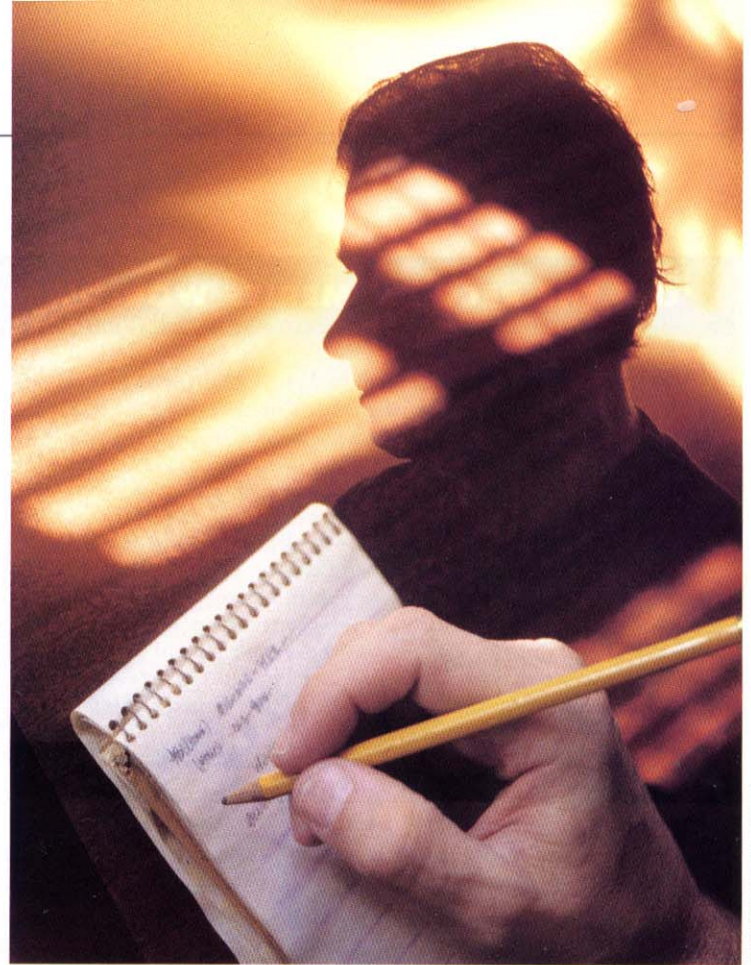


By John M. Knox



PHOTOGRAPH BY JENNIFER BISHOP

**ON THE  
RECORD OR**

**OFF THE  
RECORD?**

## *How much should you say in an interview?*

**S**ENSATIONAL JOURNALISM is not limited to British tabloids. Witness two journalistic flaps that developed within a week of one another in the U.S. First came the controversial broadcast of an interview with Kathleen Gingrich over the CBS television network. Mrs. Gingrich's son, Newt, is the newly elected speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives and second in line to the president of the United States. On the heels of the Gingrich interview came a published report of some supposedly "off the record" remarks made by U.S. First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton.

### **'Eye to Eye' didn't blink**

Controversy brewed before and after the January 5, 1995 airing of CBS News' "Eye to Eye" with Connie Chung. Television station managers, journalism professors and

men and women on the street debated the ethics: Is it right for CBS to broadcast remarks that were promised to remain between Gingrich and Chung?

During the "Eye to Eye" interview, the controversial exchange occurred as follows:

CHUNG: Mrs. Gingrich, what has — what has Newt told you about President Clinton?

GINGRICH: Nothing, and I can't tell you what he said about Hillary.

CHUNG: You can't?

GINGRICH: I can't.

CHUNG: Why don't you just whisper it to me, just between you and me?

GINGRICH: (Whispers) She's a bitch. About the only thing he ever said about her. I think they had some meeting, you know, and she takes over.

CHUNG: She does?





## 'OFF THE RECORD' MERITS WORLDWIDE CAUTION

In the U.S., a free press ranks just slightly below motherhood in the sacred institutions department. But the sanctity of a free press — and the hollowness of “off the record” — is not unique to the U.S.

“Some journalists regard off the record’ as an unnecessary encumbrance,” says Edward Townsend, head of Group Media Relations for National Westminster Bank, London. In the United Kingdom, “it is wise to expect that anything you say to the media can and will find its way into the public domain,” he adds.

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation’s Journalistic Standards and Practices includes a section on rights of participants and interviewees, which says: “Care should be exercised not to take unfair advantage of members of the general public who

may be ignorant of certain journalistic practices; for example, the difference between on- and off-the-record interviews, or the attribution of particular comments or opinions.”

“Because we are a crown corporation, we probably have stricter journalistic guidelines and principles than other media organizations in Canada,” says Glenn Lemchuk, CBC communication officer for the Saskatchewan region. “However, if I’m being interviewed by a reporter, I don’t consider anything ‘off the record.’ I would consider the possibility that anything I say could be reported.”

Experts in the U.S., U.K. and Canada agree that before entering into an “off the record” interview, there should be a high level of trust between the two parties. ▲

GINGRICH: Oh, yeah. Yeah. But when Newtie’s there, she can’t.

At the conclusion of the taped segment, Chung made the following statement during her broadcast:

CHUNG: There’s been more talk about how Mrs. Gingrich came to tell us what she says is her son’s five-letter opinion about the first lady than about her son’s opinion itself. Mrs. Gingrich was sitting before three cameras and television lights, with a microphone on. It was clear that what she said would be broadcast.

### Privacy or news?

There are codes among journalists, but the public relations creed is “there is no such thing as off the record.” Chung’s concluding remarks describe an obvious interview situation, including hot lights blaring and a lavalier microphone clipped to Mrs. Gingrich’s clothing. It is inconceivable that a woman now in the public eye was not given at least a short course in interviewing techniques prior to a session with one of the most noted journalists in the U.S. In this case, in fact, it was Mrs. Gingrich who offered, “I can’t tell you what he said about Hillary,” which raises the question of whether the mother of the most powerful leader of the Republican party in the U.S. was actually baiting the reporter in hopes that her

remarks would be broadcast!

Furthermore, one could argue that the comments of the mother of the second in line to the U.S. presidency are news.

As Eric Ober, president of CBS News, said, “While broadcasting Mrs. Gingrich’s comments may have been perceived by some as unfair, CBS News does not believe withholding those comments would have been appropriate.”

The ensuing controversy following the “Eye to Eye” broadcast underscores the point.

### Is anything off the record?

Less than a week following the Gingrich/Chung flap, another ethics controversy developed, again involving Mrs. Clinton, but this time the ethics of *The New York Times* were called into question.

The *Times* ran a page one story by Marian Burros that detailed a luncheon with Hillary Rodham Clinton. Burros and 10 other women who regularly write about the U.S. First Lady’s social functions, style, gossip and personal advice attended the luncheon “in which Mrs. Clinton began by speaking off the record but later agreed to talk for publication,” according to Burros.

Among other comments included in the *Times* story, Mrs. Clinton was quoted as saying, “I think I was naive and dumb,

because my view was results speak for themselves.” The story also reported that Mrs. Clinton said, “I am surprised at the way people seem to perceive me, and sometimes I read stories and hear things about me and I go ‘ugh’ I wouldn’t like her either. It’s so unlike what I think I am or what my friends think I am.”

The following day, the *Times* was accused of breaching journalistic ethics by publishing comments that other luncheon guests said were off the record.

“It was clear, 100 percent off the record ... I was furious,” said *New York Post* gossip columnist Cindy Adams. “I can’t believe the *Times* would follow Connie Chung’s journalism.”

Defending the integrity of his publication and backing his reporter, *Times* editor Andrew Rosenthal said that Burros “kept a very careful account of what was on the record. These quotes were on the record, which is why we put them in the newspaper.” He further emphasized his paper’s principles by saying that the reporter had even called back the White House to check whether a particular quote could be used under the ground rules. However, it was reported that a White House official called the *Times* to complain about the alleged breach of the rules.



## The tricks of the trade

Whether it's the esteemed *New York Times* or London's notorious *News of the World*, such controversies will inevitably occur.

In their book, "Groping for Ethics in Journalism," Gene Goodwin and Ron F. Smith quote writer Janet Malcolm as saying, "Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. He is a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse."

Malcolm's quote "triggered what *Columbia Journalism Review* called more newsroom and cocktail-party debate, more belligerent editorializing and more honest soul-searching than almost any other article on journalism ever had," write Goodwin and Smith.

Whether it was ethical or unethical, what Chung did is one of the "tricks of the trade" practiced by many journalists. And what Burros and the *Times* did was follow journalistic conventions.

## What's it all mean?

So what can we make of such uproars?

The primary lesson for the inexperienced interview subject is to determine clear ground rules before an interview, then to have a healthy skepticism and be wary. Beyond that, here are five rules to follow regarding news interviews:

...

### Rule number one:

#### **There are no rules**

Before any reputable media coach sends a neophyte spokesperson before a print or broadcast journalist, the coach probably says something like, "Assume the camera or microphone is on. And never say anything you don't want repeated on the air or in print because anything you say can and may be used."

One of the most famous stories in public relations lore involves a supposed "background" meeting that had been arranged between executives from a large

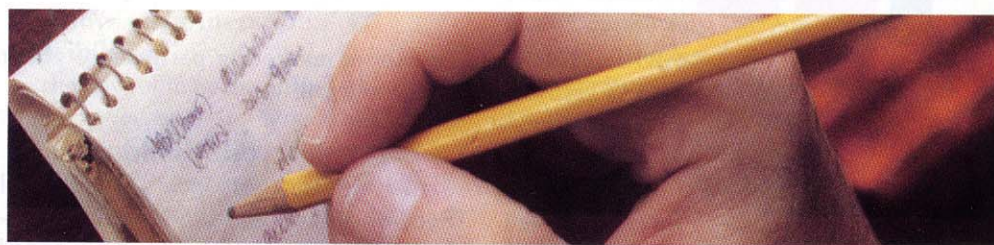
corporation and editorial representatives from *The New York Times*. The expectation among the corporate professionals was that none of the remarks made that day would ever be published. Imagine the reaction several months later when some of the executives' comments were included in an unflattering story about their company. When a company representative called a *Times* editor to hotly remind him that they had agreed that everything said would be "off the record," the editor delivered a classic public relations maxim: "There is no such thing as off the record" when a reporter for *The New York Times* is present."

...

### Rule number two:

#### **Assess the climate of the interview**

In the Gingrich case, we're talking about the most powerful Republican in the U.S.



There is controversy involved. It's clear that the climate of the interview is steeped in potential controversy. A slight gaffe by one of Speaker Gingrich's parents is bound to be pounced upon by the reporter—and other reporters following the story—to open the door wide for a chance to pique the public's interest.

...

### Rule number three:

#### **You control the interview**

You are responsible for what is said, and not said, during the interview. You really can control the interview, even though the reporter will often lead you to make comments based on the angle that he or she is taking. Remember that a reporter works for a news organization and it is the business of that organization to arouse the interest of its audience. The reporter is interviewing you because he or she wants

to develop a good story. A reporter is responsible for being accurate—not fair—accurate. He or she has nothing to gain by damaging you, nor does he or she have any interest in flattering you or favoring you. The reporter's job is to create a good story. So you have to be responsible for what is said, and not said, during an interview.

...

### Rule number four:

#### **Find out who is going to be interviewing you**

In advance of the interview, even before agreeing to the interview, learn as much as you can about the reputation of the reporter and his or her news organization. Is the reporter itching for that big break to advance his or her career? Is he or she a seasoned interviewer who has a sterling reputation for courtesy and respect? Does the television station resort to "ambush" techniques to create sensational stories?

Check with reliable colleagues who can advise you how much you can "trust" the reporter.

...

### And rule number five:

#### **Set the ground rules in advance of the interview**

Determine with the reporter how long the interview will take, where it will occur, when the interview is actually beginning, if the tape is actually rolling or if you are actually being quoted, and when the interview or story will appear in print or on the air. Of course, remember that there are no rules, and don't ever take anything for granted.

*John Knox is the owner of Knox Communications, a public relations and marketing communication firm based in San Francisco.*