

Using Skype for an oral history interview

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February 20, 2016

These notes were prepared for telephone meeting of the IEEE Computer Society’s History Committee (history.computer.org). Members of the committee have been doing a series of interviews of prior leaders of the Computer Society (history.computer.org/leaders).

In the past, I have done a lot of interviews—some by email,¹ and some by recording an in-person interview which was later transcribed by a professional transcriber.

Late in 2015 one of my interviewees was in Hong Kong while I am in Boston. The idea of an interview by email did not work out, and our History Committee didn’t have funds for me to travel to Hong Kong for an in-person interview. Thus, for the first time in my experience, I attempted to do an interview via Skype. Some of what I learned from this process may be interesting to others.

I started by asking Brad Fidler (a UCLA computing historian) how he has been doing some of his interviews by Skype. Brad said he used a piece of software called Call Recorder for his Mac. Since I have a PC and not a Mac, I bought and downloaded (for not so much money) the Pamela Call Recorder piece of software for the PC. This was easy enough to use without reading any instructions. I used it in video-and-audio mode rather than in only-audio mode on the theory that being able to see the interviewee on video might help me understand any words the transcriber could not figure out.

When I do an in-person interview, I always use two digital audio recorders in order to have a backup recording.² Two lapel mics are attached to the primary recorder via an earphones splitter used in reverse. One lapel mic is for the interviewee, and one is for me as interviewer. The backup recorder has a multi-directional mic sitting on the table between the interviewee and me.

For backup of the audio part of my Skype recording captured with Pamela, I connected a pair of speakers to the headphone socket of my laptop computer and used one of my digital audio recorders. I mounted one of the lapel mics directly in front of the speakers; this mic captured the interviewee’s voice coming out of Skype. The other mic was attached to my lapel to capture my voice as interviewer.³

Both the Pamela recording and the recording captured by the digital audio recorder were of good quality for transcribing. In fact, recording the Skype interviewee coming over the computer

¹Perhaps by some historians’ definitions, interviews done by email do not qualify as “oral histories.”

²Jeff Yost recommended this practice to me several years ago.

³I also tried having one input (into the “splitter”) be from my lapel mic while the other input was via a cable plugged directly into the headphone socket of my computer. This didn’t work. The recorder only heard the computer output even when there was no voice coming from the computer output.

speakers and recording me via a lapel mic was good enough such that my normal in-person, two-recorder recording-and-backup-recording setup without the Skype call recording software capability would have been good enough.⁴

It seems to me that doing an oral history interview via Skype has most of the same advantages and disadvantages of an in-person interview.

Anything having to do with computers or AV equipment should be practiced in advance.

A couple of weeks in advance, I practiced my Skype call recorder with digital audio backup (as described above) with Brad Fidler and made sure my setup worked and that I knew how to operate it without undue fuss.⁵

A week in advance I practiced for a minute with the interviewee's assistant to make sure we had each other's Skype names, etc. You can't Skype with someone without having in advance asked for and been granted the status of a Contact.

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⁴Still, I am happy I bought the Pamela software with its ability to capture the video as well as the audio.

⁵If anyone wants to practice their setup with me, I will be happy to participate.