBH library and build tools specifically for each professor's needs? How might they then incorporate access to other Vietnam related materials, as at least one professor had requested? He showed a graphic illustrating their solution: they would draw from the WGBH repository, streaming out, and building an analysis tool on top. Essentially this would involve separating the library and the analysis space.

He and Maris then demonstrated that students could navigate in a browser to the WGBH Open Vault archive and choose clips from the archive to analyze by simply clicking on an "analyze" button that would lift out that clip and bring it into the Project Vietnam analysis space. There they could tag, annotate, and incorporate the clip into discussions and projects, either individually or as part of a student group working collaboratively. The same "analyze" button would also allow them to pull in clips and artifacts from other online archives. The design team also built in tools that would allow teachers and

researchers to track how students were using the materials, for example, by creating a "heat map" showing how students used and connected different materials from the library. They concluded by explaining that they have now generalized this analytical model so it can be used not just for Project Vietnam but also for analyzing multimedia materials drawn from other online archives. This generalized tool is called MediaThread and it has now been used in classes throughout the university.

Dr. Margaret Crocco was the first of the faculty partners to discuss her use of Project Vietnam in the classroom. She began by explaining that middle and high school teachers like those she trains at Columbia Teachers College rarely get to spend much time on the Vietnam War, which is usually relegated to a few days at the end of the term. So she and Dr. Gaudelli wanted to create a 4-day, 9-5 summer workshop that would help pre- and in-service secondary school teachers prepare to teach more comprehensively about the Vietnam War. They assigned readings, brought in subject experts, and looked for ways to take full advantage of the footage available in Project Vietnam, taking into account what they know about the teaching of history and the use of multimedia materials in the classroom.

From the outset they knew that when it came to multimedia, teachers almost always fell back on feature films to teach about this period (*Forrest Gump* being, sadly, the most popular); they also knew that students were rarely critical of visual materials presented to them as documenting history. Their goal was to help teachers teach about multiple perspectives on historical events; too often students learn from one perspective, that of their history books. But the archival footage from WGBH beautifully illustrates different points of view and helped them convey to teachers not just that the Vietnam War was controversial, but why that was so.

They also saw this as an opportunity to help young teachers learn to teach media literacy. Since the various raw interviews are available in addition to the finished product, the archive lets teachers and students trace the *construction* of the historical record so rarely evident in teaching materials. Dr. Crocco explained that the first year that they used Project Vietnam for their workshop they found that students were disproportionately focused on domestic aspects of the war (American protests, etc.), so in the second year thy actively tried to correct that.

Here Dr. Gaudelli took over to explain how he and Dr. Crocco had also taken this opportunity to do a research project primarily concerned with: 1) the educational impact of multimedia tools and 2) how teachers deal with what has been called "difficult knowledge" or that which has a deep emotional impact. In response to the first they found that teachers said they often eschewed the use of documentaries because students find them boring, but also because of self- and institutional censorship. Through this project they came to appreciate the potential for using short clips, and how they might use raw footage to convey the concept of the construction of historical records. With regards to how teachers think about "difficult knowledge" they found it was a double-edged sword: on the one hand, provocative material grabs the attention of the students; on the other hand, it can then be difficult to know how to address these emotional topics. Early

conclusions from their research indicate that teachers and students must come to terms with multiplicity of perspectives in history. They found that Project Vietnam has great value in showing how historical narratives are constructed representations, not unilateral truths.

Here East Asian Languages and Cultures Lecturer James Lap took over to discuss how he used Project Vietnam in his Vietnamese courses. He explained that one of the challenges of learning the language is that three distinct dialects are spoken in the north, central and south regions of the country. Of the 1800 interviews in the Project Vietnam archive, 43 are in Vietnamese and all three accents are represented. In order to use these interviews in class he first asked Mark and Maria to block the translations and transcriptions of the interviews. Students were then required to choose excerpts of interviews in which they could hear each of the three accents; they then translated them and recorded a summary of each in their own words, which they uploaded into the system along with their translations. The final project involved doing this with ten minutes worth of interview material in each of the three accents (30 minutes total). They each had to present ten minutes of this to the class and respond to questions.

Some problems did arise: for one, many of the students had relatives with first hand knowledge of the war so they had strong emotional reactions to the material. They also felt the vocabulary was somewhat specialized, focused as it was on politics and war; some argued that the interviewees were aggressive, even arrogant. Dr. Lap said he tried to get students to just focus on the language by reminding them that this is history: much of what is discussed has long since changed. He also gave students the option of recording their own interviews with native speakers if they were too disturbed by the archival footage. Dr. Lap concluded his presentation with a "wish list" of features he would love to see incorporated in Project Vietnam: more interviews with overseas Vietnamese; more interviews with Vietnam veterans; and more recent interviews to bring the issues up-to-date.

Professor Charles Armstrong, Korea Foundation Associate Professor of Korean Studies in the Social Sciences at Columbia was not able to attend the meeting but a video was shown in which he discussed his experience using Project Vietnam in his undergrad and grad seminars. He explained that he saw it as an opportunity to move away from a more traditional history course and focus more on media, with Vietnam being a perfect vehicle for this precisely because media played such a large role in that war. He wanted a way to let the students incorporate the media into their own work—to be able to write traditional term papers, but with actual video clips in them. He found that the Project Vietnam tools made it possible not only for students to use media in their presentations and papers, but also as a tool in class discussions. Like Drs. Crocco and Guadelli he noticed that students tended to gravitate toward the domestic aspects of the war, so he tried to guide them toward the more international footage. He also incorporated Hollywood depictions of Vietnam into the course, including *Full Metal Jacket*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Platoon*, as well as popular songs of the era.

He concluded by noting that he found undergrads quick to appreciate the multimedia offerings, but graduate students seemed more resistant, seeming to prefer a more traditional, text-based approach. While he has used Project Vietnam only in seminars thus far, he felt it had great potential for use in large lecture courses as well. In the end he feels it has been a valuable experiment and that those teaching about many other periods in history would benefit from similar multimedia archives and analysis tools.

Discussion

The first respondent asked for elaboration on how MediaThread (the media analysis tool built initially for Project Vietnam) was being rolled out for use in other classes. Mark responded that yes, it has been used in many courses including those in English, East Asian Language and Culture, and Medical Center courses. CCNMTL's Dan Beeby asked how Project Vietnam might be used in large lecture courses, as Charles Armstrong had suggested. Maria speculated that students might use it primarily for discussion outside of class. Mark concurred, adding that one of the challenges in lecture courses is always to get students to interact more, so Project Vietnam's collaborative work space might be a way to incorporate more group work into a lecture-based class.

An attendee asked what proportion of the archival material is not actually shown in the documentary itself. Karen Colbron and Karen Cariani of WGBH responded that thirty hours of stock footage including most of the original interviews was available, unedited; most of these interviews only show up in very short, heavily edited clips in the final documentary. The b-roll material is also available in the archive.

Dan Beeby asked Dr. Guadelli whether their students actually go on to use the archive in their secondary school classes, and Dr. Guadelli responded that some do, but time limitations prevent extensive use. CCNMTL Vice Executive Director Maurice Matiz asked Dr. Guadelli to explain how they try to help young teachers incorporate media literacy goals into their teaching using Project Vietnam. Dr. Guadelli said they do so partly through modeling the behavior. For example, in their workshop they looked at several different versions of how the Gulf of Tonkin affair was presented in different periods, including what was left in and edited out of the documentary. They also explicitly required the teachers to incorporate these themes of multiple perspectives and veracity into their lesson plans.

CCNMTL's Jonah Bossewitch asked whether the teachers who attended Dr. Guadelli's workshop left planning to incorporate this multimedia style into the classroom. Dr. Guadelli replied that some had already been doing so before they even arrived, but he added that they were self-selected TC-affiliates. He and Dr. Crocco will get a better sense of how widespread these approaches are when they do an upcoming professional development day with a larger, more generalized sample of teachers. CCNMTL's Schuyler Duveen asked if the professors found that as the archive became more familiar they focused their students' attention more on select portions of that archive. Dr. Guadelli said that actually the reverse had happened: as they became more familiar with the

archive they broadened their approach. From the beginning hey were dependent on the students to help them discover what all was there.

Maurice Matiz asked Dr. Lap to elaborate on how the three Vietnamese dialects differ. Dr. Lap responded that not just the accent but also the vocabulary differs a great deal in the different regions, which he illustrated with several examples.

Ashlinn Quinn asked the WGBH reps what they had learned from their experience working on this project with CCNMTL. They responded that working with CCNMTL had pushed them to think about how they should make their archives available for people who might want to use it for many purposes, not just in TV. They learned that they should focus more on making the footage available, and less on the various annotation and analysis tools that others can always build as they see fit. They explained that Open Vault is currently undergoing a visual redesign and that while Project Vietnam was their largest project, they also have large archives available and in-the-works related to the March on Washington and other topics.

Jonah Bossewitch asked them if Open Vault efforts to preserve materials might be affecting how such documentaries are being made and the reps responded that they wished that were true; it does seem that there is a bit more effort to take into account which formats are less likely to deteriorate or become obsolete quickly.

An attendee asked the panelists whether the focus on these multimedia materials might compromise the number and quality of the traditional resources students would otherwise study. Maria responded that at least in Charles Armstrong's class the students still get the same textual materials they got in the past, but the media resources now compliment those. Mark Phillipson added that the unedited film footage is actually less digested in many ways than the traditional, single-authored text-based materials, thus offering students more (and more transparent) perspectives on historical events.

Maria concluded the meeting by thanking everyone for coming to this, the culmination of the Project Vietnam collaboration with WGBH and the final University Seminar for 2010-11.