



John Whittingdale backs aggressive interview technique at RTS event

Media and data minister John Whittingdale has defended aggressive political interviews at a Royal Television Society event.

In a wide-ranging discussion about the evolution of political reporting, broadcast journalism and their interplay during the pandemic, Whittingdale said: "I don't object to an aggressive interview style, I think if you're in public life you have to accept that. I think somebody like Piers Morgan has been very challenging in terms of some of his interviews in the last few months. I think he is perfectly entitled to adopt that critical attitude."

Whittingdale, a former Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport also lamented the demise of the long-form interview, saying he thought government communications could be moving towards an American style, particularly with the appointment of former ITV News journalist Allegra Stratton to front daily press conferences.

He added: "Where I do worry is that in some cases it appears that the interviewer is keener to trip the interviewee up often by bringing up something which is not the main issue of the day, but to resurrect some question regarding some past behaviour in the hope of getting some embarrassment out of the guest. I don't think interviewers should set out to make their interviewees look bad. They should on the other hand, probe and test the opinions given to them."

The panel debate, which marked the 65th birthday of ITN, also featured Jed Mercurio, creator of the political thriller *Bodyguard*, who called for the return of the "conversational interview", saying the public has been left in a difficult position with politicians and their interviewers often "talking at cross purposes" and the political interview reduced to a frustrating spectacle.

In the virtual RTS session hosted by ITV News at Ten anchor Tom Bradby, Mercurio said his frustrations had boiled over during the pandemic as ministers were not held to account and journalists struggled to adapt to the controlling nature of their political counterparts.

Mercurio, who also penned hit series *Line of Duty*, described political interviews as being in a "terrible state".

"What we have now is real frustration of watching two people who are speaking at cross purposes a lot of the time and the pandemic has really accentuated that," he said.

"It was so frustrating watching the coronavirus briefings and ministers being asked direct questions about PPE and testing and all they ever said was that those things are being ramped up. I was sick of hearing politicians talking about ramping up and not dealing with what was going on in the present.

"I imagine most of the public felt the same, so I think we are in quite a tricky situation now for the public which is that that style of interview is maybe being leveraged against access so we do have politicians avoiding the tougher interview."

These were just some of topics discussed at the RTS Christmas Special: TV's Most Memorable Political Moments, with debate punctuated by clips from ITN's 65-year-old archive. The wide ranging session featured dozens of evocative moments from the history of political reporting in its various forms including interview styles, speeches, historic moments and the 'and finally' moments that only a camera could capture such as John Prescott's punch and the infamous Ed Miliband bacon sandwich.

Times Radio presenter Ayesha Hazarika joined her fellow panellists in bemoaning the disappearance of longer, more conversational interviews that often revealed more than the confrontational style more common today.

“One of the things we have seen is a break down in trust between politicians and the sense of accountability. There was a while where things were going pretty badly in the pandemic when government ministers didn’t want to go on lots of TV shows and radio shows. I think that trend is now shifting a bit.”

Whittingdale, who also served as Private Secretary to former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, also discussed the art of speech writing and the importance of delivering key messages using humour, referring to Lady Thatcher’s famous “the lady is not for turning” speech or Boris Johnson’s comedic style. However, he also suggested that long-form interviews are missing from the current mix of styles. “Personally, I lament the loss of the really in-depth, long political interview. In the 80s, to give one example, Brian Walden’s show, Weekend World, which lasted for a full hour, he would devote the entire of that hour to a single interview,” he said.

However, the panel agreed that 2020 has been the year where there has been a demand for news. Hazarika described it as the year when broadcast news was “back”. “What I think people thirsted for was a more traditional way of consuming news and a desire for trusted narrators. What I thought was fascinating was how politicians themselves used television as such an important medium for them to communicate,” she said.

The event will be streamed on the RTS website at 1300 on 16 December. Register here: <https://rts.org.uk/event/rts-christmas-special-tv-s-most-memorable-political-moments>

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ABOUT ITN

For sixty-five years, ITN has been one of the UK’s foremost television production and news organisations. Combining cutting-edge technology and innovation with expert story-telling flair and energy, ITN is recognised globally for its quality, integrity and creativity.

ITN makes the award-winning daily news programmes for ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5, providing comprehensive and impartial news to the British public and reaching millions of viewers every day. ITN Productions, ITN’s independent production division, produces high quality content across seven distinct areas: television production; sports; advertising; industry-specific programming; education content; entertainment and news footage syndication; and post-production.

Each year, ITN produces over 650 hours year of non-news unscripted content for UK and international broadcasters including ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5, the BBC, Netflix, Discovery, Amazon and NBC.

ITN’s programmes have won hundreds of major awards over the last decade, including Emmy Awards, Baftas and RTS Awards. Documentaries *Watani: My Homeland* and *For Sama* were both nominated for Academy Awards.

ITN Productions Television produces hit global series and specials in the UK and US including: *History 101*, *Drug Lords* (Netflix); *North Korea with Michael Palin* (Channel 5); *Queen’s Green Planet*, *Harry and Meghan: An African Journey*, *Trevor McDonald and the Killer Nurse*, *Inside the Court of Appeal* (ITV); *Inside the Supermarket* (BBC One); *Killer Instinct with Chris Hansen* (Discovery ID);

Elizabeth (Channel 5/SBS); *Flight 370: The Missing Links* (DNI); *The Road to Waco* (Smithsonian Channel); and *The Turpin 13: Family Secrets Exposed* (Oxygen Channel). It also produces Channel 5's flagship daily daytime show, *Jeremy Vine*.

ITN Productions Sport is the worldwide production partner for World Athletics and was the host broadcaster for the 2019 World Athletics Championships in Doha. The Sport division also works with clients including the English Premier League, International Cricket Council, IOC, Team GB, News UK and CBS.

ITN Productions Advertising creates bespoke commercials and branded content for a wide range of clients including O2, M&S, Matalan, Tesco, TSB, Virgin Holidays and the National Lottery.

ITN: Trusted to tell the world's stories

About The Royal Television Society:

From glamorous award ceremonies to lively debates, the RTS embraces all aspects of television, and is open to anyone with an interest in the medium.

As an educational charity, we encourage and celebrate work in television and its related fields, from finding out how the nation's favourite shows are made in our Anatomy of a Hit series, to celebrating burgeoning talent at our annual Student Awards.

The industry's most talented individuals give us an insight into the work that goes into making cutting edge contemporary TV. From Government ministers and CEOs to workshops with great runners, our events look at every part of the business.

Our annual Television Journalism, Programme, Craft and Design, and Student Awards celebrate achievements across the broadcasting industry.

Each year, we offer Television Production and Technology bursaries to help those from less affluent backgrounds get a foothold in the industry, and Masterclass sessions bring together students, academics and industry heads.

Global television leaders gather to discuss what the future holds for television at our London Conference or the RTS Cambridge Convention.

Alongside our engaged community of over 5,000 full members, the Society is supported by Britain and the world's biggest broadcasters, producers and consultants, including Principal Patrons BBC, Channel 4, ITV and Sky.

Originally founded as the Television Society in 1927, the Society was granted its Royal title in 1966 and HRH The Prince of Wales became Patron of the RTS in 1997.

Today, 15 regional and national groups curate lively events and awards around the UK and Ireland, from Glasgow to Galway.

RTS Futures, which is aimed at those in their first two years of employment, organises an exciting roster of discussion, training and social occasions. Recent events have included workshops on learning how to format shows and how to survive as a freelancer, and expert panels explaining how to be the best researcher and how to make it on-screen.