

Zoom for Oral History Projects

<https://zoom.us/>

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*Zoom Wordmark, from
<https://zoom.us/brandguidelines>*

Many of us do not need headlines such as “Why Zoom Rose to the Top during the Coronavirus Pandemic,”¹ or “Zooming Ahead: The Explosive Growth of Zoom during the Pandemic,”² to understand the video conferencing software’s

impact on a variety of industries and workflows throughout 2020. While Zoom’s effect on the

archival profession might be seen in such examples as virtual conferences or creative delivery of synchronous and asynchronous primary source instruction, oral history projects and oral history archives have certainly been impacted.

This is a practical review that discusses some of the pros and cons of using the [Zoom video conferencing platform](#) for oral history projects, based on my experience as both an oral history interviewer and archivist for the [University Archives anniversary Memory Project](#) at NYU Abu Dhabi (NYUAD). Specifically, this review will assess Zoom for remote interviewing versus coordinating an in-person interview. While a broader conversation exists in other spaces about remote interviewing generally—see, for example, the Oral History Association’s recently-organized “[Remote Interviewing Resources](#)” or the OHA Archives Interest Group’s [crowdsourced list of remote interviewing experiences](#)—this review solely discusses Zoom and the pros and cons that I have observed in using it for archival oral history

¹ Ashely Carman, “Why Zoom Rose to the Top during the Coronavirus Pandemic,” *The Verge*, April 3, 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/3/21207053/zoom-video-conferencing-security-privacy-risk-popularity>.

² “Zooming Ahead: The Explosive Growth of Zoom during the Pandemic,” *Medium*, April 25, 2020, <https://medium.com/swlh/zooming-ahead-the-explosive-growth-of-zoom-during-the-pandemic-34f55b1f13e8>. See also Rupert Neate, “Zoom Booms as Demand for Video-Conferencing Tech Grows,” *The Guardian*, March 31, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/mar/31/zoom-booms-as-demand-for-video-conferencing-tech-grows-in-coronavirus-outbreak>.

work.³ A more detailed discussion of archival considerations for digital oral history can be found in the recently published [Archiving Oral History: Manual of Best Practices](#).

What is Zoom?

Zoom (formally known as Zoom Video Communications, Inc.) is a cloud-based, “freemium” web video conferencing service and platform, used to facilitate a variety of virtual communications such as meetings, webinars, live chats, and other types of presentations. The software is considered one of the most accessible conferencing platforms for a variety of reasons, and here are two: a user does not need to set up an account in order to participate in a Zoom session, and Zoom is compatible with major operating systems (MAC, Windows, Linux, iOS, Android). Although Zoom is not the only video conferencing tool available at both consumer and business levels, a number of comparative reviews highlight some specific positive features that might contribute to its leading spot among other platforms such as Cisco WebEX and Microsoft Teams.⁴

For archivists and their teams engaged in oral history work who are evaluating platforms for remotely recording interviews, a useful set of side-by-side comparisons exists in the above-mentioned OHA *Remote Interviewing Resources*—i.e., “[Web-Based Recording](#).” Zoom’s features are presented alongside WebEX, Skype, and [the “storytelling” platform TheirStory](#), followed by a selection of audio-only and screen capture options. According to the authors of the document, Zoom’s pros include:

Vast recognition/ease of use; great buffering; video recording ok for repositories; many organizations/institutions have Business or Enterprise accounts; Have the option to make separate audio files for each user. Offers separate audio and video file instead of video only. HIPAA-compliant version exists, though pricey.

Some of the cons are listed as: “Audio quality compressed format; time limits with free version. Not clear what rights are claimed over calls. End-to-end encryption in beta use as of summer 2020.”⁵

Anyone looking to conduct remote interviews and does not already have a platform selected would benefit from reviewing these succinct and valuable comparisons.

³ This review does not assess Zoom as a tool for conferencing, online instruction, or as a peer-to-peer meeting platform.

⁴ See, for example, “Zoom Alternatives & Competitors,” G2, accessed January 14, 2021, <https://www.g2.com/products/zoom/competitors/alternatives>; “The Top 7 Zoom Alternatives (Features, Pricing, Reviews),” ClickUp, accessed January 14, 2021, <https://clickup.com/blog/zoom-alternatives/>; among many others.

⁵ “Web based recording,” *Oral History Association*, July 8, 2020, 2, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1S9URspz0X7MyuOSmBxOK6vXpwUPr5JD71aq1BncjVOk/edit>.

And because those very well-articulated comparative reviews exist, which I fully endorse as thoughtful documents of guidance, I will not duplicate them and instead jump straight into a discussion of my experience using Zoom.

From In-person to Remote: Pivoting to Zoom

Institutions and projects are faced with having to select a recording platform or approach for remote interviews. For us, although we were not already conducting remote oral history interviews, using Zoom was a natural transition for a number of reasons. The first being that NYUAD has an Enterprise-level institutional account.

Using Zoom for remote interviewing worked for us because both our interviewing team and narrators⁶—largely all NYUAD community members—had Zoom experience, or at the very least, had easy access to Zoom and support. A noted positive feature above, the ability to join a Zoom meeting without an account also has allowed for those outside of our participant pool (for example, former employees or alumni) to join an interview. Because of our Enterprise-level institutional account, we have an unlimited amount of meeting/recording time in one session. For those with a free account, meetings are limited to forty minutes.⁷

Our remote interviewing project has experienced ongoing successes and growing pains—a story and case study for another day. But, it is important to provide a bit of project context. In just under a year I have conducted twenty-one oral history interviews on Zoom. Along the way I have also participated in various discussions and have both shared with and learned from other oral historians and archivists using Zoom.

Some of the advantages I have identified for using Zoom for oral history may be indicative of remote interviewing generally. These largely relate to accessibility:

- access to a broader narrator pool;
- access and easy use and setup of the recording technology; and
- ability to immediately access recorded interview files.

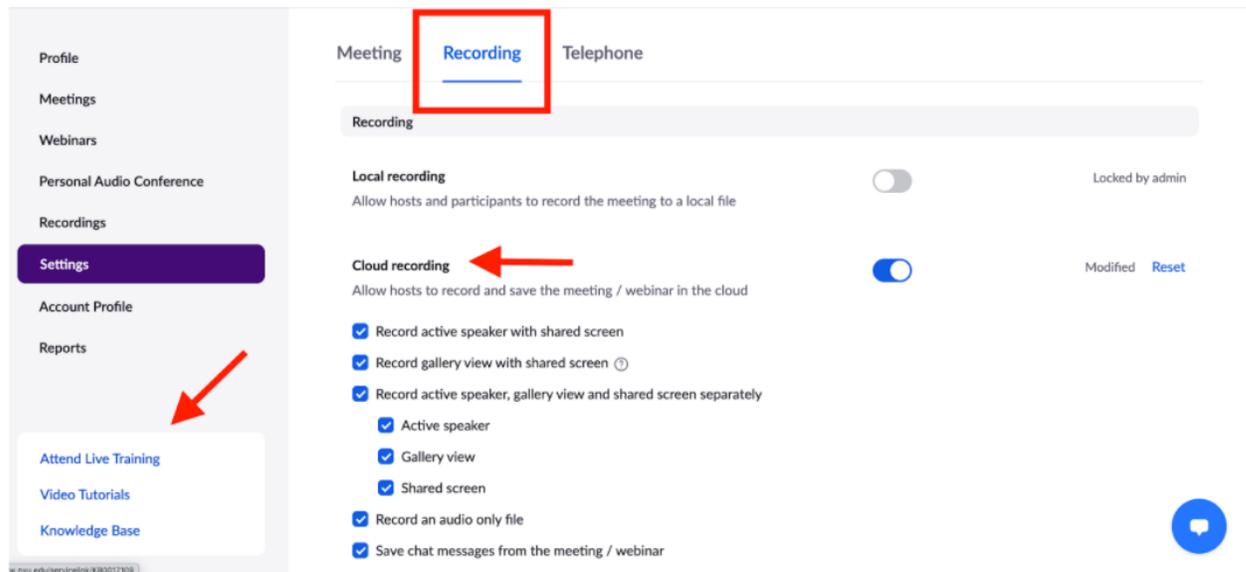
What to Expect with Zoom

Here is an overview of the stages we move through when coordinating and conducting an oral history interview using Zoom.

⁶ In this discussion, I follow the OHA Principle of defining a person being interviewed in an oral history as a narrator, as an acknowledgment that the people we interview have agency and are not merely “living human subjects.” See <https://www.oralhistory.org/best-practices-glossary/>.

⁷ Occasionally Zoom has lifted this limitation and as the software company grows it may be incentivized to extend the length for its free account holders. One example was a Mother’s Day campaign: <https://blog.zoom.us/40-minute-limit-lifted-mothers-day-weekend-zoom-with-mom/>.

First, during the **pre-interview stage** on the meeting host’s side (for our project, as interviewer I also serve as the meeting host), the Zoom **recording settings are configured** according to our specifications.



Screenshot of settings page for Zoom institutional account

Zoom allows for simultaneous cloud-recording of both the active speaker and the gallery views, and an audio file, which allows a capture of both the listener and the speaker as well as the option of just the speaker. Additional configurations allow for each participant’s audio track to be recorded as separate files; for third-party recording software and external microphones to be connected to optimize the recording if desired; and significantly, for Zoom to generate a synchronized “transcription” file (30-second segmented Web Video Text Track or WebVTT file). While the multiple files that are generated do create a collection of files that will need to be migrated and managed together, they are created and stored in one location, and easily downloaded. The file formats that are generated are M4A for audio and MP4 for video. We settled on these settings and configurations during our testing phase.⁸

Next, whenever possible, schedule a brief **pre-interview conversation** with the narrator, during which the recording and space logistics can be discussed and collaboratively configured. During his [webinar about remote interviewing using the TheirStory platform](#), Nunn Center director, oral historian, and archivist Doug Boyd referred to this as the “pre-flight check” for their remote interviewing workflow. That check-in conversation is similar for what we have developed for remote interviewing with Zoom. Loss of control of the space of the narrator is one

⁸ It is recommended that a series of test or mock interviews be conducted by an oral history project team to determine the best configuration.

disadvantage of the remote circumstance, but this conversation helps mitigate that challenge.

I found the pre-interview conversation particularly important and valuable not only for Zoom configuration but also to emphasize to our community members—who are most likely regularly using Zoom for meetings—how the oral history interview session is different in nature from meetings. For example, I ask narrators to consider not stopping their video while they are not speaking, unless it is a break or an interruption that we will pause the interview for; to try to refrain from communicating using the chat (note: recording the chat is a feature that can be configured as well); to take a moment and acknowledge the oral history space as a listening space; and to touch on space privacy issues that might not be considered outside of the remote environment. For example, does the narrator want to set up a private, neutral area if calling in from home? Although I certainly do not mind if it happens, we discuss the background visibility of other household members as well as what their internet bandwidth is like. We do a test run of each other's sound quality and internet connections as well. These are all considerations specific to the remote environment, and although not directly related to the software itself, should really be considered as part of the setup using Zoom.

An oral history interview session may be scheduled in Zoom in the same way that one would schedule a Zoom meeting. We create a Zoom link with a password—which helps with what was mostly an early-2020 challenge of “Zoom bombing” or uninvited hacked guests, something the company has addressed and fixed over time⁹—and then email a calendar invite. An early lesson learned was not to schedule Zoom interview sessions using my personal meeting room. Fortunately, Zoom has a number of [trainings and tutorials](#) as well as up-to-date “tips” and featured articles on their blog.

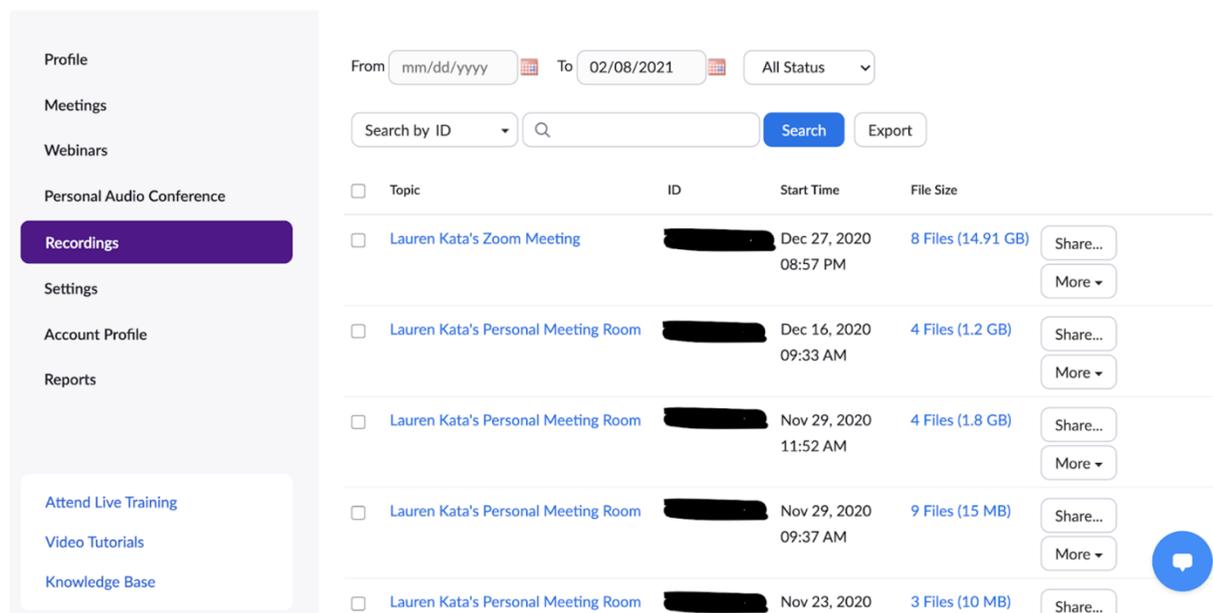
During the interview, the host of the meeting records the session. For our institutional account, session recordings are saved to and stored in the meeting host's personal account cloud folder. Following remote interviewing best practices, I also locally record the session with my laptop's screen recording software as a backup recording. The recordings and files typically become available to me within 24 hours, if not sooner. In **the post-interview stage**, which is when I send the narrators a link to the recording with a copy of the release form that we ask them to sign and send back to us (giving them an opportunity to watch/listen to the interview), it is nice to be able to quickly provide an access viewing link to our narrators. From there, I follow our internal digital archives/digital preservation workflow from the acquisition point.

⁹ “Zoom Releases Security Update in Response to ‘Zoom Bombings,’” *The Guardian*, April 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/apr/23/zoom-update-security-encryption-bombing>; see also “How to Keep Uninvited Guests Out of Your Zoom Event,” Zoom Blog, accessed March 12, 2021, <https://blog.zoom.us/keep-uninvited-guests-out-of-your-zoom-event/>.

Reflections on Advantages and Disadvantages

The ability to directly access and process the recordings, from an archivist's perspective, is an advantage to using Zoom and specifically, to using the same web conferencing tool that I use for other work-related functions and projects. Whether another archivist would see this as an advantage most likely depends on their internal workflows and setup and comfort level with technology. Using Zoom for remote interviewing, unlike our workflow for onsite in-person interviewing, has allowed me to combine tasks in my dual role as interviewer and archivist. Having immediate access to the files is a convenience and enables me to move the interview files through our digital processing workflow more efficiently and more quickly than files created from in-person interviews.

When we conduct onsite in-person interviews and our videographer is managing the recordings, access to the files takes a bit longer. For example, her workflow requires additional time to transfer large media files off of her professional-grade equipment and onto workstations to create backups and derivatives. That takes time in any case, but our project is also not her only responsibility, so additional time must be factored in for that reason. This was never and still is not seen as a problem to be solved; our workflow is stable, well-thought out and is by no means broken. I am also not an impatient person. But for anyone who manages oral history files generated on separate media the Zoom/remote model has decreased post-processing time substantially.



Topic	ID	Start Time	File Size
<input type="checkbox"/> Lauren Kata's Zoom Meeting	[REDACTED]	Dec 27, 2020 08:57 PM	8 Files (14.91 GB)
<input type="checkbox"/> Lauren Kata's Personal Meeting Room	[REDACTED]	Dec 16, 2020 09:33 AM	4 Files (1.2 GB)
<input type="checkbox"/> Lauren Kata's Personal Meeting Room	[REDACTED]	Nov 29, 2020 11:52 AM	4 Files (1.8 GB)
<input type="checkbox"/> Lauren Kata's Personal Meeting Room	[REDACTED]	Nov 29, 2020 09:37 AM	9 Files (15 MB)
<input type="checkbox"/> Lauren Kata's Personal Meeting Room	[REDACTED]	Nov 23, 2020	3 Files (10 MB)

Screenshot of a Zoom account holder's recordings, aka, my Zoom account

Of course, what we gain in this aspect, we compromise in terms of preservation-quality video recordings. The files created from the Zoom meeting itself—not using external equipment or software—are not recorded at archival preservation standards. They are low-quality recordings that are saved as compressed, MP4 files. The Zoom blog and other articles and tips from video editors¹⁰ offer many tips for how to enhance and create a high(er) quality recording while using Zoom. Our videographer and I did test having her on one of the interview calls as a technical facilitator; when we did that, we found that the equipment setup working from home—due to COVID-19 pandemic circumstances—involved a completely separate stand-alone workstation and local recording setup. This setup is a bit too involved to depend on for every interview, although we have kept note of the configuration for the future should our resources expand. On the Zoom recording side, there was not a setting that she configured that I could not manage as the interviewer/host. One potential advantage for designating a Zoom technical facilitator is that the interviewer may focus solely on the interview and not have to multitask. This scenario mirrors the pros and cons of having a technical facilitator in an in-person interview.

Another issue is the narrator's space and environment. When we host in-person interviews, we are in control of the space. We may pre-determine the frames, the privacy and chance of interruption, the HVAC controls, the lighting, and the acoustics. While we can provide guidelines and configuration settings and ask narrators to follow them and prepare their space, at the end of the day those need to be managed by the narrator, who is not necessarily an expert in space or technical configurations. Nor should that be expected, especially in the middle of memory sharing, which can be an emotional and intellectually intense experience. Having an organized checklist for them, delivered and tested during the pre-interview conversation and in a follow-up email, is a best practice that has helped us do the best we can to address this disadvantage.¹¹

On the other hand, although I have not analyzed this aspect in a structured or systematic way, as an interviewer I have observed that narrators, especially those who have never participated in an interview before, seem to be on the whole much more relaxed in the Zoom space than during interviews in a "staged" environment. Arguably the latter provides a more standard, visually appealing look and feel to the interviews, especially those that will become part of a series or overall project. But as an archivist, one of my primary concerns is providing a natural, authentic, comfortable, and unscripted opportunity and space for our narrators to engage in

¹⁰ For example, see Jonny Elwyn's "How to Record a Zoom Meeting in High Quality for Video Editing," April 7, 2020, <https://jonnyelwyn.co.uk/film-and-video-editing/how-to-record-a-zoom-meeting-in-high-quality-for-video-editing/>, among many others, including the Columbia University guidelines linked from the OHA Remote Interviewing Guidelines.

¹¹ This is also recommended by Columbia University in their case study "Zoom Interview Process" documents, developed for the NYC COVID-19 and Obama oral history projects. See "Case Studies" in *Remote Interviewing Resources*. <https://www.oralhistory.org/remote-interviewing-resources/#case-studies>.

the transfer of knowledge and share their memories and experiences. What we lose with recording limitations we gain with access to narrators' comfort level in sharing their memories, knowledge, and history from their own spaces (home or office). This last thought is not necessarily specific to Zoom, but Zoom's features described above certainly make it advantageous.

I agree with Columbia University colleagues who have described why Zoom stood out for them as a good option for remote interviewing, including their claim that Zoom offers "a way to record video and audio at a relatively good quality."¹² The local backup copy that I mentioned previously also produces a stable QuickTime MOV file. Both MP4 and MOV files are stable enough formats, and the recordings we have produced so far have been clear and intelligible. The ease with which the software creates multiple outputs is a plus, despite not meeting the highest preservation standards.

Another issue is related to the cloud recording feature I mentioned above. I suggest that the storage of all recordings in my host's Zoom cloud space is an access advantage. But there is a flip side to this convenience with regard to security. These recordings will need to be monitored and managed over time, with a sensitivity to privacy. At the beginning of our project, after files were downloaded and accessioned as part of our digital archives, as a host using our institutional account I had the ability to delete the files. Since that time, our IT administration made the decision to globally disable individuals' abilities to delete cloud recordings. This was a decision that was made at an enterprise level that centered faculty and student rights as well as remote work situations. As a result, the files will need to be monitored, and solid documentation underscoring this issue (for example, for legacy conversations down the road) is important to maintain, which is an added step that using Zoom creates in the oral history archives workflow.

Earlier in 2020, concerns were raised—concerns that digital archivists and digital forensic specialists are well familiar with—about what happens to Zoom cloud recordings, even after deleting them.¹³ Like many digital preservation systems, Zoom partners with Amazon Web Services for cloud storage services and infrastructure, and as of the submission of this review, it appears that partnership and the company will only expand.¹⁴ Also important to note as of the submission of this review is [the ability to enable end-to-end \(E2EE\) encryption](#).

¹² Oral History Association, "Case Studies."

¹³ Rae Hodge, "Your Zoom Videos Could Live on in the Cloud Even After You Delete Them," CNET, April 16, 2020, <https://www.cnet.com/news/your-zoom-videos-could-live-on-in-the-cloud-even-after-you-delete-them/>.

¹⁴ Caroline Donnelly, "Zoom Signs Multi-Year Preferred Cloud-Provider Deal with AWS," ComputerWeekly.com, December 1, 2020, <https://www.computerweekly.com/news/252492929/Zoom-signs-multi-year-preferred-cloud-provider-deal-with-AWS>.

Now that we have identified Zoom as a “good enough” tool for remote interviewing, I do expect that beyond the pandemic we will continue remote interviewing using Zoom as one approach, primarily because it allowed us to reach narrators who may not otherwise have been able to participate in memory sharing and storytelling this year had we remained only onsite. This is particularly true for former employees and alumni, but also those who had planned to participate but were not able to return to campus for many months due to COVID-19 regulations. For us, the tool clearly has reach beyond the initial workaround for which it was initially employed.