The Skill of Interviewing: An Interview with Ruth Maclean

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Ruth Maclean was a guest speaker to the HBCU-Africa Correspondents Corps. Based in Senegal, she serves as the West Africa Bureau Chief for the New York Times.

What is one piece of advice you wish you were given early on in your career concerning your connections and the position you hold today?

Not to worry about what everyone else is doing and to follow what you are passionate about. What sets you up for success is being captivated by something; so, you can ask better questions and truly find the underlying cause of that topic. You will see it better in its context and get a better story. Early on in my career, I originally did not understand or value this advice but soon understood after doing a story on the late artist, Leonora Carrington. I traveled to Mexico to meet with the British artist with the interest of interviewing her. I developed a friendship with the artist in the aftermath of the interview thus convincing me to move to Mexico on my own and find stories for myself and an audience that would enjoy such stories. I think it is important as a journalist to commit to getting the story right rather than a commitment to making your own name. I think if you get the story right then a byproduct of that is that you will make your name anyway ... It is easy to forget that it is someone's life you are writing about to counter bias is to accurately depict and represent what people are feeling, thinking, and saying.

How do you approach a conversation with someone meeting you for the first time? Are icebreakers helpful and how so?
There are many ways of interviewing people, and you must be flexible depending on the context. You should expect 90% of people to say no to being interviewed and all one can do as a journalist is politely introduce themselves, and their news outlet, and make known their intentions of valuing the interviewee’s perspective. In my work as the West Africa Bureau Chief for the New York Times, I often go into rural areas where my outlet may not be well known, I must explain what I do. It takes patience and time to manage expectations for people to fully understand what a journalist is, especially in areas where I can be mistaken for an NGO worker, missionary, or researcher.

**What means of language or direction do you take when setting up an interview with someone? Do you detail the angle of your story or the information you hope to discuss?**

The single most important takeaway for everyone covering or observing Sudan is to listen to the people. Sudan's neighborhood-based grassroots volunteers – who have gone from organizing protests to delivering life-saving aid during the current war – are the single most important voices to listen to. They knew their revolution was being stolen, and by whom? They knew the war was coming. And they know what they need now.

There is a reason the UN has called the Emergency Response Rooms the 'frontline' of humanitarian response. They are not only staving off literal famine now, but their members – both inside and outside of Sudan – have the revolutionary imagination and clear-headed analysis necessary to chart the course forward.

**How do you keep yourself inspired and going as a journalist when you cover difficult topics such as war, poverty, religious persecution, etc.?**

One of my first journalism mentors once told me that even years into his career, he could not believe he got the chance to learn new things, speak to interesting people, and tell stories for a living. It is a remarkable gift when you think about it. As often as I can, I go after the kind of reporting that reminds me that it will always go back to my curiosity and love for stories.

We are lucky to be coming up as journalists now, when it is not taboo to talk about the massive toll that covering difficult topics can take on us as professionals. The culture is changing, and we can finally talk about things like vicarious trauma and mental health,
when generations before us simply suffered in silence. My advice on this to young journalists is to use every tool at your disposal, even the ones that sound horribly cliche, because they will keep you healthy.

**How do you continue to connect or stay connected with those you interview?**

I utilize the app WhatsApp to stay connected with people but when it comes to interviewees, I rely on collaborators to bridge that gap of communication when I cannot be physically present. If I am present in areas I have been to before I always try to visit people, I have interviewed before as a way of “keeping my finger on the pulse” as it might lead to another story.