

## **Infelicitous talk**

### **Politicians' words and the media ecology in three British political gaffes**

IAN HUTCHBY  
*University of Leicester*

The broadcast interview is a staple of political communication in the developed world, often dominating the running order of flagship television and radio news broadcasts in the influential morning and evening slots (Clayman and Heritage 2002; Ekström et al. 2006; Montgomery 2007). Within conversation analysis and related approaches to language and interaction, the discourse of news interviews has been subject to fine grained analysis over a long period of time (Bull 2008; Clayman 1988; Clayman and Heritage 2002; Clayman and Whalen 1988/9; Greatbatch 1986, 1988; Harris 1991; Heritage 1985; Pomerantz 1988/89; Rendle-Short 2007; Schegloff 1988/89). In their key work on the subject, Clayman and Heritage (2002: 25) referred to the broadcast interview as a "game [whose] participants are locked in competition, and with varying levels of skill...deploy their moves strategically in pursuit of divergent goals and objectives." Yet as they go on to say, it is more than just a game because, in the end, "there may be ramifications for personal careers, for public affairs, and sometimes for the march of history."

As a range of work has shown, these ramifications derive from the way in which interviews are, simultaneously, routine television and radio events, and happenings with potentially unpredictable consequences that are bound up in a wider discursive ecology of

news in the current era of political mediatisation (Bull et al. 2014; Clayman 1995; Ekström 2001; Eriksson and Östman 2013). In various ways, the talk that is produced within a news interview can subsequently be re-contextualised and re-mediated by numerous agencies including journalists themselves, producers and editors of broadcast news programmes, and related news media including the press and, increasingly, in contemporary times, the internet and social media.

This re-mediation of politicians' words in interviews is often undertaken in the pursuit of controversial or newsworthy reportage. For example, in news bulletins that do not themselves feature extended live interviews, producers may cut single answers from longer interviews and, stripped of their context in the question-answer sequence of the interview, incorporate them into news stories (Eriksson 2011) or stitch together different interview utterances to create what appear to be dialogues on current topics (Ekström 2001). Similarly, in the soundbite culture of modern news broadcasting, it is commonplace for single utterances to be extracted, quoted, disseminated and interpreted elsewhere in the media as "defining moments" that come to epitomize a story or political position (Clayman 1995).

Increasingly, in what Chadwick (2013) has called the "hybrid media system", not only is contemporary political action enveloped by media scrutiny, but the technological forms of mediation are diversified rather than concentrated. Rather than the relatively homogeneous and sometimes slow-moving spheres of the press and the scheduled broadcast news bulletin, anything that politicians do or say, including what they e-mail, tweet, blog, and the rest, is nowadays subject to scrutiny and potential newsworthiness across an intertwined range of media outlets including social networking and other internet resources as well as the conventional forms of mass communication, which themselves transcend the limitations of schedules through non-stop broadcasting and web-based newspapers.<sup>1</sup>

To take one recent example of the consequences of this: in 2014 British politician Emily Thornberry was forced to resign from her role as shadow Attorney General in the Labour Party after a tweet in which she posted a picture of a white van parked in the drive of a suburban house in Rochdale with St George flags hanging from the windows. Here, the semiotics of the British class system became central in the re-mediation of what was, in fact,

a wordless tweet.<sup>2</sup> In England, both the white Ford Transit van and the flag of St George (the English flag, as distinct from the Union Jack) have become cultural signifiers for a particular type of white, male, working class figure whose political views are stereotypically right-wing and nationalist ("White Van Man"). Although the tweet itself did not make such a connection explicit, the picture was interpreted on Twitter and elsewhere within the social media as a sneering caricature of the English working class – hence as a particularly significant political gaffe for someone belonging to a party that speaks for the working class.

The news cycle is therefore evolving as newer media outlets merge with the traditional outlets of the press and broadcasting. But even within this changing media ecology, broadcast interviews retain significant power in the development of news stories. When a major story breaks, even if the origins of it are based in the new media rather than in broadcasting or the press, it remains the case that leading political actors will rapidly seek out, or be sought out for, interview appearances in newspapers, on radio and on television in order to put forward a response to events (Chadwick 2011).

In the present article I contribute to the investigation of the media ecology of political interview discourse by means of a comparative analysis of three examples of re-mediated "infelicitous talk" by politicians, in each of which an interview plays a central but differing role. The term infelicitous talk is intended to highlight the way in which the media themselves play a significant and often constitutive role in the construction of the phenomenon that becomes publicly and colloquially known as a *gaffe*. As Thompson (2000: 61) remarks about political scandals, gaffes and their ilk are "events which are constituted in part by mediated forms of communication."

Infelicitous talk here refers to a politician saying something in the public sphere that may be either ill-advised, or wrong; or may in fact be a genuine attempt to answer a difficult question; but crucially is subsequently *construed as* problematic, resulting in intensified media interest, usually over a concentrated period of time such as a few days. In various ways, that infelicitous talk is then re-mediated, disseminated, interpreted and reformulated through other media outlets, leading to embarrassment, controversy, and sometimes even resignation from public office. It is the different ways in which this process happens, and the

different media configurations involved, that is the focus of attention in what follows.

## **Data and method**

The analysis seeks to show these different media configurations through a comparison of similar events across time. There are three case studies, and the data were selected according to their common features as well as their differences across a timespan of almost 25 years (1987-2011). Common features of the three events include that they all involved incumbent leaders of the British Labour Party (Neil Kinnock, Gordon Brown, and Ed Miliband); that they all centrally involved conduct during a broadcast interview (though the type of interview and its context differs in each case); and that they were all, at the time, represented in the press as bearing direct consequences for the public perception of the leadership qualities of the politician in question. Although it is not only Labour Party politicians who may be prone to gaffes in the British context, it was decided to focus on Labour leaders because of the widely accepted view that the majority of the British press favour a conservative standpoint; hence it might be argued that Labour Party leaders – particularly those considered, like the three in question, to be left-wing – face a more hostile media environment in which gaffes can become more consequential.

However, each of the events differs in terms of the array of media technologies that were involved in evaluating politicians' words in the wider ecology. The earliest involved simply the printed press; whereas the more recent examples show how press involvement now accompanies the increasing role of (a) live rolling news and (b) social media and the internet. That in turn shows how contemporary conditions of total mediatisation are becoming increasingly difficult to manage for political actors.

The methods draw upon ideas from a range of sources in the broad interdisciplinary field of language and social interaction research (Sanders and Fitch 2004). Conversation analysis (CA), as noted, has been applied not just to conversation but to the distinctive methods of turn-taking and activity organisation found in a range of specialised settings including radio and television talk shows (Thornborrow 2014) and broadcast news interviews

(Clayman and Heritage 2002). Here I use CA primarily in terms of its focus on the details of turn-taking structures and activity organisation in news interviews (especially in the second and third case studies).

I also draw upon broader semiotic ideas which focus on how systems of interview conduct are not restricted to speech between journalist and politician, but involve social semiotic systems that bring into play a range of linguistic and graphical texts and technologies (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001). Here I am interested in the role played by changing technological affordances in mediating exchange between interviewers, interviewees and audiences. Contextualising factors and affordances can also be taken into account, in the concluding section, to explore how discourse practices may be related to changing relationships between the media and political representation, the nature of media ethics, and the role played by journalists in pursuing varying ideals of the public interest.

### **Gaffe configuration 1: Television and the press**

My first example of the media's constitutive role in re-mediating infelicitous talk involves an event in 1987: an era in which the primary outlets for mediated political representation were the press and broadcasting (aspects of which were earlier analysed by Garton et al. 1991). Here, then, the ecological relationship in which the gaffe was cultivated is between the two media technologies that dominated the 20th century political landscape. The important thing this example shows is that gaffes can be created entirely by media reaction to a politician's talk, however "wittingly public" (Scannell 1991: 11) it has been in the live broadcast arena. The politician may feel that they are choosing their words very carefully – particularly if the issue in question is a controversial one – but the media logic that comes into operation can construct a reading of those words that is quite different from what may have been intended.

In the late 1980s the British Labour Party, while in opposition, had adopted an official policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament. In the run-up to the 1987 election, leader Neil Kinnock was pressed on the reasoning behind the policy, and in one televised interview he was asked what he would do, as prime minister, if a non-nuclear Britain were threatened by

an aggressor who possessed nuclear weapons. Such a question is of course "loaded", in that it carries the strong implication that a nuclear force is inherently more powerful than a non-nuclear one, and therefore it would seem that the latter would be unable to resist attack or invasion by the former.

The difficult task facing Kinnock was to construct an answer to the question that neither acknowledges the interviewer's loaded implication, nor admits that there may be a weakness in his party's nuclear disarmament policy. Kinnock's answer was as follows:

**Extract (1)**

**Neil Kinnock TV-AM 05 87 (From Garton et al. 1991)**

1     Kinnock:    In those circumstances, the choice is again  
2                   posed - and this is the classical choice - of  
3                   either exterminating everything you stand for  
4                   and, I'll use the phrase "the flower of your  
5                   youth", or using resources you've got to  
6                   make any occupation totally untenable,  
7                   untenable. And of course, any effort to  
8                   occupy Western Europe, or certainly to  
9                   occupy the United Kingdom, would be utterly  
10                  untenable and any potential force knows that  
11                  very well and are not going to be ready to  
12                  engage in attempting to dominate conditions  
13                  that they couldn't dominate.

As Bull (2008) observes, political interviewers often aim to construct questions to which the politician's attempt to provide an answer will inevitably appear evasive and slippery. This is what happens in this case. Kinnock's attempts to be cautious come across as vague: he argues that "resources" would be mobilised to make the occupation "untenable" but without saying what the resources are. He implies, though with no supporting evidence, that because "any potential force" knows that an attack would "be utterly untenable" they would not even try it.

Of course, the reason for this vagueness is because his own party's policy, of which he had been a key architect, placed him in an almost impossible situation. As the leader of the party he must defend the policy; but it is relatively easy for the opposing party to argue that

having abandoned its nuclear arsenal under a future Labour government, Britain would be unable to defend against an attack by any nation threatening to use nuclear weapons.

Although he tried to construct a genuine answer to the question, therefore, potentially any answer Kinnock gave could turn out to be politically dangerous.

In the following day's newspapers Kinnock's phrase "using the resources you've got to make any occupation totally...untenable" became constructed as an example of infelicitous talk. Journalists used quotations gleaned from political opponents to render this position equivalent to "a policy of surrender" (George Younger, Conservative politician, quoted in the *Daily Telegraph*, 25 May 1987), "an invitation to attack" (Michael Heseltine, Conservative politician, quoted in the *Daily Express*, 25 May 1987) and "as if the Mujahideen in Penge High Street were expected to deter Soviet nuclear blackmail" (John Cartwright, Conservative politician, quoted in the *Daily Telegraph*, 25 May 1987). The latter quote was particularly significant for the way that Kinnock's answer became construed as a gaffe in subsequent news reporting, with its reference to the guerilla forces who, through highly trained and Western government-supported warfare in difficult mountainous territory (as opposed to the idiomatically suburban "Penge High Street"), played a major role in defeating the Soviet army during the 1979-89 war in Afghanistan.

The construction of Kinnock's gaffe became complete with the headline of the *Daily Telegraph* the day after the interview was broadcast:

### **GUERRILLA WAR A DETERRENT SAYS KINNOCK**

(Headline, *Daily Telegraph*, 25 May 1987)

Although, as we can see from extract (1), Kinnock did not use the term "guerilla war", the significance is that once these interpretations of what he did say were projected into the public sphere, the actual words which Kinnock used, as well as his actual meaning, were lost and the agenda became set by the "guerilla war" formulation. Once that happened, Kinnock was forced to respond to, and defend, a claim which, from his point of view, he had never explicitly made.

Garton et al. (1991) go on to analyse the ideological scripts and schemas according to which this reinterpretation of Kinnock's talk is made possible. For my purposes, what is significant is the way in which Kinnock's somewhat slippery attempt to answer the question yielded an example of infelicitous talk: talk that is inappropriate or unfortunate in its setting. In this case, the technological configuration of the remediation of that talk is fairly straightforward, involving a transposition from television broadcast, through journalist consultations with opposition politicians, to newspaper headline.

I next discuss two more recent examples in greater detail. In both cases, the constitution of the gaffe follows similar contours to the "guerilla war" gaffe in that a piece of talk by a Labour Party leader is remediated as infelicitous talk by other media outlets. However, as the hybrid media system increasingly comes to play its part in this remediation, we see a far more complex ecology of media discourses in which it is not just the press that plays a part in negatively construing words spoken during interviews. The interview, as a media discourse form, is entwined with other mediatised and technologised discourses in this process.

### **Gaffe configuration 2: Television, radio, the press, "the tape" and the net**

The second example occurred almost 20 years later, and this time involved an incumbent prime minister, Gordon Brown, here embroiled in a different scandal to the earlier "bullygate" affair analysed by Chadwick (2011). The configuration of infelicitous talk here involved wireless outside broadcast technology, a radio interview, a tape recording of a private conversation, and internet sites such as YouTube.

During a live television interview Brown was giving whilst on a campaign visit to Rochdale, in northern England, a voter had begun calling out, voicing her concerns (shared by many in Britain at the time) about the national debt. Eventually the prime minister's aides decided that having him be seen to engage with the kind of concerns expressed by the woman (later named as Gillian Duffy) would provide good evidence of his connection with the public mood. Brown initially made well-intentioned efforts to respond to Mrs Duffy's complaints

about education, taxation and immigration. The latter issue however became escalated, with Mrs Duffy at one point asking, "And all these eastern European [immigrants], where are they flocking from?", the word "flocking" having connotations of some kind of coordinated mass influx. She went on to indicate that the government's policies on these matters had led her to change her mind about voting for Brown's party. Nonetheless, the exchange ended with the prime minister wishing Mrs Duffy and her family well as she turned away.<sup>3</sup>

As he left the scene in his chauffeured car, heading to Manchester for an interview with the BBC, Brown discussed this encounter with a political aide travelling with him. At this point the television cameras had been left behind and Brown, thinking himself off-air, referred to the encounter as "ridiculous" and to Mrs Duffy as a "bigoted woman" (see extract 2 below). It turned out, however, that his lapel microphone was still switched on and the radio signal was still being received in the outside broadcast truck. The recording made by the engineers on location would shortly come back to haunt Gordon Brown, some arguing that this moment marked a watershed in the election campaign that he subsequently lost (Porter and Prince 2010).

Later the same day, two further encounters were broadcast that were to cement the event in the public consciousness, as what became known as the "bigotgate" controversy unfolded.<sup>4</sup> In one, Gordon Brown was in the studio giving his pre-arranged news interview on BBC radio's *Jeremy Vine* show. In the second, on-location reporters and camera crews had caught up with Gillian Duffy at the scene of the earlier exchange. Having heard the comments made in the official limousine, they interviewed her about her reaction to being called a bigot by the prime minister. Both the conversation between Brown and Vine in the studio, and that between Mrs Duffy and reporters, were broadcast live, on the BBC and Sky News respectively.

The BBC interview takes place about an hour after the encounter with Mrs Duffy, and although it is broadcast live, Brown speaks via a link from a studio in Manchester while Vine is in the BBC's London studio. The interview as a whole is 30 minutes long and for the first 27 minutes Vine presses the prime minister in some detail about the current recession and the global financial crisis. Three minutes before the end, he switches tack to raise the Gillian

Duffy encounter, revealing that he has been briefed about the newsworthy "bigoted woman" quote (lines 6-7), but not the fuller content of the exchange (lines 3-5). As Brown (IE in the transcript below) produces his apologetic response (lines 9-16), Vine (IR) introduces a fairly direct remediation of the original event, by announcing that someone has handed him "the tape" (line 17).

### Extract (2)

#### Gordon Brown BBC Radio 04 10

1 IR: Can I ask you about a voter you've just met  
2 apparently on the way to us:, this is a woman  
3 called Gillian Duffy who:, .hh I think was just  
4 questioning you about tuition fees an' a  
5 couple of other thin:gs, .hh a:n:d, as you  
6 went away a microphone picked you up saying  
7 that was, a very bigoted woman. Is that what  
8 you [said.  
9 IE: [.Mhht I apologise if I've said anything like  
10 that eh w-what I think she was raising with me  
11 was a- was an issue about eh immigration and  
12 saying that there were too many um e:::r people  
13 from eastern Europe in the country and err I do  
14 apologise if I've said anything that's been  
15 hu-hurtful and I will apologise to her  
16 personally.=  
17→ IR: =Someone has just handed me the tape let's- play  
18 it and see if we can hear it.

#### TAPE:

19 Brown: Should never have put me with that-  
20 with that woman.(0.5) Whose idea  
21 was that.  
22 Aide: Don't know I didn't see.  
23 Brown: Was Sue I think. (1.2) J's ridiculous.  
24 (1.8)  
25 Aide: They've said that- that actually- (0.3)  
26 they're not sure if they'll go with  
27 that one.=  
28 Brown: =They will go with it.  
29 (1.2)  
30 Aide: What did she say.  
31 Brown: Achh ev'rything, she's just this sort of,



responsibility for a political misjudgement: first by asking Brown to admit whether or not he said that Mrs Duffy was a bigoted woman (line 6-8); second by implying that Brown is seeking to dismiss or deny Mrs Duffy's right to express an opinion (line 34-35); and third by suggesting that Brown is seeking to deflect responsibility to one of his staff ("Sue is it," line 50-51).

Within this context of seeking to establish personal responsibility, and within the question-answer framework of the interview, the tape itself comes to be allocated a "turn". Vine inserts the taped words into the live broadcast interaction between himself and his interviewee. It is not clear whether he, or anyone else on the production team, has actually heard the tape at this point; but his phrase "Someone has just handed me the tape let's- play it and see if we can hear it" (line 17-18) suggests that Vine, at least, has not. However, the playing of the tape allows Vine, in the exchange that follows its playing, to utilise Brown's words in order to construct his line of questioning.

At the moment Vine plays "the tape", then, Brown's gaffe is made concrete as his very words now become public, broadcast talk. Moreover, unlike in most other instances in which political gaffes unfold in the media, Brown himself is made witness to his own infelicitous talk, sitting in the studio listening to his supposedly private comments become public material. And Vine can use those words as a resource ("Thu-that is: w-what you said." line 34) in his attempt to establish Brown's personal responsibility for a political misjudgement (which Brown, in fact, accepts in his turn beginning on line 52).

As noted, this interview was broadcast on radio, which meant of course that Brown was not visible to the audience at the time. However it turns out, compounding the prime minister's problems, that these days live video feeds of popular radio programmes are often streamed via the internet. Footage from this live feed, subsequently posted on YouTube, shows Brown with his head in his hands as he listens to the tape recording that Vine is broadcasting.

Not only was Brown, like Kinnock in the previous example, subsequently forced to account for himself under intensive scrutiny in the press and broadcast media; the mediatisation of his gaffe also took place via the internet and social networking. With sites

such as YouTube, Twitter, FaceBook, Instagram, WhatsApp and the rest, an ever-widening sphere of public access to, and debate about, the remediation of the gaffe comes into play. Not only was the video footage of Brown's interview with Vine posted on YouTube, but also the original televised footage of his interview with Gillian Duffy, and the recording of her subsequent interview with Sky television reporters, in which she is shown in open-mouthed shock at the reporter's recounting of the prime minister's description of her as "bigoted". Thus, even those who missed the original media event (a much larger group than those who may have been watching Sky News or listening to Radio 2 at the time) now have direct access to the event via their computers. And, of course, web technology enables all of this to be subjected to extensive and often, it seems, only minimally regulated commentary from members of the public (Thornborrow 2014).

This widening of the sphere of total mediatisation is something that can also be exploited by journalists themselves, in their attempts to report on events outside the constraints placed on them by political communications managers. My final example illustrates how this, too, can result in the construction and remediation of infelicitous talk.

### **Gaffe configuration 3: Television, the press, the net, bloggery and tweeterly**

In the third example British public sector workers were engaged in a dispute with the government over their pay and pensions provision, which were under the control of the Treasury rather than private pensions companies. Labour politician Ed Miliband, who had just taken over leadership of his party and was soon to be standing for election as prime minister,<sup>5</sup> gave a television interview to outline his position on the strike campaign that the public sector unions had just announced.

Miliband's aim in this interview was to express his opposition to the strikes, on the grounds that negotiations between the Conservative/Liberal government and the unions were still ongoing. In order to achieve this, Miliband faced a problem similar to that faced by his predecessor Neil Kinnock, discussed above. He led a party that had originally been established by the trades unions; that professed to be the party of the workers as opposed to

the Conservatives, who were seen as the party of business; and in which the trades unions still wielded enormous power through the number of votes they controlled in key policy decisions, including the election of party leaders.

Miliband's strategy in walking the line between aligning himself with the significant proportion of the voting population who were opposed to the idea that teachers, nurses and firemen should go on strike, and risking the opposition of unions and striking workers themselves, was to engage in a highly controlled interview aimed at creating a soundbite for dissemination across the news networks. The soundbite was to have been something like Mr Miliband saying: "These strikes are wrong, at a time when negotiations are still going on."

In fact, Miliband posted exactly this soundbite on his Twitter feed: "These strikes are wrong at a time when negotiations are going on. People have been let down by both sides – the Govt has acted recklessly" (twitter, @ed\_miliband, 30.6.2011).<sup>6</sup> And the BBC News website included the soundbite in its report on the matter:

The Labour leader Ed Miliband has expressed his disapproval at both the unions and the government over the strike action taking place around the UK. Picket lines have been set up by public sector workers, to protest at planned pension changes, resulting in the closure of almost half of state schools across the UK. Mr Miliband said "these strikes are wrong at a time when negotiations are going on", but refused to elaborate when asked further questions. (bbc.co.uk/news, 30.6.2011).<sup>7</sup>

The interview subsequently became notorious because of two things. First, the means by which Miliband's communication managers sought to ensure that the soundbite would be clear enough to be picked up by the mainstream media; and second, the way that their techniques of doing so were subsequently revealed to public view via other media such as Twitter, YouTube and internet blogging.

As we see in the following transcript (produced from the extended footage the BBC posted on its news website), the strategy was for there to be a series of about four memorised phrases that together encapsulated the intended message. Miliband simply reproduced that same set of phrases, in slightly different order, in response to each of the questions the

interviewer put to him (cf. Ekström and Fitzgerald 2014).

For ease of reference I will split the interview into segments. Extract 3a shows the initial statement made by Mr Miliband (IE). The question to which this is probably a response was not broadcast, a common strategy in news reporting (Clayman 1990). The subsequent extracts show the four follow-up questions that do in fact appear on the recording.

**Extract (3a)**

**Ed Miliband BBC 07 11**

1 IE: These strikes are wrong, at a time when negotiations  
2 are still going on. .hh Our parents an' the public  
3 ev been let down by both si:des, .h because the  
4 government es acted in a reckless, an' provocative  
5 m-manner. (0.2) After today's disruption, I urge  
6 both si:des, (.) t' put aside the rhetoric, (.) get  
7 round the negotiating table, and stop it happening  
8 again.

Here we find the four central points Miliband wishes to convey: the strikes are wrong because negotiations are ongoing; parents and the public have been let down by both sides in the dispute; the government has acted reckelssly and provocatively; and both sides should put aside their rhetoric and get round the negotiating table. As the interviewer puts a set of questions which seek to expand on Miliband's statement from various angles, it is noticeable that these four central points are reiterated with only slight modifications that make them appear to act as answers to the questions.

First, the interviewer (IR) seeks to press Miliband on the problematic issue that many of his own supporters actually make up the striking workforce that he appears to be criticising. In response, Mr Miliband repeats his points, but in a different order to extract 3a (line 16 on).

**Extract (3b)**

**Ed Miliband BBC 07 11**

9 IR: .HHhm E:rm, u-I: listened t'your speech in Wrexham  
10 you talked about the Labour Party being a movement=a  
11 lotta people in that movement, .h e::r are people

12           who're on strike toda:y an' they'll be looking at  
13           you an' thinking well, .hh you're describing these  
14           strikes as wro:ng. Why aren't you giving us more  
15           leadership as the leader of the labour movement.  
16    IE:    .hh At a time when negotiations are still going  
17           o:n, I do believe these stri:kes, are wrong. .h An'  
18           that's why I say, both sides, should after today's  
19           disruption, get round the negotiating table, .h put  
20           aside the rhetoric, .h an' sort the problem out.  
21           .h Because the public an' parents ev been let down  
22           by both sides, .h=the goverment's acted in a  
23           reckless an' provocative manner.

Next, the interviewer asks whether Mr Miliband considers the negotiations themselves to be in good faith. Again, rather than answering that particular question, Mr Miliband repeats his list of central propositions in a different order (this time omitting the point about public and parents being let down).

**Extract (3c)**

**Ed Miliband BBC 07 11**

24    IR:    .hhMHh Well I spoke to Francis Maude before I  
25           came here and, the tone he was striking was a very  
26           conciliatory one..hh D'you think there's a  
27           difference between the words they're saying in  
28           public an' the attitude they're striking in  
29           private in these negotiations=Are their  
30           negotiations in good faith would you say.  
31    IE:    .hh What I say is that the strikes are wrong when  
32           negotiations er still going on. .h=But the  
33           government has acted in a reckless and provocative  
34           manner. .h=in the way it's gone about these  
35           issu:es. .h A:fter today's disruption I urge  
36           both sides to get round the negotiating table,  
37           put aside the rhetoric, an' stop this kinda thing  
38           happening again.

In the final two questions, the interviewer seeks to press Mr Miliband on whether he has expressed his views on a personal level to the key negotiators in the government and the

unions (lines 39-45); and subsequently, on whether he has a view on how the disruption might affect parents on an everyday level, including within that category both himself and Mr Miliband (line 54-55: "You're a parent I'm a parent, lotta people watching this will be parents"). Once more, between lines 46 and 53, and lines 61 and the interview's end in line 70, the answers consist of the four central propositions reiterated in slightly different order.

### Extract (3d)

Ed Miliband BBC 07 11

39 IR: Er:m, it's a s- it's a- it's a:- it's a statement  
40 you've made, er publicly=an' you've made it to  
41 me=an' obviously this will be broadca:st  
42 obvislee=but have you:: .hhh spoken privately  
43 to any, e::r union leaders en and expressed  
44 your view to them on a personal level would you  
45 say.

46 IE: Well what I say in public, and in private, tuh  
47 evrybody involved in this, is, .h get round the  
48 negotiating table, put aside the rhetoric and  
49 stop this kind of thing happening again. .h These  
50 strikes are wrong because negotiations er still  
51 going on:, .h but parents en the public ev been  
52 let dow:n, .h by- the government as we:ll, who've  
53 acted in a reckless an' provocative manner.

54 IR: .h=erm, You're a parent I'm a parent, lotta  
55 people watching this will be parents, .hh erm  
56 has it affected you personally this action='as  
57 it- affected- your family an' friends I mean an'  
58 and, .h what is the net effect of that gonna be  
59 on, on parents, having t' take a day off work  
60 today.

61 IE: I think parents, up an' down the country've  
62 been affected by this action. .h a-an' it's  
63 wro:ng at a time when negotiations er still,  
64 going on. (0.2) .h Parents've been let down  
65 by both sides because the government has acted  
66 in a reckless an' provocative manner. .hh I  
67 think that both sides should after today's  
68 disruption get round the negotiating table,  
69 put aside the rhetoric, and stop this kinda  
70 thing happening again.

(Interview ends)

As Ekström and Fitzgerald (2014) point out, repetition is a strategy used by both interviewers and interviewees for different purposes. They distinguish between "embedded" repetition in which the wording of a question or answer can be changed but a key phrase is nevertheless repeated; and "stripped" repetition in which the whole turn consists of a repeat, either word for word (as in the IE's asking the same question over again) or in slightly reordered form (as in Miliband's answers above). Thus, although Miliband here engages in "stripped" repetition, it is nonetheless possible to see that he makes some attempt to vary his answers: first of all by changing the order in which he repeats the four statements, and secondly by using prefaces that link the start of each of his answers to some aspect of the preceding question. For example, in the above extract the IR's "have you spoken **privately**" (line 42) is linked to via "what I say in public, and in **private**" (line 46); while "You're a **parent** I'm a **parent**" (line 54) is linked to via "**parents**, up an down the country've been affected" (line 61).

Despite this, media commentary rapidly fixed its attention on the sense of Miliband answering "a series of different questions...by reciting a single soundbite over and over, like a mantra" (Brooker 2011; see also Robinson 2011), treating this as evidence of the vacuousness of political discourse in an age of media spin. Yet as Brooker (2011) acknowledges, a significant feature of this interview not so far mentioned is that it was not intended for broadcast on live television, but was recorded for distribution as a "pool" interview available to all news channels for their bulletins (cf. Ekström and Fitzgerald 2014: 92-94). In that context, there is a sense in which Miliband's form of communication is a rational strategy. Communications managers know that the interview will be edited down before broadcast (Kroon Lundell and Ekström 2010); hence if they can ensure that all that the politician says on the tape is the intended soundbite, there is some guarantee that the necessary statement will, ultimately, find its way onto the broadcast news.

What is less common, however, is for whole, unedited versions of these pool interviews to appear in the public sphere. This is what happened in the Miliband case. In fact,

at the time of writing, the interview as transcribed above is still accessible on the BBC News website as well as via YouTube. This leads to the second point of note, namely that this was the first of these repetition-gaffe soundbite interviews to "go viral" in the social media.

A significant part of the reason for this is that the journalist who conducted the interview subsequently posted on his own blog a detailed account, not only of how the interview had been set up and managed by Miliband's political communications managers (including their need to be in control of the particular backdrop against which Mr Miliband was filmed, with family photos visible over his left shoulder), but of his personal recollections of and reactions to what he clearly considers to have been the unacceptable behaviour of his interviewee. As he writes:

If news reporters and cameras are only there to be used by politicians as recording devices for their scripted soundbites, at best that is a professional discourtesy. At worst, if we are not allowed to explore and examine a politician's views, then politicians cease to be accountable in the most obvious way. So the fact that the unedited interview has found its way onto YouTube in all its absurdity, to be laughed at along with all the clips of cats falling off sofas, is perfectly proper. (Green 2011: 1).

As in the previous two examples, significant media coverage – primarily in the press and on the internet – followed the posting of this blog and the YouTube video, as what was called the "Milibot" gaffe unfolded into the public sphere (Milibot being an amalgam of Mr Miliband's name and the word "robot"). The significant feature here, of course, is that the journalist has taken advantage of the proliferation of communications channels within the contemporary media environment to feed that process with his own views on the professional discourtesy and lack of accountability that can emerge from political attempts to manage the conditions of total mediatisation.

### **Total mediatisation, media management and media ethics**

The gaffe reveals something about the exquisite ambivalence of mediatised politics. This is perhaps why gaffes are so readily satirised in television comedies such as *Yes Minister*, *Veep* and *The Thick of It*. The attempts of political communications managers to control the process of mediatisation by ensuring that politicians remain "on message" can themselves lead to a loss of control, as not only interviewers, but other journalists working for other media outlets, and indeed ordinary Twitter users and so on are scrutinising their statements for mistakes that can be turned into reportable phenomena. Political cautiousness not only leads to perceptions of evasiveness or refusing to answer a "straight question"; infelicitous talk can itself be constituted by the remediation of things said within earshot of the rapidly inflating public sphere.

Thus, broadcast political interviews are two things simultaneously: (a) routine media events, both for politicians, their communications advisers and for broadcast journalists; and (b) potentially explosive media phenomena. As all three examples above have demonstrated, in different ways, the broadcast political interview is at the heart of a discourse ecology, entwined with a whole range of mediation channels and associated means of public participation in the definition and redefinition of events.

We have seen how tiny lapses in the constant attention that is nowadays required by politicians and their advisers can reveal just how totally mediatised modern politics is. We have also seen how increasing diversification of mediated sources opens the possibility of a mutual entwinement of discourses that can rapidly spiral the definition, meanings and consequences of mundane events out of the grasp of even the most cautious political managers.

There is a form of media power involved here that also raises questions about journalistic responsibility and ethical conduct. In recent years there have been major public inquiries into the ethics of journalistic practice in the UK (the Leveson Inquiry) and elsewhere. The Leveson Inquiry was sparked by claims about press journalists illegally using technology to tap into the mobile phone messaging systems of people about whom they were writing stories, including, in one case, a kidnapped teenage girl. The inquiry resulted in the closure of a major British newspaper, the *News of the World*, and the jailing of a number of

both editors and journalists.

Although the examples discussed in this article are far less consequential than some of the behaviour revealed by Leveson, they do raise similar questions around the leaky boundaries between public and private in conditions of total mediatisation; and the ways this leakiness might be utilised for the purposes of journalistic coups. Mullaney (2011), for example, cites the blog of the radio producer in the Gordon Brown case, who writes of the tape which Vine describes someone "handing" to him during his interview as "a dream spot – the Prime Minister revealing a chink in his carefully choreographed election campaign. Caught on tape – and seen by me before anyone else" (Hoffman, cited in Mullaney 2011: 156). The prime minister himself also referred to the ethical dimension of this issue in his interview, immediately after the tape had been broadcast (extract 2, lines 54-59).

The leaks of off-record conversations, or posting of entire recordings of interviews not intended to be broadcast as such, that caused the embarrassments outlined above are sometimes justified using what in Atkinson and Silverman's (1997) terms would be an "interview society" rationale. As they argue, in modern, mediatised culture, there is a tendency to "celebrate the interview and the narrative data it produces as an especially *authentic* mode of social representation" (1997: 312). For example, Green's (2011) comments regarding the Miliband interview indicate that he believes Miliband's conduct to have revealed something authentic about politicians, namely that they are, in fact, inauthentic. This is also the gist of Brooker's (2011) commentary on that particular gaffe (see also, for a slightly different angle, Corner et al. 2013).

Here again we encounter the ambivalence of mediatisation. Miliband and his advisers clearly understood the journalist's purpose in this case to be the production of a pool interview for subsequent editing; not a live broadcast or even an interview to appear "whole" in the public sphere. The interviewer, in his blog, invokes the professional ethics and responsibilities of journalism in contrast to the "professional discourtesy" exhibited by the politician. Yet at the same time, the interview having been placed, by someone, in its raw form on YouTube and the BBC News website, the celebration of the interview's laughability, in its new placement alongside "all the clips of cats falling off sofas," is only from one

perspective "perfectly proper." From another, it is ethically questionable.

Although the landscape of mediatisation is expanding and evolving, therefore, the broadcast interview remains a highly significant social and cultural phenomenon. The changing technologies of media and communication, and their affordances, do not lessen its importance as a form of political discourse. If anything, they increase it.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In 2016, an influential British broadsheet newspaper, *The Independent*, became the first of its kind to cease production in traditional paper format and become an online-only newspaper.

<sup>2</sup> BBC news website, 21/11/2014, at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-30142579>. Accessed January 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Mullaney (2011: 133-161) provides an analysis of this event in terms of politeness theory.

<sup>4</sup> The suffix "gate", as in "bullygate", "bigotgate" or "plebgate", has become widely used by the British media to refer to controversies involving politicians, and is obviously derived from the mother lode of political scandals, Watergate.

<sup>5</sup> Miliband's party went on to lose the 2015 election in one of the worst Labour Party defeats of recent times.

<sup>6</sup> Accessed November 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Accessed November 2015.