Interviews: A Key Data Source in International Business Research

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Ask Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, the legendary *Washington Post* reporters who broke the Watergate story that led to the downfall of the Nixon presidency, about open-ended interviews. They are likely to tell you that, triangulated with other modes of data collection, interviews with key informants located at important nodes of knowledge flows are an invaluable way of connecting with empirical reality.

There are important lessons here for researchers of international business, in particular, for qualitative researchers of international business. In many areas of rigorous empirical investigation, there is simply no satisfactory substitute for interviews. Certainly, paper-and-pencil surveys are far less costly in terms of time and money, and secondary data require far less commitment from the researcher, than do interviews. And certainly, interviews are subject to potential problems of self-reporting bias, poor recall, selective memory, and so on. Yet as I discovered in the area of international alliances, there is no data source as rewarding as interviews, in order to tap into the brain of the person(s) within each organisation under study who are most directly responsible for the phenomenon being researched.

As for international alliances, so for numerous other branches of international business research. With appropriate safeguards and precautions for language, context, interpretation and meaning, interviews with key managers can add rich insights to most studies. OK, so what are the major issues that an international business qualitative researcher is likely to face in using interviews? In no particular order, these would include: gaining access to suitable people and getting them to agree to do interviews; confidentiality; permission to tape record and transcribe; travel expense; language skills of the researcher and/or interviewer; and triangulation of interview data with archival data and other sources. Try it, you'll like it!