
In one of many memorable Monty Python skits, Eric Idle, playing a television public-affairs interviewer, begins an allegedly serious conversation with a contemporary British classical music composer: Arthur "Two Sheds" Jackson. However, instead of questioning Jackson on the state of music today, or his works in progress, Idle focuses on the nickname. The maestro is taken aback at this unexpected breach of interview protocol; after all, he did not come all the way into the studio to discuss the metal sheds in his backyard garden!

What makes this funny is the violation of an expected script, namely, the structured question and answer discourse of the "serious interview." It is this discourse, the "unfolding interactional 'game'" between interviewer and interviewee, that is the subject of Clayman and Heritage's study. Using the sociological technique of conversation analysis, they make a case that the "news interview can be understood in its entirety as a system of speech exchange" that is unique because of the "underlying method by which the participants take turns at talk."

Using analysis of parts of 250 news interviews broadcast on both U.S. and U.K. television during the past 20 years, the authors work hard at making a case for the fact that the "'news' in a news interview consists entirely of mundane interactional transactions between journalists and their sources." As a regular guest on "serious" television news panels, this reviewer certainly has little quarrel with the "mundane" part of it! "Green rooms" with musty sofas and coffee as cold as an anchorman's smile are often a mere prelude to three predictable on-air questions by the interviewer, followed by answers suddenly cut short by "We're almost out of time." However, to state that a news interview is entirely explained in terms of interactional transaction is wide of the mark. For although Clayman & Heritage allude to the interview as "embedded within institutional, cultural, and sociohistorical environments," their study steadfastly refuses to explore these in any detail.

The world of television news interviewing they portray is what the Nielsen ratings people used to call the "halo." In other words, it's the saintly world of Radio 4, the "Beeb," PBS, and the Sunday morning U.S. network interview shows. Seen through such a relatively small keyhole, the conversation analysis methodology does cast valuable light on the news interview. However, the world of television news has changed utterly in recent years, and although this study has a 2002 date, it really seems like something from 10 years earlier.

Clayman & Heritage cogently argue that the news interview preserves the illusion of impartiality. But if so, how do we account for phenomena such as Fox News, where guests are often selected to buttress a position clearly espoused by the interviewer and a large part of the Republican Party? This relatively new phenomenon appeared with a vengeance in the first Clinton term, but had been building steadily in U.S. "talk radio" for at least two decades. It represents a return to the partisanship and ideology of the eighteenth-century's media, before "objectivity" and "the facts" became the alleged touchstones of news.

Furthermore, the past 10 years have seen the rise of "infotainment" as "real" news. The "high culture" of pre-1992 television news, at least as envisioned by Clayman & Heritage, seems worlds away from Senator John Kerry's being asked on MTV if he considered himself a "cool" person. Far from being a frivolous sideshow, this kind of "news interview" increasingly represents the high-water mark of political awareness for people of all ages.

The stately world of the U.S. presidential "press conference," so dear to Clayman & Heritage's view of a substantive news event, has become, under George W. Bush, as rare as a pterodactyl. In fact, as of this writing, Bush's last press conference began with a 24-minute presidential monologue, and the New York Times, arguably the American newspaper of record, has yet to be granted an interview with George Bush.
There continue to be “news interviews,” but it is doubtful that they can any longer be fit into Clayman & Heritage’s magisterial scheme of analysis. Except for their short list of news shows (most of which survive, and play to an aging, upscale audience), today’s interview is more often an excursus into what the newsmaker “felt” when a certain event happened. Millions judge the “winner” in today’s news interview as the one who “seemed the most sincere.” He could espouse both a flat-earth and a grassy knoll conspiracy theory: what matters to viewers is whether the interviewee sincerely believes it.

This emotional, even maudlin, link to the television audience is quite a distance away from Clayman & Heritage’s “overhearing news audience.” Yet it is the new face, or rather the new heart, of news. Today’s “news source” is increasingly the “little guy” and his emotional reaction to “world events.” It is the high-school principal of Anytown reacting to the deaths of seven local boys in Iraq. It is the increasingly ubiquitous “streeter” segment of TV news, where “we at Channel 12 ask you” what you think of any topic whatever. It is the “poll results” that are now an entrenched part of virtually all network and cable news shows.

Seen from this perspective, Clayman & Heritage’s work, although it discusses events as recent as the Clinton/Gennifer Flowers scandal, reads like news from another time and place, almost like a dinosaur’s diary the day before the asteroid struck. It is well-written and carefully edited, and could very well be one of the last creative studies of television news when it was still seen as an act of public service and civility.

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