

# Man on the Street, Version 2.0

*By Pauline Peretz*

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**For more than ten years, a mobile studio has been touring the United States and offering to record the conversation of all those who might be interested. By collecting the words of anonymous people, StoryCorps aims to strengthen ties and to document contemporary America. Could it be that it primarily encourages self-staging?**

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In 2003, the documentary film-maker Dave Isay had a relatively simple idea: To offer two persons the possibility to meet in front of a recording microphone in a soundproof booth set up in a public place, and to give them, at the end of a 40-minute recording session, a burned CD of their conversation. The first site selected to try the experiment was Grand Central Station in New York, a place of heavy traffic and social mixing. Fairly soon, the studio became mobile as it was integrated into a van; it went to different sites in New York—Ground Zero and Brooklyn—and then travelled across the United States. Today, there are three permanent recording stations—in Atlanta, Chicago, and San Francisco—as well as a mobile studio that moves from town to town and stops a few days in each place to fill up with stories.

The project has grown tremendously in the last thirteen years. It now employs about a hundred people in its Brooklyn office, while a dozen others crisscross America. It operates on a 10 million dollar budget that comes primarily from public grants (the National Endowment for the Arts and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting) and private grants (the Ford, W.K. Kellogg, MacArthur and Bill and Melinda Gates foundations, as well as the Subaru car company and the Cancer Treatment Centers of America), but also on revenues drawn from book sales and crowdfunding. Dave Isay is now a businessman constantly seeking to develop his initial intuition and to adapt it to different media. Today, StoryCorps exists in the form of two websites ([storycorps.org](http://storycorps.org) and [storycorps.me](http://storycorps.me)), weekly broadcasts on

the NPR public radio station,<sup>1</sup> cartoons featuring the best stories,<sup>2</sup> and themed books organized around a selection of transcribed and edited stories—many of which were bestsellers. Thus, the latest book published in April 2016, *Callings*, is dedicated to the birth of vocations<sup>3</sup>; *Listening is an Act of Love: A Celebration of American Life* (2008) presents itself as a “moving portrait of American life.”<sup>4</sup>

The development of StoryCorps is not merely aimed at broadcasting stories on ever-larger numbers of media. The project also seeks to shed light, in a voluntaristic manner, on sections of American society which do not spontaneously go and record themselves in the mobile studios, and which are insufficiently audible or present in the press or in public debate. It has tried to give voice to certain age groups (the young and the elderly), certain ethno-racial groups (Latinos with the “Historias” project,<sup>5</sup> African-Americans with the “Griot Initiative”<sup>6</sup>), historically silent groups (the LGBTQ community with the “Outloud” initiative<sup>7</sup>), war victims (Iraq and Afghanistan) and disaster victims (hurricane Katrina) through the creation of partnerships with representative associations of each of these groups. Following a clearly progressive political agenda, the StoryCorps project has gradually expanded its coverage of American society. The last two initiatives have been aimed at collecting the memories of persons suffering from memory disorders (the “Memory Loss Initiative”<sup>8</sup>) and the testimonies of prisoners (the “Justice Project” launched in 2016<sup>9</sup>)—each of these groups being accompanied by trained facilitators.

The most ambitious initiative, funded with a million-dollar TED Prize for Innovation, is a milestone for StoryCorps. The public release of a mobile application that allows for the recording of a conversation anywhere in the StoryCorps format and for its instant archiving at the Library of Congress (the recording is “born digital,” ready for preservation) increases the potential of the project, and will likely make it a truly popular tool. In one year, 60,000 new stories were sent to the Library of Congress via this application. Its success was facilitated by the fact that high school students used it as part of an educational project about Thanksgiving: Every student had to go and interview an elderly relative. Thus, historical documentation and intergenerational rapprochement were made to coincide, with the mobile phone—which is generally viewed as driving a wedge between the millennial generation and others—becoming a bonding instrument. Development has been spectacular and the ambition quite megalomaniac, for the application is aimed at nothing less than to “help create an archive of the wisdom of humanity.” The next step is to upload all these recordings to the [storycorps.me](http://storycorps.me) website and to classify them so that they can be consulted by everyone.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.npr.org/series/4516989/storycorps>

<sup>2</sup> <https://storycorps.org/animation/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://storycorps.org/books/callings-the-purpose-and-passion-of-work/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://storycorps.org/books/listening-is-an-act-of-love/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://storycorps.org/historias/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://storycorps.org/griot/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://storycorps.org/outloud/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://storycorps.org/memory-loss/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://storycorps.org/storycorps-justice-project/>

## A Staged Intimacy

For those who have recently seen the French documentary film *Les Habitants* (The Inhabitants), it is difficult not to think of the device Raymond Depardon conceived to “listen to the words” of the French: a refurbished caravan travelling across France and set up in high-traffic places, a few microphones, a camera. The documentary filmmaker invited people he met along the way to pursue their conversation in front of the camera “without constraints, in complete freedom.” He filmed them from the side, in front of a window overlooking the street, without asking questions, letting the words flow freely and contenting himself with reproducing the conversations as they unfolded, with no indication of age or profession.<sup>10</sup> Beyond the technical device, the similarities between the two projects are obvious: the same ambition—giving voice to ordinary people—the same operating mode—recording a conversation between two members of a “pair” understood in the very broad sense of the term—and the same expectations placed on the recorded individuals—that they agree to leave a trace which may be used for public or artistic purposes.

Yet the differences between the two projects are very real, even beyond the incomparable means deployed by StoryCorps. To be sure, there does exist in both cases a bias in the selection of “pairs.” Depardon proposed to individuals he spotted on the street or in public places that they continue their conversation in the caravan; he does not say what prompted him to invite some individuals rather than others. Was it the interest or the intensity of their conversation? The fact that they were photogenic? Their social representativeness? By contrast, in the StoryCorps project, the recording is the result of self-selection: Those who cross the threshold of the studio are volunteers who had to book a recording session in advance. The temporality is therefore not the same: In *Les Habitants*, the session takes place immediately after the person has been spotted; in the StoryCorps project, volunteers have time to prepare for the session. They can listen to the selected and edited recordings posted on the website, and can therefore attempt to imitate these examples, which may be viewed as models of the ideal recording. They are able to prepare for the conversation and to discuss the questions beforehand. The site also proposes a series of questions likely to orient the discussion in moral, intimate or anecdotal directions that are far removed from journalistic or ethnographic interviewing: “What are the most important lessons you’ve learned in life?” “How would you like to be remembered?” “What songs did your mother sing to you when you were a child?” Hence, “moments of truth” are clearly encouraged: the discussion of what may turn out to be fundamental misunderstandings, the revelation of family secrets, words of reconciliation before an inexorable disappearance, the transmission of heroic memories or of repressed humiliations. Thus, Sam Harmon, an African-American Navy veteran, tells his grandson how he was denied access to a movie theater in Washington even though he was wearing the uniform.<sup>11</sup> The StoryCorps project consequently results in recordings that are far removed from the spontaneous words that

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<sup>10</sup> Raymond Depardon, *Les Habitants*, Le Seuil, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.thestory.org/stories/2012-06/storycorps>

Depardon tried to collect, as had many other interviewers—radio hosts, ethnographers, or folklorists—before him.

In addition, because the recording requires an appointment, it tends to become an important event in the lives of those who decide to make it. The conversation that unfolds in front of the microphone is very far from an innocuous exchange in a usual setting; on the contrary, some apparently expect it to be a cathartic experience. This is the occasion for life lessons once the ordeal has passed—illness, war, the disfigured or mentally disturbed husband returning from the front, etc. Secrets that could never be said are spoken into the microphone, including all forms of coming out related to sexual orientation, drug addiction, or shameful political activities. The recording can be the time of confession. In the online selection, questions that were never asked for shame or fear of the answer are asked as if this were the last chance to have an honest conversation (a son to his mother: “Why did you wait so long to tell me that I am not your biological child?”). One has the impression of coming upon an intimate exchange between two persons who are about to separate for a long time (departure for the front) or forever (serious illness, memory loss, imminent death). This is also the moment for a declaration of love or of admiration, or for the expression of gratitude, such as that of a nephew to his uncle who helped him prepare for his release from Rikers Island.<sup>12</sup>

The microphone seems to play the role of midwife, even that of therapist—incidentally, the session lasts forty minutes and a box of tissues is placed on the recording table. Dave Isay often recounts how he decided to create StoryCorps following a recorded conversation in which his father revealed to him that he had been leading a double life as a homosexual. Thus there is in these standardized and ritualized recordings a staging of the self and of intimacy that no longer has anything natural about it, but is also a form of emotional exhibitionism.<sup>13</sup>

## Ears to listen?

“I exist”—according to the founder of StoryCorps, Dave Isay, this is the conviction to which the people who make a recording should come. After undergoing this experience, they should be persuaded that their life, like that of many ordinary Americans, has intrinsic value, for their loved ones but also for the whole of society. When they leave the studio, they should have the feeling that they have emerged from invisibility. For Dave Isay, the recording of these anonymous voices in the streets of large American cities must contribute to honoring, preserving, and educating all at once.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.npr.org/2016/06/03/480449806/at-the-end-of-the-day-i-m-a-25-year-old-convicted-felon>

<sup>13</sup> See Nancy Abelman, Susan Davis, Cara Finnegan and Peggy Miller, “What is StoryCorps Anyway?,” *Oral History Review* 36 (2), Summer/Fall 2009, pp. 255-260.

On the vans that crisscross the country to record ordinary Americans, one can read the following inscription in white letters on an orange background: “Listening is an act of love.” This slogan can apply to the relationship that connects the two individuals who have decided to conduct the interview together. But does this generous and loving ear extend far beyond the circle of loved ones? Until all the sessions are uploaded to the new website, only a selection of recordings are posted on the [storycorps.org](http://storycorps.org) website; the others—probably the vast majority—can be listened to only at the Library of Congress. The selected and edited recordings have a very dramatic charge. And this selection appears to follow a certain number of criteria: The recordings must have edifying value (stories of resilience, love beyond separation, trauma, war, determination in the face of adversity), an unusual character, and the ability to rehabilitate despised minorities (notably gays and lesbians who occupy a prominent place on the website) or to illustrate unfamiliar aspects of American history. Oftentimes, the online recordings make everyday Americans appear as heroes, as “ordinary people doing the extraordinary.” Thus, Austin Chen, a 51-year-old obstetrician born in Taiwan, is regarded as a heroine by her interviewer Dave Isay because she has definitively renounced taking a single day off from work so that she may honor her commitment to help all her patients give birth.

It is also difficult to know how many people listen to these stories—the recording’s listening counts are not made public. The weekly broadcast “StoryCorps” on NPR, whose average length is about ten minutes, seems to be appreciated by listeners. But it does not reproduce the raw recordings as they were made. The most emotionally charged passages (often those in which interviewees cry or declare their love) or the most striking sentences are selected to serve as illustrations of a narrative told by one of the team’s producers. The initial recordings are therefore considerably altered; the few preserved minutes have no other function than to authenticate the story. The moderator edits the conversation in order to offer his interpretation. Consequently, it is doubtful whether the voices of those who go to the StoryCorps studio to leave an oral trace of their existence for posterity will be listened to by other ordinary Americans.

## Historical Documentation or Storytelling?

But do these recordings have a documentary or historical value? At the project’s inauguration in 2003, Dave Isay wished to place StoryCorps under the patronage of the great radioman Studs Terkel who, as he himself noted, was “celebrated for celebrating the uncelebrated.” Through collecting life stories in front of the microphone, Terkel had managed to give voice to the anonymous whose words had long been disqualified as insignificant or incompetent.<sup>14</sup> A generous man, Terkel said at the inauguration that the new project would allow for the voices of the anonymous workers who had built Grand Central Station stone by stone to finally be heard—that is to say, it would contribute to a history of

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<sup>14</sup> Laure Bordonaba, “L’Amérique vue d’en bas,” *La Vie des idées*, 7 September 2011, <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/L-Amerique-vue-d-en-bas.html>

the United States from below by also listening to those who are usually missing in history books. Inviting Terkel meant placing StoryCorps in the tradition of the greatest American oral projects with a historical and social documentary intent. And yet, if we listen closely to Dave Isay, we hear two simultaneous ambitions. The first is to turn the StoryCorps recording into a tool for strengthening friendship, family and intimate ties and for facilitating intergenerational communication and understanding. The second is to make history: StoryCorps was to be “the most important oral history project ever undertaken.” Are these two ambitions—intimate and documentary—compatible within a single project?

By convincing, apparently without difficulty, the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress to preserve all the recordings made (more than 65,000 stories today), StoryCorps signaled its documentary ambition and its desire to follow the tradition of the greatest oral history projects of the previous century. Indeed, this center is the repository of all the interviews recorded with former slaves by the Federal Writers’ Project team (which included Alan Lomax,<sup>15</sup> Zora Neale Hurston and John Henry Faulk) as part of the Work Progress Administration created under the New Deal, of the cultural and folklife surveys conducted in many states (such as that on the life of cowboys in Montana), of the Civil Rights History Project<sup>16</sup> and of the Veterans History Project.<sup>17</sup> It is therefore central moments of twentieth-century American history whose memory is being preserved by the AFC thanks to these oral history collections.

To be sure, the materials collected by StoryCorps are of a different nature: Participants are not selected by an interviewer familiar with the field, but are volunteers who carry out the interview without external intervention—the “facilitator” present in the cabin does not intervene in the conversation. For the record, in 1941, in order to take the pulse of the nation after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Alan Lomax entrusted Library of Congress recording equipment to a dozen people so that they could collect on the field the reactions of the “man-on-the-street.” On the StoryCorps recordings, only the first and last names of the two persons recorded and the recording location are specified; we know nothing of their age, profession, family situation, or place of residence. The socio-demographic specifications required in a documentary project are missing, probably to give voice to an anonymous person with whom everyone might identify. The recordings invariably last 40 minutes, regardless of the density of the conversation, and they are neither edited (in the version preserved in the AFC) nor transcribed for future academic use.

Wherein, then, does the documentary value of these recordings lie? The grasping of intimacy made possible by the conditions of story collection is what paradoxically makes it interesting. There exist few other means of getting this close to the sort of exchange that can take place between two family members, two friends, two lovers, or two colleagues. The historian and the sociologist can resort to correspondence, diaries, or Facebook pages if they can gain access to them. But unless one resolves to conceal a microphone and cameras in a house, it is hard to imagine a better device than Storycorps, despite the dramatization

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.loc.gov/collections/alan-lomax-manuscripts/about-this-collection/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.loc.gov/collection/civil-rights-history-project/about-this-collection/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.loc.gov/vets/stories/>

associated with the presence of the microphone and the incitement to self-staging on the part of the project initiators. Thus, via the StoryCorps recordings, researchers are provided with considerable materials on intimate subjects such as marriage, attitudes to illness and death or children's education, but also on taboo subjects that usually leave few traces, like incest, sexual harassment or child abuse. According to Nicole Saylor, Head of the American Folklife Center Archive, historians also use these materials as sources for research on topics as diverse as the Berlin Wall, the 1967 Detroit riots, and the history of community gardens or of migratory routes—especially Mexican ones.<sup>18</sup> This corpus also makes it possible to hear a very broad sample of voices, accents and expressions, which in the United States vary considerably according to region, gender and race. Many uses can be made of this material, the magnitude of which is considerable.

Criticisms have nevertheless been expressed by oral historians. StoryCorps is regarded by some of them as emblematic of a diffuse movement of popularization of oral history in American society, which is deemed harmful because it does not respect the rules of the discipline. According to these critics, humanizing history through individual life stories certainly has pedagogical virtues, but this comes at a price. The most pressing questions concern the conditions of story collection, as mentioned above. In the eyes of certain historians, the room deliberately left to emotions also disqualifies StoryCorps's claim to the legacy of Lomax and Terkel because, while emotions are not always misleading, they can impair the intelligibility of recollected events. Moreover, for Alexander Freund, the type of oral history that is promoted by StoryCorps is conservative: it reconnects with 1950s consensus history, built around the themes of American exceptionalism and national unity; this goes against the grain of the new social history which insists on the country's diversity, on its divisions and conflicts. Finally, by consecrating the individual's resilience in the face of adversity, StoryCorps seems to suggest that the state plays no role in the lives of Americans.<sup>19</sup> Yet insofar as the project enjoys remarkable public success, it remains impermeable to these critiques, which hardly move beyond the world of oral historians.

The StoryCorps experience is an ambivalent one. It aims to cultivate interest in others as well as social curiosity. It also seeks to contribute to greater tolerance and to the inclusion of the excluded in an American society that is deeply divided socially and racially. Dave Isay even presents it as an antidote to the cynicism and violence that periodically plague American cities. But the sincerity and the laudable intention of the project—giving voice to those who are not heard—are impaired by the staging and dramatization of the recorded narratives. These have certainly contributed to the popularity of StoryCorps, but they have also led to questioning the authenticity of the recordings. It is not “the man-on-the-street” who speaks into the microphone of the mobile van, but a person lifted out of her usual surroundings so that she may engage in a conversation—which the project tries in many ways to render extraordinary. Does the person speak the truth when she tries, in front of a microphone, to give the best image of herself in the hope of leaving a trace for posterity? By blurring the boundaries between the intimate and the public, StoryCorps participates in a

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Nicole Saylor, 13 July 2016.

<sup>19</sup> See Abelman, Davis, Finnegan and Miller, *ibid.* and especially Alexander Freund, “Under Storytelling’s Spell: Oral History in a Neoliberal Age,” *Oral History Review* 42 (1), Winter/Spring 2015, pp. 96-132.

broader movement of emotional staging that takes place at the expense of the intelligibility of social phenomena.

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