

# Atty Media Interview Lessons From Trump's Axios Appearance

By **Michelle Calcote King**

On Aug. 3, Axios released one of the most jaw-dropping interviews ever conducted with President Donald Trump. For a president so well known for flouting the rules of engagement with the press, this interview stands above the rest as an example of what not to do in a media interview.

In the 38-minute interview on "Axios on HBO," Trump sat down for a one-on-one with national political reporter Jonathan Swan and discussed a wide range of topics, from COVID-19 to Ghislaine Maxwell and the late John Lewis.[1]



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Swan has been widely praised for his carefully researched, fact-based interview performance, while Trump has been, well, widely panned for his head-scratching answers, which ranged from incoherent to seemingly heartless.

While Trump's public relations style is an aberration of best practices, the "Axios on HBO" interview provides a dramatic example of how not to conduct an interview. Let's look at four lessons attorneys can take from the interview when dealing with the media.

## **1. Answer the darn question, then bridge to your message.**

Politicians like Trump are famous for answering the questions they wish they'd been asked, rather than what they've actually been asked. This strategy, called "bridging" in media relations lingo, can be effective when employed appropriately.

Bridging involves moving the conversation from a negative or inappropriate question to a topic that you, the interviewee, want to discuss. You do this by using bridging phrases, such as:

- I can't tell you that, but what I can tell you is;
- Let's put your question into perspective;
- I'm not going to speculate, but what we do know right now is;
- The real issue here is;
- I'm not allowed to comment on pending litigation, but what I can tell you is;
- Before we move on to another subject, I want to add;
- Even more importantly;
- There is more to the story, specifically; and
- That reminds me.

Politicians go wrong when they blatantly ignore the questions presented to them. For example, in the Axios interview, Trump claimed that the "people who really understand it" say that he's done an "incredible" job handling the COVID-19 pandemic. When Swan asked, "Who says that?" Trump blatantly ignores the question, undermining the point he's trying to make.

For an attorney looking to build rapport with the press to develop a reputation as an expert source, not answering questions presented to them is a death knell.

Instead, lawyers should acknowledge and address the question, then bridge to their preferred message. Answer questions with authority and humility — and when you can't, be honest. "I don't know, but let me look into it," will suffice.

If the question is inappropriate or strictly off the table, say so, but be polite. For example, "Thank you for your question, but we don't feel that sharing the information is appropriate at this time. But I'd be happy to answer other questions."

## **2. Prepare, then prepare some more.**

My first reaction when I watched the Axios Trump interview was how well-prepared Swan was and how wildly unprepared Trump appeared. While the president is known for his preference for "playing it loose" — as he wrote in "The Art of the Deal" — a media interview is not the time for freewheeling.

When Swan pushed back on Trump's incongruencies and vague pronouncements, the president got defensive — which is never, ever a good look in an interview. For example, when confronted with the daily death toll during the COVID-19 pandemic, Trump claimed that the "United States is lowest in numerous categories. We're lower than the world, we're lower than Europe."

That's right: lower than the world.

Without preparation, a media interview can tarnish your credibility and leave a lasting negative impact on your personal and firm's brand reputation.

To prepare for a media interview, you should:

- Ask the reporter for their story angle (what kind of story they are looking to write), who else they are interviewing, and what questions they plan to ask you in the interview. Some journalists won't provide questions in advance, some will. But you should always ask what the journalist is hoping to get from you. Be clear that you are simply trying to be as prepared and helpful as possible during the interview and make efficient use of the reporter's time.
- If the journalist doesn't provide questions, and even if they do, brainstorm a list of possible queries they could pose. Put yourself in the journalist's shoes and develop a list of questions you would ask if you were writing the story. Include ones you hope don't come up so you're prepared for the worst. It's often good to ask for one or two other people to review your list, particularly if they have a journalism or PR background, as they might see obvious questions you'll miss. Or ask a litigator — they're good at finding uncomfortable questions.
- Read up on the journalist and their media outlet. Most reporters are on Twitter, which is a good place to start. Try to get a sense of the stories they typically write, including the tone, topics and quotes they include.
- Write down your key messages. What do you hope to convey? Think about your preferred outcome — the ideal quotes, headline and story angle — and work backward from there.

### **3. Don't speculate about what you don't know.**

One of the more shocking moments of the Trump Axios interview came when the president claimed his administration had done an "incredible" job handling the coronavirus pandemic.

Immediately, Swan pushed back, pointing to the prior week's death rate, which had hit daily death tolls above 1,000. And that's when television history happened.

Trump's response — saying that "The United States is lowest in ... numerous categories" — made it clear that he did not have a grasp on what was happening with the pandemic. Shuffling through papers, yet unable to parse the numbers in his hands, Trump resorted to telling Swan "You can't do that," when Swan pushed back on which numbers were relevant to the discussion.

This devastating exchange revealed that Trump wasn't simply repeating partisan messaging, but instead lacked a foundational understanding of the data.

If you are presented with a question in a media interview that you don't fully understand or know, don't engage in conversation on the topic. Instead, acknowledge the question, be honest that you aren't prepared to answer it, and ask if you can come back later when you are. It can be as simple as, "I have to check on that and get back to you."

Lawyers are often asked by the media to opine on lawsuits or legal matters that they are not directly involved in. While it's fine — and good practice — to provide expert legal analysis, don't talk about the specifics of the case. Instead, speak only to the legal principles involved.

### **4. Practice message discipline.**

Words matter. And on the internet, they live forever.

"It is what it is."

These five words — uttered by Trump about a thousand Americans dying every day due to COVID-19 — are now political ammunition that have been used in a Joe Biden campaign ad and in Michelle Obama's closing speech at the Democratic National Convention.

Don't let the same happen to you. Offhanded, throwaway remarks are no place for a media interview. "It is what it is" is something you say about a difficult situation you can't do much about. But in the context of a global pandemic, it sounds heartless and insensitive.

Lawyers, who have been trained to aggressively counter an opponent's claims, may get lost in the moment and lose control, as did Trump's lawyer Rudy Giuliani when he used profanity in a live interview with Piers Morgan.<sup>[2]</sup>

Don't be afraid of awkward silences. When speaking, pause frequently and consider your words carefully.

Journalists are looking for sound bites. If they aren't getting what they need in an interview, a reporter may ask questions with emotive phrasing or subjective language. Don't take the bait. Also, resist the temptation to repeat less-than-desirable language used by the interviewer. That will become the interview's viral quote.

On TV, a sound bite is short — from about seven to 15 seconds long. Your one-minute answer will likely get edited down to a 10-second sound bite. In print, you'll likely get a couple of sentences as a quote, if that. So practice discipline when answering, aiming to deliver your key points in sound bites that will be used.

## **Conclusion**

Are media interviews sometimes challenging? Yes. Do they require a bit of planning, awareness and discipline? Definitely. Do they have to become a dumpster fire? Absolutely not.

Keeping a few things in mind when preparing for and doing a media interview can go a long way to preventing disasters. And it's something that should be done consistently, for every interview. That's the only way to keep from becoming a case study in what not to do.

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[1] <https://www.axios.com/full-axios-hbo-interview-donald-trump-cd5a67e1-6ba1-46c8-bb3d-8717ab9f3cc5.html>.

[2] <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/04/media/rudy-giuliani-piers-morgan-argument/index.html>.