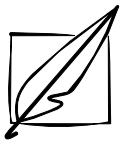

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Striking a balance between norms of impartiality and adversarialness in broadcast interviews

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on questions posed by professional journalists in broadcast interviews on sensitive topics, like pandemics, wars, and international affairs. Proceeding from the rules of conduct of interviews as characterised in manuals and scholarly studies, particularly with reference to journalistic stance, the aim of the research is to check if, and to what extent, interviewers diverge from the 'rules' advocating impartiality so far as to betray subjectivity/adversarialness. To carry out the study, I analyse a subsection of the *InterDiplo Corpus*, where the interviewers are mother-tongue speakers of English while their interlocutors are ambassadors from different lingua-cultural backgrounds; the data are screened both quantitatively and qualitatively. The results unveil a set of discursive traits in the questions posed by journalists that partly diverge from the current rules of conduct, while also pointing to sociolinguistic differences between male and female journalists.

Keywords: broadcast interviews, journalistic norms, questions, impartiality in journalism, corpus linguistics.

So let's be clear and I want reality to interfere with the propaganda.
(InterDiplo Corpus_war_004)

1. Introduction

The interview has always been an asset in a variety of professions; in the healthcare system, for example, textbooks teach and train (prospective) doctors and practitioners how to conduct interviews with patients and

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relatives to develop "the art of understanding" (Shea 2017) for appropriate bio-psycho-social assessment, diagnosis and therapy, particularly in the case of psychiatric patients (Carlat 2016; MacKinnon et al. 2015). To this end, in each phase of the interviewing process, the cultural backgrounds of interactants, as well as cues offered by body language (Platt – Gordon 2004), need to be taken into consideration to ensure effective communication (Cole – Bird 2014; Sommers-Flanagan – Sommers-Flanagan 2015).

In the legal and social service, professionals are provided with specifically structured protocols for best practice to guide them through the task of interviewing the people involved in offences, especially children (e.g., National Children's Advocacy Center 2019). When interviewing young victims of abuse (Fessinger et al. 2021; Lamb et al. 2018), for instance, the focus of the interview is particularly on how testimony can be made reliable despite the understandable reticence victims may have. In turn, interrogations of people accused of a crime, as well as witnesses or other prospective informants, are key to detect behaviour symptoms of truth or deception (Inbau et al. 2010).

Social science research also heavily relies on interviewing as an established research method to gather a detailed account of the quality and nature of people(s)'s views, experiences and behaviour in the lingua-cultural contexts they occur (Rubin – Rubin 2012). Indeed, one-to-one interviews and focus groups elicit narrative data (Alshenqeeti 2014) of invaluable help to psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists to build a holistic picture of the personal and group traits of respondents.

In journalism, the question-and-answer interview format familiar to modern readers is credited to have been born in 1859 (Silvester 1994: 4), when Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, interviewed Brigham Young, leader of the Mormon Church (Turnbull 1936). Since then, journalistic interviews have grown from "a stuffy, pompous thing that could interest only a minority of the serious-minded" into "a lively means of informing and entertaining millions of people" (Adams – Hicks 2009: 1, quoting Wynford Hicks). In such continuous swing and balance between entertainment and information lie the current rules of conduct of journalistic interviews, both written and spoken, whose benchmark is the need for the journalist to maintain and safeguard impartiality while attempting to elicit from their interlocutors both information and, at times, also possibly inconvenient truths.

Bearing this in mind, the main research question of the present paper is whether current journalistic interviews manage to comply to the rules so

as to strike a balance between impartiality and subjectivity. Moreover, little has been said so far, to my knowledge, on possibly different attitudes to questioning between male and female professional journalists; hence, the present study will also attempt to address this topic.

To do so, I will first focus on the specificities of journalistic interviews as recommended in manuals and illustrated in scholarly studies, from the prototypical structure of interviews to the types of questions and the favoured turn-taking moves (section 2). I will then illustrate the corpus exploited for the study, which draws from the *InterDiplo Corpus* developed at the University of Verona, Italy. The subcorpus selected for the present research, in particular, covers broadcast interviews where professional journalists ask diplomats questions on pandemics, wars, and international affairs (section 3). In section 4, the data will be analysed and discussed both quantitatively and qualitatively from the discourse-pragmatic perspective.

2. The design of the journalistic interview and how it is conducted

2.1 The journalistic interview

Journalistic interviews may vary depending on medium, setting, format, topic, and aim of the interview itself. What follows is an overview of the taxonomy offered in textbooks, though bearing in mind that trainers and scholars do not always share the same terminology.

The medium of an interview may be either written or spoken, thus diversifying between 'print' and 'broadcast'; in broadcast interviews, in particular, the setting may be either a televised studio with all the interactants talking face-to-face, or video-/telephone-mediated, with interviews conducted remotely. Now that social networks have spread worldwide, interviews can equally take place online, for example on Instagram, Facebook and YouTube; in that case, the virtual environment also allows journalists to crowdsource the sentiment of a wide range of population simply by posting a question on their account and receive responses directly from their followers.

With reference to the format, interviews can unfold as one-to-one or as a panel, where several people are questioned at the same time. In both cases, the interview may be either 'structured' or 'unstructured' (Morán García 2023). When structured, there is no flexibility, since the interviewer (IR) asks the same pre-determined questions to all interviewees (IEs) and collects data

in a standardised way, for example, to assess workers' well-being or their job performance, to evaluate a product or a customer's satisfaction. In contrast, in an unstructured interview, IR and IE have a free-flowing conversation with no pre-defined set of questions; this allows the journalist to follow the flow of the conversation and ask questions accordingly.

Bearing in mind both topic and aim, Clayman and Heritage (2002) qualify all broadcast interviews conducted by professional journalists as 'news interviews', while Lee-Potter (2017) and Sedorkin and Forbes (2023) distinguish between 'news' and 'feature' interviews (covering both written and spoken ones). Specifically, they remark that the former gather information on hard and soft news to check facts or ascertain details; in case of hard news, the questions generally focus on the five *wh*-words and the *how*, as for an accident with eyewitnesses, bystanders, police and fire/ambulance personnel. In case of soft news, showbiz and celebrities are involved, as well as 'vox pops' to gather the people's perspective with the benefit of immediacy and spontaneity. In turn, the latter – otherwise termed 'in-depth' interviews by Morán García (2023: 9) – address certified experts to gather relevant information about a specific topic. Instances of feature interviews may be with an expert on a financial crisis, with a scientist on climate change, with a doctor about Covid19, or again with a political leader on international situations. Be it a news or a feature interview, when internationally renowned personalities are involved, including movie and sport stars or political and business leaders, the resulting broadcast may also be termed 'prestige' interview (Sedorkin – Forbes 2023: 6).

A different perspective is offered by Frost (2010), who distinguishes between 'informational', 'emotional', 'interpretive' and 'adversarial' interviews, respectively providing facts about a news event (informational), sharing someone's personal experience (emotional), getting experts or campaigners to analyse and explain events (interpretive), and finally asking someone in authority to explain and/or justify actions and policy (adversarial).

Overall, while the terminology may partly differ, virtually all trainers and scholars agree on the fundamentals of how to conduct an interview, from the preparation stage to its closing and broadcasting, as well as the editing of the text for publication in case of written interviews. For the sake of the analysis to be conducted in the present paper, which focuses on the broadcast output of an interview, in section 2.1 I will illustrate the rules of conduct related to the types of questions to be asked and will linger particularly on the degree of impartiality to be safeguarded by the journalist.

2.2 Conducting an interview

Trainers agree that the first words and question of a journalist are key to establish rapport with their interlocutor; hence, the IR should start the interview with a remark that makes the IE feel not intimidated and ready to talk (Morán García: 33), for example by addressing common issues and establishing a good connection or by physically mirroring the IEs' body language and matching the way they are sitting (Grossman, quoted in Lee-Potter 2017: 76). As a result, the very first question needs to be uncontroversial: "Start with an easy, uncontroversial question. (…) A few straightforward questions will get you and your interviewer warmed up and into the flow of the conversation. Leave the more sensitive questions till later on in the interview. (Lee-Potter 2017: 64-65)."

Questions themselves are of different types, the most typical being 'open(-ended)' and 'closed(-ended)' questions. Open(-ended) questions are those that encourage IEs to give detailed answers, expand on the topic and/or voice their perspective, as in (1):[1]

(1) What messages are you getting from X living here who are concerned about their friends and family out in your country? (covid19_004)

As in (1), open questions usually begin with *why*, *how*, and *what* and trainers agree that open-ended questions should be favoured, since they allow IEs to speak in depth about the topic of discussion (Morán García 2023: 37).

In contrast, closed(-ended) questions require a 'yes' or 'no' answer and, indeed, they are also called 'yes/no' questions; as such, they do not leave the interlocutor much ground for interpretation or free speech, since they channel them onto a binary pattern:

(2) Is Biden correct? (war_001)

These questions are credited to be useful for the journalist as they elicit specific answers and guide the interview, thus preventing the IE from straying from the main topics. Yet, for these very reasons, they should not be favoured, since they limit the freedom of the IE; as Sedorkin and Forbes put it, closed questions can be used "but not too often" (2023: 62).

1 All examples are drawn from the *InterDiplo Corpus* (see section 3 for more information about the corpus). Names of (opposing) countries and populations have been replaced with "X" and "Y" to safeguard anonymity of data; punctuation, bold characters and underlining are mine.

Two more types of questions can be identified, namely 'choice' questions, offering an alternative between two, as in (3), and 'requests', which may take the form of either direct/indirect interrogatives (e.g., *I wonder if you can…, could you…*) as in (4), or of imperatives, as in (5):

(3) do you see this as more of a reactive response or do you see this as the desire of the X government to say this is the moment when X should lead? (covid19_033)

(4) could you please get me the mortality rate? (covid19_070)

(5) pinpoint for us and briefly the concrete measures you are calling for to be taken globally (covid19_030)

While choice questions – also called 'polar' – somehow impose an answer onto the interlocutor, like the closed questions illustrated above, requests are more similar to the open ones, since they leave more ground to the IE in answering.

Finally, independently of the syntactic structure, mention needs to be made of 'leading questions', which prompt or encourage IEs to give the answer wanted or assumed, as in (6), and of '(stand-alone) statements', namely declaratives that function as comments or questions seeking confirmation, as in (7):

(6) Why is your president downplaying the risk? (war_002)

(7) That's just a claim. There is no evidence and there is no truth. (war_016)

In (6), the journalist is not enquiring about the truthfulness of the president downplaying or not the risk, but rather takes it for granted and asks the reason for it. By 'leading' the IE to answer as required, this type of questions embodies a certain degree of subjectivity on the part of the journalist that may end into the loss of impartiality. In turn, in (7) the journalist is making a statement with no explicit question that acts both as a personal comment on the previous answer and as prompt for the next response.

Due to the presuppositions they embed (i.e. *downplaying the risk* in ex. 6) and the remarks they may convey (7), both leading questions and (stand-alone) statements can very often turn adversarial; hence, scholars and trainers agree that, to establish and safeguard rapport, journalists "can't do it right at the start of the interview" (Lee-Potter 2017: 153). Overall, bearing in mind the informative mission of the journalist and consequently

the key function of the interview of gaining information on behalf of one's audience (Strong 2014: 2), most scholars agree that journalists should "avoid judgmental language" (Lee-Potter 2017: 99) and should rather take a matter-of-fact approach; in other words, "the journalist should be objective" (Morán García 2023: 23) and "avoid biased language" (Morán García 2023: 62).

However, Clayman and Heritage (2002) value adversarial questions as a way to safeguard objectivity and not as a practice to be necessarily avoided; indeed, they posit that journalists are rather called to strike a balance between two competing conceptions of 'objectivity': on the one hand, objectivity as impartiality, which calls for neutrality in questioning, and, on the other hand, objectivity as adversarialness, since "to achieve factual accuracy and a balance of perspectives, journalists should actively challenge their sources" (Claymand – Heritage 2002: 29).

Moving from the rules of conduct illustrated above, in sections 3 and 4 I will check if and to what extent current broadcast interviews respect such recommendations in conducting an interview, particularly with reference to the issue of impartiality vs. subjectivity. Special attention will be dedicated to possible diverging attitudes between male and female IRs with reference to the types of questions preferred or dis-preferred and the discursive strategies enacted.

3. Corpus data

To carry out my analysis, I relied on a subsection of the *InterDiplo Corpus*[2]. The corpus is devised to study how the English language is used in broadcast interviews and discussions; it covers interviews from professional and non-professional journalists, as well as from celebrity entertainers and broadcasters addressing diplomats, politicians (largely government officials) or newsworthy public figures and certified experts on (potentially) sensitive

[2] The *InterDiplo Corpus* was initiated at the University of Verona, Italy, within the research project "Digital Humanities applied to Foreign Languages and Literatures", funded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research within the framework of the Departments of Excellence 2018-2022. As a first result of the project, the *InterDiplo-Covid19 Corpus* was compiled as a pilot corpus (Cavalieri – Corrizzato – Facchinetti 2021), to test the methodology of data selection and tagging system. The subsection chosen for this paper relies on further data added to the *InterDiplo Corpus* within the nationally funded PRIN 2020-2023 project "Communicating transparency: New trends in English-language corporate and institutional disclosure practices in intercultural settings".

topics, like Covid19, wars, climate change, health&wellbeing, and – more broadly – international affairs. All interviews were conducted between 2020 and 2022 and were drawn in full from well-known international broadcasting companies and their YouTube channels. For the present study, I selected a subcorpus of 10 interviews, as reported in Table 1.

Table 1. *InterDiplo* subcorpus

NETWORK	IR NATIONALITY	IR GENDER	IE NATIONALITY	IE GENDER	IE ROLE
FRANCE 24	UK	F	Russia	M	Permanent Representative to the EU
SKY	UK	F	Russia	M	Ambassador to the EU
CHANNEL 4	UK	F	Italy	M	Ambassador to the UK
EURONEWS (ENG)	UK	F	Portugal	M	UN Secretary General
BBC	UK	F	Russia	M	Ambassador to the UK
BBC	UK	M	Russia	M	Ambassador to the UK
BBC	UK	M	Israel	M	Permanent Representative to the UN
iTV	UK	M	Russia	M	Ambassador to the UN
SKY	UK	M	China	M	Ambassador to the UK
RTE'	UK	M	Russia	M	Ambassador to Ireland

The criteria for the selection of the data are as follows. In the first place, all interviews go beyond the sheer interactional pattern 'question-answer-next question' – which does not lead to proper conversation – and rather exhibit follow-up moves whereby the IR may call for amplification of the previous

answer to elicit additional details, clarify points, and dig deeper into what has just been uttered by the IE,[3] as in (8):

(8) IR (question 1) (…) is everything going according to plan?
IE (answer 1) (…) we have now more stabilized situation over the year and actually well things looks that we have a certain stability in this situation right now.
IR (question 2) And by stability what do you mean by stability?
IE (answer 2) That there are no serious moves (…) our troops is now regrouping and what I am seeing is I do not envisage that in the coming, well say weeks or days we will have serious events on the ground.
IR (question 3) So is this conflict unfolding in the way you expected it to? (war_008)

Here the journalist opens with question 1, rephrases it in question 3 and, in-between, takes up answer 1 in question 2 with the same word used by the IE (*stability*), so as to ensure clarification and a proper reply to her first question. In turn, the linking words *and* and *so* strengthen the logical consequentiality of the conversational flow.

The second criterion for the selection of the data applies to interactants. With reference to IRs, the choice was made of ten different professional journalists, all British-born and UK-based; indeed, the common lingua-cultural background of IRs on the one hand avoids the discursive flow to be possibly affected by different degrees of linguistic expertise, while on the other hand it safeguards from differences in interviewing practices prompted by diverse institutional backgrounds; for example, "the development of news interview appears to be quite different" in America and Britain (Clayman – Heritage 2002: 55). Moreover, the diversification of journalists limits at best the skewing of data due to possible idiosyncratic linguistic choices of single IRs. Finally, the journalists are equally subdivided between men and women to detect possible sociolinguistic variations in the strategy of conducting interviews. Both subsets of men and women cover ca. 80 minutes each, so as to ensure comparability of data, for a total of ~27,000 tokens.

As for IEs, of the three professional categories covered in the *InterDiplo* Corpus – diplomats, politicians, and certified experts –, only interviews featuring diplomats were selected for this subcorpus, in order to avoid variations in the way IRs may handle different professional categories

[3] Morán García terms these moves 'follow-up questions' (Morán García 2023: 42).

of IEs. The fact that all IEs turn out to be men is due to the limited number of interviews with female diplomats available.

Finally, each interview of the corpus has been saved, transcribed, converted into XML and tagged for metadata, parts of speech and paralinguistic features (e.g. overlapping speech, pauses, repairs, restarts, hesitations) as well as for question- and answer-types according to the taxonomy 'open', 'closed', '(stand-alone) statement', 'request', and 'choice'.

4. Results and discussion

Two complementing levels of analysis have been conducted on the corpus. Specifically, the corpus has been screened quantitatively with the software *SketchEngine*, to identify the occurrences of the question types posed by the journalists; then, all data have been screened manually, bearing in mind both the syntactic structures and the discursive moves embedding them. Special attention has been dedicated to the introductory question of each IR.

The results of the quantitative analysis show that journalists markedly waive the rules of conduct illustrated in Section 2 with reference to open-ended questions that should strongly be favoured in interviews. Indeed, the highest frequency of occurrence has rather been recorded for closed questions (53.6%), while open-ended ones appear to be exploited by IRs to a lower extent (33.1%), as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Types of questions in the *InterDiplo* subcorpus (% in brackets)

IR	OPEN	CLOSED	(STAND-ALONE) STATEMENT	REQUEST	CHOICE	TOTAL
female	36 (36.6)	63 (33.6)	5 (4.6)	1 (0.9)	2 (1.8)	107
male	37 (32.7)	55 (48.6)	19 (16.8)	0	2 (1.7)	113
total	73 (33.1)	118 (53.6)	24 (10.9)	1 (0.4)	4 (1.8)	220

This confirms what has been recorded in a previous study (Facchinetti 2023) based on a different section of the *InterDiplo Corpus* and focussed on interviews that were addressed to a wider range of IEs, including politicians and certified (science) experts, and diversifying between face-to-face and video-mediated interviews. There as well the data yielded few – if no – instances of choice- and request-questions and a consistently greater percentage of closed questions, though with differing results between face-

to-face interviews and those conducted in video-mediated environments (respectively 67.3% *vs*. 59.6%).

In the present corpus, the virtual lack of requests is shared both by male and by female IRs, as well as the prevalence of closed questions, though with a distinctly higher percentage in favour of females (58.8%) over males (48.6%). In contrast, male journalists resort to (stand-alone) statements much more than their female counterparts (16.8% vs. 4.6%). Hence, the data seem to suggest possibly diverging attitudes and strategies of male and female journalists in addressing their interlocutors.

The subsequent manual checking of each contextualised occurrence has allowed verifying that many of the open questions uttered by male IRs could be better treated as 'closed questions in disguise', since they are framed syntactically as open-ended ones, starting with a *wh*-word, but function as rhetorical questions, like (9):

(9) why should our viewers believe (…)? (war_011)

In (9) the IR challenges what his IE has just said and puts himself in an adversarial mode; yet in so doing he also runs the risk of losing impartiality. Similarly, questions framed using negative-interrogative syntax leave little ground for free speech, since they embody a very strong preference for a 'yes' answer (5.3% males *vs*. 3.7% females); as such, they are pragmatically highly coercive:

(10) doesn't it need a global investigation now as soon as possible with world renowned scientists? (adv_015)

The degree of adversarialness is further strengthened by overlapping speech, whereby the IR interrupts his IE while answering; once again, this has been recorded much more prominently in the male than in the female subset (15% vs 4.6%):[4]

(11) IE: We know this guy He is very unprofessional he Well, we have, of course people who thinks differently He is one of them That's all right But I can say to you that 75% of the X population do support the <overlap> military operation </overlap> <overlap> But </overlap> he is a senior official <overlap> in the X delegation at the United Nations

4 In the tagging, <overlap> and </overlap> mark respectively the beginning and end of the overlapping chunk.

</overlap> <overlap> I wouldn't say so </overlap> We know the guy he is yes, he stayed for some time at the Ministry. (war_005)

Rather than eliciting information, as should be the case according to rules of conduct, the IR repeatedly challenges his interlocutor and blocks his flow of speech in sustained disagreement.

When focussing on the question encapsulated in the first move, the data tend to confirm a stronger preference of men for adversarialness and for leading their interlocutors in the direction they favour. Indeed, all male IRs open their interview with a question that is either covertly or overtly provocative:

(12) Let's begin with what appears to be a real sense of confusion at the top of your government in X. The world was expecting a formal declaration (…), they were expecting it days ago and it never happened. Why? (adv_007)

(13) Ambassador, the facts are clear. Thousands of people have been killed in this war. So far, 14 million people have had to leave their homes (…). Why did X start this war? (war_005)

(14) Are significant numbers of your troops being removed from (…)? (adv_009)

(15) Do you accept that X has a problem with trust? (adv_11)

(16) (to the audience): I asked him when his country would stop his aggression (…). (war_11)

Two discursive patterns are to be identified in the instances above: prefatory statements and leading questions; specifically, both (12) and (13) exhibit a prefaced question design that contains one or more statements prior to the proper question. In (12) the IR anticipates his perspective also by means of the evidential *appear*, thus presenting as fact what may derive from his perspective; in (13) the IR does the same resorting to *clear.* In turn, (14), (15), and (16) are simple questions – thus with no prefatory statement preparing the ground – but they are structured as leading questions, with embedded presuppositions that make the initial question far from uncontroversial. In contrast, according to recommendations, initial questions should rather be neutral to safeguard rapport and put the interlocutor at ease. Here the 'unfriendliness' and bias of the presuppositional content emerges from

significant in (14), from *problem* in (15) and from *aggression* in 16). Moreover, two of these leading questions (14 and 15) are even framed as closed rather than as open-ended, once again moving away from the recommendations of favouring open questions at the start of interviews.

In turn, female journalists make use of prefatory statements in three out of five of their initial questions:

(17) I'd like I'd like to start by talking about some of the latest military moves by X, by X around Y. Six X warships sent through the Bosphorus into the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. What's the purpose of this deployment? (adv_014)

(18) The whole of your country is now quarantined. Can you just describe for us the situation that X now finds itself in? (covid19_004)

(19) You said the whole world must fight back to stop this pandemic reaching apocalyptic proportions. Pinpoint for us and briefly the concrete measures you are calling for to be taken globally. (covid19_030)

Unlike the prefatory statements in (12) and (13), the ones exhibited in (17), (18) and (19) appear relatively neutral, since they present facts and focus on numbers without any word pointing to perspective or subjectivity. In this way, IRs open their interview with a question that leaves the floor to dialogue and does not appear adversarial, thus putting the interlocutor at ease.

Out of the five opening questions in the female subset, one IR resorts to a very neutral simple question with no prefatory statement (20):

(20) I want to ask you first of all in terms of what you call the special military operation, is everything going according to plan? (war_008)

while only one IR addresses her IE in the first question in a clearly adversarial mode (21):

(21) I want to kick off with this: <u>can we really believe anything</u> you say? And the reason I ask you this is that you toured the world's media not long ago and in interview after interview you assured the world that the invasion of X wasn't going to happen and I've got lots of examples here's a couple this is cnbc on the 21st January you said you were asked that (…), you said there was no evidence pointing to that, that's not your aim (…) and then another one (…) you said (…) and you then went on to say (…) ambassador, did you say those things because you

were lying or did you not know the truth you didn't realize that the invasion was imminent? (adv_026)

The incorporation of the terms *really* and *anything* embodies preference for a negative response and overtly challenges the IE to defend his position. It is to be noted, though, that in the same move the adversarial question is immediately followed by a justification ("And the reason I ask you this is that") recalling what the interlocutor himself had previously declared officially, so as to justify the adversarialness of the introductory question and to prepare the ground for an even more adversarial one, which is framed as a choice question. Indeed, using the IE as a source to corroborate her claim, the IR enacts a shrewd tactic that somehow stonewalls her assertion and allows her to maintain professional balance and neutrality while being adversarial in questioning.

As mentioned above, data show that female IRs disprefer stand-alone statements (4.6%) not followed by questions – and largely rely on pre- or post-question statements which, as in (18, 19, 20 and 22), allow them to buttress their statements with sources and data, so as to appear neutral and not to endorse those claims personally. Overall, then, when asking questions, they appear to be more tactful and less overtly adversarial than their male counterparts, who, in turn, put themselves into the adversarial arena more overtly.

Overall, in the corpus all IRs share some practices that do not fully respect the recommendations illustrated in section 2. In the first place, while rules of conduct suggest using closed questions sparingly, this typology is exploited largely both by male and by female IRs, so as to channel the IE in either one direction or the other, leaving little ground for free speech.

Secondly, all IRs resort to leading questions, which are aptly embedded particularly in the open-ended ones. In so doing, journalists on the one hand appear to allow free speech via an open question, while on the other they limit the freedom of their IEs by channelling – or rather challenging – them in a pointed direction.

Thirdly, they all resort to pre- and post-question statements, largely to disclaim responsibility from what they are about to say. In such statements, journalists offer numbers, as in (17), or quote previous statements of the IEs themselves, as in (21), or again mention high ranking sources who take a particular view of the issue (22) and finally resort to 'vox pop' (23):

(22) I'm I'm sorry sir but <u>what I hear from western leaders is that</u> they would like a peaceful negotiated settlement then why are they pumping weapons into X at an increasing speed that will certainly not

help unless they of course want to fight this war until the lastliving X (adv_026)

(23) And I've spoken to many X since February the 24th, civilians, many of them (war_008)

By resorting to data and sources, IRs provide factual and commonly shared evidence to their statements and thus manage to 'dress' their remarks with objectivity.

These shared practices clearly paint a picture of IRs – at least the British ones under scrutiny in this study – partly not aligned with the current rules of conduct but still attempting to safeguard professionality and impartiality when addressing and challenging their interlocutors on sensitive topics.

5. Conclusions

Clayman and Heritage remark that "interview questioning is very far from being a neutral activity", since it "is not, and cannot be, strictly neutral" (Clayman – Heritage 2002: 234); indeed, the selection of topics and the choice of questions make neutrality virtually impossible.

The study illustrated in this paper seems to confirm that, when it comes to sensitive topics like wars, pandemics and, overall, international issues, it is hard for IRs to tread the narrow lane of adversarialness without turning judgemental, despite that fact that journalists are invited to "be careful not to offer qualifications, opinion or value judgments" (Morán García 2023: 51). The rules of conduct generally put forward to define the playing field within which more or less cooperatively IRs and IEs interact favour keeping the channel open to dialogue, safeguarding rapport with one's interlocutor and leaving floor to the IE to express their perspective through open questions.

However, the high use of closed and leading questions in the corpus testifies to a general trend that partly distances the practice of current broadcast interviews from such rules; more precisely, the data show that IRs, on the one hand, critically challenge their IEs in different ways while, on the other, they attempt to avoid excessive aggressivity and confrontation, particularly in the female subset. To successfully strike such balance between impartiality and adversarialness, the IRs rely on statements putting forward data and sources, which allow them to disclaim responsibility of what is being put forward. Pre- and post-question statements occur in both subsets, while stand-alone statements – which tend to be more adversarial in

structure – seem to be favoured by men. Indeed, male journalists appear to be more aggressive both in their questions at the beginning of the interview and through the use of rhetorical questions and of negative-interrogatives. In so doing, male IRs appear to run the risk of losing the neutralistic posture and ending up in aggressive interrogations more than their female counterparts. In contrast, female journalists appear to be less adversarial also by disfavouring overlapping speech and avoiding stand-alone statements.

Undoubtedly, more data need to be analysed to further verify what has emerged both in terms of the waiving of rules of conduct and with reference to the differences between male and female interviewers that have emerged. Presuppositions embedded in leading questions also need to be dedicated attention in terms of the lexical items involved; indeed, for want of space, in the present study the focus has been placed on syntactic structures and rhetorical patterns rather than on single lexical items; yet, a number of other aspects were identified in the corpus that call for attention in further studies, for example (a) personal pronouns, bearing in mind inclusive and exclusive *we*; (b) adjectives and adverbs of manner, like *respectful/ly*, *serious/ly*, and *fair/ly*, as well as their positioning in the interactional flow; (c) the actualization of modality, from deontic to dynamic and epistemic and, most interestingly, evidentiality. Last, but not least, this study has focused on one-to-one interviews; attention needs to be dedicated also to the language of panels, featuring discussions and debate among IEs and also calling into question the audience, when present.

Finally, understanding the world of broadcast interviews should not be exclusive prerogative of the news-making profession or of scholarly studies. Indeed, decoding the Q&A interface also enables the general public to navigate the online and offline sea of broadcast media in an informed way, bearing in mind that, as long as journalistic interviews will be offered, the venting of perspective and subjectivity – even if in adversarial terms – will also be available, along with the sharing of information, which lies at the heart of journalism itself.

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