

Oral History Association response to developments in Boston College case

The recent arrest of Gerry Adams has been linked to the Belfast Project of Boston College, where oral history interviews conducted with the promise of confidentiality were subpoenaed and eventually released. The case raises in high relief a number of important ethical, legal and procedural issues pertaining to oral history. It also offers an opportunity to foster dialogue and sensitivity around these issues, and to encourage best practices in the future. It is in this spirit that the Oral History Association, the national professional organization in the field, issues this statement.

The concern has been raised that the Belfast Project developments will have a chilling effect on academic freedom and research. This need not be the case. As has been demonstrated in numerous settings, it is certainly possible to successfully work with oral history narrators to discuss often highly sensitive subjects. In addition, without going into all of the specifics of the matter, the Boston College situation is somewhat anomalous.

The case offers a reminder of the importance of adhering to best practices, from the inception of an oral history project through its implementation and usage. Practitioners should take seriously the principle of informed consent, actively engaging in advance with potential narrators about subjects to be addressed in the interview, restriction options, and issues of future use. Legal counsel should be consulted at the outset about any possible issues involving restriction and confidentiality. Everyone involved — including upper administration, counsel, interviewers, and archives staff — needs to have the same understanding about procedures, and there needs to be clear written documentation of the process. It is imperative that people do not make promises that they can't or won't keep. Be cautious about publicizing potentially explosive interviews which have restrictions.

The Oral History Association has developed its own “Principles and Best Practices” to provide guidance to practitioners (<http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/>), and works in numerous ways to foster high standards in the conduct, curation, dissemination, and interpretation of oral history interviews.