



**Your on the
Street Reporter**



Uyless Black

Charlie Rose Interviews Sean Penn

Charlie Rose Interviews Sean Penn¹

March 2, 2016

The Charlie Rose/Sean Penn interview made the news again recently during the 2016 Academy Awards presentations. Charlie Rose (PBS) interviewed Sean Penn on January 17, 2016, about Penn's earlier interview in October 2015 with Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzmán, the head of the Sinaloa drug cartel. The drug lord made headlines by escaping from a high-security Mexican prison last year through a long tunnel that would have put a miner's work to shame. Penn's fame and related contacts helped him land this interview.

For many journalists, such an interview would be the opportunity of a lifetime. However, Penn is not considered to be a journalist by some people who go by that title. During the interview, Penn made these observations. "Journalists who want to say that I'm not a journalist. Well, I want to see the license that says that they're a journalist."

Charlie's first question to Penn says a lot about the state of journalism and the stereotyping of roles in the industry: "Why does Sean Penn want to go to Mexico to interview a drug lord who's escaped from prison with a notorious reputation for doing terrible things and supplying a lot of drugs to America? What's the point?"

Would Charlie have posed that question to the CBS icon, Walter Cronkite, if Walter had made a trek to interview a drug lord? This question to Mr. Penn comes from a man who is affiliated with a television company (CBS) that did an interview, without controversy, of one of the most brutal dictators on earth, Saddam Hussein (on February 24, 2003).

Penn also committed what Rose characterized as, "a mortal sin...by allowing the most wanted man in the world to approve his story."

Penn disagreed with Rose's harsh and inaccurate assertions. In Sean's words, "What was brokered for me to have the interview with El Chapo was that I would finish the article, send it to him, and if he said no, then that was no harm, no foul to any reader."

The practice of a journalist not passing his/her work to the person being interviewed is contrary to common sense and leads to unnecessary errors and misunderstandings. The journalist does not have to alter anything whatsoever and at the same time, may discover a mistake has been made.

By correcting journalistic mistakes---which happen often---before the piece is made public, is a service to the public. It has nothing to do with the integrity of journalists. Many journalists mistakenly claim sharing their piece with the interviewed-person for possible mistakes will compromise their work. That makes no sense, especially if the goal of the journalist is to produce an error-free interview. *The journalist remains in control of the process.*

Penn was also excoriated for his soft questions. Author Don Winslow took issue with Penn for not asking Guzmán about his crimes. "I would like to have heard about the people on [Guzmán's] payroll who dissolved their victims' bodies in acid, about the decapitations and mutilations, about the blood-soaked bodies displayed in public places as intimidation and propaganda."

¹ Photo on cover is courtesy of

https://www.google.com/search?q=pictures+of+charlie+Rose+and+Sean+penn+interview&espv=2&biw=1177&bih=607&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi_jdmExKPLAhVJ32MKHcObACUQ7AkIMA&dpr=1.5

Sean Penn addressed this criticism by stating he was trying to learn about other aspects of the man; that many people already knew about Guzmán's brutal nature and acts.

Let's return to the interview with the gentleman who gassed his fellow citizens, Hussein. Let's learn more about the journalistic integrity of one of Charlie's news outlets, Hussein's interview that aired on CBS, Feb. 27, 2003: "The interview was held at the Republican Palace [in Iraq]. Neither [Dan] Rather nor [a colleague] were allowed to bring their own tape recorders. Hussein supplied his own translator, and CBS approved the translation of the recording [based on the use of these recorders]."

Using the tape recorders of the adversary. Relying on the translators of the adversary. Yet more examples of journalistic rigor. Edward R. Morrow would be proud.

The two-faced treatment of Sean Penn by the news media gets worse. After Hussein had been captured, he was placed under the control of FBI agent George Piro, who posed as a high-level U.S. Government official. On Jan. 24, 2008, *Sixty Minutes* aired, "Interrogator shares Saddam's Confessions."

"Piro even used Saddam's birthday, a former national holiday, to drive home another painful point. 'In 2004, no one celebrated his birthday on April 28th. So the only one that really knew and cared was us. I'd brought him some cookies, and we, the FBI, celebrated his birthday for him.' "

Charlie's second question to Sean was, "To do what, Sean? I mean I don't understand that. Because, I mean clearly-- drugs are a huge problem in America. There's a huge consumption of drugs in America. It's a terrible thing in what it does to our society. But what is going to see him gonna do about it, other than somehow-- getting a lot of attention." [That's the point Charlie!]

To place Charlie's mentality into perspective, in 1934, the writer H.G.Wells secured an interview with Joseph Stalin for the *New York Statesman*. The two men exchanged ideas about capitalism. Obviously, we cannot know the details of their talk, as recordings were into the future. But we do know that Wells was not chided by the press. After all, he was not an actor, but a writer.

Transporting Charlie Rose of 2016 back to 1934, how absurd does this sound? "Why does H.G. Wells want to go to Russia to interview a Communist who is doing terrible things and supplying a lot of labor for Siberia slave camps? What's the point?"

Here is a direct quote from Sean Penn to Rose's question of, "What's the point?"

"I feel complicit in the suffering that is going on, because I'm not thinking about it every day. I'm not watching these laws that are showing no progression, these rehabilitations that are not happening. So I'm looking the other way. I find that equally complicit with murders in Juarez."

Penn was disparaged for these heart-felt, and yes, patriotic expressions. As for H.G. Wells, who told Stalin that capitalism was on its last legs, was he run out of town? No. He even said to Stalin, "It seems to me that I am more to the Left than you, Mr. Stalin; I think the old system is nearer to its end than you think."

Wells later wrote, "I have never met a man more fair, candid, and honest." H.G. Wells went on to more fame. Sean Penn is branded as a "What's the point?" dilettante.