

JOURNALISM

PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE

--- 3rd edition

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CHAPTER 8

INTERVIEWING FOR JOURNALISM



KEY TERMS

Background research; Closed questions; Control; Conversation; Copy approval; Death knocks; Doorstepping; Interviews; Kiss and tell; Listening; Off-the-record; Open questions; Performance; Pseudo-events; Questions; Quotes; Selection; Soundbites; Victims

The interview – the asking of questions and the recording of answers – is the basic ingredient of most news and features. The interview is “the chief tool of active journalism”, argues Cedric Pulford, because “Without talking to people who can give us information or opinions, by phone or face to face, we can only print what others send us or recycle what has appeared somewhere else” (Pulford, 2001: 17). As a way of getting to the truth of a matter, the journalistic **interview** also has its

detractors and has even been described as a manufactured encounter or **pseudo-event**.

Yet interviewing remains *the* key tool at the disposal of reporters. It is also one of the most enjoyable parts of a journalist’s job because it is an exercise in nosiness, allowing us to meet interesting people and ask them pretty much any question we like. As Lynette Sheridan Burns (2013: 91) points out: “You can ask questions of an interviewee you cannot ask a document.”

“O my body, make of me always a man who questions!”
Frantz Fanon.



INTERVIEWING
SKILLS

BE PREPARED

The interview may be a brief encounter over the phone, a lengthy affair over lunch, a setpiece live broadcast, a full kiss-and-tell buy-up or just a few questions answered via email or text. Whatever it is, you should have some idea *why* you are interviewing this particular person: for factual answers to one or two questions, opinions, quotes, emotions, description, scraps of colour, background, whatever. Many journalists stress the importance of meticulous planning to ensure they remain in control, working to set questions or even a “script” determined by the particular angle being pursued (Aitchison, 1988: 40–42). Planning anything that resembles a script may encourage a rather stiff and inflexible approach

INTERVIEW

The use of the interview as a tool in reporting is generally traced to 19th-century US journalism (Patterson, 2012); before then journalists tended to rely on observational reportage and/or commentary, sometimes augmented with discussion of evidence gleaned from documents. But from the second half of the 19th century onwards, interviewing gradually became a common practice in the press, first in the USA and then in the UK (Chalaby, 1998: 127). Interviews were not universally popular. They were seen by some at the time as invasions of privacy, with one editor dismissing interviewing as “the most perfect contrivance yet devised to make journalism an offence, a thing of ill savour in all decent nostrils” (Boorstin, 1963: 26). Today it is hard to imagine journalism without the interview, described by Thomas Patterson (2012) as probably “the handiest reporting tool ever devised”. He continues:

Interviewing relieves the journalist of having to undertake more demanding forms of investigation, and the interviewee’s words can be treated as “fact” insofar as the words were actually said. Yet, the interview is not foolproof. Who is interviewed, what is asked, and even the time and place of the interview can affect the answers. Responses are subject to mistakes of memory or even a source’s determination to mislead a reporter. (Patterson, 2012)

Whether or not interviewing and other forms of reportage do – or should – relieve journalists of any investigative burden is discussed further in Chapters 5 and 6.

PSEUDO-EVENT

The concept of the pseudo-event was introduced in Chapter 2. Daniel Boorstin (1963: 27) categorises the

to an interview, but thinking of *some* questions in advance is certainly a good idea. Of course, an interview may take an unexpected turn – and that might be a route you want to follow – but along the way you should make sure you cover the ground you need to.

You will often have time to conduct background research before the interview. You might spend a couple of hours searching news archives and reading cuttings about the subject, looking for basic information and useful insights, and possibly thinking of an angle nobody has yet come up with. You might Google them, but remember to read beyond the first page of results and to not rely on Wikipedia as an infallible source; in fact, don't rely on *anything* as an infallible source. You might look in specialist magazines, consult reference books, and talk to colleagues or friends who know something about the subject – or who have something they would like to ask. When Simon Hattenstone told friends he was going to interview film director Woody Allen, for example, one suggested: “Ask him how somebody so ugly gets off with so many beautiful women?” It turned out to be good advice because it became clear it was the very question that Allen had “obsessed over for most of his adult life” (Hattenstone, 2007).

THE “WINNING GRACE” OF INTERVIEWING

There is plenty of often quite prescriptive advice available on interviewing techniques, but trial and error is the way most trainee journalists feel their way through their first interviews. Experiment with different styles and see what works for you in different circumstances. Remember that it is rarely a good idea to pretend to have a completely different personality from your own. Nor is it necessarily a good idea for every fledgling hack to try to be Jeremy Paxman, who is often said to have revealed that he approaches TV interviews by asking himself “Why is this lying bastard lying to me?”. He didn't actually say that, he just quoted Louis Heren of the *Times* (Wells, 2005), who was in turn quoting some advice he

“Listening is as important as asking the question.”
Helen Boaden.

media interview – alongside the press conference and the press release – as a form of pseudo-event; that is, not so much a way of *gathering* the news, more a way of *making* it. He explains:

Nowadays a successful reporter must be the midwife – or more often the begetter – of his news. By the interview technique he incites a public figure to make statements which will sound like news. During the 20th century this technique has grown into a devious apparatus which in skilful hands can shape national policy. (Boorstin, 1963: 34)

Before interviewing became commonplace, notes Michael Schudson, US President Lincoln often spoke with reporters informally “but no reporter ever quoted him directly” (Schudson, 2001: 156). Schudson argues that the growth of interviewing on both sides of the Atlantic helped journalists establish themselves as a separate group, brandishing notebooks and practising something that came to be called objective reporting:

In the late 19th century and into the 20th century, leading journalists counselled against note-taking and journalists were encouraged to rely upon their own memories. But by the 1920s journalism textbooks dared to recommend “the discriminate and intelligent use of notes”. The growing acceptance of note-taking suggests the acceptance and naturalization of interviewing. This is not to say the interview was no longer controversial. . . . There was still a sense that an “interview” was a contrived event in which the journalist, in collusion with a person seeking publicity, invented rather than reported news. As late as 1926 the Associated Press prohibited its reporters from writing interviews. But generally, reporting in the United States by that time meant interviewing. . . . It [fitted] effortlessly into a journalism already fact-centred and news-centred rather than devoted primarily to political commentary or preoccupied with literary aspirations. (Schudson, 2001: 157)

Contrived pseudo-events, many interviews may be – but at least they are normally based on the asking of questions, both substantive and supplementary. With some

had once received (Robinson, 2012: 219–220). But whoever coined the phrase, the “lying bastard” approach is definitely better suited to the interrogation of a slippery politician than it is to asking a nice old couple how they plan to celebrate their golden wedding anniversary.

Most journalists have to be comfortable speaking to all sorts of people, from millionaires to the homeless. This remains as true today as when Frederick Mansfield instructed trainees back in the 1930s:

Personality counts for much. A reporter has to meet all classes of people, who are potential sources of news; to talk to Cabinet Ministers as well as costermongers, I am tempted to say on their own level, and to inspire in all the confidence essential to successful approach. The happy medium between the “inferiority complex” and cocksure audacity should be the aim – a reasonable self-assurance, born of a well-informed competence. The winning grace that will extract news equally from a Lord Lieutenant and a trade union secretary, is a great asset. A reporter touches life at all points and in his deportment should show respect for the feelings and opinions of others, no matter how much he may be out of sympathy with them. Journalism tends to breed cynicism and a hypercritical attitude, but good manners, and often diplomacy, forbid a display of contempt. (Mansfield, 1936: 87–88)

The impeccably-mannered Martin Wainwright believes that a journalist’s main assets during interviews are being *curious* about people and allowing enough *time* to let them talk: “People can be diffident, so the interesting things sometimes come out only at the very end of an interview.” Also, he adds, “people can open up more if you appear a bit naïve”. Note the word *appear* in that sentence.

An example of somebody apparently opening up in this way came when the short-lived Conservative party leader Iain Duncan Smith hosted a lunch to get to know local journalists. A youthful reporter from the *Wanstead and Woodford Guardian* took the opportunity to ask him some friendly enough questions, in the course of which the Tory leader remarked that Tony

“You won’t get anywhere without being a nosy sod.”
Simon Hattenstone.

powerful people now preferring to speak in public only via Twitter, might future generations of journalists come to look back on the interview as a quaint relic from a bygone age?

CONTROL

The relationship between interviewer and interviewee has been described by feature writer Fiammetta Rocco (1999: 49) as an “ambivalent coupling”, and John Sergeant’s account of his own ambivalent encounter with Tony Benn hinges on the question of who should have the right to control an interview. Arguably things have become even more ambivalent. Although today’s journalistic style may be less deferential than in some earlier times – as recently as 1951 Prime Minister Clement Attlee could get away with answering even the soft question, “Is there anything else you’d like to say about the coming election?” with a terse, “No”, without being probed further (Katwala, 2010) – today’s interviewees may be more media-literate and schooled in the arts of spin than were their predecessors.

It is not just senior politicians who have teams of spin doctors, minders, schmoozers and enforcers surrounding them. Many celebrities (or their people) also try to impose tight control on interviews by setting conditions in return for (limited) access, as Gary Susman explains:

There’s always an army of publicists hovering over our shoulders, some from the studios, some employed by the stars, all making sure we don’t ask anything impolite or embarrassing or anything that strays too far from the movie. The threats are never spoken but always implicit – if you ask the star about his ex-wife, he’ll walk out, and you’ll have ruined the interview for yourself and your colleagues; or worse, you’ll be blackballed from future junkets. (Susman, 2001)

This “increased PR interventionism” in interviews can result in “journalistic passivity and compliance in a sanitised promotional drive”, argues Eamonn Forde (2001: 38). It can even lead to editors agreeing to give “copy approval” to PR companies acting on behalf of the most highly prized celebrities (Morgan, 2002b).

The relationship between journalist and source is explored in more detail in Chapters 4 and 6; control of the finished product is discussed in the section on quotes, below.

Blair's children had been used "ruthlessly" to promote the then Labour Prime Minister. The day after the local paper appeared, the interview was being quoted throughout the national media. Reporter Sara Dixon reflected on her scoop:

A young Diet-Coke-drinking local reporter sitting opposite you in a Woodford restaurant is distinctly less threatening than a grilling on party policy under the glare of studio lights by Andrew Marr or Jonathan Dimbleby. But it is also a question of approach. . . . [Without] the roundabout questions of how have the past six months been treating you Mr Duncan Smith, the contentious statement would never have been uttered. The comment about Blair and his children is not a thing that is extracted in pugnacious interviews, rather it *emerges out of conversations*. (Dixon, 2002, my emphasis)

Conversation is the key to good interviewing. Even the briefest interview should involve the techniques of conversation, and that means *listening* as well as talking. Yet the listening part is too often overlooked, according to Carl Bernstein of Watergate fame: "One of the things I've observed having been interviewed so many times is that reporters tend to be terrible listeners. They have usually decided what the story is before they do the interview, and they will choose the one which will manufacture the most controversy" (quoted in Silver, 2007). So interviewers need to listen and engage with what is being said rather than just wait for a gap to fill with the next question on their list. In face-to-face interviews it is important to make eye contact, and in all interviews the interviewee needs to be reassured via sounds or gestures that the interviewer is still awake and, ideally, still interested.



CLEMENT ATTLEE
INTERVIEW

ON THE TELEPHONE OR VIA SKYPE

You cannot make eye contact over the telephone, which is the way that most interviews are conducted. However, although there can be an impersonality about the phone, many journalists manage to develop chatty relationships with regular contacts whom they may never have met in the flesh.

VICTIM

The victim is a familiar character in journalism. Most information on victims comes from interviews with victims themselves if they are still alive, or from interviews with the bereaved. Thoughtful journalists may pause from time to time to consider why reporters and, presumably, readers are so fascinated with details of victims' lives. "Being the victim of crime is to lay oneself open to having one's privacy invaded", argues Chris Frost, who adds:

Journalists need always to remember that victims of crime are not there by choice and rarely through any fault of their own. If the report will make things worse for the victim, then the journalist should think carefully about how the report should be handled. (Frost, 2000: 146)

"When a politician tells you something in confidence, always ask yourself 'Why is this lying bastard lying to me?'"
Louis Heren.

And yet, do those critics who flinch from the very idea of "death knocks" not want to know about the person who was found dead in their neighbourhood last night? Where do they think such information comes from if not by interviewing distressed relatives, friends, neighbours and workmates? Sallyanne Duncan told fellow lecturers at an Association for Journalism Education seminar that journalism students should be encouraged to think positively about death knocks as one of the legitimate ways in which reporters can find things out and help those directly involved in events to have their say. Jackie Newton told the same event that journalists on death knocks should remember that the story on which they are working ultimately belongs not to the reporter or their editor but to the bereaved family – to whom it will always be more than just a story (Harcup, 2008).

The idea of the victim is considered in more detail in Chapter 9 and ethical issues are discussed further in Chapter 13.

QUOTES AND SOUNDBITES

A good quote or soundbite is highly prized. According to Allan Bell, direct quotation serves three key purposes in journalism:

First, a quote is valued as a particularly incontrovertible fact because it is the newsmaker's own words. . . . A second function is to distance and disown, to

Tone of voice is obviously important, as is the manner in which you begin the call. When somebody answers the phone, you have no idea what they were in the middle of doing when you called – or whose call they might have been hoping for rather than yours – so it is not usually a good idea to launch into a fusillade of questions the second they come on the line. Speaking clearly, politely and not too fast, explain who you are and why you are ringing them. Ask for a few minutes of their time – be prepared to call back at a prearranged time if you are not on deadline – and try to sound bright, alert, friendly and non-threatening. It has been suggested that standing up while speaking on the phone exudes extra confidence, and that making facial and arm gestures can help inflect the voice with the appropriate tone (Keeble, 2001a: 63). I've also heard advertising reps being urged to “smile while you dial”. That might be the sort of advice to make hardened hacks do the finger-down-the-throat routine, but it is endorsed by Sally Adams, who adds, “probably the most important thing is to *like* talking on the phone” (Adams with Hicks, 2001: 85, my emphasis).

Telephone interviews are almost always shorter than face-to-face ones, so you tend to get down to details pretty quickly. It is usually worth getting the interviewee talking by asking open questions such as “What happened to you?”, “What did you see?” or “What did you think when . . .?”. Their replies should prompt further questions. This is all well and good when you have called somebody and your research is fresh in your mind. But it's not so easy when *they* call *you* back hours or days later, by which time you may have forgotten why you wanted to talk to them in the first place. That's one reason why many journalists prefer to keep ringing somebody rather than rely on a return call that, if it comes at all, will probably be at the least convenient moment.

A halfway house between the telephone and face-to-face interview is one conducted via “voice over internet protocol” programs such as Skype or Facetime, using live video pictures as well as sound. Although interviewing somebody in this way clearly allows for more non-verbal communication than is possible over the phone, the result is often a rather

absolve journalist and news outlet from endorsement of what the source said. . . . The third function of direct quotation is to add to the story the flavour of the newsmaker's own words. (Bell, 1991: 207–209)

But most of what is said in most interviews will not be quoted directly; rather, the bulk of information gleaned from sources will be used as background or turned into reported speech. Bell argues that this power to edit “puts the journalist *in control* of focusing the story, able to combine information and wordings from scattered parts of an interview” (Bell, 1991: 209, my emphasis).

Ethical concerns are raised about this role of the journalist in selecting the parts of an interview to quote, the parts to paraphrase and the parts to discard, as Lynn Barber explains:

The journalist has *all* the power when it comes to writing the piece: she chooses which quotes to use and which to omit, which to highlight and which to minimise. I use a lot of quotes compared with most other interviewers, but they probably still only amount to at most two pages out of a twenty- or thirty-page transcript. So obviously with this degree of selection, one has almost limitless opportunities for “slanting” the interview, favourably or unfavourably. All I can say is that I don't aim to do that and I hope I don't. (Barber, 1999: 202, emphasis in original)

“As a journalist you spend most of your life rushing, but it's still worth spending as long as you can with people.”
Martin Wainwright.

Similarly, the editing of video or audio interviews gives journalists the potential to mislead viewers and listeners. Any journalist tempted to flam-up a story by giving the impression that the interviewee said something they did not, should resist such temptation or cease to call themselves a journalist (Hudson and Rowlands, 2012: 294–295).

stiff and formal encounter unless the participants are already on friendly terms with each other. There is also the ever-present threat of the call suddenly ending due to technical problems, which does not make for a relaxed and free-flowing conversation.

A final word of warning on remote interviews conducted via the phone or on Skype. You need to be absolutely clear whether the interviewee is being serious or is joking. Given that you have few or no visual clues you may have to ask “Are you being serious?”. Better to be thought of as lacking a sense of humour than to risk publishing a flippant or ironic remark as if it were a genuine opinion.

EMAIL AND TEXT

Telephone interviews may be impersonal, but trying to establish a rapport in written communication via email or texting can be even trickier. Traditionally, email or text interviews – like the faxed ones that briefly preceded them – have not been recommended except when they were the only way of getting through to somebody. That’s mainly because they lack the instantaneous to-ing and fro-ing of spoken conversation, no matter how quick your fingers and thumbs are. Answers via text will usually tend to err on the side of brevity, whereas some email interviewees will write in rather stiff, formal language. Also, there is a limit to how many times questions and answers can be batted backwards and forwards before one side or the other gets fed up. Although email encounters tend to be more brisk and businesslike than do face-to-face or telephone conversations, it is possible to establish some kind of rapport so that the exchange becomes semi-conversational. Most of the interviews with journalists featured in this book were conducted face-to-face, but one or two were carried out over the phone and via email. Can you tell which?

Some people are happier to be interviewed by email because it means they can answer questions at their own convenience. Email may be the most convenient way of contacting a range of academic experts all over the world, for example, because your message will be waiting for them when they log on in their different time zones. Also, if you are

asking technical questions, email has the advantage that the interviewee will be putting the answers in writing for you, so your chances of misquoting the answer should be dramatically reduced.

Arguably, email has made it harder for people in positions of power to hide from journalists by resorting to the age-old device of never being available. When Paul Foot rang people from his desk at the *Daily Mirror* they tended to take his calls because of the kudos associated with that title, but when he switched to *Private Eye* such people often seemed to be “in meetings” whenever he telephoned. That can be a frustrating experience when investigating alleged wrongdoing, because you need to put allegations to those involved, as Foot explains:

Getting information out of the people you’re accusing is absolutely crucial to the whole operation. Just as email has changed our lives, the fax changed our lives. I got in the habit of faxing questions to people. Whereas if you rang them up they would never be available, once you’ve got the fax through, you’re home. Because if you don’t get an answer you can always say “well I faxed them with these questions”. With the phone you might never get even to ask the question.

If you are going to contact an interviewee via email, it is safest to assume they would prefer to be addressed formally rather than informally, with a message that is spelled and punctuated correctly. And remember that you lose control of your email the moment you press *Send*, meaning that anything you have written may be forwarded to anyone to whom the recipient chooses to send it. It is always safer to assume that your emails or texts may one day be made public, possibly at a future Hutton- or Leveson-style inquiry or even in a trial at the Old Bailey – so think before you write or send anything.

“The eye contact is really important.”
Victoria Derbyshire.

FACE-TO-FACE

When I interviewed the then Labour MP Tony Benn in his Chesterfield constituency office he brought out his own tape machine to record the conversation. He recorded all his interviews, partly to check later if he had been misquoted, but mostly to warn journalists not to stitch him up when writing their stories. Profile writer Lynn Barber expresses surprise that so few

interview subjects make their own recordings to safeguard against being misquoted (Barber, 1999: 201). But Benn's refusal to accept that journalists should have total **control** of interviews managed to unsettle seasoned reporter John Sergeant, who recalls arriving at the MP's home to record an interview during the 1984–85 miners' strike:

When he opened the door, I immediately noticed a small tape recorder, which he thrust forward, with its red light on, showing that it was recording. "Hello," he said; and I did not know whether to reply to him directly or speak into the tape recorder. I said hello to the machine. He then proceeded to give me a short lecture on the unfairness of the BBC's coverage of the miners' dispute. I took this in reasonably good heart, but knowing that all my remarks were being recorded I said nothing which might be used against me. (Sergeant, 2001: 236–237, my emphasis)

It was a rare case of the tables being turned, with the journalist rather than the interviewee having to think twice before saying anything. That particular interview ended with Benn erasing the BBC's tape with a demagnetising device, leaving the journalist in the unaccustomed position of being "struck dumb" (Sergeant, 2001: 238).

Happily, most encounters are less prickly affairs. Just as well because, unless you are accusing the interviewee of wrongdoing, you need to establish a *rapport* between the two of you. First impressions are important, so don't be late. Don't smell of booze or fags, unless you know that will help you fit in, and do dress appropriately – not as if you are going to a wedding or a funeral, but smartly enough so that your state of dress will not be an issue for the interviewee. Non-verbal communication is important, so show interest by making eye contact without staring, nodding but not nodding off. Give verbal reassurance that the interviewee is not speaking into a vacuum – laugh at their jokes, sympathise with their troubles, and use phrases such as "Really?", "Yes", "uhh-huhh" to demonstrate that you are engaged. But don't overdo it.

Learn to listen, interrupting their flow only if they are digressing too much and you are on deadline.

Interrupting a dramatic narrative to check a minor detail – "How do you spell the name of the first boy eaten by the crocodile?" – can irritate the narrator. Make a note and check at the end. But don't be afraid to interrupt to clarify something you don't understand or to get some specific examples. Keep your eyes as well as your ears open because you might discover a visual clue to the interviewee's character (are they obsessively checking their phone, for example?) or a visual prompt for an unusual question. Clothes, hair, tattoos, piercings, pictures on the wall, books on the shelves, a pet, an unusual plant, a view from the window – all might spark off a question and lead to the discovery of a different angle.

Chat is more common at the end of an interview conducted in person than one conducted on the telephone, over Skype or via email, and sometimes this can result in further information or angles to follow up. Unless you don't mind risking any future relationship with the interviewee, you might think twice before quoting something said after a formal interview has finished without asking "Do you mind if I use that?". See the discussion later of "off-the-record" comments.

"The only time I penetrated Tony Blair's defences over Iraq was by keeping eye contact while telling him he never seemed to be sorry."

Andrew Marr.

AUDIO AND TV INTERVIEWS

Much of this chapter deals with interviews for text-based journalism, whether in print or online. Increasingly, however, journalists who were once print-only are now also filing audio and video reports for online media (see also Chapter 11). Martin Wainwright quickly adopted a digital recorder for interviews, allowing him to upload audio files online after selecting the necessary information and quotes for his written news story or feature. "The thing I really like about it is that it allows people to speak for themselves", he says.

Interviews for audio and visual use – whether online or on radio or television – will rely on many of the same techniques as do interviews for magazines or newspapers. But there are also many differences, most notably the fact that you can use the speaker's *voice* as well as their words, and that there is a greater reliance on the open question to get them talking. Also, broadcast interviews often have more

than an element of *performance* about them. Whereas the questioning is often invisible to the reader of a print interview, it is central to many broadcast interviews. None more so than when Jeremy Paxman asked Home Secretary Michael Howard the *same* question 12 times without getting an answer (Wells, 2005). However, aside from the setpiece studio slanging match or the doorstep challenge to an alleged rogue, the aggressive approach is not usually to be recommended. You will win few prizes by exhorting the organiser of a local charity jumble sale to “Come on, come on, answer the question!”. So how does Cathy Newman approach TV interviews for *Channel 4 News*?



PAXMAN V
HOWARD

I’m not of the view that the interviewer or presenter should make themselves part of the story. I think you’re there to get the very best answers out of the interviewee. Obviously you’ve got to be an engaging on-screen presence, but my questions can be quite short, whereas sometimes I think some presenters’ longer questions can be self-indulgent. You’re trying to get the best possible information out of the person you’re interviewing. That’s the key challenge. When we do pre-recorded interviews, in some ways it’s easier because you can just meander a little bit and come back to an issue, but the problem with that is that it’s all got to be cut down. It’s very hard to edit it sometimes, to make sense. I think really carefully about the structure of an interview, what issue leads where, and depending on how somebody answers, you’ve then got to change tack, and it’s all got to make sense for the viewer. That’s the most important thing, taking the viewer with you.

However, actually listening to an interviewee’s answers can sometimes be surprisingly difficult, as Newman explains:

I think that’s the most important thing but in some ways it’s the hardest thing because you’ve got people talking in your ear, there might be a problem with the next piece, so there’s a crisis going on in the gallery and you’re trying to concentrate on what someone is saying. My least favourite interviews are down the line, where there’s a delay in the satellite and you can’t really get

a proper sort of interrogation because you can’t really interrupt and that might mean if someone talks for a minute in an answer that’s a third of your interview gone and you haven’t had a chance to challenge them, so that’s very frustrating. And you might not be able to hear them that well because the link might not be that good. So the most frustrating issues are when the technicalities detract from the journalism.

Not surprisingly, then, the interviews Newman enjoys the most are either with guests in the studio or out on location when there is plenty of time. One of her most memorable and moving interviews was with Tony Nicklinson, a paralysed man with “locked-in syndrome” who was campaigning for the legal right to die. She recalls the tearful encounter that took place over two-and-a-half hours in his home as her longest and saddest interview ever, yet one she feels privileged to have conducted:



TONY NICKLINSON
INTERVIEW

“A journalist never knows what the interviewee thinks, only what the interviewee says.”
Lynette Sheridan Burns.

I did the first interview with him and he blinked out every letter of every word via his wife [who held up an alphabet board], which was his means of communicating. So that was the most painstaking interview I’ve ever done, for him as much as for me.

That was really memorable because he felt so passionately about what he wanted to get across in that interview. I think he helped change the culture around the law on right-to-die, he was a seminal figure in that debate.

Obviously in my job I’ve interviewed prime ministers, presidents, the Dali Lama, A-list Hollywood stars, but some of my most memorable pieces have been interviewing ordinary people in extraordinary situations, like Tony Nicklinson.



INTERVIEW
AND STUDIO
DISCUSSION

ASKING QUESTIONS

The precise nature of the questions you ask in any form of interview will be determined initially by its purpose and then by whatever research you have done in advance. But it is important that you listen attentively to people’s answers and adjust your line of questioning if necessary. It is usually a good idea to get the interviewee talking in an open way at the beginning, even if you intend to end up by accusing

them of some skulduggery. So, unless you specifically want a yes or no answer, try to avoid asking *closed* questions, such as “Did you see the accident?”. To get them talking, opt for more *open* questions, such as “What could you see?”. People often stop after a sentence or two, looking for reassurance that this is what you want. You might encourage them to continue by asking “And then?”, or “What happened next?”, but some interviewers prefer the trick of remaining quiet after the initial answer in the hope that the interviewee will go a bit deeper when filling the awkward silence.

Whatever the topic, you are likely to want to know the answers to the five Ws of journalism introduced in Chapter 1: Who? What? Where? When? Why? Plus, of course, How? You will often have to do some lateral thinking while listening. *Who* is that person? *What* is their relationship to so-and-so? *Where* did they meet? *When* did they arrive? *Why* did they go there? *How* did they travel? The answer to any one such question might end up providing you with the most newsworthy angle to a story. But you might never know if you don’t ask. Clarify any vague answers such as “recently” or “about”. Getting specific examples by asking “Such as?” can sometimes bring a dull interview to unexpected life. Do not be afraid to say: “Sorry, I’m not sure I’ve understood that. Could you please explain it again?”

Unless you are transmitting live, it is a good idea to ask towards the end: “Is there anything else you’d like to add?” It is polite, it stops the interviewee feeling annoyed that they didn’t get the chance to talk about their pet subject, and they might just say something far more important and interesting than anything that has gone before. Then, make sure you have checked spellings, especially names, and exchanged contact details. And don’t forget to thank people for their help and time. A little courtesy can go a long way.

OFF-THE-RECORD

An interviewee may tell a journalist that something is “off-the-record”, meaning that you should not attribute the information to them. That does not mean that you cannot include the information in an unattributed form. Check exactly what information they are referring to.

“Why? is the question I ask most often.”
Fiammetta Rocco.

They may have good reason – perhaps they might lose their job for criticising their employer in public – or they may be feeling paranoid with little justification. As the interview progresses they may begin to trust

you more, so you could try suggesting that something said earlier off-the-record might be restored to on-the-record. But if you break your word, having agreed to something being off-the-record, then you will have betrayed a source. Confusion arises if somebody *assumes* that a journalist will treat something as off-the-record without making it explicit. And sometimes people just say things that, with hindsight, they wish they had kept to themselves. A journalist who combines a conversational tone with a keen news sense will sometimes be “lucky” enough to catch an interviewee in just such a mood. Jane Merrick recalls the time that, as a Press Association reporter, she made a routine telephone call to a petrol company press office at the beginning of a series of fuel protests that went on to paralyse the UK:

It was during the protesters’ first blockade of an oil refinery. In London the company’s line was that petrol supplies won’t be affected. When I called the PR guy in the North-West I got lucky because he was really annoyed and he said: “Don’t these people realise we’re going to run out of fuel by Sunday night?” I said, like, “Really?” And he said, “Yeah, and it’s really peeing me off.” I said, “OK, fine”, put the phone down and ran the story, “Warning of fuel shortage by Sunday”.

The warning became a national talking point and the panic buying of petrol increased as a result. Merrick continues:

This guy got into so much trouble. He phoned me on the Monday and said: “It wasn’t off-the-record because I didn’t say it was off-the-record, but I shouldn’t have said that to you because our line was that it was fine.” When clearly it wasn’t fine.

DOORSTEPS AND DEATH KNOCKS

Some interviews are fraught with difficulties, ranging from the boredom of hanging around for hours waiting for somebody to emerge through a doorway to the possibility of a punch in the face. The “doorstep” and the “death knock” bring out differing emotions in journalists and interviewees alike.

Doorstepping is a peculiarly British tradition, argues Matthew Engel. And a peculiarly ineffective one, it seems:

“A lot of it is play it by ear.”

Deborah Wain.

Photographers and reporters descend on the home of a person touched by scandal or tragedy . . . and wait, in the hope of a picture of one of the actors in the drama or, far less probably, a comment. It is a tiresome and, for the reporters, almost always a pointless chore, unless they are actually paying to buy the story. (Engel, 1997: 279)

Not so, according to Nick Davies. He has no time for reporters who bully people, camp outside their homes and peer through their windows, but he argues that arriving unannounced on people’s doorsteps remains an integral part of the journalist’s armoury: “That’s how you get good stories. It is the most exciting and most skilful part of our job” (quoted in Stevens, 2001).

When it comes to death knocks – calling on a bereaved family to ask for information, quotes and a picture – few journalists actually enjoy the task, although some adopt a macho pose and boast of their experiences. Codes of ethical conduct advise reporters to be cautious about intruding on people’s grief, and families may be actively hostile to journalists’ enquiries at such a difficult time. Some people genuinely welcome the chance to talk about the death of somebody close to them, even to a stranger with a notebook, while others may answer questions to avoid inaccuracies appearing in the media, or simply because they do not think of refusing. Deborah Wain is experienced at talking to victims’ families after crimes, accidents or inquests. People usually seem to talk to her, so I asked her why:

I try to be really straight with people when I interview them. I try to be polite and people respond really. I never give people the impression that I’m doing anything other than what I’m doing. On death knocks, be upfront. Don’t try to be over-sympathetic, don’t say “I’m sorry”, because you obviously didn’t know that person. It’s a hard one to get right, a lot of it is play it by ear. Be straight about it, say this story will go in the paper and we want to give you, the family,

the chance to say something about your son or whoever as a person. I’ve often rung people up and asked them if I can come and see them, rather than just turn up. Most people say yes. I’m a great believer that if people want to talk they will, or will ring you back. I know some people say don’t do it over the phone or don’t leave a message because they won’t ring you back, but I don’t think that’s the case. If they want to say something they will get back in touch with you if you open that window of opportunity. I think women do better at death knocks. I know it’s a bit of a cliché to send women out, but it’s for good reason.

Reporter Sue White agrees on the importance of being polite and non-pushy, as she describes her own approach:

Normally it would be quiet and I’d knock on the door. It would open a crack and someone would answer. . . . I’d say, “Hello, I’m Sue White from the *Birmingham Evening Mail*. We’ve heard from the police about the dreadful accident last night. Could I come in and have a word with you about it?” Almost everyone would say, “All right”. . . . It’s important to be very, very courteous and understanding. . . . I’d be taken in and sat in the lounge. It would be very quiet, they’d be stunned. I felt if I talked openly, in as friendly and sympathetic a way as possible – one person to another, making it clear I just wanted to confirm some facts – people would give me that information. I was usually right. (Quoted in Adams with Hicks, 2001: 142–143)

To the non-journalist the death knock might sound callous, even manipulative. But when we hear there has been a murder or a fatal accident, don’t we *expect* the media to tell us about the **victim** – their name, how old they were, and something about their character and interests? This information does not appear in the media by osmosis, not everyone is yet on Facebook (nor is everything on it necessarily accurate), and full details are rarely supplied by the police or other third parties. Such details have traditionally been obtained by journalists knocking on the doors or ringing the telephones of relatives, neighbours,

friends, schools and workplaces, and a recent study found that many bereaved families can find it a positive experience, if conducted sensitively – and preferable to finding that personal material has simply been lifted from social media:

By believing in the value of interviewing the family the surveyed journalists enable the relatives to maintain a level of control over the story, something that is important to the bereaved, which may be denied to them when material is taken predominantly from the deceased's social networking sites, unless of course the journalist seeks consent from the family to reproduce quotes and pictures. (Newton and Duncan, 2012: 214)

Relatives don't have to be bereaved to be contacted by journalists at times of trauma. Jane Merrick was working for a regional news agency when news came through that the former Beatle George Harrison had been attacked, and that someone was being held by police in connection with the incident. She recalls:

The name of the man arrested had got through the rumour mill so we contacted all the names in the [phone] book and I got to his mum first. I introduced myself as a journalist and she asked me what had happened. I said, "It's OK, I'll come out and speak to you." She said, "Tell me what's happened, is he OK?" I said, "He's absolutely fine but I need to come and see you in person". Then she got very defensive and said she would put the phone down if I didn't tell her what was going on. So I said, "There's been a bit of an incident that Michael has been involved in, but he's absolutely fine". She put two and two together and shouted to her husband, "Oh my God, Michael's stabbed a Beatle!" And then she put the phone down. In the end I had to go out there. Eventually she invited everyone in, but by then we weren't the only ones.

Reflecting on the experience, Merrick says:

I felt terrible because you can't say straight out, "Your son has stabbed someone", and I was quite surprised that the police hadn't contacted her. It was a really difficult way to tell her, and I tried to soften it as much as possible, but you can't just be really mysterious and say, "I need to come and speak to you". With hindsight, I should just have established that she was the mother, and then turned up at the door to speak to her.

Brian Whittle favours the in-person approach rather than giving anyone the opportunity of putting the phone down on you. But people can still shut the door and tell a journalist to go away. The editors' code of practice instructs journalists that, except in cases in the public interest, they must not persist in questioning or telephoning people after they have been asked to stop. Harassment of unfortunate families does still go on, but nowhere near as much as it once did. As agency reporter Denis Cassidy says: "If you are told to leave, nowadays, then you leave" (quoted in Stevens, 2001).



THE DEATH KNOCK

QUOTING

As well as being a means of obtaining information, interviews provide journalists with direct quotes and their audio equivalents, soundbites.

Quotes and soundbites are a vital ingredient of journalism, adding authority, drama and powerful or colloquial expression to an account. "The key to securing a good soundbite is to frame your question so the answer will sum up the respondent's position – their view, reaction or account of what they have witnessed", advise Hudson and Rowlands (2012: 107). Short video or audio clips containing soundbites can then be used for subsequent news bulletins in addition to the original report. But it is important not to misrepresent the interviewee in the editing of soundbites. If you don't wish to report somebody's views accurately, what is the point of interviewing them in the first place (Hudson and Rowlands, 2012: 295)?

Opinions differ a bit more on the editing of written quotes, although all agree that little purpose is served by including excessive repetition of phrases such as "like", "know what I mean?", or "urn" – unless you are doing it to make a point about the speaker. David Randall questions the use of quotation marks if what they contain is not "a word for word, syllable by syllable, accurate report of their actual words" (Randall, 2000: 187). But journalists frequently "tidy up" quotes. If they did not, it would be a remarkable coincidence that sources interviewed by tabloid journalists seem

to speak in short, sharp sentences, while those quoted by broadsheet reporters speak in more complex sentence structures – even when they are the same people. Whittle defends the practice of editing quotes:

I think you can put words in people’s mouths in the sense that most people are not particularly literate. That’s perfectly acceptable if you know what you’re doing, but only experience can tell you that. We go over people’s quotes. Don’t misunderstand me on this, we’re pretty careful about it.

Merrick found contrasting policies at work when she moved from another regional news agency to the Press Association: “At the agency we could paraphrase people almost and still put it in quotes because it would be neater, whereas at PA it’s the *exact* words. Now I have two dictaphones as a back-up and tape everyone as well as take shorthand notes, to cover my own back really.” Wynford Hicks and Tim Holmes urge a similar caution:

[You] can always summarise quotes in indirect speech if tidying up causes difficulty – but you must never do the reverse: indirect speech can never be used as the raw material for a concocted quote. In subbing quotes . . . the key word is accuracy: the exact meaning of the original must be preserved. In condensing and clarifying a quote . . . you must never change the emphasis. So if somebody makes a statement that is qualified in some way, you remove the qualification at your peril. (Hicks and Holmes, 2002: 65)

The ethical line between tidying and changing can be a fine one. It can sometimes disappear entirely, especially if a reporter edits somebody’s comments when making notes, then slightly strengthens them when writing up, before passing the story on to a sub who might tidy the quotes a bit more. The published result might end up being wholly unrecognisable to the interviewee, not just in words but in meaning. The golden rule when selecting or shortening quotes, and pruning out repetitions or irrelevancies, is to retain not just the interviewee’s *voice* but the speaker’s *sense*. Otherwise, why bother quoting at all?

SUMMARY

Journalists interview sources – on the telephone, over Skype, in person, by email or text – to obtain information, facts, opinions, analysis, description, emotion, colour, background, direct quotes and soundbites. The interview has been described as an ambivalent encounter in which the interviewee controls what information they disclose but, with the exception of live broadcasts, the interviewer retains control of which bits of the interview are passed on to the audience. Interviews can themselves create news and in this sense can be seen as pseudo-events. Ethical issues associated with interviewing include questions of intrusion into grief, copy approval, selection of material and editing.

QUESTIONS

- Why do journalists interview people?
- Why do people agree to be interviewed by journalists?
- How can journalists prepare for interviews?
- Who’s in charge, the interviewer or interviewee?
- Is it ever right to edit people’s quotes or soundbites?

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

You are sent to interview a newly elected Mayor face to face to write a profile for your local news organisation. As you get up to leave, the Mayor relaxes, begins to joke, chats about their student days 20 years ago, boasts about how much alcohol they consumed back then, and hints at a youthful history of sexual promiscuity and occasional use of cannabis – before adding, “Of course, that was all off-the-record” and bidding you goodbye. What would you do? And would it make any difference if the Mayor were Labour or Tory, male or female, gay or straight?



HOW MIGHT YOU TACKLE THIS ISSUE?

FURTHER READING

Despite the sometimes prescriptive tone, there are many good tips and instructive anecdotes to be found in Adams with Hicks (2009), while Hudson and Rowlands (2012) offer guidance on broadcast interviews and Beaman (2011) deals with radio interviewing specifically. Randall (2011), Sheridan Burns (2013), Sissons (2006) and Pape and Featherstone (2005), among others, all have useful general sections on interviewing, while McKay (2006) includes two chapters specifically on magazine interviews. For a different perspective on the death knock, Harcup (2007) includes a chapter on crime reporting that features an interview with a victim’s relative as well as a crime reporter. Finally, if you can track down a copy, Silvester (1994) is a mammoth collection of historical interviews.

TOP THREE TO TRY NEXT

Sally Adams with Wynford Hicks (2009) *Interviewing for Journalists* (second edition)

Gary Hudson and Sarah Rowlands (2012) ‘The interview’, Chapter 4 of *The Broadcast Journalism Handbook* (second edition)

Christopher Silvester (ed) (1994) *The Penguin Book of Interviews*

SOURCES FOR SOUNDBITES

Fanon, 1967 [1970]: 165; Boaden, quoted in Hudson and Rowlands, 2012: 90; Hattenstone, 2007; Heren, quoted in Robinson, 2012: 220; Wainwright, interview with the author; Derbyshire, quoted in Hudson and Rowlands, 2012: 85; Marr, quoted in Barnicoat, 2007; Sheridan Burns, 2013: 92; Rocco, 1999: 50; Wain, interview with the author.