

# Beyond Sex and Saxophones: Interviewing Practices and Political Substance on Televised Talk Shows

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## Abstract

*The goal of this paper is to assess the contribution of infotainment and entertainment television talk shows by comparing political interviews on these TV shows with current affairs programs. Few political scientists have examined political interviews, in general, and political interviews on entertainment outlets, in particular. Moreover, these studies are often focused on the sorts of topic participants talk about in such programs. On the basis of literature developed by scholars in sociolinguistics and journalism, we expand the scope of our study to the assessment of questions asked by the interviewers and answers provided by the politicians. We perform a quantitative content analysis of political interviews to compare the behavior of these speakers on infotainment and entertainment programs with those on current affairs programs. Our results show that hosts on infotainment programs are no less rigorous than their counterparts on information programs, especially when the interview is centered on policy issues. We conclude that scholars interested in these questions should turn to studies in sociolinguistics and journalism to build a relevant analytical frame.*

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Television programs that blend information with entertainment have become a prominent feature of the media environment since the 1990's. This has affected the way politics is talked about on television. Traditional newscasts and current affairs programs are no longer the only place where political issues are discussed and politicians can be heard. As Baum (2005) points out, politicians "hit the talk show circuit" as broadcasters schedule more infotainment programs. Thus, politicians hope to reach a wider audience by highlighting some parts of their lives ordinarily neglected by the traditional media outlets. Presidential candidate Bill Clinton

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played the saxophone on *Arsenio Hall* in 1992. Member of European Parliament Michel Rocard was asked Thierry Ardisson's famous question on the French talk show *Tout le monde en parle*: "Is oral sex infidelity?" ("*Sucer, c'est tromper?*") in 2001. Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin bought plastic shrink-wrap kits for the windows of his house with the host of the *Rick Mercer Report* in 2005.

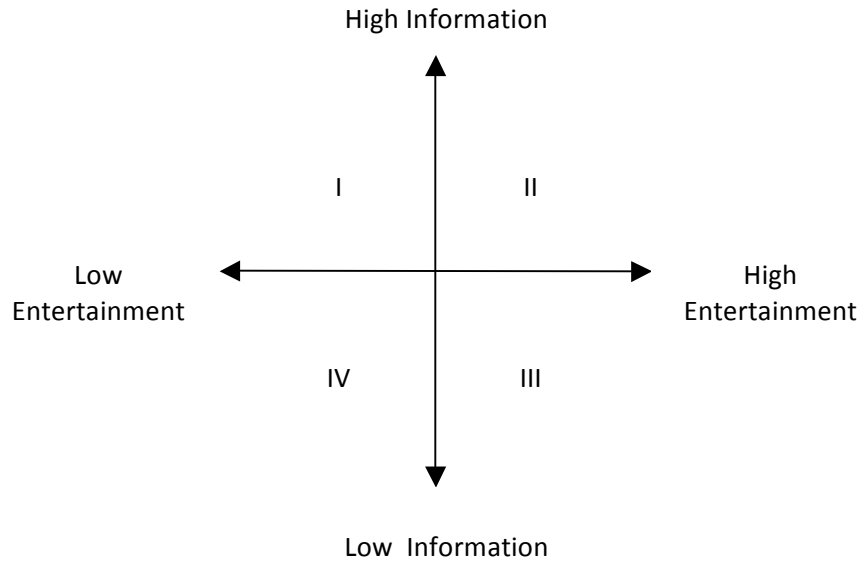
McGraw and Holbrook define infotainment as "the blending of entertainment and news programming content and styles" (2003: 399). Following studies of Graber (1994) and Brants and Neijens (1998), we specify which components of content and styles are information or entertainment as follows. On one side, the content of information programs provides answers to the traditional journalistic questions about real-world events: who, what, where, when, why, and how. The why and how questions illustrate causes, developments and consequences of a given problem. The style of such programs is characterized by the dominant role of journalists in content presentation, a serious tone, and an "objective" approach. On the other side, the entertainment programs feature dramatic content embedded in human interactions (such as love, friendliness, or violence) and emotional scenes. The style is distinguished by the prevailing role of celebrities, an informal tone, an empathetic approach, and various devices designed to create an amusing atmosphere (music, active audience in studio, etc.).

Information and entertainment are not mutually exclusive concepts. A message that is informative can also be entertaining just as a program that is principally designed to be entertaining might also be informative. We therefore believe that information and entertainment are distinct but compatible dimensions of any media message. Following common classification rules, objects to be classified must be distinguished one criterion at a time (Cohen and Nagel 1934). In this case, each media program should be classified twice: first to determine if it is an informative program; and second to determine if it is a program that is designed to be entertaining. This produces a two-dimension conceptualization of infotainment, as Figure 1 illustrates.

The goal of this paper is to assess the contribution of infotainment (quadrant II) and entertainment (quadrant III) television programs by comparing political interviews on these types of TV show with traditional information programs (quadrant I). We focus more specifically on interviewing practices and political substance of such media contents. How rigorous are the interviewers in these sorts of program? Are journalists more rigorous than interviewers on infotainment and entertainment programs? Do these people behave in different ways according to the kind of topic they talk about?

This paper begins with a brief review of existing analyses concerning interviews with politicians on entertainment programs. Next, we introduce a theoretical framework and a set of hypotheses drawn from political science, journalism, and sociolinguistics. We argue that interviewers' professional interests vary according to the sort of TV show they host and that these interests affect their interviewing style. Our hypotheses are tested using a content analysis of interviews with politicians on information, infotainment and entertainment shows broadcast on most watched French-language television networks in Canada.

Figure 1 - Two Dimensions of Infotainment



## Literature Review

Political scientists have devoted considerable attention to traditional television programs, especially news programs, political debates and advertisements. A smaller number of scholars believe that infotainment programs are also a valuable source of political information. Regarding American talk shows like those hosted by Oprah Winfrey, David Letterman and Larry King, Holbert wrote:

These traditional entertainment-based outlets have become part of the public debate, and the particular episodes containing politicians as guests are dominated by explicit discussions of politics, public policy, and the personal attributes required of a leader (2005: 447).

However, Holbert only provides anecdotal evidence to support his claim. He is not alone: despite a growing interest for infotainment, empirical analyses in this literature are rare. Fortunately, there are some exceptions. Matthew Baum (2005), a leading scholar of “soft news” programs, studied the 2000 presidential campaign. He compared 10 interviews with political candidates appearing on entertainment talk shows (including *Oprah Winfrey*, *Jay Leno*, *David Letterman*, etc.) with 22 interviews of candidates appearing on current affairs programs (including *Meet the Press*, *This Week*, *Jim Lehrer News Hour*). He counted the number of mentions of campaign issues (“issue mentions”) and the number of comparisons of the candidates’ issue positions (“issue cues”). His results show that presidential candidates talked about political issues on both kinds of program, but discussed issues less frequently on entertainment talk shows. There was, on average, 0.23 “issue mentions” per minute on infotainment programs and 0.74 on current affairs programs. In the same way, “issue cues”

occurred more often on information programs (1.78 per minute, on average) and less often on entertainment programs (0.65 per minute).

Baum's study does not compare the frequency of "issue mentions" and "issue cues" with other types of statement. By contrast, in a study of the 1992 presidential campaign, Marion Just *et al.* (1996) distinguish questions asked about political issues and those regarding candidate personalities and life experiences, from questions about the "election campaign". Their sample consists of 11 interviews from traditional information broadcasts (newscasts and current affairs programs), 20 interviews from infotainment programs (morning shows and magazine programs like *60 Minutes*) and four interviews from entertainment shows (late-night talk shows and MTV). In every type of outlet, at least half of the questions asked were about political issues. On information and infotainment programs, between 15 and 20 percent of the questions were about personality and life experiences, compared to 25 percent in entertainment talk shows. Approximately one third of the questions on information and infotainment programs concerned "the electoral campaign", compared to only 10 percent of the questions asked on entertainment programs. Just *et al.* conclude that "the interview programs gave citizens the opportunity that democratic critics have been hoping for – a format that people enjoy and that gives candidates plenty of time to talk about their positions on the issues" (1996: 143).

Érik Neveu (2003, 2005) strongly disagrees with this optimistic viewpoint. His study is based on 16 interviews with various politicians conducted outside the electoral context in 2000-01. These interviews were broadcast on three talk shows in France. Neveu claims that these shows edge out any "political discussion" about politicians' stances on issues. When participants talk about political events, it is through an emotional perspective: the joys of victory, the depression of defeat, the personal costs of taking on political challenges, etc. Neveu also notes that talk show hosts sometimes interrupt politicians when they start talking about substantive political issues.

Neveu's findings contradict the other studies we have reviewed. If he is right, there may be serious implications for democratic life and lead us to be "afraid of infotainment" (Brants 1998). However, Neveu's study suffers from several weaknesses. First, it illustrates a point of view more than it demonstrates an argument. As Brants (2003) points out, Neveu's qualitative approach means he unduly emphasizes some cases and does not develop the kind of comprehensive or systematic content analysis needed to catch or identify counter-examples. Second, his definition of a "political discussion" is unclear. Neveu recognizes that the avoidance of serious political discussion is more prevalent in some talk shows than in others but he nonetheless downplays this finding arguing that political discourse on these programs is made only of "useful politics/policies", or concerns "the politics of sleaze, scandal and corruption" (Neveu 2005: 327). Neveu never defines a clear criterion that might be used to determine the democratic relevance of a talk show.

In contrast to Neveu, Baum and Just *et al.* present quantitative, systematic, and comprehensive analyses of the interviews included in their studies. They also compare traditional information programs to infotainment and entertainment shows. But even these studies have significant limitations. Since Baum's content analysis does not compare "issue mentions" with other types of statement, it leaves the impression that issues are of paramount importance on current affairs programs. Yet, it is a well-known fact that these programs often draw attention to horserace and political strategies much more than substantive political issues (Farnsworth and Lichter 2003; Patterson 1980). Another limitation of these studies is that they only focus on

presidential candidates during election campaigns. The personalities and private lives of politicians may be more likely to be emphasized during election campaigns and this is especially likely to be the case with presidential candidates.

This study is designed to improve our assessment of political information available on infotainment and entertainment programs with a focus on interviewing practices. We do not dismiss the analysis of political life components discussed in political interviews: we link them with interviewing practices. We believe that concepts drawn from studies in journalism and sociolinguistics are useful to do that and deserve some attention from political scientists.

## **Theory and Hypotheses**

Interviews are supposed to be designed in various ways according to the type of TV program. Thus, Cohen (1987) makes a distinction between the interviews conducted mainly for information, like those on news and current affairs programs, and others performed mainly for entertainment, like interviews on the variety shows. He also recognizes that some interviews, as those on televised talk shows, may inform *and* entertain. Owing to these different functions, we assume that the strategic interests of interviewers are not the same on information, infotainment and entertainment programs. Hence, we hypothesize that the interviewers' discursive strategies are not the same on each type of program.

Along with the conceptualization of infotainment introduced above, we anticipate differences in content and style in interviews on information and entertainment shows. We expect that content on entertainment talk show is less centered on current affairs and more focused on the personalities and private lives of the interviewees. Work, leisure, family life and great hardships are often at the heart of the interviews conducted by entertainment talk show hosts (van Zoonen 2005). The style of the interviews has to be appropriate for that sort of topic. Thus, the interviewers on entertainment programs take away from the neutral tone and the question-answer format of current affairs; they are more empathetic and their interactions look more like mundane conversations (Clayman and Heritage 2002a). The famous British talk show host Michael Parkinson has described his main task as having to "create the illusion that the audience is eavesdropping on an intimate chat between host and guest(s)" (Greatbatch 1988: 424). A common technique used by interviewers to achieve this goal is to produce back-channel behaviors (i.e.: "yeah", "mhm") while interviewees answer. Furthermore, guests often hit the talk show circuit in order to promote their own projects (i.e.: a show, a movie, a book or a good cause). The interviewers thus help the interviewees with their promotional actions (Altheide 2002: 417).

The interview style should be different on information programs. The verbal behaviors of journalists and politicians in interviews have been studied by several scholars in sociolinguistics. Their works depict political interviews made on the news media as struggles between journalists searching for relevant information and politicians trying to communicate with citizens without losing face.<sup>2</sup> On one side, journalistic deference toward the politicians has declined as the adversarialness has increased over the last fifty years, at least in the U.S. (Clayman and Heritage 2002b; Clayman *et al.* 2006). Journalists take advantage of their influence to challenge politicians with questions that are intrinsically difficult to answer. On the other side, politicians use various strategies to face up to these challenges, or even to turn interviews to their own advantage (Elliott and Bull 1996). Such patterns are common to accountability interviews

conducted with public figures (heads of companies, office-holders in trades unions or professional associations, etc.) and are not exclusive to political interviews (Montgomery 2007).

One of these strategies for interviewees is to make evasive answers. For instance, an analysis of eight television interviews with party leaders during the 1987 British election campaign shows that Margaret Thatcher and Neil Kinnock did not respond to most of the questions they were asked (Bull and Mayer 1993). Bavelas *et al.* (1990) argue that such behavior does not mean politicians are ill-intentioned, but rather that interviews often place politicians in an “avoidance-avoidance conflict”, that is, where there is no way to reply without a negative consequence. Thus politicians are often interviewed on controversial issues which divide the electorate, they have to answer complex questions in a very short period of time, or they have to protect confidential information. Following Bull (1994), we use the term “non-replies” to refer to the absence of effective answer. Furthermore, it happens that some utterances can not be classified as replies or non-replies when the interviewee answers by implication (no providing an explicit answer but making his view clear enough to suggest what the answer is), replies to one part of the question but leaves another part unanswered, or is interrupted before the end of his answer. Such cases are designated “intermediate replies”. Following that, we deduce a first hypothesis:

H<sub>1</sub>: Interviewees produce more often intermediate replies and non-replies on information programs than on entertainment programs, infotainment programs being in a middle position.

When an interviewee does not reply, journalistic norms prescribe asking a follow-up question in order to get a responsive answer. Porter and Ferris (1988) state that journalists should persist until they get a direct response. Metzler (1997) also recommends repeating or rephrasing questions if the answers are not satisfying. Hence this second hypothesis:

H<sub>2</sub>: Following intermediate replies and non-replies, interviewers ask more often follow-up questions on information programs than on entertainment programs, infotainment programs being in a middle position.

In addition to the follow-up questions, textbooks written to train future journalists state that they must be prepared to ask some challenging questions. According to Sedorkin and McGregor (2002), journalists have to play the devil’s advocate and test interviewees’ claims. For instance, the interviewers may oppose a fact, or pose an argument, that interviewees would prefer to avoid. Asking challenging questions obviously requires considerable preparation because interviewers themselves may be challenged. Hence our third hypothesis:

H<sub>3</sub>: Interviewers ask more often challenging questions on information programs than on entertainment programs, infotainment programs being in a middle position.

## **Methodology**

These hypotheses are tested using a content analysis of 89 political interviews broadcast on three information (45 interviews), four infotainment (27 interviews) and three entertainment (17 interviews) programs aired on French-language television networks in Canada between April 1999 and December 2006. Without a Canadian databank similar to Lexis-Nexis in the U.S., we

have relied on many strategies to gather our sample of interviews. Since politicians are interviewed on a regular basis on information and infotainment programs, most shows belonging to these categories have been videotaped by the author for a given period and all political interviews within these broadcasts were analysed. However, rarer, intermittent appearances of politicians on other programs, especially entertainment talk shows, meant we had to use a convenience sample of interviews we were alerted to and were able to record. Finally, some interviews which had not been videotaped were downloaded from the broadcasters' websites. All interviews were conducted with elected politicians or political candidates.<sup>3</sup> Interviews coded and the sampling method for each program are listed in Appendix.

The information programs are *Le Point*, *Les Coulisses du pouvoir*, and *Larocque/Auger*. They were the main current affairs programs which featured political interviews on a regular basis (outside the all-news channels) when we conducted our study. *Le Point* was broadcast each night immediately after *Le Téléjournal*, the national newscast on Radio-Canada. It featured long reports and interviews about the main news stories. *Les Coulisses du pouvoir* and *Larocque/Auger* were political shows aired each Sunday on Radio-Canada and on TVA, the most important French-language private network in Canada. All these programs were hosted by journalists.

The set of infotainment programs is more heterogeneous. It includes the Canadian version of *Tout le monde en parle* and *Christiane Charette en direct*, which were talk shows conducted by celebrities who interviewed guests from various backgrounds (such as other celebrities, athletes, politicians, journalists, writers, scholars, and "ordinary" people who had experienced dramatic events) on a wide range of topics, in front of an in-studio audience, and aired on Radio-Canada. *Les Francs-tireurs* was a social magazine featuring long reports and interviews on news or out of the ordinary topics. It was produced by two journalists, one of whom was affiliated with a cultural weekly newspaper. The tone of the program was clearly irreverent. *Il va y avoir du sport* exhibited the most complex combination of information and entertainment characteristics. Each week, two debates were held on various political, social or cultural topics in a setting inspired by sports theatre. At the midpoint of the show (the "intermission"), two humorists reviewed the news of the week and, following the second debate, a stand-up comic recapped the viewpoints with an editorial comment. The in-studio audience decided which debater to declare the winner. One guest was interviewed at the beginning of the program (that interview is the segment analyzed in our study) and he or she reacted to the debates at the end. *Les Francs-tireurs* and *Il va y avoir du sport* were broadcast on Télé-Québec, the provincial public television.

The remaining programs are clearly in the entertainment category. *Bons baisers de France*, *Le Grand blond avec un show surnois* and *Le Poing J* were late-night talk shows hosted by celebrities and recorded in front of an audience. *Bons baisers de France* was aired on Radio-Canada during summer months. The other shows were broadcast on TVA during regular seasons. Most of the guests on these programs were celebrities, such as actors, artists or musicians, but politicians were also interviewed from time to time.

All interviews were conducted outside the particular context of an electoral campaign. This dataset is larger than those used in the studies we have reviewed and it consists of interviews with leaders and other politicians as well. The mean durations of these interviews were: 8

minutes on information programs; 17 minutes on infotainment programs; and 9 minutes on entertainment talk shows.

Since the interview is basically “a course of interaction to which the participants contribute on a turn-by-turn basis” (Clayman and Heritage 2002a: 13), our unit of analysis is a speaking turn. In the field of conversation analysis, a turn is defined as a verbal contribution from a given speaker at a given time in a course of interaction, made unbrokenly and delimited by two speaker-switches (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1998: 159). We take into consideration each turn as soon as the interview begins, including those made by other participants who are on stage during the interview, as well as turns which are interruptions, even when these interruptions fail to change the course of the conversation.<sup>4</sup> We exclude introductory monologues addressed explicitly to the audience, as well as back-channel behaviors (i.e.: “yeah”, “mhm”). When the guest is involved in another segment of a program (for instance, a politician who makes a live performance), the analysis is restricted to the interview portion. When a politician stays on stage during subsequent interviews conducted with other guests, his additional turns are excluded.

We timed and recorded a total of 5242 turns from the 89 interviews included in our dataset. The average length of a turn between categories of TV programs was almost equal, varying only from 10 to 12 seconds. Since interviews are basically made of answers from interviewees to questions asked by interviewers, it is not surprising to note that politicians’ turns are longer than that. To be more precise, politicians’ answers were, on average, 17 seconds in duration on information programs, 16 seconds on infotainment programs, and 13 seconds on entertainment talk-shows.

Questions and answers have been thoroughly analysed. Firstly, we have judged the responsiveness of politicians’ answers. Following Bull’s (1994) detailed conceptual framework, we have distinguished replies, intermediate replies, and non-replies. This classification is closely dependent on the questions asked. For instance, answers to yes/no or wh- questions need to be very specific to be considered as replies. By contrast, because they are less precise, some declarative questions that do not have an interrogative form (i.e.: “the economy will be a major issue in this campaign”) provide interviewees more room to respond with a substantive answer.

Secondly, each time a politician did not provide a responsive reply, we have noted whether the interviewer asked a follow-up question. Such questions are linked to a main question previously asked and are designed to force the interviewee to produce a responsive answer. For instance, as the Parti québécois head, Bernard Landry, was challenged by several people in 2005, the host France Beaudoin asked to the Bloc leader, Gilles Duceppe:

F. Beaudoin: Your sentences often begin with: “I am going to listen the Quebeckers.” Will you listen the Quebeckers whether they ask you to come in provincial politics?

G. Duceppe: Me, I have a work to do in Ottawa. You know, this work is very important. [...]

F. Beaudoin: But I do not in any way depreciate your work there. I just ask: whether people ask you to come in provincial politics, will you listen?



G. Duceppe: Well, I answer to people that I have a work to do there. I am entirely confident in Bernard Landry . [...]

F. Beaudoin: You do not say “no” to provincial politics for ever, do you?

(*Bons baisers de France*, May 25, 2005)<sup>5</sup>

Thirdly, we evaluate all interviewers' questions in order to determine whether they were challenging ones. The purpose of a challenge question is to test the claims of interviewees by opposing a fact or an argument he would prefer to avoid. Guy A. Lepage, host of *Tout le monde en parle* talk show, asked a challenge question to the Liberal MP Denis Coderre in January 2006, few days after the Conservative Party had won a minority government. In this interview, Coderre explained how worried he was about Stephen Harper's stands on several issues like the Canada-U.S. relationships, the same-sex marriage, the protection of minority rights, and so on. Lepage asked:

G.A. Lepage: Yes, but nonetheless, you have some common views with him. In 1997, you embraced the pro-life movement, promising that once elected, you were going to militate in favour of the abortion exclusion from the services insured by the public health insurance plan. Are you a disguised Conservative?

(*Tout le monde en parle*, January 26, 2006)

To go deeper into the analysis of these questions and answers, each turn has been classified according to the topic discussed along four categories. The first deals with policy issues, like the economy, health care, education, social programs, environment, foreign affairs, and so on. Interviewers and interviewees may talk about these issues to describe a situation, to highlight where the politician or his party stands on them, or to examine government actions. We assume that it is a fundamental function of the news media to inform citizens about the positions of politicians and parties on a wide range of relevant issues.

The second category includes all turns about political strategies and the state of the competition between political actors (i.e. 'horserace' questions). On this point, the professional interests of interviewers on information and entertainment programs are different. Journalists believe that they must play the role of a watchdog. Though they must maintain strategic relationships with politicians (Charron 1994), journalists have also to stay sceptical of the political discourse and show independence in front of their audience. Consequently, they are reluctant to let the politicians speaking too freely. For journalists, asking questions about electoral races and strategies is an effective way to control the agenda during an interview. On the one hand, it limits a politician's opportunity to expose his "propaganda" as he may do if asked about the issues. On the other hand, it is easier to ask questions about the electoral race and campaign strategies rather than public policies since most political journalists are first and foremost specialists of the political game. Thus, the prevalence of the "game schema" in political coverage is not surprising (for example, see: Andersen 2000; Farnsworth and Lichter 2003; Lawrence 2000; Mendelsohn 1993; Patterson 1980). Turns which frame the issues as component of actors' strategic motives in the political game are included in this category. This question asked by Michel C. Auger to the Québec Minister of Finance, Michel Audet, is an example:

M.C. Auger: Mr. Audet, we have felt that the political goal of the budget – there is an economic goal but there is also a political goal – was to distract attention from the 1-billion-per-year tax income cut promised by the Liberal Party, which has never happened, and that to achieve this, now, there is a new fund to reimburse the debt.

(Larocque/Auger, March 26, 2006)

Such stress on horserace and campaign strategies should not appear on entertainment outlets. This is exactly what Baum qualifies as “unappealing – either too complex or too arcane – to individuals who are not intrinsically interested in politics” (2002: 94). While a significant number of viewers who watch current affairs programs are political junkies, talk shows audience tend to be more heterogeneous and less concerned with political strategies.

The third category comprises topics related to politicians’ personalities and private lives. In a competitive market, entertainment talk shows may increase their prestige and the size of their audience by interviewing high-profile guests. Many politicians satisfy to this criterion. According to Baum (2005), episodes of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* that featured interviews with presidential candidates during the 2000 campaign reached an audience above the average recorded by this program. By highlighting politicians’ personal lives and qualities, talk shows provide the entertainment content the audience is looking for. The French host Marc-Olivier Fogiel explains that, when he interviews politicians, he mainly wants “to show who they are, what their genuine motivations are and what they are made of” (Anizon 2002: 60).<sup>6</sup> This category includes statements about politicians’ skills, qualities, faults, their families, leisure activities, personal tastes, and hardships. We also include all utterances centered on individuals in political life, like a politician’s performance or feeling. An interviewer asking how painful it is for a minister to deal with a controversial issue would, for example, be classified in this category since the question is about emotions rather than any specific political issue.

Finally, a residual category includes turns that cannot be placed in the previous categories: opening and closing statements, metacommunication statements, and all turns that are too short to be substantive (often because the speaker is interrupted or fails to interrupt the person he is speaking to).

## Results

We begin the analysis with answers provided by the politicians. Data displayed in the first column of Table 1 partly support our first hypothesis, which predicts that interviewees produce more often intermediate replies and non-replies on information than on entertainment programs, infotainment ones being in a middle position. Even though politicians gave substantive answers to most questions, intermediate and non-replies were common. Among information programs, 36 percent of politicians’ answers were not replies. It seems more difficult for politicians to provide replies on political shows: *Les Coulisses du pouvoir* and *Larocque/Auger* feature the highest percentages of intermediate and non-replies (about 40 percent). Unresponsive answers were less common on infotainment shows (25 percent) and entertainment programs (24 percent). These differences between information and other kinds of program are statistically significant; however, the difference between infotainment and entertainment outlets is not. For this component of interviewing practices, infotainment

programs are different than information ones, but not in a middle position since they are similar to the entertainment talk shows.

**Table 1 - Distribution of Answers and Questions in Political Interviews**

	Intermediate and Non-replies	Follow-up Questions	Challenge Questions
<b>A. Information Programs</b>			
Le Point	22.2	44.1	10.9
Les Coulisses du pouvoir	41.8	45.9	17.8
Larocque/Auger	39.4	37.7	15.3
<b>Subtotal A</b>	<b>36.3</b>	<b>40.4</b>	<b>14.9</b>
<b>B. Infotainment Programs</b>			
Tout le monde en parle	24.7	39.6	10.2
Les Francs-tireurs	26.6	63.0	18.6
Il va y avoir du sport	23.2	53.8	8.3
Christiane Charette en direct	21.5	53.8	11.4
<b>Subtotal B</b>	<b>24.5</b>	<b>48.8</b>	<b>12.3</b>
<b>C. Entertainment Programs</b>			
Bons baisers de France	28.1	62.5	5.3
Le Grand blond	24.7	38.1	4.8
Le Poing J	23.0	45.9	3.7
<b>Subtotal C</b>	<b>24.4</b>	<b>47.3</b>	<b>4.3</b>
<b>Statistical Significance of Differences</b>			
Information vs Infotainment	.000	.061	.150
Information vs Entertainment	.000	.818	.000
Infotainment vs Entertainment	.973	.290	.000

Notes: Cell entries are percentages. Statistical significance of differences are two-tailed Pearson chi-square tests.

Along the same lines, hypothesis 2 predicts that following intermediate replies and non-replies, interviewers ask more often follow-up questions on information programs than on entertainment talk shows, infotainment programs being in a middle position. The second column of Table 1 indicates, for each program, the percentage of intermediate and non-replies which were followed by such questions. The results do not support our second hypothesis or the conventional wisdom that suggests journalists perform better than talk show hosts when politicians are reluctant to provide a responsive answer. The former did not ask follow-up questions more often than the latter. On the contrary, journalists asked follow-up questions

only 40 percent of the time when politicians gave intermediate replies and non-replies, in comparison with nearly 50 percent of the time on infotainment and entertainment programs. *Larocque/Auger*, a political show which featured hot-seat-style interviews, even features the lowest score among all TV programs in our sample.

The other type of question we focus on is “the challenge”. Journalists must play the devil’s advocate, test interviewees’ claims, and challenge facts and arguments the politicians would prefer to avoid. Our third hypothesis predicts that challenge questions are asked more often on information and, to a lesser extent, on infotainment programs, than on entertainment shows. The last column of Table 1 shows data that partially support this hypothesis. Although the frequency of challenge questions is higher on some infotainment shows than on some of the information programs, there is an overall pattern. Fifteen percent of the 747 questions counted on information programs were challenge questions. This figure slid down to 12 percent for infotainment outlets and fell to only 4 percent for entertainment talk shows. The difference between information and infotainment programs is not statistically significant, but it is between these two kinds of program and entertainment talk shows.

It may be argued that such interviewing practices are not equally important, from a democratic viewpoint, across all sorts of topic discussed with politicians. We can believe that they matter more when the politicians are asked about “serious” topics – the policy issues – than when they are asked about their personal lives. With this perspective in mind, we consider the topics discussed in political interviews by all participants. Unsurprisingly, what people talk about is closely related to the kind of television show where they appear. For each program, Table 2 breaks down turns into each category of topics.

Among information programs, 42 percent of the turns were devoted to the issues. This is more than on infotainment shows (33 percent), and much more than on entertainment outlets (8 percent). All these differences are statistically significant. Policy issues took up more speaking time on each type of program: 61 percent, 45 percent, and 15 percent respectively. We also note major variations within each category. For instance, the current affairs program *Le Point* emphasized policy issues more than *Larocque/Auger*. The infotainment talk show *Tout le monde en parle* also focused more on policies (42 percent of turns, 58 percent of speaking time) than all other infotainment and entertainment programs. We have to stress that some politicians are sometimes invited in such talk shows to chat about a specific policy area that they are responsible for or because they are particularly involved in a specific policy. For instance, the Bloc québécois MP Maria Mourani, a criminologist who wrote a book on street gangs, was invited on *Tout le monde en parle* first and foremost because of her expertise with this issue.

The information programs, taken together, focused more than others on horserace topics and campaign strategies. On programs devoted to politics aired on Sunday (*Les Coulisses du pouvoir* and *Larocque/Auger*) about one quarter of the turns emphasized these topics. We may assume that these shows attract political junkies who are genuinely interested in the “political game”. *Le Point*, which covered a broader set of topics related to current affairs, spent more time talking about the issues and less about horserace topics and campaign strategies. Politicians were generally invited to this program in order to discuss specific policies, whereas those interviewed on other political shows were more often asked about politics in general. Horserace topics and strategies were discussed significantly more often on information than on infotainment programs where they represented only 14 percent of the turns. Entertainment programs placed

even less importance on horserace topics and campaign strategies than the infotainment programs did, but the 2-percentage-point difference is not statistically significant. Thus, our results do support the claim that horserace topics and campaign strategies are more often discussed on information programs, especially, to be more precise, on political shows.

**Table 2 - Distribution of Topics Discussed in Political Interviews**

	Policy issues	Horserace / strategies	Personalities / private lives	Others	Number of turns
<b>A. Information Programs</b>					
Le Point	63.0	12.2	7.4	17.3	376
Les Coulisses du pouvoir	42.2	26.0	8.0	23.9	389
Larocque/Auger	37.1	21.6	22.9	18.3	1164
<b>Subtotal A</b>	<b>42.2</b>	<b>20.7</b>	<b>16.9</b>	<b>19.2</b>	<b>1929</b>
<b>B. Infotainment Programs</b>					
Tout le monde en parle	42.4	11.1	26.7	19.8	1291
Les Francs-tireurs	25.2	21.2	35.1	18.5	552
Il va y avoir du sport	29.4	11.8	45.9	12.9	255
Christiane Charette en direct	13.5	11.4	59.8	15.3	333
<b>Subtotal B</b>	<b>33.2</b>	<b>13.5</b>	<b>35.2</b>	<b>18.1</b>	<b>2431</b>
<b>C. Entertainment Programs</b>					
Bons baisers de France	16.0	25.0	39.1	19.9	156
Le Grand blond	9.2	10.0	53.9	26.9	271
Le Poing J	4.2	7.7	68.8	19.3	455
<b>Subtotal C</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>11.5</b>	<b>59.0</b>	<b>21.8</b>	<b>882</b>
<b>Statistical Significance of Differences</b>					
Information vs Infotainment	.000	.000	.000	.358	
Information vs Entertainment	.000	.000	.000	.119	
Infotainment vs Entertainment	.000	.122	.000	.019	

Notes: Cell entries are percentages. Statistical significance of differences are two-tailed Pearson chi-square tests.

Although some infotainment shows devoted more time to chatting about the personalities and private lives of their guests than some entertainment programs did, the overall pattern is pretty clear. Seventeen percent of the total number of turns were devoted to this sort of topic on information programs, 35 percent on infotainment programs and 59 percent on entertainment programs. Within the latter category, some interviews were almost completely devoted to personalities and private lives. For example, when talking with federal MP Pierrette Venne of the Bloc québécois on *Le Poing J*, the host Julie Snyder focused almost exclusively on the fact

that Venne had worked as a waitress in a Playboy Club when she was a student. The host was even dressed as a Playboy Bunny! During this entertaining interview, 89 percent of the turns were included in the personalities and private lives category.

Are rates of intermediate and non-replies, follow-up questions, and challenge questions impacted by the sort of topic discussed? Table 3 allows us to take a closer look to the distribution of answers and questions in political interviews on information and infotainment programs.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 3 - Distribution of Answers and Questions by Topics**

	Policy issues	Horserace / strategies	Personalities / private lives
<b>A. Intermediate Replies and Non-replies</b>			
Information Programs	34.0 (412)	44.0 (175)	35.1 (148)
Infotainment Programs	26.5 (377)	27.7 (141)	21.5 (340)
Statistical Significance of Differences	.023	.003	.001
<b>B. Follow-up Questions</b>			
Information Programs	49.3 (140)	26.0 (77)	36.5 (52)
Infotainment Programs	52.0 (100)	56.4 (39)	39.7 (73)
Statistical Significance of Differences	.678	.001	.718
<b>C. Challenge Questions</b>			
Information Programs	21.0 (385)	14.2 (204)	0.7 (151)
Infotainment Programs	17.7 (288)	11.5 (131)	8.4 (322)
Statistical Significance of Differences	.282	.465	.001

Notes: Cell entries are percentages and corresponding denominators are in parentheses. Statistical significance of differences are two-tailed Pearson chi-square tests.

Most of these results strengthen findings shown in Table 1. Firstly, politicians provide intermediate replies and non-replies more often on information than on infotainment programs, whatever topic participants talk about. For instance, interviewees have not replied to 34 percent of the 412 questions asked about the issues on information programs, in comparison with 27 percent of the 377 questions asked on the same sort of topic on infotainment shows. For all three kinds of topic, these differences are statistically significant. We note that it is mainly about the horserace and strategic considerations that politicians are more reluctant to provide full replies. Secondly, follow-up questions are not more common on information than on infotainment programs, whatever topic intermediate and non-replies were about. Horserace/strategies is the only type of topic featuring a statistically significant difference between both kinds of program and the advantage is given to the infotainment shows: follow-up questions came after 56 percent of the 39 intermediate and non-replies whereas corresponding figure was only 26 percent on information programs. Thirdly, although there is no significant difference between the frequency of challenge questions on information and infotainment programs, these percentages are slightly higher for the former when the interview

focused on policy issues and horserace and strategies. The result in personalities/private lives category is different: challenge questions are more frequent on infotainment than on information programs. However, challenge questions about personality or private life remain rare on infotainment shows: only 8 percent of the 322 questions asked on this topic belonged to the challenge category. We note that interviewers in both kinds of program ask challenge questions more often when the discussion is about policy issues and, to a lesser extent, horserace and strategies.

## **Discussion**

Our analysis provides a deeper look into the content of political interviews on information, infotainment and entertainment programs than previous studies have offered. The findings have some implications for the assessment of political information provided on infotainment and entertainment programs, as well as for future research on these non-traditional forms of political communication.

Earlier content analyses conducted in the U.S. have shown that interviews with politicians on soft news emphasize topics related to personalities and private lives more than those on hard news, but nevertheless leave some room to talk about guests' positions on policy issues (Baum 2005; Just et al. 1996). Our data regarding the kinds of topic participants in political interviews talk about confirm such nuanced view. Thus, information programs are those where the most time is given to policy issues, entertainment programs devote the most time to politicians' personalities and private lives, and infotainment shows fall somewhere in between. But some of them also spend a lot of time talking about serious issues. At *Tout le monde en parle*, 42 percent of turns (and 58 percent of speaking time) belong to the policy issues category. Beyond sex and saxophones, there is a room for politics. Thus, these programs may be important sources of information about substantive policies.

However, what people talk about is not the whole story: the way they do is also important. Previous studies have not compared interviewing practices on information, infotainment and entertainment programs. We expected that various strategic interests of interviewers on these types of program, which explain the observed differences related to the topics discussed, would lead to different interviewing practices. More specifically, we hypothesized that journalists on information programs would ask follow-up and challenge questions more often than hosts on infotainment and entertainment talk shows. Our study indicates that the latter ask follow-up questions after intermediate replies and non-replies as often as journalists do on information programs. Though challenge questions are posed more often on information programs, hosts of infotainment shows regularly ask such questions, especially when policy issues are tackled.

These findings support an optimistic view of infotainment which contrasts with current criticisms, like those of Érik Neveu (2003, 2005) reported early. These programs allow citizens to get serious information about politics and there is no evidence that talk show hosts are less rigorous than interviewers on information programs. Thus, infotainment programs are a challenge for journalists, who have to be more rigorous in order to distinguish themselves from their "infotainers" counterparts. However, it is well-known that journalists are usually subject to one or several codes of ethics. They have to follow specific rules designed to ensure the quality of information transmitted to the citizens. The compliance of people involved into the production of infotainment programs with similar codes is, at best, unclear in most cases

(Bastien, forthcoming). This is an important point for the audience who needs to know how reliable such sources are.

Finally, we believe that scholars in political communication should consider bringing into their analyses concepts developed in other disciplines. Many studies in sociolinguistics highlight components of the material we work on. For example, interruption is another interview dynamic that should be analysed. Some scholars in sociolinguistics have argued that interruption is a demonstration of domination in unequal relations (i.e., see Ferguson 1977) and have already studied interruptions in political interviews (Bull and Mayer 1988; Lorda and Miche 1996). Since such interviews are often a struggle between participants to control the interaction, adding interruptions would be an interesting way to improve our assessment of the role of interviewers on information, infotainment, and entertainment programs.

Along with traditional information programs, infotainment and entertainment shows are a major component of the political communication process. It is therefore important to study their content and effects before, during, and after election campaigns. In the face of the controversies among media critics about this form of political communication, scholars are obliged to carefully assess the merits and limits of programs that blend information and entertainment. It is a huge task which must be continued.

## **Appendix**

List of interviews coded and sampling method for each program.

### **A. Information Programs**

*Le Point*. All eligible interviews broadcast from February to April 2006: Michael Fortier and Lawrence Cannon, Conservative [PC] ministers, 2006/02/06; Jean Charest, Québec Premier, 2006/02/16 and 2006/03/14; Philippe Couillard, Québec Liberal [Lib] minister, 2006/03/09; André Boisclair, Parti québécois [PQ] leader, 2006/03/14; Stéphane Dion, Lib MP, 2006/03/15; Michel Audet, Québec Lib minister 2006/03/23; Stephen Harper, Prime Minister, 2006/04/04; Bill Graham, Lib leader (interim), 2006/04/04; Michael Ignatieff, Lib leadership candidate 2006/04/07; Bob Rae, Lib leadership candidate, 2006/04/24.

*Les Coulisses du pouvoir*. All eligible interviews broadcast from October to December 2006: Lawrence Cannon, PC minister, 2006/10/15; Raymond Bachand, Québec Lib minister, 2006/10/22; Fernand Trahan, Mayor of Val d'Or, 2006/10/22, Gilles Ducespe, Bloc québécois [Bloc] leader, 2006/10/22 and 2006/11/26; André Boisclair, PQ leader, 2006/10/29; Stéphane Dion, Lib leadership candidate, 2006/11/05; Claude Béchar, Québec Lib minister, 2006/11/05; Benoît Pelletier, Québec Lib minister, 2006/11/12; Mario Dumont, Action démocratique du Québec [ADQ] leader, 2006/11/19; Line Beauchamp, Québec Lib minister, 2006/11/19; Michael Fortier, PC minister, 2006/12/03; Peter Julian and Bernard Bigras, New Democratic Party [NDP] and Bloc MPs, 2006/12/03; Stéphane Dion, Lib leader, 2006/12/03; Réal Ménard, Bloc MP, 2006/12/10; Michel Audet, Québec Lib minister, 2006/12/17.



*Larocque/Auger.* All eligible interviews broadcast from February to April 2006: André Boisclair, PQ leader, 2006/02/05; Stéphane Dion, Lib MP, 2006/02/05; Maxime Bernier, PC minister, 2006/02/12; Benoît Pelletier, Québec Lib minister, 2006/02/12; Philippe Couillard, Québec Lib minister, 2006/02/19; Jean-Pierre Charbonneau, PQ MP, 2006/02/19; François Legault, PQ MP, 2006/02/26 and 2006/03/26; Claude Béchar, Québec Lib minister, 2006/03/05 and 2006/04/23; Mario Dumont, ADQ leader, 2006/03/05; Monique Gagnon-Tremblay, Québec Lib minister, 2006/03/12; Jacques Dupuis, Québec Lib minister, 2006/03/19; Diane Lemieux, PQ MP, 2006/03/19; Michel Audet, Québec Lib minister, 2006/03/26; Thomas Mulcair, Québec Lib MP, 2006/04/02; Gilles Duceppe, Bloc leader, 2006/04/02; Michael Fortier, PC minister, 2006/04/09.

## **B. Infotainment Programs**

*Tout le monde en parle.* All eligible interviews broadcast from January 2005 to November 2006: Liza Frulla, Lib minister, 2005/01/23; Philippe Couillard, Québec Lib minister, 2005/03/27; Bernard Landry, PQ leader, 2005/04/17; Jean Charest, Québec Premier, 2005/09/11; André Boisclair, PQ leadership candidate, 2005/09/18; Andrée Boucher, Mayor of Québec City, 2005/11/13; Pauline Marois, PQ MP, 2005/11/20; Denis Coderre, Liberal MP, 2006/01/29; Jacques Dupuis, Québec Lib minister, 2006/09/17; Maria Mourani, Bloc MP, 2006/10/01; Michael Ignatieff, Lib leadership candidate, 2006/10/08; Claude Béchar, Québec Lib minister, 2006/11/05; Jean-Marc Fournier, Québec Lib minister, 2006/11/26.

*Les Francs-tireurs.* All eligible interviews broadcast from January 2005 to November 2006: Philippe Couillard, Québec Lib minister, 2005/01/19; Bernard Landry, PQ leader, 2005/03/09; André Boisclair, PQ leadership candidate, 2005/09/21; Sam Sullivan, Mayor of Vancouver, 2006/02/22; Stéphane Dion, Lib leadership candidate, 2006/09/27.

*Il va y avoir du sport.* All eligible interviews broadcast from January 2005 to November 2006: Jean-Paul L'Allier, Mayor of Québec City, 2005/01/28; Monique Jérôme-Forget, Québec Lib minister 2005/09/23; Svend Robinson, NDP MP, 2005/11/18; Andrée Boucher, Mayor of Québec City, 2006/02/17; Pierre Curzi, PQ candidate, 2006/10/13; Stéphane Dion, Lib leadership candidate, 2006/11/03.

*Christiane Charette en direct.* Convenience sample: François Legault, PQ minister, 2000/03/15; Jean Charest, Québec Lib leader, 2000/03/22; Bernard Landry, Québec Premier, 2001/02/28.

## **C. Entertainment Programs**

*Bons baisers de France.* Convenience sample: Gilles Duceppe, Bloc leader, 2005/05/25; Stéphane Tremblay, PQ MP, 2005/12/28; André Boisclair, PQ leader, 2006/06/05; Jack Layton, NDP leader, 2006/08/21.

*Le Grand blond avec un show surnois.* Convenience sample: Mario Dumont, ADQ leader, 2001/03/07; Diane Lemieux, PQ minister, 2001/03/08; Louise Beaudoin, PQ minister, 2001/09/20; Jean Charest, Québec Lib leader, 2002/03/07; Louise Harel, President of the National Assembly of Québec, 2002/03/21.

*Le Poing J.* Convenience sample: Lucien Bouchard, Québec Premier, 1999/04/01 and 1999/10/04; Gilles Duceppe, Bloc leader, 1999/04/15; Pierrette Venne, Bloc MP, 1999/05/13;

Pierre Bourque, Mayor of Montréal, 2000/03/01; Agnès Maltais, PQ minister, 2000/03/23; Mario Dumont, ADQ leader, 2000/04/20; Jean Charest, Québec Lib leader, 2000/05/10.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>2</sup> This outlook on the dynamic during an interview is shared by the journalistic community. According to a review by Cohen (1987), controlling interviewer and interviewee interactions is one of the most widely discussed topics in professional manuals about television news interview.
- <sup>3</sup> This criterion excludes retired politicians and federal senators (who are appointed by the Canadian prime minister and not elected). However, our dataset includes interviews with people who have declared that they will run in an election or party leadership race, even if the interviews were broadcast before their campaign started.
- <sup>4</sup> For a comprehensive classification of interruptions, see Roger *et al.* (1988).
- <sup>5</sup> All citations from TV programs are author's translations.
- <sup>6</sup> Author's translation.
- <sup>7</sup> We exclude the entertainment programs owing to the small numbers of policy- and horserace-related answers (35 and 39), non-replies (12 and 16) and questions asked (20 and 45).

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