

The Interview

1. Introduction

In our daily lives, we all speak with other people – mostly to exchange information and to find out what's new. And even if we are not aware of it: we are constantly conducting interviews.

“How are you?”

“Oh, not too good today.”

“Why not, what's wrong?”

“I wanted to go on vacation, but I couldn't.”

“And why not?”

“My wife is sick.”

“What's wrong with her?” etc.

Such a “question-and-answer-game” is nothing unusual and we conduct it with ease in our everyday lives. So, why should conducting a radio interview be any different? After all, it is not difficult to ask questions and those who ask should also get answers. But in a journalistic interview this isn't always the case. One crucial difference is the time factor.

If we had all the time in the world, we could possibly get the answers to all the questions we have and find out everything we want to know. But in radio, the time we are given to get the relevant information from our interview partner is limited. Often, radio interviews will only be two or three minutes long. Therefore, only a journalist who asks the right questions can expect to get good answers within this timeframe.

Interviewing people is an art that can be mastered, if certain fundamental rules are followed.

2. Definition

The interview is a focussed exchange of questions and answers with the objective of acquiring information. It aims to get comprehensive and clear information from the interview partner within the shortest possible time.

An interview can be conducted with the intention of broadcasting the complete exchange of questions and answers. An interview can also be conducted in order to research information or to record individual statements for news items or reports.

One thing holds true for any interview: the interviewee is the main person. His or her answers are the most important thing in the interview. We journalists only ask questions on behalf of the listeners – the questions they would ask the interview partner if they had a chance to talk to him or her.

Our questions should be short and precise and directly targeted to reach our information goal. All questions and answers should be on a linguistic level that the listeners can easily understand.

As interviewers, we have to stay unbiased and should avoid getting emotional. Our personal opinions must not shine through at any time during the interview.

Length: between 3 min. and 20 min. depending on the type of programme.

3. When and why do we use this journalistic format? Strengths and weaknesses of the format

Various forms of interview

There are various forms of interview. The distinguishing factor between these forms is the information goal that you are trying to reach.

3.1. Information interview

The aim of an information interview is to find out facts and figures about a certain topic. The interviewee's views on the topic or his personality are not relevant, what counts is his or her expertise. Therefore, the interview partners in information interviews are mostly experts, politicians or people directly involved in a topic.

Example:

The international pharmaceuticals company PILLCO plans to build a new factory in a poor neighbourhood of BIGTOWN. People who live in BIGTOWN will have to be rehoused to make room for the factory. The company has already negotiated a contract with the regional government, which will be signed by the responsible parties today. The listeners should find out what exactly PILLCO and the city have agreed on in this contract. Interviewees could be representatives of PILLCO, but also someone working for the local administration or the mayor.

“What environmental protection measures are specified in the contract?”

“The Environmental Ministry has defined maximum quotas for harmful emissions, and these must not be exceeded. The same applies to waste water that flows into the general waste water network.”

“How will you be able to ensure that PILLCO will stick to these limits?”

“This is also outlined in the contract. An independent institute will carry out measurements every six months. The results will be published to ensure the population is informed.” etc.

3.2. Opinion interview

The objective of this type of interview is to find out the opinion or standpoint of the interviewee on a specific issue, event or development.

Example:

The contract between the pharmaceuticals company PILLCO and the city on the construction of a new factory in BIGTOWN has been finalised. But now there are new problems: The residents of BIGTOWN are demonstrating because their homes will be demolished and because they will have to be rehoused. The citizens' group "Initiative Against Rehousing" wants to appeal to the courts to halt the project. And environmentalists are protesting against potential environmental damage.

Will PILLCO still go through with the project?

To find out how the chairman of the company's Board of Directors feels about these new problems, you conduct an opinion interview.

"Mr Miller, in view of the emerging difficulties, what is your stance on the demands to scrap the plans for building the new factory?"

"Scrapping the plans to build the factory is out of the question. I believe that these demands are without substance. The current situation has primarily arisen because representatives of the city did not inform the residents of the benefits that building the new factory will bring for them: e.g. jobs, new homes and an improved social environment."

"How do you rate your chances if this matter ends up in court?"

"I am not worried about any potential court case. Company lawyers drafted the contracts very carefully. Everything is water-tight." Etc.

3.3. Personality interview (portrait)

Here, the focus is on the personality of the interview partner. The questions mainly deal with the life, character and experiences of the interviewee.

Example:

In recent weeks, the chairman of the citizens' group "Initiative Against Rehousing" has become the figurehead of the protests and turned into a prominent figure in BIGTOWN. Listeners already know a lot about his activities, but very little about him personally. You would like to change this and conduct a personality interview with him, focussing on his personal background, on what motivated him to take up the fight and on his dreams and desires.

"Mr. Taylor, you have practically become the spearhead of resistance against rehousing for the residents of BIGTOWN. How come you got so involved in this issue?"

"This whole struggle is about fighting injustice. Even as a child, injustice was the worst thing for my brother and me. We learned this from our parents."

"So, what forms of injustice did you witness as a child?"

"Well, for instance, if a teacher punished one of my classmates without reason, I would stand up and support that classmate..." etc.

In practice, a clear-cut distinction between these different forms of interviews is not always possible. And sometimes it is not even desirable. Most of your interviews will

contain elements of different forms – for example an opinion interview with some information questions thrown in.

But it helps you stay on track with your questions if you define your interview goal beforehand and if you know which interview format will lead you to that goal. If you have not clearly defined your interview goal, your questions and the interviewee's answers will get side-tracked and your listener will get confused.

3.4. Interviews as tools

The three interview formats we have dealt with so far are conducted and recorded so that they can be broadcast as a whole. But journalists also conduct interviews for research purposes or to get some isolated statements for a report with clips.

3.4.1. Research interview

If you want to research or double-check information, you conduct a research interview. This kind of interview is usually not broadcast. Your only aim is to get additional information which you will use for writing a report, a commentary or a news item.

Example:

Environmentalists say that the factory which PILLCO wants to build in BIGTOWN will pollute the air. You have heard that PILLCO plans to invest around one billion Euro in environmental protection measures. But you do not know what exactly these measures will be. To find out, you conduct a research interview with a leading representative of PILLCO with the goal of

- confirming the amount to be invested in environmental protection measures and
- getting more information about the kind of measures that PILLCO plans to take

3.4.2. Statement interview

This type of interview is designed to yield an individual statement that will become part of another journalistic piece, for instance a sound bite for a report or a news item.

Example:

You are writing a report on the fact that the construction of the new pharmaceuticals factory will require the demolition of homes and the rehousing of residents. However, you still do not have any strong sound bites that you can use in your report.

You conduct an interview with a representative of PILLCO and one with the spokesperson of the citizens' group "Initiative Against Rehousing". Then you take the strongest statements from the interviews and use them as sound bites for your report.

- **Representative of PILLCO:** "All residents who will be rehoused can rest assured that they will get modern new homes that are affordable."

- **Representative of the citizens' group:** "We don't believe a word of what the company is saying. PILLCO has never kept any promises that it made in the past."

Pros and cons of an interview

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Authentic, credible	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Risk of confusing the listener if you do not strictly adhere to a logical structure
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• First-hand information, opinions and emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Only presents one person's opinion
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Contains spontaneous, non-plannable elements that are surprising and attractive for the listener	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It can be difficult for the journalist to stay in control of the interview – especially when dealing with very experienced interview partners who have their own agenda
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Makes the programme lively	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Experts have a tendency to use jargon, which the listeners will not understand. Here, the journalist has to intervene and ask the expert to repeat the information using simpler words
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cheap and quick to produce	

4. How is it done?

4.1. Preparing an interview

First, you have to research the topic of your interview. Next, you should define your interview goal. Ask yourself the questions: "What do the listeners want to know about this topic?" and "What information is relevant for the listeners?" Define a lead question for the interview as a whole.

Example

Lead question: How will PILLCO fulfil the environmental protection measures laid down in the contract?

You might not actually ask this question in your interview. But your interview as a whole should serve to answer this **lead question**. Every question and answer should add a little piece to the puzzle, so that at the end, the listener sees the whole picture – and has the answer to the lead question.

Focus on just one topic in your interview. Don't ask questions about side aspects – otherwise your interviewee will get carried away and the listeners will be confused.

And finally: do your research properly. Nothing is more embarrassing than if an interviewee corrects mistakes in your questions during an interview or if your interview partner gets away with making false statements because you did not know enough about the topic and did not realize how you were being manipulated or tricked.

4.2 Selecting the interviewee, the interview venue and time

The success and failure of an interview depends largely on choosing the right interview partner. There are many things you need to consider when deciding whom to interview: their expertise, their ability to explain things in a straight-forward way, their position and views with regard to the topic of the interview. In addition, you need to know whether your interviewee will be available for the interview and willing to talk on the radio. It is also good to know beforehand if your interview partner is someone who is quiet and shy or someone who will talk a lot during the interview.

Example:

After having considered all possibilities, you decide to interview the head engineer of the pharmaceutical company PILLCO. Your lead question is: How will PILLCO implement the environmental protection measures laid down in the contract?

The time of the interview will depend on the interviewee's schedule or – if it is a live interview - on when your radio programme is on the air.

If you are conducting the interview by telephone, you cannot influence where the interviewee will be when he or she answers your questions.

However, if you are able to determine venue and time, remember that you need time for an interview. If either you or your interview partner feels rushed, the result will most likely be unsatisfactory. The venue is also important to reduce any inhibitions the interviewee may have. The Chairman of the PILLCO Board of Directors is likely to feel most comfortable in a familiar environment (e.g. in his office at the PILLCO company). The chairman of the citizens' group "Initiative Against Rehousing" will probably give very lively answers if you interview him somewhere in BIGTOWN because he will associate this area with his fight. If you conduct interviews in your studio, interview partners who do not have a lot of experience with the media might feel intimidated by the studio technology and the journalists and radio technicians.

4.3 Interview briefing

Before you start conducting an interview, you should always brief your interviewee about some things.

- What is the topic and the focus of the interview?

- How long will the interview take?
- Will the interview be recorded or broadcast live?
- When will the interview be broadcast?
- Will it be broadcast as a whole or is it just a research or statement interview?
- When and where will the interview be conducted?
- Will it be a one-on-one interview, or will other interviewees or additional journalists be present?

One of the advantages of such an interview briefing is that you and your interview partner get to know each other. It can break the ice and reduce nervousness. You will also get an idea of how your interviewee answers questions: does he or she beat around the bush, go into great detail or are the answers short and to the point?

In your interview briefing, you should inform your interview partner about the topic and focus of the interview, but you should not discuss the questions you want to ask. If you go into too much detail, your interview partner might later, when you are recording, feel like everything has already been said. You run the risk that the answers will sound like they've been rehearsed or that your interview partner does not mention important information again.

Only in the case of an extremely insecure or difficult interview partner can it make sense to discuss the first question beforehand. This may help to reduce the interviewee's anxiety.

Do **not** give your interviewee a list of the questions you plan to ask during the interview. You will lose control of the interview. If your interviewee asks for such a list, try to convince him or her that you will stick to the topic of the interview and that you will not ask any questions that are unfair. You may also tell your interviewee that your station never supplies the questions beforehand.

If your interviewee still insists, you have two choices:

- tell him or her that you will look for a different interview partner. Faced with such prospects, interviewees sometimes decide that they will give the interview after all because they are eager to present their views on the radio.
- If you cannot find another qualified interview partner, give this interviewee a list of questions. Make sure to write "**List of some possible questions**" on the top of the paper. That way you remain flexible to change the order, leave out questions or include others if the interview situation demands it.

4.4 Different forms of questions

You will not get good answers if you ask unclear questions. To make sure that the interview will be successful, you should be familiar with some basic forms of questions. You should know what effect they will have and when to use them.

4.4.1 Closed questions

Yes/no question:

This form of question only allows a **yes**, **no** or **I don't know** answer. In most cases, you will have to ask a follow-up question to find out more. This can be a waste of time. Yes/no questions are good to pinpoint an interviewee on a certain topic, but they will not get the interviewee talking.

Example

Not good:

"Mr. Mayor, do you believe PILLCO will fulfil the environmental protection measures laid down in the contract?"

"Yes."

"What makes you think that?"

"In the contract with PILLCO, these measures are described in great detail. In addition, we've also clearly defined penalty payments in the event that these measures are not adhered to."

Better:

"Mr. Mayor, which environmental protection measures does PILLCO have to fulfil according to the contract?"

"The contract specifies that PILLCO has to stick to some precisely defined limits for emissions. If PILLCO exceeds these limits, the company will have to pay damages."

In some cases, you may choose to ask a closed question in order to get the interviewee to give a short, precise answer.

Example:

"Mr. Mayor, you have been accused of taking bribes in conjunction with the construction of the new pharmaceuticals factory. Is this true?"

"No."

You have intentionally chosen a closed question because you wanted a definite "yes" or "no" answer.

Simple questions asking **who**, **where**, **when** or **what** may also just yield very short answers.

4.4.2 Open questions

Questions asking the interviewee **why** or **how** will result in longer answers. With such open questions, you are giving the interviewee a chance to go into more detail, to explain reasons, developments or personal opinions.

Example:

"Why is it essential for the factory to be built in BIGTOWN?"

"BIGTOWN seemed the most suitable site because..." (this is followed by various reasons for choosing BIGTOWN).

4.4.3 Special forms of question

Statement plus question:

The interviewer states a fact and then adds a question.

Example:

“Most people in BIGTOWN are against rehousing. Why haven’t you thought about building the factory somewhere else?”

You should only choose this form of question if you are absolutely sure that the fact you are stating is correct. If your statement is false or needs explanation, the interviewee will start a discussion about your incorrect statement instead of answering your question. You run the risk of the interview developing into an argument, something that you should avoid at all costs.

Example:

“Most people in BIGTOWN are against rehousing. Why haven’t you thought about building the factory somewhere else?”

(potential answer if the stated fact is **not** correct) “How do you know that most people are against rehousing? Our opinion polls in BIGTOWN show very different results. I personally believe that a minority is trying to make trouble for me and everyone at city hall.” etc.

Suggestive question:

With a suggestive question, you are implying something in the hope that your interviewee will agree or disagree in a very lively way. This form of question can force the interviewee to take a stance and make the interview more dynamic.

Example:

“Mr. Mayor, you are an ardent supporter of the new pharmaceutical factory and the rehousing-project that will go with it. So you are ready to accept that many people will practically be uprooted?”

“No, of course I don’t. I am very concerned about the wellbeing of the residents of this city. That’s why the new apartments will be built close by. This will allow old neighbours to stay in touch with each other...”

But be careful: a suggestive question can sometimes be seen as a provocation by the interviewee. This could spoil the atmosphere of your interview. A disturbance on the relationship-level of the interview will also affect the information-level.

If things turn sour, your interviewee might even refuse to answer (“I refuse to answer such a question”) or ask a counter-question (“What else was I supposed to secure the economic development of our town with?”). In the end, your listeners will perceive your questions as unfair or even aggressive.

Interpreting question:

If the interviewee is not clear in his or her answers or tries to get away without making a clear statement, you can offer a possible interpretation in a follow-up

question. This would force the interviewee to take a stance and make the original answer understandable for the listener.

Example:

“So, does that mean that the factory could not have been built in any other part of town?”

“Yes, that is what I think.”

This precise answer makes the interviewee’s position clear for the listener.

Indirect question (a third party is brought into play):

In an indirect question, you confront your interviewee with a statement made by a third party. Usually, this statement will be opposed to what the interviewee thinks or says. Since you can hide behind the critical remarks that someone else made, this trick allows you to be somewhat confrontational without hurting the interview atmosphere.

Example:

“The environmental group “Greenpeace” says that the new factory will cause considerable air pollution. What is your response to such claims?”

“These are claims that are completely unsubstantiated. I can provide you with calculations that clearly show there is no risk at all.”

The logical sequence of questions

When we talked about how to prepare an interview (4.1.), we already said that you should think of a **lead question**, which the interview as a whole should answer. Getting an answer to this lead question is the information goal of your interview.

It is usually best to start an interview with a general question. This will give the interviewee a chance to talk freely and to get used to the interview situation. A non-confrontational open question will create a positive interview atmosphere.

Your first question should be interesting and new for your interviewee and for your listeners. If your first question is one that your interview partner has already answered frequently in other interviews, he or she will not develop much interest in your interview, will be bored and provide answers that sound like they’ve been rehearsed. However, if you ask your interview partner an unusual question as an opener, he or she will be drawn into the interview – and so will your listeners.

It is essential to get the listeners’ attention from the start of an interview and to make them feel that it’s worth their time to keep on listening. Radio listeners decide within the first 30 seconds of an interview whether they will keep listening or whether they will mentally “switch off”. So the first question of your interview will already determine whether you will have an interested and attentive audience or not.

Do not open your interview with a question like “Could you tell us something about...” or “Would you like to say something about...”. Such questions are much too broad, too unfocussed. Your interview partner can say whatever he or she likes and take the interview into any direction he or she desires. This will mean that you’ve lost control of the interview from the start.

Do not stick to a sequence of questions that you may have prepared. Instead, try to derive your questions out of the answers you get. That way, the flow of the interview sounds natural and logical.

It is vital that you listen to what your interviewee says. If you give your interviewee the feeling that you are personally interested in the answers, he or she will give much livelier answers than if he or she feels that you are just ticking off a list of questions.

Structure

One traditional form for an interview is the so-called funnel-structure. You start off with rather general questions. During the course of the interview you get more and more specific, until you end with a yes-or-no-question which pinpoints your interviewee. This way, your interview ends on a clear statement from the interviewee. And that will leave your listeners with the impression that the interview was worth their while because it left them with clear and concise information.

Example:

You are interviewing the head engineer of the pharmaceutical company PILLCO about the planned environmental protection measures. Your lead question is: How will PILLCO fulfil the environmental protection measures laid down in the contract?

“Environmental protection is very important to the people of BIGTOWN with regard to the new factory. What aspects of environmental protection are important to you?”

“A clean and healthy environment is also important to the people at PILLCO. That’s why PILLCO will do everything it can to make sure that the air, the water of the river and the ground will not be contaminated.”

“But environmentalist groups in BIGTOWN are not convinced that you will be doing enough?”

“Well, what the environmental activists say is nothing but propaganda. Once the factory has been built, you will see that we’ll stick to all the environmental protection measures laid down in the contract.”

“Which measures are these exactly?”

“We will secure clean air by using state-of-the-art filtering systems. We will also build a sewage facility to clean our waste water. This facility will operate independently from the public sewage system. That way we can ensure that no harmful substances can get into the public water system.”

“How will you make sure that the environmental protection measures are implemented?”

“We have commissioned an independent institute with monitoring this. The institute is also approved by the local authorities.”

“Do you believe that this will be sufficient to disperse the concerns of the residents and of the environmentalists?”

“Yes, I am sure of it. And I think that all the sceptics will be convinced once the plant is up and running.”

This interview with the head engineer of PILLCO answers the **lead question**, “How will PILLCO fulfil the environmental protection stipulations defined in the contract?”

5. Caution – stumbling blocks – “What to do if...”

Stumbling block: badly worded questions

5.1. Either-or question

If you ask an either-or-question, you narrow your interviewee down to only two alternatives. But instead of the either-or-alternative, your interviewee would possibly have mentioned a third option that you did not think of. Being narrowed down to two alternatives can feel awkward for your interview partner and may have a negative impact on the interview atmosphere. It is better to ask an open question.

Either-or-questions will usually require follow-up questions. This wastes time and can be confusing for the listeners.

Example

You are interviewing an environmentalist about the environmental protection measures.

not good:

“Are you against the construction of the new factory in principle or are you primarily concerned that PILLCO will violate the environmental protection measures?”

“Of course, the environmental protection measures must be implemented. If this does not happen, the residents will be at risk.”

From this answer, you do not learn whether the environmentalist opposes the construction of the factory. And since this does not become clear, you have to ask a follow up question. This would not have been necessary if you had asked the question differently.

5.2. Multiple question

Multiple questions create confusion and lead to you losing control of the interview. Your interview partner can decide which part of the question he or she wishes to answer. It's better to always ask one question at a time.

Example:

“How many jobs will the construction of the new factory create and what will this mean for the regional economy?”

“It will strengthen the regional economy. After all, some of the products manufactured in the new factory will be exported and that is good for this

country's trade balance.”

The interviewee did not answer the question how many jobs would be created. You will have to ask a follow-up question. This will waste time and interrupt the flow of the interview.

What to do if...

...the interviewee's answers are too long?

- **Non-verbal interruption:**

Open your mouth and take a breath as if you wanted to start speaking. This will show your interview partner that you want to ask your next question. You could also indicate with your hand that you would like to say something. Or you could start pulling the microphone away from your interviewee and direct it towards you.

- **Direct interruption:**

If the interviewee takes a breath, interrupt with “but” and add a short, quick question like: **why?** or **can you give an example?**

You can also interrupt an interviewee's flow of words by calling him by his name: “Mr. Miller, ...” and then ask your next question. For most people, hearing their own name is a key stimulus. It will startle them and make them come to a halt.

What to do if...

... you would like to get your interviewee to continue talking?

Show your interview partner you are interested in what he or she is saying by nodding and keeping eye contact. This is normally interpreted by the interviewee as approval and will encourage them to continue talking.

Sometimes it also works if you simply do not ask your next question when your interviewee has come to the end of his or her answer. Just look at him or her encouragingly, smile and nod. Your interviewee will usually find the silence awkward and continue talking.

What to do if...

...you panic, lose track of what is being said and can't think of a good next question?

In such cases you can ask a so-called **parachute-question**. This is a question that works in almost any context – regardless of what the interviewee said before. Examples for parachute-questions are: **“Why?”**, **“What does that mean?”** or **“What makes you so sure?”**

The interviewee will usually reiterate what he or she said before and go into greater detail. This gives you enough time to overcome your initial panic, refocus and think up the next question.

Another parachute question is: **Could you give an example?** Or you could just simply repeat your interview partner's last words and turn them into a question.

Example:

"... Once the factory has been built, you will see that we'll stick to all the environmental protection measures laid down in the contract. But what the environmental protection groups are saying is, of course, nothing but propaganda."

"Nothing but propaganda?"

"Yes! These environmental activists are really only interested in manipulating people with half-truths."

Technical stumbling blocks

Interesting interview partners and clever questions are worthless if technical problems ruin your interview. Always make sure that your technical equipment is working before you start recording an interview. Test your recording device, your microphone and the levels before the interview.

After the interview, check whether the recording is all right. Do this while your interviewee is still around. If you find out now that technical problems spoiled your recording, you may be able to convince your interview partner to repeat the interview.

Always take a foam wind screen for your microphone with you to avoid wind noise. Check whether your batteries are charged and bring spare batteries – just in case...