

## Paper for DISCOURSE & SOCIETY

‘Alternative facts are not facts’: Gaffe-announcements, the Trump administration and the  
media

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## Abstract

Gaffes are actions or events that are treated as problematic in subsequent news coverage through the production of what we term here ‘gaffe-announcements’. In an analysis of news media interviews conducted with members of the Trump administration during its first 100 days, we examine how interviewees respond to interviewer gaffe-announcements.

Interviewees are seen to challenge the making of an announcement, to attempt to rework the ontological status of infelicitous talk, or to introduce the views of others who view the prior talk as felicitous. These responses lead in subsequent turns to reformulation of the gaffe-announcement, rejection of the response, or the views introduced being treated as irrelevant. These forms of response allow interviewees to avoid accepting that gaffes have occurred and allow the interviews to continue in line with normative expectations, but discussion continues on matters that are treated as negative and detrimental to the interests of the administration.

Keywords: Discourse analysis; Gaffe; Gaffe-announcement; News interview; News media; Politicians’ talk.

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### Biographical note

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## Introduction

Much has been written about the form and organisation of media news interviews, especially interviews conducted with politicians that are broadcast on television and radio channels (see for example, Clayman & Heritage, 2002; Ekström, Kroon, & Nylund, 2006; Lorenzo-Dus, 2009). As Hutchby (2006) notes, such interviews have their own political dimensions, in that both interviewers and interviewees routinely pursue their own commonly divergent interests and what is said in the context of any interview can become taken up in subsequent political debate. The media news interview, then, can be seen as a 'game [where the] participants are locked in competition' and where they 'deploy their moves strategically in pursuit of divergent goals and objectives' (Clayman & Heritage, 2002, p.25). One key element of this game is the interviewer's questions. Typically these are framed so as to challenge interviewees, presenting matters in ways that seek to elicit responses incompatible with the interviewee's claims and objectives. Challenging questions range from those set out in ostensibly 'neutral' terms to those that are more explicitly combative (Rendle-Short, 2007) but usually orient towards an outcome of 'putting the interviewee on the spot'. Interviewees for their part seek to avoid responding in ways that might be taken up in a manner that is damaging to their interests. Thus, the news interview becomes the site of challenge, rejoinder and negotiation in relation to the topics made available.

For interviewees, dealings with news media bring potential benefits and dangers. The potential benefits are opportunities to present their versions of events to a wide audience who get to hear their arguments and accounts of matters that are deemed to be newsworthy and thereby of general interest. Such opportunities can be especially welcome where conflicting versions of issues under discussion, for example the explanation for a major politician's resignation, are already circulating and a speaker can seek to advance his or her own cause (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Alternatively, media interviews offer possibilities that otherwise

are not readily available to members of specific groups, for example those deemed to be terrorists, to present their cases to a broad international audience (McKinlay, McVittie & Sambaraju, 2012). But these opportunities also come with dangers. To advance their own versions of events, speakers often have to deal with interviewer questioning that is detrimental if not openly hostile to their interests. Interviewees also have to be alert to the possibility that whatever they say might not be taken up in the ways that it is designed to be and that their talk might be treated as simply of little interest in being 'off-message' or might itself become the topic of news, if they are treated as having committed a 'gaffe'.

Gaffes, according to Hutchby (2016), are instances of talk that is 'infelicitous' in that the talk 'may be either ill-advised, or wrong; or may in fact be a genuine attempt to answer a difficult question; but crucially is subsequently *construed* as problematic' (Hutchby, 2016, p.669, original emphasis). This leads to what has been said becoming subject to close scrutiny in the media for the period that follows. Hutchby provides examples from the talk of three leaders of the UK Parliamentary Labour Party (Kinnock, Brown and Milliband), in which they described that Party's policy towards nuclear disarmament, commented unfavourably on a voter who had criticised the Party's policies, and participated in an interview by producing an almost identical response to any question that was asked, respectively. Each passage of talk thereafter came under media scrutiny and was treated as failing to provide an appropriate response to the question asked or as failing to engage appropriately with a member of the voting public. Regardless of the accuracy or intent of the politician's talk in each case, the important element for Hutchby is how such talk was subsequently taken up the media and presented as being problematic, in other words as constituting a gaffe.

In examining gaffes, Hutchby's (2016) interest lies in examining how the media take up and present what they treat as being infelicitous talk by politicians, and how this in turn is

recirculated in news media and comes to inform ensuing debate. It should, though, be noted that in Hutchby's examples, the politicians do not challenge suggestions that they have committed gaffes. In Hutchby's examples, then, what it is for some prior utterance to constitute a gaffe is treated as self-evident. But acceptance or lack of challenge are only some of the ways speakers can respond to media accusations that they have committed gaffes. In particular, these findings leave unexamined participants' own understandings of what comprises a gaffe, and how participants themselves might, in other circumstances, challenge or otherwise problematize accusations that they have committed a gaffe.

Here, we examine these issues as a participants' concern, focussing attention on what we might usefully term 'gaffe-announcements'. By 'gaffe-announcement' we mean those elements of a media interview in which a speaker treats some previous episode of prior talk as infelicitous, as in some way failing to address the issue at hand or as indicating a failure of political judgment. In particular we explore how these announcements are treated in subsequent interactional turns with an emphasis on how, and to what extent, the participants in news interviews treat such utterances as appropriately or successfully announcing that a gaffe has occurred.

To pursue this aim, we examine news interview talk between members of the administration of the Trump Presidency and the media. Following a divisive US Presidential Election in 2016, Donald Trump was sworn in as 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States on 20 January 2017. In his first full speech made in office, Trump described himself as having a 'running war' with the media, characterising them as 'among the most dishonest human beings on Earth' (Langley, 2017). The early days of his administration saw widely reported disputes between Trump and other members of his administration and the media, involving reporting of matters such as claims about the size of the crowd at Trump's inauguration, voter fraud in the 2016 election, and alleged surveillance of Trump himself in the period preceding

the election. Subsequently, at a rally held on 29 April 2017 to mark his first 100 days in office, Trump attacked the media, describing sections of them as ‘totally failing’ and as ‘incompetent, dishonest people’ (CNN, 2017). The news interview talk between members of the Trump administration and the media during this period thus provides fertile ground for examining how prior talk might be announced as constituting gaffes and how interviewees respond to these announcements.

## **Method**

### **Data**

A search was conducted for press interviews and press briefings given by Donald Trump and members of his administration during the first 100 days of the Presidency, running from 20 January 2017 to 29 April 2017. The search was restricted to interviews and briefings for which full recordings were available, and reports that were selectively compiled or polished were omitted. Initial inspection revealed that dealings with the media during this period were conducted by Trump himself and by two members of the administration: Sean Spicer, his Press Secretary, and KellyAnne Conway, Counselor to the President. Further searches were conducted for all interviews and briefings given by these individuals during the period for which recordings were available. Duplicate items were removed. The remaining recordings were transcribed to a level that included timed and untimed pauses and information on how the talk was produced, such as indications of emphasis, using an abbreviated form of Jeffersonian transcription notation (Jefferson, 2004). The transcripts were read and re-read to increase familiarity with the data. We then selected out for analysis all passages involving discussions of preceding talk between members of the administration and the media during this period and in which the preceding talk was portrayed in some respect as problematic. This process was conducted inclusively with all potentially relevant passages being selected for further analysis.

## **Analysis**

Analysis was conducted using micro approaches to discourse analysis (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008), drawing upon principles of conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992; Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) and discursive social psychology (Potter & Edwards, 2001). We focused on analysing how interviewers' questions introduced and presented previous talk as being problematic and the forms and functions of these gaffe-announcements. Analysis focused also on how participants in responding took up, challenged or otherwise dealt with these gaffe-announcements. Attention then turned to examining the consequential relevance of these responses for subsequent interactional turns. Analysis focused on the selection of lexical items, organisation of talk and the functions that specific forms of construction served for gaffe-announcers and gaffe recipients in these instances.

## **Results**

In the following extracts speakers introduce gaffe-announcements in which previous claims by members of the Trump administration are presented as not being acceptable and thus open to question. In what follows, we emphasize the status of a gaffe as a participants' concern. We focus on how talk can be organized so as to introduce a claim that a gaffe has occurred, and also on how this represents a set of interactional resources and challenges for the gaffe-announcement-recipient.

In particular, the results described below show that in mobilizing gaffe talk, three types of actions are routinely performed by the gaffe-announcer and the announcement-recipient.

1. The gaffe-announcer must produce an announcement. By 'announcement' we do not here refer to a particular grammatical form of utterance: indeed, such announcements



are often embedded within questions. Rather, we deploy this specific term to highlight the action-oriented nature of such talk. Interviewers must perform some form of conversational ‘work’ to introduce gaffe-related matters into the interaction. It is to highlight this action-orientation that we refer here to such episodes as ‘gaffe-announcements’. However, such an announcement represents a potential conversational resource for the recipient. It provides scope for the recipient to question the announcement qua announcement by indicating that through the mere act of making his announcement, the gaffe-announcer has engaged in some form of non-normative activity.

2. The gaffe-announcer must provide description of episodes of prior talk or action which attributes infelicity to such talk or action, thereby establishing that a gaffe has occurred. In response, the recipient may question whether such talk or action is properly to be described as infelicitous and hence to question whether a gaffe did occur.
3. The announcement of the gaffe must be accomplished through some form of footing. Goffman (1979; 1981) noted that in talk speakers can adopt one of several positions in relation to the views being expressed so to indicate the extent of their alignment with those views. Thus, a speaker can adopt a footing of *principal*, the person whose views are being expressed, a footing of *author*, the person who scripted the views, or a footing of *animator*, someone who is (merely) expressing views attributed to others. As Clayman (1992) notes, in news interviews, interviewers commonly adopt a footing of principal or of animator to align themselves with or distance themselves from views that might be treated as contentious. Here in the extracts below we see interviewers adopt one or other of these footings in announcing gaffes. The footing adopted, however, opens up the possibility for the interviewee in responding to

address issues raised by that footing. Of course such footing is occasioned by the local context of its production. However, while we make reference to the circumstances that may possibly occasion their use here, our analytic goal is not to explain how they arise but, rather, their interactional relevance.

In addition to examining how each of these features is incorporated into gaffe-announcements and oriented to by the announcement-recipient, we conclude each of the following analyses by exploring the interviewer's uptake of the announcement-recipient's response.

### **Challenging announcement qua announcement**

The first two extracts come from an interview conducted by Chuck Todd of NBC with Kellyanne Conway on 22 January 2017. The exchange from which these extracts are taken began with an announcement from Todd that the President had sent out his Press Secretary, Sean Spicer to present false information on the size of the crowd at President Trump's inaugural event.

#### Extract 1a

- 1 Todd Why (.) did the President (.) send out his press secretary who's not just the  
2 spokesperson for Donald Trump he could be he also serves as the  
3 spokesperson for all of America at times he speaks for all of the country at  
4 times why put him out there for for the very first time in front of that podium  
5 (.) to utter a provable falsehood it's a ↑small thing but the first time he  
6 confronts the ↑public (2) it's a ↑falsehood
- 7 Conway Chuck I mean if we're gonna keep referring to our press secreta::ry in those  
8 types of terms I think that we're gonna have to rethink our relationship here  
9 (.) I want to have a great open relationship with our press

Todd announces that a gaffe has occurred by referring to previous talk and actions involving the President and his press secretary, describing these in a manner that highlights their infelicity. Todd adopts the footing of principal, which may reflect his role as a journalist – the group of people to whom Spicer’s briefing claims were originally directed. In so doing, Todd refers to the President sending out his press secretary to make a statement on his behalf. In establishing the infelicity of this event, Todd begins by claiming that the press secretary’s statement was a ‘provable falsehood’. Todd emphasises the importance and impact of this infelicity by reference to the press secretary’s role, stating that he is a ‘spokesperson for all of America’ and ‘speaks for all of the country’. By describing the press secretary in this way, whether he utters truths or falsehoods becomes especially relevant, since as a ‘spokesperson’ he can be taken to utter those truths or falsehoods on behalf of all of those for whom he speaks.

In her response, Conway does not take up the issue of infelicity: she does not, for example, deny that Spicer lied to the public, nor does she deny that he did so under the President’s orders. Instead, she questions the appropriateness of the announcement itself by taking issue with the ‘types of terms’ contained within Todd’s utterance.

She begins her response by formulating the first part of a conditional statement: ‘if we’re gonna keep referring to our press secretary in those types of terms’. In so doing, Conway indicates that the announcement is flawed because it contains ‘types of terms’ that, although unspecified, are treated as forms of talk that can be linked to undesirable consequences. The undesirable consequences are spelled out in the remainder of her conditional claim, where she neither challenges Todd’s description of prior talk nor its infelicitous nature, but, instead, challenges the announcement itself, arguing that the very act of making announcements such as this one might result in deterioration in the relationship between the White House and the press.

At a later point in the interview, we see the interviewer's uptake of this challenge as Todd returns to the topic of his original question.

Extract 1b

- 1 Todd You did not[  
2 Conway [Yes I did.  
3 Todd [answer the question of why the President asked the White  
4 House press secretary to (.) come out (.) in front of the podium (.) for the first  
5 time (.) and utter a falsehood why did he do that it undermines the credibility  
6 of the entire (.) White House ↑press office on day ↑one

Here, we see the potential interactional difficulties associated with an interviewee challenging a gaffe-announcement qua announcement. First, in settings such as these, a normative expectation is that questions posed are followed by answers. Second, by criticizing the making of Todd's gaffe-announcement, Conway positions herself as someone who has yet to address the substance or content of the announcement. That this poses a genuine difficulty for Conway is seen at lines 1 and 2. Todd accuses Conway of not doing something, but before he can specify the nature of this failure, Conway immediately rejects the claim even though at this point in the interaction, no details have been provided of what Conway failed to do. The interactional significance of this exchange is seen in what follows, where Todd accuses Conway of failing to provide an answer to the question posed. Thus, by framing her response in the way that she did, Conway provides an interactional context in which the same question can be re-posed.

And, indeed, Todd continues at line 3 by reformulating his initial announcement and providing an explicit reason for why it is appropriate for this question to be posed. He then provides a consequence of the gaffe, stating that the infelicity of the press secretary's utterance ('falsehood') 'undermines the credibility of the entire (.) White House ↑press office

on day ↑one'. This emphasises the culpability for the gaffe in two ways. First, it broadens the scope of those damaged by the press secretary's gaffe beyond the press secretary himself to include all of those who speak on behalf of the government, including Conway herself. Second, it highlights the importance of the gaffe by arguing that it has wide and enduring consequences that affect the total administration. At the same time, in re-presenting his original gaffe-announcement and describing its consequence, Todd treats Conway's earlier criticism as irrelevant by making no mention of future White House/press relations. Thus, the original gaffe-announcement reappears in a reformulated form and the gaffe itself becomes more criticisable than in the original gaffe-announcement.

### **Attempting to rework prior talk as felicitous**

In this section, we examine a form of challenge to a gaffe-announcement based on a re-description of the prior talk that is presented as being problematic thereby questioning whether a gaffe occurred. The next extract is again taken from the interview conducted by Chuck Todd of NBC with Kellyanne Conway on 22 January 2017 and continues directly on from the exchange seen in Extract 1b.

#### Extract 2

- 1 Conway No it doesn't don't be so (.) don't be so overly dramatic about it Chuck what  
 2 it it you're saying it's a falsehood and they're giving Sean Spicer >our press  
 3 secretary< gave (.)↑alternative facts to that [but the point remains  
 4 Todd [Wait a minute alternative facts=  
 5 Conway =that [there's  
 6 Todd [Alternative ↑facts four of the five facts [he uttered the one thing he got  
 7 Conway [hey Chuck why hey Chuck  
 8 Todd right was Zeke Miller four of the five facts he uttered were just not true (.)

As seen above in Extracts 1a and 1b, Conway's challenge to the making of the gaffe-announcement qua announcement led to Todd accusing her of failing to answer his question and reformulating the announcement later in the exchange. In this subsequent turn, Conway begins at line 1 not by responding to the gaffe itself but instead by rejecting Todd's claim for its consequence, namely that the gaffe had undermined the 'the credibility of the entire (.) White House ↑press office'. She seeks to undermine this accusation, suggesting that Todd is being 'overly dramatic' in characterising the consequences of the press secretary's actions in the way set out. Thereafter Conway's statement at lines 1 to 2 'what it it' projects a description that will provide a somewhat different consequence. Before specifying what such a consequence might be, however, Conway initiates a same turn self-repair (Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks, 1977) in which that potential continuation is not pursued and she instead turns to a different claim. This indicates that she treats such a potential continuation as problematic in this context. And, indeed, were she to offer any consequence, Conway would be heard as accepting the characterisation of the press secretary's actions as a gaffe, in the terms previously set out by Todd. Her self-repair is designed to avoid this possibility and rather to respond to the reformulated gaffe-announcement and its consequences in a different way. She does this at lines 2 to 3 by arguing that instead of being described as 'falsehoods' and consequently infelicitous, the press secretary's utterances should be understood as providing '↑alternative facts'. This re-description seeks to rework the truth value of what the press secretary said, thereby constructing what he said as an alternative way of describing events that is valid and felicitous and, therefore, as not a gaffe.

This however is no mere re-description. The attempt to rework something that has been classed as 'false' to something that on a different basis can be treated as factual constitutes what has previously been described as 'ontological gerrymandering' (Potter,

1996; Woolgar & Pawluch, 1985) where matters of fact and matters of social construction become interwoven so as to meet the arguments being advanced in any particular case. Conway's description of the utterances under discussion as 'alternative facts' makes issues of what is to count as true and what is to count as false immediately relevant. But, the construction of one candidate version of events as true necessarily undermines the factual claims that can be made of any other version: speakers do not ordinarily treat directly competing versions of events as having equal claims to truth. Thus, at line 3, when Conway subsequently attempts to change the topic under discussion through the disjunction 'but', she is interrupted by Todd who, in stating 'Wait a minute', signals that the preceding talk is problematic. Todd continues by challenging Conway's reformulation. Interspersed with overlapping talk from Conway, Todd orients to the attempt at ontological gerrymandering by querying the description 'alternative facts'. He goes on to expand his previous gaffe-announcement by specifying at lines 6 and 8 the extent of the false claims made by the press secretary: 'four of the five facts he uttered were just not true'. This is followed by forthright rejection of Conway's attempted reformulation: 'alternative facts are not facts (.) they're falsehoods'. Thus, Conway's attempt to describe the prior talk as potentially felicitous is followed by outright rejection of her claim and criticism of her attempt to challenge how the prior talk is to be understood.

### **Challenging others' views that prior talk was infelicitous**

In preceding extracts, the interviewer adopted a footing of principal: indicating that what is being said represents his own viewpoint. In part this selection may reflect the interviewer's role as a journalist of the sort to whom problematised remarks were originally directed. In the next set of extracts, the interviewer adopts the footing of animator, indicating that some other party is the principal whose views are being set out. As we see below, this offers an alternative means by which interviewees may challenge the infelicity of previous

events or talk. In adopting the stance of animator, the interviewer makes relevant the judgements of another or others – the principal/s – as to whether the prior talk was indeed infelicitous. However, introducing the role of others in determining the infelicity of prior talk makes available to the interviewee the possibility of referring to alternative others who might not share such a view.

The following two extracts are taken from the question and answer session of a Press Briefing given by Sean Spicer on 16 March 2017. The questions below are asked by Jonathan Karl, Chief White House Correspondent of ABC News and focus on the President's prior claims that during his presidential campaign, his campaign base, Trump Tower, was wiretapped by the then current administration led by President Obama.

Extract 3a

- 1 Karl So Sean uh the day before yesterday you said you were extremely confident  
2 that the >House and Senate Intelligence Committees< would ultimately  
3 vindicate the President's allegation that Trump Tower was wiretapped as I'm  
4 sure you have now seen the Senate Intelligence Committee has said they see  
5 no indications Trump Tower was the subject of surveillance that seems to  
6 be a pretty blanket statement (.) what's your reaction?
- 7 Spicer Well (.) I I think there are several things (.) I'd also (.) it's (.) its interesting to  
8 me that you know (.) just as a (.) as a point of interest that when (.) when one  
9 entity says one thing that (.) uh proves (.) that claims one thing you guys  
10 cover it ad nauseam when Devin Nunes came out and said I think it's very  
11 possible yesterday (.) there was crickets from you guys when Devin Nunes  
12 came out and said there was no connection that he saw to Russia (.) crickets



13                    when Tom Cotton said the same (.) you don't wanna cover this stuff

In this announcement, Karl refers to a specific action carried out by the President: he made allegations of wiretapping. In describing this event as infelicitous, Karl adopts the stance of animator by expressing views he attributes to a major government agency. In this sense, the footing adopted again reflects the local context of its production. Karl claims that the President's allegation is unsubstantiated because in that agency's view, there were no indications that Trump Tower was under 'surveillance'. This specific accusation allows Karl to adopt an animator footing through reference to that agency. Karl presents this finding as something that he is 'sure' that Spicer will 'have now seen', thereby emphasising the determination of the infelicity. He also emphasises the all-encompassing scope of this determination in characterising the Committee's finding as 'a pretty blanket statement'. Karl also indicates that Spicer, himself, is associated with the infelicity in that he was 'extremely confident' that the Committee would 'ultimately vindicate' the President whereas that authority offered no evidence supporting the President's allegation. This undermining of Spicer's claim that the governmental committee would vindicate the President serves to emphasise the now established infelicitous nature of that allegation.

Spicer, unlike Conway in the earlier extracts, does not challenge Karl's announcement qua announcement: indeed, he orients to what Karl has said as a matter of some concern to him in that his initial response is characterised by a number of hesitations. Moreover, in continuing, Spicer produces a same turn, self-initiated repair at lines 8 to 9: 'when one entity says one thing that (.) uh proves (.) that claims one thing'. In doing so, Spicer initially refers to matters introduced in the interviewer's question by describing what an entity says in terms of proof. However, to treat that version of events as being factual would render problematic claims that might be made for other competing versions of these events. As noted above, in the exchange between Todd and Conway seen in Extract 2, Conway's attempt to introduce a

competing version of what is to count as reality met with immediate rejection and criticism from Todd: speakers do not readily accept competing version as having equal claims. For Spicer to attempt here to introduce a different version of events subsequent to accepting that the version introduced by Karl had been established as proven therefore would be problematic. What we see then in Spicer's self-initiated repair is a different form of ontological gerrymandering in which the findings of the 'one entity' under discussion are reformulated as being 'claims' and thereby open to challenge.

Following this self-initiated repair, Spicer turns attention to the issue of whose views are to be treated as relevant in determining whether an infelicity, and hence a gaffe, has arisen. In what follows, Spicer contrasts what members of the press, Karl included, 'cover' and what they do not 'cover'. The former he describes as comprising what 'one entity says' rhetorically emphasizing the extent of the coverage given to this through the extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986) 'ad nauseam' which indicates the extensiveness of such practice and offers a negative evaluation of it. The latter, what the press do not cover, is stated to comprise the talk of named individuals who could support prior claims of wiretapping. He describes the lack of press attention given to this talk through the use of the idiomatic expression 'crickets'. As Drew and Holt (1995) point out, idiomatic expressions are relatively robust and are treated as being difficult to challenge with specific factual claims or through providing further information. It is this feature of idiomatic expressions, Drew and Holt claim, that suits them to contexts of conflict or absence of support. Later, at line 13, Spicer provides an explanation for the lack of coverage given to this latter talk in arguing that 'you don't wanna cover this stuff'. In contrasting the views that Karl has cited as the basis for his claim, those that describe the President's allegation as infelicitous, with the views of others who receive no attention but who argue that the allegation was felicitous, Spicer seeks to undermine the characterisation of the prior talk as infelicitous.

The interviewer's uptake of Spicer's attempt to undermine Karl's infelicity claim appears at a later point in the exchange.

Extract 3b

1 Karl Okay so are you saying that the President still stands by his allegation that  
2 President Obama ordered wiretapping or surveillance (.) of Trump Tower  
3 >despite the fact that< the Senate Intelligence Committee says they see ( )  
4 no indication that it happened

Here, Karl refers again to the President's prior actions that were earlier described as being infelicitous. By prefixing his turn with the term 'Okay so', Karl produces his question as an upshot (Antaki, Barnes & Leudar, 2005) of the preceding debate as to the basis on which the President's prior talk should be judged infelicitous or otherwise. In asking whether the President continues to make his allegation of wiretapping, Karl characterises such an action as one in which the President 'still stands by his allegation'. As Lampropoulou and Myers (2013) have pointed out, the use of the adverb 'still' makes salient whether someone has changed his or her stance on the issue in question. Moreover, Thorne (2013) suggests that the use of 'still' indicates that such changes in position are associated with the potential availability of evidence contrary to that position. Here, Karl's use of 'still' raises the possibility that the President might have abandoned his earlier allegation. He sets this, via 'despite the fact that', within a context in which the President's allegation was found by an authoritative source to be unsubstantiated. In so doing, Karl treats the sources cited by Spicer as requiring no further comment and, instead, treats his own sources as those whose views are relevant to determining the infelicity of the prior talk. Thus Spicer is required to maintain a claim that has been signalled to be problematic or to accept that the allegation was indeed infelicitous and that the prior talk constituted a gaffe.

The next extract comes from an interview conducted by David Muir of ABC News

with President Trump on 25 January 2017. This extract comes from an exchange on the topic of controversial claims made by the President, allegedly on the basis of no evidence, that he failed to win the majority of the ‘popular’ vote in the US Presidential election due to substantial numbers of illegal votes being included in those cast for his opponent, Hillary Clinton.

Extract 4a

- 1 Muir House Speaker Paul Ryan has said I have seen no evidence I have made this  
2 very very clear Senator Lindsey Graham saying it's the most inappropriate  
3 thing for a President to say without proof he seems obsessed with the idea that  
4 he >could not have< possibly lost the popular vote without cheating (.) and  
5 fraud I wanna ask you about something bigger here (.) does it matter more now  
6 Trump There's ↑nothing bigger there's nothing bigger  
7 Muir But it is important because  
8 Trump Let me just tell you (.) you know what's important? (.) millions of people agree  
9 with me when I say that (.) if you would've looked on one of the other  
10 networks and all of the people that were calling in they're saying we agree with  
11 Mr. Trump we agree they're very smart people

Above, Muir announces a gaffe has occurred by referring to prior talk relating to the presidential election in which the President claimed that ‘he >could not have< possibly lost the popular vote without cheating (.) and fraud’. Here, Muir adopts the stance of animator, characterizing this talk as infelicitous by repeating views he attributes to two senior members of the President’s own party, the Republican Party, that they saw no evidence that would substantiate the President’s claims. Again, the selection of an animator footing is occasioned by local context. A potential problem for Trump is that his views are presented as being

inconsistent with the views of other politicians who might be expected to share Trump's Republican politics. So the precise nature of the gaffe as described makes the animator footing available for Muir to adopt. Muir further emphasizes the difficulty this poses for the President in that one of these authoritative sources is described as claiming that the lack of evidence is 'very very clear', while the other source is quoted as claiming that for the President to make this claim without proof is 'the most inappropriate thing for a President to say'. This latter description is associated with a further claim that the President is 'obsessed' with the substance of the prior talk, suggesting that the President maintains a claim that is known to be infelicitous for reasons other than its accuracy. In formulating this claim, Muir directly reports the speech of the two individuals involved. Reported speech of this type, as Buttny (2003; 2004) has noted, can serve various functions in the making of such a claim. In particular, it distances the reporting speaker from what is being said and provides the description with an apparently more 'objective' quality in attributing to other sources the views being expressed. By doing so, reported speech can function 'to give evidence for a position' (Buttny, 2004, p.98). Here, by reporting the speech of two individuals who might be expected to defend Trump's claims but who instead criticise them, Muir emphasises the evidential basis on which the prior talk is deemed infelicitous. At line 5 Muir treats the gaffe as established and indicates that there may be further grounds of infelicity in stating that there is 'something bigger' which, although as yet unspecified, is a topic he now intends to pursue.

Trump's response, like that of Spicer in the preceding extract, does not take issue with the gaffe-announcement qua announcement. Indeed, in characterising the prior events referred to as 'There's ↑nothing bigger', Trump orients to the announcement and the reference to prior events contained within it as being of real concern. However, although, at line 7, Muir attempts to switch the topic under discussion away from those prior events to 'something bigger' in claiming that that 'bigger' issue 'is important', Trump returns focus to

the prior actions that Muir had introduced by introducing a competing claim as to what is to constitute a matter of importance: ‘Let me just tell you (.) you know what's important?’.

Trump then provides a description of what is to be correctly treated as important. In so doing he, like Spicer, focuses on an issue that Muir himself has made relevant: the issue of whose views are to form the basis for determining the prior talk as felicitous or infelicitous. Thus, whereas Muir based his infelicity claim on the reported speech of senior members of Trump’s own party, Trump introduces the views of other individuals who are said to agree with his voter fraud accusations. The extent of this agreement is emphasised in terms of the numbers of individuals involved, ‘millions of people’ (line 8), the proportion of those who support Trump’s own position, ‘all of the people that were calling’, and the positive evaluation of those who agreed with him: ‘they’re very smart people’. Similarly to Muir earlier in the exchange, Trump reports the speech of those to whom he is referring. Here, Trump’s reference at lines 10 to 11 to ‘we agree with Mr. Trump we agree’ is designed to summarise the speech of a group of people who agreed with his claims (Buttny, 2004), thereby offering ‘objective’ evidence in support of his position. In addition to providing an alternative source of information that undermines Muir’s claims of infelicity, Trump also indicates that Muir’s procedures for locating adequate sources of evidence are faulty, pointing out that alternative sources would have been apparent to Muir ‘if you would’ve looked on one of the other networks’ other than his own ABC network.

Below we see the interviewer’s uptake of Trump’s attempt to introduce alternative sources on which to base the felicitous nature of his prior talk.

Extract 4b

1 Muir You don’t think it undermines your credibility (.) if there’s no evidence?

Earlier in the interaction, Muir had indicated that Trump’s prior actions were relevant to an as yet unspecified issue of broader concern, represented by ‘something bigger’. Here, he

makes specific reference to one such broader concern: through his actions Trump has damaged his own credibility. In establishing that this broader issue is associated with the infelicity of Trump's prior actions, Muir reintroduces the grounds of his original infelicity complaint by repeating his earlier suggestion that there is 'no evidence' for Trump's allegations of voter fraud. And just as Karl, in extract 3b, treated his own evidential sources as authoritative and Spicer's sources as irrelevant, so here Muir treats Trump's claims about 'millions of people' as irrelevant.

### **Discussion**

Media contexts in which public figures are interviewed by journalists represent occasions in which what has been said or done in the past may be opened up to scrutiny or challenge. One means by which interviewers accomplish this is through what we have called here 'gaffe-announcements'. Previous research has examined cases in which interviewees have explicitly or tacitly accepted that a gaffe has occurred. In the present paper we have focused instead on occasions when the interviewee seeks to avoid or undermine that announcement.

What we have seen is that gaffe-announcements embody three design features: an announcement, the formulation of prior talk or events as infelicitous, and the interviewer's adoption of the footing of principal or animator. We have also seen that each feature represents a resource for the interviewee through which he or she may seek to challenge the interviewer: either by challenging the announcement, by ontologically gerrymandering prior events or by responding to an animator footing by making relevant the views of other people.

We have also shown how such interviewee responses are taken up by the interviewer. In all of the cases examined here, interviewee responses are treated as at least potentially problematic in that a reformulation of the original gaffe-announcement is produced or another

problematic topic raised. Moreover, any attempt to rework the ontological status of the gaffe can lead to an interviewee's response being treated as implausible and to consequent rejection of what is claimed.

Given the interactional problems created by these ways of responding to gaffe-announcement, it is worthwhile considering why interviewees adopt them. For the interviewee, there are potentially two advantages in responding this way. First, although these forms of response lead to subsequent interviewer challenge, they allow interviewees to continue the interview encounter without accepting that a gaffe has occurred. Second, they allow interviews to proceed within normative expectations: questions are posed and answers provided. In this respect, what is said in such contexts may turn out to be less important than how it is said: by deploying responses that continue the competition between themselves and the interviewers, interviewees maintain the 'game' of the media news interview (Clayman & Heritage, 2002).

Beyond maintaining the 'game' of the interview, the exchanges considered here have broader implications. Pollner (2010) notes that in interaction participants commonly proceed on the basis that everyone shares access to the same underlying reality. This understanding is however a construction that can be open to challenge when participants introduce competing versions of reality in specific instances, leading to what Pollner terms 'reality disjunctures'. Here we see such reality disjunctures in two particular instances, first in Extract 2 where Conway seeks to reformulate Spicer's prior claims as 'alternative facts' and second in Extract 3a where Spicer seeks to rework what Karl has stated as being a matter that is claimed rather than proven. These attempts at ontological gerrymandering, however, fail in that in subsequent turns the interviewer in each case treats the interviewee's attempt as constituting a disjuncture from what is to be treated as reality in these cases.

What we see then is a conflict between how the President and his staff make sense of



the social world and their actions, and how the media construe these activities. When the interviewees here seek to avoid the consequences of the interviewers' gaffe announcements, the interviewers refuse to accept those responses and return to the original complaint. The interviewers thereby treat what is said in the media as constituting an authoritative record of events and hold the interviewees accountable for reality disjunctures. It is perhaps for such reasons that news media find themselves under continual attack from the President. The failure of attempts to shift discussions onto safer ground, and the refusal to accept, as relevant or accurate or truthful, what it is that Trump and his administration say results in what are announced as gaffes continuing to feature in media coverage of the administration. Notwithstanding therefore that members of the administration engage successfully in the 'choreography' of the media news interview (Clayman & Heritage, 2002), their efforts over the first 100 days of the administration to deal with questioning that was viewed as detrimental or hostile to their interests served to continue such questioning rather than to move discussions onto their preferred topics. And this continuing questioning, in turn, served to highlight the ongoing inconsistency between the claims of the administration and social reality as reported by news media.

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