

Journalists and politicians in television interviews after elections: A redefinition of roles?



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ABSTRACT: According to the canons of liberal democracy, both political and media systems constitute two spheres which strongly interact but still are separated and fulfill different aims. The actors belonging to these spheres play specific social roles, due to sets of rules called (respectively) the logic of politics and media logic. Politicians are supposed to create and reshape the world gaining electorate support while the media should show, explain and interpret the world in a way that attracts its audience. The two are expected to compete inside their spheres but not with each other. Today, however, the mediatization of politics and politicization of the media have changed the relationship between politicians and journalists. The aim of the article is to describe the phenomenon of redefinition of roles of the main actors of political communication, using content analysis of television political interviews during an election campaign. Elections create a special situation of mutual interdependence of the two entities as well as the need to achieve their specific goals. The authors weigh up whether the changing formula of TV interviews is an element of a broader phenomenon of competition and trial of taking up control in the process of political communication or just incidental behavior typical for the time of an election.

KEYWORDS: political interview, journalism, coverage of politics, journalist-politician relations



INTRODUCTION

According to the canons of liberal democracy, both political and media systems constitute two spheres which strongly interact despite being separate and fulfilling different purposes. The actors who belong to these two spheres play specific social roles, acting according to sets of rules called political logic and media logic, respectively. Politicians are supposed to create and reshape the world, thereby gaining the electorate's support, while the media should show, explain and interpret the world

in a way that attracts an audience. The two are expected to compete inside their spheres but not with each other. Today, however, the mediatization of politics and politicization of the media have changed the relationship between politicians and journalists.

An issue of overlap politics and the media is as old as the history of communication. However, models of cooperation or competition between the representatives of these two spheres are not constant. Such models change along with the development of new forms of exchanging ideas as well as are influenced by economic and cultural transformations. Moreover, it has been proven many times that discourse on links between the two spheres — politics and the media — has to be reductive and results in creating an illusion of separate realms, whose elements very seldom hybridize. In the field of empirical research aimed at examining and revising the illusion mentioned above, important credit should be given to Timothy Cook. In the book *Governing with the News: The News Media as a Political Institution* (1998), he made an effort to “develop, clarify and refine a new model of the reporter as a key participant in decision making and policy making and of the news media as a central political force in government.” For that reason he tried to build “an empirical theory of the news media as a political institution that will bring together growing literatures: on the internal structures of news organization; on the development of press offices in every branch of government and every level of government; on the relationships of governmental officeholder and journalists inside and outside of the newsbeat system; and on the direct and indirect ways in which official federal policies and practices have, both historically and today, accommodated, regulated, and (above all) subsidized the news” (p. 3). What is important, the author warned against researchers’ unreasonable personalization and psychologization concerning the mixed worlds of politics and media. In his opinion: “Far too many observers succumb to the temptation to access the ongoing negotiation of newsworthiness between the news media and of political actors via studies of individual journalists interacting with individual politicians.” What is more, “the actions of political actors and of journalists in the United States are contingent upon the roles they occupy within their respective political and social systems, and the resultant rewards and sanctions to particular behaviors. In particular, when reporters make choices on who and what to cover and how to cover it, these choices are governed less by personal values prior to becoming a journalist or by their placement within the social structure as a whole than by a *logic of appropriateness* based on their professional and craft-related roles as journalists” (p. 61). As a result, he argued, further explorations should concentrate on discovering models which are used by political and media actors to organize their mutual relations: “media strategies become increasingly useful means for political actors to pursue governance — and become an increasing focus for their attention and their activities — as the disjuncture between the power of those actors and the expectations placed on them grows” (p. 118).

The aim of the paper is to describe the phenomenon of redefinition of roles played by the main actors of political communication, using content and discourse analysis of televised political interviews broadcast after election campaigns. Elections create a special situation of mutual interdependence between the two parties, as well as the need to achieve their specific goals. The authors examine whether the changing formula of television interviews is an element of a broader phenomenon of competition and an attempt at taking control in the process of political communication, or just incidental behavior.

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN MODERN DEMOCRACIES

The significance of the media in the political process is indisputable. The media “monitor” and control the activity of every public institution, including, first and foremost, the activities of politicians and officials who represent the executive and legislative powers. In politicians’ perception the media, while not free of weaknesses and dependent on numerous factors that affect their operation, are basically seen as autonomous, strong and influential. Therefore, the projections of what journalistic reports are going to be like, of their content and general overtone impact on politicians’ behavior. The relations between politicians and the media in a democratic system are dynamic and depend on current conditions, such as the election calendar.

The importance of the media in traditionally understood political communication is great enough to make some researchers treat them as political institutions that play a decisive political role and are part of the process of governance along with political parties and interest groups (Esser et al., 2001). News media are not independent, unaffiliated observers covering political affairs from the outside, because as a link between political actors and citizens, the media facilitate communication between the three powers and make possible “governing through publicity.” Political leaders and other political actors adapt certain media strategies that are rooted in the logic of the media, and by this token journalistic standards are allowed to influence the process of governance. The media cannot be treated as separate individual institutions, but rather as a single institution. The processes of news generation and developing news content are sufficiently similar throughout all the media to justify treating them as a collective institution (Esser et al., 2001, p. 21).

Blumler and Kavanagh claim that the transformations of societies and the media have significantly impacted the shape of political communication in modern democracy (1999, p. 209). The content, participants, principles, standards, values and interests of political communication have been transformed. It is fair to say that modern practice has considerably diverged from earlier ideas of what political communication should be and what contribution it should bring to the democratic system. The authors identify seven trends in the post-war environment of political communication that this system has both responded to and co-created, namely:

care for viewership, which results from how attractive his programme is, similar to a talk show. Current standards of journalistic activity and the criteria that define their role have therefore changed.

Election time marks a period of particularly intense contacts between politicians and journalists. It is worth noting that generally during this specific period the position of journalists is much better than between electoral campaigns. Politicians care about their presence in the media more than usual, which makes them more willing to accept the invitations and topics suggested by the anchors. This is not to mean, however, that politicians fail to take the opportunity to impose their own agenda regardless of the expectations voiced by journalists. Participating in a discussion or giving an interview provide exceptionally advantageous conditions to present oneself in the desired way and generate the coveted image. The professionalization of political communication, as understood by Holtz-Bacha (2002), signifies individualization, personalization and the possibility as well as the ability to choose the most efficient communication strategy exercised by politicians and/or their advisors.

THE ROLE OF INTERVIEW IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The interview still remains the most popular form of political journalism. According to Voltmer and Brants (2011, p. 127) “the political interview appears like a conversation between two — sometimes more — participants who are engaged in discussing political issues of the day. However, it follows a set of rules and norms that sets it apart from any other form of interpersonal exchange where people talk about political [...] matters.” In their opinion, this set of rules comprises the following elements: the predominance of the logic of the media over the logic of politics, a clear definition of roles and the principles of how to perform them, the absence of the actual recipient in the conversation, and a staged performance (Voltmer & Brants, pp. 128–130). All these properties are changing along with the transformation of the relations between the media and politicians that is the product of two fundamental factors: technology and commercial success. Commercial success in the perception of politicians is obviously not identical to how the media see it. This concerns the way of thinking and the adopted quantitative criteria of success, which in the case of politicians means the number of votes allowing politicians to stay in power, which they understand as the ability to run public affairs and achieve an individual’s interest rather than implement a vision of holistic social advancement. The progress in mass communications technology has given politicians independence from journalists to an extent that seemed impossible only a few years ago. One of the main consequences of the professionalization of political communication has been the politicians’ management of the media, which has produced an utterly new situation for the journalists who were not prepared for it. This has resulted in frustration, manifested, among other things, by focusing on their own relations with

the politician's lack of arguments, incompetence, or merely allows the journalist to present a standpoint he favors. It also happens that the guests assume the role of interviewer and ask questions of journalists. These are mostly rhetorical questions intended to undermine journalists' competence or demonstrate their bias.

MEDIA AND POLITICS: THE CASE OF POLAND

Relations between politicians and journalists are sometimes analyzed in terms of Bourdieu's theory (Piontek, 2011, p. 154). In his concept, the field of journalism and that of politics are mutually related and intertwined. Consequently, journalists and politicians, who are doomed to each other, have to cooperate. This cooperation, however, is always involuntary and caused by the fact that each party has certain assets that are valuable for the other party. Therefore, relations between politicians and journalists constantly have to be tense, as both parties want to gain the most at the lowest expense. Consequently, the world of the media and the world of politics are suspicious and manipulative towards each other; they constantly try to wheedle the other party out of something while claiming their own self-sufficiency and dependence of the other party. Bourdieu observed that journalists owe their position in society to their monopoly of the instruments of "mass production and dissemination of information." At the same time, however, the field of journalism has a certain peculiarity, since it is significantly more dependent on external forces than all other fields of cultural production. It relies directly on demand and subjects itself to the verdicts of the market and polls probably to a greater extent than the field of politics does (Bourdieu, 1998). This produces a strong dependence of journalists on politicians, who generate events that are attractive for the media and decide who will be first to be notified about the situation, and who they are going to discuss this situation with in a manner that will be most desirable from the point of view of media standards. The representatives of the field of politics cannot bypass the media in reaching out to the electorate. Media institutions remain the most important and efficient platform to disseminate political images and initiatives. Hence the permanent competition of politicians to attract the attention of the media, which are in turn mostly, or rather exclusively, interested in what can be transformed into a commonly accessible and commonly desired product.

It should also be emphasized that the technological revolution intensifies the permeation of the realms of politics and the media (mediatization of politics and politicization of the media) (Brants & Siune, 1999; Dobek-Ostrowska, 2011). Political and media actors meet each other more and more often and in increasingly diverse, frequently unprecedented, situations. This process results in a growing uncertainty of what standards are supposed to rule the interactions between the representatives of politics and the media. A consequence is the growing confusion of both journalists and politicians. It can be said that both in unofficial and official contacts between journalists and politicians there is a growing number of

other words, the battle between journalists and politicians is waged constantly, and not only during a heated political game.

This is corroborated by the data collected after the analysis of exchanges ($n = 316/313$)³ that occurred in the research material:

- at the level of questions asked by the interviewer ($n = 316$)
 - a transition to the next question less frequently ends in a natural manner (after the interviewee finishes his answer, without the interviewer interrupting) and is more frequently marked by an interruption (understood as a verbal attempt to stop the interviewee's statement); 106:190;
 - over 10 per cent of responses to the answer are marked by its rejection, whereas nearly 30 per cent are neutral responses accompanied by attempts to clarify the answer;
 - in an overwhelming majority of exchanges the interviewer did not focus on the substantive matter but adopted an institutional or personal perspective (the interviewee's own ambitions, his position inside the organization, or other plans); 32:171:108;
 - almost half of the exchanges between interviewers and interviewees concerned the negotiation of the time and subject matter of the interview; additionally, 117 exchanges involving negotiations included the interviewer's demonstration of power — of his own role, while only 26 negotiation exchanges referred to the procedure (setting the rules, in particular with respect to time, demanding short answers, putting an arbitrary end to the interviewee's statement because the time for the interview is over);
 - the proportion of non-confrontational questions to confrontational and highly confrontational ones was as follows: 161:101:48;
 - manipulation/guiding questions (rhetorical devices enforcing a concrete answer, such as: but this means that...; wouldn't you agree that...; or questions with an element of assessment or suppositions, e.g.: how is your party dealing with this mess?) were relatively frequent (there were 124 neutral questions, whereas slightly leading, or highly leading questions amounted to as many as 67);
 - on thirty-one occasions the tone of questions was aggressive and arrogant.
- at the level of answers given by the guest ($n = 313$)
 - nearly 10 per cent of responses to the question involved questioning/challenging (e.g. this is not a question for me, I will answer that after I consult... etc.);
 - only 40 responses concerned the subject matter (a given case, detailed policy, solution) whereas 165 and 104 responses concerned institutional and personal issues respectively (it is easy to notice that the number of responses concerned the subject matter (40) is slightly higher than the number of relevant questions; seemingly this fact can be interpreted in favor of the interviewees — people usually

³ According to Brants and Voltmer, exchange "is the immediate sequence of question and answer" (2011, p. 135).

his own professional circle. Nevertheless, there is no shortage of cases when both political and media actors go for bitter controversy.⁴ In Poland it is also hard to find a popular television political journalist whose political likes and dislikes are difficult to guess. Politicians are similar in failing to restrain themselves from eagerly pointing out which journalists they appreciate, or even intend to support, and who they cannot count on.

What's more, it needs to be said that political and media players do not only aim for personal conflicts during interviews, but they actively provoke such situations. This is easily observable in many political programmes, e.g. *Tomasz Lis na Żywo*.⁵ The analysis of the subject matter and the selection of guests/interlocutors indicate that for several years the host has been arranging discussions where he and his interlocutors convince the audience of acute polarization of the political stage and Polish society. This journalistic creation of the dichotomous image of reality is accompanied by an analogical process animated by political actors, i.e. stimulated polarization of the media. The current political and journalistic narration presents the media in Poland as divided into the "mainstream" media, which support the government, and particularly Prime Minister Donald Tusk and his party, the Civic Platform, and the so-called independent media, backing the opposition, in particular its presumed leader, Jarosław Kaczyński and his party. All this results in the politicization of the media where each participant is considered to support one of the two political groups, or even "two Polands."

Experienced political and media actors do not avoid risky disputes, which is sometimes explained by their unwillingness to redefine their roles. It is assumed that, having succeeded in their fields, renowned journalists or politicians get bored with their activity and stop focusing on themselves. They gather a team or teams of people around themselves instead and try to provide them with some framework in which to operate and develop. In this manner a relation of patron-customer emerges, where leading journalists and politicians act so that they increase the network of people who depend on them in return for a variety of services related to increasing social influence. A popular political and media actor becomes a persona then, a signboard gathering the groups of less popular players around. One can even talk about the emergence of certain political and media cliques surrounding the most

⁴ Two interviews stirred particular emotions in the latest elections campaign in Poland. In each case the politician who behaved insultingly towards the journalist observed a clear drop in sympathy of the audience, as evidenced by internet forums. The same was experienced by the journalist who decided to reveal his political sympathy. Cf. *Wywiad Tomasza Lisa z Jarosławem Kaczyńskim z dn. 3 października 2011 r.* (TVP 1, *Tomasz Lis na Żywo*); *Wywiad Jarosława Gugały z Adamem Hofmanem z dn. 5 października 2011 r.* (Polsat News, *Gość Wydarzeń*); M. Kowalczyk, *Pobłażliwy. Rozmowa z Jarosławem Gugałą, dyrektorem Pionu Informacji i Publicystyki Telewizji Polsat, Press*, 2012, no. 5, pp. 18–24; T. Lis, *Niezależny genetycznie*, Gala.pl, 3 April 2012.

⁵ The most popular political journalism programme in Poland with an average audience of 2,692,404 and SHR of 21.88 per cent (5.09.2011–4.06.2012), broadcast weekly by state-owned television and hosted by one of the most renowned political journalists.

or trivial subjects with a huge potential of attracting attention. Journalists claim to implement the doctrine of social responsibility, but it seems that their activities are inspired by two main motivations: commercial motivation (viewership) and involvement. The latter is highly personal and means that journalists are not inspired by institutional entities (e.g. political parties or their own editors) but by the need to express their own views, which results either from their social ties or conformism towards their own political circle. Strongly polarized politics is one of the factors of strong politicization among journalists which influences their instrumentalization on the one hand and politicization of the media on the other (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2011). Generally political journalists working in Warsaw are said to be divided into two groups: right-wing (as described by the journalists themselves) and “mainstream” (as named by the journalists from the former group). The notion of “mainstream” is intended by the representatives of the first group to be derogatory and signify tight cooperation with the politicians from the ruling coalition, or rather offering them overt support.

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