

## COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

### COLUMBIA CENTER FOR ORAL HISTORY

#### *Procedures: Video Interviews*

#### **Background**

Over the last 15 years 500 hours of oral history on broadcast quality video, adapting the traditional techniques of oral history - in which rapport and research are central to the interview - to the studio environment. Interviews on the history of the Carnegie Corporation culminated with a series of interviews conducted with Carnegie grantees in South Africa, including Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, and a biographical interview with Jimmy Carter in Atlanta.

#### **Reasons for Video Interviews**

The introduction of video into the oral history process often follows a series of audio interviews, which are transcribed and returned to the interviewee before the video session is scheduled. The video interview is then an opportunity for a deeper reflection on the issues discussed in the previous interview and a moment in which the interviewee can consciously speak to a larger public. While the integrity of oral history, as a biographical interview in which the interviewee retains interpretative authority over the transcript, is maintained in the first stage of the interview process; the interviewee also now has the opportunity to record his or her story for dissemination to a larger public and establish a visual record as well as an aural one. This dual opportunity preserves the best of the traditional oral history format while creating a fuller historic record from which historians, students and subsequent generations can learn. There is no doubt that visual history is one direction that oral history must take in the 21st century in order to ensure that those we interview are recorded with the highest degree of professional expertise.

#### **Video Interview Process**

The audio and video interviews are transcribed and indexed as one interview. The audio and video are captured on digital recorders and are made accessible to our team immediately after the interview session. This will allow the Columbia Center for Oral History to index the audiotapes and videotapes so that researchers can locate the portions of the sound and video they are most interested in focusing upon. This will allow audio and video producers, independently or in concert with the staff of the Center, to make use of the interviews we produce just as historians have in traditional publishing venues. The Center will carefully explore the wishes of the interviewee, in each case, regarding the use of the video interview just as we have always done the audio interview. The video session will remain optional for all biographical projects, and the audio and transcribed interview will provide the basis from which video sessions are conceptualized. Interviewees who wish to record all of their testimony on video will also be provided with that option.

Typically, an audio interview is conducted in a place of the interviewee's choosing: either a home or an office. The video interview may be more comfortably conducted in a studio facility, depending on the size of the crew and the amount of equipment, as it may be a burden on the interviewee to open up their home or office as the site of the interview. The video session can last the length of a regular oral history session, one to two hours, but often requires an additional session which can occur the same day or in a second day. Regular breaks are taken as a new tape usually needs to be inserted approximately every thirty minutes.

The size of the crew varies depending on the format, and the producers the Columbia Center for Oral History hires to work with understand the principles and procedures of oral history. The authority over what happens in the video session remains with the interviewer and the interviewee, though a professional member of the Oral History staff is present to ensure that things are running smoothly. The Director or Assistant Director of the Center has worked with the interviewer in advance to discuss the content and purpose of the interview, and/or conducts the interview.

### **Summary**

As stated above, the video interview usually follows an audio interview or series of interviews, and the person interviewed is given an opportunity to review transcripts of these sessions before the video interview takes place. Conversations are held between the project director and the interviewer, as well as the interviewee, in order to think carefully about how to use the on camera interview most effectively. Often this results in a more thoughtful, and relaxed, interview than in most typical filmed interviews.

The video is the primary product in a visual oral history, though a transcript is provided for the researcher's reference. The person interviewed is provided with a copy of the video, as well as the transcript.

The interviewee signs a legal release granting the Columbia Center for Oral History the right to make video interviews available to the public through standard mechanisms of dissemination, though some restrictions can be applied regarding dissemination over the Internet.