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# 'A mess' and 'rows': evaluation in prime-time TV news discourse and the shaping of public opinion



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**ABSTRACT** This article examines a recent shift in the organization of prime-time news on Greek private television, from the 'one-way' dissemination of information to an interactive format, where the news genre meets the talk show. By drawing on Hunston's model of evaluation in written academic discourse, it is argued that this conversational news format serves as a vehicle for evaluation, allowing the anchorpersons and journalist panels more freedom to voice concrete views. More specifically, prime-time news is generally cast in terms of two major sub-genres, namely the debate and the structured panel discussion. These sub-genres particularly lend themselves to the performance of acts of evaluation by TV journalists. Far from merely reporting events, journalists unequivocally show that their main task is to jointly *interpret* reality (news events and the actions of news makers) on behalf of the viewer audience. They set about this task by explicitly encoding their personal attitudes, while directly challenging government spokespersons and policies. It is argued that, in so doing, media personalities in effect shape audience opinions. The data attest to the increasing empowerment of the Greek media, and illustrate the ways in which conversational processes bring into being the continuously evolving public sphere in contemporary Greece.

**KEY WORDS:** *conversation, conversationalization, debate, evaluation, journalistic discourse, prime-time news*

## Introduction

Evening news plays a pivotal role in political communication, as it is involved in the construction of political meaning, the formation of the political agenda and public opinion (Hallin, 1994; see also GUMG, 1993; Jensen, 1998; McCombs et al., 1996; Robinson and Levy, 1986). Within communication studies, two broad approaches to news research and theories of news production have evolved over time. On the one hand, newsroom studies have emphasized routine processes of

mass production and organizational values as the driving forces in the production and organization of news (Epstein, 1974; Hetherington, 1985). According to this perspective, news production is constrained by organizational factors, such as intense financial pressure and (lack of) time. The detected bias and pro-status quo character of news is thus construed as the inevitable, albeit unintentional, consequence of these organizational constraints. On the other hand, 'social constructionist' studies (Schudson, 1991: 149) have drawn attention to the social function of news as a vehicle for the transmission and reproduction of dominant ideologies (GUMG, 1976, 1993; Hallin, 1994; Langer, 1998; Manoff and Schudson, 1986; Robinson and Levy, 1986; Romano, 1986; Van Ginneken, 1998; for a discussion of the two approaches, see MacGregor, 1997).

While shedding light on different aspects of the news, the research in question has rendered clear that any individual theory cannot fully explain the complex, dynamic, socially and culturally embedded process of news creation (MacGregor, 1997); this is because one theoretical explanation may apply in one case, but not in another. As a way of coping with the multifaceted character of broadcast news, MacGregor recommends focusing on the news product itself: 'look in a detailed manner at the screen product produced in the brave new world of satellite television and 24-hour rolling news' (p. 84).

Among the components of television news, interviews have been extensively researched as a 'brief but significant component of most newscasts' (Cohen, 1987: 8). Interviewing first appeared in the United States in the mid-19th century, and became well institutionalized by the 1930s (Schudson, 1994). Although, in its early days, it was considered a 'barbaric' invention inviting comparison to the Inquisition (p. 568), the status and social role of interviewing have by now become well-established as a form of 'cultural control over the powerful' (p. 584); however, the ethical contradictions inherent in the practice of interviewing remain problematic. Given the 'vulnerability of the reporter to the source and of the public to both' (p. 583), Schudson characterizes it as an ambiguous act of controversial morality.

In the mid-1980s, news interviews in the US only constituted a small part of national evening news programmes, while they were mostly salient in 'current affairs' programmes and morning news magazines (Cohen, 1987). Nonetheless, they were organized in terms of well-defined verbal and non-verbal (including filmic) codes, and 'rules of etiquette' governing the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. What is more, cross-cultural comparison of television news interviews revealed significant quantitative variability along a number of verbal parameters, such as the numbers of questions asked, the use of repeated and provocative questions and interruptions by the interviewer, the use of first names and the relative amount of talk produced by the parties involved.

Finally, textbook manuals for aspiring journalists (Boyd, 2001; Cremer et al., 1995) are revealing in so far as they spell out the values that (should) guide standard journalist practice for interviewing. Boyd (2001), for instance, exhorts journalists-to-be to avoid both statements posing as questions and leading questions, on the grounds that 'a leading question is one designed to lead

interviewees into a corner and trap them there. More often it has the effect of boxing in the reporter with allegations of malice, bias and unfair play' (p. 120).

From a conversational-analytic perspective, the news interview has been given special analytical attention in the Anglo-American literature of the mid-1980s and early 1990s. Researchers have reported a change from the former 'soft' interviewing practices characterizing the public broadcasting ethos towards more combative forms of interviewing. Despite this, the deployment of strategies of journalistic neutrality is a major theme in the studies in question (Clayman, 1988, 1992; Greatbatch, 1992, 1998; Heritage, 1985; Heritage and Greatbatch, 1991).

More specifically, Clayman views the interviewer's questioning as displaying and asserting his neutral stance. Interviewers do not personally affiliate with or reject opinions reported by interviewees, while refraining from commenting on these opinions. Thus, interviewers' assertions involving overt agreement or disagreement with interviewees are rarely encountered in nonprofessional TV interviews (Heritage and Greatbatch, 1991), while the interaction is conducted almost exclusively through chains of questions and answers (Heritage, 1985; see also Roth, 1998).

Overall, the presenters take care so as to disavow any personal involvement and distance themselves from the positions expressed. For instance, the possessive pronouns that would attach assessments and disagreements to the interviewer are markedly absent. Rather, the host's contentious statements are typically embedded within questions, attributed to third parties, or, less often, mitigated as temporary actions formulated with caution (Clayman, 1988, 1992). According to Clayman, these procedures enable the host to perform the complex task of being 'interactionally adversarial' while remaining 'officially neutral'; that is, to introduce viewpoints that contradict those of the interviewees not as a matter of personal opinion, but as a way of soliciting the interviewees' own views (Clayman, 1988). Thus, the journalists claim the identity of a public spokesperson who impartially elicits the view of others on behalf of citizens.

In a recent paper, Clayman (2002) identifies the journalistic practice of aligning oneself with the public as a resource for maintaining the legitimacy of aggressive journalism in the USA. Clayman emphasizes the fact that aggressive journalists are particularly vulnerable to the charge of having transgressed the boundaries of professionalism or propriety. To safeguard themselves from such challenges, journalists strategically adopt a 'tribune of the people' stance, namely of one who invites government officials and other public figures to address the concerns of citizens. This resource is deployed 'in a highly selective manner' (p. 213), namely in interactional environments involving aggressively probing or adversarial lines of questioning. In same vein, Montgomery (2006) points out that correspondents in live news interviews regularly formulate propositions as part of what people are saying or thinking, that is, they attribute them to other people's words or thoughts 'in a kind of propositional ventriloquism' (p. 243). Finally, Rendle-Short (2007) tackles the question of journalistic legitimation in the Australian political news interview, showing that interviewers

and interviewees collaboratively produce the news interview in such a way as to avoid accusations of bias.

The increasing use of 'live' dialogic modes of discourse on broadcast news in relation to parameters of evaluation is addressed by Montgomery (2006). Montgomery examines the role of live interviewing (the live 'two-way') of field correspondents in broadcast news, focusing on the differences between the discourse of the live two-way and that of other scripted sections of the news. Importantly, the linguistic choices of live dialogue (particularly choices in linguistic modality) 'project a different approach to the truth conditions of its discourse with less emphasis on precise veracity than is found generally in the news' (p. 238), sometimes, as the analysis shows, with serious, even tragic, consequences for broadcast journalists, the news station and news makers themselves.

In the study in question, the discourse of the live two-way is only attested as a sub-genre in live interviews with highly esteemed correspondents and news editors, and occupies a sequential position within a news item of allowing the speaker the last word. In the Greek data from the most popular (in terms of audience ratings) private national channels, dialogue is not only encountered in live interviews with field correspondents; rather, it is far more pervasive as an aspect of 'pure' news discourse, such that it constitutes a news genre per se. In other words, live conversation is part and parcel of today's mainstream news discourse, and, as will be argued in the following sections, it plays a paramount role in the construction of the political public sphere.

### *News from Greece: the generic transformation of prime-time news*

In recent years, news as a television genre in Greece has undergone fundamental changes. Most important among these is the pervasiveness of dialogic modes of discourse in the flow of the central (prime-time) news bulletins of the major private national outlets. In this scheme, the anchor person, well-known journalists, politicians and other news makers come together to discuss or debate a central news story. This marks a radical shift from the – predominantly – 'one-way' dissemination of information to an interactive format. In fact, mainstream TV stations have raised multiple participant 'windows' to perhaps the most important ingredient of their bulletin, as they devote to them a significant amount of air time (Doudakis, 2004).

According to Doudakis (2004), this is because of the sense of 'liveness' and immediacy, of news making in progress offered by dialogue. Conversations with studio guests (a large part of them, as Doudakis asserts, *cannot* be characterized as interviews) create the feeling that television people are close to the events and to the citizen, that they are not detached from the viewer. 'Electronic window' conversations are offered as a podium for journalistic dialogue; more fundamentally, this podium is presented as democratic since, at first sight, journalists grant the opportunity of expression not only to the official side, but also to the everyday citizen, such as the unemployed or the person treated

with injustice. As such, live dialogue gives the viewer a sense of participation. Another important attribute of such interactions is that they often create an atmosphere of tension (artificial or not).

Importantly, within the logistics of news production, conversations and prolonged disputes allow stations to cover television time at a relatively low cost, and without time-consuming preparation in comparison to journalistic research and reportage production.

This article will show that this new, conversational news format has important implications for the evolving relationship between media institutions and representatives of established power, and the attendant public sphere in contemporary Greece; what is more, its implications span definitions of newsworthiness, reportability and the truth value of television news.

Overall, what sets the Greek news data apart from the body of the news interview literature discussed in the previous section is a) the pervasiveness of live conversation as a source of newsworthiness in the central news bulletin of national, private TV outlets in Greece, and b) the salience of the debate genre, where journalists directly challenge government politicians. Far from observing a formally neutral posture, journalists confront politicians and/or comment on topics that are conversationally established as 'critical' or 'controversial' in overtly disputatious and markedly informal terms, echoing the everyday concerns of the lay viewer audience.

Drawing upon Hunston's model of evaluation in written academic discourse (Hunston, 1994, 2000), it will be shown that high-profile television journalists openly engage in acts of evaluation of news makers and news events in and through the process of conversation. According to Hunston, evaluation serves two interrelated functions: that of *status* (evaluating the degree of certainty and commitment attached to the propositions expressed in the discourse) and *value* (assessing the positive or negative value of discourse items and information).

The next sections will focus on the ways in which journalists evaluate the 'status' and 'value' of discourse propositions, while boldly formulating points of view that are not mitigated or in any way signposted as 'not personal'.

## *The data*

The research data include more than 20 hours of taped excerpts from the central news programs of two major Greek private channels, namely MEGA channel and ALPHA channel. The data were collected from 1996 to 1998. The anchor persons, both popular television personae, are surrounded by equally recognizable journalists, who form the regular 'panel' of prime-time news bulletins on each channel. The journalists are accompanied by news makers themselves, who, depending on the story, may be government and/or opposition members, and other institutional spokespersons. These participants appear on electronic 'windows' through online camera links from the studio or from remote locations. As this research shows, conversational processes have been raised to a dominant component of the central news program, to the extent that, on occasion, they take

up as much as 90 per cent of the total programme time (about an hour long). As a result of the incorporation of panel discussion/debate in the news bulletin, fewer news stories now find their way into prime-time news, whereas, on occasion, the whole bulletin is focused upon a single current affairs story, which is labelled 'the newsworthy' event of the evening.

Following from the above, this media format marks the evolution and transformation of the news interview into a scheme that is, more or less, akin to the talk show. Overall, interaction in the central news bulletins of Greek private television falls into two broad categories in terms of the sequential organization and type of participant contributions. I call these a) the debate, and b) the structured panel discussion.

### *The debate*

In the debate genre, the newscaster sets the scene to the subsequent discussion by reporting on the newsworthy item and providing relevant background information ('headline' and 'story'; Clayman, 1991: 50–2), before nominating a member of the journalist panel or invited guest to comment. Notably, the 'lead-in' segment, where newscasters introduce the interviewees in news interview openings (Clayman, 1991), is either reduced or completely absent in the context of the news bulletin. This is because each of the panel participants appears online on an individual screen 'window', often with a caption identifying his/her name (and institutional capacity). This renders the need for a more elaborate lead-in redundant, and helps save valuable air time. In addition, membership of the journalist panel surrounding the anchorperson is generally fixed.

The debate genre is instantiated in the following way<sup>1</sup> in the context of the central news bulletin:

Panel journalists challenge participating politicians in a direct, face-to-face manner. Notably, the journalists' individual communicative style (idiolect) comes forward forcefully as part of their performance for the public. In this way, the journalists realize their identity as recognizable media personalities. Far from avoiding revealing any personal involvement in the expressed views (Clayman, 1988, 1992), presenters regularly formulate personal assessments, challenges and criticisms to politicians both within questioning formats and in the form of statements.

In the next extract, a panel journalist and newspaper editor (K), well-known for his intense temperament and relentless critique of authority, progressively escalates a straightforward attack on the vice-minister:

#### **Extract 1 (K: panel journalist; G: Employment Vice-minister; N: newscaster)**

- 1 K: . . . the ((pause)) minister Mr Giakumatos, Gerasimos, two or three years  
 2 later, will develop into the greatest defender e:r advocate, while he's a  
 3 distinguished doctor – because of the way he defends, government ((pause))  
 4 policies – that are none of his business at the [end of the day],  
 5 G: [specific policies] =  
 6 K: = mhh?

- 7 G: specific policies =  
 8 K: = ((loud)) nothing – a fireman that’s what you are, [you’re a fireman], and }  
 9 G: [( ) ]  
 10 K: } a defender, and that’s well done – because that’s what  
 11 [unemployment does – but look – look at me –] look my sweet boy – look }  
 12 G: [the truth – the truth – the truth ]  
 13 K: } my sweet boy – what are you going to do about ((Greek National Insurance  
 14 Fund)) IKA – [that’s right – and leave] the unemployed aside now  
 15 G: [I’ll tell you about IKA ]  
 16 N: gentlemen – one moment – [ gentlemen – one ] moment  
 17 K: ((loud)) [don’t spread out - ] }  
 18 K: } [don’t spread out Gerasimos ] – you’ll catch a cold-  
 19 G: [but concerning redundancies,]

[ALPHA Channel – central news bulletin]

In lines 1–4, the journalist formulates a third-person, albeit biting, challenge about the Employment Vice-minister, namely that he repeatedly and unjustifiably defends government policies. As the journalist initiates his utterance, his three-part reference to the vice-minister consists of the latter’s title, followed by the formal ‘Mr’ and his last name, with the vice-minister’s first name as the third item in the list (‘the ((pause)) minister Mr Giakumatos, Gerasimos’, line 1). His utterance is grammatically cast as a prediction (‘two or three years later, *will develop*’, lines 1–2), and is imbued with subtle irony (‘will develop into the greatest defender e:r advocate, while he’s a distinguished doctor’, lines 2–3). His personal attitude is overtly encoded in a subordinate clause (‘that are none of his business at the end of the day’, line 4).

When the vice-minister interjects that it is specific policies that he defends, the journalist cuts him off by directly dismissing his claim (‘nothing’, line 8), and variously upgrading his verbal attack: first, he switches to the informal second-person singular form of address and resorts to name-calling (‘a fireman that’s what you are, you’re a fireman, and a defender’, lines 8, 10). The term ‘fireman’ is used derogatorily in this context, as it implies that the vice-minister typically attempts to justify the government’s ‘faux pas’ (metaphorically, to put out fires). Then, the journalist uses an informal imperative coupled by a peculiar address form implying familiarity (‘look at me – look my sweet boy – look my sweet boy’, lines 11, 13). He further escalates his confrontational stance with a questioning challenge about the vice-minister’s intentions concerning the problems faced by the National Insurance Fund (‘what are you going to do about IKA’, lines 13–14) followed by an adversarial imperative (‘and leave the unemployed aside now’, line 14). Finally, while ignoring the newscaster’s bid to end the dispute (line 16), he is warning the politician to not interfere with affairs that are beyond his jurisdiction; he does so through an ironic exhortation again cast in the imperative form, while at the same time addressing the vice-minister by his first name (‘don’t spread out – don’t spread out Gerasimos – you’ll catch a cold’, lines 17–18). Note that the journalist recurrently ignores the vice-minister’s attempts to claim the floor (lines 5, 7, 9, 12, 15), while his loud volume of voice underscores his disputatious stance.

Notably, grammatical modality is not explicitly encoded in the journalist's utterances above. The absence of marked modality choices in direct, unmitigated assertions delivered in a firm, falling intonation conveys an effect of high modality. In other words, it underlines the truth and reliability of discourse information, and projects a high discourse status for the speaker as knowledgeable and authoritative (He, 1993; Patrona, 2005).

It has been argued that challenging descriptions of news interviewees involve evaluations of public figures, but also, more fundamentally, a definition of the standards by which public figures should be evaluated (Roth, 1998). As the extract above illustrates, the evaluation achieved through interviewee descriptions in the Greek news data is phrased in bluntly aggressive terms, which, unexpectedly, are *not* attributed to third parties; rather, the news journalist appears to talk on behalf of himself as the 'author' and 'principal' of views (to use Goffman's, 1981, distinction of speaking roles). Thus, through a combination of paralinguage, evaluative lexis ('defender', 'advocate', 'a fireman', 'and that's *well done*'), categorical assertions ('that are none of his business'/'a fireman that's what you are') and informal forms of address, a cumulative effect is achieved, and the journalist's challenge against the government spokesperson comes forward in forceful and categorical terms.

As shown in the conversational excerpt, in the debate genre, turn-taking rights are largely negotiated online by the debating parties with minimal intervention by the anchorperson.

### *The structured panel discussion*

In this sub-genre, conversational processes form a continuum, from multiple journalist reports on the newsworthy item in a serial fashion, that is, one after the other following the presenter's prompt, to a scheme more akin to informal conversation, where conversational rights are locally negotiated through self-selecting among panel journalists.

In the former case, sequentially, the newscaster provides background information on the story, and then allocates the speaking right to panel journalists, who take turns to provide in-depth insider details, as well as evaluate and interpret the events for the overhearing audience.

In the next extract, the anchorwoman (N) sets the scene for the subsequent commentary by the panel journalist (P) (lines 1–7). Far from reporting events, her utterance provides an initial assessment of the events surrounding the central news story (here, a major scandal concerning the tapping of mobile phones of senior government members and plain citizens who were subscribers to a particular telecommunications provider), before handing over the floor to P ('Aleksis', line 3). Through the use of evaluative nouns and adverbs ('political *storm*', 'which is not *purely* political', 'we have an *attack*', 'we also have an *attack* on justice', 'we have *friction* too'), the newscaster progressively leads up to an equally evaluative summational phrase ('a mixed up landscape', line 7). Grammatically, her turn contains unhedged assertions, while modal modification is again missing:

**Extract 2 (N: news caster; P: panel journalist)**

- 1 N: Now let's move from the snow storm to the political storm to which we  
 2 also referred at the beginning of our bulletin ((panel journalist))  
 3 Aleksis, which is not purely political, because we have an attack, (0.1)  
 4 by ((opposition party)) PASOK against the government ministers on  
 5 the grounds that they are involved in the case but we also have an,  
 6 attack on justice, and on the other hand we have friction too inside  
 7 justice but also inside the government party – a mixed up landscape  
 8 P: good evening Olga and the (((inf.)) rows are more than I can count  
 ((lines omitted))  
 9 P: I, can't make heads nor tails, I don't understand who knew what, what I  
 10 do understand is that that the investigation that was carried out, is, very  
 11 very shallow ((pause)) we must also say – that there is a lot of tension  
 12 and (((inf.)) row inside the government itself  
 ((lines omitted))  
 13 P: look – to begin with Olga we must say that either the Greek state is in a  
 14 complete e:r ((coll.)) mess that is, there's nothing left standing and  
 15 that's why they don't do their job, or there is a (((inf.)) cover-up one  
 16 can't find a different answer –

[MEGA Channel – central news bulletin]

In his response (lines 8–16), the panel journalist further elaborates on the newscaster's assessment of the situation, while trying to establish the far-reaching repercussions of the scandal for the political system. More specifically, he formulates personal judgements, without taking any care whatsoever so as to downplay his personal involvement in the discourse. On the contrary, his evaluation is punctuated with subjectivity markers ('... the rows are more than I can count; I, can't make heads nor tails') and an emphatic structure ('I don't understand who knew what, what I do understand', lines 8–10). The journalist severely criticizes the government's handling of the situation, by repeating the intensifier 'very' followed by the adjective 'shallow' ('what I do understand is that that the investigation that was carried out, is, *very very shallow*', lines 10–11).

What is more, his critique of the government is highlighted through register shifts to colloquial language. Note the informal use of 'rows' ('*kodres*', line 8, '*kodra*', line 12). Tsitsanoudi-Mallidi (2006) identifies the word '*kodra*' as one of the cliché words and phrases that are regularly used in the introductions, titles and commentary of news bulletins in Greece. Herself an acting journalist, Tsitsanoudi-Mallidi criticizes the overuse of '*kodra*' (in Italian, '*contra*', meaning opposite to, in contrast to, against) as evidence of a lack of originality and tendency towards imitation. Yet, she admits that '*kodra*' as well as the metaphorical use of cliché vocabulary from football and gambling help create a journalist discourse that appears familiar, popular and, above all, easily understood by its recipients.

The journalist ends his long-winded commentary with a categorical statement cast as a two-part structure ('to begin with Olga we must say that *either the Greek state is in a complete e:r ((coll.)) mess that is, there's nothing left standing and that's why they don't do their job, or there is a (((inf.)) cover-up*', lines 13–16). Both options included in this proposition are equally detrimental to the government's image.

Again, the journalist's disparaging stance becomes transparent by resorting to a streetwise, popular idiom ('cover-up' *kukuloma*, line 15; 'a mess' *baχalo*, line 14).

In the latter conversational format, the newscaster expresses opinions almost on an equal footing with the rest of the panel. Consider the following extract from a news programme on the phone-tapping scandal:

**Extract 3 (T: panel journalist; N: newscaster; L: panel journalist)**

- 1 T: indeed did Mr. Papagelopoulos keep a file for eleven months, and was  
2 looking at it, (0.1) was dusting it [and putting it back in his drawer?]  
3 N: [this I think has been pointed out - ] }  
4 N: } [that within twenty days ADAE ] }  
5 L: [and there is an additional political issue Olga,]  
6 N: } ((Telecommunications Privacy Assurance Authority)) ((address to T))  
7 Stratis, found what was discovered – e:r wasn't discovered by justice  
8 and the government in eleven months =  
9 L: = exactly – and there is an additional political issue, precisely  
10 mentioned by ((panel journalist)) Aleksis too –  
((turns omitted))  
11 N: in any case what Erickson will say is important, now that you're saying  
12 Stratis that they will talk soon, I also agree with what Aleksis says that  
13 we will find ourselves in front of great legal conflicts, ((pause)) we will  
14 in all likelihood move to a Vodaphone Erickson conflict, =  
15 L: = also let me add [something else Olga ]  
16 N: [and it's important that –] let me add that in its latest  
17 announcement, the first and last one I think Erickson, had said that the  
18 joint listen – this system of joint listening, was installed because it was a  
19 demand, of authorities around the world, after September 11 – I think  
20 that says a lot ((pause)) now –  
((turns omitted))  
21 L: but we as citizens, ((pause)) when we see that our prime minister's and  
22 our ministers' phones are being tapped, ((pause)) and they tell us that a  
23 year later we don't know how many more were being tapped,  
24 justifiably [lose our temper ]  
25 N: [look Stratis, ] there is no doubt that there are a great  
26 many gaps ((pause)) here we understand that the government ((sl.))  
27 dumped ((Vodaphone chief executive)) Mr. Koronias today, e:r we  
28 have pointed out the contradictions traced by the MPs in Mr.  
29 Koronias's multi-hour testimony, but there are also significant  
30 differences between what Mr. Koronias claims in his testimony and the  
31 concluding document, that ADAE has compiled on the case – Marios  
32 Vevilis has talked with telecommunications specialists and has  
33 recorded these contradictions  
((taped reportage follows))

[MEGA Channel – central news bulletin]

In lines 1–2, the panel journalist addresses a request for confirmation to the anchorwoman. His question contains negative presuppositions about a government official, indirectly accusing him of inertia and belated action ('... for eleven months/was dusting it and putting it back in his drawer'). The newscaster supplies

the requested confirmation, further elaborating on the theme of belated action by the government. Another panel journalist (L) claims the speaking right to further expand on this point (lines 5, 9–10). In lines 11–14 and 16–20, the newscaster capitalizes on the significance of current and upcoming events ('what Erickson will say is *important*'/'and it's *important* that'/'I think *that says a lot*') as well as foreseeing important developments on the issues at hand ('we will find ourselves in front of *great* legal conflicts/we will in all likelihood move to a Vodaphone Erickson conflict').

Predictions by panel journalists serve the interpretive function of discourse in the new, interactive format of prime-time news. According to Montgomery, the use of hypothetical conditionals in live dialogue with correspondents shows that news items are treated in a more speculative way than in conventional newscasting: 'And whereas news presentation offers a series of apparently established "facts", the live two-way can afford to explore possibility and to indulge in conjecture' (Montgomery, 2006: 244). Indeed, exploring possible scenarios for future developments is part and parcel of the journalists' interpretive task. What is more, the ability (and entitlement) to forecast the turn-out of critical current affairs issues signals the speakers' discourse power. Predictive statements are tacitly defined as 'newsworthy' by virtue of being formulated by established media personalities in the context of prime-time news, and can be expected to influence the decisions and actions of political newsmakers themselves.

In lines 21–4, the journalist (L) switches to the first-person plural, thus taking on the identity of a spokesperson for the public. Through the use of the polarized pronouns 'us' and 'them' (Van Dijk, 1997: 32), he linguistically constructs a chasm between the citizenry ('but *we* as citizens . . .') and the government ('and *they* tell us . . .'), asserting that citizens are reasonably angry about the government's handling of the situation ('justifiably lose our temper', line 24).

The anchorperson claims the last turn at talk (line 25), and ends the panel discussion by signalling the passage to a taped reportage, which apparently documents the 'contradictions' in the chief executive's testimony that she has referred to in line 28. Note that she uses a factual statement (see Almeida, 1992; Patrona, 2005) and the verb 'recorded', thus linguistically framing the upcoming taped interview with telecommunication specialists as irrefutable proof of the alleged contradictions ('Marios Vevilis . . . has recorded these contradictions', lines 31–3).

Like the panel journalists in the previous extracts, the newscaster highlights her assessments by resorting to informal, idiomatic language. Note the slang – newly coined – use of the word 'dumped' (*aδjase*, line 27) to mean 'left uncovered, unprotected; put the blame on'. This is a word that would typically figure in the everyday language of the younger generation.<sup>2</sup> Its use by the anchorperson on the prime-time news bulletin of a major Greek TV station is rather unexpected, as it departs from the norms established in the surrounding discourse. The stylistic effect created through these register shifts is part of the rhetoric of persuasion, as it aims for the emotional involvement and identification of the audience with the discourse (see Scotton, 1985, about style-shifting as a property of powerful language).

As regards the newscaster's modality choices, a marker of personal opinion ('I think') is used in lines 3, 17 and 19. Rather than serving to mitigate the validity of expressed views, markers of personal point of view are used to facilitate the exchange of arguments in the process of spontaneous dialogue, calling attention to the personality and intellectual positioning of individual speakers. Montgomery points out that, in the live two-way, correspondents are relatively 'unbuttoned': 'they speak as if they are licensed to project a particular point of view as personal observers of a scene' (2006: 244). The same is true of anchorpersons and panel journalists in the Greek news programmes. The personal voice is thus foregrounded, without any indication that this might constitute a breach of news discourse norms.

In fact, on two occasions only does the newscaster show a concern with the probability of events: more specifically, in the course of a prediction ('we will *in all likelihood* move to a Vodaphone Erickson conflict', lines 13–14), and in the last utterance of the exchange, which she initiates with the high modality adjunct ('there is no doubt', line 25). She thus frames her evaluative assessment ('there are a great many gaps') as undisputed fact. Finally, the adjectives 'a great many' (lines 25–6) and 'significant' ('there are also *significant* differences', line 29) are used to evaluatively 'colour' the reported discrepancies between the chief executive's testimony and the formal case document compiled by the Telecommunications Privacy Assurance Authority (ADAE). Again, attribution of evaluative comments to third parties is missing. Overall, through a series of assertions occasionally punctuated with the signalling of personal opinion, and minimal concern with positioning events on a scale of likelihood, the anchorperson collaborates with the panel journalists in co-interpreting news stories for the viewer audience.

The linguistic expression of solidarity among panel journalists is made visible through agreement tokens and further expansion of points previously made ('exactly', line 9), and conversational floor-claiming signals, such as perception verb followed by first name ('look Stratis', line 25). Finally, it is evident in the conversational timing of turns through supportive overlaps (lines 2–3, 24–5) and latching (lines 8–9, 14–15). Simultaneous talk and latching of turns create the effect of spontaneous conversation.

Through the use of categorical assertions qualified with minimal – if any – modal modification, news journalists construct credible representations of news events and their meaning as the only possible, reliable and factual versions of reality. Finally, through switches to an informal idiom, TV journalists take on a public spokesperson identity, juxtaposing the concerns of everyday citizens to abstract or impersonal institutional discourses.

## *Discussion*

Prime-time news programming on Greek national, private television supplies evidence for the passage to an overwhelmingly conversational format, where the news genre meets the talk show, resulting in a hybrid form of news organization: multi-generic and multi-modal, comprising 'live' location reportage, taped

reportage and captions summarizing the main point while talk is progress in a catchy, 'headline' style.

It was shown that journalists regularly depart from the institutionalized stance of formal neutrality;<sup>3</sup> rather, they manifest active personal involvement in the discourse. The 'intrusion of "authorial stance"' (Montgomery, 2006: 242) is signalled through markers of propositional attitude and personal point of view. As a result, the audience is metaphorically placed in the position of overhearing, not so much a conventionally detached and 'objective' news bulletin, but rather an informal chat among journalists in a newsroom or in a political talk show; interestingly, some of the most prestigious newscasters on prime-time news also have their own political talk shows. The news items that emerge through the conversational process on the actual news programme often feed into the talk shows as topics for more elaborate discussion and debate.

More specifically, a) prime-time news journalists engage in personal assessments, challenges, and criticisms to government officials and policies that are often *not* embedded within questioning formats; that is, they are cast in the form of statements, b) they do not attribute statements or thoughts to third parties (thus claiming the footing of a mere animator of talk, see Goffman, 1981), and c) they often underline the subjective character of the opinions they express through first-person personal and possessive pronouns ('*eyo / mu*') (I / me), and subjective modal verbs (subjective explicit modality, Halliday, 1985), such as '*nomizo*' ('I think'). The presenter's personal commitment to opinions is further highlighted through switches to colloquial language, informal forms of address and use of idioms. Often, more than one device is simultaneously exploited in order to communicate the host's personal stance.

Challenges take the form of adversarial (open) questions, requests for confirmation (with negative presuppositions about politicians' acts and public image) and categorical statements challenging prior talk or the participant as a representative of established power. A hostile stance is also manifested through uncooperative conversational behaviour, namely interruptions, ironic remarks and face-to-face disagreements with institutional spokespersons. It was shown that representatives of government policies are challenged, controlled and held accountable to the viewer audience through both direct and third-person challenges by panel journalists. Again, the journalists' attitude is highlighted through register shifts to informal or colloquial language.

It becomes clear, therefore, that journalists encode reality (events and the actions of news makers) in a relatively limited range of items from informal registers. These items have become part of the new television code, namely a recognizable public idiom that the audience can easily understand and identify with. Conversational words and phrases serve an interpretive function, in that they provide an interpretive framework for news events; at the same time, they supply an evaluative framework; that is, they assess the value of news stories and news makers in an epigrammatic (summary) fashion, much like newspaper headlines. The interpretive function of journalist interaction on prime-time news echoes a similar thrust in American journalism. Schudson (1994) views American reporters as legitimate interpreters of views, whereas, as Hallin (1994) points out,

American journalism has become more confrontational to political authority and 'more interpretive in modes of presentation' (p. 173).

The data illustrate the increasing conversationalization (Fairclough, 1995, 1998) of a traditionally formal television genre in Greece, the prime-time news bulletin on private news programming. This tendency is in tune with the broader sociocultural developments of marketization and commercialization (Fairclough, 1995; Maniatis, 1998; Paraschos, 1995; Zaharopoulos and Paraschos, 1993), and affects current media output in Britain, the USA and Greece (Fairclough, 1995; Patrona, 2006). In sum, it appears that a populist journalistic stance emphasizing people's desires and concerns (see Clayman, 2002) and market criteria have taken over on national private television.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, the new, interactional news format projects and helps constitute a populist public sphere (see Hallin, 1994, about journalistic populism in the US; McManus, 1994, quoted in MacGregor, 1997: 76, about various 'objectivity violations' in the production of news as a commercially determined practice).

Moreover, the data confirm the tendency for the projection of personality by the media (Fairclough, 1995; Tolson, 1991; see also Brand and Scannell, 1991). In the Greek prime-time news, the personalities of TV journalists are effectively foregrounded through the adoption of an informal, personal code. Following Fairclough (1989), Tolson (1991) argues for a general cultural development defined as 'synthetic personalization' (p. 213). This consists in the manipulation of the personal and the subjective for institutional ends (Fairclough, 1989), and can be located in diverse areas, such as advertising and political discourse. Today, the personality of news journalists emerges as intrinsically synthetic, that is, ambiguous as to the sincerity or authorship of content, vacillating between the personal and private, public and institutional.

Following from the above, evaluation of news events and newsmakers rests with media representatives and is part and parcel of the process of conversation. As regards the evaluation of the 'status', or degree of commitment attached to discourse propositions, television journalists rely heavily on categorical assertions, namely statements that are not qualified by marked modality choices. Unhedged assertions have been found to characterize the 'factual' discourse of news presentation; by contrast, live interviewing is said to consist of marked modality choices, locally modulated from strong to weak and vice versa, resulting in a blend of both assertiveness and tentativeness (Montgomery, 2006). In the Greek news data, the journalists' relative lack of concern with scales of probability is part of the rhetoric of mainly argumentative talk. It serves the interpretive function of live conversational news discourse, stressing the reliability of information in an authoritative manner. In other words, it stems from the journalists' need to construct persuasive arguments so as to safeguard their positions against potential challenge (Patrona, 2005).

In the debate genre, the newscaster stands between the strongly opinionated journalists and the news protagonists. In the structured panel discussion, the anchorperson formulates arguments and views on an equal footing with the rest of the panellists. Through the online connection of participants appearing on

electronic 'windows', newsworthiness, points of view, social facts, meaning and knowledge are constituted and negotiated conversationally in a powerful new form of social organization of the news.

It is argued that this new media format is part of a continuously evolving mediated political sphere in Greece, and attests to the increasing empowerment of media actors and media institutions (see also Patrona, 2006). Moreover, it invites conflicting interpretations as to the democratic character of the emerging public sphere, and raises questions of citizen participation, influence and control of public opinion. More specifically, everyday citizens are not given the speaking right as panel members on prime-time news. Rather, they only briefly report their personal experiences in taped reportage comprising location interviewing ('vox pop'). Through their reports and the reporters' voice over, citizens are portrayed indirectly as passive 'bearers' of inflation, unemployment, low wages and pensions. Interestingly, as far back as 1979, Golding and Elliott make a number of suggestions by way of remedying the attested limitations of news. More specifically, they recommend a) lengthening news bulletins to an hour, thus allowing for the provision of more background information; b) using a more active and less reportorial mode of presentation; and c) breaking down the divide between news and current affairs. The data from Greek television news collected almost three decades later demonstrate that Golding and Elliott's suggestions have indeed materialized as a consequence of the deregulation of broadcasting and commercial journalism; yet the questions of bias and control of public opinion are as much pertinent today as they were in the early 1980s.

Still, issues such as *what* is defined as newsworthy (*what* is the central news story) and, accordingly, *what* is excluded from the central news bulletin, *who* is invited as a guest on prime time news, *how* do the ideological affiliations and economic interests of journalists and host stations creep into the conversational process and the overall news programme remain problematic. As Olga Tremy, the prestigious journalist and anchorwoman of prime-time news on MEGA channel, asserts in an interview for the 'On/Off' magazine of the newspaper *Kyriakatikh Eleftherotypia* (issue 267, 13 April 2008):

I am not caught by surprise [on the air], because what is said on the news bulletin are views and topics that have been discussed during the team meeting. This is what we have been doing for more than two years. We don't go on the air with each one of us saying whatever crosses his mind at the time.

It becomes evident, therefore, that spontaneous discussion on prime-time news is simply staged to appear as such, whereas, in reality, it conforms to a pre-agreed upon agenda of topics and points of view. In fact, as Doudakis (2004) explains in her extensive Greek newsroom study, at least three or four conferences take place daily in all television newsrooms both before and after the central news bulletin. One of the major functions of these conferences is to exercise 'control, at all levels, of conformity with station policy and return to it [station policy] if there is divergence, where the role of the news editor-in-chief is central and regulatory' (p. 295). It is recognized, of course, that the journalist has some degree of freedom to diverge from station policy, which is greater or lesser in different

cases.<sup>5</sup> In any case, 'policy is by nature covert and extends over a broad spectrum [of practices]' (p. 182).

Importantly, on no occasion do interviewees challenge the journalists for lack of objectivity or professionalism (see Rendle-Short, 2007), although, one could argue, they would certainly have several reasons to. Thus, in contrast to the USA, where the legitimacy of aggressive journalism needs to be established and maintained in actual conversation (Clayman, 2002), in the Greek media landscape this legitimacy appears to be granted a priori. It is generally recognized, that is, that journalists are entitled to directly challenge and control institutional spokespersons, as well as engage in personally phrased acts of evaluation of the political and social reality. This observation lends support to the argument for the increasing power of media representatives and media conglomerates in Greece today. This is something that professional politicians know and take heed of; and this precisely explains politicians' 'respectful' and 'tolerant' stance towards television journalists on prime-time news and beyond.

Thus, although studies of neutralism in news interviews emphasize that 'the production of the interview is a collaborative achievement, with both interviewers and interviewees working to ensure that their talk does not shift from being an interview to a more adversarial debate or discussion . . .' (Rendle-Short, 2007: 401–2), the same cannot be said of Greek prime-time news. In other words, on Greek private television, neutrality appears to be unilaterally and tacitly bestowed by participating institutional spokespersons on the journalists, who aggressively confront them during conversation while advocating personal views.

By breaking away from the requirement of appearing formally neutral, media representatives are now freer to negotiate meanings as well as their alignments with different (categories of) institutional spokespersons. Put differently, journalists are now allowed greater 'frame space' (Goffman, 1981: 321), that is, flexibility to project multiple selves, or shift between different footings. Because they are more uninhibited in their communicative practices, journalists have more freedom to convey concrete messages and influence audience opinions. The transparency through which ideological messages are formulated – as compared to the discourse of monologic, 'factual' news presentation – is legitimated in and through the process of apparently spontaneous conversation. Nonetheless, rhetorically such messages are cast much more forcefully – and convincingly – precisely because they draw upon the 'poetic' or 'expressive' sources of meaning available to live conversation. Because evaluation works on many different levels (vocabulary and register choice, grammar, speech act design and paralanguage), the rhetorical impact of live conversation is arguably much stronger than that of conventional ('one-way') news discourse. Although a superficial reading of these discourse practices might lend support to a cultural democratization of news discourse, in fact it is more likely that the new, conversational and populist news format leads to – or can lead to – the subtle, largely unseen, ideological manipulation of audiences (for a similar view, see Fairclough, 2006). At least, it provides the conditions for a far more dangerous form of institutional control of public opinion, precisely because the potential of control is disguised in a more democratic, informal and dialogic scheme.

## APPENDIX A: TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

In the original extracts, Greek sounds are transliterated using the conventions of a phonetic alphabet. The transcription symbols used in the conversational excerpts are the following:

[	onset of overlapping talk on two successive utterances
[	
]	offset of overlapping talk on two successive utterances
]	
}	continuous utterance by the same speaker with no actual break, which is cut in order to accommodate the placement of overlapping talk.
=	continuous utterances
(( ))	editorial comments, transcriptionist's description, paralinguistic cues
((pause))	pauses of less than 0.1 seconds
,	continuing intonation
:	extension or prolongation of a sound
::	longer extension

Numbers in parentheses mark the seconds of timed intervals within an utterance or between utterances.

Underlining signals that the word or segment is delivered with a marked intonation.

–	an abrupt cut-off or self-interruption of the sound in progress
( )	inaudible or unintelligible word/utterance

## ABBREVIATIONS

coll.	colloquial
inf.	informal
sl.	slang

## APPENDIX B: GREEK CONVERSATIONAL EXTRACTS

**Extract 1 (K: panel journalist; G: Employment Vice-minister; N: newscaster)**

- 1 K: ... o:: ((pause)) ipuryos, o cirios jakumatos, o jerasimos, meta apo: dio tria  
 2 xronja, tha ekselixθi os to meyalitero iperaspisti e: diciyoro, eno ine  
 3 diakekrimenos jatros – me to dropo pu iperaspizete, politices, ((pause)) tis  
 4 civernisis – pu de don aforun sto [kato kato tis yrafis,  
 5 G: [sikekrimenes politices] =  
 6 K: = e:?  
 7 G: sikekrimenes politices =  
 8 K: ((loud)) tipota – pirozvestis ise, [pirozvestis ise,]  
 9 G: [(( )) ]  
 10 K: ce iperaspistis, ce kala kanis – djoti etsi kani  
 11 i [anerjia – ala citakse – citakse mu – ] }  
 12 G: [i aliθja – i aliθja – i aliθja ]  
 13 K: } citakse yliko mu ayori – citakse yliko mu ayori – ti tha kanis me to ika –  
 14 [etsi – ce ase ] tora i anerji  
 15 G: [θα su po ja to ika – ]

- 16 N: cirii – ena lepto – ena lepto – [cirii – ena ] lepto  
 17 K: ((loud)) [min aplonese – ] }  
 18 K: } [min aplonese jerasime ] – tha krisis –  
 19 G: [ala setika me tis apolisis.]

[ALPHA Channel – central news bulletin]

**Extract 2 (N: news caster; P: panel journalist)**

- 1 N: na pame tora apo tin conoθiela stin politiki θiela ja – stin opia  
 2 anaferθikame ce stin arçi tu deltiu mas aleksi, i opia den ine amiγos  
 3 politiki, dioti eγume mia epiθesi (0.1) tu tu pasok kata ton ipuryon tis  
 4 civernisis pu θeori oti eblekode stin ipoθesi ala eγume ce mia, epiθesi  
 5 sti diceosini, c' apo tin ali plevra eγume ce trives sto esoteriko tis  
 6 diceosinis ala ce sto esoteriko tis civernosas parataksis – bleymeno to  
 7 topio  
 8 P: kalispera olya c' ine perisoteres i kodres ap' oses boro na metriso –  
 9 ((lines omitted))  
 9 eγo, de vγazo akri, de gatalaveno pjos iksere ti, afto pu katalaveno ine  
 10 oti i erevna pu eçi jini, ine, para para poli riçi ((pause)) prepi akoma na  
 11 pume – oti iparçi poli meγali edasi ce kodra mesa stin iδja ti givernisi  
 12 ((lines omitted))  
 12 citakse – kat' arçin olya prepi na pume i oti to eliniko kratos ine se  
 13 plires e: baγalo dilaði, den eçi mini tipota orθio ce j'afto de ganun ti  
 14 δulja tus, i iparçi ena kukuloma de bori na vri kanis mja ali apadisi –

[MEGA Channel – central news bulletin]

**Extract 3 (T: panel journalist; N: newscaster; L: panel journalist)**

- 1 T: Qndos o cirios papagelopulos, içe edeka mines enan facelo, ce ton  
 2 citaze, (0.1) ton kseskonize [ce ton ksanavaze sto sirtari tu? ]  
 3 N: [afto:: nomizo oti eçi episimanθi – ] }  
 4 N: } [oti mesa se ikosi meres i aðae: ] }  
 5 L: [ce iparçi olya c'ena alo politiko zitima, ]  
 6 N: } strati, vrice afta ta opia de vrikan – e: de vrice i diceosini ce i civernisi  
 7 mesa se edeka mines =  
 8 L: = akrivos – ce iparçi c' ena alo politiko zitima, akrivos to anefere c' o  
 9 aleksis –  
 10 ((turns omitted))  
 10 N: pandos eçi simasia: ti tha pi i erikson, pu les strati oti opu na 'ne tha  
 11 milisi, eγo simfono ce m' afto pu lei o aleksis oti tha vreθume brosta se:  
 12 meγales, nomices sigrusis, ((pause)) tha pame se singrusi vodafon  
 13 erikson kata pasa piθanotita, =  
 14 L: = episis olya na [sibliroso kati alo ]  
 15 N: [ce eçi simasia:: oti ] na θimiso oti sti delefta tis  
 16 anaçinosi, sti broti ce telefta nomizo i erikson, içe pi oti:: i: sinakroa –  
 17 to sistema afto ton sinakroaseon, egatastaθice dioti itan apetisi, ton  
 18 arçon ana ton kozmo, meta tin enðekati septemvriu – nomizo oti afto lei  
 19 pola ((pause)) tora –  
 20 ((turns omitted))  
 20 L: emis omos san polites, ((pause)) otan vlepume oti parakoluθite to

21 telefono tu proθipuryu mas ce ton ipuryon mas, ((pause)) ce mas lene oti  
 22 den kserume ena xrono meta posa ala parakoluθundan, δiceos  
 23 [(ayanaktume)]  
 24 N: [citakse strati,] den iparçi amfivolia oti iparχun para pola cena  
 25 ((pause)) eδo katalavenume oti i civernisi adjase ton cirio koronja  
 26 simera e: episimaname tis andifasis tis opies endopizune i:: vuleftes stin  
 27 poliōri kataθesi tu ciriu koronja, iparχun omos ce simantices diafores  
 28 anamesa sta osa ipostirizi stin kataθesi tu o cirios koronjas ce sto  
 29 porizma, pu eçi sintaksi ja tin ipoθesi i aδae – o marios vevilis milise  
 30 me iδikus ton tilepicinonion ce kateγrapse aftes tis andifasis  
 ((taped reportage follows))

[MEGA Channel – central news bulletin]

## NOTES

1. Another type of news debate is face-to-face debate between invited guests, for example, between government politicians and opposition MPs. As this article focuses on journalistic practices in the new, conversational news bulletin, this latter type of debate is beyond the scope of this study.
2. Tsitsanoudi-Mallidi (2006) also points out the use of words and phrases from social dialects, such as the vocabulary of young speakers in Greek news programmes.
3. According to the 1975 Greek constitution, radio and television are supposed to *objectively* inform, educate and entertain the Greek people for the purpose of advancing society (Zaharopoulos and Paraschos, 1993). Similarly, the ESR (National Council of Radio and Television) ethics code states that 'news and commentary, judgements or opinions must be distinguished in a clear-cut manner. Hypotheses or speculations are not to be presented as facts' (article 15, paragraph 1). Neutrality is therefore, at least in theory, an institutionally-sanctioned requirement. The demise of the ESR ethics code in modern-day Greece appears to parallel that of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) ethics code in the United States since 1982 (see Matelski, 1991).
4. Interestingly, article 3 of the ESHEA (Association of Journalists of Daily Athens Newspapers) ethics code asserts in a biting, self-reflexive acknowledgement of the contradictory role of contemporary market-driven media: 'The principles of equal rights of expression and plurality of voices, [which constitute] the oxygen of democracy, are abolished in conditions of state monopoly control of the media, and are undermined through the concentration of [media] ownership by gigantic profit-making companies, which treat public opinion as a consumer and try to manipulate its beliefs, habits and overall behaviour.'
5. According to Doudakis (2004), the journalist's freedom of choice depends both on his/her position in the station and the type of reportage. The longer the journalist's office with the station, the greater the potential for autonomy and divergence; this potential is, however, counteracted by the journalist's year-long 'socialization' in station practices. Accordingly, journalists display greater autonomy in sports reportage, whereas control and supervision are tighter in internal affairs reportage.

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