

## Transcript of the On the Spot Interview with Dave Jones from 19 Jun 22

[This has been slightly edited for clarity.]

Welcome to On the Spot, public affairs programming on WGRC.

**Dave Jones (Dave):** I'm Dave Jones and joining me is author: Ivan Obolensky. We'll be talking about how to keep conversations civil. Ivan, how you doing?

**Ivan Obolensky (Ivan):** I am fine and thank you for having me on the show.

**Dave:** Glad to have you with us. Talking about a very important, pertinent subject, especially in the times that we live in: how to keep conversations civil? It seems like that can be a tough task because, Ivan, it seems like everyone wants to argue.

**Ivan:** Yes, and arguing is the thing. Actually, it was funny, I was doing a study on this to find out what is with this, because it seems to be more ramped now than it has been ever before, and strangely enough, part of that had to do with the rise of the Internet, and email, and eventually of tweets and everything like that, but more interestingly was in the 1980s, a study was done in England, and the idea was they were trying to figure out how to get complex technological information about economics and about science into the heads of the public, and so they wrote a paper called, of all things, "The Deficit Model of Scientific Communication".

What they came up with was that even if somebody has no information about something, they have an opinion about it. So, there's no such thing as an empty mind. There is always—they're always going to think, regardless of whether you're talking about some obscure financial product, or you're talking about how you do gene editing, people do have opinions on it, and so the idea was how do we—how do you get information across?

Well, if everybody has an opinion, then the idea was to have talking heads, where somebody would voice say a negative opinion, and the other person would voice a positive opinion, and in that sense, you would get an interflow, and the information would come across, because the information that was given, would align with the opinion of the individual. The first people who really got this together were the financial networks. You started that pretty much in the nineties, eighties. A lot of financial news services, like CNBC, would have talking heads.

This went on into the broad news media, and now you have talking heads everywhere, on pretty much every communication channel. This, in a sense, and again because you have conversations, people have opinions, and people have strong opinions, so all of a sudden everybody's talking opinions, rather than facts.

Data is slightly... it's nuanced, and that has been the way we've been communicating for I'd say the last ten to twenty years, and it's ramped up of course when you have elections. You have political ideas, and these can get rather hard and fast, and one of the

things that happens is—emotions are the down and dirty way to decide something. Animals have emotions. There's nothing like an angry horse. I don't know if you've ever experienced that.

**Dave:** Unfortunately.

**Ivan:** Yes. They can get pretty rowdy. But that's the fast and dirty way to do it. The factual, logical sense is much slower and requires reflection and, of course, with economic pressures, the amount of reflection time one actually has is somewhat limited.

**Dave:** The art of communication, it is a real thing, knowing how to talk with someone. What is your background, and how did you get into studying this?

**Ivan:** My background—my parents were very socially prominent, and we got trotted out starting at about age six to meet people. I met all sorts of strange people. I met presidents: JFK, Johnson, Nixon. I met Grace Kelly, the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. I mean, it goes—it's one of those.

**Dave:** Quite a list.

**Ivan:** Oh, it is. Of course, you start out being pretty insufficient in that area, but I watched my parents handle it, and my mother had an extraordinary gift on talking to people and to just listen, and to put all her attention on them, and they would respond. I thought this was extraordinary, and it took a long time for me to—because I'm not necessarily as outward—I suppose I'm a bit more introverted than the normal extrovert, who can just go out and talk to people, but I trained myself to do that with great success.

There're certain things that I've learned. First of all, you have to allow the other person to exist. Oftentimes to get into a conversation, there's a preamble. I live in Uruguay. There's almost a set piece that you go through when you talk to somebody. You talk. You say hello. You ask how the family is. You go into this whole set thing, which sort of allows everybody to settle down and maybe institute a little trust between the parties, so to speak, and then you can get down to business. I think that's a really important thing. You have to establish some sort of a base in order to have a communication and to actually have a conversation. That's the first thing.

The second thing is something I learned actually from Ben Franklin. He was a very contentious fellow, and when he went over to England to take on the Penns of Pennsylvania, and also later, when he went to Paris to help the United States, he was very argumentative, and he found himself in deep difficulty because he was supposed to be a diplomat. So, he learned to ask questions, and I think that's one of the best things you can do. If you find somebody—that they come up with an opinion you really don't agree with, or you just go, Whoa! The first thing is you want to ask questions. You don't necessarily say, "Oh, that's wrong." You might ask why a person would think that way, and then you begin to—it gets them to talk about it, and you be the listener. Gradually, a lot of the "I must have this opinion" sort of goes away. That's one thing. It's a technique. I think you have to learn that.

The other thing, I think you have to—what I do, is I don't try and antagonize somebody. You keep the rhetoric quiet. When you deal with angry people, and a lot of people get very opinionated and very angry, the trick is not to get angry back, but to whisper. If you just lower your voice. Speak more slowly, I think you'll be really surprised as how effective that is in terms of ramping things down. Of course, everything can go to heck, in which case, you have to bail, but that's how it is. You learn this.

**Dave:** You mentioned a few moments ago, you have facts and you have opinions. How has the discourse, the dialogue rather, in American society... how has it been manipulated among everyday folk by the media, whether it be radio, TV, Internet, because if you look hard enough, you can find a station or a commentator that has your viewpoint. How do we get beyond being manipulated and actually thinking for ourselves in the conversation?

**Ivan:** That's a really difficult question, because you're right. Whatever you search for, and if you want an opinion that conforms with yours, you can find it. I think what you have to do is question your own opinion and know why it is you believe what you believe, and that means taking a look at it and examining it—taking some time to see what the facts of the matter are. What is the information that we are getting?

Unfortunately, with the media, even the data that we get is skewed, and it's skewed because there's often great bits that are missing, and the only bits that you get are the ones that sort of align with whatever opinion they have. I think that one of the things you have to be able to do is get more information.

Also, I think it's very, very important to have face-to-face contact, because conversation is nuanced, and you can have an opinion, but what's the volume on this? What are the caveats? You really can't do that just in a phone conversation or particularly in an email.

You need to sit down with the person and actually look them in the eyes. You can see the zeal that goes along with some people. You know you're not going to get anywhere because they're incensed about it. But you can question them and say, "What about this fact? Have you heard about this?" and introduce it that way and maybe you can have a slight shift. But mostly we need more information, and actually working out how it is we think the way we do, and why you think the way you think. Once you know that, one is more firm, and one doesn't have to assert it so much, because a lot of people like to assert.

**Dave:** I believe you touched on it here briefly, but one final question for you. Two people are coming together. Most of the time, I would say, it's safe to say, they don't intend to get into an argument, but when two people are coming together, talking about two different sides of a conversation, how do you prevent that conversation from escalating into a war, into an argument?

**Ivan:** You can't play the same game. You gotta play a different game. You can't just go on the assertion side, and I think one of the things you have to have when you do get in a conversation with a person is why are you doing it? And to know that the other person is

doing the very, very best they can on the information they have. You don't know that they've gone through in their lives or whatever. You have to give them the benefit of the doubt. I think this really is a key thing.

Right now, we're too quick at casting doubt and figuring that this person is X or Y as opposed to giving the benefit of—you know, that's a real person over there who's had experiences that I have no idea about and has a story to tell, because I think everybody has a story, and the stories are marvelous, if you can get them to open up, and open up to tell you about it. That requires trust, and that requires being a darn good listener.

**Dave:** Today, everybody certainly does have an opinion and there's no shortage of topics to be talking about. How to keep conversations civil. Ivan Obolensky, thank you so much for joining us here on WGRC.

**Ivan:** Thank you, Dave.