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Gary Scharnhorst
University of New Mexico

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Scharnhorst, Gary, "On Editing Late-Nineteenth-Century Author Interviews" (2011). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. Paper 4.
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On Editing Late-Nineteenth-Century Author Interviews

Gary Scharnhorst

The wish of his soul was that he might be interviewed; that made him hover at the editorial elbow.

–Henry James, *The Bostonians* (1886)¹

Contrary to the assertions of the marketing department of the *Paris Review*, the celebrity interview was not invented in 1953.² In fact, the first interviews with prominent authors began to appear in American newspapers in the early 1870s. No interviews with Edgar Allan Poe, Henry David Thoreau, or Nathaniel Hawthorne, each of whom died before or during the Civil War, are known to exist. Charles Dickens sat for no interviews during any of his U.S. speaking tours, including the final one in 1867–1868. The first known interview with Mark Twain appeared in 1871, and the second was not published until November 1874, the same month Twain satirized his experiences with reporters in “An Encounter with an Interviewer”: “You know it is the custom now,” he wrote, “to interview any man who has become notorious.”³ During his “Twins of Genius” tour with George Washington Cable in 1884–1885, Twain was approached by reporters for comments some four or five times a month, but he was interviewed at virtually every stop on his round-the-world speaking tour a decade later. As Oscar Wilde insisted in January 1882, during the first days of his visit to the U.S., “interviewers are a product of American civilization, whose acquaintance I am making with tolerable speed.”⁴ Wilde later added that the genre was unique to the American press: “We have no interviewing in England.”⁵

¹ James, *The Bostonians* (1886; rpt. New York: Modern Library, 1956), p. 106.

² www.parisreview.com/literature.php

³ *Mark Twain: Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, and Essays 1852–1890*, ed. Louis J. Budd (New York: Library of America, 1992), p. 584.

⁴ “The Aesthetic Apostle,” *Boston Globe*, January 29, 1882; rpt. *Oscar Wilde in America: The Interviews*, ed. Matthew Hofer and Gary Scharnhorst (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), p. 48.

⁵ *Oscar Wilde in America: The Interviews*, p. 87.



Mark Twain and reporters in Vancouver, B.C., August 18, 1895. Courtesy of Kevin MacDonnell.

The author interview was in fact the product of advances in post-Civil War printing technology and the growth of celebrity culture. As major American daily newspapers expanded from four to eight and even twelve pages, editors had to fill more space. Under the circumstances, fame became a commodity and privacy its price. Henry James, for one, rarely sat for interviews—a total of only three during his career—and he even burlesqued the journalists who sought them in the characters of Henrietta Stackpole in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), Matthias Pardon in *The Bostonians* (1886), and George Flack⁶ in *The Reverberator* (1888). Henrietta, for example, works for a gossip rag called the *New York Interviewer*, and as one of James’s characters she remarks, once “you read the *Interviewer* you . . . lost all faith in culture.”⁷ James personally dreaded “the assault of the interviewer”⁸ and the invasion of privacy it portended. (When

⁶ No etymological dictionary I have consulted credits James with coining the term “flack” for a publicity agent.

⁷ James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881; rpt. New York: Norton, 1975), p. 53.

⁸ Quoted in *Henry James on Culture*, ed. Pierre Walker (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), pp. 138–39.

Wilde was asked by a reporter in Washington, D.C., for some details of his private life, he replied that he wished he had one.⁹) As James explained to the poet Witter Bynner in his characteristically prolix style,

I have a constituted and systematic indisposition to have anything to do myself personally with anything in the nature of an interview, report, reverberation, that is, to adopting, endorsing, or in any other wise taking to myself anything that anyone may have presumed to contrive to gouge, as it were, out of me.¹⁰

Journalists lacked “delicacy,” “discretion,” and “reserve,” James insisted in his notebooks.¹¹ His friend and editor W. D. Howells, too, characterized the journalist Bartley Hubbard in both *A Modern Instance* (1881) and *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), which opens as Hubbard is interviewing the title character, as a mendacious scoundrel.

Let me offer here my working definition of an interview. It is the record, usually a transcription, of a spontaneous conversation between one or more journalists and a celebrity that is published soon thereafter. That is, an interview is not a reconstructed conversation long after the fact nor is it a set of written responses to questions. The “cumulative effect” of a series of interviews, as Thomas P. Riggio remarks, “is of a kind of oral memoir”¹² or, in Twain’s phrase, another form of “autobiographical dictation.” The only significant exception to this definition (in my view) is a court transcript with lawyers rather than reporters asking the questions, such as the transcripts of Henry Ward Beecher’s trial for alienation of affection in 1875 and Wilde’s three trials at the Old Bailey in London in 1895, ending with his conviction on a charge of gross indecency.

Why are interviews significant? Not all are, to be sure, though Louis J. Budd correctly claims that “even a slipshod interview may hold a fact or judgment that fits while enriching other sources.”¹³ Simply put, an interview recovered from a late-nineteenth-century newspaper may contain information not available elsewhere. Who would not value the discovery of an interview with Melville in the 1870s or 1880s, when his reputation was in eclipse? In the

⁹ *Oscar Wilde in America: The Interviews*, p. 87.

¹⁰ Bynner, “A Word or Two with Henry James,” *Critic and Literary World*, 46 (1905): 148.

¹¹ James, *The Complete Notebooks*, ed. Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 64.

¹² Riggio, “Preface” to *Theodore Dreiser: Interviews*, ed. Frederic E. Rusch and Donald Pizer (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), p. xiii.

¹³ Budd, “Interviews,” *Mark Twain Encyclopedia*, ed. J. R. LeMaster et al. (New York: Garland, 1993), pp. 402–03.

absence of audio recordings, interviews in a very elementary way may recreate patterns of speech, such as cadence or a drawl. An interview, like a letter, may be an important source about the composition history of a text, as when Howells was asked in June 1885 about his novel in serialization in the *Century*.¹⁴ An interview may also offer a new basis for evaluating contemporary response to a writer or recovering his or her lost writings. In his only known interview, with a reporter for the *Boston Advertiser* in 1896, Horatio Alger, Jr., mentioned that he had contributed a series of travel articles to the *New York Sun* during his trip to Europe in 1860–1861, a clue that enabled Alger’s biographers to locate a series of thirteen pieces hitherto unknown to scholarship that he sent to the paper from England, Ireland, France, and Italy. More to the point, these articles were signed with the pseudonym “Carl Cantab,” an abbreviation of Cantabrigian, the term for Cambridge students, including students at Harvard, Alger’s alma mater. This discovery, in turn, enabled them to identify nearly a hundred poems and stories by Alger signed with the same pseudonym in weekly Boston literary papers such as *Yankee Blade* and *American Union* in the 1850s.¹⁵

Interviews may also help scholars and critics establish authorial intent. When asked in his only known interview why he “always had a boy and girl in love” in his novels, John W. De Forest, author of *Miss Ravenel’s Conversion* (1867), replied that “it was the only kind of plot a writer could get the public interested in.”¹⁶ When Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the leading American feminist intellectual at the turn of the twentieth century, was interviewed while on lecture tour in Topeka, Kansas, in June 1896, she readily allowed that she had a didactic purpose in her first book, *In This Our World* (1893), a collection of verse: “I don’t call it a book of poems. I call it a tool box. It was written to drive nails with.”¹⁷ This comment has been cited in every scholarly article to date devoted to Gilman’s poetry.

An interview recovered from the morgue of a newspaper or magazine occupies a peculiar middle ground between a private letter or a message in a

¹⁴ Edwards Roberts, “Two Famous Authors, Aldrich and Howells at Home / Lions of Literary Boston,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 28, 1885; reprinted in “William Dean Howells,” Chicago Inter-Ocean, July 22, 1885, 11:4. Edward Roberts, “Two Famous Authors,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 28, 1885; rpt. Cindy Murillo, “‘I Do Not Pretend to Illustrate Any Great Truths’: Two Newly Recovered Interviews with W. D. Howells,” *American Literary Realism*, 39 (2006): 76–77.

¹⁵ “A Famous Writer / Horatio Alger, Jr., is Taking a Much-Needed Rest,” *Boston Advertiser*, April 10, 1896.

¹⁶ “Edwin Oviatt, ‘J. W. De Forest in New Haven,’” *New York Times Saturday Review*, December 17, 1898.

¹⁷ “Mrs. Gilman as a Woman,” *Topeka State Journal*, June 15, 1896 (vol. 7, Charlotte Perkins Gilman Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College).

bottle and a publication subject to individual control, revision, and approval. The interviewer is a collaborator in its production, for good or for ill. The interviewee, as in the case of Wilde, may consider the event a type of performance. Certainly, there were conventions governing the interview; for instance, the reporter and subject were guest and host respectively. In *Sister Carrie* (1900), Theodore Dreiser commented derisively on the conventions “of those tinsel interviews which shine with clever observations, show up the wit of critics, display the folly of celebrities, and divert the public.”¹⁸ There is also a critical difference between celebrity interviews published in the late-nineteenth century and those published since roughly 1920: without exception, the earlier ones were published from a reporter’s scribbled notes or shorthand. No authoritative or unfailingly accurate version of such texts could then or can now be established, so editing them presents a monumental challenge.

So far as I know, however, no one has tried to establish a set of editorial principles applicable to this material. Here, then, I offer a baker’s dozen suggestions based on my own research over the past few years into the lives of the oft-interviewed Mark Twain, Oscar Wilde, Kate Field, and Julian Hawthorne.

1. The editor of nineteenth- and early-twentieth century periodical interviews should be aggressive in correcting obvious mistakes. Because they are records of oral conversations, not manuscripts, editors should prepare clear texts, silently regularizing punctuation and emending typographical errors and misspellings, particularly of names. For example, Twain referred in a conversation with a reporter for the *Bombay Gazette* in January 1896 to J. C. Calhoun and Thomas H. Benton, a pair of antebellum U.S. Senators who championed states’ rights. In the published interview, however, the reporter misconstrued their names as J. C. Cabbon and Thomas H. Bentham.¹⁹ A responsible editor certainly takes no liberties in silently correcting such egregious errors.

2. The editor must always allow for the possibility that published texts of interviews may be inaccurate. When Twain returned to the U.S. after several years abroad in mid-October 1900, and later when he returned to New York after his receipt of an honorary doctorate from Oxford University in late July 1907, he was met at the gangplank by a gaggle of reporters. On each occasion, his arrival turned into an impromptu press conference. On neither occasion, however, did any two reporters file exactly the same version of events—*prima facie* evidence that there is no single “correct” or definitive version of an interview. What to do? In my edition of *Mark Twain: The Complete Interviews*, I publish the most complete

¹⁸ Dreiser, *Sister Carrie* (1900; rpt. New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. 527.

¹⁹ *Mark Twain: The Complete Interviews*, ed. Gary Scharnhorst (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), pp. 279–80.

version of each interview—in 1900 in the *New York Herald* and in 1907 in the *New York American*—and then annotate all significant variants or alternative phrasings.²⁰ Every word attributed to Twain in any printing of either interview is thus recorded, but only one version of each interview is reprinted in full.

Elsewhere, Twain denied that a published interview, even if it accurately recorded every spoken word, was a satisfactory account of a conversation because it could not capture the nuances, inflection, facial expression, and the like of the interviewee. “I have never yet met a man who attempted to interview me whose report of the process did not try very hard to make me out an idiot, and did not amply succeed, in my mind, in making him a thorough one,” Twain remarked in May 1882.²¹ Or as he once wrote Edward Bok, the editor of the *Ladies’ Home Journal*,

The moment “talk” is put into print you recognize that it is not what it was when you heard it; you perceive that an immense something has disappeared from it. That is its soul. You have nothing but a dead carcass left on your hands. Color, play of feature, the varying modulations of the voice, the laugh, the smile, the informing inflections, everything that gave the body warmth, grace, friendliness and charm and commended it to your affections—or, at least, to your tolerance—is gone and nothing is left but a pallid, stiff and repulsive cadaver.²²

Fair enough. But neither do most private letters capture these nuances. Twain certainly did not refrain from granting interviews—some two hundred of them—during the final fifteen years of his life, when doing so was in his self-interest; moreover, many of them contain invaluable information about his life and career. These texts should be available to critics and scholars and subject to their analysis no less than other biographical sources.

3. On the other hand, an editor should omit from the record any interview or part of one that has been repudiated on the grounds of inaccuracy. Put another way, on what basis can an editor overrule the judgment of an interviewee who claims that he or she has been misquoted? In 1908 Twain repudiated an interview with him conducted by the novelist Elinor Glyn because she did not “reproduce the words I used.”²³ Thus Glyn’s account of the conversation has no credibility and should be ignored.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 352–64, 637–45.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

²² Bok, *The Americanization of Edward Bok* (New York: Scribner’s, 1920), pp. 205–06.

²³ *Mark Twain: The Complete Interviews*, p. 674.

4. On yet another hand, an interview repudiated not on the ground of inaccuracy but because the subject did not know the conversation was on the record should be regarded as authentic. The interviewer may have crossed an ethical line in publishing the details of a private conversation, but there is no reason to doubt its credibility. The most infamous case in point is Julian Hawthorne's interview with James Russell Lowell in late October 1886, which Lowell soon repudiated because, as he insisted, he had not known that Hawthorne was planning to print a transcript of their conversation in the New York *World*. To his chagrin, the poet and former U.S. Minister to the Court of St. James's was quoted describing the Prince of Wales as "immensely fat," allowing that Prince Leopold "was the greatest cad I ever knew in my life," and admitting that he preferred to live in England rather than in the U.S.²⁴ Of course, Lowell responded immediately upon publication of the interview that "nobody could have been more surprised and grieved than I by Mr. Hawthorne's breach of confidence."²⁵ Hawthorne defended himself in the *World*: "I had no doubt, until this moment, that Mr. Lowell knew I was interviewing him for the *World*. I cannot comprehend how there could have been any misunderstanding on the subject."²⁶ During the controversy, the editors of the *World* and most other papers backed Hawthorne, their fellow journalist, whose honesty had been impugned. Lowell tried a second time to set the record straight: he complained that he had "suffered an irreparable wrong" and reaffirmed "unequivocally that I not only did not know but that I never even suspected Mr. Julian Hawthorne's purpose in visiting me."²⁷ In the ensuing free-for-all, as George Knox remarks, the

editorial consensus was that Lowell had better let the matter drop; that it was ridiculous to assume that Julian Hawthorne would have risked his reputation for a fraudulent newspaper interview; that Lowell had made a fool of himself; that he was capricious and motivated by pique; and that his memory was slipping.²⁸

Obviously, an interviewee at the time enjoyed no legal protection or guarantee that whatever was said was off the record. Privately, Lowell fumed that Hawthorne's "infidelity" was "like a dead rat in the wall,—an awful stink and

²⁴ Hawthorne, "Lowell in a Chatty Mood," New York *World*, October 24, 1886.

²⁵ "A Prompt Denial from Mr. Lowell," *Boston Advertiser*, October 25, 1886; rpt. *Critic*, November 6, 1886.

²⁶ "Julian Hawthorne's Reply," *Boston Herald*, October 27, 1886; rpt. *Critic*, November 6, 1886.

²⁷ New York *World*, November 1, 1886; rpt. *Critic*, November 6, 1886.

²⁸ Knox, "The Hawthorne-Lowell Affair," *New England Quarterly*, 29 (1956), 500.

no cure.”²⁹ Three weeks later, Henry James, the paladin of privacy, wrote Lowell from England to condemn “Julian Hawthorne’s damnable doing.” He could “imagine no more infamous trick & no more shameless piece of caddishness” than to stir up a controversy for personal benefit at Lowell’s expense: “It shows how dangerous & noxious a man may become when he is so discredited (as J. H. has been, I take it, for a long time,) that he has no further credit to lose.” Hawthorne “ought to be shot & that is the end of it.”³⁰

5. Many interviews survive only in translation (for example, Twain’s interviews with German-language papers while he was living in Europe from 1896 to 1900). I believe they belong in a separate category of documents, if not ignored entirely, for the simple reason that there is no way to verify the accuracy of the translations. If an interview is often a flawed transcription of a conversation, how much more is lost in translation?

6. So-called “self-interviews,” such as Twain’s “Mark Twain, Able Yachtsman,”³¹ are not interviews at all but sketches or stories, often comic pieces, composed in the interview format.

7. Given the topical and local issues usually discussed in interviews, editors should annotate them as fully as they would private letters.

8. Editors must trace all interviews to their original source. Often the texts of interviews were corrupted when reprinted in other papers. Sometimes “ghost” interviews appeared, based upon an author’s speeches or earlier writings rewritten by journalists in the interview format. In August 1895, for example, Twain repudiated a spurious interview entitled “Twain’s Obituary Poems” that had originally appeared in the *Hartford Post* and was subsequently reprinted in the *Minneapolis Pioneer Post* and the *San Francisco Examiner*. It was nothing more than a revision of his essay “Post-Mortem Poetry” (1870).

9. All photographs and other images that accompany an interview should be reproduced, if possible. That is, the context in which an interview appears ought to be recreated to the extent that expense permits.

10. Editors always have to weigh the motives of the interviewees. Like a talk show appearance on television by a writer today, a late-nineteenth-century author normally agreed to sit for an interview in order to promote a project, usually a book, or to grind an ax. For example, Theodore Dreiser perpetuated the legend of his own invention about how *Sister Carrie* (1900) was suppressed by its publisher, Doubleday, Page and Co., in interviews, such as one with the *St. Louis*

²⁹ Carl J. Weber, “Lowell’s ‘Dead Rat in the Wall,’” *New England Quarterly*, 9 (1936), 469.

³⁰ Quoted in George Knox, “Reverberations and *The Reverberator*,” *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, 95 (1959): 353.

³¹ *New York Herald*, August 30, 1903.

Post-Dispatch in January 1902.³² Similarly, in his interview in the Washington, D.C., *Capital* in 1876, one of only six interviews with him known to exist, Bret Harte tried to defend himself in the midst of personal scandal.³³ Mark Twain typically shunned interviewers, reticent to give his words away in “literary charity” when, as he said, he could sell them for thirty cents apiece—except when he needed the publicity.

A corollary to this suggestion: The editor of an interview known only because it survives in the archives of the subject should weigh the author’s motive in preserving it. Many of the interviews with Twain in Australia, Asia, and South Africa during his round-the-world lecture tour in 1895–1896 are known only because clippings of them are filed among the Mark Twain Papers in the Bancroft Library at Berkeley. Such interviews may enjoy greater authority because Twain apparently approved of them.

11. Editors should weigh the role of reporters in the production of interviews; that is, editors should consider the motives and interests of interviewers such as Julian Hawthorne and Kate Field. They were, after all, a screen or filter between the celebrity and the reader. Reporters for the yellow press, specifically for the Hearst newspapers, were more interested in creating a sensation than in identifying and printing a genuine scoop. For instance, Hawthorne wanted to demean the ostensible artlessness of literary naturalism in his interview with Jack London for Hearst’s *Los Angeles Examiner* in 1905. And although the interests of the interviewer and the subject were usually compatible, they were rarely identical. Thus, for instance, when Field interviewed the Irish playwright Dion Boucicault for the *New York Herald* in 1876,³⁴ she was earning a paycheck in her area of expertise while he was puffing a play.

12. Editors should weigh issues of access to celebrities related to gender. Most journalists were men who might visit other men in their homes or hotel rooms without violating the proprieties. But certain proprieties had to be preserved, at least on paper. No proper Victorian lady met privately with a man not her husband in a hotel room. As a result, women writers while traveling were rarely interviewed by men, and women journalists interviewed male writers, if at all, in public venues such as train platforms or hotel dining rooms. When Lilian

³² *Theodore Dreiser: Interviews*, pp. 1–3.

³³ “Bret Harte Interviewed,” *Washington Capital*, October 1, 1876. Harte’s play “Two Men of Sandy Bar” had just opened to a chorus of hostile reviews and allegations that he had bilked the actor to whom he sold the script. On his part, Harte alleged that the drama critics had asked him for bribes to review the play favorably.

³⁴ Hawthorne, “Jack London in Literature,” *Los Angeles Examiner*, January 12, 1905. Field, “London Gossip / Interesting Chat with Dion Boucicault,” *New York Herald*, August 11, 1876.

Whiting interviewed Wilde in Boston in January 1882, they met in the dining room of the Hotel Vendome, where Wilde was staying. To bridge the divide they perceived between the conventions of propriety and their responsibilities as professionals, women journalists, among them Gilman, organized the Pacific Coast Women's Press Association in the early 1890s in part to lobby for greater access to authors and other celebrities visiting San Francisco.

13. Editors should weigh issues of access to celebrities related to race.

Most of the journalists who worked for the mainstream press in the late nineteenth century were white, and while they enjoyed access to white celebrities, they were able largely to ignore minority writers on the grounds that their life stories did not interest most of their readers. In many parts of the country, moreover, minority writers were denied public accommodations—so when traveling they could not be found in hotels, unlike their white counterparts. When Paul Laurence Dunbar lived in Denver and Colorado Springs between September 1899 and the spring of 1900, he was mostly ignored by the local press; living in homes rented from local black merchants, he virtually disappeared from public view.

I offer these thirteen suggestions for editing author interviews, which have emerged from my own scholarship in recent years, if for no other reason than they can be disputed—not as hard and fast rules. Given the increasing access to antiquarian newspapers in digitized, fully searchable format, our opportunities to recover author interviews and other primary sources will doubtlessly multiply in the future. For instance, four interviews with Twain have surfaced since the publication of *Mark Twain: The Complete Interviews* in 2006. The online research tools available today, far from easing the task of bibliographers and textual editors, require them to be more fussy and fastidious than ever.