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Radio Interviews:

A Changing Art

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“If you want to drop a word in the ear of the nation, then this is the programme in which to do it.”

Brian Redhead, former presenter of
BBC Radio 4's Today programme

In the Spring of 2007, after he announced that he would be standing down as Prime Minister but before he named the day, Tony Blair gave a pair of interviews to the Today programme. The first was to concentrate on domestic policy, the second on foreign affairs. They were certainly significant; in some ways, I think, remarkable.

They were not billed as valedictory, but the sense that they were hung in the air. They were broadcast live - the first in slightly strange circumstances from a GP's surgery in Tony Blair's constituency, the second from an ornate room in Downing St - and they were quite long, nearly an hour in total. I remember any number of small details about the way we prepared; the gentle arm-wrestling with John Humphrys, who was doing the interviews, about content and tone; the hours of agonising about how we could even begin to make sense of ten years of a premiership. But I remember most clearly that, at the end of both interviews, Tony Blair needed to change his shirt. The intense mental focus he devoted to the interviews was hard physical effort. I had never seen that before, and I have never seen it since.

People who knew Tony Blair would probably not have been surprised. They might have recognised something coherent in his approach to politics in general and interviews in particular: he wanted to make an argument, and to win it. There are other ways of going about the job - you can pitch your case to the persuaded and take a chance with the rest - but, whether you liked it or not, this was Blair's style. That the mental effort needed to win was physically demanding was clearly old

news. There were spare shirts on hand, as I recall.

If Tony Blair was determined to make an argument, we made one too. We did more than try to understand and clarify his account of a decade in power, we offered an alternative account and questioned his motives (all, of course, we would say, on behalf of our listeners). So although we approached those interviews in a way that we hoped would be precise, well thought-through, and revealing, in tone they were adversarial. Some of the papers, in fact, saw them through that prism, and wrote them up as encounters between two old adversaries, Blair and Humphrys.

In adopting that tone, the interviews were part of a solid tradition in political interviewing, which, at that point, had been present or dominant in Britain for just short of 50 years. Over the past decade that approach has come under consistent pressure on a number of grounds. Does it work? And even if it does, is it corrosive of trust in politics; part of the slew of reasons why everything from turnout at general elections to respect for people in public life has subsided?

If, day after day, we are persisting in a way of interviewing which is ineffective; and if, week after week, we are melting the institutional glue, which holds this country together, then we have a problem. How do we respond to the charge?

This chapter will try to answer that question. It is about interviews and how we conduct them. But at the same time, it is about more than just that; it is about how we in the media relate to politicians and to people in public life generally, and the values that both sides bring to that relationship.

For the mainstream media, getting this right is one of the big challenges of our time. If traditional programmes - Today, and many others - are going to remain important in a radically-altered media world, then holding the powerful to account will be a key plank in the case we make for our own survival. We need public support for our role in holding to account, but we also need public support for the way we go about it.

Shifting relationships

Like most important transitions in broadcasting, the shift in the relationship between the media and politicians from deferential to adversarial was not the product of one man or one

moment, but man and moment came together powerfully and symbolically when Robin Day interviewed Harold Macmillan in February 1958. At the time, the *Daily Express* called it “the most vigorous cross-examination a prime minister has been subjected to in public”, but with the benefit of half a century of hindsight it has taken on a wider significance. It was the moment when the broadcast interview became part of the political process in the UK.

Three years after that pivotal interview, Robin Day had become a substantial enough figure for someone to ask him to codify what he had so recently invented. He did it in ten points, ending with a warning flourish to a wannabe successor:

“He should remember that a television interviewer is not employed as a debater, prosecutor, inquisitor, psychiatrist, or third-degree expert, but as a journalist seeking information on behalf of the viewer.”

(Day, 1990)

We could debate among ourselves how closely Robin Day followed his own tenth commandment - despite his warning that interviewers should not think of themselves as inquisitors, his autobiography was called ‘*Grand Inquisitor*’, and he lies in a grave inscribed with those two words - but his call to the next generation was clear. They should inquire, not argue.

In defining the job in that way, Robin Day was drawing on his own experience as a barrister. The interplay between the law and politics, the law and journalism, has helped to shape both parliament and the media over the years, and now the chief agent of change in the relationship between the two was using the etiquette of the courtroom as a point of reference for the new rules of the television studio.

It is tempting to think of the arrival of Robin Day on television as a disruptive moment, a break with the past, which set a tone that has endured ever since. And certainly - more in the way that he practised the interview rather than preached about it - that view seems to hold water. The ripples from that interview with Harold Macmillan are still washing through radio and television studios today.

Over the same period - no surprise - the practice of the law has been evolving. And since it served as an important refer-

ence point for Robin Day half a century ago, it may still have something useful to tell us.

A legal approach to journalistic practice

Broadcast interviewing and courtroom advocacy are different crafts but, thanks partly to Robin Day, they share a common footing; both lawyers and interviewers in the UK operate in adversarial systems. Definitions vary but one of the most succinct comes from the New Zealand Law Commission, that ‘an adversarial system is based on mistrust in the reliability of the prosecution evidence.’ Today listeners and Newsnight viewers will recognise that stance.

The alternative legal approach, which is often urged on us as interviewers, is inquisitorial; the system which operates widely across Europe and much of the rest of the world. Under it, a judge or examining magistrate sets out to establish the key facts of a case before it reaches court. For our purposes its significance is that material, which is brought to court is regarded as having been verified before it gets there. There are not the same disputes in court about the value or the veracity of evidence.

Within our shared adversarial tradition in the UK, the legal profession has one distinct advantage over journalism. Every day, in courts throughout the country, small groups of randomly-selected members of the public tell barristers whether or not their approach to advocacy is persuasive. Juries deliver verdicts, and advocacy changes as a result. The feedback to broadcasters is neither so quick nor so precise.

The long-run trend that many senior figures in the law identify is away from a grandiose, showboating style (crudely, think Rumpole) to something quieter and lower key. The evidence seems to show that the new approach is simply more effective.

One of the proponents and theorists of the new wave is Matthew Ryder, a QC at Matrix Chambers, described by the leading legal directory in 2010 as “a master of the trial process.” One of his current projects is to make the case for what he calls Invisible Advocacy:

“It is a style of advocacy that seeks to minimise the voice or presence of the advocate. The critical points appear to present themselves.

The outcome of invisible advocacy should feel obvious; a matter of inevitability; or something to which the audience has been led by its own deductive reasoning.

The ultimate goal of invisible advocacy is that the listener feels he or she has been persuaded by the quality of the argument and not by the quality of the advocate.” (Chambers & Partners, 2010)

As a way of doing business, it demands more self-conscious humility than lawyers, generally, are famous for displaying (or broadcasters, you might think). But the rationale, in the courts at least, seems rounded and astute. Importantly, it is not a plea to switch from an adversarial system to an inquisitorial one - that option is not open to lawyers practising in the UK - but for a more subtle and forensic adversarial form:

“First, and foremost, a modern or post-modern audience is well aware of the adversarial ‘show’. They see - or think they can see - the levers, pulleys and showmanship of how an advocate tries to win a case. As a result both judges and juries observe it, but view it almost as outsiders.

To use a slightly inept analogy, lawyers often think that they are like Derren Brown, using skilful techniques to twist and persuade the jury just as Derren Brown fools his victims. In reality, if the lawyer is Derren Brown, the jury is not his victim but his audience. They are impressed by the techniques but see it as a show, not as reality.

In other words, modern juries and judges have largely disconnected the techniques that give entertainment as part of the ‘show’ from the information that they need to reach their decision. Once an advocate realises that a modern audience will see his work as a triumph of technique but, partly for that very reason, will not necessarily be persuaded by it, it becomes obvious that the best advocacy needs to be invisible.

What is more, neither judges nor juries like to think they have been persuaded by lawyers. They pride themselves on being able to see past the lawyers’ techniques. What they are looking for is the meat of the argument, not the showmanship of the advocate. Ultimately, the noticeable presence of the lawyer is a distraction or - even worse - an irritant and an obstacle to

reaching the right answer. Everyone's lives would be easier if the lawyer disappeared."

The lazy thing to do at this point would be to swap 'lawyer' for 'presenter', 'jury' for 'audience', and declare a new paradigm. But the broadcast studio is not a court - different pressures and responsibilities apply - and some options available to barristers may not be open to us. There is undeniably, however, one serious intellectual challenge in all this: if a new style of advocacy is proving more effective in front of juries made up of the same men and women who watch and listen to BBC programmes, we would be failing in our duty if we did not consider the possibility that it might work better for us too.

A varied landscape

The courts might get more useful and meaningful real-time data on what works and what does not, and change accordingly, but it would be a mistake to think of broadcasters as static and monolithic. Interviewers within the same organisation, within the same programme, on the same day, use very different approaches and techniques. Any decent presenter should be able to call on the full range of techniques and approaches at our disposal.

Within that varied landscape, there is a constant; most days, to quote Matthew Ryder, we put on a largely 'adversarial show', and on the relatively-rare occasions when we think it is merited, an aggressive one. The invisible advocate's silent reprimand would be simple; the showiness does not work any more, we should change.

In fact, over time, practice is changing. Some less well-regarded tradecraft is in decline. What the former BBC Director General, John Birt, called the "rabbit punch" (Birt, 1995) - the question without substance, designed mostly to destabilise - is thrown less often than it used to be (although politicians may still need to know the price of a pint of milk to prove that they inhabit the 'real world').

Better advocacy is certainly something we should aim for; invisibility, I suspect not. One of the reasons audiences invest trust in high-profile interviewers is because, in some sense, they think they know them; they have a sense of their person-

alities. A broadcasting presence as powerful as that is often built on an element of showmanship. There is theatre in what we do, and there always has been.

Before we agree to the proposition that our interviews are failing too often, we need a yardstick of success. What constitutes an effective interview? Here again, lawyers have an advantage over journalists. In court, the only thing that really matters is what works. For a barrister with an eye on his career an elegantly-argued lost case might not be a disaster, but for the defendant outcome is everything.

Broadcasting is a muddier business, and judging the success or failure of an interview is complex and subjective. Listeners are capable of telling us one thing and doing another. They might inform us (and mean it) that all they really want is for light to be shed, but tests can show that they pay closer attention to the radio, and enjoy it more, when an interview generates heat.

All the same, we can probably agree some benchmarks:

We want to elicit information; hopefully the information the audience is looking for. It is inexcusable if an interview does not manage this to some extent.

Our ambition, particularly in political interviews, is to hold to account; to challenge, interrogate, and represent other points of view.

We might look for a moment of revelation; a surprising insight into policy, politics, or character. Anybody hoping this will happen often is likely to be very disappointed.

And we want to entertain (a key difference between broadcasting and the courts). The conversation has to be engaging.

If an interview manages none of the above we do not need to dwell on it for long; it failed. Sadly, life is rarely so absolute, but even if our interviews are becoming relatively less effective over time we still have cause for concern.

Signs of a trend in that direction are elusive, although the size of the audience is potentially one useful guide. If listeners were becoming disillusioned with a sterile and predictable pantomime then you would expect them to desert us, but numbers, for Today at least, have been rising, whether you look over a ten year horizon, or twenty five. Perhaps not every outlet could say the same, but if the daily programme most closely associated with the adversarial style of interviewing is still healthy

then it is more difficult to diagnose the style itself as a disease.

What about other symptoms? There is one, which might suggest a sub-conscious concern on our part with the effectiveness of our interviews: they are going on for longer. Over the past decade the duration of the big political set-piece on Today has grown. We might be persevering because we are enjoying ourselves so much. More likely, we are doing it because we are taking more time to make even limited progress.

The two measurements above are narrow and statistical. The broader one - more interesting, perhaps - is environmental: are we poisoning the water? Is the style of political interview, which has been prevalent for so long injuring politics, journalism, or both?

A question of trust

The most important currency in the trade between interviewers and politicians is trust. The balance of trade between them can shift quickly within an individual interview, but accounts have been filed for decades, and the picture they reveal is discouraging to both sides.

The polling organisation Ipsos MORI has been measuring confidence in a number of professions since 1983 through its Veracity Index. In 2011, as in the previous 29 years, it asked people who they would “generally trust to tell the truth”. Politicians scored 14%, and journalists 19%. It is tempting to think that the public is describing to pollsters a collapse in confidence, but the truth is almost more troubling; they are describing a relatively steady state. In 1983, politicians scored 18%, and over the nearly 30 years of the survey the ‘sector average’ for journalism has been around 17%. It is very hard to collapse from those levels.

By 1983, when the Ipsos MORI survey started, the broadcast interview had been established as a part of the political process for a generation. If the style is corrosive of public trust in politics then the rust might have taken hold long before pollsters started looking for it. But if we are trying to find evidence that politics has been further damaged in the past 30 years, and that journalists have played a part in that process, that evidence is not obvious from this, the longest-running survey of its kind.

Other surveys are available, of course. The Committee On

Standards In Public Life commissions one of the more interesting which makes distinctions between different categories of journalists, and may suggest something about the dynamic between journalism and politics.

The Committee has published its *Survey Of Public Attitudes Towards Conduct In Public Life* every two years since 2004, asking members of the public which professions they trust to tell the truth. In it, tabloid journalists achieve roughly the same startling levels of disdain that Ipsos MORI finds (scoring between 7% and 16% over the four surveys thus far), but MPs do better, trusted to tell the truth by between 23% and 29% of people over the years. And television journalists are dramatically separated from the red tops, at levels that range between 47% and 58%.

As interesting as those base figures, potentially, is the glimpse these snapshots may give us of the interplay between TV journalists and politicians in the public mind. These particular polls have not been running for long enough to count as rock-solid evidence, but here is an interesting thing: in each of them, every time trust in politicians declines, trust in TV journalists increases, and vice versa. Is it possible that there is a zero sum game in trust between the two sides?

It is worth remembering that earlier definition of adversarial justice, which could equally well apply to the relationship between interviewers and politicians: “An adversarial system is based on mistrust in the reliability of the prosecution evidence”. On that reading, mistrust is the core principle we bring to interviews; the principle on which our approach is based.

It would be easy to build a neat syllogism around that idea: our fundamental approach is to mistrust; if we treat interviewees as untrustworthy every day, people are bound to trust them less over time; it follows that we undermine trust.

What is more, a supporter of Invisible Advocacy would argue, there is no strong evidence that a showy, adversarial approach works. It might not be easy to demonstrate that it does not, but that is really only because we cannot find an accurate way of measuring the effectiveness of interviews. And, unlike the courts, broadcasters are not tied to any particular style by centuries of tradition. Robin Day led the way from deference to an adversarial approach. Someone else could lead us to the inquisitorial high ground where trust is less contested.

It is a coherent and reasonable argument, but there is a danger

that it neglects one vital component: the importance of values.

So let us take those values seriously and look at the counter-arguments.

For a lawyer, the question of modifying his or her approach in court is only a tactical one: what will work best? For us as journalists, figuring out whether we should become less adversarial, values immediately come into play.

To put it at its simplest, distrust - reasoned distrust - is a core value in British journalism, and that value is a significant and interesting constraint on how much we can change, and even how much we might want to change.

We have not embraced distrust just to ape the legal system where some of our interviewers cut their teeth, we have done it because the public expects it of us (the polls surely tell us that?). Where might a more trusting approach lead? At worst, to a political and media class respectfully intertwined, mutually supportive, feigning an appropriate distance at moments when it suits them - getting away with stuff. On a clear day, we might be able to see across the English Channel and point to France where some of those horrors came to pass (though, we would have to admit, less so now than in years gone by).

So, on that reading, we distrust our interviewees because British people distrust them, and because trusting seems to lead to worse outcomes. And we distrust them because, although some people suspect that it does harm to public life, no one can prove it. We hold to our course because if, suddenly, we changed it - towards politicians, for example - we would be fearful of sacrificing some of the reserves of trust we have built up over many years. Trust probably would turn out to be a zero-sum game to some degree.

That, too, is a coherent and reasonable argument, but not without its dangers. If it holds out no possibility of change then it may also be a trap. We cannot find ourselves locked into arguing in favour of an ineffective approach to interviews only because it suits our values. We cannot cling to a corrosive approach just because we are afraid of changing it.

The cornerstone of this whole debate is the question of good faith. As things stand, when we slip into adversarial mode we assume that the people who sit opposite us in the studio are likely to be acting, to some degree, in bad faith. At best, they might want to tell us part of a story not the whole thing. Quite possibly, they

will be determined to actively conceal a lot of information, which would be relevant and interesting. At worst, although few will actually lie to us, many will come as close to lying as a technical get-out clause would allow.

Faced with that set of assumptions, the incentives for an interviewee to act in good faith - to be as open, revealing, and truthful as possible - are not obvious. On the other hand, hindsight tells us that our assumptions are not stupid. Interviewees frequently do behave in those ways, so the rewards for us to change are not great either. There is a strong first-mover disincentive.

How could either side overcome that disincentive? In a much more disparate media world than the one Robin Day inhabited it seems unlikely that a single, disruptive figure will emerge, as influential as he was, to single-handedly change the terms of trade in interviews.

That leaves two other possibilities. The first would be some sort of external stimulus. Public trust in politicians could shift decisively; audiences could start to turn away from our programmes; someone could establish a causal link between the way we go about our business and the erosion of trust in the institutions of British public life. At the moment, none of those conditions seem to be in place. But perhaps the important thing is that we do not close the studio door to good faith if, at some point, the evidence tells us that we should let it in.

The second possibility is that we, journalists and politicians, act collectively to create the right conditions for a different relationship. To some extent, I think, this already happens. If the answers to our questions are candid and direct, an interview changes course. Small acts of good faith are reciprocated. This 'deal' has never been formal - nor should it be - but some politicians understand it much better than others. And there are times when we in the media could understand it, and act on it, better than we do. For anybody, on either side, looking for a way out of our entrenched, adversarial positions, a series of carefully-negotiated baby steps feels a much more likely way forward than a giant leap.

A different relationship

Against that backdrop of rumbling concern about how politics and the media affect each other there has been talk from time to time of a 'third way' for programmes like *Today*, neither

adversarial nor inquisitorial but ‘deliberative’. If we followed that star, the argument goes, we would be more interested in problem-solving than in fault-finding; we could be the glue in society, not the rust.

Deliberative policy-making tries to reach a consensus through careful consideration of the facts. One of the mechanisms it can use is the citizens’ jury. Not long after Tony Blair gave those two interviews to *Today* in 2007, his successor Gordon Brown came on the programme to express his enthusiasm for the idea:

“I’d like to have what are called citizens’ juries, where we say to people, “look, here is a problem that we are dealing with; today it’s housing, it could be drugs or youth services, it could be anti-social behaviour; here’s a problem, this is what we are thinking about it, but tell us what you think. And let’s look at some of the facts, let’s look at some of the challenges. Let’s look at some of the options that have been tried in different countries around the world, and then let’s together come to a decision about how to solve these problems.”

(Brown, 2007).

On the face of it, it is an attractive proposition: mature, rational, and maybe even appealing to a British sense of fair play. If it has not produced an obvious shift in our policy-making since Gordon Brown endorsed it that may be because it is difficult to carry through a change which can seem designed to de-politicise choices which we have always seen as inherently political. If it has not produced an obvious change in the way we make our programmes that is probably, in part, because of the risk that it would make terribly dull radio or television. Broadly speaking, it would also imply a shift to an inquisitorial approach (the facts and the nature of the problem would be agreed before anybody went into the studio).

So, just like the challenge in the adversarial/inquisitorial argument, the challenge to broadcasters from the deliberative camp is really to do with our effectiveness as part of the democratic process. Critics would say that we lack the obvious calmness and seriousness of a room filled with citizen jurors; we persist in looking for splits in parties or coalitions

and ignore more serious issues; we are very bad at calibrating risk; and more than anything, perhaps, we pretend that decisions are simple and trade-offs do not exist.

On some occasions, on all of those points, we are guilty to some extent. But, of course, not entirely and not always. In our messy and unfocused way (also very British) we play a vital role in helping listeners and viewers to form their views, and for consensus or disagreement to emerge. If that were not the case politicians would not care so much about what we do. We might not play a neat deliberative role but we do allow people to think and decide.

We also have to contend with some constraints when we try to change things. The way we are perceived by the people we interview, and our place in the wider press environment, tend to fix us rather than free us. An example: in November 2008 when Jacqui Smith was Home Secretary she launched a policy to tackle the trafficking of women for prostitution. Like any policy, it was the result of finely-balanced calculations within government. It would certainly have been one of a number of policy options which were considered, and emerged from that process either as the best or the least-worst.

With all that in mind, Evan Davis asked Jacqui Smith an unusual question on Today: “What are the disadvantages of this scheme you’re proposing today?” (Today, BBC Radio 4, 19 November 2008). It was intended - genuinely, I am sure - as a way of exploring complexity, trade-offs and nuance in government, but it fell flat. Jacqui Smith paused for a time and then replied that, in effect, there were no disadvantages.

It would be easy to dismiss it as a ludicrous answer: she could have said ‘Of course there were disadvantages; here they were; but obviously there were fewer downsides to this policy than to any other on the table, which was why it had emerged as the government’s chosen option’.

In a different world, all those things would have been sayable. In this one, it is not so clear that they were. The next-day headline-writers would have done a little dance at the prospect of a government minister “rubbishing” or “disowning” a policy on air. The whole policy prospectus - which was intended to do good to vulnerable women, after all - might have been sunk while it was being launched. Uncertainty, doubt, and imperfection may be difficult commodities for us to trade

in as journalists, but we are far from alone.

An age of uncertainty

Interviews define our relationship with politicians, and of all the many phrases that try to pin down that relationship, three are probably trotted out more than any others: we should “Speak truth to power”; ask ourselves “Why is this lying bastard lying to me?”; and remember that “Journalism is to politician as dog is to lamp-post”.

I have never particularly liked any of those descriptions. They seem, in turn, conceited (when were we given a monopoly on the truth?), cynical (obviously), and abusive (urinating on people or institutions is frowned on for a reason). They reflect an uncomfortable certainty in the virtue of journalism and the vice of politics.

Some of that assurance is fading. The decline in the power of the written press, the rise of social media, and the light that has been shone on the way journalism has been practised in some quarters, all conspire to make those primary-colour maxims from the middle of the last century feel too vivid for a more muted here and now.

All interviews are products of their age, and our age is characterised by uncertainty. If those old definitions of the relationship between the media and politics seem cocksure, what would work in their place?

Certainly, a more equivocal definition; we are not really in a position to make a grab for the moral high-ground.

One that allows an interviewee to show good faith - to be as open and honest as he or she can realistically be - and demands that we recognise good faith when we see it.

One that begins now, and for the foreseeable future, from an adversarial point of view; from a position of reasoned distrust.

Our traditional concern about values means that we focus very heavily on our inputs to interviews. Invisible Advocacy emphasises outcomes, so it presents us with a set of intellectual challenges which are strengthened by evidence and weakened by the fact that the evidence is gathered in courts not studios.

We can learn from it. To some extent we have already begun to observe the same preferences in our audiences as barristers have seen in juries, and to absorb the same lessons. Interviews have

started to change: less knockabout, more precision. But firing arrows is a more skilled and time-consuming business than flinging mud, and so the demands on us multiply. We have to understand subjects more completely, and constantly look in on ourselves from outside. Will the audience think we sound reasonable? Will they agree with our judgements? The less we rely on tricks of the trade, the surer we have to be of the facts and the evidence.

There is a danger of this appearing almost trite - hands up if you think that sounding ill-informed, irrational, and wayward in our judgements would be a good idea? - but the hidden potential is profound; we can begin to test whether there really is a zero-sum game in trust between journalists and politicians. In the past we might have built trust in our side by routinely distrusting the other. If, in the future, we can build it more quietly and patiently, through hard work and knowledge, by getting our culture and values right without suggesting that others' are wrong, then the rules of the interviewing game will have changed, and perhaps for the better.

Challenging questions

- Construct a debate between a champion of invisible advocacy and a supporter of the traditional style radio interview, drawing on examples from your own listening to radio news and current affairs programmes.
- Select an interview from a recent edition of the Today programme and analyse the questions asked. How might these questions be changed to conform to the style of exchanges used in the legal system outlined in this chapter?
- 'All interviews are products of their age, and our age is characterised by uncertainty.' Discuss this statement using examples from your own listening and reading.
- Consider the importance of trust in the context of the radio news interview.

Recommended reading

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