

Question Design in the Press Conferences of U.S. Presidents Harry S. Truman and George W. Bush

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Abstract

This research aims at laying out some basic features of question design in presidential press conferences to describe their use to convey adversarial proposition. Underlying some of the observations is the suggestion that the innovation in question design can be an important element of social change in the political interviews context, and broadcast journalism more generally. It is hypothesized that present-day press conferences and political interviews differ from those of the past in their aggressiveness, and this can be conveyed through question design.

For this study, two U.S. presidents George W. Bush (2001-2009) and Harry S. Truman (1945-1953) were selected. Four press conferences were sampled and analyzed. Two press conferences for each president, and each question is analyzed in terms of three basic aspects of adversarialness in question design (a) Question Complexity, (b) Assertiveness, and (c) Accountability.

Examining the questions in Bush and Truman press conferences shows that Journalists are more aggressive and exert more pressure on Bush. Whereas they are more cautious and more polite with Truman. They convey their aggressiveness through a combination of both the content and the design of the question. There is a general increase in the use of complex questions with preface or with multiple questions, and in the use of assertive questions. Accountability questions are never used with Truman, but they are used from time to time with Bush. These findings can support the assumption of the growing of aggressiveness in political interviews and press conferences through the use of question design .

1- Background:

The public image of both interviewers and interviewees comes in part from the special ways they play interview game. Different styles of conducting the question in political press conferences and interviews also discriminate the institution of journalism in different historical and national context. Deferential styles of questioning in the 1950s differ from the adversarial manner in recent years, precisely in British news interview and in American press conferences (Clayman and Heritage,2002:14).

The developing culture of American journalism has attracted significant attention since 1970s. Many scholars have suggested that journalists after World War II have become more aggressive and less deferential when dealing with governmental officials and political candidates. This idea was introduced and supported by Michael Robinson (1976). In U.S. a transformation in the deferential position of the printed press came about in the 1960s when radio and television became the main way to address the audience rather than the newspapers. Since presidents and other politicians can be easily accessed, journalists have begun to break the strict rules that presidents had once imposed for access. Politicians are aware of the adversarial relationship between them and the press and they frequently express their point of view on that. For example at the end of his last briefing, McCurry was asked about his feeling on retiring:

Q: What are you going to miss the most about being the spokesperson?

MR. McCurry: I'll miss the give-and take room. I enjoy this –it's kind of fun. The press want more details:

Q: Do you have any words for us?

MR McCurry: I am too close to the combat that we've enjoyed here to make any profound comment... but look, this is a contentious environment, and it is , by design an adversarial relationship. But what I've tried to do is to make it a professional relationship and one in which we can still have some measure of amicability in the proceedings.

The politician in the above example chooses expressions like 'combat', contentious environment' and 'adversarial relationship' to describe the relationship with the media (Prtington,2002:108).

Although adversarialness 'is justified by some practitioners and a segment of public opinion as necessary for the pursuit of truth, it is increasingly perceived as inappropriately rude' (Montgomery, 2007: 212). Therefore, interviewers are expected to be objective. Clayman and Heritage (2002) argue that attempting to achieve objectivity involves striking a balance between objectivity as impartiality (disinterested, neutral in their questioning, and respectful of perspectives and facts), and objectivity as adversarialness (challenging in an attempt to '...achieve factual accuracy and a balance of perspectives'). Although it is important to be (or at least appear) neutral, it is also favorable to the reputation of the interviewer to appear professional in discussion, and a good performance for him or her is likely to threaten the face of the interviewer or even to damage it.

There are different practices that convey deference or adversarialness in the context, and when we look at the interviewer's question it is important to make distinction between the grammatical form of spoken utterances, and the meaning of those utterances when spoken in a particular context. Linguists used the term "declarative" and "interrogative" to describe the grammatical form of utterances, and they use the terms "statements and "questions" to name their function in context. This distinction is important.

As we shall see:

- 1- Declarative formulated utterances can function as questions.
- 2- Interrogatively formulated utterances can achieve many non-questioning actions including:

- Assertions.
- Agreements.
- Accusation.

Consider these two grammatical interrogatives :

- " Where did you lose your laptop?"
- "How could you lose your laptop?"

It is clear that while the first elicits information and is designed to "question," the second is designed to "criticize" or "blame".

So what is needed in addition to linguistic knowledge is some more pragmatic consideration of speaker purpose. The interviewer and interviewee must look at the grammatical form, the content, the context of an utterance to decide whether it is a "question" that should

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properly be "answered", or it is an assertion or accusation which can be "addressed" and/or "rejected" in some other way (Partington 2002, Clayman and Herritage 2000).

(2) Data Analysis:

For this study, two U.S. presidents George W. Bush (2001-2009) and Harry S. Truman (1945-1953) were selected. Four press conferences were sampled and analyzed. Two press conferences for each President, and each question is analyzed in terms of three basic aspects of adversarialness in question design (a) Question Complexity, (b) Assertiveness, (c) Accountability.

(a) Question Complexity

Journalist's question turn may consist of one "unit of talk", usually one sentence as in the following example:

(1) [Truman 24 march 1949]

Q: *Mr. President, have you any plans for a new ambassador to Moscow?*

Sometimes the journalists asks multiple questions within one turn as in example (2).

(2)[Bush 14 February 2007]

Q: Thank you, Mr. President. Mr. President, it seems pretty clear where this Iraq vote in the House is headed. Your Press Secretary has said repeatedly that Members of Congress ought to watch what they say and be concerned about the message that they're sending to our enemy. *I'm wondering, do you believe that a vote of disapproval of your policy emboldens the enemy? Does it undermine your ability to carry out your policies there? And also, what are you doing to persuade the Democratic leadership in Congress not to restrict your ability to spend money in Iraq?*

The above turn consists of many questions, and the journalist wants to make use of his turn by asking many questions. This will increase the pressure on the president because he has to address many questions at the same time. The president is aware of this fact when he suggests in his response that there are a couple of points to be dealt with.

Bush: Yes, thanks. A couple of points: One, that I understand the Congress is going to express their opinion, and it's very clear where the Democrats are, and some Republicans; I know that. They didn't like the decision I made. And by the way, that doesn't

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mean that I think that they're not good, honorable citizens of the country--just have a different opinion. I considered some of their opinions and felt like it would not lead to a country that could govern itself, sustain itself, and be an ally in the war on terror—one.....

Here Bush responds to the last question, about convincing the Democratic leadership in Congress to support Bush in his conduct in Iraq. Then he answers the second question concerning legitimizing his policies in Iraq. At the end Bush asks the journalists about his first question:

Bush: Secondly, I find it interesting that there is a declaration about a plan that they have not given a chance to work. Again, I understand; I understand. The other part of your question?

Q. *It emboldens the enemy*----

A complex question may consist of prefaced questions that contains one or more statements before the question. In particular the function of prefaced question design was to inform the news audience about important contextual details (Heritage 1985). But nowadays it is used not only to give background information, but to introduce aggressive questions. Thus the journalist appears to provide contextual information for the audience, but he gives hostile content that threatens the face of the president, and to push the president to answer in a certain way, by blocking some kinds of reply (Brown and Levinson, 1978; Heritage, 2002a), for example:

(3) [Bush 4 December 2007]

Q. Mr. President, Iraq's WMD turned out not to be there, and now Iran halted its nuclear program in 2003. *Are you concerned that the United States is losing credibility in the world and now may be seen as the boy who cried--who called wolf?*

The above preface is hostile in character and tilted against the President and his administration. Also it paves the way for the presupposition that is embedded in the yes/no question, suggesting that USA is losing its credibility because of the President's policy.

Journalists make use of complex question design with Bush more frequently than with Truman, about 27 times with Bush, and 12 times with Truman. This shows that the journalists have begun to utilize more constraining strategies, through their use of complex question design to elicit more revealing information.

(b) Assertiveness:

Yes/No question with preface:

The aggressive nature of journalists can be formed in a way to suggest, imply, or favor a certain response over another. Journalists normally limit themselves to asking questions, and thus they avoid any utterance whose main purpose is to express opinion. However, a question cannot be completely neutral, because the journalist may design his question to prefer a particular answer, or he exerts pressure on the President to give a particular response (Heritage,2000a,2000b).

Questions can be formed to prefer a particular answer through the interrogative design of the question itself or through question preface or by using both strategies. The analysis is restricted to yes/no questions which are more constraining on the interviewees because they are forced to say 'yes' or 'no' right away. A Yes/no question may be neutral and its main function is to elicit response from the president as in the following example:

(4) [Truman24 march 1949]:

Q: *Mr. President, did Ed Pauley tell you that Jimmy Roosevelt is going to run for Governor out there?*

Truman: No, he did not.

But sometimes the preface in yes/no question is designed to favor one answer rather than the other, consider the following example:

(5) [Bush February 2007]

Q: *Mr. President, on Russia--is the Vladimir Putin who said, "The United States is undermining global security and provoking a new arms race," the same Vladimir Putin whose soul you looked into and found to be trustworthy? Has he changed? Are U.S.-Russian relations deteriorating?*

In the first yes/no question the journalists constructs an agenda for Bush's response which suggests that Vladimir Putin is untrustworthy, and that he has changed. The journalists invokes the view of a third party (Clayman, 1992; Partington,2002). He quotes a speech in which Putin is criticizing the United States. Putin's speech contradicts Bush's policy with Russia and his opinion about Putin.

Data analysis reveals that there are clear differences in using yes/no questions with Bush and Truman. As shown in table 1 simple yes/no questions are used more frequently with Truman, more than

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67% whereas they are decreased to 42% with Bush. Neutral prefaces before yes/no questions dropped from 27% with Truman to 14% with Bush. However the greatest difference, between the two presidents is in the rate of hostile preface, only 5% with Truman and more than 45% with Bush. Thus most preface yes /no questions that prefer one kind of answer rather than another are antagonist in character and they are used widely in recent presidential press conferences.

Table 1. YES /No questions with preface

		No preface	Neutral preface	Hostile	Total
Truman	n	40	16	3	59
	%	67.79	27.11	5	100.0
Bush	n	18	6	18	42
	%	42.85	14.28	42.85	100.0

Negatively formulated question;

Questions that are designed using negative interrogative syntax, e.g. *won't you...*, *isn't this*etc are treated as embodying a very strong preference for a "yes" answer. Such kind of question is understood as conveying an assertion rather than asking a question (Heritage,2000b). Table 2 shows that in Bush Press conferences negatively formulated questions are used 5 times about 11%, in each time they convey a hostile proposition against the president's conduct and their main purpose is to convey a point of view. But such kind of questions are used only twice,3% with Truman.

Table 2. Negatively formulated question

		Not negative	Negative	Total
Truman	n	57	2	59
	%	96.61	3.38	100.00
Bush	n	39	5	44
	%	88.63	11.36	100.0

Consider the following example,

(6) [Bush 4 December 2007]

Q: Mr. President, thank you. I'd like to follow on that. When you talked about Iraq, you and others in the administration talked about a mushroom cloud; then there were no WMD in Iraq. When it came to Iran, you said in October--on October 17th, you warned about the prospect of world war III, when months before you made that statement, this intelligence about them suspending their

weapons program back in '03 had already come to light to this administration. *So can't you be accused of hyping this threat? And don't you worry that undermines U.S. credibility?*

In the above question the journalist raised a topic about the assumed Iraqi's WMD which turned out not to be there. This important issue is used frequently by journalists as a stick with which to beat Bush and his government.

The journalist, after his hostile preface that contests the president's position, makes an assertion about Bush's speech that a military confrontation is likely to occur because of the Iranian's uranium enrichment program. But the journalist mentions a fact that Bush was informed by his intelligence that Iran had stopped its nuclear program; before his speech about Iranian threat. When the journalist is criticizing Bush he uses a negatively formulated question: *"So can't you be accused of hyping this threat? And don't you worry that undermines U.S. credibility?"* Questions formatted in this way are not searching for information' but rather are taking a position. The main function of these questions is to convey the idea that Bush is exaggerating, and this might affect negatively U.S. credibility.

Here Bush responds to the preference conveyed by the negative interrogative as having made a critical assertion and he tries to defend himself by suggesting that Iran is dangerous and that he is not exaggerating:

Bush: And the second part of your question has to do with this: Look, Iran was dangerous; Iran is dangerous; and Iran will be dangerous if they have the knowledge necessary to make a nuclear weapon. The NIE says that Iran had a hidden--a covert nuclear weapons program. That's what it said. What's to say they couldn't start another covert nuclear weapons program? And the best way to ensure that the world is peaceful in the future is for the international community to continue to work together to say to the Iranians, we're going to isolate you. However, there is a better way forward for the Iranians.

There are rare instances of using negatively formulated question with Truman, as in the following example about Eisenhower, Truman's political rival :

(7) [Truman 22 December]:

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Q: *Mr. President, do you think General Eisenhower is a candidate?*

Truman: I do not. General Eisenhower and I are on the friendliest of terms, and always have been. I told you in 1948--when they were passing around all those remarks--that there wasn't anything to them, and none of you believed me, but they happened to be the facts. [Laughter]

Q: *Mr. President, couldn't you be on friendly terms even if he ran?*

Truman : Why certainly I could--certainly I could.

As shown in the above example, media are preoccupied with conflict, the journalist concentrates on who is winning or who is losing. He asks about a sensitive topic that is whether General Eisenhower is going to run against him. Truman's reply implicates that Eisenhower is not going to run as a presidential candidate because they are friends. But the journalist challenges him by using a negatively formulated question that prefers 'yes' answer. Thus he succeeds to elicit a positive answer from the president. In fact the Truman-Eisenhower relationship, once good, died in the bitterness of the campaign.

(c) Accountability Questions:

As shown in the above example not all questions are simple requests for information; they can also be accusations. Such questions take the form "Why did You do X". Moreover they can take more damaging design: "How can you do X" or "How could you X" (Clayman and Heritage 2002). "How could you do X?" when it is used to ask about a past action of the president, its main function is not to request for information, but to perform the act of accusation and criticism (Harris, 1986). "How you could X" or "How you do X" such questions are considered by both the presidents and the audience as rhetorical in character. Also "Why you do X"? is hostile in character because it asks the president to justify a certain policy, action, opinion or activity. The presidents usually are asked about their opinion, policies, activities and prospects, but they are not asked to provide any reason or rational for certain actions. When the journalists do so they treat the president action as being inappropriate, putting him in a situation of having to defend himself.

As shown in table 3 accountability questions are never used with Truman, but they are used with Bush more than 13%. This is another

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indication of the growing aggressiveness in the presidential press conferences.

Table 3. Accountability Questions.

		Other Questions	Accountability Questions	Total
Truman	n	79	0	79
	%	100.0	0	100.0
Bush	n	57	9	66
	%	86.36	13.63	100.0

In the following example, the journalist asks Bush “Why do you do X?” :

(8) [Bush 14 February 2007]

Q. Mr. President, Republican and Democratic Presidents before you sat down for face-to-face talks with the Soviet Union, a nation that was clearly hostile, tyrannical, and had a huge nuclear arsenal. *Why do you think that face-to-face talks between yourself and the leadership of Iran would be any more compromising for you?*

Here the journalist gives a prefatory statement about U.S. former presidents’s foreign policy. The statement highlights a contrast between then republican and the democratic U.S. presidents and Bush policy. He is asked to explain the contrast in his conduct and that of the other presidents. Thus the journalist represent the other side of the argument by implying that since the Republican and Democratic Presidents before Bush had bilateral conversations with their enemy, then why should not he do so with Iran. Thus the journalist casts the president’s policy as being irrational and arrogant.

(9) (Bush 4 December 2007):

Q. Mr. Bush, *how can you say nothing has changed?* You may see it this way, but the rest of the world is going to see the lead as the fact that the nuclear weapons program was halted in 2003.

Bush. Right.

Q. When you first saw this, *weren't you angry?* You didn't know about Syria. In 2005, you had the same assessment, "with high confidence that Iran currently is determined to develop nuclear weapons." And now, quite the opposite. *How can you possibly think the rest of the world is going to continue--to the degree it did--to rally around you and your intelligence?*

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In the above example accountability question, “Mr. Bush, *how can you say nothing has changed?*”, is followed by a statement that contests Bush’s position. “*But*” establishes a contrast between his speech and between the fact that Iran had stopped its program of developing WMD. Bush interrupts the journalist to comment, but the journalist does not give Bush the turn and he proceeds by using a negatively formulated question “weren't you angry?”, this negatively formulated question implies that Bush has to be angry because he has done something wrong. The journalist wants to present the other side of the argument as aggressively as he can, therefore; he uses accountability question design again to convey a very hostile assertion: the other world is going to lose trust in U.S., implying that since you got it wrong once, in the case of Iraq, why the world should believe you?.

Conclusion

Grammar and content in political interviews interconnect one another to fulfill the journalist’s basic function. Questions can be formed in a certain grammatical design to convey aggressive content. Journalists are more aggressive and exert more pressure on Bush. Whereas they are more cautious and more polite with Truman. They convey their aggressiveness through a combination of both the content and the design of the question. This finding can support the assumption of the growing of aggressiveness in political interviews and press conferences.

Examining the questions in Bush and Truman press conferences shows that there is a general increase in the use of complex questions with preface or with multiple questions. In Truman’s press conference, the preface before question is to provide background information for the audience, to justify the question, or to provide a context. But the function of preface with Bush is to convey a hostile content, to exert pressure on the president and to push him to answer in certain ways. Preface statements are used to expose the intelligence failure, to criticize Bush’s conduct or point of view, also to detect and highlight weakness in his policy.

The use of negatively formulated questions is very rare in Truman press conferences, but it’s use with Bush is more frequent. Such kinds of questions are used with Bush after a preface statement to highlight

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the contradiction between the president's speech and what is really happening, accusing him of having to hide the truth.

Accountability questions are never used with Truman, but they are used from time to time with Bush. "How could you do X?", "How can you do X?" are more hostile than "Why do you do X?" (Heritage, 2000a). Accountability questions are used with Bush when he is questioned about his previous speech. The function of such questions is to cast doubt on the president's policy and to question its appropriateness.

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صيغة الأسئلة في المؤتمرات الصحفية للرئيسين الأمريكيين

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المستخلص

يهدف البحث الى تحديد الخصائص الأساسية لصياغة الأسئلة في المؤتمرات الصحفية الرئاسية ووصف كيفية استخدامها بصورة تهجمية. من بين الملاحظات الخاصة بالمقابلات السياسية المقترح بأن التجديد والتغيير في صيغة السؤال يعتبر عامل أساسي يعكس التغيير الحاصل في مجال المقابلات السياسية والصحافة المعلنة. يتناول البحث دراسة الفرضية التي تنص على أن المقابلات السياسية و المؤتمرات الصحفية في الوقت الحاضر تختلف عن نظيراتها في الماضي ،بحيث أنها أصبحت أكثر هجومية . للتأكد من الفرضية تم اختيار رئيسين من رؤساء الولايات المتحدة هما جورج دبليو بوش (2001_2009) وهاري اس ترومان (1945_1953). تم اختيار اربع مؤتمرات صحفية كنموذج للتحليل بواقع مؤتمرين لكل رئيس لغرض تحليل صيغة الأسئلة مستنديين على ثلاث ميزات قد تتصف بها هذه الأسئلة : (أ) مدى تعقيد السؤال (ب) الجزم في السؤال (ج) تحميل المسؤولية.

أظهرت تحليل الأسئلة الخاصة بالمؤتمرات الصحفية للرئيسين بوش وترومان أن الصحفيين اكثر هجومية في أسئلتهم الموجهة لبوش ،بينما هم اكثر حذراً و تأدباً في أسئلتهم الموجهة لترومان يتضح ذلك من محتوى الأسئلة و طريقة صياغتها. كما أثبتت الدراسة بأن هناك علاقة بين الأسلوب الهجومي للصحفيين وطريقة صياغتهم للأسئلة .