

## Becoming an Expert Interviewer – Part 3

### caffeine overdoses

Too much caffeine in the human body can create disease. Too much caffeine in questions can produce dis-ease in both interviewees and your listeners and viewers. At some level, both parties can *read* your biases, prejudices and assumptions. In other words, people can unconsciously tell when you're imposing your view of the world on the interview encounter. Their response may well be to feel, at some level, that you have dispensed with so-called objectivity. Audiences generally have an expectation that you will be "fair" in your dealings with interviewees and subject material. They may not be able to articulate precisely how you're being unfair, but it's reasonable to assume they will 'feel' uneasy when you consistently adulterate your questions and reports with the "paraphernalia of your own prejudices".

Caffeinated questions go to the heart of many of the accusations of bias and unfair reporting levelled at the electronic media. Consumer distrust registered in survey after survey on the credibility and integrity of western news media can also be part-explained by the trend of news organisations towards the caffeination of stories and interviews by those who gather and conduct them.

### doing 'objectivity' daily

Many news and current affairs organisations vigorously assert their independence. Historically, the sub-text of the independence argument has been that information is less contaminated, less influenced by vested interests, less tainted by advocacy. In other words, independent news, current affairs, and program content, it's claimed, is 'purer' and contains fewer *presuppositions*, *assumptions*, *judgements*, *distortions*, and *generalisations*.

A question you may find interesting to ask yourself about your own work is "Does the product I am producing reinforce the above claim?" To answer the question you need to measure your output against what are fairly universal standards used to determine impartiality and even-handedness. Those standards will help you to determine if you are supporting your organisation's avowed role to broadcast or publish without fear or favour.

An organisation's editorial policies, if indeed there are any, impose an editorial responsibility on every individual involved in the broadcast of news, current affairs and information. This implies the need for self-discipline and a personal capacity for introspection. Are you engaging in enough vigorous questioning of your own practices and methods to be able to answer questions about bias and even-handedness with any degree of accuracy?

If you were to take any story or interview you produced, for example, how would it measure up against the template below?

- Is the story fragmented or unconnected to the bigger picture?
- Is the issue clearly and precisely stated?
- Is the information on which the reasoning is based verifiable?
- Is any information being presented as a fact, or is it simply an inference or conclusion drawn by other sources? Is there factual support for the inferences made?
- What values are underpinning the approach to this story? Can the values be supported?
- Are there other values, sets of beliefs, and cultural positions, that the above values can be compared with? Are comparisons being made?

- What kind of visual images, symbols, etc., is the story built around? Are they congruent with the story being told?
- Are questions:
  - clear?
  - Can they be answered with facts, reasoned judgement, or are they confused with opinions.
  - Are they leading questions? Where are they leading to?
  - Are they intended to steer the interview, or the interviewees response, in a certain direction? Which direction?
  - Are follow-up questions in a logical sequence?
  - What assumptions and pre-suppositions are contained in the questions?
- Is one example, or person, being projected on to the “whole”?
- Is two-value logic being applied? Does the story fall into the trap of right/wrong, either/or, up/down, liberal/conservative acceptable/unacceptable, improvement/decline etc?
- Does it operate on the misconception that there are only “both” sides of the story?
- Does the story canvass options other than the obvious polemics?

Questions, such as the above, have to be answered by the individuals who report, interview and present programs. No organisation is an homogenous mass. It's made up of people like you who apply skills and knowledge to the job of informing the public hopefully without fear or favour. Individual reporters, producers, interviewers and presenters have a responsibility to ensure that their organisation's stated mission of reportage without fear or favour is upheld. For this task you need skills which go beyond those normally identified by the mass media.

### thinking filters

One of the easiest ways to attract accusations of bias is to get involved in the argument. There is a disturbing trend in journalism of people becoming active participants in interviews, of arguing the toss, of introducing their opinions into the process, and filtering the responses of interviewees through their world-views. This is called perceptual bias and the worst examples can be heard on hate radio and some current affairs shows. It contrasts with the more even-handed practice of ‘unpacking’ a subject's opinions and judgements, comparing them with other opinions and judgements, and seeking to discover the underlying motives, vested interests, beliefs, and values, which inform the subject's opinions.

The skill of ‘unpacking’ is well suited to organisations that proclaim an ‘independent’ role in news gathering. It can provide many of the ingredients we imagine are required to generate compelling listening and viewing. The psychology of ‘unpacking’ can stimulate suspense, heat, energy, evoke a fairly broad range of human emotions and it's tailor-made for the independent, unbiased reporting and coverage of issues and events. A way to understand unpacking is by analogy. If your luggage has been searched in a customs hall at an airport you would have noticed that customs officers go about searching your effects in a systematic way:

- they remove the contents of your case layer by layer, carefully observing you for any non verbal responses
- they examine closely anything suspicious during the process of removing the layers
- they ask you questions to confirm ownership of items
- they listen carefully to your responses as they continue with the process
- they eventually get down to your underwear

Unpacking during the interview process is much the same. Depending on time available, you may choose to unpack a small or large suitcase. Unpacking in interviews involves making many distinctions,

and bringing to the interview a body of knowledge and skills suitable for the task: just as customs officers do when they are examining luggage for contraband. Customs officers ask seemingly innocuous questions to elicit a range of responses they can scan to determine if you fit the profile for a body search. So can interviewers. Customs officers are real, real curious. A competent customs officer *suspends judgement* while engaging in the process of searching for things that don't fit, or are unusual. So can interviewers.

So, what kinds of distinctions can you make when unpacking an interviewee? Below are a series of thinking filters (distinctions) you can put information through as part of your process of getting to the underwear:

### **clarity**

If a statement or issue is "fuzzy", then any ensuing discussion or analysis will be based on false or incomplete understanding of the point in question.

Until a point has been clearly expressed, you will not be able to determine its relevancy or accuracy. Clarify precisely what it *is* that's being said by asking the following types of questions:

- ⇒ *Could you explain what you precisely mean?*
- ⇒ *Could you tell me how specifically your point addresses the issue?*
- ⇒ *Can you offer an example which characterises the way you see this?*

Ensure that responses given to your questions **address the issues you raise**. Listen carefully to ensure the respondent doesn't 1) miss the point, 2) cloud the issue by addressing a question you didn't ask, 3) answers in a general or abstract way which removes clarity from the discussion.

When you analyse, or give out, information make sure you are clear and unambiguous.

Ask questions which elicit clarity, and which encourage, or demand, specificity

*"What specifically needs to be done to raise the national competency level in numeracy skills?"*

Not:

*"How are we going to tackle the deficiencies in education?"*

### **accuracy**

A response or statement can be crystal clear but be totally devoid of accuracy.

The statement *"Everyone has some skeleton rattling around in their closet"* is extremely clear, but is it accurate? To guide the speaker towards a broader outlook and promote greater accuracy, you could ask *"Can you think of someone who doesn't, and is open about their life?"*

When you hear statements which include assumptions or generalisations about people or things that don't offer factual support, ask yourself, and the person making the statement, questions like:

- ⇒ *How do you know that is true?*
- ⇒ *Everyone? Can that be verified?*

- ⇒ *Where are the facts to support that inference?*
- ⇒ *Where did those figures come from and who compiled them?*
- ⇒ *Explain what you mean*

## **precision**

An assertion can be clear and accurate but lack precision.

The statement “*Nicholas is a farmer*” is both clear and accurate, but lacks detail that could be important. For example:

1. Nicholas may own a five acre hobby farm and grow peaches
2. he may be a businessman who has a farm manager
3. he may farm a property that has been in the family for three generations
4. he may have farmed for 50 years but lost his farm in a foreclosure

Questions of precision force people to be specific, to provide detail, to add flesh to their argument, proposition, or statement.

Often when people express opinions (rather than reasoned judgement) they are short on detail, and frequently express something they simply have “faith” in.

Whenever you sense someone is making bald statements, or has left out detail, ask questions along the following lines:

- ⇒ *Can you be more specific?*
- ⇒ *What details would we need to know to make an accurate assessment*

## **relevance**

A statement can be clear, accurate, and precise, but not relevant to the question at issue.

Questions of relevance force us to be more discriminating. Review the following example:

*Interviewer: “You said that your objection to cloning people is that it interferes with nature. Identical twins are, indisputably, clones. How can you apply the anti-nature argument when nature itself provides examples of cloning?”*

*Church Minister: “What cloning is all about is the dignity of the human race. It is undignified to be a clone of someone who is fifty years older than you”*

Notice the minister introduces an idea not relevant to the question put, and maybe irrelevant to the entire subject.

Ask the following types of questions to determine relevance:

- ⇒ *How is that related to the question?*
- ⇒ *Explain the connection between what you said and the issue/subject*
- ⇒ *What specific bearing does that have on the point being discussed?*
- ⇒ *How specifically is that relevant to the issue at hand?*

⇒ *How does that address the point just made?*

When you are organising your own propositions and ideas, test them by putting them through the Relevance filter.

### **depth**

You can have clarity, accuracy, precision, and relevancy in a statement, but it can still only scratch the surface of an issue, and therefore lack depth.

For example you could compile a report on the titillating details of a Senator's travel allowance rorts and still be accused of superficiality if you didn't analyse the institution that harbours cheats and allows travel rorts to occur.

Analyse the following statement, and determine what is superficial about it:

*"We have to return to solid family values because the breakdown of the family unit is responsible for many of the social problems we are faced with today"*

This statement is not only lacking in depth, but is imprecise, of questionable relevance, and may not be accurate. Let's simply test it for depth by asking questions like:

⇒ *How does that solution tackle the highly complex issues involved?*

⇒ *How does that response take into account the diverse and significant factors which contribute to the problems?*

⇒ *What other things are left out of your answer that need to be taken into account?*

⇒ *How would you overcome the problems caused by your solution?*

If you really wanted to tie down the interviewee, you could ask:

⇒ *The solid family values of when? Could you name a specific date or decade?*

Notice that questions like the above require the interviewee to be time specific. Many interviewees get away with outrageously simplistic solutions to complex problems because the interviewer fails to challenge on lack of depth. In the above example the speaker could be alluding to the family values of 1642 when most families supported the burning of witches. Or maybe 1952 when most families supported the adopting out of illegitimate children and the birch for juvenile offenders? Can you see the importance of challenging subjects who avoid depth in favour of slick, simplistic, solutions?

Whenever you sense an issue or question is being treated superficially, and fails to take into account the complexities involved, challenge it.

And, it goes without saying that your statements, inferences, opinions, presuppositions and *questions* should also be run through the Depth filter. You could look silly otherwise, could you not?

### **breadth**

An argument can be clear, accurate, precise, relevant, and have depth, but be deficient in breadth. In other words, it can simply express one of many points of view.

Remember, there is no such thing as both sides of the story. The world, contrary to the opinions of many, is not divided into conservative/socialist, right/wrong, pro/con, etc., etc.. There may be an entire index of well thought-out opinions between any two poles.

Apply the following kinds of question to filter for breadth:

- ⇒ *What other ways of looking at this issue are there?*
- ⇒ *What other points of view could help me gain a deeper understanding*
- ⇒ *If I place myself in the shoes of those affected by, and involved in, this issue, what perspectives would I discover?*
- ⇒ *What is stopping the speaker, or me, from exploring other points of view?*
- ⇒ *If the speaker, or me, killed all the sacred cows, how would we see it then?*
- ⇒ *How could have the options been narrowed down to the illogical choice of either/or?*

## **logic**

Questions of logic make us consider how a whole order of thought is put together, how it all adds up, and how it makes “sense”.

Filter responses, ideas, positions, and claims through the following:

- ⇒ *How does this make sense?*
- ⇒ *Do all the points/facts raised mutually support each other*
- ⇒ *Are there any gaps in the line of reasoning?*
- ⇒ *Are there any points/facts which are contradictory?*
- ⇒ *Does everything follow?*

## **Summary**

The seven filters you have reviewed are important members of a family of thinking tools you can use to develop a more agile and disciplined approach to questioning.

You have a choice of how you may use the thinking filters. You can “use” them on other people to inflate your intellectual vanity or arrogance, if you want. You can apply them to others as part of a process of learning and training your own mind. You can “adopt” them as friends to help you evaluate and critically analyse your own thoughts beliefs, values, and attitudes and develop a richer model of the world. And you can apply them to “test” the values, beliefs, judgements and opinions of all you encounter.

The above filters allow you to *responsibly* and impartially put information you gather from interviewees through a process of fair-minded evaluation. So what can we mean by ‘responsible’? In short, responsible treatment of information involves questions: questions of precision, logic, depth, breadth, context, relevance, clarity, and so on.

Exercising responsibility in the treatment of information means placing data, so called facts and truths, opinion and reason through a process of thoughtful and independent evaluation. It allows you to unpack another’s opinions without becoming part of the argument. Responsible treatment of information also

involves an understanding of how we often react to particular elements in our language like Pavlov's dogs. It involves operating on principles of uncertainty and challenges us not to oversimplify. It demands we question commonly accepted ways of thinking about, and doing, things. It encourages us make distinctions between evidence and interpretation, and so on.

The role of a responsible gatherer and disseminator of raw information involves putting information through professional filters before it's filed as a story. It also implies that the filterer will have a certain competence to deal with the techniques, ruses and manipulations of those who seek to use the media for their own ends. The seven filters above provide a sample of how it can be done.

On reviewing the above, you may notice that questions are at the very heart of any process which aims to establish the bona fide's of a given piece of information and its source. Questions, not answers, not statements, not argument, are the starting point for any story. They are stock-in-trade for rigorous and fair-minded inquiry.