

Best Practice versus Reality: Arts at Warwick, coronavirus, and remote interviewing in oral history

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Abstract

COVID-19 was repeatedly labelled ‘unprecedented’. In unprecedented times, we rethink conventional wisdoms. This short article explores oral history, an important element of the Then & Now student-led research project explored in this Special Issue, with such rethinking in mind. Then & Now’s alumni interviews had to be conducted remotely but remote oral history interviews are not universally popular. The Oral History Society (OHS) is hesitant and suggested postponing interviews, reflecting best practice concerns about rapport-building, audio quality and archiving, data protection and security, and community building. For groups like the Disability Visibility Project (DVP) and oral historians like Sarah Dzedzic, remote interviewing is the only viable method and ideals of best practice are too rigid. For oral history to uncover the experiences of those disregarded by conventional histories, access to it and its employment as a research tool should be as universal as possible.

This article examines and questions best practice guidelines in light of the pandemic and the experiences of the DVP and historians such as Dzedzic. It draws on personal experience of interviewing and from the Then & Now project. This article argues that oral history, an inherently fieldwork-based activity, needs to take remote interviewing as seriously as face-to-face interviewing to become more widely accessible and sufficiently flexible to adapt to conditions in the field.

Keywords: student-led research; oral history; remote interviewing; Coronavirus; COVID-19; Disability Visibility Project

Introduction

COVID-19 has caused huge disruptions across Higher Education. Early reports indicated incoming Freshers would delay studies if pandemic-related social distancing measures around teaching, socialising, and sports remained too restrictive (**Conlon et al., 2020**). Universities scrambled to pivot to online teaching and it was quickly apparent how unprepared most were regarding resources and staff training for this transition (**Batty & Hall, 2020**). In Britain, the lockdown from March 2020 similarly disrupted ongoing research projects – including *Then & Now*, as discussed in this Special Issue. Teamwork-based, *Then & Now* experienced ‘teaching’ and ‘research’ disruption: its weekly meetings and collaboration between student participants occurred remotely; its archival research, alumni interviews, and final exhibition relied on digital resources and tools.

The pandemic was repeatedly labelled by the Anglophone press as ‘unprecedented’. In unprecedented times, we rethink conventional wisdoms, as has been the case for both teaching and research in Higher Education. This short article explores oral history, an important element of *Then & Now*, with such rethinking in mind. The project’s alumni interviews, planned as traditional face-to-face interviews, were ultimately conducted remotely. Remote oral history interviews are far from universally popular. The Oral History Society (OHS) is hesitant about them and recently suggested ‘if possible you should postpone your oral history interview’ until face-to-face interviewing can resume (**Morgan, 2020: 4**). Their hesitancy reflects concerns over best practice for rapport-building with interviewees, audio quality and archiving, data protection and security, and the ‘community building’ impact of interviewing (**Ibid: 3**). However, as OHS guidance acknowledges, remote interviewing is not just a response to the pandemic but is, for groups like the Disability Visibility Project (DVP) and oral historians like Sarah Dziedzic, the only viable interviewing method. In such cases, like in the pandemic, ideals of best practice prove too rigid. Given that oral history seeks to ‘uncover the experiences’ of those who have been ‘disregarded by conventional histories’, should not access to it and its employment as a research tool be as universal as possible (**Abrams, 2016: 4, Portelli, 1981: 97**)?

This article examines best practice guidelines from the OHS and other organisations. It contrasts these with the experiences of the DVP and historians like Dziedzic, and draws on experiences of interviewing from *Then & Now* and from my other research. Whilst ethics and safeguarding are always a priority, as an inherently fieldwork-based activity, oral history practice must reflect conditions in the field (whether an actual field, someone’s house, a cafe, or a computer screen). Ultimately, this article argues that oral history needs to take remote interviewing as seriously as

face-to-face interviewing to become more widely accessible and sufficiently flexible to adapt to conditions in the field.

The Oral History Society's COVID-19 advice

The OHS' 'Advice on remote oral history interviewing during the COVID-19 pandemic' leans heavily towards postponing interviewing until face-to-face is possible again. It highlights several problems with remote interviewing:

- difficulties building rapport, being sensitive to mood changes, providing non-verbal feedback, and establishing a successful relationship with interviewees
- poor quality recordings which cannot easily be archived
- challenges around data security, data storage, and interview documentation
- negative impacts on oral history's 'community building' potential (**Morgan, 2020: 4**)

The guidance further suggests avoiding first-time interviews and/or long 'life story' interviews (**Morgan, 2020: 4, 6**). Video calls are said to be more tiring than face-to-face meetings, notably because non-verbal cues are harder to discern so long interviews might be challenging (**Morgan, 2020: 9, Naughton, 2020**). Shorter follow-up and/or 'focused' interviews, the guidance goes on, might be feasible, as are ones not intended for archiving because the recording quality matters less (**Morgan, 2020: 4, 6**). The guidance stresses that the pandemic has left many people – interviewers or interviewees – 'in financial, psychological and personal distress' (**Ibid: 5**). Though some might appreciate the interview as a 'coping mechanism' or distraction, others might find the process 'intrusive or insensitive' and, particularly if the interview discusses sensitive or traumatic experiences, lack the necessary support (**Morgan, 2020: 5, Abrams, 2016: 190-191**).

Beyond concerns over the safety and support of the interviewee (and the interviewer), the guidance highlights technological pitfalls of remote interviewing. These include:

- interviewees – and interviewers – being uncomfortable or unfamiliar with, or lacking access to, remote recording software
- the terms and conditions of remote recording software (audio rights, confidentiality, storage)
- poor internet connections or phone coverage

- general low quality of in-built microphones on computers and laptops
- differences in volume level on either end of the recording
- background noises which might be picked up (**Morgan, 2020: 7-9**)

This guidance, as its author acknowledges, was compiled in an uncertain climate, as indicated by it being on its sixth iteration by May 2020, just a few months after the pandemic began (**Ibid: 1**). It views COVID-19 as temporary and envisages a future return to face-to-face interviewing (**Ibid: 3**).

General Concepts of Best Practice in Interviewing

The OHS' recent advice reflects its general preference for face-to-face interviewing, shared by many involved in oral history. The OHS' introductory training session is clearly geared around face-to-face interviewing, as is its online 'doing the interview' advice. Specifically, this guidance emphasises interviewing in the interviewee's home, where they are likely to be most comfortable, ideally in a quiet room away from noisy roads, with mobile phones and appliances such as radios and televisions switched off, and sat as close as possible to the interviewee to better guarantee a high-quality recording (**Oral History Society, n.d.**).

Other oral history organisations replicate this advice. Old North West Sound Archive documentation concerns only face-to-face practice, reminding interviewers to think about clothing, check the recording equipment before travelling, shake the interviewee's hand, avoid strip-lit rooms with noisy electrical appliances such as fridge-freezers, and ensure pets (specifically dogs, cats, and caged birds) cannot interfere with the interview or the equipment (**North West Sound Archive, n.d.**). The Heritage Lottery Fund guidance similarly advocates face-to-face interviewing somewhere quiet in the interviewee's home or another location where they feel comfortable. Such guidance underlines non-verbal feedback, as 'lots of 'yes' and 'umms' on the recording can be off-putting for the listener' (**Heritage Lottery Fund, 2014: 18**). As with the OHS' warnings about remote interviewing, there is emphasis on obtaining archive-quality recordings.

Major literature routinely included as 'suggested reading' for budding oral historians discusses interviewing in the same way. Donald Ritchie gives barely a page to remote interviewing in his wide-ranging thirty-page chapter on the interview process, offering a cursory justification of the merits of video interviews over phone interviews but little advice on optimising remote interviews (**Ritchie, 2014: 98-99**). Paul Thompson allots a sole paragraph to remote interviewing in his chapter on interviewing,

saying that whilst ‘it is now possible to consider’ them (if an interviewee is particularly busy or lives abroad, for instance), they are ‘unlikely to achieve the deep interview which can be made in person’ (Thompson, 2017: 320). Thompson describes how and where to conduct interviews in the same way as the organisations mentioned above (Ibid: 317-319, 322). Lynn Abrams evokes the ‘democratising’ effect of the ‘digital turn’ on oral history in terms of ‘anyone with a mobile phone’ being able to conduct a face-to-face interview and/or disseminate the output online. However, she does not discuss the potential of this technology for facilitating remote interviewing (Abrams, 2016: ix, 173).

‘It should not have taken a global pandemic for oral historians to evaluate the safety and accessibility of our in-person interviewing practice. But here we are’ⁱ

Sarah Dzedzic, an oral historian with an immunodeficiency condition, advocates strongly for remote oral history interviewing. She urges practitioners to consider the quality of the interaction between interviewer and interviewee over the setting:

Our interaction was good because she listened to me explain my unique, embodied experience, and listened respectfully — and in turn, I respected and trusted her. Isn’t this the fundamental core of oral history? How had being in the same room with someone become the only predictor of quality? (Dzedzic, 2020)ⁱⁱ

For Dzedzic, remote interviewing is equally as valid as face-to-face. Oral historians, she says, should use the pandemic’s enforced postponing of face-to-face interviewing to learn ‘how to conduct good, remote, safe, and accessible oral history interviews [...] leaning into our skills as listeners – no matter the recording format – and re-evaluating the long-standing insistence on doing this work in person’ (Dzedzic, 2020).

Whilst admitting that oral history currently lacks the equipment and technological ‘know-how’ to conduct entirely satisfactory remote interviews – particularly archival-quality ones – Dzedzic believes the bigger barrier is a lack of ‘willingness’ (Ibid). To increase oral history’s accessibility, Dzedzic suggests re-evaluating the field through a ‘disability justice lens’ to better understand who has been excluded or put at risk by an insistence on face-to-face interviewing (Ibid). The standard guidance on face-to-face interviewing ignores that, for someone like Dzedzic, meeting in person and/or physical contact (like handshaking) is often impossible due to her immunodeficiency (Dzedzic, 2020). Interestingly, the Heritage Lottery Fund guidance urges oral historians to consider the accessibility of archived interviews – for instance, ‘are disabled people able to get into and around the building, and/or readily access the material via the web in

accessible formats?’ – but does not extend this to the interview process itself (**Heritage Lottery Fund, 2014**). Treating face-to-face and remote interviews equally would enable mutual decisions between interviewer and interviewee based on ‘health, wellness and physical access’ (**Dziedzic, 2020**). Rapport-building via phone or video call might feel unusual for many but ‘we *can* re-orient to another body through a video call, just as we can re-orient in person’ – and it is up to oral historians to develop this capacity (**Dziedzic, 2020**).

Dziedzic argues that, for many people, remote contact has long been ‘necessary, commonplace’ and a key source of community strength and resilience (**ibid**). A prime example is the Disability Visibility Project (DVP), founded by activist Alice Wong in 2014 in the run-up to the American Disability Act’s twenty-fifth anniversary. The DVP describes itself as ‘an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture’ (**DVP, 2020a**). In particular, in partnership with StoryCorps, it encourages disabled people to record oral histories of their disability experiences, either in person at a StoryCorps recording booth or remotely via ‘StoryCorps Connect’ or the StoryCorps app (**DVP, 2020b**). By 2016, the DVP had collected over one hundred oral histories, with more added since (**DVP, 2016**).

The remote options are particularly important as the DVP aims to collect testimonies from across America but StoryCorps only has recording facilities in a handful of cities (plus a roving ‘mobile booth’). The internet – and the remote social contact it facilitates – has long been a source of ‘disability community formation’, highlighted recently by COVID-19 during which ‘the online disability community [...] demonstrate[d] its seemingly boundless collective capacity to care, listen, and inform’ (**Gaeta, 2020**). The DVP cannot currently reach all disabled people due to the ‘audist nature’ of oral histories but, by embracing remote interviewing options facilitated by modern communications technology, it has increased its reach and replicated the community formation visible online (**Gaeta, 2020, DVP, 2020c**). It is to such communities and projects with long-standing experience of negotiating barriers to face-to-face interactions, Dziedzic suggests, that oral historians should turn to understand the possibilities offered by remote interviewing.

Face-to-Face or Remote Interviewing: Common sense and case-by-case in the field

The general preference for face-to-face is partly attributable to widespread access to remote communications technology – landline telephones aside – occurring relatively recently. Practice in the field has not yet caught up with the available technology. The OHS’ COVID-19

guidance is very reluctant towards remote interviewing generally, not just in the context of the pandemic. Read between the lines, however, many of its points feel more like reasons against interviewing during the pandemic rather than convincing arguments against remote interviewing itself.

Caution around COVID-19 is sensible. For many people, it has been distressing and traumatic. Oral history interviews are complex and delicate, and ethics and safeguarding of both interviewee and interviewer are of paramount importance however one conducts the interview. This complexity and delicateness only increases in times of crisis (like COVID-19) and/or when the interview is covering difficult – perhaps traumatic – ground (**Abrams, 2016: 175-194**).ⁱⁱⁱ In this respect, it feels contradictory that the OHS' guidance warns against remote interviewing but gives projects documenting the pandemic as an example of ones which might continue – particularly as it expressly cautions against interviews with new interviewees (**Morgan, 2020: 3, 6**).

Many of the issues mentioned above stem from unfamiliarity with remote interviewing or highlight the exclusionary nature of face-to-face interviewing and the need for oral historians to exercise common sense judgement in the field. Some – particularly technological limitations such as unfamiliarity with software, how to complete the accompanying documentation, how to ensure clear sound quality – could be solved, or mitigated, if oral historians engaged fully with remote interviewing. The question of the interview's urgency, meanwhile, demonstrates the need for common sense. This really concerns the ethics and safeguarding which form part of all oral history practice. If both interviewee and interviewer are happy to do the interview, can access support if needed, and are comfortable with the remote format, why not proceed? Others, of course, are more difficult to resolve. If an interviewee does not feel comfortable being interviewed remotely, it cannot be done, but nor can a face-to-face interview proceed if the interviewee is uncomfortable. Some interviewees will lack access to or familiarity with the necessary equipment and some places lack reliable internet or phone coverage; though it is reasonable to think that both of these will be less of a barrier as time goes by.

The legalities around who owns the rights to recordings made on platforms such as Skype or Zoom and the potential ramifications for confidentiality and data protection do pose questions of ethics and safeguarding. One short-term option is making the interviewee aware of these risks and ensuring they are comfortable proceeding. Long-term, oral history should look to communities and projects familiar with remote technologies. The DVP works with StoryCorps, an 'independently funded non-profit organisation' set up in 2003 to 'preserve and share humanities' stories'

and create ‘an invaluable archive for future generations’ (**StoryCorps, 2020**). Other projects use telephone – rather than internet-based – interviews, with various techniques employed to record the conversation (**H-Net, 2020**). The OHS guidance lists various software which produce better quality recordings than video-calling platforms but many are expensive, limiting their accessibility (**Morgan, 2020: 14-18**).

Similarly, regarding inclusivity/exclusivity, though the community-building element of oral history projects is valuable, those for whom face-to-face interviewing is inaccessible are excluded from this without remote interviewing. The DVP – like the disabled community more widely – has shown that community building is very possible remotely. Concerns over low quality microphones in computer or laptops and issues of inconsistent volume on recordings, meanwhile, are cosmetic and arise from current archiving standards advocated by bodies like the OHS. That lower quality recordings are not considered archive-quality excludes those without recourse to professional equipment or who cannot conduct their interviews in distraction-free environments. Given the digital turn has democratised the ability to conduct interviews, widening the potential reach of oral history, should not requirements for archiving recordings be democratised to match?

Neither face-to-face nor remote interviewing are flawless. Both suffer from barriers to access. Remote interviewing’s data protection risks can be paired against potential physical risks with face-to-face interviewing, for instance incidents where interviewers suffer ‘problematic encounters’ or even assault (**Zembrzycki, 2018**). Being able to use both would help overcome their respective limitations and increase oral history’s accessibility, particularly once in the field where conditions rarely permit exact adherence to best practice guidelines. Case-by-case decision-making and common sense are often required of oral historians.

This has certainly been true of my own oral history experiences for my thesis research and as Project Officer for *Then & Now*. In interviewing local residents of St. Helens (Merseyside) about their experiences of de-industrialisation and (post-industrial) regeneration, I conducted my face-to-face interviews in interviewees’ homes, pubs, cafes, and even at an interviewee’s workplace, always a case-by-case decision to accommodate the interviewee. Though not something I considered at the time, this mitigated the safeguarding risk for myself as interviewer; a public place is safer than entering a stranger’s home alone. It also enabled me to offer the interviewees a drink (non-alcoholic) as a thanks for their time. There were drawbacks: background noise (music, conversation, cutlery/crockery), interruptions (by colleagues, once by an interviewee’s friend), and public interviews are less conducive to discussing distressing

or emotional material. Whilst not examples of best practice, in these public interviews the conversation between the interviewee and myself was always audible and the material gathered was very rich – as rich as that gathered from conversations in other interviewees' homes.

Then & Now, meanwhile, is a perfect example of adapting to changing circumstances, as discussed elsewhere in this Special Issue. Alumni interviews were a key aspect of the project throughout. They were planned as face-to-face, with interviewers being sent out to the interviewees wherever possible. With the pandemic, remote interviews were the only option given the project's June 2020 exhibition launch. Despite my criticism of the attitude towards remote interviewing of organisations like the OHS, their guidance does agree that remote interviewing is viable – albeit with a distinct tone of 'last resort' – where deadlines are unchangeable (**Morgan, 2020: 3**). Amidst the project's wider adaptation to remote working, the student interviewers devised strategies for remote interviewing. Given the circumstances, they proved very resourceful and sensible. One used a combination of Microsoft Teams and Zoom to conduct the interviews, which lasted around forty-five minutes on average. Digital signatures were used for the accompanying documentation, and a copy of the email chain between them and the interviewer was retained as further proof of consent. Another interviewer used Skype and again found interviews lasted on average forty-five minutes – although one chattier interviewee talked for over ninety minutes, showing that some people are comfortable with longer interviews remotely. The decision to proceed with remote interviews has been vindicated by the webpages which draw from them being amongst the most popular of *Then & Now's* online exhibition: 1123 views for 'Student & Alumni Experience', 1002 for 'Isolation Diaries', and 918 for 'Interactive Campus Map' (**Then & Now, 2020**).^{iv} As with the work of Dziedzic and the DVP, *Then & Now* showed that effective oral histories can be conducted even when circumstances do not allow adherence to established concepts of best practice.

Conclusion

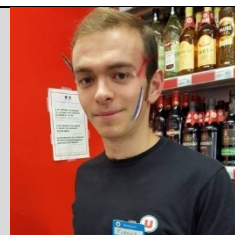
The OHS' caution about interviewing, even remotely, is understandable and sensible given the challenging and potentially distressing COVID-19 context. *Then & Now* was fortunate that its oral history interviews concerned peoples' memories of Warwick which, mostly, were positive and enjoyable to recall; albeit care had to be taken with the lockdown diaries which directly concerned COVID-19.

The OHS' attitude towards remote interviewing more generally, however, reflects a wider reticence amongst oral historians. As the website statistics indicate, *Then & Now's* remote interviews and lockdown diaries proved

very popular, suggesting the exhibition would have been poorer without them. In being decidedly *ad hoc*, the approach taken was no doubt imperfect, but there was still a conscious and deliberate attempt to maintain ethics and safeguarding in terms of interviewee consent and accommodating their needs (for instance anonymity).

For oral history to fulfil its role of uncovering the experiences and stories of those absent from the historical record, it cannot rely solely on face-to-face interviews. Rather than listing the current drawbacks with remote interviewing as reasons to eschew it, oral historians should look to remedy them by actively engaging with the remote process and by learning from communities and projects already making use of it. Interviewing is complicated and messy with subjective results, but a flexible interviewer can obtain interesting material from interviewees with very different attitudes and personas (Thompson, 2017: 308, 311-313). Flexibility also enables interviewers to be fully accommodating of an interviewee's needs, crucial in terms of safeguarding the interviewee's wellbeing. Decisions on how and where to conduct an interview – like decisions on how to interact with an interviewee during the interview – should be made on a case-by-case, common sense basis. If oral history becomes more open to multiple ways of interviewing and works to ensure they can be collected with proper ethics and safeguarding, it will become more accessible to a wider audience and will put both interviewees and interviewers in a safer, stronger position.

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Endnotes

ⁱ A quote taken from (Dziedzic, 2020).

ⁱⁱ Thompson describes interview interactions in similar terms: 'lying behind [the interview] is a notion of mutual co-operation, trust, and respect', (Thompson, 2017: 323).

ⁱⁱⁱ Abrams devotes an entire chapter – new to the second edition of her book – to 'trauma and ethics', reflecting the recent trend in oral history projects dealing with traumatic events. The trend is significant enough for Abrams to call it a 'sub-genre' with 'a distinctive field [that] has grown up around the methodological, conceptual and ethical' challenges it poses (Abrams, 2016: 175).

^{iv} Statistics correct for June 2020-February 2021. Accessed: 01 February 2021.

^v The Warwick Oral History Network runs a range of research seminars and provides guidance and support to oral history projects. Email: oralhistorynetwork@warwick.ac.uk or visit: <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/schoolforcross-facultystudies/networksandinitiatives/oralhistorynetwork/> for more information

^{vi} For more information on the Student Research Portfolio see: <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/applyingtostudy/currentstudents/studentresearchportfolio/>

^{vii} Note, the more up-to-date guidance on its website does not discuss remote interviewing either: Oral history guidance, <https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/publications/oral-history-guidance> [Accessed: 28 August 2020].

^{viii} This document, alongside reading lists and print-outs of training PowerPoints, was amongst various papers and books left behind by the Warwick Oral History Network's founder and former Director, Angela Davis.