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The production of a newspaper interview: Following the story at the business desk of a Dutch daily

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Abstract

Based on 4 years of work experience in a newsroom, this article analyses in detail how news interviews are produced at the business desk of a Dutch daily newspaper. It focuses on the power dynamics, multiple social interactions and reciprocal exchanges which govern its production. The main case is an interview conducted with the president of the European Central Bank. Decomposing the production process in three stages (arranging an interview, conducting and publishing it), the article ‘follows the story’ from the beginning to end. In particular, it shows how the power balance between journalist and source shifts during the production process, how the outcome of the interview is governed by a range of relations other than the one between interviewer and interviewee and how conflicts over interview authorization are solved and social ties reproduced through opportunistic reciprocity between the journalist and his source.

Keywords

Financial journalism, media sociology, news interview, newspaper journalism, symbolic interactionism

Introduction

The news interview is ‘the archetypal act of journalism’, as Michael Schudson (1995) put it. But how interviews are produced by journalists has so far received little attention. The genre is generally studied as product rather than process: through, for instance,

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conversation analysis, scholars have sought to understand how culture, ideology and power structure the way journalists and their sources talk to each other during the actual interview; how questions are framed; or how both attempt to define and re-define the interview agenda (see, for example, Clayman et al., 2007; Clayman and Heritage, 2002; Ekström and Fitzgerald, 2014).

Developing a relational perspective, this article seeks to understand the power dynamics, institutionalized rules and reciprocal exchanges involved in the production interviews at the business desk of a Dutch daily newspaper (cf. Tuchman, 1980). In doing so, it 'follows the story', from the moment an interview is arranged until it is finally published (see Boyer and Hannerz, 2006; Cottle, 2007; Hout and Jacobs, 2008). The article is based on 4 years of observations conducted when the author worked as a journalist for *de Volkskrant*, one of the main newspapers in the Netherlands.

A better understanding of how newspaper interviews are produced is first of all important because of the prominent role of the genre in the rise and legitimization of modern journalism (Schudson, 1995). Second, interviews are one of the main tools journalists have at their disposal to 'make' news: information provided by interviewees frequently serves as the 'raw material' for a news story (Clayman and Heritage, 2002: 1; Gans, 1979). Third, they deserve attention within the sociology of journalism in particular because it is a 'social' genre par excellence: compared to reporting based on documents such as press releases (Hout and Jacobs, 2008), referencing other media (Reinemann, 2004) or official reports and data released by, for instance, government institutions, the interview revolves around social interactions between the journalist and his sources (Ekström and Fitzgerald, 2014). These interactions are not confined to conducting the interview itself, but include among others the creation and maintenance of social ties to sources which enable a journalist to arrange the interview or the negotiations involved in getting approval of separate quotes or an entire interview text before it gets published.

Fourth and finally, since news interviews tend to be conducted with prominent government officials, politicians, chief executives of companies or other members of societal elites, studying their production is particularly apt for a better understanding of the power dynamics between the field of journalism, on the one hand, and the fields of, for example, politics and business, on the other. On the one hand, some strands in journalism studies have voiced concerns that business and political elites, aided by a rapidly increasing number of public relations (PR) officers and spin doctors, are increasingly able to set agendas and get privileged access to the media (Davies, 2008; Doyle, 2006; Ewen, 2008; Tambini, 2010). On the other hand, alternative strands stress the persisting power of journalists and see the interview, which is used to perform the media's watchdog role, as exemplary of this power. Empirical studies within these strands show how journalists develop strategies to interrogate their sources (Ekström and Fitzgerald, 2014), how they define the topical domain and force the interviewee to remain within this domain (Clayman and Heritage, 2002) and how they edit the interview text, compressing and simplifying the interviewee's answers, selecting quotes and framing them in a way which suits their journalistic interests (Nylund, 2011). Studying television interviews, Nylund (2011) argues that

many interviewees experience that both the outcome of the news item as well as the interview is predetermined by the news reporter. The interviewees feel that they cannot really influence the content of the interview and are only obliged to accomplish the story line for the news report made by the news reporter. (p. 483)

In short, the power struggles between journalists and their interviewees seem to be particularly precarious and unsettled. Studying interviews enables scholars to understand the power dynamics in empirical detail. While the way television interviews are produced has recently started attracting scholarly attention (see, for example, Ekström and Fitzgerald, 2014; Ekström and Kroon Lundell, 2010; Kroon Lundell, 2010; Nylund, 2011), newspaper interviews, and interviews with members of financial elites in particular, have remained by and large unstudied (cf. Doyle, 2006; Velthuis, 2015).

Building on newsroom studies as well as recent studies of interviews and the journalist-source relations they come out of (see, for example, Davis, 2009; Dindler, 2015; Ekström and Kroon Lundell, 2010; Nylund, 2011; Reich, 2006), my relational perspective makes the practices, tactics, strategies, but also the rules and restrictions of journalists in preparing and conducting business interviews in the Netherlands visible and tangible (cf. Boyer and Hannerz, 2006; Velthuis, 2006). The assumption is that these practices, tactics, strategies, as well as rules and restrictions are not deliberately chosen by individual journalists, but are institutionalized and are giving the interview production process a durable, predictable character (cf. Ekström, 2002).

In order to study this process, I divide it into three stages: the preparation stage (which includes arranging an interview and making an interview questionnaire), the interview stage (which can itself be decomposed into the actions and interactions between journalist, interviewee and usually a press officer right before, during and right after the interview) and the publication stage (which includes writing the interview up, getting authorization from the interviewee, publishing it and managing the effects which its publication may have).

The contribution of following the story from a relational perspective is threefold: first of all, while previous studies of interviews have focused on the interactions between the interviewer and the interviewee, I show that interactions with a host of other actors are all involved in the production of interviews as well. For instance, who is interviewed, which questions get asked and answered or how disputes arising in the authorization of an interview are resolved should be seen as the outcome of recurrent interactions, not only between journalist and source but also between the former's colleagues and competitors at other media outlets as well as the latter's PR officers.

Second, following the story allows me to develop a more fine-grained understanding of the power dynamics between the interview and the interviewee. While media critiques frequently focus on the first stage of the production process in which elite sources manage to get privileged access to the media or on the second stage of the process in which those elites and their spin doctors control which information is released, how this happens and what is censored (Cottle, 2000; Davies, 2008; Ericson, 1989), they have devoted scant attention to the final stage in which journalists are usually empowered and have the means to 'bully back': they can decline to publish interviews in spite of having promised

the contrary, write up an interview selectively, try to create a riot between one source and another or change quotes after they have been agreed upon. In short, decomposing the interview into stages enables me not only to provide a more encompassing understanding of how the interview is produced. It also shows how the power dynamics between source and journalist change and shift during those stages (cf. Reich, 2006).

Third, while some studies have emphasized the increasingly antagonistic nature of interviews (see, for example, Clayman et al., 2007; Ekström and Fitzgerald, 2014), I show that both the interviewer and interviewee (or his PR officers) are keen on reproducing and cementing social ties, among others, by engaging in reciprocal gift exchange (cf. Davis, 2009). For instance, at times, journalists consciously and willingly let themselves be 'bullied' (by, for instance, publishing an interview that they would per se not deem worthy of publication) because they expect from or implicitly agree with their source that valuable information or scoops at a future occasion will be delivered in exchange. Far from entailing altruism, this reciprocity is informed by the expectation that both parties need each other in the future (cf. Gouldner, 1960). Indeed, I use the term opportunistic reciprocity to emphasize that exchange of services and information will continue only as long as this exchange benefits both parties, and may be halted as soon as the interests of both parties are no longer served.

The focus of this article will be on the interview as a newspaper *genre*: the interviews which I study are invariably conducted in order to be published as such in the business section of the newspaper. The interview as a journalistic *tool*, which may be used to source information which is subsequently integrated into a news or background story or which is used for research purposes only (cf. Ekström and Kroon Lundell, 2010; Nylund, 2011), will be disregarded. Although many aspects of their production are identical, the interview as a newspaper genre is more intricate and therefore lends itself better to the analytical purposes of this article: arranging, conducting, writing and authorizing them involves more and more varieties of source-journalist interaction than is necessary for the production of an interview as a journalistic tool.

Methodology

This article is based on observations of business journalists conducted between the winter of 2004 and the summer of 2008, when I interrupted an academic career in order to work 4 days a week as a financial journalist at the Dutch daily newspaper *de Volkskrant* (for 1 day a week, I remained affiliated with academia). *Before* starting at the newspaper, I decided to use my work experience for a sociological study of how economic news gets produced.¹ Soon after starting, I obtained permission to do so from the editor of the business section and the newspaper's editor in chief. During the 4 years I worked in the field of journalism, I was able to observe and was socialized into the journalistic practices, interactions between journalists and their sources and newsroom routines which structure the daily production of news (cf. Tuchman, 1980). Although immersing oneself in the field by actually working in it is rare in journalism studies, the method has been frequently used by sociologists and anthropologists alike for various purposes. For example, James Spradley and Brenda Mann (1975) conducted a now classical study of gendered interaction patterns in an American college

bar, based among others on the second author's experience working as a cocktail waitress. Michael Burawoy (1979) sought to understand the functioning of capitalist exploitation of labourers by working himself in a steel plant. Matthew Desmond (2007), who financed his undergraduate and graduate studies partially by working as a fire-fighter in Arizona, used his work experiences in an ethnography of the profession's 'pace, sound and dynamics' (p. 271). More recently, Bowen Paulle (2013) worked as a teacher in deprived neighbourhoods of New York and Amsterdam and wrote an ethnography of violent urban schools based on his experience. Unlike these ethnographies, however, the purpose of this study is not to generate a general 'feeling for the field'. Instead, I use rich, ethnographic data in order to 'follow the story', which in turn allows me to understand how an interview gets manufactured.

Although immersing oneself in a field comes with obvious risks, the advantages are that, getting socialized into being and acting as a journalist, one can gain a deeper and more encompassing understanding of the business journalist's habitus than would be possible on the basis of interviews or short episodes of participant observation. Following Bourdieu (1990), I define habitus as 'systems of durable dispositions' which 'generate and organize practices' within fields (p. 53). Another advantage is that I was able to engage in and study the various ties which the news production process is embedded in, including ties to sources, their PR representatives, fellow reporters, the newspaper's editors, colleagues at rival journals and (imagined) audiences. I tried to manage one of the key risks of immersing oneself – the inability to distance oneself from the research object resulting in a conflation of the emic and etic perspective – by keeping a daily diary and talking regularly about my experiences as a journalist with (ex-)academic colleagues (cf. Kanuha, 2000). The fact that my immersion in the field was never complete is attested by the nickname – 'the professor' – which some of my direct colleagues at the newspaper kept using. Moreover, with an academic background in cultural sociology, I went into the field 'armed', as Loic Wacquant (2009) put it,

equipped with your theoretical and methodological tools, with the full store of problematics inherited from your discipline, with your capacity for reflexivity and analysis, and guided by a constant effort, once you have passed the ordeal of initiation, to objectivize this experience and construct the object – instead of allowing yourself to be naively embraced and constructed by it. (p. 119)

With a daily circulation of – at the time the fieldwork was conducted – 280,000 copies and 225 journalists (of which 15 were working for the business section), *de Volkskrant* is the second largest newspaper of the Netherlands and the country's largest 'quality newspaper', as it calls itself. My fieldwork covered the newspaper's newsroom, but also over 200 press conferences of private companies and public economic organizations, meetings of mostly international organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), conferences, product launches or round-table discussions where journalists are invited. As a staff journalist, I had to attend daily editorial meetings. I observed informal interactions in the newsroom and, at informal meetings or formal press conferences of companies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or government bodies, interactions between journalists of competing newspapers and between

journalists, their sources and their sources' press officers. Of all (self-)observations, detailed notes were taken in the form of daily diaries.

In total, between April 2004 and June 2008, I wrote 743 articles, varying in length between less than 200 and over 2000 words. Of these articles, 72 were published as interviews. In this study, one interview, with Jean-Claude Trichet, at the time the president of the European Central Bank (ECB), will be followed in particular. The focus on the interview with Trichet serves to enhance the generalizability of my findings since it was conducted with journalists of three other European newspapers of similar size and reputation. Their actions, interactions and responses to requests made by the ECB could be observed in detail and were found to be highly similar to those I had come to know as routine-like and legitimate at *de Volkskrant*. Moreover, the interview with Trichet is a representative case because the power dynamics, interactions and negotiations involved in its production are encountered in most of the other 71 interviews as well. Given that the procedures and interactions in producing the interview were particularly tedious, it presents a magnifying glass for the dynamics which are present in the production of other interviews as well, albeit less visibly.

The preparation stage

Arranging the interview

On Wednesday, 20 June 2006, an invitation from the head of the press and information division of the ECB arrived by email to interview its president, Jean-Claude Trichet. To be contacted by an organization who 'offers' one of its members (usually the CEO, president or director) for an interview was a common practice. The production of 24 of the 72 interviews (33%) I conducted was initiated by the interviewee or, more commonly, his or her PR employee or agent. The offers tended to be framed in terms of 'exclusivity' (meaning that other media would not be offered the interview opportunity), or a scoop of some sort was promised.

A detailed analysis of the way interview requests are handled goes beyond the scope of this article. For now, it suffices to say that interview offers were more likely to get accepted at the business desk of *de Volkskrant* when the organization is considered to be elite, powerful or prestigious (cf. Zelizer, 2004). Most of the offers were however sent by PR agencies hired by smaller organizations which have no PR department of their own, no direct, personalized ties to the media and which are not covered routinely by journalists (Doyle, 2006; Ryfe, 2006; Tuchman, 1980). Those offers made on the occasion of, for instance, the release of a new product, a new marketing campaign or a new CEO were unlikely to be accepted at *de Volkskrant*. Usually, they were not even responded to (cf. White and Hobsbawm, 2007). One office ritual in the newsroom was to turn down such offers as rudely as possible, or to tease a colleague by transferring the call of a persistent press officer to him or her, telling the press officer, tongue in cheek, that 'my colleague will surely be interested'.

Offers to interview a high-ranking official were usually made on the basis of pre-existing social ties between the journalist and the official (cf. Peterson, 2001: 69; Tuchman, 1980). Those ties came into being through introductions by colleagues, through repeated

interactions between press officers and journalist at, for instance, press conferences or through former colleagues who had ‘switched sides’ and became press officers themselves (see also Grafström and Pallas, 2007). For instance, at *de Volkskrant*, access to high-ranking officials at the World Bank (including its president) was enabled by a former befriended colleague at a competing Dutch newspaper who continued her career as a press officer of the development bank. Less frequently, offers came without the presence of pre-existing ties, but were directed to a journalist because of the institutional reputation of the newspaper or because he was known by PR officers to cover a specific topic which the interview invitation fitted with.

The invitation of the ECB, which fell into the latter category, came with many strings attached. For instance, the format would be a group interview²; the interview text had ‘to be checked from our side for its final accuracy ahead of the publication’, while ‘any single answer given by the President’ had to appear ‘in its original form as approved in the English version, without arbitrarily shortening it’ (email from Head of the ECB’s Press and Information Division).

Almost invariably, agreements were made between an interviewer and an interviewee at *de Volkskrant*, for instance, considering the length of the interview, the topics that would and would not be addressed (cf. Grafström and Pallas, 2007) or the right of the interviewee to check the interview text on factual errors or to authorize it. In the case of Trichet, the demands were many and particularly tight. Especially, the imposition of the question and answer (Q&A) format and the prohibition to publish fragments of answers went against everyday editorial practices at *de Volkskrant* and could even be seen to conflict with the rules for news production codified in the Dutch Code of Journalism.³ Therefore, after reading these demands, I called out the name of the chief of the business section, who walked to my desk and read the ECB’s email over my shoulder. ‘Those conditions are absurd, who does he think he is? Even the queen does not have such strict rules for conducting interviews’, she remarked. But since we were concerned that the ECB would approach the main competitor of *de Volkskrant* if we would decline, we decided to consult the editor in chief and make sure we had his backing. Known by reporters in the newsroom to be concerned about the status of *de Volkskrant* vis-a-vis its competitor, he quickly agreed with the ECB’s demands. The prestige of publishing an interview with Trichet, and the risk that this prestige would be conferred upon the main competitor, outweighed the journalistic value of autonomy in determining the interview’s format.

What to ask?

Interview questions were usually not written up by journalists individually, but were the outcome of interactions with colleagues and competitors. Five days before the interview was scheduled, and 1 day before a joint list of questions had to be sent to the ECB, I asked my colleagues during lunch what they would like to know about Trichet. Later on, I repeated the question to colleagues whose desks were adjacent to mine. One of them answered,

We have pieces about the ECB and the interest rates all the time. But who cares about them? My mother certainly not, and me, to be honest, neither. Those pieces remain so flat. I don’t have

a clue what type of guy this Trichet actually is. That's what I would like to know. Does he have a family? What does he do in his free time? About what types of things in society is he concerned, I mean, not inflation, but real societal issues. Does he care about the environment? Is he interested in art? What music does he listen to?

Both me and other colleagues smiled. The colleague who had spoken up was known to find business affairs generally boring. She herself wrote about food and invariably emphasized 'human interest' because, she argued, otherwise 'my mother will immediately skip the business pages and that would be a pity, we should make sure it is also interesting for her' (cf. Doyle, 2006). While the email sent by the ECB had not stipulated what type of questions were and were not to be asked, the other colleagues and I judged her human interest questions as inappropriate.

After having asked colleagues, I requested the archivist assigned to the business section to retrieve interviews with Trichet which had appeared since he took office, as well as recent pieces on ECB policy in leading business media such as *The Economist* and the *Financial Times*. About half an hour later, the archivist returned with a small pile of articles, which I read or skimmed through, underlining passages which I deemed important, putting question marks in the border for issues which were in need of clarification and typing questions on my computer. When I started working at the newspaper, the head of the business section who coached my first steps in the newsroom had instructed me to use the archivist when preparing for important interviews.

Apart from providing background information about the interviewee, previously published interviews could point at controversial issues to be pursued during the interview, and could thereby indicate where news might be 'found'. However, the practices of talking to fellow reporters and reading previous interviews conducted by other media also resulted in news isomorphism (see, for example, Deuze and Marjoribanks, 2009; Reinemann, 2004). It directed journalists to similar themes and types of questions and steers them away from, for example, the lifestyle questions suggested by my colleague. This became evident when the other three journalists involved in the joint interview sent in their questions: 14 of the 19 questions I had come up with turned out to overlap with or even be identical to some of theirs. Given the technical nature of central banking, relying on previous interviews and not deviating from the type of questions that are usually asked provide certainty and legitimacy to the interviewer (cf. Ericson, 1989).

The interview stage

One week later, upon arriving at the ECB, and after going through the building's security checks, we were all welcomed by the bank's press officers. We engaged in informal interactions and the type of small-talk ('It's great to finally see you in person', 'I very much liked the background story you had in *de Volkskrant* on last week's rate decision'), which was common for the pre-interview stage. These types of informal, pre-interview interactions served among others to cement social ties between journalists and their sources and to exchange information which may be useful to both parties (cf. Dindler, 2015; Nyland, 2011).

While talking, the press officers had escorted us to the 35th floor of the building, where the president's office is located. Having arrived there, the interaction order changed, in ways which can be understood from a Goffmanian perspective as a switch from the backstage to the front stage (cf. Dindler, 2015). Small talk dropped dead. The press officers and the journalists distanced themselves from each other, thereby symbolizing their oppositional roles within the field of journalism. Initially, Trichet (or 'the president', as the press officers and other staff members would invariably refer to him) was sitting behind his desk, finishing up other business, while we were seated around the long conference table. We all remained silent until Trichet arrived at that table as well. In the meantime, we had put our tape recorder close to the head of the table where he would be sitting. Trichet welcomed us, shook hands with each of us in a collegial manner and inquired whether all practical details about the interview had been agreed upon with the press officers. After he sat down himself, we were invited to ask the first question. The press officers remained present during the entire interview, as was customary for many of the interviews I conducted. Usually, they intervened only to fill in the blanks (for instance, when the interviewee did not remember a specific event, person or date), to remind the interviewee of the interview's agreed upon main topic and summon him not to sidetrack too frequently or when he thought that the interviewer did not abide to pre-agreed rules.

As previous studies have noticed, the actual interviews I conducted were generally characterized by antagonistic interactions: I sought information which enabled me to 'make news', to hold the interviewee accountable for his organization's past actions or results or to interrogate him critically about future policies. Conversely, the interviewee needed to make sure he did not mistakenly release new, confidential information, defend and explain his own actions and decisions and protect his organization's reputation. The antagonistic interactions were, however, governed by a set of shared, informal rules. For instance, a strong distinction between on and off the record was made, which was safeguarded by cues such as the switching on and off of the tape recorder (cf. Dindler, 2015). Likewise, when a phone rang or a secretary entered the office of the interviewee with an urgent message, my colleagues and I routinely switched off the tape recorder and did not incorporate the information we might hear, at least not directly, into our articles. In the execution of this rule, both personalized trust (built up specifically between the journalist and his source) and, as in the case of Trichet, generalized or institutionalized trust (related to generalized role models within the field of journalism) were involved (Davis, 2009). Moreover, the on/off the record rule was enforced by self-interest: I realized that if I would use what is said off the record, access to my source would be curtailed in the future.

Right after the interview, the journalists were escorted out of Trichet's office by the press officers. 'What did you think of it', one of them asked. 'Do you think you will be able to make news out of it?' Press officers thereby sought to find out how the interview will be written up. If, on the basis of these probes, they thought that a risk of negative publicity existed, they would try to manage that risk immediately by, for instance, reframing the content of the interviewee to me. Conversely, I would try to extract additional or contextual information from the press officers or check their interpretation of what has been said.

Post-interview interactions also served the relational purpose of mending or cementing social ties. For instance, after an interview with an IMF director, the latter remarked that ‘the cooperation was really nice’, while a CEO complemented me and a colleague with ‘the excellent level of preparation’. These interactions were, as Ekström and Kroon Lundell (2010) put it, ‘a way of neutralizing a hostile relation proposed and performed in the interview’ (p. 180; cf. Schudson, 1995: 75).

The publication stage

After the interview had been conducted, an interview text needed to be written and, in 31 (43%) of all the interviews I conducted, sent to the interviewee for authorization. In all but three cases, the interviewees requested amendments to the text, which, I noticed, was common practice for my colleagues as well. In 12 interviews, (some of) these amendments were refused, resulting in authorization conflicts of varying intensity. These conflicts could arise because of the fictional nature of the newspaper interview. The text which was published would frequently resemble only to some extent what had originally been said during the interview: when I did not use a tape recorder, it was sometimes hard to read and make sense of the interview notes I had made. Other fictional elements entered because spoken language needed to be transformed into written language. Finally, since no interviews could be printed entirely, I had to select excerpts and could manipulate their meaning through the contextual frames in which they were put. In doing so, the interests of myself and my colleagues usually diverged sharply from those of the interviewees. We had an interest in writing up interviews as ‘hard’ or ‘sharp’ as possible, stressing aspects which are considered newsworthy, ‘juicy’ or controversial. The interviewee, by contrast, needed to promote himself or herself and the organization he or she works for, defend his or her actions or promote a new policy or product (cf. Velthuis, 2015).

Three types of authorization conflicts

In my interviews, three different types of authorization conflicts occurred, sometimes simultaneously. First of all, interviewees claimed that they had not used a specific word or uttered a specific phrase which appeared in the text. This type of conflict only occurred when no tape recorder had been used. Second, they argued that a statement which was included in the interview was meant as off the record or claimed that they were not authorized to make the statement, and would therefore like to withdraw it. Third, interviewees complained that the context in which their statements were presented in the text had been changed, thereby changing their meaning as well.

The authorization conflict regarding the Trichet interview was of the second type. Upon returning to our respective countries, each of us took care of part of the transcription. All parts were subsequently compiled and sent to the ECB’s head of the press and information division for authorization. Three days later, the ECB returned a thoroughly revised text, in which some sentences or entire paragraphs had been added, others had been removed and again others had been rewritten. For instance, during the interview, Trichet had expressed a preference for a ‘European solution’ to the takeover battle for the

stock market operator Euronext which was taking place at the time of the interview. He hoped that the German company Deutsche Börse would buy Euronext instead of its American competitor New York Stock Exchange. Also, Trichet said that in 2004, the ECB had raised the interest rate against the – as he phrased it during the interview – ‘bad advice’ of a number of international institutions including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the IMF. In the revised text, both phrases had been removed. Trichet’s PR officer insisted on the latter amendments because it would be part of the ‘institutional etiquette’ as she called it in emails, of the world of international financial organizations to not criticize each other publicly. For the same reason, a phrase had been added in which the governors of the national central banks of the respective countries of the participating newspapers were acknowledged.

Three of the four journalists were dismayed and refused to accept the amendments. As one of them remarked in a collective email to both his fellow interviewers and the ECB’s press department,

his answers were interesting and direct, the kind of answers that a reader can relate to. Now in many places they have been replaced by wooden and empty stock phrases that the ECB regularly disseminates in its public relations material.

In justifying our refusal to accept amendments in communication with interviewees, we would emphasize responsibilities towards readers and emphasize the watchdog role which readers would expect us to play. Letting sources interfere with their texts would undermine this role, eroding trust of the public in newspaper journalism (Zelizer, 2004). Moreover, in newsroom interactions among colleagues at *de Volkskrant*, it could negatively affect a journalist’s reputation if he was known to let himself be ‘bullied’ by press officers (cf. Peterson, 2001). As one of the editors of the business sector exclaimed when he was editing an article of one reporter,

I get a completely different text now. That is not possible. Half an hour ago I get this phone call from [a reporter] that he is still waiting for approval of the text from [a big Dutch bank; the reporter had interviewed one of its top managers]. Now he sends me the new version. Half of the text has been rewritten. All the juicy parts disappeared. Other parts now almost state the opposite of what he had originally written up. Why did he allow them to do that? It is almost like [big Dutch bank] outsourced their pr-work to [the reporter]. I want to talk about this at the 10 o’clock [editorial meeting] tomorrow, it’s not the first time he does this, and it’s unacceptable.

Resolving authorization conflicts

Authorization conflicts were resolved in a bargaining process which had three characteristics. First of all, I as well as my interviewees had a shared interest in reaching agreement over a text since we usually had long-term relationships. The interviewee knew that in case no agreement was reached, I could retaliate by publishing negatively or not at all about him or her or his or her organization in the future (cf. Davis, 2009). Vice versa, I understood that the interviewee or his or her press officer could retaliate by blocking access. As Schudson (1995) puts it, ‘The reporter’s dependence on the words and views of the interviewee for his or her reputation, or even livelihood, is balanced against the

interviewee's vulnerability to public exposure or need for public recognition controlled by the journalist' (p. 75; cf. Kroon Lundell, 2010: 180).

The second characteristic of the bargaining process was the reciprocity involved: I would agree to leave some key passages in the interview text unchanged in exchange for which the interviewee was allowed to amend other passages which were crucial to him. Third, the bargaining process had a highly opportunistic character: if the quid pro quo did not result in an interview text which both parties are satisfied with, threats instead of favours were likely to be exchanged. The interviewee's main threats were to block access of the journalist or the entire newspaper to the organization, or to file a complaint at the Dutch Press Council ('Raad voor Journalistiek'). Conversely, journalists at *de Volkskrant* would occasionally threaten to stop coverage of the organization altogether or to put the audio file of the interview on the web for the entire public to listen to. The credibility of these threats depended on a mutual assessment of the extent to which both parties need each other. Indeed, the authorization stage had characteristics of bargaining processes studied by game theory, including the possibilities of cooperation, threats, bluff, retaliation and reconciliation (see, for example, Muthoo (1999) for an overview).

The authorization process of the Trichet interview had these characteristics as well. Most amendments which the press department had made were either cancelled because the ECB after all did not think they were crucial or, in exchange, were confirmed because we could live with them. The conflict focused on two key amendments (the 'preference for a European solution' and 'bad advice'), which for both sides were not negotiable. When the head of the business section was briefed about the authorization conflict, her first response was 'well, that's really unacceptable', and continued to wonder out loud: 'How often do you need those people there in Frankfurt?' She considered proceeding with the publication of the original version of the interview text, even if this would have a negative impact on ties with the ECB. Following the third bargaining principle, *de Volkskrant* then threatened to refrain from publishing the interview altogether, and publish a news piece about how the ECB 'bullies' the media instead (cf. Doyle, 2006). Likewise, the Finnish journalist threatened to put the mp3 file of the interview on its newspaper's website. Apparently, the threats were considered credible since the head of the press and information division responded with a new compromise text. After another round of internal consultations with other editors, *de Volkskrant* decided to agree to this compromise. It was accompanied by a side article which described the stringent conditions of the interview and argued that the newspaper had 'highly exceptionally' agreed with these conditions because it would be the only way to get access 'the most important monetary policy makers of Europe'. In the article, a parallel was drawn to embedded journalists covering war situations, in which similar restrictions apply (cf. Allan and Zelizer, 2004).⁴

Publishing the interview text

While or after interview texts were authorized, I had to start negotiating with the business section's editors about the timing and length of publication. In doing so, I would compete with direct colleagues for 'space' which our articles would occupy on the business section's pages. The outcome of these negotiations depended among others

on the question whether other, competing media also interviewed the person, whether there was 'news in the interview' which should need to be published urgently and how long the interview text was. In the case of a long interview which 'does not contain news', it would sometimes take more than a week before the interview would be published. This would then happen on a day with 'empty pages' (a day in which few articles are filed by reporters), or for a day when the composition of the page in terms of subject matter (for instance, a lot of Dutch, company-related news) benefited from inclusion of the interview.

While the publication of some interviews went by and large unnoticed, others resulted in informal compliments at the coffee machine from colleagues, comments during the editorial meetings (which contributed to a journalist's status), feedback from the editor in chief. Also, in case the interview contained news, other media would refer to the interview and a political response could ensue (e.g. a member of parliament asking questions to cabinet members). Moreover, the interview usually affected the social tie between me and the interviewee. If the interviewee was satisfied and had served his or her interests, the tie would be strengthened, frequently resulting in better access and favours coming my way. For instance, after an interview with the minister of environment, which had put him in the media spotlight at a crucial moment in the parliamentary year, his press officer continued to supply me with (small) scoops afterwards. In case of the Trichet interview, although the press officers after publication expressed dismay about the side article, this did not have a noticeable impact on the tie: only a couple of months later, when Trichet visited Amsterdam, I received an invitation for a background meeting with him.

Conclusion

Based on 4 years of ethnographic fieldwork at a main national newspaper in the Netherlands, this article has analysed how news interviews are produced. In order to understand the *modus operandi* of interviewing and study the rules which govern the production process, it has 'followed the story' from the initial stages, in which interviews are prepared and requests are made, to the final stage in which the interview is published.

Advocating a relational perspective, I have argued that the interview production process does not solely evolve around journalist-source interactions but is also structured by the professional ties, collegial ties and sometimes friendship ties which news production is embedded in. In turn, the interactions of journalists with his or her colleagues, superiors, sources, PR officers and competitors are governed by institutionalized interaction rules. On the one hand, these ties have an enabling character. Attesting to the collective nature of the production process, they assist journalists in getting access to desirable interviewees; obtaining valuable, newsworthy information during the interview; or contributing to a list of interview questions.

On the other hand, the network of ties which news production is embedded in has constraining effects as well. For instance, they may prevent a journalist from asking questions which sharply diverge from those of colleagues and competitors in previous interviews, resulting in news isomorphism (Deuze and Marjoribanks, 2009). Also, they may contribute to the intensity of authorization conflicts between the interviewer and the interviewee. In these conflicts, journalists are concerned about their reputation among colleagues, which is

at stake if they let the interviewer make what are considered to be excessive amendments. At the same time, letting interviewees amend some passages is frequently warranted in order to reproduce social ties, which are valuable in the future. Indeed, the interview production process is characterized by opportunistic reciprocity, in which mutual favours, valuable information and authorization to amend passages in interview texts are exchanged as long as interests of both parties are served. If news production essentially evolves around 'a process of sourcing and negotiation' (Hout and Jacobs, 2008: 64), this article demonstrates that the interview is the genre par excellence to study this process.

Given the ethnographic method which was used to collect data, the generalizability of my findings may obviously be limited. Fieldwork, including repeated interactions and extensive conversations with journalists from other Dutch 'quality' newspapers and from other European and North American countries, suggests that some of the rules which govern the interview production process at *de Volkskrant* are institutionalized elsewhere as well. This fieldwork was conducted during and after press conferences, at annual meetings of both national and international organizations such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the IMF, as well as during cooperation with journalists from three other European countries for the joint interview with Trichet.

Nevertheless, some of the findings may be specific to (1) the Netherlands, (2) business journalism and (3) newspaper journalism: research in the tradition of comparative media systems (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) suggests that the character and intensity of relations between journalists and sources may differ across regions, with Southern European countries characterized by a higher degree of 'parallelism' between media and politics. Anecdotal evidence moreover suggests that rules regarding authorization differ between continental and Anglo-Saxon newspapers. Likewise, how interviews are produced at a business desk may differ from, for example, a sports or political desk. For instance, in the production of political news, interactions between sources and journalists are more frequent and intense. The fact that political journalists, unlike business journalists, spend most of their time in the presence of their sources (e.g. inside the parliament) results in different patterns of interactions and reciprocal gift exchange (Davis, 2009; Dindler, 2015). Finally, although some of the social dynamics are similar to those previously found in studies of television interviews (Kroon Lundell, 2010; Nylund, 2011), differences exist as well. For instance, in television interviews, the pre-interview stage is even more important and may serve as a rehearsal stage for the actual interview, while the post-interview authorization process frequently does not exist. Future research should demonstrate more systematically to what extent the findings of this study are indeed generalizable across national borders and types of journalism.

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Notes

1. I did so because, first of all, I hoped that this would facilitate a possible return to academia and, second, because I had been told that ethnographic studies of financial journalism in particular were few.

2. The other three newspapers involved were the Italian *Corriere della Sera*, the Finnish *Helsingin Sanomat* and the Portuguese *Diário de Notícias*. See <http://www.ecb.int/press/key/date/2006/html/sp060627.en.html> for the final interview text (last accessed on 5 January 2012).
3. See <http://www.nvj.nl/ethiek/code-voor-de-journalistiek/> (last accessed on 10 January 2013).
4. This 'solution' fits in a broader trend within the media: at a time when the credibility of the media is questioned, they have increasingly become reflexive about the constructed nature of news and try to explain to their public how news stories come about (Karlsson, 2010).

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