

The Birth of the Journalistic Genre of the Interview: From a Judicial Instrument to Mass Communication

El nacimiento del género periodístico de la entrevista: de instrumento judicial a la comunicación masiva

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Rubén Fernández-Costa O'Dogherty. Doctor of Information Sciences from the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM) and Telecommunications Engineer from the Polytechnic University of Madrid (UPM). Since 2019, he has undertaken several research stays related to his doctoral work and other projects at the Real Colegio Complutense at Harvard (Boston), a university centre affiliated with Harvard University, and at the Royal Academy of Spain in Rome. He is a researcher at the 'Observatory of the Quality of Information on Television' (OCITV), a research group of the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM), where he has led several of its publications. He is a Master's degree lecturer at Nebrija University and an independent consultant for institutions and companies on matters of Communication and Art. For years, he has published his work as a journalist in outlets such as *El Español*, *El Mundo*, *Expansión*, *Forbes*, *Cyberlideria*, *Looc*, *Vogue*, and *Harper's Bazaar*, with a particular focus on the interview genre. He is the author of the book *1058 Questions to Successful Women* (2010).

Journalist at *El Español*

odogherty1@yahoo.es

ORCID: 0000-0003-4284-882X



Joaquín Sotelo González. Doctor of Information Sciences with an 'Extraordinary Award' from the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM, 2005). He completed his Doctorate with a UCM FPI Predoctoral Fellowship, during which he conducted research stays at University College Cork (Cork, Ireland), Oxford Brookes University (Oxford, England), and the European University Institute (Florence, Italy). Since 2020, he has been a Full Professor in the Department of Journalism and New Media at the Faculty of Information Sciences, Complutense University of Madrid (UCM). He has been accredited as a Full Professor since 2024. He has three research sexennia out of three possible and one knowledge transfer sexennium recognised by Aneca. He is the principal investigator of the 'Observatory of the Quality of Information on Television' (OCITV), a research group of the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM). Since 2020, he has been the Director of the Ximénez de Cisneros Residential University College, affiliated with the Complutense University of Madrid (UCM). Prior to his Doctorate, he worked as a news editor at Antena 3 Television.

Complutense University of Madrid, Spain 

jsotelo@ucm.es

ORCID: 0000-0001-5116-4345

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Abstract:

This article reviews the emergence of the journalistic genre of the interview in the United States in the 19th century. It examines the medium considered the founder of this practice and the first to publish interviews: *The Herald*, under the direction of James Gordon Bennett, inventor of the genre.

Keywords:

Interview; James Gordon Bennett; *The Herald*; journalistic genres; sensationalism.

Resumen:

Se propone una revisión del nacimiento del género periodístico de la entrevista en Estados Unidos en el siglo XIX. Para ello, se estudia el medio considerado como el fundador de esta práctica y el primero en publicar entrevistas, The Herald, bajo la dirección de James Gordon Bennett, inventor del género.

Palabras clave:

Entrevista; James Gordon Bennett; The Herald; géneros periodísticos, sensacionalismo.

1. Introduction

Although the first newspapers published regularly in history emerged in Germany around two centuries earlier (Jensen, 2014), interviews, understood as the textual reproduction of a question-and-answer conversation, did not appear in printed media until the 1830s. This emergence is of particular interest, as it marked the initial step in connecting audiences with the private lives of others (Rubery, 2007), an unstoppable phenomenon that began then and continues to thrive today, reaching its peak with the advent of social media.

Through language, humans engage with the experiences of others and their own self-knowledge, an engagement based on a question-and-answer process in any of its forms, including internal dialogue (Alderson et al., 2018). This involves an exchange of information through a variety of statements, asking and being asked, answering and being answered (Khan & Cannell, 1957). For many scholars, such as Quesada (1984), there is no formal “Theory of the Interview” as such: indeed, the concept of the interview is defined in multiple ways depending on the authors who have explored this object of study. Quesada (1984) herself describes it as “an unrepeatable relationship between two people,” a “conversational moment,” a “conversation intended for dissemination,” or an “asymmetrical conversation, distinct from spontaneous encounters.” From the perspective of Information Sciences, the interview is considered a genre in its own right by some experts, while others view it merely as a form of reporting (Echevarría, 2012).

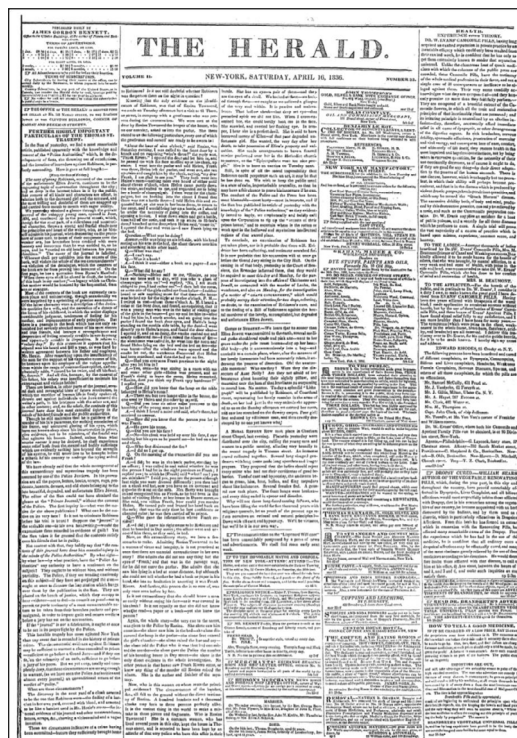
Etymologically, in English, the term “interview” may derive from the French “entrevoir,” meaning “to see one another” (Morgan & Cogger, 1977). For Quesada (1984), an interview must stem from a pre-planned situation, requiring intentionality. In her view, the question-and-answer process can be modelled on the well-known Shannon and Weaver (1949) communication model, where the interviewer acts as the sender, the reading public as the receiver, the interviewee as the message, and the publishing medium as the channel (Quesada, 1984). It is worth noting, though beyond the scope of this research note, that the interview remains one of the most widely used tools in qualitative research and is studied in the Social Sciences from various perspectives, yielding significant insights and potentially cross-disciplinary applications (e.g., psychology, education, medicine, legal and judicial fields).

From its inception, the use of the interview developed slowly, not only in the press. Indeed, it was not until the late 1930s that the interview was formally distinguished from the questionnaire. By the 1950s, new systematic practices regarding the use of the interview were introduced (Sheatsley, 1951), and its role as a fundamental tool in Social Sciences research was not formally established until the 1970s (Platt, 2012).

Taking the United States as a reference, a country significant in these studies, there is little specialised documentation on the emergence of published interviews in media during the 19th century. A key contribution is the classic article by Nils Gunnar Nilsson (1971) in *Journalism Quarterly*, in which the scholar explains that, although dialogue is as old as humanity, the question-and-answer method as a journalistic tool is a relatively recent phenomenon (Nilsson, 1971). According to this author, the mass dissemination of textual conversations began to appear in the 1830s in the American press, adopting two characteristics from the British press: the humorous treatment of courtroom news and a more or less sensationalist approach to trial content (Nilsson, 1971).

Regarding the first published interview, most experts, including Nilsson, seem to agree. While the journalist and politician Horace Greeley (1811–1872) is considered one of the pioneers for his interview with the Mormon leader Brigham Young, published in *The New York Tribune* on 20 August 1859, or James Gordon Bennett for his interview with President Martin Van Buren in the same outlet in 1839, it is highly likely that the first interview in history was one allegedly conducted with a woman named Rosina Townsend, manager of a rendezvous hotel (City Hotel) in 1836, concerning the death of another woman, Helen Jewett, at the same location. This conversation, published by James Gordon Bennett, considered by various scholars to be the inventor of the genre, appeared in the newspaper *The Herald* (*The New York Herald*) on 16 April 1836 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Front page of *The Herald* (New York), 16 April 1836



Source: scanned by Rubén Fernández-Costa O'Dogherty from the repository of the New York Public Library

2. Objectives and methodology

Having established the importance of the journalist and editor James Gordon Bennett as the creator of the journalistic genre of the interview, and *The Herald* as the key medium in its emergence, this research has a dual purpose. On the one hand, it studies the birth of what is known as the first interview published in a newspaper. It draws on a review through qualitative content analysis of this medium in search of precedents and possible social reasons for its emergence in that place and historical moment. On the other hand, it explores the scientific literature on this origin and on the transformation and current relevance of this genre.

For this research note, an exhaustive review of the newspaper's archive of *The Herald* has been conducted from October 1835 (the birth of the analysed medium) to June 1836. The analysis was carried out in 2024 in the microfilm reading room of

the Widener Library at Harvard University, in Boston. In a meticulous page-by-page review process, a detailed search was conducted for possible interviews prior to the aforementioned one that appeared in this newspaper before 16 April 1836.

3. Results

3.1. On the content analysis of *The Herald*

In the research process, what we might term “precursors” to the birth of the format have been found prior to 16 April 1836, in which it can be said that the genre is gestating, and where a social interest in individual explanations, in those “fragments of personal narrative,” is manifested. From this qualitative content review, the following observations are obtained:

- 1) Prior appearance of the use of the word “interview”: in the edition of *The Herald* on 7 September 1835, the headline “Interview with the King of Sandwich Islands” is observed, but it is not an interview in the strict question-and-answer format, but rather an indirect account that, nevertheless, begins to manifest interest in a direct personal encounter.
- 2) Appearance of a “verbatim” reproduction of another conversation held with a character on 13 October 1835, specifically with the ex-Sheriff Parkins, accused of corruption. Nor in this case would it constitute –at least, according to our criterion– an interview *sensu stricto* for the medium, but rather the reproduction of a fragment of a previous conversation, on which James Gordon Bennett himself makes comments in his article.
- 3) It is confirmed upon reviewing the analysed sample that, indeed, it would be in the morning edition of *The Herald* on Monday, 11 April 1836, when a text is published describing James Gordon Bennett’s visit to the brothel run by Rosina Townsend, where the prostitute Helen Jewett had been murdered, something that was not habitual for the press of the time. However, no interview appears in that text yet. It would be two days later, on Wednesday the 13th, when Bennett writes a new text on the case with more details, as if it were a novel. And it is on the 16th that the key event occurs: the journalist’s conversation with Rosina Townsend, a direct witness to the murder of Helen Jewett, is published. In that text (Figure 2), the editor opts for the publication of such a direct conversation in a pure interview format, as we know it today, thereby inventing the genre.

Figure 2. Detail of the image of the text traditionally accepted as the first interview in history, published in *The Herald* (New York) on 16 April 1836

Question.—What was he doing?
Answer.—He was lying on his left side, with his head resting on his arm in the bed, the sheet thrown over him and something in his other hand.
Q.—What was that?
A.—I can't say.
Q.—Was it a book?
A.—I think it was—either a book or a paper—I saw his face.
Q.—What did he say?
A.—Nothing—Helen said to me, “Rosina, as you have not been well to day, will you take a glass of champagne with us?”—I replied, “No, I am much obliged to you, I had rather not”—I then left the room,

Source: Scanned by Rubén Fernández-Costa O'Dogherty from the repository of the New York Public Library

3.2. On the Emergence and Expansion of the Genre

According to María Nieves García (2006), it was in the 19th century, within the framework of the Romantic movement, that an attraction to “the fragment,” including conversational fragments, was fostered, becoming an artistic form that rendered things more truthful, authentic, and intense. According to Fay (2013), the human being as an individual began to assume new social significance at this historical moment, when penny press newspapers started publishing what would later be called “human interest stories,” aimed at giving readers a sense of intimacy. Throughout the 19th century and up to the present day, media have used these human interest stories to cultivate what Richard Schickel (1986) describes as the presence of an “intimate stranger.”

Undoubtedly, the birth of the interview also coincided with a sales strategy. It is worth noting that other commercially driven innovations emerged during this period in the same medium, such as classified advertisements or the use of correspondents on ships. According to Cantabella (2002), James Gordon Bennett devised a strategy to increase the circulation of *The Herald*, the newspaper he founded in 1835, and its social appeal. To this end, he considered how compelling it would be to offer real dialogues as they occurred (Cantabella, 2002). Indeed, Bennett's method of reporting through question-and-answer gave readers the sensation of having been present at the reported event. These innovations made *The Herald* a highly successful newspaper almost from its inception (Cantabella, 2002). In fact, *The Herald* announced in its own pages that it had tripled its sales within less than a year of its founding, following the use of these new journalistic tools.

A search in the newspapers.com database for the date range of Helen Jewett's murder confirms that *The Herald* garnered the highest number of mentions among its contemporaries regarding the violent death of this woman at the City Hotel, and that New York was the state with the densest coverage, although at least 24 newspapers from neighbouring states covered the murder in various ways.

It is highly significant that the birth of the journalistic genre of the interview coincided with that of the detective novel. It is worth recalling here that Edgar Allan Poe –also a journalist– lived in New York in 1837 and could directly observe readers' interest in descriptions and dialogues about the murders of the time, suggesting possible evidence of mutual influence between the detective novel and this type of crime reporting (Buozis, 2018). Some literary examples of this cultural climate (Anthony, 1997) include works by authors such as George Lippard with *The Quaker City* (1845), Herman Melville with *Pierre* (1852), or Nathaniel Hawthorne with *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), all within the orbit of this new “sensation of intimacy” produced by the dialogues in the penny press.

It is thus evident that scandalous stories of everyday life told in a question-and-answer format, a method previously used only in trials to gather legal information, became a tool to capture readers' attention. Initially, transcriptions of direct conversations, originating from the judicial sphere, involved individuals related to trials and legal cases and were often scandalous. This connection or root of the journalistic genre with the judicial sphere is also highlighted by Nilsson (1971), who refers in his work to the “position of a magistrate” adopted by Bennett when inventing the genre. Ultimately, it represents a new tool for conveying a personal narrative, where an individual is explained in their own words, a formula aimed at delivering those words with greater authenticity to a potential new audience, while also appealing to the common person to attract a mass readership, even in a context of widespread illiteracy, where readers could enjoy hearing someone read aloud (Nilsson, 1971).

It could therefore be argued that this reflects a new vision of the journalist, a new perspective in which the reporter focuses on the interviewee, as if it were a theatrical performance. Notable in this period for its quality, and as one of the earliest examples, is the interview by Jerome B. Stillson, a reporter for *The Herald*, with the Native American chief Sitting Bull (Cantabella, 2002), or the one published by *The New York World* with Pope Pius IX in 1871, which caused a significant impact under the headline “The Church and the Press have kissed each other” (Schudson, 1995). With the advent of new media and the prominence of images and photography, the interview genre became a symbol of success and status, with media prioritising glamorous or photogenic/telegenic figures over meritorious work or less camera-friendly creators or artists (Rodríguez Pastoriza, 2006).

The interview genre first spread from the United States to England and, progressively, to other countries, as a less reckless or audacious collective proposal, seeking to provide interesting information rather than “gossip” or scandals (Mackie, 1894). In Spain, the interview technique was directly imported from the Anglo-Saxon world but, curiously, also drew from the question-and-answer format used in the Congress of Deputies (Cantabella, 2002). Indeed, Cantabella notes that the earliest examples of interviews in Spain also related to scandalous judicial proceedings, such as the Salar Murder (1883), the Fuencarral Street Murder (1888), or the Puerta del Sol Lottery Robbery (1889), which were prominently covered by *La Correspondencia de España*.

Even today, despite its prominence in podcasts, high-audience television programmes, and social media, the interview genre continues to have significant intellectual detractors, such as Milan Kundera or Gabriel García Márquez, who consider it a

“voice-stealing genre” (Echevarría, 2012: 26). There are also individuals who only wish to be interviewed by highly selective media, such as *The Paris Review*, which boasts a long list of creators who have only been interviewed in its central pages.

The interview genre remains highly relevant today, even in high-audience and influential television programmes, perhaps partly due to this “renewal of personalised contact in the face of the technological revolution” (Arfuch, 1995: 23). The questions in this genre, “bordering between orality and writing” (Echevarría, 2012: 31), are typically defined as “free” by journalistic practice or ethics, but there are also structured interviews, such as standard questionnaires known by the names of Proust, Marx, or Tolstoy. Various sources highlight prototypical interview styles that remain current, such as the “Spanish-style interview,” popularised in Spain since the 1980s in the supplements of the most widely read newspapers and vertical websites (Quesada, 1984), which includes a description of the setting, the interviewee’s psychophysical appearance, and introductory and concluding questions. Another example is the so-called “anti-interview,” an intentionally unstructured conversation, often with an ironic or humorous tone, as pioneered by the television programme *Caiga quien caiga* (Telecinco) at the end of the 20th century, or those currently conducted by programmes such as *La revuelta* (La 1 de TVE), *El hormiguero* (Antena 3), or podcasts like *Estirando el chicle*, among many other formats, all of which are audience successes at the time of writing this research note.

In the current historical moment of technological transformation, where there is even talk of a future with “ghost newsrooms” (without journalists) due to the use of Artificial Intelligence and LLM models, the idea of whether the interview genre could be automated using chatbots is beginning to emerge. However, countering this automation, some innovative studies highlight the importance of context and the interviewer, as the exchange of questions and answers is always articulated and subject to different interpretations depending on the situation and environment (Dengel et al., 2023).

4. Conclusions

Journalistic interviews, understood as conversations with a purpose that can be shared on a large scale, began to be published from 1836 in the United States, during the period historically known as the birth and rise of the penny press and with the literary Romanticism as a backdrop. The use of the new genre coincides with the emergence of journalistic formats aimed at large audiences and attracting new publics.

It involves a transfer from judicial processes to the practice of journalism, a public imitation of legal interrogations for mass reading, precisely at the historical moment when a certain cultural angle is changing and the human being as an individual begins to become of interest. The new genre places the journalist in the position of a potential magistrate who asks questions in a judicial tone –at times, with a humorous charge– in the same era in which the rise of the detective novel begins.

The precursor of the genre is the journalist and editor James Gordon Bennett, who resorted to it probably to optimise the sales of his newspaper –The Herald– in a social climate that demanded conversations with a sense of intimacy and in which the individual personal vision begins to be valued. After landing in England, the genre is imported to other countries, including Spain, with a formula similar to the original, related to trials and controversial social views, an approach very distant from the current one, in which the interview is rather associated with prestige and the public image of the interviewee.

In our days, the genre remains alive and in constant evolution, although its meaning has changed radically, coming to represent personal prestige or the possibility of improving the public image of a character. Interviews continue to constitute a journalistic genre of great value, both in the press and in audiovisual media, where on many occasions they have become the backbone of television networks with maximum-audience programmes and their online replicas, as well as of the new platforms, such as YouTube, Twitch or Spotify.

The interview continues to be a resource used as the basis of qualitative research in general and it would be of great interest for new interdisciplinary research with other perspectives (psychology, education, medicine...). Likewise, more up-to-date studies and new research on the quality of interviews and the styles of interviewers are necessary, which is especially relevant and pertinent in the face of the emerging automatic question-and-answer systems that are hastening to be offered in the coming years through LLM models and Artificial Intelligence mechanisms.

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6. Specific contributions of each author

	Name and surname
Conception and design of the work	Rubén Fernández-Costa O’Dogherty
Methodology	Rubén Fernández-Costa O’Dogherty and Joaquín Sotelo González
Data collection and analysis	Rubén Fernández-Costa O’Dogherty
Discussion and conclusions	Rubén Fernández-Costa O’Dogherty and Joaquín Sotelo González
Drafting, formatting, revision and approval of versions	Rubén Fernández-Costa O’Dogherty and Joaquín Sotelo González

7. Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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