Reports

The Latest Oral History Challenge: The Ever-Expanding Technology Toolbox

JUDY HUGHES

Judy Hughes is a PhD candidate at La Trobe University who is currently researching the 1980 Australian national journalists strike and related issues of identity and activism. A journalist and communications professional by background, Judy is an experienced oral historian and current web manager of the Oral History Australia website.

In the film *Mary Poppins*, the prim but fun nanny charmed the children under her care with her magical carpet bag. This object of wonder contained a seemingly endless supply of useful objects – a hat stand, two mirrors, a lamp and a tape measure – although how one bag could contain all this was a complete mystery. Luckily, Mary Poppins had it all under control.

Since 2020–21, the worst years of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the technology toolkit available to oral historians has evolved into something like the magical Poppins' carpet bag with seemingly endless useful options and gadgets. Keeping abreast of changes in recording equipment, online interview platforms and AI-generated transcription services has become the new challenge for oral historians, such has been the rapid rate of technological innovation in a few short years.

New technology has provided opportunities to record interviews in high quality within an expanded range of circumstances, but there are concerns about the complexity of options available and the new skills required as well as unforeseen risks such as the potential impact of remote interviewing on the interviewer–interviewee relationship. In this report, I provide an overview of the technological changes currently transforming oral history practice and some of the opportunities available. This work has been informed by my own personal experiences as a professional historian and postgraduate student.
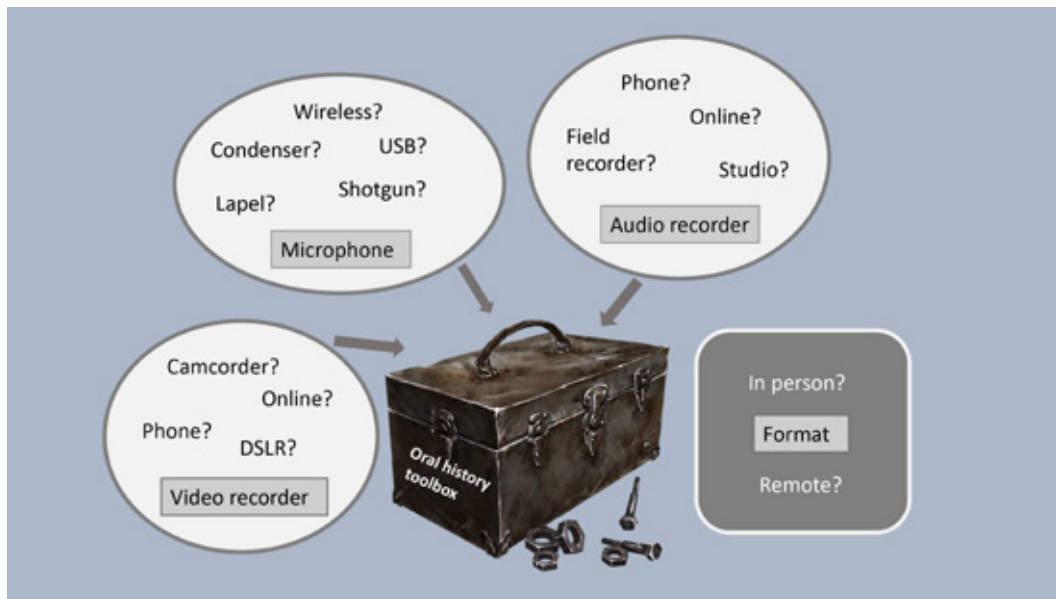
Figure 1 The oral historian's toolbox. Graphic by Judy Hughes.

THE COVID YEARS

Pre-COVID, a standard oral history interview generally involved an in-person exchange with two microphones and a field recorder. A particularly well-resourced project team or tech-savvy individual interviewer might contemplate a video interview, but for many practitioners, conducting an audio-only interview remained the preferred course. Phone interviews were pretty much a no-no due to poor audio quality, a technique of last resort.

Then everything changed.

The extraordinary circumstances of the global pandemic with heightened fear of infection, escalating deaths (particularly among the elderly and immunocompromised) combined with frequent lockdowns, forced many oral history practitioners to put their interviews on hold. In Melbourne, Australia, where I live, the repeated and lengthy lockdowns – a total of 262 days from March 2020 to October 2021 – were particularly burdensome.[1] As it became evident that the pandemic would not be over in a matter of weeks, oral history professional bodies and collecting institutions

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1   Ian Macreadie, 'Reflections from Melbourne, the World's Most Locked-down City, through the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond', *Microbiology Australia* 43, no. 1 (28 April 2022): 3–4, https://doi.org/10.1071/MA22002.

initially urged caution and then reluctantly started facing the prospect of a turn to remote interviewing.

The Oral History Society in the United Kingdom, like other oral history professional bodies, posted a guide to remote interviewing to its website, which at February 2021 was up to version 7. At that time the focus was still on postponement, if possible, but the guide presented considerable information about the efficacy of emerging technologies including online interview recording platforms such as Zencastr, Squadcast and Cleanfeed.[2]

In Australia, the 2020 issue of this journal, *Studies in Oral History,* documented the experiences of oral history practitioners during the pandemic. Oral History Australia (OHA) president Alistair Thomson said he, like other oral historians, had put planned oral history interviews on hold for safety reasons. Other oral historians, however, for a range of reasons had continued to conduct interviews using remote recording techniques, weighing up issues of urgency, recording quality and the rapport between interviewee and interviewer.[3]

THE RISE AND RISE OF ZOOM

The pandemic years certainly played a role in driving technological change. The online meeting platform Zoom, little known before COVID, exploded in popularity not just for working from home arrangements, but for exercise classes, workshops and even informal catch-ups with family and friends.[4] The use of Zoom became so commonplace that many oral historians turned to it for interviews, reasoning that it imposed little technical burden on interviewees.

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2   'Covid-19 Remote Recording – Oral History Society', 2 October 2020, https://www.ohs.org.uk/ covid-19-remote-recording/. Accessed 9 August 2023.

3   'COVID Reports', *Studies in Oral History*, no. 42 (2020): 163–195, https://oralhistoryaustralia.org.au/ journal/issue-no-42-2020/.

4   Melody Brue, 'Zoom Gears Up For Post-Pandemic Growth As Competition Heats Up', *Forbes,* 3 March 2023. Available at https://www.forbes.com/sites/moorinsights/2023/03/03/zoom-gears-up-for-post-pandemic-growth-as-competition-heats-up. Accessed 9 August 2023.

Easy to use and widely understood, Zoom is very useful for pre-interviews. It is not necessarily, however, the best choice for recording oral history because it compresses the audio as a default and does not provide for uncompressed WAV recording. Oral historians interested in remote interviewing would do well to explore options beyond Zoom. It is also worth pointing out with regards to any remote interviewing that the recording is only as good as the microphone and camera being used. Many inbuilt webcams and microphones are poor quality. It is better to use a USB microphone connected to the computer and a webcam if video is being recorded.

Due to the rise in popularity of podcasting there are now a range of online recording platforms available offering high-quality audio capture and audio production features. Some offer free plans such as Cleanfeed (no video interface) and Zencastr (MP3 recording only) but a subscription is often needed to get all the features required. These platforms are evolving quickly. During the COVID years, Zencastr initially offered audio recording only, but it quickly developed a video interface so the interviewer and interviewee could see each other. Video recording is also now available.

The company Hindenburg Systems, which initially offered a recording and audio editing program specifically designed for voice, has now further developed its product to include AI-generated transcript and even audio editing via transcript. This is a great option for oral historians, but the service is subscription-based and pricey so may be better suited for larger projects or short timeframes.

STATE OF PLAY

In 2023 Oral History Australia (OHA) conducted a technology survey to better understand the technology-related needs of members and how oral history practice had been impacted by the pandemic. As expected, survey results showed a drop in oral history practice during the main pandemic years of 2020 and 2021. Less than half (45.8 per cent) of respondents had conducted oral history interviews during the pandemic years. Two-thirds (66.7 per cent) had conducted interviews in 2022–23 and slightly more, 70.8 per cent, had conducted interviews before the pandemic.

The survey showed that while oral historians were prepared to use remote inter-viewing their overwhelming preference was still for in-person interviewing.

RECORDING EQUIPMENT

For those conducting in-person interviews the range of recording equipment available has also changed substantially. The technology survey showed field recorders such as the popular Zoom H5 and Zoom H4N remained preferred, but some respondents had also used dictaphones, mobile phones and tablets and wireless recording systems such as the Rode GO. Even phone recording is now emerging as a viable option for oral historians who need high-quality audio. This includes both recording a phone interview and recording an in-person interview using a mobile phone or tablet.

The Australian-based Rode company has developed a range of products aimed at delivering high-quality audio and video recording. In addition to dedicated recording apps and microphones for mobile devices, Rode also offers the convenient AI-Micro, a tiny device, just 4cm square, which combines with two lapel microphones and a mobile phone or tablet to produce high-quality WAV audio recordings.

A device, designed primarily for podcasters, but with potential application in oral history is the Zoom Podtrak P4. Released in August 2020, this field recorder contains four XLR inputs and specifically provides for recording high-quality phone inter-views. This particular device has been reviewed favourably by United States–based oral history technology guru Doug Boyd on his Digital Omnium blog.[5]

TRANSCRIPTION

Oral historians have longed for an alternative to expensive transcription and thanks to Artificial Intelligence (AI), a solution is closer than ever. Automatically gener-ated transcript has been improving in recent years and is substantially cheaper than human transcription. Services such as Rev, Otter.ai and Temi offer affordable auto-mated transcription in a user-friendly online interface where the transcript can also

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5   Douglas A. Boyd, 'Zoom Podtrak P4 and phone interviews', *Digital Omnium* (blog), 21 May 2023, https://digitalomnium.com/zoom-podtrak-p4-and-phone-interviews/.

be edited. These services offer a high degree of accuracy but are still not as accurate as transcription by a real person.

The latest offering is Whisper.ai produced by OpenAI, the company behind ChatGPT. Whisper is free and provides for amazingly accurate voice transcription, in different languages, conducted locally on the user's computer rather than online, but has some drawbacks. It is open-source software and the steps to installing it on a personal computer are not straightforward. It also does not automatically provide speaker names, which need to be added manually later. For those without a suitable IT friend or relative the best option currently is to use an application that provides an interface to Whisper. Such apps will most likely have some cost.

CONCLUSION

Like the Poppins' carpet bag, the oral historian's technology toolkit is magical, mysterious and constantly changing. While navigating the many options requires a learning curve, the potential rewards are substantial. Oral historians now have the opportunity to conduct interviews remotely without sacrificing audio quality. Their recording kit could fit into a small handbag if necessary and they have access to highly accurate transcription at low cost. While it is clear there is still a strong preference among oral historians for in-person interviews, technology is delivering choice and flexibility. This can only benefit interviewees and oral history practice.

Deindustrialization and the Politics of Our Time

ELIOT PERRIN

Eliot Perrin is a History PhD candidate at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada. His research focuses on the impacts of urban renewal projects and deindustrialization on a historically Francophone neighbourhood in a Northern Ontario mining town. He is also the archives coordinator at Concordia's Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling.

Since 2021, I have had the privilege of being a student affiliate of Deindustrialization and the Politics of Our Time (DePOT). This seven-year (2021–27) Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada–funded partnership project aims to address the ongoing political and economic legacy of deindustrialization. From the 1970s to the present, millions of jobs have been lost in industrial 'heartland' regions throughout Europe and North America, as well-paying unionised jobs were traded for economic precarity and wage stagnation. Following years of neoliberal policies, traditional political parties have been abandoned by many voters as evidenced by the rise of Donald Trump, the popularity of Brexit, the continued support for Marie Le Pen's Rassemblement National, and the election of Giorgia Meloni's Brothers of Italy. Attempting to understand how deindustrialization factors into these present circumstances provided the impetus for this project.

Earlier studies of deindustrialization sought to understand this process from within local, regional or national parameters.[1] Building upon these important works, the DePOT project seeks to bridge the international and the local by making transnational comparisons across North America, Western Europe and beyond. With that in mind, DePOT is grounded in 33 partner organisations and 24 collaborators found primarily in six nations: Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, France,

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1   See Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America: Plant Closings, Community Abandonment, and the Dismantling of Basic Industry* (New York: Basic Books, 1982); Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA's Seventy-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); Steven High, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rust Belt 1969–1984* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

Italy and Germany. Joining these partner institutions are a range of affiliated trade unions, museums, publishers and Indigenous organisations, as well as a number of students, faculty members and independent researchers based in Europe, South America and China. In bringing together these many affiliates, DePOT has built an international community of researchers for collaborative work.

Six thematic initiatives frame DePOT: the politics of industrial closure; gender, family and deindustrialization; race and the populist politics of deindustrialization; the politics of industrial heritage; deindustrialization and the environment; and working-class expression. These initiatives are guided by a group of affiliates who map out the research outcomes, including the publication of an edited volume on the subject. Highlighting the early success of DePOT's collaborative approach, the first volume – the *Politics of Industrial Closure,* due 2024 – is mostly comprised of co-authored, transnational chapters. Each initiative will also be the subject of an international conference that includes project outcomes as well as presentations from outside researchers. Conference sites reflect the contrasting areas in which deindustrialization occurs, from both historically major industrial hubs like Germany's Ruhr Valley and Glasgow, to a more hinterland location such as Sydney, Nova Scotia.

Oral history is central to the research being undertaken for this project. Studies of deindustrialization often speak with those left behind in communities following the closure of a local industry.[2] As Jackie Clarke argues, local and national narratives of deindustrialization work towards rendering both the industrial past, and the remaining industrial present, invisible, seemingly indicating the arrival of a post-industrial society.[3] Oral history helps to remind us of the ongoing existence of a working-class community. These testimonies help uncover the hurt, pain, and suffering that impacts multiple generations of residents who have suffered following

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2   For examples see Kathryn Dudley, *The End of the Line: Lost Jobs, New Lives in Postindustrial America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Steven High, *One Job Town: Work, Belonging and Betrayal in Northern Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018); Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo, *Steeltown U.S.A.: Work and Memory in Youngstown* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002); Alice Mah, *Industrial Ruination, Community, and Place: Landscapes and Legacies of Urban Decline* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

3   Jackie Clarke, 'Closing Moulinex: Thoughts on the Visibility and Invisibility of Industrial Labour in Contemporary France', *Modern & Contemporary France* 19, no. 4 (November 2011): 443–458.

factory and plant closure. But there are also stories of resiliency, defiance and community solidarity in facing down some of the worst consequences of the economic collapse of their region.

In addition to the work currently underway, the project is also calling attention to already compiled oral history archival holdings. These collections highlight the prominence of oral history practice in the field throughout the past few decades.[4] The publication of this information is intended to help identify existing collections for both project affiliates and other researchers. In addition, the project is creating a SharePoint-housed 'research commons' by which oral history transcripts can be shared between affiliates. Following the project's completion, newly compiled oral history collections will be housed at relevant institutions for consultation by future researchers.

Oral history also helps us to broaden our understanding of the field. At the outset deindustrialization studies frequently forefronted male factory/mine/mill workers. Works on traditionally female-gendered manufacturing spaces have since grown, although with much more work to be done.[5] Similarly, the field must more thoroughly engage with how race and settler colonialism both shapes, and are shaped by, deindustrialization and state/corporate responses to it.[6] The breadth of this project is exciting as it seeks to further integrate industries, communities and processes not always associated with deindustrialization studies, while making transnational connections amongst them. Colleagues studying fisheries, queer community

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4   The project has published two reports that are listings of available oral history repositories in the United States and the United Kingdom: https://deindustrialization.org/research/publications/.

5   See examples of works done by DePOT affiliates: Fred Burrill, 'Deindustrialization, Gender, and Working-Class Militancy in Saint-Henri, Montreal', *Labour/Le travail* 19 (Spring 2023): 89–114; Andy Clark, *Fighting Deindustrialisation: Scottish Women's Factory Occupations, 1981–1982* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022); Lauren Laframboise, '"La Grève de la fierté": Resisting Deindustrialization in Montréal's Garment Industry, 1977–1983', *Labour/Le travail* 19 (Spring 2023): 57–88; Rory Stride, 'Women, Work and Deindustrialisation: The Case of James Templeton & Company, Glasgow, c.1960–1981', *Scottish Labour History* 54 (2019): 154–180.

6   Important publications include Steven High, *Deindustrializing Montreal: Entangled Histories of Race, Residence, and Class* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022); Lianne C. Leddy, *Serpent River Resurgence: Confronting Uranium Mining at Elliot Lake* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022); Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

members, female garment workers, nuclear dismantlement and department store closures are all examples by which the field is benefiting from an expanded focus, including ideas, theories and methodologies from other disciplines. Projects also interrogate gentrification, the adaptive reuse of industrial structures, local heritage regimes, and municipal fascination with cultural economies as responses to deindustrialization, and what impact they have on existing communities. These few examples demonstrate the growing depth of the field, as we gain a fuller picture by which to understand deindustrialization as an ongoing process.

Mirroring many of the faculty investigators, students frequently hail from cities and areas facing deindustrialization and have stories of their own familial experiences with this process. Throughout the project, we are given spaces through which to collaborate both with project investigators and amongst ourselves as well. Despite the challenge of being located throughout many nations, we have strived to remain connected over the course of the project. Monthly Zoom student caucus meetings have helped to foster a sense of camaraderie that is bolstered by our annual meeting. Immediately preceding the project's yearly conference, students hold their own summer institute by which to showcase their own research and workshop ideas. The result of our ongoing communications and discussions are scholarly collaborations that will be published alongside faculty affiliates in our upcoming volumes. It has been an increasingly rewarding experience to be working alongside colleagues such as these.

For those of you who are working on studies of deindustrialization – professor, student or community member – we highly encourage you to contact us. As noted earlier, while we are 'grounded' in the aforementioned six nations, we have affiliates from a number of other countries and are always looking to add scholars from other areas. In addition to our annual conference, the project has workshops, roundtables and presentations throughout the year that would be of interest to scholars. Please have a look at our website (www.deindustrialization.org) and reach out to us at deindustrialization@concordia.ca.

The 100 Project – A Celebration of Australian Centenarians

JOHN WINTER

John Winter is an Australian filmmaker who has produced and directed Australian films for over four decades. His latest endeavour is The 100 Project, a series of documentary short films each comprising a video interview of an Australian aged 100 years or older.

The 100 Project is partly crowdsourced; we encourage families, carers and friends of 100-year-olds to follow our online tutorials to use their smartphones to interview centenarians. We then professionally edit the video for free, integrating the video interview with family photos and archival video, audio and photographs. The short films are screened on The 100 Project website (www.the100project.com), YouTube Channel and Facebook page.

Figure 1 The 100 Project banner featuring the first four centenarians on the website: William 'Bill' Bartolo, Stefan Kulesza, Molly Cummings and Julia Kenny. Photos by David Bartolo, Joanne Donahoe-Beckwith, John Winter and Ros Walker. Graphic by John Winter.

THE JOURNEY

In 1998 I sought funding for a documentary series about centenarians for the new millennium. I wanted to give voice to, and hear the perspective of, the people who had lived through the entire twentieth century. It was going to be a relatively expensive production requiring broadcaster funding as professional camera and sound recording equipment would be needed, and the crew would have to travel around

Australia to film the centenarians. A broadcaster was also required to screen the series. However, with no funding forthcoming, the idea was parked.

In 2019, still keen on capturing the stories of Australia's oldest citizens, I teamed up with friend and documentary film producer, Roslyn Walker. Having failed previously to finance the project, we decided to explore something different from the standard film industry production model. Extraordinary recent technological developments in smartphone videography and post-production paved the way for us to pursue a new approach to creating the series.

CROWDSOURCING ORAL HISTORY

Our core concept was simple: reach out to people throughout Australia who have connections with centenarians, help them record video interviews of Australian 100+-year-olds to capture their diverse stories and upload the files to us. We then professionally edit the material to create a quality, lasting record for audiences in Australia and around the world.

PRODUCTION

In the years since 1998, digital technology has revolutionised cameras and the internet has democratised film production. Smartphones recording 4K video are now readily available and they produce surprisingly good quality images and audio which are acceptable to most audiences, if not to broadcast engineers!

By making it possible for the community (families, friends, carers, oral historians and so on) who know a centenarian, to interview and video them now, instead of us travelling to each centenarian, we can outsource, or more correctly, crowdsource, the filming so that anyone, anywhere in Australia can get involved. However, editing the video and turning the rushes into a short documentary requires professional skills, and this work is done by The 100 Project.

The 100 Project website (www.the100project.com) is the portal for centenarians and their interviewers to learn how to make their video, register and complete essential

documentation, and the place to upload content to our cloud so that we can edit the material.

Our mantra is: 'You film an interview of a 100-year-old and we'll edit it for free'.

Capturing reasonable video and audio from a smartphone is relatively simple but not necessarily obvious, so we created video tutorials and guidelines to help our crowd contributors achieve the best results possible. There are also interviewing tips and, because the films are significantly enhanced by including photos, we also give suggestions about how to best scan or photograph old family photos. As the source video and audio are unlikely to be of a professional standard, the film editors will then need to ply their trade to make the most out of the provided materials. Interviewing the very old has its particular challenges: including English language captions on all the films is one of the many tricks used to make the final films as good as possible for our online audience.
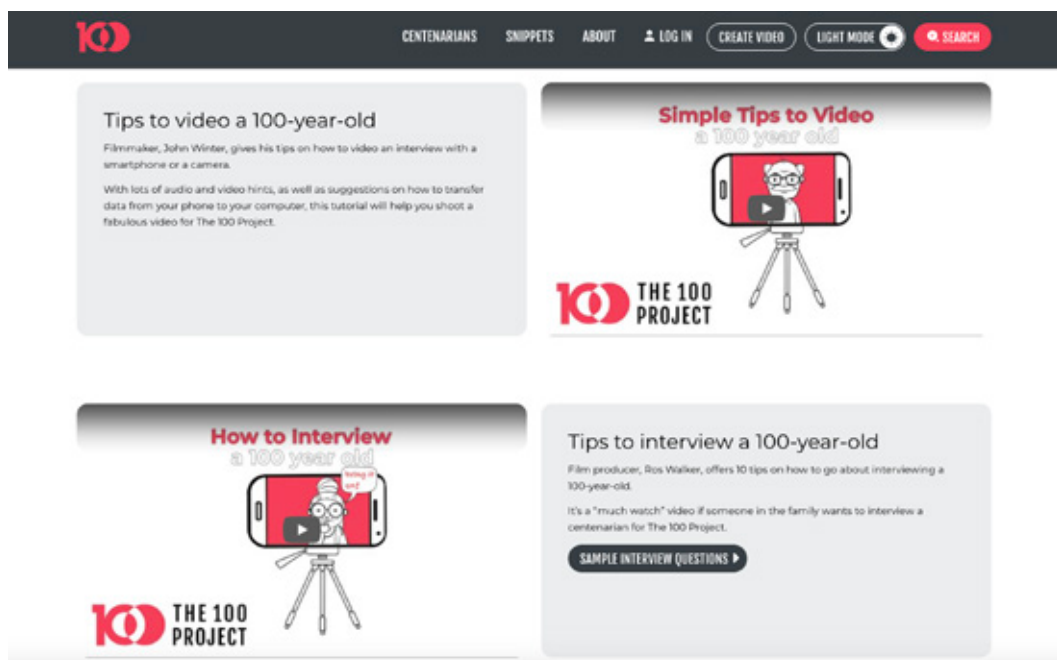

Figure 2 Screengrab of The 100 Project website featuring tutorial videos. Graphics by John Winter.
Website design by Jala Design.

Early feedback such as, 'But I don't know what questions to ask', has led us to spend considerable time developing a list of sample questions for interviewers. We continue to review the question list and have even used artificial intelligence (AI) as

a tool to improve our questions. Our aim is to grow the crowdsourced component of our videos but we always have the option to film the centenarians ourselves.

POST-PRODUCTION

Post-production (audio, video, special effects, titles, music) is a skilled craft that generally takes years of experience to master, so editing the videos is done by The 100 Project professionals. Thankfully, democratisation has also hugely impacted post-production. Expensive post-production suites and facilities to edit, audio mix, title and finish a film are no longer essential for this kind of project. Software such as Premiere Pro and a Mac or PC meet our needs for a fraction of the cost. Furthermore, dramatic improvements in data upload and download speeds and cloud storage have enabled us to handle the amount of 4K video and hi-res photographs required to edit, archive and screen high-quality videos.

PATHWAYS TO AN AUDIENCE

The ways audiences watch films have changed: the internet and social media channels have eliminated our dependence on broadcasters, thereby 'solving' our screening issue. Our website, the100project.com, is the heart of the project. We created a DIY 'proof of concept' website and it soon become apparent that we needed a very skilled, creative web development team to build the multifunctional website we needed whilst keeping the interface simple, welcoming and stylish.

It took almost two years to achieve what we wanted. The resulting website allows our audience to search for and view content. Each centenarian has a personal profile with biographical details and family photos accompanying their video. In addition, the website features short-form 'snippets' which are video compilations featuring multiple centenarians offering insights on historical events or social topics. The website is supported by our YouTube channel and Facebook page. We are 'screen agnostic' with the potential to later add new paths to different audiences such as a museum installation, library exhibition, TV series, school and tertiary curriculum or academic study.
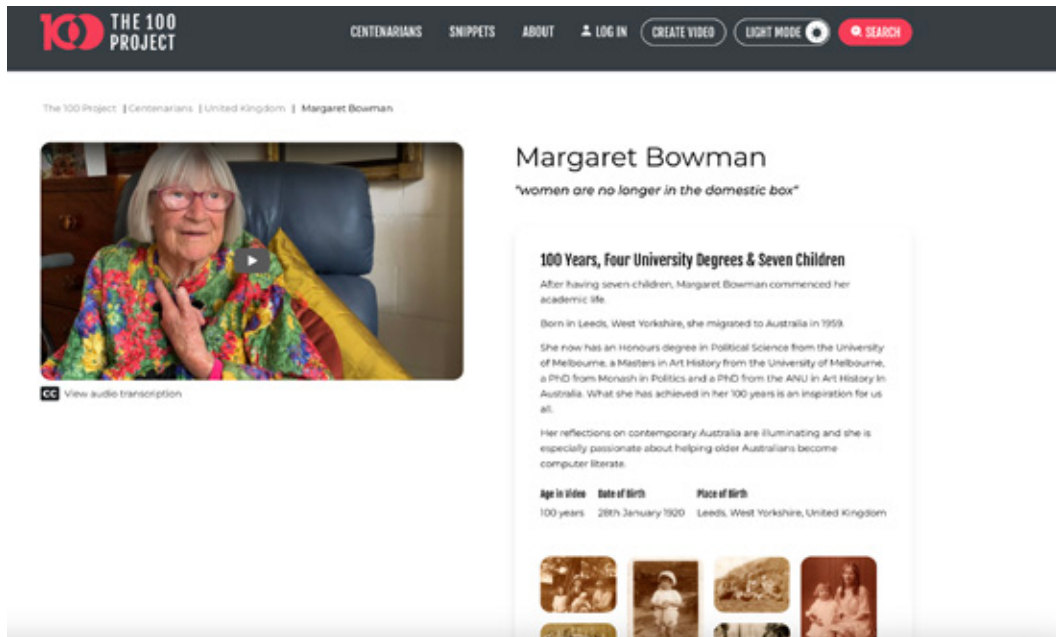
Figure 3 Screengrab of The 100 Project website featuring Margaret Bowman's Centenarian Profile. Photo of Margaret Bowman by Ros Walker. Other photos courtesy of Margaret Bowman's family. Website design by Jala Design.

To grow our audience, our focus has been on building communities – especially within the aged care, education, diversity and oral history sectors. We have put a lot of emphasis on website and social media SEO analytics to maximise our audience. As the project matures, we hope that future funding will allow us to engage publicists to significantly extend our audience reach.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

From a filmmaking perspective, with its crowdsourced content and online screening, The 100 Project cannot be easily 'pigeon-holed'. That resulted in early barriers to funding support. There was a perception that the internet is for the young and that a web series with social media outreach about old people would not work, and there was concern that we would fail to find and video more than a small handful of centenarians. When embarking on our journey, Ros and I soon realised that we needed to build the project ourselves and that meant largely self-financing it. Rather than talking about our vision, we had to show it and that's where we are now.

THE 100 PROJECT ONE YEAR ON

As the videos do not have an 'expiry date', content builds over time: the more centenarians, the more videos, the more interesting and valuable the project. With 18 centenarian stories published in our first year, we are starting to reflect today's diverse Australia. Given the current life expectancy of First Nations Australians, we are fortunate to have interviewed and created four videos of Uncle Wes Marne, a Bigambul man, Aboriginal elder, storyteller and poet.

To date, The 100 Project has stories from centenarians who have migrated from Greece, Poland, Netherlands, China and the UK. In 1923, the population of Australia was under 5.7 million so it is not surprising that many of our current 100+-year-olds were immigrants to Australia. Interviewing non-English-speaking centenarians presents special challenges, especially given our funding constraints.

The Australian-born 100+-year-olds hail from both the cities and the 'bush', recalling a simple childhood without electricity, telephones or cars, and often defined by Depression-era and wartime experiences. Whilst each centenarian offers a first-hand journey back in time, with some even offering stories from their grandparents, they are living in modern Australia and we have been mindful of this in telling their stories. Given their 100 years of life and experience, their thoughts and insights on the present and the future of Australia and the world are equally relevant:

> 'I like the idea of us belonging to the land, belonging to the universe, not owning it for God's sake.' (Guy Warren, artist)

> 'The one thing that older people need nowadays is that, before you retire from work…you should be given the opportunity of actually becoming computer literate because if you're not computer literate, you're f****d.' (Margaret Bowman, academic)

> 'Without an education, I believe that we're nothing. And you can be whatever you want…I have never seen an Aboriginal kid who didn't have the ability to do something.' (Uncle Wes Marne, Aboriginal Elder and educator)

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Building communities remains our guiding principle. We are as committed as ever to the importance of The 100 Project, the value of capturing oral history in this way and the power of technology to share the stories of 100+-year-olds with the widest possible audience.

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Bronwyn Elliott – Contributor to this report

Jala Design – Website design and development

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The centenarians and their interviewers, videographers and translators who continue to provide material for The 100 Project.

The South Australian Frontier and Its Legacies Project: Some Unanticipated Difficulties

SKYE KRICHAUFF

Skye Krichauff is an ethnohistorian who combines the methodologies of history, anthropology and oral history. She is interested in colonial cross-cultural relations, the relationship between history and memory, and how societies live with historical injustices (in particular how Australians live with the enduring legacies of colonialism).

I am currently working as project manager and research associate for ARC Linkage Project 'The South Australian Frontier and its Legacies'. The project stemmed from the release in 2017 of the Uluru Statement from the Heart, in which the authors of the statement ask for a First Nations Voice to be enshrined in the constitution, and a Makarrata Commission 'to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history'.[1] Based at the University of Adelaide (UoA), the project's partners include the State Library of South Australia (SLSA), State Records of South Australia (SRSA), the History Trust of South Australia (HTSA), the South Australian Museum (SAM), and Reconciliation SA. The project's outcome is a website that hosts a digital story map, and this will be publicly launched later this year.

All on the project team strongly support the need for truth-telling; we are compiling a comprehensive register of violent interactions between Aboriginal people and colonists that were a direct result of European occupation of Aboriginal land.[2] From the earliest stages of the project, the project team has been guided by the advice of the project's Aboriginal team members, Aboriginal Reference Group and South

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1 Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017). Available at https://ulurustatement.org/the-statement/. Accessed 23 August 2023.

2 Other chief investigators are Amanda Nettelbeck and John Carty. I use 'Aboriginal people' rather than 'First Nations' in accordance with the preferences of the Aboriginal participants of this project.

Australia's Aboriginal Heritage Committee (a body made up of Aboriginal representatives that operates through the South Australian Government's Department of Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation) regarding best practice in contacting, engaging with and working with Aboriginal communities and individuals.

There are two components to the research, namely, an extensive examination of archival material (which Rob Foster and I have undertaken) and the collection of oral histories. It is important to the project team that, in addition to publishing our findings, we enable relevant sources to be made available to the wider public. The topic of colonial violence is confronting for many and has, in the past (i.e., during the so-called 'history wars' of the late twentieth to early twenty-first centuries), been politicised. By making our sources accessible, the public can see for themselves the evidence we are basing our findings on, and evaluate our summaries accordingly. As such, project partners SLSA and SRSA are scanning any historical documents that Rob and I identify as relevant. Digital copies of these documents will be accessible for viewing through the website. Similarly, with regard to the oral histories, website viewers will be able to hear excerpts of interviews conducted with Aboriginal people and the descendants of colonists.

The project is in its final stages: the archival research is concluding, the development of the website is nearing completion, and numerous oral history interviews have been conducted. As the project manager and sole oral historian on the project team, I have been responsible for organising, conducting, transcribing, editing and gaining final approval for the oral history interviews. As such, it seems timely in this report to reflect critically on problematic aspects of the oral history component of the project.

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HREC) REQUIREMENTS
CONTACTING ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

It was important to the project team that as many Aboriginal people as possible be informed about the project and invited to participate. Previous experience has taught me that the best way of ensuring an introduction to potential Aboriginal participants is through personal connections, and the best means of initially communicating

with and engaging potential participants is through face-to-face meetings. However, in accordance with the requirements of the UoA's HREC, it was not possible for any member of the project team to initiate contact with individuals. Instead, we could only provide information about the project to organisations, and this was to be in writing. (This requirement is in recognition that community leaders tend to be volunteers who are overstretched and often bombarded with requests they may feel awkward refusing).

Accessing the names and contact details of position holders in Aboriginal organisations is not necessarily straightforward. However, the Aboriginal Heritage Committee provided the project team with contact details of all the Aboriginal Public Body Corporates (PBCs) and organisations and associations listed on their register. Each group was contacted by email and/or post, but the response was disappointing. We feel that there are several reasons for this. Some addresses were outdated – emails bounced and letters were returned unopened. A number of PBCs have administrators – often Adelaide-based lawyers. Although they acknowledged the receipt of my email, there was no way of knowing if it had been read by those for whom it was intended. Additionally, as pointed out by a member of our Aboriginal Reference Group, there is great variety amongst PBCs and other Aboriginal organisations regarding the level to which they communicate with the wider community whom they represent. There is no guarantee that, if the relevant position holders of the PBCs did receive my email, they communicated its contents to the broader community.

THE PROJECT INFORMATION SHEET

As is standard across Australian universities, the UoA's HREC required potential participants be provided with a project information sheet approved by the HREC and to have read or been read the information sheet before the commencement of an interview. The template provided by the UoA is over three pages of solid text with numerous subheadings requiring explanatory information. Troublingly, as pointed out by a different member of the Reference Group, the HREC template did not include any reference to Aboriginal intellectual and cultural property rights remaining with the interviewee and/or the group. Including this clause in the consent

form took several months of liaising with the UoA's legal department and delayed interviews.

Although the template recommends using plain language and tailoring it to suit different groups, and despite being modified as far as possible to suit the diverse backgrounds of potential participants, there was a disjuncture between what was acceptable to the UoA and what is readily interpretable to potential participants, some of whom are illiterate or semi-literate. As one of the project's Aboriginal Reference Group members made clear, the recommended wording sounded to her like 'legalese'. Reading or being read the project information form caused some interviewees to switch off, or, ironically, to perceive the University's intentions as sinister.

BUDGETING FOR THE TIME AND EXPENSE TO GENUINELY WORK WITH ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

ENGAGING ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

Face-to-face meetings are the best way of engaging potential participants. As such, if an Aboriginal organisation indicated a desire to hear more about the project, where possible I would travel to a place nominated by them, and meet in person to introduce myself, explain the project and the consent and interview process, and (where practicable, i.e., if internet was available) demonstrate the website and story map. I allow plenty of time for potential participants to get back to me if they wish to be involved.

CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS AND ENSURING PARTICIPANT SATISFACTION

If people are keen to participate in the project and agree to be interviewed, I am guided by interviewees as to how much time is needed, where we should meet, and who should be present. With regards to Aboriginal interviewees, interviews tend to be social occasions that may involve several interviewees, and are best conducted on Country. Time is needed for the interviewer and interviewees to get to know each other. This cannot be rushed; it is important to talk, eat and travel together – outside the interview.

Later on, in order to ensure interviewee satisfaction with the process and outcome, I meet up with interviewees and go through relevant transcripts, discussing excerpts

I would like to include on the website. The audio is then edited according to our discussion, and a further meeting held to demonstrate how the audio will be included on the website.

Face-to-face meetings in remote and regional areas take time and cost money (for travel and accommodation) but are the most conducive to establishing interest and gaining trust. In our Linkage application, we budgeted to compensate Aboriginal participants for their time and travel. We adhered to the SAMs recommended daily and hourly reimbursement rates which, in retrospect, are inadequate. We did not adequately budget for the time and travel required to build and maintain trust and rapport with remote and regional communities. Grant funding is competitive, and, as it was, we did not get the amount of funding we requested. A higher budget for interviews may have made our costings appear extravagant to ARC grant reviewers. Project budgets on grant applications rarely take into account genuine and enduring participant engagement – this is a pertinent ethical issue for oral historians.

PROBLEMS WITH REIMBURSING ABORIGINAL PARTICIPANTS

Last year, the UoA finance department introduced new processes for engaging non-staff for short-term work and, unfortunately, did not communicate these changes to the project team. Under the new system, any potential interviewees must be assessed and approved by HR for their suitability as 'external contractors'. This involves filling out forms asking a number of questions that can be perceived as intrusive for Aboriginal people who, historically, have not had positive experiences with government agencies. The UoA's process of vetting and approving contractors can take months, and does not allow for flexibility with regard to including people who may have relatively spontaneously been suggested to participate in interviews, but who have not been 'approved' as an external contractor by the UoA.

Similarly frustrating is the lengthy delays in reimbursing participants. There is a seeming institutional insensitivity or lack of recognition that people from a financially disadvantaged group may be relying on these payments. Equally embarrassing and awkward are bureaucratic irregularities in who gets paid when – with some interviewees being reimbursed weeks before others despite the paperwork being

submitted at the same time. A delay in payment can cause anxiety and feelings of ineptitude among those who do not readily understand bureaucratic red tape, who may interpret the delay in payment as their input not being valued.

CONCLUSION

Certain well-meaning requirements stipulated by the UoA's HREC in 2021 contained the potential to deter some Aboriginal participants, suggesting HRECs should recognise diverse processes for contacting and informing Aboriginal communities about projects. New processes introduced by the UoA's finance department complicated and delayed the reimbursement of project participants, and the failure of relevant staff members to communicate these changes to the project team could have derailed the oral history component of this project.

Establishing a rapport and building trust with Aboriginal communities takes time, requires numerous face-to-face meetings at places chosen by Aboriginal communities, and cannot be pushed. The time taken and the geographical distances that must be travelled for university researchers to forge genuine connections with remote or regional communities do not fit easily within the expectations of competitive grant applications, funding bodies and administering institutions. If, in the future, long-lasting and meaningful collaborations between universities and Aboriginal communities are to eventuate, the expectations and requirements of funding bodies and administering institutions will need to accommodate more realistic timeframes and budgets.

Interviewing Veterans of Australia's Offshore Oil and Gas Industry

BY DAVID GOODWIN AND PAUL BRONSON

Professor David Goodwin is dean of the University of Nottingham Business School in Malaysia. He is also a Victorian barrister and holds a PhD in Law. Paul Bronson is a lecturer and discipline coordinator of Communication Studies and Writing in the College of Arts and Education at Victoria University, Melbourne.

The article describes a project undertaken from 2021 to 2023 in Melbourne, Australia, during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns.[1] The project involved recording oral histories of veterans of Australia's shipping industry, specifically focusing on the early days of Bass Strait oil and gas exploration in the 1960s and '70s. The project resulted in a four-episode podcast series called the 'Offshore Shipping Podcast Series' that allowed industry veterans to share their stories about their experiences during their lives at sea and on offshore platforms as their sector was first developed. This is a neglected period of Australia's industrial history: few oral histories of these early days have been compiled despite their economic and environmental significance.

The project was made possible by collaboration with students. It involved under-graduate students from Victoria University's College of Arts and Education in interviewing, production and editing as part of a capstone unit in their Arts degrees.[2] The students helped identify candidates for interview, based on dialogue with the industry partner which supported the development of the podcasts, Offshore and Specialist Ships Australia (OSSA). The interviews, which were undertaken with four industry veterans in total, were recorded and sound-edited by the students. There was also collaboration with the university's business school, which initially devel-oped the relationship with OSSA. Overarching guidance was provided by academic

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1   The project was made possible by funding support provided by Victoria University as part of a 2021 Small Grants Scheme that aimed to support the development of 'Skills and Jobs for Melbourne's West'.

2   Predominately Angus Cattlin and Isobel McCullagh-Hunter.

staff of the university. Collectively the team decided that podcasts would be the best way to have the stories shared with the public as they could reach a wider audience.

The likelihood of oil and gas in Bass Strait was pointed out to executives of the company BHP in 1960 by a visiting American petroleum geologist, Dr Lewis Weeks.[3] In 1964 BHP, in partnership with Esso, began drilling for oil in the Strait. The dangerous exploration work offshore was performed by a collection of American engineers and geologists and intrepid mariners, supported by a small band of local Australians.

Early development of Australia's offshore oil and gas industry depended on people with a rare combination of attributes – the technical and engineering skills needed to implement complex platform structures, but also the willingness to brave the elements for long periods of time.[4] Dr Tony Krins was one such individual. For three summers, from late 1964 through to early 1967, while a medical student, Tony worked as a roustabout on the *Glomar III* during his university holidays. He went on to become a leading obstetrician and gynaecologist – but he was also present to witness the birth of one of Australia's most lucrative resource industries.

The initial work was undertaken by the self-propelled drilling ship *Glomar III*, built in Galveston, Texas. This ship was able to reach a depth of 25,000 feet. Between December 1964 and March 1966, the *Glomar III* discovered the Barracouta and Marlin gas fields which then supplied Victoria with natural gas for many decades.

Another key interviewee in the series was offshore oil and gas industry veteran Dennis White, who served a 41-year career with the Esso organisation as an offshore construction coordinator and a commissioning manager. He was involved in the fabrication and installation of platforms and the laying down of hundreds of kilometres of pipes. He commenced with Esso in September 1972 and was one of those

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3   Peter Thompson and Robert Macklin, *The Big Fella: The Rise and Rise of BHP Billiton* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 2009), 92–104.

4   A key interviewee, Jim Anderson, was a superintendent of oil rig supply and anchor vessels, from 1969 onwards. Jim Anderson, interviewed by David Goodwin at Owen Dixon Chambers West, Melbourne, Australia, 2 March 2022, Offshore Shipping Podcast Series, Victoria University, https://offshorespecialistships.com/ossas-podcasts.

who established the offshore sector from scratch in the early 1970s, working on the installation of more than 10 offshore platforms in Bass Strait.

Figure 1 *Glomar III*, self-propelled drilling ship, image as it appeared in ExxonMobil, 'The obstetrician at the birth of an industry', *Connection*, no. 136 (Second Quarter): 5. Photograph courtesy of ExxonMobil.

Perhaps the most compelling reminiscences in the series were those of Tony Krins which concerned an infamous 'blowout' of a gas seam that occurred on 18 February 1965. Tony was an eyewitness to this event; one of about 40 individuals who were present offshore on that significant day, and possibly, by virtue of his age, the sole surviving witness.

The incident that occurred in February 1965 was officially reported by Esso at the time as a 'small blowout', 'minor blowout' or a 'gusher'. It was referred to in ExxonMobil's *Connection* magazine in 2020 as 'a blowout like the gushers of the oil industry's early days'.[5]

According to Tony Krins, those descriptions would never have been used by any eyewitnesses. Instead, he describes the events that occurred in graphic language. In Tony's recollection the appropriate descriptors are 'enormous, roaring, spectacular and terrifying':

> …all the chemical mud was coming out of under the drill platform at 2,000 pounds per square inch. The plume of mud concealed the whole rig and there was a terrible roar and of course because it was gas and mud coming out it was explosive.

5   ExxonMobil, 'The obstetrician at the birth of an industry', *Connection*, no. 136 (Second Quarter 2020): 4.

Tony noted that the event took a number of days to control and that the workforce had to be flown off by helicopter. This was not the only noteworthy aspect of the drama, as he explained:

> It was a dangerous situation and very frightening. And while we were waiting for the [supply vessel] *Pointe Coupee* to come and collect us, another young fellow and I were training fire hoses on the funnel to make sure there were no sparks coming out from there. And I noticed out of the corner of my eye that one of the men gathered there was shaking in fear and reached into his pocket for a cigarette and lighter. But before he could light up I set him on his backside with a blast from the fire hose and prevented him from blowing us all up.[6]

The historical significance of the blowout event is corroborated elsewhere. Thompson and Macklin's 2009 book *The Big Fella: The Rise and Rise of BHP Billiton* describes *Glomar III* hitting gas on the East Gippsland Shelf-1 (later known as Barracouta-1) at a drilling site 24 kilometres off the coast in a water depth of 45 metres in February 1965 as 'a spectacular hole-in-one that almost blew the drill-ship out of the water'.[7]

Tony Krins' first-hand recollections of the blowout incident were vivid, despite the passage of six decades. He attributes this to the deep impressions created by his experiences, and his passion for the sea.

The Bass Strait is a hazardous working environment. On top of that, construction work is always inherently dangerous. Work in Bass Strait involved significant construction in very hazardous settings. This was affirmed by the interviewees. As Dennis White said, 'A lot of people don't really understand the ferocity of Bass Strait.

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6   Tony Krins, interviewed by David Goodwin via Zoom, 29 September 2021, Offshore Shipping Podcast Series, Victoria University, https://offshorespecialistships.com/ossas-podcasts/.

7   Thompson and Macklin, *The Big Fella,* 103. See also Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, 'History of Petroleum Exploration in Victoria' (2022). Available at https://earthresources.vic. gov.au/geology-exploration/oil-gas/history-of-petroleum-exploration-in-victoria. Accessed 23 August 2023; Rick Wilkinson, *A Thirst for Burning: The Story of Australia's Oil Industry* (Sydney: David Ell Press, 1983), 44.

If you discount the North Sea, the Bass Strait has got to be one of the worst bits of ocean in the world'.[8]

Dennis continued with a vivid description:

> I have stood on the main deck out there in raging storms and seen as high as seventy-foot waves shifting those platforms…It wasn't really pleasant and it was unsettling. You get monstrous seas in the Bass Strait from time to time…The majority of the time you're in stormy conditions – rain and/or wind and/or pretty significant seas. Twenty to thirty feet, or ten metre, swells would be hitting the platform.

Dennis also had exposure to fatalities, as an investigator:

> I led a team on the investigation of a diving fatality and I was also a member of a team in another diving fatality. One was on a drill rig and one was on a construction barge. They were very stressful to say the least, very revealing. The whole objective was to get the teachings from it, so those things never happen again.

When asked whether he had to drive new practices to improve safety Dennis responded:

> All the time…You could never rest on your laurels, and that's for a good reason. You might convert a person today but next swing you might have three new people out there that have never been out there before and you've got to go through it all again. Just repetition, telling the same message, showing people you really cared about them, that you wanted them to go home in one piece to their families. All the time, you had to preach that message, you had to be genuine. If you weren't genuine they'd see right through it.

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8   Dennis White, interviewed by David Goodwin at Owen Dixon Chambers West, Melbourne, Australia, 9 March 2022, Offshore Shipping Podcast Series, Victoria University, https://offshorespecialistships. com/ossas-podcasts.

Tony Krins, speaking of experiences in Bass Strait a decade earlier, in the early 1960s, was less positive about the standard of safety management that he encountered:

> You were sort of trained on the spot…It was obvious to me as just a labourer that there was a lot of improvisation going on and that there was really no regulation as far as safety was concerned…It's not fair to say there was no culture of safety. We did have talks from the bosses about being careful, but they weren't formal.

Tony described a horrific incident he was aware of that occurred shortly prior to the commencement of his service on the rig *Glomar III*:

> Just before I went on the rig two hands were lost at sea on [the task of rig shift] when the giant steel buoys that were above each of the anchors broke free and slid across the deck, sweeping the two young men with them into the sea. As I recall either one or both of them were never recovered.[9]

The podcast series, which was broadcast via the OSSA website from June 2023 onward, began as a story capture exercise.[10] It evolved in ways that were not envisioned at the outset. Recognising that there was likely to be broad interest in the recordings, the students and staff involved agreed on organising the material into a number of podcasts. The project unearthed important insights relevant to modern-day safety management, the decommissioning of offshore oil and gas production installations and the looming new era of offshore wind turbine deployment. As interviewee Dennis White predicts, new players in Bass Strait, such as those installing wind turbines, will face exactly the same kinds of challenges as the early pioneers: ferocious weather, logistical complexity and marine skills deficits. Let's hope that the stories and lessons learnt by our industry veterans can help guide future operations in this challenging marine environment, as Australia transitions from fossil fuels towards renewable energy.

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9   Tony Krins interview, 29 September 2021.

10   OSSA, OSSA's podcasts. Available at https://offshorespecialistships.com/ossas-podcasts/. Accessed 23 August 2023.