

These new modes of engagement have thrown into relief significant ethical and practical challenges that remain unresolved. *Ethical* because doing research not on but with stakeholders, in a meaningfully inclusive and non-extractive mode, requires special care; *practical* because delivering on the promise of collaborative, community-centered research typically involves experimenting across methods, genres, and formats—from oral history and ethnography to filmmaking and community archiving. To support these new ways of working, and critical reflection on them, we established the Laboratory for Multimodal History in the Department “Knowledge Systems and Collective Life”, directed by Etienne Benson, at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science.



01 A research partner shares private documents during an oral history interview. Source: Eddie Bolger.

Learning about the Past from Living People



02 On-location filming in Berlin for the course in essay-film production offered by the Lab. Source: Eddie Bolger.

professional and lay experts with divergent knowledge claims, whether about public health, the environment, or other topics.

In practical terms, the Lab focuses on three interrelated approaches: (1) oral history, ethnography, and other interview-adjacent methods that involve learning about the past from living people; (2) more-than-textual forms of research and communication, including audio-based scholarship and filmmaking; and (3) inclusive, collaborative research with non-academic partners, at eye level. The overarching goal is to facilitate collaboration on historical research and communication with non-academic partners. Oral history and audiovisual media are a means to this end.

The Laboratory for Multimodal History, which opened its doors in September 2025, provides researchers and practitioners based at the Institute with the equipment, know-how, and physical and ethical space necessary for genuine collaboration across disciplinary, political, and other divides, while at the same time upholding the highest academic standards. The aim is not only to push the boundaries of the field but also to intervene, from a historical perspective, in public discourse. This includes intermediating between

Research Projects and Working Groups

Through a series of projects over the course of the next years, researchers working with the Lab will develop and experimentalize the concept of multimodal history as it applies to research and communication in the history of science, broadly conceived. We will offer technical support as well as guidance on ethical and legal considerations, including through ethics workshops, oral history training sessions, and a crash course in filmmaking.

In parallel to the Lab, the “Living Knowledge” working group hosts a series of meetings to discuss methods, ethics, and sources across oral history, critical archival studies, and related fields; an edited volume is in the works. We are also helping to develop CORAL (Commoning Oral Histories of Knowledge), a digital platform that enables researchers to search across institutions for oral history interviews on specific themes, and to analyze the content and distribution of interviews within each thematic collection.

Crucially, the development of the Lab has been supported by the library, a student assistant, an external media consultant, and an Institute-based team experienced in audiovisual production, communication, data management, and digital humanities. Further guidance is provided by an international advisory body, or “Sounding Board,” with expertise in oral history, ethnography, and filmmaking. As part of a broader strategy that involves building bridges beyond the institute and field, we are actively exploring partnerships with venues, journalists, filmmakers, artists, activists, and communities, both in our vicinity and farther afield. Such connections are vital to achieving the Lab’s aim of encouraging scholars to responsibly experiment with new, more inclusive modes of engagement while bringing historical perspectives to bear on the wider, more public conversations of our times.

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External Media Consultant: Eddie Bolger

Sounding Board: Linde Apel (Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg), Andrea Ballestero (University of Southern California), David Caruso (Science History Institute), Melissa Nelson (Arizona State University), Shaunak Sen (Kite Rabbit Films), and Jaipreet Virdi (University of Victoria)

Additional information and more research topics are available on the Institute’s website: www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/researchtopics

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