

An Interview with Edwin Newman

My hands were shaking, my palms were sweating, my mouth dry.

Sure, I had read the public relations pamphlet: Edwin Newman, over 28 years experience in broadcast journalism, winner of numerous awards, including the prestigious Peabody. Moderator of the first Jimmy Carter/Gerald Ford debate, and the first U.S. journalist to be granted an interview with Hirohito, the emperor of Japan who reigned during World War II. And I had done my homework as well: He had narrated a substantial number of memorable documentaries, winning six Emmys in the process; served as overseas correspondent for NBC, heading their London and Rome news bureaus; and, as of late, has established himself as our day's Professor Higgins with the publication of two best sellers, *Strictly Speaking* and *A Civil Tongue*, both dealing with the use — misuse, really — of the English language in America.

Still, like you and me, he is a man, too. He dresses in the same manner as everyone else, eats food, drinks — and ages, as evidenced by his receding hairline. Actually, the only thing that I should have been nervous about was the possibility of committing a verbal *faux pas*.

And yet, something still bothered me, flustered me, unnerved me. It was the atmosphere surrounding the press conference this evening, so carnival-like. The notables attending the “informal” press conference, my journalistic peers, as it were, were obviously prepared and waiting — not to mention attired — for something of a coronation. These professionals, probably most amiable as individuals, collectively appeared stern, stuffy, and above all, intimidating.

Mr. Newman entered. Without his fine Saks Fifth Avenue suit and his usual cortege of secretaries, he would have easily passed for one's own favorite uncle, his manner so relaxed and pleasingly plain.

Mr. Newman seated himself at a smaller table facing us. His manner was relaxed and almost routine. In front of me were the questions I had chosen to ask, ones that I had hoped he hadn't answered too many times before. Also, foreseeing that I would be able to ask but one or two questions, I had selected questions which I presumed some of the others might ask as well.

A reporter from some local paper commented on the fact that President Reagan is considered to be a great communicator, as far as presidents go, but what did Mr. Newman think of Mr. Reagan in that regard?

“Well, there is no doubt that the background that President Reagan has in the media — movies, radio, and so on — has greatly aided him in his communication with the American people. He has a great understanding of the power of the media and often uses it to his best interest, or at least up to this point.” He paused. “But you have to be aware, too, that when President Reagan announced his plans for a new income tax cut, all hailed him a great communicator, and in the very next weeks upon announcing his plans for Social Security reductions, he was not hailed a great communicator. So you see, it's basically what it is that he communicates that determines his ‘greatness.’”

"Where do you feel," a lady from a magazine began, "that the roots of our language problems lie? With parents? Schools? Television?"

Bingo! One down.

"Well, each of the aspects that you have mentioned plays a certain role in the problem, plus there are many more." He spoke with an aura of self-assurance, yet not overbearing. His opinions were his, and if others wished to listen, then fine; and if they wished to disregard them, fine also. "I do feel television could do more than it presently is doing to enhance the English language. We have commercials which take every possible liberty with the language, sports announcers flaunting a shallow and ill-used vocabulary, and network programmers who seem to feel that the viewing public wants, what has been criticized as light, mindless fluff. I do feel, however, that the 'thoughtful' shows, given a chance, will attract the nation's viewers. It seems to have been proven in the past with individual series as well as some fine mini-series . . . Most viewers, I feel, do not have a choice of what to watch and, if given one, would opt for the more artistic offerings."

Contrary to what I had expected, his speech was not escalated above the average man's comprehension. But, after all, he is an average man, with the gift of insight. His speech was articulate, but naturally so. He did not force it.

A spokesman from the college asked Mr. Newman whom he felt is the greatest author of all time. Mr. Newman informed him that there really is no objective or correct way of determining who is the best or the greatest. The spokesman then inquired as to who is Mr. Newman's favorite fiction writer. Mr. Newman said that he really did not have as much time as he would like to read fiction, particularly contemporary fiction. "Though I do enjoy and admire the few works that I have read by Robert Benson."

"Is there any concrete reason for optimism as far as the correct use of our language is concerned? Are we leaning toward better grammar and usage?"

"Oh, yes, I think that there is a very optimistic outlook. People have started to become more aware of the importance of using correct English, and though I previously attacked the media, I must say that there seems a resurgence of emphasis on correct usage and grammar and encouraging the use of proper English."

He spoke with candor, seemingly undaunted by what others might think, and yet he was not a henchman. His gibes were warranted, his beefs legitimate, and he coated them with tact and diplomacy, taking away a bit of the sting. He did, however, seem to shy away from a question which invited him to comment and, in essence, attack and belittle his television journalistic peers.

"I am really not qualified to judge. I have personal viewpoints on certain correspondents and anchorpersons ("persons" — definitely an '80's man!) which, and I mean no disrespect to you people, might be misinterpreted."

Smart move.

"I do feel, however, that Charles Kuralt and Ed Bradley are two of the finest "relayers" of news. They speak well, with good voice inflection and enunciation and, in my opinion, have yet to receive the recognition and notoriety which I feel they truly deserve."

He was versatile. He could speak praise and criticism, talk on somber topics, or very smoothly make use of our human flaws for humor purposes. And he invoked a certain common sense wisdom, pulling it off by maintaining a deadpan, wry delivery.

What! No, not my turn!

Well, here goes. Deep breath. Relax. Oh, no. Pulse rate doubles. Stomach turns. Mouth dry.

Don't stumble over your words, don't overdo it.

"You've created for yourself a reputation . . . as a type of language laureate. I was wondering if, when in the course of everyday speaking, you are alerted to common mistakes and *faux pas*, and when done repeatedly by one person, does it bother you a great deal?"

What did I just ask?

"Well, I thank you for your gracious compliment, although I am not sure I am really deserving of such appraisal. To answer your question: Yes, I do pick up a good deal of

mistakes I hear in everyday speech, as well as on television and radio, although I'm not fanatical about it. As a matter of fact, I find many of them amusing; however, I do become bothered by repetitiveness and those people who take a certain pride in deliberate ignorance. I pick up on mistakes because I have become conditioned to do so, a conditioning that began while constructing my books. I even have gotten my family members on the lookout, a habit that also started while compiling my books. But though I would never think of correcting someone, especially a stranger, I am very much aware of them."

That was easy enough. Quick! Get in the second question!

"Have you ever made an embarrassing verbal error while lecturing or speaking in public?"

"Oh, yes, there have been many times in which I have stumbled over words, or inadvertently mispronounced words, but I usually try to pass over them with the hope that it passed over the heads of the audience. There are times when I may make a mistake and do not acknowledge it, but you might have caught it. It's not always that I haven't caught it, I just had hope that no one else had . . . Only if it's an obvious mistake will I stop and make reference to it. I believe many speakers do that."

That wasn't so hard. If it weren't for all these people! I'd love to be able to sit down with him for a few beers and chat with him. He does look more like a whiskey-and-water man, though, come to think of it.

"Mr. Newman, is there one most memorable event that you covered in your career as a journalist?"

He thought a moment. "There have been so many. The Kennedy assassinations stick out. The first moon walk. Watergate. The Iranian hostage homecoming. The Cuban missile crisis. They all stick out in my mind and I can recall each pretty vividly."

Not bad. All six of my questions asked and answered, plus a few bonus ones. I wanted another chance though. I was finally relaxed and confident. I was ready to *rap* with Edwin Newman now.

A lady from a local television station asked, "Are there any certain words which you feel are overused?"

"Definitely. Usually it's the adjectives, and usually it's the adjectives which hype up one's ability. 'Awesome' is *the* adjective of late. 'Awesome ability,' 'awesome display,' 'awesome performance.' It has joined the ranks of 'superstar' and 'great.' 'One of the greats of our time.' 'A superstar in every sense of the word.' There are so many greats and superstars in our era that there are no more mediocre favorites, those individuals with questionable ability, yet who play their hearts out to achieve the humble status of mediocrity. They seem to have vanished, but there still are many around, however, who are now 'great superstars.' Also, the word 'address.' It has come to my attention that if someone is to be anyone, he must address something or someone. 'We address the press.' 'He addressed the issue.' 'She made a public address.' 'They addressed the problem.' 'Will you address the assembly?' and so on."

The public relations lady broke in. "If that is all, we are running a little late. I'd like to thank you all for coming, and if you follow me, I'll direct you to your seats." Gratuities were exchanged and Mr. Newman exited one door to the stage and the press people went out another. Except for me; I just sat there.

Wait a minute. I'm relaxed now. I'm ready to go. Let's sit back down and pick each other's brains apart, whatdaya say? But no one could read my mind or see the perplexity on my face. But I could see a man, Edwin Newman, who, while others searched for quicker ways of doing things, said, "Wait! Slow down! Our basic necessity is that of communication! Let's master that. Then let us move on."

I tip my chapeau. Well addressed, Mr. Newman. □

Matthew Weiland '83





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National Broadcasting Company, Inc.

Thirty Rockefeller Plaza
New York, N.Y. 10020 212-664-4444

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Brother Joseph Chvala, C.S.C.
St. Edward High School
13500 Detroit Avenue
Lakewood, Ohio 44107

Dear Brother Joseph:

Thank you for your kind letter and for the enclosures.

I have read Mathew Weiland's story about ~~the~~ interview and enjoyed it. Some of the quotations seem to be slightly off, but no more so than is often found in the copy of professional journalists. Young Mr. Weiland, I think, has a distinct flair for writing.

I intend to look at the other material you sent me as soon as I can. I have just returned from vacation and I did not want to delay my reply further.

With good wishes.

Sincerely,

Edwin Newman
EN/rt



Edwin Newman 508

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Thirty Rockefeller Plaza
New York, N.Y. 10020

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Lakewood, Ohio 44107



