

Video 2: Behind the Process: Meet Joanna Stern.mp4

[00:00:12] **Kim Last** Welcome back to going live, building live journalism in your newsroom. This is Module four video two. I had the pleasure of sitting down with my colleague Joanna Stern, who works at The Wall Street Journal and is an Emmy award winning journalist and also our senior personal technology columnist. Joanna has been a fixture at many Wall Street Journal live events. And we dug into her creative process for preparing for delivering excellent live journalism sessions. Take a look at the video. Here it is.

[00:00:52] **Last** All right, John, thanks so much for joining us. I want to start with talking about your research methods, no matter the story. The product review or the live interview. You take the time to actually become an expert in the subject you're about to take on. Can you shed a little bit of light on the tactics you take to feel prepared?

[00:01:13] **Joanna Stern** I read everything on the internet about that person or that topic. Everything on the entire internet. That's why it takes me years to prepare for a 20-minute interview. But really, that's actually mostly what I do, I try to just search and look for- it depends on what I'm preparing for, but specifically for live interviews, I look for two things, one which is previous interviews that person has done. Mostly, I look like my first places to go look on is YouTube just to see if they've done any video, any interviews. Obviously, I'll also look for podcasts or anything else, but video interviews seem to be the most similar to what I'm going to be doing, which is alive usually a live onstage interview where a live virtual interview like this. And so, I do that. I then look for really if it's a specific company, I look for pretty much anything that's going on in the news about that company. And then I take all that and try to then figure out what do I want to accomplish in this interview? What is the news I want to break? What is the thing that I want to get out of this person? It tends to be, as Kim, you know, you edit my questions. It tends to be that I'm all over the place and then I try to take all of that. I write a lot of questions like too many questions. Kim, you can elaborate until your class about too many questions. And then I put them all down and sort of try to categorize to find some structure into the groups of things. And then I try to look at, ok, how can I take this conversation and lead them through these different things? And so that's a little bit of the method to the madness. I can elaborate on anything specifically there, but that is kind of the process.

[00:02:55] **Last** You know, I'm actually kind of curious. I didn't realize you started with the video interviews first. Are you studying body language or are you studying if it's just any, any nonverbal cues that you might pick up? Or are you just really listening to whatever talking points or whatever information's being shared?

[00:03:15] **Stern** I guess a little of both, I would say more, I'm just listening. First, I just want to get a sense of like their personality. I would say most recently, as you know, I did an Elon Musk interview at one of our biggest conferences, and there is a ton of stuff that Elon Musk has done in the last two years podcasts, video, interviews, tweets. And I found that the lots of tweets I found that the YouTube videos gave me the best sense of his personality and where he lights up the most. And from that, yes, you see, like, he's really engaged with something not only you can hear it, but you can see it like in the way he communicates with the onstage interviewer in most cases recently like through Zoom. And you definitely can see that is a topic that if you get him going on, he's going to respond to and he's going to actually take off and you're not going to. There's no interrupting you on Musk. I tried, but he's going to really run with it and give you like his best self.

[00:04:14] **Last** I'm curious, too. ok, so Elon Musk aside, what are the tactics to actually interrupt someone, especially when you've studied them? You know, they're about to launch into a talking point or an anecdote that's been shared before that maybe you just you don't want to. You don't want this to be the forum where that happens again. Do you have a little bit of advice around steering the conversation into a different direction?

[00:04:37] **Stern** I think this is a place I can get a lot better, and I know you might have some good feedback for me on this, but I think this is one of the toughest things, especially at the beginning of an interview where you're still trying to get this person warmed up and you don't want to necessarily like put them on the defensive or be like, well, you know, jump in, you're trying to get them comfortable. So, I've tended to do that more towards like the middle or the end of an interview. So, I will say that's one piece of advice. I think this is something that's also a lot easier when you're in person because you can kind of like, lean over and say, well, OK, one second, I don't want to interrupt you there, but I want to go back to something you said or, you know, before you get started on this thing. Can I get you to go back to that right? Because what tends to happen is like with any of us, when we answer a question that we might not want to answer, we pretend like we're going to answer the question. We might start off about it and then we're going to pivot to something like, oh, here are my talking points. Here's what I know I can talk about versus answering that, that actual question. So, trying to get them to go back to their initial answer or their initial like, got like, oh yeah, I was-that was the question I was going to try to answer.

[00:05:46] **Last** Yeah, I think that's right. And actually encourage, as you know, to interrupt where you can and dissect the interruption even before you get on stage in that green room space as you're sitting on in the Zoom green room, for example, behind stage, if you're in person, actually, I think people should be prepared about that and not surprise people that you would actually do that.

[00:06:11] **Stern** Yeah. And I think also I recently did an interview or video interview with the CEO of LinkedIn, and it was similar in that sense. Like, I could get the feeling like there were certain things that he really wanted to talk about. And I just sort of kept saying, OK, we're going to get to that. But first, I want to talk about this. And you know, you might not actually have the intention to get to that. I did in that case, but like it's a little bit of a little white lie. You can, you can tell.

[00:06:41] **Last** Well, I want to talk about another topic that I think is on a lot of journalists' minds, especially ones who haven't really done this before, which is how to combat stage fright. And, you know, so I'm curious, what's your advice about not being swept up by stage fright? So, we talked about you recently interviewing Elon Musk. You've also interviewed top executives at Apple and Facebook. And yet you still find ways to inject your personality into your questions and into the sessions. So, what are your tips for maintaining that voice?

[00:07:13] **Stern** Well, the first thing goes back to the first answer, which is if you are confident in the subject matter and in your questions and you feel like, hey, I know this so well, you're going to exude confidence, you're going to feel like yourself up there. If you're sitting and you're scrambling through your papers and you're not feeling confident in the subject matter, then you're not going to feel like you can be yourself up there. So, I would say that's number one. Thing is, if you are confident and you know this thing, just bring it like, you know, maybe you need someone to give you a pep talk like Kim does for me, but that's what you really will bring yourself. And then I probably interject more sort of fun or personality towards the beginning of the interview because I want to give people a sense

like this is a welcome place. We're yes, we're journalists. Yes, this is The Wall Street Journal and you're on stage with The Wall Street Journal. But like also, we want you to feel at home here and so usually might be cracking a joke or maybe poking fun at them in a way that's sort of like, hey, we can have fun here. And yes, we're going to get to some hard questions or there's some things you might not want to talk about, but we are like, it's an it's we're not teammates, but we're, you know, we're I don't want us to have a brawl on stage.

[00:08:33] **Last** It's the balance of hosting and being that host balanced with, you know, everyone's journalistic roots and DNA and asking questions, but still being respectful because it's not like it's over the phone or across a desk or via the attorney or some PR person, it's with the actual source next to you. So, there is a balance of politeness at times, too, even if you're asking a really hard question at the time.

[00:09:04] **Stern** Right. And I think the real art of a good interview, is it being a conversation where like I- and this is tough to do, especially because we have time constraints. It isn't like a free-flowing podcast that can be two hours, but where you really feel like, oh, I don't need to move on to that next topic or that next question. But I'm actually like here in the moment, going to ask you this follow up question because I was really listening to what you were saying and you said something, and now I have something else to ask you based on that. I think that's a good sign of a conversation.

[00:09:38] **Last** I want to talk about where in two years plus now of virtual events that are very different from in-person events. What has surprised you about preparing for and delivering a virtual interview vs. what you did recently in a hybrid scenario with Elon Musk? And way back when we used to do these things in person in a ballroom with 300 people watching you live, what have been the biggest differences that you've seen?

[00:10:10] **Stern** Yeah. So, there's it's funny. There's like so many different formats now, right? We're like, this is pure virtual. There's hybrid virtual, which is what I did with Musk, which was like I had an audience in their room with me. But Musk was in Austin, Texas, on a big screen in D.C. Then we were in L.A. for Tech Live, and I did an interview with Evan Spiegel, the CEO and founder of Snapchat. And he and I were literally in the room together, but we didn't have a live audience. And then, yes, the good old days when we were just an audience in the room and the two people on stage with an audience, which is definitely actually what I still prefer. I would say the hardest thing about virtual like this is that even in this situation, like your students right now, might be so bored. And I have no idea, like they are just sitting at their desks sleeping, and I have no idea. Like maybe their eyes are bleeding because they're just like, this is so boring. If they were in the room, we would know, right? We would know their reaction. We would know from chatter; we would know from laughter. We would know like, yeah, somebody fell down because they were falling asleep. And like, we heard someone fall out of their chair. You know, we would know the reaction of the people in the room. So that's been really tough. We kind of compensate with that. Sometimes it's like that, you know, sort of like if you're doing a Twitter space or something like that, you might see like emoji reactions. And in our live Q&A tool, you can see comments and though I try not to-

[00:11:42] **Last** Comments coming in on the threads, on our virtual events and the virtual platform

[00:11:47] **Stern** and I try not to honestly pay attention to that because like I said before, I want to be in the conversation and I don't want my mind to go, oh, somebody just said

something about whatever oh, I should ask about that. Like, I try to not look at it. So, I do think, like for me, the hardest thing about going to this and especially the first couple of interviews we did in the pandemic, I felt like we're total bombs and they actually were people that I had spoken to before a Facebook executive to Facebook executives. And I just felt like that did not go well because I had no idea how the audience felt. But then, of course, there are a lot of pluses to this like, I can look at my notes and you probably wouldn't even know it. I can, you know, get like your focus. I mean, I can see your facial expressions a lot more. Like, there's that sort of directness is a bit of a plus to this format. But yeah, I would. I think all of them are going to stick around. And so, you'll find some techniques that work for you and each of them.

[00:12:49] **Last** Yeah. And I'm curious, your technique. Let's think about when we're back in person and we're taking audience questions or even audience questions virtually. I'm curious, what do you do when there's an audience question that just does not vibe with you or with the source on stage? What's your what's your number one tactic to move things along gracefully?

[00:13:12] **Stern** I don't know if you mean like we're one was just like that was inappropriate or like, let's-

[00:13:16] **Last** say it's inappropriate or the speaker just doesn't have a great answer for it or just something that just isn't compelling or interesting, period.

[00:13:26] **Stern** I mean, I think one of the most common things that happens in audiences is like, they don't actually have a question, they just want to speak. And so, I have had two in the past to say thank you. So, and I usually don't know their name, so say thank you so much. But is there a question in there for Mr. or Mrs.? On stage? And that either prompts them to say yes, or no? No, actually, I just had a comment and then they go back to their seat. Or sometimes I've sort of like said, OK, I'm not really sure I could translate what their question was, and I would say, OK, that was a really good point. It seemed to be on this topic. Do you have any thoughts on this topic? But yeah, I would say actually one thing that I have done a lot with the audience and I would say to people who when you're trying to do audience engagement, one thing I find is actually when I'm asking questions to try to incorporate the audience or even like getting one moment sticks out for the Musk interview, he sort of had started to bad mouth CEOs, he said it was a made-up title. And so, I sort of like just said, well, yeah, like I'm sure our audience here of all CEOs really agree with you, right? And sort of gesturing to the fact that they are here in the room or even saying like, you know, arrays of hands, who here even knows what an NFT is, right? Like if you're interviewing somebody about something or they use some sort of jargon and you're like, who even knows what blah blah blah is right? And so like, you have a group of people raise their hands like kind of, and then you can kind of prompt just to bring them into the conversation.

[00:15:01] **Last** Yeah, those are all really good tips. I think another thing that you are really great at is incorporating visuals into your sessions. In the past, that's been actual physical props in virtual in a virtual setting. Usually, you're very good about incorporating audience questions ahead of time. But I'm curious if you could talk a little bit about a favorite moment, for example, of an interview where you had a prop that's really worked.

[00:15:36] **Stern** Yeah, I'm trying to think about like in the virtual world, in the virtual world and the virtual setting, one that definitely I remember and worked really well was I interviewed the CTO, Michael Schroepfer of Facebook back at Tech Live. Like New Year's

Years, we might be in- yeah, and before times and before times. Exactly. And this was like coming right off of like Facebook's like, you know, bad news cycle, bad news cycle bad news cycle. So, I started off the conversation with a stack of Wall Street journals and held up the front page of all of these. And it was all bad headlines and just sort of just said, you know, read off the data, showed it to him, gave it to him and said, so you know, what is it like right now at Facebook? Like this is every day. And then just like it, got the audience laughing, and he had this whole bunch of things that he had to hold and he was like, Thank you, Joanna, for this present. That was while actually he was that was a great time. The whole interview he played and actually then I interviewed him virtually, and I don't think it went as well. So, you know it, you kind of figure out people in a different way. I think other visuals, I mean, it's always nice to be able to even when I do a lot of tech stuff and I'm sort of talking about a product or I'm talking about a feature of a product to be able to say, oh, can we bring up that screenshot? Oh, can we bring up that video just so the viewers know, and we're not just like abstractly talking about something. I think we did it with Evan Spiegel. When they're talking about Snapchat, you know, they were, they were. I asked him a little bit about the new glasses they were working on, and we brought up that and he was talking about air and how that's worked into their product. So, stuff like that, you know, sometimes it can be distracting, especially if like the materials or to marketing-y? Is that a word for it? And so, we try to trim that back and be careful about that, too.

[00:17:35] **Last** Yeah. And I think the key on that is to not force it. If it's easier to just describe something. Describe it. Because I've also seen folks trip up on trying to incorporate the cool looking graphic or remember when we used to pull questions or, you know, just whatever prop moment that they had for a session.

[00:17:56] **Stern** Yeah, and we have done like a bit of charts like sometimes you can work that into a question saying so like, this is your last quarter and you, I don't know, I'm making some. I'm really not good with numbers, you know? Tell us what happened here versus here or something like that. Or you might be like general trends in an industry to say so. Smartphone sales are on the decline, and you show a chart where the Wall Street Journal people like charts. So yeah, we showed more charts.

[00:18:26] **Last** Yep, I think the takeaway on that is stay true to your audience with whatever visual or prop you bring into a session. And just to wrap things up, Joanna, I'd love for you to talk a little bit about how you tap into social media and your social media following when it comes to that big Elon Musk interview or any of the interviews that you've done for the Journal and even any other conferences that you've participated in the past.

[00:18:53] **Stern** Yeah. I mean. I do love to crowdsource questions. I think when I can, like sometimes things are exclusive, and I don't necessarily want to say, hey, I'm doing this interview that you can't watch or, hey, I'm doing some secret of interview because it's going to be around some topic or something. So, but when I can, I love to crowdsource questions. In fact, like there was one very clear moment when I did that for Elon Musk, and he didn't have a great answer. But I think he also could tell like, oh, I've been talking to the insiders to ask a question like that. So, I do that. I could definitely be better about my own social media. Like, I'm not great about clipping things and finding the right thing, but I, you know, I post the photos and I, you know, certainly when we were in the real world and doing these like to take a selfie with the person before and after. Like, I did an interview that was also on before times with Trevor Noah and his whole team. And so, I was like, I was so excited just to be with them. So, I took a bunch of selfies and not sure anyone of my who got them or like in my Instagram feed appreciated them. But um yeah.

[00:20:04] **Last** Those are my behind the scenes in the green room, in the green room, during the good old days. Yeah, yeah. All right, Joanna. Well, thanks so much for. It was like five and a half questions with you, and thanks so much for doing this.

[00:20:17] **Stern** And you didn't interrupt me.

[00:20:19] **Last** No, I tried not to.

[00:20:20] **Stern** You could, you could. I would like to see your interrupting technique. You could have taught people right here.

[00:20:26] **Last** And this is exactly how Joanna gets her personality across during sessions like this. On that note, we're going to wrap.

[00:20:33] **Stern** Thanks, guys.