



Talking to a Reporter, Featuring Newsweek Journalist Nick Mordowanec

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On March 14, [Newsweek](#) political reporter Nick Mordowanec joined us for a Q&A focused on what reporters look for in interviews with researchers. Here are some of Mordowanec's insights:

On whom he considers an expert source:

"Someone who can take complex subject matter and, for lack of a better term, dumb it down in a way. Obviously, in your fields, you know a lot more than I do, you know a lot more than the general public does.

It's meeting that impasse between what people know and what people don't know, and making it accessible to the casual reader. At the same time, given that I talk to a lot of people while working on a piece, I learn things as I go. You know, the more people I talk to the more I'm going to gain my own knowledge on a certain subject."

On the importance of letting conversations develop organically when interviewing a researcher:

"Sometimes I just ask things off the cuff. If we're having a conversation and something pops into my head based on something the researcher said, I'll ask, 'oh, can you elaborate on that?' Just having that kind of normal fluid conversation like you would in everyday life, is helpful in journalism, and for the person I'm talking to, I hope it makes [them feel] more comfortable."

When interviewing a researcher during a tight deadline:

"If I have an 80-minute deadline, I really need you to share a few thoughts on something really quick. If a source can say, alright, here are two things that we could really touch upon that can impact your story in a positive manner and you can use whatever you wish, I find that that really helps."

On remembering some of the researchers he talks to:

"I've written thousands of stories and talked to probably thousands of people in that span. But there's kind of a symbiotic nature when I talk to someone and, you know, even after six months, a year or two years, I'll remember certain people I've talked to if I see a story come out that's similar."

On whether researchers can ask reporters for a list of questions ahead of an interview:

"As soon as we make a connection, I let you know what the conversation will be about. Can we focus on so and so? And then they will say, you know, before we talk, can you let me know what you're going to ask? Whether it be more broad or exact questions, verbatim. I don't mind doing that at all. Some people do get weary about speaking with journalists, which I completely understand. So it seems to ease any tension that's there before we actually talk."

On a common mistake academics can make during an interview:

"Veering off. You might touch on a different subject matter and it might be in the same realm, but it's not directly related to what we're talking about. And then it kind of takes the conversation off course. Sometimes that is a good thing but it really depends in terms of how much time we have to talk.

A lot of conversations are 10 minutes or so. You just want to kind of follow the journalist's lead in terms of, can you speak to this, can you speak to that? And once you start veering off the path, that can kind of complicate things."

On the process of being proactive and pitching story ideas to a reporter based on new research findings:

"Odds are, if it's something interesting or worth looking into, I'll respond directly. I try to entertain as many [emails] as I can within the time that's allotted to me in a given day. Another format that is more traditional is, going through your media department [and they provide] an introduction and a brief two to three-paragraph pitch.

I've received some emails and it'll be three or four pages and it's just exhausting. You just want to get straight to the point and then we can go from there."

On the benefits of researchers sending story pitches:

“Sometimes I'll get a pitch and it's something that I don't really write about but I'll pass it on to colleagues who do.

It can be difficult to find a lot of credible people to talk about certain subjects, and it would honestly make my job easier if they reached out to me first and shared what their background is, and what their research is about. But again, you want to keep it pithy.”

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