

## Tribune of the people: maintaining the legitimacy of aggressive journalism<sup>1</sup>

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Like other societal institutions, the institution of American journalism confronts a problem of legitimation. In order to be granted continued access to the corridors of power and to maintain the trust of news consumers, the journalistic enterprise must be perceived as essentially valid and legitimate (Hallin, 1994; Tuchman, 1978). As Hallin (1994: 32) has observed:

The media have to attend to their own legitimacy. They must maintain the integrity of their relationship with the audience and also the integrity of their own self-image and of the social relationships that make up the profession of journalism.

Moreover, rather than being a static phenomenon, legitimacy requires ongoing maintenance and upkeep. Because the practice of journalism frequently tramples on prestigious individuals and institutions, its legitimacy is recurrently questioned both by news subjects themselves and by members of the public. Aggressive journalists are particularly vulnerable to the charge of having gone beyond the bounds of professionalism or propriety.

To insulate themselves from external pressure and more generally to maintain a semblance of legitimacy, journalists draw on a variety of resources,<sup>2</sup> one of which is to align themselves with the public at large. The role of public servant has deep historical roots within the profession (Schiller, 1981; Schudson, 1978) and it continues to have salience today, not only as a normative ideal that journalists strive for but also as a strategic legitimating resource. It is no coincidence that 'tribune' remains a

common newspaper appellation – the term derives from the ancient Roman official who represented plebeian citizens before patrician magistrates.

The problem of legitimacy is perhaps never more salient than in direct confrontations with government officials and other public figures – that is, in broadcast news interviews and press conferences. Within such contexts journalists raise questions that put elite figures in the position of having to explain and justify their opinions, policies, and actions before the citizenry. Although it is now generally accepted that journalists should be permitted to ‘question authority’ and that government officials should make themselves accessible to such interrogations, this is subject to challenge. The news interview in its early years was regarded as highly controversial in part because of its intrusive and confrontational character (Schudson, 1994), and while the controversy surrounding interviewing has dissipated somewhat, it has not disappeared entirely. Contemporary interviewers are recurrently attacked for excessive aggressiveness, both after the fact by media critics of various stripes (Clayman and Whalen, 1988/89) and within interviews themselves by offended interviewees (Heritage and Greatbatch, 1991). Given such threats from various quarters, the legitimacy of the power to question authority must also be achieved and sustained.

Here again, the journalist’s relationship with the public is a crucial resource. When journalists reflect on the craft of interviewing, they frequently portray themselves as striving to ask questions on behalf of the public – or at least the segment that is listening in. In a recent book about the prominent *Nightline* program, Ted Koppel characterized his interviewing technique this way:

My assumption is always that the audience is listening closely. When I ask a question, it’s something I think the viewers want asked. I’m their representative. (Koppel and Gibson, 1996: 157)

A similar view was expressed by Mike Wallace, of *60 Minutes* fame, in a documentary on classic television interviews.

Television interviewers, folks like me, are a kind of surrogate for you. . . . None of us could keep our jobs for a day if we didn’t ask the questions that you out there wish that somebody had the common sense or the nerve or the foolishness to ask.

This is not just an abstract ideal that interviewers pledge allegiance to on special ceremonial and commemorative occasions; it is also on display within routine interviews themselves. In the course of questioning public figures, interviewers will sometimes present themselves as acting in the interest of the general public, or more often as giving voice to their immediate concerns. To illustrate, consider the following excerpt from an interview with a prominent nuclear safety engineer who had resigned in protest from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. Ted Koppel launches the

interview by asking the interviewee to elaborate on his decision, and he invokes the public (at the arrowed line) as the primary motivation for this question.

*Excerpt 1: ABC Nightline, 6 June 1985, Nuclear Waste*

IR: Mister Pollard uh:: that's- (.) kind of a f:ascinating .hhh  
→ background because I'm sure people are particularly concerned what would cause someone to resign. What do you mean: .hh when you say you felt the agency was not adequately protecting the public's health 'n safety.

Koppel presents the issue in question, not as a technical political matter, or as his own personal concern, but as something that 'people are particularly concerned' about.

That interviewers frame questions in this way may at first seem quite natural and unremarkable, a direct reflection of the journalist-interviewer's actual professional role. However, the relationship between the professional culture of journalism and actual journalistic practice is complex and by no means straightforward. As studies of objectivity have demonstrated (Tuchman, 1972), lofty ideals get operationalized in eminently practical ways that enable journalists to manage various contingencies and hazards that arise in the course of their daily work. Correspondingly, when journalists invoke the ideal of public service, they are not simply playing out a preordained cultural script. This is plainly apparent in the selectivity with which the ideal is invoked. Interviewers frame their questions explicitly on behalf of the public only occasionally and in a limited range of environments – most notably during highly probing or adversarial lines of questioning. Thus, far from being a simple manifestation of unadulterated professionalism, this practice is best understood as a mode of self-presentation – a style of questioning employed methodically to achieve a defensible professional posture at particularly sensitive moments in the course of an interview.

This article examines the journalistic rhetoric of public service, and in particular the way in which this rhetoric is mobilized as a legitimating resource in US news interviews and press conferences. The primary objective is to understand how aggressive questioning of public figures is managed,<sup>3</sup> and by extension how journalistic legitimacy is maintained in this context.

## Data

The primary database for this study includes more than 50 journalistic interviews drawn from a wide range of news and public affairs programs in the USA. Most appeared on programs that regularly feature live interviews:

*Nightline* (ABC), *The NewsHour* (PBS), *Meet the Press* (NBC), *Face the Nation* (CBS) and *This Week* (ABC). A smaller number of interviews and interview segments were drawn from the networks' regular nightly news programs, National Public Radio newscasts, news magazines such as *60 Minutes*, presidential press conferences and other contexts. All interviews have been fully transcribed in accordance with the conventions of Conversation Analysis (see Appendix).

A search through the database yielded a collection of more than 40 cases in which journalists invoke the public as motivating their question. The findings reported here are based on a comprehensive analysis of all cases in the data set. Transcript excerpts reproduced in the article are thus illustrative of more general regularities.

### Aligning with the public

As a first step in understanding the practice of aligning with the public, consider how this contrasts with other alignments that a journalist may take up in the course of an interview. In general, when an interviewer (henceforth IR) is asking a question of a given interviewee (henceforth IE), the IR must decide whether and how to allocate responsibility for the question. Some questions are formulated straightforwardly, on what may be assumed to be the IR's own initiative. For example:

*Excerpt 2: NBC Meet the Press, 9 November 1997, Clinton*

IR: Are you worried about the roller coaster: stock market?

In other cases, responsibility for the question is ascribed to a third party, such as a government official, expert, or some other elite source. More specifically, elite-attributed questions typically are prefaced by a statement of opinion that the IE is asked to respond to, and it is this preliminary opinion statement in particular which is attributed to an elite source. In the next example, Allan Boesak, a leading black spokesperson in South Africa, is asked to respond to views of 'Ambassador Beukes', South Africa's ambassador to the USA.

*Excerpt 3: ABC Nightline, 22 July 1985, South Africa*

IR: → Reverend Boesak (.) Ambassador Beukes makes the poi:nt (.) that you can't have any discussions you can't have any progress in South Africa until the violence stops..hhh And therefore the state of emergency is necessary. Fair?

Alternatively, questions may be attributed to the broader public via reference to 'the audience', or 'citizens', or 'people', as in Koppel's question to the nuclear safety engineer (see excerpt 1). Unlike elite-attributed questions, public-attributed questions do not necessarily contain prefatory opinion statements. As excerpt 1 illustrates, the public may be invoked as responsible, not only for an assertion linked to the question, but for the very act of inquiring into some matter.

Each of these alignments entails a distinct interactional stance or 'footing' (Goffman, 1981) with implications for the IR's situated identity and professional role. When the question contains no explicit reference to a responsible party, the IR is presented as acting on his or her own initiative. Alternatively, when an official or expert is cited, the IR is presented as an elite go-between, an agent of communication between powerful political actors. Finally, when the public is invoked, the IR is cast as a 'tribune of the people', one who invites elites to address the concerns of the citizenry.

This latter stance has, from the IR's standpoint, certain practical advantages. Consider first the issue of professional neutrality. By invoking a responsible third party – whether elite or public – IRs distance themselves from the line of questioning and the views being expressed within it, thus taking up a formally neutral or 'neutralistic' posture (Clayman, 1988, 1992). IRs present themselves, not as pursuing a purely personal agenda, but as impartially relaying the concerns of others.

Invoking the public has the additional benefit of legitimizing a line of inquiry. By claiming that the public wants or needs to know about some matter, the IR also implies that it is appropriate and justifiable to ask about it. In this connection, recall that the public is invoked as responsible, not only for question-preliminary opinion statements, but often for the very act of questioning itself (see excerpt 1, as well as excerpts 4, 5 and 6 below). With the public offered as the primary rationale for the question, the reason why it is being asked of a given IE at a given moment, the question is thus presented as legitimate.

Finally, this practice increases the pressure on IEs to be forthcoming in response. It is more difficult for an IE to sidestep or evade a question that has been legitimated in this way, because that could be taken as an offense not merely to the IR but to the broader public that he or she claims to represent.

The advantages of a tribune-of-the-people stance, and the effort IRs expend to achieve it, are nicely illustrated in excerpt 4a, from David Frost's famous 1977 interview with former President Richard Nixon. The interview focused on the Watergate affair, and in the course of the discussion Frost succeeded in getting Nixon to admit to having made 'mistakes'. At one point, however, Frost tries to induce Nixon to go further than this, pointing out that the word 'mistakes' seems 'not enough for people to understand' (lines 1–2). Thus, this initial push for a stronger

admission of guilt is presented as being done on behalf of ‘people’ in general.

*Excerpt 4a: Nixon–Frost*

- 1 DF: ... Would you go further than mistakes:: (.) the wor::d (0.9)  
 2 that seems n- n- (.) not enough for people to understa:nd.  
 3 (1.5)  
 4 RN: What wor::d would you:: (.) express,  
 5 (3.8)  
 6 DF: My goodness that's a:: hhh (0.2) I:: think (.) that  
 7 there're (.) three things. (.) since you ask me, (0.2)  
 8 I:: would like to hear you sa:y > I think the  
 9 American people would like to hear you say. ...  
 10 ((question continues))

However, when Nixon invites Frost to indicate what word he would prefer (line 4), Frost momentarily strays from the safety of a tribune-of-the-people stance. Frost begins an extended question by indicating that there are three things that ‘I:: would like to hear you say’ (lines 6–8), emphasizing the first-person pronoun ‘I’ and thus framing the question-in-progress as an expression of his own personal preferences. Notice, however, that he carefully modulates this stance just as he launches into it, pointing out parenthetically that he is expressing his preferences at Nixon’s request (‘since you ask me’) rather than on his own initiative.

Even this modulated stance is not maintained for long. Although Frost does not perform a complete about-face, he adds that this is also what ‘the American people would like to hear you say’ (lines 8–9). Frost seems to treat the addition of this reference to the public as something of a priority – he speeds up (denoted in the transcript by the ‘>’ symbol) just as he launches into the clause containing this attribution.

All of this maneuvering to achieve a tribune-of-the-people stance is explicable given the gravity of the question that is eventually delivered. Frost pointedly asks Nixon to make three extraordinary admissions of guilt – the beginning of each is arrowed below.

*Excerpt 4b: Nixon–Frost*

- 8 DF: ... I:: would like to hear you sa:y > I think the  
 9 American people would like to hear you say..hh (.)  
 10 1→ Q:ne is::, (0.7) the:re was probably mo::re (0.2) tha::n, (0.4)  
 11 mista::kes there was:: (0.7) wro:ngdoing (0.2) whether it was  
 12 a cri::me > or not = yes it may have been a crime < too:. (0.6)  
 13 2→ Secondly:: (0.8) I did h (0.6) and I'm saying this without  
 14 (.) questioning the motives alright. I di::d h (0.2)  
 15 abu:se the power I had as President. (0.2) or:: ha::ve  
 16 (.) not fulfilled it (.) totality, .h (0.2) (eh)the

17 oath of office that- that's the second thing, (0.2)  
 18 3→ And thir::dly, (0.7) I: put the American peo- people  
 19 through two years of needless agony > an' I apologize for  
 20 that. (0.9) And I: say that- (.) you've explai:ned your  
 21 motives, (.) I think tho:se > are the categories. <  
 22 (0.7) And I kno:w how >difficult it is for anyone, < and  
 23 most of all you: but I: think h (0.8) that (.) people  
 24 need to hear it, (0.4) and I think unless you say it,  
 25 (0.6) you're gonna be hau:nted > for the rest of your life. <

Frost asks Nixon to admit: (1) that some of his actions were wrong and possibly criminal, (2) that he abused the power of the presidency, and (3) that he put the American people through two years of needless agony. Frost also asks Nixon to apologize for the latter offense. Frost himself acknowledges the magnitude of what he is requesting when he subsequently notes 'how difficult it is for anyone, and most of all you . . .' (lines 22–23). But as he completes this question, he reiterates that this is something that 'people need to hear' (lines 23–24). In so doing, he strives to neutralize and legitimate what is an extremely face-threatening and incriminating set of requests, while increasing the pressure on Nixon to comply with them.

### Environments of use

Given that this practice renders a question defensible and more difficult to ignore, it is particularly well-suited to interactional environments involving aggressively probing or adversarial lines of questioning. Accordingly, IRs make use of this practice in three broad environments of this sort.<sup>4</sup>

#### 1. *Broaching a sensitive matter*

Consider, first, the situation of an IR broaching a topic that is in some way sensitive or delicate. A straightforward illustration occurred in an interview with ousted Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, when Marcos was asked about his wife Imelda's enormous shoe collection (see excerpt 5). Prior to this interview, Imelda's shoe collection had been widely reported in the news media, and was treated as emblematic of the extravagance and excess of the recently-ousted Marcos regime. Consequently, what might otherwise be regarded as an extraneous personal matter had become, by the time of the interview, a well known and deeply symbolic political issue. The infamous character of this issue is apparent in the brief and elliptical way it is introduced (line 5) – the shoe collection is merely referred to without elaboration – and the way in which Marcos anticipates the thrust of the question before it is completed (lines 6 and 8).

*Excerpt 5a: ABC Nightline, 4 April 1986, Marcos*

- 1 IR: → Whe:n people heard I was coming out (.) to do an interview  
 2 → with you (1.0) you know what most people are interested in?  
 3 FM: Mm mm.  
 4 (0.4)  
 5 IR: Your wife's:: three thousand pairs of shoes.  
 6 FM: How many shoes  
 7 IR: How many sh[oes  
 8 FM: [can you wear: (0.2) on (.) twenty years.  
 9 IR: Exactly (.) how many can you?

Notice that as the IR first begins to raise this sensitive issue (lines 1–2), he makes a special point of indicating that it is ‘what most people are interested in’.

None of the previous questions to Marcos were framed in this way. The IR began with comparatively open-ended and sympathetic questions regarding Marcos’ own experiences, opinions, and plans for the future:

*Excerpt 5b: ABC Nightline, 4 April 1986, Ferdinand Marcos*

- IR: President Marcos, you’re a very proud man. I think even your enemies recognize that. Tell me a little bit about what it has been like for you these past few weeks. . .
- IR: Where can you go? I mean, it must be a terribly humiliating experience. At one point you were thinking of going to Spain. . .
- IR: So what you’re really saying is that in some fashion the American government was helping the rebel forces against you. . .

These questions are offered straightforwardly, without any overt reference to the public. It is only with the distinctly unflattering matter of the shoe collection that the IR makes a point of emphasizing that this is a matter of broad public concern.

This practice is not limited to political interviews. The next example (excerpt 6) is from an interview with a gay couple, one of whom was dying of AIDS. At one point the IR asks them to explain why they love each other (see line 17).

*Excerpt 6: ABC Nightline, 19 September 1986, AIDS*

- 1 IR: You know (.) in one sense (0.4) this story: your story has  
 2 been a story of w:atching (0.3) a dise:ase take its toll:  
 3 But in another sense, (.) it has been (0.8) very much a:  
 4 chronicle of a love story. (0.4) You two love each other  
 5 very mu:ch don’t you.  
 6 (0.3)  
 7 KM: Yes indeed.  
 8 JS: .hhh .hhh ((sniffing, possibly tearful))  
 9 KM: .hhh ha ha.  
 10 IR: → That’s: somethin:[g also: that (.) a lot of people in the =

- 11 KM: [come on  
 12 IR: → = straight community, (0.3) have a great deal of trouble  
 13 → understanding, I'd I don't know whether it's I (.) you know  
 14 if someone said to me explain why you love your wife (0.3)  
 15 I'm not sure uh I could d- (.) could do that to their  
 16 satisfaction either but let me .hhh ask you both (0.6)  
 17 w:hy (1.6) why do you love each other. (0.3) Jack?  
 18 (2.4)  
 19 JS: This is the most special human being I've ever met in my life. . . .

The delicacy of this question stems not only from its deeply personal character, but also because it asks the IEs to explain something that ordinarily requires no explanation. As a general principle, explanatory accounts are called for when behavior is unanticipated or out of the ordinary (Heritage, 1988; Scott and Lyman, 1968). Accordingly, by asking the gay couple to account for their loving relationship, the IR could be taken to imply that the relationship is abnormal or deviant.

Much of the lead-up to this delicate question (lines 10–16) is an effort to soften or mitigate what is to come. The IR observes (lines 13–16) that the question would be difficult for a ‘straight’ person such as himself to answer – this not only exhibits a modicum of empathy, but it also normalizes the question by casting it as one that could in principle be asked of anyone. More importantly for our purposes, the IR frames the question as having been motivated by the puzzlement of ‘a lot of people in the straight community’ (lines 10–13, arrowed). He thus presents himself as speaking on behalf of the majority. By way of contrast, a prior question (lines 1–5) asking them to confirm what had been implicit in the discussion thus far (that they love each other) is comparatively innocuous and contains no overt reference to the public.

## 2. *Countering, criticizing, condemning*

‘The public’ is also invoked in transparently adversarial circumstances, when the IR is plainly on the offensive. Often this occurs when the IR is countering something an IE has just said. A comparatively mild example of this sort took place during an interview with Larry Spreewell, a basketball player who had physically attacked his own coach (see excerpt 7). At one point in the interview, Spreewell sought to reduce the blameworthiness of his action by portraying it as a justifiable response to the harsh and offensive style of his coach ‘PJ’ (lines 1–13). As he put it, ‘It was about PJ disrespecting me as a man’ (lines 6–7), and he concludes by invoking a general moral rule (‘You don’t talk to people the way PJ talked to me’ in lines 12–13) that casts the coach’s conduct as improper.

*Excerpt 7: CBS, 60 Minutes, 8 March 1998, Spreewell*

- 1 IE: It was all about .hh- (0.2) the: the respect  
 2 factor with me. I mean I (don'-) I think with  
 3 PJ his- .hh his coaching style is (such) that  
 4 (0.5) ya know he likes to get- he likes to  
 5 discipline you = ('n) get on guy:s. And I'm  
 6 saying we're men. .hh It was about my: It was  
 7 about PJ disrespecting me as a ma:n.  
 8 (.) (A[n' it-)  
 9 IR: [Person to person.  
 10 IE: Person to person.  
 11 (0.2)  
 12 IE: Person to person you (don:') .hh you don:'t talk  
 13 to people the way .hh PJ: talked to me.  
 14 IR: → People might be saying "Hey kid. .hh You ear:n (0.2)  
 15 millions and millions of dollars, .hh Live with it."  
 16 (0.2)  
 17 IR: Forget the respect, take your money,  
 18 IE: When you're dealing with respect: uh: money is not  
 19 a issue.

In response to this exculpatory account, the IR (lines 14–17) proposes that, given the 'millions and millions of dollars' Spreewell earns, he should have been able to 'live with it'. This response directly opposes Spreewell's account, and it is incriminating in its import, implying that his violent actions were unjustified. Significantly, the IR delivers this pointed riposte, not on his own behalf, but as something that 'people might be saying' (arrowed).<sup>5</sup>

IRs do not invoke the public merely to dispute something an IE has said; usually something more than a simple disagreement is involved. Oppositional responses containing this practice also tend to embody a hostile commentary on the IE's moral character – in the vast majority of cases they are derogatory or incriminating. This element is present, albeit somewhat indirectly, in excerpt 7. It is more apparent in the next example, from an interview with a convicted child molester who has served out his sentence but remains in confinement because he has been judged a continuing threat to society. The IE, arguing for his release, makes an impassioned claim to have been cured of his propensity to molest (lines 1–5), and he begins to cry at this point (lines 5–6).

*Excerpt 8: CBS, 60 Minutes, 12 January 1998, Stephanie's Law*

- 1 IE: Well the law was the one that brought me here. (0.5)  
 2 But it was me that decided that I wanted to stop ( )  
 3 .hh I want to stop the molesting, I want to stop the  
 4 offending, I want to stop the hurting? (0.2)  
 5 ((sniff)) I want to heal myself. ((crying))  
 6 (2.5) ((sniff:::))  
 7 (2.5)  
 8 IR: → Do you know that there're people watching (0.7) who



particularly hostile question is delivered, Koppel-the-narrator interrupts Koppel-the-interviewer to point out that ‘When I ask a question, it’s something that I think the viewers want asked. I’m their representative’ (1996: 157). This isolated quotation was featured at the beginning of this article – now re-embedded in its textual context, its immediate practical import becomes transparent. It invites readers of the book to analyze the upcoming antagonistic question as having been properly motivated.

### 3. *Defending and pursuing*

If IRs invoke the public when taking the offensive, they also do so when the initiative is reversed and they are defending themselves against an IE’s criticism or attack. For example, when Pat Buchanan was interviewed after he became President Reagan’s Director of Communications, he was questioned about his influence on the increasingly ideological tone of the President’s speeches. Buchanan strongly objects to the idea, and he accuses the IR of having ‘demeaned the President’ (line 1) by suggesting that Buchanan was ‘running down there sneaking phrases or lines into speeches and the President doesn’t know what he’s saying’ (lines 2–5).

#### *Excerpt 10: ABC Nightline, 3 June 1985, Pat Buchanan*

- 1 PB: . . . It demea:ns the President to suggest that someone  
 2 say Pat Buchanan or anyone el:se .hh is running down  
 3 there at night sneaking phrases or (line:s) .hhh into  
 4 speeches an’ the president doesn’t know what he’s  
 5 sayi[ng] .hhh]  
 6 IR: → [No Pat ] I don’t think anyone’s sug[ gest ]ing =  
 7 PB: [(sure)]  
 8 IR: → = that, I think what people are suggesting is that the  
 9 President of the United States perhaps more than any  
 10 other man or woman in the country is terribly  
 11 terribly busy cannot pos[sibly] write every speech of =  
 12 PB: [Mhm  
 13 IR: = his own .hh or for that matter go over every speech  
 14 line by line as you suggest. [.hhh] Uh- an when that =  
 15 PB: [Mhm ]  
 16 IR: = happens, then people in positions such as your own,  
 17 .hh can sometimes get some of their own ideas across.  
 18 PB: .h Well sure. you could get ideas in but look every  
 19 speech in the White House Ted .hhhh go:es through a process. . .

In response to this attack, the IR pursues two lines of defense (lines 6–17). First, he characterizes his previous question in a way that detoxifies it, reducing much of its ‘demeaning’ character. That is, he grants how ‘terribly busy’ the president is, suggesting that it is perfectly under-

standable and indeed inevitable that Buchanan would be wielding increased influence. More importantly for our purposes, he presents the line of questioning (arrowed) as having been motivated by ‘what people are suggesting’. He thereby defends his prior conduct and justifies his continued pursuit of the matter.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of this sort occurred in Dan Rather’s infamous interview with Vice President George Bush during the 1988 presidential campaign (see excerpt 11). The agenda for the interview was Bush’s involvement in the Iran-Contra scandal. This agenda was set from the very beginning – it was the main focus of the hard-hitting taped segment that preceded the interview, as well as the IR’s opening question. The agenda projected by this opening elicited a strong reaction from Bush – he registered a series of complaints against Dan Rather and the CBS *Evening News* team, accusing them among other things of having previously misrepresented the purpose of the interview. Specifically, he charged that he was led to believe that it would be a broad ‘political profile’ rather than a narrow investigation of his involvement in Iran-Contra. Following these accusations, he calls for ‘fair play’ (lines 1–3), and he bids to broaden the agenda of the interview as he claims he was promised.

*Excerpt 11: CBS, Evening News, 25 January 1988: Bush–Rather*

- 1 GB: . . . I’m asking for: (0.3) fair play:, and I thought I was  
 2 here to talk about my views on education, or on  
 3 getting this deficit down =  
 4 IR: = Well Mr Vice Preside[nt we wanna talk about the re[cord o]n =  
 5 GB: [Yes. [Well lets]  
 6 IR: = this, .hh because it-  
 7 GB: Well let’s talk  
 8 abo[ut the (full) record, that’s what I wanna talk about] Dan,  
 9 IR: → [th- the framework he::re:, is that one third of- ]  
 10 IR: → one third o’the Republicans in this poll[: , one third =  
 11 GB: [Yeah  
 12 IR: → = o’the the Republicans .hh and- and one fourth of the  
 13 → people who say:: that- eh y’know they rather like you:,  
 14 → .hh believe y[ou’re hi]ding something. = Now if you =  
 15 GB: [(wha-) ]  
 16 IR: = [are: here’s a ch-]  
 17 GB: [I am] hid[ing something]  
 18 IR: [here’s a ch]ance to get it out.

Rather simultaneously defends himself and justifies further questioning on Iran-Contra by reference to poll results (arrowed) indicating that a substantial segment of Bush’s own supporters believe he’s ‘hiding something’. The concerns of the citizenry are thus offered as the rationale

behind the adversarial line of questioning that Rather, despite the objections, continues to pursue.

### **Interactional consequences**

To recap, journalist-interviewers sometimes present themselves explicitly as servants of the public, but they do so in a highly selective manner. This practice is particularly prevalent during probing or adversarial lines of questioning, either when these are being launched by the IR or defended against attack. This pattern is plainly not coincidental – IRs are drawn to a *tribune-of-the-people* stance at such moments in an effort to neutralize and legitimate their more aggressive conduct, and thereby increase the pressure on recalcitrant IEs.

Are such efforts actually successful? In other words, does the practice ‘work’? The evidence indicates that for the most part it does, at least within the framework of the interview itself.

Consider first the problem of maintaining a formally neutral or ‘neutralistic’ posture. This is a generic problem that IRs face, but it becomes particularly acute when an IR does not come to a grammatically formatted question (as in excerpts 7 and 8; cf. excerpt 9). While questions have a neutralistic quality, unvarnished declarative assertions threaten to undermine the IR’s neutralism (Clayman, 1988; Heritage and Roth, 1995). By invoking the public at such moments, IRs present themselves as relaying the concerns of the populace rather than pursuing a personal agenda. One indication of the effectiveness of this claim to neutralism is that it is almost never challenged by IEs; indeed, IEs often respond in such a way as to validate the claim. This is perhaps most striking in excerpt 9, when the dog psychiatrist disputes the IR’s ‘poppycock’ characterization and – like the IR – attributes that viewpoint to the public: ‘I say they are entitled to their opinion. And I would also say to those people . . .’ He thus presents himself as disagreeing, not with the IR *per se*, but with the public on whose behalf the IR was ostensibly speaking. (A similar pattern may be observed in excerpt 8, line 13.) In this way, IEs tacitly validate and reinforce the IR’s neutralistic posture.

In a similar vein, IEs appear to accept the fundamental legitimacy of questions framed in this way, although once again this acceptance is registered tacitly rather than on an explicit level. In probing or adversarial environments, IRs are always in danger of being seen as exceeding their professional mandate, and in some cases they are actually criticized for overly aggressive questioning. However, when such questions are cast as responsive to the concerns and interests of the public, IEs generally proceed to answer them – or at least they present themselves as ‘answering’. Acquiescent responses occur even when the line of questioning was

previously the object of complaint. Consider excerpt 10 – although Pat Buchanan vociferously attacked the question (lines 1–5) when it was initially raised, he subsequently gives in and answers it without complaint (lines 18–19) when it is reissued as something that ‘people are suggesting’. There is only one exception to this general pattern of cooperation – George Bush continued to resist Dan Rather’s Iran-Contra questions (following excerpt 11) even after Rather mobilized opinion poll data to justify his line of inquiry. That may well be the exception that proves the rule, since the resulting interaction was so argumentative that it became a major news story in its own right (Clayman and Whalen, 1988/89).

Of course, what impact all of this may or may not have on the viewing audience remains an open question which cannot be resolved with the present data. But at least within the confines of the interview itself, a tribune-of-the-people stance is remarkably effective in rendering a question defensible, thereby encouraging IEs to acquiesce – or at least feign acquiescence – to highly aggressive interrogation.

### **The journalist-interviewer as populist**

If journalists recurrently invoke the role of public servant at strategic points, what precisely is being proposed through this practice? While serving the public is generally seen as fundamental to journalism, what this should entail in practice is a matter of some controversy.

One view equates public service with fostering citizenship – journalists can best serve the public by reporting what it *needs* to know if its members are to become well-informed citizens. From this point of view, journalists should disregard the vagaries of public opinion and popular taste, and should strive to monitor objectively the affairs of government and society, even if this results in news that is boring, objectionable, or otherwise unpopular. For example, in his memoir Sam Donaldson (1987) argues strongly for the necessity of asking tough questions and holding politicians, including the president, accountable for their actions. Donaldson freely admits that adversarial questioning frequently alienates viewers, but he defends the practice as a fulfillment of the journalistic mandate. This viewpoint is expressed most often in the ‘backstages’ of journalism – in professional journals such as the *Columbia Journalism Review*, and inside the newsroom itself, where reporters and editors tend to disregard letters, phone calls and other forms of audience feedback (Gans, 1979: 230–5).

Alternatively, journalists can also be found to adopt a more unabashedly populist stance, aligning themselves with the immediate concerns of the ordinary person (Hallin, 1994: 87–111). This is the point of Ted Koppel’s observation that ‘When I ask a question, it’s something I think the viewers want asked’ (Koppel and Gibson, 1996: 157). This viewpoint appears to be

more prevalent on the journalistic 'frontstage', when journalistic conduct comes under broad public scrutiny.

Both of these conceptions of public service – which might be termed 'professional' and 'populist' respectively – are rooted in the complex institutional circumstances in which journalism is practiced. On the one hand, journalism aspires to the status of a profession, which in democratic societies is charged with the lofty goals of enhancing citizenship and democratic participation. On the other hand, the actual practice of journalism occurs for the most part within commercial enterprises competing for consumers in the marketplace. Professional ideals may favor reporting without regard for what will be momentarily popular, but the realities of the marketplace often press in the opposite direction. Recent controversies surrounding experiments in 'Civic Journalism' (Hoyt, 1995) and the incursion of market research and commercial pressures into the newsroom (McManus, 1994; Underwood, 1993) highlight the tension between these divergent conceptions of public service.

Against this backdrop, what model of public service do IRs invoke when they make reference to the public? For the most part, it is 'populist' rather than 'professional' – interviewers use the language of the people's wants, desires, and concerns far more than their needs, requirements, or obligations as citizens. They typically refer to what people are interested in, puzzled about, concerned with, etc.<sup>7</sup> Thus, at least in this intensely public environment, the journalistic persona takes on a distinctly populist cast.

## **Discussion**

The phenomenon examined in this article has a clear sociocultural basis. It would be neither as prevalent nor as effective as it is, were it not for the democratic and capitalist thrust of American society. Given the great value placed on the rights and preferences of individuals – whether conceived as political 'citizens' or economic 'consumers' – a wide range of institutions are geared toward satisfying those interests. Against this backdrop, when interviewers invoke the public in the context of their daily work, they are mobilizing a powerful and deeply resonant symbolic resource.

Does this practice extend beyond the American context? It seems plausible that a similar legitimating rhetoric would be found in other market democracies, perhaps inflected by local variations. Where broadcast journalists are more insulated from commercial pressures, for example, one might perhaps find a less populist form of rhetoric. In any case, it would be fruitful to compare the rhetorics of legitimation that undergird aggressive journalistic questioning across national boundaries.

However, it is important to remember that such rhetoric is by no means a straightforward reflection of the cultural environment. It tends to be

deployed by interviewers in a highly selective manner, in just those interactional circumstances where it is most useful. Thus, overt references to the public cannot be predicted or explained solely on the basis of the general cultural environment, nor can the aggregate frequency of such references be treated as a direct indicator of the strength of democratic values within journalism or the wider society. A full understanding of this practice requires appreciation of how it is mobilized as a resource within the interactional framework of the news interview – the specific interactional circumstances in which it is used, what it does or accomplishes therein, and how it is responded to and dealt with subsequently. Viewed in this light, its import as a legitimating resource becomes transparent. Aligning with the public is a stance that journalists invoke strategically to deal with certain occupational hazards that arise when confronting prestigious public figures in the glare of the media spotlight. At such moments, it can be extremely useful to present oneself as a tribune of the people.

### Appendix: transcript notational conventions

Transcript excerpts in this article employ the notational conventions used in conversation analysis. The transcripts capture the details of talk and interaction as it naturally occurs. Below is a guide to the transcription symbols used here; for a more detailed exposition, see Atkinson and Heritage (1984: ix–xvi).

ED: <u>That's our policy.</u>	<i>Underlined items</i> were markedly stressed.
ED: That's our po::licy.	<i>Colon(s)</i> indicate the prior sound was prolonged.
ED: THAT'S our policy.	<i>Capital letters</i> indicate increased volume.
ED: That's our- our policy.	<i>A hyphen</i> denotes a glottal stop or 'cut-off' of sound.
ED: .hhh That's our policy. IR: But should it be.	<i>Strings of 'h'</i> mark audible breathing. The longer the string, the longer the breath. A period preceding denotes inbreath; no period denotes outbreath.
ED: That's (.) our policy. (1.3) IR: But should it be.	<i>Numbers in parentheses</i> denote elapsed silence in tenths of seconds; a period denotes a micropause of less than 0.2 seconds.
ED: That's our policy. = IR: = But should it be.	<i>Equal signs</i> indicate that one sound followed the other with no intervening silence.
ED: That['s our policy] IR: [But should it] be.	<i>Brackets</i> mark the onset and termination of simultaneous speech.

ED: That's our policy,  
 IR: But should it be.  
 ED: I think so?

*Punctuation marks* denote intonation rather than grammar at turn constructional unit boundaries. Periods indicate falling intonation, question marks indicate rising intonation, and commas indicate 'continuing' or slightly rising intonation.

ED: That's our ( )  
 IR: But (should it) be.

*Open parentheses* indicate transcriber's uncertainty as to what was said. *Words in parentheses* represent a best guess as to what was said.

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the American Sociological Association annual meeting in Toronto, August 1997. I would like to thank John Heritage, Anne Holohan, and Andy Roth for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this paper, and Tanya Stivers for providing research assistance.

2. The ideal of objectivity is one such legitimating resource – within each news account are practices for dramatizing its objective character (eg. Clayman, 1988, 1992; Raymond, 2000; Tuchman, 1972, 1973; Zelizer, 1990). After an account has been published or broadcast, there are further practices for sanctioning departures from objectivity (Winch, 1997), and for sustaining the authority of journalistic accounts over those offered by competing definers of reality (Zelizer, 1992).

3. For other studies of journalistic questioning and interrogation, see Clayman (1988, 1992), Heritage (forthcoming a, forthcoming b), Heritage and Roth (1995), Roth (1998), and Bull and Elliott (1998).

4. The practice also appears in other contexts which are beyond the scope of this article, but will be briefly noted. First, IRs may refer to the public when asking the very first question in an interview (as in excerpt 1). Here the practice occurs just after having introduced the IE to the audience, and it is notable that IRs address the audience directly during such introductions. This audience-attentiveness appears to 'bleed over' into the first question, which is addressed to the IE but may contain references to the overhearing audience. Second, IR references to the public are also commonplace when that is the established topic of discussion, as in interviews concerning election campaigns and other efforts to woo voters. Finally, IR references to the public also occur when the IE raises and in effect topicalizes such matters in prior talk.

5. The IR's reference to 'people' echoes the IE's parallel usage in the prior turn (line 13). This may explain the IR's choice of this specific term over other broadly synonymous terms such as 'the public', 'viewers', etc.

6. The IR's reiteration in line 12 syntactically parallels the original formulation in line 9, and this makes it hearable as a reiteration and thus still an expression of what the 'people watching' will say.

7. As populists, IRs are claiming to know the real concerns of the public. This is a tall order, and it explains what might otherwise be a curious pattern in IR assertions about the public's concerns – namely the overwhelming tendency for such assertions to be offered cautiously, with marked uncertainty (e.g. 'I *think* what people are wondering . . .') or qualified as partial (e.g. '*Some* people are wondering . . .').

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