

A comparative study of toughness and neutrality in Italian and English political interviews[☆]

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Abstract

While interview styles are studied in an increasing number of countries, truly cross-national comparative research on interview styles is scarce. This paper addresses this lack of comparative research by comparing both English and Italian journalistic styles in terms of face-threatening acts and coercion because they are good representatives of the “Atlantic” and the “Mediterranean” models of media systems. We compared two sets of questions from 75 televised political interviews that were broadcast in England ($N = 234$) and Italy ($N = 380$) in 2004. Two bilingual observers coded both samples using comparable category systems. The results showed that Italian and English interviewers were equally tough. English interviewers, however, showed a systematic bias toward the opposition over government politicians. In contrast, Italian interviewers treated left- and right-wing politicians according to whichever channel the interviewers belonged, depending on the political and financial groups who supported the channel. We discuss the cross-cultural, social and psycho-social implications of this study and also discuss the merits and challenges of comparing interview styles across countries. © 2013 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Cross-cultural; Coercive questions; Face-threatening questions; Politics

1. Introduction

It is widely recognized that democratic systems need agencies to exert control over many important functions. One of these control agencies is the mass media. In television programs, political journalism acts as a liaison between politicians and citizens (Ekström, 2001). Most scholars acknowledge that the mass media is able to influence public opinion and affect viewers' voting preferences (Della Vigna and Kaplan, 2007; Kahn and Kenney, 2002). As a result, journalists are expected to remain independent from political and financial power groups or lobbies. An independent journalist is tough and impartial (Bull, 2008) and expects fair treatment of parties in the pursuit of an effective pluralism. The most prominent style in journalism is the so-called Anglo-Saxon style, which is characterized by reportorial objectivity, the presentation of well-sourced and transparent evidence and assumes the right of reply and refutation (Lloyd, 2004).

Within the narrower sphere of televised political interviews, social psychology has been applied to language and communication, resulting in several ways to evaluate the performance of journalists when interviewing politicians. The present study utilizes these indices pragmatically by comparing the performance of a sample of Italian and English political interviewers to clarify how the two types of interviewers serve this function. We chose to compare these two countries because they are valid representations of two different ways of doing political journalism (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). While the two nations share a comparable population size and economy (e.g. citizens, GDP, etc.), they may be

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considered as prototypical examples of two different styles of journalism: the “Mediterranean” and the “Atlantic” models (see below). Therefore, this comparison is not only informative, but also essential to the study of political journalism, as we will explain in the next paragraph.

1.1. Toughness and partisanship in political interviews

During both electoral periods and routine periods, political bias in television broadcasts of political information has been researched extensively because it may affect the audience’s views of a particular party, the nature of public opinion and even electoral outcomes (see [Hopmann et al., 2012](#) for a recent review). One of the most important and interactive arenas ([Clayman, 2004](#)) in which a bias can be found is in the news or in a political interview, which are both planned for view by the overhearing judging audience of the broadcast ([Clayman and Heritage, 2002](#); [Ekström and Kroon-Lundell, 2011](#)). Interviews with politicians also attract less interested viewers ([Baum and Jamison, 2006](#)) because both parties appear in structured but relatively uncontrolled situations ([McNair, 2000](#)) in which the audience gets the impression that the politicians are being observed directly. In theory, the interview should be used to obtain objective information from political elites ([Clayman and Heritage, 2002](#)). Indeed, politicians have the opportunity to present themselves as competent and able to face unexpected situations, themes and questions ([Hagerty, 2010](#)), thereby promoting their positive “face” (see below). The viewers evaluate the performance of the politician in terms of the quality of their answers, appropriateness, cooperativeness, authenticity, leadership and personality ([Caprara and Zimbardo, 2004](#); [Liebes, 2001](#)). Interestingly, the interviewer has recently become less deferential and tougher toward the political interviewee ([Clayman and Heritage, 2002](#)), which is probably a result of increased competition in the media market ([Clayman, 2001](#); [Lengauer et al., 2012](#)) and professionalization of the politicians themselves ([McNair, 2000](#)). The interviewer, who manages and controls themes and questions, directly faces the politician and acts both assertive and hostile, which has led to interviews becoming increasingly adversarial ([Clayman and Heritage, 2002](#)). In the media, where spectacularization is becoming more important in catching the audience’s attention, the toughness of the interviewers may be a way to improve one’s reputation and status, and it may even become “news” at the center of journalistic debates ([Hagerty, 2010](#)). Sometimes, these experienced interviewers are regarded as media celebrities or as “tribunes of the people” ([Higgins, 2010](#)) and are supported by a large audience ([Gnisci et al., 2013](#)).

Previous research on these themes has been conducted in both the United Kingdom and the United States, the reference nations for the liberal (or Atlantic) model of the relationship between media and political systems ([Hallin and Mancini, 2004](#)). These countries represent strong professionalization, limited intervention from the state and low political parallelism ([Hallin and Mancini, 2012](#)). The United Kingdom is the home of the Anglo-Saxon style of reference for journalism, which is based on objectivity, impartiality and sourced evidence ([Lloyd, 2004](#)). The majority of recent studies has shown that the interviewer’s features are strongly pronounced, if not exaggerated, by these nations ([Bull, 2003](#); [Clayman et al., 2012](#)), where the objective and autonomous interviewer becomes “the watchdog of democracy” ([Dimitrova and Strömbäck, 2012](#); [Gnisci et al., 2011](#), p. 205; [Waver and Wilnatt, 2012](#)). The watchdog is tough, but he/she is equally tough toward different political parties and therefore impartial ([Bull, 2003](#)), although he/she also has a tendency to confront powerful politicians more aggressively (e.g. in charge) ([Gnisci et al., 2013](#)). Although this model remains the ideal reference for journalists all over the world, many journalists now recognize that the real applicability of the watchdog model is limited ([Hallin and Mancini, 2012](#)). Outside and inside the Atlantic nations, these watchdogs have become the exception rather than the rule because of the polarization of the television markets (see [Baum and Groeling, 2008](#); [Coe et al., 2008](#)).

The most widely applicable model for other systems is undoubtedly the polarized pluralist (or Mediterranean) model ([Hallin and Mancini, 2004](#)), in which we find less freedom of the press and greater press interference ([Hallin and Mancini, 2012](#)). Within the polarized pluralist market, the journalists, including the interviewers, are not necessarily less aggressive than their liberal counterparts. Their toughness, however, is distributed in a biased way: the partisan (or political) bias in political interview is a systematic difference of treatment, intentional and ideological ([Strömbäck and Shehata, 2007](#)), in favor of politicians and parties affine and/or allied with the economic and political orientation of the channel. Thus, politicians and parties who are not connected with their employer are discriminated against ([Gnisci, 2008](#)). Journalists are not objective watchdogs. On the contrary, they perceive themselves as advocates of a political perspective ([Donsbach and Patterson, 2004](#); [Hallin and Papathanassopoulos, 2002](#)). Notwithstanding the wide diffusion of the polarized pluralist model, only a few studies are dedicated to the interviewer’s partisan bias. This fact is more notable considering there is recent evidence ([Huls and Varwijk, 2011](#); [Strömbäck and Shehata, 2007](#); [Van Kempen, 2007](#)) that partisan bias is present even in Northern European nations that use the democratic corporatist model (e.g. Swedish, Belgium, The Netherlands).

This study will present a comparison of toughness and impartiality between Anglo-Saxon journalism of the United Kingdom and their Italian counterpart. Given that toughness and impartiality are difficult to quantify, we will attempt to define them in theory in the following paragraph.

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