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0521812593 - The News Interview: Journalists and Public Figures on the Air

Steven Clayman and John Heritage

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Introduction

If you sit down in front of your television to catch up on the news, or if you turn on the radio for the same purpose, you will very likely be treated to a series of stories narrated by an anchorperson or correspondent. However, at least some of what you hear is apt to appear in a different form altogether – not a narrated story, but an interactional encounter between a journalist and one or more newsworthy public figures.

The news interview has come to occupy a prominent place in the landscape of broadcast journalism and political communication. Interviewing has long been a basic journalistic tool – perhaps the most important tool¹ – for gathering information, the raw material that will later be worked up into finished news stories. What is new is its increasing use as a finished news product in its own right. Whether live or taped, in studio or via remote satellite links, as one segment of a news program or the overarching format for the program as a whole – the interview is now a common form in which broadcast news is packaged for public consumption, and hence an alternative to the traditional narrative or story form of news presentation. Although the news story remains important, a significant proportion of news content now consists of a journalist asking questions of politicians, experts, or others who are “in the news.”

Numerous factors have contributed to the growth of the news interview. Technological innovation is part of the mix. The advent of cable has greatly increased the number of channels and news outlets,

¹ Both Gans (1979: 138) and Hess (1981: 18, 52) find that reporters get most of their information, not by witnessing events directly or by consulting documents, but by interviewing sources.

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while satellite feeds and electronic newsgathering equipment now permit live interactions with newsmakers from virtually anywhere in the world. These changes have expanded opportunities for the development of new forms of news and public affairs programming.

At the same time, increasing competitive pressures have encouraged broadcasters to exploit these opportunities. The older commercial television networks are now competing with a growing array of cable channels, as well as VCRs and the Internet, with predictable consequences for each content provider's market share and profitability. Meanwhile the US networks have each been taken over by conglomerates that have assumed substantial debt and have been much less willing to allow their news divisions to remain insulated from the pressures of the bottom line (Auletta 1991; Hallin 1997). All of this has had a substantial impact on the ethos of broadcasting, with producers much more concerned about production costs and audience ratings, and hence willing to experiment with new formats for news and public affairs programming. Against this backdrop, formats based on spoken interaction – panel discussions, informal debates, various forms of audience participation, and of course news interviews – are particularly attractive. Such formats are inexpensive to produce, and they embody qualities of “spontaneity” and “liveliness” that audience members are believed to like.

The rise of the news interview has made it a significant component of the contemporary public sphere, and hence worthy of social scientific attention. It is a locus of direct and essentially unscripted encounters between journalists and a wide range of public figures, including government officials at the highest levels. It is an arena in which journalists perform certain core democratic functions: soliciting statements of official policy, holding officials accountable for their actions, and managing the parameters of public debate, all of this under the immediate scrutiny of the citizenry. If journalists have traditionally discharged these tasks through practices of storytelling and narration, now they also do so through practices of questioning and interrogation. Correspondingly, public figures' ability to deal adeptly with journalists' questions has become an essential prerequisite for successful political communication. Just as speechmaking skills were crucial in the days of the public square, the capacity to field questions has become a core skill for public figures in the television age.

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To underline these points, consider that both journalistic and political careers are now contingent on performance in news interviews and their close cousins, press conferences. If journalists previously gained professional status and popular renown mainly by virtue of their investigative and literary abilities, their ranks have been joined by journalists known mainly for their skills at questioning and interrogation: Sam Donaldson and Ted Koppel in the USA, Robin Day and Jeremy Paxman in the UK. Correspondingly, politicians who can “think on their feet” and deal effectively with unexpected and difficult questions (John Kennedy and Margaret Thatcher) receive praise and admiration, while those who have difficulty in this forum (Ronald Reagan and John Major) are criticized for their interactional failings.

It is not difficult to find cases where career prospects have been substantially boosted – or hindered – on the basis of performance in a single news interview. When revelations about Gennifer Flowers threatened to undo Bill Clinton’s first run for the presidency in 1992, a joint appearance by the Arkansas governor and his wife on *60 Minutes* did much to resurrect his campaign. Conversely, Bob Dole’s 1996 campaign suffered an important setback when, in an interview on *The Today Show*, he expressed a seemingly cavalier attitude about the addictiveness of tobacco.

One remarkable illustration of the power of the contemporary news interview is Jeremy Paxman’s 1997 encounter with Michael Howard on the BBC’s *Newsnight* program. Howard was formerly Home Secretary under Prime Minister John Major, and at the time of the interview he was a principal challenger for the leadership of the Conservative Party. As Home Secretary, his responsibility for the British prison system had previously become a contentious political issue. Two years earlier, following a well-publicized prison escape, Howard appeared before the House of Commons, and while he admitted setting policy for the prison service, he denied any involvement in operational matters. His denial was subsequently contradicted by numerous authoritative sources, raising the specter of having willfully misled the House.

In the 1997 interview, Paxman zeroed in on an event that had a direct bearing on the veracity of Howard’s claim to having had no operational role in the prison service – namely the firing of a prison official. Paxman asked whether Howard had overruled the Director

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General of Prisons (Derek Lewis) by instructing him to fire the official. If Howard had actually given such instructions, it would directly contradict his prior claim to having been operationally uninvolved. When Howard refused to give a straightforward answer, Paxman pursued the matter with extraordinary tenacity, asking essentially the same question another thirteen times! Perhaps never has a single act of evasiveness under questioning been so massively pursued and placed on display before the viewing public.

The Howard–Paxman interview has been described as “a watershed in political interviews and a new low in relations between the Tory government and the BBC” (Gibson 1999), and the ramifications were indeed substantial. The interview received much subsequent news coverage, it was seized upon and exploited to good effect by Howard’s challengers for the Conservative Party leadership (Cordon 1997), and it marked a turning point in his political fortunes. Howard would eventually lose his bid for the leadership, and his party would lose the election, ushering in the ascendancy of the Labour Party under Tony Blair.

Howard’s waning political standing was matched by Paxman’s veneration as a broadcast journalist. Paxman was subsequently named Interviewer of the Year by the Royal Television Society (Summerskill 1998). The following year, the interview was featured and commemorated on *Newsnight’s* twentieth anniversary program.

The Howard–Paxman interview rebounded to the benefit of the journalist and the detriment of the public figure, but news interviews can also have just the reverse effect. Consider Dan Rather’s encounter with George Bush during the 1988 presidential campaign.² The political stakes could not have been higher: Bush was a front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination, the race was just getting underway, and he was about to be interviewed on the CBS *Evening News* – then the most highly rated television news program in the USA. The interview started out routinely enough, but it soon developed into a sharply acrimonious confrontation over Bush’s involvement in what came to be known as the Iran-Contra

² This interview was the focus of a series of articles in a special section of the journal *Research on Language and Social Interaction* (1988/89) edited by Anita Pomerantz. See especially the contributions by Clayman and Whalen (1988/89) and Schegloff (1988/89).

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scandal. That nine-minute interview had substantial repercussions for both parties.

Bush's campaign got a substantial boost. He was widely perceived to have dispelled his unflattering image as an obedient and "wimpy" second fiddle to President Reagan. Thus, *Time* magazine – which featured the encounter as its cover story – characterized it as "video High Noon" and described Bush as follows: "Bush had shot down the legendary media gunslinger from black rock. It was the new George Bush. Not Bush the perpetual stand-in, but Bush the stand-up guy. Bush unbound. Bush unwimpered" (Stengel 1988: 17). Moreover, a *Time* magazine poll indicated that a majority felt that Bush had indeed strengthened his public image, and that he had "won" the battle with Rather (Stengel 1988: 17–19). It was by no means a total victory – he failed to fully dispel doubts about his knowledge of the arms-for-hostages deal (Toner 1988), and he was questioned further about the scandal on Ted Koppel's *Nightline*. That later interview prompted an eerie sense of déjà vu when Bush adopted the same defensive stance and mistakenly referred to Ted Koppel as "Dan"! These were minor setbacks, however, as Bush went on to win the Republican nomination and later the presidency by a landslide.

The interview had quite the opposite effect on Dan Rather's career. CBS received 6,000 telephone calls that evening, most of them expressing disapproval of Rather, and poll results suggested that a majority of viewers thought Rather had been "rude" (Stengel 1988: 19). The CBS affiliates also expressed dissatisfaction with Rather at the annual affiliate convention (Auletta 1991: 500–1). Later in the campaign when the presidential debates were held, Rather was the only network news anchor who was not on any panel of questioners – it was feared that Bush might use the incident to beat back Rather's aggressive questions, or that Rather might be inhibited from raising such questions (Weintraub 1988). At about the same time, Rather began to lose influence at CBS when a CBS News president took charge who was determined to impose greater discipline and to ensure that the news division focus on covering the news rather than making it (Auletta 1991: 536–8). Finally, while the *CBS Evening News* would remain the leading network news program through most of 1988, it began to lose viewers and slipped into third place the following year (Goldberg and Goldberg 1990).

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The causes of this steady decline are undoubtedly complex, but it is significant that some commentators (e.g., Du Brow 1990) have attributed the problem, at least in part, to lingering memories of that unseemly but ultimately fateful interview.

These cases demonstrate one final point regarding the distinctiveness and import of the news interview. Unlike the traditional news story, the news interview is essentially unscripted and unpredictable. Of course, interviewers and interviewees may each have a preconceived agenda in mind at the outset, a more or less developed idea of what they would like to say and do. However, each party's capacity to realize his or her agenda is thoroughly contingent on the conduct of the other party. The actual course of an interview is thus by no means predetermined; it is an emergent product of how the participants choose to deal with each other then and there, move by move, moment by moment. Part of the appeal of the news interview is precisely this spontaneous quality, the sense of liveliness and even danger arising from the spectacle of a powerful public figure matching wits with a seasoned journalist. This is why some interviews – like the Bush–Rather and Howard–Paxman encounters – become news events in their own right, the focus of subsequent news coverage that further enhances their impact.

If the news interview is not scripted in any strong sense of the word, neither is it a disorganized free-for-all in which “anything goes.” Indeed, as we will be arguing throughout the book, the parties to a news interview observe an elaborate set of social conventions associated with the roles of interviewer and interviewee. These conventions are largely tacit and taken for granted – they are rarely commented upon within interviews themselves, and they receive only cursory and superficial attention in journalism textbooks and manuals of interviewing technique. And yet, these conventions of interaction are very real and very powerful. Adherence to the conventions is what distinguishes the news interview from other genres of broadcast talk and other forms of interaction more generally. These conventions are robust and remarkably similar in both Britain and the United States, although they are subject to cross-cultural variation and historical change. In all of these ways, the news interview can be understood as an organized social institution in its own right.

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At the same time, the news interview is deeply intertwined with other societal institutions, most notably journalism and politics. It is a public arena in which representatives of these institutions encounter one another and strive to pursue their respective goals and agendas. Accordingly, what transpires within a news interview both reflects and contributes to the current state of journalism, politics, and their co-evolution over time.

Our primary objective in this book is to examine the inner workings of the news interview in Anglo-American society – the roles, norms, and elementary practices that sustain it. We will also explore aspects of its relationship to the larger social world – the forces within journalism and politics that first gave rise to the news interview and continue to shape its development in both Britain and the United States, as well as its consequences for news, political communication, and the public sphere.

The news interview as a genre

The news interview is a familiar and readily recognizable genre of broadcast talk. But what makes it so? What sets news interviews apart from talk shows, panel discussions, debates, audience participation programs, and other interaction-based genres of broadcast programming? Like most ordinary language categories, the “news interview” has fuzzy boundaries – its members share a loose family resemblance rather than a rigid set of defining attributes. Nevertheless, certain attributes do tend to characterize instances of this programming genre.

The prototypical news interview involves a distinctive constellation of participants, subject matter, and interactional form. The interviewer is known as a professional journalist rather than a partisan advocate or celebrity entertainer. Interviewees have some connection to recent news events, either as primary actors (e.g., government officials) or as informed commentators (e.g., certified experts). The audience plays no active role in the interaction. The discussion normally focuses on matters related to recent news events, is highly formal in character, and is managed primarily through questions and answers. In the USA, prototypical news interviews are featured on nightly programs such as *Nightline* (ABC) and *The NewsHour* (PBS), and weekly programs such as *Meet the Press*

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(NBC), *Face the Nation* (CBS), and *This Week* (ABC). In the UK, prototypical news interview-based programs include *Newsnight* (BBC2), the *Sunday Breakfast With Frost* (ITN), and various radio programs produced by BBC Radio 4: *The Today Programme*, *The World at One*, and *PM*.

The boundaries of the news interview genre can be clarified by considering some marginal cases. Consider CNN's *The Larry King Show*. It is news-oriented, features politicians and other newsworthy guests, and largely maintains the question–answer format. On the other hand, Larry King's background is in talk radio rather than traditional journalism, and he takes telephone calls from viewers during the show. The resulting program is thus a hybrid of the news interview and radio call-in genres.

A closer relative of the news interview is the press conference, which shares most of the news-interview attributes outlined above, but with a few important differences. Press conferences are held at the behest of the public figure rather than the news media, and involve large numbers of participating journalists instead of just one or two. The latter difference may not seem particularly significant, but the participation of numerous journalists fundamentally alters the conditions of interaction, reducing the opportunity of each journalist to ask follow-up questions, and thus making it easier for public figures to be less than fully responsive and to pursue their own agendas. Thus, while news interview questioning is often under the control of a single journalist who can counter self-serving or evasive responses, in press conferences the journalistic role is fragmented, making it somewhat less effective as an instrument of public accountability.

The news interview in disciplinary context

The research reported in this book falls within an interdisciplinary field of study concerning the news media in contemporary society. More specifically, it builds upon a long line of research dealing with Anglo-American newsmaking institutions and the social processes through which news is produced.³

³ For more comprehensive reviews of this extensive literature, see Schudson (1996), Shoemaker and Reese (1996), and Tuchman (1988).

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Although research of this sort now crosses disciplinary boundaries and includes important work in communication studies and political science, its deepest roots are within sociology. Max Weber ([1910] 1976), in a speech delivered at the first Congress of Sociologists meeting in Frankfurt, advanced what is perhaps the first fully developed proposal for research into the social organization of the press. Many of the questions Weber raised concerned the significance of the commercial basis of news organizations – the need for newspapers to serve both consumers and advertisers, the rise of newspaper trusts and monopolies, and the impact of all of this on news output. However, Weber also called attention to reporters' routine everyday practices – including, most notably, where and how they obtain the information that is subsequently relayed to the public as news.

This research agenda problematizes the social process by which news is constructed. In so doing, it runs contrary to the view of news offered by journalists themselves and perhaps assumed by many news consumers in their unreflective moments: that news is best explained as a more or less straightforward representation of “reality.” Journalists occasionally assert that news reflects reality pure and simple, but most offer the more sophisticated view that news is a judicious selection of the most newsworthy events of the day (Epstein 1973: 13–37; Gans 1979: 79–80). This view is founded on the assumption that journalists are autonomous professionals who are insulated from extraneous pressures and are trained to report news objectively in accordance with established standards of newsworthiness. This viewpoint has not held up well against research into the various practical constraints and institutional circumstances under which journalists actually operate.

Such research would take considerable time to develop. Although important work followed Weber's proposal, studies of newsmaking institutions and production processes remained few and far between from World War I through the 1950s. Work in this area all but died out altogether by the early 1960s, prompting Herbert Gans (1972) to comment on “the famine” in institutional media research. This state of affairs was due in part to the early dominance of the Columbia school of media studies associated with Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues. Their work was concerned mainly with the “effects” side of the media equation, conceived in social psychological terms as the

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impact of news on individuals' attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, because that work revealed media effects to be more modest and limited than had previously been assumed, it probably contributed to a general waning of academic interest in the news media.

Interest would re-emerge with a vengeance in the early 1970s. On both sides of the Atlantic, a plethora of monographs, edited collections, and articles in leading academic journals appeared within the span of a few years. This burst of attention was due, at least in part, to a growing suspicion that the theory of minimal media effects was premature and probably overstated. That theory appeared increasingly implausible in the face of the dramatic expansion of television as the dominant source of information and entertainment. The rise of television seemed, to many, to fill a void created by the declining influence of political parties in election campaigns and as mediators of political meaning, and it happened to coincide with an equally dramatic increase in social turbulence in the late 1960s and early 70s. In addition, the popular writings of Marshall McLuhan had a less direct but nonetheless tangible influence on the intellectual ferment of the time. Accordingly, researchers began to develop new ways of conceptualizing media effects,⁴ thus resurrecting – albeit cautiously and not without controversy – notions of media power.

Another reason for renewed interest in the news media was particular to the US context. Journalists came under sustained attack during the first Nixon administration when both President Nixon and Vice President Agnew, with the aid of a young speechwriter named Patrick Buchanan, accused them of widespread “liberal bias.” These well-publicized attacks appeared to gain support from an ostensibly systematic study of the 1968 presidential election (Efron 1971) which argued that network news broadcasts strongly favored liberal Democrat Hubert Humphrey over conservative Republican Richard Nixon.

The liberal bias thesis set an agenda for subsequent research in the USA, much of which refuted that thesis by directing attention to constraints on newsgathering that transcend the partisanship of individual reporters, constraints inherent in the bureaucratic, professional,

⁴ See, for example, discussions of agenda setting (McCombs and Shaw 1972), the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann 1974), and cultivation theory (Gerbner and Gross 1976).