Vermont Folklife Center Listening in Place Project

Zencaster Interview Process

INTRODUCTION

The Vermont Folklife Center (VFC) initiated the Listening in Place (LIP) project in direct response to the emergence of COVID-19 in the United States as a way to encourage Vermonters to maintain interpersonal connections remotely during the winter/spring stay-at-home period of the pandemic. LIP (http://vtfolklife.org/listening) encompasses four overlapping facets, three of which sought to encourage interview-based communication between residents of the state. Due to the nature of the pandemic, LIP encourages remote interviewing between people not residing in the same household and offers suggestions for platforms and software for recording. This case study describes our experience with Zencastr (https://zencastr.com), a web-based recording and podcasting platform.

Why we chose it: Choosing the best remote recording platform has much to do with the person you're interviewing, the technological resources they have at their disposal, and their comfort level with that technology. While the general public is increasingly proficient with Zoom as a remote conferencing tool, and recording through Zoom is very easy to do, the sound quality is not great mostly due to latency issues. The Zencastr platform was originally designed for podcasters, offering a simple way to record hi-fi, audio-only interviews and discussions between two or more users. Some Zencastr users will also host a simultaneous video conference with muted audio--via Zoom, Google, or some other platform--so that the Interviewer and Interviewees can see as well as hear one another. As of 2020 the company is currently beta testing a new video-recording option. Zencastr's strength lies in the fact that each individual's audio track is recorded locally (to each individual's computer) and then the individual tracks are made available to the administrator through their Zencastr dashboard.

We have used Zencastr in a specific facet of LIP—what we called "Virtual Vox Pops" (http://vermontfolklifecenter.org/virtual-vox-pops), and also to conduct remote interviews for our podcast, VT Untapped (http://vermontfolklifecenter.org/untapped). This document provides a generic, practical overview of the use of Zencastr for remote interviews.

How it works: From the dashboard of the Zencastr platform Interviewers/hosts are able to invite guests to an interview and control when to start and stop the recording (when you hit record the program starts recording everyone in the remote interview simultaneously). Interview guests receive an email with a link inviting them to the recording session. The link opens the recording platform automatically; guests do not need to download anything in advance. Once guests follow the link and are connected to the Zencastr platform they will be able to hear and speak with the host and any other guests in the interview. Recording does not start automatically; the host must start the recording manually.

ROLES AND PROCESS

Two roles are required to set up and host these interviews: Interviewer and Interviewee

Interviewer: Coordinates scheduling of interview, conducts the interview, thanks the interviewee afterwards, and provides interviewee with a copy of the recording

Below is an overview of the responsibilities of each person within the process of managing the technical aspects of the interview.

- The Interviewer and Interviewee communicate regarding scheduling of the interview and the potential scope and content of it

    a. The recording platform that will be used is dicussed. Both parties must have a high-speed internet connection, a built-in computer microphone ,and use Chrome or Firefox as a web browser. Headphones or earbuds with a built-in microphone are strongly recommended.

- Prior to the interview, Interviewer shares release form (electronically or via mail) with Interviewee and explains consent procedure

- Interviewer emails Zencastr interview link to Interviewee on an appointed day, at least one day in advance, informs Interviewee prior to initiating recording, and initiates recording when approved by Interviewee

- Interviewer delivers copy of recording to Interviewee

COORDINATING INTERVIEW

- Initiate contact with Interviewee in accordance with standard personal or institutional approaches. For the Virtual Vox Pops facet of the LIP project, Interviewees filled out an online form to request an interview with a VFC staff member. Staff members responded to these submissions via email. Interviews for the podcast are requested by staff and scheduled via email or phone.
- Finalize date and time of interview

SETTING UP ZENCASTR

Pricing:
To start you'll need to make an account at the Zencastr website (https://zencastr.com). The software offers two pricing tiers:

- <u>Hobbyist – Free</u> Normally the free version of Zencastr limits users to two guests and up to eight hours/month of recording time. As of early March 2020 and the onset of COVID-19, the company has lifted these restrictions and it appears they will remain lifted as the pandemic continues. With the Hobbyist plan you can only record in "high quality .mp3" format and pay-per-project access to post-production tools such as audio mixing and audio enhancements.
- <u>Professional - $20/mo or $216/year</u> The Professional plan includes unlimited guests and recordings, access to a live editing soundboard, ability to record in "high quality .mp3" or 6-bit 44.1k WAV format, and allows for ten hours automatic postproduction per month

VFC has been using a Hobbyist account since early March so this case study only covers use of features included within that plan

Set-Up:
- Ensure that you are in a quiet space where you won't be interrupted. We highly recommend wearing headphones or earbuds with a built-in microphone during the interview. Communicate these suggestions to your Interviewee(s) as well.
- We recommend making several test calls prior to your interview to familiarize yourself with the app

CONDUCTING AND RECORDING INTERVIEW

Because Zencastr is geared towards podcast producers its terminology refers to recording sessions as "episodes"

- Interviewer signs into Zencastr
  - From the Dashboard select "Create New Episode"
    - Give episode a name
  - From within New Episode click "Invite" and enter names and e-mail addresses of interviewees
    - If you need to resend the link to the Episode click on "Invite" and "Copy Invite Link"
  - When interviewee has signed-in to the interview their name will appear on your interface and you should be able to voice chat with them
    - Greet Interviewee and inform them that they are not yet being recorded. When they are ready for recording, tell them they will hear silence for a few moments and then recording will begin.
  - When you're ready to record click "Start Recording"

- At conclusion of interview, Interviewer clicks "Stop Recording." You will still be able to chat with your Interviewee to thank them and say goodbye.
- It is a good idea to exchange phone numbers with your interviewee ahead of time so you can reach them in case of any technical difficulties

Tips to Give Interviewees:

- Remind people that recording will work best if all parties are in a quiet space, and preferably wearing headphones or earbuds with a built-in microphone (although this is not necessary for the recording to work)
- Zencastr works best in Chrome or Firefox. Firefox users will need to switch to "Standard Browser Privacy" (change in "Settings" under "Privacy and Security") and not use "Private Browsing Mode" in order for it to work.
- When they're ready to do the interview all they need to do is click on the link they received in the invitation email (make sure you send the link well in advance)
  - Interviewee will be prompted to allow access to their microphone in the upper-left-hand side of the screen — they should do this. If using Firefox, ask them to select the "Always Allow" option.
  - Zencastr will run a "health check" to make sure all users have sufficient bandwidth for the software to work
  - Once the health check is complete the Interviewee will be able to hear you and voice chat with you before the recording begins

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PROCESSING FILES

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- Immediately after completing your interview you will receive a notification that your recordings (one track per person) are being uploaded
- When the upload completes you should see your MP3 files listed. Click on the cloud symbol to download each track.

Saving and Naming the Files
- Zencastr generates monophonic 16 bit 44.1kHz MP3 files, creating one track per person. If you wish to hear both Interviewer and Interviewee(s) in one file you will need to create and export a multitrack session that combines the individual tracks.
  - Open the files in the audio editing software of your choice. Everyone's track will be exactly the same length so they should automatically sync up.
  - Export the multitrack session as a 16 bit 44.1kHz monophonic WAV. Name the file in accordance with your own or your institution's file naming protocols. This will be your preservation file.
  - Save an MP3 version of the combined file. This will be your use copy and the version you share with your Interviewee.
  - Rename the original files in line with file naming protocols and save it along with the others as the original source file

Sharing Recording with Interviewee

- Contact Interviewee and ask how they would like to receive their copy of the interview recording. VFC options generally include Dropbox, Google Drive or via mail on a USB thumb drive, SD card, or CD- or DVD-R.