
ENGAGING WITH CYCLONES

When giving interviews to the press, business leaders of the 21st century should read a Mark Twain essay from the 19th, says David Yelland

It happens all the time, all over the business world. You work your entire career to reach the very top and then, sometimes quite suddenly, you get there. You have arrived.

It's only then that you start to make mistakes. Picture the scene: You are the new man or woman, the CEO or country chief. You are at the very apex of your career, the number one, the person the entire organization looks to for leadership. All eyes turn to you. What you say suddenly matters. It matters to investors, employees, regulators, governments, in fact nearly everyone you know or are likely to know.

Being the leader of an organization magnifies everything you do. It makes your successes appear bigger than they are, but it makes your errors bigger too. You are like the rabbit in a shadow puppet show. Suddenly, your every movement is magnified on a canvas so large – global even – that it can be scary to even think about it. And the biggest magnifier of all is media.

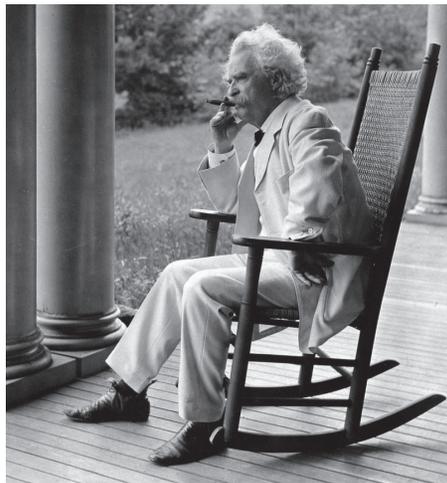
It is about this time that you are asked to do an interview. Somebody walks into your office and suggests it. Or you think it might be a good idea yourself. After all, now you are at the top, shouldn't you do a press interview or go on the television? Yes, yes, yes, you may think. This is my time to speak, time to make my mark.

You may be right. You may be that rare leader who has arrived at the top with a plan and an ability to say exactly the right thing. Such people do exist. But many more make the cardinal error of forgetting that in order to do that first interview – or indeed any interview – you first have to have something to say. The timing needs to be right. Your head needs to be right.

I know about this not only because of my role as a partner at Brunswick, but mainly

because I made errors myself, a few weeks after taking over as editor of Rupert Murdoch's London newspaper *The Sun*.

Fresh from seven years in the US as Deputy Editor of the *New York Post*, I thought I knew everything that needed to be known about media. I was, after all, in the business and had interviewed hundreds of people myself. So, I gave an interview far too early. I was unprepared. It is a harsh lesson I wouldn't wish on any man or woman new to a high profile job. If you do an interview with no planned narrative and for no real reason then it is like instructing a ghostwriter you have never met to write your autobiography.



“Interviewers are courteous and gentle-mannered, even when they come to destroy”

Mark Twain

Which is why when I first read Mark Twain's essay on the art of the press interview, I jumped up and down with joy and delight. Twain's essay is the best polemic on the press interview I have ever read. This essay lay undiscovered for 40 years in the archive of the Mark Twain Project at the University of California, Berkeley. Scholars believe it was written in about 1889 or 1890, during a period when American newspapers were changing and becoming more sensationalist, led by titles such as Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*.

Although best known for his eponymous prize for excellence in journalism, Pulitzer was also responsible for creating a new kind of newspaper, elements of which live on in titles like my former employer, *The Sun*. This trend was dubbed “yellow journalism” by some, and not everyone approved of the *World's* populist approach. Twain, at times, was also a critic.

This essay, then, should possibly be read in the context of Twain's particularly difficult relationship with American newspaper editors of the time. Although anybody who has ever sat down and given a newspaper interview and been less than impressed with the article that was subsequently published may well sympathize with the great man's viewpoint that “the interview was not a happy invention.”

Twain suspects that most journalists do not set out to misrepresent or destroy their interviewee, rather “I think their attitude is more that of the cyclone, which comes with the gracious purpose of cooling off a sweltering village, and is not aware, afterward, that it has done that village anything but a favor.”

He adds that the interview “is perhaps the poorest of all ways of getting at what is in a man. In the first place, the interviewer is the reverse of an inspiration, because you are afraid of him.”

no. 94

Concerning the "Interview."

No one likes to be interviewed, & yet no one likes to say no; for interviewers are courteous and gentle-mannered, even when they come to destroy. I must not be understood to mean that they ever come consciously or are aware after words that they have destroyed; to destroy; indeed I think they never do that: ^{no,} I think their attitude is more that of the cyclone, which comes with the gracious purpose of cooling off a sweltering village, & is not aware, afterward, that it has done that village anything but a favor. The interviewer scatters you all over creation, but he does not conceive that you can look upon that as a disadvantage. People

Nevertheless, Twain would not recommend never doing interviews. They are as essential now as they were for Twain, because leaders of all kinds need to reach wider audiences.

Instead, Twain is saying *be very careful*. Understand that the encounter is a false one, a power imbalance between the hunter and the hunted, a piece of human calculus you need to think about. And be prepared for your interviewer to leap from one subject to another, confusing your flow. "His interruptions, his fashion of diverting you from topic to topic," Twain noted, "have in a certain way a very serious effect: they leave you but partly uttered on each topic. Generally, you have got out just enough of your statement to damage you; you never get to the place where you meant to explain and justify your position."

This habit, Twain reckons, is bad for the interviewer too. It means, Twain says, "He doesn't know when you are delivering metal from when you are shoveling out slag, he can't tell dirt from ducats; it's all one to him, he puts in everything you say; then he sees, himself, that it is but green stuff and wasn't worth saying, so he tries to mend it by putting in something of his own which he thinks is ripe, but in fact is rotten. True, he means well, but so does the cyclone."

Twain was a wise man and a very great writer. And what he says about the interview is as true now as it was in his time. Perhaps every new CEO should read this essay and sleep on it a few nights before agreeing to that first "big interview." It will still happen of course; no business leader can steer clear of the media forever, nor should they. But the key thing to remember is this: The idea of there being "friendly" and "hostile" journalists is not as simple as it seems. Even a friendly reporter can act as Twain's cyclone. And sometimes a hostile one asks the best questions.

All you can do, as the subject of any interview, is prepare and do your best. Be honest. Be yourself. Be relaxed. And maybe send your interviewer the Twain essay by e-mail after the interview as a goodwill gesture. Just to say you understand. ☺

David Yelland is a former Deputy Editor of the *New York Post* and ex-Editor of Rupert Murdoch's tabloid *The Sun*, the biggest selling newspaper in the UK. He is now a Partner in Brunswick's London office.

Considered one of the all time greats of American literature, Mark Twain had a love-hate relationship with the press, which presumably motivated him to pen this unpublished, and possibly unfinished, 10-page essay: *Concerning the "Interview,"* the first page of which is reprinted here. The original is in the Mark Twain Project archives at the University of California, Berkeley, www.marktwainproject.org. Facsimile, text and photograph © Mark Twain Foundation. Read the full essay at www.brunswickgroup.com/review