



Tips and tricks for radio interviews

(from RAWIK Radio Aus- und Weiterbildung im Interkulturellen Kontext and Near FM training)

Interview is a skill that needs to be developed to be a successful broadcast journalist. It is through interview that you gather information on specific issues and it is a more interesting and entertaining way to present it to your audience. Research is essential for a good and relevant interview; it will help you to find the right questions to get the relevant information. Remember, even when you know the answers your audience doesn't, so you need to ask the questions again.

The Techniques used for interviewing depend on who is the person who would be interviewed, the length of time allocated to it, whether is live or pre-recorded and what time of programme is for.

Your role as an interviewer is to be a facilitator between the interviewee and the audience. It is the interviewee and what they have to say what is important, it is their voice that the audience want to hear.

An interview is not more than an informative and prepared conversation. It is important that the interviewer listens to what the interviewee is saying, to avoid repetitions, but also to pose relevant questions that would help to clarify what is being said.

In a radio interview, the important thing is to encourage the chosen interviewee to give interesting answers. This means being aware from the beginning that a public radio interview is completely different from a research interview or a private conversation.

A radio interview is always intended for a third party, namely the invisible audience. In order for the interview to be a success, it is most important to keep the topic of the interview in mind and to listen very closely during the interview. Only then is it possible to decide whether a question has been answered sufficiently, or whether additional questions are needed.

Good preparation provides confidence, so that the interviewer can fully engage with the interviewee during the interview. The following thoughts on interview preparation and on the interview itself should help to ensure a good interview!

For an interview with an expert, a participant or an affected person, it makes sense to inform the listeners about the topic to be discussed, or to obtain one or more opinions or emotional inputs on the issue.

Some interviews are solely for research purposes. Original sound from other interviews can be included and broadcast within the item or show. To do this, use an audio editing programme to extract the interviewee's answers which need to integrate into the finished item. Some interviews can be broadcast simply as an interview, with questions and the interviewee's answers.

Live or pre-produced?

How should the interview be recorded? Should it take place "live" in the radio studio? The advantages of a live interview are that it makes a show very lively and also saves time.

Or is the interview to be recorded and edited before it is broadcast? Every pre-produced interview should be edited. It is not necessary to cut out every "er...", but the interview must have a clear start and a clear end. Questions and answers which are not related to the topic can be cut out. In any case, it makes sense to plan a pre-produced interview just like a live one. Otherwise, the subsequent editing takes up a lot of time.

Preparing an interview

Selecting a topic: What is the topic? From which perspective is it to be approached? Choosing a topic for an interview usually requires more precise information. The quickest and best way to obtain this is with the help of people who know the topic well. They can often also recommend an interviewee.

When preparing an interview, ask yourself the following questions:

- Why does the topic interest me and my listeners?
- What is unclear to me?
- What contradictions are there?
- What positions are there?
- Narrowing down the topic: Which aspect do I find the most important / topical?

It helps to discuss this with other people! When looking at controversial issues, it makes sense to familiarise yourself with the "opposing" arguments. Are there other sources of information that could be used?

Choosing the interviewee: Who is to be interviewed?

- Who can speak competently about the chosen topic?
- Who has which perspectives on the topic?
- Which aspects are in the foreground: an overview, professional competence, everyday experience, evaluations, or personal experiences?
- If the topic is controversial: Which side is the interviewee on?
- What is particularly interesting about this interviewee?

In an interview, men and women should have an equal say.

Choosing the guest determines the perspective on the topic. Possible criteria include the following:

- In what language is the interview to be conducted?

- How can translation be organised?
- Who is invited by other media?
- Should people who are otherwise not often interviewed have a say?
- What aspect of the topic or which side of a controversy is to be emphasised?
- What is more important: providing an overview, or learning about personal experience?

How to deal with interviewees

Anyone who wants to learn something should treat their interviewees with respect and openness. First, introduce yourself, giving your own name and that of the broadcaster which you are researching for. Then explain what the interview is about. Excerpts from interviews should be selected carefully and must not, by any means, be used to ridicule the interviewee.

There are people who like to be interviewed, such as politicians, musicians, press spokespersons, etc. They have interview experience and are well-spoken. Here, there is a risk of losing control over the interview. This can render it impossible to ask any questions. If interviewees try to avoid answering questions, it is essential to press them. There are also people who do not want to be interviewed. Everyone's right to decline an interview is to be respected. It can be mentioned on the radio that person X declined to be interviewed. All the while, remain polite, because perhaps at some stage, under different circumstances, an interview with this very same person may come about after all.

There are people who wish to remain anonymous when being interviewed. This is well within their rights and is to be respected.

Interviewing styles

- The aggressive style (play an example and ask the participants what would be their reaction if someone would address them in that manner). The interviewee will be in the defensive, and they might be resentful and refuse to provide answers to the questions.
- The Polite but firm style (play an example). A clear answer is required on a controversial issue. This is the style usually used with politicians.
- Critical Style: Clear answers and information are required. This is recommended for positions of responsibility and experts.
- The softly-softly approach (play an example). Recommended when dealing with sensitive issues and/or nervous interviewees, also consider that this approach is only possible for lengthy interviews.
- Building up to the leading question. Recommended for lengthy interview on difficult or controversial issues.
- Plugging straight with the main question (for vox-pops or soundbites)

Choosing the right place for the interview

The chosen location of an interview can have a major influence on the interview itself.

- In the studio
 - The advantage of studio interviews is that the interviewer already knows the studio, maybe has a technical assistant, and can concentrate entirely on the interview. It is soundproof and the recording quality is good.
 - It can be a disadvantage if the interviewee feels intimidated by the studio equipment. The interviewer tries to establish a friendly atmosphere!
- On the telephone
 - Telephone interviews are quick, uncomplicated, and directly from the scene of action.
 - The disadvantage is that they are often impersonal and of relatively poor quality. It is very important that the interviewer switches off their microphone while the interviewee speaks, so as to improve the recording quality. Every pre-produced telephone interview should be edited.
- On the interviewee's premises
 - The interviewee feels more comfortable and is less inhibited, although background noise makes recording more difficult. With a short test recording, the interviewer can check the quality, so as to then eliminate any background noise and disturbances!
 - The interview must be conducted in the most quiet place possible.

Making contact: inviting the interviewee and clarifying the facts

Gather all necessary information on the interviewee, including: full name, title / role and how they would like to be addressed.

The interviewer informs the interviewee about themselves and what they have planned:

- Their name, name of the broadcaster and show, topics / key points and estimated length of the interview.
- Arrangement of a suitable place and time for the interview.

The journalist's main goal when making contact is to convince the person to take part in the planned interview. When making contact, the journalist should not allow themselves to be brushed aside lightly: an interview is not "less important" just because it is for community radio! The journalist tries to reach the interviewee by telephone, writes them an email and gets in touch again if there is no response!

When making contact for the first time, the journalist checks whether the chosen topic really suits the chosen guest. However, if the interviewee starts to speak at length, the journalist interrupts them politely and says that they wish to question them in this regard later, during the interview! The journalist does not, by any means, reveal their questions just yet, as this detracts from the liveliness of the interview later on.

DOs and DON'Ts when asking questions

- The six basic questions (who, when, where, what, how and why) should be included in the interview. The most difficult of these, but often also the most fascinating, is certainly the "why" question.
- The journalist avoids closed questions which lead to a yes or no answer, unless specifically trying to obtain such an answer in order to nail down an interviewee who is perhaps avoiding answering their questions.
- Double questions are to be avoided. For instance: "Does the company have fewer orders or have you streamlined?" The answer will inevitably be unclear, e.g. "Neither." or "A bit of both." Double questions also pre-empt the answer.

The journalist thinks about when to ask which question and structures their interview. A rousing introductory question is important, so as to motivate the listeners to stay tuned for the whole interview.

- The journalist is confident enough to ask further questions if they do not understand something that the interviewee says.
- The journalist tries to encourage the interviewee to speak vividly and asks for examples.

Equipment checklist: do the recorder and microphone work?

The following routine equipment checks are to be conducted before every interview:

- Check that everything is there: microphone, cables, batteries / power adapter, headphones, sound carriers. Does the recorder have enough free memory space?
- Do the microphone and headphones work?
- Practice using the equipment (connecting microphone and headphones, handling the microphone and changing batteries).
- Make a test recording and listen to it: What is the optimal microphone distance and recording level? (Every device's display is different in combination with each microphone).

Get your radio station's technician to give you an explanation of the recorder that you are using).

The optimal recording level is between minus three and zero decibels. Never go above zero!

Anything recorded too quietly will later sound noisy when brought up to the right volume. If the recording volume is too high, the recording sounds distorted and thus cannot be used. When recording the interview with the recorder, it makes sense to start recording already during the "warm-up talk". This is the easiest way to find the right recording level.

The most important thing now is to put aside all the preparation and, with the topic of the interview in mind, to engage completely with the guest.

Conducting the interview

- A good interview atmosphere is important: Show interest! Encourage inexperienced guests and establish an atmosphere in which they feel comfortable.

- The journalist takes responsibility for consciously guiding the interview – for their listeners!
- The journalist addresses their counterpart personally and treats them with respect.
- Do not begin sentences with "hmmm" or "yesss" (this sounds like commentary and creates distance, even if said because of confusion or uncertainty).
- Ask about specific events and experiences.
- Do not hand over the microphone!
- During a telephone interview, switch off your own microphone while the interviewee is answering.
- The journalist listens closely and addresses what is said, rather than simply adhering to their prepared questions.
- They ask further questions if they do not understand something or if the guest fails to answer a question (confrontation can be important, particularly with guests who are used to the press, e.g. politicians).
- The journalist does not shy away from asking a question if they already know the answer: after all, they are asking on behalf of the listeners and may want the guest to explain something in their own words.

Ending the interview

Towards the end of the interview, the journalist considers whether they have been able to ask all of the questions that they see as important and whether they can use the interviewee's answers.

With guests who have little experience with interviews, it can be a good idea to ask them to summarise or to give a closing sentence at the end. This gives them a chance to mention anything important which was previously forgotten in all the excitement, or else they can give a final evaluation.

In interviews with professional speakers, such as press representatives etc., it is better to leave out a closing question of this kind, as otherwise the interviewee may repeat points from the interview, or bore the listeners with truisms and closing phrases.

Thanking the guest for the interview and mentioning their name once again is always a good ending. (Listener's remark: it is also a good idea to repeat the name now and then during the interview because maybe the start was missed and it is not always clear who is speaking at the moment).

Interview checklist

In the studio

- Ask interviewees to be in the studio well in advance of programme (1/2 hour)
- Give instructions of how to reach the station
- Check microphones, headphones are working
- Make sure there is water available
- Keep the name of interviewee in large writing

Outside the studio

- Always confirm time the day before
- Make sure interview will take place in a quiet place
- Check your recording equipment (batteries, microphone, tape or md...)

On the phone

- Phone line quality (Land line reliability vs. Mobile phone possible connection problems)
- Check quality
- Ask to make sure line will not be on use at interview time
- Check time and availability
- Phone five minutes before interview to re-check everything is OK
- Can you make the phone call or need help. If going from a live interview directly to the phone interview, consider to play a track of music or ask someone to organise the phone call for you

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