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THE CHANGING TENOR OF QUESTIONING OVER TIME
Tracking a question form across US presidential news conferences, 1953–2000

John Heritage and Steven E. Clayman

This paper uses a single question form—the negative interrogative—as a window into the increasing aggressiveness of American journalists and hence the increasingly adversarial relationship between press and state in the United States. The negative interrogative in English is a type of yes/no interrogative (e.g., “Isn’t it . . .”, “Don’t you . . .”) often understood as asserting rather than merely seeking information. Its frequency in the construction of yes/no questions is an index of the propensity for journalists to depart from a formally neutral posture and express a point of view on the subject of inquiry. Previous quantitative research documented their growing use in US presidential news conferences since the 1950s, with the Nixon Administration as an historical turning point. Here we incorporate a more nuanced qualitative analysis of single cases in use. Beyond their growing frequency, negative interrogatives were increasingly mobilized to raise substantively adversarial matters, increasingly prefaced by adversarial assertions, and increasingly likely to treat such prefaces as presuppositionally given. Together these trends indicate journalists’ growing willingness to highlight administration problems and failings and to hold Presidents to account, with Presidents since Nixon facing a harsher climate of journalistic questioning than did their predecessors.

KEYWORDS assertive questioning; journalistic norms; journalistic questioning; news conferences; negative interrogative; news interviews; press–state relations; White House press corps

Introduction

The relationship between reporters and their sources is a keystone for the study of journalism, both as a medium of cultural production and a quasi-political institution. At one level, the reporter–source relationship is a central contingency bearing on the production of news and public affairs information, while at the same time it is an index of the level of press independence, or conversely subordination, vis-à-vis the state. Accordingly, taking the measure of this relationship is a central problem in the study of journalism and political communication systems. Journalism scholars within disciplines ranging from communication to political science to sociology have long recognized that the development of quantifiable measures of journalistic vigorosity in reporter–source relations faces significant obstacles (Kernell 1986, 76; Schudson 1995, 151; Smith 1990, 10–11), and the absence of valid and reliable measures of this sort has for many years hindered theoretical development in this area.

Our contribution to the resolution of this problem has been to focus on a novel form of data, namely the design of the questions that journalists ask of public figures in
broadcast news conferences and news interviews. Utilizing conceptual tools derived from the tradition of conversation analysis, we developed a multi-dimensional coding system which serves as a barometer of vigorousness or aggressiveness in question design, and applied that system to a five-decade sample of US presidential news conferences. The fruits of this project have thus far included insight into long-term historical trends in the evolution of President–press relations (Clayman and Heritage 2002b; Clayman et al. 2006), and some of the social factors that significantly affect the level of aggressiveness with which journalists treat the President (Clayman et al. 2007, 2010, 2012). Subsequent researchers have built on this approach, adapting the question analysis system—with modifications to accommodate language differences and somewhat distinct analytic objectives—to the study of reporter–source relations in the Netherlands (Huls and Varwijk 2011) and Sweden (Ekström et al. 2013), and the flow of public affairs information from live interviews to subsequent news coverage in the United States (Baum and Groeling 2009).

The historical trend documented for the United States is one of declining deference to the President and the rise of a more aggressive posture (Clayman and Heritage 2002b; Clayman et al. 2006, 2010). This shift, which begins in the late 1960s, is manifest in a variety of aspects of question design. Journalists have exercised greater initiative in their questions to the President. Their questions have also become more opinionated or assertive, more adversarial in content, and more apt to hold the President accountable for his policies. And they are also more direct, placing maximum pressure on the President to respond. These patterns are broadly convergent with other historical studies of US journalism utilizing news stories rather than questions as data. Robinson (1981) and Rozell (1994) document a rise in investigative stories with hostile content in coverage of the US Congress. Patterson (1993), focusing on coverage of election campaigns, demonstrates that news has become more interpretive, more negative, and more preoccupied with political strategy over policy substance. In other campaign studies, Hallin (1992) and Steele and Barnhurst (1996) utilize the shrinking television news soundbite as a window into the journalist’s increasingly prominent and independent voice relative to the candidates themselves (see also Barnhurst and Steele 1997). And in a wide-ranging survey of print journalism, Fink and Schudson (2013) document a substantial increase in stories incorporating background, context, and analysis. While most of these studies focus on trends since the 1960s, other research suggests that the rise of journalistic autonomy and expressive independence has deeper historical roots (Schudson 1982; Barnhurst and Nerone 2001).

In this paper we revisit our question analysis system and consider the trade-offs involved in using discrete quantifiable questioning practices, as opposed to the nuanced description of such practices as they are deployed in singular cases within a specific discursive and interactional context. We will argue that although our question analysis system provides a valid general picture of aggregate trends in President–press relations, like any coding system it necessarily overlooks various subtleties surrounding the precise tenor of questioning in any particular case. These subtleties, although quantifiable in principle, were not part of our original coding system. When taken into account, they suggest that the main historical trend previously identified—the shift toward a more aggressive mode of questioning Presidents since the late 1960s—is substantially stronger than previously documented.
Background: The Question Analysis System and the US Presidents Project

The question analysis system, initially reported in Clayman and Heritage (2002b) and subsequently refined (Clayman et al. 2006), decomposes the phenomenon of aggressive questions into five dimensions:

1. **Initiative**: the extent to which questions are enterprising rather than passive in their aims.
2. **Directness**: the extent to which questions exert full versus mitigated pressure for response.
3. **Assertiveness**: the extent to which questions are opinionated rather than neutral on the subject of inquiry.
4. **Adversarialness**: the extent to which question content is oppositional rather than benign.
5. **Accountability**: the extent to which questions oblige Presidents to defend and justify their actions.

Indicators of each dimension are specific questioning practices, for the most part formal features of question design whose aggressive import was documented in previous conversation analytic research.

The application of this system to US presidential news conferences encompassed nine Presidents, 12 administrations, and more than 4600 questions across five decades (1953–2000). The initial results were primarily descriptive, documenting raw historical trends in the aggressiveness of the White House press corps, with White House journalists growing significantly more vigorous on all dimensions (Clayman and Heritage 2002b; Clayman et al. 2006). Journalists were increasingly likely to exercise initiative via more elaborate and confining questions; the substantive content of their questions grew more adversarial; and they exerted greater pressure on the President to address such content via more direct and assertive forms of questioning.

Subsequent research on the same database has been more explanatory in emphasis, using multivariate analysis to identify the social conditions associated with variations in aggressive questioning. Clayman et al. (2007) identify significant predictors of aggressive questioning that include the content of the question (domestic affairs questions are more aggressive than foreign affairs questions), the timing of the conference within the President’s tenure in office (second terms yield more aggressive questions than first terms), and the broader economic context (questions become more aggressive when unemployment and interest rates are rising). Returning to the explanation of historical trends, Clayman et al. (2010) document an enduring “paradigm shift” in the normative level of aggressiveness after 1968, which we will refer to as the “post-1968 inflection.” Focusing on two outcome measures (adversarialness and accountability) while controlling for the aforementioned social conditions, questions exhibited a relatively stable level of deference toward the President from 1953 to 1968, and then jumped abruptly to a more aggressive level and remained at that level or above from 1969 to 2000. This punctuated equilibrium pattern suggests that the historic rise in the press corps’ aggressiveness was not just a transitory response to shifting circumstances, but reflected a more fundamental and enduring transformation of the normative tenor of President–press relations, perhaps driven by the breach of trust and societal unrest associated with the era of Vietnam and Watergate. Finally, focusing on the attributes of individual journalists, frequent news conference participants have been more aggressive than infrequent participants, and female journalists have been more
aggressive than their male counterparts, although gender differences have attenuated over time (Clayman et al. 2012).

These findings offered the first comprehensive overview of the nature of questioning at presidential news conferences, but their scope and generality was achieved at the cost of detail and specificity. Discrete question design characteristics, which occur in many varieties and combinations in the real circumstances of news conferences, were bundled together and aggregated to index underlying dimensions of questioning. This bundling and aggregation, though theoretically justified and empirically well validated, tends to obscure the evolving texture and tenor of questioning in news conferences. These latter aspects tend to yield more readily to the qualitative analysis of language practices as they are deployed in particular contexts. In this paper, we attempt to marry quantitative techniques and qualitative analysis by tracing the changing patterns of use of a single question form—the negative interrogative—that we previously treated as an indicator of journalistic assertiveness.

The Negative Interrogative: Preliminary Observations

Negative interrogatives are utterances beginning with interrogative frames such as “Isn’t it . . .”, “Doesn’t this . . .”, and “Don’t you . . .”. Notwithstanding their interrogative syntax, which is a variant of the yes/no or polar interrogative form, these utterances are not always understood as questions. For example, in the following interchange concerning a lunch guest at an event hosted by Margy, Emma’s negative interrogative at line 7 is treated as an “assertion” to be “agreed with” rather than a “question” to be “answered.” And, it may be noted, Margy’s agreement is managed through the same practice—the negative interrogative—deployed in Emma’s previous turn:

(1) NB VII:1–2

According to Bolinger (1957), when negative interrogatives (henceforth N-I) are delivered from a position of knowledge, they are understood as “assertions” rather than “questions,” whereas when delivered from a position of ignorance they assume the more familiar guise of information seeking (see also Heritage 2012; Heritage and Roth 1995; Heinemann 2006; Koshik 2002). This Janus-faced characteristic can be helpful to journalists who can use the format to make substantive assertions to newsmakers while apparently “asking a question.” A journalist who is challenged by a source for trespassing on the boundaries of legitimate questioning will thus have a secure, though possibly disingenuous, line of retreat, as illustrated in the following exchange between veteran correspondent Sam Donaldson and George H. W. Bush’s budget director, Richard Darman. The topic concerns methods of paying for the taxpayer “bailout” of US Savings and Loan institutions that became bankrupt following a period of deregulation during the Reagan Administration:
After two N-Is focusing on taxpayer costs (lines 1 and 6), the latter an addendum to a flatly stated disagreement, Darman insinuates that Donaldson has an axe to grind on this issue ("twenty of the fifty billion is being handled in just the way you want," lines 8–9). At this point Donaldson retreats to the "safety" position enabled by his previous use of interrogative syntax—"I'm just asking you a question. I'm not expressing my personal views" (lines 11–12)—and Darman, in turn, acquiesces to this (line 13).

The evidence that N-I syntax is "assertive" comes from multiple sources. First and foremost, it is frequently treated as such by respondents (Heritage 2002; Clayman and Heritage 2002a). The most common way in which this emerges is for respondents to reply that they "agree" or "disagree" with the proposition prefaced by the N-I frame, as in the following response by President Bill Clinton to a question from veteran White House correspondent Helen Thomas about fund-raising—that included "sleepovers" for big donors in the Jefferson bedroom of the White House:

(3) Press Conference of William J. Clinton, March 7, 1997
Journalist: Helen Thomas
Topic: Campaign finance

1 Thomas: W'l Mister President in your zea:(.) for funds during
2 the last campaign.hh didn't you put the Vice President (.)
3 an' Maggie and all the others in your (0.4) Administration
4 top side.hh in a very vulnerable position, hh
5 (0.5)
6 President: → I disagree with that.hh u- How are we vulnerable because…

Here the very first element of Clinton's response to Thomas's N-I framed question treats it as if it were a statement of opinion ("I disagree with that"). This form of response to N-I questions is comparatively frequent in news interviews, and this is the only type of question that regularly attracts such responses (Heritage 2002).

Second, both politicians and journalists are aware of, and occasionally comment on, this aspect of questioning. Thus in the impeachment hearings of President Clinton, Senator Howard Cobel (Republican, North Carolina) asked the following of a member of the Prosecutor's Panel:
Cobel here straightforwardly acknowledges the assertive character of the N-I frame, and the same acknowledgement is made by PBS interviewer Margaret Warner in a live television broadcast about the same impeachment hearings. Warner’s question is designed to invite one of the panelists to comment critically on the presentational strategy of one of the House prosecutors. She frames her question using three different forms (lines 4–5), beginning with an abandoned N-I format (“Wouldn’t-”) before finally commenting that she will ask it “in the form of a question” (lines 5–6)¹ and then successfully delivering a fourth, and complete version of the question (line 8):

In sum, it is clear from the academic literature, and from the participants themselves, that questions framed in N-I syntax are frequently understood as opinionated, and as straddling a line in which describing facts or expressing opinions is, at the minimum, part of the process of inviting response.

These interrogatives ostensibly seek information and are characterizable as neutralistic “questions” (Clayman and Heritage 2002a), thus providing a measure of deniability in the event of challenge (as in (2) above). At the same time they also assert information and do so more strongly than any other polar or yes/no interrogative form in English. This is why they were included as an indicator of “assertiveness” in our measures of long-term change in presidential news conferences. The frequency with which they are used in the construction of yes/no questions is an index of the propensity for journalists to operate at the boundary of strict neutrality and, correspondingly, their willingness to express a point of view under the guise of “questioning.”

**Negative Interrogatives Across Historical Time**

N-I questions emerged only gradually over the time period selected for our analysis. During the first Eisenhower Administration (1953–1956), they made up just 2 percent of the polar (yes/no) questions directed to the President. They picked up briefly during...
Eisenhower’s second term to 6 percent, before declining during the Kennedy–Johnson era. It was only after the inflection, which for this practice begins around 1973 when the Watergate scandal began to mushroom, that N-I questions begin a strong and continuous climb (Figure 1).

Clearly the Nixon era represents something of a watershed in the growth of N-I questions. Up to and including 1972, N-I questions represented just under 2.5 percent of all polar questions. Subsequent to 1972, that proportion quadrupled to 10 percent.

Sheer quantity gives us an approximate indicator that the White House press corps became significantly more assertive during the post-1968 inflection, but what about the quality and texture of the questions that were put to various Presidents across the period? The evolving tenor of questioning may be characterized by addressing two broad questions. (1) What content were N-I questions used to make topical and what assertions or claims did they advance for presidential consideration? (2) What other elements of question design were they combined with? Were they combined with practices that rendered them relatively innocuous, or, alternatively, were they joined with practices that created significant difficulties for presidential response? We begin with the “content” question.

The Changing Topics of Negative Interrogative Questions

During the pre-1968 inflection period, the topics broached using N-I questions, while significant, rarely crossed into matters of policy substance or statecraft. They were, for example, used in semi-serious arm-twisting efforts to get the President to comment on forthcoming electoral contests, as in (6) and (7) below.

(6) Press Conference of Dwight D. Eisenhower, August 1, 1956
Journalist: James Reston
Topic: Eisenhower’s running mate in the forthcoming presidential election
Reston: Mr. President, in the light of what you have said about Mr. Nixon this morning and your failure to comment about other candidates for the Vice Presidency, is it not inevitable that we should conclude that Mr. Nixon is your preference?

President: Well you have a right to conclude what you please. But I have said that I would not express a preference...

Journalist: William Knighton
Topic: The 1960 presidential election

Knighton: Mr President, don’t you think the country ought to have the benefit of your advice as to who you think the other Republicans are who could be President?

President: Well I’ll tell you what: there’s a number of them, and I am not going into the business of nominating people...

In such matters, of course, the President was not to be drawn into a response. And journalists were no more successful when they applied the same questioning practices to later Presidents on the same topic, as in (8) and (9):

(8) Press Conference of Richard M. Nixon, June 29, 1972
Journalist: Unknown
Topic: Nixon’s Vice presidential running mate in the 1972 election

Journalist: Isn’t it time you told us, will Agnew be on the ticket?

President: I know that that is a question that is very much on the minds of the delegates who will be coming to Miami in August...

(9) Press Conference of Ronald W. Reagan, October 19, 1983
Journalist: Steven Taylor
Topic: 1984 Presidential Campaign

Taylor: Thank you, Mr. President. Let’s speak about reelection if we might for a moment……. But it's getting late, and if you don't run at this point, other Republicans who would then have an interest in it would be way behind their Democratic opponents. It would seem to hurt the party. Therefore, practically speaking now, don’t you have to run?

President: I have to commend all of you people; you can find more different ways of asking that question. [Laughter]

Sometimes, indeed, the question was deployed to humorous effect, as in (10) where Richard Wilson used a N-I question to ask if Eisenhower might be considering the repeal of the 22nd Amendment to the Constitution (which prohibits Presidents from holding office for more than two terms):²

(10) Press Conference of Dwight D. Eisenhower, January 30, 1957
Journalist: Richard Wilson
Topic: The possibility of Eisenhower’s running again

Wilson: Mr. President, I wonder if you would clarify a statement that you made earlier. I think you said in the present tense, “…if I ever run again.” What were you referring to there, sir?

President: No; I was talking about the past. I said I stated during my first Administration that “if I should ever run again,” I wanted to run on policies and not
personalities.

Wilson: I wondered, sir, if you might not be referring to the possibility of the repeal of the twenty-second amendment.

President: Look, I will give you people a piece of news. They can repeal it if they want to. I shall not run again. [Laughter]

A further characteristic of the topical content of N-I questions, particularly commonplace during the early years, was the fact that the President's answer was often easy to anticipate if not downright obvious. Thus there was little mystery surrounding whether a popular President would be running for re-election (excerpt 9), or whether the President would retain his Vice President in the impending campaign (excerpts 6, 8). The obviousness quotient may also account for the use of N-I questions on relatively factual matters. Thus, although the following question raises the serious and politically charged topic of investigating civil rights abuses in the Southern states, the specific issue to which the assertive N-I component is addressed is the proper bureaucratic jurisdiction for such an investigation.

Journalist: Robert Spivak
Topic: Civil rights

Spivak: Recently you suggested a commission to study acts of violence against Negroes in certain States. I wonder if you have discussed this with Attorney General Brownell or the FBI, and if that isn't really one of their functions?

President: Well what I want to find out is, of course, someone to define the lines in which Federal responsibility in the great fields of civil rights lays . . .

(12) Press Conference of Dwight D. Eisenhower, April 2, 1953
Journalist: May Craig
Topic: US “butter mountain”

Craig: Mr President, if I could get away from high politics to butter, do you think there is anything you can do in the long term, so that people can get butter at reasonable prices, and not have it stored away at taxpayers' expense to spoil? It is a long-term problem, I know, but it's a symbolic thing.

President: Well of course, you are talking about something where you could far better go to the Secretary of Agriculture and get a really definitive answer to such a question . . . .

Craig: But Sir the reason we have so many million—nearly half a billion—pounds in storage is because the taxpayers' money is taken to buy, put it there.

President: I think you are exaggerating the figures somewhat, but it's still too large in my opinion . . . .

Craig: Well sir if you did not—this Administration did not price support it, couldn't you find an outlet in the ordinary people buying it—the housewives—at prices they could pay?

President: I would say . . .
This essentially populist use of N-I questions extended into the Kennedy Administration, where the President was asked a question about re-uniting GI families:

(13) Press Conference of John F. Kennedy, April 11, 1962
Journalist: Unknown
Topic: Reuniting service families

1 Journalist: Mr. President, now that General Clay is coming home from Berlin,
2 don’t you think that the service wives have borne the brunt of our gold
3 shortage long enough, and should be permitted to join their soldier
4 husbands in Europe.
5 After all, you can almost say that service couples have had to bear a cross
6 of gold alone, and in a very lonely way. And spring is here and everyone
7 knows that the GI’s—[laughter]—get into much less trouble and do their
8 jobs better if their wives and kids are with them.
9 President: I agree. And we’re very sympathetic…

Before 1973, N-I questions on matters of high policy, although vanishingly rare, did occur on occasion. In the following case, the question leans towards the suggestion that Eisenhower would be, or even should be, worried about Russian advances in atomic warfare:

(14) Press Conference of Dwight D. Eisenhower, April 7, 1954
Journalist: May Craig
Topic: Delays in US production of hydrogen bombs

1 Craig: Mr. President, aren’t you afraid that Russia will make bigger hydrogen bombs
2 before we do?
3 President: No I am not afraid of it…

After 1969, however, questions emerged that addressed the responsibilities of the President and became more pointed in referring to that responsibility. In the following case, President Nixon is invited to agree that he and his Vice President have sought support for their Vietnam policies at the cost of “polarizing” the country—something that ill-becomes a head of state:

Journalist: Robert Semple
Topic: Vietnam

1 Semple: To broaden that a little bit, on November 3 you called for support for
2 your policies in Vietnam. You since received a response that some
3 of your aides feel is gratifying.
4 → My question is, however, have you not, with the help of Vice President
5 Agnew, and I am referring to some of his recent speeches, purchased
6 this support at the cost of alienating a sizable segment of the American
7 public and risking polarization of the country?
8 President: Well, Mr. Semple, one of the problems of leadership is to take a position…

Subsequent to this, N-I questions were increasingly mobilized as pointed and direct efforts to make Presidents accountable both for policies and executive decisions, as in (16) and (17):

Journalist: Unknown
Topic: Gender gap in government
Journalist: Mr. President, if may follow up with another question about the Commission, you
talk a lot here, and your aides do, about the gender gap. And yet that Commission
was appointed—12 men, no women. Doesn’t that add to the perception that you’re
insensitive to women?

President: It might add to the perception, and that’s all it is is a perception…

If, in (16), President Reagan was castigated through an assertive question suggesting that
he was “insensitive to women,” less than a decade later his successor George H. W. Bush
encountered two back-to-back N-I questions that ended by holding both him and Reagan
to account for economic woes:

Journalist: Ellen Warren
Topic: Republican nomination campaign

Warren: Mr. President, you seem to be brushing off this 30-to-40-percent
consistent voting for Pat Buchanan as a frustration with the economy.
Sir, doesn’t the buck stop here? Don’t you take any responsibility—
and your predecessor, Ronald Reagan—for the state of the economy, sir?

President: Absolutely.

Warren: Well, so why should people vote for you if it’s your fault?

President: Because they know I’m trying to change it…

And only a year later President Clinton was left without a hiding place in regard to the
ultimate authority behind the disastrous intervention by the FBI in Waco, Texas which led
to the deaths of 76 people including 20 children:

(18) Press Conference of William J. Clinton, April 20, 1993
Journalist: Sara McClendon
Topic: FBI intervention in Waco, Texas

McClendon: Mr. President, why are you still saying it was a Janet Reno decision?
Isn’t it, in the end, your decision?

President: Well, what I’m saying is that I didn’t have a four- or five-hour briefing
from the FBI. I didn’t go over every strategic part of it. It is a
decision for which I take responsibility. I’m the President of the
United States, and I signed off on the general decision giving her
authority to make the last call…

Perhaps the most pointed single use of a N-I question came as the Watergate
scandal was accelerating in the run-up to the 1972 presidential election. Here the question
clearly, albeit indirectly (“you people”), implies that the President was involved in the
Watergate break-in and, with the expression “make a clean breast,” also suggests that
wrongdoing was involved:

Journalist: Unknown
Topic: Watergate

Journalist: Mr. President, don’t you think that your Administration and the public
would be served considerably and that the men under indictment
would be treated better, if you people would come through and make
a clean breast about what you were trying to get done at the Watergate?

President: One thing that has always puzzled me about it is why anybody would
have tried to get anything out of the Watergate…”
In sum, not only did N-I questions proliferate after 1968, but also their content and tenor changed. Whereas during the Eisenhower Administration N-I questions were predominantly used in a somewhat lighthearted fashion to address relatively “light-weight” topics, after the Nixon Administration they were deployed increasingly to address topics of considerable gravity and significance. Moreover, they became used in an increasingly pointed fashion to raise issues of direct presidential accountability for policy decisions that were treated, at least by implication, as problematic or misguided. Across the 48-year period, the topics and uses of N-I questions underwent a marked darkening in content, tone, and tenor.

Questions in Sequence: Negative-interrogatives as Follow-up Questions

In our original studies of presidential news conferences (Clayman and Heritage 2002b; Clayman et al. 2006), we included the incidence of follow-up questions as an indicator of journalists’ initiative: the extent to which journalists are enterprising rather than passive in their pursuit of responses from the President. We included follow-ups while recognizing that their incidence is a product both of the journalist’s inclination to pursue, on the one hand, and the President’s willingness to acknowledge and respond to them, on the other. However, although the number of follow-ups appearing in the record varies considerably from President to President, there is an overall rising trend in their incidence over time. Prior to 1972, follow-up questions represented 7 per cent of all questions, but in the period after 1972 their incidence more than tripled to 24 percent.

The inherently assertive character of most N-I questions would seem to make them ideal candidates for use in contexts where journalists are aiming to follow-up, especially if the follow-up, as in (12) above, is contrastive or argumentative with the President’s earlier response. This was borne out in our statistics: across the full sampling period, N-I questions were 50 percent more likely to occur as follow-ups than in other positions. Excerpts (20) and (21) below are reasonably representative cases from the pre-Nixon news conferences in our database. In (20), the first question—itself an N-I question—follows up an immediately previous response from the President, while the second follows up for a second time:

(20) Press Conference of Dwight D. Eisenhower, April 2, 1958
Journalist: Raymond Brandt
Topic: The management of psychological warfare

1 Brandt: → Does not the Coordinating Board have to get their directions from the National
2 Security Council?
3 President: Oh yes, yes.
4 Brandt: → Isn’t that rather cumbersome?
5 President: Well they don’t have to get their directions on our ideas about psychological
6 warfare…

And in (21), a journalist pursues the question of whether space agreements with Russia concerning cooperation in the use of weather satellites should not be concluded by treaty where, as indicated in the first question (lines 1–4), they would have to be ratified by the US Senate:
Press Conference of John F. Kennedy, April 24, 1963

Journalist: Unknown

Topic: Agreements with the Russians on space programs

1 Journalist: Sir, this regards the agreements with Soviet Russia, between the United
2 States and Soviet Russia, regarding programs in outer space. We have two
3 that are about ready. Those are not coming back to the Senate for ratification,
4 I don’t believe. I wonder why?
5 President: Well, the kinds of agreements—the executive agreements to cooperate on
6 weather? That is not a treaty.
7 Journalist: → Well, should it not be a treaty?
8 President: No, it doesn’t seem to me that it involves issues…

In (22), a follow-up by Gary Schuster opens the question of a new “arms race” between the United States and the Soviet Union:

Press Conference of Ronald W. Reagan, October 19, 1983

Journalist: Gary Schuster

Topic: Space defense program

1 Schuster: Mr. President,—thank you—do you favor the five-year program that Cap
2 Weinberger has recommended to you for the outer-space defense of this
3 country?
4 President: Gary, nothing has actually been presented to me as yet…
5 Schuster: → Well, can I follow up? Would this not create, instead of an offensive arms
6 race, a defensive arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union?
7 President: Well, would that be all bad?
8 Schuster: Well, that’s what I’m asking you.
9 President: If you’ve got everybody building defense, then nobody’s going to start a war…

After the post-1968 inflection, however, it is possible to discern more pointed and personally directed N-I follow ups. The following exchange between Godfrey Sperling and Ronald Reagan begins with a highly assertive question (see below) about the relationship between the high US murder rate and failure to regulate the possession of guns (lines 1–5). Subsequent to Reagan’s response, Sperling follows up with a question that explicitly ties the gun-crime nexus to the assassination attempt on Reagan by John Hinckley in March of the previous year. This follow-up culminates in an N-I question that effectively pushes his point home in a way that is both highly assertive and pointed directly at Reagan’s personal experience:

Press Conference of Ronald W. Reagan, November 11, 1982

Journalist: Godfrey Sperling

Topic: Gun crime

1 Sperling: To another very difficult problem, Mr. President: crime. You are aware, I
2 am sure, that the United States has an utterly disgraceful number of murders.
3 Do you believe that there’s any correlation between the wide dissemination
4 of guns in this country and this disgraceful record? And, in short, isn’t it
5 time for a truly effective gun control law?
6 President: We get back to the old argument again…
7 Sperling: Well, I’ve been wanting to ask you this for a long while, and with Mr. Hinckley
8 → in the news again this last week, don’t you think that things might have been
9 different if Hinckley hadn’t had more difficulty in being able to get a gun?
10 President: Sure would have been more comfortable, except that at 2 o’clock in the
11 afternoon, thereabouts, out there surrounded by many of you, he did what he did
in an area that has about the strictest gun control laws that there are in the United States.

And, in 1989, after President George H. W. Bush has deflected a question inviting him to account for his position on abortion, which is broadly aligned with the Hyde Amendment, a N-I follow-up question is used to suggest that his position is morally incoherent:

Journalist: Owen Ullman
Topic: Abortion funding

1 Ullman: Let me ask you a question about your position. Can you explain why you believe it’s all right for women who can afford an abortion on their own, that in cases where they are raped or in cases of incest, that it’s permissible; but that for poor women who cannot afford abortions, it is not permissible to help them get abortions in cases of rape or incest.

President: Owen, the only answer I can give you on that is to go back to the original Hyde amendment and to the position that I took and will stay with. And to some there might be a contradiction there. To me there is none.

11 Ullman: Just to follow, sir: I mean, it’s not a question of contradiction. It seems that if you can pay it yourself it’s okay under these circumstances. But the message, it seems, is that if you can’t afford it yourself—

14 President: No, I don’t think it’s a moral conflict in my own position.

Although follow-ups grew very substantially after the post-1968 inflection, the proportion of N-I questions deployed as follow-ups remained effectively constant across the two time periods (25 percent pre-inflection, 28 percent post-inflection). Thus the expansion in the use of N-I questions after 1972 remained evenly distributed between their use in follow-up and non-follow-up contexts.

Compounding Assertiveness: Prefaced Negative-Interrogative Questions

It is a characteristic feature of modern news interviews and news conferences that journalists frequently do not ask simple questions, such as “Mr. President, aren’t you afraid that Russia will make bigger hydrogen bombs before we do?” (from (14) above). Rather they preface them with statements that provide “background” or “context” for the question to come (Clayman and Heritage 2002a). Just under 57 percent of the questions in our news conference study were prefaced in this way with one or more statements. Sometimes these statements simply explain what occasioned the question, or at least provide a pretext for it. This is the case, for example as in (11) and (13) which are partially reproduced below:

Journalist: Robert Spivak
Topic: Civil rights

1 Spivak: Recently you suggested a commission to study acts of violence against Negroes in certain States. I wonder if you have discussed this with
However, quite frequently the question prefaces may themselves be assertive with respect to the type of answer that should be forthcoming. In the following, the journalist builds an elaborate case for certain de facto advantages that the Soviet Union enjoys in the context of the Cold War before going on to ask a N-I question about public perceptions of US inferiority:

The careful marshaling of factual circumstances that could issue in realistic public perceptions of inferiority creates a context in which the assertive N-I question can itself be understood to project these perceptions as a realistic possibility. Here then the assertions preceding the question converge with the question’s own tilt towards a “yes” response (Clayman and Heritage 2002a, 2002b) to create a redoubling of the question’s overall assertiveness. This cooperation between preface and N-I question may be deployed to exert moral pressure on the President:

(26) Press Conference of Dwight D. Eisenhower, April 27, 1960
Journalist: May Craig
Topic: Hunger in America

1 Craig: For more years than you have been in the White House, the pitiful
2 children of the West Virginia unemployed coal miners have been
3 starving for proper food. We do give them whatever surpluses we have.
4 While you and Congress talk about helping the needy in foreign countries,
5 isn’t there something that you could do for needy Americans in this rich
6 America of our own?
7 President: Well, Mrs. Craig, you say they haven’t been helped. I thought they had…
In this case Craig’s evocation of the needs of “pitiful” children, together with the references to the wealth of the United States and its support for the poor of other countries, creates a powerful context for a correspondingly assertive N-I question about helping the needy in America.

The prefices in (25) and (26) built arguments that were reinforced by the assertive tilt of the N-I questions that followed them. However, in the following cases, prefatory information is “built into” the subsequent N-I question as a matter of presupposition, and is substantively negative toward the President or his Administration. In the first two cases that follow, the prefices describe matters that are “on the record” and hence incontestable, but are also incontestably adverse to the President, his policies or his Administration. The subsequent questions presuppose the truth of these assertions to build an interlocking structure of assertiveness. In (16), appointments to a presidential commission are portrayed as in conflict with the President’s remarks about the “gender gap” and the subsequent question pointedly reinforces that portrayal:

Journalist: Unknown
Topic: Gender gap in government

1 Journalist: Mr. President, if may follow up with another question about the Commission, you talk a lot here, and your aides do, about the gender gap. And yet that Commission was appointed—12 men, no women.
4 → Doesn’t that add to the perception that you’re insensitive to women?

In (27), the man whom the President has nominated as arms control director is portrayed as cynically indifferent to arms control negotiations, and this portrayal is presuppositionally leveraged into the proposal that the President has handed the Soviet Union a “propaganda advantage” in Europe:

Journalist: Lesley Stahl
Topic: Arms control

1 Stahl: Mr. President, back on your Arms Control Director nomination, Kenneth Adelman. He was quoted today in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing as having said that, “Arms talks are a sham that we just have to play out to keep the American people and European allies happy.”
5 With that kind of statement on the record from him, and with the fact that he doesn’t have a lot of experience in arms control negotiations, are you not handing the Soviet Union a propaganda advantage in that propaganda war in Europe by presenting this man as our lead man on arms control?
9 President: No, I don’t believe so . . .

In (28), an account of bad economic news is associated with the claim that “more people” are becoming concerned about interest rates. The Reagan Administration’s own deficit spending is portrayed, by implication at least (line 6) as contributing to the problem. Thus the fact that interest rates are problematic is the presumptive basis for an assertive N-I question about the possibility of action to reduce interest rates:

(28) Press Conference of Ronald W. Reagan, October 19, 1983
Journalist: Unknown
Topic: Interest rates
Journalist: Mr. President, new figures out today show that housing starts were down pretty sharply last month, and the number of building permits went down for the second month in a row. Analysts are saying this could mean the economic recovery is going to level off, maybe kind of peter out next year. And more people are becoming concerned about high interest rates. And given the big deficits being projected by your own administration, isn’t it time for some strong action by you to get interest rates down?

President: Well, I think what we’re doing is aimed at getting interest rates down...
Discussion

This brief examination of a single interrogative form over a half-century of US presidential news conferences sheds new light on previously-documented patterns of change in relations between journalists and Presidents. On the one hand, it validates our earlier finding that journalists have grown more assertive in their dealings with the President over time, and that this change is markedly discontinuous across two historical eras that are divided by the presidency of Richard Nixon. On the other hand, our relatively “thick description” of one particularly assertive question form in use also reveals that our previous analysis understated the magnitude of the change, and the extent to which the tenor of questioning practices in these two eras is distinctive. Not only did assertive negative interrogatives become markedly more frequent after 1968, they were also increasingly mobilized to address matters that were substantively adversarial toward the President and his Administration. Two further elements of this trend are particularly noteworthy. First, the use of adversarial statements as prefaces to assertive negative interrogative questions, and second, within the context of that development the deployment of negative interrogatives that treat the content of these prefaces as presuppositionally given. Together these trends indicate an increasing willingness on the part of journalists to highlight administration problems and failings and to hold the President to account. In sum, the Presidents who followed Richard Nixon found themselves facing a substantially harsher climate of journalistic questioning than did their predecessors. Indeed, during this period the parameters of questioning underwent a process of elaboration that stretched the meaning of “neutralism” in the context of broadcast journalism.

We believe that the results of this paper exemplify the utility of combining quantitative and distributional analyses with qualitative characterization of language form.
and sociopolitical content. In our own research on broadcast news interviews, we began with qualitative analyses of specific questioning practices as instantiated in singular instances of use. Subsequently, we used these findings to develop a coding scheme that was aimed at measuring the aggressiveness of questioning across historical eras and varying social circumstances. The coding scheme was validated by the prior qualitative work showing how these practices were deployed and responded to, but it was inherently limited in its ability to reveal the detailed texture of questioning in news conferences. In this paper we have returned to a more qualitative treatment of journalistic questioning, but we now have the advantage of hindsight. Our qualitative analysis can now be situated within a context of documented historical trends in questioning in this arena. As we have suggested, we believe the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

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NOTES
1. Margaret Warner’s mention of “Jim” in line 5 is a reference to longtime PBS NewsHour anchor, Jim Lehrer.
2. In this case, the assertiveness of the N-I is mitigated by the initial frame of the question (”I wondered, Sir, if . . .”). A similar frame mitigates the assertiveness of the N-I in the next example (excerpt 11).
3. General Lucius Clay was American Commander during the Berlin Airlift of 1948 that relieved the Soviet blockade of the Western part of the city. In 1961, during the Berlin Wall crisis he returned to Berlin as special advisor to President Kennedy.
4. Vice President Agnew gave several speeches during 1969, vigorously attacking opponents of President Nixon’s Vietnam policies and giving aggressive support to those policies.
5. The “Hyde Amendment” in question here bars the use of certain federal funds to pay for abortions. Introduced by Republican Congressman Henry Hyde in 1976 as a “rider” to annual appropriations bills, it primarily affects poorer patients whose needs are served through the Medicare program.

REFERENCES


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