



Oral History at a Distance: Conducting Remote Interviews Webinar

Baylor University Institute for Oral History
Oral History Association



Adrienne Cain – Legal/Ethical Implications of Distance Interviewing

Whether done in-person or remotely, it is imperative that oral history practitioners are legally compliant and ethically sound in their interview work. Although the legal guidelines may vary by location, the Oral History Association’s Principles and Best Practices provide a useful framework for ethical considerations (www.oralhistory.org).

With remote interviewing, practitioners are often challenged with building rapport with their interviewees, especially if the oral historian is unable to conduct a pre-interview. If feasible, the oral historian should conduct any pre-interview contact or conversations in the same manner that the interview will be recorded. For example, if the interview will be conducted using an online video recording platform, use that same platform for the pre-interview. Therefore, once the interview day arrives, the interviewee will not be distracted or uncomfortable with being confronted with a new platform. By conducting the pre-interview in the same manner, the practitioner makes the interviewee more comfortable with the process.

An important part of the pre-interview process is to provide information to participants about the project, which is referred to as informed consent. Informed consent involves making sure the interviewee knows the process and procedures of the project, is informed of their rights as a participant, and understands the necessity of the legal release form. More information about these particular rights can be found on OHA’s website. One way to help make sure interviewees are informed is by providing a project design, or a document that spells out the plan and purpose for the project being conducted.

An additional challenge in conducting remote interviews is obtaining a signed release form. With any interview—remote or not—it is imperative to obtain a signed release form that includes a donor agreement, copyright transfer, and future use statement. There are several ways to secure this form such as email, electronic signature, scanning, or even traditional “snail mail.” It is essential to have this form because there are several rights covered by copyright that are needed in order to complete oral history projects as well as the potential outcomes and materials that will derive from these interviews.

In closing, with remote interviews there are several legal and ethical considerations that should be made for oral history projects. For those in the U.S., John Neuenschwander’s *Oral History and the Law* is a great resource that surveys the various legal components of oral history projects. If outside of the U.S., practitioners should become familiar with the copyright laws of their country, region, and/or territory. A great resource to use to become more familiar with these laws is the World Intellectual Property Organization’s website (www.wipo.org).

Stephen Sloan – Interviewing at a Distance

The collaborative work between interviewer-interviewee to create an oral history undergoes some fundamental changes when participants engage in the process at a distance. It is essential for

practitioners to think through the ways this shapes their exchange, weighing research goals, shifted interviewer and narrator frameworks, and desired outcomes.

After considering the implications of taking interviews to a remote format, oral historians should then consider the new frameworks for the interviewer-narrator interaction. Interviewers can often employ distance interviews to save time and money, expand the geographic distribution of their interviewees, accelerate the pace of their project, and make scheduling easier. The interviewer can work from a more predictable setting and be situated where their behavior, even something as simple as note taking or managing recording devices, can be less distracting.

For the narrator, distance interviewing can, at times, be more empowering by giving them more control over the scheduling and location of the interview. It is also easier for them to terminate the oral history and they may feel less social pressure with the setup. For the narrator, they also have more control of the pace of how they share their story as the interview can be continued or rescheduled for another day.

In considering the remote interviewer-narrator relationship, there are additional factors to weigh. Studies on distance interviews draw conflicting conclusions on whether the distance format enhances phenomena such as truth-telling or dealing with sensitive topics. While distance interviews can seem less invasive and more private, the introduction of more technology between the two parties and concerns of surveillance/security may be at play in the oral history as well. All the dynamics of increasing the social distance between interviewer and interviewee influence the oral history, from establishing trust, to maintaining motivation and keeping concentration, to limiting the data passed between interviewee and interviewer to verbal elements. The new format also passes more control to the narrator and diminishes the control the interviewer has over the exchange, including the narrator's recording environment.

For a host of reasons—development of technology, rising costs and declining budgets, growth in transnational studies, work with at-risk populations—distance interviewing is a tool that will be increasingly used by oral historians. As this evolves, careful consideration is needed to adapt established best standard and practices to this new form. Although it seems familiar, even at a distance, the position of the interviewer and narrator shifts the character of the exchange in many critical ways.

Steven Sielaff – Recording Remote Interviews

Any discussion of remote interviewing technology for oral history should begin with a reminder of best practices for recording preservation-quality audio for long-term archival holdings. In general, audio practitioners should aim for uncompressed WAV format recordings at “CD Quality” or better (16 bit/44.1kHz). For video there are still several acceptable options (MP4/MOV/AVI/AVCHD) so that typically you are choosing a format your archiving institution is familiar with and/or a format that is as uncompressed as you can afford when considering total preservation server space investment. Storage estimates for one-hour interviews range from 1GB for WAV audio to 10-30GB for HD video.

Professional audio recorder companies currently offer entry-level models in the \$250-350 range, some of which feature quality on-board microphones or free XLR external microphones. Digital storage during your project should follow the concept of LOCKSS (Lots of Copies Keeps Stuff Safe) and is most often achieved through a variety of on-board, portable physical, and cloud-based storage solutions.

When considering remote interviewing options, one should always focus on best practices to determine if their choices in technology measure up to these preservation standards. The most frequent offenders are file type (many recording apps only record in MP3) and storage logistics (do you have enough local storage space/can you easily offload the file to your venue of choice?). In addition, one should consider if

extant professional-grade equipment should be used in place of built-in cameras/microphones of lesser quality. For example, does it make more sense to allow a video conferencing application to record an interview or should you place near/link up professional equipment to record the conversation separately? Keep in mind that your interviewee's equipment and internet bandwidth issues may play into this equation as well. Also, consider how you might handle the introduction of video into an audio-only project. It is typically advantageous to see the interviewee to connect during the session, while the actual recorded video can be converted to an audio file afterwards as needed.

Technology to enable your remote interviews falls under the following categories:

- Landline telephone calls – requires physical adapters to run telephone signals to a professional recorder or a call recording service that sends you the recording afterwards
- Cellular telephone calls – requires a smartphone application capable of recording calls in WAV format, physical adapters to run telephone signals to a professional recorder, or a call recording service that sends you the recording afterwards
- Video conference calls – requires microphones and/or cameras for both participants on either a desktop, laptop, tablet, or smartphone device, video conferencing software, and the ability to record the conversation either natively within the software or with separate screen/audio capture software on the interviewer's system

Recording from your computer can be aided through the purchase of USB microphones, external webcams, and headphones/headsets. Testing the equipment and recording functions beforehand with friends or as part of a pre-interview process is recommended. In addition, please consider potential security risks of allowing recordings of your oral history interviews to be processed by third-party companies or placed on cloud storage servers. In general, the more at-risk your project topic, the more local you should make your recordings (either conducting the interview in-person or only recording remote interviews on your local device).