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Doing Politics

Interviewing the Political Elite: Navigating a Potential Minefield

Darren G. Lilleker

Bournemouth University

Conducting interviews can be a fundamentally important part of a research project that analyses the motivations and activity of those within the political process. However the logistics of interviewing are fraught with a number of serious obstacles and what information one can glean may not always serve the purpose that was originally intended. This article offers some observations gathered from conducting interviews with a wide range of political actors which is intended to help prepare all those considering interviewing for the first time.

During the course of my doctoral research, and as part of my role as research assistant, elite interviewing has been one of the key methodologies employed. In fact when first asked how I intended to discover what motivated radical members of the parliamentary Labour party I responded, somewhat glibly, 'I'll ask them'. This appeared obvious. When one reads many works of political analysis it becomes apparent that many academics have relied upon the elite interview as the staple method for getting inside the subject. Elites can be loosely defined as those with close proximity to power or policymaking; the category would include all elected representatives, executive officers of organisations and senior state employees. Beyond the confines of politics the definition could clearly be broadened out.

The fact that interviews are an integral part of many research projects is apparent if one refers to the preface or the endnotes of many authoritative texts. Here a veritable plethora of household names can be found. However few authors hint of the difficulties that are faced: when locating individuals one feels are imperative for a project; when attempting to obtain answers to the questions one has set, and when dealing with the data gathered from interviews. These, as well as matters of courtesy and legal necessity, are key factors to consider when beginning a programme of interviews. This article aims to offer some pointers to the would-be interviewer.

Why interview the elite?

Before discussing the problems faced when arranging and conducting interviews, it is important to consider whether interviewing is a worthwhile exercise. This is largely dependent on the nature of the research project and on what questions one

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seeks to answer. As Tim May points out, 'interviews yield rich insights into people's biographies, experiences, opinions, values, aspirations, attitudes and feelings' (May, 2001, p. 120), thus 'Warm, vivid contemporary history has almost always been written by authors who have conducted interviews' (Seldon, 1988, p. 9). This would suggest that interviews are only necessitated when a researcher wishes to produce a work with textural depth as well as empirical strength.

Interviews do provide insights into events about which we know little: the activities that take place out of the public or media gaze, behind closed doors. We can learn more about the inner workings of the political process, the machinations between influential actors and how a sequence of events was viewed and responded to within the political machine. Though one has to be aware that some details may be exaggerations or even falsehoods, a point to which we will return, suffice it to say that interviews can provide immense amounts of information that could not be gleaned from official published documents or contemporary media accounts.

Interviewing does have severe limitations however, which means they cannot be relied upon as the sole methodology. The data collected must be reinforced by other forms of empirical data or must be based upon a broad sample of interviews, all conducted with those who enjoyed equal access to the event or activity under focus. For example it would be impossible to discover what took place within a Cabinet meeting simply by asking one Cabinet member. They may offer insights, but could equally exaggerate or downplay their own role. Similarly if one seeks to define the nature of an activity, asking parliamentary questions for example, the number of interviewees must be of a reasonable size and must be representative of the larger body.

Therefore when considering methodological choices it is important to consider what methods are most likely to answer the questions that have been set. If one only seeks simple answers to questions like 'Why do MPs ask questions in parliament', a questionnaire may reach a broader sample and would be more cost-effective than interviewing. A number of interviews may be useful to define what questions work, or what options you wish to provide on the questionnaire, but overall the interview should only be employed if individual insights and rich depth are required. This does have a place in political science, and is not restricted purely to historical or journalistic approaches. Interviews can provide the means for expanding upon data and will add greater depth to a scientific analysis of an event and phenomenon.

Seeking, locating and contacting

Having decided that interviewing is worthwhile to the research project, and having identified potential interviewees, it is then necessary to seek, locate and make contact with those individuals. For those who intend to interview sitting members of parliament (MPs), their lordships, local councillors or members of the parties' organisations the problem of locating them is fairly irrelevant. These can all be located using recognised channels and often can be reached using e-mail. If one wanted to embark on a study of one, or all of this type of individual then it would be a simple procedure to create a standard letter, employ some form of mail-merge

facility and produce the correctly addressed standard letters at the touch of a button.

The greater difficulty arises when one seeks to interview those who are no longer active in public life. These may have been pivotal figures at one time, but have become almost completely untraceable using conventional channels. *Who's Who* can be useful for locating figures formerly in the public eye, while internet search facilities such as www.192.com may have some application for locating people with unusual names, but only if you know where they live; however when locating people such as former Leicester Labour party press officer John Smith, there remain significant obstacles.

The only recourse is to approach those it is possible to locate and attempt to glean from them information on the whereabouts of former colleagues. This can be a highly successful method for locating people. Never underestimate the fact that individuals can remain friends long after they cease working together. But if it remains impossible to locate one person, however pivotal they appear to your research, they may have to be rejected in favour of others who are more accessible.

Once you have begun to locate those who have been identified for interview it is necessary to consider the mode of approach. Whether using e-mail or letter, the written request is usually the best way to establish first contact. Bearing in mind the adage that 'first impressions last', the written request must establish three things:

1 what your research project is about;
2 why you wish to interview them;
3 what questions you are likely to ask.

Explain the nature of the project carefully; ensure it comes across as a sound piece of academic work as this will give you credibility. Explain why the individual is important to your research; this may mean buttering them up: 'as a figure of significant importance within ...', but avoid appearing sycophantic. Finally also give some indication of what sort of questions you want to ask and what the purpose is for your line of inquiry. This gives the impression that you are conducting a well thought out piece of research and also allows them time to consider your questions and prepare answers. This is important if you are interviewing individuals about events of more than 10 years ago; they may need to consult papers, discuss the matter with others, or even consult a history book to remind themselves of a particular event or period. There are a number of caveats that should be kept in mind however.

If the work could be deemed controversial it may be necessary to couch your request in fairly broad terms, providing broad areas rather than specific questions and highlight your target's 'influential role within ...' whatever organisation, rather than asking the individual's position on one particular subject – this could be fitted into the interview if your subject appears receptive. For example, when asking one former MP to discuss his role as chairman of the British–Soviet Friendship Society, the initial inquiry asked for 'an insight into the ideological undercurrents on the left of the Labour party' and emphasised that MP's 'prominent position and long service on the backbenches and within left wing political groups'. Such consider-

ations may not always be appropriate, however; one does have to consider 'will they answer that?'.

How would Paxman deal with this?

The main problem with not fully disclosing the nature of your research is that once the interview is arranged, and you have paid exorbitant sums to travel to the home or office of the interviewee, they may say 'I'm not willing to talk about that' and you find yourself attempting to make the effort and cost worthwhile by pursuing other, tangential avenues of inquiry. Most of the time no researcher should find themselves in this position, but handling an interview can be a very complex business that is often learned through making errors.

The first point to remember is that, under normal circumstances, you have only one opportunity to interview this individual. Preparation is ultra-important and prior to the interview you must research the individual carefully and have drawn up a list of questions that you wish to ask. Sometimes one may find structured questions useful as this will allow answers to be compared. If the interviews are individual-specific a list of headings or objectives are often more appropriate; this will allow the interview to be fluid and organic and the interviewer can alter the line of questioning pragmatically.

Prior to beginning the interview, establish how you wish to record answers; if you intend to record the interviews it may be wiser to mention this in your initial letter. A recording is the most practical method for gathering accurate data, despite the fact that transcribing is time consuming and/or very costly. However the presence of a tape can be inhibiting and so if the material is contentious it may be wiser to consider taking notes only. The main problem with taking notes is accurately recording what is said. If this method is to be used ensure there is sufficient time after the interview for making a more detailed version of your notes, do not rely on memory for longer than a few hours and never try to remember the details from two interviews; this will only result in bastardising the data.

One should also inquire how long the interviewee can spare, then work to that limit. There is nothing worse than running out of time without asking all the questions you needed. That said you will find the interviewee will deviate from the path you have set for the interview and drawing it back on course can be tricky without appearing rude. Never adopt the methods successful for Jeremy Paxman or John Simpson; these work only in the exceptional circumstances of the television or radio studio. It is of far more utility to gain the trust of the interviewee and encourage them to talk freely and openly; this reaps far greater rewards than hammering home 'You have not answered my question!'. At the end of the day the average elite individual has been interviewed by far more persistent interviewers, under far more difficult circumstances.

In order to steer the interview on to the desired course use phrases such as 'That was very interesting, could you elaborate on ...', 'You mentioned/did not mention ...', or 'Going back just a little way, could you comment on ...'. Make sure that they feel you are listening carefully while yourself keeping an eye on your own agenda. If you want to propose a critical view of their activities avoid making that view

your own. You can introduce a criticism with 'I noted an academic/journalist argued ... how do you respond to that?'. State that you would like to understand what their position is, that perhaps you do not accept the criticisms and would value an alternative perspective and, if you feel it appropriate, give the impression that you are on their side. This may encourage them to respond favourably, open up to you and give a good account of, at least, what they thought about the issue and the debates surrounding events. A good interviewer, however, should ensure that a balanced impression is given. It is counterproductive to appear too favourable or too hostile.

The final point on conducting interviews is one that is perhaps specific to academic elite interviews; that is determining who is in charge. Sally Conkright highlights how, in the process of interviewing 11 chief executives of US corporations, many sought to take control of the interview (Seidman, 1998, pp. 89–90). This can involve them ignoring your questions and saying what they want, or them pre-empting questions with: 'Let me say this about ...'. This can say much about the interviewee, and can sometimes throw up interesting details, however it is normally counterproductive to the research process. Taking charge of the situation is difficult; sometimes showing you will not acquiesce by returning to your set of questions will be successful, but in the end the only weapon the academic interviewer has is persistence.

Perceptions, perspectives and the rewriting of history

The chief difficulty with elite interviews is how to interpret the data. In some cases individuals can have very different perceptions of an event. They may have a unique perspective of what the facts are and may also attempt to rewrite history in their own favour. This cannot be reasonably avoided, but if one is aware that it may occur it can be dealt with. I recall a colleague talking on his research into the Suez crisis, conducted during the early 1980s. He was able to interview 13 individuals who had had reasonably prominent roles in determining party and/or government policy. The results were 13 almost completely different perspectives of the event with the majority of interviewees recalling that they had, at the time, voiced 'misgivings'. The question his data begged was: how did the crisis come about when no one agreed with government policy. The answer appeared simple: it was all the fault of British prime minister Anthony Eden; after all he had long since died and could not offer his own defence.

This appears as a fairly humorous anecdote. However, it is natural for individuals to have differing perspectives of events; equally it is also natural for one to distance oneself from disastrous decisions, regardless of their magnitude. The nuances that can occur between hard fact and an individual's perception can create problems, particularly if the area under research has had little prior attention. The only safeguards are to attempt to corroborate facts, where possible, using primary or secondary sources and to compare the results gained systematically. In a recent edition of *Politics*, Phil H. J. Davies offered one solution to avoiding errors: triangulation. This means cross-referencing data you have collected from interviews rigorously, firstly with data obtained from published first-hand accounts or other documentary sources, and secondly with published secondary source material

(Davies, 2001, pp. 77–79). This still may leave a degree of uncertainty as to which facts are accurate, or even the most reliable. The contrasts in interviewees' perceptions may in themselves be worth noting, showing how there are alternative perspectives. The data may also be used to denote nuances between your and previous analyses in the area. Whatever your analysis does produce one has to be aware that you cannot base a conclusion upon the recollections of any one individual any more than you would base history on a single autobiography. This highlights Davies's conclusion that 'if any particular version of events is to be adopted and presented as probably accurate ... there must be strong, clearly defined and articulated criteria for making that judgement' (Davies, 2001, p. 79).

Those interviewed probably do not intend to deceive. The memory can be a deceptive tool at the best of times, and it is often difficult for anyone to remember exact dates, places, names or suchlike over long periods of time. Therefore even simple facts need to be checked. I owe a debt of gratitude to a member of a conference panel who pointed out that one MP mentioned in my paper could not have stood in the constituency I stated, in the year I had said, as it did not exist. This was true; my interviewee had innocently got the wrong year and my initial trust in his memory (not to mention my laziness in not checking it immediately) was an error. Sometimes you may find it necessary to insert a 'get-out clause' by saying 'according to ...' or '... recalled that', then if someone does know otherwise blame does not immediately rest with the writer. This of course depends upon the magnitude of the error. The important point would be that one should never rely on an interviewee to provide a key fact on which your conclusion hinges. If uncorroborated this would be highly unreliable and could become your proverbial albatross when proven inaccurate.

This all appears to lead to the conclusion that interviews produce data that is so unreliable that the process is probably not worth pursuing. This is not the argument being put forward. However, when interviewing, one must ensure that one has as good a knowledge of the facts as is possible from existing primary or secondary sources, and one should have detailed knowledge of the interviewee, particularly their role within the event or activity being studied. Thus the interview must take place towards the end of the research programme. This may not be possible or appropriate for all research projects, however where possible a researcher should enter an interview with as good a command of the facts as they can have. Not only does this make them appear credible, it also ensures that the interviewee cannot offer a completely false account of events without being questioned.

But don't quote me on that!

The final area of real concern is how to reference data gained from interviews. If all those who agreed to be interviewed also agreed to go 'on the record', tell the full story regardless and be recorded for posterity, no researcher would have any problem. Sadly the reverse is far too often the case. There are stories of researchers conducting interviews while en route between buildings, being given a number of very controversial accounts of events, only to be told that if the interviewee's name appears in print a lawsuit may follow. This is, of course, an extreme example, but

do not for one minute believe that it could never happen. Therefore it is often necessary to prepare for the latter while fervently praying that all your targets will opt for the former.

The normal situation is somewhere in the middle. Sitting MPs, or those still active in politics, will happily go on record to an extent. They may be willing to give off-tape comments that are unattributable, but largely it is possible to record their participation and quote them where you feel it appropriate or necessary. Often you will find that you will have a reasonably open, taped interview, which is followed by a number of off-tape remarks that are more important than anything previously said. Such instances emphasise the importance of being able to scribble these remarks down, once out of eyeshot, and then record them to be used preceded by 'As one former minister said ...'. One thing to keep in focus is that if you promise anonymity you must give anonymity and if you leave the option open it is often best to ask 'can I quote you on that?'

There are those who show extreme caution when under interview. They may also ask for a full transcription of the interview for them to approve. It is only courteous to fulfil such requests even though that does mean having to transcribe the interview verbatim. However if things are said off the record do remember them. These are the gems that often give an argument kudos and credibility; they may not be the ultimate foundation for a grand theory but they make a work entertaining. The more controversial the research the less response you will get and fewer of those who do respond will be willing to speak entirely on the record. This is a commonly recognised law of research interviews. Sometimes former MPs and retired political actors are the only individuals who will respond. One must take whoever one can get, interview them at their convenience and just hope the results are useful.

On a positive note

It is reasonable for a researcher to have grave doubts about the utility of interviewing. These will be compounded by the trouble incurred finding agreeable interviewees, the extensive preparation involved and the cost of travelling to inconvenient destinations, only to find they may be unwilling to answer your questions. They could provide an answer marred by hindsight and, if they do give you the facts you want, they may well tell you not to quote them. However, if there are areas within your research that are sketchy, or have not been covered previously, often the best way of filling these gaps is by interviewing. After all, no one is able to offer the level of knowledge of an issue or aspect of government as one deeply involved within that area. While few politicians are specialists, many do hold specialist knowledge of procedures, policymaking and of course are the only source for information on their own activities and motivations. Much of what occurs in politics is 'off-stage' and is either unrecorded or it is locked away under a 30 or 50-year rule and therefore inaccessible. Thus making contact with those within the political process is often the only way of uncovering details about your area of research. Also, and despite the obstacles, it is a highly enjoyable activity. Whether you love or hate your interviewees, the experience of meeting them gives colour to your writing. Following interviews it is often no longer possible to accept

black and white analyses of events or people; instead you accept that there were at least different perspectives, if not also different yet valid versions of a story. Overlaying these with the various debates on issues and events can provide a very richly textured analysis.

Of course interviews are not appropriate for every research project. Also they may be prohibitively expensive or assessed to be of potentially little value. This is a decision for the researcher only. Therefore, this article is not intended to deter anyone from or encourage anyone towards interviewing, only to prepare them for the pitfalls that I personally faced. Neither is this article an exhaustive guide to successful interviewing. Research training, provided in all universities, is an invaluable resource, as is the advice of more senior academics. For those who are extremely serious about interviewing in a professional way, training courses are available, though university-based research training is usually of high quality and conducted by someone experienced in the area. This article does, however, forewarn those starting out interviewing of what could go wrong and how to avoid mistakes before it is too late.

Many, like me, do learn by their mistakes regardless of training. This is mainly because of the formal setting and broad sweep adopted in research training programmes. Often seeking the advice of those who have conducted interviews, discussing your own interview programme, aims and strategies on a one-to-one basis can be highly beneficial. This article is intended to supplement such a discussion. The basic laws I would offer are: be tactful when seeking interviewees' co-operation; be well prepared and well organised, and try to project the right image: in other words be confident, knowledgeable and professional. Interviewing is a challenge, but it can also be highly rewarding, and including interview data can enhance a published work. However it must be approached with caution to ensure that, when you reach the stage of writing up your research, the data is reliable, relevant and usable.

Notes

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