

The Psychology of Interviewing: Psychological techniques for revealing authentic narratives

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Abstract

This study explores interviewing as not merely a journalistic tool but a complex psychological interaction shaped by trust, empathy, and ethical responsibility. Drawing upon more than one thousand interviews conducted across diverse sociocultural and political contexts, the article systematizes key techniques that contribute to uncovering authentic narratives. The research applies a qualitative, autoethnographic methodology, supported by thematic coding of transcripts and field observations. The findings identify a set of effective practices, including active listening, strategic use of silence, open-ended questioning, interviewer's emotional self-regulation, trauma-informed approaches, overcoming impression-management strategies of public figures, and adherence to ethical standards. These techniques are not universal, but they demonstrate consistent patterns in facilitating disclosure, structuring narratives, and reducing communication barriers. The discussion relates these findings to existing psychological theories, including Rogers' empathic listening, Goffman's self-presentation, and trauma-informed frameworks, while emphasizing the ethical dimension of journalism as a resource for building trust and safeguarding informants. The study contributes to bridging journalism and psychology, offering both practitioners and researchers insights into the integration of psychological approaches into journalistic practice.

Keywords: Interviewing; Psychology of Communication; Empathic Listening; Trauma-Informed Journalism; Self-Presentation; Media Ethics

1. Introduction

The interview is one of the key methods of gathering information in journalism; however, its effectiveness directly depends on the quality of interaction between the interviewer and the respondent. Despite the apparent simplicity of this genre, numerous studies in the field of communication psychology indicate that a respondent's answers are shaped not only by content, but also by their emotional state, level of trust, and perception of the situation [1]. In this regard, the past decades have witnessed growing interest in the integration of psychological approaches into journalistic practice.

The problem of reliability in interviews is complex. On the one hand, the journalist seeks to obtain factually accurate information; on the other, respondents often construct defensive strategies, reproduce socially expected narratives, or use stereotypical responses. This is especially evident in situations involving trauma survivors or public figures inclined toward strategic self-presentation [2,3]. In such cases, traditional interviewing techniques prove insufficient for uncovering deeper meanings and authentic personal experiences.

The scientific and practical significance of this study lies in the fact that in today's media environment, interviews often shape public perception of social and political processes. The use of psychological techniques not only enhances the

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reliability of information but also minimizes the risk of secondary traumatization of respondents, which aligns with professional ethical standards [6].

The purpose of this article is to analyze the psychological aspects of interviewing and to systematize techniques aimed at eliciting authentic narratives. Unlike purely methodological manuals, the emphasis here is placed on combining practical journalistic experience with psychological concepts, which allows us to view the interview as a specific form of interpersonal interaction, in which not only questions and answers are important, but also the emotional, cognitive, and ethical dimensions of communication.

2. Literature review

Issues of interviewing in journalism are traditionally examined within an interdisciplinary field that brings together communication psychology, media theory, and trauma studies. Both classical and contemporary works demonstrate that the effectiveness of an interview is determined not only by the technique of formulating questions, but also by the quality of interpersonal interaction between interviewer and informant.

Significant attention in the literature is devoted to the concept of empathic listening, developed by C. Rogers within the framework of client-centered therapy [1]. According to his approach, effective interaction is based on the unconditional acceptance of the interlocutor, the reflection of their feelings, and the creation of an atmosphere of trust. The transfer of these ideas into journalistic practice is seen as a way of overcoming formal or defensive responses from respondents and obtaining more reliable narratives. Contemporary research in narrative psychology confirms that empathic listening facilitates deeper self-disclosure and the formation of more complete autobiographical accounts [5].

Another important direction concerns studies of the impact of trauma on memory reproduction. The works of J. Herman [3] and B. van der Kolk [4] show that individuals who have experienced traumatic events tend to reproduce them in fragmented or non-linear form, often accompanied by emotional “numbing.” In such cases, traditional linear methods of interviewing prove ineffective, and there arises the need for trauma-informed approaches. The academic literature emphasizes that such approaches include the recognition of the informant’s right to pauses, respect for the sequence they themselves choose, and the necessity of granting control over the interview process.

The theory of self-presentation proposed by E. Goffman [2] is of particular importance for analyzing interviews with public figures, as it interprets communication as a process of impression management. In this context, interviewing is presented not only as an act of information transfer, but also as a form of social interaction in which the respondent constructs a particular image for the audience. This makes it necessary to identify discrepancies between the “official” and “personal” narratives, which is further confirmed by studies on the strategic construction of identity in public communications.

Finally, modern journalistic literature emphasizes the ethical standards of conducting interviews. According to the approaches of B. Kovach and T. Rosenstiel [6], the key principle is the minimization of potential harm to the informant while maintaining the public significance of the material. An additional contribution to this field was made by the work of S. Ward [7], which substantiated the necessity of combining society’s right to information with respect for the autonomy of the individual and their right to control over their personal story.

Thus, the analysis of existing literature makes it possible to highlight three theoretical blocks most relevant to this study: the concept of empathic listening, trauma-informed approaches, and the theory of self-presentation. Their combination forms the theoretical foundation for analyzing the practical techniques applied in journalistic interviewing and allows us to consider the interview not only as a method of data collection, but also as a complex psychological interaction.

3. Methodology

This study was conducted within the framework of a qualitative approach, focused on identifying meanings and patterns in the process of interviewing. This choice is determined by the fact that the subject of analysis is related not so much to quantitative indicators as to the characteristics of perception, psychological interaction, and the formation of trust-based relationships between interviewer and respondent.

The empirical basis of the study consisted of the author’s professional experience, which includes the conduct of more than one thousand interviews between 2008 and 2023. The interviews were carried out in diverse sociocultural and political contexts: with representatives of government, the business community, as well as socially vulnerable groups,

including refugees and survivors of violence. This breadth provided the opportunity for a comparative analysis of communication strategies characteristic of different social strata and types of narratives.

For data collection, field notes and interview transcripts were used, along with observations of respondents' non-verbal reactions. The analysis was conducted using thematic coding, which made it possible to identify recurring categories: trust and safety, the use of pauses, the interviewer's emotional self-regulation, the specificity of traumatic memories, strategies of self-presentation among public figures, and ethical dilemmas.

The study is autoethnographic in nature, as it draws upon the journalist's personal experience, systematized in comparison with theoretical concepts from psychology and sociology of communication. Autoethnography enables the integration of empirical observation and academic interpretation, making it possible to identify not only practical techniques but also their psychological justification.

A limitation of this approach is the subjectivity of interpretation: conclusions are drawn from the author's experience and do not claim universality. At the same time, such a design makes it possible to reconstruct patterns that are consistently reproduced in different contexts and thus contributes to substantiating practical recommendations for journalists.

4. Analysis of Practical Interviewing Techniques

The results of the empirical analysis make it possible to identify a set of psychologically grounded techniques that were applied during interviewing and proved effective in various social contexts. These techniques cannot be regarded as universal; however, they demonstrate consistent patterns in the ways trust is established, narratives are structured, and communication barriers are overcome.

4.1. Active Listening

The most frequently applied technique is active listening, which includes both verbal and non-verbal confirmation of attention, reflection of key meanings, and repetition of metaphors used by the respondent. Taken together, these methods help reduce the informant's anxiety and foster a sense of recognition and acceptance. Empirical material confirms the thesis that it is precisely through active listening that the transition from superficial, stereotypical answers to the disclosure of personal experience occurs. This is consistent with the principles of Carl Rogers' client-centered therapy [1].

4.2. Use of Pause

The strategic use of pauses functions as an independent tool. In a number of cases, maintaining silence after an emotionally charged statement allowed the informant to continue the narrative in greater depth. Psychological research confirms that a pause serves as a "container" for emotions, encouraging the respondent to further reflection [3]. Silence, therefore, can serve not only as a means of politeness but also as an active element of the interview.

4.3. Open-Ended Questions

The use of open-ended, emotionally evocative questions ("What did that mean to you?", "What changed after that?") makes it possible to shift the focus from factual information to interpretation and subjective perception of events. The analysis shows that it is in response to such questions that value orientations, internal conflicts, and personal transformations most often emerge. This conclusion aligns with studies in narrative psychology, where such questions are considered a key to the activation of autobiographical memory [4].

4.4. Emotional Self-Regulation of the Interviewer

The effectiveness of an interview largely depends on the interviewer's ability to maintain emotional stability in situations where traumatic or conflictual experiences are discussed. The analysis revealed that excessive emotional expression by the interviewer (for example, a sympathetic reaction expressed in tears) often led to the blocking of the narrative, whereas maintaining a calm but benevolent tone facilitated the continuation of dialogue. This confirms the thesis that the interviewer acts as a "regulator of the emotional field," ensuring the safety of the communication environment [3].

4.5. Working with Traumatic Narratives

In cases where respondents recounted events related to violence or loss, the interview acquired the characteristics of trauma-informed interaction. The most significant elements included: granting the right to pause, allowing non-linear reproduction of events, and ensuring informed consent for recording and publication. These observations correlate with the findings of studies on the specifics of post-traumatic narrative [4].

4.6. Overcoming Self-Presentation Strategies

When working with politicians and other public figures, a key factor was the presence of pre-prepared “showcase” narratives. An effective strategy was the use of questions that went beyond the standard discourse (“What worries you personally?”, “What changed in your family after that?”). Such questions disrupted the self-presentation scenario and prompted a more personal response. This confirms the relevance of Erving Goffman’s theory of impression management [2] for the analysis of journalistic interviews.

4.7. Ethical Practices

Finally, adherence to ethical principles was a crucial condition for effective interviewing. Withholding certain details from publication, granting the respondent the opportunity to review quotes before release, and allowing them to stop the interview at any moment all contributed to strengthening trust and increasing the reliability of the data obtained. These observations are consistent with modern concepts of “ethical journalism,” which emphasize the balance between public interest and the protection of individual dignity [7].

The analysis of practical techniques demonstrates that successful interviewing cannot be reduced merely to a sequence of questions and answers. It represents a complex psychological interaction in which trust, emotional dynamics, and the ethical stance of the interviewer directly influence the authenticity and depth of the narrative obtained.

5. Discussion

The results obtained make it possible to view interviewing not only as a professional tool for collecting information but also as a specific form of interpersonal interaction in which psychological and ethical factors play a key role. The analysis of practical techniques demonstrated that trust and safety are the basic conditions for the disclosure of the informant. This confirms the conclusions of C. Rogers [1] regarding the central role of empathy and acceptance in communication. In journalistic practice, these principles are manifested in active listening and attentive consideration of non-verbal signals, which reduces the likelihood of receiving formal or defensive responses.

The findings also confirm the significance of the trauma-informed approach developed in psychology and social work [3,4]. In situations involving recollections of traumatic events, the use of linear and rigidly structured methods proves ineffective. On the contrary, flexibility in structuring the interview, granting the right to pause, and ensuring informed consent create conditions for a more complete and reliable reproduction of events. Thus, journalism borrows from psychology certain elements of working with trauma, adapting them to the media context.

Particular attention should be given to the comparison of these observations with E. Goffman’s theory of self-presentation [2]. The practice demonstrated that public figures actively employ impression management strategies, which supports the thesis that communication functions as a form of staged performance. The use of questions that go beyond the prepared script allows personal aspects to emerge that would otherwise remain hidden. In this way, the journalist assumes the role of a researcher who reveals the contradictions between the “public image” and the “private experience.”

Finally, the issue of ethics has substantial importance. Empirical data show that withholding certain details from publication or providing the informant with the opportunity to review quotations before release does not diminish the value of journalistic material; on the contrary, it strengthens trust and enhances the quality of the narrative. This corresponds to modern approaches to “responsible journalism” [7], in which the minimization of potential harm is considered as important as informing the public.

Thus, the discussion of results allows us to conclude that interviewing should be viewed not only as a tool for extracting facts but also as a process of co-constructing a narrative, in which the informant and the journalist act as co-authors. The effectiveness of this process is determined less by the formal structure of questions than by the combination of empathic listening, trauma-informed practices, the overcoming of self-presentation strategies, and adherence to ethical principles.

6. Conclusion

The study confirmed that interviewing in journalism is not merely a technical procedure for obtaining information but a complex psychological interaction requiring the journalist to combine professional and interpersonal competencies. The analysis of empirical material revealed that the key factors of a successful interview are: the creation of an atmosphere of trust, the use of active listening techniques, the ability to work with pauses, the formulation of open-ended questions, the interviewer's emotional self-regulation, and consideration of the specific features of traumatic narratives.

The identified patterns are consistent with Rogers' concept of empathic listening, the trauma-informed approach in psychology, and Goffman's theory of self-presentation. Their integration into journalistic practice makes it possible to overcome superficial or defensive responses and to approach an authentic narrative that reflects personal experience and the emotional dimension of events.

Another important conclusion is the confirmation that ethical aspects are inseparably linked to the quality of interviews. Adherence to the principles of voluntariness, transparency, and minimization of potential harm strengthens trust between journalist and informant and increases the reliability of the data obtained. Thus, ethics in interviewing should be seen not as a limitation but as a resource for deepened and more accurate understanding of reality.

The contribution of this study lies in the systematization of psychological interviewing techniques and their correlation with existing theoretical approaches. The results obtained may be useful both for practicing journalists and for media researchers interested in issues of communication, narrative analysis, and ethics.

Prospects for further research include conducting comparative analyses of interviews aimed at different groups of respondents (for example, political figures and trauma survivors), as well as integrating quantitative methods that would allow for statistical assessment of the influence of specific techniques on the depth and reliability of the narratives obtained.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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