

The Interviewer's Questioning Strategies and the Art of Listening in Talk Shows

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ABSTRACT

Interview programmes centre on the dialogue and interaction between the host and guests, with the host's questioning and listening skills being pivotal to the quality of the conversation. Currently, some interview programmes suffer from homogenised questioning and superficial listening, failing to meet audience expectations. This paper, grounded in the perspective of broadcasting and presenting, focuses on interview scenarios to examine the transformative logic of shifting questioning from 'unidirectional inquiry' to 'two-way empathy' and listening from 'passive waiting' to 'active engagement'. It explores their reciprocal relationship: listening anchors questioning to its core purpose whilst preventing deviation, and questioning deepens listening by uncovering underlying information. It provides theoretical reference and practical insights for optimising interview communication strategies and enhancing dialogue quality for presenters.

KEYWORDS

Presenter; Interview programme; Questioning strategy; Active listening

1 Introduction

As a television format that seamlessly blends information delivery with emotional resonance, interview programmes have produced numerous representative works throughout their evolution in both content and form. Examples include The Three-Person Talk, Roundtable Talk, and Thirteen Invitations. Whether cultural dialogue programmes or character-focused interviews centred on individual narratives, both have cultivated a solid audience base through their high-calibre dialogue design and production standards. The success of these programmes hinges on the presenters' masterful command of questioning and listening. In fact, the art of questioning and listening in interviews transcends mere verbal exchange; it constitutes a professional practice that integrates psychology, communication studies, and interpersonal skills. The host must possess the ability to think on their feet, precisely timing, framing and delivering questions to propel the conversation naturally and deeply. They must also be an acute listener, discerning the underlying emotions and deeper meanings behind the guests' words, and responding appropriately to sustain the discussion. However, some programmes still suffer from an imbalance where they prioritise posing questions over attentive listening. They may either resort to one-sided questioning with predetermined answers, rendering the dialogue superficial, or fail to delve into substance due to insufficient engagement. This paper, grounded in the perspective of broadcasting and hosting studies, focuses on the practices of questioning and listening by presenters. It analyses the transformative logic and pathways for enhancing these skills, offering insights for creating high-quality interviews and advancing professional competence.

2 Questioning: from 'one-way inquiry' to 'two-way empathy' — infusing questions with humanity

2.1 Anti-formulaic questioning: eschewing preset standard answers

In today's media landscape, where interview formats grow increasingly diverse and audience expectations continually rise, a presenter's questioning ability has become a crucial benchmark for programme quality. For a long time, many interviews have been mired in the predicament of 'predetermined answers' and 'routine responses,' struggling to evoke profound resonance. For presenters seeking to stand out, cultivating a distinctive personal style is paramount. Many opt for counterintuitive questioning—a technique that demands abandoning the mechanical repetition of conventional Q&A formats. Instead, it requires reconstructing the dialogue through sincerity, empathy, and independent thought, thereby accessing the guest's authentic emotional landscape.

Dong Qian's interview with Paris Olympic champion Quan Hongchan on Face to Face provided a clear model for unconventional questioning. Rather than asking the newly crowned gold medallist the usual question about how it felt to stand on the podium, she instead inquired whether there had been mornings when exhaustion made getting out of bed difficult. This line of questioning, which stepped away from the champion's halo and avoided formulaic expressions, directly tapped into the athlete's everyday reality. Quan Hongchan's response was equally forthright: 'The alarm went off but I stayed in bed, feeling utterly knackered.' This unvarnished candour stripped the interview of any pretence of polite

pleasantries. Dong Qian then pressed further, asking, 'Do you consider yourself a genius?' thereby challenging the prevailing notion that champions must be naturally gifted. Quan Hongchan answered earnestly: 'I believe that moment when you've executed a jump perfectly and completed your training is when you truly become a genius. In truth, every athlete trains with immense dedication; I could call each and every one of them a genius.' Her clear-headed statement revealed a level of reflection beyond her years. Through these conversations, the audience sees not the rigid image imposed by the "champion" label, but ordinary young people who experience fatigue and possess independent judgement. The essence of counter-conventional questioning lies in the host setting aside the guest's social status and aura, focusing instead on their genuine human experience. Dong Qian eschews grand narratives in favour of focusing on the individual, lending emotional depth to her interviews while enhancing their communicative impact. This approach to questioning represents not merely an innovation in conversational technique, but a profound respect for humanity and an unwavering commitment to authenticity. Only through such an ethos can communication achieve its deeper purpose.

2.2 Dynamic questioning: adjusting in line with the flow of the conversation

In interview programmes, interviewees possess diverse personalities and exhibit varying degrees of emotionality and rationality in their understanding of questions and subsequent responses. Consequently, presenters must tailor their questioning style to each interviewee's individual character. This approach fosters a conducive interview atmosphere, enables better control over the interview's pacing, guides the conversation's direction, and ultimately achieves the desired interview outcome^[1].

Prior to the interview, the host must undertake thorough preparation, clarifying the logical structure of the core topics. This enables them to swiftly identify relevant points when the guest improvises, thereby guiding the conversation with composure. More importantly, presenters must learn to listen attentively, discerning shifts in tone and fluctuations in emotion within a guest's speech. These nuances often convey more information than the words themselves. When the other person deliberately slows their speech or becomes lost in thought, they may be touching upon significant matters. At such times, appropriate follow-up or empathetic responses can elicit more genuine expressions.

The essence of dynamic questioning lies in mastering the balance between posing questions and allowing space for reflection. Should a guest stray from the topic, the host must skilfully steer them back to the main thread; whereas when the guest enters a state of profound expression, the host should step back, using encouraging words to create room for their thoughts to unfold. This adaptability does not rely on fixed techniques, but rather stems from the host's respect and understanding of the guests. Only by keenly sensing the atmosphere on the ground can an interview maintain its central thread while preserving genuine emotional expression, ultimately forging a dialogue that is both profound and warm.

2.3 Detail-anchoring: Using a small entry point to introduce a larger topic

In interview programmes, grand themes often fail to resonate with guests and audiences due to their vague presentation. If the host can pinpoint the subtle nuances within a guest's remarks, they can both ground the conversation and seamlessly transition to deeper topics. This is the essence of detail anchoring—using specific details as anchor points to allow broader themes to emerge from tangible minutiae, thereby evolving from one-way questioning towards mutual empathy.

Effective moderation often avoids posing abstract or general questions directly. Instead, it selects distinctive personal details from the guest's discourse, behaviour, or background as the basis for questioning, thereby guiding the conversation towards deeper exploration. Dong Qing's interviews with guests on *The Reader* are imbued with such wisdom. When the ninety-six-year-old Xu Yuanzhong appeared as a guest on the programme, a business card bearing the inscription 'Over a hundred books sold worldwide; the sole translator of poetry into English and French' stood out conspicuously. These words carried conviction, yet could not help but strike one as rather blunt. Dong Qing, however, did not shy away from this directness. Instead, she took it as her anchor and spoke softly: "Your card states 'the sole translator of poetry into English and French'. Are you not concerned that when you present it, others might wonder why Mr Xu would make such a claim?" This question both acknowledged the facts and offered the guest room to elaborate. Mr Xu Yuanzhong smiled upon hearing this, and following the thread of the conversation, he recounted the origins of this phrase. He extended from the factual basis of the expression to his personal experiences and steadfast commitment throughout his translation career, thereby giving concrete form to the grand theme of 'the translator's faith'. The value of this approach to questioning lies not only in enhancing the credibility and immersive quality of the dialogue, but also in using the guest's genuine experiences as a bridge. This avoids an abrupt introduction to the topic, fostering a more relaxed and open atmosphere for the interview. Guests need not conform to a predetermined questioning framework, but rather respond based on their own experiences, allowing genuine emotions and insights to emerge naturally.

3 Listening: from passive waiting to active response—making listening meaningful

3.1 Observational listening: capturing emotions beyond words

In interview settings, observational listening demands not only that the host accurately capture the guest's verbal cues, but also keenly discern the non-verbal signals concealed beneath their words—be it the subtle shifts in micro-expressions, the unconscious changes in body language, or the abrupt fluctuations in speech rhythm. These nuances often reveal the guest's true emotions more profoundly than explicit statements. Guests in interviews often conceal their true feelings due to concerns about their status, contextual constraints, or emotional restraint. At such times, observation becomes the key to penetrating the “filter of expression”. For instance, when a guest suddenly slows their speech, lowers their voice, or unconsciously avoids eye contact—even if their verbal delivery remains steady—these signals subtly betray their emotional fluctuations. The ability to detect such nuances directly determines the host's depth of understanding regarding the guest's psychological state. The core value of observational listening lies in constructing a comprehensive understanding of the guest's emotional state through the dual integration of verbal and non-verbal cues. This approach to listening enables the host to pose more targeted follow-up questions, thereby breaking down barriers to expression for the guest. Effective listening is not passive reception but an active, interactive behaviour. It enhances the depth and authenticity of the interview, opening up greater possibilities for dialogue.

3.2 Reflective listening: fostering dialogue through response

True professional listening extends beyond mere hearing; it lies in providing effective feedback after genuine comprehension—this constitutes the core function of responsive listening. It requires the host to transcend conventional roles, capturing not only the guests' verbal messages but also the emotional threads woven between the lines. Through warm, insightful responses, they build bridges of psychological resonance, elevating the dialogue from superficial exchange to profound engagement. This form of listening requires the host to first calmly analyse the core meaning conveyed by the guest, then use more precise language to connect the scattered information and implicit emotions before feeding this back to the guest. This sense of being understood is precisely the key to encouraging guests to open up further. To achieve this, the host must maintain intense focus, discerning emotional points worthy of deeper exploration amidst the guest's fragmented expressions. Crucially, they must abandon any air of dominance, adopting instead an equal and sincere stance of dialogue to cultivate a safe environment where the guest feels empowered to confront their innermost thoughts. The genuine humanistic concern of interview programmes manifests not merely in satisfying the audience's informational needs, but more importantly in delving deeply into the emotions, thoughts and personalities of the subjects. Such care should not only convey positive cultural values to the audience, but also empower the powerless, instil confidence in the pessimistic, and offer hope to the despairing ^[2].

In the third season of *Talking to Strangers*, the episode titled ‘A Beijing Drifter Girl's Hardcore Revenge Against a “Pig Butchering Scheme”’ featured host Chen Xiaonan demonstrating how responsive listening can deepen dialogue through nuanced, reflective engagement. When guest Zhao Jing recounted her experience of reporting a fraudster and witnessing his arrest, her emotions were deeply complex: ‘His gaze was quite terrifying at the time—it felt like the kind of look that radiates pure hatred towards you.’ Chen Xiaonan refrained from pressing for specifics, merely responding softly, ‘That feeling of sudden clarity’—not an interrogation, but rather a way of articulating the unspoken emotions for Zhao Jing, letting her know she had grasped that complexity ‘I thought only I understood.’ Subsequently, as Zhao Jing continued describing her ‘dreamlike’ state, even descending into self-doubt about whether she too was a fraud, Chen Xiaonan refrained from hastily reassuring her with ‘you're not wrong.’ Instead, she offered just two words: ‘Quite contradictory.’ This brief response, seemingly understated, precisely captured the inner turmoil within Zhao Jing. It allowed her to lower her guard and reveal her deeper feelings.

From an industry perspective, the value of responsive listening extends far beyond producing a single high-quality programme; it fundamentally reshapes the dynamic between presenters and guests. In this format, the interview ceases to be a scripted “question-and-answer” session dictated by the host, but rather a dialogue between two independent individuals conducted on the basis of mutual respect. Each response from the host serves both as a mark of respect for the guest's narrative agency and as a precise steering of the conversation's direction—transforming the guest from an interviewee into a storyteller, and elevating the dialogue from mere information exchange to a collision of emotions and ideas. This capacity for listening that transcends mere technical proficiency is precisely the embodiment of a media professional's expertise and humanistic concern. It demonstrates that high-quality interviews often draw out genuine responses through sincere engagement, offering a valuable model of deep communication for contemporary interview programmes.

3.3 Inclusive listening: allowing space for expression

In interview programmes, inclusive listening serves as the bedrock for hosts to build rapport with guests. Its essence lies not in hastily driving the conversation forward, but in embracing the natural flow of expression with an open attitude. Through patience, it creates a safe space for guests to reveal their genuine thoughts and emotions, refraining from interrupting their train of thought or rushing to fill pauses.

In the programme *Thirteen Invitations*, Xu Zhiyuan's interview with Mr Hsu Chao-yun exemplified the qualities of inclusive listening. When Xu Zhiyuan asked, 'Looking back, what is your greatest regret?' Xu Zhuoyun did not respond immediately, but fell into a prolonged silence. His gaze seemed to pierce through time and space, returning to bygone years. At this juncture, Xu Zhiyuan did not break the silence with a new topic, nor did he disrupt the atmosphere by urging a response. Instead, he waited quietly, relinquishing the initiative of the conversation entirely to the other party. After a long pause, Xu Zhuoyun spoke slowly, his voice breaking as he uttered, 'But alas, I shall not see the nine provinces united.' His emotions were already surging. Xu Zhiyuan still refrained from pressing for details, allowing the other person to narrate freely from their emotions. Even when Xu Zhuoyun's subsequent account became somewhat disjointed due to heightened emotion, he maintained his restraint and did not interrupt. This form of listening is fundamentally the host's respect for and empathy with the guest's rhythm of expression—refraining from forced intervention or hasty steering, allowing the guest to follow their own train of thought and emotions, touching upon the tender depths of their innermost being. It is precisely for this reason that interviews can transcend superficial exchanges to touch upon deeper, more authentic content, endowing the dialogue with a power that resonates profoundly with the human spirit.

4 Questioning and listening: The dialogue logic of mutual engagement

An interview is not a monologue, but a dialogue in which the host and guest jointly weave meaning. What makes an excellent interview programme so compelling is precisely the virtuous "two-way engagement" formed between questioning and listening. The host should neither be a mechanical questioner nor a passive listener, but rather switch flexibly between the two roles, guiding the conversation to greater depth and encouraging genuine expression from the guests.

4.1 Listening to guide the direction of questioning

Listening constitutes a vital component of interpersonal communication, with the communicator and listener forming the two fundamental prerequisites for its establishment. Larry King, the renowned talk show host of Cable News Network (CNN), once observed: 'The cardinal rule of interviewing is to listen.' In interview programmes, a host's adeptness at listening, coupled with timely and accurate responses, facilitates the progression of the conversation and fosters emotional resonance^[3].

Truly effective questioning is never based on a pre-prepared script, but rather on the host's wholehearted listening throughout the dialogue. This form of listening focuses not only on verbal content but also encompasses non-verbal cues such as tone, rhythm, pauses, evasions and repetitions, thereby capturing the guest's genuine emotions and underlying intentions. It is precisely through perceiving these subtle nuances that the host can promptly adjust their questioning strategy, tailoring queries to align with the guest's train of thought and emotional trajectory, thereby posing more targeted and genuinely "lively" questions.

In the interview with Yu Haoming featured in *Standpoint*, Yi Lijing masterfully exemplifies this logic of 'listening-oriented questioning'. When Yu Haoming recounted his burn rehabilitation journey, Yi Lijing did not dwell on superficial sympathy for his "suffering". Instead, through the emotional fluctuations and rhythmic shifts in his narrative, she discerned his struggle in confronting trauma, his efforts to adjust his mindset, and the inner journey of ultimately achieving self-reconstruction. Through this attentive listening, her questioning ceased to be fragmented inquiries, instead following Yu Haoming's psychological trajectory layer by layer, ultimately guiding him towards an expression that combined personal depth with social resonance. It is evident, therefore, that listening effectively anchors the direction of questioning. It demands that the host maintain acute perceptiveness in following the guest's discourse, transforming each response into a basis for adjusting the conversation's trajectory. This ensures that questioning truly becomes the pivotal link connecting superficial narratives to deeper thoughts.

4.2 Questions deepen listening

Listening paves the way for dialogue in an interview, while questioning serves as the driving force propelling this conversation towards deeper exploration. It not only receives the information captured through listening, but also actively transcends the superficial boundaries of communication, elevating dialogue from mere information exchange to a more

insightful collision of ideas. Poorly crafted questions can easily stall a conversation. When discussing personal growth, for instance, asking 'Were you under a lot of pressure at the time?' typically elicits only a brief 'Yes' or "No" in response. However, reframing the question to 'How did that experience influence your subsequent choices?' can guide the guest to reflect on their journey, revealing the thought processes and transformations that occurred along the way. Only such precise and thought-provoking questions can provide the host with richer, more substantive content to underpin their listening. At the same time, questioning also serves to filter and focus during the listening process. When confronted with diverse or even fragmented information in a guest's statements, the host may employ targeted follow-up questions to distil key points from lengthy narratives and delve deeper into the subject matter. Moreover, posing questions can regulate the pace of an interview—using relaxed queries at opportune moments to help the guest unwind, or employing focused follow-up questions to guide their concentration, thereby creating conditions for more effective listening. It is evident that posing questions is not a passive act of listening, but rather an active approach to deepening and broadening understanding. It enables the host to possess the ability to organise the flow of conversation, strategically steering the discussion through probing questions, ultimately creating an effective space for intellectual exchange and emotional engagement.

5 Conclusions

As a human-centred form of media, interview programmes not only convey the genuine emotions and reflections of their guests but also respond to viewers' curiosity and concerns about the world. The host's questions serve as keys to unlocking understanding, while listening acts as a bridge for building resonance. These two elements do not exist in isolation but form a dynamic, interactive dialogue logic characterised by mutual engagement. An excellent interview stems from the mutual reinforcement of precise questioning and profound listening. The host must steer the conversation with insightful questions while also capturing subtle emotions beyond words through attentive and perceptive listening. It is precisely through this interplay of questioning and listening that interviews transcend mere Q&A, becoming a form of communication that touches the soul and sparks reflection. Only by striking a balance between incisive inquiry and empathetic warmth can an interview transcend mere dialogue to become a vessel for capturing the spirit of the times and sparking public reflection. This is precisely why such programmes retain their distinctive appeal within the media landscape.

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