

## **A short “How-To” on audio interviewing**

In our times it has become common for photojournalists that they're expected to deliver more than just a picture story. For a successful career, it is essential to have skills in videography and audio gathering. One of the most difficult parts is to conduct audio interviews. In order for a story to be compelling and successful, the interviewer not only has to elicit raw information, but also he has to draw a picture of his subject's character and personality.

### **Preparation for the interview**

- Know your subject! Get information from secondary sources (family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, Google, etc.)
- Prepare your questions. Write them down (memorize, re-read and re-phrase them)
- Prepare your gear (customize recorder setup to your liking, charge batteries, test microphone(s) and recorder)
- Take pen and paper, make notes or at least write down meter readings at key moments)

### **Setup of the interview**

- Choose a quiet location. Background noise is hard to deal with in the editing process. The less background noise, the smoother the editing. Less distraction to the listener
- Have your microphone close to the subject: Width of the fist (Comparison with telephoto vs. wide angle)
- Keep microphone steady and at same position throughout the interview. If possible, use stand or boom (handling noise)

### **Interview technique**

- Make your subject feel comfortable. In most cases, you want your interview partner to be at ease and relaxed. Choose your location accordingly
- Build rapport. This may take more than one session
- Look your subject in the eye, make them forget the microphone in front of them
- Show attentiveness. Don't stare at the meter. Keep the subject from staring at the microphone
- Wear headphones. Hear what your recorder hears. A recorder doesn't filter surrounding noise.
- Listen carefully: Background noise, half sentences, etc: ask to repeat sentence or thought. Offer subject to start again if they mess up a sentence
- Ask neutral questions
- Don't interrupt. Use body language to engage in the conversation
- Ask simple questions

- Ask open-ended questions that have to be answered as a complete thought (“Describe for me...”, “Give me a sense of...”, “How did you feel about....”)
- Don’t ask for the obvious. Know your subject and ask accordingly

## **Interview stages: Development – Pursuit – Mop-up**

### 1. Development

- Usually off tape and informal
- Pre-interview, even by phone: make sure they’re good talkers. Research and possible leads to other subjects. Ask secondary sources about the subject at hand before you commit to interview a subject
- Get the facts: phone numbers, name spellings, pronunciations, details etc.
- Get to the heart of what you want to talk about
- Give an understanding of what the interview will be about
- DO NOT GO TOO MUCH IN-DEPTH. KEEP THE MOST THOUGHT-PROVOKING QUESTIONS FRESH FOR THE ON-TAPE INTERVIEW
- Intelligent conversation based on your research about the subject

### 2. Pursuit

- On tape
- Start with letting the subject introduce themselves. Name, title, what do they do. Set your record levels
- Warm-up questions to help both you and subject get a feel
- Start asking prepared questions. LISTEN!!! Don’t just read down prepared questions. Venture into the heart and the mind of the subject
- Ask follow-up questions
- Try to unearth the unusual
- LISTEN!! LISTEN!! LISTEN!!

You are an explorer, and there are awesome uncharted territories within the human heart. You will be amazed at what you can find, but you have to dare to go there, and you have to have the stamina and faith to make the journey.

### 3. Mop-Up

- After the taped interview, in a follow-up conversation or phone call
- Fill in holes in background information
- Clarify understandings
- Verify facts and figures. People get stuff wrong. Give them the chance to set them straight
- If subject expresses concerns about what they said on tape, take notes. Decide later what you use and what not. Balance responsibility to subject and to audience

## Bad habits

- Don't confuse silence with discomfort. Give subject time to think. Watch for distant look and expression on subject's face
- Don't ask multi-barreled questions. Subject will forget beginning and only answer last question
- Don't ask leading, editorializing questions. "What do you think about...?" rather than "Is it not bad to....?" elicits narrow answer, puts words into subject's mouth, decreases subject's respect for interviewer, shows pre-drawn conclusions
- Don't ask assumptive questions. "Isn't it a good time to start..." subject deals with your own assumptions/beliefs rather than his/her own
- Avoid trigger word questions: frustrated, greedy, unfair, etc...
- Avoid biased words: "How have you enjoyed the last days?"
- Avoid endless questions: confuses subject, lets them take advantage by evading, etc.
- Avoid either-or questions. Answer is short, maybe there is another option that you didn't consider

## Some more tips

- Don't be afraid to ask "What do you mean by that?" Clarifies not only for you, but also for audience
- Use "How do you feel?" sparingly and wisely, not without context or because you don't know what else to ask
- Use place-setter before asking "What do you think...?" Better: "When you were...?" Triggers anecdotes
- Be ready to leave the pre-laid path of your prepared questions and venture into unknown territory. Listen actively
- Don't be afraid to use time limits to keep answers concise and linear
- Don't forget your body language! It's your part of the conversation in the audio interview. EYE CONTACT!!!
- Don't be afraid to remind subject of requirement of audio interviews: Can start over again if they make a mistake, respond in whole sentences, repeat questions in answer, etc...
- Don't panic if you made a mistake. Listen to yourself as closely as you listen to your subject. You'll be able to recover from mistakes before the interview is over

Get the "Sound in the Story" handout of the Poynter Institute from  
<http://www.visualedge.org/lessons/SoundStory.pdf>