

Informational Interview Report

By Quinn Schweitzer

Introduction

As part of my *Interviewing and Negotiating* course, I had the opportunity to conduct informational interviews with five accomplished professionals across journalism, communications, and sports psychology. The goal was to gain insight into their career paths, day-to-day responsibilities, industry trends, and advice for someone like me — a student looking to enter the ever-evolving media world. Through these conversations, I not only refined my interviewing skills but also uncovered valuable truths about success, adaptability, and passion in high-stakes, high-reward careers.

Interview Summaries

1. Liz Vaccariello – Former Editor-in-Chief, Reader's Digest

Liz Vaccariello has held top editorial positions at some of the largest magazine brands in the world. From an early age, she knew she wanted to write non-fiction and pursued journalism at the University of Michigan. Internships at Cleveland Magazine and an ad agency confirmed that storytelling — not PR — was her calling. Liz's career path was calculated; at every stage, she made sure she was preparing for the next role.

Now as a leader in digital and print media, she splits her time between managing creative direction and serving as the face of her magazines. She emphasized how the industry has shifted — particularly with print in decline and digital platforms, video, and AI on the rise. To stand out today, she says, students must have writing chops, a strong digital toolkit (including video and podcasting skills), curiosity, and the ability to network effectively through platforms like LinkedIn. Above all, she still loves the storytelling, teamwork, and influence of trusted media brands — though she cautions against being “print-first” in a digital age.

2. Dr. Bradley Bond – Professor, University of San Diego

Dr. Bond’s journey into academia wasn’t planned. Initially unsure of his path, it wasn’t until a tough undergraduate course and a professor’s comment on his paper that would spark the idea of graduate school. He later earned both a master’s and PhD and completed a postdoc at Georgetown. He now chairs the Communications department at USD.

His typical day balances teaching, research, and administrative “firefighting.” Teaching is the highlight, but time management and imposter syndrome remain ongoing challenges. Dr. Bond stressed the importance of adaptability, student engagement, and the ability to explain complex theories in accessible ways. He also spoke candidly about how AI and political pressures are creating uncertainty in higher education. While concerned about the future, he finds fulfillment in mentoring students and knowing his research is starting to shape real-world media. He chose academia over big tech because of the intellectual freedom and the lifestyle, even if the salary isn’t as high.

3. John Jenks – Former Journalist; Professor, Dominican University

John Jenks spent years as a crime and politics reporter at the *Wichita Eagle* and *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* before transitioning to teaching. He entered journalism because it combined what he loved — writing, curiosity, action — with a real-world job. His early reporting career was hectic and intense, often covering crime scenes, listening to police scanners, or chasing scoops under deadline.

He described journalism as a "trapline" — checking in with sources, looking for stories, and staying alert. The rush of breaking a big story and seeing it talked about around town was, for him, unbeatable. But mistakes in reporting or pushing people too hard in sensitive situations were difficult parts of the job. Jenks highlighted the importance of student newspapers, knowing media law, data journalism, and practicing writing with tough feedback. He also stressed networking and volunteering in local journalism circles. Though the industry has become less stable due to AI and advertising shifts, he said journalism in your twenties — with the right newsroom — is "the best job you can have."

4. Dr. Wendy Borlabi – Sports Psychologist, Consultant, Formerly with Chicago Bulls

Dr. Wendy Borlabi's path to sports psychology was anything but traditional. She first discovered the field by chance and only pursued it after years of unrelated work. Once she returned to school for her master's and doctorate, she threw herself into hands-on learning, creating her own practicums and offering free services to athletes.

Today, her work revolves around being present and responsive — whether she's walking through a stadium or getting a FaceTime from an athlete in need. She relies on face-to-face conversations, not email or texting, and emphasized the importance of knowing who you are, being quick-witted, and not trying to impress or cater to fame. She advocates for licensure,

CNPC certification, and joining organizations like AASP to build lasting, meaningful connections. While she stepped back from a full-time role with the Bulls due to a toxic culture, she continues to love the work itself — especially when she hears athletes using tools they discussed in public interviews. For her, real change is personal and powerful.

5. Thomas Herman – Former Journalist, Washington Post; Lecturer at USD and Former Yale Lecturer

Thomas Herman got his start early — writing for his high school paper and landing a *Washington Post* internship while still in school. His reporting career spanned everything from food and civil rights in the South to sports and tax policy. He spent 16 years writing a tax column that started as a five-week gig and discovered that, with persistence and curiosity, any beat can become a passion.

Herman's favorite stories were always sports-related, especially tennis. He said the most important qualities for a journalist are persistence, curiosity, timeliness, and strong writing. He echoed the advice of other journalists: students must write for the school paper, always chase the latest scoop, and love what they do — because journalism demands dedication and energy. He also stressed the importance of being first, being accurate, and never losing your love for storytelling.

Analysis & Reflection

Despite the wide range of roles — from editing to academia to sports psychology — several clear themes emerged across all five interviews. First, passion is non-negotiable. Every

interviewee emphasized loving the work, whether that's writing under deadline, helping athletes, or mentoring students. In fields as demanding as journalism and psychology, you must be driven by genuine interest.

Second, adaptability is crucial. Liz Vaccariello and John Jenks both spoke about the shift from print to digital and the looming presence of AI. Dr. Bond and Dr. Borlabi addressed how time, politics, and technology are reshaping academia and mental performance fields. All agreed that emerging professionals need to be flexible, multi-platform fluent, and ready for change.

Networking was another common thread. Whether it's making meaningful connections at conferences (Dr. Borlabi), staying visible on LinkedIn (Liz), or helping someone without expecting anything in return (John), your relationships can open doors. But they all warned that empty networking won't get you far — it must be real and relationship-based.

Lastly, I was surprised by how many professionals shared doubts about their industry's future. From the economic uncertainty in academia to the instability of media jobs, there's a sense that these once solid careers are becoming more unpredictable. Yet, all five professionals have found ways to stay relevant and impactful by constantly learning, mentoring others, and holding onto the core values of their work.

Conclusion

This assignment gave me more than insight into five incredible careers — it offered a roadmap for how to navigate a rapidly changing professional world. I learned that curiosity, hard work, and integrity will always matter. I learned that relationships — not just resumes — are what build careers. And I learned that while the media and communications industries may be shifting fast,

there is still room for passionate, driven people who know how to tell stories and make connections.

Moving forward, I plan to write more, seek critical feedback, build authentic connections, and stay flexible as I explore where I belong in journalism or communications. I'm grateful for the time, wisdom, and candor each interviewee shared. Their stories gave me a better sense of the future I want — and the work it'll take to get there.