

## Qualitative Methods Beyond the Recipe Book: Teaching How to Conduct Interviews

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## Political Communication Report Summer 2025 - Issue 31 “Teaching Political Communication”

### Qualitative Methods Beyond the Recipe Book: Teaching How to Conduct Interviews<sup>1</sup>

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Methods are often taught like recipes, and qualitative methods are no exception. Take interviews. Most of the commonly used texts in classes on this topic share a common structure. Starting with a research question, they proceed through various stages: sampling and recruitment, designing and piloting questionnaires, conducting interviews, transcribing and analyzing data, writing up the results<sup>2</sup>. Each of these steps can be approached in various ways, and the best texts provide insights into their respective strengths and limitations. But the overall logic is that of a recipe book: follow the guidelines, get the expected result.

This approach is both important and misleading. It demystifies the research process, showing the concrete steps involved in moving from project idea to practical implementation. This is no small feat and mitigates against the still-too-common tendency toward crypticism in the description of analytical decisions in qualitative research<sup>3</sup>. But interviews are also social relations (Bourdieu, 1996). Unlike recipes, which should work regardless of the person cooking, interviews are done by social agents that occupy specific positions (e.g., professor, student, journalist, politician, each with their own biographies and trajectories). These positions shape the very discourses produced in interviews. Accounting for their effect, therefore, ought to be a basic feature of interviewing pedagogy.

#### “Review your definitions!”

A simple example can illustrate the idea and apply it to those who study political communication. In our comparative analysis of political journalists in France and the United States, Sandra Vera-Zambrano and I did pilot interviews with reporters in both countries. One

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<sup>2</sup> Weiss (1994) remains the classic overview; for an example of a more recent work with a similar structure, see Edwards and Holland (2023).

<sup>3</sup> The classic example is analysis of interview data, where readers are told that findings “emerged from the data.”

question we asked was whether they had received pay for their work. This question was motivated by extant scholarship that finds a growth in unpaid labor for such journalists in both Western Europe and North America (Chadna and Steiner, 2022). This scholarship is part of the discourse that shapes academic understandings of political journalism. It's available to those who have access to libraries that subscribe to research journals and hold positions that afford the time to read such research.

This academic discourse sometimes clashed with journalists' own discourses. In France, for example, one person took exception to the question itself. "It's not journalism if one is not paid," she responded. "You have to review your definitions!"

What's important to know is that political journalists in France *do* engage in unpaid labor, especially early in their careers. In fact, the number of internships that an aspiring journalist does has been growing steadily over time (LaFarge and Marchetti, 2011; Powers and Vera-Zambrano, 2023). But these internships are not seen as experiences in professional journalism. They are seen, instead, as preparation for experience in professional journalism. Therefore, we had to change the question in France to ask whether political reporters did internships before becoming professional journalists.

This is a simple but telling example. Especially in the early stages of the project, it is common to have awkward experiences in interviews because the researcher is moving between academic scholarship (and its discourses) and the worlds of the interviewees (and their discourses). Pilot interviews, for good reason, are part of the recipe for identifying these problems. But the source of the problem lay elsewhere – in the two social worlds and their distance.

### **Making Common**

Seen as a social relation, the purpose of interviews can be stated as an effort to communicate – literally, to “make common,” in the etymological sense of the term. What is being made common via the interview is the definition of the social phenomenon under investigation.

This sounds easy but is tough to do. You cannot simply ask your research question, as it is posed in the scholarly literature, and expect your interviewees to give coherent or meaningful responses. It also takes work because it is easy to accept the discourses that interviewees provide in their responses as truth, rather than as a starting point from which we can construct a shared understanding. This is the kernel of truth in the recurrent criticism that interviews equate what people say with what they do (Jerolmack and Khan, 2014; Ryfe, 2018). Rather than abandon the technique, it invites us to do better interviews.

Early in the research project mentioned above, Sandra and I examined the formation of online political news sites in France and the United States.<sup>4</sup> We knew there were a lot in the US and surprisingly few in France, especially outside of Paris. We wanted to ascertain why this was the case. Interviews with people who founded online sites were one part of our research strategy to answer the question.

Below is the response we received when asking a political journalist (male, 40s, who worked previously in the state capital of Olympia, Washington) about the initial idea for his startup. Note how stylized his response is.

I'd been at [local newspaper] for 9 years and, you know, that's a good run. Like any long run, I had plusses and minuses. So I kind of left it like, "yeah, it's time to get out of here!"

And that era—the 2008/2009 time—was the beginning of the great recession... People were freaking out about the death of newspapers... For people that have just grown up like me with newspapers and had never... envision this new world. It was kind of scary and exciting.

So those two things coalesced, and there was just this kind of clear opportunity to report on Olympia. So I just saw an opportunity to, well, start a site that covered Olympia.... That's the genesis of it.

This is a narrative that frames his decision to form a startup primarily as a brave individual decision. One could stop there, and say that online-only political news sites are formed by brave individuals in turbulent moments. It wouldn't be untrue. But it would simply reproduce the respondent's own definition of startup formation.

We knew, based on prior scholarly research (i.e., our discourse), that some hypotheses about startup formation highlighted individual traits like business acumen and technical skill. So we followed up and pushed him to be more specific.

*So you started the site in January 2009. How did you do the basic stuff like find office space or funding? Can you take me through those steps?*

God, I have to remember this to be accurate here! Ok, so I knew a couple of wealthier people, some people who had money... and were fans of my work, liked me, and trusted me as a journalist. One of them wrote me this check so I could basically live for, you know, about 3 months, and make rent. I remember now those days...

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<sup>4</sup> Powers and Vera-Zambrano (2016)

Here we are beginning to “make common” our understanding of the formation of online only political news sites. He is telling us that he had social networks that gave him access to funding, and that these networks were based partly on being recognized as a “good” journalist. Notice that “making common” is not proving pre-existing scholarly hypotheses right or mechanically applying some theoretical precepts. In this study, actually, we end up learning that business acumen and technology skills are relatively unimportant. Instead, social networks and peer recognition matter more.

Also notice his very first response to the question. “God, I have to remember this to be accurate!” This suggests that this is not the narrative he is used to telling, and that one implication of our effort to “make common” is to get interviewees to lose control of their stylized discourses.

### **Competence and Reflexivity**

The recipe approach to teaching interviews cultivates an important form of procedural competence. Without it, students would be far less equipped to carry out qualitative research. But this approach also risks conferring an illusory stability, as if good results stem from following a series of steps. In reality, interviews are encounters among agents located in specific social fields, each with its own hierarchies, discourses and stakes. To treat interviews as an effort to “make common” is to take seriously the social dimension of these encounters.

The pedagogical implications of this perspective are straightforward. Because interviews are social relations, interviews themselves cannot disclose the relational world behind the person talking. You cannot, in other words, get the interviewee to provide more or better information unless you know what kind of information you want. This requires all sorts of legwork both before and after the interview itself. It entails knowing the state of the academic literature, of course. It also requires the existence of some theoretical principles that guide the interviewer in the very questions they bother to ask. And it entails a constant theorization of the interview itself – i.e., an understanding of what the respondent understands herself to be answering. Those issues aren’t typically part of the standard recipe book approach. But it doesn’t make them any less central to an effective interview.

In this sense, interviewing is not only a communicative act but a reflexive one. It is the product of negotiation, itself ongoing, between what the researcher knows and what the interviewee reveals. At their best, interviews are not mere techniques for extracting data – though that’s certainly one use. They are also moments of discovery, where both parties move beyond the surface answers to create a common understanding of the phenomena under investigation. To do this, one needs to grasp the social positions that shape the very possibility of “making common” in the first place. In other words, we make common by recognizing that interviews—whatever their other virtues and vices—are, at their core, social relations.

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