DOCUMENTARY MAKING

For Digital Humanists

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13. Interviews

Fig. 45. Watch the video lesson on conducting interviews. http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12434/47ac0bf7

Interviews are often at the heart of documentaries. They will provide you with an opportunity to engage with other scholars, or to create new primary artefacts based upon the lived experiences of participants, activists, and witnesses. Conducting a successful interview involves balancing a number of factors, from ethics and safety, to intellectual preparation and writing the questionnaire.

Conducting primary interview research for your documentary project will add depth to its analysis. Whilst questionnaire data can be deployed in the narration or as statistics on screen, filmed interviews are an excellent addition to a documentary and provide both depth and production value. It is in these interviews that we experience the tension between ideas and perspectives, and the evocation of life stories. In fact,

when we think about documentary films, one of their most important and visible features is frequently the interview.

Until fairly recently, conducting professional-style documentary interviews has been somewhat out of reach. Access to suitable equipment was often limited by its expense and transportability. However, with the democratisation of filmmaking technologies, filmed interviews have become increasingly viable, especially with advances in online video-calling.[1] The very rudiments of the humanist's study — a written record on paper — is also undergoing radical change. As our means of communication and documentation evolve, so too does the framework in which they may be studied and articulated. Borrowing from the methods of oral historians, you can use interviews in your own research, producing primary data as well as developing archives of their subject's lived experiences. This chapter will provide a theoretical discussion about the application of oral history methods, as well as providing a step-by-step guide to interviewing, designing questions, the ethics of interviewing, the role of the interviewer, and the limits of interview data for academic use.

Oral History and Interviewing

By borrowing from the oral historian, filmmaker-scholars can produce their own primary materials. Whilst scholarship in the humanities is historically rooted in the analysis of written materials from state archives and newspapers, for example, and published in the same form, oral historians operate beyond these parameters, gathering novel interview material as the basis of their work. In the same way that oral historians' innovations in historical method added to the record by providing a voice to those often denied visibility in traditional archives, the filmmaker-scholar has the capacity to platform these voices. The digital revolution has fostered an academic environment wherein the analytical skills of the humanist can be readily captured by new technologies and disseminated by new and emerging distribution channels.

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1   Oral History Society (nd), *Getting Started*, https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/getting-started/3/#:~:text=Be%20able%20to%20record%20uncompressed,use%20different%20types%20of%20card); L. Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 82.

By moving to generate their own primary material, the pioneers of oral history in the 1960s and 1970s opened up the study of the past to include groups often omitted from the archival record.[2] As Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson put it:

> While interviews with members of social and political elites have complemented existing documentary sources, the most distinctive contribution of oral history has been to include within the historical record the experiences and perspectives of groups of people who might otherwise have been "hidden from history", perhaps written about by social observers or in official documents, but only rarely preserved in personal papers or scraps of autobiographical writing.[3]

The harnessing of the availability of sound-recording technologies was so profound a shift in the way that the historical record could be expanded that Arthur Marwick called it a 'mini-Renaissance'.[4] The drive to uncover submerged layers of the past has seen 'the experiences of a number of groups who had traditionally been disregarded by conventional histories: women, gays and lesbians, minority ethnic groups and the physically and learning disabled' become important aspects of the record.[5] The addition of a visual element, capturing nuances of body language and inflection, can only deepen the potential of this method. The Oral History Society breaks the advantages of this approach down into four key elements:

- A living history of everyone's unique life experiences.

- An opportunity for those people who have been 'hidden from history' to have their voice heard.

- A rare chance to talk about and record history face-to-face.

- A source of new insights and perspectives that may challenge our view of the past.[6]

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2   Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire, *Research Methods for History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 18.
3   Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson *The Oral History Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. ix.
4   Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
5   Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 4.
6   Oral History Society, https://www.ohs.org.uk/

Oral historians choose their interview subject and shape the contours of that encounter; they are the 'only historians who deal exclusively with the living'.[7] In addition, direct encounters with one's subjects can create new opportunities to gather other forms of evidence, with interview subjects often being in a position to provide further written documents, photographs, and other research materials, which might not otherwise have been available. As a consequence, the 'confines of the scholar's world are no longer the well-thumbed volumes of the old catalogue. Oral historians can think now as if they themselves were publishers: imagine what evidence is needed, seek it out and capture it'.[8] By embracing the interview as the means to reconstruct the past or present, oral historians have significantly widened the source-base upon which we can draw. . If we position the documentary-making humanist as a publisher in a trans-media environment, that widening becomes even more apparent. Not only do they collect and store data, stories, and perspective, they now actively disseminate those accounts in a way that captures the nuance of body language and facial expression, as well as changes in tone, delivery, and emphasis.

Designing an Interview

When planning for your interview there are four main approaches that might be taken: structured, semi-structured, unstructured, and focus groups:[9]

Structured interview: This is the most rigid form of interview, in which you arrive at the interview with a pre-determined set of questions. You will only ask these questions. Structured interviews are useful if, for example, you have multiple interviews planned and you wish to offer a uniform experience for your interview subjects. This adds consistency and, perhaps, a way to ensure that you can compare and contrast views in your documentary. In many ways, this style of interviewing is like an oral questionnaire.

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7   Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. xiv.
8   Paul Thomson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 28.
9   Patrick McNeil and Steve Chapman, *Research Methods* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 56.

Semi-structured interview: Like a structured interview, this approach also requires a pre-planned questionnaire. However, rather than being entirely pre-determined, a semi-structured interview provides the flexibility to ask follow-up questions. It requires you to design and plan the exchange, but it eschews the rigidity of a fully structured process; it is not essential that each question is asked, nor that your interviews all follow the same sequence. This is likely to be the style of interview that documentary makers will find the most useful — it ensures that the key areas of the project are covered but also allows for flexibility. A semi-structured interview would allow the interviewer to adjust their questions in response to the answers given, enabling them to elicit the best responses from each subject. Together with this flexibility, this approach retains an overall structure, ensuring that common themes and issues are covered by all of your different interview subjects.

Unstructured interview: This type of interview requires less formal planning (though not less preparation). Although the broad parameters of the exchange will be understood in advance, no formal questionnaire would be utilised, relying instead upon the interviewer's familiarity with the topic or their chemistry with the subject. Such encounters may provide unexpected results that might not have emerged from a more rigid line of questioning. However, what is gained by limited planning is potentially lost if the resultant discussion fails to engage with core ideas or themes — issues can easily be forgotten in the moment, and important issues left unexplored. Unstructured interviews are most appropriate in a spontaneous context, such as during a protest or emergency when circumstances do not allow for any advanced planning.

Focus groups: This a group interview. The interviewer acts as mediator or chair of a panel-style discussion about a given topic. It is a useful method if there are a large number of available interview subjects or, for example, there is an opportunity to interview a whole department of an organisation. Focus groups might draw out debates between participants and necessitate not only listening skills but also mediation, ensuring that dominant voices are controlled and quieter ones encouraged. Focus groups also lend themselves to longitudinal studies whereby repeat interviews can eke out changing (or static) attitudes.

Formulating Interview Questions

In designing the interview, the phrasing of questions is very important. Different types of questions lead to different types of responses and, of course, the questions must be designed to avoid leading the interview subject towards a pre-determined response. A list of twenty-five questions should be drawn up for a sixty-minute encounter.[10] This might be broken down into five key areas, each comprising five questions per section. In other words, the interview starts with a general question before becoming more focused. Donald Ritchie has argued that a two-sentence format is preferable, whereby the first offers the problem, and the second poses the question.[11] This is sometimes referred to as 'funnel interviewing'.[12] There are, of course, many ways of phrasing questions; this will determine the nature of the response you wish to capture: do you want single-word answers or longer, more considered, discussion?

When you are designing your interview questions, there are two main types of questions that you might pose your interviewee — open and closed questions. Open questions invite longer, more involved answers. Closed questions tend to elicit short, decisive answers. You will no doubt want to include a mixture of open and closed questions, but you will need to plan the order in which you pose them to your subject.

In general, it is best to start with open questions; allow your subject to ease into the topic and express their thoughts. As you progress through the questions for each section of the interview, you can start to round each discussion off with a closed question. For example, in a discussion about the history of silent film, you might ask your interviewee:

> To what extent was Charlie Chaplin the master of the silent film era?

This is an open question: rather than inviting a 'yes' or 'no' answer, it invites a longer and more considered response which will provide much deeper insight and consideration. These are sometimes also referred to as dialogical questions, as they encourage reflection and the creation of an extended discourse.[13] Such a question would likely provide much

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10   Thomson, *The Voice of the Past*, pp. 225–26.
11   Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, p. 81.
12   Ibid.
13   Higher Education Academy (n.a.), *Historical Insights Focus on Research: Oral History* (Coventry: Warwick University Press, 2010), p. 28.

deeper material for a documentary than its closed equivalent. In purely practical terms, this would provide you with significantly more material on which you can draw during the editing process. It would also allow you to compare and contrast the responses of different interviewees.

In contrast, when discussing the significance of Chaplin's filmmaking, it might be interesting to evoke a definite answer about the quality of his work. Asking a closed question would encourage this. For example, you might ask:

Did Charlie Chaplin make the best silent films?

This question invites a 'yes' or 'no' answer; your interviewee will either agree with the proposition or not. Closed questions are appropriate if you want a definitive answer to specific question. They are also useful as a final summation of a topic, perhaps to distil a conversation down to a final conclusion.

There are other types of questions, such as anchoring questions that ask the subject to place themselves at a particular point in time. So, for example, you might ask:

Where were you when you saw Charlie Chaplin's *Limelight*?

This question invites the interviewee to reveal a date, place, and time. It also helps to indicate the interviewee's age and elicit some of their socialisation.

The Phrasing of Questions

Closed questions:	Open questions:
'Did you....'	'To what extent....'
'Do you think that....'	'In what ways....'
'Do you agree that....'	'Tell me about....'

The Role of the Interviewer

As well as developing certain research skills, filmmaker-scholars must also learn to be effective interviewers. It is essential that interviewers develop a new set of skills that include an understanding of human

relationships.[14] Having framed the contours of the encounter in the research documentation (discussed below), the interview should settle into a rhythm within the first twenty minutes. Fundamental to the interview is that, like an oral historian, the interviewer 'has to be a good listener, the informant an active helper'.[15] Indeed, patience and considered prompts following natural pauses in the conversation will keep the dialogue going: do not interrupt the subject, only follow with additional questions once they have finished. According to The Higher Education Academy's oral history guide, interviewers should:

- **Show interest:** by active listening, looking interested (nodding and smiling rather than making verbal sounds of appreciation), picking up on what has been said when it is appropriate and in natural breaks in the conversation.

- **Maintain eye contact:** although beware that this is subject to cultural contexts.

- **Reassure:** that what is being said is interesting, even when it might not seem so; it is surprising how often what seems to be mundane turns out to have significance when it is subsequently analysed.

- **Empathise when appropriate**: be compassionate, but try to avoid empathising with experiences that are simply outside of the interviewer's knowledge or experience.

- **Avoid making assumptions:** try to ask questions to test assumptions. If information seems ambiguous, find ways of asking for clarification.

- **Avoid disagreeing or arguing:** interviewees can have values and beliefs that are at odds with those of the interviewer, but the session is about the interviewee's life, including their ideological orientations. It is not about the interviewer's prejudices, assumptions, and beliefs (no matter how well-intentioned they might be).

- **Be relaxed and measured**: avoid hurrying through the interview and skipping from topic to topic — think about the

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14   Thomson, *The Voice of the Past*, p. 30.
15   Ibid, p. 31.

interview flow and keep questions and prompts short and clear.

- **Use emotional intelligence:** to connect to the interviewee and fine-tune when and how questions should be asked.[16]

The Interviewer/Subject Relationship

The interview process is, by definition, an active one, whereby the communication between the two actors must develop what has been called a 'conversational narrative: conversational because of the relationship of interviewer and interviewee, and narrative because of the form of exposition—the telling of a tale'.[17] In that sense, then, we must, as scholars conducting interviews, and thus the creators of new primary material, acknowledge that we are involved in the creation of artefacts, unlike our peers who rely on archival material alone. We must, therefore, carefully consider our role — the impact of our own subjectivities — in the production of the primary data derived from that process.

The active participation of the interviewer in this 'conversational narrative' disrupts their attempts at neutrality as they fundamentally help to shape the story. In other words, the memories, experiences, and reflections elicited by the interview process are not an objective truth about the past; they are creative narratives shaped in part by the personal relationship that facilitates the telling.[18] This methodological conundrum has been referred to as intersubjectivity, a phenomenon that 'describes the interaction — the collision, if you will — between the two subjectivities of interviewer and interviewee. More than that, it describes the way in which the subjectivity of each is shaped by the encounter with the other'.[19] For many scholars this creates a validity problem, which may prompt some to question or even refute data that is collected in this way.

In addition to the perceived issue of intersubjectivity, and the active participation of the researcher in shaping the historic record, others

16   Higher Education Academy, *Oral History*, p. 31–31.
17   Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, p. 44.
18   Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, p. 58.
19   Ibid.

have noted the potential rift between truth and memory. Indeed, the filmmaker-scholar, like the historian,

> asks people questions to discover four things: what happened, how they felt about it, how they recall it, and what wider public memory they draw upon. At the heart of this lies memory. Memory and the process of remembering are central to oral history. The recollections of memory are our primary evidence just as the medieval manuscript or the cabinet-office minutes are for historians working within other traditions[.][20]

Indeed, this idea lies at the heart of A. J. P Taylor's often used[21] but uncited disapproval of oral history as 'old men drooling about their youth' — a scathing commentary on the ability of interviews to generate objective recollections given the fallibility of human memory, and the propensity of such recollections, unlike written documents, to change over time.[22] This does, however, seem to ignore the fact that written testimonies or minuted records are likewise based on the selection of information committed to paper, or the memories of those, for example, writing their memoirs. It also ignores stark discrepancies between different ethnic groups, genders, social classes, and sexualities within the archive.

So, whilst '[d]ealing with memory is a risky business',[23] it is the fundamental ingredient of a documentary film's ability to engage a wide range of voices. In addition, providing that the interview is constructed in a way that avoids leading the interviewee, it unlikely that the interviewer can subvert the historic record as '[p]eople remember what they think is important, not necessarily what the interviewer thinks is most consequential'.[24] In that sense, the objective is 'searching not for fact, but the truth behind the fact'.[25] Oral historians have helped us to understand the distinctive qualities of recorded memory.[26] Indeed,

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20   Ibid, p. 78.
21   This quote first appeared in Brian Harrison's 'Oral history and recent political history', *Oral History* 1 (1972), 30–48, and is likely derived from personal correspondence rather than Taylor's published writings.
22   Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, p. 10.
23   Ibid, p. 15.
24   Ibid.
25   Ronald J. Grele, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History. Second Edition* (1985; New York: Greenwood Publishing, 1991), p. 129.
26   Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire (eds), *Research Methods for History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 102, ch. 7.

whilst the humanist (and historian) usually relies on archival sources, the 'use of interviews as a source for professional historians is long-standing and perfectly compatible with scholarly standard'.[27]

The Ethics of Interviewing

Before interviews can be arranged and filmed, there are some important steps that must be taken. These ensure your safety as an interviewer and that of your subject. It is 'essential that interviewees should have confidence and trust in interviewers, and that recordings should be available for research and other uses within a legal and ethical framework which protects the interests of interviewees'.[28] Most universities and institutions will have their own ethics procedures to ensure the safety and well-being of the researcher and participants. It is absolutely essential that these are followed, both from a legal and moral perspective. In particular, and applying the methods of the oral historian, the interview process has the potential to be an emotive experience whereby, depending on the topic, the participant may be speaking about troubling aspects of their life. Indeed, during the interview process, the participant 'may breach a lifelong silence or make new sense of experience, and perhaps find recognition or even catharsis through stories that have never been easily told. At worst, if the dialogue opens wounds that are still raw and offers no way to make new, affirming meaning, it risks a "dis-composure" of safe stories and settled identities"'.[29] In order to safely navigate this process, there are a number of key steps that must be taken.

As a starting point, you must produce two documents that you can send to your interviewee in advance of encounter. The first is a Participant Information Sheet; this document describes your project's aims, objectives, and scope. As part of this, it is important to explain why you have asked the participant to be involved, what the participation (i.e., the interview) involves, how you will use and store the footage, and the contact details of a person who can handle any complaints they

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27 Thomson, *The Voice of the Past*, p. 26.
28 Oral History Society, *Is Your Oral History Legal and Ethical?* https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/ethical-and-legal/
29 Gunn and Faire, *Research Methods for History*, p. 108.

may have once the interview has been concluded. The second document is an Informed Consent Form. This asks the participant to sign off on the aspects of the exchange that they are happy with. These will take the form of declaratory statements which ask, for example, whether they are happy to be named or for you to use their footage in your documentary film.

The Interview Process

1. Make a list of people you would like to interview for your documentary film.

2. Conduct your preliminary research to gather contact details of your potential interviewees.

3. Contact your list of interviewees either by telephone, email, or via social media with a short outline of your research and why you have contacted them. Avoid using the word 'interview' as this can sound overly formal. Instead, ask whether they would be willing to have a 'chat' or 'conversation' about your topic.

4. Once they have provisionally agreed to take part, forward your Participation Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form to ensure that they know what taking part involves.

5. Arrange the date, time, and location of the interview.

6. The interview should take place in a safe space, mutually agreed, and in a room without distractions such as televisions and telephones.

7. On the day of the interview, set up your equipment and build some rapport with your subject as you position them and the equipment. Consider the rule of thirds (see chapter ten) when framing the interview subject. The interview sections of your documentary film are as important to your visual grammar as any other aspect of your project.

8. Before you start the interview, make sure your subject introduces themselves to the camera, providing their name, the purpose of the interview, and their consent to being filmed.

9. The interview should last no longer than sixty minutes.

10. Ask one question at a time — be clear in your questioning.

11. Start with open questions that are broader before moving to more incisive questions; conclude with closed questions to draw out more definite answers.

12. Make eye contact as your subject answers your questions — listen intently and provide a relaxed environment.

13. Do not interrupt the response; wait for a natural pause before moving on or asking a follow-up question.

14. Do not be combative or argue with your interviewee.

15. Allow your subject to speak 'off the record' if they wish.

16. Following the final question and response, ask if they have anything else to add or whether they have any questions.

17. Thank your subject for taking part.

18. Ask them to sign the Informed Consent Form.

Sample forms and templates (Participant Information Sheet, Informed Consent Form) are included on the following pages.

Participant Information Sheet Template

[Title]

[Short paragraph of your documentary's key aims]

What is the purpose of the study?

Why have you been chosen?

What will participation involve?

You should know that:

- The interview will take place at an agreed location that ensures the safety of both interviewee and interviewer.

- The interview will be recorded, with your consent.

- Initially, access to the interview recording will be limited to [name] and academic colleagues and researchers with whom [he/she] might collaborate as part of the research process.

- Both summaries of, and direct quotations taken from, our conversation, attributed to yourself by name, will be used in a documentary film and academic publications unless you wish these comments to be anonymised. If you wish parts of the interview to be regarded as 'off the record', please indicate that this is the case.

- The actual footage will be stored on [insert storage solution].

Do I have to take part?

What will happen to the results of the study?

Who should you contact for further information?

If you wish to seek further information or have a complaint about the researcher, please contact:

Researcher:

Name:

Job Title:

Address:

Email:

Telephone:

Director of Research

Name:

Job Title:

Address:

Email:

Telephone:

Informed Consent Form Template

[Project Title]

[Short paragraph of your documentary's key aims]

Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to read the accompanying Participant Information Sheet.
If you have any questions or queries about the interview, please contact the researcher using the details listed below:

Name:
Job Title:
Address:
Email:
Telephone:

By signing this form, I agree that:

	Please initial
1. I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.	☐
3. I agree that this interview may be recorded and stored electronically.	☐
4. I understand that, unless I indicate otherwise, the interviewer may reproduce material gathered from this interview as attributed quotations in their documentary project, and subsequent academic publications.	☐
5. I understand that if I wish any part of this interview to remain in confidence, this is possible, and I should indicate to the interviewer which passages should be treated as 'off the record'.	☐

6. I do not expect to receive any benefit or payment for my participation.	☐
7. I agree to take part in the research project.	☐

Participant(s) Details:

Name of participant(s):

Signature(s) of participant(s):

Date:

Name of Researcher:
Address:
Email:
Telephone:

Signature of researcher:
Date: