



Why the Live Interview Is Here to Stay

Five reasons you should insist that your interviews be face-to-face.

There's an ongoing debate involving media interviews in which many self-anointed new media pundits have demonized the live interview as unfair and outmoded. Who wins this debate could have grave consequences on whether objectivity remains a core value in journalism.

The issue reached a flashpoint last spring when *Wired's* Fred Vogelstein attempted to interview Internet entrepreneurs Jason Calacanis and Dave Winer for a profile on one of their new media brethren.

Calacanis and Winer agreed to the interview, but stipulated that Vogelstein ask his questions via e-mail. The *Wired* reporter declined, and Calacanis and Winer trumpeted it in their blogs. Soon after, the issue was being debated all over the blogosphere.

The saga eventually had a happy ending. Calacanis came to an agreement with Vogelstein—to do the interview over the phone, record the entire conversation and make it available online. But the battle rages on.

Calacanis, Winer and others, such as prominent New York University online journalism professor Jay Rosen, contend that live media interviews give reporters an unfair advantage that can result in inaccurate news coverage. They fear that journalists who insist on live interviews might be seeking a "gotcha" moment. E-mail ensures that an interviewee won't be misquoted or misunderstood, they argue.

In addition to A-list bloggers, an increasing number of sources in all sectors

now insist on having questions e-mailed, either so they can be answered in-kind or to allow them to prepare for a live interview, whether that's to be conducted in-person or over the phone. It has particularly become an issue in politics, causing a backlash from reporters.

Many political journalists are spurning e-mail interviews—and rightly so—because they don't produce natural, conversational responses, which make for good copy. E-mail allows a source to engage in too many public relations and legal considerations, which results in a stilted, dull response devoid of flavor or interest. Who wants to read that? That's not how people speak.

At its best, journalism is a search for the truth. For the vast majority of reporters, wanting to conduct an interview live is not about seeking that gotcha moment. It's about giving a source the chance to speak her mind and capturing that in a story.

If a source is worried about being misquoted, she can tape the interview and ask the journalist to do the same. E-mail won't stop misquoting.

There are many other good reasons to conduct an interview live:

1. People take you more seriously when you're face-to-face or at least speaking live. It's more personal and, therefore, a better way to build rapport.
2. You can make sure the person you're talking to is the person he claims to be. With e-mail and faxes you can't. Spokespersons are much less likely to impersonate an interviewee on the phone than they are to ghost-write answers.

3. You can ask immediate follow-up questions. This saves time. There's no e-mail tennis going back and forth. If a new idea comes up, a journalist can pursue it on the phone.

4. You might make a surprising discovery. Sometimes the interviewee will mention something that takes the story in a whole new direction. That doesn't happen with e-mail.

5. E-mail offers only a one-dimensional portrait of a source. It's hard to gauge a person's personality from a carefully crafted e-mail. You can pick up signals by watching body language. A source's physical surroundings can also provide useful info.

Fortunately, for most stories, journalists have any number of sources they can interview. If one source is unavailable or unwilling, a reporter can move down to the next number in her Rolodex. Publicity is usually a good thing, and most interviewees will bend over backwards to get a mention on the evening news.

But, sometimes, giving in to a source's demands may be the only way to land an interview. What should you do then?

Allowing sources to dictate the terms of an interview sets a dangerous precedent. Making even a minor concession can lead to bigger demands. Next, a source wants to review a story before it runs and suggest changes. Where do reporters draw the line?

They should be firm from the get-go in standing up for important journalistic principles. The media is already under fire for its objectivity—or lack of it. Allowing sources to manipulate the reporting process threatens to undermine journalists' objectivity and credibility even further.

The day the live interview becomes obsolete is the day journalism itself becomes obsolete.—Mark Grabowski is a journalism professor at Monmouth University in New Jersey. He also blogs for the Asbury Park Press and consults on media relations. For more journalism tips, visit his website, <http://CubReporters.org>.