

Talking it through: The case for the use of conversational analytic approaches in the analysis of news journalism

Abstract

This study makes out the case for the use of the Conversational Analytic method as a research approach that might both extricate and chronicle the features of the journalism interview. It seeks to encourage such research to help inform understanding of this form and to provide further lessons as to the nature of journalism practice. Such studies might follow many paths but this paper focuses more particularly on the outcomes for the debate as to the continued relevance of “objectivity” in informing journalism professional practice. To make out the case for the veracity of CA as a means through which the conduct of journalism practice might be explored the paper examines: the theories of the interaction order that gave rise to the CA method; outlines the key features of the journalism interview as explicated through the CA approach; outlines the implications of such research for the establishment of the standing of “objectivity”. It concludes as to the wider relevance of such studies of journalism practice for a fracturing journalism field, which suffers from a lack of benchmarks to measure the public benefit of the range of forms that now proliferate on the internet.

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Introduction:

Studies that seek to explain, or explicate, journalism professional practice are often based on the examination of the journalistic interview. Frequently, these analyses use conversational analysis (CA) to isolate the particular features of the interview. Furthermore, such conclusions are often used to divine broader understandings of journalism practice. In order to advance such understandings, this paper traces the origins of CA. In so doing, it seeks to uncover the nature of the journalism interview and journalism practice. We understand that the lessons that might emerge from CA examinations of the interview are many and so have refined our approach to the topic to present a particular focus on the generation of better understandings of the value of “objectivity” as a cornerstone of journalism professional practice. Our paper seeks to provide support for the argument of Kovach and Rosenthal (2001) that understandings of such “objective” practice are important to the verification of “truth” claims from newsmakers. To achieve such a goal it is necessary to provide examples of when and how journalism interviewing approaches move towards these ends. It is our contention that CA can, and does, provide evidence of such activities. Furthermore, the conclusions from CA studies, and, in particular, those reported by Clayman and Heritage (2002) make a start in providing a practical solution to the “apparent” contradiction at the heart of “objective” practice: How does one protest “objectivity” while, at the same time, arguing for the parallel need to “challenge” the positions of “authoritative” sources?; The difficulties that this situation provides for the advocacy of journalism “objectivity” is a difficulty lamented in the writings of journalist/ academic Brett Cunningham (2003).

To help with the development of such understandings, the paper, firstly, sets out to shed light on the theoretical underpinnings of the CA method and then to explain how the method has been used to examine journalism interviews. Support for the proposition that CA methods can inform understandings of journalism “objectivity” come from Erving Goffman’s theories of the interaction order. Such theories became the justification for the use of CA as a method of uncovering cultural counterbalances to pre-framed norms emanating from political and social power structures. To this end, this paper first discusses his work and then proceeds to examine the subsequent works of Garfinkel and Sacks (1984) and An n Rawls (1989). The work produced by each scholar represents a progression in thought that stemmed from Goffman’s identification of the Interaction Order – a cultural phenomenon with the potential to counteract the influence of institutional power structures. In essence, Goffman’s contribution to the discussion of institutionalised power relations was to posit that the norms of daily

interaction between people importantly preceded broader social structures in imposing rights and responsibilities on the participating parties. He extended his argument to suggest that, in some circumstances, the requirements for adherence to the interaction order might override the broader social structures within which the parties to the interaction existed. In presenting such an argument- that the structure of interaction might, at times, subvert its encompassing macro power structures-he presented an argument that made the case for a cultural counterbalancing of imposed political and social power structures. Goffman's theoretical exposition of the potential for activities at the level of the interaction order to transform more broadly based structures of power and social control was important to the development of CA techniques. His theories suggested that certain examinations of conversational interaction might identify, and exhibit, journalism professional "objective" practices capable of the independent pursuit of a "public interest" However, Goffman's work required considerable adaptation before it could inform methods that could identify specific forms of institutionalised talk. The particular deficit, in this regard, stemmed from Goffman's exclusive focus on ordinary conversation; a pre-occupation that precluded discussions of how such forms were adapted to the particular needs of the formalised conversations that formed part of the work of social institutions, such as broadcast media organisations and the court system.

Work that started the process of bridging this divide work was undertaken by two disciples of Goffman, Garfinkel and Sacks(1984). Garfinkel and Sacks broadened the understandings of Goffman to allow for its importance in the influence of institutional decision making. The impact, and nature, of this analysis was such that, Sacks, in particular, became known as the originator of the CA method. However, the overarching tasks of adapting Goffman's work to the task of justifying the CA method was undertaken by sociologist Ann Rawls. Rawls plotted this course in her work on '*the interaction order sui genesis*' (1989). In this work, she examines Garfinkel and Sacks's development of Goffman's (1967) work that adapt his principles to conversation. Her important work foreshadowed (CA) studies of the journalism interview by scholars such as Greatbatch (1991) and Clayman and Heritage 2002. This paper now turns to the work of Rawls in explicating the value of Goffman's theories in identifying important cultural aspects influencing conversational interaction in institutional settings.

The interaction order and its relations to power structures:

To make out the theoretical case for the influence of the interaction

order(that in the subject matter examined in this paper-is represented through the journalism interview) Rawls (1989) argued that this phenomenon might allow participants who play a subordinate role in the power structure, to relate to authorities on a more equal footing in certain instances of interaction. In supporting this contention, she argues that, "(if individuals need to interact with others, they need do so in orderly ways, but they do not need to play unequal social roles or conform to institutional orders" (Rawls 1989: 149).In this context Rawls (1989) argues for a more satisfactory distinction between various forms of social interaction and, in so doing, she draws a line between those aspects of encounters where meaning is a constitutive achievement, and therefore requires mutual commitment of a special sort; and those aspects whose meaning is defined with respect to pre-given framing considerations (e.g. the role of institutions such as governments). In the former case, she argues, the constitutive achievement of meaning requires a direct relation between expectation and actuality, whereas, in the latter case, institutional or framed meaning allows a great deal more room for strategic manipulation by institutionally backed actors(such as ministers of the crown). She argues, through this analysis, that Goffman (1967), Garfinkel and Sacks (1989) have been working in the realm of constitutive achievement and mutual commitment that she has called '*the interaction order sui generis*'. Such a distinction, then, formed the basis for identifying those forms of interaction, within institutional settings, where CA might identify instances where broader social structures (Governments particular persuasions) might be counterbalanced through a mutual commitment by parties to the maintenance of the interaction order. In further explaining '*the interaction order sui generis*', Rawls (1989) argues that Goffman (1967) describes order as the product of commitment to a shared set of expectations, but that these expectations are obviously not all, or even primarily, generated by overarching social structure. She argues that Goffman's (1967) treatment of self and meaning suggests that constraints originating in the needs of the interaction order, rather than with individuals and institutional structures, can help shape both individual scenes and selves, as well as both resisting and placing constraints on social structure. Rawls states that the notion of *interaction order sui generis* depends on Goffman's (1967) ideas that describe the order of interaction as partly the product of constraints on the interactional treatment of selves – a level of constraint not reflected in the formal properties of macro structures. Goffman (1967) believes that the idea of an emergent constructive order hinges around his idea that the self must be continually constituted and re-affirmed in interaction. Such a constitution of the self is, for Goffman (1967), the basic moral and order constraint on the settings of co-presence (Rawls 1989: 153). She goes on to argue that if institutional order (i.e., social structure), is created through interaction, then what are recognised as institutional

constraints cannot have the status of continual constitutive achievements. That is to say that they must be created and recreated through instances of interaction. As such, she argues that Goffman presents a picture of constraints on interaction that are internal to interactional scenes and that they do not rely for their meaning on a direct relation to external ends. For Goffman, the performance requires commitment to this order even for the simplest of interactions. Meaning is, according to this latter view, a constitutive production in, and through, group performance (Rawls 1989: 154).

As a consequence Goffman (1967) states that the existence of “order” requires that there is a “working” consensus where “(p)articipation in any contact with others is a commitment; an involvement in the face of others that is immediate and spontaneous as the involvement he has in his own face” (Rawls 1989: 155). He argues that when the “working consensus” is violated, interaction collapses. He notes that “(i)ndividuals collapse as units of minimal ceremonial substance and others learn that what had been taken for granted as ultimate entities are really held together by rules that can be broken with some kind of impunity” (Rawls, 1989 :155). Rawls further provides the following statement from Goffman where he states “(w)e must be prepared to accept that the impression of reality fostered by a performance that is a delicate, fragile thing that can be shattered by very minor mishaps” (Goffman 1967). Rawls argues that social status and role do enter conversation in ways that are accountable. But at the level of sequences, such as turn-taking, relationship to social structure is essentially irrelevant. Sequential orders in conversation are interpreted in the same fashion, regardless of one's social structural position (Rawls 1989: 162). In arguing that this represents conversations as representing a mix of accountable actions, as well as actions that are influenced through the sequence of conversation turns, Rawls (1989) refers to Sacks, who saw conversational organisation as constituting a “multi-dimensional cross word puzzle” (1989: 164) with accountable versus sequential relevancies making up the “across” versus the “down”. No conversation would contain only one or the other, it would contain both, and they would be closely intertwined in all interactions. Rawls (1989) argues the important point is that while both are always present, the sequential order provides the constitutive level of meaning, and the need for a sequential order poses constraints on the need for commitment to the conversation. This is similar to the way in which Goffman's (1967) version of self poses constraints in the shape of interactive encounters. This analysis situates the interaction order as potentially a site where the power relations that are present in social structure are counterbalanced through the particular mores of the interaction order. As Rawls indicates, overarching social structure is generated in the interaction order, a construction that

would privilege this order as essentially generative of structure. In this sense, it is in line with the arguments of Schegloff (1992) that interaction might reproduce, but *importantly* might also transform, social structure. Such are the various justifications for the understanding that various conversational interactions might influence the outcomes, and, ultimately, events. The following section turns to the particular adaptation of the CA approach to the journalism field, and in particular, the features of the journalism interview. It represents both an exploration, and an explication, of the norms that govern this adaptation of forms of conversational analysis to the particular purpose of a self conscious pursuit of public discussion and public interest. In so doing, it examines the work of CA scholars who have focussed on normative conversational interactions designed towards the testing of “authoritative” positions. It particularly examines the norms of journalism interviewing, and the nature if the normative challenges to “authoritative” sources. However, the parallel nature of some forms of legal cross examination is also considered. A particular feature that is common to both forms is that both journalists and legal counsel adopt approaches that are designed to include, and inform overhearing audiences. In both arenas the audiences are presented as adjudicating on the content matter. In the legal arena, the “audience” is the jury of “ordinary citizens”. In the case of the journalism interview these “ordinary citizens” are the listeners/viewers of broadcast programs

Interaction order, social structure and the journalistic interview:

In adapting the work of Rawls, conversational analysis (CA) scholars such as Greatbatch(1991) and Heritage and Clayman (2002) argue that such transformations take on a particular form when applied within the journalism field. Their work sets out to identify the patterns that are the hallmark of the journalistic interview. Greatbatch notes that in journalism interviews, journalists are restricted to asking questions and their source is restricted to answering them. In normal conversation, where the needs of an overhearing audience are not a factor, a party to a conversation might have interrupted to agree or disagree, or take issue with one or other of the statements. However, as Greatbatch and Heritage have established journalism interview norms indicate that the journalist and the source routinely collaborate in the production of the question answer sequences even though the content might not follow their preferred trajectory for interview pursuit of topic. Furthermore, Greatbatch shows that, in presenting interviews to an overhearing audience, journalists question sources in a neutral manner - that is to say that no overt preference is given to one point of view over another; in simple terms, the journalists might canvass a number of positions, but

refrain from presenting their own position on, or preference for, any one of these positions. The avoidance of personal opinion, then, is accomplished by the journalist “deferring” to the authorities position when resolving apparent conflicts between this opinion, and another that they have presented for discussion. This analysis indicates that the journalism has similarities to legal cross examination as identified through the work of Drew(1992:474)¹. The journalism interview Greatbatch (1991) indicates that these parameters put the interview on a broad “footing” but this broad construction cannot allow for the range of contingencies that might emerge from such interviews. Here the notion of “footing” represents an overarching description of the specific features that define interview practice ;in particular the nature of influence the interaction between journalist and the source has on the journalism interview.

Within the context of a broad “footing” Greatbatch indicates that the parties must then initiate a range of “rules of thumb” to allow for the range of contingencies that might arise during an interview. In this regard, Clayman and Heritage (2002: 29) indicate that journalists have developed a further stance as a guide to the doing of a “neutral” or “objective” interview. The specific features of such an approach to “neutral” interviewing are based on a particular understanding of media pluralism that instructs “common” understandings of broadcast interviewing in Australasia, Canada, The United Kingdom and the United States. Such understandings might come under the journalist-inspired rubric of the “Fourth Estate” which legitimises the development of protocols that “challenge institutions in the public interest”. In terms of orientation to “objectivity” Clayman and Heritage argue that such an understanding has meant that broadcast approaches have incorporated a “balancing act” that requires that an interview must incorporate an approach

¹ In this regard, the studies of Drew (1992) show how legal counsel adapts apparent puzzle questions in formal exchanges in the courtroom “to get to the truth”. His studies focus on the nature of the adversarial system where oral evidence is given, “so that it may be tested and, of necessary, challenged by the other side in the cross examination.” While Drew does not draw in final conclusions on the veracity of the objective truth that emerges in the adversarial courtroom examination , he notes that witnesses accept the institutional setting to be hostile and may face attempts to discredit their testimony (Drew, 1992, 474).

to competing prerogatives; the need to remain impartial and the need to challenge the positions of the source. The importance of the injection of this notion into interview norms is important to those who would claim that journalists use the form to “challenge” authorities in the public interest. Therefore it is important to the case for CA methods in forming journalism practice that a fulsome examination of these norms is undertaken.

Objectivity: A journalistic perspective

It is perhaps important to explore the notion of objectivity from a journalistic perspective, in a bid to further ground the argument in journalistic practice, before exploring it further through the theoretical framework of conversation analysis.

In this context Kovach and Rosenthal (2001) present objectivity as an active pursuit of truth, not a passive balancing of perspectives. Kovach and Rosenthal, note Walter Lippmann’ s 1922 book *Public Opinion* - one of the earliest works on the relationship between news and truth where he wrote: “The function of news is to signalize an event” – make people aware of it, “the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of reality on which men can act.” The central argument presented in this context is “getting the facts straight and making sense of the facts” (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001, p43).

The pursuit of truth as objectivity however does not suggest a transcendental truth, rather an acceptable truth reached through an exhaustive journalistic process of query and verification. the ‘objectivity’ under scrutiny is what the Canadian journalism ethicist Steven Ward calls ‘pragmatic objectivity’ - an objectivity that is not absolute but defined through institutional parameters of journalism practice. Ward notes “(a)n objectivity of fallible, holistic judgement is more appropriate for the hurly-burly of reporting than absolute, philosophical notions of objectivity. Pragmatic objectivity does not relinquish the idea of truth seeking, but it never loses sight of the precarious epistemic position of journalists,” (Ward, 2004, p314).

Fourth Estate and Journalistic objectivity:

The nature of the role that such understandings impose – as deduced from their CA analyses – are expressed as follows: “On the one hand, there is objectivity as impartiality – audiences expect journalists to be disinterested and neutral in their questioning of public figures who are the journalists’ interview subjects and sources; journalists must have respect for the facts and the perspective that their sources communicate, and must work to bring these into the public domain. These requirements of their calling mean journalists need to adopt an approach that takes the sources’ information seriously and seeks to present the sources’ position to the audience in a way that it can be fully understood and appreciated. While objectivity in this context could mean a mere presentation of the numerous aspects of an issue, it can, mean an active interrogation of the facts - objectivity as adversarialness. Clayman and Heritage (2002:29) describe this notion in the following way: “To achieve factual accuracy and a ‘balance’ of perspectives, journalists should in this context actively ‘challenge’ the positions of their interviewees as sources”. Such analyses of the institutional order of journalism interviews- through the use of CA methods- then might identify professionally motivated challenges in line with Fourth Estate notions of pursuing the truth in the public interest. Where such analyses move beyond the identification of a broad footing, they might present information as to the extent and persistence of such challenges undertaken in the public interest. Bowman (2006, 2008) Bowman and Ubayasiri 2010 chronicle a case of Australian journalism coverage of the 1998 Waterfront Dispute that, they argue, represents strong and persistent challenges in the public interest. However, the mere fact that features of an interview might present as some form of challenge is not prima facie evidence of Fourth Estate journalism in action. In this sense, Clayman and Heritage (2002) indicate that journalists might use “apparent “challenges in an approach that favours “style over substance” in a sensationalist approach primarily designed to attract larger audiences. In [pursuing this discussion, Clayman and Heritage (2002:38) argue that there is an unspoken contract where journalists give sources publicity in exchange for news that will keep viewers watching. Such understandings of the relationship between journalist and source indicate that the adversarial nature of the interview adheres to the news “value” of conflict that is believed to attract audiences, over and above any search for the truth of the matter under discussion. Such conflict based approaches are the bases for the criticisms of Bourdieu (1998) of the superficial nature of much that passes as challenging interview content ; he argues that much of this material is simply designed to arouse curiosity rather than to develop analysis. It is also consistent with the criticism of famous United States journalist Carl Bernstein who, as a co-investigator in the Watergate scandal that ended the Presidency of Richard Nixon, became seen as an exemplar of quality journalism (Allan 1999: 186). Bernstein (cited in Allan 1999) laments what he sees as a recent media tendency towards

sensationalism at the expense of inquiry that connects with the reality of people’s lives. The exchange, however, gives authority figures access to an audience in a form that gives off an appearance that they are “answering” for their actions, and that the adversarial questions are testing their position through presenting the “other side”.

To fully accept such criticisms is to collapse the categories of challenge identified in CA studies and is to deny a place for the “objective” pursuit of the public interest in journalism interviewing. Such an acceptance would accord with the critique of Tuchman (1978) who argues that in interviews displaying professional “balance”, where one “side” is pitted against the “other”, definitive conclusions are reached only through favouring the position of the authoritative source. This paper argues that such positions cannot capture many important influences on the shaping of public opinion. To support this argument we summarise her position and then seek to counter her argument through reference to CA inspired understandings that argue for the possibility of a journalism professional contribution to the process. Her conclusions are informed through reference to the broad theoretical premise (political economy) that privileges the political enforcement of capitalist-inspired economic prerogatives as important to the outlook of those large corporations that employ many journalists. She argues that the onset of large media conglomerations and the symbiotic relationship that has developed between such large, and complex, public and private bureaucracies has placed significant constraints on professionally motivated journalism inquiry. In the first instance, such a systematic bias has led to a preference for stories emanating from the political “establishment” and, further, to a tendency to generalise about news events in terms constructed by the “official” “authority” sources that exist within it. Such an argument suggests that journalism’s ability to challenge the positions of power is diminished due to a systematic preference for explanations and conceptualisations generated by sources given authority through their position within social power structures. Tuchman argues that this preferencing of these “authoritative” sources and of the associated input that is generated from within the subordinate public and private bureaucracies means journalists routinely access such sources of news material . Such an approach, routinely overrides attempts to gather information, or challenge “authoritative” positions in the quest for a more pluralistic public interest. However, her methods for evidencing the journalistic adaptation to such principles are confined to instances of content analysis of story structures as published in newspapers. Tuchman’s analysis, however, finds some support from Schlesinger (1987) whose studies focussed more specifically on the activities of broadcast journalists employed by the British Broadcasting Corporation, the BBC. He argues that journalists’

approaches to the news interview potentially produced a situation where conflicting accounts cancelled each other out, providing an audience with no basis to determine the relative weight given to any particular version. However, in this, and other, works, (Schelsinger and Tumber (1994) he noted that a more dynamic and ongoing examination of news output was needed to determine whether journalists approaches contributed to the ultimate approach to, and framing of, various issues. Tuchman, herself, acknowledged that her observations were such that they could not capture data concentrating on professional interactions between journalists and their sources.

Conclusion

This paper has presented theorisations and approaches that might ameliorate the broad assumptions that emerge from studies such as the one conducted by Tuchman and that is the subject of analysis here. Therefore, it is argued that the theorisation of the interaction order and the subsequent results from the CA analysis of journalism interviews with authorities are sufficient to support claims that journalists might mount claims to the existence of challenging inquiry in the public interest. It is acknowledged that “challenging” interviews, indeed, can occur on a continuum, ranging from the superficial to a strong and persistent pursuit of the truth of an issue. Variations might occur according to the nature of the organisation (popular versus serious news approach) and the nature of the program (current affairs versus talk show style) and according to the skill and experience of the interviewing journalist. For these reasons, it is argued that journalists, journalist academics, media scholars and others interested in promoting a distinct journalism professional contribution to the public interest use CA methods to research journalism professional practices. Such a quest might help further understandings as to how journalists pursue truth in the public interest, and help to provide a measure of the value of such enterprises. It might provide evidence to counteract the belief, in some quarters, that the caravan has moved on leaving a floundering profession tethered to an unsubstantiated appeal to the existence of some “objective” standard of practice. Furthermore, the discipline that such research provides might help a bewildered public to navigate the confusing array of alternative claims to truth in the public interest. The proliferation of such claims has emerged as part of the digital revolution were producers of a range of “public interest” products ply their wares, through a range of practices, to consumers who can connect through the click of a computer mouse to the various online publications available. The explication of the “objective” approaches that buttress journalism claims to independent practices within “mainstream”, and

allied ,organisations might form a benchmark against which “news” consumers might judge the, equally, diverse and opaque contributions that appear on the internet of “news” material.

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