

Disagreements and third parties: dilemmas of neutralism in panel news interviews

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Abstract

Broadcast news interviewers in both Britain and the United States are obliged to maintain a formally neutral or neutralistic posture. Previous research has documented the language practices through which this is achieved in singular actions directed toward particular interviewees. Maintaining neutralism becomes more complex within panel interviews where interviewers ask questions of different interviewees in succession. In this environment, conduct toward successive interviewees can be compared and contrasted for evidence of partiality or favoritism. This paper analyzes in detail one particular panel interview in which the norm of neutralism appears to have been breached. This interview is examined in the spirit of deviant case analysis, with the main objective being to elucidate by reference to a counterexample how a neutralistic posture normally is maintained. © 2002 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Disagreement; Neutrality; Bias; Alignment; News interviews; Journalism

1. Introduction

Disagreement is an activity framework and an environment for language use that consists, in its most elementary form, of an oppositional transaction between two primary participants. This basic form—and the options for participation that it implicates—is elaborated when a third party is present who may choose either to align with one of the disputants or to maintain a formally neutral or neutralistic posture (cf. Simmel, 1950).

Numerous factors can encourage third parties to choose a stance of formal neutrality over partisan involvement. In some institutional contexts, neutrality is mandated either by formal rules or informal norms—this is so for the judge in trial

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proceedings (Atkinson, 1992) and the professional mediator in mediation sessions (Garcia, 1991). In other settings, where the third party has the power to impose a solution on the participants—e.g., professional arbitrators and adults who act as arbitrators in disputes between children—the third party may still be obliged to remain neutral when initially investigating the facts of the case. Even in ‘casual’ contexts involving friends and family members, where neutrality is in no way mandated, the third party to an ongoing dispute may choose to avoid taking sides in an effort to maintain harmonious relations with both disputants (cf. Maynard, 1986).

Professional journalists who conduct interviews for broadcast represent a case in point. Contemporary news interviews frequently involve a panel of participants who represent distinct and often conflicting perspectives on the issue under discussion (Greatbatch, 1992; Olsher, forthcoming). When disagreement emerges among the panelists, the interviewer is obliged to remain formally neutral in accordance with deep-seated norms of the journalistic profession in Anglo-American society (Schudson, 1978; Gans, 1979). Absolute neutrality may be an unattainable ideal, but previous research has documented some of the ways in which both American and British interviewers attend to this ideal through the design of the actions they produce (Clayman, 1988, 1992b; Heritage, 1985; Heritage and Greatbatch, 1991; Heritage and Roth, 1995). Interviewers generally restrict themselves to asking questions, avoid making unvarnished assertions except as prefaces to questions or as attributed to third parties, and avoid various responsive actions indicating approval or disapproval with what the interviewee has said. In all of these ways, interviewers maintain a formally neutral or neutralistic stance in the course of their work.

The practices examined thus far are clearly a prerequisite for neutralism, but they do not by themselves ensure its accountable achievement. The analysis of journalistic neutralism has thus far been restricted to singular actions directed toward particular interviewees. Maintaining neutralism becomes considerably more complicated within panel interviews involving multiple participants, where interviewers are seen asking questions of different interviewees in succession. In this environment, conduct toward, and treatment of, successive interviewees can be compared, contrasted, and scrutinized for evidence of partiality or favoritism.

This paper focuses on the news interview as a strategic site for investigating the problem of third-party neutralism and its maintenance. It begins with a discussion of the rise of the panel interview as a format for news and public affairs programming, dissects the problem of neutralism in this context, and analyzes in detail one particular panel interview in which the norm of neutralism appears—at least to the casual observer—to have been breached. This interview is examined in the spirit of deviant case analysis, with the main objective being to elucidate by reference to a counterexample how a neutralistic posture normally is maintained.

1.1. Background on panel news interviews

Panel news interviews can involve varying numbers of participants, but they often consist of two interviewees who represent opposing ideological positions and political interests. Compared to single-interviewee interviews, panel interviews tend to

attract a less distinguished cadre of participants. While presidents, prime ministers, and senior cabinet officials are periodically interviewed solo, they rarely participate in panel discussions or debates. Legislators, certified experts of various stripes, and representatives of advocacy groups are the mainstay of the panel interview, making it a somewhat less prestigious variant of the news interview genre.

This variant has grown steadily over the years. Panel interviews were rare in the 1950s and 1960s, occasional in the 1970s, and have become commonplace from the 1980s onward. In the US, they have been most ubiquitous since the advent of Ted Koppel's *Nightline* program, which was initially promoted under the auspices of the slogan, "Bringing people together who are worlds apart". They remain a common format for news interviews featured on programs such as *Nightline* (ABC), *The NewsHour* (PBS), *Meet the Press* (NBC), *Face the Nation* (CBS), and *This Week* (ABC).

The proliferation of the panel format stems from its utility to broadcast journalists: it helps to solve certain fundamental problems associated with interviewing as a journalistic activity. Consider the divergent and often conflicting norms that journalists are expected to uphold when questioning a public figure. On the one hand, interviewers (henceforth IRs) are supposed to be suitably adversarial in their treatment of interviewees (henceforth IEs). That is, they should not allow the IE to make untrue, misleading, or purely self-serving remarks, but should subject such remarks to criticism and challenge. Being adversarial ensures that the IE will be held accountable before the viewing public, and it also helps to generate lively discussions with maximum audience appeal. However, adversarialness can conflict with the equally venerated ideal of journalistic neutrality, in that an IR who is persistently adversarial can be seen as having an ideological axe to grind.¹ Thus, when Dan Rather aggressively interrogated Vice President George Bush regarding his involvement in the Iran-Contra scandal, he was widely criticized for abandoning the role of journalist in favor of that of prosecutor (Clayman and Whalen, 1988/1989). A similar fate befell David Frost following a particularly contentious interview with insurance man Emil Savundra, an event that was later denounced as 'trial by television'. In extreme form, adversarialness can also inflict damage on the broader professional relationship between IR and IE. In retaliation for excessively zealous interrogations, public figures may refuse to participate in future interviews and withhold other forms of cooperation—as the BBC's Jeremy Paxman knows all too well. On rare occasions, public figures have even been known to physically attack offending IRs.²

Against this backdrop, the attractions of the panel format should be obvious. Not only do such interviews promise liveliness and dramatic conflict, but they create a

¹ The norm of neutrality applies only to the prototypical news interview programs that form the basis for this study: those involving a professional journalist, one or more newsworthy public figures, and content pertaining to recent news events. It does not necessarily apply to the various talk show formats on 24-h cable news channels, some of which are hosted not by journalists but by commentators who make no claims of impartiality.

² A recent Australian telecast documented a series of such attacks against IRs by angry politicians, sports figures, and others.

division of labor that reconciles—at least in principle—the divergent ideals of neutralism and adversarialness. With partisan IEs playing the role of adversary vis à vis one another, the interviewer is insulated from the heat of battle and is free to act as a disinterested moderator and catalyst.

However, this role has pitfalls of its own. The problem of neutralism re-emerges here in a different form—namely, balanced treatment of the panelists. Since the IR is seen questioning different IEs who represent divergent interests and ideologies, treatment of one panelist can be compared and contrasted with treatment of another, and variations can make the IR vulnerable to charges of partiality or favoritism. Of course, IRs can always be monitored for their conduct toward different IEs, but in one-on-one interviews any such monitoring must extend across separate and temporally distant events. Preferential treatment is clearly much easier to detect when multiple IEs are co-present and are being questioned in close proximity.

How prevalent is this phenomenon? It is difficult to say. There is as yet no systematic analysis of the extent to which IRs are unbalanced in their conduct toward panelists.³ The lack of comparative research undoubtedly stems from the formidable methodological difficulties that surround this issue. Consider, for example, that a pattern of differential treatment is not necessarily indicative of favoritism or partiality. If IE1 receives tougher questions than IE2, this may be because IE1's remarks contain more factual errors, are more evasive, or are otherwise faulty and hence deserving of adversarial treatment.⁴ There may, in other words, be good reasons for an IR to treat the panelists differently, and these reasons must be ruled out in order to demonstrate convincingly that ideological favoritism is at work. Further complicating matters is the fact that endogenous journalistic norms may require neutralism only within certain broad ideological boundaries, permitting more unabashedly hostile treatment of those who are regarded as “beyond the pale” (Hall, 1973).

Nevertheless, any pattern of differential treatment may be significant from a public relations point of view. To the casual observer, it can make an IR appear to be ‘playing favorites’ in a manner that is decidedly nonneutral.

Several years ago an interview came to my attention in which differential treatment of this sort was massive and highly conspicuous. This case was striking because it was so different from most of the panel news interviews I had seen. Whatever considerations may have contributed to this asymmetry, and however it may be justified in retrospect, it can be taken by the casual observer to be a manifestation of unprofessional favoritism. Accordingly, this interview will be examined in some detail. In the spirit of deviant case analysis, a close look at this extraordinary case will reveal how neutralism can be compromised, and by implication, how under normal circumstances it is maintained.

³ Several researchers have compared the treatment of different IEs across different interviews. For quantitative analyses, see Bull and Mayer (1988), Bull and Elliott (1998), Elliott and Bull (1996), and Clayman and Heritage (2002b). For qualitative analyses, see Hall (1973), Schlesinger et al. (1983), and Jucker (1986).

⁴ This is a variant of what Schegloff (1993) terms “the denominator problem” in quantitative analyses of interaction. It has also been discussed, in an entirely different disciplinary context, in writings on the methodological difficulties surrounding studies of objectivity and bias in journalism (e.g., Hackett, 1984).

2. A case study

The interview in question was conducted in 1985 by Lesley Stahl for the Sunday morning public affairs program *Face the Nation* (CBS). The interview concerned the topic of genetic engineering, and it was set up as a debate between two panelists, one a supporter of genetic engineering and the other an opponent. The interview appeared as the final segment of a program devoted entirely to genetic engineering, and prior program segments were broadly favorable to this new technology. The program began with news about a promising new medical application of genetic engineering—namely the creation of an anti-cancer drug called ‘interluken two’. This good news was discussed in a taped segment and in an initial interview with two medical doctors with expertise in that area of research. By documenting the life-saving potential of one application of genetic engineering, this first part of the program is at least implicitly supportive of its continued development. This attitude can also be discerned in the conduct of the interview that closes the program, the particulars of which we will examine in roughly chronological order.

2.1. *The introductions*

When the focal interview itself begins, the participants are introduced in divergent ways that can be taken as favoring the supporter of genetic engineering (Alexander Capron) over the opponent (Jeremy Rifkin).

(1) [US *Face the Nation* 8 December 1985: Genetic Engineering]

1	IR:	Joining us now::, Jeremy Rifkin, author, (.) an’
2		opponent of genetic engineering, .hh
3		An’ on the other si:de, Alexander Capron, former
4		Director of the President’s Commission on Bioethics.

Notice that the introduction of Rifkin (lines 1 and 2) makes no mention of his relevant credentials or institutional affiliations; he is characterized only as an “author and opponent of genetic engineering”.⁵ By contrast, Capron’s introduction (lines 3 and 4) highlights an institutional affiliation (“former director of the President’s Commission on bioethics”) despite the fact that he no longer holds that position. Moreover, Capron’s attitude toward genetic engineering is never asserted outright (although it is implied by the lead-in to his introduction: “on the other side...”). Thus, Rifkin is portrayed as a free-floating political activist who is committed to a particular point of view, whereas Capron is portrayed as a bioethics expert with an institutionally legitimated track record of service in his specialty.

⁵ In fact, Rifkin has degrees from the Wharton School of Finance and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, and he established the Foundation on Economic Trends. This background information was culled from the Biography Online Database (www.biography.com), which itself incorporates the Cambridge Encyclopedia Database.

2.2. *The first round of questioning*

This pattern of apparent favoritism toward Capron over Rifkin continues as the questioning begins. Consider how the IEs' initial contributions to the interview are subsequently dealt with by the IR.

The very first question (lines 1–4 below) is directed toward Rifkin; it asks whether he is opposed to genetic engineering for medical purposes as discussed previously in the program. Rifkin, in response, denies that he is flatly opposed to such research (lines 6–8), but he then goes on to argue for careful consideration of the long-range ethical implications of genetic engineering (lines 9–27).

(2) [US Face the Nation 8 December 1985: Genetic Engineering]

- 1 IR: Mister Rifkin you are an opponent = h of genetic > engineering, =
 2 = .hhh < D'you oppo:se h the kind of work that Doctor
 3 Rosenberg is doing with interluden two < which is
 4 de[veloped through genetic engineering, =
 5 JR: [.hh
 6 JR: = No I don't. = I- I think that = uh: (.) that work is
 7 very exciting, there are some (0.4) obvious: = uh
 8 breakthroughs happening: wit' genetic engineering
 9 technology. .hh (Ya know) like: with every technology: ih-
 10 there are benefits an' cost(s). .h And = uh- wit' genetic
 11 engineering we have the ultimate technology. .hh (we'
 12 beginning) a process where we learn ho:w to: .h
 13 cha:nge the genetic co:de for living thi:ngs. for
 14 plants, animals an' humans. .hh And certainly
 15 there are long range ethical implications = uh when we
 16 began to embark on a course where we become (.) the
 17 enginee:rs. .h of parts of our own code. .hh I
 18 should he- hasten t' say th't- (.) #uh# we're only at
 19 the crude beginnings of this technological
 20 revolution. There's very little that can be done now:.
 21 .hh But I think we owe it to ourselves > as a species. <
 22 to begi:n to look at some o' the lo:ng term
 23 questions. .h uh- (0.2) What ge:nes are permissable
 24 to engineer. (.) Which genes are no:t. (0.2) Who should
 25 make the decisions of- as to which ki:nd of:
 26 genetic engineering should be: (0.4) #-# taken an' what
 27 should no:t.
 28 IR: (Well) let me stop you > for one minute. <
 29 Didn't = you:: #uh:- e# = sponsor, .hh #uh: uh# program
 30 duh s:top all of this research?
 31 < I mean it isn't just that you think we oughta (f- think)
 32 it you want it stopped.

The IR responds to Rifkin's opening statement by forcefully challenging its veracity. She proposes that, contrary to his denial, he is indeed seeking to stop genetic engineering research altogether. Although her initial proposal to that effect (lines 29 and 30) is built as an interrogative and thus might be thought to be epistemically cautious, it uses a linguistic form that is, in fact, highly assertive—the interrogative is negatively formulated (“Didn’t you sponsor a program to stop all of this research”). Heritage (2002) has demonstrated that negative interrogatives are highly assertive and are in effect tilted in favor of a ‘yes’ answer, so much so that recipients regularly treat them as if they were asserting a position rather than merely asking a question. Furthermore, after completing this interrogatively formatted proposal about Rifkin’s intentions, the IR goes on to make the same point once again via an unvarnished declarative assertion (lines 31 and 32). In all of these ways, she counters the position Rifkin has taken.

Capron’s first contribution to the interview is treated very differently by the IR. Capron launches an unmediated disagreement with Rifkin (the last part of which is reproduced below), arguing that the groups with which Rifkin has been associated had previously taken a stronger anti-research position, and he concludes (lines 1–5) by pointing out that cancer-fighting benefits of interluku two would be impossible without genetic engineering.

(3) [US Face the Nation: 8 December 1985: Genetic Engineering]

- 1 AC: ...after all the interluku two that’s being used here is a
 2 result of genetic engineering. (.) Without genetic
 3 engineering, (.) this wouldn’t be possible. <It was a
 4 very rare .h protein to have, = it can now be
 5 produced easily.
 6 IR: .h Yeah (b- #ehI-#) I- that’s what I wanna ask you. = If you
 7 stop the research- #uh-# in any phase of this_
 8 aren’t = you cutting us off?, from finding cures, < not
 9 only for cancer, but for these .h horrible genetic
 10 diseases th’t- people are born with, ‘n: die young
 11 from or .h sickle cell anemia, some o’these other-
 12 (0.5) horrible dis[eases.]
 13 JR: [.hh] Well I think > this is
 14 something (that’s) < been brought up quite a few times
 15 at the National Institute of Health....

In response, the IR first acknowledges Capron’s final point via a token: “Yeah” in line 6. In general, IRs very rarely use acknowledgement tokens of any kind (Greatbatch, 1988; Heritage, 1985; Heritage and Greatbatch, 1991), in part because such tokens can be taken as expressing at least a modicum of support or agreement with the IE and are thus threatening to the IR’s neutralistic posture. The supportive import of this particular token foreshadows what immediately follows (lines 6–12)—IR subsequently takes up and uses Capron’s argument as the basis for yet another

challenging question directed toward Rifkin, one that portrays Rifkin as unreasonably hindering the progress of medical research that might otherwise find cures for various “horrible genetic diseases”. As she launches the question, she explicitly indicates that it is touched off by Capron’s remarks (“that’s what I wanna ask you”, in line 6). Moreover, this question is again negatively formulated (“aren’t you cutting us off...”, in line 8) and thus highly assertive in its unflattering portrayal of Rifkin.

In short, the panelists’ initial contributions are subject to very different interactional fates. Whereas Rifkin’s remarks are challenged and countered, Capron’s remarks are accepted and used as a resource with which to challenge Rifkin once again.

2.3. *Inviting interplay between panelists*

Consider next how subsequent questioning is organized. The IR structures the next four question–answer sequences in accordance with a consistent pattern—she begins each line of inquiry by asking a question of Rifkin, after which she solicits a reaction from Capron, and then shifts to a new topic with the next question put to Rifkin. Thus, Rifkin is repeatedly placed in the position of going first with his argument, has his argument refuted by Capron, but is not given an opportunity to respond. This sequential arrangement can be seen to benefit Capron over Rifkin, although recognizing that fact requires that observers track lengthy stretches of talk involving many interactional sequences.

The tilt toward Capron is more immediately apparent in the design of the questions that solicit his responses to Rifkin—questions that Olsher (forthcoming) has aptly characterized as inviting interplay between IEs. Questions of this sort can, in principle, take a variety of forms, including simple address terms with rising intonation (e.g., “Senator Dole?”), open invitations to respond (e.g., “How do you respond to the Ambassador’s point?”), invitations to agree or disagree (e.g., “Do you accept that?”), and invitations that solicit disagreement in particular (e.g., “You don’t agree with the Senator, do you?”).⁶ However, these alternatives do not all figure in the present context. The IR’s inviting-interplay questions most closely resemble the fourth category, albeit a markedly stronger variant thereof. Rather than merely invite Capron to disagree with Rifkin’s point, these questions invite a response that undercuts the relevance of Rifkin’s point. Moreover, by virtue of their design, these questions provide resources for Capron to mount just such a rebuttal, and in that way they can be seen collaborating with his side in the dispute.

The first instance of this sort occurred immediately after Rifkin answered the IR’s challenge in excerpt (3) above. Rifkin argues that although some forms of genetic engineering may be less hazardous (i.e., somatic gene therapy, which does not affect offspring), nevertheless “we owe it to ourselves to begin the process of studying the

⁶ A much fuller discussion of alternative forms of inviting-interplay questions can be found in Olsher (forthcoming). For a discussion of inviting-interplay questions that solicit disagreement in particular, see Clayman and Heritage (2002a: Chapter 8).

long term effects” and the implications for “our relationship to our children and future generations” (lines 1–21).

(4) [US Face the Nation 8 Dec 1985: Genetic Engineering]

- 1 JR: [.hh] Well I think > this is
 2 something (that's) < been brought up quite a few ti:mes
 3 at the National Institute of He:alth. At the: = uh
 4 last uh:- uh- (.) meeting at the National Institute
 5 on this .hh they were discussing the first gene
 6 therapy. somatic gene therapy:, an' the kind of
 7 guidelines that oughta be established. An' the point
 8 I made at that time is .hh even though the ethical
 9 considerations for somatic therapy .h are not a:s
 10 uh- as profou:nd as the ethical implications for germ
 11 line, .hh we owe it to ourse:lves to begin the
 12 process of studying the long term effe:cts. of
 13 bringing in uh wi::de range of disciplines (th't) c'n
 14 loo:k .h at the: long term eugenics implications.
 15 .hh certainly when we talk about engineering changes
 16 in the genetic co:de. regardless of the tremendous
 17 benefits available_ .hh we've gotta a:lso-be aware
 18 of (the) responsibility_ (.) that this kind of genetic
 19 engineering: = uh: #e-e-# really me:ans, in terms of our
 20 relationship to our children. (in)/(an') future
 21 generati[ons .]
- 22 AC: [Owe-] [I:: see-]
 23 IR: -> [Does any]body disagree [with that,
 24 AC: [No no one
 25 disagrees with = that Jeremy as you know- we've been
 26 talking about this: .h for fifteen yea:rs....

As Rifkin winds down his argument, the IR invites Capron to respond with the question “Does anybody disagree with that” (arrowed). Considered as a strictly grammatical object, this is a yes/no question, and it is formulated in such a way—with the inclusion of and emphasis on the encompassing pronoun “anybody”—as to prefer a ‘no’ answer. Consistent with this preference, Capron produces just that type of answer forcefully, and at the first grammatical completion point (line 24). Substantively, this question is mobilized in the service of an action that treats Rifkin’s point as banal, something that no one could possibly disagree with and hence of no consequence to the issue under discussion. It thus provides grounds for a dismissive response, which Capron subsequently provides—launching his response with almost the very same terms as were used in the antecedent question.

In the next very next round of questioning, the IR again aligns with Capron as she invites him to respond to Rifkin. When Rifkin is asked about his effort to block the

use of a genetically engineered microbe in agriculture (lines 1–7), he argues that such organisms should not be released without first considering the long-term environmental consequences (lines 8–24).

(5) [US Face the Nation 8 Dec 1985: Genetic Engineering]

- 1 IR: = But we're getting onto a phase where (.)
 2 th-uh products of some of this: research .h are
 3 now being (.) #uh# allowed to get out into the
 4 environment = > an' I understand < .h Mister = Rifkin you're
 5 going to c(h)ourt this week to try an' prevent .h-
 6 (#h#)one of these microbes from being introduced into the
 7 agricultural process. What is that issue.
- 8 JR: Well that's the issue of uh- releasing, genetically
 9 engineered organisms into the biosphere. .hh and the
 10 fact is: we haven't taken a look at the long term
 11 (.) environmental consequences of introducing: (.)
 12 genetically modified forms into our environment. .h
 13 We need to: take a careful look at this before
 14 we pell mell rush into it = > an' I think there's an
 15 analogy here. .hh Ya know during the nuclear
 16 technology revolution. (.) an' the petrochemical
 17 revolution after World War Two. .h we were so
 18 transfixed with all the benefits_ .h that we didn't
 19 ask the hard questions about long term consequences.
 20 .h This time around with genetic technology, .h
 21 <perhaps we: could ask> the hard questions at the
 22 beginning_ .h an' have a more realistic appraisal
 23 (.) of the context in which this technology's going =
 24 = to be introduced. =
- 25 IR: -> = Have we not done that,
 26 AC: We have done that. = > I mean <the <scientists themselves>
 27 back in nineteen seventy five called a moratorium on
 28 their work...

Following this argument, the IR turns to solicit Capron's response via the question, "Have we not done that" (arrowed). Much like the previous example, this question invites a counter argument from Capron and implicitly aligns with that as-yet-unexpressed counter argument. How is this accomplished? Notice first that the question is negatively formulated; as noted earlier, such questions are strongly tilted in favor of a 'yes' answer (Heritage, 2002). Substantively, the question is tilted toward an answer that would render Rifkin's point moot, and it anticipatorily formulates what might be the crux of Capron's rebuttal ("we have done that"—i.e., we have already considered the environmental consequences). In effect, the question assists Capron in making his point, and Capron incorporates much of the wording

of the question into the beginning of his response (line 26), thereby asserting it ‘independently’ while simultaneously borrowing its phraseology.

In summary, both of the IR’s inviting_interplay questions display a preference for Capron’s side of the debate, and they do so through a common set of design features. Both questions are (i) highly assertive in character, (ii) undercut the relevance of Rifkin’s point, (iii) invite a rebuttal from Capron, and (iv) provide grounds for rebuttal that are subsequently taken up and used by Capron in his ensuing response. In all of these ways, the IR can be seen as partial toward and subtly collaborating with Capron in the debate. Further contributing to the sense of partiality is the fact that the grounds for rebuttal are not attributed to Capron or to a third party (cf. “Your position is that we have already done that”), and are thus offered on the IR’s own behalf (cf. Clayman, 1992b).

2.4. *A note on facial expressions*

The IR’s apparent partiality can also be discerned at the nonvocal level. In the previous exchange (excerpt 5 above), she exhibits clearly different facial expressions as she delivers questions to Rifkin and Capron respectively. Throughout her question to Rifkin (lines 1–7 above), she remains largely expressionless, except for brief eyebrow flashes at points of emphasis. Fig. 1 shows the first frame of videotape following the completion of her question (in line 7). The relaxed facial muscles are representative of her appearance throughout the antecedent question.

However, when she turns to Capron to invite an oppositional response (line 25 above), she smiles broadly. This is indicated in Fig. 2, which shows the first frame of



IR: What is that iss^uue.*

Fig. 1.

videotape following the completion of her question to Capron. The smile's point of onset cannot be determined, because the camera does not cut to the IR until the final word "that" at line 25. At that point, the smile is in full bloom, and it remains—albeit fading slowly—for about one full second into Capron's response. Smiles can, of course, convey a range of meanings, not only when blended with other facial expressions (Ekman and Friesen, 1975), but also when produced in association with a particular spate of talk. In the environment of a question that so clearly favors Capron's side in the debate (for all of the reasons outlined above), this particular smile can be taken as a further display of affiliation with that side.

Throughout the body of the interview, the IR is shown smiling broadly at only one other juncture—during another 'friendly' question directed to Capron (in excerpt 7, discussed in Section 2.6 below). Rifkin never receives such a nonvocal display of affiliation.

2.5. *Cross-examining one panelist*

Following the preceding exchange, the IR subsequently shifts gears, so to speak, in her management of the interview. Instead of inviting Capron to counter Rifkin, the IR enters the fray and begins challenging Rifkin on her own initiative. By assuming the role of cross-examiner, she becomes more directly adversarial toward, and thus more clearly aligned against, Rifkin in the dispute.

The cross-examination phase begins with the IR asking Rifkin to talk about "what some of these microbes can do" (line 1)—she elaborates on this query by



IR: Have we not done that,*

Fig. 2.

noting their “enormous benefits” (lines 2–4) and referring to one microbe that “prevents frost from forming” (lines 6–7). Rifkin begins to respond at this point (line 8), taking up the issue of the anti-frost microbe and pointing out that it could negatively affect worldwide rainfall patterns (lines 8–22).

(6) [US Face the Nation 8 Dec 1985: Genetic Engineering]

- 1 IR: Tell us what some (of) these microbes c'n ^do though. = It-
 2 it all = we:(m)- talked about the benefi[ts] they're =
 3 (JR): [Yes.]
 4 IR: = en:ormous.
 5 (): .h [h-
 6 IR: [You c'n- (w) the one you're tryin' 'to sto:p_ (.)
 7 prevents frost from forming, =
 8 JR: = Well let's- let's take a look at this
 9 particular microbe. (.) In nature this
 10 genetically engineered microbe also is- (.) plays a
 11 major role in rainfall patterns. .h The genetically
 12 engine:red counterpart, (.) uh does not make
 13 ice for- uh- rai:n nucleation. .h So: you could
 14 have a si [t u a t i o n h e r e-]
 15 IR: [Whatever that means .hh] huh [huh
 16 JR: [could
 17 have a situation here where yo[u('re) putting out a =
 18 IR: [Mm hm,
 19 JR: = bacteria in the environment, .h an' in the long run
 20 it could develop a niche, an' prevent uh = s- uh:
 21 effective rainfall patterns on the planet.
 22 .hh an i[t-]
 23 IR: [But] = you don't know that.
 24 JR: .h But you see the other side [doesn't] know either until: =
 25 IR: [Do you?]
 26 JR: = we devel[op (uh s-)]
 27 IR: [But they s]ay it won't.
 28 (.)
 29 JR: .h Well the interesting thing i:s we've never developed
 30 a science to judge the risk of placing these
 31 experiments in the environment.

The IR's initial reaction to Rifkin's argument is striking. Midway through his argument, just after he uses a bit of technical terminology (“rain nucleation” in line 13), she makes a dismissive remark (“Whatever that means” in line 15) followed by derisive laughter. This remark does not appear to be directed toward Rifkin. It begins in overlap with Rifkin's talk, midway through the turn constructional unit following the focal term. Moreover, it is delivered *sotto voce*, and can be interpreted

as an aside aimed at Capron, or the audience, or perhaps both. Correspondingly, Rifkin does not respond to it overtly, although he does abort (line 14) and then restart (line 16) the overlapped unit in progress. Substantively, the remark is entirely out of character in the news interview context. Not only does it depart from the norm that IRs should restrict themselves to asking questions (Greatbatch, 1988; Heritage and Greatbatch, 1991), but it is clearly nonneutral in its treatment of the IE. To be sure, IRs are generally alert to technical terminology that the audience may not understand, but they normally deal with it by asking the IE to clarify; they do not dismiss it altogether, nor, as a rule, do they laugh at the IE who produced it!⁷

Perhaps even more striking is how the IR deals with Rifkin's argument once it is completed. When Rifkin arrives at a possible completion point (at line 21), asserting that the microbe could "prevent effective rainfall patterns on the planet", the IR directly and forcefully challenges him ("But you don't know that" at line 23) on the grounds that he does not know for certain that this dire consequence will follow. A delayed tag question—"Do you" in line 25—adds a veneer of epistemic caution to this otherwise assertive challenge, while at the same time disrupting his response-in-progress (Jefferson, 1981). In contrast, when Rifkin points out that his opponents cannot be certain that this won't happen (line 24), the IR counters with "But they say it won't" (line 27). Across this exchange, the parties are held to dramatically different epistemic standards—Rifkin to a standard of absolute certainty ("But you don't know that" at line 23), but the opposition to a standard of mere assertion ("But they say it won't" at line 27).

2.6. *The closing*

The final question of the interview is a fitting coda to what has transpired. Capron is given the last word when the IR addresses him with this question (arrowed):

(7) [US Face the Nation 8 Dec 1985: Genetic Engineering]

- 1 IR: Mister Capron one final quick h question.
 2 AC: [#Yes,]
 3 IR:-> [.hh] Can: we stop this trai:n,
 4 AC: .mlh I don't think we c(h)a::n stop it but I do think_
 5 (.) there are mechanisms_ (.) to control it. an'
 6 to make sure it's gonnu- (0.2) go as well as (we) ca:n.
 7 IR: Gentlemen, (.) Thank you very much, .hh This is a discussion
 8 I'd like to have (.) a[gai:n on Face the Nation.
 9 ??: [mm hm,

Stepping back from the details of the preceding discussion, she asks whether it is possible to halt the progress of genetic engineering. As it is designed, this question is

⁷ On the distinction between "laughing at" versus "laughing with" see Clayman (1992a) and Glenn (1995).

far from neutral with respect to the issue that it raises. By metaphorically characterizing the enterprise as a “train”, she evokes the image of something that would be both difficult and disruptive to stop. Correspondingly, as she completes this question, she shakes her head laterally. Thus, through both discursive and gestural resources, she tilts the question strongly in favor of a no answer—which is just the sort of answer that Capron, who has argued for genetic engineering throughout this interview, can be expected to give. Another broad smile caps off and accentuates the affiliative character of this final question.

3. Conclusion

One consequence of the rise of the panel interview format has been the marginalization of the interviewer’s substantive journalistic role. As the interactional center of gravity shifts toward the interplay between interviewees, the interviewer becomes a less central player who primarily launches topics of discussion and elicits statements of disagreement from the panelists. However, within this framework of diminished involvement, interviewers can continue to exert an influence on the trajectory of the discussion (Olsher, forthcoming), and can also act in such a way as to privilege or favor one side in the dispute. Thus, while the panel interview enables interviewers to distance themselves from the heat of battle, there remain avenues for continued influence and new bases on which observers can detect bias.

Within a given panel interview, avenues for the differential treatment of interviewees vary in their conspicuousness. Some can only be detected by monitoring and comparing the interviewer’s conduct across multiple question–answer sequences; in other cases, it is more immediately apparent within a single question. Particularly noteworthy in this regard are inviting-interplay questions, wherein a single action pivots between the panelists and can be scrutinized for signs that the interviewer is ‘leaning’ this way or that. Such ‘leaning’ questions may be entirely justifiable in the context of a particular interview and the trajectory of the interaction prior to that point, but they are vulnerable to being seen as expressing favoritism or bias. The launching of an inviting-interplay question is thus a distinctly sensitive moment for the interviewer, a moment when his or her professionalism is perhaps most vulnerable to critical scrutiny.

In the present case, differential treatment became manifest by virtue of a combination of design elements. The inviting-interplay questions were highly assertive, built to invite a dismissive form of rebuttal, and provided unattributed grounds for rebuttal that were subsequently taken up and used by the interviewee. In panel interviews more generally, it is extremely rare for inviting-interplay questions to have this combination of features. In this way, a distinctive participation framework is maintained in which the interviewer appears as a detached moderator and catalyst for a dispute constructed as taking place between and among the panelists themselves.

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