

# Avoidance in contemporary Australian political interviews

## Abstract

Political interviews in the theatre of television, a form of turn-taking dialogue, is not simply an exchange of information in the form of utterances, but a theatrical process, where impressions are formed through not only what is said, but what is not said and how things are said.

The paper focuses on three instances where politicians in the contemporary Australian media landscape attempt to change the conversation trajectory, violating norms of turn-taking dialogue, which result in the theatrical elements taking precedence over the interview content. The examples focus on three distinct attempts to avoid answering a simple yet damaging political question, where in the absence of a meaningful dialogue, both the journalists and the politicians resort to projecting their respective messages through interview theatrics as opposed to content. The study argues that both journalist and politicians are aware of the audience, the ultimate arbitrators of the voracity of the information presented in the interview.

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## Introduction: the request and denial of information in political interviews.

The ‘speech exchange system’ of political interviews is widely accepted to be one of turn-taking, a systematic transformation of a communication strategy used in mundane conversation. In their seminal work on turn-taking in conversations, Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974) present turn-taking as a vital attribute in ‘small group behaviour’ where turn-taking is used from “ordering of moves in games, for allocation of political office, (and) for regulating traffic at intersections... (to) talking in interviews, meetings, debates, ceremonies, conversations...”. In this context the study of turn-taking in conversations explores the interaction of the participants and the nature of turn allocation. Sacks et al. present the allocation of turns in conversation in a linear bi-polar format, based on the protocols and rules governing the allocation of turns. One end of the spectrum presents ‘local allocation of turns’ where the sequence of turns, length of turn and content are determined by the speakers during the conversation, as in mundane conversation. The speakers are selected through either ‘current speaker select next speaker’ or ‘next speaker self-select’ method (Greatbatch, 1988). The other end of the spectrum is represented by ‘pre-allocated’ speech turns where attributes such as turn allocation, length of turn and content is pre-ordained, as in the case of ceremonies.

Political interviews fall within this turn-taking framework where turns are usually allocated locally. While turns and content are not pre-determined, the turn taking structure represent a two party question and answer format, which will be discussed later in this paper.

Political interviews also represent a vital and at times controversial theatrical aspect especially in broadcast journalism, and by its very nature are designed to elicit an acceptable answer from the interviewee who has agreed to be subjected to a media interview for that purpose. However it is frequently argued that politicians evade, inveigle and obfuscate, during political interviews.

The design of a political interview dictates that a question must be answered, where the question and the answer form two parts of an adjacency pair. The protocols of the conversation dictate a number of valid responses, where the

request for information can be met with “an acceptance, denial or a counter-request – a failure to produce at least one of the second parts is noticeable and would merit explanation or action” (Rosenblum 1987). However such norm violations are commonplace in political interviews, where interviewees frequently attempt to evade difficult and politically injurious questions. Peter Bull and Kate Mayer (1993) analysed the content of political interviews conducted during the 1987 British General Election campaign. The study showed “(Tory Prime Minister Margaret) Thatcher and (Labour Opposition Leader) Neil Kinnock did not reply to a large proportion of the questions put to them...” - Margaret Thatcher 56%, Neil Kinnock 59%.

The nature of covert avoidance is studied by Steven Clayman (1993), who pointed out a series of question reformulation tactics used for both the legitimate purpose of clarification and ‘managing a response trajectory’ and wily political tactics of obfuscation. Clayman’s research shows a number of ‘covert agenda shifting’ tactics such as agenda shifting under the guise of summarising, where the question is reformulated through a series of subtle changes away from the original premise; ‘reaching back’ to a previous section of a question in order to avoid answering part of a question; and moving away from the central issue, through agreement or disagreement of a non-essential element embedded in the main question.

There is ample evidence of quantifiable avoidance in political interviews to such an extent that it can be argued that avoidance is a commonplace answering strategy in political interviews (Bull and Mayer, 1993; Sally, 2008). If avoidance is an ‘acceptable’ tactic in political interviews then it must be argued that interviews are not simply dialogues designed to extract information, but dialogues where the rules of the conversation provide an opportunity for skilful avoidance.

### **The theatre of political interviews:**

Anita Fetzer (2005) argues political interviews should be assigned a dual status as a communicative genre and as media event. Her argument situates the political interview in Jürgen Habermas’s notion of communicative action, which suggests that within the dialogical framework “a speaker postulates a

communicative action, which has the status of a potential validity claim,” needing acceptance or rejection, and once a claim has been accepted “they do not require further explanation.” Claims that are initially rejected, initiate a “negotiation-of-validity sequence, in which the non-accepted claims and their presuppositions are negotiated,” where successful negotiation could result in the presupposition entering the dialogue’s common ground. However, within the context of a politico-media interview it can be argued that this ratification process between interviewer and interviewee is only one part of the conversation where the journalist is merely a representative of a mute audience. While presuppositions are accepted outright, those accepted through negotiation and those rejected are merely assigned these respective position within the framework of the interview, and ‘true’ acceptance or rejection is left to the audience, who by the nature of their involvement, are unable to actively engage in the dialogue and thus negotiate claims. Fretzer (2005) argues the existence of this media frame within the dialogue in phrases such as ‘in today’s program’ or the Minister ‘goes on record’; or in questions such as ‘Minister we will see how the public judges you’ are directed at the viewer. Since true ratification is left to audience members who do not actively participate in the conversation it can be argued both the interviewer and the interviewee are in fact performing for the audience – the ultimate arbitrators of the voracity of the information presented in the conversation.

In this context Peter Bull and Kate Mayer (1993) argue “the conversation that takes place in a political interview is a very special kind. To some extent it is a form of illusion; what appears to be a conversation is in fact a performance, arranged to take place for an overhearing audience potentially of millions”.

The theatre of political interviewing, therefore by its very nature suggests audience scrutiny of both the interviewer and interviewee. The interviewer must be seen to; ask the right questions, pursue relevant lines of debate, while being fair, neutral and respectful. The interviewee in turn must be seen to answer openly and not attempt to conceal information from the public.

In his study of perceived neutrality in television news interviews, Steven Clayman (1988) notes that “as professionals, journalists are expected to be objective, in pursuit of this aim, they are supposed to keep their personal

opinions out of the reporting process...”. Steven Ward (2006) argues the nature of this objectivity to be situated within journalism practice. Ward’s concept of pragmatic objectivity lends itself to the notion of the professional journalist’s ability to exercise critical journalism judgement where journalists are proactive yet objective. The journalist through their privileged position as the public’s representative is able to direct questions to authority figures that may in other theatres be considered adversarial and even impertinent.

It can equally be argued that the journalist, within the framework of pragmatic objectivity, is expected to pursue interviewees when they evade questions, in order to prevent the information from becoming inadvertently accepted or ratified as fact, due to inadequate negotiation in the Habermasian process of communicative action. Therefore the pursuit or the ‘media spectacle’ of a dogged pursuit is not simply good theatre but at least in some cases, a vital component of accessing the credibility or incredulity or statements made within the dialogical framework of a politico-media interview.

This paper examines the theatre of political interviews through three distinct case studies, presenting three separate types of avoidance tactics that lead to a norm violation in the discussion, which in turn creates theatre.

- i. Interview between New South Wales Education Minister Verity Firth and a group of journalists, where the minister continues to ignore the actual question and repeat her rote answer, creating a avoidance and pursuit theatre.
- ii. A one-on-one interview between opposition leader Tony Abbott and Channel Seven journalist Mark Riley, where the theatre is created in the form of silence, when the opposition leader refuses to engage in further dialogue.
- iii. A probing, hour-long interview between Australian Federal Treasurer Wayne Swan and veteran ABC journalist Kerry O’Brien, in which the treasurer continues to side-step questions over his arguably sullied friendship with former party leader Kevin Rudd.

#### **Direct avoidance and the pursuit by a group of journalist:**

The following dialogue is between New South Wales Education Minister Verity Firth and a group of journalists, during her first media conference on

February 3, 2011, three days after her husband Matthew Chesher was charged with possessing an ecstasy tablet. In the following media conference transcript the minister continues to stress that ‘it was her husband’s mistake and that she has done nothing wrong’.

Turn-taking in media conferences has been studied to some extent by numerous scholars including Collins (1987) and Schegloff (1987). While a detailed recount and analysis of media conference turn-taking is beyond the scope of this research, suffice to say, turn-taking in media conferences such as Minister Firth’s are determined through self-selection between journalists and by the interviewee to varying degrees of control. In the case of journalists self-selecting, many reporters may attempt to ask questions simultaneously, and all but one may abandon their questions mid-stream as it becomes clear their question has failed to dominate. Interviewee selection however may be conducted through direct selection of reporters by pointing and such, or through subtle attention shifting and making of eye contact. In this context Schegloff presents media conferences as a two-party turn-taking system, where “the multiperson party (does the asking) and the one person party does the answering,” (1987, pp222-223), thus ensuring alternating turns between the two parties, with the exception of occasional interjections as seen in the case of the following example.

Dialogical protocols of this type of two party turn-taking suggests that each question must be answered by the interviewee, upon which the answer is accepted or rejected in whole or in part, thus validating or rejecting claims within the communicative action framework. However in the following example, Minister Firth deliberately violates the norms of the dialogue, by presenting a ‘non-answer’, one that is overtly disjointed with the essence of the question, which results in the interview moving further away from the communicative genre and morphing into a media event, or a performance.

However a performance in this context does not necessarily suggest a substandard interview, and in many cases may simply suggest a breakdown in the question and answer information seeking process, necessitating an alternative approach of validating information. In this alternative performance-based media event, impressions are traded with the audience through the actions of the interviewer and the interviewee, where concepts

are ratified not simply through the voracity of the information but the impressions of the delivery.

In the following exchange the Minister attempts to portray herself as victim, and align herself with those affected by the drug use of a loved one. The journalists in turn attempt to show the Minister is blatantly avoiding to answer a key question that will absolve her of any wrongdoing and that her refusal to do so is a possible admission of guilt.

- <sup>1</sup>Journalist (?) How long since you took ecstasy
- Verity Firth I have < done (.) nothing (.) wrong > I have nothing to apologise for (( *delivered with a facial expression of furrowed brows and forehead, suggestive of stress and concern* ))
- Journalist (?) Minister, have you ever (.) in your life (.) taken ecstasy
- Verity Firth (.hhh) (1.5) I want to make it very clear that I have done nothing (.) wrong (.) I have nothing (.) to apologise about (.) my conscience is absolutely clear I have done nothing (.) wrong (.) my husband (.) has admitted that he has made a mistake (.) he has paid for that mistake
- Journalist (?) Have you ever taken ecstasy
- Verity Firth I have done (.) nothing (.) wrong (.) I have nothing to apologise for
- Journalist (?) Is there a reason why you won't say whether you've taken ecstasy

<sup>1</sup> The interview may not represent a chronologically continuous dialogue, and there may be some editing, but it is believed the spirit of the press conference is not altered though this. The first question and answer set is from a news Ten report; and the remainder is based on a audio excerpt from Radio 2GB; sets 2-4 were also available as a video file on the ABC's Insiders program, where the three sets were cut and edited to form a single package unit.

- Verity Firth Because (hhh) I have ~done~ (.) nothing wrong. I have done nothing (.) wrong
- Journalist (?) [But are you] obviously thinking this question is going to come and you're worried about the impact it might have if you say yes
- Verity Firth [I've]
- Verity Firth I have done (.) absolutely (.) nothing (.) wrong [ I have nothing to apologise ] about I have done absolutely nothing wrong Mathew (.) Mathew has admitted to a mistake he has absolutely cooperate with the police there is no doubt about that (.) he has (.) and will face the absolute due process of the law as it should be no one is above the [ law ] but I:: have done nothing wrong I:: [have done nothing wrong] (.) my conscience is clear (.) and I don't (.) and I think that is'n appropriate thing ↓ to [ (take to heart) ] there are (private) !-
- Journalist (?) [ What was the most resent time you took it ↓ ]
- [so]
- [so you've (.) we (have heard)]
- [so you are at home]
- Journalist (?) We've had politician admit to using cannabis but you don't think people are ready for a politician to admit they've used ectacy ecstasy
- Verity Firth I have done (hhh) nothing wrong (.) I have not done anything wrong ↑ [ I have not been ] (.) I:: (.) I:: (.) my conscience absolutely clear (( *the conference continues*))
- Journalist (?) [minister can you clarify]

The avoidance is clear and overt in this instance and is picked up by the journalists who continue to ask variations of the same question, ‘Minister, have you ever taken ecstasy?’ The minister’s husband is charged with drug possession, which leads to the assumption that he is an ecstasy user, which in turn opens up the possibility that the minister herself may have used the drug. The Minister is bombarded with three basic types of questions in this interview.

- i. variations of ‘have you ever taken ecstasy?’, a *direct question* at its most fundamental level designed to elicit a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer. The question itself makes no inherent assumptions.
- ii. variations of the question ‘when was the last time you took ecstasy?’, a question which assumes as given that the minister has at some point in her life used the drug. It must be noted that the assumptions, while it may have political ramifications to the education minister, are not accusatory. *‘Moving on’ question*.
- iii. variations on ‘why will you not deny taking ecstasy?’ – a multilayered question containing a *why won’t you tell question*. This line of questioning is coupled with others such as “(you are) obviously thinking this question is going to come and you’re worried about the impact it might have if you say yes” and “We’ve had politician admit to using cannabis but you don’t think people are ready for a politician to admit they’ve used ecstasy”.

As journalist Barry Cassidy noted on the ABC’s Insiders program, “it is a cruel and unusual punishment,” but the minister’s strategy, however painful, is one of the few options available to her. Any deviation from her key message that she had ‘done nothing wrong’ would have led to a follow up question that would have taken the story in a direction that may not necessarily be beneficial to the Minister’s political interests. It can be argued that it is somewhat obvious the minister may have used ecstasy; if this is the case an open denial would pave the way for media interviews and tabloid magazine exposés with alleged witnesses who claim to have intimate knowledge of the minister’s drug taking; if she claimed she used the drug, then the question of ‘when’ comes into play, which in turn paves the way for a line-up of media reports similar to those following an outright denial. If she openly admits she has taken ecstasy in the recent past then she would be

committing political suicide, where a drug-using education minister in an already unpopular government stands little chance of political survival.

Here the contents of the dialogue are subordinate to the performance, the theatre of the media interview. The journalists are aware of the slim possibility of the minister deviating from her rote answer, and the minister is aware of the tenacity of the media contingent. The journalists’ performance in this context attempts to highlight the minister is avoiding answering the crucial question – whether she has used the drug herself, while the Minister’s performance is designed to generate audience sympathy, by presenting herself as an innocent victim, persecuted by the media for a crime committed by her husband – just another ordinary wife affected by drug abuse in the family.

The interview’s theatrical elements are also seen in the media choice of media conference content where electronic media, and online video clips often focussed largely on the minister’s avoidance of questions over her possible drug use, while newspaper coverage was largely devoid of the media spectacle of a repetitive dialogue.

An Australian Associated Press report, reproduced by many newspapers is typical in this context. The AAP led with “NSW Education Minister Verity Firth says she’s a ‘normal wife’ who did not suspect anything was out of the ordinary while her husband allegedly was scoring drugs.”

The report contained a number of quotes from the minister including –

“Friday night was probably the worst night of my life...”;

“I had no reason to suspect him of anything out of the ordinary. I am like a normal wife. I was just at home getting on with the evening”;

“It was a shock I cannot describe. I have never been more shocked in my life”;

“I was incredibly angry with him. I was incredibly hurt by him and disappointed in his behaviour”;

“But I also love my husband and I really, really, just want to make sure he is okay”

Reference to the Minister’s refusal to answer questions relating her own implied drug use were placed eleventh and twelfth in the report, towards the end of her comments.

### **Theatrics of a refusal to engage in conversation: The opposition leader and the media ‘ambush’**

Lance Corporal Jared MacKinney, 28, from the 6th Battalion Royal Australian Regiment, was killed in a fire fight between coalition troops and Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan’s Deh Rawud region in August 2010. A few weeks later, Federal Opposition leader Tony Abbot was in Afghanistan visiting the troops and was briefed of the events surrounding the corporal’s death by the overall commander of allied forces in Oruzgan, US Colonel James Creighton and Commander of Australia’s Middle East forces, John Cantwell. Channel Seven claimed it had obtained the footage of the meeting after a three-month freedom of information battle. Channel Seven journalist Mark Riley claims the footage was supplied by defence media who filmed about 90 minutes of footage during the opposition leader’s visit, but released about five minutes of vision to the media.

The hitherto unaired vision shows Abbott responding with “...well sometimes shit happens doesn’t it?” when the circumstances surrounding the corporal’s death was explained to him.

Confronted with the video footage, Tony Abbott responded with a brief statement reiterating he had not meant any disrespect, launched a counter attack on the journalist accusing him of blatant media exploitation, and lapsed into what he called a ‘dignified silence’ – a norm violation of turn-taking by refusing to respond on camera.

Riley’s February 8, 2011 report starts with combat camera footage of the fire fight, which include a brief dialogue between two soldiers saying;

“Dan’s guy’s got a gunshot wound.”

*((unclear and edited conversation))*

“I think it’s Australian.”

“Who?”

“I think it’s Australian.”

The report then shows footage of the opposition leader shooting weapons and posing for photographs with troops. The news report voice-over claims “Tony Abbot visited Lance Corporal MacKinney’s mates on the front line...as Corporal MacKinney’s death hung heavily on his comrades”.

The report further notes that a leaked email from one of the soldier’s suggested inadequate fire power resulted in MacKinney’s death, claiming “it’s a miracle another five or six weren’t killed”.

The vision cuts to footage of the opposition leader’s visit:

Col. Creighton It was tragic end (.) it was not executed perfectly *((edit point in news footage))*

Mark Riley Colonel Jim Creighton the US commander of Australia’s troops in Oruzgan province defended the operation but admitted mistakes

Col. Creighton Was it tragic (.) Absolutely *((edit point in news footage))*

But we’re all (.) we’re all in the knowledge (.) that all the stuff you see here and more was available on the day *((a continuous clip shot over the colonel’s shoulder shows Abbott nodding))*

Mark Riley And this was Tony Abbott’s response *((image cuts to another camera angle showing a close up of the opposition leader nodding, the speaker is obscured and the sound unclear, but Abbott’s expression and head movements suggest it was different camera angle taken towards Col. Creighton’s explanation of events in the section above))*

Tony Abbott (( *the camera returns to the previous camera angle, suggesting the discussion to be a continuation from the end of the colonel's explanation*)) Nah it's pretty obvious that um (.) ((*shrugs*)) well sometimes shit happens doesn't it.

(( *the remainder of the conversation is edited out*))

In the remainder of the news report, Riley shows the vision on a laptop computer to the opposition leader in the Canberra parliament grounds, and the following dialogue is recorded;

Tony Abbott well (.) ya:: look (.) you've taken this out of context (.) you weren't there (.) I would never seek to make light (.) er (.) of the death of an Australian soldier

Mark Riley I am not suggesting that (.) (But that's) he was explain what happen::ed (.) on the da::y that Jared MacKinney was killed (.) er: there was the email from the soldier suggesting there was (.) um (.) not enough support (.) and Creighton was saying:: all the support you see here (.) was there (.) u::m Cantwell was saying he was (.) upset that (.) there'd been criticism (.) of (.) the operation (.) on the day MacKinney (.) and (.) as a response to that reaction (.) you said what you said.

Tony Abbott Ar I was (.) doing my best (.) to support the soldiers I was discussing with then (.) look a soldier has died (.) er (.) and you shouldn't be (.) trying to turn this into a:: subsequent media circus

Mark Riley The:: (.) soldiers shouldn't

Tony Abbott ° you ° (( *Abbott points a finger at the journalist* ))

Mark Riley I shouldn't ↑((*journalist points to himself*)) (.) but I am not turning it in to a media circus I am showing you vision:: (.)

of you:: (.) your reaction (.) to:: his explanation of what happened on the da::y (.) in the operation (that) (.) in which MacKinney was killed

How's that turning into a media circus (6.5)

~ Well um ok ~ tell me what the context (.) if it is out of context what is the context (4.5)

You're not saying anything Tony (6.5)

Um

Tony Abbott I've given you the response you deserve

There is very little substance to the dialogue between journalist Mark Riley and Opposition Leader Tony Abbott, beyond Abbott's initial response that he would "never seek to make light of the death of an Australian soldier". With the break up of turn-taking norms in the interview, and in the absence of a dialogue, the impressions are formed through the theatre.

The opposition leader attempts to prevent being drawn into the debate with a futile counter attack, claiming that he respects the soldiers and that the journalist should do the same without "trying to turn (the death) into a subsequent media circus." He then responds to continued questions with a prolonged silence, a violation of turn-taking in interviews in an attempt to say that he has said everything he is prepared to say on the matter. The norm violation is deliberate; it is a refusal to answer on account of having answered everything. The deliberate norm violation attempts to highlight the absurdity and incredulity of the question, and suggests the media performance is simply a 'stunt'. This idea is further strengthened by his comments at the end of the 'dialogue' when he says "I've given you the response you deserve." Abbott later told the media his response was a "dignified silence" and viewers should make up their own minds on how Channel Seven handled the story. "As a general principle I think as dignified

a silence as you can muster is sometimes the best response,” he said. The comments add credence to the argument that the interview was theatre and that Abbott expected the viewers to construe the silence.

The absence of comment and the prolonged silence provides ideal theatre for the interview, which attempts to portray Abbott’s inability to engage in a fruitful dialogue on the issue. A justifiable editorial decision if the silence is an unambiguous inability to answer a question as opposed to a poorly executed media strategy of non-engagement.

Had the interview been terminated with the opposition leader’s initial comment, the story would have had little politico-media impact, an uneventful culmination of a three month long Channel Seven freedom of information process.

It can be argued that both players fail to drive the messages home and the performances at best represent and strategic stalemate. Riley’s accusations seem trivial in a society where the comment ‘shit happens’ is commonplace albeit outside court discussion. In the ensuing political debate the journalist and Channel Seven were forced to defend the decision to ‘ambush’ the opposition leader. “Is it tacky for me to report what Tony Abbott’s said in the context of a battle in which a soldier has been killed? No, no I don’t think it is,” Riley said on the network’s *Sunrise* program the following morning. Riley told ABC Radio “I briefed Mr Abbott’s office on exactly what I was going to ask him, and with two-and-a-half hours notice they nominated a place ... to have the interview.” He claimed “It wasn’t an ambush. It was an organised interview and they had two-and-a-half hours,” adding in numerous media interviews that he was not responsible for the way the opposition leader responded.

Australia Defence Association executive director, Neil James was quoted by the *Australian Associated Press*, claiming Australia’s Middle East forces commander, Maj Gen. John Cantwell responded to Abbott’s “...well sometimes shit happens...” with “It certainly does, yeah” – a comment omitted in Channel Seven’s edited news report.

Abbott’s prolonged silence similarly failed to show confident resilience as he suggest and instead present an image of ambivalence, an inability to respond

under pressure and the image of a bumbling opposition leader lost for words. The ambiguity of his performance is evident in the following day’s newspapers reports which highlighted the unprecedented silence. “... Abbott stuffed up his response. Instead of explaining the context he accuses Seven of taking him out of, Abbott attacked the journalist, accused him of playing dirty then gave him a death stare...,” *The Sydney Morning Herald* media editor Tim Dick wrote.

Channel Seven’s decision to present the *theatre* in the absence of the *dialogue* opened a media debate which is central to fully understanding the issue. Once again both players are performing to a media audience, and the audience response can be gauged to some extent through the secondary media reports generated by the interview. A *Sydney Morning Herald* online poll is equally inconclusive, with 59% of 21,865 readers who participated in the poll answering ‘no’ to the question “Do you take offence at Tony Abbott’s comment?”

The analysis of media reports examining the event, suggests that Riley could have phrased the question and plotted a different trajectory for the interview which should have had greater political ramifications calling the coalition’s position of the Afghan war into question. At best Channel Seven’s accusation is an accusation that the opposition leader was inconsiderate or even flippant in his response to the events surrounding the death of an Australian soldier – the criticism is one of poor taste. As *Sydney Morning Herald* chief political correspondent Phillip Coorey points out, while the ‘shit happens’ phrase is regrettable “to accuse Abbott of deliberately making light of a trooper’s death is absurd...”

Coorey further argues that following the soldier’s death an anonymous email was sent to the media suggesting the death was caused due to inadequate fire support, a claim if not orchestrated by the opposition was definitely embraced by Abbott and his defence spokesman, Senator David Johnston who called for a greater commitment in Afghanistan including more “tanks, artillery, helicopters and 360 more men” (Coorey, February 9, 2011). The pertinent question should have included this crucial element, which may have generated more of a dialogue.

### The theatre of avoidance and pursuit in a one-on-one political interview:

In the following transcript journalist Kerry O'Brien speaks with Federal Treasurer, Labor's Wayne Swan on the ABC's July 28, 2010, *7.30 Report*. The backdrop of the conversation is a series of leaks within Labor party ranks, following the removal of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd from office by his own caucus in the lead-up to the 2010 Federal elections.

Wayne Swan, a close friend and cabinet colleague of Kevin Rudd, is believed to have been a key player in the political pincer movements that led to a surprise mutiny against the Prime Minister – a political manoeuvre executed with surgical precision that led to the historic removal of a first term PM by his own party.

O'Brien opens the interview with "Wayne Swan, how big a problem has Kevin Rudd become for the Government in the campaign?" The question set the tone for the interview, where O'Brien has already established as fact that Rudd is a problem, and Swan is only asked 'how big a problem?'.

The politically important question of a fractured government contesting a Federal election is punctuated by a line of questioning that explored the relationship between Rudd and Swan. Considering Rudd's popularity in his home state of Queensland, the party is not in a position to win the election if they were to fully remove him from government, which presents the political conundrum of now presenting Rudd as a key member of a new government, a vital player in the new team, weeks after having deposed him for his micromanagement, lack of consultation and above all his inability to work as a team player.

Swan is a key member of both the old and new regimes, and as a close friend of the former PM he is abundantly qualified to present a character assessment of his colleague. However if he is vociferous in his defence of the former PM, the Treasury is in danger of opening a line of uncomfortable questions as to why Rudd was removed from office, and if he is less than generous in his praise the Labor party is seen as a spent force and a fractured entity that may not be suited for government.

O'Brien is aware of this conundrum, and enters a line of questioning that is simple in the extreme, when he asks the Treasurer if he has spoken to his friend since he was removed from office.

Kerry O'Brien How recently have you spoken to Kevin Rudd

Wayne Swan Look I'm not going into: (.) any of the discussions I have had with Kevin Rudd.

Kerry O'Brien = Now I'm not asking you to [tell me] what you've said to each other, I'm saying, how recently you have spoken [to him]

Wayne Swan [well I'm not]

Wayne Swan =[Well I'm] not going into discussions (.) that I've had with Kevin Rudd (.) and I don't think that I ought to.

O'Brien reiterates the question and disrupts Swan who is attempting to change the conversation trajectory by claiming he is not willing to talk details of the conversation.

Kerry O'Brien =But does that include but does that include hiding from the Australian electorate (.) uum:: whether you have spoken to [him] or not

Wayne Swan [No]

Kerry O'Brien =What is there (.) what is there

Wayne Swan I'm not hiding from anybody. I'm not hiding from [anybody I'm out there]

O'Brien deliberately frames the viewer into the conversation and Swan somewhat unsuccessfully attempts to mitigate the damage.

Kerry O'Brien [Well] when was the last time you spoke to him

Wayne Swan I'm out there campaigning, but I'm not going to go into the detail of discussions that I've had with Kevin Rudd, or for that matter (.) others (.) when it comes to the questions of leadership (.) I'm just not going to do that (.) and I don't think that that works either (.) Because all it does is feed the sort of stories that you're talking about, which you say:: (1.0) are (0.5) causing difficulties for our campaign:: so I don't intend to do that (.) [and] there's no way in the world, and you can ask all the questions you like (.) but I'm going to do that tonight.

Kerry O'Brien [↓all right]

Kerry O'Brien Well (.) I'm going to ask a question (.) that you're not actually addressing (0.3) I'm not asking you to tell me what you and Kevin Rudd have (0.3) or are saying to each other.

Wayne Swan Sure.

Kerry O'Brien I'm simply asking (.) you (.) to tell me (.) when you actually last (.) spoke to him. Now is there a potential embarrassment

Wayne Swan No (.) there's no potential embarrassment.

O'Brien delivers the crucial blow in the discussion, the potential embarrassment as a possible explanation for Swan's refusal to providing a straightforward answer.

Kerry O'Brien [Then when did you last speak to him]

Wayne Swan [But there's no potential story in it either] (.) So I'm not going into the nature of the discussions I've had with him (.) or the timing of the discussions that I've had with him. Kevin Rudd (.) is a candidate in this campaign. He's out there campaigning. I'm a senior minister (.) Deputy Prime Minister in this campaign (.) I'm out there doing that as well (.) and [that's what] and that's what the public (.) expect me to do and that's precisely (.) what I intend to continue doing.

[(inaudible interruption)]

Kerry O'Brien Kevin Rudd is not just a candidate for Labor in this campaign (.) Kevin Rudd is aspiring to be a senior minister (.) in the Gillard Government (.) arr (.) Julia Gillard has made plain on more than one occasion that there is a senior ministry for him [(.)] I would suggest to you that it is absolutely relevant to people making their judgments (.) about this government (.) in whether they vote for or against it (.) as to how coherent you would [be in government and in and in doing that] I'm asking you (.) I'm asking you (.) whether (.) you have had any contact with Kevin Rudd you see (.) you've use you have you've been a friend of Kevin Rudd's for a long time

[exactly]

[(inaudible interruption)]

Wayne Swan That's right.

Kerry O'Brien And when you were asked arr I think a few days after the leadership changed whether you had seen Kevin Rudd you said "No, I haven't, but I intend to catch up" (.) but why is

it a why is it a sensitive issue for you to say whether you've even seen him?

Wayne Swan Because it simply feeds the sort of stories you're talking about. I've been campaigning right around Australia. In the last (.) four or five days I've been around (.) northern Queensland, I've been to Darwin, I've been to Perth and now I'm back here. I will run into Kevin Rudd in the course of the campaign and I will be talking to Kevin Rudd in the course of the campaign. [But the one thing I]

Kerry O'Brien [That suggests that you haven't]

Wayne Swan No, it doesn't suggest that at all. But the one thing I'm not going to do is to go on your program and talk about dates (.) times (.) contents of conversations end of story.

Kerry O'Brien Well, Julia Gillard said this morning that she hadn't spoken to Kevin Rudd. She didn't seem to find a problem in that. But why wouldn't she lift the phone (.) to Kevin Rudd herself when (.) this is (.) an [issue that has the potential to damage (inaudible)?]

Wayne Swan [Well Kerry (.) Kerry (.) according to you (.)] acc (.) according to you it's an issue that has the potential to damage the campaign or the Government.

Kerry O'Brien You have been around politics a very long time, Mr Swan. You don't think this has any capacity to affect people's judgments? (( *O'Brien looked over his spectacles while delivering the question*))

O'Brien's 'simple' request for information is ignored by Swan who repeatedly claims he is not prepared to go into details, an obfuscation O'Brien is unwilling to ignore. Swan's continued attempts to answer what is essentially a simple question dominated the discussion with O'Brien refusing to relent and Swan painting himself into a rapidly shrinking corner. This dialogue, unlike the two previous examples, contains few rote phrases or awkward silences. The dialogue is more about conversational sparring as

opposed to the sharing of information, with O'Brien attempting to 'force' Swan to admit he had not spoken to his former friend Kevin Rudd, while Swan somewhat obstinately clings a futile attempt at avoidance.

The theatrical element in the conversation in this case centres on the implied, the elephant in the room, the potential embarrassment to Labor. While the conversation continues, the listener is drawn to the cat-and-mouse nature of the conversation gaining little or no new information, all the while waiting for one or the other to yield.

Throughout the conversation Swan and O'Brien both continue to challenge each other's assertions and assumptions, where Swan continues to argue that he does not want to be drawn into a trivial discussion which is in the domain of gossip and not politics, while O'Brien continues to insist the collegiate relationship of key members in the future cabinet is vital in assessing Labor's suitability to hold office in the upcoming elections.

O'Brien is aware that Swan will not relent, and having avoided the simple question on principle, Swan is unable to renege, and insistence on O'Brien's part, in the absence of a reasonable hope of a straight answer, is a clever use of interview theatrics to pin Swan into a corner he has so willingly entered. The theatre is evident in O'Brien's questions that focus on whether the issue is embarrassing to Swan in particular and Labor in general, or why he thinks the voters don't deserve an answer.

### Conclusion:

It is clear that the theatre of a political interview sometimes is more important than the content of the discussion. The theatrical elements can be subtle, or overt and dominating as in the case of the interviews between Kerry O'Brien and Treasurer Wayne Swan, Verity Firth's media conference and Mark Riley 'ambush' of Tony Abbott.

In all three examples the theatre arises through a refusal to comply with the questions posed by the journalist(s). Thus the overt emergence of theatrical elements or perhaps more accurately the theatrical domination results from a breakdown of conversation norms of the interview. The turn-taking

framework breaks down through norm violations and use of avoidance tactics beyond an acceptable range, allowing the usually latent theatrical elements of the political interview to manifest.

This argument is given further credence in the stylistic discrepancy and framing techniques of the text-based and vision-based media, where the vision-based television reports are able to latch on to and emphasise the theatrical elements of the interview. Unlike its printed counterpart, television by its very nature as a visual medium allows the transmission of mannerisms and subtle gestures in media reports creating a multi-dimensional media product. Television audiences as a rule therefore are able to see information and dialogue validated through expression and gestures, not merely accept information provided by an authoritative press. In this context audience impressions are formed, and the information presented is validated or rejected through both the overt informative content and the traditionally subtle theatre. But when the process of information delivery through content is lost through a norm violation in the interview process, the usually subtle theatrical elements take its place in trading impressions as opposed to information.

Thus theatrical media resulting from television interviews are not simply media stunts or substandard content but a sub-species of the communicative process, where usually subtle or even dormant aspects of the political interview process are allowed to emerge.

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