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# Arenas of interaction in the mediated public sphere

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## Abstract

News and public affairs programming is increasingly organized around modes of human interaction rather than scripted narratives. This paper surveys a number of such interactional forms in the US, with an emphasis on news interviews, news conferences, and various forms involving audience participation (radio call-in shows, TV talk shows, and town meetings). These are analyzed as distinct arenas within the public sphere, each with its own conditions of access and modes of conduct. Accordingly, interactional arenas are examined from the standpoint of their historical development, constraints on participation, and the evolving norms and practices that organize conduct. The conclusion of the paper addresses the broader ramifications of broadcast interaction for journalism, politics, and the public sphere.

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In recent years there has been a sea change in broadcast news and public affairs programming. The traditional way of packaging and presenting news—in the form of a narrative or story, which dominated broadcasting up through the early 1980s—has steadily declined in prominence. It now coexists alongside a plethora of communicative forms organized around human interaction—news interviews, news conferences, panel discussions, formal and informal debates, town meetings, and talk shows of various kinds. Some of these forms are fully institutionalized within broadcasting where they function as programming formats; others are *ad hoc* events occurring independently but still broadcast to the public. This diverse collection of media events shares a common property: each involves relatively unscripted encounters involving some combination of public figures, media professionals, and ordinary people.

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Numerous conditions in the US have contributed to the growth of interaction as a vehicle for presenting broadcast news and information. Technological and legal changes have been enabling factors. The advent of cable has greatly increased the number of channels and news outlets, while satellite feeds and more portable news gathering equipment now permit live encounters with newsmakers from virtually anywhere in the world. Correspondingly, the demise of the Fairness Doctrine—an FCC regulation mandating that broadcasters offer a range of views on controversial issues of public importance—has reduced inhibitions stemming from government oversight of program content. All of this has yielded expanded opportunities for the development of new interaction-based forms of informational programming.

At the same time, economic conditions have encouraged broadcasters to exploit these opportunities. In the deregulatory environment of the 1980s, the three major commercial television networks in the US—ABC, NBC, and CBS, which had long been stable corporate entities devoted primarily to communications—were each bought out by conglomerates that assumed substantial debt and were much less willing to allow their news divisions to remain insulated from the pressures of the bottom line (Auletta, 1991; Hallin, 1997). That changing of the guard occurred during a period of tremendous volatility in the media marketplace, with the networks facing a succession of new competitors starting with cable and the VCR and culminating in the personal computer and the internet. All of this has had a substantial impact on the ethos of broadcasting. Producers have become much more concerned about production costs and audience ratings and more willing to experiment with new formats for news and public affairs programming.

Moreover, such experimentation has taken place in an occupational culture that places a high value on ‘live’ programming—the presentation of raw events that are, or appear to be, unfolding ‘in the present tense’ (Timberg, 2002: 4)—as the distinctive province of broadcasting. As former NBC president Reuven Frank put it in a famous staff memo, “the highest power of television journalism is not in the transmission of information, but in the transmission of experience” (quoted in Epstein, 1973: 39). Not only do many producers believe that relaying events-as-they-happen is what television does best, but the spontaneity associated with such programming is also believed to have substantial audience appeal.

Against this backdrop, formats based on spoken interaction have been particularly attractive. Such formats are inexpensive to produce, and they embody qualities of ‘eventfulness,’ ‘spontaneity,’ and ‘liveliness’ that are regarded as intrinsically televisual and popular with audiences.

Interactional formats have thus proliferated in recent years, and yet to a significant extent social science research has failed to keep pace with this development. The discipline of communication studies continues to be dichotomized between ‘interpersonal’ and ‘mass’ communication subfields (e.g., both American and International Communication Associations maintain separate ‘interpersonal’ and ‘mass’ divisions), a split that seems increasingly archaic in light of the developments outlined above. More generally, studies of journalism across the social sciences remain preoccupied with the traditional story form of news. This preoccupation is apparent both in studies of news production that focus on the backstage work routines through which

raw information is gathered, sifted, and assembled into finished news stories,<sup>1</sup> and in studies of news content that focus on the themes and perspectives that predominate within such stories.<sup>2</sup>

Neither production nor content studies have devoted much attention to newer interaction-based forms of news, which transcend the distinction between news production and news content and thus require new modes of analysis. Recently, however, significant work on the subject has begun to emerge. While studies of presidential news conferences have a comparatively well-established pedigree (Clayman and Heritage, 2002b; Cornwell, 1965; French, 1982; Smith, 1990), work has recently appeared on broadcast news interviews (Bull and Mayer, 1988; Clayman and Heritage, 2002a; Croteau and Hoynes, 1994; Myers, 2000; Roth, 1998, 2002; Schudson, 1994), daytime television talk shows (Carbaugh, 1988; Gamson, 1998; Grindstaff, 2002; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; Munson, 1993; Shattuc, 1997; Tolson, 2001), talk radio (Davis and Curtice, 2000; Hutchby, 1996, 1999; Owen, 1997; Thornborrow, 2001), and broadcast talk more generally (Davis and Owens, 1988; Herbst, 1995; Martinez, 2003; Pan and Kosicki, 1997; Scannell, 1991; Timberg, 2002).

This paper surveys a number of such communicative forms, with an emphasis on news interviews, news conferences, and various modes of audience participation (radio call-in shows, TV talk shows, and town meetings). These are analyzed as distinct arenas within the public sphere—that aspect of civil society in which persons from various backgrounds meet to confer on matters of public importance. Contrary to some of the more abstract theoretical accounts of this subject, the public sphere is best understood not as a singular entity but as encompassing a variety of communicative arenas (Jacobs, 2000), each with its own conditions of access and modes of conduct. The arenas of interest here are constituted not by specific media (cf., Meyrowitz, 1985) but by specific modes of interaction conveyed through radio and television. Accordingly, each interactional arena will be examined from the standpoint of its historical development, constraints on who may participate, and for the more well-established arenas (news interviews and news conferences) the evolving norms and practices that organize conduct. The conclusion of the paper will address the ramifications that broadcast interaction has had for journalism, politics, and the public sphere more broadly conceived. Throughout, the analysis will focus primarily on the US context, and it will be guided by a concern with how these arenas mediate relations between political actors and ordinary citizens.

## 1. News interviews

The *news interview* is a familiar and readily recognizable genre of broadcast interaction. It differs from other interaction-based genres by its distinctive constellation

<sup>1</sup> Prominent news production studies include Altheide (1974), Epstein (1973), Fishman (1980), Gans (1979), Hess (1981), Kaniss (1991), Molotch and Lester (1974), Pedelty (1995), and Tuchman (1978).

<sup>2</sup> See Entman and Rojecki (2001), Gitlin (1980), Hallin (1986), Jamieson and Waldman (2003), Kerbel (1994), Patterson (1994), and Robinson and Sheehan (1980).

of participants, subject matter, and interactional form. In a prototypical news interview, the interviewer is known as a professional journalist rather than a partisan advocate or celebrity entertainer. Interviewees are public officials, experts, or others whose actions or opinions are newsworthy. The discussion normally focuses on matters related to current events, is highly formal in character, and is managed primarily through questions and answers. In the US, prototypical news interviews are featured on daily shows such as *Nightline* (ABC) and *The NewsHour* (PBS), and Sunday shows such as *Meet the Press* (NBC), *Face the Nation* (CBS), *This Week* (ABC), and *Late Edition* (CNN).

Notwithstanding these clear cases, the genre has fuzzy boundaries, with shows that share many of the features sketched above while differing in other important ways. Thus, cable news channels have numerous quasi-interview shows (e.g., *Hardball*, *The O'Reilly Factor*) hosted by partisan advocates of various stripes, who are less bound by norms of impartiality and are much more overtly opinionated in their dealings with public figures. Farther afield, *Larry King Live* is hosted by a former radio personality rather than a professional journalist, and although he questions his guests, he also takes telephone calls from the home audience. The result is a hybrid of the news interview and radio call-in formats.

### 1.1. *Origins and institutionalisation*

The news interview prototypically involves the confluence of representatives of two key societal institutions—journalism and politics. Accordingly, the history of the news interview is thoroughly intertwined with the co-evolution of these institutions.

Although it now seems quite natural for journalists to interview elected officials and other public figures, it has not always been so. In the US, interviewing was virtually nonexistent for the first half-century of the nation's existence. Institutions of national government only gradually became publicly accessible, and even as journalists were granted access first to the House of Representatives and later to the Senate, verbatim quotations were normally prohibited (Leonard, 1986). The aloofness of government officials was matched by the disinterest of most journalists. Newspapers during this period were financed by political parties and were vehicles for editorial opinion more than factual reportage (Schudson, 1978).

The practice of interviewing can be traced to the rise of the American penny press in the 1830s, the first papers to devote themselves primarily to 'news rather than views' and to employ reporters broadly devoted to the task of newsgathering. But published interviews with public figures did not become common journalistic practice until quite late in the 19th century. This new form of journalism first expanded rapidly in the US and then more slowly in England and other European countries, in part at the prompting of American journalists in Europe. This expansion did not occur without controversy—interviewing was frequently attacked as an artificial and unduly intrusive journalistic practice (Schudson, 1994).

Although these criticisms would not disappear entirely, the news interview became increasingly accepted as normal journalistic practice in the early decades of the 20th century. This development roughly coincides with the growing stature and

professionalization of journalism (Schudson, 1978, 1988) and the shift within government from backstage intragovernmental negotiations to public relations as tools of governance (Kernell, 1986; Tulis, 1987). The normalization of the news interview reflected these twin institutional changes, and it furthered their development. The advent of television subsequently increased the prominence of news interviews, first with weekly interview-based programs, and then nightly programs that began on the broadcast networks and later expanded onto cable news channels.<sup>3</sup>

In short, what used to be regarded as extraordinary has become standard practice across the political spectrum. Just as journalists were once criticized for questioning public officials, now officials are subject to criticism if they fail to make themselves sufficiently accessible to journalistic interrogations.

### 1.2. *Patterns of participation*

The news interview, as a journalistic form, is responsive to journalistic ideals of balance and fairness. However, these ideals are not interpreted to mean that any and all viewpoints should be equally represented. News interview programs do not provide ‘equal time’ to terrorists, violent criminals, or political extremists on the left or right. Producers of such programs appear to distinguish between areas of legitimate controversy—where diverse perspectives are given their place—versus persons and viewpoints regarded as fundamentally illegitimate and hence undeserving of airtime (cf., Hallin, 1994).

Beyond the wholesale marginalization of those regarded as ‘beyond the pale,’ there is a general tendency for the major news interview shows to favor broadly mainstream and establishment guests. In a study of ABC’s *Nightline* and PBS’s *NewsHour*—the two main nightly news interview programs in the US—Croteau and Hoynes (1994) demonstrate that guest lists are dominated by current and former government officials and other establishment elites, while leaders of labor, public interest, and racial/ethnic groups appear relatively infrequently. This emphasis, which is consistent with general patterns of news coverage (e.g., Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979), reflects in part an understanding by program producers that the ideal guests are newsmakers who play a central role in shaping the events under discussion. Granting this justification, the emphasis on newsmakers plainly constrains the range of perspectives that are given voice in interview-based discussions of public affairs.

In addition to these general patterns of participation characteristic of news interviews as a group, there is also internal variation between particular programs. The most significant line of distinction is between those airing weekly on Sunday—*Meet the Press* (NBC), *Face the Nation* (CBS), *This Week* (ABC), and *Late Edition* (CNN)—and those airing on a nightly basis—*Nightline* (ABC) and *NewsHour* (PBS). The Sunday shows have the greatest visibility, routinely generating subsequent news coverage in the form of stories for the Monday newspapers. Correspondingly, they attract the most prominent guests, a high proportion of which are senior Administration officials and Congressional leaders. In contrast, the nightly shows ‘make news’ far

<sup>3</sup> For an historical account of the later development of news interviews on television, see Clayman and Heritage (2002a: Chapter 2).

less often, and their guests include fewer ‘heavyweight’ newsmakers and more rank-and-file legislators, former officials, and expert commentators of various kinds.

### 1.3. Norms and practices

The news interview is not merely a reflection of journalistic and political institutions; it is also a social institution in its own right. Conduct within the news interview is organized around the roles of interviewer and interviewee, and is governed by a complex matrix of social norms and conventions.

The most fundamental and pervasive characteristic of news interview interaction is that it unfolds as a series of questions and answers. This is both an empirical regularity that typifies news interview talk (Heritage and Roth, 1995) and a social norm that participants are obliged to uphold (Clayman and Heritage, 2002a: Chapter 4). The question-answer framework may seem obvious, but its very obviousness makes it constitutive of the news interview as a recognizably distinct form of interaction. Moreover, underlying this normative framework is a far less obvious substrate of practices that are necessary to produce interaction in manifest compliance with the question-answer norm. These practices include the systematic avoidance of a wide range of acknowledgement tokens and other responsive behaviors (e.g., *uh huh*, *yeah*, *right*, *oh*, *really*) that are absolutely pervasive in ordinary conversation but become incongruous in a context where the parties are supposed to restrict themselves to the actions of questioning and answering. Both the question-answer norm and the practices that underlie it are usually taken for granted by interview participants, but they may become more fully conscious of the ground rules at problematic or contentious moments, when those rules may be appealed to explicitly as a means of complaint or self-defense.

In building questions, interviewers are sensitive to two further journalistic norms that are difficult to reconcile. On the one hand, consistent with the overarching ideal of objectivity, they are supposed to be impartial or neutral in their questioning. While absolute neutrality is an unattainable ideal, interviewers do strive to maintain a formally neutral or ‘neutralistic’ posture by restricting themselves to questions *per se*—avoiding all tokens of acknowledgement (e.g., *mhm*, *yeah*) and avoiding flat assertions except as prefaces to a question or as attributed to a third party (Clayman and Heritage, 2002a: Chapter 5).

On the other hand, consistent with the ideal of political independence and the ‘watchdog’ role of the press, journalists are also supposed to be *adversarial* in their questioning and should not allow guests unfettered access to the airwaves to say whatever suits their interests. Interviewers pursue the ideal of adversarialness in part through the content of their questions, raising matters that cut against public figures’ own interests and subjecting their previous responses to challenge. Adversarialness is also implemented through the underlying form of such questions (Clayman and Heritage, 2002a: Chapter 6, 2002b)—for example, by designing questions in ways that narrow the parameters of an acceptable response, by ‘tilting’ questions in favor of one particular response over others, and by encoding presuppositions that are difficult for the interviewee to counter or refute. An important resource for these

various forms of aggressiveness are the preliminary statements that interviewers often make when leading up to a question. Such statements are accountable as providing ‘background information’ necessary to render the question intelligible to the audience, but they can be mobilized in ways that allow the interviewer to maximize control over the discussion agenda and to exert pressure on recalcitrant interviewees.

The balance that is struck between the ideals of neutrality and adversarialness is a signature that distinguishes individual interviewers, the news programs on which they appear, and historical periods characterized by dominant styles of interviewing.

Interviewees, in responding, face a different set of cross-cutting pressures. Adversarial questions create an incentive for resistant or evasive responses, encouraging interviewees to be less than forthcoming or to shift the discussion agenda in a more desirable direction. However, the normative question-answer framework obliges interviewees to answer straightforwardly, so that failure to do so can be costly. Interviewers often counter such maneuvers with probing follow-up questions and negative sanctions; audience members may infer that the interviewee has some ulterior motive for avoiding the question; and acts of evasion are often singled out in subsequent news coverage (Clayman, 1990). Accordingly, interviewees almost always design their resistant responses in such a way as to minimize these undesirable consequences (Clayman and Heritage, 2002a: Chapter 7). They may choose to sidestep the question in an overt or explicit manner, which allows for equally explicit forms of ‘damage control’ (e.g., justificatory accounts, displays of deference to the interviewer). Alternatively, when evading the question covertly, they may take steps to obscure what is transpiring (e.g., by giving it the surface form of an answer). By these means, interviewees gain a measure of control over the discussion agenda and can to some degree ‘stay on message’ even in the face of highly adversarial lines of questioning.

Many contemporary interviews involve multiple interviewees who represent diverse and frequently opposing viewpoints. The panel interview format is attractive to broadcasters, not only because it promotes varying degrees of dramatic conflict (Clayman and Heritage, 2002a: Chapter 8; Greatbatch, 1992; Olsher, forthcoming), but also because it creates a division of labor that helps to reconcile the divergent ideals of neutrality and adversarialness. With partisan interviewees playing the role of adversary *vis a vis* one another, the interviewer is left free to act as an impartial catalyst.

#### 1.4. *Evolving styles of questioning*

Comparative research on the news interview remains underdeveloped, but styles of questioning appear to have changed substantially since the advent of television. In general, journalists’ questions to public figures have become less deferential and more adversarial during this period.

However, this trend has developed somewhat differently in U.S. and Britain (Clayman and Heritage, 2002a: Chapter 2). In Britain, a robust tradition of government regulation of broadcast journalism, coupled with the absence of competition prior to 1958, fostered a highly deferential style of questioning in BBC interviews of the 1950s. When the BBC monopoly was replaced by a duopoly in 1958, the resulting competition fueled a sudden and dramatic increase in adversarial questioning. In

U.S., where government regulation of broadcasting has been comparatively minimal and where competitive pressures have been present from the outset, adversarial questioning has grown more modestly from a higher baseline. Indeed, the shift is far less apparent in routine news interviews than it is in presidential news conferences (see below).

To the extent that questioning has become more aggressive, the news interview (and its cousin the news conference) has been transformed into a more formidable instrument of public accountability. It is now more difficult for officials to make purely self-serving statements in this invigorated journalistic arena. However, this revolution has stimulated a counter-revolution by politicians and public officials—increasingly sophisticated strategies of resistance, aided by a burgeoning cottage industry of media advisors and consultants (Jones, 1992). There are broader ramifications for both journalism and government, and these will be explored in the conclusion.

## 2. News conferences

Closely related to the news interview is what was once known as the press briefing or conference, but is now perhaps more accurately termed the *news conference*. News conferences differ from interviews in a variety of important ways. They are independently-occurring events held at the behest of the public figure rather than the news media. They typically involve a much larger number of participating journalists from a variety of media outlets. And rather than consisting entirely of questions and answers, news conferences often begin with the public figure delivering an uninterrupted statement or speech and then fielding questions from participating journalists. This basic format not only characterizes news conferences *per se*, but it has also been exported to other public events. Thus presidential debates in recent years have often followed a quasi-news conference format, with each candidate answering questions from a panel of journalists.

### 2.1. *Origins and institutionalisation*

Little is known about the early history of news conferences in the US, with the exception of those prominent encounters involving the president (e.g., Cornwell, 1965; French, 1982; Smith, 1990; Tebbel and Watts, 1985). The following historical account is thus limited to the presidential context and draws heavily on these sources. The institutionalization of the presidential news conference closely parallels that of the news interview, and it provides a useful exemplar of how the emergence of an interactional arena is tied to changes in both journalistic and political institutions.

In the nineteenth century, presidents occasionally had informal conversations with journalists, but they rarely participated in either formal on-the-record interviews or news conferences. Presidents did not, as a rule, instigate such encounters, and journalists do not appear to have been particularly enterprising in seeking them out. One journalist of the era recounts how, as late as the 1890s, reporters congregating outside the White House would approach cabinet officers for impromptu interviews, but they would refrain from speaking to the president as he passed by.



It is part of the unwritten law of the White House that newspaper men shall never approach the President as he passes to and fro near their alcove or crosses the portico to his carriage, unless he himself stops and talks to them. (Tarbell, 1898: 214; quoted in Kernell, 1986: 59)

This kind of self-restraint is of course unthinkable today. It is indicative of a vastly different president–press relationship, one in which the president is relatively inaccessible to direct journalistic engagements.

The only prominent exception during this period involves Andrew Johnson, who participated in at least a dozen formal interviews. Johnson's accessibility was extraordinary, but then so were the circumstances. Johnson oversaw the divisive post-Civil War reconstruction following Lincoln's assassination, and his conciliatory approach to the Southern states stimulated outrage in his own party in Congress. When impeachment seemed imminent, he fought back by using the bully pulpit, long before that term was coined, and doing newspaper interviews was part of this strategy (Tebbel and Watts, 1985: 212–213). Thus, Johnson is truly the exception that proves the rule—the only nineteenth century president to be interviewed recurrently did so in a crisis situation, when his political survival was at stake.

Conferences involving groups of reporters did not emerge until the early decades of the twentieth century. As noted earlier, this was a time when journalism was becoming professionalized (Schudson, 1978, 1988) and when presidents began to rely less on backstage negotiations with Congress and more on courting public opinion as a resource for governance (Kernell, 1986; Tulis, 1987). It is not coincidence that the presidents most responsible for developing and institutionalizing the news conference—Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt—were each progressive reformers with ambitious political agendas, and each sought to use such conferences to build popular support for their respective programs. Teddy Roosevelt began the practice of meeting regularly but informally with a select group of reporters, importing a practice from his prior experience as governor of New York. Woodrow Wilson made these meetings more open, more formal, and more interrogative in character, consciously or not following the British model of the Prime Minister's appearance before Parliament. After a period of retrenchment following the suspension of press conferences during World War I, Franklin Roosevelt held such meetings frequently and continuously through periods of both war and peace.

With FDR, the era of the journalistically accessible presidency was fully established. While the frequency of news conferences would subsequently decline, for more than four decades after FDR no president would avoid meeting openly with the press on a regular basis.

## 2.2. *Patterns of participation*

In order to understand who participates in news conferences, it is important to register that, from the public figure's vantage point, they provide what is in many ways a more attractive platform relative to the news interview. Consider first the sociopolitical environment of the news conference. Because news conferences are

held at public figures' initiative, the timing and context of the encounter is more fully under their control. Recent presidents have exploited this to advantage, most notably by avoiding conferences during times of uncertainty, controversy, or scandal (cf., Lammers, 1981). Thus, in the wake of the Iran-Contra scandal, Ronald Reagan suspended news conferences for almost a full year, and Bill Clinton held only a single conference in the year following the Monica Lewinski scandal. Conditions of interaction *within* the news conference are also favorable to the public figure. This theme will be explored further in the next section, but for now it may be noted that, relative to news interviews, public figures here are less constrained by journalists' questions and are thus able to exert greater influence on the discussion agenda. Finally, because numerous journalists are often present, the public figure gains access to a wide range of media outlets and can in principle reach a larger and more diverse audience. In summary, compared to news interviews, news conferences allow the public figure greater control over the context of the encounter, greater control over the discussion agenda, and the potential for superior public exposure.

This platform, while advantageous, is not equally available to all who might seek it. One must be sufficiently newsworthy to attract reporters in significant numbers, and there is a clear hierarchy in the capacity of officials to do this. The president is, of course, the ultimate newsmaker, and presidential news conferences are widely attended and are usually broadcast live on cable news channels. While presidents since FDR have held such conferences with declining frequency (Grossman and Kumar, 1981: 245), the slack has been taken up by the White House press secretary who holds briefings on a daily basis. Within the administration, daily briefings are also held at the Departments of State and Defense, but most other administrative departments and agencies do not meet regularly with reporters (Hess, 1984: 61–62).

Legislators, who are obviously more numerous and less powerful than the president, have a more difficult time attracting journalistic attention. The vast majority receive little or no attention from the national media, which tends to focus on those few legislators who occupy leadership positions and, in election years, those who are running for president (Cook, 1989; Hess, 1986). Thus, while the Senate majority and minority leaders hold daily conferences with reporters, rank-and-file Senators hold conferences much less frequently, and these are concentrated among committee chairs (Hess, 1991). Moreover, these events tend to be poorly attended, leading some rank-and-file Senators to actively promote their conferences—via personal invitations and offers of free food—in an effort to attract reporters in greater numbers (Hess, 1991: 10).

### 2.3. *Norms and practices*

Conditions of interaction within the news conference in many ways resemble those of the news interview. Both involve questions and answers which are responsive to a similar set of institutional norms and pressures. However, compared to news interviews, news conferences entail a substantial shift in the interactional balance of power that favors the public figure over the journalist.

This tilt toward the public figure is embodied in a variety of features, the most obvious of which is the opportunity to make a preliminary and uninterrupted

speech. This can in principle set the agenda for subsequent questioning, although this happens to a lesser extent than might be assumed. In a quantitative study of Eisenhower and Reagan news conferences (the main findings of which are reported in Clayman and Heritage, 2002b), the president's opening remarks were found to have relatively little agenda-setting impact, so that more than 80% of journalists' questions concerned other matters. Nevertheless, opening remarks are commonplace and the propensity to make them has increased significantly—from roughly half of Eisenhower's conferences to more than 90% of Reagan's conferences—suggesting that even though it only minimally constrains journalists, the opportunity for unfettered communication with the audience is too attractive to ignore.

The public figure also benefits from the presence of numerous journalists, which fundamentally alters the conditions of exchange—necessitating special turn taking arrangements that typically give the public figure some capacity to determine who gets to ask each next question. In presidential news conferences, there has been periodic experimentation with different methods for selecting questioners. Early in the 20th century, Warren Harding instituted a rule that written questions be submitted in advance, apparently because he wanted to avoid the negative inferences that can follow when the president momentarily hesitates or overtly declines to answer a given question. Concerning this arrangement, which persisted through the subsequent Coolidge and Hoover administrations, Cornwell (1965: 67) has observed that 'silence can be at times as pregnant with meaning as a specific answer, or at least can be so interpreted.' Written questions eliminate this problem, allowing presidents to pick and choose their questions without being accountable for the questions they pass over. In a different vein, the Reagan administration experimented briefly with a prearranged order for the questioners, supposedly in an effort to bring greater decorum to encounters that were then being broadcast live. This arrangement had an unintended consequence—without the din of journalists clamoring for the president's attention after each response, follow-up questions became easier to request and harder to avoid (Schegloff, 1987: 223–225). Given this, the arrangement was subsequently abandoned.<sup>4</sup>

Notwithstanding these experiments, by far the most commonplace turn-taking arrangement, not only in presidential news conferences but in news conferences more generally, is for journalists to 'bid' for each next question (by raising their hands and/or calling out the public figure's name) and for the public figure to select among the bidders. This of course facilitates the avoidance of journalists regarded as unfriendly or unduly aggressive.

Not only is journalists' access to the floor relatively limited, but this has the effect of diminishing their power as interrogators. In this context, the capacity to ask probing follow-up questions is contingent on the discretion of the public figure, and follow-ups are in general much less common here than in news interviews. Journalists adapt to this constraint by asking more complex questions—often two or three

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<sup>4</sup> The prearranged-questioner system has been resurrected recently in the current Bush Administration, but its fate remains uncertain.

questions within a single turn at talk—and their questions tend to become more elaborate in conferences that allow fewer follow-ups. Nevertheless, journalists are much less able to pursue resistant or evasive answers, and this in turn licenses politicians to exert greater initiative in their responses. Indeed, some particularly blatant forms of resistance, which are virtually nonexistent in news interviews, are more commonplace in news conferences (Clayman, 1993). The journalistic role is thus fragmented in this context, making it rather easier for public figures to ‘stay on message’ and pursue their own agendas.

#### 2.4. *Dynamics of questioning: The case of the presidential news conference*

Among news conferences, those involving the president are of course the most prominent and consequential. When designing questions for the president, journalists can choose to be relatively polite and deferential, or they can take up a more vigorously adversarial stance. The manner of questioning is thus an important contingency affecting presidential communication with the public, as well as an index of the president–press relationship as it evolves over time and under different sociopolitical circumstances. A large-scale quantitative study of presidential news conferences from Eisenhower through Clinton (the first installment of which is reported in Clayman and Heritage, 2002b) explores the circumstances under which journalists gravitate toward these different postures. The study examines various aspects of aggressiveness in question design, including (1) *initiative*, whether the question is enterprising rather than passive, (2) *directness*, whether the question is delivered bluntly rather than cautiously or indirectly, (3) *assertiveness*, whether the question displays a preference for a particular answer and is thus opinionated rather than neutral, and (4) *hostility*, whether the question contains information that is overtly critical of the president or his administration.

The results reveal significant historical trends for all dimensions. In general, questions have become less deferential and more aggressive over time, although this process has developed differently for particular aspects of aggressiveness. The increase in directness has been gradual, and largely continuous. Thus, while journalists in the 1950s were exceedingly cautious and indirect in their questioning (e.g., often asking questions in the form ‘Would you care to tell us...,’ ‘Can I ask whether...’), they have gradually become more straightforward in putting issues before the president. Since this trend has advanced steadily across four decades, directness in question design appears to be a deeply ingrained aspect of journalistic conduct, and its change represents a gradual tectonic shift in the culture of the White House press corps and its relationship to the office of the presidency.

By contrast, assertiveness and hostility, and to a lesser extent initiative, are more contextually sensitive, rising in a concentrated manner in certain historical periods and falling in others. Assertiveness and hostility remained minimal from Eisenhower through the Johnson administrations, and then began an upward trend with Nixon that continued (with some perturbations) through Reagan’s first term. Both dimensions declined from Reagan’s second term through Bush, leveled off in Clinton’s first term, and rose in Clinton’s second term. These patterns suggest that a series of historical

circumstances and events, prompted subsequent journalists to exercise their watchdog role much more vigorously from the late 1960s through the mid-1980s, but they have recently retreated to a somewhat less adversarial posture.

Various circumstantial factors are statistically significant predictors of aggressiveness in question design. Three robust factors are the content of the question, the identity of the journalist, and the state of the economy. Concerning question content, journalists behave differently depending on whether the question concerns domestic affairs as opposed to foreign or military affairs. Consistent with the ‘rally ‘round the flag’ syndrome and the maxim that ‘politics stops at the water’s edge,’ journalists are significantly less aggressive when raising foreign and military matters. Historical trends can be found here as well, closely mirroring trends in questioning more generally, but these questions are consistently less aggressive than their domestic counterparts.

Journalistic conduct also differs depending on who is asking the question. Aggressiveness varies with the gender of the journalist and the medium with which he/she is affiliated, although gender has the most consistent effect. Contrary to stereotypical notions of femininity and masculinity, female journalists have generally been more aggressive than their male counterparts for various aspects of question design. However, most of these differences have attenuated over time, so that by the 1990s the culture of the White House press corps has become relatively homogeneous in terms of aggressiveness.

Finally, concerning the economic context, both the unemployment rate and the stock market are broad and consistent predictors of question design. When the unemployment rate is rising or the stock market is falling, journalists become significantly more aggressive in a variety of ways. Journalists thus exercise their watchdog role more vigorously during economic hard times, and they seem attuned to conditions on both Wall Street and ‘Main Street.’

### **3. Arenas involving audience participation**

In contrast to the arenas examined thus far, which involve journalists and public figures exclusively, various arenas incorporate ordinary members of the public as active participants. These include radio call-in shows, TV talk shows that feature contributions from the studio audience and/or telephone calls from home viewers, and—in a somewhat different vein—town meetings.

#### *3.1. The rise of the participatory audience*

Audience participation is by no means a recent invention, even in the context of the mediated public sphere. Radio call-in shows have been around since at least the 1950s. But the participatory audience has become increasingly prominent in recent years, as measured by the growing number of programs organized around such participation and by the expansion of these programs beyond their humble origins in radio entertainment.

The audience participation show was pioneered on radio and became an institutionalized programming format by the 1960s (Munson, 1993: 37ff). Although a few television programs in that period experimented with audience involvement in various forms, it did not come into its own as a prominent TV format until the 1980s. Not coincidentally, that was when the television marketplace was becoming increasingly competitive, and when the remote control and the practice of ‘channel grazing’ sent TV producers in search of formats that would be ‘grazer-resistant’ (Munson, 1993: 72). They turned to radio for inspiration, because radio channel grazing had been a fact of life for decades via the in-car pushbutton tuner. The participatory format seemed to have the kind of liveliness that could hold the home viewer’s attention, while also capturing those who were just ‘grazing by.’

Consider two major signposts of the rise of the participatory audience. Phil Donahue began his career on local talk radio and moved to local television in 1967. Although his daytime TV show was not initially conceived as involving the audience, he soon began to field questions and comments from those in the studio. Subsequent nationwide syndication of the popular program spawned nearly a dozen imitators, all built around the Donahue format and including a substantial dose of audience participation (Timberg, 2002: 68–71, 93–95). Following a similar trajectory, Larry King created the late-night call-in show that bears his name on the medium of radio in the late 1970s, but he moved to television’s CNN in 1985, and by the mid-1990s he was reaching an audience spanning more than 150 countries worldwide (Timberg, 2002: 161–169).

Audience participation shows have not only expanded, but they have also become increasingly important in the realm of national politics. While political candidates once avoided these programs in favor of more ‘serious’ news outlets, they have increasingly sought them out as part of a diversified campaign strategy in an increasingly segmented media market. The 1992 election season was a key turning point. In 1988, despite overtures from program producers, the major presidential candidates all refused to appear on both the *Donahue* show and *Larry King Live*, although Michael Dukakis reluctantly changed his mind and allowed a King appearance in an effort to counteract his weak performance in the debates. Four years later, in a dramatic turnaround, Ross Perot appeared on King’s show and offered to toss his hat in the ring if ‘drafted’ by the people, and tens of thousands later phoned his Dallas headquarters. Subsequently, George Bush and Bill Clinton each made three separate appearances on King’s show, and a range of primary and general election presidential candidates appeared on *Donahue* (Kurtz, 1996: 56–57, 90–92).

The town meeting, a forum that predates the broadcast media and continues to be held independently, has also shown signs of new life at the level of national politics. While it has long been used by political candidates as a way of connecting with potential voters and attracting news coverage, this forum has recently expanded beyond the domain of campaign strategy. Once again, 1992 appears to have been a turning point. That election season was the first in which a general election debate at the presidential level was conducted in accordance with a town meeting format, replacing the more common news conference format and thus placing ordinary citizens

rather than journalists in the role of questioner. The format was used again in the presidential debates of 2000. Outside of elections, the town meeting forum has become a recurrent tool of presidential governance. Although it was rarely used in this way before 1992, Bill Clinton held a large number of town meetings on subjects ranging from health care to race relations, and George W. Bush has continued the practice albeit at a slower pace. Finally, the town meeting has also been taken up by broadcast news producers at ABC and CNN, who have recurrently exploited the format in recent years for special programs focused on pressing issues of the day.

### 3.2. *Patterns of participation*

The rise of the participatory audience gives ordinary people a greater voice in public deliberations, and it thus introduces a degree of democratization into the mediated public sphere. Indeed, one reason that politicians are drawn to audience-participatory arenas is that they are believed to yield insight into the prevailing climate of opinion. Such arenas enable politicians not only to gain publicity but also to take the pulse of the public with regard to specific issues and, more generally, to keep in touch with the concerns of ordinary people.

However, far from being a straightforward barometer of public opinion, audience members' contributions are not necessarily representative of the general public. A sequence of gatekeeping processes determine which members of the public come to participate actively in such programs, and these have the potential to introduce nonrandom factors into the selection process. The first level of selection bears on the composition of the audience—only some members of the public actually listen to or watch such programs, and even fewer attend the live event to become part of the studio audience. Among audience members, only some nominate themselves to make a contribution (e.g., by calling in or, in the case of the studio audience, by raising their hands). Finally, among those who bid to contribute, only some are chosen by call screeners or the host.

Audience research, while limited, provides evidence that these selectional processes do indeed operate in a nonrandom manner. Consider the composition of the audience. The audience for daytime TV talk shows diverges from the general public on a range of demographic factors, with viewers disproportionately female, younger, less educated, and concentrated in lower income brackets (Davis and Owen, 1998: 149). There is also variation among programs, with the 'classier' shows (e.g., *Oprah*) attracting more female, white, and middle class viewers than the 'trashier' shows (e.g., *Ricki Lake* and *Jerry Springer*). The studio audience is even more distinctive, with a high proportion of tourists, school/church groups, college students, the unemployed, and the elderly (Grindstaff, 2002: 61–64).

Correspondingly, the audience for talk radio is also demographically unlike the general population, with listeners wealthier, better educated, disproportionately male, and concentrated in the 30–49 age group (Davis and Owen, 1998: 146). The talk radio audience is also politically distinctive, with listeners more likely to be affiliated with the Republican party and less likely to self-identify as 'liberal' than the public at large (Davis and Owen, 1998: 168–169; Herbst, 1995). Not surprisingly,

the audience for specific ideologically oriented programs like Rush Limbaugh's is even more distinctly partisan and ideological (Pan and Kosicki, 1997).

Nonrandom factors also condition the processes by which some audience members come to contribute to the discussion. In a study of a BBC program broadcast on both radio and television, Davis and Curtise (2000) examined the composition of callers to the program, as well the selection decisions made by call screeners. In terms of demographics, callers tended to be more male, middle class, and middle aged than the general electorate. Call screeners tended to reproduce the first two biases via their selection decisions, but they resisted the age bias by favoring somewhat younger callers. In terms of partisanship, callers were not much different from the electorate—both were disproportionately affiliated with the Labour party—but call screeners tended to favor Conservative and Liberal Democratic callers. This presumably reflected not a bias against the Labour party *per se*, but rather an effort to maintain a greater balance of perspectives on the program.

### 3.3. Norms and practices

Audience-participatory arenas may consist exclusively of exchanges between the host and audience members, but the majority also involve public figures or other noteworthy guests as participants. Although the host moderates the discussion, nominating topics and at times asking questions of the guest, at other times audience members take a prominent role by making comments and asking questions to which the guest is obliged to respond.

How do audience members—most of whom are laypersons with no particular expertise in broadcasting or politics—compare to journalists or other media professionals in their conduct toward public figures? Comparative research along these lines remains underdeveloped, and what such research might yield is by no means obvious. Audience members are subject to many cross-cutting forces which are quite unlike those bearing on journalists, and which could propel them in different directions. On the one hand, audience members are in general relatively inexperienced at public speaking and have little background in dealing with either public figures or the mass media. Consequently, relative to journalists, they tend to be less skilled at political interrogation and debate, and are apt to feel less of an entitlement to confront prominent public figures on the issues of the day. This should in turn encourage a more deferential posture.

Preliminary research on town meetings held by Bill Clinton after his election suggest that ordinary people are indeed markedly more cautious than their journalistic counterparts in specific ways. Audience members tend to raise an issue only after making it clear that they have some direct personal connection to it (e.g., 'I live in an inner city neighborhood, and I'm concerned about street crime'). Moreover, when making claims to knowledge about public affairs, such claims may be epistemically marked in ways that display the grounds of knowledge and portray it as having been acquired in a 'casual' or unmotivated manner (e.g., 'I've heard that...', 'I noticed that...'). Professional journalists, by contrast, rarely engage in either of these practices, thereby maintaining a formally detached and 'omniscient' stance. Audience members'



contributions thus tend to have a markedly perspectival character, and they thereby present themselves as having comparatively restricted entitlements to make comments and ask questions of public figures (see also Myers, 2000; Thornborrow, 2001).

On the other hand, precisely because lay audience members are peripheral to the worlds of media and politics, they lack the relational baggage that might otherwise inhibit their participation. Members of the Washington press corps, for example, regularly encounter and come to know government officials, and they must act in the context of developing relationships and in anticipation of future encounters. Lay audience members, in contrast, stand in a detached and anonymous relationship to officials—a relationship in which direct contact normally does not extend beyond a single question-answer exchange. This could in principle facilitate greater levels of adversarialness. For instance, at Clinton's town hall meetings, it was rather common for audience members to ask the president to explain and justify his policies, thereby in effect holding the president accountable for his actions. Professional journalists do not ask explicit accountability questions of the president very often, although the frequency of such questions has increased in recent years in tandem with other manifestations of journalistic aggressiveness in question design (Clayman and Heritage, 2002b). Accordingly, this is one way in which ordinary people do indeed withhold deference and act with some aggressiveness toward the president. Whether lay aggressiveness toward public figures is manifest in other ways, and the circumstances that condition its expression, remain to be determined.

#### 4. Discussion

Given important differences between genres of broadcast talk—differences in historical development, conditions of access, and modes of conduct—theorizing about the broader sociopolitical significance of broadcast talk should proceed with caution. Sweeping generalizations must be disciplined by reference to specific interactional arenas and supported by empirical observations about how those arenas actually operate. With this cautionary note in mind, the following is offered as a set of grounded but as yet preliminary hypotheses that might guide future research.

Consider first the implications for politicians and political communication. The increasing prominence of interaction places new demands on public officials and political candidates, thus altering the communicative skills and practices that facilitate success in politics. Indeed, new technologies of communication have often had this effect. The rise of broadcasting fundamentally changed the nature of political speechmaking, fostering a more restrained, personal, and intimate style of oratory (Jamieson, 1988). Correspondingly, the rise of interactional formats *within* broadcasting has reshaped the landscape of political communication once again. The new environment places a premium on the ability to speak without a script, deal with unforeseen contingencies, and manage the delicate balancing act of being properly responsive to others while continuing to 'stay on message.' Just as Ronald Reagan was supremely suited to the communicative demands of the classic television era, Bill Clinton was particularly suited to the new interaction-based media age. Of

course, older communicative skills are far from obsolete (Atkinson, 1986), but new skills have come to the fore as the communication environment has expanded and diversified.

This kind of communication environment has also reduced the social distance separating government officials and other elites from the public at large. Where a certain aloofness attends the act of delivering an unfettered speech, communication in the interactional arena requires direct engagement with, and attentiveness to, both journalists and ordinary people. For US presidents, the growing prominence of interaction thus continues a trend that began a century ago, when presidents first started to supplement backstage intragovernmental negotiations with public relations as tools of governance. Just as the practice of actively courting public opinion brought presidents closer to ‘the people,’ the current practice of directly engaging ordinary people and their journalistic surrogates marks a new phase in this process.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, if the sheer fact of interaction has a leveling effect on elite-public relations, this effect will be modulated by how elites are actually treated within interaction. Thus, while highly deferential patterns of conduct mark government officials as having elevated status, the withholding of deference and the willingness to act aggressively toward officials plainly ‘brings them down a notch.’

The increased prominence of interaction has had a corresponding impact on the institution of journalism. Broadcast interaction has substantially changed journalistic work routines, redefined professional skills, and altered the conditions of professional success. If journalists previously gained professional status and popular renown mainly by virtue of their investigative and literary abilities, their ranks have been joined by journalists known mainly for their skills at questioning and interrogation (e.g., Sam Donaldson and Ted Koppel in the US, Robin Day and Jeremy Paxman in the UK).

Moreover, as the obverse of the leveling effect noted above, interaction has placed journalists on the same public playing field as government officials from the president on down, although here again the specific consequences will be contingent on the level of deference journalists choose to display when dealing with their prominent guests. Through vigorous, nondeferential questioning (of the sort documented in presidential press conferences since the 1970s) journalists enhance their own relative status, and they also present themselves as autonomous professionals who are willing to hold even the most elite agents of power accountable before the public.

Finally, the rise of interaction has introduced a degree of democratization into the public sphere, or at least that component of the public sphere constituted by the mass media (Carpignano et. al., 1990; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). Insofar as broadcast talk incorporates audience participation, ordinary people gain a voice in a highly prominent deliberative domain previously dominated by media professionals and public figures. On the other hand, this development does not alter the ways in which the contemporary public sphere may fall short of democratic ideals (cf., Habermas, 1989). The deliberative promise of audience-participatory broadcast talk

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<sup>5</sup> The leveling effect of interaction dovetails with, but operates independently of, the leveling effects of electronic media discussed by Meyrowitz (1985).

must be tempered with a realistic assessment of how conditions of access and norms of conduct impose constraints on participation.

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