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Wanted for Questioning: Interviewers on the Art and Craft of Interviewing

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Here are a couple of questions about asking questions:

If interviewing is central to journalism why are so many interviews so boring to watch?

If interviewing is a cornerstone skill in journalism, why do so many aspiring journalists find it so difficult to do?

Taking these one by one, so many interviews are boring to watch (or listen to) because so many of those who are interviewed have been trained — often by former journalists — in the ju-jitsu art of not answering questions while appearing to do so. Those who appear regularly in the news media, and you probably would be surprised by how few newsmakers occupy so much available airtime (think of prime ministers, business leaders, sports stars and celebrities), also simply become very practised at being interviewed, as David Speers says. He should know, because as political editor for the 24-hour television network *Sky News*, he interviews dozens of politicians each week:

> By the time they get into a ministerial role they've done so much of it that they're pretty good at it. They're the ones that get picked for those roles more and more.

As to why so many beginning journalists find the practice of interviewing so difficult, many don't realise until they do it that there is a presumption of rudeness at the heart of interviewing. Journalists are supposed to be the representative of the audience; they need to ask questions that most of us pussyfoot around. Many criticise journalists for asking someone who has just lost a relative in a bushfire, say, how do you feel? But does the audience want to know instead the bereaved's view of the falling stock market? No, they want a sense of what the person has experienced. They also want to be given that sense without the journalist inflicting any unnecessary suffering on the person. But they want it now because that's what news is. There is a number of moving parts in that equation and they're not all that malleable. That is one reason why beginning journalists find interviewing difficult, but there are others: you may have to ask someone a difficult question — Why did you embezzle money from your parents' company? — or you may need to test the assertions of experts on topics about which you are not expert. You may find it difficult to persuade people to talk; you'd be surprised how many people do not really welcome the journalist's call. Equally, you might find that once you've persuaded someone to talk you can have a hell of a time shutting them up, or at the least pushing the interview along a productive route.

Interviewing is central to good journalism, and this chapter will focus on political interviewing and, to a lesser extent, on interviewing big name writers. It is important to understand that this far from exhausts the range of interviews or the questions surrounding the practice. Look at Christopher Silvester's *The Penguin Book of Interviews* (1993), which is an anthology of interviews with the famous (Sigmund Freud, Marilyn Monroe) and infamous (Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin) that makes wonderfully entertaining, informative reading. It perfectly illustrates the interview's universal appeal — a sense of being there in the room with the famous one. The lengthy introduction illuminates the inter-

view's history. Then read Janet Malcolm's *The Journalist and the Murderer* (1990), whose opening sentence has become famous:

> Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. He is a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse.

You don't have to agree with Malcolm, but it is essential to think about the issue she raises. Is journalism a business transaction or a personal relationship? What if it is both? Interviews come in all shapes and sizes today, because of the sheer proliferation and variety of media available and because of the cul-de-sac down which many news interviews have driven. So, be alert to the many different ways in which people engage in the essential task of interviewing. Look at Andrew Denton's interviews for his *Enough Rope* television program (2003 to 2008), many of which are available on *YouTube*. They are by turns warm, funny, intimate and revealing. Or look at variations in what seems to be one of the stalest formats in television, the chat show, with James Corden's Carpool Karaoke. His spin with first lady Michelle Obama almost made the 2016 American presidential national conventions bearable.

For the 2015 New News conference three of the nation's leading broadcast interviewers — Emma Alberici of ABC's *Lateline*, broadcaster and author Ramona Koval and David Speers of *Sky News* — were interviewed about interviewing by journalism academic and, ah, interviewer, Andrew Dodd. The questions by Dodd and their (edited) answers are illuminating.

How important is the first question in an interview?

Ramona Koval: It's absolutely vital. It's the gateway to the experience you're going to have with the person. It will show them you're bona fides, it will make them either relax in a sense that

they think that they're with somebody who understands them, or who's done the reading or who knows the area, but it won't put them off, it won't be too aggressive, it will save the more difficult, prickly things perhaps for later.

David Speers: Sometimes there's just an obvious question that all of the viewers are dying to ask the polly, so you've got to start with that, right, that's a no-brainer. Sometimes, though, you've done your research and you just want them to state their position first before you then come in with what you've actually got in your back pocket.

Emma Alberici: Unfortunately, politicians are so trained within an inch of their life, they have their talking points and they don't care what the first, the second or the seventh question is, because they've got a message and they can mould that message to whichever question you ask. So the challenge is finding a question that won't suit their message, so we can get them off their script.

Ramona Koval: I haven't interviewed politicians for many years. I moved to interviewing artists and writers and poets because I just got completely sick of this weird dance that you would do.

Commentary: First questions are important, then, to show your bona fides as an interviewer, or to ensure you get various issues covered before asking your most difficult questions. Sometimes blunt opening questions are needed, especially with politicans. Remember how, immediately after the federal treasurer, Joe Hockey, delivered the first budget of the Abbott coalition government in 2014, Sarah Ferguson opened her interview on ABC television's *7.30 Program* with: 'It's a budget with a new tax, with levies, with co-payments. Is it liberating for a politician to decide electoral promises don't matter?' Asking whether an election promise has been dishonoured is one thing but asking whether a politician finds it liberating to do so is another. It presumes the promise was broken and ascribes motive to the politician's actions. It is not that far from the proverbial 'When did you stop beating

your wife?' question. Blunt questions may be necessary, in major stories and with resistant interviewees, to blast out admissions. Ferguson would argue a gentler approach would be easily dismissed or evaded by a politician. Her pugnacious approach elicited a revealing response, as the then treasurer flailed about. It was controversial and it was complained about, not just by Joe Hockey.

What do people want from an interview?

David Speers: I reckon viewers love a combative interview, or something unexpected in an interview. They either want to see the interviewer or the interviewee melt down. They're the famous interviews, aren't they? But what does a journalist want from an interview? Well, yes, you do want a bit of theatre, but I want information. I want to actually find something out from the interview and I've gone into that interview to find that out.

Emma Alberici: I'm always thinking, what does the person sitting down that night want to know from this person, and that's what guides my questions and what guides the way I interview a politician.

Commentary: In all journalism there are the twin imperatives of being informative and being entertaining. Neither should be forgotten. That both are functions of journalism is actually written into the preamble of the journalists' Code of Ethics. It is also important for journalists to keep in mind what audiences and readers want from them.

How much preparation should you do?

Ramona Koval: Well, over researching, reading everything, reading things that aren't even relevant to that particular conversation you're going to have; I mean, I was interviewing the world's best writers for a long time, and people like Gore Vidal and Norman Mailer or Susan Sontag or people who had a lot of books behind

them. And because I hadn't had a literary education, I always was anxious in case someone said, if you'd read my book, you'd know the answer to that. And that's what you never want to hear; you never want to hear the interviewee saying that you'd missed out on something. So it was a kind of over-preparedness anxiety about being shamed in public, but then I discovered that this was the best way to do the best kind of interviews, because you'd go in and you say, there's nothing you can do or say to me that will cast any doubt over my dedication and my interest in your work. And then everything else that goes after that, like bad behaviour on the part of the interviewee, is totally their problem, and not because of something that you have caused.

Emma Alberici: It is frustrating when you can't penetrate politicians' veneer and get to what it is that has driven them in this way, especially when their messages are inconsistent perhaps with someone else in the party, or with something they've said previously. Equally, we have to be careful that if we're going to press them on something, we need to be so incredibly well researched and exhaustibly fact checking things.

David Speers: And, to that point, I've done interviews where the person you're interviewing might say something at the start and you think, oh, hang on, I don't think that's right.

Emma Alberici: Yeah, but if I challenge them I'd better know.

David Speers: But I've actually gone online, Googled it while we're doing the interview, because a lot of what they're saying is really boring.

Emma Alberici: Well, see, I don't have that. I wish I had that.

David Speers: And found the answer and then you can come back and go, well, hang on, this is actually …

Andrew Dodd: There's a good example of that that I can think of, of your interview Emma with the Minister for Finance, Mathias Cormann, after the last budget. You said to him when Labor

announced a deficit of $18 billion, you called it a budget emergency, so what do you call a deficit that's now double that at $35 billion?

Emma Alberici: Unfortunate, is that what he said?

Andrew Dodd: He didn't even concede that.

Emma Alberici: It's all Labor's fault anyway.

Andrew Dodd: That's right, he didn't concede that it's unfortunate, he tried to shift the turf. And so it became a process of extraction to get an admission.

David Speers: Mathias Cormann, too, is the ultimate robot in politics.

Emma Alberici: He is one of the hardest people to interview, absolutely. Did you mean to say that, the terminator reference?

David Speers: Yeah.

Emma Alberici: But, that was a very interesting interview because I've spent 20 years as a business journalist, I'm wired to think very much about the budget from an economic perspective. I study budgets and by the time I sat there with Mathias Cormann, I could quote chapter and verse. If you want to call it a skirmish, which it sometimes is, I could match him because I knew what he was going to say, and I knew where it was wrong. And, in fact, that interview in particular is interesting on a number of fronts, because that was the interview that Malcolm Turnbull said — and Leigh Sales' interview with Joe Hockey and mine with Mathias that night, he quoted as 'very aggressive', both of them. He said we should be more forensic. And I thought, more forensic; I couldn't have been more forensic. And, in fact, as a result, I wrote a piece for *The Drum* that went through line by line why what I said was right. And I have since had coffee and lunch and dinner with Mathias Cormann and we still argue every single line item. The thing about Mathias is he'll come to it, and to his credit, he will never say no. He will always front up.

Commentary: It is clear from the three interviewees' statements that good preparation is essential for good interviewing. This is especially true when the interview is about a contested issue, and it is useful to see how nimbly David Speers has adapted to using Google as an instant fact-checking tool during interviews. It is equally important to re-emphasise here that the combative political interview is just one kind of interview. For interviews conducted during breaking news events you may well have little time to prepare. A clear head and an orderly approach to working through the who, what, when, where, how and why of the news is your best preparation here.

How do you deal with a combative interviewee?

Andrew Dodd: I want to throw one name at you: Wassim Doureihi is from the organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is an Islamic organisation in Sydney, and both of you, Emma and David, did an interview with him, because you wanted to get to the heart of whether Hizb ut-Tahrir, this Islamic organisation in Sydney, was prepared to condemn the activities of ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Both of you opened with questions along those lines. And he took this opportunity to say, well, wait on, I think before I answer anything, I want to give you a lecture on the history of the West and the Middle East and why the West is so imperialistic and how this is the problem. David, you gave him a little bit of space to do it but Emma, you didn't.

Emma Alberici: No, he got it out, he got it out a number of times.

Andrew Dodd: He got it out eventually, but you jumped on him immediately and said, no, wait on, you're here to answer questions.

Emma Alberici: And he would have had the opportunity to say those other things and that was my point, that I'm the interviewer, not you. I dictate the terms of this interview, not you. And, if you've come here to answer my questions, you answer my questions. If

you wanted a soap box on which to say whatever you wanted, then go somewhere else. But if you agree to do an interview, you agree to answer questions; you don't agree to just sit there and pretend to have an interest in what I'm trying to ask you but actually have no interest in answering. That interview went for 11 minutes. He would have had plenty of time to say everything he wanted to say, and I had questions that went to the things he wanted to talk about. But I wanted him to first deal with the issues that clearly people were exercised about. Still today, nobody really understands what Hizb ut-Tahrir is all about. And, unfortunately, for people who thought that interview was over the top, they ought to look at their website. The website calls for a caliphate in Australia. I wanted to get to those questions: What does that mean? What does that look like? Why? What's wrong with the way society works? And I had all those questions, so I was frustrated that we couldn't get to all that.

Ramona Koval: But you were completely correct to do that. And I saw that interview, and not enough people say that or ask the question many, many times; because that's your job to ask the question, and not to be too polite. It's not a tea party, you're not inviting people to your lounge room and they're your guests, you're actually there to do a job.

Andrew Dodd: David, you took a different approach. You gave him a little bit of space initially just to blow off steam and say what he had to say. And then there was a little less of that sort of attack thrust, cut and thrust.

David Speers: Yeah, look, that interview, I tried to drop all my own ideological views on these things and think, okay, well, these guys have some pretty extreme and uncomfortable views on things, but do they deserve to have a say, give their position on this topic? Yes. And then we can get into challenging it. So, I guess that's how I did it. It did get fairly aggressive towards the end of the interview and I don't know about you, but I came out of something like that

feeling a little — your adrenaline is certainly coursing at the end of something like that. And I wouldn't say it's an enjoyable interview to do, but I guess I was trying to at least allow him to say his fairly off views on things, but get that out, and then get into the contest.

Emma Alberici: At the end of my interview, the director kept laughing that he just wanted to keep cutting back to us, because we went to a package piece, and he and I were still going, and he said he wanted to just keep cutting back to us. But it became just a chat, and for him it was more theatre than it was for me, is what I discovered, because at the end of it he said to me, 'Look, if you really want answers to your questions, here's my number, give me a call.' And then he went and had his photo taken with B1 and B2 in the entrance of the ABC. I kid you not.

Commentary: These two interviews with Wassim Doureihi repay viewing alongside each other. They show there is more than one way to approach a difficult interview and that both approaches offer something that the other doesn't; likewise, you could argue both have shortcomings. Emma Alberici does her darndest to prevent Doureihi from propagandising but her interview quickly descended into a shouting match and never really moved beyond it. Speers allows Doureihi time and space to present his view, which enables the audience to first, hear it, and second, to see how Doureihi keeps coming back to prepared lines rather than actually answering Speers' questions. That is good, but Speers allows him to speak unchallenged for several minutes before reining him in, by which time it is possible at least some viewers would have switched stations.

Is there such a thing as a smart dumb question?

Andrew Dodd: David, what is metadata?

David Speers: Don't ask me that.

Andrew Dodd: The reason why I'm asking that is this is the wonderful question you very simply and genuinely put to George Brandis, and then we watched over the next few minutes a train wreck, where he started off so well with a beautiful analogy that had something to do with a letter.

David Speers: And an envelope.

Andrew Dodd: Yeah, the contents of the letter won't be metadata but the address on the envelope is. And then it all fell apart.

David Speers: It did. He sits down and that was the obvious question, and as soon as you got that first answer, you could tell he didn't know the definition or he hadn't worked out exactly what they were targeting.

Andrew Dodd: That's what interviewing often is, isn't it, it's being able to discern that crack; it's often an inflection in the voice, and it's a crack that says please open me up and have a look.

David Speers: That is exactly right. You see it, and you don't get it in every interview. In fact, I do them every day and it's pretty rare that you do. And then it's deciding, okay, do you forget everything else you've prepared here and dive into that crack or not, because I had a stack of questions on all sorts of things.

Andrew Dodd: But the other remarkable thing about that interview was that it disproved the rule that you can ask the same difficult question perhaps three or four times, after that you're really pushing. Do you feel the audience beginning to turn on you as the interviewer?

David Speers: Yep.

Andrew Dodd: But there you could just keep going. And the reason why you kept going is because you genuinely wanted to know what he was about.

David Speers: I was puzzled. And I think with that interview he didn't keep saying the same thing, he kept saying a slightly different contortion of the same thing. It's extraordinary how often,

even with politicians who have been there for a while, they'll spout the line, the prepared answer that we're talking about, but then if you scratch it a bit and go, well, okay, but if you do that does it mean this? And that's when the crack will open. So it's knowing how to scratch below that line.

Commentary: It is often said by journalism educators that there is no such thing as a dumb question, and Speers' now famous 'What is metadata' question would seem a perfect exemplar of that point. In many ways it is, but note what he was asking about, of whom and in what context. Lots of people still don't have a clear idea what metadata is, so it is a legitimate request for information. But it was asked of the Attorney-General, who really should have known as he was the one bringing into parliament legislation about metadata. But there are still plenty of dumb questions that, if you do your preparation, you won't need to ask. Don't front up to the after-match media conference of an AFL game and ask how the coach spells his name….

What if you only have time for one question?

Emma Alberici: I've worked in many situations where you only get one question. And, I spent five years at *A Current Affair*, and that used to be called the walk-in. So you're going to confront someone. I used to do a lot in the finance area, people had been dudded, investors in scams and whatever, and you finally track down the conman who's taken millions of dollars from everyone, and you know he's going to run away from you and you're going to get one question, if that.

Andrew Dodd: So the challenge is to compose the question?

Emma Alberici: Yeah. And, in another situation, I recently did a *Foreign Correspondent* story on Donald Trump, and I knew I was going to get one question. So I spent two weeks thinking about my one question. When you've only got one question, that is really hard.

Andrew Dodd: Remind us, what was it?

Emma Alberici: Well, I didn't get to ask it, because he got disinvited from the event that we were supposed to meet at.

Andrew Dodd: Now's your chance.

Emma Alberici: It was just after the blood out of the eyes and the blood out of everywhere comment, and I'd been listening to him speak for the whole week. I was there for the Cleveland debate and for all of that, and so we'd been listening to him all week saying very choice things, particularly about women and minorities and so on. So my question to him was going to be: aren't you confusing political correctness with old-fashioned good manners?

Andrew Dodd: Good question.

Emma Alberici: I don't suppose he was going to answer it though.

Commentary: The one question interview, like the blunt opening question, is about cutting to the core of an event or issue and wrapping that up in a question that has sufficient sting to elicit an unscripted answer. It is analogous to how the discipline imposed by having only 140 characters for *Twitter* has spawned the art of the online zinger.

How do you handle difficult interviewees?

Ramona Koval: I had a famous interview with Bret Easton Ellis who I was asked to interview at a writers' festival and I wasn't a great fan of his work. He's the author of *American Psycho*, the book that came in a plastic wrapping because it had stuff about cannibalism and all kinds of stuff and he was a bad boy of the 80s, early 90s. I thought, okay, it can't just be the 'What Ramona Koval likes to read' show, I need to extend myself a bit. So I read his books, which I thought were really awful, and then I was told I could ring him up at ten to two and we would discuss the gig before we were going to go in front of a big audience to do it and so it would be recorded live. And I rang him and we had this conversation and I

said, so what do you want to do, this is your event, people are here to see you. He said, I'm happy, what do you want to do? And I said, well, I've read all your work and it's a literary festival and they'll want to talk about writing and your books and all of that stuff, since it's a literary festival? He said, that would be fantastic, let's do that, absolutely. And then I thought, oh, well, he was very nice. And when we got to the set-up, he didn't turn up for the sound check and he arrived about two minutes to the hour, and I went up to him just to say hello and his people went, oh, please, please, please, we do not speak to Bret Easton Ellis before the performance. I went, what, I've already spoken to him. No, no, no, he has to centre himself and I thought, Jesus, I'm dealing with a prima donna kind of bad boy, what is that? So we get on stage and the sound guy has to mike him up in front of the whole audience because he hasn't been there and hasn't allowed it. And I thought, you're a bit of a dick actually, aren't you.

Andrew Dodd: Was that your first question?

Ramona Koval: No, it became my third question though, it turned out.

Emma Alberici: She eased him in.

Ramona Koval: So I ask him the first question. I introduced him, asked him the first question and he doesn't answer it at all. And he says, who's that singer that had Hodgkin's lymphoma at one point and a very attractive girl?

Andrew Dodd: Yes, Delta Goodrem.

Ramona Koval: He says, Delta Goodrem, God, she's hot. Delta Goodrem. I was in my hotel room and I thought, God, she's hot, Delta Goodrem. And I thought, you are not going to play with me.

Andrew Dodd: This is your Mark Latham moment.

Ramona Koval: It was. And then I thought, am I going to be the fall guy for this guy? And I thought, no, because actually we had a conversation beforehand and if he hadn't actually asked me to have

a conversation about what we were going to do, then I might have had a different attitude. I think I asked a second question, and I got the same kind of dismissal. And then I said, you don't really want to have a conversation with me, do you? What would you rather do, would you rather do a stand-up or something? And I just called him on it, I suppose.

Commentary: The story about Bret Easton Ellis is a salutary one, and it is worth reading the transcript of the whole interview. It underlines the importance of preparation, certainly, but also of confidence on the interviewer's part. Ramona Koval trusted her emotional response to Ellis' entitled, egocentric behaviour and, thinking as much of the audience who had paid to see Ellis as her own effrontery at his casual sexism, she called him out on it. The interview was the better for it even if Ellis didn't dramatically change his behaviour or offer any particularly interesting insights into his work.

ENDS.