

Becoming an Expert Interviewer – Part 2

Content lodges oftener in cottages than in palaces ...Proverb

Expert Questioners make tactical decisions on the quality and quantity of their world-view to impose on the interview. The more skilled you become in precision questioning, the more able you'll become in judging how much and what parts of 'you' are required to drive an interview towards achieving its strategic purpose. A major strategic purpose of an interview, as you know, is getting answers to the issue/s you've stated and unpacking the responses of your subject.

There will be occasions where the stated issue changes during the course of the interview. An interviewee may reveal something which is so compelling and interesting that you have to drop everything and pursue new lines of inquiry. In other words, you have to state a new issue on the run and formulate a cluster of questions as you proceed with your questioning. Being able to state issues on the run cuts down on the amount of time you have to spend acclimatising to the bombshell which has been dropped. It also prevents too much of 'you' encroaching on the interview.

The quantity and quality of 'you' imposed on an interview will have a bearing on its outcome. You've discovered that inappropriate presuppositions can represent the reading of too much of 'you' into your questions. Now you're going to build on that knowledge by exploring how certain types of intervention can further fuzz up the process and devalue the quality of information you elicit.

Remember, in any questioning environment, the most serious impediment to gaining high value information is you. You can't help but be part of a process of transference and counter-transference in your conversations and encounters with people. Transference, in the context of an interview, can be seen as the thoughts-feelings the interviewee develops towards you which may effect the interview. Counter-transference relates to the thoughts-feelings you may develop towards an interviewee which may cause you to choose to behave in a manner that compromises your outcomes. In media interviews there is a third consideration: *the thoughts-feelings which will be evoked in listeners, viewers, and readers, by you and your talent.*

It may be worth reminding yourself from time to time that an interview is a structured event which requires self-discipline. Timing and choice of what you communicate to your subject can be critical factors in achieving your interviewing objectives. Remember, whatever you say and do is also being communicated to your audience, who, naturally, will make certain judgements about you and your handling of the situation. All behaviour is said to be communication. The following questioning behaviours communicate 'something' about you to interviewees and audiences. As you review each example, pause to think about what it is that's being communicated:

parroting. A common habit of questioners who have lost their way in the interview: paraphrasing the previous answer, and often beginning with the word "so".

"So" is a fairly reliable indicator of the launch of a paraphrase into the proceedings. It's generally used in this context as a conjunction which helps organise a restatement of what has been said, as in "So *what you're saying is*" "So *therefore it will happen as you said*," "So, *you are serious about reform*".

At times it's appropriate to summarise an answer to clarify a point which may have been lost, or is unclear. Paraphrasing, as means of eliciting additional facts or information, may waste time,

before the issue, provoke negative responses from interviewees, or make you appear just plain dumb.

Example: Interviewee: "We're starting construction of the northern by-pass in January next year."
Interviewer: "So, you're going to go ahead with the northern by-pass?"

Rather than paraphrasing, the interviewer could, if the issue was contentious, ask a series of questions to elicit how the speaker intended to satisfy the concerns and objections of those affected. If it wasn't a burning issue, questions about outcomes, cost-benefit, impact on what was going to be by-passed etc., would be a more effective way of keeping the momentum of the interview going.

the logical leap. Often starts with "so" or "therefore". The interviewer draws inferences on, or make assumptions about, the preceding response and articulates what s/he thinks is the next logical step.

Logical leaps are fertile territory for fact-inference distortion and can be a sign of the interviewer wishing to enter a 'debate'. In these instances, the interviewer takes a piece of information, infers much more than the 'facts' would permit, and literally starts an argument with the interviewee..

Example: **Interviewee:** "I've decided that a consultative process is the best way to serve the interests of everyone concerned. I hope I can listen to all the parties involved in the forestry debate. I would very much like to work with these people, to look for options which will reflect high conservation values and enable an intelligent use of our forestry resources"
Interviewer: "So, therefore, you're going to stage another talkfest with these groups which have been at odds with each other for years. Surely an independent inquiry would yield better results?"

The interviewer infers that the "consultative process" represents a "talkfest". This can be seen as a fact-inference distortion which the speaker may well challenge. The interviewer goes on to read himself into the discussion by advocating an independent inquiry.

A better way to approach the interviewee's statement may be to 'unpack' the ideas represented in it. For example:

"please define what you mean by a consultative process?"
"Who will be consulting whom?"
"How did you decide on the consultative process?"
"what specific interests will it serve?"
"Everyone? Can you think of some whose interests may not be served?"
"How exactly do you propose to "work" with these people?" etc., etc.

The interviewee's statement contains an entire process. By unpacking the process, the interviewer may uncover the strengths, weaknesses, or gaps in the speaker's reasoning. In other words, the speaker, responding to precision questions, may unravel her own argument.

two prongs don't make it right. Asking two questions simultaneously. Interviewees and audiences are likely to have their thought-flows confused by this form of questioning. Astute interviewees may address both parts of a question, and, possibly, not to your liking.

Example: "To what extent are feral cats endangering our native species, and what is the Department of Agriculture doing to ensure survival of species that are endangered?"

The question has two distinct parts, both of which may deserve attention. By combining the two questions, the interviewer nullifies the first part of the question by presupposing some species are endangered. The following transcript of the response says it all:

"Well you obviously don't need me to answer the question for you, seeing that you've already made up your mind that species are endangered"

This form of questioning gives interviewees the opportunity to pick the easiest part of the question to answer, or the most recent/last thing they heard. The questions would be more effective if they were singly spaced. The answer to the first part of the question, in this case, will necessarily influence the second part of the question.

opposites don't attract. Questions which set up a response of the "best" and "worst", "first" and "last", "advantages" and "disadvantages" of something within the one question.

Simultaneous opposites often allow an interviewee to weigh the opposites according to personal favour. Interviewees regularly "forget" to answer one, or the other, part of the question.

Ask "What are the Advantages?" and follow up with "What are the disadvantages?" once the first question has been answered.

bogus truth questions. Question which seek definitive responses of true or false, right or wrong, good or bad, when the question cannot reasonably be constructed as such

1. "Is it 'right' that there should be disparities between male and female earnings?"
2. "Is it 'wrong' to expect the Australian taxpayer to foot the bill for tobacco-related diseases?"
3. "Isn't it 'true' that you're pushing this through the upper house before you lose your majority?"
4. "Would you say it's 'bad' economics to have a system which allows speculators to dictate the value of our currency?"
5. "What's the 'best' way to stay healthy?"

Philosopher, Donald Davidson, makes a point when he says "Nothing in the world, no object, no event, would be true or false if there were not thinking creatures". You may like to add the modification 'thinking-unthinking' to Davidson's observation. Many people assume that somewhere 'out there' reality, right, wrong, truth, fiction, and so on, just exists. A point worth considering is that people determine what so-called truth is, and they may determine it in a rather haphazard and puritanical fashion.

Bogus truth questions can be a reflection of the belief that there are rigid archetypes to measure things against. Without getting into questions of how we determine morality, phoney declaratives such as "It's *wrong* to shout at your children", and the endless litany of similarly absolutist prescriptions and proscriptions, generally reside in the domain of opinion. It's important, as a questioner, to know the difference between fact, reasoned judgement, and opinion. The distinctions can be illustrated as answers to the following types of questions:

- (a) *Facts and Truths:* Questions with only one valid answer.
- (b) *Reasoned Judgement:* Questions with better or worse answers, depending on the strength, logic, relevance, etc. of the response.
- (c) *Opinion:* Questions inviting expression of personal preferences.

A 'better' way of approaching the content of the above questions may be to excise the absolutist terminology:

1. "How do you explain the disparities between male and female wages?"
2. "In your opinion, who should pay the difference between tobacco-related health costs and taxes raised by tobacco?"
3. "What's the hurry with this legislation?"
4. "What, if anything, can be done to ensure the Australian dollar is not under-valued?"
5. "What are some of the things we can do to be healthier?"

A test you may like to make when framing questions is to ask yourself what kind of response you expect from the question. Are you expecting (a. 'facts'?), (b. a better or worse argument to be put?, or (c. an opinion? In the five examples cited above, words like right, wrong, true, bad, and best, can have no place in the question, **because** opinions and argument are solicited. Logically, opinions and argument reside outside the domain of so-called fact and truth, do they not?

rhetorical questions. Questions which do not need an answer like "Who knows!" or "I guess that's just one of life's little mysteries?" Add little substance to an interview. Unless you're saying them for effect, forget them.

non-questions. Questions which ask nothing from an interviewee usually get nothing.

Example: "That was a wonderful characterisation of Lady Bracknell."

The above types of questions may arouse modest approval from the interviewee and little more in the way of information.

grandstanding questions. These are questions that just about pre-suppose everything. There are multiple reasons behind this particular form of information impoverishing approach. Often it materialises from a seemingly desperate need of the interviewer to feel or project 'equality' with the person being interviewed. It's frequently born out of the desire by interviewers to cast impressions of 'expert status': the humility, and the power, of the genuine inquirer being imprudently exchanged for that of 'big noting'.

Ego's may be large in the media, and they can also be fragile. However, this trend of setting one's-self up as a specialist to satisfy some inner need to be recognised, can rob the encounter of the richness of available responses and debase your status as a Master Questioner. Take the following example:

"Peter, you really went hard for the ball in the last quarter. You outmanoeuvred the opposition, you marked well, your ball passing skills were outstanding, and your every kick found just the right distance. You won the game for St. Kilda. What's your response?"

You call that a question? Basically, this can be seen as an attempt by the interviewer to interview himself. The player is surplus to requirements as there's little left for him to say. What insights would an audience gain on the rough and tumble of the contest and the player's skill and experience on the ground? Such questions generally elicit lame, occasionally inarticulate, replies which tell the audience nothing more than it already knows. Now, what would happen if the interviewer reclaimed his identity of genuine inquirer, and asked some questions?

"Peter, how were you able to be so energetic in the last quarter?"

"What tactics did you adopt to outmanoeuvre your opposite number?"

“What did you do differently in the last quarter to keep the ball away from him?”

“What turned your kicks into goals in the final quarter ?”

While grandstanding questions can be a favourite of sports interviewers, they're also popular with personality, or profile, interviewers. For reasons known only to themselves, they seem to be compelled to disgorge the entire contents of their pre-interview research into the laps of their subjects.

himbo/bimbo questions. Have you ever heard questions like:

1. “Now, tell me about your book”
2. “What's it like being a movie star?”
3. “Are you happy to have won lotto?”
4. “What're your impressions of Australia?” (The subject having been in the country for eight hours)
5. “Which breast?” (To a survivor of a radical mastectomy)

Poorly thought-out questions get you nowhere. They can make you look silly and unprepared. They may invoke the scorn of interviewees, particularly high profile subjects who have endured much at the hands of inexperienced questioners. The following transcriptions will give you an indication of the risks of such folly:

1. “Ah, you haven't read or researched the book. Shall I read it to you....cover to cover?”
2. “Well, one of the worst things about it is having to answer inane questions all the time and still be nice, when I wanna rip the person's throat out”
3. “Yes”
4. “You have the strangest toilets. Just half a pint of water at the bottom of the bowl. Man, in the States, our bowls are like swimming pools.”
5. “I'm sorry.....I don't believe this!”

oratorical questions. Questions longer than three sentences are ‘speeches’. If you wish to imitate Cicero, join a debating society. Research indicates that people begin to go into information overload by the fourth sentence. The longer the question, the more likely it will be misunderstood or misinterpreted.

cliché questions. Close cousins to the himbo/bimbo genus: the types of questions which have been perennially asked, generally, to ill effect:

Examples: “How do you feel?”
“What have you been doing?”
“Who were the main influences on your early music?”
“Tell us about your latest project?”
“What is the price of fame?”

Cliché questions are somewhat like mind viruses. Inexperienced interviewers hear them posed by other ‘inexperienced’ interviewers: they take hold in the new hosts, who, in turn infect others.

Possibly one of the most common and potentially offensive of the mixed fodder of cliché questions is “How do you feel?” This question has been hurled inaptly at people as diverse as a mother whose children were being held hostage by a crazed gunman to a sporting heroine who lost a 1500 metre race by a micro-second. While the motives of the questioners may have been to elicit some hint of the inner turmoil being experienced by the subjects, their techniques were at best or least naive. So, if it was ethically acceptable, what questions could you ask in place of the cliché question?

To the mother of the hostages, providing such an interview was ethical to conduct:

(In deep rapport)

"Can you recall exactly what happened?"

"Can you share the thoughts that race through your mind as you think about this terrible situation?"

"Can you say what signs are giving you hope?"

"What have the police told you?"

To the vanquished sporting heroine:

(In deep rapport)

"Let's go back to five metres before the finishing line. Can you recount those last seconds?"

"And now, you're at the finishing line, and you notice the tape is not there for you to claim, what's going through your mind?"

You may have become aware of the use of the conversational postulate "can" in four of the questions above. In interviews where the emotional quotients are high, it's preferable to use questions which do not directly demand the information. The word "can" operates at the unconscious level in these instances. The subject is required to process the idea of being able to reveal the information, rather than entertaining the choice of revealing it or not.

Notice the last question employs the present tense throughout the question. This is an effective way of inducing recall in subjects. The use of concrete language further assists in creating pictures in the subject's mind, from which the athlete can construct words.

Who needs clichés when there's a cornucopia of penetrating and incisive questions you can select from to win powerfully evocative responses from even the most tender of situations?

surprise attacks. Verbal assaults which are deliberately crafted to unsettle, goad, and strike fear in interviewees. Some 'hard nosed' journalists actually describe this behaviour as a 'technique'. Surprise attacks can be studio based, part of the method of television 'walk ins', and are as common as muck in most communication environments where abuse of power goes unchallenged.

Originally, surprise attacks were reserved for cracking the hardest nuts: a last resort attempt to elicit honest responses from highly experienced media performers. Increasingly, in so-called television current affairs, they're being directed towards those who may have little skill in fending off such assaults: petty rip-off merchants, small fry, people who hold 'idiosyncratic' viewpoints, and so on.

Judgemental, confrontationist, and bullying questioning methods can be seen as cowardly substitutes for legitimate inquisitional technique. There are times, particularly in investigative journalism, where subjects need to be confronted with probing questions and evidence of wrongdoing, but even then, one need not take on the identity of a KGB interrogator. As you already may have come to realise, a well designed questioning routine will produce better, more revealing, answers than pugilists in make-up who clothe their questions in phoney righteousness.

'telling' questions. Questions which tell rather than ask. Telling questions are a favourite with hate radio comperes and journalists who allow their 'advocacy' to impede a freer flow of information. The pre-suppositions contained in the questions are fashioned in a way to elicit pre-determined responses. They are popular with practitioners of 'mono-logical' debate in interviews, and where the interviewer weighs in as part of the argument or discussion.

Monological thinking, as reflected in questions, generally pre-supposes that there is only one perspective or context in which the stated question can be explored:

"Do you agree that big companies should start paying their fair share of taxes before the Government increases the taxes of ordinary Australian wage and salary earners?"

"Given that the cause of structural unemployment is the high cost of wages in this country, what can be done to reduce the wages component of production?"

"Is it simply to satisfy the carnivorous appetites of so-called current affairs programs for cheap dramatic reality at any price?"

In each of the above examples the questioners can be observed to steer the interviews towards a set of answers already formed in their minds. They are 'telling' questions in the sense that they set up a frame of reference and attempt to restrict the interviewees reasoning to a predetermined point of view - the questioners. Propaganda theorists would argue that questioning behaviour like the above fulfils most of the criteria for propaganda. Do you wonder what that may 'tell' an interviewee and audience about the interviewer?

Another thing you may have noticed about the above questions is that they appear to be one-dimensional. This is what's meant by 'mono-logical'. The questions indicate that the questioner may not know how to rationally go about settling a particular issue with questions which take into account a multiple perspective. Telling questions are usually monological in the thinking which supports them. An easy way to grasp the concept is to take a practical example:

Imagine you've walked into a clothing shop and picked up a blue shirt which attracted your attention. You look at, and feel, the shirt, and begin to ask yourself a series of question about it. Will it go with other articles of clothing in your wardrobe? Does it have double stitching in places where it will be stressed? Are the arms long enough? Can it be tucked in as well as worn out? Are the buttons sturdily attached? How much does it cost?

So far, the process has been mono-logical because all questions are based on the one shirt. To make it multi-logical you would need to broaden the range and types of questions. How does this compare with other styles of blue shirts on the rack? How do prices and value for money compare? What other shirts are on offer at other shops? What other colours are available? What is driving my preference for blue? What likes and dislikes am I manifesting? Are shirts the only option? What about knitted tops? And so on.

Most people can think multi-logically about shirts, can they not? But what about ideas, beliefs, etc.? Try the above questioning process on something you firmly believe in, or something someone else firmly believes in, and observe closely what happens.

Mono-logical questions almost always tend to restrict a conversation or interview to one dimension. Astute listeners and interviewees will notice how 'Telling' questions are loaded with a particular prejudice and may question your integrity or grasp of the issue. As a Master Questioner, you may need to choose to become comfortable with the idea of exploring questions at issue from a multiple perspective, just like you can with shirts! When you do this, you may notice how it generates a heat and an intensity as you struggle to free up the flow of information from your interviewee. Puts a different spin on "asking the hard questions", doesn't it?"

the professional narcissist. A highly idiosyncratic style of questioning that, at some time or other, contains many of the 'offences' mentioned in this and the previous essays.

This style is used by some of the more knowledgeable and high profile interviewers in infotainment current affairs. It's particularly prevalent in political and issue-based interviewing. The questions are generally well researched. The interviewers are tenacious, sometimes

incisive and can impose a force of will on their questioning which often overcomes resistance in difficult interviewees. They generally play the issue 'hard' and, given time, can demonstrate a rare capacity to entrap sleight-of-mouth adepts in their own webs of deception.

High profile interviewers of this ilk distinguish themselves in yet another way: a practice which can be seen to introduce a counter-force to their interviews and one which may seriously compromise the quality of their outcomes. Amongst their peers in journalism, few can be heard asking *longer* questions. Brevity is rarely a discernible element of their style.

When analysed, their questions can contain many of the 'transgressions' lesser mortals may be well advised to avoid: qualifying phrases, historical quotes and references, long propositions, elliptical clauses, asides, logical leaps, mind reads, a muddle of pre-suppositions, multiple parts to the question, two-value logi, and so on. It's a heavily caffeinated style which is being copied by the newer generation of reporters and presenters.

Professional Narcissists tend to set themselves up as commentators and as equals, or superior, to the talent they are interviewing. This can have the effect of provoking arguments with the talent during interviews. When interviews turn into arguments and the interviewer is seen to become part of the argument, the interviewer has lost any claim s/he may have had to objectivity and impartiality. Arguments are predicated on winning and losing and by the very nature of the argument process the participants must demonstrate a 'partiality' to specific ideas and points of view.