



Being a 'Host' or a 'Journalist': Orientation to role on the ABC's Q&A



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ABSTRACT

Broadcast nationally, Q&A is a television program promoted by the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), Australia's national broadcaster as an 'adventure in democracy'. Previous academic study on the program has considered the program from a range of perspectives but this paper specifically examines the techniques used by Tony Jones, long-time host of Australian current affairs program Q&A, to facilitate panel discussion and interaction between members and the studio audience. This paper considers the way Jones is skilfully able to transition between the role of host and journalist, arguing that these are two quite different roles. The analysis also demonstrates the way in which the audience members in turn orient to the role Jones plays, and suggests that this occurs through familiarity with the show's formula and consistency of approach by Jones.

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1. Introduction

All broadcast television panel programs have a host who acts as a facilitator between guests, producers, and a televised or in-studio audience. Within news and political discourse, recognizable hosts are critical in helping programs differentiate themselves (Chan-Olmstead and Cha, 2008; Vraga et al., 2014). Hosts on broadcast television programs are required to play a number of roles dependent on the genre in which the talk occurs. Hosts can act as a counselor, friend, member of a community, or facilitator as examples of possible roles, and dependent on genre, can orient to sociability (as might be in the case with chat-based programming on radio), social degradation, or moral ordering.

This paper seeks to consider the way in which a host on a televised political talk show orients to a number of different roles within one program in a way that enables the program to meet its commitment as one that entertains and informs (see Given and Radywyl (2013) and Vraga et al. (2012)). This paper specifically examines the techniques used by Tony Jones, a well known Australian political journalist and long-time host of Australian current affairs program Q&A, to facilitate panel discussion and interaction between members and the studio audience. Its focus is on the way a host can shift or alter role on a turn-by-turn basis, and in doing so reinforce moral order (or norms) associated with the program. This paper demonstrates the way Jones transitions between the role of host and journalist. Analysis considers the way in which the host manages and orients to role in a fine-tuned

balance between entertainment and information within a live, televised panel show format.

This paper is organized as follows. First, it examines the role of the host in mediated, multiparty broadcast talk. Second, it considers the features of news and political discourse. Third, it outlines the methodological approach based on conversation and membership category analysis and provides background to the program being analyzed. The data is considered in Section 4, based on episodes of a broadcast television panel show, Q&A, and Section 5 discusses the implications for broadcast practice. The paper concludes by arguing that 'role-switching' by a host in this context is an identifiable and tangible practice that can occur on a turn-by-turn basis.

2. Mediated multiparty talk and orientation to role

Multiparty talk occurs when more than two people are speaking in conversation (Korolija, 1998) and is a distinct phenomenon (Busch, 2011; Sacks, 1995). In ordinary conversation, multiparty talk is always interactionally problematic, because it lacks the predictable turn-taking sequence that can be seen in two-party conversations (Sacks, 1995). Multiparty talk is complicated because a speaker may be addressing all or only some of those other persons present and there is always the problematic question of who will speak next (Sacks, 1995). In the case of broadcast talk, however, multiparty talk is ever present. That is, even when those who are speaking on a program are simply talking to one another, there is always suggestion that the conversation is multiparty, because it is for the listener that talk is designed: "First and last, all talk on radio and television is designed for reception by absent listeners and

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viewers” (Scannell, 2009, p. E2; Scannell, 2000). This includes talk between two people without direct reference to the audience (see Scannell and Cardiff (1991)).

Managing turns at talk in multiparty conversation in broadcast talk is facilitated and managed by the host. The way in which this is done, as an institutional action to ‘allow’ someone to speak, has been the focus of much research attention because of its link to institutional power, and has also been considered as a conversational action or part of interaction (Clayman and Heritage, 2002; Thornborrow, 2001). In multiparty talk in broadcast settings, speech by guests/panelists/audience members/participating publics is the *purpose* of conversation – it is their story, opinion, to which the rest of an overhearing or overwatching audience are listening. All participants in the interaction rely on the host to provide verbal prompts to indicate that it is their turn to speak. The initial choosing of the speaker, however, which is a participatory action in ‘normal’ multiparty talk (Sacks, 1995), becomes an institutional action. Hosts have multiple roles, and the way they act as facilitators to talk in a multiparty setting impacts on the sense of community. Hosts establish acceptable rules and standards of behavior, and in doing so, establish social norms associated with the ‘group’ that is the listening/watching community (see Ames (2012) and Fitzgerald (2007)). The way in which the host selects speakers, and facilitates or mediates talk is therefore important because as an institutionally-based conversational speech act, it also works to establish moral order (see Ames (2012)).

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to consider ‘political discourse’ as a general concept, the premise on which some of the argument in this paper rests is that political talk shows play an important role in informing publics about politics. The mediatisation of political discourse has been well-considered as has the development of conversationalisation in televised political discourse (Charaudeau et al., 2012) with a particular focus on the news interview (see Clayman and Heritage (2002) and Fetzer and Weizman (2006)). This conversationalisation of discourse has served, some argue, to further democratize politics and the staged and monologic approach to political discourse is ‘no longer considered to be appropriate in the western and Anglo-American contexts’ (Fetzer and Weizman, 2006, p. 146). More recently, political discourse from a talk-based (including online talk) perspective has also been considered in terms of civility and politeness (Gervais 2014; Smith and Bressler 2013; Sobieraj and Berry 2011) and hybridity (Ekström 2011). Hamo et al. (2010) analysis of communicative competence also makes reference to the macro-trends of personalization, cynicism and infotainment in televised political discussion, and recognize the change in ‘discursive positioning’ of journalists from neutral moderators to news-celebrities or pundits. They argue: “politicians and journalists are becoming equal participants in an entertaining interactional game, and compete with each other to promote their own personas” (Hamo et al., 2010, p. 249).

There are many examples of panel-based shows internationally that focus on political discussion. For example, the news-based show that relies on journalistic commentary about political issues is well established as per Hamo et al. (2010) discussion (see Patrona (2012)). However, there are fewer programs that incorporate politicians, a diverse range of other public figures, an in-studio audience, and an embedded social media presence. Panel show interactions are not specifically news interviews – the type of talk and what it achieves differs greatly, even within one program. Analytical interest in this case is would be *how* a host facilitates such a diverse range of participants engaging in an ‘entertaining interactional game’ through talk.

3. Data and method

This paper focuses its attention on the Australian television current affairs program *Q&A* as a case study for analysis. Broadcast nationally, *Q&A* airs on the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) channel ABC1 on Monday nights at 9.30 p.m. Australian Eastern Standard Time. The ABC is Australia’s national public broadcaster, and operates as a network incorporating television, radio, and online media, and a commercial (retail) arm. *Q&A* commenced in 2008 with the tagline ‘Democracy in Action’, and from its inception has been hosted by renowned Australian political journalist Tony Jones. The program format is based on interactions between the host, Jones, who facilitates discussion between (normally) five panelists and members of the studio-based audience. Topics are based on current issues, or news of the week, and in addition to questions from the studio audience, questions are also fielded from the general public via interaction with the program’s website. Panelists include a mix of industry representatives, artists, academics, business and media personalities and politicians, among others. *Q&A*’s premise has always been that it is live and interactive, and in 2010, the program incorporated a live Twitter feed.

In 2015, the public is able to interact with the program by submitting questions (text or video) to the program’s ‘Ask a Question’ page on its website (www.abc.net.au/tv/qanda), or via Twitter (@QandA and #QandA). While based in Sydney normally, *Q&A* also regularly conducts programs at sites around Australia. In 2015, the program’s tagline is ‘Adventure in Democracy’ rather than its originating ‘Democracy in Action’. The program format is very similar to that seen in the BBC’s *Question Time*, but the show’s format is unique in Australian broadcasting. The only other television program in Australia that integrates audience and expert panel discussion in a similar manner is *Insight*, shown on Australia’s second public broadcasting channel SBS (Special Broadcasting Service, which focuses on multicultural and multi-language programming). *Insight* differs from *Q&A* in that panel and audience members sit together while the host stands on the stage in the role of facilitator, directing questions and responses. Additionally, *Insight* does not draw on questions from a non-present studio audience. On *Q&A*, the host Tony Jones sits with panel members, and facilitates questions from an in-studio audience as well as those submitted online.

Q&A attracts a national audience of approximately 800,000 viewers, which is significant given Australia’s relatively small population of nearly 23 million people. Its ratings appear to be directly influenced by the makeup of its guest panel, with social media playing a significant role in informing others of who might be on the program (Bodey, 2012). Single guest episodes have also rated highly, prompting a recommendation in the ABC’s annual report *Sharing Australian Stories: Annual Report (2014)* that the program focus on more of these in the future. More recently *Q&A* has attracted significant negative and political and media attention because an audience member was perceived as a threat to Australian national security (see Green (2015) and McMahon (2015)).

The ABC promotes its own rhetoric about *Q&A*, highlighting its significance in promoting public debate (see ABC, 2010). There is, however, ongoing debate as to the influence and relevance of *Q&A* in in media and political circles. Initially, the originality of the program’s format attracted praise within media circles. For example, in 2010 journalist and literary and cultural critic Craven wrote:

Q&A began only last year, but is already essential to the political landscape. It presents a panel that includes a member each from the government and the opposition, a couple of journalists or intellectuals, perhaps someone from business or a think tank – five in all plus the presenter (Lateline’s Tony Jones) – and subjects them to live questions from the audience plus a

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