

## Answers and evasions

STEVEN E. CLAYMAN

*Department of Sociology, University of California,  
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1551*

### ABSTRACT

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

When Albert Gore was Bill Clinton's vice presidential running mate in 1992, Gore's position on abortion became the focus of controversy. As a legislator, Gore had opposed federal funding for most abortions, but now he was expressing support for it as part of Clinton's health care reform plan. In an aggressive interview conducted by Sam Donaldson, Gore received a barrage of tough questions exposing this apparent contradiction. He was momentarily rescued by a commercial break, at which point he was urged by his media advisor to sidestep questions of this sort: "Don't be afraid to turn their questions. If they ask you about [abortion], just say . . . 'I want to talk today about the new direction that Governor Clinton and I want to take the country.'"<sup>1</sup>

There is a widespread perception that politicians are frequently evasive under questioning from members of the news media, and this perception is not without merit (Bavelas et al. 1988; Bull 1994, 1998; Bull & Mayer 1993; Clayman 1993; Greatbatch 1986b; Harris 1991). The impetus to resist a line of questioning is understandable, given the adversarial character of contemporary journalism. In news interviews – as well as press conferences and other forms of interrogation – journalists are drawn to questions that are unflattering, incriminating, or otherwise hostile in character. If answered straightforwardly, these can inflict damage on a politician's policy objectives, career prospects, and personal reputation. When

1996 presidential candidate Bob Dole was questioned about the addictiveness of tobacco, his equivocal response was roundly attacked by the Clinton campaign and received weeks of unfavorable media coverage. On the other side of the Atlantic, a question about the Labour Party's opposition to nuclear weapons prompted party leader Neil Kinnock to give a cavalier response that was subsequently exploited by the Tories and helped ensure Thatcher's reelection in 1987. And it is not only politicians who face such dangers: no interviewee is immune. In response to a question about the absence of African Americans at the managerial level in professional baseball, Al Campanis, vice president of the Los Angeles Dodgers, made some racially insensitive remarks which caused such an uproar that he was fired the next day. To avoid consequences like these, interviewees may be motivated to be less than forthcoming in the face of hostile questioning.

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

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

Monitoring by journalists can also extend beyond the occasion of the interview itself. Subsequent news stories about interviews and press conferences often contain excerpts (in the form of quotations and sound bites) that show public figures to be refusing to answer questions, or initially resisting questions, or answering only after being repeatedly pressed to do so (Clayman 1990). When Texas governor George W. Bush, early in his 2000 campaign for the presidency, gave less than forthcoming answers to questions about his cocaine use, there

followed a virtual feeding frenzy of stories dissecting the ramifications of his evasiveness. A similar fate befell President Bill Clinton following his artful responses to questions about Monica Lewinsky. An act of evasion can thus become a newsworthy event in its own right, and a persistent source of unfavorable publicity.

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

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

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

This article provides an overview of the dynamics of answering and resisting questions in broadcast news interviews. An exhaustive treatment of this complex subject is, of course, beyond the scope of a single essay. The present objective is to delineate some of the main issues involved and some of the main practices mobilized to manage responses that resist the agenda of a question. The primary database consists of more than 100 news interviews broadcast in the United States and England over the past two decades. A second and much smaller data set consists of journalistic questioning in other contexts, including U.S. presidential press conferences and campaign debates.

## CONCEPTUAL PRELIMINARIES

Evasiveness is an elusive phenomenon, and its analysis is fraught with conceptual pitfalls. The concept is, in the first instance, a familiar part of interactants' ordinary language for characterizing and sanctioning conduct, but it is also deployed by social scientists in technical analyses of such conduct. This raises numerous difficulties, including the question of the perspective from which evasiveness is to be assessed.

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

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

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

Accordingly, well-grounded analytic judgments must draw not only on resources internal to the particular instance under examination, but also on patterns of conduct that cut across numerous cases. Moreover, to maintain analytic clarity, I will adhere to the following terminological convention: I will reserve the term "evade/evasive" for actions that are treated as inadequately responsive by the

interview participants; other terms – e.g. resist, sidestep, agenda-shift – will be used more broadly to encompass responses that depart from the agenda of the question, but which the participants may not necessarily treat as inadequate on that occasion.

## DOING “ANSWERING”

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

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

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

- 1 IR: ... Mister Howell what are the attractions as you see them:  
 2 uh- of this workfare idea?  
 3 RH: .hh Well (.) hh it seems to me to be ludicrous that we  
 4 are spending according to the government more than  
 5 eight billion pounds: in support of the unemploy:ed on  
 6 condition that they do nothing whatsoever .hh to(t)  
 7 help society. .hh And I believe the time has come

8 when- when we've got to recognize: that (.) par::ing  
 9 down benefits is not the answer. That isn't how  
 10 savings can be made.  
 11 .hhh Savings ku- huge savings could be made: if ahm  
 12 (.) one the unemployed people were offered the right  
 13 to work and given an opportunity to work. . . .

Although the initial remarks could not by themselves stand as an answer, they are not irrelevant to the question at hand. Indeed, the initial assessment of alternatives to workfare is a relevant prelude to rendering a comparative assessment of workfare itself. Thus, considered holistically, this entire turn can be seen as occupied with the task of answering the question. And IRs generally treat such roundabout answers, once completed, as adequate.

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

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

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

1 IR: Continuing our: conversation now with Pat Buchanan,  
 2 Pat- uh:- (0.2) to put it as gently as I ca:n there're some  
 3 people: fairly high up in this administration who seem  
 4 to be able to contain their enthusiasm for you, .hhh  
 5 And every once in a while stories crop up in thuh press  
 6 that one can only assume come from some o' those folk. (0.2)  
 7 How does that sort of thing happen. in an administration.  
 8 (.)  
 9 PB: tlk .hhh Well I think 'ere was a lotta that in the  
 10 first ter:m Ted, an' =uh: >I think one o'thuh reasons<  
 11 was you had=-

- 12 IR: → =Well you weren't in in the first [term.  
 13 PB: [Right, but you had  
 14 three chiefs of- (.) ehsta:ff virtually, you had Baker  
 15 (.) Deaver and Meese .hhhh An' there was it seemed to me  
 16 from the outs:de an awful lot of leaking on one er against  
 17 one er another, from secondary an' tertiary personnel .hhhhh  
 18 A:n' s'nce Don Regan came in we've been goin' through a  
 19 bit of a transition, there was some o'that I think back  
 20 in April, .hhhh but since thuh transition's been complete  
 21 I haven't seen any of it an' we don't expect to see as  
 22 much in the:: uh .hhh in the second term ...

It is possible that the design of the final question (line 7) unintentionally encourages Buchanan to begin his response as he does. Perhaps to soften what is plainly a face-threatening subject, the IR depersonalizes the question somewhat by asking how *that sort of thing* can happen, and this may license Buchanan's decision to talk initially about the larger history of Reagan administration leaks. But whatever may have prompted this initial response, and whatever direction Buchanan may have pursued subsequently, the basic point is that a circuitous trajectory is vulnerable to being heard as evasive and may be pursued as such.

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

- (3) US, 22 Feb. 1985, *Nightline*: South African State of Emergency

IR: tch .hh Are you willing (.) personally to renounce  
 the violence (.) in that country.  
 (0.6)

AB: → .hh Yes I will.  
 I mean I have said so on Saturday I was on a platform ...

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

- (4) UK, *Newsnight*: China 2

IR: And how long how long will that take and how long has  
 he got to prove he can do it?

ZM: → .hhhh Ah:: (0.2) it ti- (0.2) maybe it take uh  
 → one or two years (.) to to do that. (0.7)  
 And I think ah that ...

Like a standard written paragraph, this trajectory of answering begins with an initial unit of talk that minimally fills the information gap targeted by the question, while subsequent talk furnishes details that clarify, support, or elaborate.

Furthermore, the initial remark's relevance to the question is often marked by various surface features of the remark's design. Perhaps the most obvious way of marking question-relevance is to incorporate some of the wording of the question into the initial response (Roth 1996, Schegloff 1998). The repetition may involve a single key word – **confrontation** in ex. (5):

(5) UK, *Newsnight*: Tiananmen Square Uprisings

- IR: Jonathan first (.) let me ask you:, uh what is the latest situation are we any nearer: the actual (.) straight  
 → **confrontation** between the troops and the students (.) in the square.  
 JM: ⇒ Well I think we've already had this **confrontation**.  
 The: uh citizens of Peking .hhhh and of course ...

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

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

- IR: → .hhh Now tell us about uh=the **side effects**. .hhh Is it as toxic (.) a:s chemotherapy, <Is it as poisonous: an- (.) to the system and what=are the other  
 → **side effects**.  
 SR: ⇒ The **side effects** could be quite seve:re, but they're somewhat different than the kinds of **side effects** that one sees with- uh with chemotherapy. .hhh The major  
 ⇒ **side effect** is a buildup of fluid in the body... .

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

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

- IR: → And what do you think the result of the ballot will be.  
 AS: ⇒ I:: think that the result of the ballot will most probably be acceptance of the deal:, (.) but it could be: er closer than most people expect.

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

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



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

- IR: .hhhhh Reports today: are: of course that the violence  
has continued uh what have you heard tha- whether er not  
the state of emergency is in fact working.  
(0.4)
- HB: tch .hhhhh It is perhaps too soon:: to make  
→ make a judgement on that. . .

Here the IR asks whether the South African government's imposition of a state of emergency is working to stop the violence there. The IE's response – *It is perhaps too soon to make a judgment on that* – ends with a pronoun that acquires its meaning by referring to the matter raised by the previous question.

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

(9) UK, 5 Nov. 1979, *ATV Today*: Innocent Man

- Int: .hh Were you surpris:ed when you: w- went to court,  
an- and indeed went down,  
(0.2)
- TS: → hhhh .hhh I was mos- I- I certainly was,  
in fact I- I .hh all the way up to the- to the court. . .

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

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

(10) UK, *Today*: Child Support

- IR: .hh But who's going to be the judge of that, the judge  
of good cause:.
- RH: → .hhhhh Child support offices.  
Ahm in the local offices and in our regional centers  
.hh ah we'll look at each case very very carefully . . .

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

(11) US, 18 Sept. 1992, *MacNeil/Lehrer*: Perot

- IR: So why don't you go ahead and (.) say:  
I'm (.) a candidate for pr[esident]?
- RP: → [Because that's not (.)  
where the organization is now.  
Our organization (.) is to:tally focused on try:ing  
to get both parties to do the job. (0.7) That's why.

In all these cases, the sense of the initial remark is, by itself, indeterminate at least to some extent. Observers must refer to the question to disambiguate the

remark, and in so doing its meaning is “filled in” in a way that is thoroughly question-relevant.

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

#### DIMENSIONS OF RESISTANCE

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

##### *The Negative Dimension*

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

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

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

In a less extreme form of negative resistance, the IE provides an answer that is partial or incomplete. For instance, in the face of a two-part question, an IE may address one part while leaving the other unanswered. Thus, in a Nixon press conference<sup>5</sup> held during the Watergate period, a journalist first asks (beginning at arrow 1 in ex. [13]) whether Nixon is personally investigating charges that his campaign funds were mishandled, and he then asks (arrow 2) whether the charges will hurt his bid for reelection.

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

- JRN: 1 → Mr. President, are you personally investigating  
 the mishandling of some of your campaign funds,  
 2 → and do you agree with Secretary Connolly that  
 these charges are harmful to your reelection?
- RN: Well, I commented upon this on other occasions,  
 and I will repeat my position now.

- 3 → With regard to the matter of the handling of campaign funds, we have a new law here in which technical violations have occurred and are occurring, apparently, on both sides. As far as we are concerned, we have in charge, in Secretary Stans, a man who is an honest man and one who is very meticulous – as I have learned from having him as my treasurer and finance chairman in two previous campaigns – in the handling of matters of this sort. Whatever technical violations have occurred, certainly he will correct them and will thoroughly comply with the law. He is conducting any investigation on this matter, and conducting it very, very thoroughly, because he doesn't want any evidence at all to be outstanding, indicating that we have not complied with the law.

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

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

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

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

IE: 1 → No.  
(0.2)

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

IE: 1 → [No.  
(.)

IR: 2 → W- Wh:at are we talking about.

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

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

### *The Positive Dimension*

Resistance has a positive dimension as well. This is manifest to the degree that an IE moves beyond the parameters of the question, saying and doing things that

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The most subtle form of evasion is embodied in those responses that alter the terms of the question ever so slightly. Consider ex. (17), from an interview with the deputy secretary of defense, John Deutch, on the subject of Gulf War syndrome. Across this excerpt, the IR tries to get Deutch either to confirm or to deny reports that U.S. troops were exposed to chemical weapons during the Gulf War.

However, Deutch will not be pinned down; although he repeatedly offers denials, all are in some way qualified.<sup>6</sup>

(17) US, 12 March 1995 *60 Minutes*: Gulf War Syndrome

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

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

Finally, even responses that do address the agenda of the question, but contain additional turn components that shift away from that agenda (as in exx. [18–20]), are treated as problematic in the news interview context (Greatbatch 1986b). This is a product of the distinctive turn-taking system that organizes news interview talk, which obligates IEs to restrict themselves to the action of answering IRs' questions (Greatbatch 1988, Heritage & Greatbatch 1991). Given this normative

constraint on IEs' talk, any attempt to produce something other than an answer – even as a supplement to an otherwise responsive answer – may be regarded as an improper diversion from the agenda at hand.

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

#### OVERT PRACTICES

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

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

#### *Deference to the IR*

IEs often preface their agenda shifts with remarks that display some degree of *DEFERENCE TO THE IR*. Perhaps the greatest deference is conveyed when the IE actually *REQUESTS PERMISSION FROM THE IR* to shift the agenda.<sup>7</sup>

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

(18) UK, *Newsnight*: Civil Unrest in China

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

- 12 and say: I think it's likely to be increased further  
 13 .hh by future events  
 14 1 → but I would like to make two very quick points. =  
 15 IR: 2 → =Very quickly if you would.  
 16 DH: There's a genera:tional thing he:re. .Hhh U:um (0.4) ih  
 17 Deng Zhao Peng is going to be ei:ghty fi:ve on the twenty  
 18 second of August this year: .Hh he joi:ned the  
 19 Communist Pa:rt'y (0.3) .h in nineteen twenty fou:r. .Hh  
 20 When Mister Baldwin had become prime minister for the  
 21 first time in this coun:try: . Just. .Hhh (0.3) Secondly  
 22 (0.3) corruption. .Hh A lot of (.) what is: (.) ca:lled  
 23 corruption .hh is in fact the by:produ:ct (0.1) of a  
 24 system of multiple pricing .hhh which I think is going to  
 25 have to be rela:xed.

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

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

- 1 IR: .hhh Well Miss Jenckes he raises an interesting question. =  
 2 Again just as a matter of stra:tegy your ad doesn't  
 3 say:: that it's sponsored by the heal:th (.)  
 4 in[surance companies]  
 5 LJ: [Margaret that's abs]olutely incorrect. .hh Our a:ds  
 6 (.) whether they're on TV, .h our print a-advertisements,  
 7 that appear in newspapers .hh even radio spots indicate  
 8 that we have paid for it. =  
 9 1 → Let me may- just make one  
 10 comm[ent in [terms of wha[t Ron: says.  
 11 IR: [.hhh [wh- [ih-  
 12 IR: 2 → Al[l right.]  
 13 LJ: [.h h h ] Of course. any coalition, I don't care  
 14 whether it's Save: the Whal:es .hh I mean Common Cause  
 15 you always start with like minded people. But whether  
 16 you're an agent or a broker, .hh you have legitimate  
 17 health care concerns youself. . . .

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

The IE may also offer what Greatbatch 1988 has termed a TOKEN REQUEST FOR PERMISSION to shift the agenda; this resembles an actual request but is not

treated as requiring a response from the IR. Thus, in ex. (20), a discussion of newly proposed legislation to restrict access to abortion, an anti-abortion advocate answers a legalistic question about the wording of legislation, but she then goes on to argue that current law is too permissive. She prefaces this agenda shift with a request-like object, *can I also point out* (arrowed).

(20) UK, *Afternoon Plus*: Abortion

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

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

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

### *Minimizing the Divergence*

A second form of damage control involves downplaying the agenda shift by portraying it as insignificant, a minor digression from the agenda established by the question. Requests for permission often contain MINIMIZING CHARACTERIZATIONS, such as reference to “a very quick” or “just one” comment.



(21) UK, *Newsnight*: Civil Unrest in China

DH: But I would like to make *two* very quick points

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

LJ: Let me may- just make one comment in terms of what Ron says ...

In addition to temporal and numerical minimizers, the inclusion of the adverb “just” further downgrades what is about to be said, as in the preceding example and again in the following:

(23) UK, *Today*: Child Support

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

In each of these ways, the divergence is cast as a slight digression from the framework of the question.

### *Justifying the Shift*

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

(24) US, 13 Oct. 1992, *Nightline*: Presidential Debate

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

This token request contains justificatory elements, and these are embodied in how the requested action is characterized. Instead of asking generically to “say one more thing” or “make an additional point,” this IE asks specifically to address *Molly’s point before the break*. This way of characterizing what he wants to do is not technically necessary for the token request to be intelligible; it is a choice that provides an implicit rationale for the agenda shift. In the context of a debate interview involving partisan IEs, portraying the shift as a response to a point

made earlier by an opposing IE tacitly justifies the shift on the grounds of fairness and the principle that partisan accusations should not be permitted to stand unanswered. In addition, the shift is characterized in relation to an impending commercial break, further justifying the maneuver by explaining why it is being launched at this particular point in time.

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

(25) US, 5 June 1985, *Nightline: Corporate Mergers*

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

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

(26) US, 3 Feb. 1992, *MacNeil/Lehrer: Haitian Refugee Repatriation*

- BA: Ahm: let me just respond to a few things that (.) Congressman Rangel said...

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

- LJ: Let me may- just make one comment in terms of what Ron: says

Alternatively, unsolicited material may be justified on the basis that it has a significant bearing on the overarching subject at hand. This type of rationale is illustrated in ex. (25); other examples include the following:

(28) UK, *Today*: Child Support

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

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

RR: But I think there's really a- a mu:ch b:igger (0.4)  
this is part of a much bigger picture . . .

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

### *The Special Case of Refusing to Answer*

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

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

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

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

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

Notice that the IE does not merely assert that he DOESN'T KNOW the answer, which might taint his reputation as a medical expert. In general, DON'T KNOW accounts in news interviews usually contain some further explanation for the IE's lack of information. Indeed, when a simple don't know account is offered without any further explanation (arrow 1 in ex. [31]), it is pursued by the IR (arrow 2) in a way that strongly implies that the IE ought to know the answer in some form.

(31) US, 22 July 1985, *News Hour*: South Africa

- IR: Who are these people.  
(0.7)
- HB: 1 → I do not know.=
- IR: 2 → =You don't know the naych- I don't mean their names obviously but I mean what kind of peopl:e are falling- [are falling- (0.4) into the category uh those=
- HB: [I would ha-
- IR: =thetch- need to be arrested.

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

(32) US, 6 June 1985, *Nightline*: Nuclear Waste

- IR: Continuing our conversation now with Doctor Rosalyn Yalow.  
Doctor Yalow uh- ehh lemme put it in very simple terms.  
If it's doable, if it is: easily disposable, why don't we.  
(1.0)
- RY: → Well frankly I cannot- (.) answer all these scientific questions in one minute given to me. . . .

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

(33) US, 8 Dec. 1985, *Meet the Press*: Bob Dole

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

Notice that this account, by proposing that TO ANSWER would be inappropriate, can also be taken to imply that THE QUESTION soliciting this answer was inap-

appropriate, although this is an unstated implication of an account that remains focused primarily on the inappropriateness of answering.

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

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

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

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

- (35) UK, Greatbatch 1986b:451: Unilateral Nuclear Disarmament]
- IR: You wouldn't serve in a Cabinet committed to lu-  
unilateral nuclear disarmament of Britain would you  
Mister Shore?  
PS: .hh What I do believe:: er: Mister Day (which)  
→ I will not a:answer that question, I'm not (.)  
→ deliberately answering that question.  
What I do believe is thi:s. I do actually genuinely believe  
lo:ng believe: (d) .hhh that unilateral initiatives: (.) can  
assist (.) multilateral disarmament....

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

At the opposite extreme are refusal accounts that are nonhostile in character and inflict minimal damage to the interpersonal relationship between IR and IE. The most notably benign practice involves refusing to answer AS A MATTER OF GENERAL POLICY; IEs may assert, in effect, that they never answer questions of

that sort. In ex. (36), for example, when Arthur Scargill is asked if he is planning to run for the presidency of the National Union of Mineworkers (lines 1–2), he refuses to say then and there, pointing out that he’s been similarly unresponsive to *every other pressman over the past forty-eight hours* (3–5):

(36) UK, 13 March 1979, *World at One*: National Union of Mineworkers

- 1 IR: M:ister Scargill will you run for the presidency of the National  
 2 Union of Mineworkers.  
 3 AS: .hhh er Mister Day: I must give you the same answer that I’ve  
 4 been giving every other pressman over the past forty-eight  
 5 hours. .hhh If and when Mister Gormley officially (.) hands in  
 6 his resignation and that’s by no means certain .hhh er during:  
 7 this year or at any time during the next three years .hh then I  
 8 will give (.) serious consideration to the matter . . .

Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin does something very similar when asked about the direction of future interest rates. He characterizes his refusal as part of a three-and-a-half-year-old policy of not commenting on the future course of the financial markets (lines 2–4):

(37) US, 5 May 1996, *ABC This Week with David Brinkley*: Robert Rubin

- 1 IR: But which way are they going now?=  
 2 RR: =>For three and a half years.< .hhh Sa:m. I have had for  
 3 three and a half years a policy of >not commenting on  
 4 what markets are gonna do. . . .

As a form of damage control, the general-policy account has advantages that extend beyond its justificatory import. By emphasizing that there is a principled rationale underlying the refusal, this type of account also has the effect of *DEPERSONALIZING* the refusal. It is presented not as an idiosyncratic response to a particular question from a particular IR, but as a general policy applied to all questions of that sort. This helps to ensure that the refusal will not be taken as an act of defiance against the IR *per se*. Furthermore, insofar as this practice implies that any further efforts to elicit an answer will prove fruitless, it also *FINALIZES* the refusal. It thereby inhibits follow-up questions and represents a strong bid to close down the entire line of inquiry.<sup>8</sup>

#### COVERT PRACTICES

Overt practices have their counterpart in strategies for resisting a question *COVERTLY*. Covert practices are used mainly in the context of positive resistance, or talk that departs from the agenda of the question. What makes them covert is that the IEs avoid any explicit acknowledgment of the fact that a shift is in progress, and they may also take steps to conceal that fact. For the IE, the obvious advantage of a surreptitious strategy is the possibility of “getting away with it”; if done with enough subtlety, it may escape the notice of the IR and many audience members. On the other hand, if the maneuver *is* noticed, it can be particularly costly for the IE. Those who sidestep questions while pretending to answer them

risk being seen as devious and manipulative, and this is over and above the negative inferences generated by the resistance itself. Furthermore, such inferences cannot be forestalled via forms of “damage control,” because the covert nature of the practice precludes any explicit remedial effort. IEs can, however, reduce the likelihood that the resistance will be noticed by taking steps to render it less conspicuous.

*Subversive Word Repeats and Anaphoric Pronouns*

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

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

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

- |   |       |  |
|---|-------|--|
| 1 | IR:   | .hhh er What’s the difference between <u>your</u> Marxism and                |
| 2 |       | Mister McGahey’s Communism.  |
| 3 | AS: → | er The difference is that it’s the <u>press</u> that <u>constantly</u>       |
| 4 |       | call me <u>Ma:rxist</u> when I do <u>not</u> , (.) and never <u>have</u> (.) |
| 5 |       | er er given that description of myself. . . .                                |

But appearances can be deceiving: Scargill uses the word *difference* to mean something quite other than what it meant in the IR’s original question. In that question, *the difference* refers to a distinction between two candidates, Scargill vs. McGahey, and their ideologies. In the response, *the difference* refers to a distinction between two interpretations – by the press vs. by Scargill – of Scargill’s ideology in particular. This semantic shift in the meaning and reference of *the difference* is part and parcel of a more encompassing shift in the agenda. Scargill veers away from the question per se in order to counter a presupposition that was embedded within it – that he is in fact a Marxist. To be sure, this is a relatively mild divergence, in that Scargill does not change the subject so much as propose that the question is inapposite. Nevertheless, he does not, strictly speaking, an-

swer the question in the way in which it was framed. And yet he presents himself as if he were being dutifully responsive. By repeating a key lexical item from the question (*What's the difference... → The difference is ...*), he packages his response as if it were filling the information gap targeted by the question.

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

(39) US, 15 Oct. 1992, *MacNeil/Lehrer*: Presidential Debate

- 1 IR: .hh Mister Milfor:d ah r- your man Ross Perot is gonna  
 2 spen:d at lea::st ten mill:ion dollars .hh in TV advertising  
 3 >in the final two and a half weeks of this campaign. <  
 4 .hhh Is he actually gonna get out and- and meet with  
 5 voters, campai:gn like the other candidates?  
 6 CM: Yeh, well I- let's: (.) talk about this: for a second.  
 7 Ah- the- the other two: (.) candidates recei:ve over  
 8 fifty five point two million dollars directly from the  
 9 taxpay:ers. .hh Mister Perot is spending his own money.  
 10 In addition to the fifty five million dollars that they  
 11 get from the federal government, .hh they get over a  
 12 hundred million dollars in so::ft money. The whole way  
 13 the (.) political process is financed is something we  
 14 objec:t to:: .hhhh I- I imagine he will spend ten  
 15 million dollars on media 'cause what we see is something  
 16 very extraordinary in Amer:ican politics. .hh Usually,  
 17 with the passage of ti:me independent candidates go  
 18 down: in the polls:. .hh Since we have entered the  
 19 race according to the polls, we've gone from seven to  
 20 fifteen percent. . . . And we think Perot is gonna win.  
 .  
 . ((Some 20 lines of transcript omitted))  
 .  
 21 IR: ... You : you gave a good answer. = You never answered my  
 22 question, how:ever. .hh >Part of thuh political process <  
 23 is for candidates actually to get out and mee:t with voters.  
 24 (0.3) >Is he gonna do tha:t?'

Rather than answer the question about meeting with the voters, the IE responds instead to the prefatory comment, offering a lengthy justification for Perot's advertising expenditures (lines 6–14). He then goes on to comment on Perot's rise in the polls and his chances of winning (15–20). This shift is obscured by the initial back-referencing statement, but it is not exactly invisible. The IR pursues the matter (21–24), explicitly sanctioning Milford for having *never answered my question*.



Subversive word repeats and anaphoric pronouns also can be used in combination, as in ex. (40), from a British debate interview concerning a proposal to make abortions more difficult to obtain. The excerpt begins with the IR asking Jill Knight, an outspoken opponent of abortion, about one aspect of the legislation, which would shorten the time period for legal abortions. A key word in the question is *concern*; it is central to the final question (line 13), which asks about the IE's level of *concern* regarding the more restricted time frame, and it also appears in the preceding statement (12) and the earlier lead-in (3–4), both of which make reference to widespread public “concern” about the new restrictions:

(40) UK, *Afternoon Plus*: Abortion

- 1 IR: .hhh (Oh) can we now take up then the main issues of  
 2 that bill which r- (.) remain substantially the  
 3 same. (.) and indeed (.) have caused great deal of  
 4 concern. (0.4) But first you'll note .hhh is the  
 5 clause about (.) time limits h in which h abortions  
 6 can be .h legally=  
 7 (JK): =\*(yes)\*=  
 8 IR: =ha:d. And the time limit h (.) according to the  
 9 bill has now dropped .h from twenty eight weeks .h  
 10 (.) to twenty wee[ks.  
 11 (JK): [Yes.=  
 12 IR: =Now< a lot of people are very concerned about this.  
 13 [.hh How concerned are you.  
 14 (JK): [\*yeh\*  
 15 JK: → .hhh Uh: (.) I think this is right. I think that um:  
 16 .hh again one's had a lot of e:uh conflicting  
 17 evidence on this but .hh what has come out: t h an'  
 18 → I think that .h the public have been concerned about  
 19 → this. .hhh is that there have been th' most  
 20 distressing cases. .hhh of (.) live (.) kicking  
 21 babies who have been destroyed. .hh I've had nurses  
 22 come to me in great distress (0.2) about this .hh and  
 23 uh there was undoubtedly (0.1) throughout the whole  
 24 → (ambit) of public opinion .hh very great concern .h  
 25 on this whole question. . . .

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

It is useful to consider the ramifications of a more overt mode of resistance. The IE could have said something like “I'm not the least bit concerned about a

shorter time frame; what worries me is the destruction of live and kicking babies!" But that would place her in direct disagreement with the viewpoint embedded in the question, and it would make her vulnerable to being seen as insensitive to the plight of those seeking abortion services. Her actual course of action obscures such implications. She presents herself as if she were straightforwardly answering, and agreeably expressing "concern," while surreptitiously veering away from the question in the way in which it has been framed. The cover for this maneuver is provided by the back-referencing confirmation and the lexical repetition, the latter serving as a kind of pivot between the question's agenda and the somewhat different direction pursued subsequently.

### *Operating on the Question*

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

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

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

- IR: Uh- (0.5) I told you:. (0.4) some days ago when we spoke, and I told our audience this evening that I would ask you both questions. I will ask you the first now: just before we take a break because I think I know what your answer's gonna be. =
- 1 → =Did you have an affair with Miss Rice?
- GH: 2 → . . . . hhhh Mister Koppel (1.1) if the question: (.) is in the twenty nine years of my marriage, including two public separations have I been absolutely and totally faithful: to my wife .hhh
- 3 → I regret to say the answer is no: . . . .

The advantages of such a transformation should be obvious. It enables Hart to appear "forthcoming," but in response to a question that, by virtue of its generality, is much less pointed. His admission is thus less politically damaging than it might otherwise have been. In effect, Hart manages to "steer the question" in a more desirable direction. In this particular example, Hart seems to acknowledge

the fact that the question has been modified. Notice that his reformulation is offered tentatively within an *if*-clause (*Mister Koppel, if the question is . . .*). This case is thus comparatively overt in the way in which it shifts the agenda.

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

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

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

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

(*whether I'm qualified*) and thus facilitates a more upbeat response. Despite the magnitude of this transformation, it is asserted affirmatively and without qualification (*The question goes to . . .*). Quayle thus proposes that his reformulation successfully captures what the question comes down to in its essence.

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

(43) [Invented]

- JRN: . . . Why do you think that you have not made a more substantial impression on some of these people who have been able to observe you up close?  
 DQ: Qualifications for the office of vice president or president are not age alone. You must look at accomplishments and you must look at experience.

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

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

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

- JRN: 1 → Mr. President, are you personally investigating the mishandling of some of your campaign funds,  
 2 → and do you agree with Secretary Connolly that these charges are harmful to your re-election?  
 RN: Well, I commented upon this on other occasions, and I will repeat my position now.  
 3 → With regard to the matter of the handling of campaign funds, we have a new law here in which technical violations have occurred and are occurring, apparently, on both sides. As far as we are concerned, we have in charge, in Secretary Stans, a man who is an honest man and one who is very meticulous – as I have learned from having him as my treasurer and finance chairman in two previous campaigns – in the handling of matters of this sort. Whatever technical violations have occurred, certainly he will correct

them and will thoroughly comply with the law. He is conducting any investigation on this matter, and conducting it very, very thoroughly, because he doesn't want any evidence at all to be outstanding, indicating that we have not complied with the law.

This reformulation is subversive in two respects. First, it replaces a key term from the question that implied wrongdoing (*mishandling*) with a more favorable term (*handling*). Furthermore, the remainder of the response deals exclusively with the matter of the investigation; Nixon never gets around to the second part of the question, regarding the consequences for his reelection campaign. This omission may not have been accidental. Dealing with the investigation question enables Nixon to present himself as “doing something” about a scandal within his administration, and thus independent of the morally tainted forces which brought it about. In contrast, the issue of whether the scandal will hurt his campaign seems, at least from his standpoint, less advantageous.

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

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

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

- 1 JW: But isn't this (.) d- declaration of the state of  
 2 emergency:: (.) an admission that the eh=South African  
 3 government's policies have not worked, an' in fact that  
 4 the um- United States (0.2) administration's policy of  
 5 constructive engagement (.) has not worked.  
 6 FW: → I do not agree with you .hhhh that the approach we have taken  
 7 → (.) toward South Africa is- ay- is an incorrect approach.  
 8 .hhhhh We want (0.5) to see that s- system change. We wanta see  
 9 South Africa end apartheid. We wanta see basic rights established  
 10 for all South Africans. .hhhh We wanta see peace and stability  
 11 in that country. .hhh An' that's a PERfectly respectable goal.  
 12 Second. The way we have pursued it .hhh I also believe  
 13 .hhh is the most SENSible way: in dealing with a  
 14 dangerous situation....

Here, the IE first asserts disagreement (*I do not agree with you*) and then characterizes the object of his disagreement (*that the approach we have taken. . .*) in a manner that transforms the terms of the question. The transformation is subtle yet advantageous for the IE, who was then a U.S. State Department official during the Reagan administration and is here defending Reagan's policy of "constructive engagement." The original question asked (after some preliminary talk) whether the U.S. policy of constructive engagement *has not worked*. This is reformulated in the statement of disagreement as a question about whether U.S. policy *is an incorrect approach*. The latter version is very much easier for the IE to refute. It is difficult to argue with the original assertion that U.S. policy *has not worked*, since at the time of the interview apartheid remained intact. But one can assert the overall *correctness* of U.S. policy even in the face of its manifest failure to bring about an end to apartheid, and this is precisely what the IE does in his subsequent response.

#### TWO CASE STUDIES

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

##### *Dan Quayle and the Succession Question*

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

An extended tug-of-war developed around the issue of presidential succession. It began when Dan Quayle – a youthful senator and George Bush's running mate – was asked what he would do if the president died or became incapacitated for some reason. The purpose of this question was to test Quayle's readiness for assuming the presidency in an emergency: What would be his plan of action? Quayle sidestepped this issue when it was first raised, prompting several follow-up questions and rounds of evasion and pursuit.

The first journalist to raise this question was Brit Hume of ABC News. Noting the apprehensions people might feel about Quayle being *a heartbeat away from the presidency* (ex. [46], lines 1–4), he asks Quayle to describe, in the event of his sudden succession to power, *the first steps that you'd take and why* (5–10):

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

- 1 JRN: Senator I wan- I wanna take you back if I can  
 2 to the question Judy as:- asked you about some  
 3 o'the apprehensions people may feel about your  
 4 being a heartbeat away from the presidency. .hhhh  
 5 And let us assume if we can for the sake of this  
 6 question that you become vice president- an:d the  
 7 president is incapacitated for one reason or  
 8 another and you hafta take the reins of power.  
 9 .hhhh When that moment ca::me, w- what would be  
 10 thuh first steps that you'd take (0.2) and why::.  
 11 (3.2)
- 12 DQ: .hh First I'd- first I'd say a prayer (1.1) tch for  
 13 myself (2.3) and for thuh country I'm about to  
 14 lead, (2.4) And then I would (1.1) assemble his  
 15 (1.1) people and talk (0.8) .hhh  
 16 → And I think this question keeps going ba:ck to: (1.0)  
 17 the qualifications and what kind of (1.1) of vice  
 18 president 'n (0.7) in this hypothetical situation  
 19 (1.0) if I had to assume:: (0.8) thuh responsibilities  
 20 of: (0.3) president what I would be. (1.0) .hhh  
 21 And as I have said (1.2) tch age alo:ne. (0.3) .hh  
 22 although I can tell you h.h after the experience of:  
 23 these last few weeks 'n the campaign I've added  
 24 ten years to my a[ge,  
 25 AUD: [x-x-x-x-x-x[-x (1.7)  
 26 [Age alone. (1.0)  
 27 is not (0.2) the only (0.5) qualification. .hhhh  
 28 You've got to look at ex:perience. (.) And you've  
 29 got to look at accomplishments. . . .

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

Although this shift is managed covertly and is obscured by the use of an initial question reformulation, Brit Hume is not oblivious to what has transpired. In ex. (47), after a full round of questioning from the other panelists, Hume regains the floor and pointedly pursues the question (line 6). Before doing so, however, he carefully justifies this move by calling attention to the inadequacy of Quayle's previous response, summarizing it in a way that highlights its feebleness: *You*





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

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

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

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

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

- 1 DQ: ... and I'll try to answer it again for you.  
 2 (0.3) as clearly as I can. (0.7) .hh Because  
 3 the question you're asking. (1.3) is what (.)  
 4 kind (.) of qualifications  
 5 .hh[hhhh does Dan Quayle have to be president. (0.5)] (0.5)  
 6 JRN: [ (( H e a d s h a k i n g ) ) ]  
 7 DQ: tch What kind of qualifications do I have  
 8 and what would I do: (1.0) in this kind of a situa[tion. (0.4)]  
 9 JRN: [((Nodding))]  
 10 DQ: And what would I do in this situation, .hh I would (1.9)  
 11 make sure. (2.1) that the people in the cabinet, (0.9)  
 12 'n the people 'n the advisors to the President, (.) are  
 13 called in, (0.2) an I'll talk to 'em...

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

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

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

*The Affairs of Bill Clinton*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Clinton is able to issue a denial in a way that avoids specificity regarding what, exactly, is being denied.

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

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

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

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

Around the same time, allegations about another affair surfaced, this time involving a young White House intern named Monica Lewinsky. Shortly thereafter, Clinton was questioned about the affair in an interview on *NewsHour*. Once again, what initially appear to be forthright denials of the affair are in fact covertly resistant. In this case, the specific mode of resistance is a subtle shift in the terms of the question, a shift involving the verbal tense in which it is expressed:

(52) US, 21 Jan. 1998, *NewsHour*: Clinton

- 1 IR: You had no sexual relationship with this [young wo[man.]
- 2 IE: [ml [Th- ]
- 3 IE: There is not a sexual relationship. That is accurate.

The IR asks Clinton to confirm that he *had no sexual relationship with this young woman*. Clinton eventually issues a confirmation (*That is accurate*), but only after reformulating the issue from past to present tense (*There is not a sexual relationship*). This response does not necessarily rule out an affair that is over and done with, but to the casual listener it might seem that Clinton has denied an affair altogether. This type of tense shift would later become notorious when it was exposed as a strategy employed by Clinton in the Paula Jones deposition.

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

#### DISCUSSION

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

On the other hand, by virtue of these practices, politicians and other public figures can indeed gain substantial “wobble room” for pursuing their own agendas even under the most persistent interrogation. It is possible that such practices

have evolved over time in relation to the changing culture of the journalistic profession. In both England and the United States, journalistic questioning has become less deferential and more adversarial since the 1950s (Clayman & Heritage in press a, b). This could prompt interviewees to become more resistant and/or to develop more sophisticated methods for dealing with difficult questions, just as they have developed other strategies for managing adversarial encounters with journalists (see Jones 1992). Alternatively, increasingly adversarial questioning could have precisely the opposite effect: Insofar as adversarialness includes a greater propensity to ask follow-up questions that pursue evasive responses (Clayman and Heritage in press a), it could encourage interviewees to adhere more closely to the question agenda. Whether there actually has been a systematic change in public figures' responsive conduct – in either the propensity toward resistance or in the practices for managing resistance – must await further research.

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

## NOTES

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

<sup>1</sup> This incident was discussed in a documentary film by Brian Springer entitled *Spin*.

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

<sup>3</sup> This kind of full-form repetition, where the entire framework of the question is preserved in the initial response, appears disproportionately in certain environments. It is often found in exchanges that (i) are highly argumentative, or (ii) involve a response that ultimately departs from the agenda of the question. It may be that the practice of repeating the framework of the question, rather than

accepting it and building on it, conveys a modicum of independence from the prior course of questioning, and is thus useful in resistant and hostile environments.

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

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

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

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

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

## REFERENCES

- Bavelas, Janet B., et al. (1988) Political equivocation: A situational explanation. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 7:137–46.
- Bull, Peter (1994). On identifying questions, replies, and non-replies in political interviews. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 13:115–31.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1998). Equivocation theory and news interviews. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 17:36–51.
- \_\_\_\_\_, Judy Elliott, Derrol Palmer, & Libby Walker (1996). Why politicians are three-faced: The face model of political interviews. *British Journal of Social Psychology* 35:267–84.
- \_\_\_\_\_, & Mayer, Kate (1993). How not to answer questions in political interviews. *Political Psychology* 14:651–66.
- Clayman, Steven E. (1990). From talk to text: Newspaper accounts of reporter-source interactions. *Media, Culture and Society* 12:79–104.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1993). Reformulating the question: A device for answering/not answering questions in news interviews and press conferences. *Text* 13:159–88.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1998). Some uses of address terms. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, New York City, November 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_, & Heritage, John (in press a). Questioning presidents: Deference and adversarialness in the press conferences of Eisenhower and Reagan. To appear in, *Journal of Communication*.
- \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ (in press b). *The News Interview: Journalists and public figures on the air*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Davidson, Judy (1984). Subsequent versions of invitations, offers, requests, and proposals dealing with potential or actual rejection. In J. M. Atkinson and J. Heritage (eds.), *Structures of Social Action*, 102–28. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Day, Robin (1993). ... *But with respect*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Donaldson, Sam (1987). *Hold on, Mr. President!* New York: Random House.
- Greatbatch, David (1986a). Some standard uses of supplementary questions in news interviews. In J. Wilson and B. Crow (eds.), *Belfast working papers in language and linguistics*, Vol. 8, 86–123. Jordanstown: University of Ulster.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1986b). Aspects of topical organisation in news interviews: The use of agenda shifting procedures by interviewees. *Media, Culture and Society* 8:441–55.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1988). A turn-taking system for British news interviews. *Language in Society* 17:401–30.
- Harris, Sandra (1991). Evasive action: How politicians respond to questions in political interviews. In P. Scannell (ed.), *Broadcast Talk* 76–99. London: Sage.
- Heritage, John (1984). *Garfinkel and ethnomethodology*. Cambridge: Polity.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1985). "Analyzing news interviews: Aspects of the production of talk for an overhearing audience. In T.A. van Dijk (ed.), *Handbook of discourse analysis*, vol 3, *Discourse and dialogue*, 95–119. New York: Academic Press.

- (in press). Designing questions and setting agendas in the news interview. In J. Mandelbaum, P. Glenn, & C. LeBaron (eds.), *Unearthing the taken-for-granted: Studies in language and social interaction*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- , & Greatbatch, David (1991). On the institutional character of institutional talk: The case of news interviews. In D. Boden and D. H. Zimmerman (eds.), *Talk and social structure*, 93–137. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jones, Bill (1992). Broadcasters, politicians, and the political interview. In Bill Jones and Lynton Robins (eds.), *Two decades in British politics*, 53–77. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.
- Koppel, Ted, & Gibson, Kyle (1996). *Nightline: History in the making and the making of television*. New York: Random House.
- Pomerantz, Anita (1984). Agreeing and disagreeing with assessments: Some features of preferred/dispreferred turn shapes. In J. M. Atkinson and J. Heritage (eds.), *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis*, 57–101. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Raymond, Geoffrey (1998). The structure of responding: Conforming and nonconforming responses to yes/no type interrogatives. Paper presented at annual meeting of the National Communication Association, New York, November 1998.
- Roth, Andrew (1996). Turn-final word repeats as a device for 'doing answering' in an institutional setting. Paper presented at annual meeting of the Pacific Sociological Association, Seattle, WA, April 1996.
- Sacks, Harvey (1987 [1973]). On the preferences for agreement and contiguity in sequences in conversation. In G. Button and J.R.E. Lee (eds.), *Talk and Social Organisation*, 54–69. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Schegloff, Emanuel A. (1968). Sequencing in conversational openings. *American Anthropologist* 70:1075–95.
- (1972). Notes on a conversational practice: Formulating place. In D. Sudnow (ed.), *Studies in Social Interaction*, 75–119. New York: Free Press.
- (1998). Word repeat as a practice for ending. Paper presented at annual meeting of the National Communication Association, New York, November 1998.
- Whalen, Jack; Zimmerman, Don H.; & Whalen, Marilyn R. (1988). When words fail: A single case analysis. *Social Problems* 35:335–62.

(Received 1 March 2000, Revision accepted 14 September 2000)