



# “Minding the Gap”: Reflections on Media Practice & Theory

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**Do Journalists know how to listen and should they be taught how to? Some thoughts on contemporary interviewing practices.**

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Journalists and media academics can have notoriously divergent perspectives on what news-making *is* or *should be* about. Both camps, though, share a fondness for machine-age metaphors. Theoretical accounts, however elegantly they are hedged, often leave the impression that the news industry is a giant engine that churns out standardized product to predetermined templates<sup>1</sup>. Hacks, too, often subscribe to a similar viewpoint and grumble about the narrowness of editorial desires and the strange sense that many stories come to feel just the same, even if names and locations change.

If so, and the news *industry* is best understood as a voracious, data-mining contraption through which information is converted into money, then it is worth looking at the machine's separate components. The output stage - the writing and editing mechanisms - are given plenty of attention by theorists and practitioners alike. The input stage - interviewing - is given almost none at all. If interviews are by analogy the conduits through which information is sucked into the engine, they are seen as simple pipes, worthy of little discussion.

In reality, this could not be less true: interviews are highly structured encounters which require considerable skill if they are to be done well.

In the twelve months leading up to this seminar, I have been working on a joint project between the Media School at Bournemouth University and the Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma, looking at how journalists might be trained to work more effectively around traumatic stress<sup>2</sup>. Much of that work has focused on interviewing in situations that some

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<sup>1</sup> This viewpoint is widely found in approaches inspired by media ethnography. Bourdieu in his book on television journalism probably gives the most merciless and entertaining version (Bourdieu, 1998). Hannerz offers a more sympathetic discussion of the global news business and the impact writing genres have on correspondents (Hannerz, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> More details about the Emotions and Journalism research project can be found at <http://www.emotionsandjournalism.org>

might classify as extreme, for example, in cases where violence, abuse, mental illness or bereavement are present. Most interviews do not stray into such demanding areas, but I would suggest looking at such difficult situations helps one to understand any kind of interviewing.

I have found it useful to divide the journalists and educators to whom I have been talking into two schematic groups: generalists who do a mixture of reporting with a predominantly local, political or business flavor, and trauma specialists who concentrate on the more emotionally challenging end of the spectrum.

I have to come to wonder whether there might be a subtle but important difference between how the two groups conceptualise the interview process. This is just a ballon d'essai, floated up as an aid to discussion. Maybe something of the difference lies in this suggestion: generalists tend to *listen for information* and *ask questions that prompt for emotion*, whereas the specialists do the reverse - they *listen for emotion* and *ask questions designed to prompt for information*.

Perhaps a concrete example can help to explain that slightly gnomic formulation. This is an interview with Paula Platt, whose 14-year-old daughter was shot dead in Nottingham in 2004. It is from Radio 4's *PM* programme.

**Studio presenter, throw to recorded interview:**

“Now also today Danielle’s mother Paula Platt has given an interview talking about her daughter’s death and in it she remembered the moment her daughter’s friends told her about the shooting and how she went to find her little girl.”

**Paula Platt:**

“When I got to her, she was lying on the ground. I knelt down beside her [*sharp out-rush of breath*] and she kept closing her eyes and I kept telling her to stay awake and keep conscious. And she said that she felt that she was dying. And I said no, you are not going to die, just stay awake, just stay awake. I honestly believed that she’d be okay... though... You don’t ever dream that you’ll send your kids out and that they are not going to come back. I just believed that she’d be OK. I was just scared...”

**Interviewer:**

“It is only a few days since she died can you believe yet that is really happening to you and your family?”

**Paula Platt:**

“No... No... No... [*sounds distant*] It is the sort of thing you see on TV and you feel for other people. You never ever dream that it is going to be in your own home. Never. She had not done anything to anyone. A fourteen-year-old girl... [*sighs*]”

**Interviewer:**

[*with marked emphasis*] “Your girl!”

**Paula Platt:**

“My girl. My baby”

**Interviewer:**

“In the light of what that has happened to Danielle and to all your family, how do you fee about the streets of Nottingham. Is Nottingham a safe place?”

**Paula Platt:**

[*Sharp intake of breath, loud distracted tutting sound*] In all that has happened, I used to say that if you keep away from trouble, it'll keep away from you. But at the moment I don't know how true that is. I would never say now that the area I live in is a safe place. No, It is not. And I have got other children there. My nine-year-old son is asking if he is going to die as well. What nine-year-child needs to be worried about that sort of thing?

**Interviewer:**

What will you say to him?

**Paula Platt:**

We have reassured him. That he is not going to... We have to reassure him. We are not sure ourselves. We can never be sure now, we can never say never.

**Interviewer:** Do you think that gun crime in Nottingham is out of control [*Platt sighs again*] as we have said? .... [Interview continues for several more minutes]

When I played the clip during the training day, feedback from the group was mixed.

Some thought that it was a robust and effective piece. Certainly, gun crime is an important story, the material is powerful, and the detail about the nine-year-old son gives an affecting entry into understanding the family's situation.

The majority, though, expressed unease. There was something in the tone of the piece that engendered a manipulative quality. Why interject the reinforcement, “your girl!”, in such a response-demanding tone unless the intention was to precipitate a particular emotional reaction? The interview lacks the flow of a conversation, but stop and starts, repeatedly

jerking back to an agenda imposed by the interviewer. Several times she tries to cast Platt as both victim and criminological pundit by inviting her to participate in a political discourse on the growth of gun crime. Perhaps not the best thing when interviewing somebody so fresh in her grief.

My own feeling is that the interviewer is lucky to have got the responses she did, and is saved by the generosity of Platt. Another interviewee might have become angry or even broken down. In saying that, I am not singling out the interviewer for blame or suggesting that there is some easy option. Quite the reverse: I want to drive home the point that this is all very difficult. The excerpt illustrates what can happen when a standard *generalist* approach to interviewing is used in a traumatic context<sup>3</sup>. The interviewer is listening for information (it sounds as if she has a pre-set questions in the forefront of her mind) and is asking questions that prompt for emotion.

So what might a specialist, who thinks the other way around, have attempted? To start, he or she would have been more attempted to disappear into the background and steer the conversation less obtrusively. A specialist would avoid precipitating the interviewee into any emotional state that might cloud his or her ability to advance a narrative.

John Sawatsky - a Canadian investigative journalist and one of the few practitioner-theorists to have given detailed attention to interviewing - likes to use the metaphor of looking through a window. For him, in a perfect interview, one should have an unimpeded view across the lake. If the onlooker becomes aware of the dirt on the glass, that is the journalist, then the interview is not working. The all-important editorial shaping of the conversation happens through the journalist asking simple, but precise, information-eliciting questions that demand factual answers and invite vivid description. Usually, Sawatsky suggests, there is no need to ask “how do you feel?” type questions. If interviewees feel properly listened to, and are given a safe space into which they can move, how they feel will emerge naturally in what they say. Deliberately harvesting

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<sup>3</sup> This clip was brought to my attention by Ros Toynbee and Mark Brayne, two trauma specialists who have run training sessions at the BBC and use it as a ‘how not’ to example.

emotion often makes an interviewer sound false<sup>4</sup>.

In the Platt interview the insight into the condition of her son emerges at the end of a distracted train of thoughts. It does not feel prompted by the question, which focuses primarily on Nottingham and not on Platt's family. In all likelihood, asking the more direct "how has this affected your family?" as a second question would have drawn out the same detail and might have made it easier for the mother to talk, by virtue of casting the attention away from her grief to the practical problems associated with caring for her other children.

Many of the specialists in trauma journalism I talked to have learnt to do something psychology professionals variously call 'active', 'empathic' or 'non-judgmental' listening. The idea is that bad listening, overly extractive questioning, badly disguised impatience at not hearing the answer one wants, inability to digest the traumatic content of what one is hearing, or guilt for asking the question in the first place, can all poison the channel of communication between interviewee and interviewer. When interviewees feel they are not being properly listened to they are liable to clam up, drift off topic or become agitated in some other way.

In contrast, when one listens actively to somebody's distress, something paradoxical often occurs: the traumatic content of the material becomes easier for the listener to process. A virtuous circle is enacted in which both parties are likely to feel more protected: the listener finds it easier to listen and consequently progressively more space opens up into which the interviewee can move. Interestingly, if this dynamic is engaged, often the factual detail comes more sharply into relief.

The sorts of emotional micro-processes which form the interior world of the interview are not widely discussed by either practitioners or theorists. There is also a general playing down of the powerful sense of ritual participation which ordinary people can experience when they first find themselves the object of public attention. Questions of ethics are

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<sup>4</sup> For an introduction to Sawatsky in the *American Journalism Review*, go to: <http://www.ajr.org/article.asp?id=676>

framed in contractual and representational terms. The concentration is on the *before* and *after*. Did the subject give informed consent? What use was made of the information divulged?

For the most part *generalists* see interviewing itself as a simple set of procedural skills, best mastered quickly at the very beginning of one's professional career. Like riding a bike, once learnt it does not need continuing development<sup>5</sup>. Currently medical and psychology professionals and the police all receive explicit training in active listening, as well in other aspects of trauma awareness. As yet, only a handful of journalists are given, or avail themselves of, the same opportunity.

Quite why the interview itself remains such a black box is an interesting and complicated question whose answer probably lies largely in the political economy of the news industry. The presentational world and workplace ideology of the *generalist* journalist is a lot like that of the businessman. They may spend much of their time interviewing similar professionals, politicians, business people and assorted PR functionaries who have all been fully initiated into a shared understanding of what constitutes appropriate public discourse. In business meetings data are meant to be more the object of inquiry than the subject of personal emotion.

We are now as a society more interested than ever in talking about how we feel. Giddens has called this the 'affective turn' (Giddens 1992). And there is some evidence that audiences do not trust people who are not capable of communicating themselves emotionally. But this shift does not entail that writing about emotion has become more sophisticated. Just as journalists have a tendency to construct copy in a formulaic way out of bits of data: facts, quotes and snippets of local colour, one might argue that there is a tendency to reduce emotional processes to reified objects, that serve as simple shorthand

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<sup>5</sup> All journalism colleges believe they have a responsibility to instruct their students in basic interviewing tradecraft, pre-deployment. It does not tend to go into the complexities outlined here.

formulations. Pictures of tears and banner headlines that pulsate with words like: ‘DECEIVED’, ‘RAGE’ and ‘LOATHING’. This is most obvious in the tabloids, but similar tendencies are evident in the broadsheets.

This can put the *generalist* in a strange bind. The journalist is being asked to go out and collect fragments of other people’s emotional experience, at the same time as working in an environment that downgrades the relevance of his or her own emotional processes.

That might not be such an issue when doing straightforward business or political interviews, but it can be when the *generalist* is working on a story with traumatic content, as almost every journalist will at some stage of their career. The *specialist*, in comparison, has absorbed a paradox: he or she has learnt that a journalist’s personal feelings are more likely to prove problematic in the reporting of a story, if they are active but left unexamined. The *generalist* does not necessarily discover this, not being tested by the same volume of emotionally difficult material.

The commodification of emotion is not just endemic in journalism. In a sense we all do it. The anthropologist Victor Turner suggested that industrial societies prefer to do things in the indicative mood, and pre-industrial in the subjunctive (Turner 1982). We prefer facts and other pieces of information that we can easily weigh and categorise. Emotions are suspect because they are slippery and hard to define. ‘If you can’t kick it, it is not real’. The same habit of trying to convert human experience into bone-dry artifacts of thought is still very present in the social sciences. Part of that is the inevitable by-product of converting lived experience into dried ink. But maybe more active listening, a focus on people’s particular narratives and a reluctance to attach simplistic tags to emotional reactions can help counter any sense that journalism is written by machines.

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