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THE MEDIA INTERVIEW

Confession, Contest,
Conversation

On interviewing techniques

*Philip Bell and
Theo van Leeuwen*



PRESS

But questions do something else as well. When I ask, 'Why didn't John tell me?', I am not only asking for information, I am also giving information. I am stating that John didn't tell me. And this statement is not itself in question; it is assumed to be already agreed upon. All that is in question is the reason why John did not tell me. In fact the question states even more. It also implies that there is a reason. It says: 'John did not tell me for a reason. Please tell me that reason.' And if you answer, then you signal your agreement with my statement by the very fact of answering, even if, inwardly, you disagree: what you think, but do not express in word or deed, will not become part of social reality. You may of course hedge, and so express your unwillingness to answer. Or you may openly disagree, and challenge the premises of my question — 'But John did tell you' — in which case you are treating my question as a statement. This is more easily done when the questioner is your equal or lower in status than when the questioner has, for example, the power to pass or fail you in an exam, or to give you a job or withhold it from you.

However, not all questions contain the same amount of information. 'WH-questions' — also called 'open questions' and 'content questions'; the kind of questions which use interrogatives such as 'why', 'what', 'when', 'where', and 'how' — provide less information than yes/no questions, from which only the polarity, the 'yes' or 'no', is lacking. Among WH-questions, some lack a major element of the statement (the 'who' or the 'what'), others only an attendant circumstance (for example, the 'when' or the 'where'). In each case the form of the question itself encodes what information is to be provided in the answer. The question instructs the answerer to give a particular kind of answer, to complete the statement in a particular way.

This means that question and answer together form one statement — one statement produced by two people. It is not one person saying one thing and the other another thing, as would be the case if the answerer had expressed disagreement instead of answering; it is two people saying

gether. This is at the root of the creative question, its ability to open up new ideas, at the root of its manipulative power, its ability to make people say what they might not otherwise have chosen to say and to enforce consensus. Questioners always have four distinct advantages over answerers: (a) they can choose the topic; (b) they can determine what will be treated as 'already agreed upon', as taken-for-granted; (c) they can direct the answerer towards certain kinds of answer; and (d) they can compel the answerer to answer (at least in all but a very few situations).

They can compel the interviewee to answer because questions are more than incomplete statements. They also embody a demand. They say: 'tell me where' or 'tell me why' or 'tell me who'. And this demand goes hand in hand with the assumption that the answerer knows the answer. The question says: 'John didn't tell me for a reason. Please tell me that reason, because I am assuming that you know and I will be disappointed with you if you don't.' In our society, not to obey such a demand is difficult. Disclaimers ('Don't know', 'Haven't seen that movie') will disappoint the questioner and hamper the conversation or interview. A refusal to answer will be seen as uncooperative and unfriendly if the questioner and the answerer are each other's equals, as obstinate and rebellious if the questioner is in a position of power. This obligation to answer is instilled in us when we are young children. Interchanges like this one, between a mother and a child between 18 and 24 months old, are typical for our early socialisation, but do not occur in many other cultures:

MOTHER:	<i>What did you have for tea?</i>
CHILD:	(silence)
MOTHER:	<i>What did you have for tea, darling?</i>
CHILD:	Tea.
MOTHER:	<i>Yes, what did you have for tea?</i>
CHILD:	(silence)
MOTHER:	<i>Did you have an egg?</i>

CHILD: Egg.
 MOTHER: *And some toast?*
 CHILD: (silence)⁵

The reason for 'interviewing' the child like this is not only to find out what the child has eaten, or to teach it to say words, but also to teach it to answer . . . to teach it to engage in verbal exchange, in producing shared meanings together with its mother.

In each question, then, there are these two dimensions: the 'statement' dimension and the 'demand' dimension. The latter is, in some ways, primary. It encodes the obligation without which dialogue cannot exist, and thus enables the formation of shared statements, the moment of social semiosis. At the same time, however, questions will differ in the degree to which the 'demand' function overrides the 'statement' function, and this, in turn, will depend on the power relationship between the questioner and the answerer.

The Advantages of the Interviewer

We have discussed the advantages which rest with questioners: they can choose the topic; they can determine the premises; they can direct answerers to certain kinds of answer; and they can compel answerers to answer. The anthropologist E.N. Goody compared the question to the gift:

The gift, like the question, demands a return. Both may be seen as social devices for compelling interaction, for forcing two people to enter into a social exchange. Malinowski and Mauss emphasised that the critical feature of gift exchange is the delay between gift and return gift, during which time a debt relationship binds the two partners in unequal bonds. The giver is socially in credit, while the recipient is socially a debtor. The time-scale of a question-answer sequence is, on the contrary, collapsed

into the briefest of conversational pauses . . . Thus questioning binds two people in *immediate* reciprocity.⁶

In conversation, the advantage of the question is shared out equally. Each participant is now questioner, now answerer, now creditor, now debtor. In interviews, however, this is not the case. Interviewers, and only interviewers, ask the questions; interviewees, and only interviewees, give the answers. Interviewers receive, interviewees give. If this rule is broken, friction inevitably results. For the interviewer to give an answer is a refusal of the gift, hence a refusal of the social bond. For the interviewee to ask a question is a denial of the debt. Here is an excerpt from an Israeli television program in which the rules are broken.

INTERVIEWER: *Are you saying, Minister, that someone in television is trying to prevent you from stating your case?*

MINISTER: Let me explain. You recorded me. You conducted an interview. On Friday I received a message that for some reason it was all unsuitable for showing. Seems odd to me.

INTERVIEWER: *More precisely, your spokesman was informed in the morning, not in the afternoon.*

MINISTER: Are we having an interview or an argument? You don't have to mix in. Just ask your questions.

INTERVIEWER: *Are you saying that television has it in for you?*

MINISTER: God forbid, Elisha, don't identify yourself with television.

INTERVIEWER: *Although you seem to want to tell me how an interviewer should do his job, I still want to ask you: is it correct that one ought to mention that the message was delivered at seven in the morning? Is it correct that you refused to be interviewed? Is it correct that you made a speech repeating things that had already been said?*

MINISTER: It is not correct. As for my refusal to be interviewed: I don't want to be interviewed on the steps. It isn't efficient. Not in a hurry. The public has a right to know.

expressions of interest — “really”, “how extraordinary”, “hm hm” and the like — sound silly in the mouth of an interviewer’.¹²

Once again, the interviewee must do all the giving. Or to put the point more strongly: the interviewer possesses the power to control the interview. (S)he is not being ‘tested’, is not contingent, but given. There is, then, considerable asymmetry between the roles of interviewer and interviewee. Interviewers not only have the advantages of their monopoly on the question, they also have the advantages of advance planning. Interviewees not only have the disadvantage of their role as answerers, they also have the disadvantage of not being able to plan in advance even when they are, in fact, addressing a large audience. They also lack the listener support one usually receives when thinking on one’s feet in conversation. Further, the interviewer is often familiar to the audience, and is presented as having high professional prestige.

In emphasising this asymmetry between interviewer and interviewee, it should be remembered that it is the institutional context (in this case the modern-day mass-circulation media) that determines such relationships of power. Just as magistrates or priests gain their power from the institutional purpose which they serve, so too do radio and television interviewers. The interview is always conducted and presented within the context of a particular institution, in which power is implicit. This is not to imply that media interviews are very similar to legal interrogations or to confessions, but to emphasise that interviewers inhabit roles which are embedded in institutions. They are not merely talented or charismatic individuals whose skill determines their right to ask, rather than to answer, questions in public. Interviews involve more than the two parties who interact through language. They, at very least, involve an institutional context and particular classes of real or potential audiences (remember the origin of the word — those who listen). And these institutions and listeners, as we shall see throughout this book, are always present in subtle ways as the interaction between questioner and answerer

unfolds. Indeed, when we later distinguish different genres of media interview, it will be in relation to particular institutional contexts and the audience that these imply.

Interviews in Their Social Context: Other Practices

Some kinds of interviewees — business leaders, politicians, union officials — now have access to media training or ‘image making’ training as it is often called in the U.S.A. The training is usually given by ex-journalists, and the fees may run into thousands of dollars a day. This training can make interviews into a more equal kind of contest. Other interviewees, however, do not have the advantage of this kind of training. Paradoxically, they may find themselves exposed to a captive audience of perhaps hundreds of thousands of people, yet denied access to the linguistic means required to address such an audience in their own right, without an intermediary, because interviewers reserve these means for themselves. However, the advantages of the interviewer should be seen in the context of two other questions: (a) Does the interviewer have the ‘correct’ answer already in mind? and (b) Does the interviewer have the power to materially affect the life of the interviewee? These two factors, taken together, make it possible to distinguish a number of different ways in which question and answer exchanges are used in contemporary Western society. Both, it need hardly be added, relate to the interviewer’s institutionally derived power.

TESTS

The mother, in the example given earlier, has what she sees as the right answers already in mind. She in fact feeds them to the child. As E.N. Goody has observed, mothers ‘seem to use the questioning exchange as a way of telling the child what it wants and what it means’.¹³ She also has the power to affect the life of her child both psychologically and materially: she can withhold her affection, deny the child material luxuries or even necessities. Teachers,

similarly, want specific answers from their students. They are not seeking information; they seek to control what their students want and mean, or at least what they say they want and mean. And they, too, can affect the lives of those they question: failing exams can restrict the student's access to material rewards and social status.

It might be more appropriate to call these 'interviews' by the name 'tests'. In all of them, questioners have the power not only to ask questions, but also to give or withhold rewards, and this power is based on their knowledge of the 'right' answers. The questioners are doubly advantaged: by their role as interviewers, and by their material power. They use questions as a means of control. On the other hand, the ostensible aim of the test is ultimately to remove the inequality between the two participants. There is a return gift. The mother's knowledge of the right answers rests on her status as an adult and, if all is well, she aims to bring up her child to become an adult and, hence, an equal. The employment interview, to use another example, is a kind of initiation in which passing the test results in the interviewee's admission to the group represented by the interviewer or interviewers (which may, of course, have its internal inequalities).

Tests of this kind have a long history and can be found in many cultures. The historian Johan Huizinga gives many examples, amongst them the riddles the kings of Ancient India posed to their wise men and the tricky questions the marriageable girls of Vietnam address to their suitors. And he stresses how such tests were often important and festive events, and how much pleasure people took in them, even in cases where the wrong answer could cost the answerer his life.¹⁴ It is only when the reward of equality, the element of initiation, is not there, or not meaningful and desirable — when, for example, teachers no longer see their students as future equals, or when students no longer want to be like their teachers and no longer perceive the knowledge they are taught as relevant and desirable, or when education can no longer deliver the rewards it promises — that tests can become a meaningless ordeal

and/or an exercise of naked power. This is, to some extent, the situation imposed on the Aboriginal children to whom we referred earlier.

Educational 'tests' on the media include the television quiz show. The quiz seems to have retained something of the playfulness, the pleasure and the sense of a special, festive occasion that school exams have lost. On the other hand, as John Fiske has pointed out, the knowledge they test is the knowledge of the consumer, rather than knowledge that gives access to the class that asks the questions and to the means of producing the answers.¹⁵ The reward is commodities or money, not equality. In addition, mixed in with the test is an element of the lottery, which diminishes the achievement of the quiz participants. In quizzes, people's ability to take pleasure in tests is sidetracked to the dead end of the 'trivial pursuit'; their skill in answering questions does not lead to material or social benefits in the realm to which the ritual testing refers.

CONFESSIONS

Among the institutions licensed to allow professional interviews are psychiatry, social work, counselling and the social sciences. In contrast to the mother and the teacher, their questioners do not already know the answer when they ask their questions. On the other hand, they do have, or claim to have, knowledge which their interviewees do not share — expert professional knowledge about people, about their thoughts, their fears, their desires. Indeed, if the interviewees also had this knowledge, the proper conduct of such interviews would become impossible. Their conventions require inequality of expertise. They require that the interviewer, in the end, knows, better than the interviewees themselves, who they are, what they feel, what they want, what they need. This is so, not only when the interview takes place in the context of a social institution that deals with people as individuals (medical and psychiatric interviews, counselling sessions and so on), but also when it takes place in the context of a social institution that deals