The Changing Tenor of Questioning over Time: Tracking a Question Form across U.S. Presidential News Conferences 1953-2000

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Introduction

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

Our contribution to the resolution of this problem has been to focus on a novel form of data, namely the design of the questions that journalists ask of public figures in broadcast news conferences and news interviews. Utilizing conceptual tools derived from the tradition of conversation analysis, we developed a multi-dimensional coding system which serves as a barometer of vigorousness or aggressiveness in question design, and applied that system to a five-decade sample of U.S. presidential news conferences. The fruits of this project have thus far included insight into long-term historical trends in the evolution of president-press relations (Clayman and Heritage 2002, Clayman, Elliott, Heritage, and McDonald 2006), and some of the social factors that significantly affect the level of aggressiveness with which journalists treat the president (Clayman, Heritage, Elliott, and McDonald 2007, Clayman, Elliott, Heritage, and Beckett 2010, 2012). Subsequent researchers have built on this approach, adapting the question analysis system - with modifications to accommodate language differences and somewhat distinct analytic objectives - to the study of reporter-source relations in The Netherlands (Huls and Varwijk 2011) and Sweden (Ekström, Eriksson, Johansson, and Wikström 2012), and the flow of public affairs information from live interviews to subsequent news coverage in the U.S. (Baum and Groeling 2009).
In this paper we revisit our question analysis system and consider the trade-offs involved in using discrete quantifiable questioning practices, as opposed to the "thick description" (Geertz 1973) of such practices as they are deployed in singular cases within a specific discursive and interactional context. We will argue that although our question analysis system provides a valid general picture of aggregate trends in president-press relations, like any coding system it necessarily overlooks various subtleties surrounding the precise tenor of questioning in any particular case. These subtleties, although quantifiable in principle, were not part of our original coding system. When taken into account, they suggest that the main historical trend previously identified – the shift toward a more aggressive mode of questioning presidents since the late 1960s – is substantially stronger than previously documented.

Background:
The Question Analysis System and the U.S. Presidents Project

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

1. initiative – the extent to which questions are enterprising rather than passive in their aims
2. directness – the extent to which questions exert full versus mitigated pressure for response
3. assertiveness – the extent to which questions are opinionated rather than neutral on the subject of inquiry
4. adversarialness – the extent to which question content is oppositional rather than benign
5. accountability – the extent to which questions oblige presidents to defend and justify their actions

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

The application of this system to U.S. presidential news conferences encompassed 9 presidents, 12 administrations, and more than 4600 questions across five decades (1953-2000). The initial results were primarily descriptive, documenting raw historical trends in the aggressiveness of the White House
press corps, with White House journalists growing significantly more vigorous on all dimensions (Clayman and Heritage 2002b, Clayman, Elliott, Heritage, and McDonald 2006). Journalists were increasingly likely to exercise initiative via more elaborate and confining questions; the substantive content of their questions grew more adversarial; and they exerted greater pressure on the president to address such content via more direct and assertive forms of questioning.

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

These findings offered the first comprehensive overview of the nature of questioning at presidential news conferences, but their scope and generality was achieved at the cost of detail and
specificity. Discrete question design characteristics, which occur in many varieties and combinations in the real circumstances of news conferences, were bundled together and aggregated to index underlying dimensions of questioning. This bundling and aggregation, though theoretically justified and empirically well validated, tends to obscure the evolving texture and tenor of questioning in news conferences. These latter aspects tend to yield more readily to the qualitative methods of language analysis and thick description (Geertz 1973). In this paper, we attempt to marry quantitative techniques and thick description by tracing the changing patterns of use of a single question form - the negative interrogative - that we previously treated as an indicator of journalistic assertiveness.

The Negative Interrogative: Preliminary Observations

Negative interrogatives are utterances beginning with interrogative frames such as 'Isn’t it...', 'Doesn’t this...', and 'Don’t you...'.¹ Notwithstanding their interrogative syntax, which is a variant of the yes/no or polar interrogative form, these utterances are not always understood as questions. For example, in the following interchange concerning a lunch guest at an event hosted by Margy, Emma's negative interrogative at line 7 is treated as an 'assertion' to be 'agreed with' rather than a 'question' to be 'answered.' And, it may be noted, Margy's agreement is managed through the same practice - the negative interrogative - deployed in Emma's previous turn:

(1) NB VII:1-2

1 Emma: =Oh honey that was a lovely luncheon I shoulda ca:led you
3 Margy: ))((f)) Oh:::
4 Margy: =I wz gla[d y o u (came).]
5 Emma: ['nd yer f: fr:ends 'r so da:rl:ing,
6 Margy: =Oh:::[: it wz:
7 Emma: → [e-that Pt:t i:sn’t she a do:][;ll?
8 Margy: → [iY eh i:sn’t she pretty,

¹ This format for negative interrogatives in English finds parallels in other languages with interrogative syntax for
According to Bolinger (1957), when negative interrogatives (henceforth N-I) are delivered from a position of knowledge, they are understood as 'assertions' rather than 'questions,' whereas when delivered from a position of ignorance they assume the more familiar guise of information seeking (see also Heritage 2012; Heritage and Roth 1995; Heinemann 2006; Koshik 2002). This Janus-faced characteristic can be helpful to journalists who can use the format to make substantive assertions to newsmakers while apparently 'asking a question.' A journalist who is challenged by a source for trespassing the boundaries of legitimate questioning will thus have a secure, though possibly disingenuous, line of retreat, as illustrated in the following exchange between veteran correspondent Sam Donaldson and George HW Bush’s budget director, David Stockman. The topic concerns methods of paying for the taxpayer 'bailout' of US Savings and Loan institutions that became bankrupt following a period of deregulation during the Reagan administration:

(2) ABC This Week October, 1989: Darman

1 Donaldson: → Isn’t it a fact, Mr. Darman, that the taxpayers will pay more in interest than if they just paid it out of general revenues?
2 Darman: No, not necessarily. That’s a technical argument--
3 Donaldson: It’s not a-- may I, sir? It’s not a technical argument.
4 → Isn’t it a fact?
5 Darman: No, it’s definitely not a fact. Because first of all, twenty billion of the fifty billion is being handled in just the way you want -- through treasury financing. The remaining--
6 Donaldson: → I’m just asking you a question. I’m not expressing my personal views.
7 Darman: I understand.

After two N-Is focusing on taxpayer costs (lines 1 and 6), the latter an addendum to a flatly stated disagreement, Darman insinuates that Donaldson has an axe to grind on this issue ("twenty of the fifty billion is being handled in just the way you want," lines 8-9). At this point Donaldson retreats to the 'safety' position enabled by his previous use of interrogative syntax -- "I'm just asking you a question. I'm not expressing my personal views" -- and Darman, in turn, acquiesces to this.
The evidence that N-I syntax is 'assertive' comes from multiple sources. First and foremost, it is frequently treated as such by respondents (Heritage 2002; Clayman and Heritage 2002). The most common way in which this emerges is for respondents to reply that they 'agree' or 'disagree' with the proposition prefaced by the N-I frame, as in the following response by President Bill Clinton to a question from veteran White House correspondent Helen Thomas about fund-raising - that included 'sleepovers' for big donors in the Jefferson bedroom of the White House:

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

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

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

Second, both politicians and journalists are aware of, and occasionally comment on, this aspect of questioning. Thus in the impeachment hearings of President Clinton, Senator Howard Cobel (Republican, North Carolina) asked the following of a member of the Prosecutor's Panel:

(4) Senate Judiciary Committee Hearings 8th December, 1998

1 Cobel: Now lemme ask you this Mister Davis,
2 (1.5)
3 Cobel: → Would you:, (0.8) I started to say wouldn’t you,
4 → but then I’d be speaking for you.
5 Would you acknowledge (0.5) that this committee’s
6 consideration ….
Cobel here straightforwardly acknowledges the assertive character of the N-I frame, and the same acknowledgement is made by PBS interviewer Margaret Warner in a live television broadcast about the same impeachment hearings. Warner's question is designed to invite one of the panelists to comment critically on the presentational strategy of one of the House prosecutors. She frames her question using three different forms (lines 4-5), beginning with an abandoned N-I format (Wouldn't-) before finally commenting that she will ask it "in the form of a question" (lines 5-6) and then successfully delivering a fourth, and complete version of the question (line 8):

(5) PBS: Impeachment Coverage February 6th, 1999

1 Warner: I went back and looked. That first presentation by Rogan,
2 >Congressman< Rogan took a half an hour where y'know
3 he played the Sidney Blumenthal and he showed her takin:
4 → (. ) the oath_ <I mean in retrospect wouldn't- would you say
5 that's (. ) might you say, (. ) or as Jim would
6 → [say <(h)h'll: a(h)sk in thuh form of uh que(h)stion:. 
7 ( .):
8 Warner: Could that have be:en, (. ) a waste o(h)f ti(hh)me?

In sum, it is clear from the academic literature, and from the participants themselves, that questions framed in N-I syntax are frequently understood as understood as opinionated, and as straddling a line in which describing facts or expressing opinions is, at the minimum, a part of the process of inviting response. They are, for the most part, 'assertive' and it was for this reason that we included them as a component of 'assertiveness' in our measures of long-term change in Presidential news conferences.

**Negative Interrogatives across historical time**

N-I questions emerged only gradually over the time period selected for our analysis. During the first Eisenhower administration (1953-56), they made up just 2% of the polar (yes/no) questions directed to the President. They picked up briefly during Eisenhower's second term to 6%, before declining during the Kennedy-Johnson era. It was only after the Nixon inflection point, which for this practice begins

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2 Margaret Warner's mention of "Jim" in line 5 is a reference to longtime PBS NewsHour Anchor, Jim Lehrer.
around 1973 when the Watergate scandal began to mushroom, that N-I questions begin a strong and continuous climb (Figure 1).

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

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

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

(6) Press Conference of Dwight D. Eisenhower, August 1, 1956
Journalist: James Reston
Topic: Eisenhower's Running Mate in the forthcoming Presidential Election

1 Reston: Mr. President, in the light of what you have said about Mr. Nixon this morning and your failure to comment about other candidates for the Vice Presidency, is it not inevitable that we should conclude that Mr. Nixon is your preference?
2 President: Well you have a right to conclude what you please. But I have said that I would not express a preference….

Journalist: William Knighton
Topic: The 1960 Presidential Election

1 Knighton: Mr President, don't you think the country ought to have the benefit of your advice as to who you think the other Republicans are who could be President?
2 President: Well I'll tell you what: there's a number of them, and I am not going into the business of nominating people…

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

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

1 Journalist: Isn't it time you told us, will Agnew be on the ticket?
2 President: I know that that is a question that is very much on the minds of the delegates who will be coming to Miami in August…
11

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

1 Taylor: Thank you, Mr. President. Let's speak about reelection if we might for a
2 moment. But it's getting late, and if you don't run at this point, other
3 Republicans who would then have an interest in it would be way behind
4 their Democratic opponents. It would seem to hurt the party. Therefore,
5 → practically speaking now, don't you have to run?
6 President: I have to commend all of you people; you can find more different ways
7 of asking that question. [Laughter]

Sometimes, indeed, the question was deployed to humorous effect, as in (10) where Richard Wilson used

a N-I question to ask if Eisenhower might be considering the repeal of the 22nd Amendment to the

Constitution (which prohibits Presidents from holding office for more than two terms):³

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

1 Wilson: Mr. President, I wonder if you would clarify statement that you made earlier.
2 I think you said in the present tense, '…if I ever run again.' What were you
3 referring to there, sir?
4 President: No; I was talking about the past. I said I stated during my first Administration
5 that "if I should ever run again," I wanted to run on policies and not
6 personalities.
7 Wilson: → I wondered, sir, if you might not be referring to the possibility of the repeal
8 of the twenty-second amendment.
9 President: Look, I will give you people a piece of news. They can repeal it if they want
10 to. I shall not run again. [Laughter]

A further characteristic of the topical content of N-I questions, particularly commonplace during

the early years, was the fact that the President's answer was often easy to anticipate if not downright

obvious. Thus there was little mystery surrounding whether a popular President would be running for re-

election (excerpt 9), or whether the President would retain his Vice President in the impending campaign

(excerpts 6, 8). The obviousness quotient may also account for the use of N-I questions on relatively

factual matters. Thus, although the following question raises the serious and politically charged topic of

³ In this case, the assertiveness of the N-I is mitigated by the initial frame of the question (“I wondered, Sir, if…”). A similar
frame mitigates the assertiveness of the N-I in the next example (excerpt 11).
investigating civil rights abuses in the Southern states, the specific issue to which the assertive N-I component is addressed is the proper bureaucratic jurisdiction for such an investigation.

(11) Press Conference of Dwight D Eisenhower, January 19, 1956
Journalist: Robert Spivak
Topic: Civil rights

1 Spivak: Recently you suggested a commission to study acts of violence against
2 Negroes in certain States. I wonder if you have discussed this with
3 → Attorney General Brownell or the FBI, and if that isn't really one of their
4 functions?
5 President: Well what I want to find out is, of course, someone to define the lines in
6 which Federal responsibility in the great fields of civil rights lays….

Certain populist themes also crop up in early-period N-I questions. In excerpt 12 the question concerns the use of Executive power to deal with the U.S. "butter mountain" - a product, as in Europe, of farm subsidies. In this case, the questioner's suggestion that the butter could be sold to housewives "at prices they could pay" (lines 5-7) comes at the end of extended sequence of exchanges on the topic:

(12) Press Conference of Dwight D Eisenhower, April 2, 1953
Journalist: May Craig
Topic: US "Butter Mountain"

1 Craig: Mr President, if I could get away from high politics to butter, do you think
2 there is anything you can do in the long term, so that people can get butter
3 at reasonable prices, and not have it stored away at taxpayers expense
4 to spoil? It is a long-term problem, I know, but it's a symbolic thing.
5 President: Well of course, you are talking about something where you could far better
6 go to the Secretary of Agriculture and get a really definitive answer to
7 such a question, …..
8 Craig: But Sir the reason we have so many million - nearly half a billion - pounds in
9 storage is because the taxpayers' money is taken to buy, put it there.
10 President: I think you are exaggerating the figures somewhat, but it's still too large in my
11 opinion……
12 Craig: → Well sir if you did not - this administration did not price support it, couldn't you
13 find an outlet in the ordinary people buying it - the housewives - at prices they
14 could pay?
15 President: I would say ….

This essentially populist use of N-I questions extended into the Kennedy administration, where the President was asked a question about re-uniting GI families:
Press Conference of John F. Kennedy, April 11, 1962
Journalist: Unknown
Topic: Reuniting service families

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

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

Press Conference of Dwight D Eisenhower, April 7, 1954
Journalist: May Craig
Topic: Delays in US production of Hydrogen bombs

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

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

\(^4\) General Lucius Clay was American Commander during the Berlin Airlift of 1948 that relieved the Soviet
blockade of the Western part of the city. In 1961, during the Berlin Wall crisis he returned to Berlin as special
advisor to President Kennedy.
Journalist: Robert Semple
Topic: Vietnam

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

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

Journalist: Unknown
Topic: Gender gap in government

1 Journalist: Mr. President, if may follow up with another question about the Commission, you talk a lot here, and your aides do, about the gender gap. And yet that Commission was appointed - 12 men, no women. Doesn't that add to the perception that you're insensitive to women?
2 President: It might add to the perception, and that's all it is is a perception.....

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

Journalist: Ellen Warren
Topic: Republican Nomination Campaign

1 Warren: Mr. President, you seem to be brushing off this 30-to-40-percent consistent voting for Pat Buchanan as a frustration with the economy.
2 → Sir, doesn't the buck stop here? Don't you take any responsibility - and your predecessor, Ronald Reagan - for the state of the economy, sir?
3 President: Absolutely.
4 Warren: Well, so why should people vote for you if it's your fault?
5 President: Because they know I'm trying to change it.....

\textsuperscript{5} Vice-President Agnew gave several speeches during 1969, vigorously attacking opponents of President Nixon's Vietnam policies and giving aggressive support to those policies.
And only a year later President Clinton was left without a hiding place in regard to the ultimate authority behind the disastrous intervention by the FBI in Waco, Texas which led to the deaths of 76 people including 20 children:

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

1 McClendon: Mr. President, why are you still saying it was a Janet Reno decision?
2 → Isn't it, in the end, your decision?
3 President: Well, what I'm saying is that I didn't have a 4- or 5-hour briefing
4 from the FBI. I didn't go over every strategic part of it. It is a
5 decision for which I take responsibility. I'm the President of the
6 United States, and I signed off on the general decision giving her
7 authority to make the last call….

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

Journalist: Unknown
Topic: Watergate

1 Journalist: Mr. President, don't you think that your Administration and the public
2 would be served considerably and that the men under indictment
3 would be treated better, if you people would come through and make
4 a clean breast about what you were trying to get done at the Watergate?
5 President: One thing that has always puzzled me about it is why anybody would
6 have tried to get anything out of the Watergate…

In sum, not only did N-I questions proliferate after the Nixon inflection, but also their content and tenor changed. Whereas during the Eisenhower administration N-I questions were predominantly used in a somewhat lighthearted fashion to address relatively 'lightweight' topics, after the Nixon administration they were deployed increasingly to address topics of considerable gravity and significance. Moreover they became used in an increasingly pointed fashion to raise issues of Presidential accountability for
policy decisions that were treated, at least by implication, as problematic or misguided. Across the 48 year period, the topics and uses of N-I questions underwent a marked darkening in content, tone and tenor.

Questions in Sequence: Negative-Interrogatives as Follow-Up Questions

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

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

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

1 Brandt: → Does not the Coordinating Board have to get their directions from the National
2 Security Council?
3 President: Oh yes, yes.
4 Brandt: → Isn't that rather cumbersome?
5 President: Well they don't have to get their directions on our ideas about psychological
6 warfare….
And in (21), a journalist pursues the question of whether space agreements with Russia concerning cooperation in the use of weather satellites should not be concluded by treaty where, as indicated in the first question (lines 1-4), they would have to be ratified by the U.S. Senate:

(21) Press Conference of John F. Kennedy, April 24, 1963
Journalist: Unknown
Topic: Agreements with the Russians on space programs

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

In (22) a follow-up by Gary Schuster opens the question of a new 'arms race' between the U.S. and the Soviet Union:

(22) Press Conference of Ronald W. Reagan October 19, 1983
Journalist: Gary Schuster
Topic: Space Defense Program

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

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

(23) Press Conference of Ronald W. Reagan November 11, 1982
Journalist: Godfrey Sperling
Topic: Gun Crime

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

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

Journalist: Owen Ullman
Topic: Abortion funding

1 Ullman: Let me ask you a question about your position. Can you explain
2 why you believe it's all right for women who can afford an abortion
3 on their own, that in cases where they are raped or in cases of
4 incest, that it's permissible; but that for poor women who cannot
5 afford abortions, it is not permissible to help them get abortions in
6 cases of rape or incest.
7 President: Owen, the only answer I can give you on that is to go back to the
8 original Hyde amendment and to the position that I took and will
9 stay with. And to some there might be a contradiction there. To me
10 there is none.
11 Ullman: Just to follow, sir: I mean, it's not a question of contradiction. It
12 seems that if you can pay it yourself it's okay under these circumstances.
13 But the message, it seems, is that if you can't afford it yourself -
14 → tough luck! And isn't that a moral conflict in your own position?
15 President: No, I don't think it's a moral conflict in my own position.

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6 The "Hyde Amendment" in question here bars the use of certain federal funds to pay for abortions. Introduced by Republican Congressman Henry Hyde in 1976 as a "rider" to annual appropriations bills it primarily affects poorer patients whose needs are served through the Medicare program.
Although follow-ups grew very substantially after the Nixon-inflection, the proportion of N-I questions deployed as follow-ups remained effectively constant across the two time periods (25% pre-inflection, 28% post-inflection). Thus the expansion in the use of N-I questions after 1972 remained evenly distributed between their use in follow-up and non-follow-up contexts.

**Compounding Assertiveness: Prefaced Negative-Interrogative Questions**

It is a characteristic feature of modern news interviews and news conferences that journalists frequently do not ask simple questions, such as "Mr. President, aren't you afraid that Russia will make bigger hydrogen bombs before we do?" (from (14) above). Rather they preface them with statements that provide 'background' or 'context' for the question to come (Clayman and Heritage 2002a). Just under 57% of the questions in our news conference study were prefaced in this way with one or more statements.

Sometimes these statements simply explain what occasioned the question, or at least provide a pretext for it. This is the case, for example as in (11) and (13) which are partially reproduced below:

(11) Press Conference of Dwight D Eisenhower, January 19, 1956
Journalist: Robert Spivak
Topic: Civil rights

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

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

1 Journalist:→ Mr. President, now that General Clay is coming home from Berlin,  
2 don't you think that the service wives have borne the brunt of our gold  
3 shortage long enough, and should be permitted to join their soldier  
4 husbands in Europe.

However quite frequently the question prefences may themselves be assertive with respect to the type of answer that should be forthcoming. In the following, the journalist builds an elaborate case for certain *de*
facto advantages that the Soviet Union enjoys in the context of the Cold War before going on to ask a N-I question about public perceptions of U.S. inferiority:

Journalist: Edward Morgan
Topic: American public's view of the Russians

1 Morgan: I would like to pursue this discussion about our relative progress with the
2 Soviet Union from a different angle.
3 Have you considered the possibility that the American public may be
4 confused by a psychological aspect of our struggle with the Russians. They
5 may have more missiles than we. They did beat us to the moon. Their rate
6 of economic growth now is faster than ours, and they are, net, turning out,
7 for example, more trained engineers than we do. Now, individually,
8 none of these factors is decisive.
9 → But cumulatively, is it not possible that a state of mind, a dangerous state
10 of mind, is being created under which we would be in a position or be
11 forced into a position to accept a posture of second-best in everything or
12 anything.

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

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

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

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

Journalist: NEED TO FIND THIS
Topic: Gender gap in government

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

In (27) the man whom the President has nominated as arms control director is portrayed as cynically indifferent to arms control negotiations, and this portrayal is presuppositionally leveraged into the proposal that the President has handed the Soviet Union a 'propaganda advantage' in Europe:
(27) Press Conference of Ronald W. Reagan November 11, 1982

Journalist: Lesley Stahl
Topic: Arms Control

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

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


Journalist: Unknown
Topic: Interest rates

1 Journalist: Mr. President, new figures out today show that housing starts were down pretty sharply last month, and the number of building permits went down for the second month in a row. Analysts are saying this could mean the economic recovery is going to level off, maybe kind of peter out next year. And more people are becoming concerned about high interest rates.
2 President: Well, I think what we're doing is aimed at getting interest rates down….

Finally, in (29), the questioner begins by re-invoking an earlier attempt by Clinton at the same news conference to deflect responsibility for campaign finance irregularities to the Democratic National Committee (lines 1-3). He then re-connects Clinton to this malfeasance by observing that the committee co-Chairmen were Clinton appointees working for his re-election (lines 4-6). The subsequent N-I
question closes the circle by inviting Clinton to acknowledge accountability for the campaign finance problems:

Journalist:  John Broder  
Topic:  Campaign Financing  

Broder:  Yes, Mr. President. When questions came up earlier this afternoon about questionable campaign finance contributions, you took pains to say these were Democratic National Committee matters. But with all due respect, you named the cochairmen of the Democratic National Committee. Much of what they did this year was in furtherance of your reelection and that of other Democrats. Don't you feel some responsibility or accountability for what was done in your name?  
President:  Well, first of all, we are doing -- I believe the Democratic Committee is doing the right thing by returning any contributions that were improperly tendered to it…

These questions asked of Presidents Reagan and Clinton (16, 27-29) have no counterparts prior to the Nixon inflection. They could not have been asked of Presidents Eisenhower or Kennedy. They encode a different relationship between the White House Press Corps and the President than previously obtained: one in which journalists no longer hesitated to use highly assertive question forms to ask direct questions about Presidential conduct in a deeply adversarial fashion.

We have already documented the growth in the use of assertive questions during the period 1953-2000. To this we can now add their association with question prefaces that are adversarial in the sense that they portray the conduct of the President or his Administration in negative terms. In combination, these questions become among the most adversarial questions in the journalist's armory and, over time, journalists became more and more prepared to deploy them. Figure 2 depicts the growing use of this combined question form over time.
Figure 2 documents an explosion in the use of hostile prefaces to N-I questions after the Nixon inflection. While 8% of N-I questions (1/12) were associated with adversarial prefaces before the end of 1972, the proportion rises to 33% (32/98) after that date. A second trend is apparent within the first. From 1981 onwards, the highly adversarial question form illustrated in 27-29 above, in which the N-I question presupposes the truth of the adversarial preface, becomes the dominant form of hostile prefaced N-I question: in effect, the weapon of choice with which to confront U.S. Presidents.

Discussion

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

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


