

# Oral History and COVID-19: Drastic Changes or Business as Usual?

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Life has changed dramatically for the world due to COVID-19. Social distancing requirements, travel restrictions and risks to vulnerable people rapidly became commonplace in reporting as the pandemic developed. Many researchers were quickly required to alter their plans if their projects were to be completed on schedule. Travel was severely restricted, and many found themselves wondering how their work would continue if they could not travel to meet an interviewee. A number of people have adapted their work to reflect this changing situation. Yet there is a proportion of researchers, historians and scholars for whom life has not changed. The anxieties, fears and concerns surrounding COVID-19 of course remained prominent for them, as it did for many people, but oral history in a COVID world is, for some, not too dissimilar to oral history in a pre-COVID world.

I have been fortunate to have worked with a diverse community of historians and researchers, including academics and practitioners, volunteers and staff, oral historians and those who favoured other methods. I have enjoyed the reciprocal sharing of ideas with researchers who focus on local histories, those who work on broader projects, people based in my own region and those who live across the globe. Yet one aspect of their work has often resurfaced – the requirement to travel great distance for work-related research.

As an historian and academic, I have faced barriers that have prevented me from travelling to conduct oral history interviews face-to-face. Indeed, many researchers face such barriers for a variety of reasons including disability, illness, financial strain, and care commitments, among others. Yet through the availability of technology, willing interview participants and supportive colleagues, my work has been

conducted via telephone and video conferencing platforms. We shared photographs and documents via secure methods, and live video allowed us to feel as if we were in the same room. Those who have participated in my research projects as interviewees were quite willing to be part of an interview via this method. As many of us have experienced, the understanding and willingness of these people to participate in our research makes our projects possible. Yet I have often been met with surprise from people who had not realised my research was possible without undertaking travel.

As the COVID-19 travel restrictions increased, many people found themselves turning to technology to make their work possible. This has included oral historians and other researchers. I saw many researchers rapidly sign up for information sessions on conducting interviews and focus groups online, adjusting projects for the online interview environment, and adjusting human research ethics procedures to incorporate these interview processes. Yet for those who already faced barriers to travel, this aspect of their work did not change. Video and telephone interviews continued as scheduled, project planning continued as scheduled and research continued – albeit with many more people now utilising these same online platforms due to the COVID-19 travel barrier. As a result of a pandemic, the method of work already in frequent use by those who face barriers to travel was becoming a much more widespread occurrence.

Several colleagues have expressed to me their belief that this new way of working might well continue after the pandemic. For some, such as myself, this is not a new way of working. Yet the pandemic has made this way of working more commonplace. Yes, there will still be times when researchers will need to travel – but there are many more people who have now seen their research continue and succeed despite their inability to travel during the pandemic. While I have faced barriers to travel, I have not faced barriers in my research. I have conducted successful research that has brought forth new understandings of refugee resettlement experiences in Queensland, much of which is either forthcoming or under consideration for publication. I have worked with numerous local communities to undertake research that has allowed for a greater understanding of heritage and community engagement. I have had the support of colleagues who saw beyond a barrier, and instead saw

projects with potential, and an historian who was going to see each of her projects through to completion. For many people who have faced similar barriers, this was (and will be) life as normal – before and after the restrictions caused by COVID-19.

Importantly, this piece does not seek to diminish the work of those who conduct interviews in person, or those who travel for work-related research. It does not seek to diminish the importance of work that relies on on-site work, such as projects involving an archaeological component. Nor does it does not seek to diminish the severity of the impact COVID-19 has had on the lives of people across the globe. Instead, it highlights the determination of those who face barriers restricting travel and physical meetings to continue in their work, and how a COVID-19 world has made their way of work become more commonplace than ever before.