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Press Conferences on the Internet

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the study of the discursive mechanisms underlying news production by focusing on a novel and hybrid type of online press conference, i.e. one which allows for both live attendance and participation through the Internet. Drawing on a single case study of a press conference of the Dutch communication regulator OPTA hosted by ANP I set out to demonstrate how this unusual participation framework leads to a continued shift in the interactional balance of power in favour of the news sources, resulting in a further fragmentation of the news production process.

Keywords: press conferences, Internet, interactional sociolinguistics, participation framework, journalists and PR officers.

1. Introduction

This paper deals with press conferences on the Internet. In particular, I will draw attention to a special type of press conference where journalists can attend live as well as following the proceedings on-line, i.e. they log into the press conference from their PC at the news desk or elsewhere, they can see and hear the interaction in real time and they can even ask questions through e-mail. The central issue that I would like to address is to what extent the hybrid format presented here (combining features of traditional face-to-face press conferencing with those of internet-mediated Q&A) impact on the delicate power balance between journalists and their sources.

Put simply, I believe that there are two ways in which such research on press conferences on the Internet can bring added value to the field of media discourse studies: on the one hand, it is part of a promising new wave of discourse-oriented work on news production processes, in general, and on the uneasy relationship between journalism and PR, in particular; on the other hand, it can be seen as a contribution to a subfield of technology-sensitive discourse analysis that has received little attention so far, viz. that of the language of online journalism and of the role of new media as a site of a societal power struggle.

As for the first added value, one leading strand in the discourse-oriented work on news production processes so far has focused on press releases: what they look like and how they affect reporting. Lassen (2006), for example, popped the question whether press releases should be considered a regular genre in their own right. More recently, McLaren-Hankin (2008) has analysed the lexicogrammatical features of hedging in the forward-looking statements typical of disclaimers in press releases. Back in the 1990s, my own corpus-based study of corporate press releases had led me to propose the concept of preformulation as an umbrella term for the wide range of metalinguistic features that make press releases look like the newspaper articles which they are meant to result in, including the use of powerful, newspaper-like headlines followed by a comprehensive 'lead' paragraph as well as third-person self-reference and (pseudo-) quotation (cf. Jacobs 1999a and 1999b). While most of this work started out from a text-oriented, product-based perspective, a couple of process-oriented studies have since led to exciting new insights in the PR-journalism interface. Sleurs & Jacobs (2005), for example, have examined how press releases are written at the PR end and they point out that, in addition to preformulation, there are a number of other strategic concerns on the press officer's mind. Alternatively, Pander Maat (2008) has



compared press releases with their corresponding newspaper articles in terms of the use of promotional language while Van Hout has investigated how press releases are rewritten by journalists, foregrounding the interactional dynamics of story board meetings among other arenas of entextualization (cf. Van Hout & Jacobs 2008). In terms of methodology, both Sleurs and Van Hout have embraced an innovative mix of linguistic ethnography and computer-assisted writing process analysis.

Along with the other contributions to this special issue, the present paper shares with some of this previous work a sharp focus on process, not product – on textual practices and entextualization instead of just text – and on the tension between PR and journalism instead of the functioning of just journalism on its own. At the same time, what is new about the research presented here is that we are not dealing with press releases, but with the wide spectrum of interactional dynamics surrounding their oral counterpart, viz. press conferences. Just like press releases, press conferences have been – and continue to be – a classical tool for all sorts of organisations and public figures to get in touch with the media (Bell 1991).

At the same time, very little attention has been paid to the discursive mechanisms underlying press conferencing. One exception is the work by Clayman & Heritage (2002), who in their book on news interviews have suggested that press conferences constitute exciting research objects for interactional sociolinguistic analysis, with the strategic question and answer game shedding new light on the complex interdependencies between journalists and their sources as well as on their impact on the construction of the news. Clayman, in particular, has shown that the special multiparty talk of US Presidential press conferences differs sharply from the traditional dyads in news interviews. Compared with one-to-one news interviews, he argues, press conferences have come to “fundamentally [alter] the conditions of interaction” between journalists and their sources: for one thing, journalists get fewer chances to ask follow-up questions and so it’s a lot easier for the public figures in press conferences to avoid addressing the issues they’re being confronted with (cf. Clayman et al 2007). In fact, Clayman has argued that “in press conferences the journalistic role is fragmented”. (Clayman and Heritage 2002: 8).

At the same time, it’s been argued that most conversation analytic work on the news is essentially an exercise in the anatomy of oral interaction with relatively little or even no interest in the institutional context in which it takes place (cf. Ekström 2007). This is where we believe the type of analysis that we propose in this paper comes in, as we turn to the hidden power struggle underlying the press conference as a complex news management and newsmaking arena with its technological and institutional restrictions and opportunities.

It is important to note that the data presented here are drawn from a special new type of press conference on the Internet that has received no attention from discourse analysts so far, and this brings us to second way in which this paper may be said to bring added value to the field of media discourse studies. In fact, most of the research devoted to online journalism comes from sociology. Recent studies include Hemmingway (2008) and Bivens (2008) on the electronic delivery of press releases and on integrating blogs into the news. Again, it is within the broad field of interactional sociolinguistics and CA that we can find the few language-oriented contributions to the study of online news, including Thornborrow (2002) and Hutchby (2006), who deal with a special brand of radio phone-in programmes where the listener can react through e-mail and who show that it’s the programme host who takes advantage of the new interaction format in order to dominate the proceedings. Similarly, my own preliminary work on so-called e-releases, i.e. the digital equivalent of paper press releases, has shown how the Internet is rapidly changing the use of press releases, in



various, even opposite, directions: on the one hand, it serves to free press releases from the demands of preformulation and turns them into a special form of direct mail aimed at the general public; on the other hand, it reconfirms the pivotal role played by the media, leading to more rather than less or no preformulation (cf. Jacobs & Strobbe 2005).

Overall, it's been argued that the study of online journalism has so far concentrated more on content, professional profiles and attitudes and audiences than on the production routines and context (Paterson 2008: 2). In addition, the question has been raised whether the internet makes any difference: after all, the places most western online news consumers go for their news closely model the traditional broadcast and newspaper structure in many respects. One thing we seem to know for sure is that, in spite of initial utopian visions, the supposed interactivity of the Internet has failed to revolutionize the way news is consumed or produced. Bruns (2008), on the other hand, points to a decline in the gatekeeping power of traditional media as a result of a rise in internet-based citizen journalism, in general, and blogging, in particular: audiences now have direct access to a multitude of sources and no longer rely on journalists to report the statements of politicians or the press releases of corporations. It is against this background that I believe we need to interpret the various calls for research that begins to examine the role of new media as a site of social struggle and the discursive intricacies of its mediated interaction as a way of unravelling the delicate power balance between the parties involved. These are some of the issues that I set out to address in this preliminary study of on-line press conferences.

2. Research question.

What is special about the type of press conference on the Internet that I propose to examine in this paper is that, as I suggested in the previous section, it is a hybrid: in addition to those journalists who attend the press conference live, a number of journalists follow the proceedings on-line. They log into the press conference from their PC at the newsdesk or elsewhere, they can see and hear the proceedings in real time and they can even ask questions through e-mail.

In this paper I would like to focus on what this unusual participation framework implies in terms of access and in terms of the interactional balance of power among the parties involved, viz. the journalists (both online and live), the people in the panel answering the questions and the press officer chairing the press conference. In particular, I would like to concentrate on the way in which this press officer mediates the discursive interaction between the panel, on the one hand, and the journalists who are present and – crucially – the journalists who are attending the press conference in the virtual mode and who send in their questions through e-mail, on the other hand. In fact, I will zoom in on the double mediating challenge that the press officer is facing in my data: on the one hand, he has to present the absent journalists' e-mail questions to the panel (and of course to the journalists who attend the press conference live) and, on the other hand, he has to repeat the questions asked by the journalists who are present for the sake of their online colleagues (who, for technical reasons, cannot hear those questions very well).

My ambition is to investigate the conditions of access in this brand new interactional arena. The question here is: how does the special turntaking in our press conferences on the Internet affect the media – PR power balance? Does it lead to less or more of the fragmentation that Clayman refers to? It's interesting to note in this respect that the participation framework we are looking at here may not be as new as we might assume it is in the sense that, in the early 20th century, at the very origins of the press conference genre, there was a brief experiment in which



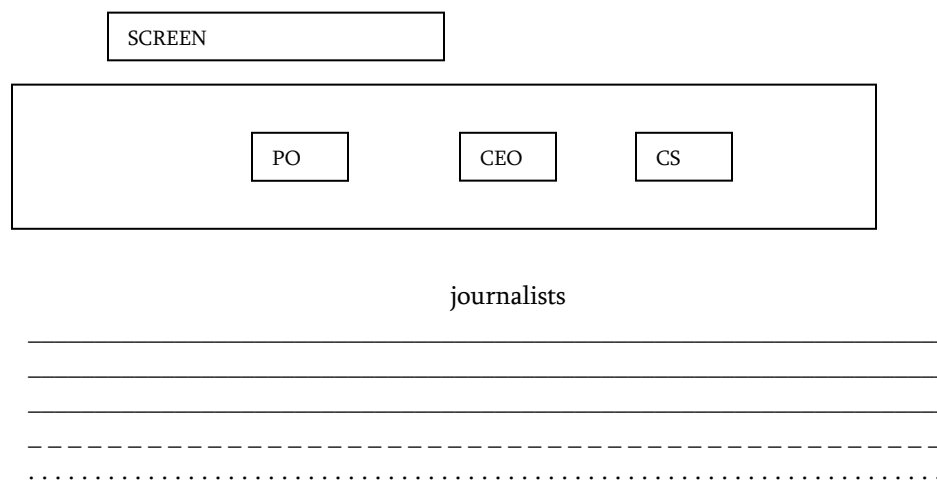
written questions had to be submitted before the day of the press conference, allowing the speakers in the panel to pick and choose questions without being accountable for the ones they pass over (Clayman 2007 et al).

3. Data

My analysis is informed by a preliminary study of a wider corpus including the video files and transcripts of the Internet archives of 16 press conferences broadcast by the Dutch news agency ANP between 2004 and 2006. In this paper, however, I will present a qualitative analysis of a single case only, since it allows us to focus in detail on the wide range of textual resources that the press officer makes use of in fulfilling his mediating task. Although I am of course aware of the limits of such a single-case analysis, I am more interested at this stage in its unique, close-up view of a particular interactional give-and-take than in the tentative generalizations that a quantified approach to the complete corpus could offer.

The press conference I have selected is that of the announcement of the 2003 annual results of OPTA, which is a non-departmental agency of the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs. OPTA serves as an independent regulator in the areas of post and electronic communications. Its main purpose is to promote competition on these markets, resulting in more choice and fairer prices for consumers. The press conference was held early in 2004 and apart from OPTA's press officer, Mr Van De Haar, who served as a mediator, there were two people on the panel, viz. OPTA's CEO, Mr Arnbak, and a top civil servant from the Dutch Ministry of Economic Affairs, Mr Frequin. Since the video in my corpus does not offer a view of the complete room, I do not know how many journalists attended the press conference. Based on the number of questions that are asked in the course of the press conference, however, it is safe to assume the number must have been around a dozen. Similarly, I have no idea how many journalists attended the press conference from a distance, lurking behind their computers. The press conference lasted for about 45 minutes. It started off with a 20-minute uninterrupted presentation by OPTA's CEO followed by the Q&A. The press conference was in Dutch and I have translated the relevant extracts in English for this paper.

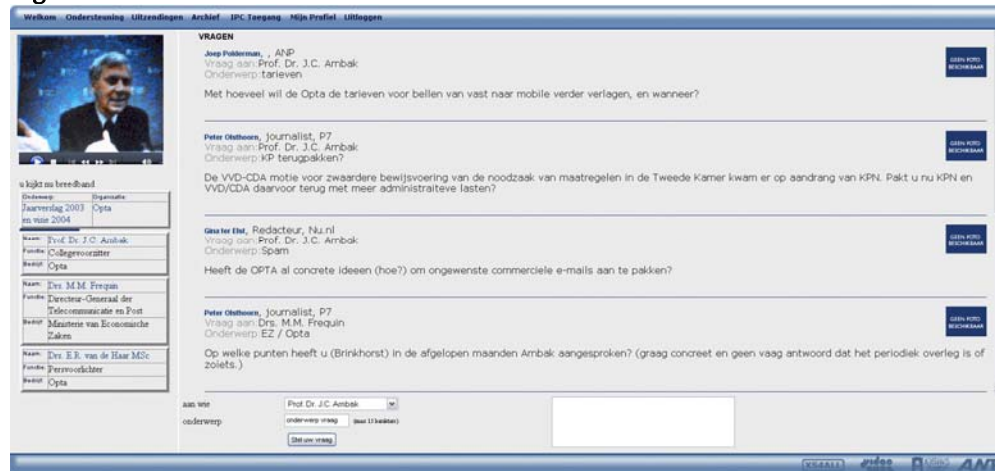
Fig. 1



The floor plan in fig. 1 shows what the ‘live’ seating arrangement looked like, with the press officer on the left from the journalists’ point of view, the CEO in the middle and the civil servant on the right. In front of the press officer is a laptop showing e-mail questions as they come in and behind him, on the wall, is another screen for everyone – the ‘live’ journalists in particular – to see what’s on the press officer’s laptop screen. This means that the two persons on the panel, the CEO and the civil servant, cannot normally read the e-mail questions unless they turn around or bend over to look at the press officer’s screen.

Fig. 2 is a screen shot of what the absent journalists got to see on their PCs. Most of the screen is filled with the absent journalists’ e-mail questions as they come in. In the column on the left is a set of factual details about the press conference (including names of those in the panel) as well as a tiny screen showing who is talking.

Fig. 2



4. Method

My analysis of the data presented in this paper is essentially inspired by the methodological framework of interactional sociolinguistics, combining close scrutiny of the details of the talk at hand with careful consideration of the context in which it unfolds, including – in this case – the restrictions and opportunities linked up with the technological and institutional setting. In addition, I have argued elsewhere in this volume, along with a number of co-authors, in favour of linguistic ethnography as an effective way of going behind the scenes and investigating what’s happening inside the newsroom (NT&T position paper this volume). So the question could be raised to what extent the present paper could be called ethnographic.

Since we are dealing with an online news production here, my approach might be viewed in terms of what Hine (2000) has called ‘virtual ethnography’, an approach that seems to bring quite a number of challenges compared to more traditional modes of ethnography. To begin with, virtual ethnography is time- and space-shifted, which means that the ethnographers and their



participants are not sharing the same time or space frame, thus challenging the traditional conceptualization of ethnographic authenticity. Secondly, virtual ethnography is bound to be focused on digital, written texts, which seems to clash with a romantic legacy in ethnography treating speech as the primary mode of communication. Finally, virtual ethnography is highly reflexive, with the ethnographers' private on-line interactions taking up centre stage.

On closer scrutiny, it could be argued that the preliminary investigation presented here falls short of being a full-fledged ethnography. To begin with, there's been no long-term fieldwork engagement of any kind and I have not engaged in any extensive interviewing. Although I have thoroughly familiarized myself with this new press conference service offered by ANP through its website as well as through extensive e-mail contact, clearly as a researcher I have not tried to gain any confident status whatsoever with the actors involved and there's been no direct and intimate exposure to the subject culture. What my approach does have in common with the ethnographic mode of investigation, is that I do not aim at generalizing; I have focused on anecdotes and single cases not rules and patterns. In addition, since my research perspective coincides with that of the absent journalist, there's a clear self-reflective, insider's dimension to the findings presented here. Incidentally, this means that, just like the absent journalists, I could not clearly understand the questions asked by the journalists who are present at the press conference and so I had to rely on the press officer's reformulations.

All this implies that while this study does not fall under the heading of ethnography, it does point to the ethnographic potential of the topic under consideration as far as more large-scale follow-up research is concerned.

5. Results

At the very beginning of the press conference, the press officer refers to a double mediating challenge that he is facing. On the one hand, he has to present the absent journalists' e-mail questions to the panel (and of course to the journalists who attend the press conference live).

(1) die kunnen eventueel euh wat vragen nog stellen die zullen dan op het scherm hierachter geprojecteerd en die zal ik dan wel in het vragenhalfuurtje euh euh der in fietsen als het als het ware.

they can erm still ask a couple of questions which will be projected on the screen behind us and I will erm erm integrate them so to speak in the q&a.

On the other hand, the press officer has to repeat the questions asked by the journalists who are present for the sake of their online colleagues since, for technical reasons, the latter cannot hear those questions.

(2) dat ik euh tijdens de vragen zal ik wat herhalen euh in de microfoon. Euh dat is even dubbelop zeg maar.



*that I erm during the questions I will repeat a little bit erm in the microphone.
Erm that'll be double..*

We will first look at the way the press officer presents the absent journalists' e-mail questions to the panel and to the journalists who attend the press conference live before turning to the way in which he repeats the questions asked by the journalists who are present for the sake of their online colleagues.

When it comes to the way in which the press officer mediates the absent journalists' e-mail questions to the panel, at first sight the new format seems to offer *enhanced direct access*. In fact, all of the absent journalists' questions in our data are 'forwarded' to the panel; none of them are passed over. In addition, most of them, even the elaborate and multi-part questions, get read verbatim. Here's an example:

- (3) Ik wil even een paar vragen van de meekijkers om het zo maar even te zeggen euh behandelen. Euh de heer Polderman van het ANP vraag zich af met hoeveel Opta de tarieven van het bellen van vast naar mobiel wil verlagen en wanneer dat gebeurt.

*I'd like to erm deal with a couple of questions from the onlookers so to speak.
Erm mister Polderman from the ANP is wondering how much OPTA is willing to reduce the telephone charges from landline to mobile phones and when this will happen.*

where the journalist's original e-mail question was:

- (4) Met hoeveel wil Opta de tarieven voor bellen van vast naar mobile verder verlagen, en wanneer?

How much will OPTA reduce the telephone charges from landline to mobile phone calls, and when?

This finding seems in sharp contrast with what Thornborrow found in her work on radio phone-in programmes and on the way e-mailing listeners saw their interventions integrated into the programme by the presenter: her overall conclusion, in line with what Clayman & Heritage (2002) say about the fragmentation in press conferences, was that the power of the e-mailing questioner is seriously limited by the mediated structure of the interaction (2002).

On closer scrutiny, however, there are a number of observations which lead us to conclude that what we have here is no more than an *illusion of direct access*. To begin with, unlike journalists who are present, the online journalists cannot in any way control *when* their questions will be presented to the panel. As a matter of fact, most questions in our data get seriously delayed. As the press officer says at the start of the Q&A:

- (5) Zoals u al ziet op het scherm, komen de vragen al binnen. Maar ik wilde eerst toch de gelegenheid geven aan de vertegenwoordigers van de media hier in de



zaal om euh wat vragen aan de heer Arnbak of natuurlijk de heer Frequin euh te stellen. Wie mag ik het woord geven? Als u even uw naam naam en medium zegt.

As you can already see on the screen, the questions are coming in. But first, I'd like to give the opportunity to the media representatives in the audience here today to erm ask questions to mister Arnbak or, of course, mister Frequin. Who'd like to go first? Please state your name and medium.

Interestingly, it's not just the questions that get delayed: answers get delayed as well. Here's the CEO reading the question on the screen of the press officer's laptop and inserting a three-second pause, which would be very unusual in a standard press conference but looks like a perfectly normal and acceptable way for the CEO to buy precious time in this hybrid setting:

- (6) Mag ik even meekijken nog een keer? (3) OK concrete ideeën hoe we ongewenste commerciële e-mails opvangen. Als dat euh dat is een moeilijke in die formulering van wat is ongewenst wat de ene ontvanger wenst, wenst de andere misschien niet. ...

Mind if I take another look? (3) Okay concrete ideas about how we deal with unsolicited commercial emails. If that erm that's a hard one if you talk about unsolicited what one recipient wants, the other may not want

Another reason why I believe that the impression of direct access for the online journalists is no more than an illusion is that there is no opportunity for asking probing follow-up questions. In fact, in this respect online press conferences seem even worse than the traditional press conferences which Clayman has analysed. Here's an example from our data, where it would have been natural for the journalist to clarify his question, if he had been present:

- (7) PO: Nog een vraag. KPN heeft een verzoek ingediend om telefonie via ADSL aan te bieden aan bedrijven. Wat vindt Opta daarvan?

Another question. KPN has filed a request to offer IP-based telephony to companies. How does Opta feel about this?

CEO: KPN dient veel verzoeken in bij Opta. ... Ik weet niet wat hier in het bijzonder wordt bedoeld ...

KPN files many requests with Opta. ... I do not know what it is you are referring to here.

At the end of this sequence, the press officer directly turns to a new question and so there is no way in which the absent journalist can intervene.

That direct access is no more than an illusion is perhaps at its clearest in the following extract, where the press officer is reading out another online question, but not in any neutral way



at all. When he gets to the tricky part (where the journalist is overtly criticizing OPTA), the press officer (who is of course on OPTA's payroll) seems embarrassed to voice the journalist's criticism and therefore adds a 'smiling' intonation to signal that, in Goffman's terminology, he is a mere animator, an unwilling sounding box, a neutral or not so neutral transmitter, and not at all the author or principal of these words.

- (8) OK, dan nog een andere vraag der achteraan euh van de heer Olsthoorn euh De VVD-CDA motie voor zwaardere bewijsvoering van de noodzaak van maatregelen in de Tweede Kamer kwam er op aandrang van KPN, stelt de heer Olsthoorn. Pakt u nu KPN en VVD/CDA daarvoor terug met meer administratieve lasten?

Okay, here's another question erm from mister Olsthoorn erm. The VVD-CDA motion for increased furnishment of proof for measure necessity in the Lower Chamber was a direct result of KPN's insistence, argues mister Olsthoorn. Is more red tape your way of getting back at KPN and VVD-CDA?

The same seems to be happening in the first part of (9) as well as at the end, where the press officer can only just refrain from answering the question himself instead of leaving it to the civil servant.

- (9) En de heer Olsthoorn is helemaal goed geïnformeerd, zo blijkt, op welke punten heeft u, ik neem aan dat u dan meneer Arnbak is, Brinkhorst in de afgelopen, neen, dat begrijp ik niet, Op welke punten heeft u Brinkhorst in de afgelopen maanden Arnbak aangesproken? Ik neem aan dat het een vraag is voor de heer Frequin dan. Euh en daar wil de heer Olsthoorn dan graag een concreet en geen vaag antwoord. Eu ja dat ... maar het is aan u om een antwoord te geven, meneer Frequin.

And mister Olsthoorn seems to be really well-informed, it seems, on which issues did you, I'm assuming it's mister Arnbak, Brinkhorst in the past, no, I do not understand. On which issues did you, Brinkhorst, address Arnbak these last couple of months? I'm assuming it's a question for mister Frequin then. Erm and mister Olsthoorn would like a concrete and not a vague answer. Erm yes that...but it is up to you to answer, mister Frequin.

Another reason why this extract is very interesting is that the press officer seems to struggle with the deictics of the journalist's question. In reading the words from the e-mail out loud, the press officer gets confused about who the word 'you' is meant to refer to and he only manages to get the question right after one or two false starts. As a result, the impact that the question would have had if it had been asked by a 'live' journalist gets lost completely. The same goes for the additional remark included in the journalist's question, viz. that he expects a concrete and not a vague answer: in the reported speech mode of the press officer, the remark is a far cry from what it could have been if the journalist himself had been talking to the panel.



So far we have seen that the hybrid technological format in our data seems to strengthen the position of OPTA's press officer and, hence, of the people in the panel. Let's now turn to the press officer's second mediating challenge, which has to do with the way in which he repeats the questions asked by the journalists who are present for the sake of their online colleagues. Again, it looks like the press officer and the people in the panel turn out to be the winners while the absent journalists as well as the journalists who are present lose out. Take the absent journalists first: it's not just that they see their own questions seriously disfigured in the forwarding process, as we have shown above; our data show that they find it very hard, if not impossible, to understand the interaction triggered by the questions of the journalists who are present. As we've said, the press officer has to repeat the questions asked by the journalists who are present for the sake of their online colleagues who, for technical reasons, cannot hear those questions very well. In reality, the press officer fails to do this job properly. In one or two cases, he simply forgets about repeating the question altogether and limits his own intervention to passing on the floor to the intended receiver:

(10) *Inaudible question asked by a live journalist.*

PO: De vraag wordt doorgeleid aan de heer Frequin.

The question is for mister Frequin.

CS: Het antwoord is ja. Dat doen we.

The answer is yes. We do.

The result is of course that the sequence above doesn't make any sense to the absent journalists.

Even when he doesn't forget about the absent journalists, the way the press officer repeats the questions can hardly be called satisfactory. Although our analysis is of course seriously hampered by the fact that we find ourselves in the position of the absent journalists and so do not know what the journalist's original question sounded like, there is clear evidence that the press officer's reformulating work leaves the online journalists out in the cold; far worse, it also makes the questions of the journalists who attend the press conference live a lot less effective. This is how the press officer summarizes a 34-second question:

(11) De vraag is of er nog meer alternatieve netten zouden moeten ontwikkeld en of Opta daar een rol ziet voor zichzelf.

The question is should even more alternative networks be developed and what role Opta sees for itself.

Although, just like the online participants, we have no clue what the journalist really asked (apart from a couple of disconnected snatches here and there), there can be no doubt that the press officer's repeat is an extremely concise summary (at best) of what must have been an elaborate, multi-part inquiry. Interestingly, in answering the question, the CEO conveniently orients to the press officer's summary and not to the original question with all its tricky details, although it can



be assumed that, just like the press officer who is sitting right next to him, he did hear that question. (12) is the press officer's summary of a 48-second question:

- (12) Ik probeer even samen te vatten. Is Opta bereid of bevoegd om nummers sneller af te laten sluiten. Eu met name waar het gaat om informatienummers en dat gewoon weer in relatie tot spam over de telefoon mobiele telefoon.

I'll just try to summarize. Is Opta prepared or licensed to shut down numbers more quickly? Erm specifically when it involves information numbers and this again in relation to telephone spam mobile phone spam.

The least we can say is that in terms of Clayman et al's (2007) analysis of aggressiveness in question design the journalists who attend the press conference live are forced into a format that allows them less initiative, less directness, less assertiveness, less hostility. In fact, in (12) the press officer starts smiling when he says that he'll "try to summarize". In other words, he seems aware of the impossibility of his task to render the journalist's question correctly and of his impact on the way the journalists and the members of the panel interact. In (13), where exceptionally the journalist's original question came through loud and clear for the online journalists (as well as for myself as researcher), the press officer may not be aware of his reformulating impact, but the result is probably no less damaging: the journalist's question is asked with a rising intonation, it sounds eager and sharp; the press officer's repeat has a falling tone, it comes across as flat and meek.

- (13) J: Zijn er al contacten met buitenlandse toezichthouders over de verdere aanpak van spam?

Are there any contacts with foreign watchdogs about the policy on spam?

- PO: En ik moet de vraag even herhalen voor de meekijkers zeg maar. Dus zijn er al contacten met buitenlandse toezichthouders over aanpak van spam.

And I have to repeat the question for the onlookers so to speak. So are there any contacts with foreign watchdogs regarding the policy on spam.

In (14) the personal question aimed at OPTA's CEO is reformulated with an impersonal passive and the CEO is happy to continue on this impersonal note:

- (14) J: Heeft u een onderzoek gedaan naar hoeveel spam er komt?

Have you researched how much spam there is?

- PO: Is er onderzoek gedaan naar hoeveel spam er komt?



Has research been done to see how much spam there is?

CEO: Het is heel duidelijk dat mensen die zelf heel actief zijn op het net of organisaties die heel actief zijn op het net die worden ook meer slachtoffer van spam want hun e-mail adres komt meer in omloop.

It's very clear that people who are very active online or organizations which are very active online that they are falling victim to spam more so because their email address circulates more.

In (15), finally, the press officer is clearly transcending his role as a go-between by asking the journalist for clarification before he passes the question on to his CEO.

(15) PO: Is de kwestie met KPN opgelost? Ik neem aan dat u dan refereert aan de zomer.

Has the KPN issue been resolved? I presume you are referring to the summer.

J: Ja.

Yes.

Overall, it can be concluded that our analysis of the second challenge that the press officer is facing has shown that the special participation framework in our data doesn't just leave the online journalists with less direct access than what they may have been hoping for. The journalists who are present seem to suffer just as much: as the press officer repeats their questions, they lose lots of their complexity, assertiveness, initiative and directness. In other words, the range of possible actions available to both categories of journalists, live and online, appears seriously reduced as an indirect result of the special participation framework we have analysed here.

6. Discussion

The preliminary analysis of an online press conference presented here points to a further fragmentation of the news production process: as a result of the press officer's mediating efforts, the speakers on the panel (the CEO and the top civil servant) seem less constrained by the journalists' questions, both live and online, and they are able to exert greater influence on the discussion agenda. In other words, there seems to be good evidence of a continued shift in the interactional balance of power in favour of the news source (who could even be called a 'news manager').

Of course more work is needed on issues of voicing and access as well as power relations in online press conferences. In particular, more ethnography-based work is needed (both virtual and real) to further explore the various parties' fears and hopes about the new format as well as the future development of press conferences on the Internet in particular and its implications for news



production processes in general. As OPTA's press officer said at the start of the press conference that we have analysed here:

- (16) Euh dat zou dus tot consequentie hebben op termijn dat wij hier mekaar nooit meer zien omdat u gewoon op uw redactie blijft en euh via internet allerlei dingen kunt vormen volgen. Euh maar zover is het gelukkig nog niet. Ik hoop ook dat u niet als journalist er al te zenuwachtig van wordt dat er allerlei al dan niet hoge heren van uw organisaties mee kijken maar ik neem aan dat dat allemaal wel meevalt.

Erm this would, in time, lead to a situation in which we never see each other because you can just remain in your newsroom and follow all sorts of issues online. Erm but we're not there yet. I do hope that you as journalists don't become too nervous over the fact that would-be hot shots of your organization look on but I presume it will all be okay.

The bleak picture painted by the press officer is no more than a distant nightmare at this stage. In fact, the Dutch press agency ANP has since given up its online press conference service. Here's what one of the organization's sales administrators told me about this in a personal e-mail communication.

- (17) De dienst is om een aantal redenen stopgezet. Onder andere omdat het technische proces te ver af stond van onze core business.

The service has been suspended for a number of reasons. Among others because the technical process was too far removed from our core business.

Could it be that the journalists, both live and online, didn't feel happy with the new format because of some of the limitations pointed to in this paper? One thing we know on the basis of our complete 2004-2006 corpus is that towards the end of the period the online journalists' active participation started to decline quite dramatically, with only a handful – or in one or two cases – no questions at all asked through e-mail. It remains to be seen what a more wide-ranging research initiative in this area would reveal.



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