

Questioning Presidents: Journalistic Deference and Adversarialness in the Press Conferences of U.S. Presidents Eisenhower and Reagan

By Steven E. Clayman and John Heritage

This paper develops a new system for analyzing the questions that journalists ask public figures in broadcast news interviews and press conferences. This system is then applied in a comparative study of the forms of questioning that characterized the press conferences of Dwight Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan. The comparison focuses on the phenomenon of adversarialness in question design. Ten features of question design are examined that serve as indicators of 4 basic dimensions of adversarialness: (a) initiative, (b) directness, (c) assertiveness, and (d) hostility. The results reveal substantial and significant differences for all indicators, all in the direction of increased adversarialness. This pattern suggests that journalists have become much less deferential and more aggressive in their treatment of the U.S. president. Possible factors contributing to this development, and its broader ramifications for the evolving relationship between journalism and government, are also discussed.

In a 1954 press conference, U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower was questioned about his plan to reduce taxes and government expenditures:

(1) [Eisenhower 27 Oct 1954: 9]

JRN: Mr. President, you spoke in a speech the other night of the continued reduction of government spending and tax cuts to the limit that the national security will permit. Can you say anything more definite at this time about the prospects of future tax cuts?

Steven E. Clayman and John Heritage teach in the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles. The authors would like to thank Amira Day, Min Lee, Parisa Leviadin, and Shannon Seibert for essential research assistance. Earlier versions of this paper were presented to the Language, Interaction, and Social Organization group at the University of California in Santa Barbara; the Center for Language, Interaction, and Culture at UCLA; the Communication Studies Forum at UCLA; the ASA annual conference, Washington, DC, August 2000; and the APSA annual conference, San Francisco, August 2001.

Copyright © 2002 International Communication Association

Almost 3 decades later, U.S. President Ronald Reagan was asked about his own tax reduction plan:

(2) [Reagan 16 June 1981: 14]

JRN: Mr. President, for months you said you wouldn't modify your tax cut plan, and then you did. And when the business community vociferously complained, you changed your plan again. I just wondered whether Congress and other special interest groups might get the message that if they yelled and screamed loud enough, you might modify your tax cut plan again?

Although both questions concern budgetary matters and tax cuts, they are strikingly different in terms of the manner in which this issue is put to the president. The Eisenhower question is relatively polite and deferential. The question's agenda is derived straightforwardly from the President's own previous remarks, and it contains nothing hostile to his administration. When the question probes for further elaboration, it does so gently and allows for the possibility that Eisenhower may not be able to say more ("Can you say anything . . ."). Finally, the question displays minimal expectations about what the answer will or should be and is largely neutral in this respect. The Reagan question, in contrast, is much more adversarial in character. Although it also makes reference to the President's previous remarks, it highlights contradictions between his words and his actual deeds. Far from being neutral, this question strongly anticipates a "yes" answer, one that would portray the president as weak and beholden to special interests.

The differences between these two questions, and in particular the significantly more adversarial character of the second, are intuitively apparent, but can such differences be specified in a way that would permit the development of quantitative measures of deference and adversarialness in the questioning of presidents and other public figures? Such measures would be highly desirable. They would facilitate systematic comparisons of how officials from the president on down have been treated by journalists in press conferences and news interviews. This would, in turn, illuminate the evolving role of the Washington press corps and the sociopolitical conditions to which it is responsive in this key arena of political accountability.

These objectives, although desirable, have remained elusive. Numerous scholars have commented on the difficulty of systematically quantifying the phenomenon of journalistic adversarialness. Michael Schudson, in a thoughtful assessment of the impact of Watergate on American journalism, observes that "civility is not something easy to measure" (1995, p. 151). Focusing on presidential press conferences in particular, Carolyn Smith notes that, although adversarialness can be illustrated anecdotally, "there is little systematic evidence to demonstrate this relationship" (Smith, 1990, pp. 10–11). Finally, Samuel Kernell notes that "the adversarial aspect of presidential-press relations is an elusive quality, difficult to quantify" (Kernell, 1986, p. 76).

¹ For an introductory overview of conversation analysis, see Heritage (1984, chapter 8). For a thorough discussion of conversation analytic methods, see ten Have (1999). For discussions of the use of conversation analysis to study institutional forms of talk, see Boden and Zimmerman (1991) and Drew and Heritage (1992).

Difficult, perhaps, but not impossible. Drawing on the tradition of conversation analysis,¹ various scholars have examined the social norms and conventional practices that organize news interview talk.² Although news interview research is based on contemporary data drawn from England and the U.S., it has generated findings about forms of questioning that can be mobilized in the service of systematic comparative and historical research. The present study builds on what has already been learned about basic forms of journalistic questioning to develop a new system for analyzing the questions that journalists ask of public figures in broadcast news interviews and press conferences. This study also applies that system in a comparative analysis of the forms of questioning that characterized the press conferences of Dwight Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan. This comparison suggests that, at least in the questioning of presidents, there has been a shift from a relatively deferential style that appears to have been prevalent in the 1950s, toward a more adversarial style that has become commonplace in more recent years.

Background

The evolving culture of American journalism has attracted significant attention since the 1970s. Numerous scholars have argued that journalists in the postwar era have become increasingly aggressive and adversarial in their treatment of government officials and political candidates. This idea was advanced most forcefully by Michael Robinson (1976), and, although there are significant limits to adversarialness (Bennett, 1990; Hallin, 1984), the general trend has since received empirical support. Robinson (1981) and Rozell (1994) document a rise in investigative stories with hostile content in coverage of the U.S. Congress, with the shift in network television news outpacing the shift in the national print media. Sabato (1991) finds an increasing emphasis on scandal in national political news generally. Finally, in a study focusing on coverage of election campaigns since 1960, Patterson (1993) demonstrates that news has become more interpretive, more negative, and more preoccupied with political strategy over policy substance (cf. Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

Although these studies are largely convergent, they are based mainly on data consisting of traditional news stories composed for print or broadcast. Overlooked are other modes of journalistic practice involving interactions with government officials and other public figures in broadcast news interviews and press conferences. What is not known is whether or to what extent the impetus toward adversarialness extends to these direct confrontations between journalists and officials. If adversarialness is to be expressed in an interview or press conference, it must be done directly to the face—indeed, in the face—of the politician. This runs contrary to established norms of interactional politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967; Holtgraves, 1992) and rituals of deference toward political leaders (Alexander, 1989; Schwartz, 1987; Shils, 1975), which might be expected to inhibit adversarial questioning or at least temper the manner in which it is

² For a sampling of research relevant to the present study of question design, see Clayman (1988, 1992, 2002), Clayman and Heritage (2002), Heritage (2002a, 2002b), Heritage and Greatbatch (1991), Heritage and Roth (1995), Macaulay (1996), and Roth (1998).

expressed. The domain of interaction thus represents an acid test for the strength of adversarialness in journalism. There are, however, as yet no systematic comparative or historical studies of news interviews or press conferences that bear on this phenomenon.

It is not for lack of interest. At least for the case of presidential press conferences, there is a lively and illuminating tradition of historical research. This tradition includes several monographs offering historical overviews of presidential press conferences in the context of evolving president-press relations (Cornwell, 1965; French, 1982; Juergens, 1981; Pollard, 1947; Smith, 1990; Tebbel & Watts, 1985) and articles devoted to more narrowly defined topics (Cornwell, 1960; Lammers, 1981; Manheim, 1979; Manheim & Lammers, 1981; McGuire, 1967). However, much of this research focuses less on the substance of what actually transpires within press conferences in favor of the institutional conditions under which they occur, for instance, their initial growth and institutionalization, their increasingly public character, the declining frequency with which they are held, and so on.

When conduct internal to the press conference is considered, the analysis tends to be broad and impressionistic in character. There are few efforts to analyze journalistic conduct systematically in a way that would permit quantification, and these remain underdeveloped. McGuire (1967) examines various dimensions of questioning, but only one such dimension—the increasing prevalence of follow-up questions—is at all relevant to adversarialness. Manheim (1979) analyzes the relative frequency of certain broad categories of question content (e.g., domestic politics versus foreign policy, etc.) and overall hostility in question design. However, variation over time is examined only within each administration in order to test for the validity of the widely assumed “honeymoon period” in president-press relations. Long-term historical trends thus remain unexamined.

Methodology

How does one go about measuring adversarialness in this context? One could in principle develop a coding scheme based on a set of straightforward thematic or topical content categories (i.e., questions about the president’s conflicts with Congress, dissension within the administration, established scandals, etc.). However, the difficulty with any strictly content-based approach is that it is less likely to reflect the culture of journalism *per se*, so much as the extrajournalistic reality of a particular administration. For instance, Bill Clinton faced unprecedented questions about his sex life, questions that were not asked of Bush or Reagan. It may be tempting to conclude that this reflects shifting journalistic norms, but it may also be driven by real differences in Clinton’s sexual conduct and by the efforts of his opponents to expose such conduct—all of which has arguably made such questions more salient for Clinton than for his immediate predecessors. The need to control for extrajournalistic reality is, of course, a general methodological problem that besets efforts to treat news content as a reflection of journalistic culture.

In light of these considerations, the present coding system focuses less on historically contingent themes and topics—what the questions are “about”—and more

Table 1. Questioning Turns by President

	<i>n</i>	%
Eisenhower	374	50.4
Reagan	368	49.6
Total	742	100.0

on relatively formal aspects of question design that may relevantly be applied across questions and presidents. Question content has by no means been ignored—content-based categories remain a part of the system—but they are less central and have been formulated in a way that enhances comparability across presidents.

The emphasis on formal design features has additional advantages for both the reliability and validity of the coding system. Thematic content categories tend to be highly interpretive, and their application requires considerable judgment (Krippendorff, 1980, pp. 62–63); formal design features are relatively concrete and hence more reliably codable. All coding was performed by the authors working as a team seeking consensus. Reliability was assessed by joint recoding of a subsample, yielding kappa scores above .80 for 7 of the 10 indicators. Two others were just shy of this level at .74 and above, and the remaining indicator (content-based) was .62. Accordingly, the system achieved a high level of reliability.

As for validity, formal features of question design have been the subject of substantial prior research, both on journalistic questioning per se and on questioning practices in interaction generally.³ This research demonstrates that specific design features are indeed understood and treated by interactants as embodying adversarialness in various forms. Consequently, the validity of these design features as indicators of adversarialness has for the most part been well established.

For this study, two presidents—Dwight Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan—were selected as historical signposts. They were chosen in part because they span the time period during which American journalism is widely supposed to have become more aggressive, and also because of their many similarities. Although they are by no means a perfect match—Reagan was more conservative than Eisenhower—both were popular two-term Republican presidents who held office during relatively peaceful and prosperous times. Thus, they provide the best signposts for documenting the changing culture and practice of journalism in American society.

Four conferences were sampled per year, staggered quarterly over the year, through the first term of each president. A temporally stratified sample was chosen on the grounds that president-press relations are known to be cyclical in nature, with an initial honeymoon period followed by more aggressive treatment (Brody, 1991). Because each president held no press conferences during one

³ For research on question design in news interviews, see the references cited in note 2. For relevant research bearing on question design in interaction generally, see Pomerantz (1988), Raymond (2000), and the extensive line of research concerning conventional indirectness (e.g., Blum-Kulka, 1987; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Clark & Schunk, 1980; Van der Wijst, 1995).

quarter, this sampling procedure yielded a database of 30 conferences and a total of 742 questioning turns that happen to be almost perfectly split between Eisenhower and Reagan (see Table 1).

Each question was coded in terms of 10 variables that bear on 4 four basic facets or dimensions of adversarialness: (a) initiative, (b) directness, (c) assertiveness, and (d) hostility.⁴ These dimensions, and the variables that serve as indicators of them, will be explored in turn.

Initiative

When asking questions, journalists can choose to be relatively passive in the sense of allowing the president maximum leeway to construct his response and placing few constraints on him. Alternatively, they can take a more enterprising role, building their questions in such a way as to set a more independent and constraining agenda for response. If journalists have indeed become more aggressive over time, one way this should be manifest is in an increase in the exercise of initiative.

Question Complexity

One straightforward indicator of initiative is the sheer elaborateness of the journalist's questioning turn. Some turns consist of just a single unit of talk, ordinarily one sentence, as in example 3 below:

(3) [Eisenhower 2 April 1953: 1]

JRN: Mr. President, what is your estimation or analysis of the recent peace overtures from Russia and Communist China?

Alternatively, questioning turns can be elaborated in various ways. One mode of elaboration involves asking multiple questions within a turn, as in example 4. Note that the beginning of each new question is arrowed in the left margin.

(4) [Reagan 11 Nov 1982: 1]

JRN: 1-> Mr. President, who will be leading the U.S. delegation to Leonid Brezhnev's funeral?

2-> If you won't be going, how come?

3-> And also, aside from your personal hopes for peace, do you have reason to believe that the next coming months might see the new Soviet leadership flexing its muscle a bit and a period of increased tension coming about?

RR: 3-> Well, answering the last question first, no, I don't anticipate that as they make this transition. . . .

⁴ Due to space limitations, this paper will not discuss two additional variables that were also examined, but that yielded statistically or substantively insignificant results. One measure of initiative (adherence to the agenda of the president's opening statement) turned out to be statistically insignificant. One measure of assertiveness (question cascades that narrow the question to a single proposition) was statistically but not substantively significant.

- 1, 2-> But with regard to the service, we've had no direct, official word yet on anything about the service, although we are in communication directly with them. And it was just a plain case of looking at schedules and my own schedule . . .

Such multipart questions plainly multiply the demands placed on the president, a fact that presidents themselves are oriented to in their responses (Clayman, 1993). Thus, Reagan first answers the third and last question about increasing tensions in the wake of Brezhnev's funeral, and he then proceeds to address the first two questions about administration attendance at the funeral.

A second mode of elaboration involves delivering the question with more or less extensive prefatory statements (Greatbatch, 1988; Heritage & Greatbatch, 1991; Heritage, 2002a). For example:

(5) [Reagan 19 Oct 1983: 28]

JRN: S-> 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.

S-> Analysts are saying this could mean the economic recovery is going to level off, maybe kind of peter out next year.

S-> And more people are becoming concerned about high interest rates.

Q-> And given the big deficits being projected by your own administration, isn't it time for some strong action by you to get interest rates down?

These preliminary statements contain contextual background information that renders the question intelligible to the audience and provides for its appropriateness. By producing such statements, journalists construct a context for the impending question, thereby freeing themselves from the confines of what may be understood or presupposed in the preexisting context. Furthermore, under the guise of providing background information, such statements can also be used to introduce information that is hostile to the president and to exert pressure for a response (Heritage, 2002a). In example 5 the statements contain various pieces of economic news, all of it bad news. This material establishes the relevance of the subsequent question about the need to reduce interest rates, favors a "yes" answer to that question, and makes it more difficult for the president to sidestep the question or offer, say, a simplistically rosy economic analysis in response. In various ways, then, the inclusion of such preliminary material embodies the exercise of initiative.

Finally, note that elaborative resources can be combined to construct supercomplex questions containing both preliminary statements and multiple questioning components. For example:

(6) [Reagan 19 Oct 1983: 20]

JRN: S-> Mr. President, before the United States went into Vietnam, the French suffered a devastating defeat there by putting their troops in a saucer-shaped depression with the enemy up around the sides shooting down at them.

Table 2. Question Complexity by President

		Simple	Prefaced	Multi	Super	Other	Total
Eisenhower	<i>n</i>	141	139	23	13	3	319
	%	44.20	43.57	7.21	4.08	0.94	100.00
Reagan	<i>n</i>	29	124	23	56	2	234
	%	12.39	52.99	9.83	23.93	0.85	100.00

Pearson $\chi^2 = 90.7191$, $p < 0.001$ (kappa 1.0)

Q->Doesn't this appear uncomfortably similar to you to the way we are deploying our troops in Lebanon on the low ground?

Q->And how soon can we expect that we're going to redeploy them to a spot that makes more sense?

Given a general propensity toward greater journalistic adversarialness over the time period examined, and given that the initiative dimension of adversarialness is manifested in question complexity, one would expect an increase in the prevalence of elaborated questions from Eisenhower and Reagan. As Table 2 shows,⁵ questions have indeed become more elaborate over time. The first column shows the frequency with which each president was asked simple, one-sentence questions. For Eisenhower, roughly 44% of the turns contained simple questions, but for Reagan this rate drops to just 12%. Moving across the table, Reagan was asked every type of elaborated question more frequently than Eisenhower was. However, by far the most dramatic increase was in the supercomplex category of questions, that is, those containing both preliminary statements and multiple questions. For Eisenhower about 4% of the questions were supercomplex, whereas for Reagan this rate increased almost sixfold to just under 24%. The significance of this finding is that, whereas journalists exercised greater initiative across the board in questioning Reagan, the increase in initiative is concentrated in a style of questioning that embodies the most initiative—both controlling the context in which the question was offered and placing greater and more constraining demands on the President.

Question Cascades

A second indicator of initiative involves the prevalence of a phenomenon we termed a *question cascade*. This involves a journalist, following the completion of a given question, going on to produce a second (and occasionally a third) version of that question. For example:

⁵ For this table, follow-up questions—those in which the same journalist regains the floor to pursue the matter—have been excluded on the grounds that they are focused on and tied to the prior “base” question, and so are rarely elaborated. Indeed, only 24% of follow-up questions were elaborated in any way; most were managed within a single sentence.

Table 3. Question Cascades by President

		No cascade	Cascade	Total
Eisenhower	<i>n</i>	391	20	411
	%	95.13	4.87	100.00
Reagan	<i>n</i>	420	40	460
	%	91.30	8.70	100.00

Pearson $\chi^2 = 4.9628$, $p = 0.026$ (kappa 0.78)

(7) [Eisenhower 27 Oct 1954: 24]

JRN: Mr. President, you mentioned a moment ago your receiving reports of apathy among voters.

-> To what do you ascribe this apathy?

-> Is it a disenchantment with the program of the last 2 years, sir?

Unlike the multipart questions examined above (cf. examples 4 & 6) which raise separate and distinct issues for the president to address, a question cascade involves different versions of what is ostensibly the same question. In the above example, both components seek an explanation for why labor unrest cannot be permitted to interrupt the operation of a noted weapons facility.

Question cascades typically involve the exercise of journalistic initiative because, although the topical focus of inquiry remains the same across successive versions of the question, in most cases the latter version tightens or narrows the parameters of an acceptable response. For instance, in the example above, the first question open-endedly seeks an explanation, whereas the second version nominates a single proposition for the president to confirm.

Given the clear link between question cascades and the exercise of initiative, one would expect their prevalence to increase over time, and Table 3 demonstrates that this has indeed occurred. Fewer than 5% of Eisenhower's questions took this form, but for Reagan this rate almost doubles to just under 9%. The pattern is again statistically significant. It is thus clear that journalists were more inclined to revise and tighten their questions to Reagan in an on-the-spot fashion than they were willing to do in the more sedate and formal Eisenhower press conferences.

Follow-up Questions

The third indicator of initiative is the prevalence of follow-up questions. Although journalists can elaborate their turns in various ways, they are typically restricted to just a single turn at talk. This is a product of the turn-taking system that organizes press conference interaction, in which large numbers of journalists must bid for the president's permission to take each successive questioning turn.⁶ However,

⁶ For a discussion of this turn-taking system, and a short-lived effort to modify it, see Schegloff (1988–1989).

Table 4. Follow-up Questions by President

		Not follow-up	Follow-up	Total
Eisenhower	<i>n</i>	319	55	374
	%	85.29	14.71	100.00
Reagan	<i>n</i>	234	134	368
	%	65.39	36.41	100.00

Pearson $\chi^2 = 46.0408$, $p < 0.001$ (kappa 0.95)

occasionally the same journalist who asked a particular question will, immediately after the president's response, regain the floor to press for a more substantial answer or to raise a related matter. For example:

(8) [Reagan 16 June 1981: 19–20]

JRN: Mr. President, do you approve of conservative fundraising groups such as NCPAC making these expensive television commercials targeting liberal Democrats for defeat in the next election?

RR: I don't really know how to answer that, because the game of politics is to try to win an election. . . .

JRN: -> If I may follow up on that sir, is it really a sense of fair play that these groups with all their money are, in effect, ganging up on one member of Congress to make him an object lesson for other wavering Congressmen who might not see things their way?

Follow-up questions embody the exercise of initiative, in general by exceeding the one-turn-per-journalist norm and, in many cases, by declining to accept as adequate a response that the president offered as adequate. However, the analysis of follow-up questions is complicated by the fact that success in getting such a question is contingent on the president, who can choose to acknowledge the journalist and thereby facilitate a follow-up question, or forestall the impending follow-up by calling on another journalist. The frequency of follow-up questions is thus an imperfect indicator of journalistic initiative.

As Table 4 shows, follow-up questions were significantly more prevalent in Reagan's press conferences. The frequency of follow-up questions more than doubled—fewer than 15% of Eisenhower's questions were follow-ups, but more than 36% of Reagan's were. When dealing with Reagan, journalists were more inclined to assert themselves in an effort to regain the floor and probe for greater detail.

In summary, these three measures of journalistic initiative—the prevalence of complex questions, question cascades, and follow-up questions—all point in the same direction, indicating that journalists have become substantially more enterprising in the design of their questions and have tended to deploy question forms that are more constraining on the president.

Directness

It is a well-established principle among scholars of language use that modes of expression may be distinguished in terms of their level of directness (Levinson, 1983, pp. 263–276). Unlike direct (i.e., blunt, straightforward) forms of expression, indirect forms entail some divergence between what is said and what is meant, such that meaning is circuitously implied rather than literally stated. Thus, to take a familiar example, “Can you pass the salt” is not to be taken literally as a question seeking information, but as an indirect request.

Indirectness often occurs in the context of speech acts, such as questions and requests, that threaten to impose on the recipient. It has been proposed that such indirectness functions as a ritual display of politeness that reduces the magnitude or forcefulness of the imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This has been amply supported by experimental and survey studies demonstrating that conventionally indirect forms are indeed perceived as more polite (Blum-Kulka, 1987; Clark & Schunk, 1980; Van der Wijk, 1995), and by observational research demonstrating that at least some such forms facilitate noncompliant responses.⁷ Given a general rise in adversarialness, journalists’ use of indirectness might be expected to have declined over time, resulting in questions that are more blunt and hence more forceful instruments of interrogation.

In the press conference context, indirectness typically takes the form of a phrase, clause, or sentence that precedes and frames the focal question. These can be grouped into two broad categories: (a) other-referencing question frames and (b) self-referencing question frames.

Other-Referencing Question Frames

These involve some reference to the president’s ability or willingness to answer the question. The standard way this is done is by launching the question with a phrase such as *can you*, *could you*, *will you*, or *would you*, followed by a speech act verb like *comment*, *explain*, *tell*, and so on. Examples 9 and 10 illustrate this practice (arrowed).

(9) [Eisenhower 7 April 1954: 17]

JRN: → Sir, could you tell us how soon you expect to name a successor to Mr. Warren, the Comptroller General?

DE: No, I can’t tell you.

(10) [Eisenhower 7 July 1954: 2]

JRN: To carry that a bit further, sir, there have been some suggestions on the Hill that if Red China is admitted over our protest, that the United States should then withdraw from the U.N.

→ Would you comment on that, sir?

⁷ See the analysis of example 9 above. For a related analysis of the import of indirectness in news interview questioning, see Macaulay (1996).

Table 5. Other-Referencing Frames by President

		None	Ability	Willing	Total
Eisenhower	<i>n</i>	256	103	52	411
	%	62.29	25.06	12.65	100.00
Reagan	<i>n</i>	415	39	6	460
	%	90.22	8.48	1.30	100.00

Pearson $\chi^2 = 100.5661$, $p < 0.001$ (kappa 0.97)

Notice that the other-referencing frame is not essential to the substance of the question—each question could have been asked without it. In example 9, for instance, the journalist could have simply said, “How soon do you expect to name a successor. . . .?” The inclusion of the frame adds an element of indirectness because it casts the question as concerning the contingencies that affect whether an answer will be forthcoming. Can you/could you highlights the ability to respond, evoking circumstances beyond the president’s control; will you/would you highlights willingness to respond as a matter of preference or choice. Asking about these contingencies is a way of indirectly inquiring into the subject at hand.

This form of indirectness not only mitigates the forcefulness of the question, but it also gives the president an “out,” a way of sidestepping the issue that’s signaled by the design of the question itself. Consider example 9 above—in the context of a question framed by reference to the president’s ability to answer (“Could you tell us . . .”), the president’s refusal to speak to the issue (“No I can’t tell you”) is nonetheless fully responsive to the question in the way in which it was framed. In various ways, then, such indirectness is demonstrably cautious and deferential to the president.

Although other-referencing frames generally are deferential, they are not all equally so—willingness frames are more deferential than ability frames. The basis for this distinction is the fact that, although both frames give the president an “out,” they do so on very different grounds. Will you/would you licenses the possibility that the president might refuse to answer simply as a matter of personal preference. This is plainly more deferential than can you/could you, which licenses only external circumstances as an account for not answering. Thus, if journalists have become less deferential and more direct over time, one would expect a greater decline in willingness frames than in ability frames.

The results for this indicator of directness are summarized in Table 5.⁸ In general, other-referencing frames were less prevalent for Reagan than they had been for Eisenhower. The first column shows the percentage of questions that were

⁸ For Tables 5 and 6, the unit of analysis was the individual question rather than the turn at talk. Because a given turn can contain more than one component question, the totals for these tables are larger than for the previous tables.

Table 6. Self-Referencing Frames by President

		None	Wonder	Like/Want	Can/May	Total
Eisenhower	<i>n</i>	327	68	9	7	411
	%	79.56	16.55	2.19	1.70	100.00
Reagan	<i>n</i>	427	23	8	2	459
	%	92.83	5.00	1.74	0.43	100.00

Pearson $\chi^2 = 35.7084$, $p < 0.001$ (kappa 1.0)

direct, unmitigated by any other-referencing frame. For Eisenhower, about 62% were unmitigated, but for Reagan the rate rises to 90%; conversely, the use of such frames dropped from 38% to 10%. Proceeding across the table, whereas both frame types have declined substantially, the decline has been greater for willingness frames. Between the Eisenhower and Reagan years, ability frames declined by roughly 65%, but this substantial decrease is eclipsed by the effective collapse in the use of willingness frames. Eisenhower's questions were mitigated by willingness frames about 13% of the time, but Reagan's were so mitigated only a bit over 1% of the time. In short, the more cautious of the two frame types has all but disappeared entirely.

Self-Referencing Question Frames

Turning now to self-referencing frames, these make some reference to the journalist's own intentions, motivations, or capacity to ask the question. For instance, a question may be prefaced with *I wonder* or *I wondered* or *I was wondering*, as in example 11.

(11) [Reagan 16 June 1981: 14]

JRN: Mister President, for months you said you wouldn't modify your tax cut plan and then you did. And when the business community vociferously complained, you changed your plan again.

-> I just wondered whether Congress and other special interest groups might get the message that if they yelled and screamed loud enough, you might modify your tax plan again.

It may also be prefaced with *I would like to ask* or *I want to ask*, as in 12.

(12) [Eisenhower 1 July 1953: 16]

JRN: Mister President, may I return to the matter of the revolt behind the Iron Curtain?

RR: Yes.

JRN: -> I would like to ask whether you feel that the events which are now taking place create an opportunity for the administration to take any tangible action to support liberation in line with its stated objectives.

Also in this category are prefaces such as *Can I*, *Could I*, or *May I ask*:

(13) [Eisenhower 8 Oct 1953: 20]

JRN: Mister President, I ask this because many of us are not well acquainted with Mister Mitchell.

-> Could I ask you the same question, sir, in reference to him that was asked about Chief Justice Warren last week, that is, what are the qualifications that attracted Mister Mitchell to you, as Secretary of Labor?

This latter formulation closely approximates the form of a outright request for permission, and on this basis it appears to be the most indirect and deferential of the self-referencing frames.

The results for self-referencing question frames (Table 6) are more mixed, and the pattern is not quite as strong as it was for other-referencing frames, but the increase in directness is clear.

Questions unmitigated by any form of self-referencing frame increased from about 80% for Eisenhower to 93% for Reagan; conversely, the use of such frames dropped from 20% to 7%. However the decline in self-referencing prefaces was concentrated in the *I wonder/I was wondering* category. This less explicitly deferential category registers a greater than threefold decline. The other two forms of self-referencing indirectness were by no means common in Eisenhower's day. However, although there was not much difference between the two presidents in the use of *I would like/want to ask*, *Can I/May I* also virtually disappeared in the Reagan era. Once again, the overall pattern is highly significant.

The results for both sets of question frames combine to indicate that the Washington press corps has become significantly less indirect and cautious and more direct and straightforward in its questioning of the president.

Assertiveness

The third dimension of adversarialness, which we term *assertiveness*, concerns the degree to which the journalist manages to suggest or imply or push for a particular response in the course of asking a question. Of course, no question is neutral in an absolute sense, but questions do vary in the degree to which they manage to express an opinion on the subject being inquired about, thereby portraying one type of answer as expectable or preferable (Heritage, 2000a, 2000b; cf. Pomerantz, 1988).⁹ To simplify the coding of this dimension, the analysis was largely restricted to yes-no questions, where the phenomenon is comparatively straightforward. Thus, some yes-no questions are relatively neutral as to which answer is correct or preferable, whereas others are in various ways "tilted" in favor of either yes or no.¹⁰

⁹ Assertiveness in question design is analogous to the conversation-analytic concept of preference organization in what Schegloff (1988) has called its structure-based sense.

¹⁰ From a technical point of view, it may be argued that all yes-no questions embody a preference, however slight, toward one pole or the other. For example, "Are you going to the store" prefers "yes"

Preface Tilt

The first and perhaps most obvious way of tilting a yes-no question involves those prefatory statements that often come just before the question. To be sure, some prefaces have no bearing on the outcome of the question either way, as in example 14, where the preface merely identifies an issue (here, statehood for Alaska and Hawaii) and establishes its relevance as a topic of inquiry.

(14) [Eisenhower 7 April 1954: 11]

JRN: S-> Mr. President, last week the Senate passed a measure enabling both Hawaii and Alaska to achieve statehood.

Q-> If the house should pass that measure, would you veto the bill?

Other prefaces tilt the question toward either yes or no. Consider example 15. Here statements from Reagan's close advisors about his intention to run for reelection combine to favor a yes answer to the question soliciting Reagan's own declaration to that effect (see also example 6 above).

(15) [Reagan 16 June 1981: 12]

JRN: S-> Mr. President, about 10 days ago your Chief of Staff said on a television interview program that he thought you were committed to running for a second term. And another aide of yours, Lyn Nofziger, has said virtually the same thing.

Q-> Can you tell us, sir, if you are committed to running for a second term?

Tilting prefaces may be further distinguished in terms of how the substance of the tilt bears on the president's political interests. Some tilting prefaces are comparatively innocuous, in the sense that the tilt is not particularly damaging to the president (and may be even slightly favorable to him). For example, the preface in example 15 above tilts in favor of the proposition that Reagan will indeed be running for a second term—from Reagan's vantage point, a relatively innocuous idea. Alternatively, prefaces may be hostile in character, tilted against the president and toward a proposition that is substantially damaging to him or his administration. Example 16 is a good illustration of a tilting preface that is massively hostile. Before delivering the question about whether the "arms buildup is money well spent," the journalist runs through a lengthy litany of failures in Reagan's weapons systems. These prefatory remarks not only tilt the subsequent question toward a no answer, but this tilt is plainly working against the president.

(16) [Reagan 11 Nov 1982: 20]

JRN: S-> Mr. President, evidence mounts that key weapons in your \$400 billion weapons procurement buildup are in trouble. Navy testers say that the F-18, on which

on the grounds that it nominates one proposition for confirmation rather than its alternatives ("Are you staying home"; Pomerantz, 1988). However, because preference in this sense is unavoidable, it cannot provide a basis for discriminating between styles of questioning. Accordingly, the present analysis focuses on manifestations of preference that are stronger and more conspicuous, and whose deployment is optional and hence variable from case to case.

Table 7. Yes-No Questions With Preface Tilt, by President

		No preface	No tilt	Innocuous	Hostile	Total
Eisenhower	<i>n</i>	143	42	40	11	236
	%	60.59	17.80	16.95	4.66	100.00
Reagan	<i>n</i>	83	59	38	55	235
	%	35.32	25.11	16.17	23.40	100.00

Pearson $\chi^2 = 48.1733$, $p < 0.001$ (kappa 0.94)

you'd spend \$40 billion, is too heavy for its major mission. Your closest military science adviser says that the latest basing plan for the MX won't fool the Soviets. The Pershing missile, on which NATO defense would depend, literally can't get off the ground. The antitank weapon the Army wants to buy seems to be ineffective against modern Soviet tanks. The Maverick missile can't find its targets.

Q-> I wonder whether in light of all these failures you have any reason to wonder whether a \$400 billion arms buildup is money well spent.

Given this distinction, one would expect that increasingly assertive journalists would not only be more likely to tilt their questions, but would tend to do so in ways that work against the president.

The results are summarized in Table 7. This table shows, consistent with Table 2, that many more yes-no questions to Reagan than to Eisenhower were prefaced with some kind of statement. Whereas nearly 61% of questions to Eisenhower were simple yes-no questions, this proportion dropped to 35% (column 1). Within the context of this general growth in the use of question prefaces, there has been some increase in the use of neutral, or untilted, question prefaces, as represented in column 2, but this growth, though substantial, is not proportional to the general growth of prefaced questions.

Clearly there has also been a disproportionate growth in tilted question prefaces. Although roughly 22% of Eisenhower's question prefaces were tilted in some way (the vast majority innocuously), almost 40% of Reagan's were tilted. Moreover, within this general growth of tilted question prefaces, the changes between the Eisenhower and Reagan press conferences took a very specific form. The presidents were almost exactly equal in the rate at which questions were innocuously tilted—just over 16% for each. The big difference between them is in the prevalence of hostile tilt—just 5% for Eisenhower, but 23% for Reagan, more than a fourfold increase. Thus, all of the increase in prefatory assertiveness has been substantively hostile in character.

Negatively Formulated Questions

Journalists can be assertive in other ways, not only in the preface to the question but also in formulation of the question itself. Questions were coded for the presence of a linguistic form that Heritage (2000b) has termed a *negatively formulated*

Table 8. Yes-No Questions Negatively Formulated, by President

		Not negative	Negative	Total
Eisenhower	<i>n</i>	232	4	236
	%	98.31	1.69	100.00
Reagan	<i>n</i>	205	30	235
	%	87.23	12.77	100.00

Pearson $\chi^2 = 21.5485$, $p < 0.001$ (kappa 1.0)

question. These are questions that begin with a phrase like *isn't it* or *aren't you* or *don't you think that* (arrowed):

(17) [Reagan 19 Oct 1983: 28]

JRN: Mr. President, new figures out today show that housing starts were down pretty sharply last month, and the number of building permits went down for the second month in a row. Analysts are saying this could mean the economic recovery is going to level off, maybe kind of peter out next year. And more people are becoming concerned about high interest rates. And given the big deficits being
-> projected by your own administration, *isn't it time* for some strong action by you to get interest rates down?

This linguistic form has the effect of tilting the question toward a yes answer. Indeed, the tilt is so strong that speakers are often treated as if they were making an assertion rather than merely asking a question (Heritage, 2000b). For instance, consider this question from a Clinton conference:

(18) [Clinton 7 March 1997: Simplified]

IR: -> Well Mister President in your zeal for funds during the last campaign didn't you put the Vice President and Maggie and all the others in your administration top side in a very vulnerable position?
(0.5)

BC: -> I disagree with that. How are we vulnerable because . . .

Here President Clinton is asked a negatively formulated question (first arrow) about his fund-raising practices, and his response—"I disagree with that"—clearly treats the prior turn as embodying a viewpoint to be disagreed with and not merely a question to be answered. Responses of this sort provide strong internal validation for the claim that negative questions embody assertiveness.

Results for this second indicator of assertiveness are in Table 8. Consistent with the previous results, these highly assertive questions have become more prevalent, and the difference between Eisenhower and Reagan is substantial. Eisenhower received only four questions of this sort, less than 2% of the yes-no questions he received. Reagan got 30 negatively formulated questions, more than 12% of his

yes-no questions, a sharp increase over his predecessor. Thus, just as journalists have become more assertive in their question prefaces, they have also become more assertive in the design of the questions themselves.

In summary, in various ways journalists have become more inclined to convey specific expectations about the realities their questions address. In this way, their questions have become less neutral and “information seeking” and more opinionated and assertive. It is clear that in the period between the Eisenhower and Reagan years journalists’ questioning of the president underwent a shift in the balance between fact gathering and adversarialness in favor of the latter.

Hostility

The last dimension, hostility, captures the degree to which a question is overtly critical of the president or his administration. This dimension was measured rather differently than the first three. There are few formal design features that manifest hostility per se, so this dimension was assessed in part by reference to the thematic or topical content of the question. Accordingly, the coding of hostility is the main avenue through which the substantive content of the talk enters into the analysis. Correspondingly, the coding categories that serve as indicators of hostility are, in general, more interpretive and require more judgment than the other indicators examined here. For these admittedly interpretive coding categories, validity and reliability were enhanced by setting a relatively high threshold for their application.

Preface Hostility

The first indicator of hostility is based on an assessment of question prefaces. Here hostility was operationalized as remarks overtly critical of the president or his administration. Statements proposing that the president’s policies are misguided, statements highlighting contradictions between the president’s words and deeds, statements exposing splits or disagreements within the administration, and statements that explicitly disagree with something the president has said—prefaces that asserted such things were coded as hostile, whereas the rest were coded as innocuous. It should be apparent from this list that the coding of hostility was conservative—statements had to be quite explicitly and directly critical of the president to meet the threshold. So, for example, statements about bad economic news, as in example 3, would not be coded as hostile unless the president or his administration was overtly treated as responsible.

Hostile prefaces were further distinguished in terms of how the subsequent question relates to its preface. In some cases, the question merely invites the president to respond to the criticism contained in the preface. In example 19, for instance, the statement concerns an accusation made by Adlai Stevenson to the effect that Eisenhower is taking credit for civil rights progress achieved by Democrats, and the question asks Eisenhower to respond to the accusation. Here the preface is the focus of the question; its truth is not presupposed.

Table 9. Preface Hostility by President

		Nonhostile preface	Hostile preface focus of Q	Hostile preface presupposed by Q	Total
Eisenhower	<i>n</i>	154	12	4	170
	%	90.59	7.06	2.35	100.00
Reagan	<i>n</i>	198	17	158	273
	%	72.53	6.23	21.25	100.00

Pearson $\chi^2 = 31.1290$, $p < 0.001$ (kappa 0.74)

(19) [Eisenhower 5 Oct 1956: 1]

JRN: S-> Mr. President, Adlai Stevenson said in a civil rights speech in Harlem that you were trying to run on the Democratic record, that the Democrats started desegregation of the Armed Forces, and that the Republicans have made a brazen attempt to take credit for civil rights progress.

Q-> Would you care to comment on that, Sir?

In other cases, the question presupposes and builds on the foundation established by its preface. Consider example 20 below (seen at the beginning of this article). Here the preface portrays Reagan as twice caving in to special interests, and in this case the subsequent question specifically does not invite Reagan to comment on the prefatory criticism. Instead, the question builds on the preface, drawing out an inference about Reagan's general susceptibility to pressure from special interests, and it is this inference to which Reagan is asked to respond.

(20) [Reagan 16 June 1981: 14]

JRN: S-> Mister President, for months you said you wouldn't modify your tax cut plan and then you did. And when the business community vociferously complained, you changed your plan again.

Q-> I just wondered whether Congress and other special interest groups might get the message that if they yelled and screamed loud enough, you might modify your tax plan again.

The deployment of the preface in this latter excerpt is more hostile than in the previous excerpt. In the former case (example 19), the prefatory criticism is not taken for granted as factual, and the president is given a direct opportunity to counter it. In the latter case (example 20) the prefatory criticism is treated as a given, becoming part of the presuppositional foundation of the question in such a way as to be less accessible to refutation.

Table 9 shows the distribution of prefaced questions and reveals a general increase in the prevalence of hostile prefaces. Eisenhower's prefaces were hostile

Table 10. Global Hostility by President

		Nonhostile	Hostile	Total
Eisenhower	<i>n</i>	399	12	411
	%	97.08	2.92	100.00
Reagan	<i>n</i>	369	91	460
	%	80.22	19.78	100.00

Pearson $\chi^2 = 59.1949$, $p < 0.001$ (kappa 0.62)

only about 9% of the time, whereas Reagan’s prefaces were hostile 27% of the time, a threefold increase in hostility. Furthermore, the major increase among hostile prefaces has been for those more damaging prefaces that are presupposed in the subsequent question. For Eisenhower, hostile prefaces were much more likely to be the focus of the question, and only rarely, less than 2.5% of the time, was the hostile preface embedded presuppositionally in the question. For Reagan the pattern is reversed. Reagan was much more likely to be given questions with hostile prefaces presupposed—more than 21% of the time, more than three times as often as those with hostile prefaces exposed for rebuttal. In short, Reagan’s prefaces were not only more likely to be hostile than Eisenhower’s prefaces, but they were also more likely to be treated as given and, in effect, beyond question.

Global Hostility

Questions were also coded for their “global hostility.” Here each question was examined in its entirety, the question proper in conjunction with any prefatory remarks that might precede it. Once again, a conservative threshold was set for the operationalization of global hostility. For prefaced questions, both the preface and the question proper had to embody hostility. Thus, example 20 is globally hostile, but example 19 is not.

Simple one-sentence questions can also be globally hostile. The majority of these involve follow-up questions that plainly disagree with or challenge what the president has just said. In example 21, Reagan defends the policy that U.S. troops in Nicaragua should defend themselves if fired upon, and he disavows any intention to start a war with Nicaragua. The journalist counters this with a negatively formulated question suggesting that the policy makes war more likely. The element of disagreement with the president fits one of the criteria for global hostility.

(21) [Reagan 26 July 1983: 3–4]

JRN: Mr. President, you’ve mentioned your interest in easing tensions, and you’ve said you hope the Nicaraguan proposals will have that effect. Now your spokesman has said that the 4000 troops that you’re planning to send down there will. . . have standing orders to defend themselves if they’re fired upon. How does that help to ease tensions?

RR: . . . this is just a standard order. We don't want war. But I don't think that you prevent war by letting your personnel out there become the victims.

JRN: -> But doesn't this simply increase the chances of war?

Simple questions can also be globally hostile when they are designed to highlight a contradiction between the president's words and deeds, or between different policies or actions. In example 22, the contradiction is between the decision to sell grain to the Soviet Union versus efforts to pressure our allies to restrict trade with the Soviets.

(22) [Reagan 17 May 1983: 11]

JRN: Since it will result in more grain being exported to the Soviet Union, how do you justify that with our position, our pressure on the European allies to restrict our trade, Western trade with the Eastern bloc?

The distribution of globally hostile questions is summarized in Table 10. Fewer than 3% of Eisenhower's questions were globally hostile—just 12 questions out of more than 400 that he received. For Reagan, almost 20% of the questions were globally hostile, nearly one fifth of the questions he received. This represents almost a sevenfold increase in global hostility across the two administrations.

Accountability Questions

The final indicator of hostility is somewhat more formal and less interpretive in character. It is the frequency of what may be termed *accountability questions*, that is, questions that ask the president to explain why he's adopted a given policy or taken some course of action. Such questions are by no means commonplace—presidents are often asked to characterize their policies and actions—but they are rarely asked to provide a rationale for them. This type of question embodies at least a modicum of aggressiveness on the part of the journalist. As a general principle, parties in interactions seek out and provide accounts mainly for actions regarded as out of the ordinary in some way and hence at least potentially improper; routine behavior is simply not treated as requiring an account (Heritage, 1988; cf. Scott & Lyman, 1968). Accordingly, accountability questions cast the president's conduct as at least potentially improper, while placing him in the position of having to defend himself.

Accountability questions may be further distinguished in terms of the level of hostility they embody. The milder form of accountability question merely asks the president to explain some action, while remaining formally "neutral" as to what type of account is likely to be forthcoming. As example 23 illustrates, such questions typically take a form similar to "Why did you do X?"

(23) [Eisenhower 6 July 1955: 7]

JRN: Mr. President, according to yesterday's report, the administration does not now include the minimum wage in its top measures for passage this year. Would you -> explain, Sir, why this change in signals on the part of the administration?

Table 11. Accountability Questions by President

		Other Q	Why did you	How could you	Total
Eisenhower	<i>n</i>	406	5	0	411
	%	98.78	1.22	0.00	100.00
Reagan	<i>n</i>	426	25	9	459
	%	92.61	5.45	1.96	100.00

Pearson $\chi^2 = 20.1212$, $p < 0.001$ (kappa 1.0)

This milder form of accountability question will be termed a *why did you*-type question.

The more hostile variant, which will be termed a *how could you*-type question, is more accusatory in its import. Not only is the president asked to explain his action, but embedded within the question is an assumption that the president cannot provide an acceptable account. This assumption can be encoded in the verbal form of the question itself—questions in the form *How can you do X* or *How could you do X* or *How is it possible for you to do X* all heavily imply that there is no acceptable account for the president’s actions. A similar assumption can be encoded in the prefatory statements. Both are illustrated in example 24. Here a *how could you*-type formulation (arrowed) is offered in conjunction with other economic facts to portray the president’s action (deep cuts in social programs) as inexplicable.

(24) [Reagan 19 Jan 1982: 1]

JRN: Mr President, since you took office a year ago, there have been—unemployment has shot up to more than 9 million people. The recession has deepened. Two Republican Congressmen say that the tax increases that you may propose will hurt the little guy and give a bonanza to the big corporations. My question is, what are you going to do about the people who are undergoing great hardship
-> now, and how’s it possible for you to propose deep cuts in the social programs in view of all this suffering?

That such questions are indeed more hostile than *why did you*-type questions is apparent from their placement in news interviews at the apex of accusatory lines of questioning and in their treatment by the participants as argumentative in the extreme (Heritage, 2000a).

The distribution of accountability questions appears in Table 11. Accountability questions were rather uncommon across the board, but they were even rarer for Eisenhower than for Reagan. Accountability questions made up just over 1% of Eisenhower’s questions but more than 7% of Reagan’s questions. Furthermore, all of the accountability questions to Eisenhower took the milder *why did you* form—Eisenhower was simply never asked the tougher *how could you* type of question. In contrast, Reagan received both kinds of questions, including nine of the accusatory *how could you* type.

All three indicators of hostility thus point in the same direction. They reveal a substantially greater propensity for journalists to convey a critical attitude toward the president and his administration. Moreover, as with the other dimensions, this trend was focused on the more extreme, rather than the less extreme, manifestations of hostile questioning. Washington journalists were thus significantly more hostile in their questioning of Ronald Reagan than they had been of Dwight Eisenhower 30 years previously.

Discussion

Specified in terms of our four dimensions, and in the overwhelming majority of their operationalizations, journalists were substantially less deferential and more adversarial in their treatment of Reagan than they were of Eisenhower. This shift is manifest in the tendency for journalists to exercise greater initiative and to be more direct, assertive, and hostile in the design of their questions. It would appear that the general trend toward adversarialness previously documented within journalism does indeed extend to direct encounters with the highest elected official in the land.

Although all of these results point in the same direction, it is important not to overstate the level of adversarialness embodied in these findings. There is no evidence, in the present data, that contemporary journalists are systematically promoting a coherent political ideology in opposition to that of the president. Nor do they question the fundamental legitimacy of the presidency, or the broader political and economic institutions with which it is associated. Indeed, their very presence at the press conference tends to legitimize the president as a national leader and an authoritative source of information. However, journalists have become substantially more enterprising in the design of their questions, more inclined to raise matters that are problematic or unflattering, and more apt to increase the pressure on the president to address such issues.

The pattern of findings suggests the possibility of an evolutionary process by which questions have become more adversarial over time. A major innovation in this process appears to have been the shift from simple one-sentence questions to questions elaborated by prefatory statements. In Eisenhower's day, statement-prefaced questions had already become somewhat common, but they were overwhelmingly innocuous in character. The prefaces at that time were not particularly likely to impart an assertive tilt to the question, and only rarely were they overtly hostile toward the president. By the time Reagan assumed the presidency, statement-prefaced questions had not only become more frequent, but they were also substantially more assertive and more hostile in character. These findings suggest that when journalists first began prefacing their questions, this move was initially accountable as an effort to provide the background information necessary to render questions intelligible and provide for their relevance. Once prefatory statements had become normative and the right to make such statements fully institutionalized, journalists subsequently began to mobilize them in the service of increasingly aggressive forms of questioning.

There is still much that remains unknown about the process by which this

transformation came about. Because only two historical signposts have been examined thus far, little can be said about when or how the transition occurred. Was it a gradual tectonic shift in the practice of journalism, perhaps reflecting a much more general decline in politeness and a coarsening of the culture at large? Or was it a more sudden change in response to some specific historical event such as the Vietnam war or the Watergate affair? Did the rise of television and the proliferation of TV journalists at press conferences play a part in this development? Also unknown is whether all aspects of adversarialness changed simultaneously in the intervening years, or whether some led while others lagged in the transition. Finally, it is an open question whether the trends documented in presidential press conferences may or may not correlate with other measures of journalistic adversarialness (e.g., Patterson, 1993; Robinson, 1981; Rozell, 1994) and with the president's standing in the polls (cf. Groeling & Kernell, 1998).

Whatever its causes, the rise of adversarialness has transformed the presidential press conference into a formidable instrument of political accountability. Whereas presidents were once given tremendous latitude in which to speechify, now they face a much more confining and inhospitable interrogative environment. Of course, presidents are not always fully constrained by the questions they receive—they may on occasion refuse to answer or shift the discussion in a more desirable direction (Clayman, 1993, 2001). However, any resistant or evasive response is accountable as such and is subject to probing follow-up questions from journalists, negative inferences by the viewing audience, and unfavorable subsequent news coverage.¹¹ The rise of adversarial questioning is thus consequential both for the way in which it has “tightened the reins” on presidential conduct and has provided a more exacting standard in terms of which such conduct is judged and evaluated. This development may explain, at least in part, the declining frequency with which presidents have been willing to hold press conferences.

There are broader ramifications for the institution of the presidency and the profession of journalism itself. The withdrawal of deference in this very public arena may be one factor contributing to rising skepticism regarding the presidency, declining social status accorded to that office, and a reduction in the social distance separating the president from ordinary citizens (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Patterson, 1993; Tulis, 1988). Correspondingly, vigorous questioning of the president enables journalists to present themselves as autonomous professionals who are willing to hold even the most elite agents of power accountable before the public, even as it fosters uneasiness among the public about the proper boundaries of journalistic professionalism. Indeed, both academic analysts and the lay public are ambivalent about this trend in relations between government and the news media. Nevertheless, it seems clear that conduct within presidential press conferences is an important element in this development.

Finally, this study has methodological implications for the analysis of contemporary mass communication. With the rapid expansion of broadcast news and public affairs programming, the traditional narrative or story form of news presen-

¹¹ Indeed, resistant responses are often used as quotations and sound bites in later news stories (Clayman, 1990).

tation has given way to a plethora of new program formats organized around modes of interaction, such as interviews, panel discussions, and audience participation programs. This development makes it necessary to supplement traditional content-analytic methods with new research methods that are appropriate to the distinctively interactional form in which news is increasingly packaged. The present paper illustrates one way in which the data of broadcast interaction can be subjected to systematic scrutiny and analysis.

References

- Alexander, J. (1989). Culture and political crisis: "Watergate" and Durkheimian sociology. In *Structure and meaning: Relinking classical sociology* (pp. 174–216). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bennett, W. L. (1990). Toward a theory of press-state relations in the United States. *Journal of Communication, 40*(2), 103–125.
- Blum-Kulka, S. (1987). Indirectness and politeness in requests: same or different? *Journal of Pragmatics, 11*, 131–146.
- Boden, D., & Zimmerman, D. H. (Eds.). (1991). *Talk and social structure*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Brody, R. (1991). *Assessing the president: The media, elite opinion, and public support*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Cappella, J. N., & Jamieson, K. H. (1997). *Spiral of cynicism: The press and the public good*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Clark, H. H., & Schunk, D. H. (1980). Polite responses to polite requests. *Cognition, 8*, 111–143.
- Clayman, S. E. (1988). Displaying neutrality in television news interviews. *Social Problems, 35*, 474–492.
- Clayman, S. E. (1990). From talk to text: Newspaper accounts of reporter-source interactions. *Media, Culture, and Society, 12*, 79–104.
- Clayman, S. E. (1992). Footing in the achievement of neutrality: The case of news interview discourse. In P. Drew & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Talk at work* (pp. 163–198). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Clayman, S. E. (1993). Reformulating the question: A device for answering/not answering questions in news interviews and press conferences. *Text, 13*, 159–188.
- Clayman, S. E. (2001). Answers and evasions. *Language in Society, 30*, 403–442.
- Clayman, S. E. (2002). Tribune of the people: Maintaining the legitimacy of adversarial journalism. *Media, Culture, and Society, 24*, 191–210.
- Clayman, S., & Heritage, J. (2002). *The news interview: Journalists and public figures on the air*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Cornwell, E. (1960). The presidential press conference: A study in institutionalization. *Midwest Journal of Political Science, 4*, 370–389.
- Cornwell, E. (1965). *Presidential leadership of public opinion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Drew, P., & Heritage, J. (1992). Analyzing talk at work: An introduction. In P. Drew & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Talk at work* (pp. 3–65). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- French, B. A. (1982). *The presidential press conference: Its history and role in the American political system*. Washington, DC: University Press of America.
- Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays in face to face behavior*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

- Greatbatch, D. (1988). A turn-taking system for British news interviews. *Language in Society*, 17, 401–430.
- Groeling, T., & Kernell, S. (1998). Is network news coverage of the president biased? *Journal of Politics* 60, 1063–1087.
- Hallin, D. (1984). The media, the war in Vietnam, and political support: A critique of the thesis of an oppositional media. *Journal of Politics*, 46, 2–24.
- Heritage, J. (1984). *Garfinkel and ethnomethodology*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Heritage, J. (1988). Explanations as accounts: A conversation analytic perspective. In C. Antaki (Ed.), *Understanding everyday explanation: A casebook of methods* (pp. 127–144). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Heritage, J. (2002a). Designing questions and setting agendas in the news interview. In J. Mandelbaum, P. Glenn, & C. LeBaron (Eds.), *Studies in language and social interaction*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Heritage, J. (2002b). The limits of questioning: Negative interrogatives and hostile question content. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 34, 1427–1446.
- Heritage, J., & Greatbatch, D. (1991). On the institutional character of institutional talk: The case of news interviews. In D. Boden & D. H. Zimmerman (Eds.), *Talk and social structure* (pp. 93–137). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Heritage, J., & Roth, A. (1995). Grammar and institution: Questions and questioning in the broadcast news interview. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 28, 1–60.
- Holtgraves, T. (1992). The linguistic realization of face management: Implications for language production and comprehension, person perception, and cross-cultural communication. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 55, 141–159.
- Juergens, George. (1981). *News from the White House*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kernell, S. (1986). *Going public: New strategies of presidential leadership*. Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly.
- Krippendorff, K. (1980). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Lammers, W. W. (1981). Presidential press-conference schedules: who hides, and when? *Political Science Quarterly*, 96, 261–278.
- Levinson, S. C. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Macaulay, M. (1996). Asking to ask: the strategic function of indirect requests for information in news interviews. *Pragmatics*, 6, 491–509.
- Manheim, J. B. (1979). The honeymoon's over: The news conference and the development of presidential style. *Journal of Politics*, 41, 55–74.
- Manheim, J. B., & Lammers, W. W. (1981). The news conference and presidential leadership of public opinion: Does the tail wag the dog? *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 11, 177–188.
- McGuire, D. (1967). Democracy's confrontation: The presidential press conference, I. *Journalism Quarterly*, 44, 638–644.
- Patterson, T. E. (1993). *Out of order*. New York: Vintage.
- Pollard, James E. (1947). *The presidents and the press*. New York: Macmillan.
- Pomerantz, A. (1988). Offering a candidate answer: An information seeking strategy. *Communication Monographs*, 55, 360–373.
- Raymond, G. (2000). *The structure of responding: Conforming and nonconforming responses to yes/no type interrogatives*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.

- Robinson, M. (1976). Public affairs television and the growth of political malaise. *American Political Science Review*, 70, 409–432.
- Robinson, M. (1981). Three faces of congressional media. In T. E. Mann & N. J. Ornstein (Eds.), *The new congress*. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute.
- Roth, A. (1998). Who makes news: Descriptions of television news interviewers' public personae. *Media, Culture, and Society*, 20, 79–107.
- Rozell, M. J. (1994). Press coverage of Congress 1946–1992. In T. E. Mann & N. J. Ornstein (Eds.), *Congress, the press, and the public*. Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute & Brookings Institution.
- Sabato, L. J. (1991). *Feeding frenzy: How attack journalism has transformed American politics*. New York: Free Press.
- Schegloff, E. A. (1988). On an actual virtual servo-mechanism for guessing bad news: A single case conjecture. *Social Problems*, 35, 442–457.
- Schegloff, E. A. (1988–1989). From interview to confrontation: Observations on the Bush/Rather encounter. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 22, 215–240.
- Schegloff, E. A. (1993). Reflections on quantification in the study of conversation. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 26, 99–128.
- Schudson, M. (1995). Watergate and the press. In M. Schudson, *The power of news* (pp. 142–165). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Schwartz, B. (1987). *George Washington: The making of an American symbol*. New York: Free Press.
- Scott, M. B., & Lyman, S. M. (1968). Accounts. *American Sociological Review*, 33, 46–62.
- Shils, E. (1975). *Center and periphery: Essays in macrosociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, C. (1990). *Presidential press conferences: A critical approach*. New York: Praeger.
- Tebbel, J., & Watts, S. M. (1985). *The press and the presidency*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tulis, J. (1988). *The rhetorical presidency*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Van der Wijst, P. (1995). The perception of politeness in Dutch and French indirect requests. *Text*, 15, 477–501.