

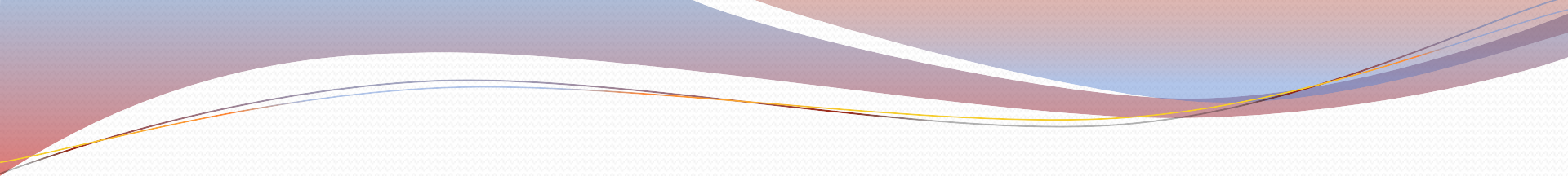
# The Art of Questioning

In the shoes of a journalist

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- “Animals are such agreeable friends - they ask no questions; they pass no criticisms”. (George Eliot, British novelist)
  - Understanding a question is 50% of the answer

# Meanings of the word « question »

- A **search**: a quest (from the latin word **quaestio**)
- A **request**:
  - Government's Question Time at the Parliament
  - An interview with the media
  - The idea is to speak to someone in order to learn more about that person, his/her actions, his/her thoughts, his/her statements etc.
- It is not however a police interview (journalists are neither police officers nor judges)



# 2 types of questions

- **Closed questions:**
  - answer by « yes » or « no »
    - Example: Did you enjoy your trip to Las Vegas?
  - Multiple choice questions: you offer your guest several options
    - Example: Now what can Boris Johnson do? Explain himself? Resign? Apologize?
- **Open questions:** the answer cannot be « yes » or « no » . It must be more substantive
  - In what way did you enjoy your trip to Las Vegas?
  - What are Boris Johnson's options now?
- Questions help journalists writing a story by answering the basic questions: Who; What; When; Where; Why; How

**The 6 W's**

# Closed questions

- The video extract is about an **interview** given in May 1997 by **Michael Howard** (Home Office Minister in J. Major's government) to BBC 2's journalist **Jeremy Paxman**, about the dismissal two years earlier of a Prison Director in London.)
  - The minister keeps **dodging** Paxman's questions
  - Paxman uses the **closed question** technique
- Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uwlsd8RAoqI>

# Some explanations

- Paxman will ask the same question (“Did you threaten to overrule him?”) **12 times in 90 seconds**. It became a cause célèbre of political interviewing.
- Later M. **Howard gave his explanation**: he was tired because of the campaign for the Conservative party leadership.
- **J. Paxman also gave his explanation**: while interviewing Howard his producer told him that the next guest he was supposed to interview would not make it to the studio. So he had to find a way to extend the interview.
- (Source: Daily Telegraph – 31/8/2017)

# During the interview

- To make an interview a kind of easy-to-follow conversation, the journalist prepares only **one question**, the first one.
- He or she will use the answer to his/her first question to ask a second question.
  - Nevertheless:
    - **The journalist must do his/her homework by preparing the interview** (when it is possible – In a crisis it may be difficult)
    - **He/she has to listen carefully** to what the guest says

# Concision

- Avoid long and winding questions (« Marcel Proust » questions), i.e. more than 20 seconds
  - They confuse the listener/reader/spectator
- Be **concise**, **incisive**, **provocative** even
  - Examples:
    - If anything's possible, what's important?
    - Will people remember you in a million years? Do you still want to be famous?
    - If we learn from our mistakes, why are we always so afraid to make them?



# « Gotcha Questions » or loaded questions

- Example
- Reporter: “Have you stopped beating your wife?”
- Answer with, “I never started.”
- If you answer, “I didn’t beat my wife,”
- Possible headline: “X denies beating his wife.” (which of course is **ambiguous** as it may lead the reader to think he has been accused by someone of beating his wife).

# Other loaded questions

- Why in your view does everybody hates you? (**directed question**)
- There is a power failure in your house. You have a box of matches. You go into the kitchen. What do you do first: open the door of the refrigerator, press the electrical switch, or turn on the gas cooker? (**multiple choice question that blocks the 4th option**)

# Example

- Suppose you interview a representative of Total on the « energy transition of the Group ». He/she would use some of the following arguments:
  - **Climate change** = opportunities for the energy markets
  - **Demographic angle** = to reduce the coal's share in primary energy consumption while the world population will reach the 11 billion mark by 2040
  - **Green energy**: to increase the gas share and renewable energy.
  - **Stagnation** of crude oil production (P. Pouyané - Positive Investors Forum – Nov. 18)
- What **incisive questions** could you ask the representative of Total's?

# Possible questions

- Why do you continue to invest in Saudi Arabia after the controversy surrounding the assassination of the Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi?
- Option: Why do you continue to invest in Saudi Arabia despite the multiple and documented human rights violations in this country?
- Why don't you follow the example of some companies and institutions that have decided to boycott Saudi Arabia (supported argument: Christine Lagarde, chairwoman of the IMF decided to postpone a Middle-East trip that would have included a stop-over in Saudi Arabia)?