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Politicians on celebrity talk shows[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Politicians frequently appear on entertainment talk shows like *The Tonight Show* and *The View*, particularly during election campaigns. Previous research shows these appearances can inform and sway voters, but the practices of these interviews are still not fully understood. This study builds on previous work on talk show and news interview norms to measure the normative organization of interviewing in this environment. The findings suggest that these interviews represent a blending of news and talk show norms. This results in a distinctive type of interview and gives candidates unique opportunities and challenges. This study provides insight into an understudied aspect of the current media landscape, and into the pressures that shape today's election campaigns.

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In the wake of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, many commentators sought to explain the surprising outcome. One highly critical editorial in the *New York Times* began with marked sarcasm: “Such a surprise! So many people to thank!” and the subsequent list included the Electoral College, third party voters, and the media (Coen, 2016). Among media figures, Jimmy Fallon of *The Tonight Show* was singled out for having failed in his duties with dire consequences (see also, Itzkoff, 2017). This commentary betrays a key insight regarding the current media landscape: that talk show hosts are playing an increasingly prominent role in election campaigns and political processes.

Popular and scholarly thought generally dates the rise of politicians appearing on talk shows back to the appearance Bill Clinton made on *The Arsenio Hall Show* in 1992. Commonly credited with saving a campaign that was at the time flagging, this appearance marked the start of a gradually increasing trend in talk show appearances for major political candidates. In the 2012 Presidential election all the major candidates appeared on talk shows, including sitting President Barack Obama, despite the fact that previously such appearances were considered beneath the dignity of the office. Plainly talk show appearances are no longer a fringe part of the election season, but instead a commonplace and thoroughly routinized component of contemporary campaign strategy (Molek-Kozakowska, 2013).

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This shift can be attributed in part to technological changes. In the past, when broadcast television was the norm, a political candidate in the United States could feel fairly secure that they were reaching a large share of the television audience by appearing on the news programs of the three major networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS). Now however, with the proliferation of cable channels and the rise of satellite television and the internet, the three major networks no longer command a dominant share of the market (Baum and Kernell, 1999). In this fragmented media landscape viewers have hundreds of programs to choose from and many viewers do not choose news or politics. To address this problem, politicians are reaching beyond the traditional news program and are seeking out various broadcast talk formats that include the celebrity talk show.

Despite the advantages of appearing on such programs, for some scholars and public commentators this shift in emphasis from traditional news to talk shows is a symptom of the corruption of the media landscape (Allan, 1999; Langer, 1998). For these thinkers, the prevalence of entertainment in the political process signals a decline in serious thought and serious candidates. For other scholars it is merely indicative of a new “media regime” (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2011) in which the common understanding of “news” and “entertainment” must be rethought. They argue that the 20th century model of broadcast news, with its strict separation from entertainment is neither an ideal or necessary form for the media; instead this should be viewed in historical context as just one of a succession of media models. Earlier in history the media moved from the partisan press of early America, to the penny press, to the broadcast model of the 20th century, and

now that model is being overtaken by a new one (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2011). In this new model the distinction between news and entertainment is less clear-cut, with opinion media and infotainment talk shows becoming a more significant source of public affairs information (Jacobs and Townsley, 2011). Today, the journalistic role has become more diffuse, performed by both professional journalists and a variety of para-journalistic actors.

Additionally, scholarly research has already shown that such infotainment programs are not without benefits for viewers. Matthew Baum has found that politically unengaged viewers of these shows are more likely to vote for a candidate based on a favorable interview performance, even if the candidate is affiliated with a different party than the one with which the viewer typically identifies (Baum, 2005, see also Moy et al., 2005a). These programs can also help less politically engaged viewers identify candidates who fit their political preferences and allow them to vote in a manner that is consistent with those preferences (Baum and Jamison, 2006). Entertainment programs can increase viewer attention to national campaign news as the election approaches (Feldman and Goldthwaite Young, 2008), and may also increase political involvement (Pfau et al., 2005) for viewers (but see also Moy et al., 2005b). Beyond election season, consumers of soft news are kept more informed about foreign policy (Baum, 2002), which can shape how they see America's role in the world and the success or failure of its current leaders (Baum, 2003, 2004). In short, soft news can have real effects on audience members' policy preferences and voting behavior.

Previous research has offered a general understanding of the general expectations for a talk show interview with a political guest (Baym, 2010, 2013a, Molek-Kozakowska, 2013), but overall, despite the influence these interviews can have, these types of interview are relatively underexplored compared to the prototypical news interview and celebrity interviews. Further, this previous research has been qualitative; limiting what can be said about distribution and frequency of the practices identified by this research. The present paper extends this literature in a quantitative direction. It does so by drawing on prior conversation analytic research in the broadcast talk area to develop a coding scheme that maps how interviews change and become hybridized when political guests appear, how genre can shift throughout the interaction, and by implication how that might change the information presented to voters.

1. Theoretical background: interviewing norms on talk shows and news programs

Previous research on talk shows (Loeb, 2015) and political interviews (Clayman and Heritage, 2002b) suggests a range of possibilities for the structure of talk show interviews with political guests. This paper will briefly outline these possibilities, starting with news programs, where historically most political interviews have been conducted.

News interviews and their characteristic practices have been extensively researched (examples include: Clayman and Heritage, 2002b; Clayman, 2010; Clayman and Romaniuk, 2011; Ekström et al., 2006; Montgomery, 2007; Roth, 2005; Schudson, 1994). This work shows that news interviews are confined by a strict turn-taking system, organized into questions from interviewers and answers from interviewees (Heritage and Roth, 1995; Tolson, 2012). Both questions and answers tend to be long and complex (Clayman and Heritage, 2002b; Greatbatch, 1988). Within this framework, questions are sensitive to two primary norms rooted in the professional culture of broadcast journalism. In accordance with the first norm, neutralism, interviewers present themselves as impartial catalysts, primarily engaged in eliciting talk from interviewees for the benefit of the overhearing audience (Clayman and Heritage, 2002b). The second norm, adversarialness,

leads interviewers to present themselves as “watchdogs of democracy” by challenging political guests and their positions (Clayman and Heritage, 2002b). The following excerpt (E1) illustrates both of these norms, and the distinct turn taking system of news interviews. In E1 Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is on *Meet the Press* to discuss Israel's relationship with Palestine.

Excerpt 1 (E1) - Meet the Press, 9-25-2011, Benjamin Netanyahu

1 Gre: Let- let me ask you this question, .h
 2 Israel is uh as arguably as isolated as
 3 it's ever been. .h Uh in the midst of
 4 -Arab spring, .h uh Turkey has turned
 5 against you, .h Uh the Arab world has
 6 moved away from dictators who supported
 7 Israel had peace treaties with Israel .h
 8 and is now uh e-more negative toward
 9 Israel, .h Uh in this day and age at
 10 this particular moment despite Israel's
 11 .h um: well known and substantial
 12 security concerns how can you occupy
 13 Palestinian territory at this
 14 momen[t].

15 Net: [.h Well #y-you've got two
 16 assumptions in your questions that I
 17 wanna uh parse out and actually
 18 -> suggest that they're wrong, .h The first
 19 -> one is that we're eh isolated, Well
 20 we're not isolated in this country .h
 21 which happens to be the strongest
 22 -> country on earth. I walked yesterday in
 23 the: in- in Central Park, .h You know
 24 -> people met me, uh- e-Jewish Americans
 25 but many non-Jewish Americans. .h And
 26 they said keep the faith

The norm of neutralism is enacted in a variety of ways. The host, David Gregory, refrains from doing anything that cannot be seen as part and parcel of “asking questions.” He does offer several declarative assertions (lines 1–9), but these are preliminary background to an eventual question (lines 9–14). Although there are places in Netanyahu's response where a receipt token (e.g. *mmhm*, *uh huh*) could have been produced by the interviewer if this had been an ordinary conversation (Clayman and Heritage, 2002b; Gardner, 2001; Heritage, 1985), here they are strictly avoided (arrowed lines). The norm of adversarialness is enacted by mobilizing the question preface to portray Israel as isolated and vulnerable (lines 1–12), as well as in the question format (“how can you”, lines 12–14) which Clayman and Heritage classify as markedly adversarial or “accusatory” (2002a, 2002b). Finally, all of this occurs within a turn-taking framework of long uninterrupted questions and answers, as is characteristic of the news interview.

Turning to talk shows, and in particular the celebrity talk shows on which politicians are most likely to appear, prototypical guests are typically cultural luminaries such as movie and television stars, musicians, and comedians (Baym, 2013a; Farnsworth and Lichter, 2007; Molek-Kozakowska, 2013). The main topics of discussion in these celebrity interviews concern aspects of popular culture, and the guest's professional and personal lives, although political topics may also be introduced (Loeb, 2015; Baym, 2010; Bell and van Leeuwen, 1994; Eriksson, 2010; Fairclough, 1995; Jones, 2010; Tolson, 1991; Tuchman, 1974).

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