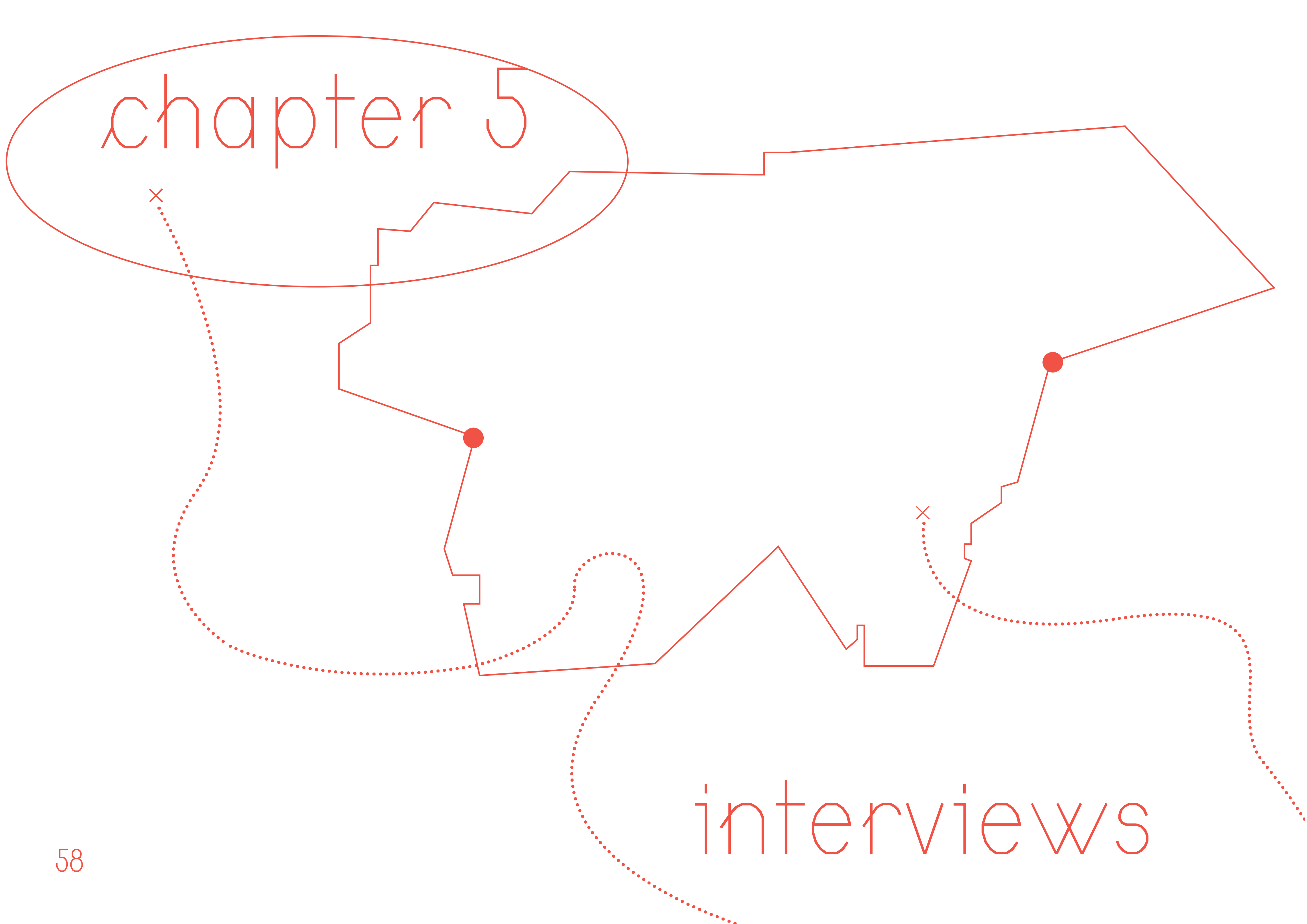

# chapter 5

# interviews

# interviews

Journalists often speak about being ‘on the ground’ or ‘in the field’ when they do interviews or spend time in the places they write about. Researchers many times do the same, and people from NGOs as well. While this serves to define a specific part of the storytelling process, it is misleading in the sense that there is no separate ‘ground’ or ‘field’ that storytellers suddenly step onto. Interviews, recordings and observations don’t take place in an isolated space that can be entered and exited but happen, like everything else, in our common and shared reality.

Many conversations with participants took place around what happens during this part of the storytelling process, when storytellers meet with people to interview for their pieces. In these discussions, both positive and ill-fated examples of such encounters were brought up, as well as points to consider for doing interviews better.

First of all, several people spoke about the importance of establishing a good and respectful connection to the person sharing their story. “I am happy when I work and it is important to me that the people I meet are happy too,” Rayan Sukkar from Campji said. “I always think that in order to get good content, the interviewees have to feel comfortable being with you, and get to know you as well.” Building such connections requires awareness of things brought up in earlier chapters: recognising one’s own positionality and how power dynamics play out in each given situation. Laure Makarem from ARM said that storytellers should work in a way that gives back to the people they meet: “The process should not be exploitative but shift power in favour of the people sharing their experience.” Stories, Makarem said, should be “something that fuels.”

“I am happy when I work and it is important to me that the people I meet are happy too.”



Doha Adi from Sawa for Development and Aid described an instance when a journalist came to interview women whose husbands were disappeared or detained in Syria. “The journalist was very respectful,” Adi said. “She sat with them, not just as a journalist doing a recording, but she had coffee with them and asked about their children.” Before the interview started, the journalist had told the women to only share what they were comfortable with, and that they could ask to remove anything afterwards if they changed their mind. “It was more of a chat, and it was edited in a way so that the women were telling their own stories. It is important to build bridges in this way,” Adi said.

“Stories should be something that fuels.”

Participants gave opposite examples as well. Fatima Alhaji, the journalist who now lives in Berlin once translated meetings for a TV-team coming to Lebanon from abroad. “They were interviewing this amazing woman, she was the head of an NGO and her husband was detained in Syria. But they were not sensitive to how hard it was for her to talk about her missing husband. Many of their questions were not respectful. What bothered me was how they dealt with the situation. It was as if their interview was more important than the woman’s feelings and experience.”

Whether or not a genuine connection is established during the meeting often depends on the approach of the storyteller. If they arrive with set ideas and expectations, the interview will likely be transactional and not reciprocal. The opportunity for it to become a genuine conversation, based on listening and sharing, is lost. Omar Saadeh, who used to film videos for an international NGO in Lebanon, said that when he met families for his stories, they often brought up entirely different topics: “I felt that they needed to tell their stories. Once people started to talk they usually wanted more time to share their problems.” This, he said, is something that journalists and others are not always open to hear. “They instead ask them very basic questions which always lead to the same pattern in the stories. Like, ‘What happened in Syria during the war?’ or ‘Was your house destroyed?’” Sometimes, when his NGO had visitors from abroad, they acted as if they were producing a film, Saadeh said. “They did not give the space to the people they met to tell stories they wanted to tell.”

Gary Younge, who served as The Guardian's editor-at-large and long-term U.S. correspondent, said[9] in an interview that "sometimes the things that aren't stories should be stories, and the news agenda is skewed towards power and the powerful. Also, the people in the newsroom think if it's not happening to them, it is not news in the same way." This explains how power dynamics impact the practice of storytelling: people in privileged positions tend to make choices based on their own views of the world. Then, they approach interviewees accordingly. Makarem from ARM said that this is apparent when journalists feel that they have "a lot of entitlement." In such interview situations, the approach "is very top-down and questions are thrown at people." There needs to be a shift, Makarem said, "so that people who share their stories still own them." People who are interviewed should "have power enough to take ownership of the story that is written about them."

> "There needs to be a shift so that people have power enough to take ownership of the story written about them."

One good example is a journalist who came to interview one of the members of ARM's migrant community center. "This person was very open and wanted the people she met to direct the conversation," Makarem said. "Her questions were like, 'How do you deal with everyday problems?' or 'What brings you joy?' She also sent a voice note to introduce herself before coming, saying that, 'If you are interested in chatting we can chat, but you are not prompted to talk,'" Makarem continued. ARM now runs a media capacity-building program for their members that is continuously being developed. "We did a session recently on how to take interviews with journalists – how to answer difficult questions, navigate certain conversations, set a tone and boundaries," Makarem said. "And a chunk of the training is for people to be able to produce media on their own."

9 | www.thehindu.com/opinion/interview/the-further-you-are-from-power-the-more-you-see/article30925158.ece

Participants also spoke about the set-up of the interview session itself, in particular the onus on storytellers to make sure that interviewees understand the implications of speaking to them. Abby Sewell, the journalist from the U.S. working in Lebanon, said that it can be hard for people to foresee what sharing their stories with a journalist may lead



to. "There have been times where I did an interview and then realised that these people are not used to dealing with the media, they don't understand what a journalist is." In such cases, Sewell said, she tries to be as protective as possible: "Even if people say that I can use their names, I sometimes refrain from doing so if I think it might cause them problems."

In Lebanon and elsewhere, it is common that people from refugee or migrant communities get interviewed on several occasions by people in different roles. One day, NGO field-workers or UN staff may come to ask about an issue; another day, local or international media may inquire about something else. Sometimes, people in different capacities from the same NGOs visit the same family but for different purposes. In such cases, the difference between one meeting and another is not always clear. Saadeh, the videographer, said that people he filmed sometimes expected that the interview would improve their situation. "If I interviewed a mother for a story about education, for example, she would also tell me about water or food problems. Why? Because she believed that she could get help." Independent reporters should be aware of this too. "Sometimes I realise afterwards that people might be thinking that I work with the UN, or if they tell me something it might lead to them getting aid," Sewell said. In such situations, she said, she tries to refer people to organisations that provide help and support.

> "Research can be a process of solidarity."

Other participants spoke about the idea of 'giving back' to interviewees as well. Inga Hajdarowicz, the PhD student researching migration in Lebanon, said that she tries to find ways to offer things in return. "There are not so many things I have but I have time, for example. So I usually offer workshops or conversation classes, spaces where people can discuss what they want to discuss and I update them on my research," she said. "Research can be a process of solidarity. I try for it to be as much of an exchange as possible."

Makarem from ARM also mentioned reciprocity, and gave the example of an organisation approaching them to collect testimonies from migrant workers for a report. "It was an amazing process," Makarem said, "because they first took their time to meet with everyone, then walked them through the entire report." This, Makarem said, did not raise any false expectations. "It was very participatory and there was a cer-

tain safety and trust so when people spoke about things that did not feel great, there was still a lot of support." There was also the fact, Makarem said, that people were fairly compensated for their time. This is not always the case when researchers or journalists contact ARM to be put in touch with people who are migrant workers. "Other times, they have asked about 'the rate for migrant workers,' as if it would not be the same as for others. That is a red flag because come on, it is doing the same job."

If interviews don't take place on a 'ground' or 'field' that you step off once they are over, then the commitment to the interviewee does not end there. Saadeh, the videographer, said that he was once interviewed by a journalist himself, but the connection was not maintained afterwards. "It felt like a one-night stand," he said. "And when I reached out later, the person 'ghosted' me." After the explosion in Beirut on August 4 2020, the same person contacted Saadeh for a new interview. "But I didn't do it, they had not maintained the connection," he said.

Many participants said that they appreciate staying in contact with people they meet when working on their stories. Fatima Alhaji, the journalist in Berlin, said that she does not believe in "this rule within journalism that you cannot get personal." That, she said, is not right: "It turns people you meet into only material for your story." Instead, she prefers to be close to the community. "That is how I like to work on stories." Shehrazad, the writer from France, said that she finds a lot of joy in the interview moment: "It is really beautiful to sit in front of someone who tells you all about their life. You don't know the person, yet they can tell you everything. This is an experience of pure humanity." After the interview, she often stays in contact. "I want to know how their life is going. I am not saying we become best friends, but I send messages maybe once a year. I don't see the person solely as a project I work on and that's it," she said.

"It is really beautiful to sit in front of someone who tells you all about their life."

More than a chance to get quotes or prove beliefs or assumptions, the interview is an exchange and commitment. If we think and act like this, not only does it make the interview more equal, it also enhances its potential. Storytellers who enter conversations with an open mindset and curiosity to listen and discover – perhaps also get proven wrong – are not only more true to the people they meet, but also to the stories they tell. And such stories will always capture the world better.

"It felt like a one-night stand. When I reached out later, the person 'ghosted' me."

## Questions in this chapter

How do power dynamics tend to manifest during interviews and meetings?

How can interviews be more reciprocal in nature, and not transactional?

What kind of stories can come out from more equal and open-minded interviews?