

Food for thought !

It doesn't matter how clever you are - talk for more than a minute and you've lost me

*Adrian Chiles*



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▲ Just a minute ... James Comey. Photograph: J Scott Applewhite/AP

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James Comey has been on my mind since I recorded an interview with him last month for my radio programme. The former director of the FBI and avowed Trump adversary spoke with a winning mixture of intelligence, candour, humility and a smattering of spite. Nice work, sir. But there was more to it than that. It's one thing for an interview to be good; it's another for it to be easy to edit. My producer, listening in, was purring with satisfaction

because it was the easiest edit ever. It didn't need any editing at all; what we recorded went out exactly as we recorded it. This was as much to do with the length of Comey's answers as what he was saying. Whatever the optimum length of answers is, our man nailed it.

I listened back, with half a mind to producing a how-to sheet for the perusal of all my future interviewees. His first eight answers varied in length between 21 seconds and one minute 43 seconds. They averaged just over a minute. I wonder if this kind of length is not only perfect for the convenience of overworked producers and the blood pressure of presenters, but also for the comprehension of listeners. You can be the cleverest of clogs but if you bang on for ever, attentions may be lost and your brilliance may elude us.

I've done many interviews with interesting people telling fascinating stories that don't quite come across because their answers are too long to live with in the time allowed. Mind you, listening back, my embarrassingly rambling questions don't help much either. I'm working on that. I've been working on it since 1993, actually, and I'm confident there will be an improvement soon.

A speaker's very erudition and eloquence is sometimes the problem. Barack Obama is a case in point. In David Olusoga's interview with him for the BBC ahead of the publication of his latest book, the first answer runs to one minute 50 seconds; the second to three and a half minutes and the third to perilously near the five-minute mark. It's possible these were shorter answers edited together, but it didn't sound like it. Such was his fluency that I'm sure to have interrupted him would have felt like dabbing paint on a Monet, but I found it a mite exhausting to listen to. Obama might get away with it; the rest of us can't, on the radio or in real life.

It might be that my judgment is coloured by the time I spent presenting *The One Show* on BBC One. Here brevity was absolutely essential more than desirable. It mattered not if the guest was Clive James, Michael Caine, Bette Midler, Gordon Brown, Morrissey or Meryl Streep, they had no more than four minutes at most to do their bit. For added distraction they would have to do this sandwiched between a film about, say, badgers and another about perhaps the design of front doors. I remember a bewildered Michael Stipe struggling most with this. I'll never forget seeing the whites of the poor man's eyes as he tried to make sense of it all. He seemed to slip out of public life shortly afterwards. For my part, I lost the ability to sustain any conversation for longer than three minutes. Even bumping into someone in a pub I'd find myself firing three quick questions at them before feeling it necessary to move them on.

But since examining that Comey interview with stopwatch in hand and having listened to conversations, my own included, on air and off, I've come up with a simple rule: never talk for more than a minute in one go. Less is always more. On air, I hardly ever find myself despairing because an interviewee's answers are too short. It's like coming out of church: in all my years I've never once heard one congregant remark to another, "Y'know, I really wish that sermon had gone on longer." In the case of conversations, if not in priests' homilies, one whole minute talking at a time is ample; any more than that and, if your first name isn't Barack, you're being boring.