*NOHANZ member* ***Janet Toland****, School of Information Management, Victoria University of Wellington attended* Command Lines: Software, Power and Performance*, at the Computer History Museum in California in March. She reports on a panel discussion about the use of oral history in the wider history of computing.*

The Special Interest Group in Computers in Society (SIGCIS) is a community of academics and practitioners who study the history of information technology. Members frequently use oral history as a research method. At a 2017 SIGCIS conference five researchers discussed the different ways they use oral history in their research projects. The discussion was videoed and with the consent of participants made available on YouTube. This review of the session will hopefully tempt you to spend an hour watching that video.

The Tools, Techniques and Communities: Oral History in Software History panel was led by Deanna Day, a research fellow from the Chemical Heritage Foundation, which has an extensive oral history repository. Other members included David C Brock, from the Centre for Software History at the Computer History Museum; Melanie Swalwell from Flinders University, who is researching the history of home micro computing in Australia and New Zealand; Laine Nooney from Georgia Tech, who researches the history of the US video game company Sierra Online; and Brian McCullough, who produces a series of Internet History podcasts with over 10,000 subscribers.

The panel explained their different approaches. Deanna and David use a traditional approach aimed at producing oral histories that can be deposited in an institutional repository. In contrast Laine’s approach is more casual often taking interviewees to a location where they may feel most comfortable, such as the Zoo, without worrying too much about how background noise may affect the quality of the recording. Brian originally set out to interview the developers of Netscape, but as his podcasts became more popular his project expanded. His interviewees are usually well known in their field and his big draw card is that he promises to release their interviews without any editing so they can tell their story in their own words. In contrast, Melanie interviews unknown home users and has taken the approach of involving them in writing their own history by setting up “Play it Again”, a popular memory archive where users of homebrew microcomputer games can share their stories.

Deanna Day asked the panel a number of questions about how they select their interview subjects, and any tips they might have for the best ways of getting in contact. They were also asked about any specific strategies used for getting the interviewee to think differently about an issue or offer new insights. The final question addressed why they had chosen to use oral history at this moment in time.

Depending on the nature of their projects panellists had different ways of selecting potential interviewees. Getting input from the community they were trying to research was a common theme. One approach was word of mouth, asking an interviewee to recommend other potential contacts. It was pointed out that this technique is a good way of reaching people who are very central to a social network but are not well known themselves. Sometimes the engineer or secretary who no one has bothered to talk to previously may give more revealing insights than the Vice President who has a standard dinner party story off pat. Brian McCullough found that as his podcast became well-known potential interviewees started approaching him directly; his listeners would also give him suggestions about who to interview next.

Despite working in the IT field, panellists often favoured traditional approaches for contacting interviewees. There were a variety of reasons for this, a letter was felt to be a “safer” way of getting in touch than cold calling. Also with the pervasiveness of electronic communications, a formal letter with an official letterhead or alternatively a personal handwritten letter can often cut through the noise and get peoples’ attention more effectively. Hand written thank you notes were also widely used. However, panellists also made use of social networking sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook; public record search services were also an option.

Some interviewees, such as the home micro computer users, are unlikely to have ever been asked to tell their stories before, however people who are well known are often used to trotting out the same old stories, and the interviewer needs to think of techniques to throw them off balance a little in order to get new insights. For some preparation was the key here, spending time doing extensive research before the interview and always having more questions than needed so any new information can be followed up on the spot. When an interviewee comments “well I haven’t thought about this in 20 years” then the interviewer knows they are getting some interesting material. Often people aren’t reflective, so it is interesting to see their reaction when you run an interpretation of their life story by them. However in some cases detailed preparation is not possible as no previous information exists.

Other strategies included asking an unexpected question such as; “What was the role of religion and politics in your life?” Dumb questions can also be useful by getting interviewees to go back to first principles, as can asking them to draw diagrams. It is also beneficial to take away the presumption that working in computing was an inevitability in interviewees’ lives, and to get the story of how they entered the field.

Panellists pointed out that IT is relatively new and its history is only just entering the record; sometimes the only option for researchers is to generate primary sources themselves using oral history. Ironically, though much more data is stored online rather than on paper these days, much of it is password protected and not readily available, making oral history even more important. Even where there is good access to textual materials, oral history still has the benefit of uncovering contingencies not present in the textual record.

Oral history is an important tool in the computer historian’s arsenal, adding a richness that is often lacking in other techniques. It can be carried out in many different ways for different purposes: sometimes the interview is intended for a formal repository, while other interviews will be disseminated online, or used for personal research. Despite this variety some common themes emerged, and all panellists agreed that training in oral history techniques was essential for potential interviewers.

The discussion panel was convivial and offered useful insights into the different ways oral history can be used in the fields of science and technology. Oral history tends to be underused in these subject areas, especially as paper or online documentation is often available. However, as the panellists unanimously agreed oral history unearths insights and connections that other methods don’t. Hopefully discussion panels like this will raise awareness of the benefits of oral history for researchers whatever their field.

Youtube link for panel discussion

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ziXWP7I3eyk&list=PLQsxaNhYv8dZLtHNYG0ygsOjVvvRg87c9&index=8>

Internet History Podcast

<http://www.internethistorypodcast.com/>

Podcast on the history of Sierra Online with Laine Nooney

<http://www.internethistorypodcast.com/2016/06/the-history-of-sierra-online-with-laine-nooney/>

Play it Again popular memory archive

<http://web.archive.org/web/20170405032734/http://playitagainproject.org/>

Computer History Museum oral history repository

<http://www.computerhistory.org/collections/oralhistories/>

Chemical Heritage Foundation oral history repository

<https://www.chemheritage.org/oral-history-collections>