Press conferences

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Introduction

In many political systems, the press conference is an institutional arrangement of public political communication, and has, as Kumar (2007, p. 255) puts it, ‘come to be regarded as part of the foundation of democratic government’. It gradually progressed during the twentieth century from controlled and confidential, off-the-record meetings between leading politicians and journalists into an arena for public accountability with great significance for the news production cycle (Eriksson & Östman 2013). A press conference takes place on the political institution’s initiative to announce policies, decisions, and so on, but occasionally also for handling challenging events, such as accidents, catastrophes, or even political scandals. There are differences between national contexts, but as a communicative genre, press conferences are characterised by certain standards (see Bhatia 2006; Eriksson, Larsson & Moberg 2013; Kumar 2007). The events are typically embedded in political processes and normally announced through press releases. The two main parts of the events involve the pre-planned speech by one politician (or sometimes two or more) and a question-and-answer session in which journalists pose questions. Through the subsequent news-construction phase, journalists process these different instances of talk and other information into news items that provide the public with a chance to know about politicians’ actions.

The following chapter focuses on how politics and political actions are publicly performed, negotiated, and transformed (recontextualised) in the context of press conferences. It will show how power is exercised and negotiated in different phases of the communication processes, and how it relates to language and discourse on different levels. The chapter is based on research from disciplines such as conversation analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, media discourse analysis and historical approaches to political communication and governmental PR. This research ranges from detailed studies of press-conference interaction (see e.g. Clayman et al. 2006, 2007; Clayman & Heritage 2002; Ekström 2009; Eriksson 2011) to broader approaches focusing on the origin and the development of press conferences as a forum for PR activities (Kumar 2007; Larsson 2012). Although there is now a growing body of research on political press conferences, two national contexts and forms of press conferences, in particular, have been explored most thoroughly: press
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conferences with the Swedish government (see e.g. Eriksson 2011; Eriksson & Eriksson 2012; Eriksson, Larsson & Moberg 2013; Larsson 2012) and those with the President of the United States of America (see, e.g. Clayman et al. 2006; Clayman & Heritage 2002; Clayman et al. 2007; Kumar 2005, 2007). This chapter relies extensively on these studies and it is organised as follows. In the next section, we describe the historical development of the political press conference. Thereafter, we discuss it as a genre, comprising a mix of sub-genres. This is followed by a section describing the different activities of talk that are crucial for press conferences. The chapter ends with a discussion on how the press conference is integrated into the news-production cycle and explores the recontextualising power of news journalism.

Historical developments: the organisation of public political performances

In many countries, press conferences are a routinised and frequent form for meetings between journalists and politicians. They are public events in the sense that they are often broadcast live (via traditional television or the web) and they generally receive extensive news media attention. In contrast to other public events, such as news interviews, a political press conference takes place on the initiative of a political institution and is an arrangement where the politician meets many journalists at one time. The form for press conferences has altered over the years – they started as informal off-the-record meetings to which chosen reporters were invited – but they nevertheless emanate from a need to communicate with the public and to handle the pressure of intensified media attention (Kumar 2007; Larsson 2012). Historical developments reflect changes in the strategic organisation of mediatised political performances.

Kumar (2005) describes the development of US presidential press conferences in four different steps. Although Theodore Roosevelt was the first president of the United States (1901–1909) to arrange regular off-the-record meetings with a handful of chosen reporters, the first period (1913–1933), started with the Woodrow Wilson administration (1913–1921). President Wilson saw such an arrangement as a way to reduce the total number of meetings he had to attend. These conferences were off-the-record sessions for the president to respond to questions, but reporters were not allowed to reproduce these responses without permission from the White House. Kumar (2005) depicts these meetings as ‘reactive’; the president mainly answered questions that were posed beforehand and used a limited extent of the time to make statements. In the succeeding Warren Harding (1921–1923) administration, White House staff constructed a box in which the reporters put their queries when entering the conference room. As the number of reporters was rather large – between 50 and 200 – only a few questions could be responded to and the president could choose which ones gave him opportunities to decide what should be stressed during the meeting.

During the next period (1933–1953), the conditions for press meetings altered slightly. Off-the-record exchanges were still held, but the requirement for reporters to submit questions in advance ceased during Franklin D Roosevelt’s administration (1933–1945), which affected meeting dynamics. The president would talk according to his own agenda and more thoroughly express his opinions and explanations. Another crucial change was the introduction of joint press conferences with foreign political leaders and with members of the president’s administration, arrangements that are frequently used today (see Bhatia 2006; Kumar 2007).
The most dramatic changes in the press-conference format took place during the third period (1953–1981) when press conferences were put on record and televised. An obvious consequence of that change was that presidents could no longer control what was reported or how they were cited. According to Kumar (2005, p. 183), these changes ‘transformed the forum from a low-risk to a high-risk performance’, but they also provided presidents with the possibility to talk directly to the public. It nevertheless led to increased concern about communicative strategies. Certain organisations aimed at planning and working with such strategies were established. One aspect of this was to keep press conferences to times when it seemed most appropriate, from a strategic point of view, for instance, in the evening on prime time, which gave the president a chance to reach a wide audience. Kumar characterizes this format also as part of the extended fourth period, dated 1981 to 2004, but this era involved an augmented awareness of strategic communication intended to manage the president’s exposure to an increasingly aggressive journalistic style (Clayman & Heritage 2002). As a result, the president often appeared in joint press conferences with foreign leaders or other public figures, which have become a form of press conference considered more advantageous for the president’s image (Bhatia 2006).

According to Larsson (2012; see also Eriksson, Larsson & Moberg 2013), the outbreak of the Second World War led to the Swedish government’s increased interest in having regular meetings with the press. Such meetings had, until then, been infrequent and random occurrences. The press conferences that took place four to six times a year were both a way for the government to provide information about its reaction to the ongoing war, and also an opportunity to control press reporting about the aggressors, that is, to show cautious opinions, especially about German and Soviet rulers. Normally, the information provided by the government was confidential, which meant the press was well-informed about governmental actions, but prevented from writing about them.

The arrangement of regular and confidential governmental press conferences (normally one each month with a limited number of journalists) continued after the war (Larsson 2012, pp. 266–267). It should be noted that the prime minister’s office during the 1950s comprised a minimal staff consisting of a secretary and a typist. Journalists had no problem contacting the prime minister or the secretary. In 1963, the first press officer was appointed and was so influenced by President Kennedy’s televised conferences that he launched a new form of press conference that was open to accredited journalists. The agenda was open and journalists were now free to report from them. However, these conferences never worked well; neither politicians nor journalists found them fruitful.

At the end of the 1960s and in the early 1970s, the Swedish government’s press relations changed drastically (Eriksson, Larsson & Moberg 2013). After a less successful election in 1967, the social democratic government identified a need to strengthen press relations and recruited press secretaries to the different ministries. Olof Palme, who was appointed prime minister in 1969, was clearly a ‘press-minded’ person (Larsson 2012). During his first period in office (1969–1976), he had almost daily contact with several journalists, but on some occasions, he also arranged press conferences that became the institutional form of press conferences. Contact with individual journalists had become too time-consuming and the press conference was a way to handle increased demands from the media to obtain information about governmental actions. With all the technological landmarks arising in the last decade, press conferences seem old-fashioned for today’s political communication, but they are still a crucial arrangement for political meetings with journalists. In Sweden, the number of press conferences has risen steadily during the last twenty years (Larsson 2012).
The history of press conferences in US and Sweden shows national specificities as well as general trends most likely found also in other countries. It is reasonable to see the development of more frequent and institutional forms for meetings between journalists and politicians against a background of a general ‘mediatisation’ of politics (e.g. Asp & Esaiasson 1996; Mazzoleni & Schulz 1999; Strömbäck 2008); a process of growing mutual dependency between political institutions and journalism, and increased adaptation of political strategies, performances and language to the media. Historical research on press conferences suggests that, during the twentieth century, political institutions recognised the need to communicate their policies and ideas with the public, and the press conference was one crucial means to achieve that. It was a way to handle growing media attention. Accordingly, journalism progressed during this era to become an institution fulfilling a ‘watchdog role’, legitimised as essential for democracy. For today’s political institutions, the actual organisation of press conferences involves management of public performances. Important strategic decisions concern the timing of the event and its relation to other activities, location, formats, and so on (cf. Kumar 2005).

**Press conferences as genre and sub-genre**

The press conference can be classified as a broad genre of public political talk. It is organised by political institutions with the overall purpose of releasing public statements and making officials available for questions from the public (or, more specifically, from journalists who are assumed to act on behalf of the public). Among the various genres of political talk, the press conference thus stands out as being a distinctly formalised frontstage activity. The politicians literally come forward on a stage arranged for a particular public activity. It involves the dramaturgical components that Goffman (1959) identified as central to audience-oriented performances in social interaction; the setting that provides the scenery and appropriate location for performances; the expressive resources related to the performer (speech, bodily posture, gestures, etc.); and the collaborative work of team performances (cf. Wodak 2011, pp. 8–9). In press conferences, the boundaries between the front and the politics behind the scene are also constantly negotiated. Politicians prepare speeches to announce certain messages. Journalists push the boundaries and indicate concealments in questions that go beyond what politicians are prepared to talk about. The performances may indicate an event of strategic PR activities as well as transparency and public accountability.

The rationale for this communicative genre is manifest in the generic structure comprising a number of instances for talk and interaction (Bhatia 2006). These include: an opening and welcoming, the pre-planned speech, the interactional question-answer session, the closing, and, in many cases, a session of post-interviews. The roles and resources of the participants (as chair, speaker, interviewer, interviewee and audience) are partly pre-allocated in relation to these activities. They will be described in more detail on pp. 347–349.

The research, however, also shows that there are substantial differences between types of press conferences in terms of their rationale, conventional practices and communicative styles. They can be conceptualised in sub-genres. The following are three examples: first, government press relations officials invite journalists to press conferences to announce policies, reforms and other political initiatives. These events are typically part of proactive public relations and designed to demonstrate the capacity of the government to address problems and deliver good policy. The timing and packaging of messages are often the result of strategic planning where PR managers have a central role. The frequency of such
conferences varies partly in relation to the cycles in mediatised politics. They are, for example, frequently organised to announce policy agreements between the political parties in new government coalitions and to intensify efforts to influence the media agenda during election campaigns.

The official diplomacy press conference is another sub-genre. A primary objective of these events is to display mutual relationships between governments, states, and international organisations. They are organised as joint sessions in connection to, for example, official state visits. The performances have ceremonial character, comprising a mix of official joint statements, friendly conversation and handshakes. As noted by Bhatia (2006, p. 176) the conferences represent a ‘mediatization of political actions’ in which the success and important outcomes of the meetings are often emphasised and conflicts are concealed. (The rhetorical features are further described in the next section on p. 347.) The diplomatic character of the conferences is reflected also in the interview session. In some cases, the time allotted for questions is restricted and researchers have observed a tendency for journalists to avoid aggressive questioning (Banning & Billingsley 2007). For prime ministers and presidents, diplomatic press conferences thus involve delicate performances of politeness, agreement and disguising problems, and at the same time create a lower risk of critical questions posed by journalists (Kumar 2003, p. 8).

A third and considerably different type of political press conference is that organised to manage criticism and political crises in the context of media scandals. It can be about norm transgressions of individual politicians, or serious deficiencies in governmental management of crisis situations (Ekström & Johansson 2008). Those press conferences often involve processes of blaming, articulated in acts of accusations and managed in blame avoidance strategies (Angouri & Wodak 2014; Hansson 2015). In these contexts, journalists claim to act on behalf of an accusatory public. The blaming is carefully managed in the design of questions, and its consequences for the politicians are negotiated in the interactions. Partly depending on the phase of the media scandal, the individual speech of the politician and their answers to critical and accusatory questions could, for instance, be designed as justifications, denials of the problem (that it never happened, or is not true), or public apologies (that to some extent, or fully, admit the problem). It could also involve a resignation announcement. Accountability questions are common in such interview sessions and can easily progress into a rather aggressive discourse. Emotional intensity is a common feature of these events.

It is a task for PR managers to help politicians handle media scandals. There is no simple answer to the question of what is the most successful strategy, although PR managers have reasons to generally recommend politicians to be open and apologise in order to terminate the narrative of the media scandal as quickly as possible. It also happens that politicians’ conduct in press conferences develops into new media scandals. Ekström and Johansson (2008) provide an example when a Swedish government minister invited journalists to a press conference in order to handle a criticism (and what was about to develop into a typical power scandal) regarding the appointment of the director of the State Audit Institution. The press conference, which was broadcast in the news, began with the minister reading a scripted message. This message was then repeated, almost verbatim, regardless of what questions the journalists asked. This staying-on-message strategy, however, brought extensive criticism in the media. It developed into a ‘talk scandal’ (Ekström & Johansson 2008) in which the minister’s reputation was seriously threatened. The minister transgressed the interactional norms and expectations by not responding properly to journalists’ questions. He failed in at least giving the impression of being open to answering questions asked on
behalf of the public. In the media, the minister was described as totally incompetent; he was ridiculed and asked to resign. The politician’s performance in the press conference was thus planned as a way to handle the boundaries between the front- and backstage of politics, but rather, it appeared as an act of concealment and political ignorance.

Three activities of talk

The communicative activities in press conferences constitute significantly different contexts for political performances and journalism. This is manifest in the participant roles and relationships, expected contributions and the discursive orientation to particular tasks. In this section, we describe results from studies that have analysed language and discourse within three main activities of press conferences.

The political speech

Appearances in political press conferences are characterised by discursive and rhetorical strategies aimed at achieving certain goals. The first phase is the introductory speech in which politicians have opportunities to thoroughly announce policies, justify ideas and actions, or counter critiques directed at them (often without being interrupted). Normally, such statements are carefully prepared and can, to varying extents, set the agenda for the entire event. A good example of such rhetorical strategies is given by Bhatia (2006), who studies the performance of joint diplomacy talk by political leaders from different ideological backgrounds. Based on Critical Discourse Analysis, she investigated the discursive strategies used to dispel the differences and conceal potential conflicts in a joint press conference with Chinese President Jiang Zemin and US President George W Bush. The study shows how the two presidents make use of a variety of strategies (evasions of controversial issues, inclusive ‘we’ statements, and humour and informality) to accomplish a diplomatic performance. The discourse is, however, anything but unambiguous, and Bhatia shows that the statements can be interpreted as ‘having one value on the surface and quite the opposite implied’ (ibidem, p. 200). Language, she states, ‘is used to choreograph a game of cat and mouse between the two diametrically opposed speakers’ (ibidem, p. 194).

Moberg and Eriksson (2013) explore a similar rhetorical situation when studying press conferences with the leaders of the four parties forming the Swedish government. The particular events they study are press conferences in which politicians present major policy issues. Although the four parties’ ideologies differ significantly in some important matters, it is crucial for them to appear united – to present a joint front – and this is handled through certain uses of the personal and plural pronoun, ‘we’. For instance, the prime minister, who starts the speech phase, addresses subsequent utterances from the other politicians, which is a way to demonstrate their co-ordinated opinions. He does so by repeatedly using ‘we’ to refer to the actions of the four parties as a unit. Another key strategy is the use of a block of plural pronouns, as in the following example, in which one of the politicians (the leader of the Centre Party, Maud Olofsson) underlines the four parties being united as if one:

Example 1

Politician: we are saying half of our energy shall be renewable
           we are saying that ten percent of our energy in transport shall be renewable
we are saying that we must increase the energy efficiency by twenty percent and
we are saying that we shall reduce emissions by forty percent…

(Moberg and Eriksson 2013)

Here the politician starts in the same way in four clauses in a row (‘we are saying’), and she
thereby demonstrates the government is talking with one voice. Although ‘we’ can be used
in such a way that its reference is vague and signals ambiguousness in political matter, it can
also, as Moberg and Eriksson (2013) show, be used to demonstrate a united front and tone
down ideological differences.

*The question-and-answer session*

The political speech is typically followed by a session in which journalists pose questions
and the politician provides answers. This is a moment when journalists can perform their
role as a public watchdog institution and hold politicians accountable for their words and
actions, a phase considered as absolutely crucial for the press conference as an arrangement
for political communication (Clayman et al. 2006, 2007; Ekström 2009; Eriksson & Östman
2013). The interaction involves power in at least two related aspects: the actors’ access to
the floor (territorial power), and the power over the topic agenda and actions performed,
negotiated through the exchange of questions and answers.

The journalists’ access to the floor is regulated through pre-planned arrangements and
negotiations in the interaction. Modern press conferences are public events that are often
open to all accredited journalists. The time given for questions from journalists, however,
varies. Press conferences are more or less strictly scheduled, and there are sometimes
reasons for the organisers to limit the interrogation session. This can almost reduce the event
to the individual voice of the politician.

The journalists’ access to the floor also depends on the intensity of competition during the
question-answer sessions. There are prestigious, high-intensity, live-broadcast events
involving struggles for the floor between politicians and journalists and within the group of
journalists. By asking questions in competitive contexts, the journalists not only influence
the topical and action agendas that politicians have to deal with, but at the same time, they
perform in positions of power and status. As part of their public-relations activities,
government officials, however, also issue invitations to press conferences that receive such
low interest from journalists that they are closed before the deadline.

The allocation of journalists’ questions can be pre-scheduled in different ways. There are
press conferences in which the journalists are expected to announce their questions in
advance. Often, there is a formal or informal division within the group of journalists, based
on the medium they represent and their status, which manifests itself according to where
they are seated in the room and in the order in which they are invited to ask a question.
Research based on conversation analysis has shown how the allocation of question turns is
negotiated during the interaction (Ekström 2009). The politicians have potential power in
their roles as both interviewee and as chairperson who selects the next speaker. The
journalists are often selected by the politician as a second pair part response to a hand
gesture, or they self-select and start talking without being invited. In some situations, the
politicians make use of their role as a chair to avoid risky reporters or non-preferable follow-
up questions (cf. Eriksson 2011; Eshbaugh-Soha 2003). In a study of George W Bush’s
press conferences, Ekström (2009) shows how the president uses his position to interrupt
initiatives for self-selections and follow-ups and also to prevent self-selections by latching
the selection of the next speaker onto his answering turns. Compared to individual interviews, the question-and-answer session in a press conference can be challenging for politicians if they encounter a number of journalists who have planned their best and toughest questions. However, a group of competing journalists can also be a resource for politicians who, in their role as a chair, can control the allocation of turns and, for example, interrupt follow-ups on the (normative) grounds that other people also have to ask their questions (Ekström 2009).

What has been discussed as politically controlled versus journalist-controlled press conferences are, to a large extent, the result of the various regulations of territorial power already discussed. This distinction is best understood, not as a dichotomy, but rather as a matter of degree. It can be used to explore differences between press conferences in various institutional settings, political events and political cultures. Yan and Tsan-Kuo (2012), for example, show how the regulation of question turns in the Chinese premier’s press conferences make these events highly politically controlled. The question-answer session that followed the political speech included a few questions from selected media organisations, which were mainly decided by the political administration.

The design of questions is the key resource available for journalists to not only search for information, but also to influence the interactions and the context for political performances. Based on conversation analysis, Clayman and Heritage (2002; see also Clayman et al. 2006, 2007, 2010) show how questions alternatively set the topical and action agenda that politicians have to handle in their role as interviewees. The politicians can use strategies to – either overtly or covertly – evade questions, shift the agenda and perform actions not asked for. The questions, however, create conditions and expectations in relation to the answers, which can be recognised as particular actions. Clayman and Heritage explore the variety of resources in question designs used by journalists to put pressure on politicians, to criticize and create potential communicative conflicts, without having to take a clear stance while staying within the role of a formal neutral interrogator. An often-occurring technique is to refer statements to a third party, a move that is conceived of (with reference to Goffman) as a ‘footing shift’ (Clayman & Heritage 2002). In the following example, which comes from a press conference with the Swedish government the journalist makes such a shift by referring a statement to political opponents.

Example 2

Interviewer: the opposition says that of these ten billions that you are assigning to labor market policies the main part goes to unemployment benefits is that correct?

(Eriksson, Larsson & Moberg 2013, p. 116)

In this case, the opponents are identified as the alliance of political opponents, but footing shifts can also be achieved with reference to unspecified parties in constructions such as ‘many people claim that’ or ‘critics say that’.

This research on question design has deepened our knowledge about how journalists enact the ‘watchdog role’ and critically scrutinise politicians’ words and actions in the interactional phase. A key work is Clayman and colleagues’ historical investigations of journalistic interrogations, focusing on the levels and changes of aggressiveness (Clayman et al. 2006, 2007, 2010). Based on detailed analyses of question design, they have developed a conceptualisation of five overall dimensions: initiative, directness, assertiveness,
adversarialness and accountability. The conceptualisation is applied in empirical studies of president–journalist relationships from the 1950s to the 2000s. They found that from the Nixon era (1969–1974) journalists’ questions became increasingly more characterised by directness and adversarialness, and journalists paid more attention to accountability. Generally, the study provides evidence for a normative shift in journalism in the 1960s and 1970s towards a more critical style of political interviewing. The level of aggressiveness is, however, dependent on contextual factors. The journalists, for example, tend to be significantly less critical when interviewing a president on foreign affairs.

The post-interviews

The post-interviews are, in many cases, an important part of a press conference, in particular from the perspective of journalism. In relation to the more public events, the post-interviews represent an exclusive context for questioning. The situations can be competitive for the journalists. The exclusivity not only concerns the particular questions that individual journalists would like to ask and the information and answers they hope to obtain, but in the production of broadcast news, the exclusiveness also relates to the production format as such and the fact that sound bites from individual interviews are often preferred to sound bites from the question-and-answer session. The individual interview displays journalists at work undertaking interviews. It is considered an important format to produce voices possible to use in segments of news stories. As in non-live interviews in general, these communicative activities involve particular asymmetries of relevance when it comes to power. Experienced politicians design their answers with respect to the potential to include all single utterances in a news report. However, the journalists not only set the topic and action agenda through their questions, but also decide what utterances are in the end treated as quote-worthy and how they are edited and recontextualised into the news reports (Ekström & Kroon Lundell 2010).

Press conferences and news production: the recontextualisation of political voices and actions

Press conferences are a crucial part of the news production process and the routine report on political institutions’ activities, at least for high-status media (Eriksson & Östman 2013). Previous research on news journalism shows that news production relies on detailed organisation, routinised working procedures, established networks of sources, and that following political institutions is essential (see, e.g. Tuchman 1978; Gans 1979; Golding & Elliot 1979). After all, politics is, as McNair (2000, p. 43) states, ‘the staple food of journalistic work’, and press conferences typically provide pre-scheduled events. In reporting on governmental activities, journalism at the same time demonstrates an authoritative role in democracy. It is also central to how journalists perceive themselves. They see one of the most important journalistic enterprises as monitoring politicians and political institutions (Wiik 2009).

In relationship to press conferences, journalistic work can be described as a process consisting of several different moments or phases (Eriksson & Östman 2013). As press conferences take place on the initiative of political institutions, journalists normally receive a press release announcing time, place and theme for the event. How they are scheduled and what agenda is announced partly influence editorial decisions to prioritise events and also how journalists plan and prepare for possible news stories. The activities during the press
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Press conferences – the speech, the question-and-answer session and the post-interviews – are opportunities for journalists to obtain (and produce) statements or comments that can be used to quote or cite in other ways in the news report, something that is crucial for news production (Kroon Lundell & Ekström 2010; Kroon Lundell & Eriksson 2010).

Even if the question-and-answer sessions of press conferences can be considered an ‘adversarial moment’ where the watchdog function can be performed, they are clearly characterised by co-operation between journalists and politicians. Studies of Swedish press conferences demonstrate that many of them are characterised by an exchange model (see Blumler & Gurevitch 1995) and shaped by a mutual dependency (Eriksson & Östman 2013; Eriksson, Larsson & Moberg 2013). For journalists, there are often good reasons for this. To produce news items, journalists need valid information and the collaborative approach can be a fruitful way to obtain such information.

The news-construction phase, following the interactional phase, is the moment when diverse material and data are assembled, edited and made ready for publication (Eriksson & Östman 2013; cf. Cook 1998; Reich 2006). Depending on whether the news product is published in a newspaper, aired on the radio, or broadcast on TV, the character of this moment of production will vary, but the end product – the particular news item – will be a heavily edited text. This phase thus involves discursive practices through which political voices are transformed into news and represented as particular actions.

A particular question explored in a few empirical studies is how political talk influences the news media. Based on a comparison of transcripts from a selection of US presidential press conferences from 1990 to 2010 and transcripts from the CBS Evening News, Eshbaugh-Soha (2013, p. 549) concluded that the news reports ‘rely heavily on the president’s own words’. The study measured the extent to which such words appeared in the news. The empirical result suggests that press conferences are effective ways for the president to influence the news agenda. As indicated by the author in the conclusion, the study, however, does not reveal how the words were used in the news, that is, how political voices (and actions) are recontextualised in the news discourse.

This is investigated by Eriksson and Östman (2013) who explore how statements from press conferences are compared and played out against other sources, often in ways that imply criticism of the initial political source. Criticism could, for instance, be ascribed by directly or indirectly quoting oppositional politicians, or, as in Example 3, be ascribed by journalism itself.

Example 3

One day he makes an agreement on budget policy with two EU-hostile parties, at least one of which, the Green Party, does not consider economic growth to be a central issue. The next day he puts forward a government declaration that reshuffles the cabinet with an orientation toward the EU and economic growth.

(Dagens Nyheter 7 October 1998)

In this case the text points out discrepancies between the politician’s different actions. Eriksson’s and Östman’s study show that journalists often add a high level of criticism when press-conference utterances and actions are reported in news stories, and they suggest that an adversary model is the most valid way to grasp what takes place in this phase of news production. After attending a press conference, journalists work independently of the initial source, that is, the politician, and they also include other actors. They contact other sources.
who represent alternative perspectives and can take a critical stance of the initial source. But, by using certain discursive techniques, it is also possible for journalists to criticize the initial source without using the voices of other actors. In the Swedish context, this latter form of criticism was the most common form in the news-construction phase (Eriksson & Östman 2013). This confirms previous studies showing that the various methods and devices used when voices (from interviews and press conferences) are quoted, referred to, and recontextualised in, news discourse, constitute key resources when news journalists adopt the expected critical stance in relation to the political elite (Ekström 2001).

Summary

The press conference, in its various forms, represents an institutionalised arena for political actions and journalistic interrogations. They have a ceremonial character, and they can serve as symbolic representations of public political accountability, but they are also a context in which political discourses are articulated, (re)enacted and negotiated. In this chapter, we have shown how press conferences have evolved over time as part of a growing mutual dependency between political institutions and journalists. We have suggested that press conferences are analysed as both platforms for strategic political communication, genres, contexts for audience-orientated talk and interaction, and resources in news production.

Press conferences are frontstage activities that take place on the initiative of political institutions and are characterised by discursive and rhetorical strategies aimed at achieving particular political goals, to convincingly present policies or reforms, to show a shared front (e.g. between states or within governments), or to manage criticism and crises. The introducing political speech is, as demonstrated by previous research (Bhatia 2006; Moberg & Eriksson 2013), crucial for these strategies. The following question-and-answer session is the part of the conference when journalists can perform the watchdog role by posing challenging questions to politicians. Politicians can, to some extent, regulate the talk by posing questions to politicians. The following question-and-answer session is the part of the conference when journalists can perform the watchdog role by posing challenging questions to politicians. Politicians can, to some extent, regulate the talk by choosing the next speaker and preventing follow-up questions, but journalists can nevertheless scrutinise the politicians’ words and deeds and pursue evasive or vague answers when they get the floor. It is more or less routine for high-status news media to report from press conferences, and this is the phase when political statements are recontextualised and integrated in news stories. Views from other sources can be added and played out against press-conference statements. Other information can be included in ways that imply criticism of these statements. Research on Swedish press conferences has shown that while the interactional phase is best characterised by a co-operative model, the news-construction phase is best characterised by an adversarial model as news stories generally involve criticism aimed at the initial political source.

References

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