

The News Interview

Journalists and Public Figures on the Air

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Introduction

If you sit down in front of your television to catch up on the news, or if you turn on the radio for the same purpose, you will very likely be treated to a series of stories narrated by an anchorperson or correspondent. However, at least some of what you hear is apt to appear in a different form altogether – not a narrated story, but an interactional encounter between a journalist and one or more newsworthy public figures.

The news interview has come to occupy a prominent place in the landscape of broadcast journalism and political communication. Interviewing has long been a basic journalistic tool – perhaps the most important tool¹ – for gathering information, the raw material that will later be worked up into finished news stories. What is new is its increasing use as a finished news product in its own right. Whether live or taped, in studio or via remote satellite links, as one segment of a news program or the overarching format for the program as a whole – the interview is now a common form in which broadcast news is packaged for public consumption, and hence an alternative to the traditional narrative or story form of news presentation. Although the news story remains important, a significant proportion of news content now consists of a journalist asking questions of politicians, experts, or others who are “in the news.”

Numerous factors have contributed to the growth of the news interview. Technological innovation is part of the mix. The advent of cable has greatly increased the number of channels and news outlets,

¹ Both Gans (1979: 138) and Hess (1981: 18, 52) find that reporters get most of their information, not by witnessing events directly or by consulting documents, but by interviewing sources.

while satellite feeds and electronic newsgathering equipment now permit live interactions with newsmakers from virtually anywhere in the world. These changes have expanded opportunities for the development of new forms of news and public affairs programming.

At the same time, increasing competitive pressures have encouraged broadcasters to exploit these opportunities. The older commercial television networks are now competing with a growing array of cable channels, as well as VCRs and the Internet, with predictable consequences for each content provider's market share and profitability. Meanwhile the US networks have each been taken over by conglomerates that have assumed substantial debt and have been much less willing to allow their news divisions to remain insulated from the pressures of the bottom line (Auletta 1991; Hallin 1997). All of this has had a substantial impact on the ethos of broadcasting, with producers much more concerned about production costs and audience ratings, and hence willing to experiment with new formats for news and public affairs programming. Against this backdrop, formats based on spoken interaction – panel discussions, informal debates, various forms of audience participation, and of course news interviews – are particularly attractive. Such formats are inexpensive to produce, and they embody qualities of “spontaneity” and “liveliness” that audience members are believed to like.

The rise of the news interview has made it a significant component of the contemporary public sphere, and hence worthy of social scientific attention. It is a locus of direct and essentially unscripted encounters between journalists and a wide range of public figures, including government officials at the highest levels. It is an arena in which journalists perform certain core democratic functions: soliciting statements of official policy, holding officials accountable for their actions, and managing the parameters of public debate, all of this under the immediate scrutiny of the citizenry. If journalists have traditionally discharged these tasks through practices of storytelling and narration, now they also do so through practices of questioning and interrogation. Correspondingly, public figures' ability to deal adeptly with journalists' questions has become an essential prerequisite for successful political communication. Just as speechmaking skills were crucial in the days of the public square, the capacity to field questions has become a core skill for public figures in the television age.

To underline these points, consider that both journalistic and political careers are now contingent on performance in news interviews and their close cousins, press conferences. If journalists previously gained professional status and popular renown mainly by virtue of their investigative and literary abilities, their ranks have been joined by journalists known mainly for their skills at questioning and interrogation: Sam Donaldson and Ted Koppel in the USA, Robin Day and Jeremy Paxman in the UK. Correspondingly, politicians who can “think on their feet” and deal effectively with unexpected and difficult questions (John Kennedy and Margaret Thatcher) receive praise and admiration, while those who have difficulty in this forum (Ronald Reagan and John Major) are criticized for their interactional failings.

It is not difficult to find cases where career prospects have been substantially boosted – or hindered – on the basis of performance in a single news interview. When revelations about Gennifer Flowers threatened to undo Bill Clinton’s first run for the presidency in 1992, a joint appearance by the Arkansas governor and his wife on *60 Minutes* did much to resurrect his campaign. Conversely, Bob Dole’s 1996 campaign suffered an important setback when, in an interview on *The Today Show*, he expressed a seemingly cavalier attitude about the addictiveness of tobacco.

One remarkable illustration of the power of the contemporary news interview is Jeremy Paxman’s 1997 encounter with Michael Howard on the BBC’s *Newsnight* program. Howard was formerly Home Secretary under Prime Minister John Major, and at the time of the interview he was a principal challenger for the leadership of the Conservative Party. As Home Secretary, his responsibility for the British prison system had previously become a contentious political issue. Two years earlier, following a well-publicized prison escape, Howard appeared before the House of Commons, and while he admitted setting policy for the prison service, he denied any involvement in operational matters. His denial was subsequently contradicted by numerous authoritative sources, raising the specter of having willfully misled the House.

In the 1997 interview, Paxman zeroed in on an event that had a direct bearing on the veracity of Howard’s claim to having had no operational role in the prison service – namely the firing of a prison official. Paxman asked whether Howard had overruled the Director

General of Prisons (Derek Lewis) by instructing him to fire the official. If Howard had actually given such instructions, it would directly contradict his prior claim to having been operationally uninvolved. When Howard refused to give a straightforward answer, Paxman pursued the matter with extraordinary tenacity, asking essentially the same question another thirteen times! Perhaps never has a single act of evasiveness under questioning been so massively pursued and placed on display before the viewing public.

The Howard–Paxman interview has been described as “a watershed in political interviews and a new low in relations between the Tory government and the BBC” (Gibson 1999), and the ramifications were indeed substantial. The interview received much subsequent news coverage, it was seized upon and exploited to good effect by Howard’s challengers for the Conservative Party leadership (Cordon 1997), and it marked a turning point in his political fortunes. Howard would eventually lose his bid for the leadership, and his party would lose the election, ushering in the ascendancy of the Labour Party under Tony Blair.

Howard’s waning political standing was matched by Paxman’s veneration as a broadcast journalist. Paxman was subsequently named Interviewer of the Year by the Royal Television Society (Summerskill 1998). The following year, the interview was featured and commemorated on *Newsnight’s* twentieth anniversary program.

The Howard–Paxman interview rebounded to the benefit of the journalist and the detriment of the public figure, but news interviews can also have just the reverse effect. Consider Dan Rather’s encounter with George Bush during the 1988 presidential campaign.² The political stakes could not have been higher: Bush was a front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination, the race was just getting underway, and he was about to be interviewed on the CBS *Evening News* – then the most highly rated television news program in the USA. The interview started out routinely enough, but it soon developed into a sharply acrimonious confrontation over Bush’s involvement in what came to be known as the Iran-Contra

² This interview was the focus of a series of articles in a special section of the journal *Research on Language and Social Interaction* (1988/89) edited by Anita Pomerantz. See especially the contributions by Clayman and Whalen (1988/89) and Schegloff (1988/89).

scandal. That nine-minute interview had substantial repercussions for both parties.

Bush's campaign got a substantial boost. He was widely perceived to have dispelled his unflattering image as an obedient and "wimpy" second fiddle to President Reagan. Thus, *Time* magazine – which featured the encounter as its cover story – characterized it as "video High Noon" and described Bush as follows: "Bush had shot down the legendary media gunslinger from black rock. It was the new George Bush. Not Bush the perpetual stand-in, but Bush the stand-up guy. Bush unbound. Bush unwimpered" (Stengel 1988: 17). Moreover, a *Time* magazine poll indicated that a majority felt that Bush had indeed strengthened his public image, and that he had "won" the battle with Rather (Stengel 1988: 17–19). It was by no means a total victory – he failed to fully dispel doubts about his knowledge of the arms-for-hostages deal (Toner 1988), and he was questioned further about the scandal on Ted Koppel's *Nightline*. That later interview prompted an eerie sense of déjà vu when Bush adopted the same defensive stance and mistakenly referred to Ted Koppel as "Dan"! These were minor setbacks, however, as Bush went on to win the Republican nomination and later the presidency by a landslide.

The interview had quite the opposite effect on Dan Rather's career. CBS received 6,000 telephone calls that evening, most of them expressing disapproval of Rather, and poll results suggested that a majority of viewers thought Rather had been "rude" (Stengel 1988: 19). The CBS affiliates also expressed dissatisfaction with Rather at the annual affiliate convention (Auletta 1991: 500–1). Later in the campaign when the presidential debates were held, Rather was the only network news anchor who was not on any panel of questioners – it was feared that Bush might use the incident to beat back Rather's aggressive questions, or that Rather might be inhibited from raising such questions (Weintraub 1988). At about the same time, Rather began to lose influence at CBS when a CBS News president took charge who was determined to impose greater discipline and to ensure that the news division focus on covering the news rather than making it (Auletta 1991: 536–8). Finally, while the CBS *Evening News* would remain the leading network news program through most of 1988, it began to lose viewers and slipped into third place the following year (Goldberg and Goldberg 1990).

The causes of this steady decline are undoubtedly complex, but it is significant that some commentators (e.g., Du Brow 1990) have attributed the problem, at least in part, to lingering memories of that unseemly but ultimately fateful interview.

These cases demonstrate one final point regarding the distinctiveness and import of the news interview. Unlike the traditional news story, the news interview is essentially unscripted and unpredictable. Of course, interviewers and interviewees may each have a preconceived agenda in mind at the outset, a more or less developed idea of what they would like to say and do. However, each party's capacity to realize his or her agenda is thoroughly contingent on the conduct of the other party. The actual course of an interview is thus by no means predetermined; it is an emergent product of how the participants choose to deal with each other then and there, move by move, moment by moment. Part of the appeal of the news interview is precisely this spontaneous quality, the sense of liveliness and even danger arising from the spectacle of a powerful public figure matching wits with a seasoned journalist. This is why some interviews – like the Bush–Rather and Howard–Paxman encounters – become news events in their own right, the focus of subsequent news coverage that further enhances their impact.

If the news interview is not scripted in any strong sense of the word, neither is it a disorganized free-for-all in which “anything goes.” Indeed, as we will be arguing throughout the book, the parties to a news interview observe an elaborate set of social conventions associated with the roles of interviewer and interviewee. These conventions are largely tacit and taken for granted – they are rarely commented upon within interviews themselves, and they receive only cursory and superficial attention in journalism textbooks and manuals of interviewing technique. And yet, these conventions of interaction are very real and very powerful. Adherence to the conventions is what distinguishes the news interview from other genres of broadcast talk and other forms of interaction more generally. These conventions are robust and remarkably similar in both Britain and the United States, although they are subject to cross-cultural variation and historical change. In all of these ways, the news interview can be understood as an organized social institution in its own right.

At the same time, the news interview is deeply intertwined with other societal institutions, most notably journalism and politics. It is a public arena in which representatives of these institutions encounter one another and strive to pursue their respective goals and agendas. Accordingly, what transpires within a news interview both reflects and contributes to the current state of journalism, politics, and their co-evolution over time.

Our primary objective in this book is to examine the inner workings of the news interview in Anglo-American society – the roles, norms, and elementary practices that sustain it. We will also explore aspects of its relationship to the larger social world – the forces within journalism and politics that first gave rise to the news interview and continue to shape its development in both Britain and the United States, as well as its consequences for news, political communication, and the public sphere.

The news interview as a genre

The news interview is a familiar and readily recognizable genre of broadcast talk. But what makes it so? What sets news interviews apart from talk shows, panel discussions, debates, audience participation programs, and other interaction-based genres of broadcast programming? Like most ordinary language categories, the “news interview” has fuzzy boundaries – its members share a loose family resemblance rather than a rigid set of defining attributes. Nevertheless, certain attributes do tend to characterize instances of this programming genre.

The prototypical news interview involves a distinctive constellation of participants, subject matter, and interactional form. The interviewer is known as a professional journalist rather than a partisan advocate or celebrity entertainer. Interviewees have some connection to recent news events, either as primary actors (e.g., government officials) or as informed commentators (e.g., certified experts). The audience plays no active role in the interaction. The discussion normally focuses on matters related to recent news events, is highly formal in character, and is managed primarily through questions and answers. In the USA, prototypical news interviews are featured on nightly programs such as *Nightline* (ABC) and *The NewsHour* (PBS), and weekly programs such as *Meet the Press*

(NBC), *Face the Nation* (CBS), and *This Week* (ABC). In the UK, prototypical news interview-based programs include *Newsnight* (BBC2), the Sunday *Breakfast With Frost* (ITN), and various radio programs produced by BBC Radio 4: *The Today Programme*, *The World at One*, and *PM*.

The boundaries of the news interview genre can be clarified by considering some marginal cases. Consider CNN's *The Larry King Show*. It is news-oriented, features politicians and other newsworthy guests, and largely maintains the question–answer format. On the other hand, Larry King's background is in talk radio rather than traditional journalism, and he takes telephone calls from viewers during the show. The resulting program is thus a hybrid of the news interview and radio call-in genres.

A closer relative of the news interview is the press conference, which shares most of the news-interview attributes outlined above, but with a few important differences. Press conferences are held at the behest of the public figure rather than the news media, and involve large numbers of participating journalists instead of just one or two. The latter difference may not seem particularly significant, but the participation of numerous journalists fundamentally alters the conditions of interaction, reducing the opportunity of each journalist to ask follow-up questions, and thus making it easier for public figures to be less than fully responsive and to pursue their own agendas. Thus, while news interview questioning is often under the control of a single journalist who can counter self-serving or evasive responses, in press conferences the journalistic role is fragmented, making it somewhat less effective as an instrument of public accountability.

The news interview in disciplinary context

The research reported in this book falls within an interdisciplinary field of study concerning the news media in contemporary society. More specifically, it builds upon a long line of research dealing with Anglo-American newsmaking institutions and the social processes through which news is produced.³

³ For more comprehensive reviews of this extensive literature, see Schudson (1996), Shoemaker and Reese (1996), and Tuchman (1988).

Although research of this sort now crosses disciplinary boundaries and includes important work in communication studies and political science, its deepest roots are within sociology. Max Weber ([1910] 1976), in a speech delivered at the first Congress of Sociologists meeting in Frankfurt, advanced what is perhaps the first fully developed proposal for research into the social organization of the press. Many of the questions Weber raised concerned the significance of the commercial basis of news organizations – the need for newspapers to serve both consumers and advertisers, the rise of newspaper trusts and monopolies, and the impact of all of this on news output. However, Weber also called attention to reporters' routine everyday practices – including, most notably, where and how they obtain the information that is subsequently relayed to the public as news.

This research agenda problematizes the social process by which news is constructed. In so doing, it runs contrary to the view of news offered by journalists themselves and perhaps assumed by many news consumers in their unreflective moments: that news is best explained as a more or less straightforward representation of “reality.” Journalists occasionally assert that news reflects reality pure and simple, but most offer the more sophisticated view that news is a judicious selection of the most newsworthy events of the day (Epstein 1973: 13–37; Gans 1979: 79–80). This view is founded on the assumption that journalists are autonomous professionals who are insulated from extraneous pressures and are trained to report news objectively in accordance with established standards of newsworthiness. This viewpoint has not held up well against research into the various practical constraints and institutional circumstances under which journalists actually operate.

Such research would take considerable time to develop. Although important work followed Weber's proposal, studies of newsmaking institutions and production processes remained few and far between from World War I through the 1950s. Work in this area all but died out altogether by the early 1960s, prompting Herbert Gans (1972) to comment on “the famine” in institutional media research. This state of affairs was due in part to the early dominance of the Columbia school of media studies associated with Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues. Their work was concerned mainly with the “effects” side of the media equation, conceived in social psychological terms as the

impact of news on individuals' attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, because that work revealed media effects to be more modest and limited than had previously been assumed, it probably contributed to a general waning of academic interest in the news media.

Interest would re-emerge with a vengeance in the early 1970s. On both sides of the Atlantic, a plethora of monographs, edited collections, and articles in leading academic journals appeared within the span of a few years. This burst of attention was due, at least in part, to a growing suspicion that the theory of minimal media effects was premature and probably overstated. That theory appeared increasingly implausible in the face of the dramatic expansion of television as the dominant source of information and entertainment. The rise of television seemed, to many, to fill a void created by the declining influence of political parties in election campaigns and as mediators of political meaning, and it happened to coincide with an equally dramatic increase in social turbulence in the late 1960s and early 70s. In addition, the popular writings of Marshall McLuhan had a less direct but nonetheless tangible influence on the intellectual ferment of the time. Accordingly, researchers began to develop new ways of conceptualizing media effects,⁴ thus resurrecting – albeit cautiously and not without controversy – notions of media power.

Another reason for renewed interest in the news media was particular to the US context. Journalists came under sustained attack during the first Nixon administration when both President Nixon and Vice President Agnew, with the aid of a young speechwriter named Patrick Buchanan, accused them of widespread “liberal bias.” These well-publicized attacks appeared to gain support from an ostensibly systematic study of the 1968 presidential election (Efron 1971) which argued that network news broadcasts strongly favored liberal Democrat Hubert Humphrey over conservative Republican Richard Nixon.

The liberal bias thesis set an agenda for subsequent research in the USA, much of which refuted that thesis by directing attention to constraints on newsgathering that transcend the partisanship of individual reporters, constraints inherent in the bureaucratic, professional,

⁴ See, for example, discussions of agenda setting (McCombs and Shaw 1972), the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann 1974), and cultivation theory (Gerbner and Gross 1976).

and cultural environments in which reporters operate. Most of the British studies during this period tended to be theoretically oriented and emphasized the broader political–economic framework in which news organizations are embedded.⁵ However, important empirical work was produced on both sides of the Atlantic, offering insight into the culture of the journalistic profession, the bureaucratic structure of news organizations, and the day-to-day practices of working journalists.⁶ Notwithstanding each author’s unique background and interests, the findings were remarkably convergent: that journalists, being limited in time and space, must somehow routinize the newsgathering process, that they do so in part by relying on certain bureaucratic locales where news is predictably available, that their decisions are also shaped by entrenched professional values, as well as external pressures from interested parties in the wider society.

A central contingency shaping the production of news is the relationship between reporters and their sources. It was repeatedly shown that reporters restrict their attention to a relatively narrow range of government officials and certified experts, whose actions and accounts form the basis for most news stories.⁷ Similar observations have been made about the range of sources that appear on programs devoted to live interviews (Croteau and Hoynes 1994). The social relationship between reporters and sources has also been the subject of sophisticated theoretical analysis (Blumler and Gurevitch 1981).

Notwithstanding this attention to source recruitment patterns and reporter–source relationships, comparatively little is known about how reporters and sources actually deal with one another on a day-to-day basis. And yet, it is through such routine dealings that the raw material of what will become “news” is generated. For the case of the broadcast interview, such dealings are themselves news – the “news” in a news interview consists entirely of mundane interactional transactions between journalists and their sources.

⁵ See, for instance, the papers collected in Curran, Gurevitch, and Woolcott (1977) and Gurevitch, *et al.* (1982).

⁶ Important British studies include Halloran, Elliott and Murdock (1969), Elliott (1972), Hall, *et al.* (1978), Schlesinger (1978), and Tunstall (1971). American studies during this same period include Altheide (1974), Epstein (1973), Fishman (1980), Gans (1979), Gitlin (1980), Molotch and Lester (1974; 1975), Sigal (1973), Tuchman (1978).

⁷ Almost all of the studies cited in note 6 make this point.

Recently, however, these transactions have begun to be explored by scholars committed to examining the inner workings of the news interview as a journalistic form. Some researchers have focused their attention on journalists and the arts of questioning and interrogation.⁸ Others have examined public figures and their techniques for dealing with journalists' questions and with one another.⁹ Still others have examined the overarching system of interaction that constitutes the news interview and distinguishes it from ordinary conversation.¹⁰ Finally, interviewing practices have been examined for the manner in which they are distributed across individual participants and sociohistorical contexts.¹¹

This line of research has provocative implications, calling into question many cherished dichotomies in social science and media studies: the split between interpersonal and mass communication, between news content and production processes, and between public and private spheres of social life. The news interview is plainly a vehicle for communicating to a mass audience, but it is, at the same time, a form of interpersonal communication between interviewer and interviewee. It is both a consumable news product, and an emergent process of news production. It is an important platform within the public sphere, but it is constituted through mundane practices of talk and interaction that have been adapted from those of ordinary conversation. These attributes make the news interview a fascinating and theoretically fruitful object of study, but they also pose special challenges for the analyst of news interview discourse.

Analyzing the news interview

Studying the news interview requires a distinctive mode of analysis appropriate to its distinctive character. To clarify this point, it is useful to begin by considering, by way of contrast, how news

⁸ Adkins 1992; Bull, *et al.* 1996; Clayman 1988, 1991, 1992, 2002, Forthcoming; Greatbatch 1986b; Harris 1986; Heritage Forthcoming a, Forthcoming b; Heritage and Roth 1995; Jucker 1986; Macaulay 1996; Olsher Forthcoming; Roth 1998a; Roth and Olsher 1997.

⁹ Bavelas, *et al.* 1988; Clayman 1993, 2001; Greatbatch 1986a, 1992; Harris 1991.
¹⁰ Clayman 1989, 1991; Greatbatch 1988; Heritage 1985; Heritage and Greatbatch 1991. See also Bull 1994.

¹¹ Bull and Elliott 1998; Bull and Mayer 1988, 1993; Clayman and Heritage 2002; Elliott and Bull 1996; Harris 1991.

is typically analyzed when it appears in story form. Traditional content analyses tend to focus on matters such as the themes that predominate within a given range of stories, and the balance and diversity of viewpoints represented therein. For example, studies of election news are concerned with the proportion of coverage devoted to each candidate, and the tendency for stories to concentrate on the theme of the horse race (e.g., who's ahead, campaign strategy, publicity efforts, etc.) to the exclusion of more substantive matters (e.g., the candidates' qualifications, issue positions, policy proposals, etc.). Studies of political news beyond the confines of the campaign have revealed a similar emphasis on political strategy over policy substance.

When we turn from the story form of news to consider the news interview, a different mode of analysis is in order. While overarching themes – such as political strategy – are highly significant to the organization of news narratives, they are rather less central within a mode of discourse that is organized interactionally rather than thematically. The news interview is, first and foremost, a *course of interaction* to which the participants contribute on a turn-by-turn basis, for the most part by asking and answering questions. Of course, particular themes are expressed within each successive contribution, but these contributions are not merely understood in terms of their thematic content. They are also understood in terms of how they bear on the unfolding interactional “game” being played by interviewer and interviewee.

To illustrate this point, consider the questions that interviewers ask. The sense and import of any given question depends in part on how it functions as a “move” within the interview game at a particular point in its state of play. Each question has a retrospective import – some questions accept and build upon the interviewee's previous remarks in a way that moves the discussion along, while other questions subject prior remarks to challenge. Each question also has a prospective import – some questions are relatively open-ended and allow the interviewee maximum leeway to respond, whereas others narrow the parameters of an acceptable response and exert pressure on the interviewee to answer in a particular way. Correspondingly, the sense and import of an interviewee's response depends in part on how it deals with the agenda established by the question – whether it is dutifully answering, or resistant in some way, or downright

evasive. Clearly, how these questioning and answering activities get realized represents a significant level of meaning in news interview discourse, one that is available both to interview participants and to the media audience. Indeed, the ability to track the interactional game as it unfolds is one of the pleasures of interview spectatorship and in part accounts for the distinctive appeal of the news interview as a genre.

The significance of the interactional dimension rests in part on the fact that while it is analytically independent of a news interview's content, it is necessarily consequential for the latter. Interaction between interviewers and interviewees is the generative process by which news interview content, whatever its character, gets created. No topic, theme, or perspective can find its way into a news interview except through the vehicle of an interactional move by one of the participants – and each such move is shaped and constrained by the moves that preceded it, just as it in turn affects what gets said and done in subsequent moves. Thus the *content* of a news interview is thoroughly contingent on the generative *process* of interview interaction.

Furthermore, the interactional dimension is responsive to, and consequential for, various aspects of the social context in which interviewing takes place. Varying styles of play tend to be characteristic of particular journalists and public figures, who become known for their manner of questioning and answering respectively, and who thereby acquire a distinctive public persona. For journalists, this is a major source of professional reputations – the cautious restraint of Jim Lehrer and Brian Walden, the challenging aggressiveness of Sam Donaldson and Jeremy Paxman, the probing intimacy of Barbara Walters, and the imperious dominance of Robin Day and Ted Koppel. Correspondingly, although public figures are seen in a much wider range of social contexts, their personae are also inflected by interview conduct. While in office, President Bill Clinton's way of handling questions was at least one ingredient in his janus-faced image as both sincerely empathetic and shrewdly calculating. In short, the public images of both interviewers and interviewees derive in part from the distinctive ways they play the interview game.

Varying styles of play also distinguish the institution of journalism as it is constituted in different historical and national contexts. To take one noteworthy example that will be explored further in

the next chapter, comparatively deferential styles of questioning in the 1950s have given way to much more adversarial encounters in recent years, especially in British news interviews and in American presidential press conferences. This shift resulted from a host of changes in the political, economic, and institutional environment of broadcast journalism. Thus, just as the underlying form of the news narrative can reflect the larger sociohistorical context (Schudson 1982; Hallin and Mancini 1984),¹² the whole manner in which the broadcast interview is conducted can be an index of much broader developments in journalism and national politics.

Finally, systematic variations in the way interviewers treat particular interviewees and categories of interviewees can be a means by which ideological bias enters into the interviewing process. Indeed, disproportionately hostile treatment can constitute some interviewees as “beyond the pale” and can function to dramatize and reinforce the boundaries of legitimate opinion in public discourse.

Given its manifold significance, how does one go about analyzing the interactional game of the news interview? In light of the preceding, it may be tempting to begin by examining how the game is played differently by different participants and in different social environments. For instance, focusing on the interviewer’s role in the game, one could chart the relative prevalence of polite or deferential styles of questioning versus more aggressive or adversarial styles of questioning across particular interviewers, interviewees, news programs, broadcasting media, national boundaries, or historical eras.

However, a comparative analysis of this sort cannot proceed without a thorough understanding of the various practices that constitute deference or adversarialness in this context. Such practices are numerous, complex, and by no means transparent. To take just one example (explored further in chapter 6), one way of expressing adversarialness is via questions that are opinionated or assertive – such questions display an expectation about the type of answer that would be correct or preferable, and thus exert pressure on the interviewee to answer in a particular way. Pressure of this sort can be

¹² The formal properties of the news narrative have been explored by discourse analytic approaches to the news. For a sampling of work in this area, see Bell (1991), Fairclough (1995), Fowler (1991), van Dijk (1988), and Weaver (1975). For an overview of discourse analytic approaches to the news, see Bell and Garrett (1998).

encoded in a variety of ways, some of which may be available to a priori intuition while others most certainly are not. For example, it turns out that when yes/no questions are negatively formulated (e.g., “Didn’t you,” “Aren’t you,” “Isn’t it true that”) they embody so strong a preference for an affirmative answer that they are often treated by interviewees as if they were expressing an opinion rather than merely asking a question. To the extent that the analyst’s a priori understanding of such basic practices is incomplete or misguided, the comparative results will be suspect.

More generally, any attempt to document systematic variations in interview conduct presupposes that one already has a grasp of the broad array of practices that comprise such conduct, and the sense and import that such practices have for the participants themselves (Schegloff 1993). These elementary practices are the axes along which variation of whatever sort will occur, so they must be thoroughly understood before variations can be described and their significance fully appreciated. Just as advances in chemistry and physics were contingent on the development of the periodic table of elements, and current advances in biology are contingent on cracking the genetic code, progress in analyzing the news interview requires similar attention to fundamentals. Priority must be given to isolating and describing the elementary practices that constitute the basic building blocks of news interview interaction.

What are these practices? How do they affect the conduct of interviewers and interviewees? What are the institutional norms to which they are responsive, and what happens when these norms are transgressed? Once these practices have been described, what can they tell us about how the news relates to its social context and how it has evolved over time? Clearly no analysis of the news interview can come to terms with its journalistic, political, and cultural power without attending seriously to such questions. Accordingly, these questions will be our principal preoccupation throughout this book.

Methodology: conversation analysis

Anyone seeking to understand how the interactional game of the news interview works must confront data like the following. This is a detailed transcript of the first few exchanges in an interview with

Bob Dole during his 1996 campaign for the Republican presidential nomination. The transcript captures not only the words themselves but also how they were articulated, including silences (denoted by numbers in parentheses), overlapping speech (denoted by square brackets), points of emphasis or stress (denoted by underlining>, and so on (see Appendix).

(1) US ABC *This Week*: 18 Feb 1996: New Hampshire Primary

IR: John Cochran IE: Bob Dole

- 1 IR: Are you: hh running scared,
 2 IE: .hh Not really. I've- uh- I'm- my I think my
 3 attitude's better too: in- in 1996. uh: .hh I'm
 4 not as tense, I'm not as tight, I'm not- I'm
 5 relaxed, .hh What will happen will happen,
 6 IR: You said earlier this week tha:t (0.2) whoever
 7 wins New Hampshire_ (0.5) in all likelihood: is
 8 going to be the nominee: . (.) Di- Do you wish
 9 you hadn't said that,
 10 IE: Y=I prob'ly shoulda said if Bob Dole: wins the
 11 New Hampshire Bob Dole(h)le'll be the nominee but
 12 that's alright you gotta be confident.
 13 (.)
 14 IR: Mm hm,
 15 IE: If we d- If we don't win New Hampshire, (0.7) uh
 16 we'll win North and South Dakota.
 17 (.)
 18 IR: Is it getting personal between you and Buchanan?
 19 IE: I don't think so:.=uh Pat 'n I have been
 20 friends=I just don't agree with him. .hh I don't
 21 agree with his view of women. I don't agree that
 22 we oughta give .hh as he said years ago, his
 23 writings (tuh) the nuclear weapons maybe to (.)
 24 Japan: 'n th- South Korea . . hh Uh : [-
 25 IR: [Do you think
 26 he's a racist? or anti Semitic,
 27 IE: Oh I don't know. I don't th- I don't believe so:
 28 but:=uh: (0.5) .hh uh : : I do believe that:=uh:
 29 (0.5) some of his views are not in=h not in
 30 accord with th- where th' mainstream Americans
 31 are.

At the level of topical content, this interview is straightforward and not particularly complicated. It is about the current state of

Dole's candidacy, and in particular his level of confidence and his relationship with his principal Republican adversary Pat Buchanan. However, if we consider the underlying interaction through which this topic is addressed – the particular practices that the interviewer is using to raise various issues, the practices that Dole is using to deal with them, how each set of practices relates to and manifests the speaker's strategic considerations, and the basic ground rules that both participants are mindful of over the course of the exchange – the picture becomes much more complex and by no means straightforward.

To explore these issues, we employ the methodology of conversation analysis. Although conversation analysis originated within sociology in the United States, it is now practiced across a wide range of academic disciplines and national contexts. Conversation analysis (henceforth CA) is an approach to the study of human interaction that involves, at its core, the direct observation of naturally occurring interaction as captured on audio and videorecordings.¹³

The value of recorded data cannot be overstated. Once recorded, a segment of interaction can be examined repeatedly, and re-examined as new information becomes available, and even slowed down for frame-by-frame scrutiny. It can thus be analyzed with much greater detail and precision than would otherwise be possible if it were observed only once in real time. The import of recorded data in CA is rather like that of slow motion “instant replay” in televised sporting events.¹⁴ While spectators in the stands may have only a vague grasp of the fleeting events in a particular play, television viewers can, by virtue of the instant replay, achieve a much deeper and more precise understanding of the specific sequence of behaviors that combined to produce the play's outcome. This applies as well to the academic study of human interaction when it has been preserved on audio or videotape.

¹³ More thorough introductions to conversation analytic methodology may be found in Clayman and Gill (Forthcoming), Heritage (1995; 1997), ten Have (1999), and Zimmerman (1988). For a broader overview that touches on both methodology and empirical findings, see Heritage (1984a: chapter 8). For introductions that deal specifically with the study of talk in institutional settings, see Zimmerman and Boden (1991) and Drew and Heritage (1992). Those interested in the intellectual origins of the field and its relationship to allied fields should consult Schegloff (1992a) and Clayman and Maynard (1995).

¹⁴ For this analogy we are indebted to Max Atkinson (1984: 7–9).

Recordings have an additional advantage in that they can be transcribed in detail, shared with other researchers, and even reproduced in the final research report. Printed transcript excerpts serve as concrete illustrations of points that the author would otherwise have to make abstractly. In this way, transcripts also provide readers with independent access to the events in question, so that they can check what the author is claiming against an actual record of what transpired. Thus, to return to the sports analogy, just as television viewers can use the instant replay to assess the accuracy of the referee's call and the broadcast commentary, CA readers can consult the transcript excerpts to evaluate the author's analysis. This serves as a powerful constraint on what a researcher can plausibly and justifiably assert in print.

Transcript excerpts are used throughout this book. They are intended to be accessible to a general audience, but they do contain a few specialized symbols to capture important interactional details like silences, overlapping speech, and so on. A key to the transcription symbols can be found in the Appendix.

Although CA is often characterized as a qualitative method, this is somewhat misleading. Conversation analysts typically deal with numerous examples of a given interactional phenomenon, and these are examined systematically to arrive at a general understanding of the phenomenon in question. However, unlike formally quantitative approaches, CA does place much greater emphasis on the close analysis of individual cases, and it is this case-by-case method which forms the backbone of the CA approach.

Analyzing single episodes of interaction is more difficult than it may appear at first glance. One may have a lively intuitive sense of the meaning and import of a particular utterance, but intuition is not always a reliable guide to interaction and at times it can be downright misleading. Thus, within CA every effort is made to ground any analysis in the understandings and orientations of the participants themselves. To this end, a crucial analytic resource is the response that a given utterance receives subsequently. Because interaction unfolds sequentially, turn by turn, each successive utterance ordinarily responds to and hence deals in some way with the one that came just before it. Correspondingly, each utterance displays that speaker's analysis and understanding of what preceded it. The sequential organization of interaction thus provides a kind of "running index"

(Heritage 1988) of the interactants' own understandings of one another's conduct, and this can in turn serve as an important resource for the professional analyst.

Generalizations are arrived at by working case by case in this manner through all candidate instances of a given phenomenon that are available. As the analyst begins to develop an initial sense of a pattern or organizational principle that cuts across the collection, close attention is paid to seemingly "deviant" or anomalous cases that appear to depart from the pattern. An anomalous case may turn out, upon closer inspection, to be beyond the scope of the core phenomenon under investigation. Alternatively, it may lead the investigator to revise his or her initial analysis in a way that encompasses both the anomalous case and the regular cases. Finally, the anomalous case may turn out to be entirely consistent with the original analysis if, for example, it is negatively sanctioned or is otherwise treated by the participants as a departure from normality. Anomalous cases can thus turn out to provide the strongest evidence in support of a given generalization. In any event, by progressively examining both regular and anomalous cases, the analyst is driven to specify more clearly the scope, character, and normativity of the conventions that govern interaction (Clayman and Gill Forthcoming; Heritage 1984: chapter 8; Schegloff 1968; ten Have 1999).

Finally, when CA methods are used to analyze talk in institutional environments – such as law courts, hospitals, classrooms, and of course broadcasting studios – the analysis must take an additional step: to link documented interactional conventions to the institutional context at hand and the specialized tasks, roles, and relevancies that comprise it (Drew and Heritage 1992).

Establishing the relationship between talk and its institutional environment is by no means straightforward.¹⁵ For example, what might seem at first glance to be a convention specific to the news interview may in fact be a highly general feature of interaction whenever and wherever it occurs, so that the institutional environment is neither relevant nor consequential for its production. For this reason, research on institutional forms of talk often proceeds by

¹⁵ Useful discussions of the relationship between talk, social institutions, and other aspects of social structure may be found in Schegloff (1987; 1991; 1992b), Wilson (1991), Zimmerman and Boden (1991), and Drew and Heritage (1992).