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# "Can You Hear Me Okay?" Launching a Story-Based Archive Collection During COVID-19

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# “Can You Hear Me Okay?” Launching a Story-Based Archive Collection During COVID-19

## **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic, racial reckoning across the United States, and the uncertainty of the future dramatically shaped the development of the UNC Story Archive collection. Formerly envisioned as a mobile recording studio that would travel to events to collect the stories of University of North Carolina alumni and students who are part of communities that have been misrepresented, ignored, or outright silenced in the historic record, a shift to entirely remote space had to happen. While considering how to rework the planning for this collection during Summer 2020, important questions about proceeding mindfully during crises arose. This article discusses how building the UNC Story Archive on intentional theoretical frameworks of collaboration, radical empathy, and honoring of space facilitated that shift and helped navigate those challenging questions.

## **Keywords**

technology, collaboration, metadata, oral history, digital archive, inclusivity

## **Author Bio**

Cassie Tanks is a second-year student in the Master of Library Science program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

## **Acknowledgements**

Numerous collaborators have played pivotal support roles in ensuring that The UNC Story Archive is successful now and will remain so into the future: the University Archives and Records Management team, Special Collections Technical Services—especially Deseree Stukes and Kaylin Blount, strategic partnerships with alumni groups, and Library Communications—all provided tremendous support in the form of technical assistance and outreach efforts. Contributors also play a valuable role in supporting the UNC Story Archive—each has the opportunity to be involved in the descriptive metadata and transcription process. So many invested people have made the UNC Story Archive what it is today and will make it better for the future.

The beginning of nearly every UNC Story Archive remote recording session begins in the same fashion—the contributor’s audio signal suddenly vibrates to life on my computer screen, and I ask perhaps one of the most ubiquitous questions in the remote work era: “Can you hear me okay?”. This seemingly banal question signifies the collaboration, flexibility, and experimentation required to rework the UNC Story Archive into a fully remote project. It also highlights how opportunity can be found in challenges and ethical considerations. In the following paragraphs, I examine how the attempts to respond to critical questions that arose during the shift to fully remote recording led to a reaffirmation of the guiding principles that continue to scaffold the development of the UNC Story Archive now and in an uncertain future.

The UNC Story Archive is a collection of recorded audio stories in the University Archives at the Wilson Special Collection Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It is a new addition to the University Archives—the framework began to be put in place in August of 2020 and the inaugural recording took place in November 2020—and is currently a collection of 33 contributions and counting. Inspired by the North Carolina State University Wolf Tales collection, who also generously shared their documentation, as well as the Virginia Tech Stories Project, the UNC Story Archive strives to push against prevailing patriarchal, white, and cisgender-heteronormative narratives in the University’s history. It is a space for Carolina students and alumni to share their stories and experiences that have been underrepresented, misrepresented, or outright silenced in the archival record using audio recordings, textual transcripts, and, when provided by contributors, images and other digitized ephemera. Although this collection is built upon contributors speaking their truth to the historical record, it is also very future focused—many participants embrace that they are in conversation with generations of students yet to come. Long before I joined the project as a Library Science graduate assistant, the vision for creating the UNC Story Archive and its strategic alumni group relationships, such as with the Carolina Pride Alumni Network, was established by University Archives staff. These established relationships were crucial because I joined the project as an “outsider” to the Carolina community—I am a born-and-raised southern Californian who only became a member of the UNC community in fall 2020 (and only set foot on campus a handful of times during that first year).

Rewind to the summer of 2020 and the rampant uncertainty about the pandemic, the lives lost to COVID-19, and the national racial reckoning rolling across the United States (and the world) after the murder of George Floyd. Working to advance the UNC Story Archive, conversations with my University Archives and Records Management supervisors, Nicholas Graham and Jessica Venlet, shifted dramatically. Gone were the golden possibilities of creating a highly mobile project that travelled to alumni and student events, instead replaced with a reality that, at the time, seemed constrained to my 13-inch laptop screen. As the tempestuous summer rolled into a fraught fall, the reworking of the UNC Story Archive caused some big questions to emerge:

- How will this work in a pandemic?
- How do we address community and accessibility in a remote world?
- What are additional avenues for centering contributors and how can we rethink metadata?

Addressing these questions meant identifying the best practices and core principles that would form the foundation of the UNC Story Archive, regardless of outreach and collection modality, and erecting the remote architecture built on those principles.

To approach the first question, three key principles in the reworking of the UNC Story Archive from a tangible recording project to an ethereal one that could flexibly operate during the deepening COVID-19 pandemic and civil rights crises emerged: collaboration, radical empathy, and honoring of space. As mentioned before, collaboration among various departments across the Wilson Special Collections Library has been, and will remain, central to the long-term success of the UNC Story Archive. But a collaboration of a different sort is vital to creating a solid base for the collection—that with contributors. Oral histories are “collaborative dialogues built on trust” that extend beyond the recording and into the collaborative transcription, editing, description of accompanying visual resources, and preservation processes.<sup>1</sup> All of this helps “balance our desire to capture histories” that would otherwise not be included in the University’s historical record with “the privacy, desires, and needs” of contributors.<sup>2</sup> A natural outgrowth of collaboration as a foundational principle of the UNC Story Archive is the embrace of radical empathy in archival practice. Michelle Caswell and Mikor Cifor describe radical empathy in the archives as a praxis of care that “make[s] survivors and implicated communities not just a target group of users, but central focal points in all aspects of the archival endeavour.”<sup>3</sup> This emphasis on empathy decentralizes the archive and the reduction of the contributor’s recording as just a historical “thing” to be preserved for that archive. Instead, empathy centralizes the contributor and the recording of their lived experience as an important piece of the history of the Carolina Community. In short, we are attempting to break away from the traditional practice of seeing the archive as the bastion of all knowledge and instead, place the contributors at the center of the collection as the true experts on their experiences.

Oral histories and the ephemera that often accompany them are powerful “vehicle[s] to create space for engagement” which “enables the participants of a particular experience to engage in dialogue and contestation of their experiences and history.”<sup>4</sup> But what is a vehicle if it has no space to roam? The initial loss of physical space felt at the beginning stages of the UNC Story Archive was illusionary. If anything, the remote world the UNC Story Archive now operated in entirely reinforced how space is not necessarily geographical or physical and that going remote, instead, opened wide vistas of opportunity. By untethering the collection process from the place of the UNC campus or events within driving distance, intellectual, feminist, political, economic, and other spaces could be explored by contributors as they saw fit. Contributors were given space to contemplate their stories—the “many maps” of life “neatly folded and tucked away in the glove compartment of

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<sup>1</sup> Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives,” *ARCHIVARIA* 81 (Spring 2016), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>4</sup> Ali Khangela Hlongwane, “The Mapping of the June 16, 1976, Soweto Student Uprisings Routes: Past Recollections and Present Reconstruction(s),” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 19, no. 1 (2007).

memory”—and be meaningful guides for future users of the archive through the space they experienced.<sup>5</sup>

The shift from geographical place to conceptual space helped launch the UNC Story Archive from the framework and planning phase to the viable project phase by guiding the selection of the technology that would help facilitate the recordings. When test-driving remote recording software, we sought something accessible and simple yet robust, so that more people could contribute with minimal technological strain.

Given these theoretical and technological parameters, the UNC Story Archive ultimately chose the remote recording platform Zencastr. This platform balanced quality recordings with ease of use. After registering for a “Professional” account for a modest monthly fee, higher quality lossless WAV recordings could be collected, rather than the lossy MP3 files that are available to “Hobbyist” no-cost accounts. Zencastr is browser-based—it does not require download—and does not require contributors to create an account. It only takes clicking on a unique URL for a contributor to enter the remote recording studio. There are also several redundancies built into Zencastr—recordings can be immediately downloaded at the end of a recording, automatic back-up to a cloud storage service can be set up in the account dashboard, and, if needed, the recording can be recovered using a URL link that allows access to browser storage. This last point makes Zencastr somewhat independent of internet signal strength, which proved to be extremely useful on one occasion. A winter storm roared outside during a remote recording session, during which the internet signal for both myself and the contributor vacillated between “pretty-dang-weak” and “barely holding on,” yet the full recording could be recovered easily with no drops in quality or audio artifacts related to the poor internet strength.

But this is by no means a claim that there have not been challenges. Though Zencastr offered flexibility and features that suited this project, it also presented constraints unique to relying on a remote “recording studio” rather than in-person recording. One such challenge is browser selectivity. Zencastr works when the URL is opened with Google Chrome, Microsoft Edge, or Brave Browser but does *not* work with Safari or Firefox. This selectivity of the browser is a result of Zencastr’s built-in redundancies—the contributor’s recording is temporarily backed up using local browser storage which enables recovery of audio later, if needed. However, not everyone uses these browsers or is able to download an additional browser to their computer. When this issue arises, it can result in a protracted “tech check” with the contributor via email or phone. In one such instance, a contributor ended up using their tablet to record remotely, rather than their laptop, because that device had access to Google Chrome when their MacBook did not. Related to this are issues with contributors being able to “enter” the remote recording studio after opening their session’s URL in a compatible browser. Occasionally, a contributor found themselves “stuck” in a remote “green room,” not fully able to enter the remote recording studio even though the connection was established. This has been resolved by either refreshing the browser, having the contributor close and reopen their browser before retrying their recording session’s URL, or the

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen S. Hall, “I, Mercator,” in *You Are Here: Personal Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination*, ed. Katharine Harmon (New York, NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003).

recording facilitator creating a new remote recording studio session for that contributor with a new URL.

Further, an evergreen challenge to *all* remote recording is the quality of the equipment and space used by contributors to record and how it affects the audio. With face-to-face recording, there can be some control over the equipment and the environment—external microphones with pop-filters can be used and efforts to create a recording environment that minimizes echoes can be made. But that control is lost with remote recording. Even though contributors are encouraged to use headphones with a built-in microphone and to record in a sound-softening space, such as a closet, they still can only work with what they have and what they are comfortable doing.

As a result of the choice to use Zencast for our remote recording studio, the community of contributors to UNC Story Archive expanded in delightful ways that would have been extremely difficult if face-to-face recording had remained the focus. Recordings occurred in living rooms, offices, bedrooms, and, at times, closets from the east coast to the west coast, up to Canada, down to Florida, and back again. The expanded space of the UNC Story Archive enabled by remote recording is in itself an important historical piece of the primary source stories from contributors. In some of the recordings, street noises can be heard, dogs bark, and phones ring. These sounds, coupled with contributors sharing where the recording took place, add texture to the historical moment of the recording.

Key information about where contributors recorded their stories is indicative of the Archive’s centering of contributors as much as possible in as many steps of the process as possible, including metadata. The development of the “Story Description Form” is another way that contributors are centered in the recording process. Through this form, contributors are invited to “provide keywords and phrases that best describe you, your story, your community, and may help others in your community find your story” using fields that are flexible and free form; there are no boxes to be “checked.” The theoretical framework of the UNC Story Archive, its shift from face-to-face place to remote space, and the desire to empower the community of contributors, provided the impetus for the “Story Description Form” and the centering of contributors in the descriptive metadata process. Using contributor metadata “explore[s] the personal contexts of community-based participatory archive contributors by unveiling the stories behind the objects the contributors donate to the archives” and reaffirms that their story is centered.<sup>6</sup>

The nuance and context that contributors provide to the metadata about their stories, as well as the additional photos and digital ephemera that some have provided to accompany their story, is also a response to the *many* issues with controlled subject heading vocabularies, such as the Library of Congress Subject Headings and other similar authority lists. This ambitious, and slightly unconventional, approach to description would not have been possible without the support of Assistant University Archivist Jessica Venlet, as well as metadata librarian Anna Goslen, and the Special Collection Technical Services department, who implemented a MODS metadata schema that centered the contributor’s metadata. During the development of the MODS XML and related spreadsheet used for adding metadata, fields specific to the needs of the UNC Story Archive and the

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<sup>6</sup> Ana Roeschley and Jeonghyun Kim, “Something That Feels like a Community?: The Role of Personal Stories in Building Community-Based Participatory Archives” *Archival Science* 19, no. 1 (2019), 28.

University Library’s initiatives were included. Our description includes fields for Interviewee Keywords and Topics, Locations, Place of Interview, Participant Correct Spelling, Pronouns, Gender Identity, Sexuality, and Ethnic or Racial Identity. Contributors create the metadata for these fields using flexible language, not a controlled vocabulary, and are encouraged to use whatever words, phrases, vernacular, or slang they feel is needed to describe themselves and their story. It should be noted that participation in this process is not demanded, and contributors have the option to choose *not* to contribute metadata. When this occurs, the contributor’s story is used to create basic metadata so that their words are still being used and appear in a basic “subject” field.

The UNC Story Archive’s audio recordings, transcripts, related photos and digitized ephemera, and contributor-driven metadata are all publicly available through Carolina’s Digital Collections Repository. There, users can browse the collection finding aid which includes a brief abstract of the story as well as the contributor’s pronouns and racial or ethnic identity, if the contributor provided that information. However, a contributor’s story and related documents are only made available once it has been approved by the contributor, based upon the stipulations they agreed to. For example, a contributor can opt to delay the availability of their recorded story and all related documents for an agreed amount of time if, say, they want to finish out a work contract or academic program with the University first.

The opportunities found in embracing remote recording do not mean that challenges have been avoided. The most glaring of these challenges are the gaps and holes in the collection that are a result of the unique historical epoch we have found ourselves in. Collecting during crises has rendered everything more challenging and demanded that care be emphasized. At every step of the process and with every request for collaboration with contributors, it proved important to remember that “trauma is still unfolding in this slow-burn catastrophe of COVID-19 [and national racial reckoning], where the full social, economic, political, and medical effects have yet to materialize fully.”<sup>7</sup> Leaning on the core tenets of collaboration, radical empathy, and an honoring of space has helped in the negotiation of challenging ethical issues of collecting during crises that have arisen as the UNC Story Archive took shape. This has proved especially salient when responding to expectations of those at the University (though outside of the UNC Story Archive team that recorded stories) that recording facilitators emphasize a narrative or address pre-selected aspects of a contributor’s story; this is against the ethics of the collection and the concern with care for the contributors. Although providing specific questions for people to respond is a common practice for recorded stories, the UNC Story Archive makes a conscious choice to ensure that contributors are able to tell their story how they feel it should be told.

The crises that are continuing to unfold have also highlighted the gaps and holes in the collection and the need to reach out to contributors who are part of Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, LGBTQ+, intersectional, and other communities. Although preserving the stories and experiences from those in the Carolina community who have historically been maligned or outright silenced in the University’s record is a founding principle of the UNC Story Archive, more needs to be done to inform communities about the project and the value of adding their stories to the

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<sup>7</sup> Jennifer A. Cramer, “‘First, Do No Harm’: Tread Carefully Where Oral History, Trauma, and Current Crises Intersect,” *The Oral History Review* (2020).

University record, create active partnerships with student and alumni groups, and collaboratively work with communities to record, both on-campus as well as at organized events. The historical admission and hiring practices of the University that favored white communities as well as the documented perfidy of traditional archival practices are compounded by the crises of COVID-19 and national racial reckoning, meaning that some potential contributors are, understandably, reluctant.

However, now that the UNC Story Archive is established, modest “snowball” recruiting has occurred, the collaborative relationship with the Carolina Pride Alumni Network (CPAN) continues, and an additional team member with meaningful ties to Carolina has joined the project. Hooper Schultz, an oral historian and PhD student at UNC, brings years of experience of interviewing members of the LGBTQ+ community in the South, as well as relationships with both the UNC and the LGBTQ+ communities. Prior to the shift to fully remote recording, the vision for outreach possibilities included social media promotion, pop-up recording events on campus, creating a “traveling” recording studio that could be brought to alumni and student group events in the area, and recording days with campus organizations, in addition to CPAN’s own outreach efforts.

These in-person outreach efforts, of course, never materialized and it is unsure when they will. Instead, outreach for the UNC Story Archive has had to rely upon the internet—social media posts, promotion of an online interest form, and email outreach with student and alumni group leaders—as well as “snowball” recruitment with the help of contributors. In late fall 2020, during the early phases of the UNC Story Archive, an attempt to recreate a pop-up recording studio during a remote student organization event was made. While two students did express interest in recording their story later, the remote pop-up recording studio largely flopped. Although there were breaks in the event schedule and times built in for attendees to “drop in” to a remote recording studio room I had created especially for the event, people did not do so to either record or to ask questions. Even when I spoke to the group about the UNC Story Archive and provided links to informational documents and flyers, attendees of the event remained almost entirely a sea of blank Zoom tiles. The few event attendees who wanted to record chose a more personal mode of communication and reached out through email or direct message. This early attempt emphasized the need to care for contributors during the ongoing crises and not attempt to force virtual space to mimic physical space.

In light of this, addressing the gaps in the collection is intensified by the fact that, no matter how much thought, guiding principles, or effort to find good software is applied, *everything* is very internet-reliant and assumes reliable, consistent internet network access. Now that the United States is inching closer to two years of various levels of social distancing and remote work for some, there is incredible internet, technology, and Zoom fatigue. Again, though, the guiding principles of the UNC Story Archive provide a path forward. By recognizing the need to “address symbolic annihilation” that the collection is accountable to the contributors and their standpoint within the larger Carolina community, expectations about timelines, level of collaboration, and modes of



communication can be tempered.<sup>8</sup> Jokingly, I tell those interested in contributing and current contributors that I have very few answers and that most questions will be met with, “well, what would you like to do?” or “let's figure it out!” because what remains most important is that their story is told their way.

Asking “Can you hear me okay?”, though mundane on the surface, really punctuates how the UNC Story Archive has worked to center contributors in the uncertain and constantly shifting remote space. The guiding principles of collaboration, radical empathy, and respect of space have provided a foundation on which decisions about recording, outreach, and development could be built. This has assisted in the emphasis on contributors and their expertise as historians of their own stories which has, in turn, created opportunities for collaboration, even in the metadata process. Though many challenges have arisen as a result of the global, national, and local crises that have forced us all to navigate sometimes uncharted and often turbulent waters, the adherence to our principles and the flexibility to adapt as needed has remained the guiding star.

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<sup>8</sup> Michelle Caswell, “Affective Bonds: What Community Archives Can Teach Mainstream Institutions,” in *Community Archives, Community Spaces: Heritage, Memory and Identity*, ed. Jeannette Bastian and Andrew Flinn (London: Facet, 2020), 37.

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