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# **The Potentials and Pitfalls of Interactional Speculations by Journalists and Experts in the Media: The Case of Covid-19**

*Jonas Nygaard Blom, Rasmus Rønlev, Kenneth Reinecke Hansen, Anders Kruse Ljungdahl*

## **Abstract**

During pandemics, uncertainty is a given condition, as are the potential risks of which the public needs to be informed via the media. In such dire straits there tends to be a shortage of certain knowledge and an abundance of speculations that can potentially inform as well as misinform the public. In this study, we conduct a conversation analysis of the interactional dynamics of speculations between Danish journalists and health experts in televised news interviews and press conferences during the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. The analysis shows how journalists and experts construct and moderate speculations interactionally by entering both convergent and divergent roles. In conclusion, the potentials and pitfalls of such speculations are discussed, and implications are suggested for journalism practice.

## **Keywords**

*Conversation analysis, Covid-19 pandemic, experts, journalist roles, misinformation, speculative journalism*

## **Introduction**

Facts are conventionally considered the core of news journalism, but speculations play a pivotal role as well. News journalists are at times as interested in the uncertainties of the future as the facts of the present (Jaworski et al. 2003; Neiger 2007; Neiger and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2016), not least because of the inherent suspense, and thus news value, caused by these uncertainties (Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2013). Perhaps most prominently, media forecasts continuously attempt to predict the future outcomes of elections with varying degrees of success and with questionable influence on the democratic process (Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2018; Westwood et al. 2020). Likewise, public crises, such as the recent Covid-19 pandemic, are strong stimulators for speculations in the media due to high levels of public uncertainty and fear of potential perils. As observed by Bjørkdahl and Carlsen (2019), the uncertainty caused by pandemics can be thought of as “a mental and emotional space that we cannot fill using reliable methods. [...] [Instead] we proceed to fill it with all sorts of other things – hopes and fears, expectations and entitlements, scepticism and doubt.” (p. 3-4). Arguably, the media play a central part in facilitating this cognitive process in the public, and speculations are an important means to do so. Yet, by venturing into the realms of speculation, journalists and experts also leave the shores of facts and certain truths. In other words, speculations in the media are a double-edged sword that can potentially inform as well as misinform the public.

In this study, we conduct a conversation analysis of how speculations play out interactionally between journalists and experts in the media and explore how they may potentially enlighten or mislead the public. Specifically, we investigate how Danish journalists and health experts constructed and moderated speculations in interaction during the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. By studying mediated speculations in this extreme setting where uncertainty and the price for getting it wrong were at their highest, general insights into the nature of speculations in the media can be gained. While the analysis departs in a Danish case, the theoretical contributions and analytical perspectives of the study go beyond this particular cultural setting.

In the research literature on speculative journalism, the interactional aspects of speculations have had limited attention so far. However, as pointed out by Ekström, journalism researchers “have to take *theories of interaction* into serious consideration [in order to] understand the roles and practices of journalism” (2007, 964, original italics). By doing so in this study, we contribute with new perspectives on the dynamic interactional processes of speculations in journalism practice with particular relevance for research in speculative, future-oriented and uncertainty-driven journalism (Hansen 2015; Jaworski et al. 2003; Neiger 2007; 2012; Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2013; 2018; van Dalen et al. 2017; Westwood et al. 2020). Specifically, we propose a novel interactional model of the convergent and divergent role encounters of speculative and factual journalists and experts, as well as a new model of the interactional push and pull-mechanisms of assertive and tentative speculations in the media. In addition, the study supplies empirically grounded insights into how speculations are constructed verbally and negotiated interactionally in journalism practice. We begin this study by giving an account of speculative journalism, as well as the different roles, norms and agendas of journalists and experts. Based on previous research in these areas, we then outline our theoretical models and apply them in a linguistic analysis of interactional speculations in TV news interviews and press conferences with Danish journalists and health experts. In conclusion, we discuss the possible consequences of mediated interactional speculations.

### **Speculative journalism**

The speculative aspects of journalism are, by most scholars, considered part of interpretive journalism (Barnhurst and Mutz 1997), and the terms *speculative* and *interpretive* are often used interchangeably in the research literature. For instance, according to Benson and Hallin, “interpretation [...] goes beyond current facts, setting or historical context to *speculate* on such things as significance, outcomes and motives” (2007, 32, our italics). Others treat speculations as a variable of interpretative journalism (Salgado and Strömbeck 2012, 156). We consider speculative journalism to be a praxis that deals with the uncertain, undetermined or undeterminable aspects of reality regarding the past, the present or the future (cf. Hansen 2015; Neiger and Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2016). By inciting experts to speculate, journalists may supply the public with

estimations of what could and may have been, and what may or will be. This leads to a shift in perspective from the basic factual news questions of *What, When, Where, Who* and the interpretive *Why* towards the speculative *What now* and *What if*. In situations where (certain) knowledge is absent, such speculative queries can act as a required alternative in the media. Previous studies have argued that speculating on the future in the media plays an important societal role in understanding things to come (Pentzold and Fechner 2020, 735). That is, in creating a prospective vision (Neiger 2007; 2012) of social expectations such as fears and hopes, and a prospective memory (Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2013) of intended societal actions, i.e. what societies commit to do in the future. These collective visions and memories serve a vital function when societies need to react in face of threats such as pandemics. Mediated speculations offer models of potential and alternative realities that may be used by citizens to evaluate choices, help them decide what to do, and mobilize them to act in different ways. Thus, speculations provide a way of addressing a problem that cannot be solved or ameliorated (only) by looking at available facts and evidence but requires probable reasoning and abstract thinking as well (or instead). This is the case when society is confronted by a new and unknown enemy, such as the coronavirus, where certified knowledge is in short stock and immediate actions are needed. In such situations, experts, as well as authorities, need to inform, warn and advise, yet at the same time reassure, the public in order not to create fear and panic (Davis 2019). Accordingly, it must be expected that journalists and health experts seek to cooperate in interactional speculations to address the problem at hand and to mobilize the public in the case of pandemics. Still, conflicting norms and objectives may interfere in this liaison.

### **The interaction between journalists and experts**

The interaction between journalists and experts is a complicated matter with different values, norms, objectives and motives in play and interests at stake. Scientists generally consider it a professional duty to participate in the media (Peters 2013), while most journalists consider it equally important to use scientists as expert sources and commentators in order to obtain background knowledge and interpret events (Albæk 2011). As such, the relation is fertile and of benefit to both parties and the public as well. On the other hand,

there is a gap between the goals of science and journalism which leads to different conditions for presenting information and ideas to the public (Wien 2014).

For journalists, the traditional normative objective is to convey information of societal relevance to the public while striving for objectivity, truth-seeking and critically watching and challenging political decision-makers and authorities (Bro 2008; Schudson 2001). In this regard, there is no obvious opposition as such to scientists who also seek the truth and may seek to challenge the scientific justification for measures adopted by authorities and decisions made by politicians. However, the practical objectives for journalism is also to convey information in a manner that appeals to and grabs the attention of the audience (Kruvand 2018, 139) and, in the case of commercial media, to monetarily profit from information. In this respect, speculating on uncertainty, rather than reporting on factual events in the present, is a convenient way for journalists to maintain ongoing suspense in the news stream and to keep generating new stories when there is no new information available (Jaworski et al. 2003, 43; Tenenboim-Weinblatt 2013, 106). Also, by inciting experts to speculate, journalists have the option of nudging experts into making (bold) assumptions and predictions – with limited focus on scientific certainty (Lemkuhl and Peters 2016) – in an attempt to obtain newsworthy quotes that may, in time, turn out to be wrong or misleading. Consequently, experts risk giving overconfident statements “only to sheepishly revoke them later” (Parascandola 2000, 2).

Normatively, however, experts – and scientists in particular – are expected to be transparent and honest when it comes to uncertainty (Parker 2014). It may even be argued that scientists ought only to communicate “claims which are well-established” (Stephen 2018, 84), and thus should refrain altogether from speculating on matters of (too much) uncertainty. When appearing in the media, health experts are constrained by such norms in the scientific and medical community they are part of, as well as the institutions they are affiliated with. Some health experts represent government agencies and are thus constrained by their relatively close relationship to the political system, e.g. the health authorities who must present professional and science-based advice during epidemics (Bjørkdahl and Carlsen 2017, 359), but also remain loyal to the decisions made by politicians. Health experts from other institutions, such as researchers at universities, are less constrained by the political system but are instead constrained by the norms of the scientific and professional

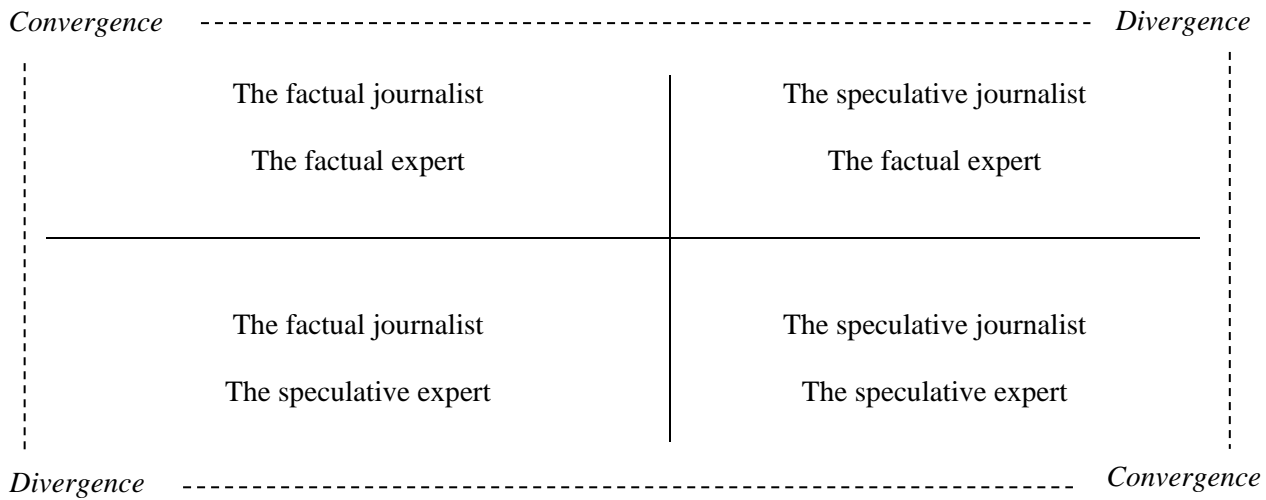
communities they represent. Such constraints put them in a vulnerable position when commenting on issues of which there is limited or no validated scientific knowledge. As stated by one of the most cited researchers in the Danish media during the coronavirus pandemic, professor of experimental virology Allan Randrup Thomsen from the University of Copenhagen: “I feel very vulnerable, because my colleagues can point fingers at me with ease if I say something stupid. I am already crossing the line by commenting on something that has not been scientifically documented.” (uniavisen.dk, 23 April 2020, translated). Moreover, health experts are often skeptical of journalists and may consider the media to be ill-informed and inaccurate with a tendency to focus on sensationalism, controversies and oppositions (Boyce 2007, 18 ff.). Thus, they may be reluctant to enter the media stage and do the speculative ‘tango’ (cf. Gans 1980).

### **Factual and speculative roles**

Journalism is traditionally oriented towards factuality as a part of the journalistic pursuit of a “truthful discourse about the real world” (McNair 1998, 65). However, as already argued, journalism also ventures into speculative domains. Experts can therefore be incited by journalists to deliver the facts or to speculate. And they can choose either a factual or speculative perspective when answering.

Accordingly, four archetypical roles present themselves: The factual journalist, the factual expert, the speculative journalist and the speculative expert. These ideal types should not be mistaken for actual persons. Rather, they are – in a conversational setting – roles that journalists and experts can assume and shift between. The varied roles lead to four different encounters characterized by *divergent* or *convergent interaction*. These are summarized as a typology in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Interactional role encounters**



*The factual journalist* encompasses characteristics from two already established roles in the research literature. First, *the disseminator* who wants to get the “information to the public quickly and avoid [...] unverifiable facts” (Weaver et al. 2007, 142). In this role, the journalist is interested in the available facts and does not incite speculations. Secondly, *the adversarial* who is critical and skeptical of unwarranted claims – or speculations – made by sources (ibid., 143). In this role, the journalist seeks to challenge speculations put forward by experts by critically testing their justification. *The factual expert*, in comparison, is characterized by focusing on the available facts and, conversely, being critical of speculative questions.

*The speculative journalist* shares certain, but not all, traits from the role of *the mobilizer* (Weaver et al. 2007), in the sense that speculations can be used to mobilize the audience to act, think or feel a certain way. In addition, the speculative journalist shares traits with *the interpreter* who wants to “provide analysis and interpretation of complex problems” (ibid., 141). In this role, the journalist seeks or gives subjective explanations and opinionated evaluations in addition to inciting or positing assumptions, predictions, conjectures, etc. *The speculative expert*, in comparison, is characterized by being willing to speculate, thus communicating more than just the facts.



Of the four encounters summarized in Figure 1, the encounter between the factual journalist and the factual expert is traditionally at the heart of journalism: to explain and validate facts. However, since speculations are the topic of our study, we will solely address the other encounters in our analysis.

### **The speech act of speculating**

We combine a pragmatic and a semantic approach to define *speculation* as a speech act in media interviews. *Speculation* can be considered a speech act that encompasses two illocutionary aims (cf. Searle and Vanderveken 1985): 1) “an attempt to ascertain or anticipate something by probable reasoning” (OED, digital edition) and/or 2) “a conclusion, opinion, view [...] by abstract thinking” (ibid.). Accordingly, speculation can be thought of as a common denominator for a series of assertive speech acts (Searle 1975) dealing with uncertain, undetermined or underminable state of affairs (Narrog 2005). Speech acts such as assuming, estimating, predicting, anticipating, expecting, conjecturing, surmising, guessing, wondering, imagining, and hypothesizing can thus all be considered hyponymic subcategories of speculation.

By speculating, the speaker can assert something:

- 1) potentially being the case in the *present or past reality*, e.g.: “It is possible/likely that the coronavirus originated in bats.”
- 2) potentially becoming the case in a *future reality*, e.g.: “In time, the coronavirus will possibly/likely become less dangerous.”
- 3) not being the case in reality but being conceivable in an *alternative present or past counterfactual reality*, e.g.: “If Denmark had not imposed restrictions, hundreds of more people would possibly/likely have died.”

Speculations that deal with the actual present or past are in principle falsifiable, i.e. they can be fact-checked, although it depends on the resolvableness of the uncertainty (King and Kay 2020). In comparison, future-oriented speculations are not falsifiable at the time of the utterance because they predate the facts. Only in time will they potentially turn out to be true or false which may result in retrospective fact-checking, dependent on the resolvableness of the uncertainty and the scope of time involved in the projected future (cf. Neiger 2007, 313). Counterfactual speculations, on the other hand, are not falsifiable and cannot, by definition, be fact-checked because they deal with alternative, rather than actual or potential, realities.

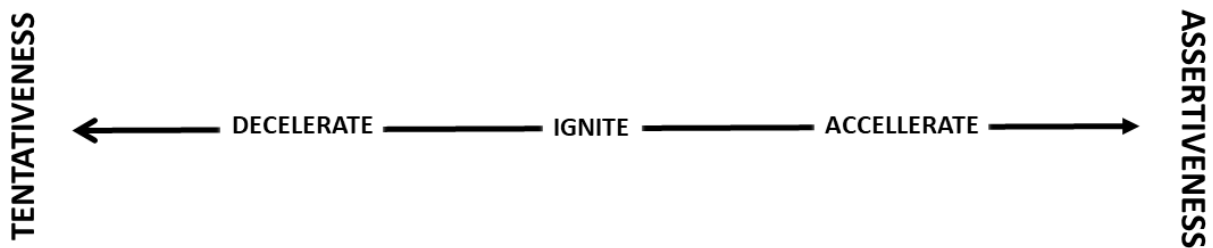
In the examples above, all speculations are *asserted*. However, viewed interactionally, speculations can also be *incited*, that is encouraged – or provoked – by questions from a journalist. In other words, speculations may be triggered conversationally as a response to speculative questions. Consequently, we regard speculations as an *interactional* act in media interviews, rather than merely an individual assertion.

When incited to speculate, experts have the option of expressing cautiousness by not fully committing to the proposition by means of *epistemic modality*, i.e. the speaker's "evaluation of the chances that a certain hypothetical state of affairs under consideration (or some aspect of it) will occur, is occurring or has occurred in a possible world" (Nuyts 2001, 21). Epistemic modality deals with knowledge according to belief, reasoning and evidence, the latter being attributed by means of *evidentiality*, i.e. the encoding of the source of evidence (Aikhenvald 2004). This, as well as other expressive means, can be used as *hedging* devices by experts, i.e. as ways to express cautiousness, tentativeness and uncertainty as a measure of precaution (Hyland 1996, 433). As described by Montgomery (2007, 125), such hedges are often used in media interviews to tentatively *pull* a claim that has previously been *pushed* assertively, i.e. without initial reservations, e.g.:

(*Push:*) The virus is highly dangerous, (*Pull:*) it seems.

We expand upon this theoretical concept by proposing that speculations in an interactional setting can be *ignited* at first and thereafter *accelerated* or *decelerated*. The typical ignition is performed by inciting or asserting a speculation, while the typical acceleration is caused by *pushing* and decelerating by *pulling*, i.e. by hedging, cf. Figure 2.

**Figure 2: The dynamics of interactional speculations**



Our analysis is structured according to this model, and we will progress by first examining how speculations are ignited, subsequently how they are accelerated and decelerated in news interviews.

In doing so, we seek to elucidate the following research questions:

(RQ) *How do journalists and health experts construct and moderate speculations interactionally, and what are the potentials and pitfalls of such interactional speculations in journalism?*

### **The Danish case and sampled interviews**

In Denmark, the prelude to and the initial arrival of the coronavirus resembled many other countries during the first months of 2020. At first, the virus was considered “a Chinese challenge” (the Director General of the Danish Health Authority, DR, 23 January), but when the virus suddenly started spreading fast, the political reaction was equally swift. As one of the first European countries, Denmark went into lockdown on 13 March, closing most of the public sector. A month later, the infection numbers were stable, and the

Danish society started reopening in phases. Thus, the case covers different stages of events and periods of uncertainty. We have chosen to focus on the prelude to the pandemic up until and at the arrival of the virus in Denmark. By doing so we look at the media coverage at a point in time when uncertainty was at its highest and very little was known of the virus. More specifically, we have chosen to collect interviews from two key events as well as their immediate aftermaths, resulting in a combination of convenient and purposive sampling:

- 1) 22-23 January: Following an issued emergency meeting in WHO, Danish media start covering the story of the new coronavirus in depth, interviewing authorities and experts.
- 2) 27-28 February – The first diagnosed case of Covid-19 in Denmark.

Since our study concerns the conversational interaction between journalists and health experts, we have chosen television interviews and televised press meetings as the object of study. These communicative genres offer the required data for conducting a conversation analysis by including the questions posed by the journalists as well as the complete and unedited answers by the sources.

In the sampling periods, we have compiled and transcribed all televised news interviews and press meetings with health experts on the primary Danish public service news channels DR, TV 2 and TV 2 News.<sup>1</sup> During the press meetings, journalists from both the public broadcasters and private press were present and asked questions.

The corpus amounts to 41 interviews and 2 press meetings in total. The length of the press meetings averaged 38 minutes and featured the Minister for Health, the Director General of the Health Authority, the Chief Executive Officer from the Serum Institute and representatives from the Patient Safety Authority. Questions to the Minister for Health were excluded from the corpus. The televised interviews averaged 4:45

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<sup>1</sup> In Denmark, televised news is almost exclusively produced by the public service broadcasters while the newspaper press is privately owned.

minutes and featured virologists, epidemiologists, immunologists, clinical professors, doctors, as well as leading representatives from the health and patient safety authorities.

## **The analysis**

In the following sections we present the analysis. We approach it from a sociolinguistic and pragmatic perspective by investigating the verbal actions of the “interactional game” (Clayman and Heritage 2002, 16) of the news interview, as well as the contextualized meaning-making of these actions (Levinson 1983). Due to translation of the excerpted examples in the analysis, the microanalytical notation of pauses and prosodic features have been excluded.

### *Notation system and abbreviations:*

[speech]	overlapping speech
((comment))	comment from the authors
(...)	omissions
( <i>push</i> :)	pushed assertively
( <i>pull</i> :)	hedged tentatively
[[→]]	slot for incited illocutionary act
IR	interviewer (journalist)
IE	interviewee (interviewed expert)
-A	- from the Danish Health Authority (constrained by political considerations)
-SI	- from the Danish Serum Institute (partly constrained by political considerations)
-U	- from a university (constrained by the norms of the scientific community)

## **Igniting speculations**

In the interviews, the journalists try to incite and thereby ignite speculations in order to qualify, amend or solve those parts of the problem at hand that are constrained by uncertainties, mainly: Will the virus come to

Denmark, how dangerous is it, what are the risks, what might happen, and how should people (re)act accordingly? Thus, the health experts are encouraged by the journalists to assess, estimate, predict, recommend and advise by speculating. This is done by means of different question designs.

First and foremost, the speculations are ignited by the journalists in adjacency pairs, i.e. a sequenced turn taking where a question establishes a slot for a subsequent speculative answer conditioned by relevance (Schegloff 1968, 1083). In other words, the journalists incite the experts to speculate by phrasing questions in such a way that the expert is expected to respond by speculating, e.g.:

IR: More than 600 people were killed during the SARS outbreak. How many do you expect here?  
(TV 2 News, 22 January, 4:40)

[[→ estimated prediction]]

The question creates a slot for a prediction of a potential future outcome. Adjacency pairs that call for a speculative answer are the most common way the journalists try to ignite speculations in the interviews.

However, the journalists also embed speculations in question prefaces, for instance as premises, presuppositions, implicatures and speculative scenarios, e.g.:

IR: If I were, in fact, exposed to this virus from your laboratory in here – in the case you had it in possession – and I contracted the coronavirus; as far as I understand, I would get pneumonia. I have had that before, and I have, in fact, survived it. So, why is it so dangerous if you merely, in quotation marks, contract pneumonia, and there is only, in quotation marks, seventeen dead? (23 January, TV 2 News, 6:10)

[[→ explanation, conditioned by a speculative scenario and embedded speculations]]

By posing the question this way, the journalist incites the expert to give an explanation conditioned by a complex preface with embedded speculations. First, he makes use of a counterfactual speculative – and spectacular (!) – scenario in which he is infected by the virus in the expert’s laboratory, the setting for the actual interview. Thereafter, he makes the premised assumption that this would lead him to contract pneumonia and gives a personal anecdote of having survived it before. This in turn, functions as a speculative *conversational implicature* – i.e. the implying of something by saying something else (Grice 1989) – namely that the coronavirus is not that deadly. Last, he poses his question with an embedded *presupposition* – i.e. an assumption triggered by a clause, word or morpheme (Levinson 1983) – namely that the virus is, by some, considered very or “so” dangerous; conditioned – once again – by the assumption that the virus “only” leads to pneumonia and the presumed fact that “only” 17 had died from it at that time.

In this highly intricate preface, the journalist uses himself as synecdoche for people who can contract pneumonia and live to tell the tale, and – by implicature – for whom the virus is not (very) dangerous. In doing so, he *frames* – i.e. selects and emphasizes a particular aspect of perceived reality (Entman 1993, 52) – his question from the perspective of a citizen who does not feel vulnerable to the virus. Consequently, he ignores the perspective of those who are susceptible and/or feel more vulnerable to pneumonia, and in turn, the virus.

The complexity of the embedded speculations leaves the expert in a somewhat arduous situation if he wishes to contest or moderate the speculative assumptions while also responding to the actual question. As observed by Heritage (2003), embeddings in question prefaces may even force the source to avoid answering (directly) if it takes too much interactional work to counter them. This is the case in the given example, where the expert, instead of answering the question, chooses to contest parts of the embedded speculations by adopting the overlooked perspective and reversing the frame:

IE-U: Well, you can say that pneumonia for weakened individuals, elderly people with cardiac diseases, respiratory diseases and so on, is also a critical disease which we usually handle in a very serious manner. (23 January, TV 2 News, 6:10)

We will return to these types of decelerative answers. For now, we continue by looking at another example of how journalists apply speculative scenarios to ignite speculations:

IR-U: If you yourself were about to go on a trip to China, would you then take any precautions, have something in the back of your mind? (22 January, TV 2 News, 07:15)

[[→ precautionary advice, conditioned by a speculative scenario]]

In the constructed scenario, the journalist makes use of a *footing shift*, i.e. a shift in the alignment between the speaker and the hearer often used by journalists to be critical while remaining formally neutral (Clayman 1992). The journalist positions the expert in such a way that the expert sees the problem from the perspective of a citizen who is going on a journey to China and might be worried and in doubt of what to do. This narrative device is used to illustrate, clarify and present the problem – as well as the scientist – in a way that is relatable, relevant and engaging for the viewers. But it may also be used to weaken the normative scientific constraints by which the scientist is usually governed when communicating to the public. In the imagined reality and in the role as a citizen on a journey, he can more freely advise because it is conditioned by something that is not *really* real. Thus, speculative reality and shifts in footing can be used as a way for the journalist to extract answers from the health expert that would otherwise be hard to obtain. This way the journalist can encourage the expert to try – tentatively – to counter a deficit of information in the real world, by recommending precautions. However, it requires that the expert accepts the conditions of the imagined reality and does not, for instance, point out that he is, *in fact*, not going to China.



## Accelerating speculations

In the given interview, the expert accepts the idea, enters the role of a speculative expert, and gives his advice based on what he would do if he were going to China:

IE-U: Well, no, at this point in time, I wouldn't ((have any precautions)). That is, I would probably consider – how should I put it – basic hygiene when it comes to respiratory infections, that is frequent hand wash, not being too close to people who cough (...). (22 January, TV 2 News, 07:15)

This is an example of *convergent interaction* between the speculative journalist and the speculative expert in which the journalist creates a scenario that the expert accepts and departs from when answering. By accepting the speculative setup, the expert *accelerates* the speculation initiated by the journalist. The risk might be that the expert ends up implicitly recommending the public to do something potentially unwise, such as travelling to China when the virus had not yet spread to Europe.

Another way of accelerating speculations for the expert is by *pushing* them, that is by asserting them without reservations or tentativeness or by expressing confidence. If this is not contested critically by the journalist, the speculation is accelerated even further.

In these cases, there is a potential risk of misinformation, i.e. accidentally spreading wrong or misleading information. For example, in this case where the director of the Health Authorities claims that there is nothing for the Danes to worry about:

IR: Should you be worried ((of the virus))?

IE-HA: (*Push:*) You should not. (*Pull:*) Not as a Dane, (*Push:*) and definitely not about coronavirus.

There are other things to worry about. We are in the middle of the flu season (...). (23 January, TV 2, 21.30)

The director pushes forward the implicit speculation with assertiveness that the virus is not (that) dangerous, and the only tentativeness, the only *pull*, concerns the presupposition that people from other countries – China, in particular, at this point in time – might have to worry.

The director's advice might be considered appropriate considering the available knowledge at the time of the utterance and the pertinent need to avoid unnecessary panic. Nevertheless, it implies that the virus would not spread to/in Denmark and be a danger to Danes – which it ended up doing and being. Consequently, the implied speculation can be regarded as *potentially* misinformative. Moreover, the director's recommendation stands untested. The – at the time – unresolvable uncertainty of the implicit speculation, hindered fact-checking, but the journalist could have followed up by asking: "How can you know for certain that there is nothing to worry about?" The omission of a critical follow-up question works as an unspoken affirmation that helps accelerate the asserted speculation.

When the speculative journalist and the speculative expert meet in convergence and accelerate the speculation, there is a risk of going too far, too fast, resulting in unchallenged speculative assertions and risk of misinformation.

### **Decelerating speculations**

In other interviews, the factual journalist is on guard when the expert pushes a speculative assertion or does not hedge adequately:

IE-sr: There are some important issues concerning the choice of words here because (*Push:*) it is not the case that the virus is in Denmark. (...). This is a single person who has been tested positive. (*Pull:*) He might also have met with family members, who will turn out positive. (*Push:*) But this is where it stops for now. So, it is not the case that the virus is spreading in the Danish society at the moment (...)

((Other questions are asked and answered before one of the journalists addresses the expert again))

IR: (...) it almost sounded – when you explained it before – as if it is already contained, that the virus is not out there. You have it under control. At least that was the impression you gave. (...) How can you be so sure, so self-assured, that it is not already out there in society?

IE-sr: (*Pull:*) I cannot be 100 percent certain, but based on the evaluation we have here, I cannot imagine that we will see a large outbreak. But of course, there can be a spark smouldering somewhere in the Danish society. (27 February, press meeting in the Ministry of Health)

In this case, the factual journalist ensures that the speculation by the expert – that the virus is not present and spreading in Denmark – does not stand unchallenged. This results in a subsequent series of tentative pulling by the speculative expert that softens his initial pushing. After having accelerated the speculation he is challenged to pull the brakes. This is an example of divergence between the speculative expert and the factual journalist that leads to a more nuanced representation of the speculative assumption.

The reverse situation also occurs in the interviews in cases where the factual expert chooses to dispute speculations that are embedded in questions by the speculative journalists:

IR: (...) what can you tell us about (the virus). What makes it so dangerous?

IE-U: Well, in principle you cannot even say that it is so dangerous at the moment. We don't know that much about the virus (...)

IR: Why is it so difficult to find a treatment, or some kind of solution, to get rid of the disease?

IE-U: Well, let me put it this way. It is probably not that hard. The problem is that it is a recently recognized virus. (22 January, TV 2 News, 12:10)

The dialogue exchange shows how the journalist and the expert in a joined effort try to establish the needed knowledge and explanations relevant for the citizens, but from different perspectives. The journalist departs from presupposed speculations that he considers established knowledge, while the expert renders the presuppositions visible and disputes them. The journalist tries to ignite the speculation, while the expert hits the evidential brakes. This is an example of *divergent interaction* between the speculative journalist and the factual expert, which leads to a nuanced representation of the speculative assumption.

The expert can also choose to dispute a presumed speculation, yet still answer within the domains of the imagined reality:

IR: Now, if we go back and compare with the Spanish flu. Maybe 50 million deaths. How hard could such a pandemic hit today?

IE-SI: Well, if you saw something that were as serious as the Spanish flu – nothing suggests that that is the case with this virus – then you could say that we are more prepared for it today (...). (22 January, TV 2, 21:30)

The journalist's question is framed in severity by a dramatic comparison with the Spanish flu which the expert interprets as an incited speculative implicature, namely the possibility of a similar dire situation today.

Thus, the expert conditions her speculation by stressing that it is hypothetical – “if you saw something that were as serious” – the potential of which she then rebuts – “nothing suggests that is the case” – before giving her assertion. By doing so, she can more freely speculate in a becalming manner that does not incite unnecessary worries or panic.

### *Decelerating by evading speculations*

Another way of slowing down the speculative prompting by the journalist, is for the expert to evade questions by shifting perspective. As outlined by Gabrielsen et al. (2020) politicians may shift perspective in time, agent and level when trying to evade critical questions. Similar strategies are applied by the health experts, the most important of which is shifting the epistemic level from speculation to knowledge – from what is *not* known (for certain) to what *is* known (for certain):

IR: So, now the virus has arrived in Denmark. What does it entail?

IE<sub>-IS</sub>: Well, of course it entails that there is one person who has been tested positive. (27 February, TV 2, 21:00)

By asking what it entails, the journalist tries to incite a speculative answer, i.e. what are the potential consequences. However, the expert enters the factual role and answers by stating the obvious known fact and already given information, namely that one person has been tested positive.

The factual experts also make use of other shifts, for instance shifts in agent:

IR: If a person at home follows this ((the media coverage of the virus)) and starts to think, ooh, this sounds ominous – you do research in this, you also do research in vaccines against these

kinds of viruses – if we see this in a, let’s say, more historical perspective, where would you place this virus compared to others?

IE<sub>SI</sub>: [Well]

IR: [In severity].

IE<sub>SI</sub>: In severity? Well, it is true that later today WHO will try to declare whether or not this is a disaster, and they will of course assess the severity of this disease. (23 January, TV 2 News, 8:20)

The journalist begins his series of questions with a footing shift so that the problem is seen from the perspective of a worried citizen. Thereafter, he tries to incite an assessment based on speculation framed in terms of a comparison. In response, the expert seems to answer the speculative question. In reality, though, he *evades* the question by shifting the agency from himself to WHO. This way he is not liable for making an assessment that for him as a scientist is risky given the uncertainty and limited knowledge of the virus at that time. Thus, the answer is “designedly opaque [...] in an effort to avoid various consequences” (Clayman 2001, 406).

### *Decelerating by hedging speculations*

While some of the experts speculate in an assertive and confident manner in the interviews, most choose to hedge and be more cautious when speculating. This is primarily done by means of epistemic modality as well as evidentiality, e.g.:

IE-HA: *Our assessment* from the Health Authority is that there is *very limited probability* that infected individuals from Wuhan and the surrounding area *should* travel to Denmark (...) but off course, *we cannot say* that it is *completely unlikely*. (22 January, DR, 18:30 – our italics)

Another important hedging device used by the experts is deictic temporal anchoring, i.e. conditioning the utterance temporally, for example by using expressions such as *so far/until now/at the moment/right now*. By pointing out the present now, the experts invoke the unspoken premise of the assertion that the proposition is based on *current* available knowledge. It is self-evident that *right now* is *right now* in the given situation, but by saying it, the experts create the conversational implicature that things may change, and that they are therefore not necessarily liable for what is said *now*, should new events alter the conditions or new knowledge be presented *later*.

Also, the experts choose to hedge by referring epistemically and evidentially in a blurred, rather than an explicated manner, e.g.:

IE-SI: There is *something* that *indicates* that it *may* infect people who are in close contact with sick patients. (TV 2 News, 22 January, 4.40 – our italics)

This is most likely a consequence of not only evidential uncertainty, but also the genre conventions and conditions of the news interview; there is no time to account for evidence sources such as scientific reports and studies and their potential validity issues, nor would the majority of the audience assumedly be interested in, let alone fully comprehend, the implications of such aspects. Accordingly, the journalists do not question these blurred references either, unless there is a critical or confrontational aim with the interview. The fact that experts can refrain from accuracy is also, presumedly, conditioned by their professional ethos.

In some instances, though, the experts explicitly mention lack of (validated) information/knowledge on the matter or articulate the difficulty/impossibility of answering the speculative question:

IR: How bad is this virus really?

IE<sub>st</sub>: It is difficult to assess exactly because we do not know the dark figures. So, we do not know how many are actually infected in the Hubei Province, for instance. Therefore, there is still great uncertainty concerning the estimation. My gut feeling says that this cannot develop into something really bad for the Danish population. This is something we will be able to handle. (27 February, press meeting in the Ministry of Health)

In his question design, the journalist incites an assessment based on speculation. In response, the expert initially refrains from speculating by referring to lack of information/knowledge. This way, he enters the role of a factual expert to begin with. However, subsequently, he nonetheless chooses to assert a speculative assessment by shifting in footing from the domain of science to his “gut feelings”, i.e. the domain of personal beliefs and opinions. By first hedging and then shifting in footing, he releases himself from (some of) the constraints of the scientific community and makes room for conjecture grounded in ethos rather than evidence. By doing so he can enter the role of speculative expert.

### *Decelerating and accelerating*

In the compiled interviews, the health experts frequently use this kind of ‘decelerating and then accelerating’ as a hedging technique to wrap their speculative assertions in reservations. First, they enter the role of factual expert and pull the brakes by pointing out that speculating on the given matter is difficult or impossible; then they hit the accelerator anyway and go into a speculative mode:



IR: Do you have an estimate of whether there will be more cases than the unfortunate editor from TV 2 ((the first official case in Denmark)), and if so, how many?

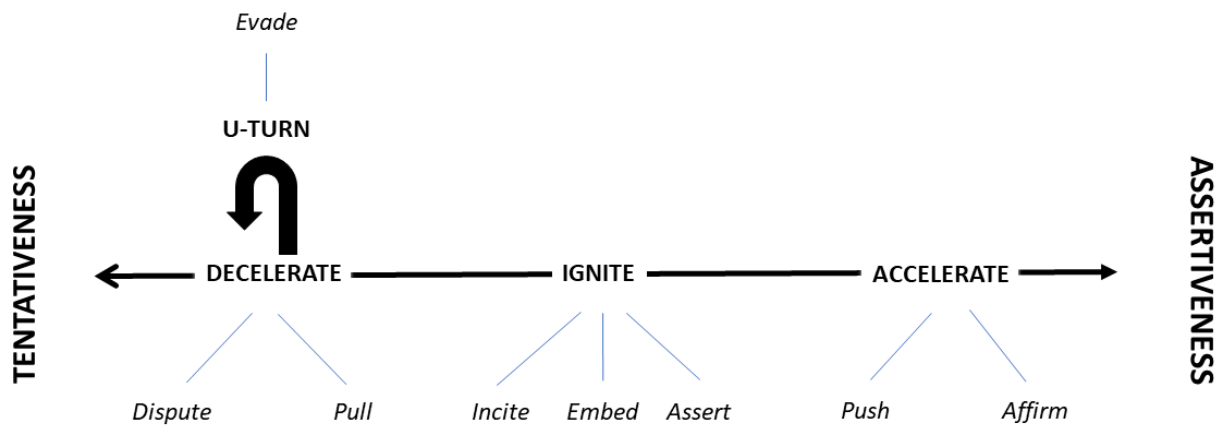
IE-ST: It is hard to predict the future, but we know that there will be more cases and that the population is not immune, and we know that it can spread easily (...). But I think that we can say that there will be more cases. (27 February, DR, 21:00)

Here, the journalist tries to ignite a prediction from the get-go. In reply, the expert pulls the brake by pointing out the obvious challenge of predicting the future. In the shadow of this hedge, he then ignites his speculation and pushes it in an assertive manner: “We know that there will be more cases,” after which he has a change of heart and moderates the speculation by combining a mental and verbal predicate as a hedge: “I think that we can say that there will be more cases”.

### **Summarized findings**

Based on our findings, we can now expand upon our theoretical model of interactional speculations in news interviews. As documented, speculations can be *ignited* by journalists inciting them or by experts asserting them. They can also be embedded as premises, presuppositions, implicatures and scenarios. When ignited, they can be *accelerated* further by (implicit) affirmation or by pushing, i.e. asserting them without reservations or by expressing confidence. However, they can also be *decelerated*, if either the journalist or the expert dispute or pull them by expressing tentativeness. The expert also has the option of making a metaphorical U-turn by evading and shifting, for instance by turning towards what is known instead of what is uncertain. This leads us to the following expanded model:

**Figure 3: The expanded model of interactional speculations**



Furthermore, we can characterize the different actions of the factual and speculative roles. The speculative journalist may incite, embed or implicitly affirm speculations, while the factual journalist may critically dispute speculations made by the expert. In comparison, the speculative expert may assert speculations in either a *confident* way by pushing, or in a *cautious* way by pulling, and (s)he may also (implicitly) affirm speculations embedded by the journalist. In contrast, the factual expert may dispute embedded speculations by the speculative journalist or evade incited speculations by shifting perspective. Depending on which roles journalists and health experts choose to take, the potentials and pitfalls of their interactional speculations may vary substantially.

## Discussion

*The first divergent encounter*, that between the speculative journalist and the factual expert, may serve to circulate tentative suggestions on how to react to matters of public uncertainty and at the same time work as a (dis)approval of presumed public speculations. By inciting or premising speculations, the journalist may give voice to citizens' concerns and doubts and, as a result, foster public engagement. Concurrently, by challenging the speculations the expert may moderate or dispute assumptions that the public may mistakenly take for granted. Thus, the expert may serve to challenge the public's adherence to *doxa*, i.e., the widespread,

albeit often tacit, social opinions and beliefs within a specific culture (Bengtson 2017, 86), and contribute to the enlightenment of citizens.

The proposed potentials of this encounter require, however, that the journalist refrains from premising speculations that resonate with personal rather than public beliefs. Also, it may prove problematic if the journalist tries to prod the expert into acknowledging unwarranted speculations for instance by embedding speculations in complex prefaces to questions that are difficult to address.

*The second divergent encounter*, that between the factual journalist and the speculative expert, may serve to circulate and critically test assertive or tentative suggestions on how to prepare for and respond to matters of public uncertainty. By asserting either bold or more cautious claims, the expert may stimulate public deliberation; at the same time, by disputing those claims the journalist may contribute to the critical assessment of the data – if any – that support the expert’s claims. The expert may in turn substantiate, clarify or retract his or her claims and, as a result, make the extent of the validity apparent to the public. In this encounter, the journalist assumes the critical function of reminding the expert – and the public – of the expert’s ideal obligations as a modern-day representative of *episteme* (Bengtson 2017, 79), i.e., as a producer and disseminator of scientific knowledge as opposed to gut-feelings and hear-say. As a result, however, the journalist may also contribute to create uncertainty about the credibility of the expert and, potentially, knowledge authorities in general.

Finally, *the convergent encounter* between the speculative journalist and the speculative expert may serve to circulate imaginative suggestions on how to respond to matters of public uncertainty. When both the journalist and the expert are willing to speculate, the result may be thought provoking and engaging.

However, the potential pitfalls of this encounter also seem obvious: When both the journalist and the expert ignite and accelerate, the result may be the uncritical dissemination of non-disputed assertive speculations. As a result, the public may be misinformed. For instance, one of the frequently cited health experts in the Danish media during the pandemic has – in retrospect – publicly expressed his regret concerning an interview in which he accepted a speculative scenario of him going on skiing holiday in Italy in February

2020 (Jensen 2020). By saying that he would have no problem going to Italy on holiday, he implicitly ended up *not* cautioning against Danes going to Italy, based on the speculative assumption that they would not contract and import the virus to Denmark. As is now known, they ended up doing exactly that. Such cases may challenge the credibility of experts, as well as the public perception of science, in general, and compromise the applied speculative strategies of journalists, potentially creating distrust between the news media and their audiences (Aharoni et al. 2020).

### **Conclusion and perspectives**

The speculative encounters we have analyzed seem to work best when there is some degree of divergence between journalists and experts. If both parties converge in speculation, they stop working as each other's checks and balances and, hence, may end up circulating speculations that are inappropriate or even misinformative. Consequently, journalists need to be aware of the intricate interplay between decelerating and accelerating speculations. In this regard, an important insight can be gained from our analysis, namely that both parties are liable for the way speculations are presented to the public. If the journalist tries to ignite an unwarranted speculation, the expert needs to pull the brakes. If the expert accelerates a speculation at full throttle, it is up to the journalist to slow the expert down. Of course, this does not entitle neither the journalists nor the experts to speculate unrestrictedly, but it accentuates the importance of regarding mediated speculations as an *interactional* and not merely an individual act.

Another practical implication for journalists is that speculations have a different set of constraints for falsifiability, and thus options for fact-checking, than factual claims. In practice, the traditional journalistic role of *fact-checker* should, ideally, be shifted to *uncertainty-checker* when experts speculate because it, by definition, concerns uncertain, undecided or undecidable matters. The critical questions are therefore not: *Is it true or will it become true?* But instead: *How certain are you and how probable is it according to what evidence?*

In this study we have focused in-depth on a particular case in a particular setting with a specific type of experts. Additional follow-up studies into interactional speculations could shed further light on other types of

mediated interactions with experts who speculate on matters of uncertainty, for instance economic experts (van Dalen et al. 2017), political experts forecasting election results (Westwood et al. 2020) and journalists themselves in the role as experts (Lundell and Ekström 2013). Such studies could further elucidate how interactional speculations, potentially, differ in different media settings, genres and situations.

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