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DOI: 10.1177/1468794118803022
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Negotiating with gatekeepers to get interviews with politicians: qualitative research recruitment in a digital media environment

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Abstract

This article tackles the puzzle of the best practices to acquire an interview with a politician. It seeks to assist researchers who must persuade gatekeepers in busy political offices to present an elected representative with an interview request. Our research is based on a copious review of the literature and is punctuated by fresh insights collected via interviews with 32 academics, journalists and political staff in six countries. We argue that researchers must tailor their approach when placing interview requests to elected officials and make careful use of email, websites, social media and online reputation management. For ease of reference three summary tables are presented. This synopsis about securing interviews with election candidates and legislators can inform qualitative research recruitment with other types of political elites in a rapidly evolving digital environment.

Keywords

digital media, elected officials, gatekeepers, government, journalism, political elites, political staff, qualitative interviews, recruitment

Introduction

Getting interviews with people in positions of authority is difficult even as information about them is becoming more available. Initially a researcher is struck by the complexities of defining and identifying elites as well as the fluid nature of an individual's status at a

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given time (Harvey, 2011: 432–433). Then there is the challenge of connecting with people at the top of a hierarchy who are insulated by layers of staff, from receptionists to communications directors, who act as gatekeepers. If a member of the upper strata of society does grant an interview, the researcher must be mindful of the considerable power imbalance (Dexter, 1970; Ostrander, 1993).

The challenges of elite interviewing are pronounced with politicians, in particular the ability to acquire the interview, a puzzle that we seek to address. Elected officials project an image of democratic accessibility and yet exhibit a 'wariness of strangers that often borders on xenophobia' (Baker, 2011: 101). Officeholders are coping with a torrent of communication and demands for their time. There are growing anxieties about saying the wrong thing and falling victim to a freewheeling online public sphere. Avenues are cut off as a result: some political parties order a clampdown on interviews, casting a chill that trickles down to lower level officials and public servants (Jiwani and Krawchenko, 2014). In many jurisdictions, interview requests from social scientists are far more likely to be ignored than acknowledged, let alone granted. Faced with rejection, researchers are susceptible to the simplicity of recruiting participants through referrals, which can lead to overrepresentation of a political ideology. This biases their sample design and fails to uncover a full range of hidden data. Researchers can consult 'how-to' frameworks, however the process for lining up interviews with politicians is often glossed over (Beamer, 2002), and much available guidance is pre-Internet (Richards, 1996: 202) or otherwise antiquated (Goldstein, 2002: 671).

Set out below is an inventory of recommended ways to obtain interviews with elected officials in a digital media environment. We begin by outlining the dynamics of political office. Next we outline our methodology. We then combine findings from our review of the literature with fresh insights we collected through interviews with 32 academics, journalists and political staff in six countries. The integration of findings with existing knowledge allows readers to treat this as a 'how-to' guide on the matter of generating participation. Our approach is grounded in empirical political science. We lean toward standardized methodology, and while we recognize this does not fit some molds of qualitative research or its terminology (Seale et al., 2004; Yanow, 2003), our objective is to assist anyone who wishes to interview public officeholders. To our knowledge, this is among the first attempts at systematic research about how to convince gatekeepers to encourage an elected official to agree to an interview, and among the first guidelines for dealing with gatekeepers in the digital age. This is timely. In a world of message discipline and fake news, and with researchers turning to other sources of data, uncovering insights via unmediated conversation with officeholders is arguably more relevant than ever. We are optimistic that the following tips and tactics will encourage and support social scientists to practice qualitative research wherever the study of politics, public policy and government is concerned.

The problem of getting an elected official to agree to an interview

Securing a research interview with a member of the upper echelon of any occupation is fraught with difficulty (but see Ostrander, 1993). A researcher must accord special

treatment to elites given their social power dynamics and the premium they place on time (Stephens, 2007; Zuckerman, 1996). In business, busy CEOs are insulated by walls of staff, and concern about lost productivity is a barrier to worker participation (Smith, 2012). In the health care sector, executives have limited experience with qualitative research and interview requests are screened by trade organizations (Goldman and Swayze, 2012: 231). The problem of access is particularly jarring in politics. Political scientists have long deliberated ways to get people to participate in interviews (Dexter, 1970; Fenno, 1978; Hunt et al., 1964; Richards, 1996), in order to understand political actors and governance (Evans, 2001; Tiernan, 2007) and to inform theory about the politically powerful (Lees-Marshment, 2016; Parry 1969).

Politicians have always treated speaking with an academic on a narrow topic as a low priority, for reasons ranging from time constraints to suspicion (Hunt et al., 1964: 61). Researchers must be attuned to changes in communications technology when placing requests. Public officeholders receive so many demands for their time that they experience information overload (Walgrave and Dejaeghere, 2017). Email, social media, virtual town halls, smartphones, access to information laws, shortening media cycles, pseudo-scandal – all of it makes for a frenetic workplace and long workdays. Schedules are constantly changing. They have difficulty responding to correspondence and keeping up with their reading. They delegate staff to triage frontline enquiries and control access to the boss (Baker, 2011). Gatekeepers fret that a problematic interview – such as an errant remark or a quote taken out of context – can have negative implications for their own careers. This is heightened when partisans expect their colleagues to stay on the party's message track. All of this has implications for qualitative research design.

Researchers seeking conversations with elected officials must be deliberate in crafting their approach. Who should they contact? How should they tailor the pitch? How many times should they try when faced with non-response? What is the trade-off of snowball sampling, which has a greater success rate for securing interviews, versus random selection which is a more robust way to encourage replication of the research by other scholars? Digital media offers more avenues for identifying, researching, contacting and conversing with officeholders. Yet anxieties about the online public sphere cause some gatekeepers to ignore or deny academics' requests for a personal interview, without ever bringing the enquiry to the politician's attention. Securing interviews with political elites requires awareness of sampling theory (Goldstein, 2002) and different approaches based on the participant/respondent cohort. A leader of a major political party, a US Senator, a senior British minister or the mayor of a major city are part of the 'ultra-elite' (Zuckerman, 1996; Stephens, 2007) or 'hyper-elite' (Baker, 2011) occupying the upper tranche of officialdom. They are the least accessible. Members of small parties, backbenchers and municipal councillors in small polities tend to be most agreeable.

We seek to identify approaches that will generate interviews among all types of elected officials. To capture a wide universe of techniques we consider how members of the fourth estate approach their subjects. Journalists and social scientists share common challenges in securing interviews from officeholders. For instance, the potential for non-participation is acute on the political right, given that many conservatives hold negative views of the media and post-secondary institutions (Pew Research Centre, 2017). Yet there are important differences. Sharing information with an academic is of little benefit

to an officeholder whereas politicians have a symbiotic relationship with the media. Journalists operate within much tighter timeframes. They exhibit more limited ethical standards, such as less rigorous informed consent (Sieber and Tolich, 2013). Their stories rapidly reach voters and other political elites. A journalist can therefore help, hinder or damage a politician's agenda and career aspirations. Qualitative researchers can learn from people who routinely negotiate with political gatekeepers and who face competitive pressure to be early adopters of digital communications technology.

Method

We compile suggestions from social scientists, political journalists and political staffers about the best ways to pitch an interview to elected officials. The pilot phase of our data collection began with Canadian interviews in mid-2016 using quota sampling (Marland and Esselment, 2018). From May to August 2017 we extended our randomized method to Australia, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the United States. Our initial completion target was two participants per cohort per country. When we stopped generating new information, we pivoted to purposive sampling to interview some prolific researchers (including one in New Zealand) and a journalist from our own networks, in order to address a need for longevity of expertise and use of digital media techniques.

To identify social scientists, we used citation metrics to list the top journals in political science for each country. We performed a keyword search of article abstracts to locate research involving depth interviews with elected officials that was published in the past two years. If no applicable research was identified we moved on to the next journal. To select journalists, we identified the most popular newspapers in each country, based on Audit Bureau of Circulation data. We looked at the website of the top three newspapers and identified the first available domestic news story featuring an interview with an elected official. We selected that reporter. To identify political staff, we listed elected officials from national legislatures alphabetically in a spreadsheet, employed a randomization function to the catalogue, and then selected offices to contact. We sought participants from two different parties in each country. This reflects some slight modifications from the Canadian pre-test (see Marland and Esselment, 2018).[1]

Recruitment occurred as follows. We telephoned political offices and asked receptionists to direct our call. This often generated a name and email address that we would not have identified. We sent a brief email message and, in the event of non-response, we re-sent it some days later before moving on. Once we established a relationship, we provided a short discussion guide with questions about how to access high ranking people in politics and government, how to work with and bypass gatekeepers, and the advantages and disadvantages presented by digital media in this regard (Appendix 1). We also provided a backgrounder about the project, an ethics clearance letter and a consent form. We contacted journalists and academics by email first, followed by telephone, and sent a second brief email if necessary. This contact mode was the reverse order than with political offices, drawing on our pre-test experience. The time of day that we placed requests was staggered to account for time zone differences.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 academics (A1, A2, A3…), 10 journalists (J1, J2, J3…) and 8 political staffers (P1, P2, P3…), of whom 21 are men and 11

are women, with both genders represented in each cohort. As shown in Appendix 2, they were spread across Australia (n=4), Britain (n=6), Canada (n=10), New Zealand (n=1), South Africa (n=4) and the United States (n=7). We estimate non-response at roughly two-thirds of journalists and the offices of elected representatives. It is difficult to discern any pattern, in part because we made slight adjustments as we learned from each experience and from participants. We had positive experiences with *The New York Times* and *The Los Angeles Times*, whereas requests to the leading outlet in Washington were ignored, and nothing came of emails to reporters with a British tabloid, a live online chat with a customer service representative, and phone calls and emails to its news and editorial departments. In two instances, we 'tweeted at' journalists, which generated one telephone interview. It was a similar story with political offices. We encountered warnings on American representatives' websites that the response time is several weeks and/or that a zip code is required to verify local residency. With the exception of South Africa, weeks of negotiation was common with political staff, most of whom worried that their remarks might be traced to their employer. We inadvertently interviewed a South African Member of Parliament who answered the phone because a family member was due to call from overseas. By comparison, almost all academics promptly agreed to an interview.

All but six interviews were administered by telephone. Four participants preferred Skype and two communicated through email exchanges. Conversations lasted between 20 to 60 minutes and were audio recorded where permitted. We took copious notes which we later reviewed to identify trends and tidbits. We cite participants when information is obscure or there is a direct quote. We opted to conceal the identity of all participants.

Our data collection is itself a social experiment that adds to our own experiences with elite interview recruitment. For instance, we are reminded that political staffers want to vet questions, and how some are recalcitrant while others are enthusiastic. We do not profess that our comparative scan is globally representative. As a measure of objectivity in case selection, we initially included all English-speaking G20 member countries, but we excluded India due to difficulties identifying potential participants. We did not attempt to speak with sitting elected officials because we would require an unwieldy sample size to account for variances (for example, party, gender, incumbency, jurisdiction, urban/rural) and because those least likely to grant interviews would be especially unlikely to do so on this topic. Our generalizations are therefore a guide rather than a prescription.

Navigating gatekeepers to get interviews with elected officials

We notionally organize our findings around three themes. Interview research preparation encompasses reputation management, sampling design, leveraging networks, timing, institutional research ethics requirements and background materials (summarized in Table 1). This is followed by crafting the interview pitch, which includes approaching political offices, mode of contact, brevity and persuasion (Table 2). Finally, converting the interview request and alternate routes involve follow-ups, negotiation, scheduling and options when a request is turned down (Table 3). We pay special attention to new

Table 1. Considerations when preparing for interview research.

- Continually practice online reputation management
- Be mindful of scientific sampling principles and cultural sensitivities
- Explore opportunities to build a network, including the use of social media applications
- Time the request during a gap in the legislative calendar
- Include a link to your website, or provide a short bio on university letterhead
- Consider partnering with a non-partisan organization

Table 2. Considerations when crafting the interview pitch.

- Place a phone call and/or mail a letter before sending an electronic message
- Emphasize benefits to the politician for participating, including the offer of web links to published articles and reports
- Customize each request to the individual politician's interests and background
- Be concise – only send lengthy details digitally after a relationship is formed

Table 3. Converting an interview request and some alternatives when unsuccessful.

- Have a flexible schedule and be easy to contact on short notice
- Be respectfully persistent
- Before giving up, try a standard final appeal
- Consider interviewing a gatekeeper and/or retired politician instead

developments with social media. Readers are reminded that the context is at a national scale, involving distance from a researcher, whereas contact at a local level might generate a direct reply.

Interview research preparation

Among the most poignant observations is the need for researchers to continually practice reputation management. Academics are subject to more thorough vetting than ever before (P5). Elites will 'check you out' multiple times (Ostrander, 1993: 25) and conduct Internet searches 'to ascertain whether the researcher's politics are aligned with their own' (Monahan and Fisher, 2015: 711). If an interview request topic is interesting, a gatekeeper performs an online scan about the researcher to assess how to proceed. A researcher with a public profile could experience success because a request from a 'thought leader' is more appealing (P3, J3, J8). At the same time, refusals might result from perceptions of ideological misalignment, association with adversaries or imagined covert operations (P2, P3; Petkov and Kaoullas, 2016: 414-15). On this we are reminded of conventional wisdom that maintaining a low public profile will optimize the possibility that all officeholders and their staff will form a positive judgment (Fenno, 1978: 261–262). Whatever the researcher's public status, a digital footprint – faculty or personal webpage, Academia.edu or ResearchGate profile, LinkedIn page, social media chatter, commentary in news stories – should exude professionalism and objectivity. What is discovered online can determine whether access will be granted.

A social scientist should decide early on how sampling rigor will be upheld in the face of non-response and refusals. More than 'a strong ego' is needed to penetrate into elite circles (Peabody et al., 1990: 453). Researchers tempted by snowball sampling must be mindful of selection and non-response biases that impede the ability to report generalizable findings. Unsolicited requests can unearth different perspectives (Fenno, 1978: 255–257). However, cold calling is a 'hit and miss' process (Richards, 1996: 201), to the point that it is seen as 'a crapshoot' involving 'dumb luck' (A4), with certain political parties being more difficult than others (Hunt et al., 1964: 61). The success rate is often so low and demoralizing that some recommend avoiding uninvited communication with elites (Beckmann and Hall, 2013: 201). Whatever pathway is followed, qualitative researchers should be mindful of scientific sampling principles throughout (Beyers et al., 2014; Goldstein, 2002; Rivera et al., 2002).

Referrals are often necessary for the study of politicians. At the conclusion of an interview, a researcher can seek permission to mention the participant's name to acquaintances, which might lead to an offer from the participant to vouch for the researcher's trustworthiness. New scholars do not typically have an existing network to leverage. A natural starting point is the researcher's home district because those elected representatives and their staff will feel a greater obligation to assist (P1, P6, P7). A call can be put out via social media, as journalists sometimes do (Figure 1), and digital networking applications such as LinkedIn can provide avenues for connections. Other options include asking for assistance from graduates of a political management program and collaborating with other researchers (Jiwani and Krawchenko, 2014: 60, 64). One of our academic participants (A11) develops contacts by inviting guest speakers in his classes and by meeting political staffers who come to campus to interview student interns. Another (A1) talked about her project to anyone who would listen – at events, on panels, while lined up at a café. Some of those she talked with shared their connections with public officeholders or knew of people who would make an introduction. Attending political or government conferences is a further networking option (Monahan and Fisher, 2015: 714).

Cultural sensitivities are an additional research design consideration. Political elites are aware of their status (Richards, 1996: 200) and some are conditioned to being 'wined and dined' by people seeking their time (Siritarungsri et al., 2013: 71). Some might respond to incentives that appeal to their good nature, such as extending an invitation to go for coffee sometime, or offering a donation to a charitable organization (A7, J7). Others want to be recognized for their expertise by having their name appear in print. Researchers need to be aware about expectations of good manners (A1, P3), whether it is rude to administer an interview by telephone instead of face-to-face (Harvey, 2011: 435), or whether being assertive is normal or impolite (Mikecz, 2012: 486). They must also consider matters of language clarity and dialect (Rivera et al. 2002: 686). Participants may be hypersensitive about secrecy, insisting on an informal setting to speak about routine matters (Jiwani and Krawchenko, 2014: 63), or even to converse in a car wash to avoid surveillance (Petkov and Kaoullas, 2016: 415).

Timing the pitch appropriately is an important consideration. Participants might need a month or more notice (Beyers et al., 2014: 185), though immediacy is preferred in some developing nations (Rivera et al., 2002: 685). A researcher must be aware of legislative calendars to maximize an officeholder's availability (A2, P3, P4). Political offices

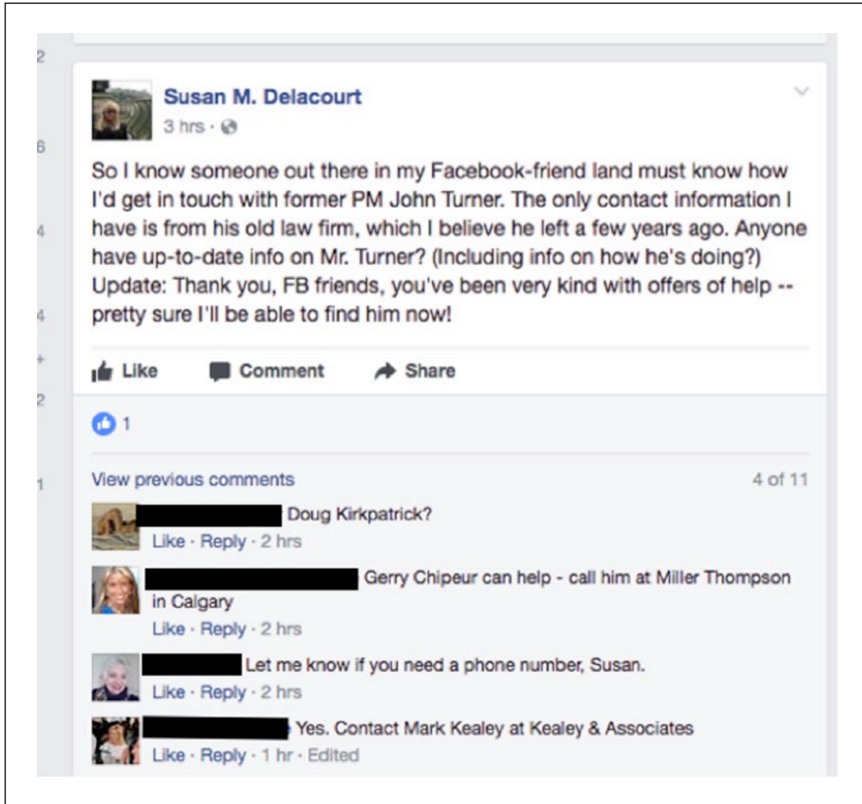

Figure 1. Crowdsourcing to locate contact information for potential interview participant.
Source: Canadian journalist's Facebook post (May 19, 2017). Reproduced with journalist's permission.

are especially busy on days that members of the legislature meet and are calmest during holiday seasons. In any given week, requests are more likely to be answered by staff on Fridays when elected officials tend to travel to their home district. Most of the journalists we interviewed follow politicians on Twitter. This gives them real time accounts of where elected representatives are. When an election is called a politician who is ordinarily accessible suddenly becomes buried behind layers of campaign aides (J5).

Academic participants raised concerns about the bureaucratic mania resulting from well-intentioned research ethics boards (A7, A12, A13). Social science cannot seamlessly import biomedical practices in this regard (Doyle and Buckley, 2016). In designing their study, researchers must observe appropriate ethical practices, while pushing back against unreasonable restrictions that fail to treat political elites as a special category of participant (Marland and Esselment, 2018: 31–32; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2016: 280).

Ethics boards are likely to want to review recruitment materials. Elected representatives need assurances that their remarks will be used in the agreed fashion and will not cause problems. Conveying high standards and inferring the researcher's own

reputational considerations can signal that an interview will be treated in confidence. Officialdom conveys trustworthiness and the promise of consequential research. This includes communicating the researcher's institutional affiliation, such as university letterhead (Peabody et al., 1990), which can be serendipitous if a participant is motivated to help an alma mater (Goldman and Swayze, 2012: 236). A short bio with a summary of some relevant publications, or a link to the researcher's faculty profile (P2), might be provided. Partnering with a non-partisan organization that promotes good government, such as the Brookings Institution (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002: 673) or the Samara Centre for Democracy, can be a strong foray for obtaining interviews (A7) and differentiates interview requests from private sector consulting research and sales (Goldman and Swayze, 2012: 236). In some cultures, people are impressed by academic credentials, and a letter from a university president or affiliation with an academic institute can contribute to high participation rates (A7, A10; Siritarungsri et al., 2013: 71; also Mikecz, 2012: 486; Rivera et al., 2002: 684). Yet caution is warranted. For instance the participant might harbour negative opinions about the polity where the researcher is based and the formalities of research ethics processes (Petkov and Kaoullas, 2016: 415). Others still are put off by academia (P1, P4; also Pew Research Centre, 2017). Above all, there must be impressions that the researcher is trustworthy, will follow the facts and will be impartial.

Crafting the interview pitch

Many of our participants noted that researchers might derive better uptake if they begin by placing a phone call and/or mailing a letter before initiating digital communication (see also Beyers et al., 2014: 185; Lees-Marshment, 2016: 27). This provides advance notice, establishes that a real person is placing the request and helps to break through the electronic cacophony. Political staffers explained that this makes an email more likely to be noticed and made actionable among a phalanx of invitations. Our own method of asking the person answering the phone to help direct our call enabled us to draw attention to the research and obtain contact information for the most appropriate gatekeeper. Even so, some researchers recommend that the initial contact begin with an email message (Beckmann and Hall, 2013: 202; Lilleker, 2003: 209), depending on local customs (Mikecz, 2012: 486). A newer option is tweeting 'at' a politician. Some public officials pay copious attention to their social media feeds or assign staff to do so. They do not want to be viewed as unresponsive. Engaging on social media can initiate a conversation and provide an entry for a later request for an interview (P8). A direct message on Twitter can be a backchannel for a personal connection with an elite (J1, J3, J6, J7, J8, J9); as one journalist put it, this 'helps to cut out the middleman' (J2). However, calling out a politician on social media is an option only when traditional channels have failed, because public embarrassment can prompt irritation. Whatever medium is chosen, a written request with details is the accepted practice in the developed world, whereas verbal communication may be the norm in other polities (Rivera et al., 2002: 685). For instance, approaching an official immediately after a public event can be fruitful, particularly if this occurs in an intimate setting such as a speech given to a small organization.

What should go in the pitch? Some suggest that the initial message need only identify the research topic, the reason for the request and the likely questions (Lilleker, 2003: 209). Others relay not to initially provide questions because this will lead to gatekeepers dismissing the request (P3). Elite interviewer William Harvey errs on the side of transparency by identifying 'who I am, where I am working, what the nature of my research is (in non-academic jargon), who is sponsoring me, how long the interview will take, how the data will be used, where the results will be disseminated and whether the information will be attributed or anonymous' (2011: 433). A researcher who has a strong network can ask former political advisors to review the initial letter (Lees-Marshment, 2016: 27).

We were repeatedly advised to pique a public official's interest. A gatekeeper is more likely to support a request if there are obvious benefits for the politician participating (A2, A11, P1, P6, P7, J3). Officeholders' motivations for participating in academic research are thought to include breaking up their daily routine; making a new contact; a habit of agreeing to requests as part of the job or sense of civic duty; interest in attention or publicity; and perhaps a dollop of wanting to be recorded in an academic publication (Fenno, 1978: 260–261). Casting the politician as the teacher and the researcher as the student can appeal to a politician's ego and reduce distance from the ivory tower. In some cases, they may like having their opinion and name recorded in an academic journal or book, particularly if the politician wants to exert expertise or document events for posterity. A pledge that participants will be among the first to receive a copy of the results can be a convincing inducement (Beyers et al., 2014: 185), as can the offer to provide a web link to the research on the politician's website (P1). A journalist suggested explaining why an interview is in the public interest and of particular concern to constituents (J3). A staffer added that some politicians are partial to hearing that their participation would improve public policy and the public good (P2). Another tactic is to present what you understand the party's or politician's position to be and to invite a correction or clarification (J7).

Ideally, the request will be customized to align with the politician's interests and background (P1, P3). Internet sleuthing enables a researcher to identify commonalities with a potential interviewee that can improve request uptakes (Beckmann and Hall, 2013: 201). For instance, mention that the topic is directly related to their current or past experience on a legislative committee, or remark on the politician's tweets to followers. Digital media can be mined to establish a prospective participant's past remarks on an issue. Identifying commonalities with the politician's family, hometown, schooling, past employment and interests can be leveraged to form a connection, if done tastefully. Many participants noted that this is most effective if the research interests of the scholar align with the ministerial post, shadow portfolio, or constituency pet projects of the potential interviewee.

Finally, practice concise communication. The request must precisely outline what is being asked of the participant. Political offices are so bombarded with letters, emails, phone calls and social media posts that staff quickly triage what is actionable, what to put aside for later and what to delete. They are increasingly viewing emails and social media on tiny handheld devices and form rapid judgments. Long email messages with attachments are prone to be ignored or treated as spam. This means that research ethics

documentation should be provided only after the researcher has begun to form a trustworthy relationship. Even then, concision is preferred. Ethics documentation can help with recruitment, because it offers some assurance that a request is a legitimate academic pursuit. Project information should be succinct, recognizing that elected officials typically want to control all aspects of their comments appearing in public, particularly with respect to social media. Efforts to document informed consent must balance a need to respect the participants' wishes against the potential that asking them to sign a legal-looking template will jeopardize the interview. Conversely, institutional boards might overlook that some political participants have a *quid pro quo* expectation of special treatment when findings are communicated (J6).

Converting the interview request and alternate options

All qualitative researchers have experience with prospective interviews failing to come through. Communication is inexplicably ignored, an interview is rescheduled, a staff member changes jobs, and so forth. With elected officials it is crucial to offer convenience and be persistent.

It is imperative to make it known that the researcher has a flexible schedule and is easy to contact on short notice. Some elites suddenly find time in their schedules, so being available at that moment can procure an interview, such as by being physically stationed with a smart phone near a legislature (A1, A8, A10, A11). To offer flexibility, scheduling a single interview per day enables accommodating delays and lengthy conversations (Mikecz, 2012: 487). In lieu of an in-person meeting, a telephone interview can optimize scheduling difficulties (Stephens, 2007), and the alternative of returning a written response can work for others.

Researchers must be tenacious in their efforts to secure the interview. Here the input of journalists is helpful. They operate under urgent deadlines and routinely seek a remark from specific politicians on controversial topics that attract public attention. They are not bound by the same ethical constraints and some go to extreme lengths to get an interview. Their determination is captured by a Canadian journalist: 'The only way today to deal with the aides and the flacks is to be persistent and to push, push, push to talk to a real person, not have an answer emailed to you. If you have to, you need to access the politico's schedule and show up wherever he or she is going to be' (J2). Another offered that it is okay to be annoying and insistent (J5) while our *New York Times* participant advocated assertiveness (J9). If a gatekeeper denies the request, going to a higher ranking staffer is an option, at a cost of potentially poisoning the relationship (J3). Some journalists seek to provoke a response by explaining that a lack of availability will be noted in the story or by observing that an opponent commented already (J1, J2).

Academics should be respectfully persistent. In Russia, Rivera et al. (2002: 684) placed 15 to 20 callbacks, a number that strikes us as harassment by North American academic standards, but is indeed practiced by academics in other parts of the world (A7). If stonewalled, a determined researcher might visit a public office or hope to catch a politician in nearby surroundings, geography permitting (Hunt et al., 1964: 60; Peabody et al., 1990: 453). One academic participant managed to secure an office inside the

legislature for a week, so the Members of Parliament were hard pressed to refuse an interview when she called, since she was quite literally down the hall from them (A2). Being physically present is common practice among journalists. They argued that the halls of legislative buildings are fair game for reporters seeking to speak with ministers, as are local hangouts and the walking routes that lead to them. One recalled stalking a former presidential candidate at multiple locations in a single day until staff relented to the request for a comment (J9) – a tenacity that would not meet the approval of ethics review boards in academia. In our own experience, remarking that an individual or office is an outlier for non-participation can prompt a reply. One academic, who had previously been an elected official, explained that many politicians grant interviews out of fear that they will be portrayed as secretive and inaccessible (A3). Before giving up, a researcher should communicate a final message to the effect that: 'I understand that you are busy, and that you have been unable to respond be interviewed. I promise this is my last request for an interview, and if I don't hear from you I will consider this a firm decision by you, which I will respect. Best wishes to you and the important work that you are doing.'[2] This can result in gatekeepers or politicians apologizing and agreeing to proceed. It proved effective in all three of our cohorts.

What if none of this works? Consider interviewing a gatekeeper. A political staffer can lay the foundation for a politician by revealing information and then by vouching for the researcher (A11, J1). Intermediaries can relay an aura of trust, exert some control over an elected official's schedule, encourage the disclosure of hidden information, and turn an academic atmosphere into a relaxed one (Petkov and Kaoullas, 2016). Political staff are a useful source of information in their own right. They are privy to behind-the-scenes action and often the ones who manage a politician's social media accounts. They may be more willing to share the intricacies of political and public administration than the politician, especially one in current office. Many of these advisors are seasoned politicos who have worked for a variety of offices and officeholders, and it is often their influence on ministers and members that drive decision-making (Tiernan, 2007). A candid political staffer can provide a wealth of information and analysis. Their participation may be conditional on anonymity, as opposed to officeholders who typically approach all interviews as being on the record (Evans, 2001: 179–182). Another option is to interview a retired hyper-elite before attempting to access a sitting one. Organizations such as the Association of Former Members of Parliament or the U.S. Association of Former Members of Congress can relay requests. Public officials who have transitioned to academia are excellent prospects (Peabody et al., 1990: 453). Those out of the political game are freer to share information that would otherwise be inaccessible and can be an excellent source of referrals.

Conclusion

Decades ago, Fenno (1978: 256) observed 'the easy way out would be to avoid the pain of dealing with people who are suspicious of academics, difficult to reach, and difficult to interview. But at what price?' Fewer studies anchored by in-depth interviews with officeholders inhibits the discovery of new information, the exploratory and descriptive research that helps us understand the practice of politics, the interpretation of other data,

and the building and testing of theory that underpins interpretations of governance. The guidance we provide here builds on literature about accessing elites generally (Goldman and Swayze, 2012; Mikecz, 2012; Monahan and Fisher, 2015; Ostrander, 1993; Siritarungsri et al, 2013), political elites (Beamer, 2002; Dexter, 1970; Goldstein, 2002; Lilleker, 2003; Peabody et al., 1990; Petkov and Kaollas, 2016; Richards, 1996) and especially elected officials (Baker, 2011; Beckmann and Hall, 2013; Fenno, 1978; Hunt et al., 1964; Marland and Esselment, 2018). Those who, like us, believe that interviewing elected officials matters will benefit from strategies to help them access data to comprehend the political forces that shape public policy.

In particular our research pushes forward knowledge about negotiating interviews in a political environment of communication control and triage (Jiwani and Krawchenko, 2014; Walgrave and Dejaeghere, 2017). Digital media is having mixed effects on researchers' ability to obtain interviews with elected representatives. It is easier to locate contact information about a potential participant and reach out to that person through a variety of mediums. An academic can supplement a telephone number and a formal address with email addresses, webpages, Twitter handles, Facebook pages, and other avenues to make contact. Information is readily available about what the officeholder is doing and thinking, possibly in real time. Communications technology is used to broadcast events, legislative matters, opinions, the release of reports, and on-goings at committee hearings. Yet elected representatives are saturated with requests, with greater expectations to communicate with the public, and a workday that stretches from early morning to late in the evening. The political casualties from wayward remarks that resulted in a negative news story or took a nasty viral turn are too numerous to count. Caution extends to granting interviews with researchers even though academics are unlikely to cause damage to a politician's career, if only because of strict ethical constraints imposed by their institutions. Researchers must be mindful that their own social media use may have implications for persuading politicians and gatekeepers to grant an interview.

The tips and tactics summarized in Tables 1 to 3 go to some length to assist researchers with navigating the digital environment in which they, and their subject matter, operate. This should give them greater ability to minimize selection bias and limit snowball sampling in their qualitative approaches in order to improve opportunities for the replication and generalization of their work. Leveraging an 'in' through an academic's own or shared networks should be employed to contact officeholders identified through random selection. At the conclusion of an interview, the researcher can inquire whether the participant would be willing to refer them to the next potential interviewee on the randomized list, not just to whoever else the participant thinks might be willing to talk. Scholars (particularly those in the junior ranks) who are despondent about even an initial lack of an 'in' to the political realm might simply talk about the research project with anyone who will listen. There is a high probability that, at some point, an offer to open a door will appear.

This is where the digital turn can be most effective for a researcher – broadcasting research plans on one's own social media platforms may turn up that crucial first lead. A scan of the literature combined with our own interviews indicates that academics are not taking full advantage of the digital resources to make connections. Rather, digital

media are used primarily to gather information. Online connections can be fostered with those who can introduce researchers to the people with whom they wish to speak. With the number of online social engagement platforms, joining a softball league to form attachments is now an antiquated suggestion (Goldstein, 2002), although nothing can replace in-person interactions. A statement or article about research interests can be published on LinkedIn, short comments can be tweeted using a common hashtag to find other users with similar interests, and Facebook updates that reference the research could result in the offer of help. Trust relationships are the key to entry into representative politics. The support of people willing to offer referrals is viewed as critical to success and digital media can be leveraged to find such people. Increasingly, qualitative researchers will need to be active online participants if they want to interview elected officials, while nurturing a reputation of discretion in order to uphold the sanctity of random sampling.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. We identified Canadian political offices based on whether a Member of Parliament appeared in a political newsmagazine. We identified Canadian journalists by stratifying constituency size, identifying the largest community media outlet in each district, and selecting the first online story featuring interviews with politicians. We opted for less cumbersome methods with the other countries but repeated the method used to select academics.
2. The authors wish to thank Christopher Adams (University of Manitoba) for this suggestion; Melanee Thomas (University of Calgary) and two anonymous referees for their helpful comments on an earlier draft; and the 32 interview participants who made this research possible.

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Alex Marland is a professor of political science at Memorial University of Newfoundland, Canada. His research about public sector communication draws extensively on in-depth interviews with politicians, political staff, election candidates and public servants. His book *Brand Command: Canadian Politics and Democracy in the Age of Message Control* (UBC Press, 2016) won the Donner Prize for best public policy book by a Canadian.

Anna Lennox Esselment is an associate professor of political science at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada. Her research and publications examine aspects of campaigns and elections, particularly how permanent campaigning is a feature of Canadian politics. She co-edited *Permanent Campaigning in Canada* (UBC Press, 2017), a book focusing on a campaign-style approach to governance. Knowledge generated from her research is based on insights gathered from interviews with political elites, particularly political staff and campaign organizers.

Appendix 1: discussion guide

Political staff received the following. Academics and journalists received slightly reworded versions.

I am interested in understanding how to secure research interviews with elected officials, particularly but not exclusively at the national level.

1. Please walk me through what happens when your office receives a request for an interview. I'm interested in details no matter how insignificant they may seem. This is to help me imagine each stage from the initial point of contact through to a decision point about whether to grant or deny an interview.
2. When an academic or journalist is seeking to talk with someone in a position of political power, such as an elected official, what are some of the most effective ways to establish contact with that person? The least effective ways?
3. In your experience, in what ways have digital communication and social media had implications (positive and negative) for researchers' ability to connect with public officeholders?
4. Elected officials are often better able to protect themselves from outsiders. A researcher must often negotiate with 'gatekeepers' – staff who are a frontline point of contact and act as intermediaries. What advice can you offer for ways to work with political staff to secure an interview? What doesn't work with staff? Are there ways to bypass staff and contact the officeholder directly?
5. Is there anything else to which you would attribute success with securing interviews with public officeholders? What about times that researchers are unsuccessful?

6. Is there anything that we have not discussed that should appear in an academic article about tips and tactics for securing interviews with politicians and elected officials in the digital age?

Appendix 2: List of Participants

Academics

A1. Royal Melbourne Institution of Technology (Australia). May 11, 2017. Skype.

A2. Queensland University of Technology (Australia). July 17, 2017. Telephone.

A3. HEC Montréal (Canada). May 27, 2016. Telephone.

A4. Brock University (Canada). June 10, 2016. Telephone.

A5. University of Moncton (Canada). August 10, 2017. Telephone.

A6. Auckland University (New Zealand). August 24, 2017. Telephone.

A7. University of the Western Cape (South Africa). June 15, 2017. Skype.

A8. Independent researcher (South Africa). June 8, 2017. Email.

A9. University of Surrey (United Kingdom). June 20, 2017. Telephone.

A10. University of Aberdeen (United Kingdom). June 28, 2017. Telephone.

A11. University of Utah (United States). May 9, 2017. Telephone.

A12. Georgetown University (United States). July 13, 2017. Telephone.

A13. Emerson College (United States). August 10, 2017. Telephone.

A14. Bournemouth University (United Kingdom). August 14, 2017. Skype.

Journalists

J1. The Daily Telegraph (Australia). August 24, 2017. Skype.

J2. Brantford Expositer (Canada). June 19, 2016. Email.

J3. Canadian Press (Canada). July 5, 2016. Telephone.

J4. Northern News Service (Canada). August 2, 2016. Telephone.

J5. The Oshawa Express (Canada). August 2, 2016. Telephone.

J6. Freelancer (Canada). August 14, 2017. Telephone.

J7. The Star (South Africa). May 4, 2017. Telephone.

J8. The Telegraph (United Kingdom). August 17, 2017. Telephone.

J9. The New York Times (United States). May 4, 2017. Telephone.

J10. Los Angeles Times (United States). July 21, 2017. Telephone.

Political Staff

P1. Liberal Party (Australia). June 28, 2017. Telephone.

P2. Liberal Party (Canada). August 2, 2016. Telephone.

P3. Conservative Party (Canada). August 17, 2016. Telephone.

P4. Member of Parliament. African Christian Democratic Party (South Africa). August 24, 2017. Telephone.

P5: Conservative Party (United Kingdom). July 14, 2017. Telephone.

P6: Liberal Democratic Party (United Kingdom). July 26, 2017. Telephone.

P7: Democratic Party (United States). July 7, 2017. Telephone.

P8: Republican Party (United States). July 14, 2017. Telephone.