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Political bias in TV interviews

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Abstract

The study aims to provide empirical data on the alleged political bias of Dutch media. It also aims to contribute to the development of an instrument for the measurement of partiality in TV interviews. Its main question is: are TV interviewers biased in putting adversarial questions to politicians with different political backgrounds? The data collection encompasses 12 interviews taken from the late-night talk show *Pauw & Witteman* during the run-up to the parliamentary elections of 2006. The analysis focuses on five measures of adversarial questioning that were developed by Clayman et al. (2007): *initiative*, *directness*, *assertiveness*, *opposition* and *accountability*, as well as on a sixth measure that was developed in the context of this study, *persistence*. The results show that left-wing politicians are approached less adversarially than right-wing politicians and politicians in the political centre, even when various factors that might offer an alternative explanation are included in the analysis. The conclusion is that interviewers are partial in shaping the way in which politicians can present themselves to the public.

Keywords

measurement instrument of adversarialness, political bias, question design, questions, TV interviews

Introduction

Occasion of the study

In the Netherlands, the political bias of media interviewers is a hotly debated issue. It is not a debate on journalistic norms and values, but on journalistic *practice*. Just as in the United Kingdom, the United States and many other countries that value the freedom of the press, Dutch news interviewers are expected to adhere to certain basic standards of professional conduct such as impartiality and objectivity. The debate focuses in particular on journalistic practice on Dutch national radio and television,

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which are state-subsidized and fulfil a public function. The criticism levelled at media journalists includes their left-wing bias. Journalists are alleged to support left-wing ideals and opinions rather than the right-wing body of thought and to influence future voters in propagating a preference for left-wing political candidates over right-wing ones. The following interview extract is an example of a politician accusing a journalist of being biased. It is taken from the breakfast show *Goedemorgen Nederland* (*Good Morning Netherlands*), which is broadcast on weekdays by the broadcast corporation KRO. The interviewer is Sven Kockelmann and the interviewee is the right-wing party leader Geert Wilders.

Interviewee:	Once again, we are from the party whose people say what they think. You may be from the party whose people only say something when it helps.
Interviewer:	I do not belong to any party.
Interviewee:	Well, that's not what it looks like.
Interviewer:	How is that?
Interviewee:	Well, your questions are quite suggestive.

This debate on journalists being biased provided the practical impetus for our study. Although it is an empirical issue, research on the matter is scarce. We try to fill this gap by empirically investigating the possible political bias of Dutch media interviewers during the run-up to the parliamentary elections of December 2006.

Interaction in TV interviews

When we sit in front of the television nowadays to see what is going on in the world, there is a big chance that what is shown will include an interview by a journalist and one or more public figures. The TV interview has grown to prominence during recent decades (Clayman and Heritage, 2002a). According to Clayman and Heritage (2002a: 28–9), this development is built on a commonality of interests between public figures and journalists: 'Journalists need access to public figures for their livelihood, while public figures need journalists to gain access to what Margaret Thatcher once called "the oxygen of publicity".' As a result, there exists an informal and unspoken 'interview contract': journalists give public figures access to their platform in exchange for news content that will attract viewers. It is within the framework of this interview contract that the television interview has grown to be one of the most widely used and best-developed formats for political communication worldwide (Elliott and Bull, 1996: 49; Ekström, 2001). Particularly in the run-up period to elections, politicians appear in TV interviews almost daily. In the context of a growing number of 'floating voters' in the Netherlands, estimated at 30 percent before the last elections, gaining access to the electorate through TV interviews can be of decisive importance. Thus, it is no wonder that politicians are eager to exploit this setting to reach and attract voters.

Although it is potentially helpful to politicians in gaining political success, taking part in a TV interview is also a risky endeavour. On more traditional political platforms, like public speeches or political advertising, politicians have full control over content and process. In the TV interview, however, there is a third party involved, the interviewers, who take over a lot of the control. In their institutional role as talk managers,

interviewers set the topics, ask the questions, determine who speaks, and decide when a question has been answered sufficiently. Moreover, as mediators between politicians and the viewers at home, interviewers fulfil a democratic function in that they are expected to probe policy issues and to organize the public debate. It is the politicians' task to present themselves to the viewers while answering difficult questions, posed by interviewers who enter the scene as 'watchdogs' (Clayman et al., 2007: 23) of a participatory democracy.

Various scholars have pointed to a tension in the current journalistic profession (Clayman and Heritage, 2002a: 150–236; Hutchby, 2006: 127–33). On the one side, neutrality in the sense of 'neutralism'[1] is considered an important condition for good journalism: broadly speaking, interviewers have to take a 'balanced, impartial, or neutral stance' towards the statements and opinions of the interviewee (Clayman and Heritage, 2002a: 199). On the other side, as critical investigators of political practice and as proponents of a participatory society, it is the interviewers' task to ask penetrating and opposing questions and prevent evasive answers. Thus, in order to discover the 'real' facts, journalists have to approach their sources critically and should not be the passive extensions of the politicians' voices. The journalists react to this tension by utilizing question forms that do not express a personal stance, but at the same time contain a critical position, i.e. by using question formats which realize a complex positioning of the participants in the interview setting, such as the formulation (Heritage, 1985: 101–12) and the 'You say X, but what about Y?' pattern (Hutchby, 1992: 675–84). In doing this, they are oriented to 'neutralism' by claiming that they apply these forms moderately and to all politicians equally.

Recently, Clayman and Heritage have developed a subtle system of categories for the analysis of the range of question forms used by interviewers of politicians, the Question Analysis System or QAS (Clayman and Heritage, 2002b: 754–71; Clayman et al., 2007: 30). In total, QAS takes into account 10 features of question design. They argue that the different features in general indicate 'adversarialness', while they form groups indicating aspects of adversarialness such as 'initiative' and 'assertiveness'. They developed this QAS while researching the hypothesized historical trend that journalists interrogate American presidents in an increasingly aggressive way – a trend that was indeed found. This QAS may be particularly useful for the problem we are focusing on. Its application to Dutch interviewers' questions when approaching politicians with different political backgrounds shows either 'equal treatment' or 'bias'. Apart from this, an application like this provides insight into the quality of QAS in a different context (USA vs. the Netherlands) and a different type of interview (press conferences vs. TV interviews).

A different form of bias, which we also took into account, is the so-called 'coverage bias' (D'Alessio and Allen, 2000): journalists might be biased in the physical amount of coverage that the various 'sides' or 'parties' in a discussion receive, i.e. they might allow some parties more speaking turns and more speaking time. Our study concerns both 'coverage bias' and 'bias in question design'. We are well aware that we are not investigating the complex notion of 'political bias' in all conceivable ways. The study is confined to a number of relatively encompassing aspects of this notion.

The aim of this study can now be summarized as a two-fold one:

1. The study aims to provide a set of empirical data on the alleged political bias of Dutch TV interviewers and, thus, to contribute to the filling of a gap in a current social debate.
2. We aim to contribute to the development of a measurement instrument of adversarial questioning in TV interviews by elaborating on the existing QAS and increasing its applicability.

Data and method

The study is a *multiple case study*: 12 interviews taken from the late-night talk show *Pauw & Witteman* were analysed. In these shows, the interviewers Jeroen Pauw and Paul Witteman discuss 'the topicality of current affairs, the talk of the town and the delusions of the day' (Pauw and Witteman, 2007) with guests who play prominent roles in politics, culture and science. The character of the shows is serious – i.e. not satirical and not belligerent – with a touch of humour, which is apparent from, for example, the witty introductions to the politicians and the other guests at the table, and the use of running jokes. The shows last approximately one hour and are broadcast live on weekdays by the broadcasting association VARA/NPS on one of the three Dutch state-subsidized national channels. VARA/NPS is institutionally embedded in NPO, Dutch Public Broadcasting, which regards its independence from political influences as a spearhead in its mission (NPO, 2010).[2] The interview setting is represented in Figure 1.

The programme *Pauw & Witteman* is considered to be one of the backbones of public broadcasting in the Netherlands (NPS Jaarverslag, 2006). Since its start in September 2006, it has been the talk show on Dutch TV with the highest ratings. It attracts many
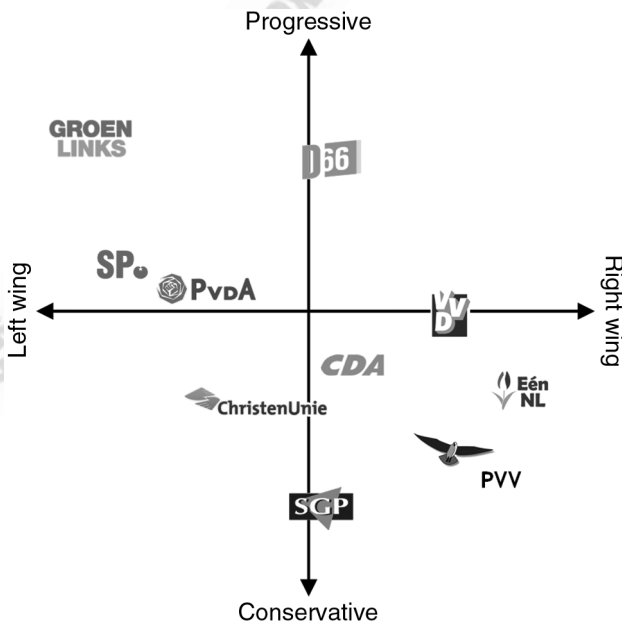

Jeroen Pauw   Paul Witteman

Figure 1. The interview setting

viewers at home with a regular market share (i.e. the percentage of the TV watching population that watches this talk show) of around 20 percent, which increases on some days to 30 percent. The 12 shows that were analysed had a mean number of viewers of 726,833, which is a mean market share of 18.44 percent, and 4.88 percent of the total TV-watching population.[3] It was – and still is – one of the most important political platforms in the Netherlands.

With one exception, all the interviews studied were broadcast in the 10-week period preceding the parliamentary elections of December 2006. The format of all the analysed programmes was such that one party leader or MP of a political party active in the electoral struggle was interviewed for 10 to 15 minutes, while there were two or three other, non-political, guests sitting around the table. With the aid of the *Kieskompas* (2007) – a sociologically based positioning of the political parties in the Netherlands in a conceptual framework with two dimensions: left vs. right and progressive vs. conservative (see Figure 2) – we decided which two of the 11 political parties were most prototypically left-wing and right-wing, as well as which two were most representative of the political centre. For each of these six parties, an interview with the party leader and an interview with an MP was included in the analysis. The distribution of male and female politicians was kept as equal as possible. Table 1 gives an overview of the interviews that were analysed.

The 12 interviews were transcribed and segmented into turns in which a question was asked. We used a rather broad pragmatic notion of 'question' (see Huls, 2009: 158–9). The data collection encompasses 186 minutes of conversation and 700 questions.

Figure 2. Positioning of the political parties in the Netherlands on the dimensions 'left wing–right wing' and 'progressive–conservative' (based upon Kieskompas, 2007)

Table 1. Overview of the data collection

No.	Date	Politician		Function	Party	Orientation
01	03-11-06	Jan Marijnissen	♂	Party leader	SP	Left wing
02	30-10-06	Agnes Kant	♀	Member of Parliament	SP	Left wing
03	17-11-06	Femke Halsema	♀	Party leader	GroenLinks	Left wing
04	18-01-07	Mariko Peters	♀	Member of Parliament	GroenLinks	Left wing
05	09-11-06	Alexander Pechtold	♂	Party leader	D66	Centre
06	11-09-06	Lousewies van der Laan	♀	Member of Parliament	D66	Centre
07	18-10-06	Jan Peter Balkenende	♂	Party leader	CDA	Centre
08	13-09-06	Maxime Verhagen	♂	Member of Parliament	CDA	Centre
09	07-09-06	Mark Rutte	♂	Party leader	VVD	Right wing
10	06-11-06	Rita Verdonk	♀	Member of Parliament	VVD	Right wing
11	14-11-06	Marco Pastors	♂	Party leader	Eén NL	Right wing
12	25-10-06	Joost Eerdmans	♂	Member of Parliament	Eén NL	Right wing

The partiality of the TV interviewers is analysed by focusing on coverage bias (do the politicians of the differing orientations receive an equal number of speaking turns and amount of speaking turns?) and bias in question design (do the politicians of the differing orientations receive the same question forms?). In line with QAS, the following five aspects of question design are investigated:

1. *Initiative*. Interviewers can choose to be relatively passive in the sense that they allow the politician maximum leeway to construct a response and impose few constraints. Alternatively, they can show initiative by elaborating on their questions and formulating them in such a way that the agenda for response is constrained. One way to show initiative is to introduce the questions (Q) with utterances (U), as shown in Example 1.

Example 1. Introduction to the question (IR = Paul Witteman, IE = left-wing party leader Jan Marijnissen)

IR: U1→   *Jan Marijnissen, you did not take part in the debate* ((i.e. a debate organized shortly before by the commercial network RTL)), *because it was RTL's choice to organize a two-way debate.*

      U2→   *Femke Halsema had some very angry words to say about that in 'De leugen regeert'* (('A pack of lies', a TV programme that exposes 'lies' in journalism)).

      U3→   *Andre Rouvoet stated this morning in De Volkskrant* ((i.e. a national quality newspaper with a high impact)) *that he regarded it as 'cheating the voters'.*

      Q →   *Do you agree?*

Another way to show initiative is to ask more than one question in one (and the same) turn.

2. *Directness*. Interviewers can choose direct (i.e. blunt, straightforward) forms of expression, but they can also formulate their questions in a more indirect and careful way. In the latter case, the interviewer reckons with potential face loss of the IE. Indirectly formulated questions are perceived as being more polite. In interviews, indirectness typically takes the form of an expression that precedes and frames the focal question. These expressions either refer to (1) the intention, motivation or ability of the interviewer to ask the question, or (2) the ability or willingness of the interviewee to answer the question.

Example 2. Reference to interviewer (IR = Jeroen Pauw, IE = right-wing MP Rita Verdonk)

IR: Q→   *May I ask you to read aloud a short passage?*
IE: *Yes.*

3. *Assertiveness*. No question is completely neutral. The notion of 'assertiveness' refers to the degree to which aspects of question design express expectations concerning the answer. Basically, there are two ways to construct 'tilted' questions: (1) by prefacing the question with statements or arguments in favour of one of the answering alternatives, and (2) by formulating the question in the suggestive sentence mode. In Example 3, both ways of constructing 'tilted' questions co-occur:

Example 3. 'Tilted' introduction and 'tilted' question (IR = Jeroen Pauw, IE = leader of a party in the political centre Alexander Pechtold)

IR: U1→   *With regard to the death penalty, you could say that if Saddam Hussein is handed over to a tribunal,*
        U2→   *with most of the parties agreeing to there being a tribunal, because the man should be tried by his own people;*
        U3→   *if you know that capital punishment is at the top of the list in that culture,*
        Q→   *then it is not so very strange that Saddam Hussein should actually get the death penalty?*

4. *Opposition*. Opposition concerns the degree to which the interviewer takes a position opposite to that of the interviewee. Opposition takes place when the question is overtly critical with respect to the interviewee and his or her party. Interviewers can express opposing views (1) in the introduction to the question. Introductions are opposing when they contain rejecting or negatively evaluating remarks concerning utterances and acts of the interviewee. QAS distinguishes two alternatives here: a milder variant (1a), wherein an oppositional introduction is the focus of the subsequent question (see Example 4), and a more adversarial variant (1b), wherein an oppositional introduction is presupposed in the subsequent question. Moreover, interviewers can express opposing views (2) in the design of the question as a whole. Opposition in the design of the question as a whole occurs when an oppositional or critical posture runs through the question in its entirety.

Example 4. Opposing introduction (IR = Jeroen Pauw, IE = PM, and leader of a political party in the centre Jan Peter Balkenende)

IR: U→ *Last night we had Amsterdam alderman Aboutaleb with us in the studio, and he got rather worked up about the fact that it is precisely this cabinet under your leadership that has paid so little attention to the problems Amsterdam is facing in working on solutions ((in problem areas with many migrants)). Let's take a look at that clip from last night's show.*

Q→ *We'd like to hear your reaction?*

5. *Accountability*. Accountability refers to the degree to which the interviewer asks the interviewee explicitly to account for his policy. The interviewer does not accept a political decision without an argument. He challenges the interviewee to justify his political behaviour. The interviewer can formulate his question in a formally 'neutral' fashion and simply ask for the reason why the politician behaved the way he did (see Example 5, Q1), or he can be more accusatory by portraying the political decision as doubtful or inexplicable (Example 5, Q2).

Example 5. Accountability questions (IR = Paul Witteman, IE = right-wing party leader Mark Rutte)

IR: *Is there anything about this issue ((i.e. the position of the party with respect to Turkey joining the European Union)) in your party's electoral platform?*
IE: *No there isn't.*
IR: Q1→ *How can that be?*

Q2→ *Hasn't this been a major issue in your party for a long time? It was part of Bolkestein's agenda for years and years.*

We have expanded QAS with a sixth analytical perspective, *persistence*. Clayman and Heritage (2002b: 749) claim that QAS can be used to analyse question design in both TV interviews and press conferences. However, they neglect an important difference in the two contexts. In contrast to press conferences, where the politician distributes the turns in such a way that an interviewer can ask only one or (rarely) two questions, whereafter the floor goes to the next one, the TV interview allows for a longer, coherent sequence of questions by the same interviewer. Although this might look like a small difference, its consequences are far-reaching: the interviewer has the opportunity to react to the adequacy of the answers and exploit a range of means in follow-up questions to obtain a more revealing answer (Greatbatch, 1988). When the interviewee fails to produce a coherent answer, the interviewer can call him or her to account and still try to obtain a satisfactory answer (Pomerantz, 1984). Answering a question adequately is a norm that, despite a lot of evasive action, remains very much in force in political communication (Clayman, 2001).

Our notion of persistence applies to the interviewer's behaviour in extended sequences of questions that are topically coherent. It is similar to the notion of 'pur-

suit' (Pomerantz, 1984; Heritage and Clayman, 2010). The interviewer shows persistence when he does not simply take the politician's answer for an answer, but repeats his question, explicitly addresses the politician's evasive reactions or interrupts the politician.

The interviewers are persistent in Example 6, where they are dealing with a comment by right-wing politician Pieter Winsemius, a fellow party member of interviewee Rita Verdonk, in which he states that, in the next cabinet, he is willing to take over Verdonk's portfolio as Minister of Immigration and Integration because she failed to solve the problems in the city neighbourhoods.

Example 6. Repeating the question, commenting on evasive answering (CEA) and interrupting IE (IR1 = Paul Witteman, IR2 = Jeroen Pauw, IE = right-wing MP Rita Verdonk)

IR1:	Q1→	And do you think it is a good idea that? Do you think it is a good idea that he will finish your job?
IE:		Well, look. What I do think is that his report is an inventory he has made and we still have big problems in the neighbourhoods. But, to me, it goes too far, and that was your first comment, that it is all integration pro[blems. I have said there is a complex
IR1:	Q2→	[Yes. That is what you have said, but do you mind if he finishes that job?
IE:		Well, look, that is I don't think that you can put it in this way. We are all dependent on formation [negotiations.=
IR1:		[Hmhm
		= Let's wait for these first and then see what [comes out.
IR1:	Q3→	[Would you be happy to get rid of it? Of this portfolio?
IE:		(<) Uh I have to say that it has been spoken of as a headache portfolio. Well, it is not like that, but I get … As far as the integration part is concerned you get gray hairs from that. [I mean.=
IR1		[Yeh.
IE		= A complete cultural change has to be brought [about. (Under)
IR1:	Q4→	[So you don't mind if you leave it?
IE:		Well. I no I am terrifically interested in it. And it also keeps me very busy. So yes of course leaving it would definitely affect me. [Sure of course, but the same applies to immigration.
IR:	Q5→	[Yes. You you you prefer to keep doing it.
IE:		Well, that is not what I am saying. You know, I have just said, it's all about these formation negotiations. So [yes
IR1:	Q6→	[No. it's about I [asked what you want.
IR2:	Q7→	[No, but the issue is what you [want.
IE:		[No.
		Nohohohoho no yes and then after that you uh god and you say just with respect to mister Winsemius. I'm getting to know you now, gentlemen. Noho, this is not what is going to happen.
IR2:		No.

IR1:	CEA→	But, we uh simply ask questions and (then I [don't understand.)=
IE:		[Yes.
		= Either you say yes we I know you as interviewers and I would rather not give an answer. But we don't know you for this.
IE:		No, oh but I keep on giving I do [my utmost to give good answers.
IR2:	Q8→	[But fine. You just said I just discussed it with Mister uh Winsemius, and so in my view you will have said just normally Pieter, before he said it on Buitenhof. So he probably also said like I do want to do that and I feel I might well say it on Buitenhof ((i.e. a political TV talk show)). What did you say then?
IE:		Well, I mean, he can say that if he wants to. And I can give my reaction to that, [the (weeks) erm [which I have.
IR1:	Q9+10 →	[And it was? [And what was your reaction then?

When the interviewer asks Verdonk whether she sees Winsemius taking her place as being a good idea (Q1), she doesn't provide an adequate answer to that question, i.e. she comments on the topic of the question, but does not answer the question in terms of the action that the question requires: a yes/no answer. This leads to the interviewers repeating the question six times (Q2 to Q7), while also interrupting Verdonk in each case. Next, Verdonk evades the question openly, after which the interviewers comment explicitly on her series of inadequate answers (CEA). After an account of the interviewee, the interviewers continue repeating the question and interrupting the interviewee (Q8 to Q10).

By interrupting the interviewee, repeating their question and commenting on evasive action, the interviewers demonstrate to the interviewee as well as to the audience that they regard the question as being answered inadequately. They display persistence in obtaining an adequate answer, thereby expressing adversarialness in the questions they ask.

Every question of the interviewer in our data collection was judged with respect to the presence or absence of the specific indicators of the six aspects of question design. This judgement, which was made by Jasper Varwijk, was often based upon formal aspects of the question, and thus could be made with a relatively high degree of reliability (Clayman et al., 2007: 31). Problematic cases were discussed by both researchers, and treated consistently by adding guidelines to the coding manual. A third researcher carried out an independent judgment of 5 percent of the questions. This judgement was compared with Varwijk's assessment, and Cohen's Kappa, a measure that gives insight into the agreement between the judges, was computed (Cohen, 1960). The kappa values of the six aspects of question design were as follows: initiative: .91; directness: 1.00; assertiveness: .78; opposition: .71; accountability: 1.00; persistence: .56.[4]

Suppose we find a relationship between the political orientation of the interviewee and the aspects of question design, and that this relationship turns out to confirm the accusations mentioned in the introduction as made by certain right-wing politicians, in particular that right-wing politicians are approached in a more adversarial way than left-wing politicians, then the conclusion that the interviewers show bias would still be premature, because this relationship might be determined by factors other than the political

orientation. For example, it is easy to imagine that an evasive answer of a politician might drive the interviewer to more assertiveness and persistence in his next question. If right-wing politicians show this answering behaviour more often than left-wing politicians, then the bias found cannot be attributed to the interviewer, but can be said to be their 'own fault'. On the basis of previous research into interaction (in TV interviews) and the relationship between media and politics, the factors that might be the most relevant as offering alternative explanations for our findings were determined and included in our study. We found 12 of them. A number of these concern the reactions of the interviewee in the turn immediately preceding the question: did the interviewee provide an answer or show a form of evasive action? An analysis of evasive action is not an easy endeavour. We based ourselves upon our own research (Huls, 2008, 2009), as well as on research done by others (e.g. Harris, 1991; Clayman, 2001; Kuiper, 2006; Ekström, 2009). We ended up distinguishing 23 forms of evasive action. These were grouped into four factors: (1) answering strategy; (2) politeness strategy; (3) playing with the turn-taking rules; and (4) playing with the discourse role.

Five factors are inherently related to the interviewee: their 'gender', their role in the party (party leader or MP?), their political experience, their party's political position (in power or in opposition) and their party's position in the polls (support may be stable, increase or decrease).
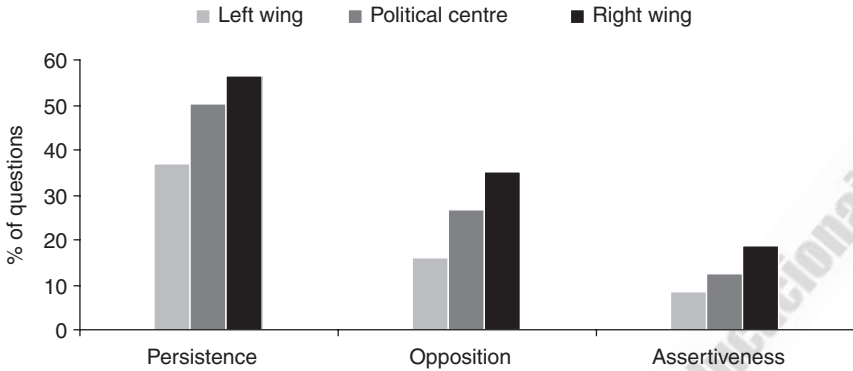
The last three factors are determined by the interviewers. It is possible that one of the interviewers shows bias, while the other does not. Moreover, the topic of the question (Does the question address a topic in national politics or another topic? Does the question address a topic in international politics or another topic?) might determine the adversarial behaviour of the interviewers.

The codings were entered into SPSS and analysed according to the statistical standard (Kinnear and Gray, 2001). This means that the two metric variables (i.e. the granted number of speaking turns and the granted amount of speaking time) were analysed by making use of ANOVAs and MANOVAs. The other variables have a nominal measurement level and were analysed by making use of cross tables, chi-square statistics and binary logistic regressions.[5]

Results

Coverage bias was not found. The politicians of the differing orientations received an equal number of speaking turns (a mean number of 58.2) and also an equal amount of speaking time (a mean of 15.5 minutes).
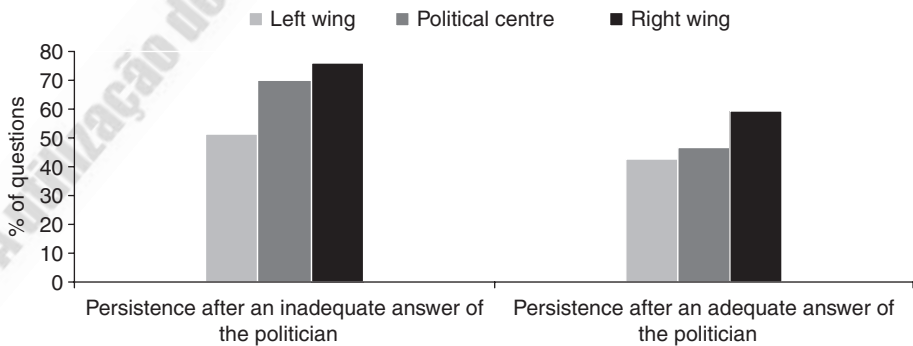
Bias in question design was found in three of the six aspects studied. There was no bias in *initiative*, *directness* and *accountability*, but bias was found in *assertiveness*, *opposition* and *persistence*. Figure 3 gives more insight into this bias. One can see that all three dimensions show the same pattern of political bias (persistence: χ^2 (2) = 19.05, $p < .001$; opposition: χ^2 (2) = 22.95, $p < .001$; assertiveness: χ^2 (2) = 11.12, $p < .005$). It is tentatively concluded that the interviewers are more adversarial when they are interviewing right-wing politicians; they are less adversarial when interviewing politicians of the political centre; and least adversarial when they are interviewing left-wing politicians.
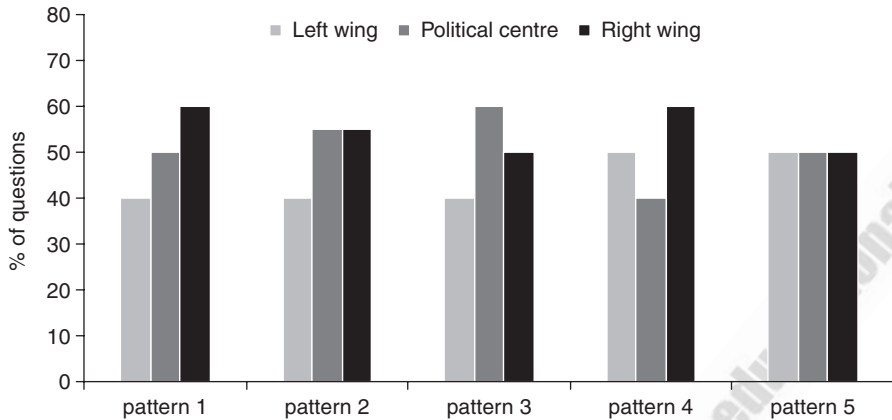
Figure 3. Persistence, opposition and assertiveness in relation to political orientation

However, in the section on data and method, we argued that a bias, if found, might be determined by factors other than the political orientation of the interviewee. To check for this possible influence, we first investigated the 12 factors that might offer an alternative explanation with respect to their effect on persistence, opposition and assertiveness; 13 of these 36 effect determinations (12 contextual factors × 3 aspects of question design) were statistically significant. Next, we made context-specific cross tables and studied the precise character of this effect on what really concerns us: the political bias.

Figure 4 shows an example of such an effect determination and context-specific analysis. The interviewers are more persistent after a so-called inadequate answer: the figures on the left-hand side are higher than those on the right-hand side, but their bias is apparent on both sides. We conclude that this aspect of the answering behaviour of the politician shapes the question design, but does not offer an alternative explanation for the bias that we found.

Figure 4. Persistence in relation to adequacy of the answer and political orientation

pattern 1: left-wing politicians treated less adversarially than politicians from the political centre,
while right-wing politicians are treated most adversarially
pattern 2: politicians in the political centre treated just as adversarially as right-wing politicians
pattern 3: politicians in the political centre treated more adversarially than right-wing politicians
pattern 4: politicians in the political centre treated less adversarially than right-wing and left-wing
politicians
pattern 5: no political bias

Figure 5. Patterns in the contextual-specific analyses of the relationship between political
orientation and the adversarialness of the question

In this way, we studied what happens to the political bias in the 26 contexts that are
encompassed by the 13 factors that proved to be relevant. Overwhelmingly (16 times), we
found the pattern that left-wing politicians are approached in a less adversarial manner
than politicians from the political centre, while the approach to right-wing politicians is
most adversarial, i.e. the patterns of Figure 4, which are stylized as pattern 1 in Figure 5.

Furthermore, we found variation in the position of the politicians in the political cen-
tre: they are treated just as adversarially as their right-wing colleagues in six contexts.
This is pattern 2 in Figure 5. In one context, they are treated in a more adversarial manner
than the right-wing politicians. See pattern 3 in Figure 5. Moreover, in one context, they
are treated less adversarially than both left-wing and right-wing politicians, as visualized
in pattern 4. However, the patterns 1 to 4 in Figure 5 are all patterns of bias favouring
left-wing over right-wing politicians. An equal treatment as visualized in pattern 5 is
found twice: in the persistence of the interviewers when they addressed MPs and in the
persistence when the preceding turn of the politician was direct. We conclude that, in
nearly all (24 out of 26) contexts investigated, left-wing politicians are approached with
significantly less persistence, opposition and assertiveness than right-wing politicians.

The study of the factors that might have offered an alternative explanation for the
political bias found did not result in an alternative explanation (for more details, see
Varwijk, 2008: 40–8). Some had an effect on the adversarialness of the questions, but
not on the bias in the use of these questions. More generally, the conclusion of this
study is that interviewers are partial in shaping the way in which politicians can present

themselves. Left-wing politicians are approached less adversarially than politicians in the political centre and right-wing politicians.

Discussion

The aim of our study was a two-fold one. On the one hand, the study aimed to contribute to the development of a measurement instrument of adversarial questioning in TV interviews. On the other hand, the aim was to provide a contribution to the discussion on the partiality of the Dutch media.

The measurement instrument of adversarial question design

QAS proved to be a manageable instrument for the analysis of adversarial question design. It proved possible to apply it in a reliable way (see Data and method, earlier), while its validity is underpinned in the previous research of the scholars who developed it (Clayman et al., 2007: 27, 32).

In this study, we expanded QAS with a sixth aspect of adversarial question design. The aim of this expansion was to reach a better fit of this instrument, which until now had been applied to press conferences only, with the specific context of the TV interview. Nearly half of the questions (48.8 percent) showed a form of persistent question design, which proves the relevance of this expansion to the analysis of TV interviews. Moreover, a post-hoc analysis of the relationships between the various aspects of adversarial question design showed that persistence has a low correlation with the other aspects (varying from .01 with accountability to .16 with opposition). The analysis of persistence has completed the picture of the interviewer bias, and it represents a different aspect of the overarching notion of 'adversarialness'. However, the reliability of the coding was not optimal and could be improved (see note 4).

Apart from exploring possible expansions, it is also important to reflect on the possibility that the instrument might be too extended. The aspect of *directness* in particular might not fit into it. More specifically, this aspect distinguished itself from the other aspects of QAS in that one politician received a remarkably different treatment from the other 11: Prime Minister Balkenende was approached significantly more often indirectly. On the one hand, this preferential treatment is in accordance with politeness theory (Brown and Levinson, 1987), which regards indirectness as being related to perceptions of the power difference between speaker and addressee. On the other hand, it is inconsistent with QAS, which sees indirectness as an aspect of the construct of 'adversarialness'.

Political bias of the media

Our study showed political bias that was not related to, and thus could not be explained by, one of the many contextual factors in the design of the study. When the factors studied cannot clarify the interviewer bias, where does it come from? Were there factors that we neglected?

We paid a great deal of attention to the answering behaviour of the interviewee, but possibly not enough to the *truth value* and *quality* of the answers. Suppose left-wing

politicians are right more often than right-wing ones and their answers are qualitatively better. If this supposition is true, it is more than reasonable that the interviewers should show political bias. However, we have not investigated the truth values of the statements and the quality of the answers, because we were afraid to stir up a hornet's nest. But on second thoughts, this explanation does not have to be dismissed as 'impossible to investigate'. It is possible to carry out a qualitative and intensive follow-up study of the transcripts and analyse so-called 'minimally contrasting pairs' (Brown and Gilman, 1989): sequences of utterances on comparable issues with comparable relationships to reality and truth, but differing with respect to the political orientation of the interviewee. Although such an analysis might not explain the bias that we found, it could offer additional insight into the precise way it works. That by itself would be a gain.

Finally, we would like to say something about the generalizability of the outcome: the results of this study show that an important political platform, which is considered to be a backbone of public broadcasting in the Netherlands (see Data and method, earlier), was not impartial in the run-up to the parliamentary elections of 2006. However, the late-night talk show *Pauw & Witteman* was not the only platform where politicians presented themselves to the public. This study is a case study whose results cannot be generalized to other TV programmes, radio or newspaper interviews, or media in general. In that context, it is interesting to take a look at the mission of Dutch Public Broadcasting, which states in its first sentence that 'Dutch Public Broadcasting belongs to everyone and is aimed at everyone, everywhere and always' (Missie en Strategie [Mission and Strategy], no date). According to University of Amsterdam researcher Scholten (in Wind, 2007), the idea is that 'the differing broadcast associations may be biased, but it is a task for them together to present sufficient multiformity'. From this perspective, our finding that Pauw and Witteman are left-wing is noteworthy, but there is no cause for concern if it is counterbalanced by right-wing platforms. However, insight is lacking here. What is needed now is more research into different interviewers, programmes, broadcasting systems, stations and organizations, and other forms of media. Only then will it be possible to make generalizing statements about the political bias of Dutch media and continue the current debate on a more empirical note.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. 'Neutralism' is distinguished from 'neutrality' in the professional literature (Clayman and Heritage, 2002a). The questions in media interviews cannot meet the norm of 'neutrality' in an absolute sense: the selection of topics and contexts is not neutral, questions unavoidably

contain presuppositions that are problematic for the interviewee to a lesser or higher degree, and questions are formulated in such a way that they create a specific expectancy of the answer.

2. NPO as well as the embedded VARA/NPS work within the legal framework of the Dutch Mediawet (i.e. Media Law), which defines it as the task of public broadcasting to offer a multiform range of programmes and to present a picture of society and its social, cultural and religious views in a *balanced* way (Mediawet, 2010: article 13). We did not find any indication that the normative framework of TV programmes in the Netherlands gets more relaxed as one moves into late-night shows, nor did we find stricter rules and regulations during the run-up to an election.

3. These figures were provided by 'KLO Informatie en Advies'. In addition, 5.8 percent of the viewers of the *Pauw & Witteman* show are younger than 30 years old, 26.9 percent are aged between 30 and 50, 52.8 percent are between 50 and 70 years old, and 14.5 percent are 70 or older. With respect to the political orientation of the viewers (i.e. their voting behaviour in the preceding parliamentary elections of 2003): 12.9 percent voted for the left-wing SP, 27.5 percent voted PvdA (the position of this party in the Dutch political landscape is clarified in Figure 2), 16.2 percent voted for the party in the political centre CDA, 7.6 voted for right-wing VVD, and the remaining category of 35.8 percent includes the voters for the other parties, the viewers without the right to vote, and the viewers whose political orientation is unknown.

4. The reliability of the coding of persistence with a value of .56 is not optimal. The kappa values of the underlying indicators 'repeating the question', 'commenting on evasive action of the politician' and 'interruption' were .47, .47 and .66 respectively. These reliabilities could be improved by defining the indicators in a more formal way and providing more specific guidelines.

5. Although the technique used in our analysis of the contextual factors looks different from what others did (Clayman et al., 2007), the difference is superficial: the binary logistic regressions led to the same conclusion that logit would have produced.

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Transcription conventions (after Montgomery, 2007)

(<)	pause of a second or less
(only partly intelligible)	uncertain transcription
((clarification))	clarification, usually contextual information
[	beginning of overlapping stretch of speech
=	introduces latched turn
→	indicates line which is the focus of comment or discussion

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