John Ellis explores off-screen tv bias

Porridge And Treacle

It has become almost a truism that television interviews are manipulated to suit the programme makers. Politicians and industrialists alike complain that their contribution 'was cut about' to 'distort' what they actually said. And this perception seems to be backed up by bias-seeking content analyses of interviews from both right and left.

But who is really doing the manipulation? There is a degree of disingenuousness in the way these powerful people present themselves as powerless in the hands of television producers. For television interviewing has undergone a sea-change. Nowadays, an interview with politicians, civil servants, representatives of corporate power and even some scientists has become a suspicious, guarded, even flirtatious affair.

What we see on the screen has become more opaque as a result. The power interview has become a less effective form of television. It has become more difficult for viewers to gain any real sense of the politics and the power relations (what in more naive times might have been called 'the truth') of any situation.

The power interview always was a tricky form. Unlike the more relaxed chat show, its origins stretch back to the birth of mass television. It is not a dialogue, more a collision of monologues. The interviewer is trying to elicit comment or fact to fit into a general thesis: that the economy is in a mess; that eating beef brains can drive you mad; that there are crooks in the financial services industry.

The interviewees may have agreed to be interviewed on these subjects, but their aims are different. They are using tv to present themselves as important; to promote the ineffable wisdom and goodness of their products or policies; to reassure the public that there is nothing to worry about and that black can be seen in certain circumstances as closely resembling white.

Interviews used to be the place where attitudes would collide. This was the main reason for putting them on tv in the first place. Entertainment was mixed with information as the viewers judged for themselves the honesty and accuracy of each party. It is now an electric moment when this suddenly occurs, as Mrs Thatcher found out on a live phone-in soon after the Falklands war, when she was taken to task on the Belgrano issue by a caller. There was no preparation for this encounter, no previous agreement about subjects and etiquette, simply a raw confrontation of ideas.

Such chance events, where reality erupts into the tv format, bring home how constructed and circumscribed the power interview normally is. Typically, it is the result of a long process of negotiation and packaging. Perhaps television itself initiated the change by introducing more programmes in which various interviews were intercut, rather than running an interview in a longer form. Certainly, considerable paranoia exists within industry as well as politics about 'how they might cut up my contribution'. However, it is a very tricky job, if not an impossible one, to distort the recorded utterances of an individual without it being obvious.

A more easily hidden form of manipulation comes from the side of the interviewees. 'Public relations' and 'media training' have introduced a new problem into interviewing. A whole industry exists to obfuscate issues. The growing role of Bernard Ingham and his subtle forms of media management are widely known and have been imitated to some extent by the Labour Party in opposition. Such moves can be criticised because there is, in theory at least, some requirement of public accountability on our politicians. But the Ingham machine in Whitehall is only the government version of a similar mechanism that operates throughout industry.

Training in television interview techniques for senior management is now commonplace. It's easy enough to spot the results on screen: the interviewees, relentlessly bland and amiable, do not so much answer the question as ruminate at a small distance from the subject. They indulge in all the routine tricks, from 'I'm very glad you asked me that, but before I answer I would just like to point out...', to tripping up the interviewer by denying something that they had cheerfully acknowledged to be true immediately before the interview began.

The first tactic guarantees that the viewer (and sometimes the interviewer too) forgets the question, or at least means that considerable time is used for a promotional monologue. The second is something that still reduces many interviewers to outraged splutters or to an over-aggressive restatement of the question.

Interviewers can scarcely get self-righteous about these techniques because they are taught, for large sums, by none other than experienced television interviewers during their 'resting periods'. After all, only interviewers can teach such techniques as 'the uncuttable sentence', 'knocking the media' or 'appealing directly to the audience'.

Such techniques can be spotted by viewers, but they nevertheless continue to blunt the collision of attitudes that is the stuff of a good informative interview. But before an interview can even take place, an increasing number of hurdles have to be jumped. This steeplechase has been devised by the ever-expanding PR industry. Large companies now employ agencies or set up their own press departments through whom all requests for interviews must be channelled. Often former journalists, they act as a buffer, since they can spin out the process of 'finding someone to answer your questions' until deadlines loom.

In some consumer-sensitive industries, the food industry for example, this process has gone further. Individual companies now refer tv researchers to trade associations who can provide spokes people for the whole industry. Their one qualification over that of the PR person is that they know a considerable amount about the industry concerned, and charmingly communicate these facts in large slabs during the interview. They are a gift to the majority of programme researchers: the hurried and harried recently ex-students who know little or nothing about the subject of the programme they are working on. But for an interviewer, they are like eating cold porridge.

'The process of securing an interview has become more tortuous, and the act of interviewing is often like wading through treacle*

The power interview on television has ceased to be a confrontation whose battlelines are clear to the audience. It has been overtaken by a war of position, a dance of discourses rather than a collision between them. The process of securing an interview has become more tortuous, and the act of interviewing is often like wading through treacle.

It is this hidden process, more than any bias in the way that programmes are constructed, that has changed the terms of the television interview. We have reached a situation where the majority of people with political and economic power who appear on television are well able to manipulate the situation to their advantage. It is they, rather than the broadcasters, who are drifting closer to hoodwinking the viewers.