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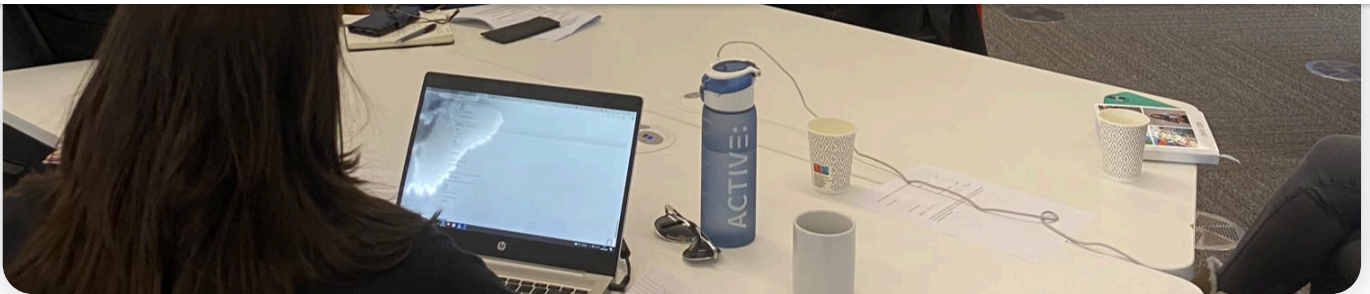
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## Future Oral History

OHS Regional Advisers Network





## Notes from the OHS Regional Network event, 2 March 2024

In March 2024 the Oral History Society Network of Regional Advisers held its annual event at the University of Leicester, hosted by Colin Hyde, manager of the East Midlands Oral History Archive (EMOHA), and Cynthia Brown, one of its previous managers. These events – a business meeting followed by a day of discussion around a particular theme – help us to keep up to date with recent developments or current issues relating to oral history. Many Regional Advisers are freelancers, or the only oral history practitioners in their workplaces, so it is also a welcome opportunity to meet and talk with each other in person.

The theme of this year's event was 'Future Oral History', as outlined by Cynthia Brown in her introduction to the day:

*We are not here – fortunately – to discuss if oral history has a future. We would not be here at all if we didn't believe that it does; and there is abundant evidence that it is thriving and developing into areas that were barely thought of when I began my own oral history career around 30 years ago. Perhaps the most striking aspect is the growth of academic oral history, with much support from research*

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*about sources of funding for theirs? The National Heritage Lottery Fund (NLHF) remains a major resource for community organisations, but are there other local or national sources of which we need to be aware? The OHS is currently investigating, and would welcome any information or suggestions you may have. However, as local authority budgets come under increasing pressure, along with those of academic institutions, oral history-based work can be seen as a 'soft' target for cuts or closures, as the recent 'discontinuation' of the Centre for Memory, Narrative and Histories at the University of Brighton has demonstrated. Nor can we be complacent about the future of the Oral History Society itself, which is very dependent on its funding from membership subscriptions – though we can do our bit to persuade those we advise of the benefits of membership.*

*The main focus today, though, is on how we can not only address some of the challenges of future oral history, but capitalise on the opportunities that are on offer.*

*How do we ensure that the oral histories recorded in the past and present – and those yet to come – will be safely preserved and made accessible in the future?*

*How do we continue to engage with wider – and younger – audiences, taking more creative approaches to collecting and using oral histories, or making the most of new or improved technology and social media?*

*And how do we address the specific issues that Artificial Intelligence raises for oral history practice and process, and capitalise on its* 

*actually use it in that way.*

*So let's not panic. Let's have informed discussions about this and the other aspects of today's programme. Let's continue to keep up to date, and share what we know and think with each other and those who come to us for advice. Let's enjoy this opportunity to spend some time together. And now, let's get on with the business of today...*

So what did we cover? Only a brief outline can be given here – but in the morning session we had presentations on different aspects of oral history, its preservation and accessibility, and how we might use it more creatively.

Colin Hyde, a Regional Advisor (RA) for the East Midlands,

spoke about the digitisation and cataloguing processes adopted by EMOHA during the Unlocking our Sound Heritage and subsequent Sounds for the Future projects. He also introduced the work of a colleague on 'Unlocking the connective potential of oral history through Natural Language Processing', which aims to connect oral history and other types of heritage collections across the UK using Artificial Intelligence, in particular the Congruence Engine project led by the British Museum.



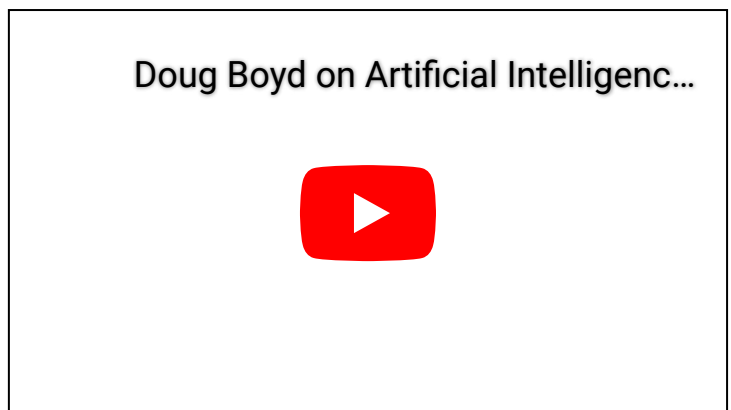
pleased to welcome Emily Godden an educator and creative technologist based in Suffolk, whose current work with StoryLab is investigating immersive storytelling and virtual heritage in the site-specific context of The Lost City of Dunwich. Emily presented examples of using various software to create immersive experiences, and of using social media to engage audiences through Snapchat and TikTok.

In the afternoon RAs split into groups to discuss one of three videos that they had viewed online in advance of the meeting. These were:

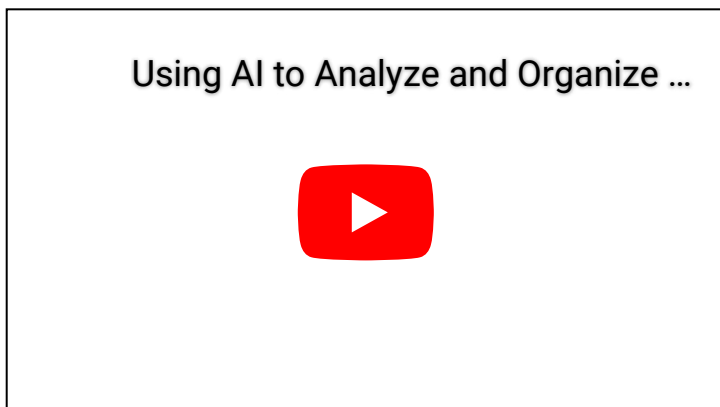
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Both positives and negatives emerged. The benefits of AI to increase accessibility to collections, to carry out mundane and repetitive tasks and quickly identify potentially sensitive content were acknowledged. AI generated transcriptions are now 80% accurate and likely to get better, and offer

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expose interviewees' personal details to potential fraud, and the danger of companies using our content for data scraping was also identified. Overall it was agreed that

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we need to reassess our processes and how content is published online, considering if current agreements need changing, and explaining to interviewees the implications of using AI to process and make available their recordings. We also need to keep up with new developments, and continue the discussions that we began during this very constructive and enjoyable Annual Event.

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### OHS Regional Advisers Network

The OHS' regional advisers are volunteers willing to assist anyone new to oral history or wanting to discuss their work with someone who is sympathetic and knowledgeable. They will act as a first point of contact for enquiries, give advice, and where appropriate refer you to other appropriate contacts or sources of guidance.

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