

Researcher has some questions for the interview

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Interviews begin with questions, but a University at Buffalo researcher is instead questioning the interview, and the answers are mapping the history and unexplored conceptual areas of this familiar information-gathering tool.

Paige Sarlin, an assistant professor in UB's Department of Media Study, started researching the interview only for the sake of improving her own interviewing skills. Sarlin says all of her scholarly interests in academic research come from questions she encounters as a documentary

filmmaker and artist.

"And after my last film, I figured out that I wasn't a good interviewer," she says.

She began reading about interviews and what she found or, more accurately, was unable to find, led her to begin writing her forthcoming book, "Interview Work: The Genealogy of a Cultural Form."

Sarlin's investigation of the interview uncovered an obvious conceptual vacuum. Most commentators, she discovered, approached the interview either technically or artistically, offering instruction or evaluating various levels of virtuosity. Discussion of the interview as a unique form wasn't addressed.

She found that absence odd since interviews are so common, easily cross mediums and influence varied disciplines, from mass media to medicine to the social sciences. Yet, the literature on interviewing was focused exclusively on content at the expense of the form's social aspects.

"There was no writing that approached the interview conceptually as much as it did practically," she says. "So many mediums rely on interviews, yet all the talk was about content."

Sarlin says the term "interview" initially described a face-to-face conversation. That concept changed in the 1840s when the development of newspapers brought new meaning to the interview. Prior to this time, conversations played like theater, vanishing the moment they happened. But newspapers gave conversations a destination.

"Newspapers provided the conversation with someplace else to go so it could be heard or read by a third public," says Sarlin. "From this point, the interview is now recognizable. It becomes the conversation that

happens for publication. This notion didn't previously exist. It's only with the emergence of newspapers that the interview arrives in this form."

Sarlin says there are two story lines leading back to the first interview. One starts with Brigham Young. For a long time, Horace Greeley's interview with Young published in The New York Tribune in 1859 was believed to be the first [newspaper](#) interview. But the other history, which Sarlin follows, begins with the interviews Henry Mayhew conducted for four years beginning in 1849 with street workers in London, England, that predate Young. London Labour and London Poor appeared in the British paper, The Morning Chronicle. Mayhew's subjects survived as beggars, street-entertainers and prostitutes. Jack Black, the queen's rat catcher, toiled mostly in anonymity outside of the royal palace before his interview with Mayhew.

Newspapers also changed the dynamics of dialogue, according to Sarlin.

"Interviews are a contrived form," she says. "That the subject is aware of publication changes how the responses are delivered. The interviewer and subject are involved in a mutual production."

The first interviews, therefore, fit comfortably into the industrial age. Like other goods being produced, interviews had value and were monetized. As factories turned out products ranging from textiles to metals, newspapers added interviews to the marketplace.

"Part of my analysis has been about how the shift in the interview corresponds to shifts in the economy," Sarlin says. "We talk about the information economy and the shift in what constitutes labor and creativity. The interview is part of that shift: the production of celebrity, knowledge, something that can be exchanged."

With print providing the evolutionary nudge, interviews developed and

adapted to different formats and uses. The associations changed as the media changed—radio, television, online. Interviews flowed into new technologies, like running water finding low ground.

"Interviews get to every new medium that emerges," says Sarlin. "But the first mediation of the interview is not the technological mediation. This first mediation is always its dissemination."

Sarlin hopes to finish the book within two years. In the meantime, her research already has begun to inform her practice.

"It has made me a more sensitive interviewer," she says. "Knowing that there are all these other uses and formats in which the [interview](#) operates helps me understand and think about a different repertoire of questions."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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