Candid Conversations: Behind the Scenes of the Playboy Interview, 1962-2011

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Master of Science

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Candid Conversations: Behind the Scenes of the Playboy Interview, 1962-2011

by

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ABSTRACT

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Candid Conversations: Behind the Scenes of the Playboy Interview, 1962-2011

Director of Thesis: Michael S. Sweeney

This paper uses content analysis, historical research and interviews with journalists to examine the subjects of the Playboy Interview and the interview’s role in shaping journalism and popular culture. The content analysis of 569 Playboy Interviews showed that the majority of interview subjects were white males, and that the television and film industry was the most represented profession. Interviews with Playboy editors and writers were used to explain the process of selecting these subjects, as well as to determine which interviews were most memorable to those who wrote and edited them. Finally, historical analysis showed that the early interviews were not acknowledged by popular media, but rather, were written about decades after they took place. Since then, interviews with political figures, such as Jimmy Carter and Jesse Ventura, have been written about more frequently by newspapers and magazines.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Michael S. Sweeney

Professor of Journalism
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Finally, I need to thank my best friend, Jeffrey Riley. Thank you for being there for me no matter what and always convincing me to never give up. There is no way I could have done this without you.
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INTRODUCTION

Often regarded as simply pornographic material, what actually lies within *Playboy*’s pages is much more. Frequently at the forefront of important cultural and political movements (Miller, 1984), the magazine provides adults with information about the world around them, carefully positioned among its signature Playmates, the female nudes whose pictorial pages formed the foundation of the magazine’s prurient appeal. In a time when pornographic material is easily available for free on the Internet, *Playboy*’s ability to maintain a circulation of more than 1.6 million readers for its monthly magazine speaks to the quality of the other content contained within its pages.

One example of the journalistic focus of the magazine is a piece published on *Playboy*’s website in early 2009. While many of the media were mocking the just-blossoming tea party movement, *Playboy* writers Mark Ames and Yasha Levine published a story calling the movement a “rightwing PR machine” (Weigel, 2010).

Through its editorial content, including traditional journalistic news stories and features, as well as its advice columns and interviews, *Playboy* has played an important role in shaping the worldview of millions of readers since its premiere in 1953 and has become an example to young men as to how to lead the ideal bachelor life.

When Hugh Hefner started *Playboy* magazine, his goal was to provide lighthearted fun for the American male. However, as time went by, it became a strong cultural influence and helped to define “an alternative, often controversial, and highly resonant version of the good life” (Fraterrigo, 2009, p. 3). The magazine featured as much, if not more, editorial content than nudity, including such regular features as an
advice column called The Playboy Advisor and a long-form question-and-answer format feature, the Playboy Interview (Fraterrigo, 2009).

In 1979, *Newsweek* called *Playboy* “an institution,” citing the “prestigious writers who give the magazine the weight and respectability” (Schwartz & Kasindorf, 1979). *Playboy*’s current editorial mission reflects this cultural power, stating that it is an “integral part of modern culture,” “defines men’s attitudes” and has an “unrivaled media influence (Mediamark, 2011).

The Playboy Interview is regarded by some as one of the most important contributions the magazine has made to journalism. For example, Miller (1984) wrote: “Through the medium of exhaustingly long and probing question-and-answer sessions, the readers of *Playboy* were introduced to widely divergent views of important issues of the day, as well as given an insight into the hearts and minds of an extraordinary variety of people, from Fidel Castro to Timothy Leary, from Albert Schweitzer to Dolly Parton” (p. 129).

Boylan (1964) lists the interview feature as one of the reasons the magazine has been successful, calling it “the gilt edge on otherwise routine, even pulpy ingredients.”

The influence that *Playboy* has had on American culture makes it an interesting and important subject for study, in particular the content of one of the highest-regarded regular features, the Playboy Interview. This study will examine the subjects of the interview to determine who is represented, why they likely were chosen and how the editors and writers of *Playboy* went about planning and conducting these interviews. It also will assess the Playboy Interview’s significance and impact.
CHAPTER 1: THEORY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Learning Theory

An important reason for looking at the Playboy Interview is the concept of social learning theory, the idea that individuals gain information by observing those who serve as role models (Mercurio & Filak, 2010). Bandura (1977), who developed the theory, stated that people look for similar people to imitate “in order to form socially acceptable and successfully reinforced methods of behavior” (Mercurio & Filak, 2010, p. 58). Grusec (1992) expanded on these ideas and posited that power and attractiveness are the most important elements when it comes to determining which individuals to “adopt” as a role model.

These concepts are crucial when it comes to studying the Playboy Interview for several reasons. Those featured in a forum such as the Playboy Interview are given a position of influence by the magazine. Thus, according to this theory, readers of the magazine are more likely to look up to these interview subjects. For this reason, identifying people who are or are not in a position to influence readers is important. For example, a lack of women in the interview may indicate that women readers do not have positive role models in the magazine.

History of the Playboy Interview

Hugh Hefner, a bachelor with a psychology degree and background in magazine journalism, knew from his previous jobs that there was a market for magazines featuring nude photos of women, but thought that the options available in the 1950s didn’t have the level of class he was hoping for (Sumner, 2010). After being denied a $5 raise at his job as a copywriter for Esquire, he decided to start his own magazine, called Stag Party, but
after legal trouble with the publisher of *Stag* magazine, he decided to call it *Playboy* (Sumner, 2010). The first issue of the magazine was assembled in Hefner’s kitchen in December 1953 and was left undated because Hefner was unsure whether the magazine would be successful enough to continue. It was successful, mostly credited to the fact that Hefner’s first centerfold model was recently-famous Marilyn Monroe, whose photographs Hefner bought from a calendar she had posed for before becoming an established actress (PlayboyEnterprises.com).

In September 1962, *Playboy* published an interview with jazz musician Miles Davis after receiving the manuscript from the stack of files of *Show Business Illustrated*, a defunct publication started by Hugh Hefner (Miller, 1984). The author, a young Alex Haley, had worked for months trying to get an interview with Davis, eventually winning the subject over by volunteering to be his boxing partner for the afternoon (Miller, 1984). Murray Fisher, an editor at *Playboy* at the time, found Haley’s piece intriguing because of the way Davis opened up about racial prejudice, and he brought it to Hefner’s attention (Miller, 1984). Hefner approved and placed Fisher in charge of lining up future interview subjects. The Playboy Interview, a long-form Q&A, was born and has run in almost every issue since. Every issue since 1973 has contained a Playboy Interview, and only 11 months between 1962 and 1973 were missing interviews.

American subjects were hard to come by at first because many did not want to be associated with the nudity contained within the magazine. Thus, many of the first interview subjects (Bertrand Russell, Jean Genet and Jean Paul Sartre) were from other countries (Miller, 1984). After the first several years, the interview gained credibility because it served as “a forum for many notable figures to discuss racial issues”
Among these notable figures were Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. While Malcolm X was willing to participate from the beginning, his interview was almost left unpublished because editors were conflicted regarding racist comments he made (Miller, 1984). King, on the other hand, was reluctant to discuss civil rights in a pornographic magazine, but Haley eventually convinced him that the *Playboy* audience needed to hear his message (Miller, 1984). The January 1965 interview, the longest King had granted to any magazine, allowed him to discuss the despair that had taken over the African-American community, a topic that Fraterrigo (2009) calls “sober content for a magazine that once promised no interest in the world’s problems” (p. 148).

Part of the success and intrigue of the interview feature was its ability to provide an outlet for all opinions, even those that were seen as unpopular. Shortly after completing his interview with King, Haley was assigned to interview George Lincoln Rockwell, the leader of the American Nazi Party (Miller, 1984). Rockwell completed the interview with a revolver on the arm of his chair, while he talked about sending African-Americans back to Africa, sending homosexuals to a deserted island and killing Jews (Miller, 1984). Providing both sides of racial issues showed “a commitment to the process of democracy, over and above and vested interests in particular outcomes of those processes” (Rafferty, 2008).

*Playboy*’s reputation for providing well-written and presented interviews continued into the 1970s, culminating in one of its most famous interviews: one with then-presidential candidate Jimmy Carter. Solomon (1978) called the interview the most talked about and attention-drawing aspect of the 1976 presidential campaign. Carter’s assertion that he had “committed adultery in [his] heart many times” as well as his use of
the words “screws” and “shacks up with” were acceptable to the average *Playboy* reader, who was accustomed to frank discussions of sex, but were deemed controversial to the American public because most people expected more formal and rehearsed language from a potential president (Solomon, 1978). This interview and the negative press coverage of it discouraged political figures from using the interview as a venue for important, serious discussions, as evidenced by Carter’s opponent Gerald Ford turning *Playboy* down (Solomon, 1978).

Gaps in Available Literature

Very little academic research has been done regarding *Playboy* magazine. Several studies exist (Schick, Rima & Calabrese, 2011; Allison & Beggan, 2005; Bogaert & Turkovich, 1993; Freese & Meland, 2002; Katzmarzyk & Davis, 2001; Seifert, 2005) that examine the *Playboy* Playmate, particularly issues related to accurate representations and objectification of women. However, there are only a few published academic works related to the editorial content of the magazine. Hollows (2002) examined the food pages of *Playboy* and the role they played in creating the “Playboy lifestyle,” while Beggan, Gagne and Allison (2000) focused on the “Playboy Advisor” feature and how it affected gender stereotypes. No academic research could be found that analyzes the evolution of the Playboy Interview and its changing subjects.

This study aims to provide information on an aspect of the magazine that is well-regarded in its journalistic influence but has yet to be studied in depth. Understanding the context and importance of this section of the magazine will allow for further research as to the effects *Playboy* had on its readership.
CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In looking at the Playboy Interview and how it has evolved over time, two major questions arise. An initial examination of the Playboy Interview, along with secondary sources, showed primarily a mix of politicians and celebrities in the interviews. As mentioned earlier, the fact the Playboy was widely viewed as a pornographic magazine in the 1960s (Fraterrigo, 2009) may have convinced some interview subjects that it wasn’t an appropriate venue for sharing their opinions. This study will systematically examine the interview in terms of structure, content and subjects by focusing on two major areas: first, who are the subjects of the interviews and what roles in society did they represent? Second, how were the subjects chosen and how were the interviews structured and carried out? Several research questions were developed to further address these questions.

RQ1. How has the number of celebrities (TV and film industry people, musicians and athletes) changed over time?

RQ2. How has the number of politicians and activists changed over time?

RQ3. What race and gender are most prevalent?

RQ4. How has the average age of those interviewed changed over time?

RQ5. What was the purpose of the Playboy Interview as defined by the editors of the magazine?

RQ6. How did the selection of interview subjects help shape the role the interview was to play?

RQ7. Which interviews were given the most media attention?

RQ8. Which interviews are considered to be the most impactful by Playboy writers and editors?
By addressing these questions, this study will provide substantial context as to how the Playboy Interview came to be so highly regarded, and how it has influenced popular American culture. It also will help explain why *Playboy* editors decided its interview subjects were deserving of the prominent forum for their opinions.
CHAPTER 3: METHOD

In order to examine the demographic characteristics of those interviewed in *Playboy* magazine, a content analysis was performed of all 569 interviews from September 1962 through March 2011. The researcher used microfilm versions of older issues and physical copies of newer issues. These interviews were coded for several characteristics of the interview subject, including profession, gender, race and age at time of interview, as well as the length of the interview in paragraphs and location of the interviews within the magazine. See Appendix A for the coding instrument.

For the purposes of this study, profession was divided into eight categories: TV/film/radio industry, which included actors, producers and writers for television shows and motion pictures, as well as television and radio hosts and broadcast journalists; musicians; writers, who included print journalists as well as authors and poets; political figures, which included politicians, as well as White House officials and campaign workers; activists; businesspeople; athletes, including coaches and trainers; and an “other” category. This list was created after a preliminary sample of interviews was examined to inform category selection.

For interviews that focused on a group of people, a third gender option, mixed-gender group, was included. Groups that contained members of several races were coded as other. Ages were coded for the age of the subject at the time of publication of the interview, as the dates the interview took place were not available. Ages for groups were determined by calculating the average age among all members of the group. When ages were not explicitly given in the interview, coders were instructed to locate the birth date of the interview subject using an Internet search engine.
Approximately 10% of the total sample was used to calculate intercoder reliability among three coders. Reliability, established on the basis of percentage of agreement, ranged from 92% for profession of subject to 100% for gender, for an overall intercoder reliability of 97%.

The second part of this study consisted of a historical look at the Playboy Interview using primary and secondary sources. A preliminary search regarding the Playboy Interview resulted in hundreds of popular periodical articles, many of which focus on a few controversial interviews. This information was combined with the author’s interviews with current and former editors and interviewers. The author conducted open-ended interviews with these subjects in hopes of getting insight into some of the most memorable and controversial interviews, as well as the process of selecting interview subjects and questions.

The author attempted to contact the following journalists for interviews: Hugh Hefner, founder and current Editor-in-Chief of *Playboy*; Jimmy Jellinek, editorial director; Christine Hefner, former Editor-in-Chief; Chris Napolitano, Editor-at-Large and former editorial director; Arthur Kretchmer, former executive editor; G. Barry Golson, former editor; and David Sheff, Alvin Toffler, Kevin Cook, Claudia Dreifus, Michael Fleming, Lawrence Grobel, Lawrence Linderman, Eric Norden, Larry Dubois, Nat Hentoff, David Hochman, Sam Merrill, Peter Ross Range, Stephen Rebello, Robert Scheer, Morgan Strong, Rob Tennenbaum, and David Rensin, all of whom were interviewers. The list was compiled by finding former editors of the interview as well as current magazine staff using secondary sources. Interviewers were included on the list if they had written at least six interviews. Dozens of freelance journalists have written
Playboy Interviews, but because the interview questions were aimed at determining greater trends of the interview process and its impact, those with multiple interviews published were determined to be able to answer the questions with greater context.

The researcher was able to talk to Randall, Range, Grobel, Sheff, and Hochman as part of the study. Their interviews will be presented in Chapter 5 of this research.

A historical analysis of selected interviews was guided by the results of the interviews with Playboy journalists. After conducting interviews, the author compiled a list of those interviews that the writers and editors considered most important, memorable and/or exemplified what the magazine was hoping to achieve with the interview feature. Once these were identified, the author did a more in-depth analysis of the interviews, including what topics were discussed, what the interview subjects’ backgrounds are, and what the settings for the interviews were, in order to show a better overall picture of the interview process and result.

Although the interviews were open-ended, the researcher consistently asked Research Questions 5, 6, and 8: What was the purpose of the Playboy Interview as defined by the editors of the magazine, how did the selection of interview subjects help shape the role the interview was to play, and which interviews are considered to be the most impactful by Playboy writers and editors? The researcher also consistently asked what characteristics of interview subjects were most important when selecting them, why has there been a shift toward celebrity interview subjects, rather than politicians and activists, and why have women and racial minorities have been underrepresented within the Playboy Interview?
CHAPTER 4: CONTENT ANALYSIS

As stated in the method section, this study examined all 569 Playboy Interview subjects from 1962 until March 2011. Of these, 55, about 10% of the subjects, were female, while 501 subjects, 88%, were male. Mixed-gender groups made up the remaining 2%. White interview subjects were the most common, numbering 465, or 82%. The most common profession among interview subjects was TV/film industry workers, with 246, or 43%. These demographics will be addressed further in this section.

Additionally, during analysis of the data, some interesting trends were observed regarding representation of gender and race that were unrelated to the hypotheses of the study. As this study was mostly exploratory in nature, these findings will be reported in the appropriate categories. Data collected regarding the position of the interview within the magazine proved to be insignificant, as the interview was a standing department and was in approximately the same part of the magazine each month, regardless of the subject.

Professions of Interview Subjects Over Time

In RQ1 it was asked whether the number of celebrities (TV and film industry people, musicians and athletes) has increased over time. As shown in Table 1, the number of interview subjects in all three celebrity categories has increased steadily from the 1960s to the 2000s. The number of TV and film industry workers increased from 27 in the 1960s to 78 in the 2000s, an increase of nearly 190%. Musicians increased from 5 to 16, more than 200% and athletes increased from 3 to 14, more than 365%.

Conversely, the number of writers, politicians, and activists has decreased over time, answering RQ2. In the 2000s, there were 5 writers, compared with 17 in the 1960s,
a decrease of more than 70%. Politicians have seen a much less steep decrease, dropping from 7 in the 1960s to 5 in the 2000s, a decrease of just less than 30%. Activists have decreased more than 90%, from 12 in the 1960s to 1 in the 2000s.

Table 1.

Relationship Between Profession of Playboy Interview Subject and Decade the Interview Was Published

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>TV/film</th>
<th>Musician</th>
<th>Writer</th>
<th>Politician</th>
<th>Activist</th>
<th>Business-person</th>
<th>Athlete</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gender and Race Representation

In RQ3, it was asked what gender and race the majority of the subjects of the Playboy Interview would be. As shown in Table 2, females make up roughly 10% of the total number of interview subjects, with only a small increase since the 1960s. Female inclusion peaked in the 1980s with 16, but has since decreased to 10, the lowest number of females interviewed since the 1960s.
Table 2.

Relationship Between Gender of Playboy Interview Subject and Decade the Interview Was Published

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Mixed-gender Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>501</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 illustrates the racial breakdown of interview subjects by decade. Though there has been an increase in the number of minority subjects included over time, more than 80% of all interview subjects have been white, 12% have been black, around 3% have been Hispanic, and less than one percent has been Asian.

Table 3.

Relationship Between Race of Playboy Interview Subject and Decade the Interview Was Published

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Other/unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table 4 shows the relationship between gender and profession of interview subjects. Sixty percent of women interviewed fell into celebrity categories (TV/film, musician, athlete), while only 11% were activists or politicians.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Mixed-gender Group</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TV/Film</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musician</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writer</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politician</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activist</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Businessperson</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The relationship between race and profession, as illustrated in Table 5, also showed some interesting patterns. While a large percentage of white interview subjects fell into the TV/film category, 38%, there is fairly even distribution among the other profession categories. This is not the case with other races. More than one-third of black interview subjects were athletes and 75% came from celebrity categories. Both Hispanic and Asian interview subjects were mostly politicians, but, it is difficult to determine any trends other than their low representation overall.
Table 5.

Relationship Between Profession of Playboy Interview Subject and Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Other/Unknown</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TV/Film</td>
<td>217</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musician</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writer</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politician</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activist</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Businessperson</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athlete</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Age of Subjects

RQ4 asked how the average age of all interview subjects changed over time.

Table 6 shows the relationship between age and the decades the interviews took place, along with the average age of the subject per decade. The average age has decreased from the 1960s until the 2000s, from 45.7 to 44.8. This has not been a steady decrease, however, as the decade with the highest average age, 46.5, was the 1990s.

Table 6.

Relationship Between Age of Playboy Interview Subject and Decade the Interview Was Published

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Age groups 21-30</th>
<th>Age groups 31-40</th>
<th>Age groups 41-50</th>
<th>Age groups 51+</th>
<th>Average age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>45.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>44.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>45.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>46.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>44.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>45.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Length of Interviews

The length of each interview, as determined by paragraph count, has seen change over time, as well. Table 7 indicates that the length of interviews hit a peak in the 1980s, with an average length of 283 paragraphs, while the lowest points occurred in the 1960s with 169 paragraphs and the 2000s with 174 paragraphs. Only about 5% of interviews were longer than 400 paragraphs, and none of that length has taken place in the last decade.

Table 7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Length (in paragraphs)</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0-200</td>
<td>201-400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960s</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The relationship between race and length of interview is interesting to note. Table 8 indicates that black and Hispanic interview subjects had shorter interviews, with averages of 200 paragraphs and 205 paragraphs, respectively. Asian interview subjects, as well as those coded as unknown or other, were afforded longer interviews, with average lengths of 260 paragraphs and 290 paragraphs, respectively.
Table 8.

*Relationship Between Length of Interview and Race of Interview Subject*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>0-200</th>
<th>201-400</th>
<th>401+</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Unknown</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gender of interview subject did not have an influence on interview length, as averages were within 5 paragraphs of each other. No distinct difference in length was observed in regard to profession, as well.
CHAPTER 5: HISTORICAL RESEARCH AND RESEARCH INTERVIEWS

In order to answer RQs 5-8, the researcher interviewed five former and current editors and writers for *Playboy* to get a sense of what the magazine was trying to accomplish with the Playboy Interview and how those at the magazine selected subjects for interviews. The interviews focused on four main ideas: what the role of the Playboy Interview is and how it has influenced or affected journalism and pop culture, how interview subjects are selected, how the Playboy Interview is different from other magazine features, and what the most memorable interviews were.

Role of the Playboy Interview

RQ 5 asked what the role of the Playboy Interview is according to the editors of the magazine. Stephen Randall, the current deputy editor of *Playboy* and editor in charge of the interviews, said in an interview with the researcher that the Playboy Interview is the second most important feature in the magazine, after the models, and it was made clear to him that it was an “extremely important franchise” to *Playboy* when he took it over in 1990. “You would be hard-pressed to find a magazine feature that is as famous as the Playboy Interview in the context of an already well-known magazine,” Randall said (personal communication, May 13, 2011). He added that it is hard to find a feature that has been around for 50 years and does as much good for a publication as the Playboy Interview does.

David Sheff, who has done more than 10% of all of the Playboy Interviews, said in an interview that the Playboy Interview is an extremely important part of the magazine and is one of the features that has allowed people to take *Playboy* seriously in a way that they wouldn’t if it were just a magazine featuring photographs of models (personal
communication, May 13, 2011). “People always joke about ‘I read it for the articles,’ and from what I’ve heard from people responding to my interviews, it is true,” he said.

Lawrence Grobel, a freelance interviewer who completed more than 30 Playboy Interviews from 1977-2005, said in an interview that the Playboy Interview greatly influenced journalism in the magazine feature’s early days in that it put more of a focus on getting more information in the form of quotes from the source. “You could get major figures, and it wasn’t just celebrities, to discuss in detail what they thought without it getting filtered through the author’s eye in the sense of changing his thoughts or summarizing what he had said,” Grobel said (personal communication, May 6, 2011).

Selection of Interview Subjects

RQ 6 asked how the selection of interview subjects shaped the role the interview was to play. While previous chapters of this study have examined who these subjects are, the researcher felt it was important to find out why editors selected those people to be part of the Playboy Interview and what purpose choosing each one served. In order to better understand the role the interview subjects played in the history of the Playboy Interview, an explanation of how editorial decisions are made is necessary.

In the introduction to the Larger Than Life set of Playboy Interviews, Randall summed up his, and his fellow editors’, opinion of what being a Playboy Interview subject means. “[We] often think of the Playboy Interview as an exclusive club, open to 12 people per year who have made headlines, influenced the culture or made an impression worth being featured in journalism’s premiere Q&A feature” (p. vii).

There have been three editors of the Playboy Interview who ultimately have made the decisions on who would be featured: Murray Fisher from 1962 until 1973, G. Barry
Golson, who was the editor from 1973 until 1990, and Randall, who has been editor since 1990 (personal communication with Randall, June 3, 2011). Selection decisions received final approval from Hefner in the beginning, but this role fell to the executive editor as Hefner opted for less control over the editorial content of the magazine.

Randall said there is no formula explaining his selection of subjects for the Playboy Interview. Sometimes, he said, there is a person who is an obvious fit based on the events of the moment, sometimes he chooses someone the staff finds interesting in hopes that others will also find him or her interesting, and sometimes he chooses to do a “spinach interview,” one he doesn’t think will be highly read, but is somehow important to the general public, such as the Helen Thomas interview (personal communication, May 13, 2011).

Randall also said that there is nothing in the magazine, with the exception of a big celebrity on the cover, that will get more press than the Playboy Interview, so he takes that into consideration when choosing subjects, as well (personal communication, May 13, 2011).

Additionally, Randall makes decisions based on other items that will be in that particular issue of the magazine, in hopes of striking a balance between serious and entertaining pieces. Randall explained, “If it is an issue that is turning out to be a little more lightweight, it might be good to put a Helen Thomas or Frank Geary in that issue” (personal communication, May 13, 2011).

Just because Playboy wants someone for the magazine, doesn’t mean the interview will materialize, particularly because the types of people Playboy tries to interview are often big names who have to choose among many potential interview
offers, Randall said, calling it a seller’s market. “So if you are Bill Clinton or if you are Johnny Depp, you get to choose where you want to be . . . there are a lot of people who we have never been able to get,” Randall said (personal communication, May 13, 2011). Randall cited Bruce Springsteen as an example of someone he’s been trying to get for some time (personal communication, June 3, 2011).

David Hochman, one of the newer interviewers for *Playboy*, said he tries to pitch ideas knowing that there need to be 100 questions he can ask the person, and that, in many cases, someone is a well-known person, but there really isn’t anything that people would be interested in knowing about them. “There has to be something about their history that is interesting, something about their personality, not just a movie they’re doing. . . They have to be complex people who you feel can sustain a lot of questioning,” Hochman said (personal communication, May 5, 2011).

Grobel said that when pitching an idea to the editor for an interview, pleasing the audience started to become more of a factor over time, rather than focusing the Playboy Interview on important figures and topics. “Once they analyze the audience and say, ‘This is who we want,’ they’re no longer looking at history, they’re looking at sales,” Grobel said (personal communication, May 6, 2011).

Randall said that there are two major factors that contribute to the influx of celebrity interviews in recent times: a more celebrity-driven culture and reluctance from politicians to appear in the magazine. When the Playboy Interview began, Randall said, there was no *People* magazine or *Vanity Fair*. “The appetite for celebrity profiles and information was nowhere near as great back in the first couple of decades of the Playboy Interview,” Randall said. He added that certain things in the culture changed, such as a
push toward feminism as well as the more conservative politics brought on by the Moral
Majority, that prevented *Playboy* from getting interviews with those who were on par
with those interviewed in the early days of the interview. “Our ability to get those people
[political figures] was hindered by cultural forces and we adapted accordingly,” Randall
said (personal communication, May 13, 2011).

Peter Ross Range, a freelance interviewer who interviewed several political
figures and businessmen for *Playboy*, as well as an editor of the magazine during the
1970s, cited Barack Obama as one such politician who wouldn’t participate. “The reason,
no doubt, is Obama and the people around him decided that it wouldn’t be a good idea for
him to do that. This is speculation by me but it very well-informed speculation,” Range
said (personal communication, May 13, 2011). Range said it was common for writers and
editors to approach politicians who declined the interview, especially since the Jimmy

presidential candidate John Edwards was afraid of being in *Playboy*:

Edwards was just another politician who wouldn’t challenge his pollsters, who
wouldn’t take risks early in his campaign (doing a Playboy Interview is always
risky, not just for what might be said, but because certain segments of our society
still don’t approve of women posing sans clothes), and who would not wind up
with the nomination in 2004 (p. 103).

In terms of race and gender representation, Randall said that the Playboy
Interview is much more diverse than what you might normally find in a men’s magazine,
particularly among *Playboy’s* main competition, and is something he makes a point of
thinking about when choosing subjects. “In a sense, because of my marching orders from Hef and the legacy of the magazine, [having diverse interview subjects] is always very much in my mind,” Randall said (personal communication, May 13, 2011).

What Makes the Interview Different

Throughout the interviews for this paper, the *Playboy* writers emphasized that the *Playboy* Interview is a unique opportunity for a journalist to really get to know his subject in a way that time doesn’t normally allow. While this wasn’t addressed in the research questions, it provides some insight as to why the *Playboy* Interview is a feature worthy of academic research.

Range said in an interview that during his career doing interviews for *Time* or *U.S. News and World Report*, among other publications, he would get an hour or two with a subject, whereas with *Playboy* his interviews would be hours or days long, allowing him to learn more about the subject. “In one or two cases, I think my total transcript was 700 or 800 pages after all the hours of interviewing . . . You get to do the grand sweep of a person’s life and it was great in that way” (personal communication, May 13, 2011).

Hochman said in an interview that working on the *Playboy* Interview is a luxury for a journalist in a time when reporting is becoming more about how quickly and concisely information can be transmitted. “This is an 8,000-word, long-form interview and I don’t think it exists anywhere else. It is like a breath of fresh air for the person that is being interviewed, the person doing the interview and hopefully the reader,” Hochman said (personal communication, May 5, 2011).
Sheff said in an interview that the time he had to interview people ultimately led to more interesting and open interviews. He said that often interviews would begin with the obvious questions, but because of the amount of time he could stick around and ask things that the interview subjects may had never been asked before, for example, when he had John Lennon explain the background to every Beatles song as part of his interview in 1981. Sheff said the extra time meant “most people engaged in a way that they hadn’t in the beginning or in any other interviews that they had done and they opened up about things they had never opened up about before” (personal communication, May 13, 2011).

Memorable Interviews

During the course of the researcher’s interviews with *Playboy* writers and editors, each was asked what interviews he considered memorable, both in terms of his career, and in terms of the magazine’s history. The following historical research examines the eight interviews that were most commonly cited by *Playboy* writers and editors as being memorable. Each interview is presented in terms of media coverage, and its importance to the magazine, addressing RQs 7 and 8.

*Miles Davis – September 1962*

As the first Playboy Interview, Alex Haley’s conversation with Miles Davis got little media attention – only about 100 articles were found using the Google News Archive and the Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature in the last 50 years that even mentioned the interview – and the attention it did receive came decades later in memorial columns written at the time of Davis’ death in 1991 and Haley’s death in 1992. No articles were found that were published in the 1960s.
Retrospectively, coverage of the interview tends to focus on two major points: the role Davis’ interview played in launching Haley’s career, and the role it played in making the Playboy Interview a place for serious discussion.

News coverage regarding Haley’s career as a writer mostly focused on his Playboy Interviews as being a springboard to writing *Roots*, his most famous work. A story about Haley’s possessions being auctioned to pay off his more than $1 million in debt on his estate after his death mentions the Davis interview manuscript among items being sold, but focuses on *Roots* memorabilia (“Alex Haley’s possessions,” 1992).

On the other side of the issue, however, in a 2010 article about Hefner’s role as an activist, *Time* pointed out that many of the early interviews focused on race relations, even when other parts of the magazine were still segregated. Corliss (2010) wrote:

Jazz great Miles Davis was the subject of the first Playboy Interview, with the Q&A led by another African American, Alex Haley, who also chatted up Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Jim Brown. Yet the first black Playmate, Jennifer Jackson, didn't appear until March 1965, *Playboy's* 136th issue.

In the introduction to the *They Played the Game* collection of Playboy Interviews, Randall wrote “Hef was struck by two things – Davis’ fiery intelligence and the fact that the transcript didn’t focus strictly on music, but gave Davis a chance to share his views on race, the government and society” (p. viii).

Dan DiNicola, a columnist for *The Daily Gazette* in Schenectady, N.Y., wrote about the interview in a column after Davis’ death, recalling an example of racism that Davis told Haley about. DiNicola (1991) wrote that Davis experienced prejudice “from workmen who came to his door and assumed he was hired help to a West Point student.
who moved to the other end of the bar when Davis asked him where all the boys came from.”

Kevin Lynch, of *The Milwaukee Journal*, also wrote about how the interview gave readers insight, not only into how African Americans viewed race issues, but into Davis as a person. “In the interview he uncovered the deep scars of racism that motivate and partly explain this son of a prosperous middle-class black family who discovered the then-embryonic music of bebop and discarded the Julliard conservatory,” Lynch wrote (1983).

*Malcolm X – May 1963*

Often grouped together with the Martin Luther King Jr. interview, Haley’s interview with Malcolm X was cited by several *Playboy* writers as being an example of an important part of the interview’s history because of its cultural significance.

The interview consisted of some radical statements from Malcolm X on the topic of race relations in the United States. Among the nine pages are statements such as “white people are born devils by nature” and the assertion that Jesus is black. Malcolm X also said that those with so much as one drop of black blood will be saved by Jesus, while all others will not (Haley, 1963).

In the introduction to the collection of Alex Haley’s *Playboy* Interviews, former editor Murray Fisher wrote that Malcolm X was amazed that *Playboy* was going to print his interview. “Hefner strongly supported the decision to run it without expurgation,” Fisher wrote. “The readers responded, for the most part, with shock and outrage, but the whole idea of the interview was to provoke debate by publishing even views we found abhorrent” (Haley & Fisher, 1993, p. ix).
This set an important precedent for the Playboy Interview: interviews would be edited for space, with interviewers and editors narrowing down hours of interview to fit the space in the magazine, but they would not be subjected to editing out inappropriate statements or censored (Haley & Fisher, 1993).

The media, however, didn’t react with the same outrage. Fewer than 100 news stories that mentioned the interview were found using the Google News Archive, Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature and America’s Newspapers databases, and the majority of those that came up were duplicates of the memorial stories from Haley’s death that were found while looking for reactions to Davis’ interview. No articles were found that were written in the decade immediately after the interview.

Haley’s interview with Malcolm X laid the groundwork for what would eventually become The Autobiography of Malcolm X, which was adapted into the 1992 film “Malcolm X” (Haley & Fisher, 1993).

Martin Luther King, Jr. – January 1965

After deciding that Martin Luther King, Jr. would be a fitting interview subject and convincing him to participate, the editors at Playboy almost missed out on the interview due to scheduling restraints. Fisher wrote that King’s schedule made it next to impossible for Haley to meet with him for an interview, but Haley refused to give up. King’s secretary told Haley about a church barbeque King was attending and warned him to just sit, but not to “press.” King eventually came up to Haley and suggested they speak for a few minutes in his office, which turned into several late-night sessions over the following weeks (Haley & Fisher, 1993).
King’s interview was another that the media didn’t pay much attention to at the time (fewer than 50 news stories were found that mention the interview using the Google News Archive, America’s Newspapers and the Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature, none of which were published in the 1960s), but has been brought up in posthumous writing about King’s life and work.

An article in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* about the 50th anniversary of *Playboy* mentioned the King interview as one of the things that gave the magazine “respectability with intellectual underpinnings” during the 1960s (Kloer, 2003).

A component of the interview that is still referenced more than four decades later was King’s response to a question regarding what is known now as affirmative action. In an article focusing on King’s thoughts on the controversial program, Earl Ofari Hutchinson of the *Daily News of Los Angeles* wrote that affirmative action was such a non-issue that it is hard to say what he might think, and his Playboy Interview is almost all of the insight we have. King avoided a straightforward answer to the question, saying only that assistance programs should apply to people of all races who need help, but Hutchinson (1996) said that if more people had pressed the issue like Haley had, King might have thought more about the topic and had a stance. “The Playboy interview was the first and last time that King directly dealt with the issue,” Hutchinson (1996) wrote/“By the time an assassin's bullet ended his life in 1968, he was still groping to find a coherent philosophy and workable strategy for social change.”

*Jimmy Carter – November 1976*

During the author’s interviews for this paper, one interview was consistently listed as being one of the most important and memorable Playboy Interviews of all time –
Jimmy Carter’s. The interview was, by far, the most written about in the magazine’s history. More than 4,200 newspaper and magazine articles reference it, according to the Google News Archive, starting in 1976 when the interview came out, all the way up to May 2011, where it was brought up by a columnist writing about political gaffes (Cotterell, 2011).

In the October 4, 1976 issue of *Time*, two stories ran: one describing the various news outlets’ decisions to run or withhold the words “screws” and “shacks up with” quoted from Carter’s interview (“Bowdlerizing,” 1976), and one chronicling the interview and the reactions it had received so far (“Trying to be,” 1976). The articles summed up the issue at hand: while Carter spoke about many topics during the interview, including foreign policy and multinational corporations, none of the serious issues were reported on (“Trying to be,” 1976). “What riveted the public, in the wink of an eye, was Carter's use of the words ‘screw’ and ‘shack up’ while making a candid, purposeless admission that like other humans, he harbors lustful thoughts,” the article said (“Trying to be,” 1976).

Alexander Cockburn pointed out in his column for *The Village Voice* that very little of the interview was actually quoted in the press and that it is disappointing for the author of the interview, Robert Scheer, to have spent so much time on it, only to have tiny pieces actually read. “So poor Bob Scheer spends three months doing a serious interview with Carter for *Playboy* and all the papers pick up from the prereleased interview are Jimmy’s remarks about sex,” Cockburn (1976) wrote.

While Carter’s comments about lust and adultery were at the forefront of news coverage, *The Milwaukee Sentinel* spoke with the leader of the American Baptist
Churches, Charles Smith, who said that he was not offended by Carter’s comments, because he was being open and honest. Smith said that there is nothing un-Christian about Carter confessing that he has human thoughts (Johnston, 1976).

Because the story broke during Carter’s presidential campaign, the news received national attention, and many stories came from wires such as the Associated Press. One such story focused on Senator and Republican vice presidential nominee Bob Dole’s announcement that Jimmy Carter should leave the presidential race following the resignation of Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz, who resigned after making an inappropriate racist joke in front of reporters. “Dole contends that some of the comments made by Carter, especially his remarks on sex and adultery in a Playboy magazine interview, are in the same league with the racial remarks that cost Butz his job,” the article stated (“Dole suggests,” 1976). Several weeks later, the AP reported that prior to Carter’s interview turning into a liability for his campaign, Republican presidential candidate Gerald Ford was in talks to be interviewed in Playboy as well (“Ford staff,” 1976). According to the article, the White House had contacted Barry Golson, the interview editor at the time, to arrange an interview with Ford, but the timing didn’t work out (“Ford staff,” 1976).

One of the most prevalent ways the interview was addressed in the media was through columns. Writers across the country weighed in on the controversy, with opinions varying from confusion to disdain.

Richard Cohen, a columnist for the Washington Post, found himself on the confused end of the spectrum, questioning why, in a “sexually-liberated America” there was so much outrage over Carter’s comments. “To read the press, it appears that the
Carter episode proves that we have not lost our moral bearings, that we remain – knock on wood – as sexually uptight and hypocritical as ever,” Cohen (1976) wrote.

Both Hugh Gibson, of the Charleston, S.C. News and Courier, and the editorial staff of the Kentucky New Era took the stance that Carter made a mistake when he agreed to do an interview of the length and depth of the Playboy Interview when he was leading in campaign polls, regardless of what was discussed. “Leaving ethics out of the situation, the giving of the lengthy and intimate interview would appear to be a poor gamble,” the New Era’s editorial read (“Playboy Ploy,” 1976). Gibson (1976) had similar remarks, essentially writing that Carter needed to think more before making statements that could hurt his political career.

The story even transcended boarders. Richard Labonte, a columnist for the Ottawa Citizen, wrote about the interview, saying Carter’s quotes were taken out of context. “Without considering the emotion behind the words and without considering their context, wire service editors provided with advance copies of the interview reached into the grab-bag for journalistic shortcomings and came up with the venerable standby of sensationalism,” Labonte wrote (1976).

Carter’s comments are still relevant today. Bill Cotterell, a political columnist for the Tallahassee Democrat, wrote a May 26, 2011 column discussing political gaffes throughout American history and Carter’s Playboy Interview was one prominently mentioned.

John Lennon and Yoko Ono – January 1981

Sheff said that his interview with John Lennon and Yoko Ono, shortly before Lennon’s death on December 8, was completely different from any of the other
interviews he had done, not only because of the timing of his death, but also because of how open Lennon was after a time in which he wasn’t seen in public at all. “Over that time he had gone through a transformation in his life, he had gone from angry and somewhat frustrated rock and roll to become a househusband, he had become a father again, everything had changed,” Sheff said (personal communication, May 13, 2011).

Sheff stayed with Lennon and Ono for three weeks, watching recording sessions, meeting them for meals, and even watching them play with their son. Sheff said the interview was inspiring to him, both as a fan of his music, but also in more personal ways. As a 25-year-old, Sheff said, he was in the generation who had grown up listening to The Beatles and Lennon’s solo music, so it affected Sheff to see Lennon talk about the pain he experienced in his life and how becoming a stay-at-home dad was what brought him peace. “It had a lot to do with that soon after I became a father,” Sheff said (personal communication, May 13, 2011).

More than 700 news stories have been written mentioning Lennon and Ono’s interview, according to the Google News Archive, most of which commented on its proximity to Lennon’s death. The Associated Press ran a story about Lennon’s positive attitude prior to his death and quoted a portion of the Playboy Interview where Lennon remarked that he hoped the 1980s would be about embracing the unknown and achieving dreams (“Lennon Looked”, 1980).

In a column for The Boston Globe, Steve Morse also commented on the many sides of Lennon and the inside look the Playboy Interview was able to provide. Morse (1980) said that the interview was worth reading just to get insight into Lennon and his internal struggles with depression and fame.
In a story about high school students’ reactions to Lennon’s death, Michael Koretzky, an editor for the *Boca Raton News*, found students who had been reading the *Playboy Interview* when they found out Lennon had died (1980).

Other publications, like *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, ran excerpts from the interview alongside other coverage of Lennon’s death.

Little coverage of the interview took place prior to Lennon’s death, because the magazine was published only days before he was shot; however, a Reuter’s release was printed during the last days of November. The story brought up two of the controversial statements Lennon made during the interview: that Paul McCartney had “subconsciously sabotaged” his songs and that the song “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” had nothing to do with LSD, as some had suspected (“Lennon Attacks,” 1980).

The interview continues to be an important part of *Playboy Interview* history. In 2010, NPR interviewed Sheff on the anniversary of Lennon’s birthday and played audio clips from the interview that had not been previously released. In addition, Sheff’s collection of interviews with Lennon and Ono was released as the book *All we are saying* in 2000, which was re-released in 2010 as an e-book (“All we are saying,” 2010)

_Ted Turner - August 1983_

While not covered much by the media (only 15 articles were found mention the interview using America’s Newspapers, the Google News Archive and the Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature), Range’s interview with media mogul Ted Turner was memorable for those who worked on it because of its dramatic ending.

Range’s second interview with Ted Turner ended with Turner destroying Range’s tape recorder after a line of questions that focused on the programming content of
Turner’s television station. Ironically, it was his unpredictable behavior that led to them choosing to interview him in the first place. “With a guy like Ted Turner, part of the reason [I chose to interview him again] was that he was this very talkative, very noisy, very outrageous character the first time I interviewed him,” Range said. (personal communication, May 13, 2011).

The Knight-Ridder News Service distributed a brief about the interview, calling it tough and hard-hitting, and saying that the tape smashing was far from the most interesting part of the interview. “In the course of interviewing Turner, Range elicited the profile of a man far different from the adventurous self-made entrepreneur who has gained a certain folk-hero status,” Berkman (1983) wrote. Turner was criticized for having a double standard about television, calling soap operas despicable when shown on other networks, but a necessary evil when they are shown on CNN (Berkman, 1983).

According to a story by The Philadelphia Inquirer, Turner accused Playboy of yellow journalism because of the way he was portrayed in the interview (Wolf, 1983).

Jesse Ventura – November 1999

When the Playboy Interview featuring then-Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura was released, it created a media storm that hadn’t been seen since the Jimmy Carter interview. A search of the America’s Newspapers database, as well as the Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature brought back more than 650 results at least mentioning the interview, about 15% of the stories written about the Carter interview.

Newspapers from across the country covered Ventura’s remarks, especially through Associated Press content. Among them was the Journal Star in Peoria, Ill., which ran a breakdown of several controversial remarks made by Ventura in the
interview, including negative views toward organized religion and the conspiracy theory that President Kennedy’s assassination was done by the military to prevent the U.S. from exiting Vietnam (Olson, 1999).

Prior to the interview being released to the media, Ventura told the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* that *Playboy* got him to agree to do an interview under false pretense, and that he was upset his interview was moved from the December issue to the November issue (Ragsdale, 1999). *Playboy* responded by saying that the quality of the interview was such that it warranted being moved up (Ragsdale, 1999).

The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* was one of the first major publications to address Ventura’s interview and explained that most of the interview would come as no surprise to locals, who were familiar with Ventura’s unpopular thoughts on legalizing prostitution and drug possession. Sweeney (1999) wrote that some of the questions, however, show a different side of Ventura, particularly the statements regarding religion. “But in some cases, the picture of Ventura that emerges in the question-and-answer transcript is a harder-edged version of the governor than Minnesotans have seen,” Sweeney (1999) wrote.

Nick Coleman, a columnist at the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, wrote that while the anti-religion remarks Ventura made were offensive, the bigger problem is the political system of the U.S. using those words as an excuse to oust a successful third-party candidate. “Gee, you'd think people this pious would be too busy praying to take a shot at the governor,” Coleman (1999) wrote. “But it is the glory of the Republican and Democratic parties that motivates many of them, not the glory of God.”
Dick Feagler, a columnist for The Plain Dealer in Cleveland, made similar comments regarding the flawed political system in the United States. He wrote that while the statements Ventura made were shallow, he was glad to see a politician actually speaking his mind, as opposed to most modern-day politicians, who make careers out of saying nothing. “It's all become a farce and the voters know it,” Feagler (1999) wrote. “When's the last time you heard a statement from any candidate for high office that had any sincere intellectual depth to it? Or even any sincere intellectual shallowness?”

Michael Taylor, a columnist for the Huntington, West Virginia, Herald-Dispatch, wrote that the media unfairly ignored most of the comments Ventura made in the interview and chose to select the most controversial to write about. Taylor (1999) wrote that the interview contained many of Ventura’s political opinions that most people would agree with, but they were neglected in the media in favor of the more controversial statements:

Read the entire interview and you discover that Ventura is fiscally conservative and socially liberal. You find he's down to earth and aware of the struggles most people have to make ends meet. You also learn he's very much a family man and thinks a person's personal life is just that – personal.

Following the media coverage, the Reform Party asked Ventura to leave the party, which ignited an entirely separate wave of news coverage. The Miami Herald reported that Ventura’s approval rating as governor dropped from 73% to 54% after the interview (Silva, 1999). However, his national media appeal continued, with Ventura appearing on ABC News the night the article ran, and on David Letterman the next night (Silva, 1999).
Several months after the interview, Ventura talked about the repercussions of his comments on Minnesota’s Public Radio, saying that he “expected only Playboy readers to pay attention to his comments” (Whereatt, 1999). He said that had the media not picked up on the interview’s contents, there would have been no public outcry (Whereatt, 1999).

Randall said that the Jesse Ventura interview and the surrounding media coverage was “an amazing thing to be a part of” (personal communication, May 13, 2011).

*Bobby Knight – March 2001*

Grobel met with recently fired Indiana basketball coach Bobby Knight in the midst of controversy. Knight had just been fired amidst accusations that he had acted inappropriately toward a student at the university, but Knight agreed to do the interview for Playboy because he believed he was treated fairly in his previous interview with the magazine in August 1984. What transpired became one of the most talked about Playboy Interviews in the sports world.

A search of articles focusing on the interview using America’s Newspapers database as well as the Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature showed 30 unique articles having at least a mention of the interview were written in the months after the interview’s publication, but a lot of the media attention came from television and radio. Grobel said that after his interview with Bobby Knight, he had ABC, CBS and CNN at his door, wanting to know more about the interview. “I’ve never seen a reaction like that,” Grobel said. “I was on the radio, talking to talk show hosts for a solid week. I got Playboy to pay me extra because it was taking up so much of my time. That never happened before” (personal communication, May 6, 2011).
Of the newspapers articles covering the interview, most were written by sports columnists weighing in on Knight’s latest controversy and what it meant for his career. Michael Lough, of *The Macon Telegraph* in Georgia, described the interview as nothing new from Knight, saying, “The last few months have so moved Mr. Knight that he, naturally, yelled at the interviewer and demanded his tape recorders and cursed him out and whined and acted like he had a game in an hour.” (Lough, 2001). Lough added that Knight continued to make excuses for his inappropriate actions, rather than take responsibility for them.

Dick Heller, of *The Washington Times*, said that the interview illustrated the fact that, even after his firing, Knight had no comprehension of what he had done wrong. He also wrote that, “All sides of Knight are visible in the interview. He puts forth some good and honorable ideas, but these are pretty much buried beneath profane piles of, er, waste matter.” (Heller, 2001).

Bill Conlin, of the *Philadelphia Daily News*, focused on the dramatics of the interview, namely when Knight tried to get Grobel to hand over his tapes and get out of the car in the middle of the highway in Ohio. After setting up the scene, he writes that the story is too good to spoil calling it one of the “most compelling and troubling Playboy Interviews ever”.

“Because all of his turmoil is compressed into one taut package, friend and foe alike should finally be convinced when Lawrence Grobel stops the recorders that Bobby Knight's red sweater falls a ball of yarn short of a full weave,” Conlin (2001) wrote.
Chapter Summary

Overall, the qualitative data presented in this chapter answers RQs 5-8 through interviews with *Playboy* writers and editors, as well as a historical look at some of the interviews those journalists felt were most memorable. During the interview, Randall helped explain both the role the Playboy Interview is supposed to be playing, as well as how the interview subject selection helps it fill that role. He said that he tries to find an appropriate mix of celebrities and other professions, as well as serious and light-hearted interviews. He also said that a lot of politicians are reluctant to be interviewed in *Playboy* because of the moral implications, which makes getting serious interviews much more difficult than it might have once been. Randall and the others interviewed defined which interviews were most memorable, as well as those they remembered for having media attention. Among these were interviews with Jimmy Carter and Jesse Ventura, two politicians who said controversial things during their interviews, as well as the classic interviews with Miles Davis, Malcom X and Martin Luther King Jr., which were not covered by the media in the decade the interviews were published. Using this information, the author was able to use databases, and the interview text itself, to give further context to the Playboy Interview as a magazine feature.
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study examined the subjects of the Playboy Interview in hopes of drawing some overall conclusions as to what type of person was, and is, most likely to appear as part of this feature, as well as how these people are selected and what that means in terms of the role the interview plays in society. The data identified various trends, as well as a clear preference for white male interview subjects. These will be discussed in more detail below.

Trends Over Time

Throughout its nearly 50 years, the Playboy Interview has featured 569 subjects from September 1962 through March 2011. It really isn’t surprising to note that there have been significant changes in those featured in the interview over this period.

Regarding profession, the number of celebrities, as defined as TV/film industry, musicians, and athletes, has increased steadily from 1962 to 2011, while politicians and activists have been featured less frequently. The 1960s saw 35 interviews with celebrities (44%) and 19 with activists and politicians (24%), while in the 2000s there were 108 celebrity interviews (81%) and only 6 interviews with politicians or activists (5%). Several factors may have contributed to this issue; however, it is possible that the larger percentage of political and social activists interviewed in the 1960s and 1970s were merely a reflection of the society that existed at the time. The inclusion of several important figures on both sides of the civil rights issue (e.g. King and Rockwell) could be nothing more than Playboy trying to address something that was arguably the biggest issue of the time. The availability of the Internet and the rise of celebrity gossip sites, such as TMZ, could also have an effect on the general public’s interest in celebrities in
general, and the inclusion of more celebrities may be Playboy’s way of addressing this popularity. Additionally, the increase in availability of cable television has given viewers many choices when it comes to what they should watch, many of which show programs with little or no news or current events coverage. This was not the case in the 1960s when the interview started and could also explain why celebrity culture has become more popular within society.

Randall discussed some of these issues during the interview, but offered no definitive method or quota system used to select interview subjects, saying only that *Playboy* tries to provide a mix of people who represent some sort of newsworthiness and timeliness. This shows a different perspective than that of Fisher, the first editor of the Playboy Interview, who wrote in the intro to a book of Haley’s interviews that the role of the interview was to “provoke debate by publishing even views we found abhorrent” (Haley & Fisher, 1993). Somewhere in the 50 years of this magazine feature, there has been an overall attitude change regarding the interview, which ultimately has led to it becoming less serious. As Grobel pointed out in his interview with the researcher, the declining number of subscribers and *Playboy’s* overall financial troubles seem to point to the interview becoming a selling point for the magazine, something to market to potential readers, rather than a feature that serves as a piece of history. With the availability of naked women on the Internet and on subscription television channels, potential readers have other options to turn to other than *Playboy*. Perhaps the magazine is trying to avoid alienating readers with controversial interviews because it cannot afford to lose its audience.
As for the decrease in the published length of interviews, the most plausible rationale is that the overall size of the magazine has had to decrease to compensate for financial constraints, although this study did not analyze changes in the volume of advertising, the main source of magazine revenue. For instance, the September 1962 issue consisted of 208 pages, while the March 2011 issue was only 126 pages. This is a decrease of almost 40%. In the researcher’s experience, these lengths were representative of a typical issue. Interview length peaked in the 1980s and has decreased since, reaching its lowest point in the 2000s. Financial problems are common in the media industry, and *Playboy* is no exception -- the magazine cut publication to 11 issues per year in 2009, down from 12 (Watson, 2009).

In addition to cutting the interview to meet the space restraints of a smaller magazine, Randall said that he made the decision to scale back the introductions to the interviews, because most people are at least somewhat familiar with those who are interviewed (personal communication, May 13, 2011). From the researcher’s observations, the introductions were scaled back as much as 50%, as interviews in the 1970s and 1980s had 4- or 5-column introductions and more recent interview introductions tend to be around 2 columns.

Age, Gender, and Race

One of the more significant things that can be taken away from this study is the comparison of the demographic breakdown of interview subjects and the average *Playboy* readers. According to its media kit, *Playboy*’s average reader is 34.9 years old, a full decade younger than the average interview subject. While one would not expect to find a perfect representation of the readership contained in the magazine’s pages, it was
particularly interesting that a magazine that focuses on living the young, supposedly
carefree bachelor life would place more emphasis on older men as interview subjects.
Similarly, females make up about 20% of Playboy’s overall readership, but only 10% of
interview subjects are female. The race of Playboy readers is unknown, but it is likely
there is a more representative distribution of race among readers than there was among
interview subjects.

Minority Representation

There were observed connections between the professions of interview subjects
and minority representation. For example, women in politics, business and athletics were
underrepresented, with zero, two, and one interview subject, respectively. About one-
third of all black interview subjects were athletes, while only two black writers and two
black businesspeople were interviewed. White athletes made up only 5% of white
interview subjects, while writers made up 14% of interviews with white subjects and
businesspeople made up 7% of interviews with white subjects. The number of Hispanic
and Asian interview subjects was so low that it is difficult to single out certain
professions that were underrepresented, but there was an especially low number of
activists and athletes. Black interview subjects also had the shortest average interview
length, at 200 paragraphs, with Hispanic subjects close behind with an average of 205
paragraphs. White interview subjects had an average interview length of 222 paragraphs.

These results are troubling for a few reasons. First of all, if one views the Playboy
Interview as a representation of society, it provides a skewed perspective to be sure.
Women are a minority in politics, business and athletics, but they make up more than half
of one percent of those industries, which is their proportion in the Playboy Interview. It is
a gross misrepresentation to have one-third of the black interview subjects as athletes, because athletes make up such a small percentage of the actual population. If the goal is to provide a space for sharing views and creating dialogue about important issues, as the interview was known for doing in its beginning stages, then the lack of inclusion of differing races and genders is something that the magazine might want to consider. Randall pointed out that *Playboy* is more racially diverse than its competitors (a claim whose verification is beyond the scope of this study), but *Playboy* might consider continuing to push for its reputation as a leader in the men’s magazine industry by including more women and minorities, rather than being satisfied being more inclusive than other magazines.

**Consistency of Interview**

While this study examined many factors relating to how the interview has changed during its history, there were a few things observed that were indications of the magazine’s attempt to maintain consistency. While every interview was coded for position within the magazine, whether it was in the first one-third, second one-third or last one-third, the data proved to be rather insignificant. *Playboy* has kept the interview as a standing department over time, and it rarely appears more than a few pages from exactly one-third of the way through the magazine.

Additionally, the signature design and layout of the interview, down to the headline font, the description of the interview subject and the series of photos at the bottom of the first page has remained the same in all 569 interviews examined for this study. This shows a commitment on the part of the magazine to retain the reputation and style of the original interview and may be interesting to research further in comparison to
other major magazine features. For example, are there features in other magazines which have retained their style and design over the course of several decades?

Media Coverage of the Interview

Media coverage of three particularly significant interviews from the 1960s, Miles Davis, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., was virtually non-existent during the decade the interviews were published, but they were mentioned retrospectively at the time of Haley’s death. This points to the idea that perhaps journalists at the time were unaware of the importance of these men participating in such a long-form interview about race relations, but could recognize them as influential after the fact.

The interviews that seem to have had the most media attention were those done by politicians Jimmy Carter and Jesse Ventura. The large amount of negative publicity caused by the comments made by these politicians may be a reason that Playboy has subsequently found it difficult to secure interviews with prominent political figures. In fact, all of the interviews listed by Playboy writers and editors as being particularly memorable received almost exclusively negative coverage from magazines and newspapers. This has little effect on the magazine itself because it benefits from name recognition associated with media coverage, regardless of whether coverage of the interview subject is positive or negative. For those interviewed, however, this negative coverage has damaged their reputations, if not their careers. Almost 40 years after the fact, many people still remember Jimmy Carter’s comments about lusting in his heart, but likely don’t recall much, if any, of the rest of the interview. This almost certainly acts as a warning to others considering the interview and could play a major role in Playboy being able to secure subjects other than celebrities who are trying to promote a project.
Overall Conclusions

In the beginning years of the Playboy Interview, editors went out of their way to secure interview subjects with something important and new to say and didn’t shy away from controversial viewpoints, whether they came from Malcolm X or George Lincoln Rockwell. *Playboy* was known for this feature because of the in-depth information it was able to get about people who were actively making a difference in the world. Today, it seems as if the editors of the magazine are not focused on having interview subjects who are saying something important, but would rather have celebrity names to drop in order to bring attention to the magazine. The effects of a well-informed public on democracy aside, one of the major problems with this tactic is that it is weakening the strength of the interview as a piece of recorded history, as Grobel mentioned in his interview with the researcher. The Playboy Interview has become more of a feature to read about what Justin Timberlake is up to, rather than to read about those who are trying to change society. There are occasionally still gems hidden among the celebrities, such as the April 2011 interview with Helen Thomas, a former member of the White House Press Corps, but if *Playboy* wants its interview to go down in history as an invaluable source of insight into the world it existed in, editors and writers might want to focus on providing a well-rounded, diverse pool of interview subjects who talk about real issues, rather than pandering to a celebrity-focused culture.
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### APPENDIX 1: CODING INSTRUMENT

**Coding Sheet**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interview Subject Name</td>
<td>_________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case ID</td>
<td>_____ _____ _____</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issue of magazine</td>
<td>___ ___ ___ ___ / ___ ___ (YYYYMM)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author of interview</td>
<td>_________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profession of interview subject</td>
<td>_____</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 = television/film industry</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 = musician</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 = writer</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 = politician</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 = activist</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 = businessperson</td>
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<tr>
<td>7 = athlete</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 = other</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 = male</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 = female</td>
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<tr>
<td>Race</td>
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<tr>
<td>1 = White</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 = Black</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 = Hispanic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 = Asian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 = Other/unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>____ ____ ____</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length of interview (paragraphs)</td>
<td>____ ____ ____</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page number of interview</td>
<td>_____</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Position of interview in magazine
1 = First 1/3
2 = Second 1/3
3 = Last 1/3