

# From adversarialism to antagonism: Challenges to the norms of the broadcast news accountability interview in an age of conflict

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## Abstract

The accountability interview in which a public figure is held to account for their statements or actions is a well-established armature in the delivery of broadcast news. In its broadcast canonical form it relies on questioning as an instrument for addressing issues of knowledge, responsibility, and the rightness of actions of those with public standing. However, shifts in questioning techniques have accelerated a movement towards argument in the context of the broadcast accountability interview and a corresponding loosening of its interview structure. Indeed, there are signs of a growing tendency for the interview framework itself to be questioned by interviewees. This article examines what is at stake in these changes and asks if the accountability interview in an era of heightened conflict remains fit for purpose or is facing a kind of legitimization crisis.

## Keywords

Accountability, adversarial, argument, assertion, broadcast news, discourse analysis, interview, legitimization crisis, metadiscourse, question

## Introduction

This article examines some of the discursive properties of the news interview in UK public service broadcasting during 2022–2024 with a view to assessing the degree to

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which it continues to serve as an instrument of accountability in the public sphere. The article first outlines some general features of accountability in a democratic society, and it then relates these to a particular form of news interview which has become known and delineated as the accountability news interview. It will review key properties of this kind of interview insofar as they constitute a normative order of discourse. The realization of this normative order, however, may take different forms; and some forms actually contain the potential to undermine this normative order, especially when they facilitate argument, and the transition from interview into assertoric argumentative sequences. Sequences of this kind have recently been overtaken by a more fundamental challenge in which normative order of the interview is reflexively, directly and fundamentally questioned and rejected. The article, therefore, seeks to trace a progression from forms of adversarial questioning that rely on declarative statement with tag, to declarative statement, to assertoric sequences, to cases where the Interviewee questions and refuses the norms of the interview. In the light of this progression, in which the terminus ad quem is fundamentally to reject the norms of the interview, doubts are raised about the continuing effectivity of the accountability news interview as an instrument of public accountability.

### *Questions of accountability*

The last decade has seen major crises across a range of public bodies and societal institutions in the UK: for instance, multiple miscarriages of justice followed on the introduction of an IT system by the Post Office in which several hundred sub-postmasters were wrongly accused of fraud; a council high-rise housing scheme suffered a catastrophic fire causing the deaths of 72 residents; the Metropolitan Police Force – the largest in the UK – was found to be institutionally racist and misogynistic; and excess mortality rates were attributed to several NHS maternity units. These – and other cases – clearly foregrounded issues of accountability, transparency and responsibility. Several major public inquiries are in train, or only recently concluded: the Grenfell Tower Inquiry; the UK COVID-19 Inquiry; the Ockenden Review into Maternity Services; the Baroness Casey Review into the Metropolitan Police; the Infected Blood Inquiry; and the Post Office Horizon IT Inquiry. Against this background, questions of accountability have increasingly become part of public discussion and debate. Indeed, news items in mainstream UK news media that feature questions of accountability – and its failure – have increased more than fourfold over the last ten years (and by more than a factor of 10 over the last two decades) as can be seen in [Figure 1](#):

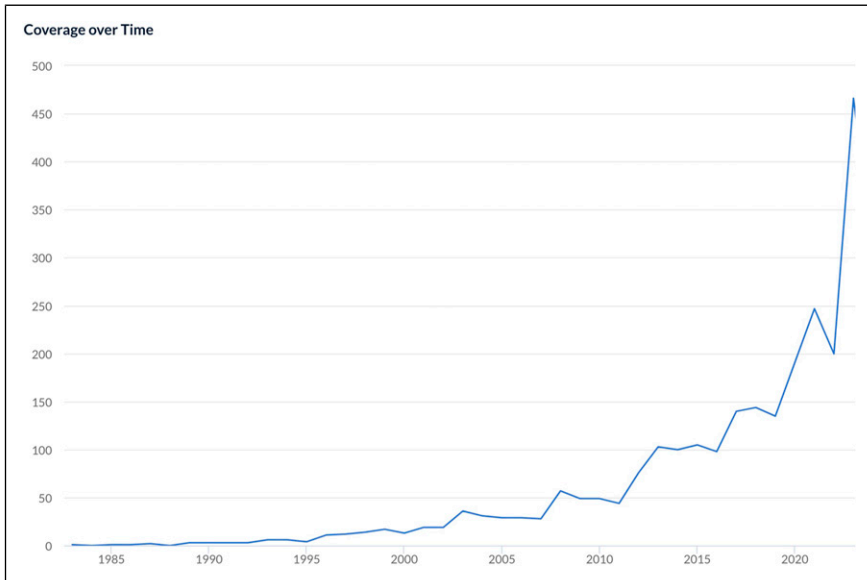
Political science has a long-standing interest in accountability. A representative definition is offered by Bovens about the concept of accountability – its meaning, function, and scope:

Accountability is a relationship between an actor and a forum, in which the actor has an obligation to explain and to justify his or her conduct, the forum can pose questions and pass judgement, and the actor may face consequences.

–Bovens, 2007: 450.

This definition is expanded by him into component parts as in [Table 1](#), given below.

A crucial role is attributed in Bovens’s account to forums that are constitutive of one side of an accountability relationship in which they pose questions and pass judgement. But the process of doing so is not explicated. Indeed, inasmuch as forums are discussed at all, the main emphasis falls on them as formal bodies (rather like the Inquiries and Reviews mentioned above) such as Parliaments, Chambers of Audit, Offices of Budget Responsibility, Cabinets, Commissions and other statutory instruments. Although accountability is considered important “to provide a democratic means to monitor and



**Figure 1.** UK news items featuring accountability and its failure: 1980-2023. (Figure derived from LexisNexis data.)

**Table 1.** Accountability as a social relation. From [Bovens, 2007](#): 452.

Accountability as a social relation
<p>A relationship qualifies as a case of accountability when:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. there is a relationship between an actor and a forum</li> <li>2. in which the actor is obliged</li> <li>3. to explain and justify</li> <li>4. his conduct;</li> <li>5. the forum can pose questions;</li> <li>6. pass judgement;</li> <li>7. and the actor may face consequences</li> </ol>

control government conduct, [and] for preventing the development of concentrations of power” (462), and indeed is considered “an essential condition for the democratic process, as it provides the people’s representation and the votes with the information needed for judging the propriety and effectiveness of the conduct of government” (463), almost no attention is given at all to the role of the media, except to say that “media, interest groups and citizens are all adopting an increasingly more critical attitude to government.” (464) This is against a background in which: “Respect for authority is fast dwindling and the confidence in public institutions is under pressure in a number of Western countries.” (Bovens, 2007: 464.) But although “In many countries, the media are fast gaining power” they do so only “as informal forums for political accountability.” P.455.

This would seem drastically to understate the role of mass media in post-Enlightenment democratic societies in – to use Habermas’s phrase “the structural transformation of the public sphere.”

There is however a parallel but separate development in media and communication studies, where a great deal of attention has been given to a particular variant of the news interview – the accountability interview.

### *General characteristics of the accountability news interview*

Montgomery defines the broadcast accountability news interview in the following way:

In news interviews of this type the emphasis falls upon calling a public figure to account in relation to an issue or event of the moment either for their own deeds or words or for the actions/statements of the institution with which they are associated. While the interviewer seeks to query the basis of a statement or action, typically the interviewee seeks to justify it. Interviewees are public figures in the sense that they hold institutional positions and by their official status are treated as “having some locus” on the matter at hand. However, perhaps the clearest examples of this kind of interview involve politicians being interviewed in relation to a relevant current news event or topic.

–Montgomery, 2007: 148

Other characteristics help to define it. Firstly, the encounter takes place in public; and the very fact of being broadcast to a large audience makes the interview a public rather than private matter. (Heritage, 1985) The public nature of the accountability interview also entails that it occurs ‘on the record’: whatever is said is susceptible to scrutiny, inspection, parsing and quotation.

Secondly, the interactional roles of Interviewer and Interviewee in the accountability interview carry other kinds of role and position with them. Thus, the Interviewer speaks in more than a personal capacity but as a member of broadcasting institution (Sky News, for example, or Channel 4 News, or BBC News) and, as such, will be expected to conform to certain kinds of institutional (and journalistic) requirement (to avoid transparent bias, for

instance, and to maintain the appearance of impartiality) (Clayman and Heritage, 2002). In addition, however, and perhaps most significantly, Interviewers in accountability interviews, speak on behalf of an audience or public, effectively projecting themselves as ‘tribunes of the people’ or even ‘public inquisitors’ (See, for example, Clayman, 2002; Higgins, 2010; Hutchby 2017). Theirs is an ‘institutional voice’ (Lerman, 1983).

Conversely, the Interviewee also is there in an institutional capacity as a senior office holder or representative of a public body – a major company, for instance, or a trades union, a utility, or an arm of government. (Montgomery, 2007, 2008) In this role they are held to have responsibility for the actions or statements of their institution, and to be answerable for them. And in answering for their institution, they are expected to be able to account for their actions, strictly to ‘be accountable’: as such, they can be expected to explain, and more crucially to justify and defend. (Andone, 2013)

### *The normative order of the accountability news interview*

These broad considerations are instantiated in practice through particular generic constraints, which have received much attention in the literature from the overlapping perspectives of discourse analysis and conversational analysis (see Clayman and Heritage, 2002; Heritage and Greatbatch; Hutchby, 2011, 2017, 2022a; Montgomery, 2007, 2008) A central feature of these accounts is their specification of the news interview as based upon the normative pre-allocation of turn-types and speaking roles: the Interviewer asks questions and the Interviewee answers them. It is, for instance, highly unusual – a breach of the normative constraints of the interview - for the Interviewee to ask questions and for the Interviewer to answer them. The distribution of turn-types is thus asymmetrical.

As a normative order Clayman and Heritage describe it thus:

In the news interview...the participants are fundamentally constrained. Interviewers restrict themselves to questioning and interviewees restrict themselves to answering interviewer questions, or at least responding to them. This constraint shapes the form taken by the participants’ talk and the order in which they talk to the following pattern:

IR: Question

IE: Answer

IR: Question

IE: Answer

This form of turn-taking involves what Atkinson and Drew (1979) have called “turn-type preallocation” in which the activities of asking and answering (or responding to) questions are pre-allocated to the roles of interviewer and interviewee.

(Clayman and Heritage 2002: 97-98)

The constraints of this normative order are described by them in further detail:

the participants – interviewers and interviewees – refrain from a wide variety of actions that they are free to do in the give and take of ordinary conversation. If interviewers restrict themselves to asking questions, then they cannot – at least overtly – express opinions, or argue with, debate, or criticize the interviewee’s positions nor, conversely, agree with, support, or defend them. Correspondingly, if interviewees restrict themselves to answers (or responses) to questions, then they cannot ask questions (of interviewers or other interviewees), nor make unsolicited comments on previous remarks, initiate changes of topic, or divert the discussion into criticisms of the interviewer or the broadcasting organization.

(op.cit. p.98)

### *Evolution within and challenges to the normative order of the accountability interview*

Exactly how this normative order is realized, however, remains open to variation and development. Hutchby for instance observes that “as well as evolving through time, the political interview is diversifying in form” (2022b: 27) He further notes that:

following the mid to late twentieth century development of more adversarial and probing formats, in more recent decades the conventional and adversarial interview formats...have been joined by still more aggressive and tendentious styles of interviewing.” (Hutchby 2022b: 39.)

Heritage, for instance, notes the emergence in the news interview of a particular kind of question design, the negative interrogative, as in “Isn’t it unjust to allow this to go untaxed”, which he argues is more than a neutral polar question but can act as a statement of opinion rather than as a question in search of information. Indeed, Clayman and Heritage track this form in Presidential press conferences to argue that there has been a changing tenor of questioning over time observing an increasing and interlocking ‘structure of assertiveness’ on the part of journalists. (2013, 496).

Montgomery (2011) analyzes increasing instability around the canonical norms of the political accountability interview with an increasing lapse into patterns of Assertion – Counter assertion instead of Q + A, an observation picked up by Hutchby who suggests that

the question-answer sequence of the standard news interview may shift not just into assertoric forms of questioning but into full-blown assertoric sequences: the exchange of assertion and counter-assertion that is one of the basic grounds of mundane argument.” (2022b: 28)

In this article we will examine the implications of these developments as they obtain in current public service broadcasting in the UK, during the period 2022-2023. In doing so we will note examples of conducive or assertive questioning of the kind explored by [Heritage \(2002\)](#) and further by [Heritage and Clayman \(2013\)](#). Inasmuch, however, as this kind of increasingly adversarial questioning relies on declarative (statement) + tag, it is a small step for interviewers to build their questioning move on statements without the tag (and without formal interrogative marking). We will show how this kind of move lends itself easily to the formation of the kind of full-blown assertoric sequences analysed by [Montgomery \(2011\)](#) and further noted by [Hutchby \(2022b\)](#). In the account that follows, therefore, increasingly adversarial and assertive questioning lays the groundwork for a challenge to, and a partial breakdown of, the normative order of the accountability interview. But, crucially, however, the article will also present and analyse examples that amount to a more fundamental breakdown in the normative order of the accountability news interview, where many of the exclusions described by Clayman and Heritage become centre stage in a fashion that calls the very legitimacy of the journalistic accountability interview into question.

The method of inquiry relies on techniques of discourse analysis applied to the close study of broadcast talk or mediated verbal interaction in the journalistic context, as developed in [Montgomery 2007, 2008, 2011](#). The ultimate focus, however, is on what the close study of patterns of verbal interaction in a specific institutional context can suggest about the prevailing social order and the role of journalism within it. As Fairclough and Wodak put it:

describing discourse as social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s), and social structure(s) which frame it. A dialectical relationship is a two-way relationship: the discursive event is shaped by situations, institutions and social structures, but it also shapes them.

([Fairclough and Wodak, 1997](#): p.258)

Data for this study is drawn from UK public service news broadcasting (BBC Radio 4, BBC One, BBC Two, Channel 4, Sky News) almost exclusively during a twelve-month period in 2022-2023.

## **Adversarialism versus neutralism in the accountability interview**

The normative order of the accountability interview is underpinned by two contradictory pressures – not only adversarialism, but also neutralism. Requirements about objectivity and impartiality in news broadcasting obtain in many democratic jurisdictions including both U.K. the U.S. and the protocols surrounding it have clear consequences for the conduct of news interviews. In particular the concept of formal neutralism may be seen as directly affected by the existence these

codes. This applies especially to the accountability interview in which the interviewer (and thereby the news institution) must take care to avoid the appearance of identifying with contested cultural, ideological or political positions. Neutralism in this sense does not mean that the interviewer or institution has no position or viewpoint, merely that any such position – if held at all – should not be openly espoused – a constraint that applies all the more so to those public service broadcasters where there is an explicit requirement for balance and impartiality. Television and radio in the UK is licensed by an independent regulator, OfCom, and governed by a broadcasting code which states that

“News, in whatever form, must be reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality.”

At the same time this requirement can conflict with the basic purpose of the accountability interview as we have described it above: to hold public figures to account. And in holding interviewees to account for their words or actions interviewers inevitably may adopt an adversarial posture. Clayman and Heritage sum up this tension underlying the accountability interview neatly as follows:

How do interviewers manage to assert themselves in an adversarial manner while maintaining a formally impartial or neutralistic posture?

–Clayman and Heritage, 2002: 151

This kind of tension may become particularly acute at times of heightened political and sociocultural conflict, not to mention the rise of fake news and the effect on public discourse of post-truth performative politics. (see [Montgomery 2017, 2020](#)). It is under these kinds of pressures that the effort to maintain a neutralistic posture in broadcast news interviews faces serious challenges.

## **Changing forms of questioning in the accountability interview: from neutralism to assertiveness**

Questioning in news interviews, as Heritage and Roth observe,

handles the main interactional and institutional tasks charged to modern news interviewers. First and most centrally interviewers are obliged to elicit interviewees’ information and opinions for the benefit of overhearers ([Heritage, 1985](#); [Heritage and Greatbatch, 1991](#)). Second, in most Western societies at least, interviewers are specifically not authorized to argue with, debate, or criticize the interviewee’s point of view nor conversely to agree with, support, or defend it. Instead, interviewers must maintain what [Heritage and Greatbatch \(1991\)](#) termed a neutralistic posture.

–Heritage and Roth, 1995, pp.1-2

Questions, in principle, do not necessarily commit an interviewer to a particular point of view (though they can admittedly be used to advance an agenda); and for this



reason they can facilitate the maintenance of a neutralistic posture on the part of the interviewer.

As noted previously, however, questions can take a variety of forms. Perhaps the mainstay of question design in broadcast news interviewing is the use of a question Wh-word such as Who, When, Why, coupled with interrogative syntax, a combination which aims primarily at seeking information. etc.) This question-type (even allowing for its capacity to embody a presupposition) can be seen as broadly neutralistic: although the question projects pressure on the interviewee to supply information it does not set tight limits on what information might be supplied in answer.

If these can be considered relatively open as questions, increasingly common, however, in the realization of *Questions* are closed forms based upon the selection of some form of *Polar Interrogative*, of a type which can be seen in the following extract, where BBC's Martha Kearney (**Int'er-MK**) is interviewing the then Chief Secretary to the Treasury, John Glen (**Int'ee-JG**), about the state of the UK economy:

**Example 1: Extr. 2/ll. 182-187**

**BBCRadio4 Today 11/08/23**

<b>Int'er-MK</b>	→	would you accept the impact that Brexit has played in our low growth	
<b>Int'ee-JG</b>		<b>well</b> we've made the decision on Brexit years ago and I think the country wants us to address the situation that we face now	185

The use of the *Polar Interrogative* invites a yes/no response, but, rather than neutrally seeking information, the question projects pressure on the interviewee to agree with the presupposition of the question (that Brexit has affected our low growth)

In the data a common way of increasing the pressure exerted by the polar interrogative is by framing it negatively, as in Ex 3 below - again from Kearney interviewing Glen, in this case about a long running strike of junior doctors.

**Example 2: Extr. 2/ll. 9-10**

**BBCRadio4 Today 11/08/23**

<b>Int'er-MK</b>	→	isn't it time to resolve the dispute	
<b>Int'ee-JG</b>		<b>well</b> we've tried very hard to resolve the dispute	

In these cases it is noticeable that the Interviewee avoids the yes/no polarity in his reply beginning his response with *well*. A particular and increasingly common variant of the polar question in the UK accountability interview takes the form of a *Declarative + Negative Tag*, as in the following, where the questioning turn terminates with *doesn't it, hasn't it*.

**Example 3: Extr. 3/4-11****C4 News 03/08/23**

Int'er-KGM	→	let's be clear about what the plan is it involves people being poorer doesn't it	
Int'ee-JH		well that is what happens when inflation gets too high it eats away at the value of the pound	10

**Example 4: Extr. 2/153-156****BBCRadio4 Today 11/08/23**

Int'er-MK	→	and growth has pretty well stagnated	
	→	[during the whole] of that period hasn't it	
Int'ee-JG		[[well that's]] I think what he has said is	no it hasn't 155

**Example 5: Extr. 2/26-31****BBCRadio4 Today 11/08/23**

Int'er-MK	→	but training isn't going to work is it if the doctors then decide to go overseas and you're losing 15% of the workforce every year I think	
Int'ee-JG		well I think listening to the doctors in your report what I was hearing was concern about the:: the:: amount of work they have to do	29

Thus, *Questions* realized by *Declarative + Tag* do two things differently from *Information Questions*. A *Declarative + Tag* question (such as “it involves people being poorer doesn’t it”, (Ex.4)) sets up a clear expectation for the polarity of the Interviewee’s response. In this case a negative tag in the *Question* projects a positive response of agreement (such as, “Yes, it does involve people being poorer”). But the choice of *Declarative + Tag* also provides the Interviewer with scope to embed an unwelcome proposition in the *Question* while simultaneously projecting a preference for the Interviewee to agree with it. This is particularly so with the polar interrogatives involving negation either in the tag (as in “it involves people being poorer doesn’t it”) or in the main clause (as in “but training isn’t going to work is it”).

Indeed, they can be characterized as *Closed Questions* rather than relatively open *Information Questions* of the WH-type. In practice, Interviewees almost invariably resist the closing down preference of *Declarative + Tag*. But in doing so they have to engage in discursive work to avoid the projected response of the *Question*: indeed, typically they avoid confirming the expectations offered by the Interviewer, by prefacing their reply with the discourse marker “well”, serving to mitigate their action of disagreeing or disaligning with the assertion embedded in the question. (See the Interviewees’ initial turn component in examples 2-6 above).

In this way interviewers can seem to preserve the neutralistic posture required of them by journalistic codes that restricts them to questioning. But the use of the polar interrogative – particularly negative interrogatives – enables them nonetheless to assert unwelcome propositions that the interviewee will inevitably wish to disalign from. The greater assertiveness of declarative + tag – especially with negation - thus provides a powerful route to square the circle for interviewers of how to assert themselves in an adversarial manner while maintaining a formally impartial or neutralistic posture.

## Departures from the canonical form of the accountability interview: the shift from adversarial but formally neutral questioning to argument

As we have seen, the use of *Declarative + Tag* as a form of assertive questioning within the constraints of the canonical form of the accountability interview explicitly projects a discursive space in which the Interviewee is required to align or dis-align with the proposition embedded in the Interviewer's question. It is, however, but a small step for the Interviewer simply to assert the proposition without benefit of an explicitly interrogative component. Here is Interviewer Martha Kearney from Radio 4's *Today Programme* with the then Chief Secretary to the Treasury, John Glen:

**Example 6: Extr 2/11.91-98**  
**BBCRadio4 Today 11/08/23**  
 Int'er-MK                    **but** as well as inflation  
                                   you have to look at the:: impact  
                                   that industrial action is having on the economy overall  
                                   and we can see that in today's er growth figures  
                                   better than expected 95  
 → **but** I'm sure you'd agree still pretty poor at nought point two per cent  
 Int'ee-JG                    **well** I think they showed a lot of resilience in the UK economy

Effectively this exchange takes the form, not so much of *Question* and *Answer*, but of *Assertion* (the growth figures are still pretty poor at nought point two per cent) and *Counter-Assertion* (they showed a lot of resilience in the UK economy). Later in the same interview the interviewer's "we're not doing ..well" is countered by the interviewee's "well .. the IMF have upgraded the UK economy":

**Example 7: Extr 2/11. 119-123**  
**BBCRadio4 Today 11/08/23**  
 Int'er-MK                    → so we're not doing nearly as well  
                                   → as (our international competitors) 120  
 Int'ee-JG                    **well** martha martha we can trade statistics  
                                   we can say the IMF have upgraded the UK economy  
                                   this year by nought point seven per cent is unprecedented

In this way accountability interviews may slip from the assertiveness of the polar interrogatives within the canonical structure of a series of Q-A adjacency pairs into recursive sequences of *Assertion – Counter-Assertion – Counter-Assertion*, as in the following example from a Channel 4 News interview by Krishnan Guru-Murthy with the then UK Chancellor, Jeremy Hunt about the government's decision to grant new oil and gas drilling licences in the North Sea:

**Example 8: Extr 3/ll.123-134****C4 News 03/08/23**

<b>Int'ee-JH</b>	what matters is not just the transition to net zero but also energy security and it happens to be a lot more uh carbon intensive to import gas than to use our own supplies	125
<b>Int'er-KGM</b>	<b>but</b> we won't have access to our own supplies as you know they get sold on the international market there's no reason	130
<b>Int'ee-JH</b>	why we will definitely get North Sea oil and gas <b>well</b> we're far more likely to get them if we're getting we're extracting that gas than if we're not extracting it	

Or earlier in the same interview where they touch on the effect of Brexit on employment:

**Example 9: Extr 3/ll. 83-91****C4 News 03/08/23**

<b>Int'ee-JH</b>	which is what happens in America we've got all of those (factors)	
<b>Int'er-KGM</b>	and and Brexit was a big factor in some of that [certainly] in the labour market	85
<b>Int'ee-JH</b>	[no ] <b>well</b> we've had low unemployment since long before Brexit it's actually been a a strong feature of our economy	
<b>Int'er-KGM</b>	<b>but</b> you're not saying Brexit (wouldn't) hasn't been a factor	90
<b>Int'ee-JH</b>	<b>well</b> actually I think you need to look at the figures	

In each case the interviewer's turns assert a proposition that is unwelcome to the interviewer without benefit of interrogative syntax:

we won't have access to our own supplies..  
there's no reason 130  
why we will definitely get North Sea oil and gas

Brexit was a big factor in some of that 85  
[certainly] in the labour market

In response to unwelcome (hostile?) propositions the interviewee elects to rebut them with a counter assertion. It is difficult to describe these sequences occurring within the overall frame of the accountability interview other than as a form of argument. As such, they amount to an evolution or flexing of the limits of the accountability interview in a process, however, that poses challenges to its very normative order.

It is noticeable that these shifts provoke attempts by participants to clarify their 'footing' (Goffman, 1981) within the shifting sands of the discourse by resorting to metadiscourse, using metadiscursive terms such as *argument*, *dispute*, *concede*, and *agree*, to define the altered basis on which the discourse is working.

- Ext2/70            well *I don't accept that*
- Ext2/96            but *I'm sure you'd agree*
- Ext2/129           well if you compare with pre-pandemic levels  
we're not doing so well  
*you must concede that*
- Ext2/162-169  
well I think *what I can what I can agree with you on*  
is that successive governments
- Ext2/183            *would you accept* the impact that Brexit has played
- Ext2/209-210  
no but *it's interesting that you're not disputing*  
the impact of Brexit
- Ext3/64            well *I disagree*  
that Brexit has been a factor
- Ext4/42-44        yes but one of the problems is  
an(d) *I don't disagree with you at all*  
one of the problems is that
- Ext1/31            *I suppose the argument that some might make*
- Ext1/64            *I'm seeking to test your argument and I'm suggesting to you*

### **Direct challenges to the normative order of the accountability interview: from argument to antagonism**

The replacement of *Question* and *Answer* exchanges with a looser structure of *Assertion* and *Counter Assertion* may be seen as stretching the limits of the accountability interview. For one thing, the pattern of *Assertion* and *Counter*

*Assertion* is prone to indefinite recursion where roles become blurred: the asymmetrical pre-allocation of turn types – Interviewer Question, Interviewee Answer – is replaced by the more symmetrical and looser interactional structure of argument.

However, the normative order of the accountability interview can be tested in more extreme ways in which the frame of the accountability interview is fundamentally broken. Here for example is the BBC’s political editor Chris Mason (BBC political editor) interviewing Sebastian Gorka (an adviser or surrogate to former President Trump) about a recent federal indictment against Trump. Mason lists the alleged offences that make up the indictment as a statement of fact rather than a question. Gorka responds “yeah but it’s all garbage”

**Example 10: Extr 1/11. 19-65**

**R4 Today Programme, 02/08/23, 08:15.**

**[Following an interview with a Trump critic at 08:10]**

Int’ee-SG	yeah but it’s all garbage	
	....	
	so so what are we talking (about)	
	how are you impeding the the will of the american people	
	or official proceedings by saying	
	we are exercising our first amendment rights	35
	to march peacefully to the site of congress	
	where the deliberations and the counting of the votes occurs	
Int’er-CM	I suppose the argument that some might make	
	looking in on America from outside	
	seeing a rich and vibrant democracy	40
	with a er legal system that is willing to challenge anyone	
	that nobody is above the law but that’s the very essence of what people might	
	aspire to in a democracy	
	something that you’re talking down here	
	that a court can hear from someone	46
	[(even if they are a former president)]	
Int’ee-SG	[(why are you putting words)]	
	why are you putting words in my mouth	
	I’m talking about the absolute opposite	
	I I do you not speak English	50
	I’m talking about equality (issues) before the law	
	did you not listen to what I said	
	president trump hasn’t committed a crime	
	and for seven years he’s been persecuted	
Int’er-CM	so why worry about going before a court	55
	[he could make a case and he could win]	
Int’ee-SG	[I want lady justice I want lady justice]	
	I want lady justice	
	to keep her blindfold on	
	she has had it ripped off her face	60
	I want equality before the law	
	is it because you work for the BBC why [ don't you	
Int’er-CM	[I’m seeking to test your	
	argument and I’m suggesting [to you	65
Int’ee-SG	[well you’re not listening	

In this extract the normative order of the interview breaks down at its most basic level with a reversal of the pre-allocated roles of Interviewer and Interviewee. Here, on several occasions the Interviewee poses questions to the Interviewer:

1. 31

so so what are we talking (about)?

11. 33-36

how are you impeding the the will of the american people  
or official proceedings by saying  
we are exercising our first amendment rights  
to march peacefully to the site of congress  
where the deliberations and the counting of the votes occurs

35

1.48

why are you putting words in my mouth

1.50

do you not speak English

1.52

did you not listen to what I said

1.62

is it because you work for the BBC why don't you

These can hardly be treated as rhetorical questions requiring no answer from the interviewer. For one thing the Interviewer's next turn seems to recognize that a question has been put, even if the interviewer resists answering directly. Instead, the Interviewee behaves in ways that correspond precisely to those interactional moves described by Clayman and Heritage as excluded from the canonical form of the accountability news interview:

if interviewees restrict themselves to answers (or responses) to questions, then they cannot ask questions (of interviewers or other interviewees), nor make unsolicited comments on previous remarks, initiate changes of topic, or divert the discussion into criticisms of the interviewer or the broadcasting organization.

(Clayman and Heritage, 2002: 98)

This kind of extreme challenge to the normative order of the accountability interview may be even more evident in the following exchanges from an interview between the BBC's Orla Guerin and the President of Azerbaijan, Ilham Aliyev. She asks him if the Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh will have the full range of human rights which the people of Azerbaijan currently lack? He replies with a question:

**Example 11****BBCNews08/11/20**

<b>Int'ee-IA:</b>	why do you think that people in Azerbaijan do not have free media and opposition	1
<b>Int'er-OG:</b>	because this is what I am told by independent sources in this country=	
<b>Int'ee-IA:</b>	=which independent sources	
<b>Int'er-OG:</b>	many independent sources	5
<b>Int'ee-IA:</b>	hahahhhh tell me which	
<b>Int'er-OG:</b>	I certainly couldn't name sources	
<b>Int'ee-IA:</b>	oohhh if you couldn't name that means you are just inventing this story	
<b>Int'er-OG:</b>	so you're saying that the media is not under state control	10
<b>Int'ee-IA:</b>	not at all	
<b>Int'er-OG:</b>	I mean NGOs are the subject of a crackdown journalists are the subject of the crackdown.	
<b>Int'ee-IA:</b>	not at all	
<b>Int'er-OG:</b>	critics are in jail	15
<b>Int'ee-IA:</b>	no not at all.	
<b>Int'er-OG:</b>	none of this is true	
<b>Int'ee-IA:</b>	absolutely fake . absolutely . we have free media . we have free internet now due to martial law we have some restrictions	20
	but before there have been no restrictions and the number of internet users in Azerbaijan is er more than 80 percent . can you imagine the restriction of media in a country where the internet is free	24
	.....	
	.....	
	we have opposition . we have NGOs . we have uh free political activity . we have free media . we have er freedom of speech (1.0) but if you raise this question . can I ask you also one (1.0) how do you er . assess what happened to mister Assange is it the reflection of free media in your country	
<b>Int'er-OG:</b>	we are not here to discuss my country	30
<b>Int'ee-IA:</b>	no . let's discuss let's discuss.	

In the opening exchanges of this example (ll. 1-7) the Interviewee asks three questions (at ll. 1,3,and 6), each of which is answered by the Interviewer. He asks further questions near the end of the extract (ll. 27-29):

but if you raise this question . can I ask you also one (1.0)  
 how do you er . assess what happened to mister Assange  
 is it the reflection of free media in your country

The interviewer this time attempts to deflect the question: “We are not here to discuss my country”, prompting the riposte “No let's discuss, let's discuss” in a move to shift the exchange onto a radically different footing, from interview to discussion.

Both examples 11 and 12 involve attempts to interview principals about ‘non-domestic’ political events. The following interview, however, takes place within the UK domestic scene between Kay Burley (**Int'er-KB**) – a Sky News anchor – and Mick Lynch (**Int'ee-ML**), leader of the RMT union representing rail workers on strike.



## Example 12

## SkyNews 21/06/22

<b>Int'er-KB:</b>	the government is saying that they're going to bring in agency workers my question to you is I'm guessing that you're members will still stay on the picket lines what will they do if agency workers try to cross those picket lines	
<b>Int'ee-ML:</b>	(2.0) well we will picket them	
→	what d'you think we will do	5
→	we run a picket line and we'll ask them not to go to work [do'you not know how a picket line works]	
<b>Int'er-KB:</b>	[( anyway )] I very well know how a picket line works I'm much older than I look er mister lynch what will what will picketing involve	10
<b>Int'ee-ML:</b>	(3.0) (Lynch turns and look towards an orderly line of 5 RMT workers standing behind him) well you can see what picketing involves I can't believe this line of questioning picketing is standing outside the workplace to try and encourage people who want to go to work not to go to work what else do you think it involves	15
<b>Int'er-KB:</b>	and what if they want well I just wondered what else it might involve because I very well remember the picket lines of the nineteen eighties mister lynch	20
<b>Int'ee-ML:</b>	→ where are you going with your questions	
<b>Int'er-KB:</b>	I'm asking you what your members would do mister lynch	
<b>Int'ee-ML:</b>	→ which picket lines are you talking about	
<b>Int'er-KB:</b>	the miners' strike (the miners' strike	25
<b>Int'ee-ML:</b>	(1.0) yeah ((Lynch turns again and looks towards the orderly picket line)) (1.0) well does it look like the miners' strike	
→	[what are you talking about you've gone off into the world of the surreal	
<b>Int'er-KB:</b>	[( I'm just trying to clarify I'm just trying to clarify)]	30
<b>Int'ee-ML:</b>	→ [no mister lynch [what are you talking about and I'm sorry you feel the need to ridicule me [but I'm just asking you what you expect your members to do [but your questions are verging into the nonsense we will picket as effectively as we can and what does that involve	35
<b>Int'er-KB:</b>	(1.0) look there it is (1.0) ((Lynch turns again and looks towards the orderly picket line)) that's what it involves	40
<b>Int'er-KB:</b>	but you won't stop you won't stop agency workers crossing the picket line	
<b>Int'er-ML:</b>	(2.0) we will try and stop agency workers crossing the picket line by asking them not to go to work what is it that you're suggesting we will do	45
<b>Int'er-KB:</b>	(and are they) I'm just asking you I'm trying to clarify for the [benefit of the British public who are traveling around the country [how clarify	
<b>Int'er-ML:</b>	→ (0.5) what is it you're trying to clarify	
<b>Int'er-KB:</b>	I'm asking politely=	
<b>Int'er-ML:</b>	=and I'm replying to you politely	50

Here the Interviewee clearly resists a line of questioning being developed by the Interviewer – that picketing might involve actions reminiscent of the miners' strikes in the 1980s (see ll. 22-30) when clashes took place between police and miners, and between picketing miners and those trying to cross the picket lines. The interview itself takes place by live feed across two separate locations on split screen. The interviewee Mick Lynch is shown on separate occasions turning in his position to look towards the picket line thereby indicating that the picketing behind him is in fact taking place peacefully. In addition, in a series of questions he calls the interviewer's line of interrogation into doubt:

- 1.5 what d'you think we will do
- 1.7 do'you not know how a picket line works
- 1.18 what else do you think it involves
- 1.22 where are you going with your questions
- 1.24 which picket lines are you talking about
- 1.27 well does it look like the miners' strike
- 1.29 what are you talking about
- 1.45 what is it that you're suggesting we will do

In this way the normative order of the canonical accountability interview is fundamentally undermined. It is noticeable also that in this case the turn-taking system is under pressure: there are complex cases of overlapping turns in contradistinction to the interrelated notions of 'one speaker at a time' and 'speaker change recurs'.

## Conclusions

The accountability interview has earned a privileged status within the discursive economy of news and current affairs, tending to be quoted in the press and recycled on social media. In part this is because of the perception that, in the accountability interview, power in the form of the executive is confronted by the public in the form of the journalist performing the role of 'tribune of the people' (Clayman, 2002; Higgins, 2010; Hutchby, 2017).

Indeed, the accountability interview mainly operates on the premise that the person being interviewed has something to hide, or at least to withhold (hence the doyen of BBC's late night interviewing Jeremy Paxman's of-quoted question that informed his adversarial interviewing style, 'why is this lying bastard lying to me?') (see, e.g., Burley, 2023); and the task of the journalistic interviewer is to expose it. In this way the accountability interview operates under the guise of having 'real-world' consequences in which the mask of power will be pulled away by forensic questioning, so that a lie, or a contradiction in public statements, or a failure of policy will be highlighted. Conversely, however, and crucially, in these circumstances the orientation of the Interviewee is to avoid anything that could be construed as a damaging admission.

We have examined the canonical pattern of the accountability interview, resting as it does upon the pre-allocation of turns in which the Interviewer asks *Questions* and the Interviewee answers them. We have shown, however, the emergence of an alternative pattern in the accountability interview stemming in part from the increasing adoption of a particular kind of *Question* – viz. the *Declarative + Tag*, in which a proposition is offered in the declarative clause, and the following *Tag* invites the recipient to agree or disagree. Indeed, these may be described as closed, coercive, or conducive questions (Kortum, 2013), i.e. they narrow the range of relevant responses. Given the widespread perception both in academic research and among the general public that politicians in accountability interviews 'do not

answer the question' (see Bull, 1994, 1998, 2000; Bull and Mayer, 1993; Harris, 1991 etc.), these closed questions from Interviewers may be seen as a deliberate effort on their part to limit an Interviewee's scope for evasion. At the same time, however, in order to avoid self-incrimination in answering the question, Interviewees routinely resort to contesting its embedded proposition. This in turn, as we have seen, gives rise to sequences of contested assertions much more akin to argument than to interview where participants compete not only for turns but over rival versions of the truth.

At stake, may be a matter of disagreement over moral positions. And as Alasdair McIntyre has commented:

The most striking feature of contemporary moral utterance is that so much of it is used to express disagreements; and the most striking feature of the debates in which these disagreements are expressed is their interminable character.

(McIntyre 2007: 6)

Even to the extent, he further adds, that: "There seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement within our culture." Often, however, as in the examples above, the disagreement operates at the level of competing definitions of reality, as in the following example where the same figures can be "pretty poor" for one participant and "show a lot of resilience" for the other:

<b>Int'ee-JG</b>	and we can see that in today's er growth figures better than expected	95
<b>Int'ee-JG</b>	<b>but</b> I'm sure you'd agree still pretty poor at nought point two per cent <b>well</b> I think they showed a lot of resilience in the UK economy	

In a time when the political-economic struggle over resources and their distribution becomes translated into struggles over values – culture wars, freedom of speech, cancel culture – it is tempting to see the increasingly argumentative character of the broadcast accountability interview as the beginnings of a specialized form of legitimation crisis (see Habermas, 1988) especially in those instances when the organizing, canonical frame of the interview, as we have seen above in examples 10-12, breaks down altogether.

For the accountability interview in its canonical form promises to make public figures answerable to a public by calling them to account. But if instead of questions and answers we encounter potentially interminable arguments then the underlying rationale of the accountability interview begins to wear thin. And it is a short step, not just from interview to argument, but ultimately to the rejection of the organizational frame of the interview and their canonical norms in their entirety. The pre-allocation of roles gets reversed and even the underlying *realia* of the encounter becomes a matter of dispute, as for instance in this exchange between Mick Lynch and Kay Burley:

<b>Int'ee-ML:</b>		picketing is standing outside the workplace to try and encourage people who want to go to work not to go to work	
	→	what else do you think it involves	
<b>Int'er-KB:</b>		and what if they want well I just wondered what else it might involve because I very well remember the picket lines of the nineteen eighties mister lynch	20
<b>Int'ee-ML:</b>	→	where are you going with your questions	
<b>Int'er-KB:</b>		I'm asking you what your members would do mister lynch	
<b>Int'ee-ML:</b>	→	which picket lines are you talking about	
<b>Int'er-KB:</b>		the miners' strike (the miners' strike	25
<b>Int'ee-ML:</b>		(1.0) yeah ((Lynch turns again and looks towards the orderly picket line))	
	→	(1.0) well does it look like the miners' strike	
	→	[what are you talking about you've gone off into the world of the surreal	

Or in this example:

<b>Int'er-OG:</b>		so you're saying that the media is not under state control	10
<b>Int'ee-IA:</b>		not at all	
<b>Int'er-OG:</b>		I mean NGOs are the subject of a crackdown journalists are the subject of the crackdown.	
<b>Int'ee-IA:</b>		not at all	
<b>Int'er-OG:</b>		critics are in jail	15
<b>Int'ee-IA:</b>		no not at all.	
<b>Int'er-OG:</b>		none of this is true?	
<b>Int'ee-IA:</b>		absolutely fake . absolutely . we have free media . we have free internet	

And so we are faced with a curious paradox: that attempts to deliver public accountability in the present time in various ways have become more honoured in the breach than in the observance. Indeed, in the case of the broadcast accountability interview, it might be argued that attempts to flex its normative order so as to close down evasion and achieve accountability are fated to end up like Xeno's paradox – stretching the format of the interview apparently in the right direction but without ultimately arriving at the infinitely-deferred, desired result. In short, the broadcast interview is evolving in ways not exactly fit for its accountability purpose.

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