

Journalists' questions in political press conferences: an  
argumentative analysis of their contribution to political  
accountability

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## **Abstract**

The dissertation investigates the argumentative moves of journalists in press conferences to explain how their interventions shape discussions in these contexts. To achieve this aim, two bodies of research are used as foundation. The first one concerns research on journalistic questioning to understand the linguistic and strategic resources journalists employ when addressing authorities. The second body of research draws on argumentation theory to frame press conferences as discussions where rational exchanges are used to test the tenability of standpoints.

Press conferences pose specific challenges for being analyzed from an argumentative perspective. On the one hand, the interaction between politicians and journalists brings dialogical situations to its limits because one party, namely the politician, interacts with several parties that bring discussions to different topics, elaborate on each other's interventions, and promote different political agendas. On the other hand, the interactional rules of press conferences constrain journalists to ask questions and, therefore, questions are used in all possible ways to pursue journalists' goals.

The first paper of the dissertation develops a theoretical model to analyze journalists' questions. The model distinguishes cases where journalists use questions to convey information from cases where they use questions to request information. Since the model is developed from an argumentative perspective, the result is a typology of questions that distinguishes different argumentative moves. Additionally, the paper highlights the importance of accountability in this context, considering that accountability requires journalists to perform specific moves to appropriately evaluate the position of authorities.

The second paper investigates journalists' argumentative moves empirically. For this purpose, a corpus of twenty-one press conferences held by seven institutions was annotated. The corpus is composed of press conferences addressing issues related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Results show that journalists displayed a wide array of argumentative moves, and the findings suggest that journalists are inclined towards retrieving information unless crises get intertwined with political turmoil. The analysis clarifies the extent to which journalists retained their deliberative aim in press conferences, and how their interventions shape discussions with authorities.

In the last paper, journalists' interventions in press conferences are confronted with discussions in social media. The point of the comparison is identifying the features that characterize accountability dialogues in each forum. For this purpose, a press conference and a corpus of tweets are analyzed according to the argumentative moves of participants to see how

discussions contribute to accountability purposes. Results showed that both fora are concerned with holding politicians accountable, but each had different strengths and shortcomings. In the press conference, the discussion was more balanced, but journalists refrained from proposing solutions to the issue under discussion. On Twitter, there were plenty of arguments and opinions, but many of them were irrelevant for accountability purposes.

**Keywords:** argumentation, corpus annotation, discourse analysis, journalism, questions

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## 1 Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation is understanding journalists' questions in political press conferences and their contribution to public debates. Accordingly, the main research question is: what is the contribution of journalists' interventions to the argumentative reasonableness of discussions in political press conferences? This research question implies the hypothesis that argumentation is an appropriate framework to evaluate the quality of political press conferences. Such hypothesis will be explored and put to test in the articles that compose this dissertation. The purpose of this introduction is illustrating the initial plausibility of the hypothesis and explaining why it is worth exploring.

Journalists' interventions are important because press conferences are spaces of public accountability. In this context, politicians need to give an account of their decisions and journalists can be seen as key intermediaries in the process of discharging politicians' obligations to account for their actions. From a Habermasian perspective, journalists contribute to the existence of the public sphere by posing questions to politicians.

While political press conferences contribute to broader deliberative processes in democratic contexts, they do not constitute formal deliberative bodies where political proposals are the subject of discussion. Rather, press conferences contribute to accountability by evaluating decisions made by politicians. As will be discussed later, press conferences belong to the so-called informal accountability practices.

Press conferences present various complexities that make their analysis challenging. One aspect is the deliberative genre of discussions. Political press conferences address issues that involve decision-making, and participants are required to adopt specific values, employ certain arguments, and follow specific protocols that delimit the appropriateness of interventions. Another difficulty is the structure of these events. Since a single politician interacts with various journalists, discussions are polylogical. The topic of these polylogues, however, can switch from one intervention to another because journalists pursue different goals in their interventions, making press conferences a collection of multiple discussions. Lastly, discussions in press conferences are conducted through questions and answers. This aspect makes press conferences difficult to analyze because there are few tools to examine questions in argumentative discussions.

This dissertation develops the hypothesis that the analytical and normative principles of argumentation theory are an appropriate instrument to reconstruct journalistic questions and evaluate their contribution to political accountability. To highlight the features that make argumentation theory particularly apt for this purpose, a comparison is made with two other

analytical instruments, both originated from different intellectual traditions. One is the Discourse Quality Index (DQI) and the other the adversarialness model.

DQI is an operationalization of Habermas' ideas of the public sphere (Steenbergen et al. 2003), and it sets normative standards for public discussions. The DQI offers some insights of discussions in press conferences because they are instances of public deliberation. However, the generality of the model does not capture the specificities of discussions in this context because it does not capture the communicative features of press conferences.

The second framework relevant for analyzing press conferences is grounded in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis. The framework is focused on journalists' adversarialness, and it is designed to scrutinize question hostility in press conferences (Clayman and Heritage 2002). In contrast to DQI, adversarialness yields numerous insights into journalists' interventions, but it remains primarily descriptive. While linked to journalistic values like objectivity and criticality, the framework lacks normative criteria for assessing the quality of journalistic interventions in press conferences.

Argumentation theory, in contrast to DQI and adversarialness, provides both analytical and normative grounds for studying discussions. However, the theory does not offer specific tools for analyzing questions. Although questioning is a fundamental practice in the theory, there are no means to identify different types of questions and their implications for discussions.

In the following sections, the relevance of these models is discussed to show their significance for the objectives of this dissertation. The literature review is designed to grasp the strengths of each model and present their shortcomings in light of the main research question of this study. After presenting the models, it is explained why a new framework is necessary to account for the nuances of questioning in press conferences. The framework developed in this dissertation is rooted in argumentation theory, and it aims to retain the relevance of the adversarialness model and the normative ambitions of DQI.

### **1.1 Deliberative democracy and the Discourse Quality Index**

Habermas introduced the notion of public sphere (1989) to describe a situation where individuals come together to discuss freely and critically issues of public concern. According to the author, the public sphere is an important feature of democracies because it allows individuals to exchange ideas and criticisms that lead to the formation of public opinion and, ultimately, to hold those in power accountable for their decisions. Without the public sphere, democracies become a pretense because democracy is founded on the assumptions that deliberation is what guides political decisions and that everyone's opinion is worthy of consideration.

Institutionally speaking, the public sphere emerged within public activities, private organizations, and newspapers that were independent from governments and commercial institutions (Habermas 1989: 43-51). Although political and economic forces constraint the public sphere, the relative independence found in it allows individuals to exchange ideas to critically scrutinize them. When individuals join the public sphere, they not only have their voices heard on topics of public concern, but also, their opinions are weighed according to rational standards. This kind of exchange makes the public sphere valuable since it gives people a way of interacting where ideas are assessed rationally.

Habermas' idea of the unforced force of the better argument (1984: 25) is closely related to the public sphere. When individuals exchange ideas, differences of opinion are likely to emerge, giving rise to a rational examination of the conflicting positions. The merits and limitations of each argument are determined by the exchange of criticisms, making arguments convincing or not depending on their own strength. In this way, arguments are convincing to the extent that they are reasonable, as opposed to being convincing because of people's personal interests or external coercion. The unforced force of the better argument comes to place by the rational deliberation of individuals in the public sphere.

Habermas' model emphasizes the importance of deliberation in political processes, and it has significantly influenced political studies, particularly in shaping the notion of deliberative democracy (Bohman and Rehg 1997). To understand the notion of deliberative democracy, it is useful to contrast it both with vote-oriented and representative democracies.

In vote-centered democracies, legitimacy is obtained by securing a majority of votes. In contrast, deliberative democracies demand that voters participate in reasoned discussions prior to arriving at the election processes. This principle is presupposed in vote-oriented democracies, but by making it explicit, the notion of legitimacy acquires a different note. A political outcome is not legitimate thanks to transparent and inclusive voting systems. Legitimacy is achieved only if the political outcome was motivated by rational deliberation.

In representative democracies, on the other hand, deliberation is key to arrive at political consensus, but deliberative processes concern representatives alone. Compared to that, deliberative democracies require that the public takes part in the discussion of political concerns, even if they do not bear agency in the final decision of a certain issue (Steiner 2012: 32-34). Thus, citizens' role is not limited to choosing representatives, people are expected to engage in the discussions of public issues. For this reason, it is not sufficient that public matters are resolved by deliberative processes, it is required that citizens are aware of political concerns, and they take part in their discussion to a certain extent.

A last feature of deliberative democracies is the motivation that brings people to engage in discussions. According to political science scholars (Estlund 1993, Cohen 1996, Martí 2006), political concerns can be addressed either with bargaining or rational attitudes. A bargaining attitude boils down to optimizing the satisfaction of interests of people involved in the exchange. In this kind of interaction, a win-win situation is ideal overall, but in principle, there is nothing wrong if one party avoids such a situation to optimize their own interests. In fact, if one party's benefit increases at the expense of compromising another party, there is no need to justify such an outcome because everyone acts under the assumption of maximizing their personal benefit.

In contrast, a rational attitude entails considering the interests of all parties during the deliberative process. This means that adverse consequences of a decision should be taken into consideration, regardless of how much benefit a particular group might get from it. Moreover, if a decision compromises someone's interests, there is a responsibility to provide justification for it based on common interests, rather than relying on personal preferences. In this way, rational deliberation involves addressing matters of public dispute while embracing the viewpoints of all stakeholders in the process of reaching a resolution.

In summary, the main features of deliberative democracies are (1) legitimization is achieved by deliberation rather than majority of votes (2) citizens should be engaged in deliberation to a certain extent, and (3) the way in which deliberation takes place should be attuned with a rational resolution of public concerns. As it can be seen, deliberative democracies are oriented towards having people discussing political issues, which resonates with Habermas' idea of the public sphere, because it is a space where citizens discuss their concerns in a rational way.

Habermas' ideas have been operationalized in the Discourse Quality Index (DQI) (Steenbergen et al. 2003). The DQI is formulated within the framework of deliberative democracy to measure the quality of deliberation. This model is a coding system designed to quantify the degree to which concrete discussions fulfill criteria set by Habermas for what qualifies as an appropriate debate. The DQI is measured according to linguistic cues of discourse, and it is based on six criteria. Each criterion assesses specific features of debates in view of an annotation system that gives points to discussions. The more points a discussion gets, the closer it is to an ideal debate. The DQI criteria are the following.

- a) Participation. It refers to the possibility of participants to speak freely in a debate. This criterion is applied only if someone explicitly states that they have been interrupted, or if the interruption occurs through a formal decision.

0. Interruption of a speaker

1. Normal participation is possible.
- b) Level of justification. It measures the extent to which a speech gives complete justification for demands. The completeness of justifications is measured in terms of the inferences that are made.
0. No justification: X should be done. A proposal is put forth, but no reason is given.
  1. Inferior justification: X should be done because Y. A reason is given, but no linkage is made between X and Y, so the inference is incomplete.
  2. Qualified justification: X should be done because Y, and Y is conducive to X. Such argumentation is a complete inference.
  3. Sophisticated justification. At least two complete justifications are given, either for the same demand, or for two different demands.
- c) Content of justification. It aims to capture whether the justification is based on narrow group interests, or according to the common good.
0. Group interests: the justification appeals to group interests.
  1. Neutral: there are no explicit references to group interests.
  2. Common good in utilitarian terms: the justification is expressed in utilitarian terms “the greatest good for the greatest number” (Mill 2016).
  2. Common good in the difference principle: the justification advocates for helping the least advantaged in society (Rawls 1971).
- d) Respect for groups. It measures the respect shown to the groups that are to be helped with the policies.
0. No respect: negative statements are made towards the groups.
  1. Implicit respect: no negative or positive statements are made.
  2. Explicit respect: there is at least one explicitly positive statement about the groups.
- e) Respects to counterarguments. It measures the respect shown by discussants to the counterarguments advanced during the debate.
0. Counterarguments ignored: counterarguments are overlooked by discussants.
  1. Counterarguments degraded. A speaker explicitly degrades a counterargument by making negative statements about it or about the group that advanced the counterargument.
  2. Counterarguments included. A counterargument is acknowledged and there are no explicit statements about it.

3. Counterarguments valued. The counterarguments are explicitly valued.
- f) Constructive politics
0. Positional politics. Discussants keep their position in the debate without attempting to make a compromise.
  1. Alternative proposal. A speaker makes a mediating proposal on a different topic from the one being discussed.
  2. Mediating proposal. A speaker makes a mediating proposal on the topic under discussion.

The DQI is an interesting instrument as it provides a template to analyze real-life discussions and determine the extent to which discussions deviate from ideal standards. The various categories in the model transform the features of ideal debates into criteria that guide analysts in identifying the most important aspects of discussions, ultimately offering a comprehensive perspective on how discussions unfold.

The DQI criteria can be categorized into procedural and substantive aspects. Procedural criteria evaluate the way discussions unfold, including aspects such as participation, respect, and constructive politics. Substantive criteria, on the other hand, assess the quality of the arguments presented in the discussion, encompassing both the level and content of justification. Each category in the model includes a numerical scale that enables a quantitative assessment of discussions. This feature is crucial as real-life discussions exhibit various degrees of adherence to reasonable standards, necessitating nuanced criteria to accommodate variations in debates.

Another notable aspect of the DQI is its strong connection to the features of discourse. Each category in the model can be linguistically traced within discussions, making the assessment reasonably equitable. While analysts are still required to interpret debates to determine the applicability and degree to which these categories are relevant, the discursive foundation of the model contributes to a fair and impartial assessment process.

Although the DQI is an interesting attempt to assess the quality of discussions, it has various shortcomings that obstruct the model from achieving its goal. The first issue concerns its unit of analysis: a *speech* “a public discourse by a particular individual delivered at a particular point in a debate” (Steenbergen et al. 2003: 27). Speeches are considered relevant if they contain a *demand* “a proposal on what decisions should or should not be made”. If there is no demand in a speech, it is considered irrelevant, and it is left out of the analysis. Analyzed speeches can contain propositions other than demands, but the criterion for deciding the relevance of interventions is the presence of demands.

Demands are prescriptive propositions of the form “X should (not) be made”. Although these propositions are crucial in public debates because political discussions concern decision-making, there are other propositions that are just as important when resolving political issues. Descriptive and evaluative propositions are relevant because they help to establish the acceptability of prescriptive propositions (van Eemeren 2017: 157). For instance, a discussion aimed at justifying a prescriptive proposition such as “People should get vaccinated” requires discussing evaluative propositions “Vaccines are necessary” and descriptive propositions “Vaccination will reduce the infection rate.”

In the case of the DQI, *speeches* without *demands* are considered irrelevant. Consequently, discussions about evaluative and descriptive propositions might be overlooked from the analysis even if they are relevant for the debate. This issue can significantly affect the overall interpretation of discussions because if the crux of a debate is a definition (e.g., What a refugee is? What counts as human life?) or a causal statement (e.g., The number of infections will drop by vaccinating people) those issues would be skipped from the analysis simply because no *demand* was contained in the *speech*. As a result, there is a serious risk of bringing about partial if not distorted analyses of discussions.

Another problem of the DQI is how justification is understood. Justification is explained in the categories of level and content of justification. Let us examine first the category level of justification. This category is subdivided into four rankings. *No justification* applies when no reason is present, so its applicability is clear. *Inferior justification* applies when a reason Y is given to why X should be the case. Such justifications are considered incomplete because there is no linkage between X and Y. This understanding of justification is rather problematic because there is no way to tell apart implicit argumentation from incomplete justifications. Furthermore, it is false that there is no linkage between X and Y. The linkage between them is justificatory because one is presented as *a reason* for the other.<sup>1</sup>

The third subcategory is *Qualified justification*. It applies when “a linkage is made as to why one should expect that X contributes or detracts from Y” (Steenbergen et al. 2003: 28). This notion is problematic as well. Firstly, because inferior and qualified justification are equivalent formally speaking (X is given as a reason to Y). Secondly, the definition displays a

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<sup>1</sup> It is not clear what the authors mean by the “linkage between propositions”. If it is understood that propositions should have a logical dependence or express a causal connection, political discussions would be trivialized to a larger extent. Political discussions cannot be reduced to logical inferences because it would imply that political issues are reducible to semantic concerns. As if a policy to overcome poverty could be settled at the semantic level by changing the definition of poverty. Likewise, political discussion cannot be addressed only in terms of causal relationships because political debates are not only concerned with how things are, but with how things should be according to people’s preferences. Therefore, the best way to interpret “linkage between propositions” is assuming that propositions have justificatory force, but in that case, a single proposition Y can have justificatory force to another proposition X.

misunderstanding between the function of utterances at the speech act level (Van Eemeren and & Grootendorst 1984), and the logical relationship of propositions. For example, the propositions “You should not cross the street” and “the traffic light is red” have no logical dependency whatsoever, but they can perfectly be used together to advance an argument.

The last subcategory is *Sophisticated justification* “two complete justifications are given, either [...] for the same demand or complete justification for two different demands” (Steenbergen et al. 2003: 28). First, it is unclear why two complete justifications are better than a single complete justification. A possible interpretation is that multiple arguments might target different segments of an audience, potentially resulting in a more robust argumentation. Nonetheless, presenting multiple arguments is not inherently superior, as time constraints and issue complexity might often favor a detailed elaboration of a single argument.

Additionally, it is confusing why advancing multiple demands is deemed superior to presenting a single one. While such an indicator might reflect the number of issues addressed in discussions, there is no apparent rationale to explain how multiple demands enhance the quality of discussions. On the contrary, a higher number of issues in a discussion increases the likelihood that some will remain unresolved due to constraints on time and resources.

The content of justifications is evaluated in view of discussants’ motivation to support demands. In the DQI, four subcategories address the content of justifications. At the bottom of the ranking, it is found justifications that appeal to group interests, then justification without any references to group interests or the common good, and on the top of the ranking are found justifications based on *utilitarian* and *difference* principles. These distinctions are rather problematic because it is not clear why group interests diminish the quality of justifications, or why *utilitarian* and *difference* principles are intrinsically better than the former.

Justifications based on group interests cannot be taken as low-quality automatically because, ideally, public debates should allow people to express their positions and defend their own interests freely. So, even if the economic interests of a privileged minority were advanced as justification of a certain demand, the justification cannot be disqualified by default. If such a justification is considered flawed it will be only because it fails at withstanding the criticism of the different parties in the debate. Moreover, appealing to group interests is necessary in political debates because only in that way disadvantaged minorities can defend their own interests, as opposed to waiting for someone else to advocate for them.

The superiority given to *utilitarian* and *difference* principles is not explained by the authors either. A possible justification for this preference is that utilitarian and Rawlsian principles have been widely theorized in political philosophy. Utilitarianism is based on a



maximizing principle “the greatest good for the greatest number” (Mill 2016), and Rawls’ philosophy (1971) is characterized by the veil of ignorance and the difference principle.

While these principles can be employed to justify decisions, there is no assurance that the justification is appropriate. This is because there are instances where the principles conflict with moral and political stances. Take utilitarianism, for instance, its principle can be invoked to generate numerous arguments, some acceptable and others not. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, utilitarianism might have been used to argue that “No measures should be implemented because they affect the population at large, and the virus endangers only a minority of individuals.” This example shows that utilitarian arguments are not inherently acceptable, as objections can be raised on both moral and practical grounds.

The same issue applies to the difference principle. Rawls’ veil of ignorance (1971) is a hypothetical situation in which individuals establish the rules of a society without knowing the social status they will end up possessing. The difference principle dictates that people who turn out to be worse off in society are given priority to improve their condition. Consequently, policies are applied differently to individuals depending on their situation.

An argument based on the difference principle could be “Health care should account for the hormonal treatment of trans people because health services do not cover their needs.” Nonetheless, the DQI does not elucidate why this argument is superior to another, such as “Hormonal treatments should be included in health care because people need them.” Moreover, situations may arise where two arguments relying on the difference principle contradict each other. In such cases, the DQI analysis would treat both arguments equally good and proceed with the analysis. However, a content analysis of justifications should aid in resolving the dilemma by determining which of the conflicting arguments better justifies its standpoint.

The problems related to the notion of justification become evident in the case study presented by the authors of the DQI. To illustrate the application of the instrument, a parliamentary debate in the British House of Commons was analyzed. The debate was about British women and various concerns were discussed to improve women’s lives. During the debate, a member of the parliament, Cheryl Gillan (conservative), made the following intervention:

“I am pleased that the hon. Lady [Julie Morgan, Labour, Cardiff North] praises the work of Chwarae Teg, on which the fair play for women exercise was built by the previous Conservative Government. Does she share my hope that the Government will continue to support fair play for women in Wales and the rest of the country? We want a firm commitment from the Minister to back that” (Steenbergen et al. 2003: 32)

Steenbergen et al. interpreted this intervention as having the lowest level of justification. Their analysis, however, is problematic at different levels. First, there is no *demand* in the intervention, and consequently, it should not have been considered for the annotation according to DQI guidelines. Second, if the intervention is relevant, it should be specified how the intervention contributes to the discussion. The DQI considered the intervention as having a poor justification, but this interpretation is inadequate because its relevance relies on Cheryl Gillan requesting a commitment from its interlocutor to increase the material premises of the debate, as it is explicitly said. Therefore, intervention can be relevant without presenting justifications.

Another example analyzed by Steenbergen et al. reveals the complexity that interventions can have in discussions. This example comes from the same parliamentary debate and the intervention was made by Jacqui Lait (conservative).

“Does my hon. friend [Eleanor Laing, Conservatives, Epping Forest] agree that, if the rumors are true that people will not need receipts to claim the childcare allowance, they could indeed spend the money on washing machines?” (Steenbergen et al. 2003: 32)

According to the authors, this intervention has an inferior justification because “the suggestion [...] is not backed up by an argument or evidence.” (Steenbergen et al. 2003: 32) Once again, this interpretation misses the point of the example because there are different elements that call for deeper analysis. The intervention contains an inference, as the authors correctly notice, but it is expressed by means of a question. This point is not minor because the example does not match the canonical form “X because Y”, and therefore, some interpretation is needed to identify the inference. The interpretation of the authors rendered the example an incomplete inference, but such interpretation is paradoxical because if there is an inference there had to be a full argument or else, there is no inference to start with.

It is possible to arrive at a better interpretation under close analysis. The first thing to notice is that the question seeks agreement on something. Second, there is a conditional sentence. The antecedent presents a hypothetical situation, and the consequent contains a counterargument meant to undermine the antecedent. With these elements, the intervention can be interpreted as Jacqui Lait looking for agreement on the counterargument, making her position stronger in the debate. This interpretation makes better justice to the intervention because it considers all its elements, but such analysis goes beyond the analytical tools of the DQI.

To sum up, it can be said that DQI is a remarkable attempt to evaluate the quality of discussions within the framework of deliberative democracy. Drawing from the ideas of

Habermas, the categories of the DQI set standards through which different aspects of discussions can be measured to determine their quality. While this model provides a structured approach to assessing real-life debates, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations.

DQI's emphasis on speeches with demands leave out important elements of discussions, and its understanding of justification gives rise to many confusions. Another limitation is that the model does not consider the context of discussions. This point is particularly important because the communicative settings where discussions take place determine the way in which discussions unfold.

For example, a political debate will be different from a press conference even if the same arguments were employed. In each case, the structure of dialogues gives certain affordances to participants that impact how they behave argumentatively. In the case of debates, discussants can advance arguments with assertions alone if they want. Contrarily, the structure of press conferences forces journalists to use questions, so they need to make implicatures if they want to advance arguments into the debate. To effectively analyze discussion in political press conferences, it is necessary to employ tools that capture more adequately the nature of this communicative activity.

## **1.2 Deliberation in political press conferences and adversarialness**

The public sphere encompasses discussions taking place in different fora. These fora can include discussions in political press conferences, social media platforms, political debates, etc. These communicative activities contribute to the public sphere when participants address public issues and argue for their positions. Press conferences represent important spaces of deliberation because they gather multiple parties that come together to address concerns about politics, governance, and public affairs. In this context, deliberation entails a discussion between authorities and journalists to assess political measures and provide information to the public.

Discussions in press conferences are structured in two parts. First, authorities make an official statement that represents their position (Wu 2023). Then, journalists ask questions on any topic that might be relevant to them. Journalists usually address the statements of authorities, but quite often, other issues are covered as well. The freedom to ask questions on any topic and the plurality of perspectives brought by journalists make press conferences important spaces of deliberation and accountability.

The features of press conferences allow journalists to choose between two different poles. One pole is retrieving information from authorities to disseminate it to the public, and the second pole is questioning authorities about their decisions to assess them. In the second

option, journalists have the potential to transform press conferences into deliberative spaces, thereby promoting accountability and transparency.

The context of press conferences has been extensively researched by Clayman and Heritage, with a focus on journalists' questions (2002a). Their research discusses the norms and conventions that shape interactions between journalists and politicians, as well as the hostility displayed by journalists in their questions. These norms and conventions reflect general journalistic values such as objectivity and neutrality, while the hostility in questions exhibits journalists' critical engagement with their interlocutors.

Neutrality is crucial in journalism as it ensures fair reporting and prevents the manipulation of information for ideological or commercial purposes. Neutrality allows journalists to provide the public with objective information, enabling individuals to form their own opinions. Clayman and Heritage (2002a: 150) discuss how journalists maintain neutrality in press conferences. The primary methods for doing so include asking questions, reporting third parties' opinions, and maintaining balance between opposing news.

Asking questions is conceived as a neutral activity because "the manifest purpose of a question is to solicit the interviewee's point of view rather than to express a viewpoint in itself" (Clayman and Heritage 2002a: 151). From this perspective, questions serve to obtain information and clarification without taking or advocating for any particular position. When journalists speak on behalf of another party "the interviewer casts himself as disinterestedly invoking the opinions of a third party" (2002a: 153). The neutrality here resides in journalists presenting relevant information in a transparent and impartial manner (2002a: 171).

Journalists can also express hostility by using questions and reporting third parties' opinions. Interrogative sentences can be used to imply journalists' opinions, passing negative judgements, and attributing opinions to politicians. Even in cases where no implications are involved, questions are considered hardballs and other softballs (Clayman and Fox 2017). Hard questions are intrinsically confrontational towards politicians and soft questions generally easy to handle by authorities. In this way, journalists have the option to modulate their questioning to choose between neutrality or hostility.

Something similar happens with reporting third parties' opinions. If the opinion brought by journalists is in any way relevant, then it must give or withdraw support to politicians' positions and, therefore, it cannot be entirely neutral. Also, the selection of the reported party depends entirely on journalists' discretion, and quite often, journalists will agree with the opinions being advanced, especially if the party is an expert or authority figure (Clayman and Heritage 2002a: 166, 186).

The ability to adopt both an adversarial and a neutral stance using the same techniques necessitates that journalists maintain a balance between opposing perspectives. Such a balance involves *shifting footing* (Clayman and Heritage 2002a: 155) based on the requirements of a particular discussion. If a discussion is overly accommodating to politicians, it becomes necessary to challenge their perspectives. Conversely, it is essential to defend politicians' viewpoints if the discussion becomes excessively critical. In principle, press conferences are equipped to maintain this balance because they rely on the participation of multiple journalists.

Maintaining balance of perspectives is easier in theory than in practice because it is necessary to determine what counts as being critical. This point on criticality leads to the main topic of research for Clayman and Heritage: adversarialness (2002a: 189, 2002b, 2013). This notion refers to the hostility journalists display in their questioning when addressing politicians.

Adversarialness is an intuitive notion to a large extent, but it is useful for analyzing press conferences because it is based on a category system focused on linguistic markers. Each category in the system is meant to capture a specific way in which journalists denote hostility in their questioning. As a result, the system enables the identification of adversarialness in press conferences by analyzing questions according to the following categories (Clayman and Heritage 2002b):

- a) Initiative: journalists set the agenda for politicians' response, leaving aside formulations that accommodate general answers.
  1. Question complexity: asking multiple questions within the same turn or prefacing questions with complementary statements.
  2. Question cascades: asking a question to reformulate it and advance it over again.
  3. Follow-up questions: regaining the question turn after receiving an answer to raise a related matter.
- b) Directness: journalists leave aside indirect formulations to make blunt questions in their interventions.
  4. Other-referencing question frames: references to politicians' willingness to answer (*can you, would you*) followed by a speech act verb *explain, comment, etc.*
  5. Self-referencing question frames: references to journalists own intentions: *I wonder, could I, etc.*
- c) Assertiveness: journalists make implications with their questions or push for receiving particular responses.

6. Preface tilt: the question is formulated in such a way that the answered is pushed into a certain direction, either to affirm or deny something.
  7. Negative formulations: the questions push for a certain answer with formulations such as *isn't it*, *don't you think that*, etc.
- d) Hostility: journalists make remarks overtly critical in their questions.
8. Preface hostility: the preface of the question is hostile towards politicians.
  9. Global hostility: questions plainly disagreeing with or challenging politicians.
  10. Accountability questions: questions casting politicians' conduct as potentially improper and placing them in a position of having to defend themselves.

The adversarialness model has multiple merits. In comparison with DQI, the notion of adversarialness is directly applicable to press conferences because it focuses on question turns. As a result, the categories of the model allow a detailed analysis of journalists' interventions and offer a better understanding of press conferences.

Another advantage of the model is that the categories in the system are easily identifiable. Three out of four categories are grounded in linguistic or conversational features, and the first seven subcategories in the system are mostly unambiguous, countable, and recognizable. These features not only facilitate the annotation of questions, but also offer reliable information for the analysis of data.

The linguistic and discursive features of adversarialness have two advantages. One advantage is that the model can be extrapolated to analyze other contexts where questioning practices are relevant, like interviews and cross-examination sessions. The second advantage is that the model not only provides information about how hostile press conferences are, but also about the different ways in which hostility manifests in concrete communicative activities.

The main asset of adversarialness research is the richness of its empirical analysis. For example, in one of their studies, Heritage and Clayman (2013) analyzed presidential press conferences from 1953 to 2000 to understand how questioning has changed in this context over time. More than 4,600 questions were analyzed across five decades, twelve administrations, and nine presidents. The results of the study showed that journalists became less deferential in their questioning, and more confrontational towards politicians. More importantly, research on adversarialness has set a benchmark for how to analyze questions in press conferences. Let us see one of the examples Heritage and Clayman present in one study:

- (1) Mr. President, new figures out today show that housing starts were down pretty sharply last month, and the number of building permits went down for the second month in a row. Analysts are saying this could mean the economic recovery is going to level off, maybe kind of peter out next year. And more people are becoming concerned about high interest rates. And given the big deficits being projected by your own administration, isn't it time for some strong action by you to get interest rates down? (Heritage and Clayman 2002b)

The adversarialness model allows us to distinguish different elements in this question. Initiative is present because the question is prefaced. The information contained in the preface allows the journalist to portray a challenging economic situation that requires action from the politician. Directness is present because the journalist avoided deferential formulations such as *could you* or *I wonder*. Assertiveness is present since the question is both tilted and negative formulated, pushing the politician towards giving a particular answer. Lastly, the question is also hostile because it addresses an accountability issue. The question portrays the administration as managing the economic situation inadequately, and it puts the politician in a situation where he must defend the adequacy of his administration. In sum, the question in example (1) manifests adversarialness at its highest level because all the adversarial categories are present in it.

Regardless of its merits, the notion of adversarialness has some limitations. First of all, it should be noticed that the model remains entirely descriptive. Although the absence of normative grounds is not a shortcoming by itself, research on adversarialness is connected to the quality of discussions and the appropriateness of journalists' interventions. Although Clayman and Heritage affirm that the question-and-answer interaction is the fundamental basis of public accountability (Clayman and Heritage 2002:235), they refrain from specifying the conditions that enhance or hinder accountability, and they provide no guidelines for establishing the quality of interactions between journalists and authorities.

Secondly, the authors do not account for how the category system was integrated. It remains unclear whether the categories are theoretically or empirically based. This point is important because if the system is empirically oriented, it primarily reflects questioning features of US presidential press conferences, compromising its generalizability. Conversely, if it is theoretically based, it becomes crucial to establish whether the system is adequate to capture the phenomenon it aims for, as there could be other relevant features that the model needed to include or omit. For example, other factors that could have been included are interruptions, voice tone, number of words in journalists' interventions, number of questions in a press conference, presence of pronouns in questions (you, it, they), etc.

The adequacy of the model to capture the intuitive notion of adversarialness is also debatable. The first three categories (initiative, directness, and assertiveness) do not capture adversarial questioning in any obvious way. Although the system captures plenty of adversarial phenomena, most subcategories do not seem to nail down adversarial questioning under close analysis. It is possible to come up with examples of questions having initiative, directness, and assertiveness that defend politicians' position instead of being challenging towards them. Take, for instance, the following hypothetical example:

- (2) The unemployment rate has drastically dropped in the last year. Is it possible to explain such trend by the influence of global markets recruiting personal for smart working or is it result of the policies meant to protect national industries? Don't you think that the latter option is more plausible given that unemployment rates worldwide remained equal overall?

Although hypothetical, this question exhibits initiative, directness, and assertiveness, yet lacks any adversarial element. In fact, it presents politicians' measures in a favorable light. If the adversarial categories genuinely represented opposition towards authorities, creating such examples would be impossible, and still, numerous similar questions can be constructed.

If questions are adversarial while having features such as initiative, directness, and assertiveness, it implies that these features are correlated to adversarialness and, therefore, they give contextual information about the phenomenon. In the case of Clayman and Heritage, their research provides insight into adversarialness within the specific context of U.S. presidential press conferences. It is crucial to acknowledge, however, that the linguistic or interactional features accompanying adversarialness can vary significantly from one context to another. For instance, in other contexts adversarialness could be related to the use or omission of honorifics, the presence or absence of eye contact, voice tone, asking questions on taboo topics, etc.

The limitation of the model to capture adversarialness is clear upon close analysis of its categories. Initiative is defined as the degree to which journalists constrain the topical agenda for the response to their questions (Clayman and Heritage 2002b: 754). However, all questions inherently constrain the range of acceptable responses to a certain degree. While some questions may be vaguer than others (for instance, "how are you?" versus "how are you feeling about your new job?"), they invariably define the topic for their answers. The preciseness of questions, in terms of their stringency or ambiguity, depends on the alignment between interrogator's intentions and the questions that are uttered, but answers are irrelevant for this matter.



Furthermore, there is a mismatch between the notion of indirectness and its subcategories. Complexity measures how many questions are asked, cascade measures how many versions the same question has, and follow-up measures whether journalists regain the stage to ask more questions. It can be said that the subcategories measure the amount of time journalists have on stage or the persistence they display in press conferences, but these matters are unrelated to the topical agenda of questions and answers.

Directness is the second category in the system, and it is defined in negative terms. A question is considered direct if it does not employ indirect phrasing that conveys politeness, phrases such as “could you tell” or “can I ask” (Clayman and Heritage 2002b: 759). The definition is clear and operational. It is possible to know whether a question has the feature, and it is specified what it means not to have it.

In this line of thought, directness was investigated in a longitudinal analysis of press conferences spanning from 1953 to 2000 (Heritage and Clayman 2013). The findings showed a gradual decrease in the use of polite formulations over time, which was interpreted as a shift towards more adversarial questioning by journalists. However, this interpretation raises a fundamental issue. It remains unclear whether the decline in polite questions reflects journalists’ growing hostility or a general trend among English speakers. If the latter is the case, direct questioning may not necessarily signify adversarialness but could merely reflect general tendencies in English language. This interpretation is plausible since there is evidence suggesting that indirect questioning has been declining since the second half of the twentieth century (Jucker 2020).

The category of assertiveness is intended to capture questions’ capacity to suggest specific responses. The subcategories of preface tilt and negative questioning do a good job at capturing such phenomenon because those types of questions are common and a useful resource when making implicatures. Nonetheless, the problem is that assertiveness does not inherently correspond to adversarialness, as demonstrated by the previous hypothetical question. If a question is perceived as adversarial while carrying an implicature, it is due to the insinuation made by the implicature.

The last category in the system is hostility. This category refers to the topicality or criticality of questions. Although this notion is the vaguest in the system because it is not based on the formal features of questions, it proves to be the most effective in capturing adversarialness. In fact, it is not possible to construct hypothetical questions that bare hostility without making them adversarial, as it was done with the hypothetical question. This category elucidates the main difference between examples (1) and (2), showing that the former is characterized by hostility, whereas the latter has an accommodating tone.

In the model, hostility has two main features. Firstly, questions are deemed hostile when they confront politicians' positions, and secondly, when they raise accountability issues. Given that hostility offers a more nuanced capture of adversarialness, it becomes imperative to delve deeper into these two dimensions, as adversarialness is predominantly embedded within them. A more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between challenging politicians and invoking accountability is instrumental in discerning the substantive contribution of journalists' interventions in political press conferences.

To sum up, it can be said that the work of Clayman and Heritage contributes not only to the understanding of press conferences as a communicative activity, but it also gives a deeper understanding of political discourse. Although the notion of adversarialness has some limitations, it lays the ground to explore journalists' questioning more deeply. At this juncture, a framework capable of accounting for journalists' challenges and pursuits of accountability is required.

### **1.3 Argumentation theory as an analytical framework**

Argumentation theory is concerned with the study of discussions to understand and represent the positions of participants, as well as the justifications they advance to hold their positions. In this context, argumentation is understood as a verbal, social, and rational activity aimed at defending the (un)acceptability of standpoints by advancing a constellation of propositions that bring or withdraw justification to standpoints (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 1).

There are four traditions in argumentation theory, each focusing on different aspects of discussions (van Eemeren and van Haften 2023). There is a philosophical tradition concerned with establishing normative criteria to distinguish good from bad arguments. The rhetorical tradition is engaged with the conditions that make speeches suitable for persuading people. A tradition rooted in linguistics examines the features of words and expressions that have a precise function in argumentative exchanges. Lastly, a tradition originating in discourse studies examines the influence of context on discussions, and the discursive features that characterize certain debates. These traditions have given rise to various theoretical approaches, each of them offering specific insights.

Pragma-dialectics is a theory that draws elements from all traditions in argumentation studies. It offers a theoretical model that explains what argumentative discussions are, it gives analytical tools to investigate communicative contexts, it provides empirical evidence to substantiate its assumptions, and it has normative standards to evaluate the appropriateness of discussions.

Pragma-dialectics is characterized by two elements: the ideal model of a critical discussion and the discussion rules for resolving differences of opinion. The ideal model divides discussions in four stages: confrontation, opening, argumentation, and conclusion (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 58-62). These stages have specific goals in the resolution of differences of opinion. The confrontation stage serves to specify the standpoints in dispute, the opening stage involves specifying the material premises and procedural rules, the argumentation stage entails the exchange of arguments and criticisms, and the concluding stage is dedicated to resolving the dispute in light of the preceding discussion.

The stages of the ideal model serve for establishing the rules for critical discussions. Moves are appropriate or not depending on their suitability to serve the purpose of the stage where they belong. In this line of thought, the normativity of the model is set in view of the adequacy of moves to resolve a difference of opinion on the merits (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 2004: 123-135). Consequently, the discussion rules explain why certain moves are inappropriate, as they specify the conditions that must be upheld to achieve the goals of discussants.

The ideal model and the discussion rules hold analytical significance as they delineate the moves that participants should execute during their interactions. In the context of press conferences, these notions provide a structured template that facilitates the examination of exchanges between journalists and politicians. Employing the pragma-dialectical model to analyze press conferences contributes to an argumentative characterization of this communicative activity, thereby yielding fresh insights into the dynamics of discussions within these events.

Argumentation theory is relevant for the study of press conferences because the interaction between politicians and journalists consists in exchanging reasons to determine the appropriateness of political decisions. Moreover, argumentation theory offers normative and descriptive grounds that are necessary for the analysis of discussions in this context.

An argumentative characterization of press conferences would help to specify the roles of politicians and journalists in this context, the argumentative resources available to participants in discussions, and the possible outcomes of their interaction. While pragma-dialectics has been previously used to analyze press conferences (Wu 2023, 2021, 2019, 2017) and the interactions between politicians and journalists (Andone 2013), this dissertation focuses for the first time on journalists' questions in press conferences.

The study of journalists' questions in press conferences is necessary to supplement the available knowledge in political argumentation. Political discussions cannot be understood solely by analyzing politicians' statements, other parties also play a part in the construction of

these discussions. In the case of journalists, their questions can frame politicians' positions, setting the agenda for discussions, delivering information to the public, etc. In this way, the question-and-answer interplay shapes discussion to a larger extent. Consequently, it is not possible to attain a proper understanding of discussions without having a proper understanding of journalists' questioning in this context.

Another motivation to study journalists' questions is the analytical challenge they present. The diversity of journalists' objectives combined with the limitations imposed by the structure of press conferences make journalists' questions difficult to analyze. Unlike politicians, journalists are required to frame their interventions as questions. This means that journalists use interrogative sentences to perform any move they want to attain. Questions are suitable to request information, but if journalists want to make assertions, different resources are employed to frame interventions as questions.

In argumentation studies, various methods have been established to examine discussions based on assertions and questions (Van Eemeren and Snoeck Henkemans 2017). These methods, however, assume that questions are used in basic ways, such as asking for clarifications or posing critical questions. What is required instead is a methodological approach that accounts for interrogative utterances when used in nonstandard ways. This is necessary because quite often, questions are used for purposes different from requesting information. This gap makes it necessary to investigate the argumentative functions of questions, and press conferences serve an ideal setting for such enterprise because journalists exploit this resource to its greater extent.

Adopting an argumentative perspective provides the opportunity to examine press conferences as forums for public accountability. Press conferences are pertinent to accountability as they bring together authorities and journalists, offering them a platform to scrutinize politicians' decisions. Argumentation theory enables the analysis of exchanges between the parties, facilitating an understanding of how evaluations unfold through their interventions.

The analytical tools of argumentation theory enable the adoption of an accountability approach to press conferences. Since accountability involves establishing the appropriateness of politicians' decisions in view of their obligations (Bovens 2007), argumentation theory offers an appropriate framework through which the evaluation process is analyzed. In this way, the argumentative characterization of press conferences not only clarifies the dynamics of discussions in this context but also paves the ground for understanding these events as accountability fora.

## 1.4 Structure of the dissertation

Since discussions in press conferences are collectively constructed through question-and-answer turns, it is crucial to have a clear understanding of journalists' interventions to comprehend the dynamics of discussions in this context. In line with this perspective, the main research question of the dissertation is:

RQ1: What is the contribution of journalists' interventions to the argumentative reasonableness of discussions in political press conferences?

To address this question, several intermediate steps must be taken. Firstly, there is a need to construct a theoretical framework capable of discerning the argumentative function of journalists' questions within the context of press conferences. For this purpose, the pragmatic affordances of questions are investigated to understand how argumentative moves can be performed by means of interrogative sentences. Accordingly, it is necessary to answer the following research question:

RQ1.1: What argumentative moves journalists make in press conferences?

Having identified journalists' moves, it is crucial to examine the way in which journalists pose questions during press conferences. To fulfill this objective, the theoretical framework developed in RQ1.1 is applied to analyze real-life press conferences. The empirical investigation covers a diverse array of press conferences to ensure a degree of generality, and it specifically focuses on events related to accountability issues to maintain consistency in the study. The following research question also needs to be answered:

RQ1.2: How are discussions in press conferences shaped by journalists' interventions?

After investigating press conferences, it is indispensable to understand what makes discussions in these events different from discussions in other contexts. This point is important because only by contrasting discussions in press conferences with discussions in other relevant fora is possible to see what features are distinctive of press conferences. Accordingly, a last research question must be asked:

RQ1.3: How do discussions in press conferences differ from discussions in other contexts?

By answering the research sub-questions, it is possible to understand the contribution of journalists' interventions in press conferences. This is achieved by specifying their

argumentative moves in that context, elucidating the way journalists influence discussions with politicians, and showing the main features of discussions in press conferences as compared to other contexts. The structure of this dissertation is as follows.

In Chapter 2, a theoretical model to analyze journalists' questions is developed to give an answer to question (RQ1.1). The aim of the model is distinguishing cases where journalists use questions to convey information and cases where information is requested. Additionally, the relevance of journalists' interventions for accountability is highlighted by showing that the only way for journalists to hold politicians accountable in press conferences is by performing the appropriate argumentative moves depending on the discussion at hand.

In Chapter 3, journalists' argumentative moves are investigated in a corpus of press conferences to answer (RQ1.2). The corpus includes twenty-one press conferences held by seven institutions. The corpus was collected during the Covid-19 pandemic and the press conferences addressed different moments during the crisis. The analysis clarifies the extent to which journalists retained their deliberative aim in press conferences, and how their interventions shape the discussion with authorities.

In Chapter 4, journalists' interventions in press conferences are investigated in comparison with posts from social media to address question (RQ1.2). For this purpose, a press conference and a corpus of tweets are analyzed according to the argumentative moves of participants to see how discussions contribute to accountability. Results showed that both fora served accountability purposes, but each had different strengths and limitations.

Finally, in Chapter 5, the main findings of the study are presented. The discussion delves into the contribution of journalists' interventions, aiming to comprehend their significance in shaping public debates and fostering accountability. Additionally, the chapter outlines the limitations of the study, providing insights into the appropriateness of employing an argumentative approach in the examination of press conferences.

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## 2 Journalists' moves in political press conferences and their implications for accountability<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** political press conferences are important spaces for public accountability because they give journalists the opportunity to scrutinize politicians' decisions. However, the structure of press conferences poses specific constraints to journalists because their role is limited to ask questions. This situation is not problematic if their goal is to ask informative or critical questions, but it becomes problematic if journalists want to advance standpoints, arguments, or criticisms. In the latter case, journalists perform their argumentative moves through façade questions to comply with the protocol of press conferences. For this reason, it is not easy to distinguish the argumentative function of journalists' questions, and consequently, their value for accountability. This paper draws on the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation to give an argumentative account of political press conferences. Furthermore, the implications of journalists' questions for accountability purposes are discussed.

**Keywords:** accountability, argumentative scenarios, dialectical profiles, journalism, political press conferences, questions

### 2.1 Introduction

Political press conferences are important spaces for public accountability because they give journalists the opportunity to scrutinize politicians' decisions and policies (Mulgan 2003, Bovens 2007). Argumentation plays an important role in accountability practices because they require authorities to provide justification for their decisions (Mulgan 2003: 100, Stinga 2008: 11, Andone 2015a: 25). The critical scrutiny of political decisions is what makes accountability important for democracies and in turn, what makes press conferences valuable. However, from an accountability perspective, the overall value of press conferences largely depends on journalists asking the right questions to politicians.

The characteristics of press conferences pose specific constraints to journalists. Since the aim of these events is giving politicians the opportunity to make their agenda public and

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<sup>2</sup> A version of this paper has been published as: Hernández, A. (2021). Journalists' moves in political press conferences and their implications for accountability. *Journal of Argumentation in Context*, 10(3), 281-314. Some modifications have been made for consistency and clarity. In the original version, the term 'objections' was used, while this version employs 'counterarguments.' Additionally, Table 8 has been modified. In the original version, the explanation for advancing standpoints and arguments was combined, while in this version, they are explained separately.

justify their decisions, journalists' role is limited to asking questions. For this reason, questioning is the only resource that journalists have for conveying their communicative goals.

From an argumentative perspective, journalists' constraint to ask questions does not represent a difficulty for having a critical discussion. According to the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 60-61), the basic situation for having a critical discussion is when a party exclusively poses critical questions to another party that advances argumentation to support their standpoint. Accordingly, the structure of press conferences provides the minimum grounds for having a critical discussion between two parties.

However, journalists do not limit themselves to asking critical questions. Quite often, they aim to put forward criticisms, standpoints, and even arguments of their own. This situation makes press conferences more complex from an argumentative perspective because those moves do not correspond to the basic argumentative situation described above and, therefore, more complex argumentative scenarios are needed to describe what happens in press conferences.

An additional layer of complexity is that journalists perform all their argumentative moves through questions, and for this reason, it is hard to distinguish their function. For example, a journalist might be asking for information on a sensitive topic. Such an intervention could be seen as a critical question, as an attempt to simply obtain more information on the issue, or as a criticism framed as a question. These complexities have been described in the literature with the vernacular distinction of hardballs and softballs (Clayman and Fox 2017).

Hardballs and softballs take place in press conferences, but the latter are less important to evaluate politicians' decisions. Without a proper understanding of the argumentative moves performed by journalists in press conferences, it is difficult to assess their significance for accountability purposes. In view of these points, this paper aims to answer three questions (a) how to distinguish the argumentative function of journalists' questions? (b) what argumentative scenarios are established in view of those argumentative moves? and (c) which argumentative scenarios are useful for holding politicians accountable in a press conference?

Since the aim of this paper is to portray press conferences as spaces of public accountability, I will only consider events that justify a course of action. For this reason, I will not consider cases where politicians hold press conferences to advance their political agenda, to legitimize governments, or to gain attention from the media. Although such cases can also be analyzed from an argumentative perspective (see Demir 2016, Wu 2017), those press conferences are not set to determine the appropriateness of decisions and, therefore, they are not relevant from an accountability point of view.

It is also important to notice that the emphasis of this paper is on the journalists' role. Although journalists' questions have received some attention in communication studies (see Clayman and Heritage 2002, Heritage 2002, Clayman and Fox 2017), they have not received much attention in the field of argumentation. This paper is a contribution to fill this gap. To illustrate the kind of problems I want to discuss, an example can be presented. In the press conference that George W. Bush gave prior to Iraq's invasion, a journalist asked a question regarding North Korea becoming a nuclear power.

- (1) George Condin: Do you believe it is essential for the security of the United States and its allies that North Korea be prevented from developing nuclear weapons? And are you in any way growing frustrated with the pace of the diplomacy there? (Bush 2013)

Although this is a typical example of the kind of questions asked in press conferences, it is hard to establish its function because it is not clear what happens to the discussion once the question is posed. Furthermore, there is no clear criterion to indicate whether the question is a *hardball* or a *softball*. These intuitive notions seem to blur in this and many other examples because there are no means to distinguish one from the other. This paper is set to answer this issue.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In section 2, press conferences are described from an argumentative perspective. With the help of the ideal model of a critical discussion (Van Eemeren 2004, 2010) the initial situation and the starting points of press conferences are highlighted to understand the features of the discussion between politicians and journalists. In section 3, the argumentative moves that take place in press conferences are spelled out in terms of dialectical profiles to specify the available repertoire that arguers have in this communicative context. In section 4, journalists' questions are analyzed from a speech act perspective to show how different questions enable specific argumentative moves. Some examples taken from the W. Bush press conference are analyzed to illustrate how the argumentative function of questions can be identified given their pragmatic features. In section 5, the implications of journalists' questions for accountability purposes are discussed. Finally, in section 6, the findings of the analysis are presented.

## **2.2 Political press conferences: initial situation and starting points**

To understand journalists' questions, it is necessary to know the features that shape discussions in press conferences. These events are organized by authorities for the purpose of making an official statement in the presence of media representatives (Harcup 2014: 244). Usually, politicians give an opening statement followed by a session of questions-and-answers where journalists scrutinize politicians' decisions and opinions. While there are other communicative

practices where politicians are questioned by the media, for example political interviews (Andone 2013), the main feature of press conferences is that several journalists take part in these events.

As will be discussed later, the multi-party interaction between politicians and journalists impacts how the discussion takes place and how journalists' argumentation is developed. For the time being, it is enough to say that none of the journalists can advance a fully-fledged line of argumentation because each of them has a single intervention and they might have different, if not contrary, communicative goals.

The interaction between politicians and journalists is what makes press conferences valuable for accountability and what makes them challenging for politicians. If politicians fail to address journalists' questions satisfactorily, press conferences can have undesirable consequences, like giving a negative impression on the public, withdrawing policies, resignation of authorities, etc. Regardless of these risks, politicians still hold press conferences because these events are perceived as sign of transparency and responsibility, and most often than not, politicians cannot avoid public scrutiny when pressing circumstances arise and they must make decisions.

Since political press conferences are meant to improve democratic values, their institutional point is holding politicians accountable. Politicians' incentive for participating in these events is to present themselves as responsible and democratic figures, while journalists' incentives is acquiring information for news-making and increasing a democratic culture (see Cornwell 1960). For politicians and journalists to accomplish their goals, both parties must perform their roles adequately. This means that politicians cannot be deemed as responsible and democratic without journalists asking appropriate questions, and journalists cannot promote a democratic culture without politicians providing the necessary conditions for freedom of speech and guaranteeing journalists' right to asking and providing information.

In the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation, the ideal model of a critical discussion is an analytical tool designed to identify the necessary stages and procedures that arguers go through for determining the acceptability of standpoints (Van Eemeren 2004: 57). The stages of a critical discussion have empirical counterparts that vary from one communicative activity to another (Van Eemeren 2017a: 15). In the case of press conferences, three elements can be identified: the initial situation, the starting points, and the argumentative means. The outcome of discussions does not take place in press conferences because the issues raised in these events become starting points for broader discussions in the social sphere. For example, journalists evaluate policies in opinion articles, citizens change their opinions regarding a certain policy, and other politicians make a case for themselves depending on the

issues discussed in press conferences. Only then, the outcome of discussions emerges, but it takes place in other venues.

### *2.2.1 The initial situation of political press conferences*

The initial situation of press conferences sets the ground for discussions. It concerns the topic, the roles of participants, and the type of dispute they have. The topic of discussions is determined by the circumstances that make press conferences necessary, for example, controversial policies or catastrophes. In such circumstances, politicians are pressured to hold a press conference to justify their decisions or future lines of action. For this reason, the topic of press conferences is generally known in advance, and the discussion is framed within that context.

The second element of the initial situation is the role of discussants. The institutional point of press conferences determines the allocation of roles. Since the point of press conferences is holding politicians accountable, they require to assume the role of protagonists because politicians need to provide justifications for their decisions. Correspondingly, the institutional point could not be achieved without journalists scrutinizing the arguments advanced by politicians, and therefore, they assume the role of antagonists in the discussion.

This allocation of roles is the initial situation in press conferences, but it does not imply that journalists or politicians cannot assume opposite roles. As will be discussed later, journalists can make argumentative moves that correspond to the role of a protagonist. However, it is necessary that discussants maintain their initial roles to a certain extent because no accountability could take place in press conferences without politicians justifying their decisions and journalists scrutinizing them.

The protagonist's role gives specific obligations to politicians. Their first obligation is defending their standpoints. According to pragma-dialectics, there are three different kinds of standpoints: descriptive, evaluative, and prescriptive (Van Eemeren 2018: 4). Descriptive standpoints give an account of the world, evaluative standpoints make judgments about the world, and prescriptive standpoints propose courses of action.

The institutional point of press conferences requires politicians to endorse prescriptive standpoints because they defend propositions of the form "Action X should/had to be done" possibly qualified by different elements like an agent, time, mode, place, etc. Politicians might also defend evaluative and descriptive standpoints, but only as sub-standpoints, because they would defend such standpoints only if journalists cast doubt on the descriptive or evaluative propositions advanced by politicians to defend their main prescriptive standpoint.

Antagonist’s role also imposes obligations on journalists. Their first obligation is maintaining a critical stance towards politicians’ standpoints. This critical stance implies asking questions regarding the acceptability of propositions employed by politicians in their argumentation. As mentioned before, journalists also perform other moves apart from posing questions, like criticizing politicians’ argumentation. Nonetheless, asking critical questions is the fundamental move journalists should perform in press conferences, because otherwise, the communicative genre would shift from a press conference into a different genre, like a political debate.

Given the roles of participants, the discussion in a press conference starts as single non-mixed, which is the elementary difference of opinion in pragma-dialectics. The difference of opinion is single because politicians defend a prescriptive standpoint, and it is non-mixed because journalists cast doubts on politicians’ standpoint. As the discussion develops, the difference of opinion might become more complex, but at the begging remains in its basic form. All these elements constitute the initial situation of press conferences when politicians defended a course of action. Table 1 summarizes the information discussed so far.

Institution	Democratic systems	
Institutional point	Holding politicians accountable for their decisions	
Structure	An opening statement followed by a question-and-answer session	
Topic	Determined by the situation that makes press conferences necessary	
Type of dispute	Single non-mixed	
Main standpoint	Prescriptive: “Action X should/had to be done”	
Participants	Politicians and journalists	
Participants’ role	Politicians	Protagonist
	Journalists	Antagonist

**Table 1. Initial situation in political press conferences**

### *2.2.2 Starting points of political press conferences*

Although there are no explicit guidelines for conducting political press conferences, some remarks can be highlighted about their procedural rules and material starting points. The procedural rules indicate the process that needs to be followed in discussions, while the material

starting points are the premises or information that can be used by participants. (Van Eemeren 2010: 44). The following remarks are based on observations of this communicative activity and the available literature on the topic (Cornwell 1960, Kumar 2003, Ingram and Henshall 2008), and the remarks are intended to describe press conferences concerned with policymaking.

There are procedural rules in both sections of press conferences. In the first section, politicians give their opening remarks, and they need to cover three points: explaining the situation that made the press conference necessary, announce the decision that was taken or that will be taken, and providing arguments for their decision. Journalists are not allowed to intervene during this section of press conferences.

The procedural rules of the second section define the essential features of press conferences. The first rule is that journalists must ask questions to politicians. The second rule is that journalists have only one intervention in which they usually ask one or two questions. And finally, the third procedural rule is that politicians should answer journalists' questions. Even if there are some exceptions to these procedural rules, they remain constant throughout press conferences, otherwise, this communicative activity would become a political speech or a political interview.

Ideally, politicians should answer to journalists in view of the information they request and the political context in which press conferences takes place, but even by providing inadequate answers, politicians manifest their commitment to the procedural rules of press conferences. In cases where politicians violate the third procedural rule by evading journalists' questions (see Clayman 2001), they still have the obligation to provide information. In such cases, a denial to answer is enough for passing a negative evaluation on politicians from an accountability perspective.

The information journalists request is connected to the material starting points of discussions. The material starting points are the premises participants use in their interventions (Van Eemeren 2010: 44). In political press conferences, there are premises and information sources that participants usually accept when engaging in discussions. The information sources are related to the institutional and communicative contexts that make political press conferences possible, and for this reason, participants are required to accept them.

An information source that constitutes part of the material starting points is the legal system where press conferences belong. A legal system is the collection of laws issued by a legitimate authority aimed at regulating the members of a community (see Raz 1980). In political press conferences, legal systems could function as information sources that arguers use to justify or criticize standpoints. In a way, law systems are the constitutive ground for politics, and therefore, political discussions inherit law systems as information and legitimation

sources. Neither politicians nor journalists could dismiss any piece of legislation brought into the discussion because this kind of information is constitutive of the political-deliberation genre (Van Eemeren 2010: 143).

Another information source that politicians and journalists usually accept is scientific knowledge. Although scientific information is not constitutive of the political-deliberation genre, politicians and journalists cannot completely reject scientific knowledge because science has a positive status in most societies, particularly when dealing with practical problems. Although it is common to discard or manipulate scientific information according to the interests of discussants, they tend to rely on scientific authorities to legitimize their opinions, especially when pressing circumstances arise. A clear example of such cases is Trump. Regardless of being the biggest obscenity of our time, he relied on different scientific authorities to justify his management of the Coronavirus crisis.

The third source of information participants use is the media. In principle, any topic available in the political sphere could be brought for discussion even if unrelated to the topic of press conferences. This feature might seem problematic because it opens the possibility for derailing the topic of discussions. However, it would be a mistake to regard such deviations as violations of relevance (Grice 1991, Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 78). This feature is a result of the institutional point of press conferences.

Given that journalists' aim is establishing accountability for politicians, they have the prerogative to question politicians regarding any decision they have made, extending beyond the decisions addressed in the ongoing press conference. In a way, the information available in the media is constitutive of journalism as a communication field, and such information is brought to press conferences. Additionally, an advantage of using external information is that it allows journalists to bring other people's opinions into the discussion and confront politicians with opposing views.

The last point concerning the material premises is the information that participants cannot use. As a rule, personal information is left out of political press conferences because it has no bearing for determining the appropriateness of political decisions. Although there might be exceptions to this rule, for example, when politicians are suspected of conflicts of interest, in normal circumstances personal information is relevant for discussions.

In sum, the starting points of political press conferences consist of the procedures that participants follow during discussions and the information they use for achieving their communicative goals. The procedures give shape to the structure of political press conferences and the material starting points establish the information that comes into the discussion. By taking into consideration the starting points of the discussion, it is possible to understand the



argumentative moves that journalists perform during press conferences. Table 2 summarizes the information about the starting points of political press conferences.

	<b>Procedural rules</b>	<b>Material starting points</b>
First part	Politicians make their opening statement: a) The issue of press conference is explained. b) The main standpoint is presented. c) The standpoint is justified.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information from the legal system</li> <li>• Information from the scientific community</li> </ul>
Second part	Questions-and-answers session: a) Journalists ask questions in their interventions. b) Journalists have one intervention. c) Politicians answer each question at the time.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information from the media</li> <li>• If relevant, personal information</li> </ul>

**Table 2. Starting points of political press conferences**

### 2.3 Argumentative means in political press conferences

The argumentative means are dialectical moves that participants use for achieving their argumentative goals. Dialectical moves vary from justifying, questioning, criticizing, refuting, defining, etc. Depending on the stage of discussions and the argumentative roles, participants are allowed or compelled to perform specific dialectical moves (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 135-157). As protagonists, politicians justify their standpoints (“Action X should/had to be done”), which means that they attempt to show the appropriateness of their decisions. Journalists, on the other hand, test the reasonableness of decisions by casting doubt on politicians’ standpoints or by advancing criticisms. Although politicians and journalists argue with each other, citizens and other political actors are ultimately their intended audience. Thus, the goal of journalists and politicians is to convince the public about the acceptability of their position.

Politicians’ dialectical moves vary depending on the section of the press conference that is taking place. In the first section, when the opening statement is made, politicians’ main argumentative move is justifying their standpoint. For this matter, they advance arguments, explanations, distinctions, definitions, etc. From an analytical point of view, the type of argumentation that politicians use is known as pragmatic argumentation (Van Eemeren 2017a: 23). Pragmatic argumentation is prototypical in political deliberation because politicians

typically defend their decisions based on the desirable or undesirable consequences their decisions bring or avoid (Van Eemeren 2017b: 158), which is the general structure of pragmatic argumentation.

To illustrate the structure of pragmatic argumentation in press conferences, an example is analyzed. On 6 March 2003, George W. Bush gave a press conference to discuss the possibility of invading Iraq (Bush 2003). His opening statement can be reconstructed as follows:

(1 The U.S. and its allies should invade Iraq.)

1.1a Iraq is a threat to the U.S. and its allies.

1.1a.1a If Hussein does not disarm Iraq fully and unconditionally, Iraq is a threat to the U.S. and its allies.

1.1a.1b Hussein will not disarm Iraq.

1.1a.1b.1 Hussein has not shown any sign of cooperation in the past.

1.1a.1b.1.1a Hussein has made a public show of destroying few missiles.

1.1a.1b.1.1b Iraqi operatives hide biological and chemical agents.

1.1a.1b.1.1c Iraqi weapons scientists are threatened not to cooperate with U.N. inspectors.

1.1a.1b.2 Hussein is a dictator.

1.1a.1b.2.1a Hussein has a long history of reckless aggressions and terrible crimes.

1.1a.1b.2.1b Hussein provides funding to terrorists.

1.1a.1b.2.1c Hussein possesses weapons of terror.

1.1b Not invading Iraq could result in worse consequences than the ones on September 11<sup>th</sup>.

1.1c Invading Iraq will achieve peace in the U.S. and the Middle East.

This argument is a typical example of pragmatic argumentation. The standpoint, although implicit, prescribes a course of action. The justification is made by advancing three propositions: a situation that calls for change (premise 1.1a), negative consequences of not carrying out the action (premise 1.1b), and positive consequences for undertaking the action (premise 1.1c). Pragmatic argumentation is important for analyzing press conferences because it characterizes politicians' opening remarks, but also because it highlights possible reactions for journalists during their interventions.

Journalists' reactions are better understood with the notion of dialectical profiles. A dialectical profile is an intercalated sequence of moves that come about from an initial move made by one of the participants in a specific stage of discussions (Van Eemeren, Houtlosser,

and Snoeck Henkemans 2007: 18). In press conferences, the initial move is politicians' pragmatic argumentation, and journalist's questions are sequential moves. Likewise, politicians' replies to questions are a sequel to journalists' intervention, and so on and so forth.

From an argumentative perspective, the most basic reaction for journalists is posing critical questions. Since politicians' argumentation is pragmatic, journalists' critical questions should correspond to this type of argumentation. The critical questions of pragmatic argumentation (Van Eemeren 2017a: 23) are meant to evaluate three aspects: (a) the causal connection between the goal and its means, (b) the desirability or undesirability of the goal, and (c) the undesirable side effects of undertaking a course of action. These three questions are applicable to all pragmatic arguments; however, for the specific genre of political deliberation, it is necessary to include an additional question meant to determine (d) the impartiality of politicians' motives for choosing a course of action. This addition is necessary because conflicts of interest are a common concern both in political discussions and in accountability practices. Taken together, these four critical questions are the basic reactions that journalists could have in view of their role as antagonists. Going back to the Bush example, the general critical questions would be:

- a) Will consequences like the ones of 9/11 occur if Iraq is not invaded?
- a') Will peace in the U.S. and in the Middle East be achieved by invading Iraq?
- b) Are situations like 9/11 undesirable?
- b') Is peace in the U.S. and the Middle East desirable?
- c) Is there any side effect that makes Iraq's invasion not worth pursuing?
- d) Is there any other motive, apart from achieving peace or avoiding terrorist attacks, that explains the decision to invade Iraq?

Had journalists wanted to pose a critical question, any of these questions would have been an appropriate sequel to Bush's argumentation. It is important to notice that the dialectical profile that corresponds to critical questions would have been initiated simply by asking one question, but it would have been fully developed only if all of them were posed. Although this list of critical questions is not meant to be exhaustive, the points covered by them (the causal connection between the means and the goal, the desirability of the goal, the side effects of the measure, and the impartiality of the decision) should be addressed by journalists somehow.

There are situations where some critical questions are irrelevant given the context of press conferences. For instance, it would be awkward to ask questions (b) and (b') in Bush's conference because presumably all parties in the discussion accept that peace is desirable and that acts of terrorism are undesirable. There might be other situations where critical questions

must be specified in a specific way. For example, in press conferences addressing practical problems, the feasibility of certain measures might be the point of contention (see Andone 2015b), while in other press conferences the causal relationship is given for granted, but the crux of the dispute is about the most effective course of action. In general terms, the function of critical questions is to evaluate the tenability of politicians' standpoints considering the answers to those questions. Table 3 presents the dialectical profile of critical questions.

<b>Turn</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Type of dialectical move</b>	<b>Refers to</b>
Initial	Politician (protagonist)	Pragmatic argumentation	NA
Sequel 1	Journalist (antagonist)	Critical question (a)	Initial
Sequel 2	Politician	Answer to (a)	Sequel 1
Sequel 3	Journalist	Critical question (b)	Initial
Sequel 4	Politician	Answer to (b)	Sequel 3
Sequel n	Journalist	Critical question (x)	Initial
Sequel n+1	Politician	Answer to (x)	Sequel n

**Table 3. Dialectical profile of critical questions**

Journalists can also react to politicians' argumentation by advancing counterarguments. This could happen, for example, when journalists' information contradicts the arguments used by politicians. Counterarguments force politicians to provide further justification, either for their standpoint or their arguments. The dialectical profile of advancing counterarguments is similar to the profile of critical questions because both moves refer to politician's argumentation, but it differs from it in the type of answer that requires from politicians. If an argument is countered, there are only two appropriate sequels that politicians could have: either replacing the attacked premise by another one, or to provide additional justification for maintaining the premise.

Journalists advance counterarguments referring to additional information present in the material starting points. The additional information allows journalists to perform this move because this is how they expose the discrepancy with politicians' information. From an analytical point of view, the dialectical profile of counterarguments gives rise to multiple or subordinate argumentation (see Snoeck Henkemans 1992). Multiple argumentation takes place when politicians decide to replace the attacked premise with another one, and subordinate argumentation takes place when they provide further justification to the attacked premise. Table 4 presents the dialectical profile for rejecting premises.

<b>Turn</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Type of dialectical move</b>	<b>Refers to</b>
Initial	Politician (protagonist)	Pragmatic argumentation	NA

Sequel 1	Journalist (antagonist)	Attacking premise (x)		Initial
Sequel 2	Politician	Replace (x) with (y)	Provide (x') to support (x)	Sequel 1

**Table 4. Dialectical profile of advancing counterarguments**

The dialectical profiles of critical questions and counterarguments correspond to the basic difference of opinion in pragma-dialectics: single non-mixed (Van Eemeren 2018: 98). These profiles correspond to a single non-mixed discussion because journalists' moves remain neutral in the sense that they do not put forward any standpoint. Journalists' role in these dialectical profiles is limited to testing the tenability of politicians' standpoint. Critical questions are meant to acquire or scrutinize information for determining the tenability of standpoints, while counterarguments are meant to prevent politicians from using information inconsistent with the material starting points of discussions.

Politicians' moves in those dialectical profiles correspond to the role of protagonists in a single non-mixed discussion. In the dialectical profile of critical questions, politicians' answers are concessions made to the antagonist. A successful defense takes place when the concessions do not compromise the tenability of politicians' standpoints. In the dialectical profile of counterarguments, politicians' answers are amendments to their initial argumentation. Without the appropriate amendments, politicians' defense is flawed because they either rely on inaccurate information or have no back up for their information.

Apart from assuming antagonists' role, journalists can shift their role to become protagonists of discussions. This situation takes place when they advance arguments or standpoints. Given the characteristics of press conferences, journalists can advance standpoints by echoing other people's opinions without necessarily endorsing them. Consequently, journalists might advance standpoints without necessarily justifying them. Ideally, journalists would provide arguments for the standpoints, but even if they do not, politicians must react appropriately to journalists' shift of role.

The dialectical move of advancing argumentation challenges politicians indirectly because journalists imply that their standpoint is more reasonable than politicians' and, therefore, journalists attempt to show that politicians' decision was not the best available option. Consequently, politicians should react to this move by assuming the role of antagonist and confronting journalists' argumentation. This argumentative situation corresponds to a single mixed difference of opinion because there are two opposite standpoints being defended by two protagonists (Van Eemeren 2018). Journalists' argumentation matches the scheme of pragmatic argumentation as well, but the dialectical profile is different because journalists'

intervention is independent of politicians' first move. Table 5 presents the dialectical profile of journalists advancing a standpoint or argumentation.

Turn	Participant	Type of dialectical move	Refers to
Initial	Politician (protagonist)	Pragmatic argumentation	NA
Sequel 1	Journalist (protagonist)	Prescriptive standpoint $\alpha$	NA
Sequel 2	Politician (antagonist)	Criticizing ( $\alpha$ )	Sequel 1

Turn	Participant	Type of dialectical move	Refers to	
Initial	Politician (protagonist)	Pragmatic argumentation	NA	
Sequel 1	Journalist (protagonist)	Pragmatic argumentation	NA	
Sequel 2	Politician (antagonist)	Questioning (x)	Countering (x)	Sequel 1

**Table 5. Dialectical profile of journalists advancing a standpoint or argumentation**

Another dialectical move that journalists perform is asking informative questions. Instead of asking for information that immediately tests the acceptability of politicians' argumentation, an informative question calls for information that makes the evaluation possible. An argumentative situation may require informative questions when politicians present incomplete or unclear arguments. In such situations, clarifications and further elaborations are needed. From an argumentative perspective, the function of informative questions is increasing or specifying the material starting points because journalists urge politicians to provide more information about their decisions. Although functionally neutral, informative questions can lead to framing politicians' argumentation in several ways.

For example, depending on journalists' intentions, an informative question could be meant to highlight positive or negative consequences about a certain measure or policy. Consequently, informative questions are not critical, but they remain argumentative because they play a role in the discussion, both for having a clear discussion (see Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984: 109) and for highlighting various aspects of the issues under discussion. The dialectical profile of an informative question is presented in table 6.

Turn	Participant	Type of dialectical move	Refers to
Initial	Politician (protagonist)	Pragmatic argumentation	NA

Sequel 1	Journalist (indeterminate)	Informative question	Initial
Sequel 2	Politician	Additional material premises	Sequel 1

**Table 6. Dialectical profile of informative questions**

The last dialectical moves that journalists perform are requesting politicians' standpoints and arguments. These moves take place when journalists ask politicians their opinions on a certain issue or, if they already have one, to defend it. These dialectical moves are pertinent even if the recalled issues are unrelated to the main issue of the press conference. In this communicative activity, it is common to address different topics because it enhances the institutional point of holding politicians accountable. Since press conferences take place in complex political environments, it is frequent that several issues are important at the same time and, for this reason, journalists ask politicians their standing on different topics and the arguments for their positions.

When journalists request politicians' standpoints, journalists present the issues they are interested in. This happens in cases of controversial issues or relevant topics for specific sectors of the population. In these cases, politicians' answers count as standpoints because they are committed to the acceptability of their answers. Politicians' standpoints can be prescriptive, descriptive, or evaluative. Politicians can also deny providing a standpoint, but in such cases, they need to justify the denial.

Journalists request politicians' argumentation when politicians already have a standpoint, but it is not justified. In these cases, politicians cannot refuse to provide justification because having a standpoint carries the obligation of justifying it. However, an alternative option for politicians is giving up their standpoints. This could happen because politicians lack the means to show the acceptability of standpoints or because they are no longer committed to the standpoints. Table 7 presents the dialectical profile of requesting a standpoint and requesting argumentation.

<b>Turn</b>	<b>Participant</b>	<b>Type of dialectical move</b>	<b>Refers to</b>
Initial	Politician (protagonist)	Pragmatic argumentation	NA
Sequel 1	Journalist (no role)	Request of standpoint in topic A	NA
Sequel 2	Politician	Standpoint $\alpha$   Refusal and justification	Sequel 1

Initial	Politician (protagonist)	Pragmatic argumentation	NA
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Sequel 1	Journalist (no role)	Request of justification for standpoint $\alpha$	NA
Sequel 2	Politician	Argumentation	Give up standpoint $\alpha$
			Sequel 1

**Table 7. Dialectical profile of requesting a standpoint or argumentation**

To sum up, the argumentative means of press conferences consist of the dialectical moves that participants perform given their argumentative roles and communicative goals. These moves make up the available repertoire from which discussants can choose when participating in press conferences. For politicians, their first move is advancing pragmatic argumentation for the standpoint they defend, and their consecutive moves depend on journalists' interventions. The argumentative moves of journalists include asking critical questions, advancing counterarguments, putting forward standpoints and arguments, asking informative questions, and requesting standpoints and argumentation.

Depending on journalists' moves, politicians need to adapt their answers to make appropriate sequels. For example, if a journalist asks a critical question, politicians must reply with the appropriate information, in the sense that the propositional content of politician's answers should satisfy the pragmatic needs of the journalist's question. This means that the appropriateness of politicians' answers depends on matching the requirements of journalists' moves.

Each time journalists have an intervention they start or continue a dialectical profile. Given that journalists ask different questions, press conferences go from one dialectical profile to another because journalists do not necessarily share the same goals. Some journalists might be interested in asking critical questions, others in putting forward standpoints, while others in asking informative questions. For this reason, dialectical profiles might be spread through different moments of press conferences. This situation makes press conferences events where various argumentative scenarios are carried on at the same time.

Argumentative scenarios are discussions where a difference of opinion is resolved by different participants from the ones who started it while attending to the same starting points and considering the previous moves. When argumentative scenarios take place, different arguers engage in the discussion by playing the role of protagonist or antagonist. Metaphorically speaking, an argumentative scenario is an argumentative relay race.

Press conferences are a communicative activity where argumentative scenarios take place because discussions initiated by one journalist can only be continued if another journalist picks up the same argumentative role and continues with the same dialectical profile. For



example, if a journalist creates a single non-mixed difference of opinion by posing a critical question, it is possible to continue with that dialectical profile only if another journalist poses another critical question while attending to the same difference of opinion, the same starting points, and taking into consideration the moves previously made by participants. In this case, the politician would maintain the role of the protagonist throughout the discussion, but various journalists would have to perform the role of antagonist one after the other.

Argumentative scenarios take place in press conferences, but also in other communicative activities, for example, in scientific discussions. Scientific discussions take place through argumentative scenarios because arguments and criticisms are made by different participants that engage in discussions by adopting the roles of protagonist or antagonist. A reason to believe that scientific controversies take place through argumentative scenarios is the transgenerational nature of scientific discussions. Without scientists joining discussions by adopting an argumentative role inherited by their predecessors, differences of opinion could not be resolved, and scientific progress would be impossible. The notion argumentative scenario should be understood within the framework of polylogues (see Lewiński and Aakhus 2014, 2017) because it explains how different actors build up discussions in multi-party dialogues.

In the case of press conferences, the notion of argumentative scenarios is useful because it helps to distinguish the differences of opinion that emerge in one press conference. Since consecutive questions of journalists might belong to different argumentative scenarios, it is important to identify the dialectical profile to which each question belongs. From a theoretical point of view, argumentative scenarios are distinguished by pointing at the differences of opinion that come about from different argumentative moves. However, to analyze real-life press conferences, an analytical step is still needed because it is necessary to identify the argumentative function of questions. In other words, the means to distinguish whether a question is a criticism, an informative question or a critical question are still missing. The following section deals with this issue.

#### **2.4 Journalists' questions as functional speech acts**

As mentioned before, press conferences give politicians the opportunity to argue for their decisions. However, journalists lead discussions because, depending on the moves they make, different argumentative scenarios emerge. Without a clear understanding of these moves, it is not possible to analyze press conferences from an argumentative perspective, and therefore, establish their value for accountability purposes.

Press conferences limit journalists to posing questions. Accordingly, two possibilities emerge when journalists take part in a press conference: (i) journalists pose a legitimate question, i.e., a speech act through which information is requested, or (ii) journalists make a façade question, i.e., an indirect speech act meant to advance information. The asymmetry between requesting and advancing information explains why, in the latter case, journalists use façade questions to achieve their goals. The difficulty for analyzing press conferences resides in the fact that questions, both legitimate and façade, enable different argumentative moves.

To identify the argumentative function of questions, it is necessary to analyze journalists' interventions at the speech act level because, regardless of which move journalists perform, they do it by means of speech acts. Thus, by understanding the kind of speech acts journalists perform, the analytical difficulties for identifying the argumentative function of questions are dispelled. Put in other words, journalists' interventions are ambiguous at the sentence level, but they are not ambiguous at the pragmatic level because the speech act of every question must correspond to one argumentative move, and there is no ambiguity between the different moves that journalists perform.

In this line of thought, the missing step is specifying how questions enact different speech acts. If a question provides pragmatic grounds for satisfying the conditions to perform a speech act, then the question has a definite argumentative function. Since journalists can only request or advance information, their interventions must fall within one of these two general categories. The argumentative moves suitable for requesting information are requesting standpoints and argumentation, asking critical questions, and asking informative questions. On the other hand, the argumentative moves suitable for advancing information are counterarguments and advancing standpoints and argumentation. In what follows, the speech acts that enable each of these argumentative moves are specified and illustrated with the help of examples coming from Bush's press conference.

Requesting standpoints is a directive speech act (Searle 1979: 14) aimed at getting the other party to perform an assertive concerning a contested issue. The intended assertive puts the other party in a position where she commits to the truth or acceptability of the proposition contained in the assertive. In this line of thought, if journalists request politicians to externalize an opinion in a topic where confrontation is expected, then a standpoint is being requested. Some typical formulations to perform this speech act are 'what do you think about X' or 'what is your opinion about X' where X is an issue that gives rise to different positions. Requesting standpoints can also be performed in more subtle ways, as in the first question Bush got during his press conference:

- (2) Ron Fournier: “if you could further define what you just called this important moment we’re in, since you’ve made it clear just now that you don’t think Saddam has disarmed, and we have a quarter million troops in the Persian Gulf, and now that you’ve called on the world to be ready to use force as a last resort. Are we just days away from the point of which you decide whether or not we go to war?” (Bush 2003).

In this example, the journalist requests Bush to state the standpoint of his argumentation. This speech act can be attributed to the journalist because in the first sentence he makes clear he is requesting something “if you could further define” and then he reconstructs Bush’s argumentation. Since Bush left his standpoint implicit, the journalist makes clear the absence by reconstructing Bush’s argumentation and finally, in the second sentence, the journalist poses a yes/no question (Rocci & Raimondo 2018: 705) in which he requests Bush to commit to the proposition of deciding to go to war or not. In this way, the journalist put Bush in a situation where he cannot leave his standpoint implicit anymore. This example illustrates that the main feature of requesting standpoints is that speakers demand from the listener to commit to the truth or acceptability of propositions on a certain issue that is controversial for the parties.

Another way to request information is when journalists ask for argumentation. Requesting argumentation is a directive speech act aimed at getting another party to perform a complex speech act (Van Eemeren 1984: 39-46) to justify a standpoint. This speech act is usually made when politicians make statements on contentious issues, but they do not justify their opinions. In the context of press conferences, journalists are entitled to request justifications because advancing standpoints bare the obligation to defend them (Van Eemeren, 2004: 139) and therefore, journalists can ask politicians to justify their opinions. The general formula to perform this speech act is by means of the adverb ‘why’ in addition to the proposition present in the standpoint, but it is not the only way to do it, as it is shown in the next example.

- (3) Jean: “Mr. President. In the coming days, the American people are going to hear a lot of debate about this British proposal of a possible deadline being added to the resolution [...] can you share for the American public what you view as the pros and cons associated with that proposal?” (Bush 2003).

In this example, the journalist refers to a proposal previously discussed in the press conference. The proposal was about giving Iraq more time for disarming before deciding to attack. Bush dismissed the proposal by saying “A little bit more time? Saddam Hussein has had 12 years to disarm.” In this context, the journalist highlights that, by dismissing the proposal, Bush committed himself to the proposition ‘The U.S. should not give Iraq a final ultimatum for

disarming before attacking.’ By asking Bush to state the *pros* and *cons* of that position, the journalist made clear that Bush had to provide justification for the standpoint he indirectly committed to. This example shows that the main feature of requesting argumentation is that journalists express the need for justifying a standpoint that can be attributed to politicians.

The prototypical way of requesting information in press conferences is by asking critical questions. Asking a critical question is a directive speech act aimed at getting the other party to perform an assertive that enables the evaluation of their argumentation. Since the purpose of the directive is to test the soundness of the argumentation advanced by politicians, its propositional content needs to be aligned with the argument type that describes politicians’ argumentation. In the case of pragmatic argumentation, the propositional content of critical questions must address the causal relationship between means and ends, the desirability of the goals, the undesirable side effects of the means, and the impartiality of the decision when choosing the means.

In pragma-dialectics, the propositional content of critical questions is determined by (i) the set of questions that come with a particular argument scheme and (ii) the specific topic discussed by arguers. In this line of thought, the correspondence between the propositional content of a question (token) with the propositional content of a critical question (type) is what makes the former to be critical. Put in other words, a question is critical when its propositional content matches the critical questions that belong to the argument scheme used by politicians.

There is no general formula to ask critical questions and different formulations can be used to pose them, such as open question, closed-list question, yes/no question, complex question, positive/negative tone, etc. (see Rocci and Raimondo 2018). The next fragment exemplifies two critical questions that were posed in the Bush press conference.

- (4) John King: [...] how would you answer your critics who say that they think this is somehow personal? [...] And as you prepare the American people for the possibility of military conflict, could you share with us any of the scenarios your advisors have shared with you about worse-case scenarios, in terms of the potential cost of American lives, the potential cost to the American economy, and the potential risks of retaliatory terrorist strikes here at home?

These questions are critical because their propositional content matches two questions of the pragmatic argumentation scheme. The first question addresses the impartiality of decisions – fourth critical question– by highlighting Bush’s personal motives as a reason for invading Iraq. As Zarefsky pointed out (2014: 255), at the time of the press conference many people thought that Bush Jr. had a fixation with invading Iraq because of the policies that Bush Sr. had in the

Middle East. In a way, the decision of invading Iraq was perceived as a personal issue to continue with some sort of legacy. By ventilating this possibility, the journalist required Bush to show that the decision was based on everyone's interests. The second question in the example deals with the negative consequences of undertaking military action in Iraq –third critical question. The journalist asked for the human and economic costs of the invasion, as well as the possibility of having more terrorist attacks in the U.S. These questions are critical because they enable the evaluation of W. Bush's argumentation. Depending on the answers given to the questions, it is possible to pass a judgment concerning the acceptability of the argumentation.

The last legitimate question that journalists can ask are informative questions. Informative questions are directive speech acts aimed at getting another party to perform an assertive whose propositional content matches the propositional content of the question. The difference between informative and critical questions is that the propositional content of informative questions does not overlap with the set of critical questions that come with a particular argument scheme. Still, the connection between informative and critical questions is strong because the propositions obtained by informative questions might trigger critical questions. Nonetheless, it is not necessary for informative questions to be oriented towards the evaluation of arguments. In fact, there are all sorts of informative questions that have no argumentative value whatsoever. There is no general formula to perform informative questions and their linguistic features are as diverse as the features of critical questions (open/closed, positive/negative, etc.) The following examples present two informative questions. The first question triggers a critical reaction, while the second question has no argumentative value for the issue under discussion.

- (5) Ann: if you decide to go ahead with military action, there are inspectors on the ground in Baghdad. Will you give them time to leave the country, or the humanitarian workers on the ground or the journalists? Will you be able to do that, and still mount an effective attack on Iraq?
- (6) April: Mr. President, as the nation is at odds over war [...] how is your faith guiding you? And what should you tell America [...] should it be "pray?"

Ann's intervention in example (5) illustrates an informative question that triggers a critical question. The first question is informative because it requires information about how a specific situation will be handled under the assumption that Iraq is invaded. The second question, however, has a critical function. The second question suggests that either Bush gives time to civilians for leaving Iraq at the expense of not having an effective military action (compromising the first critical question of pragmatic argumentation) or Bush orders an

effective military action at the expense of jeopardizing civilians (compromising the third critical question of pragmatic argumentation). In this way, the second question poses a dilemma between two critical questions. The main point of this example is showing that the critical question depends somehow on the informative question.

On the other hand, April's intervention in example (6) is also an informative question but without any value for assessing Bush's argumentation. The question is informative because requires Bush to provide information about his religious grounds, but it does not bring any insights for passing a negative or positive judgment about Iraq' invasion. For this reason, the only argumentative function of the question is to increase the material starting points of the discussion.

The argumentative moves that require façade questions are discussed now. The first move is advancing counterarguments. Counterarguments require façade questions because these moves are complex speech acts (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984) aimed at attacking a certain proposition in someone else's argumentation. Counterarguments are complex speech acts since they require performing two elementary speech acts: an assertive and a directive.

The assertive consists of presenting an objection to the proposition that is target of the criticism. The directive consists in requesting the other party to give up the proposition as part of their argumentation. Quite often, the directive remains implicit, but the assertive could never be implicit because the counterargument is based on showing that the target proposition is incompatible with another proposition in the material starting points. The basic structure of counterarguments is "You said  $X$ , but  $\alpha$ " where  $X$  is the target of the criticism and  $\alpha$  is another proposition that challenges  $X$ . In the context of press conferences, counterarguments are done by means of question, and for this reason, the tension between the two propositions has to be expressed somehow in the questions. The next example shows how a question is used to object a premise in Bush's argumentation.

(7) Dick: Mr. President, you [...] have repeatedly said that we have shared with our allies all the current, up-to-date intelligence information that proves the imminence of the threat we face from Saddam Hussein, and that they have been sharing their intelligence with us, as well. If all these nations, all of them our normal allies, have access to the same intelligence information, why is it that they are reluctant to think that the threat is so real, so imminent that we need to move to the brink of war now?

In this example, the target of the counterargument is premise (1.1a) in Bush's argumentation "Iraq is a threat to the U.S. and its allies." The journalist insinuates that the premise is false alluding to the opinion of the rest of the U.S. allies "Iraq is not a threat." In the preamble of the

question, the journalist suggests that everyone should have the same opinion because everyone shares the same information, while in the question, the journalist legitimizes the opinion of the allies by saying that there is no reason to doubt it (*normal allies*) and by mentioning that they must be right because everyone else apart from the U.S. comes to the same conclusion (*all of these nations*). By putting all these elements together, the journalist makes a counterargument to make Bush drop his premise (1.1a). This intervention poses an attack to the entire argumentation presented by Bush because the counterargument targets the premise from which the rest of the argumentation depends, namely, the assumption that Iraq was a threat to the U.S.

The next argumentative move requiring façade questions is advancing standpoints. This move is an assertive speech act aimed at committing the speaker to the acceptability of a proposition. In normal circumstances, standpoints are advanced by those affirming or denying the proposition at stake, but in the case of press conferences, journalists can advance third parties' opinions and, therefore, they can advance standpoints without necessarily committing themselves to the acceptability of propositions.<sup>3</sup> Such maneuvers are meant to confront politicians with other opinions circulating in the public sphere. A common way to advance third parties' opinions is using the formula "What is your take on *Person's* comments saying that *X*?" where *X* is the proposition of the standpoint. Journalists can also advance their own standpoints with the help of negative formulated questions, such as "Isn't appropriate to *X*?" or "Didn't you think that *X*?" In these cases, journalists are committed to the advanced standpoints because the negative formulations imply the acceptability of propositions contained in the questions. When journalists advance their own standpoints, they are obliged to advance argumentation as well to justify their opinions.

Advancing argumentation is a complex speech act where a constellation of propositions is asserted to justify a standpoint (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984: 34, 2004: 1). There is no general formula to advance argumentation, but journalists usually resort to negative formulations or prefaced questions when deploying this move, such as "Given that *Y*, why didn't you *X*?" Where *Y* is the argumentation and *X* is the standpoint. In questions advancing argumentation, it is also possible that journalists leave standpoints implicit, and only arguments are present in the question. Either way, façade questions are necessary to perform this move because it is necessary to advance propositions to provide justification to standpoints. The following example presents a question where argumentation is advanced.

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<sup>3</sup> In these cases, journalists are committed to the truth of the event being reported, namely, that someone else asserted the standpoint being brought to the discussion.

(8) Ron Fournier: [...] what harm would it do to give Saddam a final ultimatum? A two or three day deadline to disarm or face force?

This intervention can be analyzed as the journalist advancing argumentation because, in the context of the press conference, the question implies a standpoint “the U.S. should give Iraq a final ultimatum to disarm” and it is possible to reconstruct the argumentation from the remaining information in the question “two or three extra days would make no harm”. This example shows that arguments can be advanced through questions without using any special formulation. For this reason, the most important points to recognize a question as advancing argumentation is considering the context of discussions, the implicatures being made, and the information contained in questions. The following table summarizes the argumentative moves that are enabled by different speech acts.

<b>Journalist Move</b>	<b>Kind of question</b>	<b>Type of speech act</b>	<b>Specification</b>
Request of standpoint	Legitimate	Directive	Requesting information (an opinion). The intention of the speaker is to obtain a proposition to which the politician can be committed to its acceptability.
Request of argument	Legitimate	Directive	Requesting information (a justification). The intention of the speaker is to obtain a constellation of propositions that justify a politician’s standpoint.
Critical question	Legitimate	Directive	Requesting information (critical for the evaluation). The intention of the speaker is to acquire propositions for testing the acceptability of politicians’ argumentation in view of causal relations, desirability of the goals, undesirable side effects, or impartiality of the decision.
Informative question	Legitimate	Directive	Requesting information (clarifications or further elaborations). The intention of the speaker is to acquire propositions for understanding politicians’ standpoint, argumentation, or its implications.



Advancing counter-arguments	Façade	Assertive and Directive	Advancing information (a criticism). The intention of the speaker is to present a conflict between a proposition used in politician's argumentation and information present in the material starting points. The attack on the premise implies a request to drop the proposition from politicians' argumentation.
Advancing standpoints	Façade	Assertive	Advancing information (an opinion). The intention of the speaker is to present a proposition that is considered an acceptable opinion in the discussion, either by the speaker themselves or by another party.
Advancing argumentation	Façade	Assertive	Advancing information (a justification). The intention of the speaker is advancing a constellation of propositions that give justification to a standpoint.

**Table 8. Journalists' argumentative moves at the speech act level**

By specifying the speech acts that facilitate argumentative moves in press conferences, it becomes possible to identify unambiguously the function of journalists' questions. The linguistic features of questions, the interactional cues in discussions, and the presumed intentions of participants are what allow for the identification of the speech acts that journalists perform in their interventions. Although this analysis is inevitably interpretive, the theoretical frameworks of argumentation and speech acts constrain to a greater extent the possible interpretations that can be made in the context of press conferences.

### **2.5 The importance of journalists' questions for accountability purposes**

Accountability is both a practice and a value (Bovens 2010). Accountability is valuable in the sense that societies appreciate having regulations that prevent authorities from abusing their power and mismanaging public resources. However, when circumstances raise doubts on politicians' motives, accountability turns into specific practices meant to establish the appropriateness of decisions and the responsibility of the parties involved.

Press conferences are instances of informal accountability because journalists engage in discussions to establish whether politicians' decisions are taken responsibly. Argumentation is crucial for accountability practices because it helps to find out whether decisions are properly justified or not. Although press conferences provide the necessary structure for scrutinizing

politicians' decisions, the interaction between journalists and politicians is not enough to achieve that goal. To hold politicians accountable, journalists must perform moves that test the appropriateness of politicians' decisions. For this reason, journalists need to cooperate with each other to achieve the common task of holding politicians accountable.

Since different questions have different argumentative functions, journalists need to choose the questions that are conducive for accountability because some questions are more appropriate than others depending on the issue under discussion and the moves previously made by participants. The framework developed in sections 3 and 4 is useful to determine what moves are more important for accountability purposes. To establish what moves to prioritize, it is necessary to know the type of decision being assessed.

If the decision under discussion has already been made, journalists should concentrate on exhausting the critical questions that belong to politicians' argumentation. Focusing on critical questions allows journalists to test the grounds upon which the decision was made. Critical questions are paramount in these cases because, in case politicians ignored or omitted important information for making the decision, they should be considered responsible for the negative consequences of the decision. In these situations, asking other types of questions can still be relevant, but only secondarily, because the main point is establishing whether the decision was taken in a responsible way given the information available at the time.

It is important to realize that critical questions, as specified by argument schemes, simply highlight the direction in which discussions should go, but each critical question has a myriad of instantiations that change from one context to another. For example, in the case of pragmatic argumentation, the critical question regarding negative side-effects is not addressed by inquiring about a single point. Instead, it involves addressing all the negative side-effects that were relevant when the decision was made. Consequently, accountability becomes impossible without a coordinated effort of journalists because addressing a single critical question requires multiple interventions. Therefore, the less argumentative scenarios are created in such press conferences the better for accountability purposes, because each argumentative scenario that is created derails to a certain extent the goal of holding politicians accountable.

A different situation arises when politicians hold press conferences to discuss the implementation of policies and future courses of action, as decisions are still being made and there is room to explore alternative possibilities. In these cases, critical questions, advancing argumentation, and advancing counterarguments become the most relevant moves. Critical questions are relevant to test the soundness of politicians' measures. Advancing argumentation is relevant because journalists propose alternative measures that could address situations in a

better way. Counterarguments are relevant because journalists might have concrete objections to the course of action proposed by politicians.

Advancing argumentation and counterarguments are important moves because journalists make sure that politicians consider a wider perspective on the issues under discussion. In case politicians ignore the information provided by journalists and politicians' decisions end up being inappropriate, journalists can hold them accountable for negligence. On the other hand, critical questions are important because this move give the opportunity to politicians to show the reasonableness of the decisions they aim to implement.

Since critical questions, advancing argumentation and counterarguments give rise to distinct argumentative scenarios, journalists must decide which one to contribute with their interventions. It would be inappropriate not to ask various critical questions, but it would be deficient not challenge politicians with alternative perspectives. The determining factor for choosing between these moves is the nature of the decision being made and its associated risks. The greater the risks entailed by a decision, the more important it becomes to make politicians reconsider their positions by presenting arguments and counterarguments.

Informative questions should be asked of necessity. If politicians are not precise or clear enough in their proposals, journalists should ask questions to make sure that all information is as transparent and accessible as possible. Neglecting clarity in discussions is not only a shortcoming by politicians, as journalists also bear responsibility of elucidating elements that might be unclear to the public.

Concerning standpoints requests, journalists should pursue this move only if the issue they introduce is more important than the issue being discussed, since it would be inappropriate to derail the topic of a press conference if a delicate issue is being addressed. This is what happens in example (1) when the journalist asked G.W. Bush whether it was essential for the U.S. security to prevent North Korea from developing nuclear weapons. This question disrupted accountability because Iraq invasion was eminent, and the North Korean issue was not an emergency at the time.

The problem with standpoints requests is that, in principle, any topic could be considered important for journalists depending on their interests. An impartial way for deciding when to derail the topic of press conferences is by considering the issues being discussed in the public sphere (radio, newspapers, social media, etc.) at the time of a press conference. An example is the press conference that M. Pompeo gave together with the Italian Foreign Minister L. Di Maio on October 2. The press conference was part of a diplomatic meeting to discuss economic and military issues in Italy. At the time of the press conference, Trump had been exposed blackmailing Ukraine to manipulate U.S. elections. The issue became highly

controversial, and it was covered in many newspapers worldwide. One journalist derailed the topic of the press conference to ask Pompeo about the blackmailing event. In that situation, it was reasonable for the journalist to request a standpoint because the Ukrainian issue was bigger than the topic of the press conference itself.

In sum, press conferences serve as spaces of public accountability when journalists' moves are suited to evaluate politicians' decisions. Depending on the issue being discussed and the status of politicians' decisions, journalists need to promote or avoid certain argumentative scenarios. Furthermore, the structure of press conferences requires journalists to elaborate on each other's moves to successfully enact the relevant argumentative scenarios. Accordingly, each time a journalist derails from the appropriate argumentative scenario, accountability is threatened to a certain extent.

By participating in press conferences, journalists acquire a burden of questioning (Leal 2020) that can only be discharged by performing appropriate moves. As a case in point, Bush's press conference illustrates how accountability requires a sustained effort on journalists' side to evaluate politicians' decisions. Although many journalists asked questions that promoted accountability, there were many questions that nobody asked, and that were relevant in the discussion. For example, whether Bush had a restoration plan for Iraq after the invasion or addressing the possibility of the invasion being motivated to controlling Iraq's oil reserves. Most likely, asking all the appropriate questions would have done nothing to prevent the invasion, but only by improving this kind of communicative practices, informal accountability can be improved and, ultimately, the quality of public debates that have an impact in political decisions.

## **2.6 Conclusion**

Journalists' interventions in press conferences serve different purposes and bear different consequences. If journalists are committed to promoting accountability, they need to pose questions that allow evaluating politicians' decisions. The framework developed in this paper explains how certain argumentative scenarios favor the scrutiny of politicians' decisions. When decisions have already been made, the best option is concentrating on asking critical questions. Instead, when issues are still open to debate and it is possible to influence politicians' decisions, journalists can afford to create various argumentative scenarios where different arguments and criticisms are exchanged.

The contribution of this paper to argumentation studies is two-fold. On the one hand, a method for establishing the argumentative function of questions was developed. The method consists of identifying the possible moves that arguers perform given the nature of the

discussion, to later assign a specific function to questions in view of their pragmatic features. Although this procedure was developed to analyze press conferences, it can be relevant for studying other communicative activities where questioning plays an argumentative role. For example, in cross-examination sessions, academic conferences, philosophical dialogues, etc.

On the other hand, the notion of argumentative scenario was developed to account for situations where participants leave their role in a discussion, and other participants assume those roles to continue with the discussion. Aside from press conferences, this notion can be useful to analyze transgenerational discussions, scientific controversies, and public discussions. Although the idea of argumentative scenarios is rather simple, it helps to explain argumentative situations that encompass multi-party interactions that do not match the basic definition of polylogues (Lewiński and Aakhus 2014). Accordingly, argumentative scenarios help to better understand discussions that involve multiple arguers in a common argumentative task.

The findings of this study provided insights on journalists' questions and their implication for accountability. However, certain aspects need further examination. One point is the empirical dimension of journalists' moves. The typology developed in this paper is theoretically motivated, now it is necessary to investigate the extent to which the typology captures argumentative reality. For this purpose, journalists' questions need to be investigated as they occur in press conferences. Another point of research is investigating how journalists' questions as a whole shape discussions with politicians. This point is important because, once the function of individual questions can be identified, it becomes possible to investigate how clusters of questions shape discussions with politicians overall.

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### 3 Journalists' questions during crisis: watchdogs or disseminators of information?<sup>4</sup>

**Abstract:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, different institutions held press conferences to inform the public about the crisis. Journalists engaged in these events to inform the public about the situation and to examine the appropriateness of the measures. Previous research has shown that journalists have become more adversarial towards politicians, but also that health crises make them more cooperative with authorities to help manage the situation. However, it remains unknown to what extent journalists retain their deliberative aim in press conferences where crises are addressed, and how their interventions as a whole shape the discussion with authorities. A corpus of twenty-one press conferences held by seven institutions was annotated according to the argumentative moves of journalists. Results show that journalists displayed a wide array of argumentative moves, and the findings suggest that journalists incline towards retrieving information during crisis, but their criticality is triggered if crises get intertwined with political turmoil.

**Keywords:** argumentation, corpus annotation, Covid-19, journalism, press conferences, questioning

#### 3.1 Introduction

During the Covid-19 pandemic, press conferences became important venues to convey information. At the time, there was a general need to understand the situation and the measures that were implemented to contain it. Although authorities had a main role in these events, journalists also played an important role in the discussion. Journalists helped to make information understandable by requesting clarifications, and they contributed to accountability by assuming a critical attitude towards authorities.

According to research in conversation analysis, journalists have become more adversarial towards politicians in press conferences (Clayman and Heritage 2002a, Clayman and Fox 2017). But research on crisis communication suggests that journalists experience a positive shift in attitude towards authorities during health crises to help them manage the situation (Klemm et al. 2019, Hooker et al. 2011, Glik 2007). This opposition in the research literature makes wondering what happened in press conferences concerning Covid-19. If health crises have an impact on journalists' attitude towards authorities, journalists' adversarialness must have been affected somehow.

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Although journalists' attitudes and their degree of adversarialness are useful to understand the relationship between media and authorities, these notions have some limitations for analyzing discourse. On the one hand, there can be a mismatch between journalists' reported attitudes and the verbal behavior they display during crises. Even if journalists are honest about their intentions, what matters from an analytical perspective is the questions they ask in press conferences. The notion of adversarialness, on the other hand, is better suited to study discourse because it is grounded on the linguistic features of questions. However, adversarialness only captures one of many attitudes that journalists can have towards authorities, namely, being confrontational. Still, it seems reasonable that journalists become cooperative with authorities when they share the same goals, as the literature from crisis communication suggests. For these reasons, a different tool is necessary to analyze journalists' interactions with politicians during health crises, one that captures different journalists' attitudes while being sensitive to the linguistic features of questions.

This paper adopts an argumentative perspective to study journalists' questioning. Argumentation brings a nuanced view on journalists' interventions because it allows to see journalists adopting different positions towards authorities. A neutral position if journalists ask non-compromising questions, a critical stance if they hold authorities accountable without having a position for themselves, and an openly confrontational position if journalists bring arguments and criticisms.

Furthermore, the analytical tools of argumentation theory are grounded on the linguistic features of questions, which means that journalists' interventions are positioned in the discussion depending on the functions they serve. If a question raises a critical issue, the question is marked as critical independently of the intentions of the journalist. In this way, the psychological difficulties of journalists' attitudes are avoided (see externalization in van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 54) while retaining an instrument capable of situating journalists in different positions towards authorities.

To investigate journalists' questioning during crises, an analysis was conducted on a corpus comprising twenty-one press conferences held during the Covid-19 pandemic. The corpus included events from seven institutions. The research questions of the study are (i) What argumentative moves did journalists perform in the press conferences? (ii) Within each institution included in the corpus, did journalists tend to ask more informative-oriented questions or accountability questions? To answer research question (i), the corpus was annotated according to the argumentative moves of journalists in press conferences. To answer question (ii), the results of the annotation were analyzed to establish whether journalists exhibited a preference towards asking accountability questions or informative ones.

The structure of this paper is as follows. In section two, the role of journalists in press conferences and their attitudes during crisis are explained. In section three, the theoretical basis of the annotation is presented to provide an argumentative classification of questions. Section four describes the corpus and the selection criteria of the press conferences. Section five presents the methodology of the annotation together with some examples from the corpus. In section six, the results of the analysis are presented, and in section seven, the data is discussed to make sense of the findings. Finally, the paper concludes by outlining future lines of research based on the results of the study.

### **3.2 Literature review**

Communication is vital during crisis because it involves collecting, processing, and disseminating information to manage a situation (Coombs 2010). Press conferences are important venues during crises because authorities use them to deliver official information. Journalists play an important role in these events because they influence the flow of information by highlighting or ignoring different aspects of crises.

Sánchez et al. (2021) studied journalists' interventions in press conferences to understand how journalists framed the Covid-19 pandemic in Mexico. According to their study, journalists were more interested in the economic impacts of the crisis at the beginning, but over a period of one month, the content of questions changed to address health risks related to the disease. More significantly, during all press conferences, journalists remained focused on determining who was responsible for what in the pandemic. For this reason, the authors assumed that journalists framed the crisis as an attribution of responsibility, meaning that journalists were mainly concerned with holding authorities accountable for their management of the crisis.

Journalists can aid or obstruct politicians with their questions because certain answers can be facilitated or blocked depending on the formulation of questions. For example, Eriksson and Eriksson (2012) showed that open-ended questions give politicians more space to maneuver as compared to yes-no questions. In their study, two Swedish press conferences were analyzed to see how politicians handled scandals. Their analysis showed that open-ended questions helped politicians to restore their image because it was easier to provide explanations, whereas yes-no questions were more challenging because they are restrictive in terms of what counts as an appropriate answer. These insights highlight the influence of journalists in either facilitating or impeding politicians' communication strategies through their choice of questioning techniques.

The formulation of questions during press conferences has been investigated in discourse studies to understand the adversarialness of journalists towards politicians. Adversarialness is the level of confrontation that journalists exhibit in their questions. The aspects that are considered for the adversarialness of questions include length, assertiveness, linguistic construction, etc. Results show that journalists' questions have become more direct, assertive, and hostile towards politicians over time (Clayman and Heritage 2002a, see also Clayman and Fox 2017), and that negative questioning, which is confrontational because it makes implications while favoring a certain answer, has become more frequent among journalists (Heritage and Clayman 2013). Consequently, the interactions between journalists and politicians have become increasingly confrontational, putting politicians at odds with journalists' opinions. The key finding of this body of research is that press conferences have evolved into a forum where journalists not only retrieve politicians' opinions, but also use it to express their own viewpoints.

Jacobs et al. (2022) examined the dynamics of discourse between journalists and politicians to explain how journalists shape politicians' positions as discussions unfold. Using a press conference as a case study, the authors analyzed how Trump had to specify his standpoint as the interactions with journalists unfolded. During the event, journalists questioned the former president about his stance on the Charlottesville protest, which involved a racist terrorist attack. Trump had been vague concerning the issue and many people perceived his ambiguity as supporting white-supremacist groups.

The analysis revealed that Trump's position became increasingly inconsistent as journalists started to ask questions. Initially, he maintained that it was appropriate not to have a position on the issue because facts were missing. Then he changed his position to condemning neo-Nazis and alt-left groups, but excluding rightwing protestors from any blame. Journalists' interventions made evident that Trump's remarks could not be maintained consistently, and that his ambiguities were strategic to protect the public image of his supporters. The results of the analysis show the importance of context and the temporal unfolding of discourse to understand the argumentative strategies and position of discussants in press conferences, and the study also highlights the role of journalists in shaping public discourse and holding public figures accountable for their statements and actions.

Albeit confronting authorities is characteristic of political deliberation, its pertinence during crises is controversial because journalists must decide between holding politicians accountable and collaborating with them to promote adherence to cautionary measures (Klemm et al 2019: 1229). In a study about reporting on avian influenza (Hooker et al. 2011), journalists declared having a dilemma between supporting authorities during an outbreak and remaining

impartial. Although journalists acknowledged the importance of being critical, in practice, they seemed to adopt the views of authorities instead of taking a critical stance. Either way, journalists' interventions in press conference have an impact on crisis communication because, as Glik (2007: 35) points out, "[crisis communication] is essential for saving lives [...] and ultimately plays a major role in disaster and crisis mitigation efforts."

The role of journalists in public health crises was also discussed by Klemm et al. (2019). In this study, journalists reported having a positive shift in attitude towards authorities to help with crises. The authors assumed that the nature of health crises facilitates the shift from watchdog to a more cooperative role because journalists' goals are more easily aligned with the goals of authorities, particularly in acute stages of crises. If both journalists and authorities share the goal of preserving public health, their interactions are more likely to coordinate effectively to achieve their common objective.

Although journalists' questions are half of the story in press conferences and politicians tend to give evasive answers (Clayman 2001, Clementson and Eveland 2016), avoidance does not erase what questions do in press conferences. The challenges and opportunities created by journalists not only set the tone of the discussion, but also establish a specific communicative situation that endures, even if politicians do not answer appropriately. As Eriksson (2011: 3333) notices, one function of follow-up questions is to stress politicians' unsolved issues in a discussion. Seen from this perspective, journalists' interventions leave a communicative fingerprint that can be analyzed to better understand how crisis communication takes place in press conferences.

### **3.3 Theoretical basis of the annotation**

Approaching crises from an argumentative perspective can explain how participants manage disagreement and doubt in contexts of emergency. Argumentative exchanges take place in these contexts because participants need to convince each other about the acceptability of their claims. Sometimes they argue in cooperative situations where they try to solve a common problem, while other times they argue to settle a disagreement. Either way, participants need to exchange reasons and criticisms as part of the crisis management process.

In this paper, the pragma-dialectical model of argumentation (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984, Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004) is used as a framework to analyze press conferences. A main feature of the pragma-dialectical approach is the notion of ideal model of a critical discussion (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 96). Put briefly, this model describes the different stages that participants need to go through to resolve their differences of opinion. In the ideal model of a critical discussion, participants perform moves according to

their roles, which are either protagonist or antagonist (Van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 60). Protagonists provide justification for standpoints, while antagonists raise doubts and criticisms.

In the context of press conferences, authorities assume the role of protagonists because they justify their policies and describe crises (see Schueler and Marx 2022). Journalists, on the other hand, take the role of antagonists by default, but they can also become protagonists in the discussion by performing the corresponding argumentative moves. This point is frequently overlooked in the literature because journalists are considered subordinated to politicians. Nonetheless, journalists' interventions affect the discussion as much as politicians because their questions shape the discussion at large, making press conferences more adversarial, informative oriented, accommodating, etc. (see Leal 2020, and Hautli-Janisz et al. 2022 for the role of questions in argumentation).

In the simplest kind of discussion, single non-mixed, participants only justify and cast doubt on standpoints (Van Eemeren et al. 2002: 28). However, the different settings where argumentation takes place give rise to more complex discussions, and participants need to make other argumentative moves. In press conferences, journalists can perform the following moves (Hernández 2021):

- a) Advancing standpoints: the intention of the speaker is to put forth a proposition that is deemed acceptable despite being doubted or contested by other parties.
- b) Advancing argumentation: the intention of the speaker is to defend the acceptability of a standpoint by advancing a constellation of propositions that aim to provide justification for it.
- c) Advancing counterarguments: the intention of the speaker is to prevent politicians from using a certain proposition in their argumentation either by pointing at inconsistencies or the unacceptability of propositions.
- d) Asking critical questions: the intention of the speaker is to acquire propositions for testing the acceptability of politicians' argumentation in view of the scheme employed to defend the standpoint at issue.
- e) Asking informative questions: the intention of the speaker is to acquire propositions for understanding politicians' position or its implications.
- f) Requesting argumentation: the intention of the speaker is to obtain a constellation of propositions that justify a politician's standpoint.
- g) Requesting standpoints: the intention of the speaker is to obtain a proposition on a certain issue to which the politician can be committed to its acceptability.

These argumentative moves cover the interactional landscape of journalists in press conferences because they are based on the affordances that question-and-answer sessions give to journalists in view of their communicative goals and the settings of the discussion. The moves are distinguished in view of the pragma-dialectical distinction of protagonist and antagonist. Moves (a), (b), and (c) correspond to the protagonist of a discussion because they are concerned with advancing, justifying, and attacking standpoints. These moves are usually done by means of implicatures because journalists rely on interrogative formulations to perform them. The moves that correspond to the antagonist position are (d), (e), (f), and (g) because they are restricted to express doubts.

Journalists' moves in press conferences are also related to their professional roles. Weaver and Wilhoit (1996: chapter 4) describe four roles that journalists adopt in their profession: interpreter, disseminator, adversarial, and populist mobilizer. Both the disseminator and adversarial roles come to surface in press conferences. As disseminators, journalists are concerned with the acquisition and delivery of information, while as adversaries, they hold authorities accountable for their decisions. Each of the argumentative moves of journalists can be related to one of these roles because each move has a precise function in the discussion.

The argumentative moves that enact the adversarial role in journalists are (a) advancing standpoints because it implies raising an opposite opinion, (b) advancing argumentation because it provides justification for a contrary opinion, (c) advancing counterarguments because it raises criticisms, (d) asking critical questions because it implies evaluating the justification of politicians, and (f) requesting argumentation because it implies that something is unjustified.

The argumentative moves that are related to the disseminator role are (e) asking informative questions and (g) requesting standpoints. Informative questions belong to this role because they enable journalists acquiring information about the issue under discussion, while requesting standpoints belongs to the disseminator role because it gives journalists the opinion of politicians on contentious issues. These moves, albeit argumentative, give journalists a neutral stance in the discussion because the main function of these moves is obtaining relevant information regarding an issue.

Having set the relationship between argumentative moves and journalists' roles, it is possible to establish the general tendency of journalists' interventions in press conferences. If journalists make more argumentative moves that belong to the disseminator role, they focus on acquiring information and, therefore, the discussion is information oriented. Similarly, if journalists make more argumentative moves that belong to the adversarial role, journalists act as watchdogs, and the discussion becomes accountability oriented. The categories of

disseminators of information and watchdogs allow having a general picture of the type of discussions in press conferences, while retaining an argumentative analysis.

### **3.4 Data**

The corpus was composed of twenty-one press conferences (173,997 words). Three criteria were used for including press conferences in the corpus. The first criterion was language related, as only events in English were considered. Press conferences from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the World Health Organization were included. In the specific case of the United States, two different institutions were considered, the federal government and New York state<sup>1</sup>. The second criterion was time related: only events from 2020 were selected. This period corresponds to the first wave of the pandemic, when the crisis was more acute given the novelty of the situation. Finally, the last criterion was topic based. Although 2020 was characterized by controversy, there were specific moments that proved to be more difficult, either because a measure was announced, or because the situation was degenerating in a certain way (number of deaths, infection rates, political turmoil, unemployment, etc.) Accordingly, three press conferences for each institution were chosen in view of the topics that were addressed in each event. The press conferences held by politicians were retrieved from the Rev transcript library<sup>2</sup>, while the WHO press conferences from its official website<sup>3</sup>. The following table summarizes the information of the corpus.



Institution	Main speaker	Date	Topic	Tokens
Australian government	Scott Morrison	29 Mar	Emergency relief budget for unemployment and health services	17,774
		14 May	Reopening plan after 600,000 people lost their job	
		03 Aug	Melbourne is declared state of disaster, and curfew is introduced.	
Canadian government	Justin Trudeau	18 Mar	Implementation of an emergency subsidy to protect workers	20,287
		15 May	Extension of the emergency wage subsidy	
		17 Nov	Record-breaking new cases in Quebec, Ontario, Saskatchewan, and Alberta	
New York State government	Andrew Cuomo	03 Apr	Ventilators from private hospitals are taken after New York passes 100,000 cases.	23,456
		16 Apr	Significant rise in deaths, particularly in nursing homes	
		24 Jun	Implementation of fourteen-day quarantine measure	
New Zealand government	Jacinda Ardern	07 Apr	Political turmoil for health minister breaking lockdown rules	28,845
		22 Apr	Total number of new cases increases by six	
		29 Apr	The alert-level system goes from four (maximum) to three.	
United Kingdom government	Boris Johnson	22 Mar	Lockdown announcement	24,175
		26 Nov	Return to the tier-system restrictions	
		02 Dec	Vaccine approval	
United States government	Donald Trump	14 Apr	Stopping WHO funding	32,022
		27 Apr	Pushing to open the economy while deaths kept rising	
		22 May	Decision to open places of worship	
World Health Organization	Tedros Ghebreyesus	04 Feb	Covid-19 is an emergency for China only	27,438
		15 Apr	Budget cuts by the US	
		22 Jun	Dexamethasone is useful for treating severe and critical patients.	
<b>Total</b>				<b>173,997</b>

It is worth explaining the suitability of the corpus for answering the research questions. The first point concerns the decision to include press conferences by the WHO and different governments. Although the WHO and governments are fundamentally different in terms of their capabilities and purposes, it is sensible to compare them because Covid-19 put all these institutions in the same situation. The pandemic required combining expert information and decision-making and, as a result, not only the WHO became highly politicized during the pandemic, but also governments relied on their own experts to convey information. For this reason, all these institutions had to address similar if not the same issues in their press conferences. Even more, press conferences became unofficial spaces for dialogue among the different institutions due to journalists conveying information from one venue to another.

Another point to consider is that press conferences, as a communicative practice, have the same structure regardless of the institution where they take place. As Rigotti and Rocci (2006) point out, any communicative activity is composed of two elements, its interaction field and scheme. The interaction field is the social reality where the communicative activity is embedded. In the case of press conferences, it would be the government of each country and the WHO as an institution. The interaction scheme, on the other hand, is the formal structure

that gives shape to the interaction between the parties. In the case of press conferences, it is the combination of the opening remarks made by the spokesperson, and the question-answer session where different participants have a single intervention to confront the speaker. This interaction scheme remains the same among all institutions no matter how big their differences are. In fact, any modification to the interaction scheme necessarily results in a different scheme of interaction, for example, a public speech or an interview. By focusing on these features of press conferences, it is possible to analyze events from various institutions in a systematic way.

### 3.5 Methodology

The annotation of the corpus was made using INCEpTION (Klie et al. 2018). Two annotation layers were employed for the analysis. The first layer divided press conferences into opening remarks and question-and-answer. This layer was meant to have an idea of the amount of discussion that took place at press conferences in view of the opening remarks of authorities. The second layer analyzed journalists' interventions within the question-and-answer session.

The interventions of journalists were analyzed to identify their argumentative moves. The analysis was systematized as a set of instructions, which were compiled in an annotation manual (see appendix). The manual was utilized to classify all the questions in the corpus. One press conference was randomly selected to calculate the inter-annotator agreement with the help of an additional annotator (Cohen's Kappa 0.55). In what follows, each argumentative move is briefly described and exemplified to understand the features that guided the annotation of the second layer.

Informative questions are ubiquitous in the media because their function is acquiring information. Journalists use these questions to fill knowledge gaps or seek explicit confirmation on specific matters<sup>4</sup>. These questions are important in argumentative settings because they increase the common ground for resolving a discussion successfully (van Eemeren 2018: 37). Informative questions are neutral with authorities because they give authorities the opportunity to elaborate their positions without imposing many constraints on the answers. The following token is an example of informative questions (Cuomo 2020, April 16):

(1) I have a [question] on masks. Does the mandate apply to kids?

This intervention was classified as informative because the journalist requires a specification on something previously said by authorities, and because it is not possible to attribute an opinion, argument, or counterargument to the journalist. As it stands, the formulation of the question gives a lot of space to authorities to maneuver because the question could be answered negatively or positively without putting at odds the position of the authority.

Critical questions are meant to evaluate the reasonableness of arguments (van Eemeren 2018: 46, Walton et al. 2008). The information requested by these questions, contrary to informative ones, allows us to pass a judgment on the argumentation of authorities. Critical questions depend on the argument scheme used by authorities when justifying their standpoint. By identifying the scheme, it is possible to have access to its critical questions. If the question of a journalist matches any of the critical questions belonging to the scheme at hand, it is annotated as critical. This move is antagonistic because it holds authorities accountable for their decisions, without journalists having to take an opposite position in the debate. The following intervention is an example of critical questions (Cuomo, 2020 April 3):

(2) How do you decide who gets [the ventilators] if the curve hits in upstate?

This question is critical because it corresponds to a critical question of pragmatic argumentation (van Eemeren 2017: 23), namely, the one that highlights undesirable side effects of implementing a measure. In that press conference, the issue under discussion was whether emergency ventilators from one hospital should be brought to another to cope with the rising number of hospitalizations. The argument of the politician was that ventilators should be moved because they were not being used at the time. By asking that question, the journalists exposed the potential undesirable consequence of leaving the population unattended in the original place in case of need.

Journalists request a standpoint when they ask authorities to take a position on a contentious issue. This type of question gives authorities the opportunity to express their preferences or expectations, even if those could be challenged given the nature of contentious topics. This move is neutral towards authorities because, depending on the answer of authorities, journalists could agree with them or not. During times of crisis, requesting standpoints can be instrumental for crisis management because it might help to anticipate official measures, as in the following example (Ardern 2020, April 7):

(3) On funerals information, would you consider loosening some of the criteria [...] to allow maybe one person or two people to attend a cremation or a small service if they're in full protective gear or whatever?

This question is a request of standpoint because it allows authorities to express the official position on funerals, which was a controversial issue during the pandemic because it was forbidden to hold ceremonies. The formulation of the question offers two standpoints to choose from ('A couple of people are allowed to attend cremations', and 'Small ceremonies are allowed if people have full protective gear'), but it leaves open the possibility to advance

whatever standpoint suits better the authorities because the main purpose of the question is obtaining a standpoint.

Journalists request argumentation when authorities leave unjustified a standpoint they are committed to. Why-questions are a common indicator of this move, but not all why-questions fall in this category because there are cases where an explanation is requested instead of a justification. Furthermore, requests of argumentation can also be performed without employing why-questions, as in the example discussed below (Trudeau 2020, May 15). Thus, the best way to classify a question as requesting argumentation is recognizing the need to justify a standpoint in view of the issue under discussion.

- (4) Prime Minister, you've [...] talked about a lot of economic and stimulus measures that you're planning to put in force. What kind of reassurances can you give to Canadians at this time that the government has the infrastructure in place and the people in place, considering the directive to work from home, that this money will roll out in a timely and efficient manner?

This question was annotated as requesting argumentation because the journalist makes explicit that people had doubts about the implementation of measures. The standpoint that needed justification was that the government had the capacity to enact the measures effectively, but the question reflects that there were concerns about the infrastructure put in place, particularly in view of the mandate to work from home. In this way, the journalist takes an antagonistic position towards the authority because exposes the missing justification for the standpoint.

Questions advancing a standpoint put forth an opinion in view of a controversial issue (van Eemeren et al. 2002: 4-8). This kind of question can be used to advance journalists' opinions, but also someone else's opinion: scientists, authorities, the public, etc. This move is particularly useful when expert knowledge is pertinent for a discussion, as in the case of crises. When journalists bring other people's opinions into press conferences, they become argumentative intermediaries (Rocci and Luciani 2016) because they bring into the discussion relevant information that was delivered in a different context. The following example illustrates a question advancing a standpoint (Ardern 2020, April 29):

- (5) Shouldn't the Ministry of Health also weigh up human rights though, when making recommendations to the government?

This question was classified as advancing a standpoint because an implicit opinion can be reconstructed from it (the health ministry is not considering human rights when making recommendations to the government). Since there is no evidence of other argumentative moves,

the intervention remains as a standpoint alone. The opinion contained in the question is adversarial because it implies that the journalist holds an opposite position from the authority. Although standpoints alone have an impact on the discussion, quite often journalists advance standpoints to perform complex moves, such as making arguments or criticisms. In the following example (Trump 2020, April 27), a journalist makes an argument from authority by advancing other people's opinions:

(6) Dr. Anthony Fauci says that we need to increase testing by double it, at least. And so does the Rockefeller Foundation. When are we going to be doubling testing?

By recalling the authority of Dr. Fauci and the Rockefeller Foundation, the journalist implied that testing should be doubled. The interrogative sentence confirms the implication because it does not wonder whether testing should be increased or not, but the question takes it for granted, and simply inquires about when it will happen. The underline in the example corresponds to the annotation that belongs to advancing a standpoint, but the whole intervention was also annotated as advancing argumentation<sup>5</sup>.

Advancing argumentation is a complex move because journalists need to present multiple propositions to justify a standpoint. Sometimes all propositions are explicit, but quite often one or more remain implicit (van Eemeren et al 2002: 39-42). Prefaced questions, that is, questions preceded by assertions (Clayman and Heritage 2002a: 763), are a common resource in this type of move because they allow journalists to bring all the information they need to provide a justification. An indicative feature of advancing argumentation is when journalists present a standpoint explicitly together with additional information, so it becomes clear that the rest of the propositions in the intervention are the argumentation, as in the following example (Johnson 2020, November 26).

(7) *You said there would be no return to austerity, but because of COVID, we're borrowing at a completely unsustainable rate, amounts we haven't seen since the Second World War. You are going to have to cut spending and raise taxes, aren't you?*

In this example, the journalist presents two standpoints (marked in *italics*). One belongs to the politician, and the other one to the journalist (the government must cut spending and raise taxes). Since both opinions are opposed to each other, the remaining propositions are taken as argument to justify the standpoint of the journalist. It is worth noticing that there is an implicit premise in the argumentation, namely that borrowing at unsustainable rates leads to implementing austerity measures, like cutting spending and raising taxes. In this way, the journalist openly confronts the politician by taking a contrary position in the discussion. The

underline in the example corresponds to the annotation that belongs to advancing argumentation.

Counterarguments are the flip side of advancing argumentation because, instead of providing justification, they attack propositions. Journalists use counterarguments to make authorities retract something in their positions in view of flaws, inconsistencies (see Andone 2013), or shortcomings. Although a single proposition could be enough to raise a counterargument, more often than not multiple propositions are needed to make clear what the objection is about. Consequently, journalists usually preface their questions when advancing a counterargument, as shown in the following case (Arden 2020, April 7).

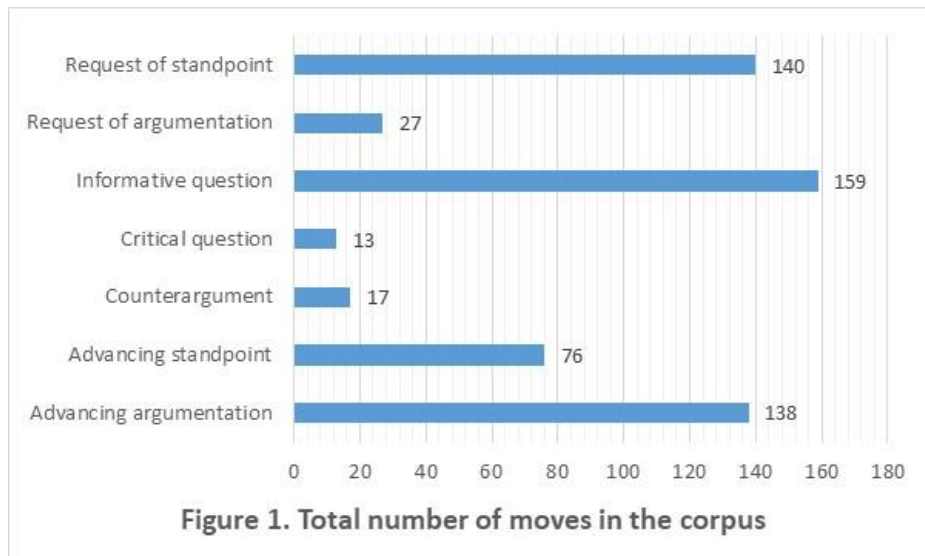
(8) When asked about nasal swabs, you said there are 50,000 of the nasal tests in the country. So, why are Auckland, Nelson, and other regions shifting to throat swabs because they've run out of nasal swabs?

In this example, the journalist first advanced the politician's standpoint (*italics*) to provide background information for the criticism, but then she recalls evidence to prove the standpoint wrong. The point of the criticisms is to expose that either the standpoint is false, or that there is a problem related to the nasal tests. Either way, thanks to the counterargument, the journalist pushes the politician to explain the situation or to take back the standpoint. The underline in the example corresponds to the annotation of the counterargument.

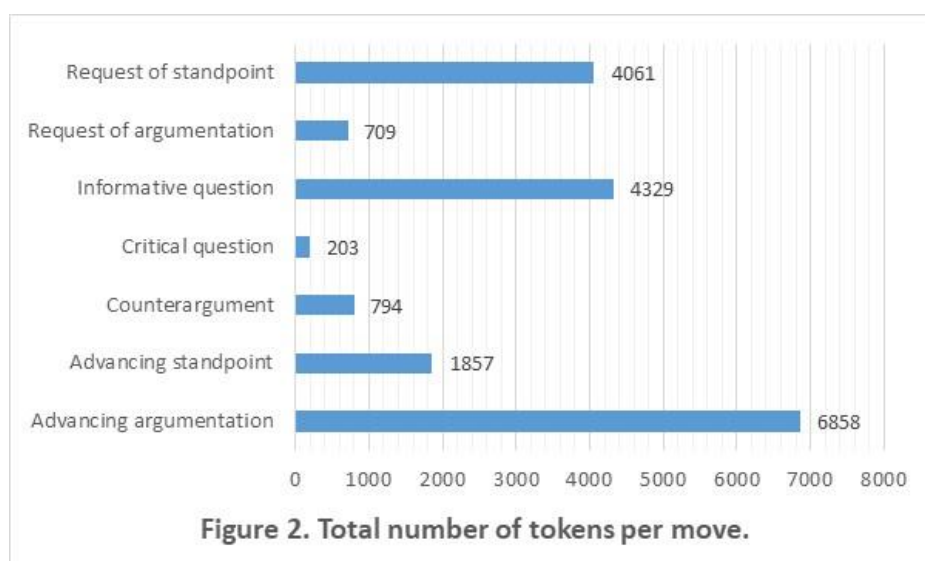
Following the previous guidelines, all questions in the corpus were analyzed. The results of the annotation were examined with ANNIS (Krause and Zeldes 2016) to observe frequencies in the types of questions, and AntConc (Anthony 2005) was used to observe word concordances among the different types.

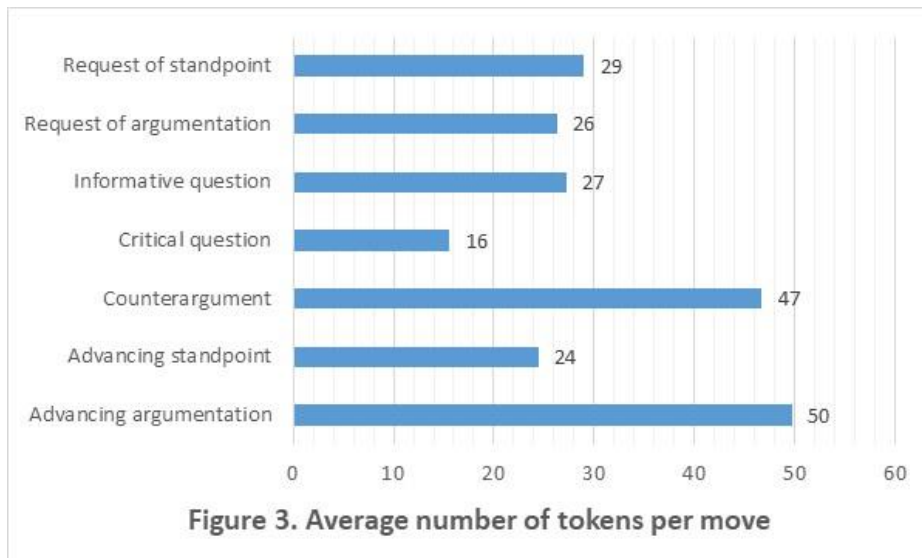
### **3.6 Results of the annotation**

There were 580 questions in the corpus, of which 570 (19,436 tokens) were annotated. The remaining ten questions could not be annotated because journalists were interrupted. The most frequent move was asking informative questions (159 entries), and the least common was asking critical questions (13 entries), but every argumentative move was found in the corpus (figure 1), which means that journalists employed every resource available they had. The occurrence of all the argumentative moves partially validates the category system because it means that the classification captures the communicative interactions of journalists in press conferences.

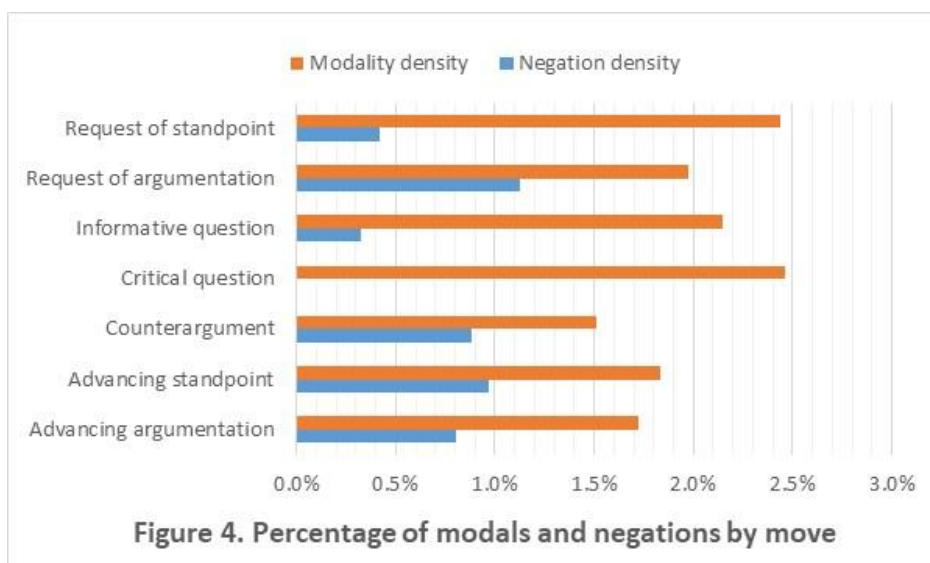


Although informative questions were the most frequent move among journalists, the number of tokens per move reveals that advancing argumentation occupied more space on stage than any other move (figure 2). Furthermore, if the average number of tokens per move is considered, both advancing argumentation and counterarguments turn out as the most expensive moves in terms of tokens. This is partially explained by the fact that these moves require multiple propositions to be performed. A correlation between the length of a move and its function can be suggested, since the moves that can expose the untenability of authorities' standpoints (advancing argumentation, counterarguments, and critical questions) are respectively longer and shorter than the rest of the moves (figure 3). However, since all questions can be prefaced (Clayman and Heritage 2002a: 763), the length of a move is indicative of its function at best.





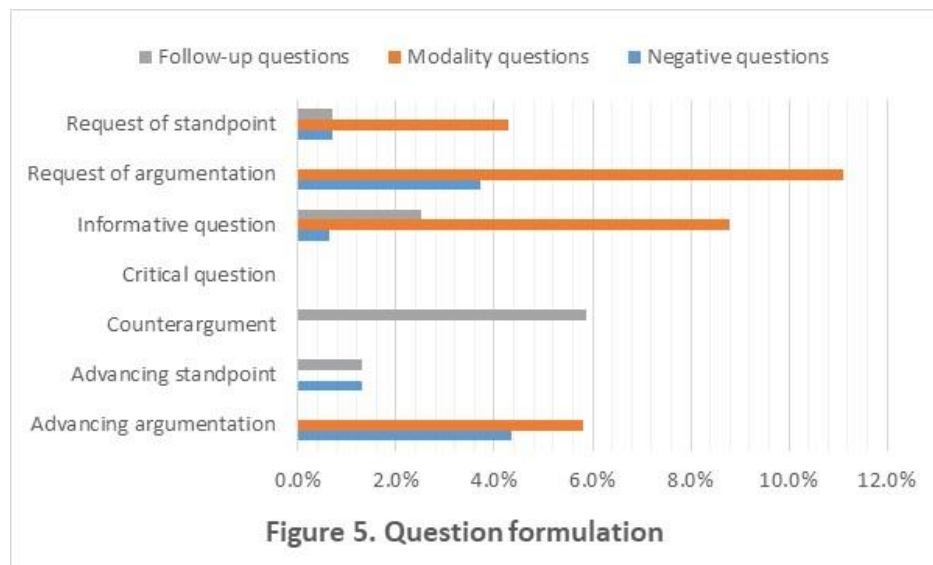
The most counterintuitive result in the data concerns critical questions. Since the structure of press conferences gives journalists the possibility to evaluate politicians by asking questions, and the function of critical questions is evaluating the acceptability of arguments, it was expected that journalists would rely heavily on them. However, critical questions were the scarcest move in the corpus. At first, this result was attributed to shortcomings in the annotation, but after analyzing the data, it was established that critical questions were simply a rare move to perform, because all questions marked as critical shared the same features: they were the shortest of all questions in terms of tokens, there was no presence of negations whatsoever (see appendix), and they had the highest percentage of modals (figure 4). These features give rise to considerations about the nature of critical questions. The analysis suggests that critical questions primarily serve the purpose of requesting truth confirmations. The absence of negations can be attributed to journalists' focus on verifying the accuracy of propositions used in politicians' argumentation. Furthermore, the scarcity of critical questions implies that





journalists do not tend evaluate authorities assuming an antagonistic role, rather the evaluation takes place assuming a protagonist role to advance their own arguments and criticisms.

The formulation of questions was investigated among the different argumentative moves because specific ways of asking questions are associated with adversarialness (figure 5). The considered formulations include follow-up questions, modality questions, and negative questions. Consistently with Eriksson (2011: 3337), follow-up questions (interventions containing the expression “follow-up”) did not appear as being necessarily adversarial because they frequently occurred in informative questions, which have a clarifying function in discussions. However, follow-up questions were a distinctive feature of counterarguments, which is an openly confrontational move. Thus, this formulation seems to capture at least a way of manifesting adversarialness, as Clayman and Heritage (2002a) notice.



Modality questions (would you, could you, etc.) were the most frequent formulation in the corpus. A correlation between politeness and informative-oriented moves was expected because these formulations are polite ways of asking questions. As anticipated, modality questions ranked the highest in information-oriented moves (informative questions and requests of standpoint), while being absent in some adversarial moves (critical questions, counterarguments, and advancing standpoints). However, these formulations were very frequent in advancing argumentation, a typical confrontational move. The presence of modality questions in advancing argumentation is explained by acknowledging that journalists have various reasons for being perceived as polite, even when performing adversarial moves. Thus, modality questions are not neutral towards authorities by default.

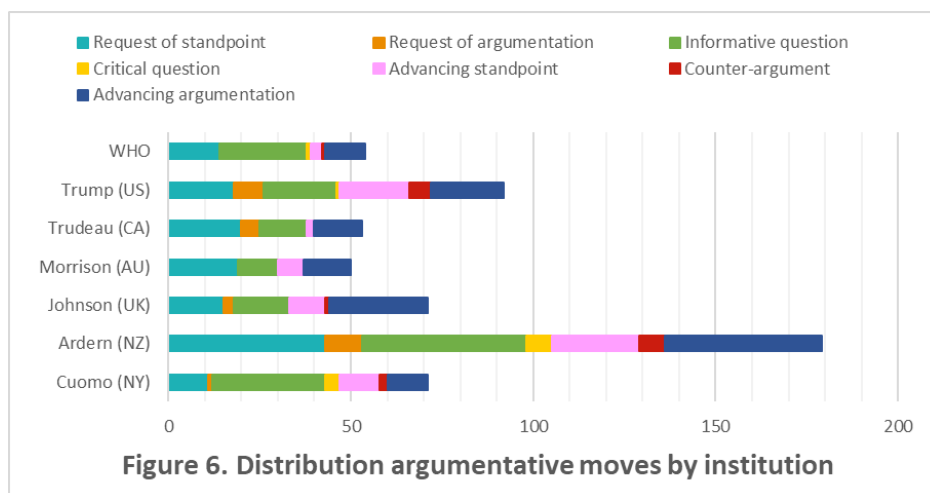
According to Clayman and Heritage (2002a: 764), another sign of adversarialness in questions is negative formulations (isn't it, didn't you, etc.). These questions are typically used

to imply opinions and to favor a certain answer. Negative formulations occurred both in adversarial and informative moves, but they occurred most frequently in advancing argumentation, which is an adversarial move. Consequently, negative questioning seems to be a reliable indicator of adversarialness in questioning.

In general terms, it can be said that the formulation of questions provides some insights into the adversarialness and argumentative function of questions. However, it should be noticed that most questions in the corpus did not display any special formulation in their construction (91.57%). Therefore, research on the functional or qualitative aspects of questioning seems to go beyond the information contained in their formulation.

The results presented so far provide enough grounds to answer research question one. Journalists performed all the argumentative moves available in press conferences regardless of the events taking place during the Covid-19 pandemic. Even if informative questions were the most frequent move in the corpus, the crisis did not prevent journalists from being antagonistic and even confrontational with authorities, since challenging moves like advancing arguments, standpoints, and counterarguments had a big share of the interventions. The diversity of moves reveals that journalists behaved both as disseminators of information and watchdogs during the pandemic.

The occurrence of all argumentative moves in the corpus already provides some information about journalists' behavior during crises, but when the data is analyzed by institution, considerable differences emerge between them because the quantity and type of moves taking place in press conferences varied significantly (figure 6). The most abundant and diverse argumentatively speaking were the press conferences of Jacinda Ardern (NZ), while the briefest and less heterogeneous were from Scott Morrison (AU).



The differences in the types of moves not only speak about the argumentative richness of press conferences, but also about the kind of discussion taking place in them. For example,

informative questions represented almost half of the questions asked to the WHO, whereas they represented less than a quarter for Justin Trudeau (CA). These ratios reveal that journalists' main goal with the WHO was acquiring information, but it was not a priority with Canada's prime minister. These results resonate with the institutional nature of the WHO as compared to the governments, but the results also shed light on the nuances of political discussions.

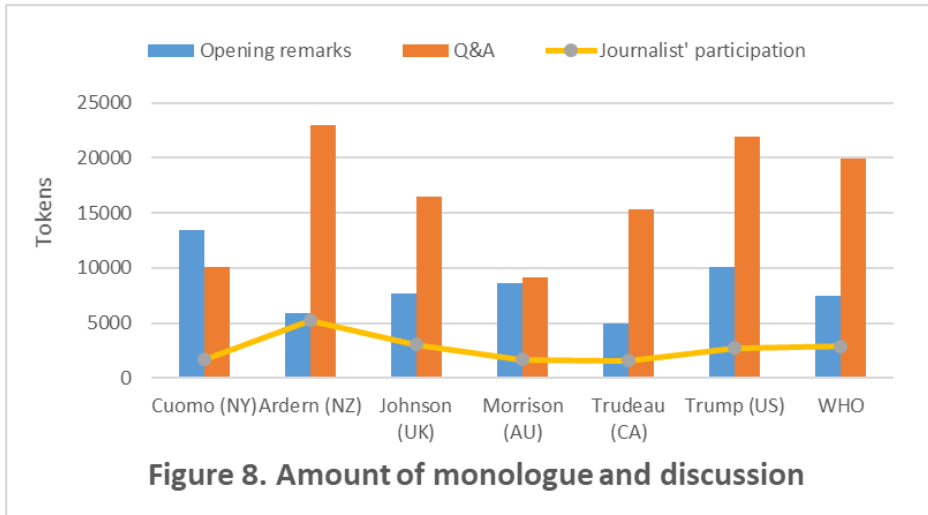
For instance, most questions asked to Scot Morrison were requests of standpoints (38%), which means that journalists wanted to know his position on contentious issues more than understanding or discussing the implemented measures to control the pandemic. At the same time, there were no entries for requests of argumentation, critical questions, or counterarguments whatsoever (figure 7). The combination of these results reveals that the discussion between journalists and the Australian government was reduced to presenting different positions without going into further examination.

Press conference	Request of standpoint	Request of argumentation	Informative question	Critical question	Advancing standpoint	Counter-argument	Advancing argumentation	Total
Cuomo (NY)	11 15%	1 1%	31 44%	4 6%	11 15%	2 3%	11 15%	71
Arden (NZ)	43 24%	10 6%	45 25%	7 4%	24 13%	7 4%	43 24%	179
Johnson (UK)	15 21%	3 4%	15 21%	0 0%	10 14%	1 1%	27 38%	71
Morrison (AU)	19 38%	0 0%	11 22%	0 0%	7 14%	0 0%	13 26%	50
Trudeau (CA)	20 38%	5 9%	13 25%	0 0%	2 4%	0 0%	13 25%	53
Trump (US)	18 20%	8 9%	20 22%	1 1%	19 21%	6 7%	20 22%	92
WHO	14 26%	0 0%	24 44%	1 2%	3 6%	1 2%	11 20%	54
<b>Total</b>	<b>140</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>159</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>570</b>

**Figure 7. Chart of argumentative moves by institution**

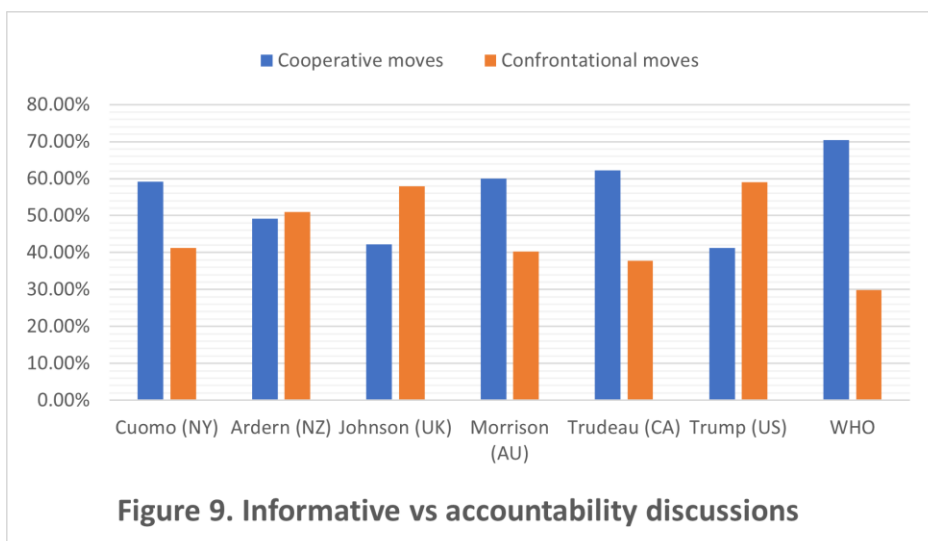
Another example is the case of the U.S. government. These press conferences were the only ones where advancing standpoints were more frequent than requesting standpoints. This shows that journalists were more interested in bringing others' opinions into the discussion than retrieving the opinion of the president. Besides that, informative questions and advancing arguments reached the same number of moves, which means that journalists equally wanted to acquire information and present opposite positions. Therefore, it can be said that, regardless of the chaotic attitude of Donald Trump and his deteriorated relationship with the media, the structure of press conferences provided enough grounds to uphold a lively discussion, even if it was far from being reasonable (figure 8).

The distribution of argumentative moves by institution allows categorizing them according to type of discussion between journalists and authorities. As previously said, journalists adopt the roles of disseminators or adversaries in press conferences, making the discussion go in one direction or another. If most argumentative moves are in accordance with



the role of disseminator, the discussion becomes information oriented, whereas a majority of adversarial moves, makes the discussion accountability oriented. Having this distinction in mind, the institutions in the corpus were analyzed.

The institutions where journalists inclined towards retrieving information are the WHO (70.37%), Canada (62.26%), Australia (60%), and New York State (59.15%). While journalists inclined towards holding authorities accountable in the press conferences of the U.S. federal government (58.70%), the United Kingdom (57.75%), and New Zealand (50.84%). These results show that it was generally easier for journalists to assume the role of disseminators because the percentages rated higher in that category (figure 9). This tendency is explained by the context of the pandemic, since the health crisis pushed journalists to become disseminators of information to help manage the situation (Hooker et al. 2011, Klemm et al. 2019).



However, two explanations are required to understand the tendencies found in the data. First, it is necessary to comprehend why discussions became adversarial despite the favorable conditions for having information-oriented discussions. Second, an explanation is needed to

clarify the presence of Jacinda Ardern, a prominent democratic figure (Pazzanese, 2020), alongside Donald Trump and Boris Johnson, who are typically associated with autocratic tendencies.

It could be thought that approval ratings might explain the type of discussion between journalists and politicians, but this explanation is not adequate because the politicians with the highest approval ratings, Cuomo and Ardern (see respectively Siena College Research Institute n.d. and Anderson, 2020), did not have the highest ratings for informative-oriented discussions. So, even if Trump and Johnson had the worst approval ratings during the pandemic (see respectively Gallup n.d. and Politico n.d.) and rated the highest for accountability discussions, approval ratings cannot explain the type of discussions that politicians will have with journalists because Ardern's case disproves the hypothesis.

### **3.7 Discussion**

To understand why journalists were adversarial with authorities in some press conferences, it is necessary to understand the factors that influenced the discussion between the parties. With the emergence of Covid-19, countries worldwide were confronted with the challenges of the health crisis, but the political situation of each country impacted how the crisis was handled and perceived. In many ways, the pandemic was a limit test for governments because decisions were highly controversial. Each policy, whether proactive or restrained, became subject to intense scrutiny and critique, and the political atmosphere that preceded the pandemic set the tone for the debate in advance. In the case of the U.S. and the U.K., the political atmosphere was particularly difficult because both countries were deeply divided regarding their governments, and partisanism and nationalism were the context of the discussion in both cases. During the presidency of Trump, the relationship between the media and the government was very hostile. In normal circumstances, the media usually adopts a critical stance towards governments to comply with its watchdog role. However, in the case of Trump, it was difficult to assume any position in the debate because he undermined the conditions that give rise to argumentative exchanges. Put it differently, Trump's behavior undermined in many ways the possibility for having a discussion, let alone a reasonable one.

Trump frequently labeled media organization that were unfavorable to his interests as "fake news". This point not only led to delegitimizing the media from public debate, but also eroding the trust of people in media broadcasters. By delegitimizing critical coverage, Trump sought to discredit unfavorable stories to control the narrative surrounding his presidency. Furthermore, Trump used social media to bypass media channels and spread his opinions in the

web, directly contributing to the polarization of online discussions and the creation of echo chambers.

In the case of Johnson, his relationship with the media was tainted by Brexit. The withdrawal of the U.K. from the European Union became an ongoing debate throughout his tenure, resulting in significant societal divisions. Media outlets not only reflected, but amplified the political divisions within the country, and the political alignments that started with Brexit influenced the perception of Johnson's management of the crisis. In fact, the shortcomings and merits in the crisis management were associated with Brexit, such as delays in supply chains for health systems and delivering the first Covid-19 vaccine.

For these reasons, the relationship between the media and governments in the U.S. and the U.K. was particularly adversarial. The political atmosphere that preceded the pandemic made it more difficult for journalists to switch from watchdog attitude into a disseminator role. Since informative-oriented discussions require trust among their participants, the exchanges that took place in the press conferences of Trump and Johnson never reached an informative character, because journalists did not trust them in general.

The case of New Zealand is particularly interesting because the effective leadership of Ardern during the pandemic gives the expectation that her press conferences would be informative oriented. For this reason, it is striking to find her press conferences inclining towards accountability discussions, because her management of the crisis was widely acclaimed for its pertinence and her approval rating reached its highest during the pandemic. To understand the data, however, it is necessary to acquire background information. At the beginning of the pandemic, there was an incident related to the health minister that became very controversial. The health minister was discovered breaching lockdown rules twice (Roy, 2020). The events triggered public condemnation because the lockdown in New Zealand was strict, and the violations represented a challenge for public accountability. Many people called for the dismissal of the health minister, and he officially presented his resignation to Ardern, but she decided to keep him in the ministry.

The decision to keep the health minister was made public in one of the press conferences, and it became a political scandal that triggered journalists' criticality. As a result, the discussion in the press conference became more adversarial than it would have been otherwise. This point is confirmed by the data because if each press conference of Ardern is analyzed independently, the discussions in the other two press conferences incline towards delivering information. These findings seem to suggest that journalists are sensitive to the nature of crises. If events like a pandemic or a natural disaster occur, journalists assume the disseminator role. But if crises are political in nature, they take the role of adversaries.

The results of the analysis bring to light different ways in which journalists behave as watchdogs. The argumentative distinction between antagonist (only asking critical questions) and protagonist (advancing arguments and counterarguments) shows different approaches for journalists to challenge authorities. A pure antagonist will take authorities' argumentation to understand it better and ultimately evaluate it. A protagonist will oppose the authorities by developing a contrary position in the debate. From a wider perspective, any of these options are intended for the same goal, aiding the public to accept or reject authorities' position, but each option enacts different processes. The former lets authorities make a case without widening the debate. The latter option broadens the debate in terms of reasons and criticisms, but it polarizes the discussion. This distinction can help analysts to understand how discussions unfold in press conferences, and it can help journalists to decide which option is better in different circumstances.

Another feature of this study is that it develops the notion of adversarialness in argumentative terms. An argumentative perspective explains why certain questions are challenging without displaying any formal feature that suggests adversarialness (initiative, directness, and assertiveness). In fact, the argumentative interpretation of the notion further explains one of its categories: hostility. Clayman and Heritage (2002a: 766) describe hostility as something related to the thematic or topical content of questions. This description is not enough because questions can be adversarial in one context but not in another while preserving their propositional content. It is better to understand such questions as adversarial because of the argumentative situation they create through the interaction between journalists and authorities. It is worth explaining this point with the help of an example.

In one of Trump's press conferences, he brought the issue of opening-up states in the U.S. This decision was controversial because it implied that businesses and schools would resume their activities and, consequently, increase the risk of infection among the population. He repeatedly brought up the idea, and during the question-and-answer session, he received questions related to it. The following excerpt presents a question that displays hostility because of the argumentative situation it creates (Trump 2020, April 14).

[Opening remarks]

– Donald Trump: The plans to reopen the country are close to being finalized and we will soon be sharing details and new guidelines with everybody. [...] The day will be very close because certain states [...] are in much different condition and in a much different place than other states. It's going to be very, very close, maybe even before the date of May 1st. [...] Actually, there are over 20 that are

in extremely good shape and we think we're going to be able to get them open fairly quickly and then others will follow.

[Question-and-answer session]

- Journalist: Mr. President, you talked about having testing and tracing equipment and the facility for that in place to open-up the government. Dr. Fauci said this morning that critical testing and tracing ability does not currently exist.
- Donald Trump: I don't know. Look, I don't know. I don't know what he said [...] Nobody knows.
- Journalist: My question is will it exist by May 1st?

The adversarialness of the intervention cannot be explained by its topic because the entire issue was brought up by Trump, not the journalist. Its adversarialness resides on what the journalist does argumentatively speaking. Trump's argument is that some states can be opened because they are in good shape. Implicitly the journalist makes an additional argument using Trump's statements together with the opinion of Dr. Fauci: states cannot be opened safely without having testing and tracing facilities and, therefore, states cannot be opened by May 1st if the necessary conditions are not met.

The challenge of the journalist is fully appreciated when the consequences of answering the question are considered. Had Trump replied that the testing and tracing infrastructure did not exist, he would have given up his position on opening the economy. Had he replied that the infrastructure was in place, he would have had to provide arguments to show that Dr. Fauci was wrong. Either way, the intervention of the journalist put Trump in a difficult situation because he had to choose between dropping his standpoint or acquiring the commitment to disprove the other position. This is where the adversarialness of the question resides, in its argumentative function.

### **3.8 Conclusions**

Press conferences have become important spaces to deliver information during times of crisis. In this paper, the argumentative moves of journalists were analyzed to understand how discussions unfold in these events. The most significant finding is that health crises do not prevent journalists from being adversarial with authorities. Depending on the nature of crises, journalists adapt their questioning to be disseminators of information or watchdogs. Discussions incline towards information when crises are not attributable to authorities, but political turmoil seems to trigger criticality in journalists regardless of being in crisis.



The analysis of questions revealed that adversarial features frequently correspond with confrontational argumentative moves. However, there are many instances where adversarial features and argumentative moves are not coherent because either the adversarial feature is absent in confrontational moves or because adversarial features are present in neutral moves. It would be worth investigating why the mismatches exist, and what information can be drawn from cases where both features are coherent.

Concerning critical questions, results show that they are an unusual move. This finding suggests that journalists rarely assume an antagonistic position to evaluate arguments. Even if press conferences provide the ideal structure for testing the tenability of standpoints by asking questions, journalists usually assume a protagonist position to evaluate politicians' argumentation. Regardless of the scarcity of critical questions in the corpus, their linguistic features indicate that their function is restricted to requesting truth confirmations about the propositions of arguments. A possible line of research is developing a corpus of critical questions to investigate other functions of this kind of questioning.

Let us now turn to the limitations of the present study. The annotation does not account for standpoint ownership. Journalists sometimes bring people's opinions into the discussion without necessarily endorsing those opinions. For accountability purposes, however, it is important to tell whether journalists are committed to standpoints or not, because advancing standpoints implies taking responsibilities in the discussion. It is worth reflecting, for example, what happens in cases where journalists make criticisms based on other people's opinions. In such situations, journalists clearly make the discussion more difficult for authorities, but it is not so clear whether journalists should take responsibility for the opinion they advance or not. If journalists take no responsibility, discussions can be spoiled quite easily by bringing unthoughtful opinions to make unfounded criticisms. Nonetheless, making journalists responsible for bringing other people's opinions can dissuade them from doing it and, therefore, the diversity of opinions in a debate would be compromised.

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## Appendixes

### Annotation manual

Instructions. Read the opening statement of the press conference before starting the annotation. Make sure to have background information about the topic under discussion and other important topics according to the context of the press conference. In the Q&A session, follow the next steps to annotate journalists' interventions. It is possible to have multiple annotations within each intervention. Overlaps between annotations are possible.

1. Is the journalist advancing a contentious opinion either explicitly or implicitly?

Yes → Advancing standpoint & 8                      No → 2

2. Is there an opposition being highlighted, or an inconsistency insinuated?

Yes → Counterargument & 8                      No → 3

3. Does the question request someone's opinion on a controversial or divisive issue?

Yes → Requesting standpoint & 8                      No → 4

4. Does the question request to justify a position that has been expressed or that can be attributed to the speaker? [If the position has already been justified but the question still requests a justification, check question seven.]

Yes → Requesting argumentation & 8      No → 5

5. Does the question ask for a clarification, elaboration, explanation, or specification?

Yes → Informative question & 8                      No → 6

6. Is the question relevant for the evaluation of the argumentation advanced by the speaker in view of the argument scheme contained in it, i.e. in principle, the answer to the question could be enough to determine whether the argument scheme was employed appropriately or not.

Yes → Critical question & 8                      No → 7

7. Is it possible to perform the following steps?

(i) Reconstructing the question as a piece of argumentation [standpoint + argument] in such a way that the position of the journalist is not misrepresented in view of the specific issue under discussion.

(ii) Is it reasonable to assume that the journalists is presenting a position on the issue in view of the context and the discussion?

Yes → Advancing argumentation & 8      No → 8

8. Is the intervention completely annotated?

Yes → End

No → Continue with the manual or go to 9

9. Is the intervention largely annotated (90%)?

Yes → End

No → Problematic & End

## **Dictionaries**

Question formulation:

- Follow-up-questions contain the expression “follow up”.
- Negative formulated questions contain at least one of the following tokens followed by a personal pronoun: isn't, aren't, couldn't, didn't, don't, hadn't, shouldn't, wasn't, weren't, and wouldn't. For example, “didn't you”
- Modality questions contain at least one of the following tokens followed by a personal pronoun: can, could, should, would, and might. For example, “could you”

Negation: anyone, are not, aren't, cannot, can't, could not, couldn't, did not, didn't, do not, does not, doesn't, don't, had not, hadn't, have not, haven't, is not, isn't, neither, never, no, no one, nobody, nope, nor, nowhere, should not, shouldn't, was not, wasn't, were not, weren't, will not, won't, would not, wouldn't.

Modals: certainly, definitely, maybe, obviously, ought, never, perhaps, probably, rarely, shall, should, sometimes, will, would.

## 4 Political accountability in press conferences and Twitter: a comparative analysis of argumentative moves<sup>5</sup>

**Abstract:** Research on journalism has acknowledged that social media users sometimes engage in activities that align with traditional roles of journalists. This phenomenon manifests, for example, when users hold politicians accountable for their decisions. This kind of engagement in social media has led to recognize the potential of Twitter as an accountability forum. However, it remains unknown to what extent such attitude prevails in online discussions, and how it differs from traditional accountability fora like press conferences. This paper explores how discussions unfold on Twitter and a press conference to understand how accountability dialogues take place in each forum. A press conference and a corpus of tweets are analyzed according to the argumentative moves of participants to see how discussions contribute to accountability. Additionally, a keyword analysis is performed to discern the topics that were prevalent in each platform. Results showed that both fora served accountability purposes, but each had different strengths and limitations. In the press conference, the discussion was more balanced, but journalists refrained from proposing solutions to the issue under discussion. On the other hand, plenty of arguments and opinions were advanced on Twitter, but many of them were irrelevant for accountability purposes.

**Keywords:** accountability, argumentative analysis, corpus annotation, press conference, Twitter<sup>6</sup>

### 4.1 Introduction

Research on journalism has acknowledged that social media users sometimes engage in activities that align with traditional roles of journalists. For instance, users participate in news production, write opinion pieces, and use platforms to hold authorities accountable for their actions (Ettema 2009, Korson 2015). The term “citizen journalism” has been coined to describe these phenomena and explore their significance for news production in today’s communication ecosystems (Sambrook 2005, Wall 2015, Miller 2019).

The relationship between citizen journalism and its professional counterpart has proven controversial because it is not clear to what extent citizens can replace, undermine, or complement the work of professional journalists (Hermida and Thurman 2008). Citizen journalism has certain advantages over professional journalism. For example, local people are

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<sup>5</sup> This paper has been submitted to the Journal of Communication.

<sup>6</sup> The study and data collection were made before Twitter rebranded itself as X.



better equipped to provide up-to-date information when it comes to reporting breaking news. The widespread use of social media combined with mobile access to the internet has created a network of potential reporters where anyone with internet access can use their phone to post about breaking-news as they happen (Murthy 2011: 782). Professional journalism has certain advantages over citizen journalism as well. Fact-checking processes (Anderson and Schudson 2019), newsroom discussions (Zampa 2016), and ethical guidelines (Ward 2019) help to preserve the quality of information in news production. Contrary to this, information on social media becomes public unfiltered, making it more prone to falsehood, manipulation, and misinterpretation (see Musi and Rocci 2022 for a discussion about misinformation related to outdated Covid-19 news).

When it comes to accountability purposes, it is more difficult to pinpoint merits and limitations of professional and citizen journalism, since accountability only takes place if participants adopt a specific stance in a discussion. Accountability is concerned with generating the conditions to evaluate the actions of a party in view of their obligations (Bovens 2007a: 450). Holding politicians accountable is equally challenging for journalists and Twitter users because there is no fixed script for it. Accountability can be enacted by requesting information about a certain issue, presenting evidence of wrongdoings, requesting politicians' motives for their policies, etc. The appropriateness of these moves for accountability depends on their suitability for evaluating the decisions of authorities according to reasonable standards.

Argumentation theory provides an appropriate framework to analyze accountability practices because it helps to understand how participants defend and challenge their positions. Understanding how participants engage in discussions allows us to assess the effectiveness and legitimacy of accountability practices because it reveals to what extent discussants comply with reasonableness standards. Discussions are reasonable when participants test systematically the tenability of opinions by advancing appropriate criticisms according to their roles (van Eemeren and van Haften 2023: 354).

Both professional and citizen journalism have the capacity to hold authorities accountable, but it remains unknown to what extent they do it and how does it take place in both cases. This paper analyzes a press conference from Jacinda Ardern, ex-prime minister of New Zealand, and a corpus of tweets to investigate how journalists and Twitter users hold politicians accountable for their decisions. An argumentative perspective is adopted as a methodological tool to identify the reasons and criticisms advanced by discussants when addressing political decisions. The research questions addressed in this paper are:

1 To what extent do press conferences and Twitter enact their potential as accountability fora?

1.1 What were the main topics raised by journalists and Twitter users in their interventions?

1.2 What argumentative moves were performed in each forum?

For research question 1.1, a keyword analysis is done to identify the main topics raised by journalists and Twitter users in their interventions. For research question 1.2, the interventions of participants are annotated according to the argumentative moves performed by them. The answers to these questions give an idea of how accountability is enacted in each forum because the keyword analysis reveals the topics that were important for people, and the argumentative analysis exposes the way in which participants engaged in the discussions. Put together, the analyses show whether people generated the necessary conditions to evaluate the decisions of politicians, and if so, how it was accomplished.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 contains the theoretical framework of the research. It is explained how press conferences and Twitter serve as accountability fora, and how argumentation is related to accountability processes. Section 3 provides an overview of the data and methodology. The press conference used for the study is described, and the criteria used to collect the corpus of tweets are explained. As for the methodology, the categories employed for the annotation of argumentative moves are outlined, and the parameters utilized for the keyword analysis are presented. Section 4 gives the results of the analysis. The features of discussions in each forum are described, along with an assessment of the extent to which they enacted accountability dialogues. Section 5 discusses the findings of the study, and it is reflected upon the capabilities of each forum for having accountability dialogues.

#### **4.2 Press conferences and Twitter as accountability fora**

The notion of accountability is ambiguous because sometimes it is used as a virtue, and other times it is used to describe processes to hold authorities accountable (Bovens 2007b, Bovens 2010). When accountability is understood in the latter sense, its study consists in describing the mechanisms through which authorities are evaluated for their decisions. In the present study, accountability is understood as a process because the goal is understanding how journalists and Twitter users evaluate politicians' decisions.

Accountability practices always involve an actor and a forum. Actors have the obligation to explain and justify their conduct, while the forum is entitled to raise questions and pass an evaluation on actors (Bovens 2007b: 107, Mulgan 2003: 11). Depending on their relationship, accountability practices can be formal or informal. Accountability is formal when

actors and forum have an institutional relationship that gives them specific roles and capabilities (Mulgan 2002: 45-63) An example of formal accountability is prime minister's question time in the U.K (Mohammed 2018a). Due to its institutional nature, formal accountability entails a greater specification of its evaluation processes, and the forum's evaluation can bring direct sanctions to actors.

Accountability is informal when there is no institutionalized relationship between actors and the forum. In these cases, actors explain and justify their actions without having a formal obligation for doing it. The forum is still entitled to raise questions and pass an evaluation on actors, but it lacks the means to sanction them directly. Political interviews are an example of informal accountability (Andone 2013). In these kinds of practices, evaluation processes can be regulated to a certain extent, but the main function of the forum is generating a critical discussion to evaluate the decisions of authorities (Andone 2015: 4, Mulgan 2003: 70).

Discussions in press conferences and Twitter are informal practices of accountability because neither journalists nor social media users have an institutionalized relationship with politicians. Politicians assume the role of actors when they give information regarding their policies to the public. Typically, this occurs in situations of crises or scandals, as politicians aim to ensure compliance with their policies or navigating difficult circumstances (Eriksson and Eriksson 2012). Journalists and Twitter users become fora when they exploit the position of politicians to publicly question their decisions in a systematic way. The reaction needs to be systematic in the sense that a specific issue needs to be addressed, and the interactions should lead to having a discussion.

A key feature of accountability practices is the phases they go through (Bovens 2010: 952). These phases include an information phase where actors provide details about their decisions, followed by a discussion phase where the forum can request additional information, pose questions, and raise objections. Finally, there is an evaluation phase in which the forum assesses the decisions based on the discussion. This process gets adapted in various ways depending on the specific practices in which accountability occurs, but the phases are invariably present in some way. In the following subsections, the distinctive aspects of press conferences and Twitter as accountability practices are discussed.

#### *4.2.1 Accountability in press conferences*

Press conferences are oriented towards accountability because their structure provides grounds for the information and discussion phases. The opening remarks of politicians coincide with the information phase because politicians provide arguments and explanations about the

situation they are confronted with. The question-and-answer session corresponds with the discussion phase because journalists engage with politicians to ask questions about their decisions. The evaluation phase does not occur within the context of press conferences themselves, but the discussion that unfolds during these events is later used to evaluate politicians in various contexts.

Clayman and Heritage (2023) have pointed out the relevance of press conferences for accountability purposes. In their study, question formulations were investigated to understand how journalists exert pressure on presidents to answer for their policies. A corpus of press conferences from 1953 until 2000 was analyzed in view of two formal features of questions: conventional indirectness and negative interrogatives. Conventional indirect questions (*could you, would you, may I ask*) are generally regarded as gentle due to their association with polite expressions. In contrast, negative interrogative questions (*isn't it, couldn't you*) are regarded as confrontational due to their formulation, which exerts pressure on interlocutors to align with the questioner's perspective because disagreeing can lead to a direct confrontation between the parties involved.

The results of the study showed that press conferences display two trends over time. The first trend is a decline in conventional indirect questions, and the second one is an increase in negative questioning. The combination of both trends suggest that journalists became more confrontational in press conferences. The decrease in indirect questions implies that journalists leave aside deferential interactions with politicians, opting for direct formulations in their questions. The increase in negative questioning, on the other hand, shows that journalists are ready to have confrontations with politicians when presenting their opinions. The analysis shows that journalists increasingly use linguistic constructions that exert pressure on presidents to answer their questions. In general terms, the study highlights how language practices are an unavoidable component of accountability, ultimately affecting accountability practices. In the case of press conferences, the evolution of questions enhanced the communicative setting as an accountability forum.

The function of journalists' questions in political scandals was investigated by Eriksson and Eriksson (2012). This research focused on understanding how questions can help and obstruct politicians when trying to repair their image during press conferences. The study used two press conferences involving politicians who were accused of financial misconduct. The study analyzed question design to see the ways in which questions exert pressure on respondents. Journalists employed two types of formulations: open-ended and yes-no questions.

Open-ended questions (*how, what, when*) allow politicians to give detailed responses, enabling them to maneuver to justify their wrongdoings. These questions proved valuable in image repair efforts, as they provide an opportunity to clarify and apologize for transgressions. Conversely, yes-no (*did you, have you*) questions elicit simple answers, posing challenges for actors in image repair endeavors, as they limit opportunities to give explanations. Additionally, yes-no questions can be negatively formulated, favoring affirmative responses that might go against politicians' interests. In brief, the findings of the study showed that journalists' questions have a significant impact on the effectiveness of image repair strategies.

Press conferences have become important platforms for accountability because they provide a framework for information sharing and discussion between politicians and journalists. The evolution of questions in these communicative events indicates a shift in journalists' attitudes since journalists are more engaged in pressuring politicians to answer their questions (Clayman and Heritage 2023). Furthermore, the formulation of questions by journalists can either facilitate or impede politicians' objectives, as the design of questions holds the capacity to steer discussions in varying directions (Eriksson and Eriksson 2012).

#### *4.2.2 Accountability on Twitter*

The features of social media offer innovative ways for accountability to take place. Online platforms give the possibility to recreate any phase of accountability processes. For instance, politicians can use Twitter to post information about a particular policy (phase one), users can engage in discussions among themselves to critically assess the decisions of politicians (phase two), and the public can evaluate the decisions of politicians based on the discussion that has taken place (phase three).

The plasticity of social media for accountability purposes is both a strength and a weakness. One advantage is the plurality of opinions that social media brings. This is valuable because it facilitates the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders in a discussion. Another advantage is the capacity to cross information from different websites. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, users frequently referred to discussions held in different fora to make criticisms and elaborate their own positions. This feature is valuable because it allows for a wider dissemination of public concerns.

At the same time, social media has limitations for accountability. One problem is the widespread use of offensive language (Paasch-Colberg et al. 2022) that undermines the necessary conditions for having critical discussions. Another limitation is the type of contributions that are made. Users can engage in debates without making relevant contributions from a critical perspective. For example, users can join discussions to mock politicians,

promoting political agendas, polarizing debates (Hong and Kim 2016), etc. These kinds of interactions make it difficult to determine what should be considered relevant for discussions. Consider the case of memes. Arguably, their archetypal purpose is making fun, but it is possible that arguments are advanced visually by combining verbal and graphic means.

The limitations of social media explain why online discussions sometimes fall short of critical discussions, but its affordances still provide enough grounds to hold authorities accountable. The quick dissemination of information allows users to share and access official statements (Bovens 2007a: 455, 457). This accessibility is frequently used to expose misconduct and inconsistencies of politicians. Another key point is that social media allows citizens to engage directly with authorities, bypassing traditional gatekeepers. This direct interaction empowers individuals to ask questions, voice concerns, and demand actions from those in positions of power.

The role of Twitter to promote accountability was discussed by Korson (2014). According to the study, social media can improve policy implementation by offering people a platform to discuss and scrutinize measures being enacted. The research consisted in analyzing 407 tweets related to UN peacekeeping missions in Haiti and Cote d'Ivoire. Tweets were classified according to their content to find out what were the main concerns of people. Results showed that the main topics raised by people were about cholera, withdrawal of the missions, protests, costs, arrests, reconciliation, violence, political tension, deploying forces, and elections among others. The study suggests that citizen journalism can challenge dominant media narratives and provide decentralized information that is helpful to evaluate the effectiveness of measures, so they can be improved by policymakers in real time.

In a different study, Neu and Saxton (2023) present an analysis of Twitter reactions concerning the Panama papers. The study collected a corpus of 28 million tweets to identify the most frequent nouns, verbs, and users. The article examined the linguistic expressions that demanded reasons, and the use of specific words and phrases that promoted an accountability narrative. The findings suggest that accountability on Twitter is constructed using certain word combinations, the accumulation of individual tweets into a broader conversation, and the continued interaction of users. According to the authors, accountability demands on Twitter can have short and long-term consequences because social reality can be modified by changing the discourse that focuses on political actors and the responsibility they bear on public issues.

Accountability on Twitter presents a distinct approach compared to press conferences due to the nature of the platform itself. The features of social media give rise to novel possibilities because users engage among themselves for a multiplicity of purposes. Korson's (2014) analysis of UN peacekeeping missions and Neu and Saxton's (2023) examination of

Twitter reactions to the Panama Papers, demonstrate the potential of Twitter to challenge dominant narratives, provide decentralized information, and shape accountability demands that can lead to tangible consequences.

To sum up, informal accountability practices have two main advantages: their accessibility to citizens and their foundation on critical discussions. When citizens engage in accountability practices, they gain the opportunity to exchange reasons and criticisms to evaluate the performance of politicians. On the other hand, argumentative exchanges among participants gives legitimacy to informal accountability, since these practices assume that judgements should be grounded in reasonable discussions. Hence, argumentation plays a pivotal role in the study of accountability.

#### *4.2.3 The role of argumentation in accountability practices*

Argumentation is a verbal, social, and rational activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability of a standpoint by providing justification to it (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 1). Assuming an argumentative perspective to study accountability makes possible to identify the contributions of participants that promote a reasonable evaluation of actors, thereby facilitating the comprehension of the dynamics and outcomes of accountability processes.

In argumentation, discussions are classified as mixed or non-mixed depending on the roles of participants, which are protagonist and antagonist (van Eemeren 2018: 42). Protagonists put forth and justify standpoints, while antagonists cast doubt on protagonists' arguments and standpoints. A discussion is non-mixed when one party assumes the role of protagonist and the other that of antagonist. Conversely, it is classified as mixed if both parties take the role of protagonist. In mixed discussions, everyone is obliged to defend their own standpoint, while only one party has the obligation in non-mixed discussions.

In accountability practices, actors necessarily take the role of protagonists because they are required to justify the appropriateness of their decisions. The forum, on the other hand, has the option to choose its role. This point is important because it implies that the forum ultimately determines the types of discussion that takes place in accountability practices. Therefore, discussions will become mixed or non-mixed depending on the moves performed by the forum.

A point to notice, however, is that informal accountability practices involve several people. While the notions of actor and forum refer to individual entities, real-life practices render the forum a collection of individuals. This multiplicity of positions is relevant because everyone makes different contributions, ultimately affecting discussions as a whole. Consequently, each member of the forum has the opportunity to choose its role as protagonists

or antagonists. For this reason, informal accountability practices are better portrayed as polylogues.

Polylogues are discussions involving three or more participants who adopt different positions in a debate (Lewiński and Aakhus 2014). The notion of polylogue expands the analysis of accountability practices because discussions become scalar instead of categorical events, encompassing discussions that range from fully mixed to fully non-mixed, with varying degrees in between depending on the positioning of the forum. For instance, a press conference where journalists primarily pose critical questions (antagonist's basic move) will tend towards being non-mixed, even if some journalists present arguments (protagonist's basic move). Similarly, if Twitter users predominantly advance arguments, the discussion will tend towards being mixed, even if some users raise critical questions. This scalar interpretation of mixed and non-mixed discussions is useful because it enhances accuracy in describing some argumentative situations by expressing the percentage to which discussions are mixed or non-mixed.

The type of discussion is determined by the reactions of the forum, but the reactions are linked to the argumentation presented by politicians. Consequently, understanding the argumentation of politicians is a prerequisite for subsequently establishing connections with the argumentative moves of the forum. The argumentation of politicians takes place in the information phase of accountability<sup>7</sup>. Depending on the situation under scrutiny, political actors will justify past or future decisions. Discussions concerning past actions are *ex-post* accountability (Andone 2015: 2), as they evaluate the appropriateness of decisions that have already been taken. On the other hand, discussions regarding unsettled issues are *ex-ante* accountability (Andone 2015: 2), as they assess the appropriateness of decisions before they are implemented. This distinction is relevant because political actors adapt their argumentation depending on the standpoint they defend. When the discussion concerns *ex post* accountability,

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<sup>7</sup> Andone (2015: 4) relates the information phase of accountability processes with the opening stage of critical discussions. I diverge from this parallelism because Andone (2015) is concerned with formal accountability, whereas this study concerns informal accountability. In formal accountability processes, the forum can request documents in advance to politicians. In these cases, it makes sense to equate the information phase (i.e., the documents) with the opening stage because the retrieved information serves as material starting points for the discussion. However, in informal accountability processes, the forum is not entitled to request documents to politicians and the information used for the discussion is provided by authorities when justifying their decisions. For this reason, arguments occur in the information and discussion phases of informal accountability and, consequently, both phases correspond to the argumentation stage of critical discussions. Furthermore, if a politician were to "explain his [decisions] by making clear his motives, approach and purposes" (Andone 2015: 6) within an accountability context, such utterance would count as argumentation and not an explanation, since the utterance is made in a situation where politicians' decisions are scrutinized because there are doubts about their appropriateness (see *externalization principle* in van Eemeren 2018: 25). Lastly, my interpretation is in accordance with Bovens (2010: 952), since he affirms that justifications occur during the information phase of accountability practices.



they rely on symptomatic argumentation (Mohammed 2016: 6, 2018b: 255), whereas they employ pragmatic argumentation in cases of *ex-ante* accountability (Andone 2015: 8). The following chart presents two schemes to analyze politicians' argumentation in accountability practices<sup>8</sup>.

**Table 1. Politicians' argumentation in accountability processes**

	<b>Symptomatic argumentation (<i>ex-post</i> accountability)</b>	<b>Pragmatic argumentation (<i>ex-ante</i> accountability)</b>
<b>Standpoint</b>	1 <i>Action X</i> was appropriate.	1 <i>Action X</i> should (not) be done.
<b>Argument</b>	1.a <i>X</i> was done in the best interest of the public. 1.b <i>X</i> was implemented using the best means available given <i>situation Y</i> . 1.c <i>X</i> was based on the best knowledge available given <i>Y</i> . 1.d <i>Y</i> required a decision to be made.	1.a <i>X</i> will (avoid) bring <i>situation Y</i> . 1.b <i>Y</i> is (un)desirable for the general wellbeing of the public. 1.c <i>X</i> is the most convenient way to (avoid) achieve <i>Y</i> .

Once the justification is completed, the information phase is over<sup>9</sup> making way for the discussion phase. This phase is crucial for accountability purposes as it allows the forum to scrutinize the arguments of political actors and pass a judgement on them. According to pragma-dialectics (van Eemeren 2018: 38), discussions are conducted in a reasonable way when standpoints are tested according to a critical procedure. This means that parties should limit themselves to perform moves that are conducive to resolving a dispute in a reasonable fashion. As mentioned before, the members of the forum can engage in discussions by choosing to ask critical questions or advancing (counter)arguments. Each of these options defines their role in the discussion and their obligations.

If forum members opt for asking critical questions, they are obliged to test the tenability of standpoints in view of the advanced arguments and concede their acceptability if no flaws are exposed throughout the questioning process. Conversely, if forum members opt for

<sup>8</sup> The schemes are an adaptation of Mohammed (2018b) and Andone (2015). Changes have been made for accuracy and comparability between *ex-post* and *ex-ante* accountability.

<sup>9</sup> Although explanations and clarifications can occur during the information phase, argumentation remains its main element because actors are evaluated in view of the responsibility they have in a given situation, and this point can only be addressed argumentatively.

advancing standpoints, they are obliged to advance arguments to justify them, and if they do not manage to respond to criticisms or doubts concerning the arguments, they must give up their standpoints (see rules five, six and seven for a critical discussion in van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004: 143-150).

The participants of a discussion satisfy their argumentative obligations in different ways depending on the setting where the exchange takes place. In press conferences, journalists meet their obligations through questions to comply with the constraints of the communicative setting, which means that they rely on diverse linguistic resources to satisfy their argumentative duties. For instance, journalists preface questions to bring additional information, use negative formulations to push the discussion in certain directions, and make implicatures to convey arguments and criticisms (Clayman and Heritage 2002, Eriksson and Eriksson 2012, Clayman and Fox 2017). In this way, journalists adapt their questioning depending on the role they assume in the discussion.

In the case of Twitter, users are constrained by the affordances of the platform (number of characters, reaction buttons, etc.), but the virtual environment provides users with peculiar ways to perform argumentative moves to satisfy their argumentative obligations (see Greco et al. 2023 for a discussion about argumentative moves in social media). For instance, users can advance argumentation by presenting a specific standpoint and providing a link that directs to arguments supporting the standpoint. Hashtags (*#BlackLivesMatter*) can be used to recall common ground for discussions, and to subscribe standpoints. Mentions to people (*@jacindaarden*) can serve to make confrontations explicit, and to advance criticisms. Visual elements such as pictures, videos, and memes can serve as rhetorical devices to gain adherence from other participants in a discussion.

Press conferences and Twitter serve as accountability platforms because they provide people with the necessary means to hold authorities accountable for their decisions. In both cases, journalists and Twitter users employ diverse argumentative moves to assess the decisions of politicians, and the discussions lead to shaping of public opinion. Reconstructing the interventions of participants makes it possible to understand the dynamics of discussions, and it helps determining the extent to which participants make relevant contributions for accountability.

### **4.3 Data and methodology**

This study utilizes data from two sources: a press conference conducted by Jacinda Ardern, and a corpus of tweets pertaining to the same event. Ardern's press conference occurred on 7 April 2020 within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The selection of this event was based on

the findings of a previous study (Hernández, in press), which examined journalists' questions during crises. According to the study, Ardern's press conferences stood out as the most argumentative among seven different politicians, rendering them suitable for further investigation<sup>10</sup>. Furthermore, this press conference holds particular interest as it witnessed journalists displaying the highest level of confrontational behavior towards Ardern among all her press conferences.

The press conference was particularly confrontational because it addressed a political scandal in New Zealand. The incident involved the minister of health, David Clark, who was found violating the lockdown repeatedly for leisure. The misconduct sparked public condemnation, leading to widespread calls for his resignation. However, Ardern chose to retain Clark in the ministry of health, and she announced her decision during the press conference. The following excerpt contains Ardern's justification for her decision:

“To begin with, today, I wish to speak about the actions of the Minister of Health. As you all have heard, last night David Clark advised me that he drove his family to the beach for a walk in the early stages of the lockdown. He also offered me his resignation. I want to share with you what I shared with him. Under normal circumstances, I would sack the minister. What he did was wrong and there are no excuses, but my priority above all else is our collective fight against COVID-19. That requires leadership amongst our DHBs. It requires a good understanding of workforce issues. It requires an intimate knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of our health system, which we have been working so hard to rebuild. And, of course, it requires knowledge of the complex nature of this global pandemic and what it means here in New Zealand.

Simply put, I determined that we cannot afford massive disruption in the health sector or to our response, because David Clark continues to possess what we require as our health minister to take on COVID-19. For that reason and that reason alone, Dr. Clark will maintain his role, but he broke the rules, and he does need to pay a price. So, while he maintains his health portfolio, I have stripped him of his role as associate finance minister and demoted him to the bottom of our cabinet rankings. His associate finance minister delegations revert to the minister of finance, with the exception of where they relate to budget oversight of Minister

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<sup>10</sup> Hernández (in press) is based on a corpus of 21 press conferences pertaining to the Covid-19 pandemic. The corpus encompasses press conferences from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the World Health Organization. The study analyzed journalists' questions to determine the presence or absence of confrontational attitudes exhibited towards politicians.

Robertson's other portfolios. They will go to Minister Parker. These changes are effective immediately. David Clark is under no illusions that I expect better, and so does New Zealand." (Ardern 2020)

Ardern's announcement caused an adversarial response from journalists, prompting them to confront the decision in different ways. All questions in the press conference (51 in total) were annotated according to the argumentative moves of journalists. The analysis was done following an annotation manual designed to identify the argumentative function of journalists' questions (Hernández 2021, Hernández in press). Journalists' moves are defined according to their pragmatic function given the affordances of press conferences. The categories of the annotation were (a) advancing argumentation, (b) advancing counterarguments, (c) advancing standpoints, (d) asking critical questions, (e) asking informative questions, and (f) requesting argumentation<sup>11</sup>. The argumentative moves of the typology correspond to the roles of protagonist and antagonist, so it can be decided how discussions turn out depending on the behavior of journalists. The moves corresponding to the protagonist role include (a), (b), and (c), while the moves aligned with the antagonist role encompass (d), (e), and (f).

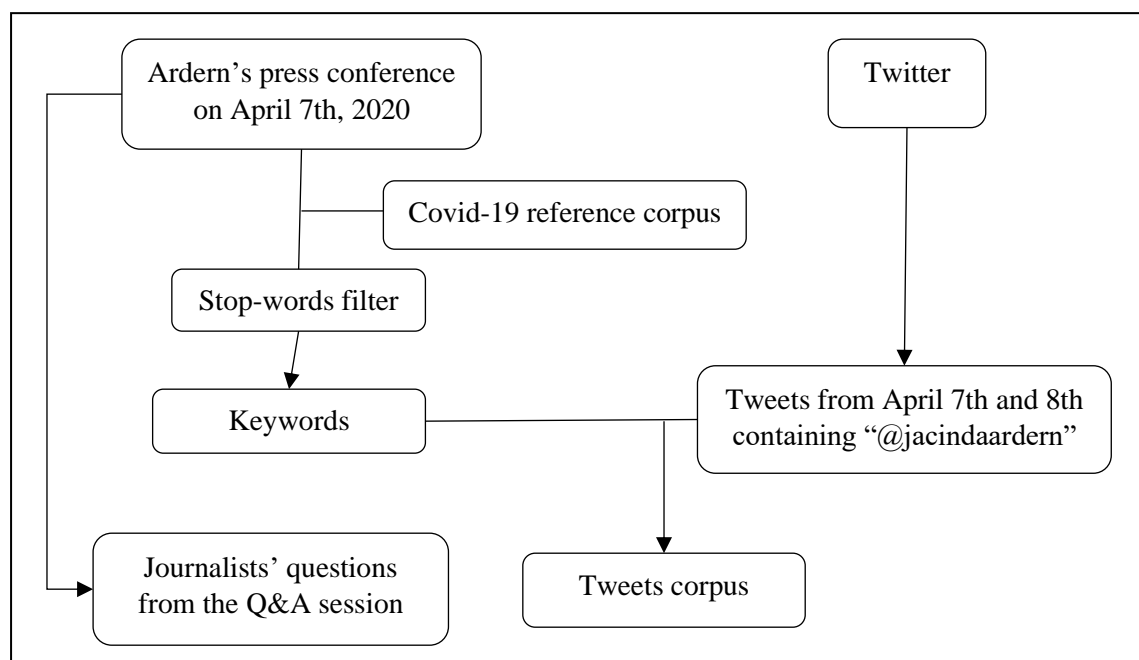
The second data source for this study comprises a corpus of tweets reacting to Ardern's press conference. All posts mentioning "@jacindaardern" between the dates of 7th and 8th April 2020 were collected using the Twitter API. This dataset included tweets unrelated to the press conference, so a criterion was developed to filter out irrelevant posts. This criterion was developed following the subsequent steps (see figure 1):

- (i) A keyword analysis of the press conference was conducted with AntConc (Anthony, 2005), using a reference corpus of Covid-19 press conferences (173,997 words).
- (ii) The results of the keyword analysis were refined by removing stop-words with NLTK (Loper and Bird 2002) (e.g., *as*, *because*, *go*, *will*, etc.), and excluding metadata from the transcripts (e.g., *inaudible*, *journalist*).
- (iii) The outcome of the previous steps was a word list that represented the key topics in Ardern's press conference (see appendix 1). The words with the highest Keyness (26 in total) were used as criterion to choose tweets from the web.

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<sup>11</sup> In the original study of Hernández, an additional category is included in the typology: requesting standpoints. This category is not included for the annotation because it is a type of question that gives rise to discussions. In this study, the analysis is based on situations where a discussion is already at hand.

- (iv) Any tweet containing any word from the list was included in the corpus, resulting in a data set of 295 tweets (9,492 words).



**Figure 1. Pipeline to obtain the data of the study.**

Forty percent of the corpus (120 tweets) was annotated to identify the argumentative moves of users. These tweets were selected to represent comments with the worst, best, and median sentiment, with 40 tweets in each category. The sentiment analysis was performed using VADER lexicon (Hutto and Gilbert 2014). The annotation of tweets used the same categories as in the press conference, but the identification procedure was different because online users do not argue in the same way as journalists. To identify the discussion moves in the posts, standard argumentative indicators were employed, following the approach outlined by van Eemeren et al. (2007).

Assertions were identified as standpoints when speakers committed to the acceptability of propositions in a context of doubt or confrontation (van Eemeren et al. 2007: 29). Comments were identified as argumentation when users provided justification for standpoints, and they were labeled as counterarguments when the justification gave support to opposing standpoints (see Rocci 2021). As for the questions of users, they were critical if aimed at testing the adequacy of a certain argument (van Eemeren et al. 2007: 140, 155, 180), informative if some clarification was requested (van Eemeren et al. 2007: 47), and requests of argumentation if demanded a justification (van Eemeren et al. 2007: 48). The following table presents examples of each category of the annotation divided by press conferences and Twitter.

**Table 2. Argumentative moves in press conferences and twitter**

	<b>Press conference</b>	<b>Twitter</b>
<b>Standpoint</b>	Tim’s Coromandel has said that there are a lot of people that they’ve discovered are flouting lockdown and traveling to holiday homes and they want the region blocked off.	@patrickgovernz @jacindaardern and NZ government doing an excellent job, so too are many of the journalist trying to hold them to account. Borders do need to be closed & this takes time to implement securely. We appreciate all that everyone is doing to keep our country safe.
<b>Argumentation</b>	Thousands of people are walking to dairies right now and purchasing products by pressing POS pads instead of using contactless payments, because they’re not available. Is that a public health issue? And what are you doing about it?	@nzherald She’s got an opinion on that but doesn’t take any action on minister of health breaking them, repeatedly. She is no leader, just a good talker...@jacindaardern
<b>Counterargument</b>	Prime Minister, how can David Clark do his job effectively when he doesn’t have the moral authority?	I fully understand @jacindaardern likely does not want to bring in someone new. I would argue, it would be wise to re-think this “think” - because NZ has never needed medical leadership as much as we do now. Ashley Bloomfield is at least is a doctor, w a degree in Public Health <a href="https://t.co/QE779zYqKf">https://t.co/QE779zYqKf</a>
<b>Critical question</b>	There were 54 new cases in the last two weeks. How confident can we be on that downward trend given the gaps in the testing around regional and demographic gaps?	Not found
<b>Informative question</b>	There seems to be some confusion over butchers, grocers, and bakers,	I was advised by my doctor that despite my neg result he did class me

	and whether they are able to operate online services. Can you just clarify that for people watching whether that's allow?	as poss/prob Covid to @minhealthnz but i haven't heard from anyone & my stats arent on list. Wondering if anyone knows what i should do or who to email @SiouxsieW @jacindaardern @medickinson @ChiefSciAdvisor
<b>Request of argumentation</b>	So, why aren't those 50,000 nasal swabs being distributed more evenly across the country?	Not found

The annotation process was supplemented with a keyword analysis to identify the primary topics of interest for journalists and Twitter users. For this purpose, all questions from the press conferences were extracted to form a separate corpus representing the interventions made by journalists (50 questions; 1,577 words). Keyword analyses were then performed on both the journalists' corpus and the tweets' corpus, using each other as reference. This approach enabled the identification of keywords within the respective datasets.

#### 4.4 Results

To understand the results of the annotation and the characteristics of discussions, it is necessary to reconstruct Ardern's argumentation first. The decision to keep the minister of health can be analyzed with the structure of *ex-ante* accountability because the decision was open to debate at the time of the press conference. The structure of the argumentation is the following:

- 1 The minister of health, David Clark, should remain in his position.
  - 1.1a D. Clark continues to possess what we require as our health minister to take on Covid-19.
    - 1.1a.1a D. Clark has a good understanding of workforce issues.
    - 1.1a.1b D. Clark has an intimate knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of our health system.
    - 1.1a.1c D. Clark has knowledge of the complex nature of the global pandemic and what it means in New Zealand.
  - 1.1b We cannot afford a massive disruption in the health sector.
    - 1.1b.1a We are not under normal circumstances.
    - 1.1b.1b The main priority now is the Covid-19 response.
- (1.2 D. Clark has been punished already.)

1.2. 1a D. Clark has been stripped of his role as associate finance minister.

1.2. 1a.1 Ministers Robertsons and Parker have taken D. Clarks delegations in the ministry of finance.

1.2.1b D. Clark has been demoted to the bottom of the cabinet rankings.

Ardern's speech during the press conference coincides with the information phase of accountability processes, while the discussion phase diverged into two separate fora. One took place in the press conference itself, and the other one on Twitter. The results of the annotation unveiled noteworthy characteristics of accountability dialogues within each forum. The first point to notice is the density of argumentation. In press conferences, all interventions of journalists had an argumentative function, whereas on Twitter, almost half of the interventions (49.6%) were irrelevant from an argumentative perspective (see table 3). These interventions varied from insults to praises, so they would be categorized as expressive speech acts. This finding is consistent with other studies that observed that online communication is characterized by a high level of expressive messages (Carr et al 2012: 191).

**Table 3. Number of argumentative moves by forum**

	<b>Press conference</b>		<b>Twitter</b>	
	No.	%	No.	%
Total interventions	49	100	121	100
Argumentative moves	49	100	61	50.4

Among the argumentative moves that occurred in each forum, it was necessary to distinguish the interventions that were relevant for accountability, since not all argumentative moves addressed Ardern's decision. In the press conference, 33% of journalists' interventions focused on accountability, while on Twitter, 29.5% of the comments addressed this matter (see table 4). Although the percentage is slightly higher in press conferences, this result shows that both fora have a similar commitment to accountability concerns. In other words, accountability emerges with comparable frequency in both platforms during argumentative exchanges. The caveat with Twitter, however, is that users engage in argumentation only half of the time.



**Table 4. Number of accountability issues by forum**

	Press conference		Twitter	
	No.	%	No.	%
Argumentative moves	49	100	61	100
Accountability related	16	33	18	29.51

The specificities of the discussion in the press conference are revealed upon closer examination of journalists' argumentative moves. Among the sixteen argumentative moves involving accountability, nine were annotated as counterarguments. The premises under attack were 1.1a (six counterarguments), 1.1b (one counterargument), 1.2.1b (two counterarguments). The following examples give an impression of journalists' opposition to Arden's decision (Arden 2020).

- (1) How can David Clark do his job effectively when he doesn't have the moral authority? [attack on premise 1.1a. Reconstruction: D. Clark cannot do his job effectively because he does not have the moral authority.]
- (2) Is he actually the guy for the job? Because we counted more than a dozen times that he had to kick to Dr. Bloomfield [...] because he simply couldn't answer the questions. So, is he actually the guy for the job? [attack on premise 1.1a. Reconstruction: D. Clark does not have the capacity to run the ministry of health because he cannot answer relevant questions about it, and he relies on Dr. Bloomfield to answer the questions.]
- (3) Is it appropriate that health is now the lowest ranking portfolio in cabinet, particularly given the crisis we're in? [attack on premise 1.2.1b. Reconstruction: It is not appropriate that the health ministry is the lowest ranking portfolio in cabinet because we are in a health crisis.]

The remaining interventions consisted of two critical questions, two informative questions, and three arguments. The critical questions aimed at evaluating the acceptability of Arden's argumentation without journalists assuming a position by themselves. Example (4) illustrates this type of questioning by challenging premise 1.1b. The informative questions were particularly interesting, as journalists tried to determine the acceptability of Arden's decision not in view of her argumentation but in view of her commitment to dismiss Clark in the future. Since Arden decided to keep Clark in his position to avoid disruptions in the Covid-19 response, journalists wanted to know whether she would dismiss him afterward. Example (5) presents one of these questions. Lastly, the argumentation put forth by journalists opposed

Ardern's decisions without attacking her arguments directly. The opposition of journalists resided in presenting a contrary standpoint and defending it with their own reasons. Example (6) shows one of these interventions.

- (4) Do you think it would be challenging to bring someone up to speed? [...] How long do you think it would have taken? [challenge to premise 1.1b]
- (5) When we come out of this thing, you'll sack him immediately?
- (6) Given the centrality of the health focus at the moment, why don't you take on the health minister role by yourself? [Reconstruction: Ardern should take the ministry of health because it has a central role at the moment.]

The discussion on Twitter also revealed distinct characteristics in terms of its argumentative moves. Among the eighteen interventions concerning accountability, twelve were arguments. The standpoints defended by users were evaluative (*She [Ardern] is no leader, just a good talker*), prescriptive (*Bill English should be health minister*), and descriptive (*Rules don't apply to politicians*). This finding not only suggests that Twitter users predominantly focus on presenting their own arguments, but also that they engage with a diverse array of issues when addressing a particular topic. Example (7) presents a paradigmatic case of argument from authority that defends Ardern's decision based on her perceived competence, and example (8) proposes specific measures to address Clark's misconduct.

- (7) @MalcolmDewald1 @BBCWorld @jacindaardern I personally haven't established an opinion on his qualification or competence to discharge the duties of the Minister of Health. JA said removing him would be a net negative for NZ's ability to respond to the COVID-19 crisis. Her judgement to date seems sound in this area. [Standpoint: Ardern's decision to keep Clark is appropriate.]
- (8) PM @jacindaardern I would suggest David Clark be fined for his lockdown law breaking that way other Kiwis get the message flouting the law has consequences and is not okay or to be tolerated period. [Standpoint: David Clark should be fined for flouting the lockdown.]

Example (9) is particularly interesting as it references an argument put forth in the press conference (example 6). In this case, the user advances argumentation to oppose the journalist's stance, ultimately strengthening Ardern's position. The intertextual reference highlights the intricate network of relationships that emerge among participants, opinions, and fora when people engage in public discussions. Arguments voiced by journalists in press conferences are

contested by users on social media, and the debate spread over newspapers, online platforms, press conferences, etc.

- (9) Agog at some journalist suggesting PM @jacindaardern took over another portfolio! Hope she was flattered at their confidence in her however our PM has more than enough to do! #Nzpol #nzlockdown #StayHomeNZ. [Standpoint: Ardern should not take over the ministry of health.]

The remaining six argumentative moves on Twitter comprised three standpoints and three counterarguments. While advancing standpoints broadens debates in terms of the number of opinions that are considered, leaving them unjustified is a fallacy from an argumentative perspective (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1987: 285) because it hinders the possibility of resolving differences of opinion. Regarding this point, it can be said that 13% of the corpus (16 out of 120 tweets) constituted standpoints without justification<sup>12</sup>. This finding gives an idea of the prevalence of unsupported opinions in online discussions. Example (10) illustrates this type of intervention.

- (10) We move ahead in NZ with cautious optimism. It must be so tiring answering stupid repeated questions each press conference @jacindaardern. You answer with such grace. Great to remind parents they are not teachers and they don't need to be. Thank you!

The counterarguments of users on Twitter exhibit the degree to which it is possible to engage argumentatively in online platforms. Counterarguments require discussants to assume a contrary position in a debate to advance specific objections. The presence of these moves in the corpus imply that users engaged with Ardern's argumentation, processes it, and subsequently adopted a contrary position in view of specific flaws. These interventions display the capacity of online platforms to serve as accountability fora because the criticisms of users contribute to the assessment of politicians' decisions with respect to their reasonableness. Example (11) presents a counterargument that addresses all the points presented by Ardern in her justification.

- (11) What happened to go hard and go early? @DavidClarkNZ could still be an advisor but lose his portfolio and increased salary. He's not even a medical doctor! FFS! But

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<sup>12</sup> In press conferences, journalists occasionally put forth standpoints without justifying them. For instance, when they ask: "Did you hear [someone]'s comments on [topic] saying that [standpoint]?" The difference with Twitter is that journalists advance standpoints to prompt politicians to justify or attack them. While the interactive norms of question-and-answer sessions allow journalists to execute such maneuvers, they are still fallacious, because the act of introducing a standpoint and subsequently prompting another party to justify or attack it shifts the burden of proof.

@nzlabour MP, Dr. Liz Craig is. SHE could become Minister of Health.  
 @jacindaardern could have had a win/win here.

Reconstruction:

- 1 Clark should not remain as health minister.
  - 1.1 Clark is not even a medical doctor. (Attack on premise 1.1a)
    - (1.2a MP Dr. Liz Craig can assume the health minister.)
      - 1.2a.1 MP Dr. Liz Craig is a medical doctor.
  - 1.3 Having Clark as advisor would avoid a disruption in the health sector. (Attack on premise 1.1b)
    - (1.4 Clark has not been punished) (Attack on premise 1.2)
      - 1.4.1 Clark continues to possess his portfolio and increased salary.

The argumentative analysis of press conferences and Twitter provides insights about how discussions unfolded in each forum (see table 5). The interventions of participants align with either the role of protagonist or antagonist, and the prevalence of interventions aligned with one role or the other determines whether discussions tend to be mixed or non-mixed. In the case of the press conference, the discussion was 24.5% mixed and 75.5% non-mixed, whereas the discussion on Twitter was 93.4% mixed and 6.56% non-mixed. These results show that the discussions in each forum not only inclined into opposite directions, but in the case of Twitter, the discussion was almost entirely mixed.

**Table 5. Types of discussion by forum**

		Press conference		Twitter	
		No.	%	No.	%
Protagonist moves	Advancing argumentation	3	6.122	38	62.3
	Advancing counterarguments	9	18.37	3	4.918
	Advancing standpoints	-	-	16	26.23
	<b>Mixed discussion</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>24.5</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>93.4</b>
Antagonist moves	Asking critical questions	8	16.33	1	1.639
	Asking informative questions	26	53.06	3	4.918
	Requesting argumentation	3	6.122	-	-
	<b>Non-mixed discussion</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>75.5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6.56</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>49</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>100</b>

In press conferences, discussions are generally more balanced and oriented towards retrieving information from politicians, which is explained by their professional role as public informants,

and the interaction scheme (Rigotti and Rocci 2006) of press conferences. On Twitter, discussions are mainly driven by people advancing arguments and opinions. This is partially explained by phenomena like polarization because arguments emerge in response or anticipation of disagreement.

The results of the keyword analysis offer insights into the significant topics within each forum (see appendix 2). While both discussions shared common themes such as Covid-19, New Zealand, lockdowns, and health, notable distinctions also emerged. Journalists in the press conference displayed a specific focus on Māori people and nasal swabs. On the other hand, Twitter users exhibited interest in subjects like the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy.<sup>13</sup>

The findings of the keyword analysis are supplemented with the argumentative analysis because it allows examining what people does argumentatively with the topics that are salient in discussions. In the press conference, the topic of Māori people was brought to advance arguments on the specific vulnerabilities of this community. The intervention on nasal swabs was a counterargument, urging for a more equitable distribution of these tests throughout the nation. Regarding Twitter, the comments regarding the Easter Bunny and the Tooth Fairy largely centered on praising Ardern for her crisis management.

The examination of discussions within press conferences and Twitter provides valuable insights into the accountability dynamics within each platform. The differentiation between protagonists and antagonists underscores the prevalence of mixed or non-mixed discussions. Press conferences tend to foster relatively balanced discussions, where journalists both question and critique politicians regarding their decisions. In contrast, discussions on Twitter are predominantly mixed, shaped by the diverse range of opinions and the frequent exchange of arguments. The keyword analysis uncovers both the shared and distinct topical interests of each platform. Collectively, these analyses illuminate how communication channels impact the expression of arguments and opinions, consequently shaping the landscape of accountability practices.

## 4.5 Discussion

Public discussions become instances of informal accountability when discussants bring about reasonable interventions to assess the decisions of authorities in view of their obligations. As shown in the previous analyses, both Twitter and press conferences operate as accountability fora, since participants utilize diverse argumentative strategies to evaluate the validity of

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<sup>13</sup> As part of the Covid-19 response, Jacinda Ardern addressed kids in New Zealand, explaining that the Ester Bunny and the Tooth Fairy were essential workers. The point of the statement was persuading people to maintain the safety guidelines when engaging in the activities concerned with those traditions.

politicians' decisions. While some individuals pose questions, others advance arguments, and a further subset offers critiques of politicians' argumentation. In all these instances, the contributions of participants collectively establish an environment conducive to the rational evaluation of decisions.

Nonetheless, distinct variations emerged in the implementation of accountability across the two forums. In press conferences, journalists displayed a greater capacity to strike a balance between posing questions and presenting arguments. This point is important because a key aspect of reasonable discussions is assessing arguments in their own right, and questions facilitate this point by evaluating the premises used in the argumentation. In contrast, Twitter discussions barely featured any questions, and none of them pertained to holding politicians accountable.

Twitter users were more efficient than journalists at advancing arguments relevant to the discussion. For example, users proposed various candidates to replace Clark in the ministry of health. Such diversity of alternatives is valuable in accountability practices because politicians' decisions can be assessed by confronting them with available alternatives. In this regard, journalists abstained from proposing other people to replace Clark and limited themselves to criticize the decision. This tendency could be attributed to the role of journalists as public informants, focusing on disseminating news (see Weaver and Wilhoit 1996: chapter 4), which places less emphasis on suggesting changes. However, from an accountability perspective, this approach diminishes the efficacy of press conferences as accountability platforms by restricting the range of perspectives that can be incorporated.

An issue worth discussing is how people need to engage in the evaluation of political decisions to make public discussions instances of accountability. Since informal accountability requires people to engage argumentatively to evaluate decisions reasonably, it is important to ask what it is needed to consider a discussion a legitimate instance of accountability. Is it required that a certain amount of people is involved in the discussion, or is it more important that people advance quality arguments? On the one hand, a shared interest among people is necessary to make accountability a public enterprise, but on the other hand, a single good argument might be enough to pass an evaluation on politicians. Most likely, both points are important elements of accountability practices, but further reflection is needed because such characteristics shape the way in which accountability is conducted in societies.

Another point to reflect is the influence of online platforms on accountability practices. As previously discussed, online platforms undoubtedly serve as arenas for accountability discussions, but the substantial volume of irrelevant information diminishes the effectiveness of these platforms as accountability spaces. This situation brings difficulties to the

identification of relevant comments for accountability purposes. A possible solution to this problem could be found in the sentiment of social media posts.

Upon analyzing the data of the study, it was revealed that tweets reflecting extreme sentiments—both positive and negative—contained a plethora of words linked to the discussion, but upon closer examination, it turned out that most of these comments were expressive speech acts. In contrast, most accountability-related interventions were present in tweets exhibiting median sentiment. Although this insight emerged incidentally from the current study, it holds potential value for future investigations.

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## Appendixes

**Appendix 1. Keyword used as criterion to build the corpus**

	Word	Freq.	Keyness
1	price	11	42.07
2	maori	7	37.85
3	David Clark	7	36.92
4	nasal	6	31.90
5	swabs	10	31.28
6	minister	27	30.78
7	wellington	5	27.89
8	border	12	25.01
9	ruby	4	24.23
10	hunting	4	22.98
11	health	52	21.94
12	visa	4	20.97
13	undertaken	4	20.14
14	ramp	5	19.93
15	obligations	5	19.93
16	mind	7	19.27
17	knowledge	9	18.86
18	determined	5	18.69
19	role	10	18.48
20	alert	9	18.45
21	tauranga	3	18.17
22	flouting	3	18.17
23	transit	4	18.09
24	haven	10	17.36
25	visas	3	16.95
26	portfolio	3	16.95

**Appendix 2. Keywords comparison between journalists' questions and Twitter posts**

Press conference		Twitter		
Word	Keyness	Word	Keyness	
1	maori	79.33	covid	196.06
2	swabs	55.52	zealand	155.00
3	nasal	47.58	lockdown	127.63
4	lockdown	39.65	easter	123.07
5	people	31.15	bunny	86.59
6	tauranga	23.79	health	73.44
7	wellington	23.79	leadership	67.20
8	zealand	23.79	tooth	63.80
9	gaps	23.79	fairy	59.24
10	flouting	23.79	essential	52.37
11	health	23.52	coronavirus	50.12
12	vulnerable	22.27	pandemic	47.85
13	feels	22.27	amazing	32.17
14	information	20.77	nagy	31.89
15	regions	19.33	rosa	31.89
16	throat	19.33	owen	31.89
17	childbirth	15.86	sacked	31.89
18	auckland	15.86	trump	27.34
19	contactless	15.86	borders	26.08
20	inability	15.86	crisis	25.80
21	covid	15.86	love	25.22
22	shifting	15.86	ministers	22.79
23	sack	15.86	uk	22.78
24	ruby	15.86	isolation	22.78
25	quarantine	15.86	kiwis	22.78

## 5 Conclusions

### 5.1 Results

The aim of this thesis was to understand the contribution of journalists' interventions to the argumentative reasonableness of discussions in political press conferences (RQ1). To achieve this goal, the first step was identifying the argumentative moves journalists perform in their interventions (RQ1.1). Since journalists employ questions in different ways to achieve their communicative goals, a theoretical model was necessary to distinguish the moves that journalists perform. In Chapter 2, seven different argumentative moves were identified by analyzing the affordances of this communicative context and the pragmatic functions of questions. The moves that journalists perform are (i) advancing standpoints, (ii) advancing argumentation, (iii) advancing counterarguments, (iv) asking critical questions, (v) asking informative questions, (vi) requesting standpoints, and (vii) requesting argumentation.

Journalists' argumentative moves can be distinguished between those that advance information (i, ii, iii), and those that request information (iv, v, vi, vii). The former employ questions as façade because no information is requested, while the latter limit themselves to use questions in their standard function. Based on the information that is requested or advanced, different argumentative moves will be performed by journalists.

The argumentative moves of journalists give them the role of protagonists or antagonists. Depending on the role journalists assume, discussions will bring about different argumentative scenarios where specific issues are addressed by journalists and politicians. The role of journalists together with the dialectical profiles they pursue will determine the kind of discussion that is developed in press conferences.

Journalists' moves impact accountability in different ways. If journalists do not demand politicians to justify their decisions, accountability cannot be achieved. This happens when journalists request information that does not contribute to the evaluation of political measures. Diversely, if journalists are committed to promoting accountability, they need to adapt their questions to the discussions with politicians.

When discussions concern past decisions that bare no incidence in current policies, critical questions are better suited to hold politicians accountable because these questions examine the soundness of decisions in view of the information that was available at the time. An example of such a situation would be holding Swedish authorities accountable today for the approach that was taken during the Covid-19 pandemic in that country.

Another situation to promote accountability is when political decisions are open to debate and policies can still be modified in meaningful ways. In these cases, journalists can

deploy a wider variety of moves. Advancing argumentation is suitable to propose alternative solutions to a problem. Counterarguments are used to highlight shortcomings in politicians' decisions. Critical questions help testing the reasonableness of politicians' argumentation without taking a position in the debate, and advancing standpoints can be useful if journalists bring third parties' opinions to confront politicians with alternative perspectives. Depending on their goals, journalists can choose between these moves to hold politicians accountable in these situations.

Informative questions and argumentation requests are moves that become necessary if politicians' argumentation is respectively unclear or incomplete. If politicians' argumentation is unclear in any way, informative questions are instrumental in pointing out such deficiencies to make politicians clarify or further explain their positions. Requests of argumentation, on the other hand, are necessary when politicians leave standpoints unjustified or when some premises in their argumentation require further justification. In this way, the contribution of these moves to accountability is specifying politicians' argumentation when necessary.

Lastly, standpoint requests are necessary when authorities do not have a clear standing on issues of public concern and journalists require politicians to define their position. This might happen, for example, when politicians hold a press conference on a certain topic, and journalists bring to discussion a different issue that needs attention.

Journalists contribute to informal accountability practices by adapting their moves to the issues discussed with politicians. In the case of press conferences, accountability requires that multiple journalists come together to complete the dialectical profiles started by their peers. For instance, if the discussion calls for asking critical questions, journalists must join forces to cover all the issues that need attention.

In addressing the relationship between journalists' moves and accountability, the notion of argumentative scenario was introduced. This notion describes an argumentative situation where different parties join the discussion to assume the roles of previous participants. Argumentative scenarios are a specific type of polylogue (Lewiński and Aakhus 2014) that can be useful to study transgenerational debates or any other type of discussions where participants need to resign their position in the debate, but the discussion must continue.

The question typology developed in this dissertation was specifically designed for press conferences, but it might be adapted to analyze other communicative activities where questioning practices are relevant. The main asset of the typology is identifying questions that are used to perform argumentative moves that typically are performed with assertions.

The second step in addressing the main research question was understanding how journalists' interventions shape discussions in press conferences (RQ1.2). This step was

necessary because discussions significantly vary from one case to another depending on the questions politicians receive. To achieve this goal, an empirical investigation was undertaken to observe journalists' moves in real life. In Chapter 3, the analysis was done relying on a corpus of press conferences concerning the Covid-19 pandemic. The typology of questions developed in Chapter 2 was used as annotation scheme to analyze journalists' interventions.

The results of the analysis showed that journalists oscillate between two poles in press conferences. One pole inclines towards seeking information, and the other leans towards holding politicians accountable. Depending on the issue addressed in press conferences and the political situation at hand, journalists adapt their questioning to hold politicians accountable or to gather information to deliver it to the public.

When crises arise, journalists cooperate with politicians by adjusting their questioning to facilitate the delivery of information. This approach is meant to promote safety guidelines among the public. However, if crises are intertwined with political turmoil, journalists shift towards holding politicians accountable for their management of the situation. In the corpus of this study, four out of seven institutions had press conferences where discussions clearly inclined towards seeking information (NY, AU, CA, WHO). Two institutions had events where discussions centered on holding politicians accountable (UK, US), and one institution remained between the two poles (NZ). In these events, the argumentative moves of journalists were instrumental in achieving their communicative goals because the moves served to hold politicians accountable for their crisis management or facilitated the delivery of information to mitigate the crisis.

Besides revealing the general tendencies of journalists' questions in press conferences, the empirical study also provided insights related to research on adversarialness and its potential correlation with argumentative moves. The analysis of questions confirmed that some adversarial features, as described in the literature (Clayman and Heritage 2002), are common in confrontational moves. Negative formulations (*didn't you, isn't it*) were more frequent among questions advancing argumentation, which confront politicians by presenting alternative positions.

However, there were numerous cases where the correspondence is absent or inverted. For example, deferential formulations (*would you, could you*) were also very frequent in advancing argumentation. Follow-up questions were common in informative questions, which bear no opposition by themselves. Moreover, the data of the study revealed that 91.57% of the questions in the corpus did not contain any formulation related to formal adversarial features, suggesting that research on the function of questions goes beyond their formulation.

Another finding of the empirical research is the scarcity of critical questions even when journalists aim to hold politicians accountable (13 out of 507 questions in total). Critical questions are meant to test the soundness of argumentation (van Eemeren 2018: 140, van Eemeren and Henkemans 2016). The finding of the study implies that critical questions, as defined by the theory, are not common in press conferences. Such a discovery was counterintuitive given the deliberative context of discussions and the question-and-answer structure of this communicative activity, which would seemingly provide an ideal setting for journalists to pose critical questions. Consequently, the default expectation was that critical questions would be frequent.

Upon analyzing the critical questions in the corpus, it was revealed that their primary function was limited to seeking truth confirmations, as they aim to have politicians reassure the certainty of their premises. For instance, in one of Ardern's press conferences, the appropriateness of lockdown measures was justified in view of infection trends at that time. In that context, a journalist asked the following question: 'How confident is the downward trend, given the gaps in the testing?' (Ardern 2020). The function of this question is to ensure the certainty of politicians' premises for making a decision. The same situation happens in one of Cuomo's press conferences. Cuomo advanced the argument that medical equipment should be moved from one hospital to another to meet the demand in the latter. The decision was motivated by the limited supply of ventilators in New York City. One of the journalists asked the following question: 'Are you still anticipating [...] that you've basically got six days' worth of supply in New York City?' (Cuomo 2020). Once again, the journalist is concerned about the truth of the information presented by politicians. The focus on the truth of premises, combined with the scarcity of critical questions in the corpus, provides valuable insights for reflecting on the role of questions in evaluating the appropriateness of arguments.

In short, journalists shape discussions in press conferences through an interplay of information seeking and holding politicians accountable. The array of moves available to them serves as instruments to achieve these outcomes. During crises, journalists frequently collaborate with politicians to disseminate information that promotes public safety. Conversely, in politically turbulent situations, their focus shifts towards holding politicians accountable for crisis management.

The final step in addressing the main research question was to understand how discussions in press conferences differ from those in other contexts (RQ1.3). To achieve this goal, a discussion in a press conference was compared with a discussion in a different forum. The discussion was focused on a political scandal addressed in one of Ardern's press



conferences, and the forum chosen for comparison was Twitter. In Chapter 4, the comparison of these fora was made to gain a better understanding of discussions in press conferences.

The analysis of discussions in these fora helped to understand the notion of informal accountability. These practices are processes where individuals hold themselves or others responsible for their actions by creating the conditions that allow the evaluation of decisions. In the case of Twitter, users interact with each other to generate discussions that enable the assessment of political decisions. In press conferences, the interaction is between journalists and politicians to discuss the appropriateness of decisions directly with them.

The results of the study showed that both Twitter and press conferences serve as active spaces for accountability where participants employ diverse argumentative moves to evaluate the appropriateness of politicians' decisions. Nonetheless, there were clear differences in the ways in which accountability is pursued in each forum. In Twitter, users were mainly concerned with advancing arguments of their own to propose measures that addressed the issue of the discussion. References to Ardern's argumentation were only made to advance counterarguments, and none of the interventions assumed an antagonistic role.

In press conferences, on the other hand, journalists were better at balancing the roles of antagonist and protagonist. Various types of questions were raised to understand and evaluate the reasonableness of politicians' decisions. Journalists also advanced counterarguments to expose the shortcomings in Ardern's justification, but they refrained from advancing any arguments with concrete suggestions. Put differently, journalists were efficient at discussing and presenting other people's proposals and opinions, but refrained from advancing their own opinions unless they were meant to expose flaws in politicians' argumentation.

The findings of the comparative study revealed that these fora served as informal accountability spaces, where participants evaluate the appropriateness of politicians' argumentation through deliberative exchanges. The main difference, however, is that accountability is pursued in alternative ways. On Twitter, interactions encourage users to put forth their own ideas to address specific issues, while in press conferences, journalists focus on assessing other people's ideas on the issues under debate. In this way, accountability in these fora is complementary within the public sphere.

With all this information at hand, it is possible to answer the main research question of the dissertation (RQ1). The contribution of journalists' interventions to discussions in press conferences lies in determining whether these events primarily serve the purpose of seeking information or holding politicians accountable for their policies. The argumentative moves journalists perform through their questions will bring discussions in one direction or the other.

If journalists decide to hold politicians accountable, they must opt for questions that confront politicians' positions, either as protagonists or antagonists. If the decision under evaluation is irreversible, the role of an antagonist allows for a thorough examination of the reasons that motivated the decision. Contrarily, if the decision under examination is open to debate, the role of a protagonist allows for examining alternative options, and the role of an antagonist gives politicians the chance to defend their positions.

When journalists decide to seek information in press conferences, their focus should be on questions that allow politicians to expand their position and questions that clarify information for the public. In these cases, press conferences do not serve as accountability fora, but they are still important since information delivered in these events can be instrumental for crisis management. For instance, press conferences can be held to promote safety guidelines or cautionary measures during crises.

In any of these possibilities, journalists' interventions are centered on discussing other people's positions and proposals. When they advance arguments or counterarguments, such moves are usually concerned with confronting politicians, either by presenting contrary positions or by exposing flaws in politicians' argumentation. In general terms, however, journalists tend to remain as neutral and objective as possible.

## **5.2 Related lines of research**

The findings of this dissertation gave rise to additional lines of research concerning critical questions (Hernández 2023). Since the presence of critical questions was scarce in the corpus, it was necessary to reflect upon the theoretical assumptions of this notion. Accordingly, the relationship between critical questions and argument schemes was explored to determine the capability of the theory to account for communicative practices where argumentation is evaluated through questions.

In examining the assumptions of the theory, two objections can be raised against the dependency of critical questions on argument schemes. One objection is that both notions impose unnecessary constraints on each other, and this ultimately disrupts their interplay. Argument schemes are designed to capture formal features of arguments, while critical questions are supposed to test all their relevant evaluation conditions. Since critical questions are related to the premises of schemes, questions end up being a formalism that cannot account for specific features of concrete arguments. In the pursuit of a substantial evaluation of arguments, critical questions are supplemented, but this ends up modifying the schemes to which questions belong, because there is an interdependency between the two notions. The result of this dependency is either having general schemes capable of capturing a wide variety

of concrete arguments at the expense of having trivial critical questions or else, having relevant critical questions for evaluating a concrete argument but having ad-hoc schemes.

The second objection is analytical rather than theoretical. If the procedures of the theory are followed (van Eemeren and Henkemans 2016), it is possible to generate critical questions to evaluate arguments. Once the scheme of an argument is identified, the critical questions of the scheme can be used as a template to evaluate the argument. This procedure, however, leads to asking irrelevant questions in the evaluation process, and there is no guarantee that the evaluation is complete. Furthermore, if the procedure is confronted with real life practices, it is not possible to explain or reproduce questions that intuitively evaluate arguments in a satisfactory way.

To avoid these problems, it is necessary to build a new understanding of critical questions that considers the dynamics of questions-and-answers discussions, while realizing that questioning practices are possible without appealing to argument schemes.

### **5.3 Limitations and future lines of research**

One limitation of this study is that no insights are offered concerning politicians' answers. This point is important because accountability largely depends on politicians' responses. It should be noticed, however, that this limitation does not undermine the insights of this study because questions make accountability possible in the first place, and journalists' questions are independent of politicians' answers.

Even when politicians' responses determine the evaluation that will be passed on them, research on questions has preeminence in any communicative activity where accountability is conducted by means of questions-and-answers, since questions set the conditions from which accountability arises. If journalists do not ask politicians to justify their actions, politicians' answers are trivial for accountability because the need of assessing decisions did not emerge. Put differently, without questions, answers are meaningless.

Contrarily, if journalists effectively require authorities to justify their actions, politicians can influence the evaluation that will be pass on them, but the evaluation will be passed even if they decide not to take part in the answering process because journalists already posed an accountability issue. Accordingly, the study of politicians' answers is an important one, but it needs to be addressed from the perspective of the questions that are made.

The framework developed in this dissertation can be used for studying politicians' answers. Since the appropriateness of answers depends on their adequacy to questions, the typology of questions developed in this study can be used as a first step in analyzing politicians' answers. If questions are successfully identified, answers can be regarded appropriate if they

are correct sequels in the dialectical profile initiated by questions. In this line of thought, any deviation from the dialectical profile would count as an inappropriate answer. In this line of thought, a future line of research is distinguishing shortcomings in politicians' answers.

Another limitation is that no information is offered about linguistic indicators that correspond to each argumentative move. Since journalists employ different linguistic resources when posing questions, it is possible to investigate which formulations are most common among each argumentative move. Having insights on this point would greatly facilitate the task of identifying the argumentative function of journalists' questions, especially for cases when implicatures are involved.

One aspect that calls for future research is the extent to which the findings of this study are applicable to other contexts where questioning practices are relevant, such as interviews, debates, cross-examination sessions, etc. Since this study was based on the functions questions serve in argumentative discussions, it can be hypothesized that journalists' argumentative moves can be extrapolated to other contexts. However, proper research is required to establish this point, since the communicative affordances of press conferences are different from other contexts. For example, advancing third-party standpoints without arguments is a common practice in press conferences because of journalists' commitment to neutrality, time constraints, discussions dynamics, etc. Nonetheless, such a practice can violate the procedural rules in other communicative contexts, as in cross-examination sessions, where simply presenting a third-party opinion would be inappropriate.

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