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Hardballs and softballs

Modulating adversarialness in journalistic questioning

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The design of questions in news interviews and news conferences has proven to be an illuminating window into the tenor of press-state relations. Quantitative studies have charted aggregate variations in adversarial questioning, but less is known about variations in the intensity of adversarialness within any particular question. Such variation is captured by the vernacular distinction between "hardball" versus "softball" questions. Hardballs advance an oppositional viewpoint vigorously, while softballs do so at most mildly. In this paper we investigate recurrent language practices through which journalists modulate the oppositionality of a question, thereby either hindering or facilitating response. The objective is to better understand how adversarialness is enacted in direct encounters between politicians and journalists.

Keywords: Questions, news interviews, news conferences, journalism, journalistic norms, objectivity, adversarialness, adversarial journalism, press-state relations

1. Introduction

A central concern in the study of media and politics has been the tenor of relations between journalists and political actors. Journalists can be deferential toward officials and candidates as sources of information and as news subjects, but they may also take up a more adversarial posture through practices of fact-checking, disagreement, and challenge. Much is known about the mix of professional values and market pressures that drive adversarialness in journalism (Schudson 2008), but only recently have researchers begun to explore how the general impetus toward adversarialness is put into practice.

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In taking the measure of adversarialness, the design of questions asked in news interviews and news conferences has proven to be an illuminating source of data. Question-asking provides a direct window into the enactment of journalistic norms and press-state relations, and it forms the immediate context in which politicians' remarks are produced and understood. The study of question design has revealed that while the norm of neutralism is a robust and pervasive feature of journalistic questioning in both the U.S. and the U.K. (Clayman 1988, 1992; Heritage and Roth 1995; Tolson 2012), adversarialness is more variable. Quantitative studies have charted aggregate variations in adversarial questioning in the U.S. (Clayman and Heritage 2002b; Clayman et al. 2006, 2007, 2010) and other national contexts (Ekström et al. 2012; Eriksson and Östman 2013; Huls and Varwijk 2011; Conza, Ginisci, and Caputo 2011), and identified boundary conditions for the observance of this norm (Montgomery 2007). While other studies have identified specific practices that embody an adversarial posture (e.g., Clayman and Heritage 2002a; Ekström 2011; Eriksson 2011a, 2011b; Hutchby 2011; Kampf and Daskal 2011; Rendle-Short 2007), what remains underdeveloped is a conception of how adversarialness varies in intensity within any particular question.

Such variation is captured by the familiar vernacular distinction between "hardball" and "softball" questions. Hardballs advance an adversarial viewpoint vigorously in a way that is ostensibly difficult to counter; softballs do so at most mildly or half-heartedly and in a way that eases response.

Terms synonymous with "hardball/softball" are occasionally invoked by journalists themselves in the course of questioning, as in this excerpt from a panel interview on the problem of nuclear waste. Here the interviewer (henceforth IR) initially characterizes his question as "a softball" (arrowed) before proceeding to ask about a proposed solution: that radioactive waste be launched into outer space as a means of disposal. This solution contradicts the anti-nuclear interviewees (henceforth IEs) who had been arguing that such waste is an intractable problem, and had not previously been proposed even by the pro-nuclear panelists.

Excerpt 1. (ABC Nightline, 6 June 1985: nuclear waste)

```
01 IR: -> Let me give any one of you a softball: uh: we're already
02        starting tuh get a lotta phone calls here tonight, (.)
03        from people who wanna know alright=you've got all
04        this: (0.4) nuclear waste. radioactive material. (0.2)
05        Why not fly it into space. Why not shoot it right
06        into=thuh sun. Who [wants to take it.]
07 JM:                       [Well  I  think-  ] (.) uh the-
08        [thuh real answer] tuh that question is that=you=
09 RY:    [(              )]
```

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10 JM:    =worry about whether er not thuh rocket would fai:l an’
11        that: (.) flight would f- uh fall back tuh earth somewhere
```

In this case the “softball” characterization captures something real about the question that it prefaces. Notice that the proposed solution is articulated but not supported or defended in any way. It is also attributed, not to an authoritative source, but to ordinary people who’ve been phoning the studio with this idea (2–3). And it is addressed to the entire panel of a half-dozen scientists, politicians, and journalists with varying expertise (“Let me give any one of you a softball…”), and is thus treated as a question that anyone should be able to answer (“Who wants to take it,” 6). In all these ways, the interviewer builds his question as a “softball” that should be easy to “knock out of the park.” Correspondingly, it is a politician on the panel, and not a technical expert, who steps forward to reject the solution.

Other adversarial questions, by contrast, are explicitly characterized and otherwise built to be understood as “hardballs” that will be relatively difficult to counter or refute. In this excerpt from a discussion of professional baseball, the IR asks a team manager what he characterizes as a “tough” question (5) about the absence of African-Americans in leadership positions in baseball.

Excerpt 2. (ABC Nightline, 6 April 1987: African-Americans in baseball)

```
01 RK:    I think if Jack were alive today Jack would say: uh:.hhh
02        (.) how come there’r no blacks running ball clubs.=
03 IR:    =Mister Campanis it’s a: (.) it’s a legitimate question,
04        you’re an old friend of Jackie Robinson’s but it’s a:
05    ->  it’s a tough question for you.=You’re still in baseball:,
06        (0.3) Why why is it that there are no black managers,
07        no black general managers, no black owners, .hh
08        And I guess what I’m really asking you is to eh- eh- you
09        know peel it away: a little bit. Just tell me (.) >why
10        d’you think it is.=Is there still that much prejudice in
11        baseball today?
12 AC:    No I don’t believe it’s prejudice…
```

Here again, the “tough question” characterization is not merely an empty label. Beyond the intrinsic sensitivity of this subject for someone currently in baseball, the IR actively constructs the ensuing question as a hardball. The absence of blacks in managerial positions is not just asserted, but exemplified through a three-part list of instances (“no black managers, no black general managers, no black owners,” 6–7). These are framed as presuppositionally given and hence established facts requiring explanation (“Why is it that there are no black managers…”). When this receives no uptake (7, end of the line), the IR renews the question (8–9), eventually raising the spectre of racial prejudice (10–11).

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Clearly "adversarial questioning" is a graded phenomenon, manifest in analog rather than digital terms. This was generally registered in Clayman and Heritage's coding framework (2002b; Clayman et. al. 2006), which distinguished oppositional content restricted to simple questions or to question prefaces, versus such content pervading complex questions in their entirety. Beyond that categorical distinction, interviewers have the capacity to modulate the degree of oppositional "punch" within a question, intensifying or conversely "pulling the punch" of oppositionality and thereby either hindering or facilitating the interviewee's response.

In what follows we isolate some of the recurrent language practices through which this happens in the U.S. media context. The aim is to better understand how the adversarial role is enacted in news interviews, news conferences, and other environments of journalistic questioning.

2. Adversarial Viewpoints: Articulated Versus Advocated

As an initial entry into this phenomenon, adversarial questions may be distinguished by whether the oppositional viewpoint is merely articulated in a minimal fashion, versus advocated through the provision of evidence, endorsements, or other supportive elaborations.

A straightforward illustration of the former type of question, positioned toward the "softball" end of the continuum, may be seen in this excerpt from an apartheid-era interview with the South African Ambassador to the U.S. during a period of civil unrest and martial law. The IR expresses the contrary view that the recent suspension of civil liberties will be counterproductive.

Excerpt 3. (PBS NewsHour, 22 July 1985: unrest in South Africa)

```
01 IR:    .hhh What d'you say: to Bishop Tutu an' others who have
02        said since thuh state of emergency was declared that this
03        will cause even more violence rather than t' stop thuh
04        violence that's in effect.
05        (0.4)
06 HB:    Well- (.) it is pretty clear: (0.2) that something has
07        to be do:ne. h.hh in order to stop thuh violence…
```

This viewpoint is articulated in a relatively minimal way, confined to a single turn constructional unit (1–4). Moreover, other than a brief *en passant* reference to support for this viewpoint extending beyond one individual ("Bishop Tutu and others", 1), the view lacks any further supporting evidence or argumentation. Similarly, later in the interview the IR proposes, again in opposition to the

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Ambassador, that the state of emergency is intended not to quell violence but to suppress political dissent.

Excerpt 4. (PBS NewsHour, 22 July 1985: unrest in South Africa)

```
01 IR:    Finally Mister Ambassador as you know thuh critics say
02        that thuh purpose of thuh state of emergency thuh real
03        purpose of thuh state of ‘merjuh- uh state of emergency
04        is to supress political dissent. those who are opposed
05        to the apartheid goverment of South Africa.=
06        =Is’at so
07        (.)
08 HB:    I would have to: uh- take issue with ‘at premise…
```

Here again the oppositional viewpoint is presented without support and is initially confined to a single sentential unit ending with the phrase "suppress political dissent" (4). To be sure, the IR goes on to elaborate by adding a grammatically continuous increment (Schegloff 1996; Ford, Fox, and Thompson 2002), but this addition merely clarifies a prior referent (Bolden, Mandelbaum, and Wilkinson 2012; Walker 2004).

Unlike the minimal expressions in excerpts 3 and 4, oppositional viewpoints may be elaborated in a way that allows for the introduction of supportive material. Here presidential candidate Ross Perot is attacked for erratically dropping out and then re-entering the race. The criticism, which is initially expressed as direct reported speech (4), is then elaborated through additional prefatory statements (6–7) and then again within the interrogative (8–9).

Excerpt 5. (PBS NewsHour, 18 Sept. 1992: candidate Ross Perot)

```
01 IR:    There was a newspaper that editorialized yesterday the
02        Boston Herald it said in so many words and I’m quoting
03 RP:    Mmm hmm.
04 IR:    Hey fella, (.) you’ve had your shot, (.) You blew it.
05 RP:    Mmm hmm.
06 IR:    Cha:nging your mind at this late date would look just like
07        what it is. Blatant manipulation of the political process.
08        What do you say to people who say (.) well he’s just (.)
09        [playing around with it.
10 RP:    [Well actually this this this is one ma:n inside the
11        establishment that is staggered and dumbfounded a:nd
12        .hhh probably nearly having a stroke because the American
13        people want a voice in the government…
```

All of this gives the oppositional viewpoint greater space and prominence, while also enabling the introduction of two forms of supportive material. One is the

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provision of ostensibly "factual" or factualistic grounds for the viewpoint. This occurs in the first elaboration (6–7) with the observation that Perot is belatedly changing his mind, which is treated as an established fact and a basis for the conclusion that this constitutes "blatant manipulation of the political process." This brief argument – [factualistic grounds + adversarial conclusion] – in turn bolsters the more idiomatic conclusion (8–9) that Perot is "just playing around with it."

The other supporting element takes the form of claimed endorsements of the oppositional viewpoint. The criticism of Perot is first attributed to a single newspaper editorial (1–2), but this is later expanded to the collective "people who say" (8), implying that the criticism has additional adherents.

Both forms of support – factualistic grounds and claimed endorsements – can receive much more sustained and pointed elaboration. Since third-party endorsements have been examined elsewhere (Clayman 1992, 2002; Clayman and Heritage 2002a, 166–170), we focus next on the practice of providing factualistic grounds.

3. Elaborating factualistic Grounds

The provision of grounds for an adversarial viewpoint can be extremely elaborate. Consider this question to President Reagan regarding his policy of increasing defense spending. Before suggesting through a *no*-preferring interrogative that the money has been squandered (13–15), the journalist provides a list of severe problems with five key weapons systems (3–12).

Excerpt 6. (Reagan News Conference, Nov. 11, 1982: published transcript)

```
01 IR:   Mr. President, evidence mounts that key weapons
02        in your $400 billion weapons procurement buildup
03        are in trouble. Navy testers say that the F-18,
04        on which you'd spend $40 billion, is too heavy
05        for its major mission. Your closest military
06        science advisor says that the latest basing plan
07        for the MX won't fool the Soviets. The Pershing
08        missile, on which NATO defense would depend,
09        literally can't get off the ground. The anti-tank
10        weapon the Army wants to buy seems to be ineffective
11        against modern Soviet tanks. The Maverick missile
12        can't find its targets.
13        I wonder whether in light of all these failures
14        you have any reason to wonder whether a $400
15        billion arms buildup is money well spent.
```

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Some recurrent features of the presentation of factualistic grounds are observable here. The list is front-loaded with references to expert validation on the first two items ("Navy testers say," "Your closest military science advisor says"), which may provide a penumbra of validation that bolsters subsequent items. Moreover the entire list is initially framed as mounting evidence of trouble (1–3), and subsequently summarized as "all these failures" (13), providing concrete support for the oppositional conclusion offered within the interrogative.

A similar litany of factualistic grounds can be seen in this excerpt from an interview with an Assistant Defense Secretary on the problem of Gulf War Syndrome. Here, in opposition to the Secretary's denial that U.S. troops were exposed to chemical weapons during the Gulf War, the IR provides a four-item list of observations to the contrary (2–9).

Excerpt 7. (CBS 60 Minutes: Gulf War syndrome)

```
01 IR:    Secretary Deutch you say there is no evidence.
02        .hh You've got ca:ses where: khh theh- Czechs: say: that
03        they foun:d seron. You say they didn't, th:ey say: (.)
04        that they did. .hh You have soldiers say:ing: that they
05        experienced burning sensations after explosions in the air.
06        That they became nauseous, that they got .hh headaches.
07        .hh You have two hundred fifty gallons of chemical agents
08        that were found in:si:de Kuwait. .hh You had scuds that
09        had seron in the warheads.
10        (1.0)
11        If that's not evidence what is it.
```

Once again, the list is front-loaded with references to first-hand validation ("the Czechs say," "soldiers say"). Furthermore, in this case each and every item on this list is framed ("You've got…," "You have…") as an established fact, implying that the Secretary is merely being reminded of what he already presumptively knows as an authority in this area (Heritage 2012; cf., excerpt 2 above). And again, the entire list is initially framed (1) and subsequently characterized (11) as "evidence" of Gulf War syndrome.

4. From factualistic grounds to adversarial conclusion

Beyond the presentation of factualistic grounds, questions vary in the degree to which they portray the oppositional conclusion as compelled or mandated on such grounds. In excerpt 6 above, the conclusion is offered in a tentative or suggestive fashion through the initial question frame ("I wonder… if you have any reason

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to wonder whether…"). Thus, having forcefully built a factualistic case against defense expenditures, the journalist pulls back and softens this hardball-in-progress by casting the conclusion as contingent and debatable. By contrast, in excerpt 7 the conclusion is portrayed as essentially mandatory and highly certain. The design of the interrogative ("If that's not evidence, what is it") challenges the IE to discount the factualistic preface, thereby treating it as compelling if not irrefutable evidence for Gulf War Syndrome. While the interrogative in 6 softens a hardball-in-progress, the one in 7 hardens it.

In other cases, a separate turn constructional unit is dedicated to advancing an explicit claim that the factualistic observations mandate the adversarial conclusion. In what has elsewhere been termed a question cascade – a succession of interrogatives building toward a single question (Clayman and Heritage 2002b) – recurrently the first interrogative within a cascade is highly assertive and devoted to closing the circle between factualistic grounds and adversarial conclusion. For instance, in an interview with the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee and a supporter of income tax simplification, the question preface lists various deductions and exemptions that the IE has "refused to kill" (4–9). In the subsequent two-question cascade, the first question ("Is this really any simpler" in 10) takes the form of a polar interrogative favoring a *no*-type answer (via the inclusion of "really" and "any"), which in context asserts that the prior exemptions/deductions do indeed betray the promise of tax reform. This explicit linking of grounds and conclusion enables the IR to interrogatively re-issue the conclusion in a form that is more idiomatic and more assertive ("isn't this…," 11).

Excerpt 8. (ABC This Week 8 Dec. 1985: tax code simplification)

```
01 IR:    .hhh Uh Mister Chairmen (.) this (0.2) tax reform
02        when it firs' got rolling was defendedeh in large
03        measure in terms of simplicity.=We're gonna simplify
04        thuh tax code. .hhhhhh You have refu:sed to kill
05        the: (0.9) mortgage interest deduction on second
06        ho:mes, you have even preserved something called an'
07        you could if you wanned to explain it to me, thuh
08        gravestone exemption, .hhh which I gather's a
09        depreciation fer granite quarries, .hhhhh
10   Q1-> Is this really any simpler
11   Q2-> an' isn't this just another example of different
12        lo:gs ro:lled in different way:s,
13        (1.5)
14 DR:    George (0.8) uh I'm a negotiator. (1.0) Uh thuh
15        president can draw a line an' say: uhthis is purity…
```

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In response, the IE implicitly concedes the point (14–15).

Similarly, in this excerpt from an interview with Vice President and NAFTA advocate Al Gore, the preface relays evidence suggesting that NAFTA has led the Mexican government to actively encourage U.S. businesses to relocate to Mexico to take advantage of cheap labor (1–8). Here again, these factualistic claims are followed by a question cascade, with the first question asserting (via a negative interrogative, 9–10) quite explicitly that these claims stand as compelling grounds for opposing NAFTA.

Excerpt 9. (CBS Face The Nation, 14 Nov. 1993: Al Gore on NAFTA)

```
01 IR:     …Y:esterday on our Saturday news broadcast David B:onior
02         the number three Democrat in thuh House an’ one a thuh
03         m:ost vocal opponents of NAFTA .hhh hel:d up on television
04         an a:d that he said that the Mexican government is
05         r:unning. .h An:d what the ad say:s, .h it encourages
06         businesses to re:locate there, for thuh very simple reason
07         (.) that you can g:et (.) labor at m:uch cheaper prices.
08         And it even suggest around a dollar an hour. .hh
09   Q1-> Doesn’t that really .hh ah: un:derline what the
10         opponents of this: uh agreement have been saying,
11   Q2-> and how do you respond to that?
12         (0.3)
13 AG:     Tha:t ad is: (.) wu- w:as running (.) before:, N(h)AFT(h)A.
14         .hh Companies (.) have relocated to Mexico before: NAFTA
15         and in fa:ct Bob .hhh there are a lot of incentives…
```

In response, Gore disputes this (13–15) by providing factualistic counterevidence of his own.

In both excerpts 8 and 9, then, the first interrogative in a cascade is devoted to cementing the link between prior factualistic observations and an adversarial conclusion. Both take the form of an interrogative polarized to assert that the observations validate the conclusion. And in both cases this is followed straightaway by another interrogative that solicits response and retroactively treats the prior, not as a “question” to be answered, but as part of a prefatory argument in progress.

5. Soliciting response: Hardening/softening by inviting affirmation/rejection

The manner of soliciting response to an adversarial question can also bear on that question’s hardball/softball status. This should be apparent from cases already

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examined (e.g., 5, 6, 7), where the turn-final interrogative contains embedded propositions that contribute substantively to the adversarial viewpoint being developed. But even relatively "pure" response solicitations (e.g, *Isn't that right, How do you respond*, etc.) can have a hardening or softening import.

Consider, first, solicitations that take the form of a *yes*/no or polar question. Polar questions almost always involve some degree of preference or "tilt" for either a *yes* or *no* type response (Clayman and Heritage 2002a; Heritage 2002), and this machinery of preference can affect the question's degree of oppositionality. It may invite affirmation of the oppositional viewpoint, thereby implying that the viewpoint is compelling enough to warrant affirmation. For instance, in an interview with a Serbian spokesperson during the conflict in Bosnia, the IR relays an accusation of extreme atrocities committed by Serbian forces (1–7), and then solicits response by inviting acceptance of that view (8).

Excerpt 10. (NPR All Things Considered, 15 July 1995: Bosnian conflict)

```
01 IR:    =Well speaking of: uh ethnic cleansing, an' gruesome: uh
02        gruesome atrocities, [we have been getting many many many=
03 JZ:                         [Yes, (huh!)
04 IR:    =reports >as you know,< from reporters, from relief workers,
05        from refugees, ˙hhh that your troops have been: raping (.)
06        women, the Bosnian women¿ and an' in some cases pulling
07        men: off buses and slitting their throats, in front of the
08     -> families. Is that true.
09        (.)
10 JZ:    Now here we go again. ˙hh Uh- we had those rape stories at
11        the beginning of this conflict, ˙hh uh- none of which have
12        been proven…
```

By contrast, here the IR relays a criticism of Serbian prison camps (1–2), and then solicits response by inviting rejection of the viewpoint (3). The inclusion of the negative polarity items "any" and "at all" tilt the question in favor of a *no*-type and hence rejecting response.

Excerpt 11. (BBC News Radio Today: Bosnian camps)

```
01 IR:    People have u::sed the phrase concentration camps:
02        and the Bosnian's themselves have used that phrase.
03     -> Do you believe there's any justification for that at all?
04 IS:    .hh I think in the case of some of the larger camps
05        there are, that's certainly accurate…
```

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In general, questions that invite affirmation (e.g., excerpt 10) harden the question by conveying a stance provisionally supportive of the adversarial viewpoint, while questions inviting rejection (e.g., excerpt 11) have the opposite or softening effect.

In the preceding pair of examples, the *yes*-preferring interrogative invites affirmation while the *no*-preferring interrogative invites rejection. This association between question polarity and soliciting acceptance/rejection is commonplace but not universal. Thus, the following interrogative is *yes*-preferring, but the specifics of its formulation ("Is that unfair") invites a rejecting response.

Excerpt 12. (ABC Nightline: 22 July 1985: apartheid in South Africa)

```
01 IR:    =.tlhh As Peter Sharp said in that piece
02        it is a lot easier to impo::se a state of emergency
03        than it is tuh lift it. .h You still have thuh root
04        cau:se when you lift it. (.) And black leaders in that
05        country have made it very clea:r .hh that this kind
06        of situation there's no way of stopping this kind of
07        situation_ .hh unless there is an end to apartheid.
08        It seems to me .h that by doing this by ih=
09        =imposing I guess this kind of repression you-
10        you really set up a system where you can do nothing
11        it seems to me .h when you lift it except to cha:nge
12        thuh system that exists there, (.) thuh basic system.
13     -> .hhh Is that unfair? er
14 HB:    Uh- (.) I- I would think it's unfair:=uh what is being
15        said=uh- because if thuh government is committed=h to:
16        bring- e=to bringing about those refor:ms. .hh uh to
17        start ay dialogue .h then at lea:st (0.2) those people:
18        who: are p- to be part of thuh process_ .h they
19        should participate in it.
```

This question delivers a pointed critique of South Africa's apartheid regime to its ambassador. Notice that the ambassador's initial response ("I would think it's unfair"), while substantively disputing the critique, is launched as a repetitional confirmation of the interrogative's embedded assessment ("Is that unfair"). This underscores that the interrogative solicitation itself embodies a point of view that is distinct from and "softer" than the viewpoint leading up to it.

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6. Soliciting response: Hardening/softening by implicating the difficulty/ease of response

Beyond polar questions, wh-type response solicitations can also bear on adversarialness. Consider two forms recurrently deployed in this context: (1) *What*-framed solicitations such as *What is your response*, *What do you say to that,* etc., versus (2) *How*-framed solicitations such as *How do you respond* or *How do you answer that*. The semantics of the first form seems to presume that the recipient has a response at hand with which to counter the viewpoint, implying that producing it will be straightforward. By contrast, the second form seems to lack this presumption, suggesting that a counterargument remains to be formulated and may be difficult to construct. Thus the question frames seem relatively "optimistic" versus "pessimistic," respectively, regarding the prospects for an adequate response, by implication treating the adversarial viewpoint in question either defeasible (in the first case) or robust (in the second case).

The actual distribution of these alternate forms suggests that this analytic distinction is meaningful for interview participants.

What-framed solicitations tend to be deployed within questions that are otherwise built as softballs, with supportive grounds that are weak or nonexistent. For instance, during the post-9/11 anthrax scare, the Surgeon General is presented with the idea of using antibiotics as a prophylactic against the disease (1–4). This viewpoint is expressed without supportive elaboration, and is attributed to ordinary people portrayed as motivated only by fear ("…because I'm afraid"). The IR then invites response from a medical expert with a *what*-framed solicitation (5).

Excerpt 13. [NBC Today, 15 Oct. 2001: Surgeon General on the anthrax scare)

```
01 IR:    You've got people right now who are going to call their
02        doctors today, and have been calling them for the last
03        week, and they're going to say, "I want a course of Cipro
04        or another antibiotic because I'm afraid."
05     -> What's your response to that?
06 DS:    Well, we really hope that people will not do that, even
07        though it's understandable that people are concerned…
```

Correspondingly, in a discussion of the tax on gasoline, a Republican senator is presented with the view that cutting the gas tax will benefit the oil companies (1–3). Here again, this view is presented without elaboration and is portrayed as emotionally driven. Indeed, the emotionality is characterized in extreme terms with heavy prosodic emphasis ("your colleagues in the Senate are TErrifie:d…"), which may be taken to insinuate that the fear is overblown. Following this, the IR invites response with another *what*-framed solicitation.

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Excerpt 14. (ABC This Week, 5 May 1996: Sen. Phil Gramm (R) on the gas tax)

```
01 IR1:   Some of your colleagues in the Senate are
02        TErrifie:d .h that if the tax is cut, (.)
03        it will benefit the oil companies. (0.7)
04     -> Wh:at do you say: [to tha:t?
05 PG:                      [Well you know: I-
06        Le:mme say: thi:s:. (0.2) Fir:st of all:: (.)
07        a:nybo:dy: who knows enou:gh: about economics, to fill
08        up a thimble, (.) u:nd[erstan:ds (.) wh:at is go[ing on:=
09 (IR?):                       [.h h h h                [h h h h
10 PG:    =in the oil market now…
```

In both of these cases the specific form of the solicitation, with its tinge of optimism, appears fitted to the softball in progress and contributes to its realization.

This form of response solicitation is also useful when dealing with persons who are unwilling to speak or be interviewed. Consider the *ambush interview*, a controversial journalistic practice whereby an unwilling IE (typically one suspected of wrongdoing) is confronted without warning in a public place. For instance, here a *60 Minutes* correspondent ambushes an alleged document thief believed to have stolen numerous rare artifacts from archives and libraries. After approaching the suspect outside his apartment building, the IR expresses a desire to "hear your side of it" (3), relays the accusations of the prosecution (5), and then solicits response (6). All of this is done while physically pursuing the IE as he walks rapidly down the street.

Excerpt 15. (CBS 60 Minutes, 2 June 2013: Document thief Barry Landau)

```
01 IR:    Just (.) answer some questions.= it's- .hh
02        You're being accused of a lot of thi:ngs, (0.6) and
03        we wanta hear your side of it.
04        (1.5)
05 IR:    They- the prosecution says you're a con man:, (.) a thief,
06     -> (0.4) What do you say to that.
07 BL:    ((opens mouth briefly; possible vocalization))
08 IR:    Don'tcha have anything to say at this point?
09        (.)
10 IR:    In your own defense?
```

Here the *what*-framed solicitation, with its optimistic presumption of a readily available response, becomes a resource for engaging an ambushed and unwilling subject, one who is unlikely to supply more than a minimal reaction and who must be encouraged to say anything at all.

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In contrast, *how*-framed solicitations tend to be deployed within questions that are otherwise built as hardballs, where the solicitation's tone of pessimism contributes to the sense that the viewpoint is compelling and difficult to counter. For instance, in one of the question cascades already examined – excerpt 9 above and reproduced below – the IR presents an elaborated evidence-based critique of NAFTA legislation (1–8), as well as a negative interrogative asserting that the evidence mandates an anti-NAFTA conclusion (9–10), before soliciting response (11). Correspondingly, the design of the solicitation – the pessimistically inflected *how*-type form – is fitted to and accentuates this hardball in progress.

Excerpt 16. (CBS Face The Nation, 14 Nov. 1993: Al Gore on NAFTA)

```
01 IR:    …Y:esterday on our Saturday news broadcast David B:onior
02        the number three Democrat in thuh House an' one a thuh
03        m:ost vocal opponents of NAFTA .hhh hel:d up on television
04        an a:d that he said, that the Mexican government is
05        r:unning. .h An:d what the ad say:s, .h it encourages
06        businesses to re:locate there, for thuh very simple reason
07        (.) that you can g:et (.) labor at m:uch cheaper prices.
08        And it even suggest around a dollar an hour. .hh
09   Q1-> Doesn't that really .hh ah: un:derline what the
10        opponents of this: uh agreement have been saying,
11   Q2-> and how do you respond to that?
12        (0.3)
13 AG:    Tha:t ad is: (.) wu- w:as running (.) before:, N(h)AFT(h)A
```

The next example also involves two successive interrogatives, although here they represent two bona fide and distinct questions, and the *how*-type solicitation appears first in the series. The preface relays a criticism of the president's plan to lift economic sanctions against South Africa, and although this viewpoint is given only minimal expression, it's hardball character is manifest in what follows the first question. After initially soliciting response (4), the journalist proceeds to anticipate a defense that the president might be expected to give (continuing diplomatic pressure in line 5), and then asks another question challenging the president to provide supporting evidence for his not-yet-articulated defense (6–7).

Excerpt 17. (Bush Press Conference, 10 July 1991: sanctions against South Africa)

```
01 IR:    Mr President, one of thuh:- one o'thee uh (.) criticisms
02        of: lifting of sanctions is it will limit the influence
03        the U.S. has over continuing the end of apartheid.
04   Q1-> .hhh How do you answer that.
05   Q2-> And if you say that the U.S. can continue diplomatic
06        pressure, was there any success in the diplomatic area
```

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```
07        during the period the sanctions were in effect .h that
08        you can point to,
09 GB:    I say sanctions continuing. Some are. .h Uh Some have
10        been lifted. .hh And uh we are going to continue to
11        engage…
```

So this turn's hardball character resides not in the prefatory elaboration of evidence, but in the subsequent challenging follow-up that treats the president's anticipated response as groundless and inadequate.

Just as the overall framework of this complex turn renders it as an adversarial hardball, the design of each component interrogative is fitted to this framework and reinforces its adversarial character. The second interrogative ("was there any success…) encodes a negative preference via the negative polarity item *any* (Heritage et al. 2007), adding a modicum of skepticism regarding the president's capacity to adequately defend his policy. And the first interrogative – designed as a pessimistically-inflected *how*-type solicitation – contributes still further to the skeptical posture that runs throughout this questioning turn.

7. Vernacular characterizations revisited: The subversiveness of a "simple question"

At the beginning of this paper it was noted that interviewers occasionally invoke terms synonymous with *hardball/softball* in the course of questioning itself, and that such vernacular metalinguistic characterizations *may* capture something real about the questions to which they refer (e.g., excerpts 1 and 2). However, at least one softball characterization – *a simple question* – tends to be mobilized in the opposite way, as a resource for hardball questioning.

Consider this exchange on nuclear waste, with a pro-nuclear scientist who had previously downplayed the problem of waste disposal. The IR projects that his next question will be put "in very simple terms" (arrowed). He then reinvokes her earlier claim about waste disposal being unproblematic within an *if*-clause, and then challenges her to explain why it hasn't been adequately dealt with (3). The question implicitly contradicts her position, and implies skepticism about her capacity to adequately respond. Here then a substantive hardball is initially cloaked in softball metalanguage.

Excerpt 18. (ABC Nigthline 6 June 1985: nuclear waste)

```
01 IR:    Continuing our conversation now with Doctor Rosalyn Yalow.
02     -> Doctor Yalow uh- ehh lemme put it in very simple terms.
03        If it's doable, if it is: easily disposable, why don't we.
```

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```
04        (1.0)
05 RY:    Well frankly I cannot- (.) answer all these
06        scientific questions in one minute given to me.
07        On the other hand there was one horrible thing that
08        happened tonight that you have- .h in addition extended.
09        .hh And that is thuh NOtion that there is an increased
10        incidence of cancer associated with the Three Mile Island
11        accident.
```

The "simple" characterization here, and in allied cases, is not intendedly ironic. It appears to be an effort to downplay or lowball the magnitude of what is being asked, thereby creating a context where any difficulty in response will stand out as a "failing." Yalow herself grasps the aggressive import of this characterization and pushes back against it in response, re-characterizing the query as an instance of "all these scientific questions," which she quite reasonably "cannot answer… in one minute given to me".

Another "simple question" characterization is deployed to similarly aggressive ends, and receives a more immediate form of push-back. Here a question to Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole is prospectively characterized as "a very simple question" (arrowed), but subsequently realized as an elaborate discrediting contrast juxtaposing Dole's prior criticisms of Reagan against a contrary reality (2–8), followed by a question suggesting that Reagan "knows more than you people on the Hill" (9–10).

Excerpt 19. (NBC Meet the Press 8 Dec. 1985: Senator Bob Dole)

```
01 IR: -> Lemme ask you a very simple question mister leader
02        if I can=I 'ave listening d'you fer ye::ars, .hhhh
03        [att(h)ACK thuh pr- atTA- .hh! attACK thuh president= ]
04 BD:    [hh! I been reading aboutchu fer years .hh heh-heh-heh]
05 IR:    =for spending (0.3) too much fer having budget
06        deficits .hhh for being wrong .hhh We're having ay
07        bi::g=eh recovery, (.) with this good economic
08        prospects fer nex' year hi:gh confidence, .hh
09        Is it possible thet- (.) he knows more then you
10        people know on thuh Hill?
11        (0.8)
12 BD:    I think we've been: pretty good supporters thuh presiden'
13        >I don' unner-< quite understand thuh question…
```

Here the senator moves to combat the subversiveness of "a very simple question" at an earlier opportunity. Shortly after the initial "very simple" characterization and the subsequent "I have been listening to you for years," but long before the

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question is actually completed, he interjects with a joke and disarming laughter (4) (Romaniuk 2013a).

The subversive low-balling of "a simple question" also makes it useful for follow-up questions geared to overcoming interviewee resistance (cf., Romaniuk 2013b). Thus when Clinton's Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin sidestepped a question about repealing the gas tax and talked instead about the general health of the economy and the wisdom of the administration's policies, the IR pursues the question and overtly sanctions Rubin for motivated evasiveness. He suggests that Rubin's actions are "all political" (1–5), and casts the prior exchange as one involving "a simple question" (8) that Rubin dealt with by "doing the light fantastic instead of giving us a direct answer" (10–12).

Excerpt 20. (ABC This Week, 5 May 1996: Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin)

```
01 IR2:   Mister Secretary one of thuh problems I think people
02        ha:ve when they say th't this is all: political, <and you
03        hear:d our first gues:t, ah Daniel (Yergin), suggest that
04        .hh thuh president's moves are basically political. .hhh
05        is that when we a:sk people like you:: and you are thus
06        chief (.) e:conomic s:pokesman, in a sense f'r thih
07     -> administration, a SImple question like (0.2) does the
08        administration support thuh repeal of thuh g:as tax or
09        no:t? (0.3) and you do thuh light fanTA::s[tic instead of=
10 IR4?:                                            [Umfhhh
11 IR2:   =giving [us a- [a direct an:swer.=
12 ??:            [H H H
13 IR4:                  [Huh huh huh huh huh
14 IR2:   =Now-Now (.) D:o you suppor:t (.) repeal of thuh gas tax,
15        or no:t?
16 RR:    S:am there's no proposal right now.=>And wh'n thuh
17        pr'posal is ma:de, then we can make a judgement.<=…
```

So here the lowballing of "a simple question" becomes a resource for highlighting prior evasiveness, impugning the motives underlying it, and justifying the subsequent pursuit of response (14–15).

8. Discussion

Adversarial questions are not created equal. While all such questions incorporate a point of view that is substantively oppositional toward the interviewee, various forms of modulation have been identified:

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1. Supportive elaboration – the viewpoint may be articulated minimally or with the elaboration of supportive arguments.
2. Endorsements – the viewpoint may or may not include reference to endorsements, which may differ in number and credibility (Clayman and Heritage 2002a, 166–170).
3. Factualistic grounds – grounds for the viewpoint may or may not be provided, and may be portrayed as either tentative or certain.
4. Adversarial conclusion – the conclusion may be portrayed as suggested by such grounds or as mandatory and beyond debate.
5. Response solicitation – the interviewee's response may be solicited through grammatical forms that are conducive to either affirmation or rejection, and may imply that an adequate response will be either easy or difficult to produce.

The vernacular distinction between "hardball" versus "softball" questions thus has ample basis in reality. However, when interviewers invoke metalinguistic terms like these within interviews, they do not necessarily do so in a way that accurately captures the character of the question in progress. Ostensibly "simple questions" are often anything but, in which case the "simple question" label is subversive and serves as yet another resource for adversarialness.

The analytic distinctions developed in this paper are not *explicitly* inscribed in the coding systems for adversarial questioning developed in the U.S. (Clayman and Heritage 2002b; Clayman et. al. 2006) or in other national contexts (Ekström et al. 2012; Huls and Varwijk 2011; Conza, Ginisci, and Caputo 2011), although they may inform the application of such systems to actual data. These distinctions are codable in principle, and their incorporation into coding systems might possibly improve the validity of their results. On the other hand, since more complex coding systems tend to be more difficult to apply, these potential gains may be achieved only at the expense of efficiency and reliability (Krippendorff 1980); for many purposes, less granular coding categories may be superior. Even so, the practices identified in this paper still have a useful role to play in the operationalization of such coding categories, potentially yielding clearer guidelines for their application. Furthermore, researchers operating on a case-by-case basis would also benefit from sensitivity to the practices identified here, which enable interviewers to fine-tune their adversarialness in the questioning of public figures.

These various question design practices have broader ramifications for politics and political action. They are a central contingency with which politicians must grapple as they build their subsequent remarks. They form the immediate context in which those remarks will be understood and interpreted by both elites and the general public. And the tenor of questioning contributes to an observable press-state relationship that is publically available to the broadcast audience and, in the age of the internet, on the record for posterity.

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Transcript conventions

Transcripts employ the standard conversation analytic notational conventions (Jefferson 2004).

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