

# Obama in the No Spin Zone

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In the run-up to the 2008 American presidential election, the three Senators who were competing to replace outgoing President George W. Bush in the White House (John McCain, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton) each gave extended interviews to cable channel Fox News' nightly show *The O'Reilly Factor*. Billed as the 'No Spin Zone', this news programme and its eponymous host, Bill O'Reilly, pride themselves on cutting through the 'spin' of political communications machines, the 'blowiation' of politicians and the 'bias' of major newspapers and broadcast network news channels to reveal for viewers the 'truth' or the 'bottom line' with regard to current affairs. Because of his willingness to engage in tendentious, argumentative and sometimes confrontational discourse in the course of his interviews, O'Reilly is a controversial figure in contemporary American broadcast news. But despite his belligerent reputation, he has secured many high profile interviews for his show, including at least two major 'sit-downs' with President Barack Obama. The first of these, conducted during the campaign leading to Obama's success in the 2008 election, provides the data for this chapter.

*The O'Reilly Factor* is part of an ongoing trend in broadcast news presentation and news interviewing towards hybridised formats. One aspect of this is the shift towards so-called 'infotainment'. Media analysts have for many years observed the tendency for news organisations to popularise their discourse by tempering the presentation of serious news with elements drawn from the linguistic and visual registers of entertainment; primarily drama (docu-dramas and real-life reconstructions), advertising (soundbites, colloquial forms of talk) and comedy (satirical and parodic forms of news presentation) (Fairclough, 1995; Thussu, 2007; Baym, 2010). The latter is perhaps furthest developed in American television formats such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* (Baym, this volume), where serious political issues are presented through a hybrid range of discourses drawn from chat shows, stand-up comedy, and news interviews. Here, we find a form of 'reflexive political interview' in the sense that the discursive hybridity itself incorporates a knowing reference to its own entanglement in the 'game' of modern mediatised politics.

*The O'Reilly Factor* is a hybrid news programme that is consequential in a different sense. Rather than embedding the political interview within an overarching comedic format, this show foregrounds the conventional style and structure of the news interview (Clayman and Heritage, 2002), but within that is embedded the production of tendentious and often directly confrontational discourses more usually associated with political *arguments* than political interviews. In other words, *The O'Reilly Factor* represents a form of news discourse

which eschews the neutralistic standpoint adopted by conventional or mainstream news interviewers (Clayman, 1992). I use the term Hybrid Political Interview (HPI) to refer to this non-neutralistic type of news interviewing (Hutchby, 2011a, b).

The HPI is in some ways related to the emergence of adversarial 'accountability interviews' described by Montgomery (2007). Montgomery notes that the tensions between journalistic neutralism and investigative probing are leading some news interviewers to adopt adversarial rather than strictly neutralistic stances when addressing certain issues – such as in interviews where high profile politicians are being brought to account for alleged misconduct, public deception and so on, or when marginalised views or extremist political stances are at issue. Here, the questions asked may become more assertoric, while still retaining their interrogative pragmatic force.

The HPI shares some of the features of this Adversarial Political Interview (API), but differs significantly in many other respects. The primary differences include the HPI interviewer's greater licence to *personalise* argumentative standpoints, including issuing personal insults to the interviewee; to foreground his or her *agency* as a spokesperson for certain political stances or social forces; and to 'go ballistic' in emotionally heightened episodes of direct, position-taking *confrontation* with the interviewee. Finally, rather than assertoric questions, the interview may come to revolve around assertoric *sequences*: the exchange of assertion and counter-assertion that is one of the structural forms of mundane argument (Coulter, 1990).

In this chapter my approach to analysing the discourses of the HPI derives from the perspective of conversation analysis (CA) (see Hutchby and Wooffitt, 2008). CA focuses on the analysis of turn-taking as a means of collaboratively organising natural forms of social interaction, and has been applied to a wide range of forms of talk from ordinary conversation to legal cross-examinations (Drew and Heritage, 1992). In terms of news interviews, previous research has addressed a variety of aspects ranging from the basic ways in which the question-answer turn-taking format is managed (Greatbatch, 1988; Clayman and Heritage, 2002), to the means by which interviewees seek to shift the agendas that interviewers' questions seek to pursue (Greatbatch, 1986); from the ways in which interviewers display their journalistic objectivity in questions (Clayman, 1988, 1992), to the means by which debate and disagreement are managed in the context of panel interviews (Greatbatch, 1992). The present chapter contributes to that body of research by investigating the ways in which the question-answer turn-taking system of the standard news interview is hybridised through the incorporation of turn-taking systems used in other forms of talk; primarily, as noted, in arguments.

### **The O'Reilly/Obama interviews**

Given the widespread perception of Fox News, and *The O'Reilly Factor* itself, as a conservative-oriented media outlet (Thussu, 2007), it may seem strange that Barack Obama, often characterised as one of the more 'liberal' or left-wing Democratic presidents of recent times, should elect to appear on the programme. Yet a moment's reflection will show that it was a wise political move to do so. Having been invited, to refuse to appear would not only open Obama to claims that he was running scared of O'Reilly's questions; but also deprive him of an opportunity to put the argument that his policies favour the majority of ordinary

working Americans over the wealthy elite to one of the largest prime time news audiences on current US television.

The most well-known televised encounter between Obama and O'Reilly is, in fact, the second of the major sit-downs in which the two have participated: a 2011 set-piece interview broadcast live in the build-up to that year's Superbowl American football final, which was aired by the Fox Sport channel. This was a 14-minute interview which O'Reilly himself claimed, probably accurately, was seen by the largest live television audience of any political interview in the history of broadcasting. This in itself makes that interview a potentially interesting media phenomenon, in line with a series of high profile set-piece-interviews-as-media-events that dates at least from the famous interviews conducted in 1977 by British broadcaster David Frost with Richard Nixon, some years after the latter's resignation as president of the United States in the wake of the Watergate scandal. Recorded over a period of four weeks, the Frost/Nixon interviews were broadcast in a series of lengthy instalments during which Frost probed Nixon on a range of controversial topics associated with Watergate and its aftermath. The interview as a whole was ultimately considered dramatic enough to be turned into a Broadway play and subsequently a Hollywood film (*Frost/Nixon*, Universal, 2008).

However, my interest in this chapter is in the less widely known 2008 O'Reilly/Obama interview that was recorded in the months before Senator Obama became president. This interview, as noted above, was conducted in the campaigning period for the election, and was one in a series of set-piece interviews that Bill O'Reilly conducted with presidential hopefuls, each of them broadcast, Frost/Nixon style, in a series of four instalments on consecutive nights of *The O'Reilly Factor*.

The first of the series of interviews was with Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton towards the end of April 2008, when she was still competing a very close race with Senator Barack Obama for the Democratic Party presidential nomination. A few weeks later in June 2008, O'Reilly interviewed Senator John McCain, by that time the presumed Republican Party nominee, his competitors Rudy Giuliani and Mitt Romney having dropped out of the race back in February. It was not until September 2008, after he had been confirmed as the Democratic nominee, that the third of these interviews was held with Senator Barack Obama. Vice-presidential candidates were not interviewed; though McCain's vice-presidential candidate, Governor Sarah Palin, did give a similar interview to *The O'Reilly Factor*, and other HPI shows such as *Hannity and Colmes*, at a later date.<sup>1</sup>

Of these interviews, I chose to focus on the Obama appearance, not just because it was Obama who subsequently went on to win the election. As O'Reilly began the interview by stating, it took a comparatively long time to persuade the liberal Senator to appear in the arena of Fox News' *O'Reilly Factor*, the interview thus being seen by many as something of a coup. One possible element accounting for this reluctance, to which I pay special attention in the following analysis, is that Senator Obama's campaign, though ultimately successful, was dogged by a number of highly sensitive issues concerning his personal and political past,

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<sup>1</sup> The special significance of Governor Palin is that she successfully transcended the presidential campaign that McCain lost, to become associated with the powerful Tea Party movement on the right wing of the Republican Party in the early years of the Obama administration. At one time her profile was so high that there was talk of her challenging for the Republican nomination in the 2012 election, though that did not happen.

including his chosen political and religious associates, that were negatively highlighted in John McCain's Republican campaign and that *The O'Reilly Factor* had focussed on to a much greater extent than the mainstream US media. Thus it was likely that Obama was going to have to address these potentially damaging issues as the interview unfolded; and in fact he did.

The interview was broadcast in four instalments of about six minutes, and in each instalment a different central issue took up the majority of the six minutes. In part one, it was foreign policy, including Obama's position on the 'War on Terror' instigated by incumbent President George W. Bush. In part two, it was the economy, primarily Obama's policies on taxation. Part three focussed on Obama's political past and his position with respect to activist and religious movements. Part four took as its topic Obama's energy and environmental policies. My analysis will concentrate on possibly the most controversial of these segments: the third instalment, in which O'Reilly raises with Obama the question of what he calls 'the associations'.

### **Obama and 'the associations'**

One of the most potentially explosive aspects of Barack Obama's 2008 election campaign were the reports that emerged concerning his associations with political activists on what was considered to be the far left of American politics. These included his membership, in the past, of the Trinity United Church established by controversial preacher the Reverend Jeremiah Wright. The controversy surrounding Reverend Wright centred upon his interpretations, in his sermons, of the writings of 'black liberation theologians' such as James H. Cone, who in the late 1960s had developed the view that mainstream Christianity in America was complicit in the oppression of black people, and that therefore there needed to be a theology that rejected 'any conception of God which stifles black self-determination by picturing God as a God of all peoples.... The blackness of God means that God has made the oppressed condition God's own condition' (Cone, 1970: 63). At the time of the election campaign, certain television news stations were broadcasting undercover footage of the Reverend Wright's sermons in which he appeared to be arguing that the root of America's problems lay in white power structures and that white people were inherently racist. This story had additional salience given Obama's status as the first ever black candidate for the presidency of the United States.

A second association picked up by elements of the media, especially cable news and internet sources, was Obama's links with Chicago-based educational activist William (Bill) Ayers, who in his younger days had been a leading member of the Weatherman organisation<sup>2</sup> (or Weather Underground), a revolutionary communist anti-Vietnam War group notorious for its campaign of bombings in American cities in the late 1960s. Ayers later became a Professor of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago after turning his attention to community politics and educational reform. Part of the controversy surrounding Ayers stems from the fact that in his writings and interviews he has refused to condemn the Weatherman

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<sup>2</sup> Sometimes wrongly referred to as the 'Weathermen' (Smith, 2001). The correct name 'Weatherman' reputedly derives from a line in Bob Dylan's cryptic song *Subterranean Homesick Blues*: 'You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows'.

campaigns and indeed has defended them on the grounds that the bombs had always been targeted at buildings rather than people (Ayers, 2008). At the time of the election campaign, press and broadcast news reported on interviews given by Ayers in which he was quoted as saying that he did not 'regret setting bombs' and in fact feels that the Weather Underground did not 'do enough' (an interview first published, in a twist of fate, on the 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001, the day of the catastrophic World Trade Center attacks) (Smith, 2001). Although Ayers subsequently maintained that this did not mean he thought that more bombs should have been set (Remnick, 2008), that was the interpretation foregrounded by numerous media outlets reporting on the possible association of Obama with Ayers.

In most liberal democratic societies, but perhaps especially in America, any hint of links between a candidate for the head of state and individuals and movements such as these would be likely to seriously derail their election campaign. Indeed, the election campaign of Republican candidate John McCain actively sought to foreground these associations in an attempt to destroy Obama's populist image. Yet as we now know, that tactic failed as Obama went on to win the election.

But before that happened, the associations question became the sole topic of a six-minute segment of the four-part O'Reilly-Obama interview. In the following, I will examine some of the ways in which characteristic HPI tactics are deployed and responded to in the unfolding of this segment.

### **Negative attributions: Non-neutrality and the use of implicature**

A characteristic feature of the HPI is that it adopts what might be called the formal structures of the conventional news interview, but adds modulations that act to 'de-neutralise' the interviewer's mode of interaction. We see this in the opening section of O'Reilly-Obama part three. As the host of the programme, O'Reilly begins in a standard way by introducing the previously-taped interview via a straight-to-camera monologue. That introductory piece has a register that typically modulates its frequency between neutralistic and non-neutralistic poles:

**Extract 1 (O'R: Bill O'Reilly, interviewer; OB: Barack Obama, interviewee)**

1 O'R: Top story tonight, part three of my interview with Barack Obama.  
2 After speaking with him last week, I have a new respect for the  
3 man. I believe he is sincere in his beliefs, and his presence  
4 has definitely changed politics forever. For our conservative  
5 viewers, consider this. Without Obama's dramatic rise, there  
6 would be no Sarah Palin. There would be no new blood in  
7 American politics. But Senator Obama's associations continue  
8 to trouble some voters, and that is where we begin tonight.

Here, we see that the neutralistic and the non-neutralistic segments are neatly separated such that the first and last sentences adopt the conventions of the introductory 'piece to camera' that frequently prefaces a pre-recorded interview. In line 1 O'Reilly states that the upcoming item, the 'top story' in this evening's schedule, is to be part three of the interview. In the final sentence, he adopts the conventional footing shift, attributing concerns about Obama's 'associations' to a third party, 'some voters' (Clayman, 1992). But in between those neutralistic brackets, a range of statements are produced that foreground speaker agency, and

hence are non-neutralistic. These include asserting 'a new respect' for Obama; a 'belief' in his sincerity, and an assertion that his candidature has 'definitely' changed American politics. A second modulation occurs when O'Reilly turns to address a specific constituency among his audience: 'our conservative viewers'. Rather than this being a footing shift in which he attributes to those 'conservative viewers' an opinion regarding Obama, it turns out that this is an *instruction* to conservative viewers to understand Obama's impact in particular terms; namely ones that are beneficial to them in the shape of the emergence of what was then seen as an exciting new presence in the Republican leadership, vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin.

In the course of this short introduction, then, O'Reilly speaks both as a broadcast journalist prefacing a pre-recorded item, and takes up a range of positions regarding the contents of that item, only once adopting the neutralistic footing shift identified in studies of conventional news broadcasting. Interestingly, while the actual topic of the upcoming interview is introduced in the form of a footing-shifted statement (lines 7-8 above), once we move into the pre-recorded interview itself we find that further, and much more extreme, non-neutralistic modulations are incorporated into the opening utterance where the topic is first broached.

Consider, by way of context, how a conventional, neutralistic political interviewer might have broached the topic of Obama's 'associations'. We might have found a question worded along the following, hypothetical lines:

**Extract 2 (IR: Invented interviewer)**

1 IR: Senator Obama, how do you respond to the concerns expressed  
2 by some voters over your supposed associations with figures  
3 like the Reverend Wright, Bill Ayers, and the Daily Kos  
4 website whose convention you were reported to have attended  
5 recently?

Here we find the standard use of footing shifts and other means of redistributing authorship of claims about controversial matters ('concerns expressed by some voters', 'you were reported to have attended'). The hypothetical interviewer constructs the question without prejudging the answer, so as to allow the matter to be raised in the public interest.

The following extract shows the way that the topic was actually broached in the HPI context of O'Reilly/Obama part three:

**Extract 3**

[BEGIN VT]

1 O'R: I'm sitting here and I'm an American. I'm sitting there in:  
2 Bismarck North Dakota, I'm sitting there in, Coral Springs  
3 Florida, and I'm seeing Reverend Wright, I'm seeing Father  
4 Pfleger, who thinks Louie Farrakhan's a great guy, I'm seeing  
5 Bernadette Dohrn<sup>3</sup> and Bill Ayers, Weather Underground radicals  
6 who:, ↑don't think they bombed e↓nough. I'm seeing Moveon dot  
7 org, who says "General Betray Us,"<sup>4</sup> and I'm seeing you go

<sup>3</sup> Actually *Bernardine* Dohrn, married to Bill Ayers since their time in the Weather Underground.

<sup>4</sup> A play on the surname of General David *Petraeus*, at the time commander of the coalition forces in Iraq; later

8 to a Daily Kos<sup>5</sup> convention, and this week Daily Kos came out  
9 and said that, .pt Sarah Palin's Down syndrome baby was birthed  
10 by her fifteen year old with no proof. They put that on air.  
11 And I'm going, gee, that Barack Obama, he's got some pretty  
12 ↓ba::d ↓friends.

Structurally speaking, though it may not seem so there are in fact similarities here with the hypothetical example in extract (2). But in terms of the turn's content, the way the issue of the 'associations' is put to the interviewee, the differences are quite fundamental.

In one sense, the turn incorporates a footing shift in Goffman's (1981) original sense. O'Reilly begins by taking up the standpoint of a third party, 'an American' (line 1), then describes a number of events in the public sphere that the first person 'American' is 'seeing' (lines 3-10); then attributes a thought or utterance to that American (line 11): 'gee, that Barack Obama, he's got some pretty ↓ba::d ↓friends.' In sum, in the Goffmanian sense, this turn sees the interviewer acting as animator for observations and thoughts that some generic American is both principal and author of.

However, in the context of the broadcast political interview, and by comparison with the invented example in extract (2), there is much more going on here than simply a shift in footing. For one thing, although O'Reilly begins with the statement, 'I'm sitting here and I'm an American', the American identity he is seeking to embody is indexed in a particular way. The American is described as sitting in 'Bismarck North Dakota' or 'Coral Springs Florida', two middle-sized, predominantly middle class and largely white US cities. This does the work of conveying that the American we are concerned with here is what we might call the *normative American*: a middling kind of decent, family man, not particularly associated with any controversial political opinions or social movements, sitting watching the TV in his living room after work, possibly mulling over who he might vote for.

Embodying this normative American, O'Reilly lists a number of individuals he is 'seeing'; but rather than simply naming them, he offers instructions as to how both Obama and the audience should understand or orient towards these individuals. Father Pfleger 'thinks Louis Farrakhan's a great guy' (Farrakhan being a highly divisive figure in American racial politics); Bernadette (Bernardine) Dohrn and Bill Ayers 'don't think they bombed enough'; the website moveon.org parodies the head of the military forces in Iraq as 'General Betray Us' and the Daily Kos website implies, 'with no proof', that Sarah Palin may have put the life of her Down's Syndrome baby at risk by allowing her to be 'birthed by her fifteen year old'.

In each of these cases, a tacit contrast is being used to do the interactional work of foregrounding negativity. The contrast is between the views expressed by the cited individuals and organisations, and the normative views held by 'an American'. In other words, it is implied that the normative American thinks that Louis Farrakhan is not in fact a great guy, and Father Pfleger is wrong to think he is. The normative American thinks that the Weather Underground in fact bombed too much (or indeed that they shouldn't have bombed at all), and Dohrn and Ayers are wrong to think they didn't bomb enough. The normative

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Director of the CIA.

<sup>5</sup> The Daily Kos is a left-leaning internet news and blogging site, named after its founder Markos Moulitsas Zúniga.

American thinks that General Petraeus is a soldier serving the American national interest, and moveon.org is wrong to say that he is betraying Americans. The normative American thinks that Sarah Palin did not in fact allow her fifteen year old to birth her Down's Syndrome baby, and the Daily Kos is wrong to say that she did.

Similarly, and much more directly, in the statement 'and I'm seeing you go to a Daily Kos convention' (lines 7-8), it is implied that the normative American thinks that going to a Daily Kos convention is not something the prospective president of the United States should be doing, and that Barack Obama is wrong for having done so. In this particular case, we find a characteristic feature of the HPI which I have previously described as 'personalisation' (Hutchby, 2011b), namely the interviewer attributing personal responsibility for reprehensible actions to the interviewee through the use of first and second person pronouns.

A second aspect of personalisation that is key in this particular HPI context is something that is difficult to convey in the form of a transcript on the page: the mounting distaste that is palpable in O'Reilly's voice and facial expression as this list of negative attributions is produced. In such a way, as well as embodying the normative American through the footing shift, 'I'm sitting here and I'm an American', the interviewer here *emotionally* embodies a negative stance towards the things the normative American is witnessing. He thus acts as something more than simply the animator, in Goffman's sense, for the imaginary American's standpoint. Particularly in the emotionally heightened way that he enunciates the final sentence, 'gee, that Barack Obama, he's got some pretty ↓ba::d ↓friends', his voice becoming a raspy whisper in the final two words, O'Reilly establishes a personal identification between the normative American and *himself*.

The discussion so far relates to what is usually referred to in studies of news interviews as the question-preface (Clayman and Heritage, 2002). News interviewers will often produce statements of some length prior to the production of a question. These statements, though formulated neutralistically, can be used to negatively pre-position the interviewee, making him or her account for duplicitous acts, failure to see through a promise, or other complainable actions (Pomerantz, 1988-89). O'Reilly's preface similarly does the work of negatively pre-positioning Obama; however it does so less neutralistically by placing him in association with influences defined as negative by the interviewer himself, in terms of the hypothetically commonsense views of an imagined American citizen and voter.

In the conventional interview, question prefaces are always followed by a question, and the interviewee typically refrains from responding until the question itself has been asked (Greatbatch, 1988). In the HPI, by contrast, questions may not always follow interviewer statements. Although the HPI does utilise the standard sequential structures of [question-answer-next question] or [question-answer-formulation] found in the conventional interview, in many cases the question-answer sequence is abandoned in favour of the more argumentative sequence structures of [assertion-counter assertion] or [accusation-response]. Sometimes an interview will begin with a question and answer and then run to completion with no further question-formatted turns being produced by the interviewer (see Hutchby, 2011a).

In the next extract, which follows directly from the conclusion of the question preface in extract (3), we see that Obama in fact begins on a response at a recognisable completion point of the preface; that is, without waiting for a following question (line 13). In other



thousands of people, though not 'anybody like that.'

Early in the exchange, then, we see evidence that the HPI is not only characterised by non-neutrality in the construction of individual interviewer utterances, but also by license to abandon the question-answer format of the interview in favour of the less constrained and often more aggressive turn-taking formats of the argument (Hutchby, 1996). In this context, the turn in line 7-8 represents not only a display of Obama's orientation to the incursive nature of O'Reilly's argumentative turn, but also an attempt to keep the exchange within the 'interview' frame itself; a claim staked for Obama to be allowed to do the role of interviewee in the face of O'Reilly's apparent move into the role of antagonist.

### **Witnessing: Disclaimer and pursuit**

A central trope in this exchange is the question of Obama's presence at, or witnessing of, the negative events, statements or actions vis-à-vis which he is being positioned. 'Witnessing', as in claims to have some personal experience or connection with something, can be used as a way of justifying an opinion in a disputatious context (Hutchby, 2001). But one's status as a witness in this sense can also become the focus of dispute if one is seeking to deny negative attributions. This is what we find in this case.

As extract (6) shows, the discussion comes to centre around O'Reilly's attempts to establish that Obama must have been witness to, or somehow known about or been aware of, the previously described negative characteristics of figures such as the Reverend Wright, Bill Ayers, or the Daily Kos; and correspondingly, Obama's attempts to deny, disclaim or otherwise close down discussion about those figures. The extract takes up where extract (5) left off:

#### **Extract 6**

1 OB: The u:h, the Wright thing we've talked about. Look. The: u:h, I  
2→ joined a church. To worship Go:d not a pastor. .hh This whole  
3 notion that he was my spiritual mentor and all this stuff, .h  
4→ this:, is something that I've, (.) com- ue:r consistently  
5 discussed. I had not heard him make the offensive comments, .h  
6 that ended up being looped:, on this show constantly. And I was  
7 offended by them and ulti-m-ma[tely-  
8→ O'R: [So you'd never heard  
9 those co[mments?  
10 OB: [I hadn't heard [those comments.  
11→ O'R: [He was sellin' 'em in the lobby uh  
12 the church.  
13→ OB: mfhh. (.) What can I tell ya.

Beginning with the Reverend Wright association, Obama first seeks to deny its present relevance. Unable to deny his membership of the church, he shifts the emphasis of his association to God, rather than to Reverend Wright himself (line 2). He then denies having heard the 'offensive comments' (lines 5-6) that Wright is alleged to have been delivering. While acknowledging that offensive comments have been spoken, therefore, Obama seeks to distance himself from the association by doing the opposite of 'witnessing': a witness-disclaimer.

Hearing this, O'Reilly again starts up in overlap (line 8) to produce a formulation: 'So you'd never heard those comments?' In conventional news interviews, formulations tend to be used to summarize the gist or the upshot of an interviewee's answer, broadly speaking for the benefit of the overhearing audience (Heritage, 1985). But formulations can of course do more than simply summarize: they can seek to probe and elaborate an interviewee's point. Here, by virtue of its sequential placement, O'Reilly's formulation does something else again. Note that it is produced after Obama has hearably started on a follow-up to his point that he had not heard Wright's comments until they 'ended up being looped on this show constantly'. This follow-up, were it to be completed, would situate Obama more closely in alignment with the normative American: 'And I was offended by them and ultimately...'. O'Reilly's overlapping formulation does the work of 'reining back' the argument so that the previous claim can be highlighted before it becomes occluded by the follow-up point (cf. Hutchby, 1996).

The topic having thus been 're-set', Obama confirms the formulation in line 10. But this confirmation is followed by a more aggressive rejoinder in which O'Reilly lays claim to personal knowledge that Wright was 'sellin' 'em [i.e. books, videos, or whatever] in the lobby uh the church.' The implication here is that, merely by virtue of attending at the church, Obama must have been aware of Reverend Wright's views. Since it is presumably necessary to pass through the lobby to get to the hall of worship, and since Obama has previously admitted that he did attend to worship, the logic of O'Reilly's rejoinder is that Obama must have passed by and hence been witness to the books or videos that Wright was 'sellin'.

Obama's response, 'What can I tell ya', though it seems like a throwaway comment, actually does some useful interactional work in this context. First, it concedes the logic of O'Reilly's point, but crucially, without admitting to the truth of his implication. Second, 'What can I tell ya' acts as an attempt to close off the line of questioning. Due to its idiomatic status (Drew and Holt, 1988) it is much more difficult for the interlocutor to follow it with a further rejoinder. Consider that, had Obama at this point said 'I didn't see those', the way would have been open for O'Reilly to pursue the logic of his argument that Obama must have seen them since he passed by them on entering the church. By contrast, 'What can I tell ya' means that, to make that point, O'Reilly would end up merely repeating his previous point.

Choosing to adopt a different tack, O'Reilly pursues the question of Obama's witnessing of Wright's 'inflammatory' sermons by introducing a new line of questioning based around the frequency of his attendance at the church, the implication now being that the more frequently Obama attended the church, the more likely he was to have witnessed the 'inflammatory stuff' referred to in line 3. In response, Obama develops a similar kind of witness-disclaimer strategy.

#### Extract 7

- 1 O'R: How many times, did you go to church a month.  
 2 OB: †You know, I'd probably go twice a month,  
 3 O'R: And he [never said inflammatory stuff?=  
 4 OB: [sometimes,  
 5 OB: =He didn't se- he didn't say stuff like that. All  
 6 right? [So- so::-  
 7→ O'R: [Did he say white people were ba:d?  
 8→ OB: U: e-e nuh. E-e-[what he said was racism was bad.

9→ O'R: [Never?  
10→ O'R: B[ut not white people are b[ad.  
11 OB: [(I:t was not) [uh there was no- no doubt that  
12 what he said was racism was bad. (.) The relationship was  
13 ruptured, I'm not a member of the church.  
14 O'R: Right.  
15 (.)  
16 OB: In both his case and Father Pflieger's case, they've done great  
17 work in the community. A:nd I worked in:, (.) some very poor  
18 communities. That's how I got to know these folks=because I was  
19 working in these neighborhoods.

Obama's response in line 2, 'twice a month', is treatable as indicating fairly regular attendance, given that the usual regular churchgoer will attend weekly, that is, only four times a month. O'Reilly's next turn begins as a recognisable upshot of that reply, using the conjunction 'And'; but before the turn has got very far Obama, possibly in recognition of the upshot that O'Reilly is embarked on producing, seeks to qualify the regularity of his attendance by adding, in overlap, 'sometimes'. Even though the qualification comes before it is clear what upshot O'Reilly is going to suggest, then, there may some evidence that Obama recognises the implicature in O'Reilly's questioning strategy and seeks to defuse it.

O'Reilly continues with his turn, however, posing the question, 'And he never said inflammatory stuff?' At this point, it is open to Obama simply to deny that any inflammatory stuff was said. Rather than doing so, he offers a qualified response (line 5) that seems to acknowledge that while 'stuff like that' (i.e. the stuff that 'ended up being looped on this show constantly') was *not* said, there was other 'stuff' that *was* said. There follows a sequence of witness-pursuit turns in which O'Reilly repeatedly pursues the question of whether Obama heard Wright arguing that 'white people [are] bad' (line 7, line 9, line 10), while Obama presents an alternative version of what he heard, namely that 'racism [is] bad' (line 8, line 12). In doing this, Obama once again strategically concedes the line of O'Reilly's logic (he did hear Wright saying things) but continues to disclaim the specific witnessing claim that is being pursued (he did not hear Wright say that white people are bad, but that racism is bad). The additional work accomplished by this shift in the account of Wright's words is of course that it realigns Obama, for the benefit of the audience, from having witnessed a negative, racially separatist argument to having witnessed a positive, racially inclusive one.

At this point O'Reilly is faced, in a similar way to his position following 'What can I tell ya', with the option of simply repeating his question; and indeed this is something that adversarial and hybrid political interviewers have been known on occasion to do (Hutchby, 2011a). Once again, he chooses not to pursue that option, and the sequence of witness-disclaimer followed by witness-pursuit is finally concluded when Obama tags onto his answer in line 12 the statement that he is no longer a member of the church. At this point O'Reilly elects to collaborate in the sequence closure with a simple acknowledgement of that statement (line 14).

A similar pattern of actions characterised by Obama's witness-disclaimers, followed by O'Reilly's pursuit of witnessing – the latter using the hybrid combination of a range of more or less unmitigated position statements in combination with questions, the former using a range of strategies to establish the denial of witnessing – appears in response to other

'association' questions later in the interview. For example, regarding the Bill Ayers association, Obama begins by seeking to establish distance, not just between himself and Ayers but between Ayers and the 'despicable' actions that he carried out 'forty years ago':

**Extract 8**

1 OB: Here's the bottom line.  
2 O'R: Y[eah.  
3→ OB: [This guy did something despicable forty years ago.=  
4→ O'R: Y-nah 'e did- des- ↑picable last ↑week. [He said he didn't=  
5 OB [What (analysis- w-)  
6 =do enough bombings. ↑That's last ↑week.  
7→ OB: I haven't seen the guy in a year an' a half.

Following Obama's proposal to give 'the bottom line' on Ayers (line 1), he uses the same strategy of acknowledging the facts of the matter (that Ayers did 'something despicable' in the form of setting bombs) but establishing distance between those facts and himself (it was 'forty years ago'). In a similar way to the earlier 'I know thousands'a people' intervention, we again find O'Reilly interjecting with a counter-position that foregrounds both its opposition to Obama's previous claim, and O'Reilly's own agency in formulating the position. That is, he does not state that 'it was reported' last week that Ayers said he didn't do enough bombings; neither is Obama invited to respond to reports as attributed to third parties. Rather, O'Reilly directly characterises Ayers as having 'said' this and personally evaluates this statement as 'despicable'.

Once more, in this situation, we see that Obama seeks to produce a witness-disclaimer. In contrast to O'Reilly's report of what Ayers said 'last week', Obama states that he has not seen him in a year and a half. In such a way, he once more establishes distance between himself and the despicable actions attributed to Ayers.

Following the witness-disclaimers, the witness-pursuit is initiated by O'Reilly as the extract unfolds:

**Extract 9 (continuation of Extract 8)**

7 OB: I haven't seen the guy in a year an' a half. [But- l-le-=  
8→ O'R: [But you know=  
9 OB: =[let- let- let-  
10 O'R: =[who he was. He's on the Woods Foundation board. You know  
11 he was there.=  
12 OB: =Let me finish my point, all right? Here's a guy who does  
13 something despicable when I'm eight years old.  
14 O'R: Okay.=  
15 OB: =All right? (.) I come to Chicago, he's workin', with, Mayor  
16 Richard Daley, not known to be, a radical, (.) So, uh he  
17 and I, know each other, a:s a consequence of work he's  
18 doing on education. (0.4) That is not an endorsement of  
19 his views, (.) That's not, [me:-  
20→ O'R: [But you guys partnered up on a  
21 youth crime bill, you remember that?  
22 OB: U-u- e- An' it was a good bill.  
23 O'R: ↑No it wasn't. That bill said that i:- if a if a if a: youth-

21 commits a second violent felony, .h he does ti:me in an adult  
25 prison. .h=That's two ↑shots. You- you said no. .h You know  
26 the [South side of Chicago. You know how many people are hurt.  
27 OB: [No no Bill- [No: but-  
28 OB Listen, you're absolutely right my community gets hit by crime  
29 more than [(it should)  
30 O'R: [An' I'm right on that bill. You were wrong on  
31 th[at bill.  
32 OB: [I disagree with you on that bill. We're getting' too far  
33 afield her[e. ( )  
34→ O'R: [O:h that's important though. You an- ↑You an' Ayers  
35 were alli:ed [o:n that ↑bi[ll.  
36 OB: [↑No:: [No: e-look hh. He didn' write that  
37 bill,  
38→ O'R: No, he was supporting it, [and so were [you.  
39 OB: [Wuh- [Ehhh heh-heh ha-hah.=  
40→ O'R: =Butchu gu[ys were together on it.  
41 OB: [Na-now Hold on a second na- now no:w we're- gettin'  
42 u[:hh a-  
43 O'R: [All right if that's unfair I'm sorry.  
44 OB: Tha- that's pretty flimsy.=Here=here's the point. Right? This  
45 guy is not part of my campaign, .h [he's not some ad- he's not  
46 O'R: [(But he's- he's)  
47 some adviser of mine, he's somebody who:, (.) worked on  
48 education issues in Chicago. That I know.

O'Reilly seeks to establish the existence of a personal relationship between Obama and Ayers; and he does this by citing factual matters (the two men were indeed on the Board of the Woods Foundation, a Chicago-based tax-exempt organisation making loans and investments in civic projects, some of which have attracted controversy; the two men did indeed both support a controversial crime bill in the Chicago State legislature) in a strategy of 'guilt by association'. Again, unable to flatly deny the factual matters themselves, Obama uses the strategy of re-interpreting the association to elide the associations of guilt. He argues that his association with Ayers emerged from his association with 'Mayor Richard Daley, not known to be a radical' (lines 13-14); he argues that he supported the bill not because Ayers also supported it but because it was a good bill (line 19), even though O'Reilly, in typical HPI fashion, directly disputes this assessment (line 20).

Throughout, O'Reilly pursues the witnessing claim over a series of turns in which he seeks to strengthen the evidence of an Obama-Ayers connection using terms such as 'partnered up' (line 17), 'allied' (line 29) and 'together on it' (line 34). But finally, at the end of the extract, O'Reilly seems once again to acknowledge that he has pressed the issue far enough (line 36), and concedes the floor for Obama to offer an association-neutral definition of Ayers as simply someone who 'worked on education issues in Chicago that I know'.

## Conclusion

When Barack Obama agreed to enter the 'No Spin Zone' by granting an interview to Bill O'Reilly in the course of his 2008 election campaign, he would have anticipated that among the topics to be covered in the interview was the question of his 'associations'. As was pointed

out previously, cable broadcast *The O'Reilly Factor* had been among the major news outlets that had covered stories about Obama's links with controversial figures on the left of American politics, in contrast to the mainstream broadcast and print media. Indeed, it is a general feature of news as presented on *The O'Reilly Factor* that it prides itself on covering stories that the mainstream media ignore or downplay.

Although the O'Reilly-Obama interview as a whole covers a much wider range of topics, many of them arguably of greater political importance, I have chosen in this chapter to address the 'associations' question because it was the most controversial, and unique, aspect of the interview. Nowhere else, except in his Republican opponent's campaign speeches and videos, was the focus placed on this question with anything like the same intensity. By focusing attention on the 'associations', *The O'Reilly Factor* argued that it was offering a more rounded picture of the comparatively unknown, but highly politically accomplished Senator than was available through what it claimed were the largely uncritical accounts of the mainstream press and broadcast news.

The analysis has shown how the techniques of turn design and sequence construction used in the Hybrid Political Interview were deployed to conduct a discussion of Barack Obama's political and religious associates. The discussion centred around presenting these associates as negative figures, as aspects of his political profile that Obama should be required to account for; and Obama, of course, needed to have ways of accounting that deflected negativity and, as far as possible, neutralised the associations issue.

We saw how O'Reilly used aspects of standard interviewing technique, such as the footing shift, in highly non-neutral ways so as first of all to establish that a hypothetical but rhetorically effective figure, the 'normative American', sees a range of persons and organisations linked to Obama as 'bad'. O'Reilly then concentrated on attempting to establish through various means that Obama does indeed have close links with such 'bad friends'. I referred to this as the attempt to establish 'witnessing'. O'Reilly used hybrid techniques in this pursuit; sometimes asking questions in conventional style, other times making statements and expressing opinions in which his own personal agency became foregrounded.

Obama's response to this tended to focus on producing witness-disclaimers: attempts to establish distance between himself and the controversial figures or statements, or to establish that any links that he might have had were there for legitimate reasons and not because of the 'bad' activities (for example, 'I joined a church to worship God not a pastor'). We saw how these witness-disclaimer/witness-pursuit sequences could extend over numerous turns. O'Reilly used a combination of logical implicature and direct personal attribution to pursue what Obama himself, later in the interview, called a strategy of 'classic guilt by association'. Obama in response pursued the strategy of acknowledging O'Reilly's logic but denying its upshots; for example, acknowledging that he heard Reverend Wright say 'stuff' but denying that it was the kind of stuff summarised in the phrase 'white people are bad'. Although there was the potential for these witness-disclaimer/witness-pursuit sequences to extend indefinitely, in each case the sequence was concluded by O'Reilly eventually conceding the argument to Obama.

What this chapter has shown is further evidence that 'the news interview' is an evolving, diversifying, and hybridising form of broadcast news presentation. The initial stages of that evolution saw the development of investigative interviewing in which the news

interviewer's role began to move away from its early manifestation as a simple conduit through which the interviewee's opinions were channelled (Schudson, 1994). Later came the development of more adversarial styles (Montgomery, 2007); though still the work of the interviewer was broadly framed within the neutralistic formulae of question-answer sequences described in detail by Clayman and Heritage (2002). Hybrid types of news interview reveal the interviewer moving beyond these formulae to adopt a more tendentious positioning; which, in the American context at least, can involve either overt or tacit political alignments on the liberal side (Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*, Stephen Colbert's *Colbert Report*) or the conservative side (Bill O'Reilly's *The O'Reilly Factor*, Sean Hannity's *Hannity*<sup>6</sup>). Thus, alongside the 'conventional' neutralistic interview, which still exists across wide areas of news broadcasting, we can now identify at least three other cross-cutting types of political news interview: the 'adversarial' political interview (API) involving aggressive but still formally neutralistic questioning, the 'reflexive' political interview (RPI) incorporating comedic/parodic or other infotainment elements, and the 'hybrid' political interview (HPI) which embeds non-neutral argument within formal interview structures.

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the predecessor to *Hannity* was a show called *Hannity and Colmes*, in which the conservative Sean Hannity and the liberal Alan Colmes jointly conducted interviews representing either side of the American political divide.

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