This article provides an overview of the dynamics of answering and resisting or evading questions in broadcast news interviews. After a preliminary examination of the practices through which answers are recognizably constructed, the analysis turns to the practices through which interviewees manage responses that resist the agenda of an interviewer’s question. When resisting overtly, interviewees engage in various forms of “damage control.” When resisting covertly, interviewees take steps to render the resistance less conspicuous. Both sets of practices facilitate resistant responses by reducing the negative consequences that might otherwise follow. Such practices demonstrate that, although interviewees have developed practices for resisting questions, the norm of answering remains a salient feature of the contemporary broadcast news interview. (Interview, news interview, questions and answers, interrogation, broadcast talk, political communication, Conversation Analysis.)

When Albert Gore was Bill Clinton’s vice presidential running mate in 1992, Gore’s position on abortion became the focus of controversy. As a legislator, Gore had opposed federal funding for most abortions, but now he was expressing support for it as part of Clinton’s health care reform plan. In an aggressive interview conducted by Sam Donaldson, Gore received a barrage of tough questions exposing this apparent contradiction. He was momentarily rescued by a commercial break, at which point he was urged by his media advisor to sidestep questions of this sort: “Don’t be afraid to turn their questions. If they ask you about [abortion], just say . . . ‘I want to talk today about the new direction that Governor Clinton and I want to take the country.’”

There is a widespread perception that politicians are frequently evasive under questioning from members of the news media, and this perception is not without merit (Bavelas et al. 1988; Bull 1994, 1998; Bull & Mayer 1993; Clayman 1993; Greatbatch 1986b; Harris 1991). The impetus to resist a line of questioning is understandable, given the adversarial character of contemporary journalism. In news interviews – as well as press conferences and other forms of interrogation – journalists are drawn to questions that are unflattering, incriminating, or otherwise hostile in character. If answered straightforwardly, these can inflict damage on a politician’s policy objectives, career prospects, and personal reputation. When
1996 presidential candidate Bob Dole was questioned about the addictiveness of tobacco, his equivocal response was roundly attacked by the Clinton campaign and received weeks of unfavorable media coverage. On the other side of the Atlantic, a question about the Labour Party’s opposition to nuclear weapons prompted party leader Neil Kinnock to give a cavalier response that was subsequently exploited by the Tories and helped ensure Thatcher’s reelection in 1987. And it is not only politicians who face such dangers: no interviewee is immune. In response to a question about the absence of African Americans at the managerial level in professional baseball, Al Campanis, vice president of the Los Angeles Dodgers, made some racially insensitive remarks which caused such an uproar that he was fired the next day. To avoid consequences like these, interviewees may be motivated to be less than forthcoming in the face of hostile questioning.

However, evasiveness has a downside. Answering questions is treated as a basic moral obligation, not only for public figures in journalistic interviews but also for interactional participants more generally (Schegloff 1968, Heritage 1984:245–53, Raymond 1998). But while interactants generally expect each other to be properly responsive to questions, the responsive conduct of politicians is perhaps more closely scrutinized, so that attempts to resist, sidestep, or evade can be costly in a variety of ways.

Interviewers themselves monitor for evasiveness, and such maneuvers can be met with probing follow-up questions and negative sanctions (Greatbatch 1986a). When Clinton administration Treasury secretary Robert Rubin sidestepped a difficult question about gasoline taxes and instead offered a rosy analysis of the overall economy, he was reprimanded for his slipperiness: “When we ask people like you a simple question . . . you do the light fantastic instead of giving us a direct answer.” Sanctions like these, in addition to upping the ante for a genuine answer, also constitute the previous response as indeed evasive, thereby exposing and highlighting that quality for the broadcast audience. Interviewers have not always been quite so aggressive, but the impetus to monitor for and respond to evasiveness is now rooted in the adversarial culture of contemporary American journalism (Clayman and Heritage in press a). Journalist-interviewers gain professional status on the basis of aggressive questioning, and they pride themselves on the skill with which they can pursue and pin down recalcitrant interviewees.2

Monitoring by journalists can also extend beyond the occasion of the interview itself. Subsequent news stories about interviews and press conferences often contain excerpts (in the form of quotations and sound bites) that show public figures to be refusing to answer questions, or initially resisting questions, or answering only after being repeatedly pressed to do so (Clayman 1990). When Texas governor George W. Bush, early in his 2000 campaign for the presidency, gave less than forthcoming answers to questions about his cocaine use, there
followed a virtual feeding frenzy of stories dissecting the ramifications of his evasiveness. A similar fate befell President Bill Clinton following his artful responses to questions about Monica Lewinsky. An act of evasion can thus become a newsworthy event in its own right, and a persistent source of unfavorable publicity.

Even when journalists allow such maneuvers to pass without comment, there may still be consequences for the broadcast audience and in public opinion. Insofar as a resistant response is noticed by audience members, they will seek to account for the breach of conduct via inferences that are apt to be unflattering or incriminating. Audience members may infer that the interviewee has some ulterior motive for avoiding the question, or that he or she has something to hide. American citizens may have a constitutionally protected right to remain silent in the face of police questioning, so that silence cannot be treated as incriminating in courts of law, but public figures have no such protection in the court of public opinion constituted by the journalistic interview.

In a nutshell, then, interviewees face a dilemma. There are various pressures, both from journalists and from the audience, from within the interview and in subsequent media coverage, to “just answer the question.” But when the question is adversarial, there are cross-cutting pressures to take precisely the opposite course of action. For those contemplating a resistant response, the problem is how to reap the benefits while minimizing the various costs associated with that risky course of action.

The management of interactional resistance, and the construction of answers more generally, is a neglected topic in studies of broadcast news interviews. Although there is lively interest in evasiveness as a phenomenon, prior research focuses mainly on distributional matters – on which politicians tend to sidestep questions disproportionately, and on the circumstances under which they do so (Bavelas et al. 1988, Harris 1991, Bull & Mayer 1993, Bull et al. 1996; Bull 1998). Less attention has been paid to more fundamental issues, such as what distinguishes an “evasion” from a genuine “answer,” the elementary forms that resistance to a question can take, and how acts of resistance are managed through specific discursive practices (Greatbatch 1986b, Clayman 1993, Bull 1994, Clayman & Heritage in press b).

This article provides an overview of the dynamics of answering and resisting questions in broadcast news interviews. An exhaustive treatment of this complex subject is, of course, beyond the scope of a single essay. The present objective is to delineate some of the main issues involved and some of the main practices mobilized to manage responses that resist the agenda of a question. The primary database consists of more than 100 news interviews broadcast in the United States and England over the past two decades. A second and much smaller data set consists of journalistic questioning in other contexts, including U.S. presidential press conferences and campaign debates.
Evasiveness is an elusive phenomenon, and its analysis is fraught with conceptual pitfalls. The concept is, in the first instance, a familiar part of interactants’ ordinary language for characterizing and sanctioning conduct, but it is also deployed by social scientists in technical analyses of such conduct. This raises numerous difficulties, including the question of the perspective from which evasiveness is to be assessed.

One approach treats the analyst’s perspective as primary. Here, the boundary between “answering” and “evading” is something that the analyst determines by formulating a clear-cut operational definition, which can then serve as a benchmark from which to assess particular responses. This approach can generate informative results (e.g., Harris 1991, Bull & Mayer 1993, Bull 1994), but it becomes problematic when the analyst’s assessment diverges from that of the participants themselves. It is, after all, the participants’ own understandings of their conduct that are consequential for the way the interaction actually develops. In light of these considerations, and consistent with the Conversation Analytic tradition that informs this essay, here the participants’ perspective is treated as of primary importance in the analysis of responses. Thus, every effort is made to ground analyses in the understandings and orientations of interviewers and interviewees as these become manifest in the interaction itself.

This ideal can be difficult to achieve in practice. One problem is that the participants may not necessarily agree on the import of a particular response. While an interviewer may treat a given response as improperly evasive, the interviewee who produced it may treat it as an essentially valid way of dealing with a difficult and perhaps flawed question. In this connection, the very terms used by the analyst to characterize responses can become problematic. “Evasion” connotes moral impropriety and thus may be seen as embodying a contestable perspective on the action under analysis.

A more fundamental difficulty is the fact the participants’ understandings are not always transparent, and they may at times be designedly opaque. Consider that when an interviewee sidesteps a question, he or she may strive to conceal that fact in an effort to avoid various negative consequences that might otherwise follow (e.g. hostile follow-up questions, negative inferences). Correspondingly, even if the interviewer recognizes that the question has been sidestepped, he or she may decide to “let it pass” in the interest of moving the interview along. It is thus possible that an act of evasion may occur that is fully apparent to both participants, yet neither party registers that fact in any demonstrable way.

Accordingly, well-grounded analytic judgments must draw not only on resources internal to the particular instance under examination, but also on patterns of conduct that cut across numerous cases. Moreover, to maintain analytic clarity, I will adhere to the following terminological convention: I will reserve the term “evade/evasive” for actions that are treated as inadequately responsive by the
interview participants; other terms – e.g. resist, sidestep, agenda-shift – will be used more broadly to encompass responses that depart from the agenda of the question, but which the participants may not necessarily treat as inadequate on that occasion.

**DOING “ANSWERING”**

Any analysis of this subject must begin by considering the fundamental nature of answering as a type of social action. In the organization of interactional sequences, answers are responsive actions that become relevant only on the completion of a question, and questions in turn set an agenda of topics and tasks to be dealt with in subsequent talk (Heritage in press). Moreover, after a question has been produced, interactants monitor the ensuing talk to determine how it embodies an answer to the question (Schegloff 1968, 1972). What, then, constitutes an answer in this context? This may at first seem obvious: an answer is an action that addresses the agenda of topics and tasks posed by a previous question. What is less obvious is precisely how such responsiveness is displayed by interviewees (henceforth IEs) and recognized by interviewers (henceforth IRs) and members of the audience, in actual practice. This puzzle is complicated by the fact that there is no single primary indicator or marker of “answering” – unlike “questioning,” which is typically marked by interrogative syntax. How, then, do IEs indicate that they are indeed being responsive to the question at hand? In other words, how do they accomplish or do “answering”?

As a point of departure, consider that there are various paths or trajectories that answers may follow. Some answers take a roundabout trajectory; they begin with a unit of talk which cannot in itself be construed as a possible answer, but which is part of a larger stretch of talk that can be seen in its entirety as answering. For instance, when a conservative politician is asked (ex. [1], lines 1–2) about the attractions of a new workfare proposal – which would require those receiving unemployment benefits to work for them – his initial remarks (lines 3–10) do not, by themselves, answer the question. Instead of talking about the advantages of workfare, he begins by attacking the current unemployment program as “ludicrous” (lines 3–7), and he then goes on to say that reducing benefits is not a viable solution (lines 7–10). Only after he has in effect ruled out these other courses of action, taking three full sentences to do so, does he speak directly to the issue of the advantages of workfare (lines 11–13).

(1) **UK BBC Today: Social Security Cuts**

1 IR: … Mister Howell what are the attractions as you see them:
2  uh- of this workfare idea?
3 RH: .hh Well (. ) hh it seems to me to be ludicrous that we
4  are spending according to the government more than
5  eight billion pounds: in support of the unemployed on
6  condition that they do nothing whatsoever .hhh to(r)
7  help society. .hh And I believe the time has come
Although the initial remarks could not by themselves stand as an answer, they are not irrelevant to the question at hand. Indeed, the initial assessment of alternatives to workfare is a relevant prelude to rendering a comparative assessment of workfare itself. Thus, considered holistically, this entire turn can be seen as occupied with the task of answering the question. And IRs generally treat such roundabout answers, once completed, as adequate.

However, IRs do not in the first instance encounter completed turns; they monitor and evaluate turns incrementally, while they are unfolding. From that in-progress vantage point, the subsequent trajectory of a response may be decidedly uncertain. In the previous example, the IE could simply have attacked the alternatives without ever advancing an affirmative argument for workfare. To hear a roundabout response-in-progress as building toward a genuine answer to the question thus requires an interpretive leap of sorts.

This is a leap that IRs are not always willing to make. Thus, roundabout answers are initially vulnerable to being heard as evasive and are subject to countermeasures from the IR. Consider ex. (2), an excerpt from a 1985 interview with Pat Buchanan, shortly after he began serving as President Reagan’s second-term director of communications. The IR rather delicately makes the point (lines 2–6) that other administration officials don’t seem to like Buchanan very much and have leaked that view to the press, and he goes on to ask Buchanan (line 7) how that can happen. Buchanan responds (lines 9–11) by noting that there was a lotta that in the first term, and he begins to explain why. This could be the first component of a roundabout answer that will eventually deal with the current situation, but it could also be an effort by Buchanan to deflect the discussion away from himself. The IR takes the skeptical view, analyzing it as an incipient evasion; he interjects at line 12 (arrowed), pointing out that you weren’t in in the first term, thereby treating Buchanan’s turn—thus—far as irrelevant and unresponsive.

(2) US, 3 June 1985, Nightline: Patrick Buchanan

1 IR: Continuing our: conversation now with Pat Buchanan,
2 Pat- uh: (0.2) to put it as gently as I can there’re some
3 people: fairly high up in this administration who seem
4 to be able to contain their enthusiasm for you, hhh
5 And every once in a while stories crop up in thuh press
6 that one can only assume come from some o’ those folk. (0.2)
7 How does that sort of thing happen in an administration.
8 ()
9 PB: tlk. hhh Well I think ’ere was a lotta that in the
10 first term Ted, an’ = uh: > I think one o’ thuh reasons<
11 was you had—
It is possible that the design of the final question (line 7) unintentionally encourages Buchanan to begin his response as he does. Perhaps to soften what is plainly a face-threatening subject, the IR de-personalizes the question somewhat by asking how that sort of thing can happen, and this may license Buchanan’s decision to talk about a larger history of Reagan administration leaks. But whatever may have prompted this initial response, and whatever direction Buchanan may have pursued subsequently, the basic point is that a circuitous trajectory is vulnerable to being heard as evasive and may be pursued as such.

A more common type of trajectory establishes the “answering” character of the talk early on. This trajectory may be termed minimal answer plus elaboration; it begins with a first unit of talk in response that provides the information targeted by the question, albeit in a minimal way, followed by subsequent talk that clarifies and elaborates. For instance, a yes/no question can prompt an initial one-sentence expression of affirmation or negation before that answer is elaborated. An explicit “yes” or “no” may be included in the initial response, which is the normative way of answering a yes/no question (Raymond 1998). For example:


IR: tch .hh Are you willing () personally to renounce the violence () in that country. (0.6)
AB: → .hh Yes I will. I mean I have said so on Saturday I was on a platform …

Similarly, a wh-type question (how long below) can prompt an initial one-sentence provision of the requested information (arrowed) prior to further elaboration:

(4) UK, Newsnight: China 2

IR: And how long how long will that take and how long has he got to prove he can do it?
ZM: → .hhhh Ah: (0.2) it ti- (0.2) maybe it take uh one or two years () to do that. (0.7) And I think ah that …

Like a standard written paragraph, this trajectory of answering begins with an initial unit of talk that minimally fills the information gap targeted by the question, while subsequent talk furnishes details that clarify, support, or elaborate.
Furthermore, the initial remark’s relevance to the question is often marked by various surface features of the remark’s design. Perhaps the most obvious way of marking question-relevance is to incorporate some of the wording of the question into the initial response (Roth 1996, Schegloff 1998). The repetition may involve a single key word – confront**ation** in ex. (5):

(5) UK, Newsnight: Tienanmen Square Uprisings

IR Jonathan first () let me ask you; uh what is the latest situation are we any nearer: the actual () straight

→ **confrontation** between the troops and the students () in the square.

JM: → Well I think we’ve already had this **confrontation**. The: uh citizens of Peking. hhh and of course . . .

A larger phrase may also be repeated, such as side effects in ex. (6):

(6) US, 8 Dec. 1985, Face the Nation: Cancer Treatment

IR: → .hhh Now te**ll** us about uh=the side effects. hhh Is it as toxic () a:s chemotherapy, â€œ it as poisonous: an- () to the system and what=are the other

→ side effects.

SR: → The side effects could be quite severe, but they’re somewhat different than the kinds of side effects that one sees with uh with chemotherapy. hhh The major

→ side effect is a buildup of fluid in the body. . . .

An IE may go still further, incorporating the entire framework of the question into the initial response and thereby matching his response word for word to the question at hand:

(7) US, 13 March 1979, World at One: Mineworkers Strike

IR: → And what do you think the result of the ballot will be.

AS: → I::: think that the result of the ballot will most probably be acceptance of the deal; () but it could be: er closer than most people expect.

This latter mode of response can seem exaggerated or hypercorrect, and it may indicate an undercurrent of resistance or hostility to the question.3 But the general import of repeating lexical items from the question remains much the same across these examples. Through this practice, IEs can propose that they are attending to the question in detail and are thus properly responsive to the issues that it raises.

Most of the practices examined thus far involve similarities in phrasing, but other practices for doing “answering” work quite differently. Certain indexical expressions, namely those involving anaphoric reference, have meanings that are inextricably linked to the prior question. The simplest type involves the use of a pronoun that refers to the issue raised by the question, such as that in ex. (8) (arrowed):

Language in Society 30:3 (2001)
Here the IR asks whether the South African government’s imposition of a state of emergency is working to stop the violence there. The IE’s response – It is perhaps too soon to make a judgment on that – ends with a pronoun that acquires its meaning by referring to the matter raised by the previous question.

It is not only pronouns that have this back-referencing character. For example, certain verbs are also heavily context-dependent for their meaning, such as was in ex. (9) (arrowed):

(9) UK, 5 Nov. 1979, ATV Today: Innocent Man
   Int: .hh Were you surprised when you: w- went to court, an- and indeed went down,
   TS: → .hhh .hhh I was mos- I- I certainly was,
   in fact I- I. hh all the way up to the- to the court…

In the context of the prior question (Were you surprised), the response (I certainly was) can readily be understood as meaning “was surprised.”

Units of talk that are shorter than a sentence also tend to be parasitic on the question for their meaning. For example, the initial phrasal response below – Child support offices – can be understood in context as advancing a claim that “child support offices will be the judge of good cause.”

(10) UK, Today: Child Support
   IR: .hh But who’s going to be the judge of that, the judge of good cause:..
   RH: → .hhh Child support offices.
   Ahm in the local offices and in our regional centers .hh ah we’ll look at each case very very carefully …

Finally, certain turn-initial discourse markers also refer to the previous question. Answers to why-type questions may be prefaced by because, which identifies what follows as an explanation fitted to the question. For example:

(11) US, 18 Sept. 1992, MacNeil/Lehrer: Perot
   IR: So why don’t you go ahead and (. ) say:
   RP: → I’m( ) a candidate for pr[esident?
   [Because that’s not (. )
   where the organization is now.
   Our organization ( ) is to tally focused on trying
to get both parties to do the job. (0.7) That’s why.

In all these cases, the sense of the initial remark is, by itself, indeterminate at least to some extent. Observers must refer to the question to disambiguate the
remark, and in so doing its meaning is “filled in” in a way that is thoroughly question-relevant.

In analyzing these various practices for doing “answering,” it may seem that we are expending a great deal of energy for a modest payoff. However, these practices are far more significant than the analysis thus far suggests. As we shall see, not only do they figure in genuine efforts to answer the question; in addition, IEs can use them subversively in maneuvers that are substantively resistant.

**DIMENSIONS OF RESISTANCE**

Resisting a question is, like answering, a complex phenomenon. We can begin to dissect this phenomenon by drawing a basic conceptual distinction between two dimensions or aspects of resistance.

*The Negative Dimension*

The negative aspect is manifest to the degree that the IE’s response falls short of an adequate answer to the question. In the strongest variation on this theme, the IE declines to provide any information at all that bears on the question. For example, when a member of the Labour Party is asked about his willingness to serve in a cabinet committed to unilateral nuclear disarmament, he flatly refuses to answer (arrowed): 4:

(12) UK, Greatbatch 1986b:451: Unilateral Nuclear Disarmament

IR: You wouldn’t serve in a Cabinet committed to unilateral nuclear disarmament of Britain would you
Mister Shore?
PS:.hh What I do believe:: er: Mister Day (which)
→ I will not answer that question, I’m not (.)
→ deliberately answering that question.
What I do believe is this: I do actually genuinely believe
long believe: (d) .hhh that unilateral initiatives: (. can
assist (. ) multilateral disarmament . . .

In a less extreme form of negative resistance, the IE provides an answer that is partial or incomplete. For instance, in the face of a two-part question, an IE may address one part while leaving the other unanswered. Thus, in a Nixon press conference held during the Watergate period, a journalist first asks (beginning at arrow 1 in ex. [13]) whether Nixon is personally investigating charges that his campaign funds were mishandled, and he then asks (arrow 2) whether the charges will hurt his bid for reelection.

(13) US, 29 August 1972: Nixon Press Conference

JRN: 1 → Mr. President, are you personally investigating
the mishandling of some of your campaign funds,
2 → and do you agree with Secretary Connolly that
these charges are harmful to your reelection?
RN: Well, I commented upon this on other occasions,
and I will repeat my position now.
With regard to the matter of the handling of campaign funds, we have a new law here in which technical violations have occurred and are occurring, apparently, on both sides. As far as we are concerned, we have in charge, in Secretary Stans, a man who is an honest man and one who is very meticulous – as I have learned from having him as my treasurer and finance chairman in two previous campaigns – in the handling of matters of this sort. Whatever technical violations have occurred, certainly he will correct them and will thoroughly comply with the law. He is conducting any investigation on this matter, and conducting it very, very thoroughly, because he doesn’t want any evidence at all to be outstanding, indicating that we have not complied with the law.

Nixon targets only the first question for response (see arrow 3), and he never gets around to addressing the second question about political implications.

Another type of incomplete answer is a simple yes-or-no reply to a yes/no question. In the news interview context, IEs normally are expected to produce elaborated answers (Heritage & Greatbatch 1991), so that minimal yes-or-no responses (arrows 1 in ex. [14]) can be seen as inadequate. They indicate tacit resistance to the broader agenda of the question, and they regularly lead IRs to probe for further elaboration (arrows 2):

(14) US, Meet the Press, 24 Oct. 1993

IR: . . . hh Madam Attorney General you’ve testified this week- u- in front of Congress about . h violence and television. . hhh And said that if the TV industry didn’t in effect clean itself up, clean its act up, . hhh there may be government intervention. Government regulation. (0.4) Thuh New York Times in an editorial said that (. ) you embarked on a quote <dangerous embrace of censorship. > (0.3) Didju?

IE: 1 → No. (0.2)

IR: 2 → . hhhh What kind of government intervention are you thinking about? Would you ban: programs like NYPD: Law and Order, would you [uh:

IE: 1 → [No. (]

IR: 2 → W. What are we talking about.

IE: We’re talking about (. ) asking the media to stop talking (. ) about what it promises to do, and do it.

In any case, to the extent that IEs avoid coming forth with an adequate answer, they have exhibited resistance in its negative aspect.

The Positive Dimension

Resistance has a positive dimension as well. This is manifest to the degree that an IE moves beyond the parameters of the question, saying and doing things that
were not specifically called for. These departures vary greatly in magnitude and in kind. The most dramatic form of departure involves a substantial change of topic. For instance, following a question about nuclear waste disposal (lines 1–3 in ex. [15]), an expert not only refuses to answer (lines 5–6); she then goes on (lines 7–10) to refute allegations made much earlier in the program regarding the Three Mile Island accident and its health consequences. The issue of power plant accidents is rather far removed from that of routine waste disposal efforts.

(15) US, 6 June 1985, Nightline: Nuclear Waste

1  IR:  Continuing our conversation now with Doctor Rosalyn Yalow.
2  Doctor Yalow uh- ehh lemme put it in very simple terms.
3  If it’s doable, if it is: easily disposable, why don’t we.
4  (1.0)
5  RY:  Well frankly I cannot- (.) Answer all these scientific
6  questions in one minute given to me. On the other
7  hand there was one horrible thing that happened tonight
8  that you have- .h in addition extended. hh And that is
9  thuh NOTion that there is an increased incidence of
10  cancer associated with the Three Mile Island accident.

Here the IE veers sharply away from the topic of the question and toward a substantially different area of discussion.

Alternatively, a response may lie within the question’s topical parameters but perform a task or action other than what was specifically requested by the question. Thus, in ex. (16), when Senator Bob Dole is asked whether he would support the reappointment of the Federal Reserve Board chairman (lines 1–3), Dole offers a generally favorable assessment of the chairman’s past performance (line 4), but he does not specifically endorse his reappointment (presumably in deference to the political independence traditionally granted to the Fed). This evasive maneuver does not escape the notice of the IR, who presses again for an explicit endorsement (line 5):

(16) US, This Week: Senator Bob Dole (from Donaldson 1987)

1  IR:  Talking about money, what about Paul Volcker, whose term
2  is up next year? Would you like to see him reappointed
3  to the Fed?
4  BD:  I, I think he’s been very effective.
5  IR:  Well, would you like to see him reappointed?

Here, the response is, broadly speaking, within the topical parameters of the question – it is “about” Paul Volcker – but it can be regarded as evasive nonetheless because it performs a different task than the question originally called for.

The most subtle form of evasion is embodied in those responses that alter the terms of the question ever so slightly. Consider ex. (17), from an interview with the deputy secretary of defense, John Deutch, on the subject of Gulf War syndrome. Across this excerpt, the IR tries to get Deutch either to confirm or to deny reports that U.S. troops were exposed to chemical weapons during the Gulf War.
However, Deutch will not be pinned down; although he repeatedly offers denials, all are in some way qualified.  

(17) US, 12 March 1995 60 Minutes: Gulf War Syndrome  
1 JD: hh Our most th:orugh (0.2) and careful efforts to  
2 determine (.) whether chemical agents were used in  
3 the Gulf, (.) hh lead us to conclude that there was  
4 no: (.) widespread use of chemicals against U.S. troops. =  
5 IR: =Was there any use. =Forget w[idespread. Was there any use.]  
6 JD: [I- I do not believe]  
7 I do not believe there was any: offensive use of chemical  
8 agents by: uh uh- Iraqi: (0.2) uh military: (.) troops.  
9 There was not-  
10 IR: [Was there any- any accidental use. Were our troops  
11 exposed in any way:.  
12 (0.4)  
13 JD: .hhh Uh- I do not believe that our troops were:  
14 exposed in any widespread way to: uh: chemical  
15 IR: [In any narrow  
16 way.=In any way.  
17 JD: hh .hh The defense science board did an independent  
18 study of this matter. hh [and foun]d in their judgement. =  
19 IR: [ ]  
20 JD: =that there was no:: confirmation hh of chemical:  
21 (0.2) weapon (0.2) widespread use: in the Gulf.  

The deputy secretary first denies that our troops were exposed to any widespread use of chemical weapons (lines 1–4). The IR seeks to disallow this qualifying adjective by asking about any use whatsoever (line 5), but the IE again qualifies his response but in a different way (6–8), this time denying only that there was offensive use. When the IR tries to disallow that qualification (10–11), the IE switches back to his previous qualifying adjective, restricting his denial to widespread exposure (13–14). This maneuver is countered more aggressively by the IR, who interjects his next pursuit just after the qualifying adjective is introduced and before the IE has reached a possible completion point (14–15). He makes one last attempt to elicit a blanket denial, but the IE holds fast to his more cautious position (17–21). The deputy secretary’s caution is not difficult to understand: any confirmation would presumably expose the government to numerous lawsuits, while a flat denial may be unsupportable and may even contradict current or future evidence. He manages to avoid both alternatives repeatedly, and in a rather subtle way. He presents himself as if he were being dutifully responsive, but in each case he winds up denying a proposition that is narrower in scope than the one posed by the original question.  

Finally, even responses that do address the agenda of the question, but contain additional turn components that shift away from that agenda (as in exx. [18–20]), are treated as problematic in the news interview context (Greatbatch 1986b). This is a product of the distinctive turn-taking system that organizes news interview talk, which obligates IEs to restrict themselves to the action of answering IRs’ questions (Greatbatch 1988, Heritage & Greatbatch 1991). Given this normative
constraint on IEs’ talk, any attempt to produce something other than an answer – even as a supplement to an otherwise responsive answer – may be regarded as an improper diversion from the agenda at hand.

By changing the topic of a question, the task that it poses, or the specific terms in which it is framed, IEs can loosen the strictures inherent in being on the receiving end of an interrogation. Any such maneuver is resistant in the affirmative sense and constitutes an effort to shift the agenda of the question.

OVERT PRACTICES

Given the various dimensions of resistance, how are such maneuvers actually managed by IEs? IEs deploy a wide range of discursive practices in such contexts, and these can be understood in terms of the way they reduce the risks associated with a resistant course of action.

One set of practices is used when IEs choose to be up front and explicit about what is taking place. The strategy of resisting a question overtly has, from the IE’s point of view, an obvious disadvantage: It renders the resistance conspicuous, and hence more likely to be noticed by the IR and the media audience. However, this disadvantage is offset by an equally important advantage: Having admitted the evasion, an IE can take steps to minimize the damage that it might otherwise cause. Three forms of damage control will be examined as they figure in efforts to shift away from the agenda of the question.

Deferece to the IR

IEs often preface their agenda shifts with remarks that display some degree of deference to the IR. Perhaps the greatest deference is conveyed when the IE actually requests permission from the IR to shift the agenda.7

In ex. (18), for example, a China expert first answers a question about whether recent civil unrest will strengthen the position of reform-oriented officials in that country (lines 4–13), and he then goes on to talk about various other matters (16–25), including the generational shift in Chinese leadership and problems of corruption. However, he does not raise these other matters without first requesting (arrow 1) and receiving (arrow 2) permission from the IR to do so.

(18) UK, Newsnight: Civil Unrest in China

1 IR: Well what do you think do you think this strengthen:s
2 (1.0) a great deal: the hand of Zhao Ze Young and the
3 reformers, the radicals.
4 DH: I think that (0.2) Jao Ze Young just as he was
5 responsible for bringing (.) China out of the turbulence
6 which followed the .hhh uh resignation of Hu Yao Bung as
7 General Secretary in=uh January nineteen eighty seven.
8 .Hhh just as he (.) brought China out of that turbulence
9 he will bring China out of this turbulence. hhh and I
10 think his stature has already been increased (.) by
11 recent events (.) h and ah (.) I’ll go out on a limb

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A similar request appears in ex. (19), an excerpt from a debate interview concerning health care reform. The IE – a health insurance industry executive who opposes President Clinton’s health care reform plan – is asked whether anti-reform TV ads disclose the fact that they were paid for by the insurance industry (lines 1–4). She answers this question in the affirmative (5–8), but she then goes on (arrow 1) to ask the IR for permission to comment on an issue raised earlier in the program by a reform proponent (Ron). When the IR grants permission (arrow 2), she proceeds to address this other issue (which has to do with whether the so-called Coalition for Health Insurance Choices is actually an association of insurance companies masquerading as a grass-roots public interest group).

(19) US, 21 Oct. 1993, MacNeil/Lehrer: Health Care Ad War

1 IR: hhh Well Miss Jenckes he raises an interesting question. =
2 Again just as a matter of strategy your ad doesn’t
3 say: that it’s sponsored by the health (.)
4 insurance companies]
5 LJ: [Margaret that’s absolutely incorrect. .hh Our ads
6 (.) whether they’re on TV, .hh our print a-advertisements,
7 that appear in newspapers .hh even radio spots indicate
8 that we have paid for it. =
9 1  → Let me may: just make one
10 comment in terms of what Ron: says.
11 IR: [hhhh [wh-
12 IR: 2  → All right.]
13 LJ: [h h h] Of course any coalition, I don’t care
14 whether it’s Save the Whales .hh I mean Common Cause
15 you always start with like minded people. But whether
16 you’re an agent or a broker, .hh you have legitimate
17 health care concerns yourself... 

Requests for permission openly acknowledge that a shift of the agenda is in the works. In ex. (19), the IE specifically indicates (lines 9–10) that she wishes to respond not to the IR’s question, but to a point made earlier by another IE. At the same time, however, such requests defer to the IR as the one who is properly in charge of the discussion agenda.

The IE may also offer what Greatbatch 1988 has termed a token request for permission to shift the agenda; this resembles an actual request but is not
treated as requiring a response from the IR. Thus, in ex. (20), a discussion of newly proposed legislation to restrict access to abortion, an anti-abortion advocate answers a legalistic question about the wording of legislation, but she then goes on to argue that current law is too permissive. She prefaces this agenda shift with a request-like object, *can I also point out* (arrowed).

(20) UK, Afternoon Plus: Abortion

1 IR: Jill Knight may I ask you how far that’s going to be put
2 into practice and [what- who: is going to de|ide what=
3 JK: [Ye::s`
4 IR: =i]s serious and what [is a substantial-
5 JK: [Ye::s'] [.uh uh
6 JK: Well of course the doctor: and u::h thub-
7 [in other areas wh|here medical- th|medical profession=
8 (): [(
9 JK: =is practiced .hh doctors’ve been quite capable of
10 deciding what’s serious, .-) and what substantial means,
11 -> .hh And can I also point out, ..hh that u::h
12 Professor Huntingford whom you had on .hh your
13 program in December:: .hh supporting the abortion act
14 .hh u::h eh said (;) really (;) again quite recently
15 there’s no do(h)ub abo(h)ut it =we have got abortion on
16 ^request, .hh and this is what parliament did NOT ask for .

Notice that the IR makes no attempt either to grant or to refuse permission, and the IE does not seem to expect a response. Indeed, she actively discourages a response by building her token request as an incomplete clausal unit (*can I also point out that . . .*), which projects further talk to come. Because they provide so little opportunity for response, token requests are somewhat less deferential than their full-fledged counterparts. Nevertheless, they do show the IE to be “going through the motions” of seeking permission, thereby continuing at least to acknowledge the principle that it is the IR who normally sets the agenda.

Whether they are “genuine” or “pro forma,” requests for permission openly acknowledge the fact that an agenda shift is being contemplated. At the same time, however, these practices alleviate some of the interpersonal damage that an agenda shift can cause. Agenda shifts constitute, among other things, a threat to the IR’s control over the course of the discussion. Any effort to seek permission mitigates that threat by deferring to the IR and sustaining a sense in which the IR remains at least formally in charge.

**Minimizing the Divergence**

A second form of damage control involves downplaying the agenda shift by portraying it as insignificant, a minor digression from the agenda established by the question. Requests for permission often contain **minimizing characterizations**, such as reference to “a very quick” or “just one” comment.
In addition to temporal and numerical minimizers, the inclusion of the adverb “just” further downgrades what is about to be said, as in the preceding example and again in the following:

(23) UK, Today: Child Support
   RH: Can I say just to (set) the context . . .
In each of these ways, the divergence is cast as a slight digression from the framework of the question.

Justifying the Shift

IEs may also strive to EXPLAIN and JUSTIFY their efforts to divert the discussion. Justifications may be embedded within requests for permission. For example, in ex. (24), a discussion of the 1992 vice presidential debate, a Republican strategist first responds to a question about the performance of Ross Perot’s vice presidential candidate, Admiral Stockdale, but he then shifts the agenda (lines 14–16) to defend George Bush’s flip-flop on abortion, and he prefaces this shift with a token request for permission (arrowed):

   1 IR: .hhhh Uh Bill Kristol, does Stockdale’s performance
   2 tonight take some of the air: (. ) out of the the
   3 Pe[rot balloon:n: just as it was getting blown up again.
   4 WK: [p H H Hhhh]
   5 (0.6)
   6 WK: Uh: I’m not sure about that Chris. I think the: ah:
   7 two things were remember- we’ll remember about Admirable
   8 Stock- Admiral Stockdale tonight ah: are his: very strong
   9 denunciation of Al Gore’s extreme environmentalism: hh
   10 and his statement about the important of cah- portance
   11 of character. h to leadership. Both of those statements
   12 will: (reboun:d) to the benefit of President Bush.
   13 .hh Ah and on that last point
   14 → if I could just speak to Molly’s point: uh before the break,
   15 uhm President Bush changed his mind about abortion an:d
   16 said so . . .

This token request contains justificatory elements, and these are embodied in how the requested action is characterized. Instead of asking generically to “say one more thing” or “make an additional point,” this IE asks specifically to address Molly’s point before the break. This way of characterizing what he wants to do is not technically necessary for the token request to be intelligible; it is a choice that provides an implicit rationale for the agenda shift. In the context of a debate interview involving partisan IEs, portraying the shift as a response to a point
made earlier by an opposing IE tacitly justifies the shift on the grounds of fairness and the principle that partisan accusations should not be permitted to stand unanswered. In addition, the shift is characterized in relation to an impending commercial break, further justifying the maneuver by explaining why it is being launched at this particular point in time.

Justifications can also appear outside of permission requests, where they tend to be more explicit and elaborate. An example is highlighted in ex. (25). The IR asks whether corporate mergers are creating monopolistic entities, and the IE briefly addresses this issue, but he then raises other concerns about mergers. Before doing so, however, he justifies this shift (arrowed) on the basis that it will concern the most important problem with corporate mergers, one that has not yet been addressed in the interview.

(25) US, 5 June 1985, Nightline: Corporate Mergers
IR: .hhh Senator Metzenbaum take me back to the- to that difference: that uh Mister Forbes made a moment ago, between monopolies and what we have today; which it seems in- in some instances is moving .hh at least (0.2) gradually in the direction of a monopoly. is it not? (0.3)
HM: Well I think that some mergers (.) don’t have any element of monopoly in them at all. .hh Uh for example General Motors buying Hughes Aircraft (’m-) not at all certain that there’s any monopoly (.) issues there. (0.5)
→ On the other hand I think the real concern that hasn’t been addressed (.) previously (.) in this program (0.7)
HAS to do with the fact that… ((parenthetical comment omitted))
... when you have a major merger of this kind, (0.2) of the Kind that we’ve been talking about on this program, (hh) you have to worry A does it eliminate (.) competition and therefore what does it do to the consumers, .h uh secondly you have to be concerned as to the impact (.) on the shareholders, (0.4) and third but certainly not least of the three, (.) is the impact upon the community …

The rationales offered for agenda shifts tend, not surprisingly, to exclude naked self-interest as a motivating factor. Instead, such rationales fall into one of two basic categories. One argument, common in panel interviews involving partisan IEs, is based on an implicit principle of fairness and the need to respond to points raised by opposing IEs. Ex. (24) typifies this rationale, but other examples are commonplace:

(26) US, 3 Feb. 1992, MacNeil/Lehrer: Haitian Refugee Repatriation
BA: Ahm: let me just respond to a few things that (.) Congressman Rangel said…

(27) US, 21 Oct. 1993, MacNeil/Lehrer: Health Care Ad War
LJ: Let me may- just make one comment in terms of what Ron: says
Alternatively, unsolicited material may be justified on the basis that it has a significant bearing on the overarching subject at hand. This type of rationale is illustrated in ex. (25); other examples include the following:

(28) UK, Today: Child Support

RH: Can I say just to (set) the context ...

(29) US, 5 May 1996, This Week: Gas Tax Repeal

RR: But I think there’s really a much bigger (0.4) this is part of a much bigger picture ...

In either case, the import of this practice remains much the same. Such accounts acknowledge the fact that a shift of the agenda is in progress, and they even grant that this constitutes a breach of interview etiquette. But by providing a justification grounded in principles of fairness or relevance to the discussion agenda, IEs present that breach in a favorable light.

The Special Case of Refusing to Answer

Justificatory accounts become particularly elaborate and strenuous when the IE overtly refuses to answer the question altogether. This follows from the fact that such refusals constitute a particularly strong breach of etiquette. It is one thing to make some effort to answer the question before proceeding to shift the agenda; it is quite another to decline to answer altogether (Greatbatch 1986b). Accordingly, justificatory accounts are crucial in this context.

Various rationales may be offered to account for a refusal to answer, but they tend to have one element in common: They deflect responsibility away from the IE and onto some circumstantial factor. For instance, one common rationale is to claim that the information necessary to answer the question is unavailable. Thus, in ex. (30), when a medical researcher is asked whether a new cancer treatment may have other applications, he suggests that the information is not yet available because the relevant research has not yet been done:

(30) US, 8 Dec. 1985, Face the Nation: Cancer Treatment

IR: Uh two final questions. Doctor Rosenberg, d’you see this having application for other diseases, like multiple sclerosis or even AIDS, (0.4)

SR: We haven’t yet begun: to explore that, although I think possibilities exist ’at need to be investigated ’n I think other:: scientists will be looking at those questions.

Notice that the IE does not merely assert that he doesn’t know the answer, which might taint his reputation as a medical expert. In general, don’t know accounts in news interviews usually contain some further explanation for the IE’s lack of information. Indeed, when a simple don’t know account is offered without any further explanation (arrow 1 in ex. [31]), it is pursued by the IR (arrow 2) in a way that strongly implies that the IE ought to know the answer in some form.
(31) US, 22 July 1985, News Hour: South Africa
IR: Who are these people.
(0.7)
HB: 1 → I do not know.
IR: 2 → =You don’t know the nays- I don’t mean their names obviously but I mean what kind of people are falling- [are falling- (0.4) into the category uh those =]
HB: [I would ha-]
IR: =thetch- need to be arrested.

Alternatively, the IE may suggest that he or she knows the answer but is unable to provide it under current circumstances. The temporal limitations of the broadcast interview are often cited – as in ex. (32), when a nuclear physicist asserts that she cannot answer all these scientific questions in one minute given to me (arrowed).

(32) US, 6 June 1985, Nightline: Nuclear Waste
IR: Continuing our conversation now with Doctor Rosalyn Yalow. Doctor Yalow uh- ehh lemme put it in very simple terms. If it’s doable, if it is: easily disposable, why don’t we.
HB: [But I do.]
RY: → Well frankly I cannot- (.) answer all these scientific questions in one minute given to me…

An IE also may refuse to answer on the basis that to do so would be somehow inappropriate. When public officials are being interviewed, they often invoke the delicacies of official negotiations to deflect questions. In ex. (33), from a discussion of the federal budget, Senate majority leader Bob Dole is asked whether it will be necessary to cut social programs, raise taxes, or reduce defense spending in an effort to reduce the deficit, but Dole declines to answer (arrowed), arguing that to do so would be premature in advance of formal negotiations.

(33) US, 8 Dec. 1985, Meet the Press: Bob Dole
AH: You can’t have it both ways either.>On this program< you have said that you don’t think, .hhh that you’ll eliminate thirty to fifty programs, [an’] Senator Packwood=
BD: [()]
AH: =says ya have to, .hh Number two you say you hope you will not have a tax increase, [.hhhh And]=
BD: [But I do.]
AH: =number- and number three you say ya hope you can have ar [m o s t] three percent on:.hhhh on: on=
(): [()]]
AH: =defn:me, .hh And yet you hafta cut fifty billion next year. Now which o’those three is gonna give Senator, (0.4)
BD: → I think that’s going to happen sometime next year when → those of us: uh in- leadership positions= set=down → with the President and make the hard choice. I don’t → think I’d make it today: .hhhhh ih= in December of 1985.

Notice that this account, by proposing that TO ANSWER would be inappropriate, can also be taken to imply that THE QUESTION soliciting this answer was inap-
appropriate, although this is an unstated implication of an account that remains
focused primarily on the inappropriateness of answering.

Occasionally, however, an IE will go one step further by asserting outright that
the question is improper and hence unworthy of an answer – in effect, deflecting
the question by attacking it. In ex. (34), for example, when a Serbian spokesper-
son is asked if recent prisoners of war are being beaten (lines 1–2), he suggests
that the line of questioning is unnecessarily provocative and biased (5–10):

(34) US, 15 July 1995, NPR All Things Considered: Serbia
  1  IR:  Are they being beaten? Or will you be: are you treating
  2  them (u-) humanely according to inter[national conventions.
  3  IE:  [hhh]
  4  (.)
  5  IE:  Well I mean your line of questioning really suggests that
  6  we are the most awful creatures on earth. That we are:
  7  beating the prisoners, raping women, and so on and so forth.
  8  .hh Please I think I have been very: uh: uh correct in my
  9  answers, an’ I would expect you to: .hh be more correct in
 10  your line of questioning= because it’s extremely provocative….

By attacking the question in this way, the IE both justifies his failure to provide an
answer and deflects the discussion away from the substance of the question and
toward the manner in which it was raised.

It is rare for an IE to refuse a question flatly, without providing a rationale of
some sort. When that does happen, it can come across as an extremely hostile
gesture (arrowed in ex. [35]). Consider how a Labour politician flatly refuses a
question concerning his willingness to serve in a cabinet committed to unilateral
nuclear disarmament:

(35) UK, Greatbatch 1986b:451: Unilateral Nuclear Disarmament]
  IR:  You wouldn’t serve in a Cabinet committed to un-
   bilateral nuclear disarmament of Britian would you
   Mister Shore?
  PS:  .hh What I do believe: er: Mister Day (which)
       →  I will not an:swer that question, I’m not .
       →  deliberately answering that question.
       What I do believe is this: I do actually genuinely believe
   in:ng believe: (d) .hh that unilateral initiatives: (.) can
   assist (. multiplat nuclear disarmament. . .

Here the IE not only declines to offer a justification; he casts his refusal to answer
as a deliberate, willful choice. This can be heard as a powerful – albeit implicit –
attack on the legitimacy of the question (and, by implication, on the judgment of
the IR who asked it), which is treated as so transparently unworthy that its refusal
requires no justification.

At the opposite extreme are refusal accounts that are nonhostile in character
and inflict minimal damage to the interpersonal relationship between IR and IE.
The most notably benign practice involves refusing to answer AS A MATTER OF
GENERAL POLICY; IIEs may assert, in effect, that they never answer questions of
that sort. In ex. (36), for example, when Arthur Scargill is asked if he is planning to run for the presidency of the National Union of Mineworkers (lines 1–2), he refuses to say then and there, pointing out that he’s been similarly unresponsive to every other pressman over the past forty-eight hours (3–5):

(36) UK, 13 March 1979, World at One: National Union of Mineworkers
1 IR: Mister Scargill will you run for the presidency of the National Union of Mineworkers?
2 AS: hhh or Mister Day: I must give you the same answer that I’ve been giving every other pressman over the past forty-eight hours.
3 This year or at any time during the next three years. Mr. Day that’s where.
4
Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin does something very similar when asked about the direction of future interest rates. He characterizes his refusal as part of a three-and-a-half-year-old policy of not commenting on the future course of the financial markets (lines 2–4):

(37) US, 5 May 1996, ABC This Week with David Brinkley: Robert Rubin
1 IR: But which way are they going now?
2 RR: =>For three and a half years, hhh Sa.m. I have had for three and a half years a policy of =>not commenting on what markets are gonna do.

As a form of damage control, the general-policy account has advantages that extend beyond its justificatory import. By emphasizing that there is a principled rationale underlying the refusal, this type of account also has the effect of de-personalizing the refusal. It is presented not as an idiosyncratic response to a particular question from a particular IR, but as a general policy applied to all questions of that sort. This helps to ensure that the refusal will not be taken as an act of defiance against the IR per se. Furthermore, insofar as this practice implies that any further efforts to elicit an answer will prove fruitless, it also finalizes the refusal. It thereby inhibits follow-up questions and represents a strong bid to close down the entire line of inquiry.

COVERT PRACTICES

Overt practices have their counterpart in strategies for resisting a question covertly. Covert practices are used mainly in the context of positive resistance, or talk that departs from the agenda of the question. What makes them covert is that the IEs avoid any explicit acknowledgment of the fact that a shift is in progress, and they may also take steps to conceal that fact. For the IE, the obvious advantage of a surreptitious strategy is the possibility of “getting away with it”; if done with enough subtlety, it may escape the notice of the IR and many audience members. On the other hand, if the maneuver is noticed, it can be particularly costly for the IE. Those who sidestep questions while pretending to answer them
risk being seen as devious and manipulative, and this is over and above the negative inferences generated by the resistance itself. Furthermore, such inferences cannot be forestalled via forms of “damage control,” because the covert nature of the practice precludes any explicit remedial effort. IEs can, however, reduce the likelihood that the resistance will be noticed by taking steps to render it less conspicuous.

**Subversive Word Repeats and Anaphoric Pronouns**

Earlier we considered how a stretch of talk becomes recognizable as an “answer,” and we described a variety of practices – including lexical repetitions and anaphoric pronouns – that are implicated in processes of doing “answering.” However, these practices are neither necessary nor sufficient for answering to occur. A recognizable answer can be constructed without any of these practices; conversely, when such practices are used, they provide no guarantee that a full-fledged answer has been given. Indeed, IEs can use these same practices subversively to provide a kind of surface camouflage for maneuvers that are substantively resistant.

A straightforward example of this sort appears in ex. (38), an interview with Arthur Scargill of Britain’s National Union of Mineworkers. The interview took place just as the mineworkers were preparing to elect a new president, and Scargill was discussed as a likely candidate. In a question seeking to distinguish the candidates on the left, the IR (lines 1–2) asks Scargill to explain the difference between your Marxism and Mr. McGahey’s Communism. Scargill launches his response (line 3) with a repeat of a key word from the question: The difference is. . . . By virtue of this literal repetition, he appears to be moving straightforwardly to answer the question:

(38) UK, 13 March 1979, *World at One: Striking Mineworkers*

1  IR: hhh er *What’s the difference between your Marxism and*
2  Mr. McGahey’s Communism.
3  AS: → *er The difference is that it’s the press that constantly*
4  *call me Marxist when I do not.* (3) *and never have.*
5  *er or given that description of myself.*

But appearances can be deceiving: Scargill uses the word *difference* to mean something quite other than what it meant in the IR’s original question. In that question, *the difference* refers to a distinction between two candidates, Scargill vs. McGahey, and their ideologies. In the response, *the difference* refers to a distinction between two interpretations – by the press vs. by Scargill – of Scargill’s ideology in particular. This semantic shift in the meaning and reference of *the difference* is part and parcel of a more encompassing shift in the agenda. Scargill veers away from the question per se in order to counter a presupposition that was embedded within it – that he is in fact a Marxist. To be sure, this is a relatively mild divergence, in that Scargill does not change the subject so much as propose that the question is inapposite. Nevertheless, he does not, strictly speaking,
swer the question in the way in which it was framed. And yet he presents himself as if he were being dutifully responsive. By repeating a key lexical item from the question (What's the difference… → The difference is…), he packages his response as if it were filling the information gap targeted by the question.

Like word repeats, anaphoric pronouns can be used subversively. Consider ex. (39), an exchange with a spokesperson for presidential candidate Ross Perot. The IR prefaxes his question with a comment on the amount of money Perot is planning to spend on TV advertising during the final weeks of the campaign (lines 1–3), and he goes on to ask whether Perot is actually gonna get out and meet with the voters… (4–5). The IE begins to respond by saying Let's talk about this (6), using a pronoun that refers to the questioning turn and thus seeming to promise a bona fide answer:


1 IR: ...hh Mister Milford ah r-your man Ross Perot is gonna spend at least ten million dollars. hh in TV advertising> in the final two and a half weeks of this campaign.<
2
3 .hhh Is he actually gonna get out and meet with voters, campaign like the other candidates?
4 CM: Yeh, well I- let's: (. ) talk about this: for a second.
5 Ah- the- the other two: (. ) candidates receive over fifty five point two million dollars directly from the taxpayers. .hh Mister Perot is spending his own money.
6 In addition to the fifty five million dollars that they get from the federal government, .hh they get over a hundred million dollars in state money. The whole way the (. ) political process is financed is something we object to: .hhhh I- I imagine he will spend ten million dollars on media 'cause what we see is something very extraordinary in American politics. .hh Usually, with the passage of time independent candidates go down: in the polls. .hh Since we have entered the race according to the polls, we've gone from seven to fifteen percent… . And we think Perot is gonna win.

   .

   . ((Some 20 lines of transcript omitted))

   .

21 IR: . . . You: you gave a good answer. = You never answered my question, however. .hh > Part of this political process<
22
23 In for candidates actually to get out and meet with voters. (0.3) >Is he gonna do that?

Rather than answer the question about meeting with the voters, the IE responds instead to the prefatory comment, offering a lengthy justification for Perot's advertising expenditures (lines 6–14). He then goes on to comment on Perot's rise in the polls and his chances of winning (15–20). This shift is obscured by the initial back-referencing statement, but it is not exactly invisible. The IR pursues the matter (21–24), explicitly sanctioning Milford for having never answered my question.
Subversive word repeats and anaphoric pronouns also can be used in combination, as in ex. (40), from a British debate interview concerning a proposal to make abortions more difficult to obtain. The excerpt begins with the IR asking Jill Knight, an outspoken opponent of abortion, about one aspect of the legislation, which would shorten the time period for legal abortions. A key word in the question is *concern*; it is central to the final question (line 13), which asks about the IE’s level of *concern* regarding the more restricted time frame, and it also appears in the preceding statement (12) and the earlier lead-in (3–4), both of which make reference to widespread public “concern” about the new restrictions:

(40) UK, Afternoon Plus: Abortion

1. IR: ... can we now take up then the main issues of
2. ... that bill which r (-) remain substantially the
3. ... same. (.) and indeed (.) have caused great deal of
4. ... concern. (0.4) But first you’ll note ... is the
5. ... clause about (.) time limits h in which h abortions
6. ... can be. (.) legally=
7. (JK): =*(yes)*=
8. IR: =ha:d. And th time limit h (.) according to the
9. ... bill has now dropped .h from twenty eight weeks .h
10. (.) to twenty weekks.
11 (JK): [Yes, =
12 IR: =Now< a lot of people are very concerned about this.
13 ... [.hh How concerned are you.
14 (JK): [*yeh*]
15 JK:  → ... .hhh Uh: (.) I think this is right. I think that um:
16 ... .hh again one’s had a lot of cah conflicting
17 ... evidence on this but .hh what has come ou::: h an’
18  → ... I think that .h the public have been concerned about
19  → ... this. (.) hhh is that there have been th’most
20 ... distressing cases. .hhh of (.) live (.) kicking
21 ... babies who have been destroyed. hhI’ve had nurses
22 ... come to me in great distress (0.2) about this. hh and
23 ... uh there was undoubtedly (0.1) throughout the whole
24  → (ambit) of public opinion .hh very great concern .hh
25 ... on this whole question... .

In her initial response, the IE appears to be moving to answer the question straightforwardly. Her first remark (*I think this is right*) refers to the IR’s prior talk and seems to be expressing some form of confirmation or agreement. And when she begins to elaborate, she twice uses that same key word, *concern* (arrowed). However, this comes to mean something very different here than it did originally. She uses *concern* to mean “concern about late term abortions”; but in the original question it meant “concern about the more restricted time frame” and, by implication, the more restricted access to abortion that this entails. This semantic shift is intertwined with a more encompassing shift in the topical focus of the response vis-à-vis the original question.

It is useful to consider the ramifications of a more overt mode of resistance. The IE could have said something like “I’m not the least bit concerned about a
shorter time frame; what worries me is the destruction of live and kicking babies!” But that would place her in direct disagreement with the viewpoint embedded in the question, and it would make her vulnerable to being seen as insensitive to the plight of those seeking abortion services. Her actual course of action obscures such implications. She presents herself as if she were straightforwardly answering, and agreeably expressing “concern,” while surreptitiously veering away from the question in the way in which it has been framed. The cover for this maneuver is provided by the back-referencing confirmation and the lexical repetition, the latter serving as a kind of pivot between the question’s agenda and the somewhat different direction pursued subsequently.

**Operating on the Question**

Agenda shifts can be obscured in other ways. Before “answering” a given question, an IE may first refer to, characterize, or paraphrase the question at hand. These various operations can modify the question in a way that both facilitates and conceals a shift of the agenda. Thus, not only can IEs adjust the surface form of a response to fit the question, they can also, in effect, adjust the question to fit the response that they intend to give.

To illustrate, consider ex. (41), an excerpt from an interview with a presidential candidate, Senator Gary Hart. The 1988 interview was prompted by media reports suggesting that Hart had an extramarital affair with a young woman named Donna Rice. At one point, he was asked specifically if he had an affair with Miss Rice (arrow 1). In the course of his answer, Hart reformulates the question (arrow 2), broadening it so that it is made to concern his marital fidelity over the past 29 years, including periods during which he and his wife were publicly known to have been separated. Upon completing this reformulation, he provides an “answer” (arrow 3), an admission of infidelity. But the parameters of his admission have been set not by the original question, but by the reformulation.

(41) US, *Nightline: The Best of Nightline*

IR: Uh- (0.5) I told you:: (0.4) some days ago when we spoke, and I told our audience this evening that I would ask you both questions. I will ask you the first now: just before we take a break because I think I know what your answer’s gonna be. =

1 → =Did you have an affair with Miss Rice?

GH: 2 → . . . . .hhh Mister Koppel (1.1) if the question: () is in the twenty nine year:s of my marriage, including two public separations have I been absolutely and totally faithful: to my wife .hhh

3 → I regret to say the answer is no:. . . .

The advantages of such a transformation should be obvious. It enables Hart to appear “forthcoming,” but in response to a question that, by virtue of its generality, is much less pointed. His admission is thus less politically damaging than it might otherwise have been. In effect, Hart manages to “steer the question” in a more desirable direction. In this particular example, Hart seems to acknowledge...
the fact that the question has been modified. Notice that his reformulation is
offered tentatively within an if-clause (*Mister Koppel, if the question is . . .*). This case is thus comparatively overt in the way in which it shifts the agenda.

Other question reformulations are asserted more forcefully, as if they were faithfully preserving the essence of the original question. Ex. (42) comes from the 1988 vice presidential debate; although not officially labeled a “news interview,” this event was organizationally similar in having the candidates respond to questions from a panel of journalists. In the first question to Dan Quayle, a journalist enumerates several prominent Republicans who have been highly critical of Bush’s decision to choose Quayle as his running mate (lines 4–16); the journalist then asks Quayle why he hasn’t made *a more substantial impression* on his own Republican colleagues (16–19). Quayle begins his response (21–24) by reformulating the question in terms of his general qualifications for the presidency:

(42) US, 5 Oct. 1988, Bentsen-Quayle Debate

1 JRN: hhh Senator you have been criticized as we all
2     know:: for your decision to stay out of the Vietnam
3     war:, (0.3) for your poor academic record, hhhhhh
4     but more troubling to some are some o’thuh
5     comments that’ve been made by people in your own
6     party. tch. hhh Just last week former Secretary
7     of State Haj:i:g. hh said that your pick. (0.2)
8     was thuh dumbest call George Bush could’ve
9     ma[:de.
10 AUD: [h-h-hxhxhxh[hhXXXXXXXXXXXXX= ]
11 JRN: [Your leader in the Senate]
12 AUD: =XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX[XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX (5.8) ]
13 JRN: [Your leader in the Senate] Bob
14 Doyle said that a better qualified person could have
15 been chosen. hhh Other Republicans have been far
16 more critical in private. hhh Why d’you think
17 that you have not made a more substantial
18 impression on some of these people who have been able
19 to observe you up close.
20 (1.5)
21 DQ: → .hhhhhh The question goe::s (1.0) to whether
22 I’m qualified (1.1) to be vice president, (0.8)
23 .hhh and in the case of a: (.) tragedy whether
24 I’m qualified to be president. (0.6) .hhhh (0.7)
25 Qualifications for:: (0.2) the office of vice
26 president ’r prPrSident (1.0) are got age alg:ne.
27 (1.5) you must look at accomplishments:’(1.0)
28 and you must look at experience. . .

This is a substantial transformation. On one level, it moves from subjective impressions of Quayle – which may be difficult to explain or refute – to his qualifications considered as an objective matter. There is also a change in the presuppositional loading of the question. The original question is presuppositionally negative: In both the preface and the wording of the question itself, it presumes that Quayle did not in fact make a good impression and asks why this was so. In contrast, the reformulated version is presumptively neutral

(whether I’m qualified) and thus facilitates a more upbeat response. Despite the
magnitude of this transformation, it is asserted affirmatively and without qual-
ification (The question goes to …). Quayle thus proposes that his reformula-
tion successfully captures what the question comes down to in its essence.

To appreciate the significance of this practice for managing an agenda shift, it
might be useful to consider what the preceding exchange would look like without
a reformulation:

(43) [Invented]

JRN: … Why do you think that you have not made a more
substantial impression on some of these people who
have been able to observe you up close?

DQ: Qualifications for the office of vice president or
president are not age alone. You must look at
accomplishments and you must look at experience.

When the “answer” is made to follow the question without any preparatory work,
it is manifestly disjunctive. Against this backdrop, the importance of the refor-
mulation is that it affiliates the matter-to-be-pursued with the matter-that-was-
inquired-about, thereby minimizing the discrepancy between the two. In effect,
the reformulation provides a version of the question that the subsequent response
can be seen as “answering.”

In ex. (42), the IE operates on the question as a whole object. But IEs also may
operate on a component of the question – a phrase, a prefatory statement, or one
part of a multi-part question. In ex. (44), from a Nixon press conference during
the Watergate period, Nixon targets the first part of a two-part question for re-
formulation. The journalist first asks (beginning at arrow 1) whether Nixon is
personally investigating charges that his campaign funds were mishandled, and
he then asks (arrow 2) whether the charges will hurt his bid for reelection. After
a prefatory remark, Nixon produces a reformulation (arrow 3) that highlights the
first part of the question:

(44) US, 29 August 1972, Nixon Press Conference

JRN: 1 → Mr. President, are you personally investigating
the mishandling of some of your campaign funds,

2 → and do you agree with Secretary Connolly that
these charges are harmful to your re-election?

RN: Well, I commented upon this on other occasions,
and I will repeat my position now.

3 → With regard to the matter of the handling of
campaign funds, we have a new law here in which
technical violations have occurred and are occurring,
apparently, on both sides. As far as we are concerned,
we have in charge, in Secretary Stans, a man who is
an honest man and one who is very meticulous – as I
have learned from having him as my treasurer and
finance chairman in two previous campaigns – in the
handling of matters of this sort. Whatever technical
violations have occurred, certainly he will correct
This reformulation is subversive in two respects. First, it replaces a key term from
the question that implied wrongdoing (mishandling) with a more favorable term
(handling). Furthermore, the remainder of the response deals exclusively with
the matter of the investigation; Nixon never gets around to the second part of
the question, regarding the consequences for his reelection campaign. This omission
may not have been accidental. Dealing with the investigation question enables
Nixon to present himself as “doing something” about a scandal within his admin-
istration, and thus independent of the morally tainted forces which brought it
about. In contrast, the issue of whether the scandal will hurt his campaign seems,
at least from his standpoint, less advantageous.

Although this omission is clear in retrospect, it was not evident at the outset
that some form of evasion was in progress. Nixon could have gone on to answer
the second question. Indeed, it is standard practice for IEs, when “reaching back”
to deal with something other than the last component of the questioning turn, to
indicate as much by referring to or reformulating that aspect of the question
(Clayman 1993). This is because IEs normally address the final component of
the question (Sacks 1987); conversely, they take steps to warn listeners when an
atypical response trajectory is in the offing. Thus, Nixon’s operation was initially
accountable as an effort to manage an atypical response trajectory rather than to
avoid the second question.

There are still more subtle variations on the practice of operating on the question.
In the cases examined thus far, the operation is exposed within a discrete unit
of talk, but it also may be embedded within some other activity – assertions of
agreement or disagreement, for example. Ex. (45) shows how, in the course of
claiming to agree/disagree with some aspect of the question, an IE can embed-
dedly reformulate that question (arrowed):

(45) US, 22 July 1985, MacNeil/Lehrer: South Africa

1 JW: But isn’t this the... declaration of the state of
2 emergency... an admission that the... South African
3 government’s policies have not worked, an... in fact that
4 the... United States... administration’s policy of
5 constructive engagement... has not worked.
6 FW: I do not agree with you... We want (0.5) to see that... system change. We want to see
7... South Africa end apartheid. We want... basic rights established
8... for all South Africans... We want... peace and stability
9... in that country... An’ that’s a PERfectly respectable goal.
10... Second. The way we have pursued it... I also believe...
11... is the most... way in dealing with a
12... dangerous situation...
Here, the IE first asserts disagreement (*I do not agree with you*) and then characterizes the object of his disagreement (*that the approach we have taken.*) in a manner that transforms the terms of the question. The transformation is subtle yet advantageous for the IE, who was then a U.S. State Department official during the Reagan administration and is here defending Reagan’s policy of “constructive engagement.” The original question asked (after some preliminary talk) whether the U.S. policy of constructive engagement *has not worked.* This is reformulated in the statement of disagreement as a question about whether U.S. policy is an incorrect approach. The latter version is very much easier for the IE to refute. It is difficult to argue with the original assertion that U.S. policy *has not worked,* since at the time of the interview apartheid remained intact. But one can assert the overall *correctness* of U.S. policy even in the face of its manifest failure to bring about an end to apartheid, and this is precisely what the IE does in his subsequent response.

**TWO CASE STUDIES**

Having analyzed various practices for managing resistance as they are employed across a wide range of interview circumstances, it is now time to apply these analytic resources to some singular cases. One objective of these case studies is to illustrate the power of the analytic apparatus developed thus far to elucidate just how particular noteworthy IEs are able to elude the grasp of an advancing line of questioning. Moreover, while a systematic analysis of audience reactions is beyond the scope of this paper, these case studies are suggestive of the impact that such practices can have on subsequent media commentary and on public opinion.

*Dan Quayle and the Succession Question*

During the 1988 U.S. presidential campaign, the two main vice presidential candidates, senators Lloyd Bentsen and Dan Quayle, squared off in a nationally televised debate. The format had the candidates responding to questions from a panel of four journalists, making it not unlike a multi-IR interview or small press conference. Opportunities to follow up and pursue evasive answers were more limited than in ordinary news interviews, because here each journalist could ask only one question at a time, and the order of questioners was predetermined. Nevertheless, processes of resistance and pursuit were both very much in play.

An extended tug-of-war developed around the issue of presidential succession. It began when Dan Quayle – a youthful senator and George Bush’s running mate – was asked what he would do if the president died or became incapacitated for some reason. The purpose of this question was to test Quayle’s readiness for assuming the presidency in an emergency: What would be his plan of action? Quayle sidestepped this issue when it was first raised, prompting several follow-up questions and rounds of evasion and pursuit.
The first journalist to raise this question was Brit Hume of ABC News. Noting the apprehensions people might feel about Quayle being a heartbeat away from the presidency (ex. [46], lines 1–4), he asks Quayle to describe, in the event of his sudden succession to power, the first steps that you’d take and why (5–10):

(46) US, 5 Oct. 1988, Bentsen-Quayle Debate

Quayle makes an initial stab at answering the question (lines 12–15), but it is rather half-hearted and insubstantial. He says only that he’d say a prayer and would assemble his people and talk. He then proceeds to reformulate the question (arrowed, lines 16–20), veering away from the issue of his plan of action for assuming the presidency in an emergency and toward the more general issue of his overall qualifications for the presidency. He then goes on to discuss his qualifications at length, ruling out age as a qualification and focusing on experience and accomplishments. In the end, talk about qualifications dominates his response, only the first part of which is reproduced here.

Although this shift is managed covertly and is obscured by the use of an initial question reformulation, Brit Hume is not oblivious to what has transpired. In ex. (47), after a full round of questioning from the other panelists, Hume regains the floor and pointedly pursues the question (line 6). Before doing so, however, he carefully justifies this move by calling attention to the inadequacy of Quayle’s previous response, summarizing it in a way that highlights its feebleness: You
said you’d say a prayer, and you said something about a meeting (4–5). He then presses Quayle to elaborate (6). Notice that some audience members in the hall begin to laugh at this point (8), displaying appreciation of Hume’s derisive commentary and aligning with him in his pursuit of an answer.

(47) US, 5 Oct. 1988, Bentsen-Quayle Debate

1 JRN: Senator I wanna take you back to the question
2  that I asked you earlier about what would happen
3  if you were to: take over in an emergency and
4  what you would do first and why:.hhhh You said you’d
5  say a prayer:: and you said something about a meeting.
6  (. ) What would you do next.
7  (.)
8 AUD: h-hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh (.laughter)
9 DQ: I don’t believe that
10  it’s (0.6) proper for me: to: .hh get into the specifics:
11  (0.5) of a hypothetical (. ) situation like that (1.2)
12  → The situation is: (0.8) that if (0.8) I was called upon
13  (0.7) to ser:ve (0.7) as the president (0.4) of this country,
14  or the responsibilities of the president of this country,
15  (1.0) would I be capable and qualified (0.2) to do that.
16  (0.5) .hh and I’ve tried (0.4) to list the qualifications.
17  (1.0) of twelve years in the United States Congress….

But that answer remains elusive, as Quayle again sidesteps the question, although his method of doing so here is rather different. Given that his prior covert maneuver has been exposed by Hume’s pursuit, Quayle now chooses a more overt mode of resistance. He explicitly justifies his failure to provide a more substantial answer by characterizing the focus of inquiry as a hypothetical situation and suggesting that it would be improper to answer in specifics (lines 9–11). He then shifts the agenda (12–15) in precisely the same direction as before – away from his plan of action and toward his overall qualifications for the presidency. Thus, while Quayle’s resistance is now overt and on record, it is also justified and accounted for.

Unfortunately for Quayle, justificatory accounts do not necessarily bring the line of questioning to a halt; such accounts can be argued with and contested. This is what the very next questioner on the panel – Tom Brokaw of NBC News – does, relinquishing whatever question he had planned to asked in order to pursue the succession question yet again. In ex. (48), Brokaw begins with a disclaimer to the effect that that he doesn’t mean to beat this drum until it has no more sound left in it (lines 1–2). He then takes issue with Quayle’s account for not answering (that it is a hypothetical situation), pointing out that it is after all the reason that we’re here tonight (4–5). He concludes not with an interrogatively formatted question but with a pointed assertion (12–16) that surely you must have some plan in mind for assuming the presidency in an emergency, since it has happened to so many vice presidents in recent years. By rejecting Quayle’s previous account for not answering, and by pressing the issue in a more pointed way, Brokaw has increased the pressure for a genuine response.

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(48) US, 5 Oct. 1988, Bentsen-Quayle Debate

1 JRN: Senator Quayle I don’t mean to beat this drum
2 until it has no more sound left in it but to
3 follow up on Brit Hume’s question when you said
4 that it was a hypothetical situation... hhhh it is
5 Sir after: all: The reason that we’re here tonight.
6 .hh/h because you are=
7 DQ: [Mhm
8 JRN: =running [not just for vice president,]
9 [x x [x-x-x-x-x-x = ]]
10 =xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx[x-x-x-x-x (4.4 ) ]
11 JRN: [And if you cite the] experience
12 that you had in Congress, (0.2) surely you must have
13 some plan in mind about what you would do if it fell
14 to you to become president of the United States—
15 as it has to so many Vice presidents. hh just in
16 the last twenty five er's or so.
17 (0.3)
18 DQ: tch.hhh Lemme try to answer the question one more
19 time. I think this is the fourth or five,
20 [(1.0) that I have had this question. h [and I think=
21 JRN: [this is–]
22 DQ: =that-hh three times, (0.8) that I have had this
23 question, and I’ll try to answer it again for you.
24 (0.3) as clearly as I can. (0.7) hh Because
25 1 → the question you’re asking, (1.3) is what (.)
26 kind (. ) of qualifications .hhhhh does Dan Quayle
27 have to be president. (1.0) tch
28 2 → What kind of qualifications do I have
29 3 → and what would I do (1.0) in this kind of a situation.
30 (0.4) what would I do in this situation, hh I would (1.9)
31 make sure. (2.1) that the people in the cabinet, (0.9)
32 ’n the people ’n the advisors to the President, ( ) are
33 called in, (0.2) an I’ll talk to ’em, (0.5) an I’ll work
34 with ’em... .

After commenting on the number of times he’s had this question (lines 19–22), Quayle promises to try to answer it again for you as clearly as I can (23–24). Quayle then does something that is very puzzling on its face. He launches into yet another question reformulation (beginning at arrow 1) that begins to reframe the issue once again as a matter of qualifications. However, in the course of this reformulation, he backtracks a bit (arrow 2), and then he returns to the original subject of inquiry (arrow 3) – his plan of action for taking charge of the presidency, which he subsequently elaborates (30–34). Why does Quayle start to veer away from the agenda of the question, only to return to it subsequently?

The solution to this puzzle lies at the nonvocal level. After Quayle launches into his reformulation (at line 3 in ex. [49]) and completes the focal word qualifications (4), Brokaw begins shaking his head (6), and he continues to do so until the reformulation reaches a first possible completion point. In this way, Brokaw nonvocally rejects Quayle’s bid to shift the agenda.

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This rejection is consequential; Quayle subsequently abandons the incipient agenda shift and returns to the original agenda (lines 7–8). Brokaw nods approvingly (9), and Quayle proceeds to elaborate on his emergency plan. Thus, while Quayle initially steers the question in a different direction, Brokaw steers him right back.

However, Quayle’s return to the original agenda is made to appear as if it is unrelated to what Brokaw has done. Notice that Quayle does not respond immediately to the headshakes; he continues to speak through the headshaking until the reformulation is possibly complete (line 5). He also places some distance between the completion of the headshakes and the start of his continuation, allowing one full second of silence to elapse, and then backtracking a bit when he continues (7). Furthermore, when he finally gets to the plan of action component of the reformulation, he links it to the previous component with and; it is thus introduced as a supplementary rather than a contrastive matter. By these various means, Quayle constructs his reformulation so that it can be seen as a single continuous action rather than an “about-face” in response to Brokaw’s prompting. In other words, he presents himself as if he had been headed in this direction all along.

In the aftermath of this debate, most observers declared Lloyd Bentsen the decisive winner, and extensive media commentary focused on Quayle’s performance and its shortcomings. A common criticism was that he came across as overly “rehearsed” or “programmed” in his remarks. This widespread impression may be rooted, at least in part, in patterns of response such as those analyzed above. He repeatedly returns to the same basic theme – qualifications and experience – as a favored response to various kinds of questions (see also ex. [42]). Moreover, he repeatedly uses the same basic practice – which we have termed “operating on the question” – to fit that favored response to the question at hand. This recurrent mode of resistance is first managed covertly, but it is subsequently exposed by persistent follow-up questions from the panel of journalists, at which point it becomes transparently manipulative. Here, then, patterns of response within the event are congruent with and thus appear to have been consequential for subsequent media commentary.
The Affairs of Bill Clinton

Perhaps more than for any other American president, Bill Clinton’s conduct in answering questions – not only in news interviews and press conferences, but in courtroom depositions as well – has had clear effects on his political fortunes and public image. He is a notoriously skilled interrogatee, adept at turning questions to his advantage while appearing to be dutifully responsive. However, when these practices have been exposed as strategies of evasion, the negative repercussions have been substantial. The following analysis focuses on questions regarding the delicate subject of extramarital affairs.

Early in the 1992 presidential campaign, allegations surfaced about an extended affair between Clinton and Gennifer Flowers. These allegations emerged just as Clinton was breaking from the pack of Democratic candidates to become the front-runner in the primary campaign, placing his buoyant candidacy in serious jeopardy. In an effort to confront the issue and put it to rest, both Bill and Hillary Clinton appeared on the 60 Minutes program. That interview has been called one of the great performances in American presidential politics, and it was widely credited with rescuing the Clinton candidacy.

Many factors undoubtedly contributed to this outcome, but at least part of the success can be attributed to the manner in which Governor Clinton dealt with the core questions concerning his relationship with Gennifer Flowers. Although he admits in a general way to having had “problems” and “difficulties” in his marriage, specific questions about the alleged affair with Flowers are met with what seem at first glance to be straightforward denials. However, on analysis it becomes apparent each response falls at least a hair’s-breadth shy of a full-fledged denial. Within the framework developed in this article, Clinton’s responses are covertly resistant and extremely subtle in the manner in which they elude the agenda of the question.

Consider the first question of this kind, in which the IR, Steve Kroft, raises Flowers’s claim of a twelve-year affair with Clinton (lines 1–3):

(50) US, Jan. 1992 60 Minutes: The Clintons

1 IR: She’s allging (0.2) and has described in some detail in
2 thuh super market tabloid .hh what she calls a twelve
3 year affair with you.
4
5 BC: (1.5) It- That allegation is false.

Clinton responds to this allegation (line 5) with a simple assertion to the effect that it is false. This assertion is squarely on-topic, but it is nonetheless only minimally responsive. As demonstrated earlier, given that elaborated answers are the norm in the news-interview context, minimal one-sentence responses are tacitly resistant to the agenda of the question. In the present case, Clinton’s unelaborated denial – That allegation is false – is not particularly informative about his relationship with Flowers. Is he denying any extramarital affair whatsoever? Or is he merely denying an affair that lasted twelve years? By responding minimally,
Clinton is able to issue a denial in a way that avoids specificity regarding what, exactly, is being denied.

The IR notices the ambiguity in Clinton’s denial, and he pursues the question in a way that seeks to resolve it (lines 1–4). He tries to pin Clinton down to an absolute denial, reformulating the prior response as categorically denying that you ever had an affair with Gennifer Flowers:

(51) US, Jan. 1992, 60 Minutes: The Clintons
1  IR:  I’m assuming from your answer (0.4) that you’re (.)
2  categorically denying (.) that you ever had an affair.
3  (1.0)
4  IR:  with Gennifer Flowers.
5  BC:  .hh I said that before. (.)
6  .hh ‘uh’ An’ so has she.
7  HC:  (hhm hnh hnh)
8  (.)
9  BC:  hh=huh Wh(h)en £these st(h)ories came out£ (0.5)
10  she:  an’ thee other people involved, (0.2) uh:
11  denied them, (.) An’ denied them (.) repeatedly, (.)
12  An’ she changed her story when she was paid.

Once again, Clinton seems at first to be cooperating with the agenda of the question by confirming this version of his denial. However, he avoids a straightforward “yes” or “that’s right,” asserting instead that he had already denied the affair on some prior occasion (line 5), an occasion which remains unspecified in his response. He then proceeds to talk at greater length about Flowers’s own previous denials of the affair (6–11), and he suggests that the recent change in her story was motivated by the money she received from the tabloid that first published it (12). Thus, while he fosters the impression of having categorically denied an affair, on closer analysis it becomes apparent that he never quite does so in the here-and-now, on his own accord. He adopts an interactional footing in which he is merely relaying denials previously expressed by himself and others.

This interview went over well at the time, and Clinton would go on to win both the nomination and the election decisively. But his performance would eventually come back to haunt him. Early in 1998, when Clinton was called to give a deposition in the Paula Jones lawsuit, he admitted under questioning that he did indeed have an affair with Flowers. Shortly thereafter, the original 60 Minutes interview was rebroadcast, exposing his slipperiness in answering for the entire nation.

Around the same time, allegations about another affair surfaced, this time involving a young White House intern named Monica Lewinsky. Shortly thereafter, Clinton was questioned about the affair in an interview on NewsHour. Once again, what initially appear to be forthright denials of the affair are in fact covertly resistant. In this case, the specific mode of resistance is a subtle shift in the terms of the question, a shift involving the verbal tense in which it is expressed:
The IR asks Clinton to confirm that he *had no sexual relationship with this young woman*. Clinton eventually issues a confirmation (*That is accurate*), but only after reformulating the issue from past to present tense (*There is not a sexual relationship*). This response does not necessarily rule out an affair that is over and done with, but to the casual listener it might seem that Clinton has denied an affair altogether. This type of tense shift would later become notorious when it was exposed as a strategy employed by Clinton in the Paula Jones deposition.

The Clinton case is a powerful illustration of the distinctive attractions and risks associated with a covert mode of resistance. Throughout these examples, Clinton never owns up to the fact that he is not answering the question fully or straightforwardly; the resistance remains unacknowledged and extremely subtle. This approach enabled Clinton to survive various difficult moments in his original presidential campaign and his tenure in office. But because some of these responses have been exposed as evasive through subsequent events, he has paid a price over the long term in the form of damage to his political and personal reputation. The indictment against him is not merely that he sidesteps questions — many politicians are guilty of that — but that he is deceitful about it. The so-called “Slick Willie” factor should stand as a cautionary note to public figures contemplating a covert mode of resistance.

**Discussion**

In this age of political cynicism coupled with anxiety about the decline of civility in public life, it is tempting to assume that virtual anomy now characterizes the domain of public discourse. Politicians, in such a world, would no longer be bound by traditional norms and could thus ignore with impunity the questions they receive in journalistic interviews and press conferences. The practices examined in this article, taken together, reveal a more complex state of affairs. Although it is true that resistant and evasive responses are commonplace, these are managed with considerable care. When resistance is done overtly, interviewees take steps to control the damage that may be caused thereby. When it is done covertly, there are corresponding efforts to conceal the resistance or at least to render it less conspicuous. Both sets of practices represent ways of reducing the negative consequences that can follow from the breach of conduct embodied in an act of evasion, and they demonstrate that such an act continues to be regarded as a breach by those involved.

On the other hand, by virtue of these practices, politicians and other public figures can indeed gain substantial “wiggle room” for pursuing their own agendas even under the most persistent interrogation. It is possible that such practices...
have evolved over time in relation to the changing culture of the journalistic profession. In both England and the United States, journalistic questioning has become less deferential and more adversarial since the 1950s (Clayman & Heritage in press a, b). This could prompt interviewees to become more resistant and/or to develop more sophisticated methods for dealing with difficult questions, just as they have developed other strategies for managing adversarial encounters with journalists (see Jones 1992). Alternatively, increasingly adversarial questioning could have precisely the opposite effect: Insofar as adversarialness includes a greater propensity to ask follow-up questions that pursue evasive responses (Clayman and Heritage in press a), it could encourage interviewees to adhere more closely to the question agenda. Whether there actually has been a systematic change in public figures’ responsive conduct – in either the propensity toward resistance or in the practices for managing resistance – must await further research.

Finally, this analysis has methodological ramifications for efforts to quantify responsive conduct as a prelude to examining its distribution across individual politicians, journalistic environments, or historical time periods. It should be abundantly clear that responses cannot properly be dichotomized as either “answers” or “evasions,” for between these black-and-white categories are numerous shades of gray comprised of varying modes and degrees of resistance (cf. Bull 1994). Moreover, these variations may have nontrivial consequences for how the public forms judgments about a politician’s moral character. To take just one example, a skillfully managed covert approach could enable a politician to get through a hostile interrogation without any negative repercussions. Alternatively, as the case of Bill Clinton aptly demonstrates, if covert evasions are exposed by subsequent events, the politician may be seen in retrospect as devious and manipulative, and this outcome may be worse for the politician than if he or she had initially acted overtly with appropriate forms of damage control. Accordingly, quantitative and distributional studies would do well to pay much closer attention to the specific practices through which interviewees deal with questions.

NOTES

* Portions of this article were presented at the 1996 conference of the American Sociological Association. The author would like to thank John Heritage, Manny Schegloff, and the anonymous reviewers for their critical input.

1 This incident was discussed in a documentary film by Brian Springer entitled Spin.

2 This professional skill is often thematized in broadcast journalists’ autobiographies (e.g., Donaldson 1987; Koppel & Gibson 1996). In two recent memoirs, it is prominently on display within the title itself: . . . But With Respect (Day 1993) and Hold On Mr. President! (Donaldson 1987). Both titles are common prefaces to hostile follow-up questions, and they evoke images of an aggressive interviewer doggedly pursuing his elusive prey.

3 This kind of full-form repetition, where the entire framework of the question is preserved in the initial response, appears disproportionately in certain environments. It is often found in exchanges that (i) are highly argumentative, or (ii) involve a response that ultimately departs from the agenda of the question. It may be that the practice of repeating the framework of the question, rather than
accepting it and building on it, conveys a modicum of independence from the prior course of questioning, and is thus useful in resistant and hostile environments.

4 Notice that the IE refers to the IR by name ("Mister Day") as he launches his resistant response. It turns out that this is a highly recurrent practice across various forms of resistance. It appears to be related to the pragmatics of address term usage in interaction generally: Speakers often address their recipients by name when expressing deeply felt opinions and personal feelings (Clayman 1998), particularly when such opinions or feelings are oppositional in character.

5 Such multi-part questions are more common in press conferences than in news interviews.

6 This excerpt is from a taped interview segment on 60 Minutes, and it appears to have been edited in such a way as to highlight and sharpen the tug-of-war between the IR and Deutch.

7 Similar requests for permission and token requests are used by IEs when speaking out of turn (Greatbatch 1988). Such practices generally serve to mitigate departures from the normative turn-taking arrangements in the news interview, and agenda shifts represent a specific type of departure that is mitigated in this way.

8 The array of refusal accounts discussed here may not be equally available to all IEs in all circumstances.

REFERENCES


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