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The Analysis of Confrontational Strategic Manoeuvres in a Political Interview

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to indicate how knowledge of the argumentative activity type of a political interview plays a role in a pragma-dialectical analysis of confrontational strategic manoeuvres. The author gives an account of the contextual pre-conditions created by the rules and conventions of a political interview for the performance by a politician of responses to an accusation of inconsistency advanced by an interviewer.

KEYWORDS: argumentative activity type, confrontational strategic manoeuvring, political interview

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to show how a pragma-dialectical analysis of confrontational argumentative moves can be empirically reinforced by taking into account the characteristics of the argumentative activity type of a political interview. I will demonstrate that, through a set of rules and conventions, the argumentative activity type of a political interview creates contextual pre-conditions for the performance of confrontational moves. In line with the pragma-dialectical perspective, such moves are seen as strategic manoeuvres that arguers perform in an attempt to remain reasonable while also trying to be effective.

2. THE ARGUMENTATIVE ACTIVITY TYPE OF A POLITICAL INTERVIEW

Argumentative activity types, as introduced in pragma-dialectics by van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2005), refer to more or less institutionalized argumentative practices in empirical reality shaped by specific goals and a set of rules and conventions that contribute to the achievement of the specific goals. Argumentative activity types represent communicative practices which can be described through the observation of regularities and the identification of explicit and implicit rules that participants observe and expect others to observe. They need to be distinguished from the pragma-dialectical theoretical model of a critical discussion, which is not empirically-based, but a normative ideal of what argumentative discourse would be like if it was aimed at resolving a difference of opinion on the merits. Analytically the purpose of resolving a difference of

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opinion on the merits is ascribed to all argumentative exchanges, but van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2005) point out that every argumentative activity type is characterized by particular goals and a proper recognition of these goals is preliminary to a good explanation of the specific way in which argumentation is disciplined.

In this paper, I focus on the argumentative exchanges that occur in a political interview for the purpose of holding a politician to account. In a political interview, the vital role of argumentation for the critical testing of standpoints becomes manifest through question-answer exchanges. Questions are advanced that hold the politician responsible for matters that have public implications and answers are provided that give an account of the politician's words and actions, such as his plans and policies.¹

Van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2005) propose to characterize argumentative activity types in terms of an initial situation, starting points, argumentative means and outcome, in correspondence to the four stages of a critical discussion. In the next section, a characterization of the argumentative activity type of a political interview as an implementation of the four stages for a critical discussion is provided. This characterization enables the analyst to understand the specific way in which discussion moves are performed in the argumentative exchanges when a politician is held to account.

2.1. Rules and conventions operating in the argumentative activity type of a political interview

When characterizing the argumentative activity type of a political interview in parallel to the four stages of a critical discussion, a set of conventional rules is described, which constitutes the procedure that furthers the achievement of the goal of holding a politician to account and which indicates the rights and obligations of the participants in terms of their verbal contributions. In the first place, various codified rules operate in a political interview that are explicitly accepted by the participants. In the second place, a number of implicit rules constrain the moves of the participants as they are involved in argumentative exchanges. Due to the conventional status of the two kinds of rules, the identification of the norms that occur with regularity, are intersubjectively accepted and are functionally adapted to the goal of holding a politician accountable, are of major significance for a proper characterization of a political interview as an argumentative activity type. In this paper, all references to codified rules concern general working principles applicable to the public and commercial broadcasters in the United Kingdom in general and more specifically to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).

The *initial situation* in the argumentative activity type of a political interview brings to light a disagreement between an interviewer and a politician that concerns decisions, plans or actions of the politician that have consequences for the general public. The disagreement is realized through a question-answer exchange performed for an audience constituted by the general public. The structure of the question-answer exchange can be more or less complex. In the simplest case, the interviewer asks questions about views previously expressed by the politician or asks the politician to advance standpoints on various debatable issues of “newsworthy character” (Clayman

¹ I confine myself to the argumentative exchanges between one interviewer and one politician, with a non-intervening audience, leaving aside ‘panel interviews’ or ‘debate interviews’ (Clayman and Heritage 2002).

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and Heritage 2002, p. 61), which the interviewer alone chooses. The acceptability of the standpoints expressed by the politician in his answer is put to test by the interviewer for the purpose of holding the politician responsible. In such a case, the participants externalize a multiple, non-mixed difference of opinion in which the politician expresses in relation to various issues standpoints which are doubted by the interviewer.

The difference of opinion between an interviewer and a politician becomes more complex when, in addition to doubting the standpoint of the politician, the interviewer expresses a positive or a negative attitude with regard to a decision or stance of the politician for which he can be held to account in public. In this case, the difference of opinion can be characterized as multiple mixed. Another case of multiple mixed difference of opinion occurs when the interviewer expresses an attitude in relation to a number of issues, to which the politician responds by advancing doubt accompanied by the expression of an opposite standpoint.

Clayman and Heritage (2002, p. 98), who analyze American and British political interviews from the perspective of conversational analysis, are of the opinion that due to their restriction to acts of asking questions, interviewers “cannot [...] express opinions, or argue with, debate, or criticize the interviewees’ positions.” In their view, the interviewer should maintain a neutralistic stance towards the politicians to remain within the boundaries of impartiality. However, codified rules applicable in the United Kingdom suggest the contrary. Section Five of the Broadcasting Code² makes clear that “‘due’ is an important qualification to the concept of impartiality.” While impartiality refers to “not favouring one side over another” and “due means adequate to the subject and nature of the programme,” Section 5.9 indicates that “presenters and reporters [...], and chairs of discussion programmes may express their own views on matters of political [...] controversy or matters relating to current public policy.” An important qualification is made in Section 5.10, where the Code conditions the expression of a personal view to be “clearly signalled to the audience at the outset.”

Closely connected with the principle of due impartiality is the fact that, more often than not, the interviewer criticizes the standpoint of the politician and expresses an opposite standpoint, by acting as the devil’s advocate. In order to guarantee the preservation of due impartiality, Section 5.9 sets a constraint to bring into discussion alternative viewpoints. The interviewer sees to this constraint by expressing an opposite standpoint, under the cover of expressing a standpoint of the audience. While the politician tries to give a positive account of his words, actions and decisions, the interviewer brings forward an opposite position only to ensure that he puts thoroughly to test the standpoint of the politician.

The *starting points* in a political interview include arrangements about the rules governing the discussion, the way in which the discussion is terminated and the division of the roles. First, in a political interview, participants are bound by a number of starting points that result from the codified rules established by institutions that set principles

² The current Broadcasting Code was issued in October 2008 by the Office of Communication and contains a set of principles, meanings and rules and in two cases—Section Seven: Fairness and Section Eight: Privacy—a set of practices to be followed by broadcasters in the United Kingdom. As specified in the Code (2008: 5), “the principles are there to help readers understand the standards objectives and to apply the rules. Broadcasters must ensure that they comply with the rules as set out in the Code. The meanings help explain what Ofcom intends by some of the words and phrases used in the Code.”

regarding the broadcasting activity and by a number of implicit rules agreed upon by the participants.

In the case of political interviews broadcast in the United Kingdom in general and more specifically by the BBC, the Broadcasting Code issued by the Office of Communication and the Agreement³ set a number of rules that are argumentatively relevant. In addition to the principles of due impartiality and undue representation of views established by Section 5 in the Broadcasting Code and Section 44 of the Agreement, Rule 8.1 in the Broadcasting Code restricts the content of matters discussed to those that are not an infringement of privacy, unless warranted.

Moreover, the Royal Charter⁴ stipulates in Article 23, paragraph (c) that the interviewer formulate questions that “carefully and appropriately assess the views of licence fee payers.”⁵ Likewise, editorial guidelines that regulate the content of programmes on politics and public policy⁶ specify that in political interviews “[...] arrangements must not prevent the programme asking questions that our audiences would reasonably expect to hear.” Whereas the requirement set by these documents explains why the interviewer plays the role of the devil’s advocate, it is also indicative of the fact that the question-answer procedure gains institutional significance in a political interview only if the tasks of the participants are oriented towards an audience. There is no point in trying to hold the politician to account through an argumentative exchange if there is no mutual commitment to do so for the benefit of the audience.

In addition to the formal starting points, a number of implicit rules operate on the argumentative exchanges of a political interview as intersubjectively accepted concessions. Such rules concern the discussion format, background knowledge, values, norms that participants jointly agree on. In a political interview, the discussion format is limited to an exchange of questions⁷ asked by the interviewer and answers provided by the politician, albeit that the politician can ask rhetorical questions. When such a normative constraint is violated, the interviewer sanctions the departures of the politicians from this provision by initiating a return to the opening stage. The background knowledge is presented by the interviewer, with the politician enjoying the freedom to add any other relevant facts. The various values shared by the participants include generally accepted norms, such as democratic principles, respect for each other and other people or telling the truth.

³ The full title is “An Agreement Between Her Majesty’s Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Broadcasting Corporation.” The document currently in force dates from July, 2006 and covers the BBC’s regulatory obligations. It is accompanied by an Amendment dated December 4, 2003.

⁴ The full title of the current Royal Charter is “the Royal Charter for the continuance of the British Broadcasting Corporation” and dates from September 19, 2006.

⁵ According to article 57 of the Royal Charter, a licence fee payer “is not to be taken literally but includes [...] any [...] person in the UK who watches, listens to or uses any BBC service, or may do so or wish to do so in the future.”

⁶ Such programmes concern political broadcasts, ministerial broadcasts, reports in national and international elections, reports on opinion polls, online voting, surveys, broadcasting of Parliament. The editorial guidelines of these programmes are outlined under the strict advice of the Chief Adviser Politics.

⁷ A question is not understood in the strict sense of an interrogative. While it includes the strict sense, it refers also to a declarative sentence that functions as a question by indicating that an answer is expected. Heritage and Roth (1995) use the term “questioning” in order to avoid the confusion between form and function.

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Second, as concerns the manner of termination, the interviewer decides, taking into account also time limits, how long an issue is discussed, by deciding when the account provided by the politician satisfies the expectations of the audience.

Third, from a dialectical perspective, the roles of the participants involved in the argumentative exchanges of a political interview depend on the kind of dispute in which they are involved. In the case of a multiple, non-mixed difference of opinion, the politician is the protagonist of his standpoints and the interviewer acts as the antagonist who criticizes their acceptability. In the case of a multiple mixed difference of opinion, the participants are the protagonists of their standpoints and the antagonists of the standpoints of the other.

When expressing a standpoint, once challenged to do so by the interviewer, the politician has the obligation to defend it by justifying or refuting the opinion expressed in the standpoint. He is constrained to argue his case as extensively as the criticisms of the interviewer require until he has provided an account of his words, actions or decisions that the interviewer judges satisfactory for the audience. The obligation to defend holds also for the interviewer when he expresses a standpoint. Due to strong time constraints, however, the interviewer has to argue his case as briefly as possible, in order to leave enough time to the politician to offer an extensive account. Moreover, as Heritage and Greatbatch (1991, p. 102) show, time constraints give priority to the politician to defend his standpoint first.

The *argumentative means* are the only acceptable means through which the protagonist can defend his standpoint against the critical reactions and doubts of the antagonist. The argumentative means that the participants in a political interview can use are restricted to questions for the interviewer and to answers in the case of the politician. In addition, both participants can advance arguments that concern only the words and actions of the politician for which he is publicly responsible.

From a pragma-dialectical perspective, it is important that, for a proper testing procedure to take place, argumentation is not only advanced but also critically evaluated. The participants check and decide jointly whether the propositional content and the justificatory or refutatory potential of the argumentation are acceptable. According to van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004, pp. 145-147), the intersubjective identification procedure tests whether the propositional content of the argument coincides with a proposition from the list of jointly accepted propositions in the opening stage. In a political interview, this procedure yields a positive result when the propositions used are chosen from the jointly accepted propositions that include general values, norms and background knowledge. Participants are free to make use of new background knowledge if they show that it is relevant for the aim of holding to account. In order to do that, they engage in a sub-discussion in which it is determined whether the new proposition can be accepted in the second instance as a means to hold or give an account.

In order to test the acceptability of the justificatory or refutatory potential of the argumentation, the protagonist and the antagonist can apply three procedures: the intersubjective inference procedure, the intersubjective explicitization procedure and the intersubjective testing procedure. While the application of the intersubjective inference procedure and the intersubjective explicitization procedure in a political interview is not different than in any other kind of discussion, in the intersubjective testing procedure the interviewer, due to his part as the devil's advocate, makes sure that the politician answers

all the critical questions in a way that the interviewer considers satisfactory for the audience. When the answer of the politician to the negative formulation of a critical question of the interviewer is a concession, it serves as an argument to an implicit standpoint that the interviewer wants to defend.

This standpoint asserts, more often than not, a negative account of the words and actions of the politician. The politician, however, due to time restrictions, has fewer chances for an elaborate testing of the argumentation of the interviewer. In addition, the interviewer does not leave much room for criticism and argues immediately after asking the question in support of his arguments, responding to anticipated criticism, initiating in this way a sub-discussion about the words and actions of the politician in which a sub-standpoint is expressed.

The *outcome* of a political interview, an implementation of the concluding stage of a critical discussion, is judged by the audience. An end to the difference of opinion is established by the interviewer in view of the time regulations.

2.2. Contextual pre-conditions for strategic manoeuvring in the confrontation stage of a political interview

According to the recently developed pragma-dialectical view (van Eemeren and Houtlosser 2002), argumentative moves are advanced in discourse in an attempt to achieve the final goal of resolving a difference of opinion by critically testing the standpoints advanced—a dialectical goal—and at the same time, to achieve the aim of being effective—a rhetorical goal. Trying to reconcile the achievement of the dialectical goal and the rhetorical goal gives rise to strategic manoeuvring. Strategic manoeuvring involves always making three choices. One choice is topical and concerns the selection of the argumentative move that is most effective in a certain context. Another choice concerns the way in which the move is adapted to an addressee so that it is accepted. The final choice is presentational and includes a selection of preferred verbal means.

The characterization of the argumentative activity type of a political interview helps to specify in which way the three aspects of strategic manoeuvring are contextually pre-conditioned, by indicating what possibilities are open or closed for the arguers to manoeuvre strategically. In what follows, I indicate the pre-conditions applicable to the three aspects of strategic manoeuvring resulting from the argumentatively relevant rules of a political interview for the confrontation stage.

In a multiple non-mixed discussion, the *topical choices* of the politician, as the protagonist in the discussion, are limited to the realization of the analytically relevant moves of advancing a standpoint, maintaining a standpoint and retracting a standpoint. The argumentatively relevant rules of a political interview pre-condition the propositional content of the three confrontational moves to the expression by the politician of an attitude with regard to his decisions and actions in his capacity of public figure. In addition, the politician commits himself to defend his standpoint in respect of the expressed opinion about his words and actions as acceptable, against the criticism of the interviewer and for the benefit of an audience.⁸

⁸ Ideally, the pre-conditions created by the argumentative activity type should not be an obstacle in the critical testing procedure. Restricting the topical choices to argumentative moves that concern only to the words and actions of the politician for which he is publicly responsible seems to be an obstruction to the

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The topical choices of the interviewer in a non-mixed dispute, as the antagonist in the discussion, amount to the realization of the analytically relevant moves of casting doubt on the standpoint of the politician, maintaining doubt and retracting doubt. The rules applicable to the argumentative exchanges that occur in a political interview restrict the instantiation of the three kinds of moves to a selection of issues connected to the decisions and actions of the politician for which he is held accountable and which are, in addition, relevant for the public.

In a multiple mixed difference of opinion between an interviewer and a politician, the politician is not only the protagonist of his standpoint, but also the antagonist of the standpoint expressed by the interviewer. As an antagonist, his attempts are restricted to the expression of doubt concerning the presuppositions embedded in the questions of the interviewer. As Harris (1986) points out, an interviewer advances questions that embed presuppositions suggested to be correct. The presuppositions embedded in the questions suggest a standpoint which amounts to a negative evaluation of the words and actions of the politician. Consequently, in order to provide a positive account of his words and actions, the politician is constrained to criticize the presuppositions embedded in the questions.

In a multiple mixed dispute, the interviewer is not only the antagonist, but also the protagonist of his own standpoint. As a thorough way of holding to account, the interviewer is conditioned to express an opposite standpoint about the words and actions of the politician, even when he does not believe in the acceptability of the standpoint he advances.

The *adaptation to the addressee* in the confrontation stage is contextually pre-conditioned by the intersubjectively accepted values or the shared background knowledge agreed upon in the opening stage. In the case of the interviewer, such values can be invoked to the extent to which they are relevant for holding the politician to account. The interviewer, for example, may advance a standpoint according to which the politician does not act in accordance with democratic principles. By saying that, the interviewer puts forward a standpoint aimed at holding the politician to account for his words or actions that violate such principles. In the case of the politician, intersubjectively accepted values can be invoked to offer an account of his words and actions. The politician can appeal to the principle of fairness, for example, to show that his decision to apply an unpopular measure is fair under certain circumstances. By appealing to the principle of fairness, the politician points to a shared element between him and the interviewer.

The *choice of presentational devices* in the confrontation stage restricts the interviewer to advance argumentative moves in question form, but there is no restriction as concerns the type of question. Opening up the possibility to formulate his questions under various forms allows the interviewer to choose from a broad range of questions to realize argumentative moves. The selection of a wh-question obliges the politician to accept the presuppositions embedded in the question. The choice of polar questions limits

freedom of the participants to advance standpoints, which in pragma-dialectics constitutes a violation of the freedom rule. However, the institutional pre-condition fulfills this requirement, as it allows for the difference of opinion to be fully externalized and ensures that the confrontation stage is properly completed.

the politician to an agreement or disagreement with the proposition put forward. The selection of disjunctive questions requires from the politician a choice between two alternative propositions. The presentational means of the politician exclude the possibility to formulate an answer in question form, albeit that rhetorical questions can be put forward, through which the politician can advance any of the confrontational moves.

3. EXAMPLE

In what follows, I analyze the confrontational argumentative contributions of the participants in a political interview, by showing the vital role that knowledge of the pre-conditions for strategic manoeuvring plays in the analysis of their strategic function. The example is taken from a discussion on *Politics Show* on November 12, 2006, between the BBC interviewer Jon Sopel and the then British former leader of the Conservative Party and Conservative Shadow Foreign Secretary.⁹

Jon Sopel:

And Labor say the big thing that you could do to help would be to support identity cards. It's fair to say that this is an issue that your party has rather flip flopped on isn't it.

William Hague:

Well it's... I think it's become clearer over time where we stand on this, let's put it that way, because we've got the government adopting an identity card scheme, but one that is so bureaucratic and involves a vast data base and this is the government of serial catastrophes when it comes to data bases as we all know, costing now, according to the London School of Economics, up to twenty billion pounds and we said that if some of that money was spent instead on an effective border police and strengthened surveillance of terrorist suspects, and strengthening special branch and things like that, we'd actually get a lot further.... (interjection)....having identity cards.

Jon Sopel:

Isn't that a detail of the legislation. I mean you supported identity cards back in December 2004, less than two years ago.

William Hague:

We supported, I and Michael Howard supported the principle of those. Subject to how the details were worked out. The details are not impressive and the grasp of detail and the ability to control the costs of the current government is so terrible, that it's not a scheme that we can support.

In this analysis, I focus on the strategic function of the realizations of the analytically relevant moves of expressing and maintaining a standpoint and casting doubt. The analysis of the instantiations of the confrontational moves as strategic manoeuvres becomes justified by showing how the pre-conditions for the three aspects of strategic manoeuvring influence the efforts that the interviewer and the politician make to achieve a favourable outcome.

In his first question, the topical choice made by the interviewer is a realization of the analytically relevant move of expressing a standpoint through an accusation of inconsistency. In this exchange, the interviewer takes the opportunity to bring into discussion a problematic decision of the politician that concerns the introduction of

⁹ The extract is written as transcribed on the BBC website.

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biometric identity cards. This is an issue of high interest for the audience, as imposed by the rules of a political interview, for which the politician can be held to account in public. The choice of the argumentative move is aimed at making the politician accept the inconsistency in his decision, which is the propositional content of the standpoint expressed by the interviewer. If the politician admits that he acted inconsistently, he retracts any doubt he might have against the standpoint of the interviewer. The retraction of doubt by the politician is favourable to the interviewer, who can maintain his standpoint without defending it.

In reply to the question of the interviewer, the politician makes a topical choice which is a realization of the analytically relevant move of expressing an opposite standpoint. The choice is aimed at making an attempt to defend that no inconsistency was committed, which amounts to providing a positive account of his decision. Although defending the opposite standpoint is not easy, given the seriousness of the charge, it is the only available means to provide an account as is expected from him and at making the interviewer give up his standpoint that suggests a negative evaluation of the politician.

In his second question, the interviewer makes a topical choice through which he realizes the analytically relevant move of casting doubt on the standpoint of the politician. The expression of doubt is intended to make the politician accept the doubt and retract his standpoint so that the difference of opinion concerning the introduction of biometric identity cards ends at this point in the favour of the interviewer.¹⁰ In reply, the politician makes an ultimate attempt at maintaining his standpoint, which he could try again to defend in order to give a positive account of his decision.

The strategic instantiation of the analytically relevant moves of expressing and maintaining a standpoint and casting doubt can be explained not only because certain topical choices are made, but also by the way in which participants adapt their argumentative contributions to one another. As restricted by the intersubjectively accepted rules, the interviewer tries to steer the discussion to his benefit when he upholds his doubt by referring to shared background knowledge. The interviewer reminds the politician that less than two years before, he advanced an opposite standpoint on the matter of biometric identity cards, which entitles the interviewer to accuse the politician of an inconsistency at the time of the interview. Such knowledge is relevant in this context and the politician is held to account precisely in view of this knowledge, which the politician cannot easily reject.

The strategic function of the argumentative moves is reinforced by the choices made with regard to the presentational devices. As pre-conditioned by the rules applicable to the argumentative exchanges that occur in a political interview, the interviewer advances his standpoint and doubt in questioning form. He selects in both cases a polar question which is aimed at restricting the opportunities of the politician to an explicit acceptance or rejection of what is expressed. In the context of a political interview, this choice is part of the effort to elicit an answer in which a politician provides an account for his decision. If an answer to the question is avoided, a sub-discussion is initiated in which the interviewer holds the politician to account for failing to provide an answer. This sub-discussion has relevance for the main discussion, as it shows that the politician attempts to evade providing an account.

¹⁰ Adopting the perspective of conversation analysis, Heritage (2002, p. 1432) argues that interviewers employ negative interrogatives, like in this example, in order to build 'yes' answers.

If the politician accepts the presupposition implied in the question, he admits that the decision taken is inconsistent with another decision taken two years before. If the politician rejects the presupposition, which he does, he has the difficult job to defend the opposite standpoint. While the use of the adverb *well* in his reply to the expression of a standpoint by the interviewer is not the most helpful choice, the politician steers the discussion towards a favourable outcome when he dissociates between the principle and the practice of introducing biometric identity cards. This dissociation makes possible maintaining his standpoint in an interpretation that is presented as vital. According to this interpretation, the details of putting into practice the idea of introducing biometric identity cards are essential. As the decision of the politician was always related to the details, there is, in fact, no change of position. The difference of opinion ends at this point in favour of the politician.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have shown that knowledge of the pre-conditions for confrontational strategic manoeuvring in a political interview can make manifest how institutional advantages are gained by achieving certain argumentatively relevant outcomes. I have derived such pre-conditions from a pragma-dialectical characterization of the argumentative exchanges that occur in a political interview in terms of a set of rules and conventions which implement the four stages of a critical discussion. Whereas the ideal model of a critical discussion makes possible the identification of the analytically relevant moves in the confrontation stage, the pre-conditions derived from the characterization of the argumentative activity type of a political interview permit the identification of the topical choices, the way such choices are adapted to the addressee and the presentational possibilities for realizing such moves in a political interview. The analysis of an example, starting from the set of pre-conditions for confrontational strategic manoeuvring, has shown why certain choices are made and also how to judge the effectiveness of the options adopted by the participants in a political interview.

[Link to commentary](#)

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