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Interviewing: The Ignored Skill

Corrections: The names of [Wendell Cochran](#) and Linda LaScola were spelled incorrectly in an earlier version of this column.

When it comes to ethics, it's essential to ask good questions to make good decisions. A successful process includes [asking key questions](#) at the right time.

The same can be said about the newsgathering process. The success of the end product – the story – is, to a great degree, dependent on the questions a reporter asks along the way. There's a premium on interviewing skills and competency.

I like the way my Poynter colleague Chip Scanlan put it in his book, "[Reporting and Writing: Basics for the 21st Century](#):" "Effective interviewing is a pillar of good reporting and writing."

Scanlan starts his chapter on interviewing this way: "Interviewing requires more than a good ear for quotes. It's a process, like writing, that involves a series of decisions and actions designed to get the best possible information."

So, if interviewing is so important to the reporting and writing process, why isn't it a more essential part of the preparation of journalists?

That, in essence, is the e-mail query posed to me this week by a non-journalist who studies the way people interact with each other in professional settings.

Linda LaScola describes herself as a qualitative researcher. Think sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists. She lives in the world of questions. And she's intrigued about how journalists ask questions.

LaScola wrote me about "the lack of formally-taught interviewing skills [that] may be an important factor in the public's diminished trust of the press."

She says she is surprised that "reporters are not formally taught how to interview." Her initial research on this

issue gleaned the following fascinating – and disconcerting – tidbit. LaScola "went to the Columbia School of Journalism website, where I found very little about journalism interviewing – but lots on how to interview for a journalism job!"

LaScola goes on in her note to me, saying "I also went to Amazon.com and on my first hundred hits, found one journalism interviewing book, among a large selection of books on psychotherapy, qualitative research, and employment interviewing."

Her point is well taken. I looked over at my bookcase and saw only a few books on interviewing techniques for journalists among many on reporting and writing.

Scanlan confirms this absence of meaningful attention to interviewing skills. He writes in his text, "Journalists get little or no training in this vital aspect of their job. Most learn by painful trial and error."

Veteran newspaper reporter and editor Wendell Cochran agrees. Cochran, who now directs the journalism division of The School of Communication at American University, told me in an e-mail exchange that "I think interviewing is perhaps the least-appreciated and least-studied skill in journalism.

"There is an assumption that 'everyone' can talk and ask questions. And because so few journalism professors have had organized training or education in interviewing, they feel they are not prepared to give it the attention it needs (and that students want)."

That's a serious ouch. In fact, it's an indictment of how we prepare for and practice our craft. If journalists aren't well-trained in the skills of interviewing, there is a much greater chance that we'll fall short in achieving ethical and excellent journalism.

If we aren't proficient at asking the right questions at the right time, we'll miss on accuracy, fall short on context, and stumble on fairness.

During this time of serious self-examination of journalism and journalists – not to mention the scrutiny of the public – it's essential to consider the role that interviewing skills – or the lack thereof – plays in how we measure up.

To be sure, interviewing is not totally ignored in

journalism school training. Cochran says that while American University, like most journalism schools, doesn't "have a separate class in interviewing ... I and other professors attempt to discuss interviewing in every writing class."

But, Cochran acknowledges, "I don't think we do enough and that we are not formal enough in our approach."

And he finished his e-mail note to me with a series of excellent questions about "the ethical dimensions of conducting interviews:

- How do you get someone to 'open up' without misleading them regarding the nature of your story (or even your own identification)?
- How do you fairly deal with someone whose views are anathema to you?
- How do you broach sensitive topics (for example, the papers today [June 13] are full of stories about Tom Watson's caddie who is dying of ALS)?
- How do you deal with children and other unsophisticated sources?
- How do you protect confidential sources (people whom you have promised to protect) while using their information to conduct further research?"

Allow me to use Cochran's questions to prompt your thoughts, as we Talk about Ethics while examining how we interview. More to come on this in the weeks ahead. (In last [week's column](#), I described my own experience as an interviewee for a recent article by the *Los Angeles Times*.)

**[Question: How did you learn the skills of interviewing?
For those of you who are editors or educators, how do
you teach those skills?]**

Posted 2:40 PM

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