“My f***ing personality”: swearing as slips and gaffes in live television broadcasts*

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Abstract

This paper examines instances of swearing in live television broadcasts. While some cable television shows routinely involve swearing without censorship and recorded shows may include swearing “bleeped out,” our interest is in instances of swearing in contexts where swearing is prohibited. We look at live interviews and panel debates where swearing is clearly noticed and reacted to strongly—and in all cases retracted or apologized for in some way. The examples we examine thus involve a participant visibly moving outside the normative limits of the interaction, and as such reveal the boundaries that serve as organizational structures for the interactions. Drawing on Goffman’s work on gaffes and slips and ethnomethodological conversation analysis, the paper explores how swearing is treated by the participants as a practical concern, and how swearing and its management implicates the identities and relationships of the participants and the specific context of the interaction. We discuss how swearing in live broadcasts reveals the limits of authenticity within informal, conversational interviews and debates.

Keywords: news interviews; live broadcast; expletives; ethnomethodology; conversation analysis; Goffman.

1. Introduction

Swearing is one of the strongest taboos on primetime television and is subject to strict regulations and harsh penalties (Chidester 2004). While swearing can be easily avoided or censored in pre-recorded shows, in the “anything can happen” context of live broadcasts (Marriott 2007) participants can do little more than attend to their language use and remain mindful of the context in which they speak. Profanities and obscenities that do slip out during live broadcasts
are described as *fleeting expletives* and can lead to hefty fines. In a press state-
ment following a recent Federation Communications Committee ruling, Fox News stated that “while we will continue to strive to eliminate expletives from live broadcasts, the inherent challenges broadcasters face with live television, coupled with the human element required for monitoring, must allow for the unfortunate isolated instances where inappropriate language slips through” (Wyatt 2010).

The claim, then, is that fleeting expletives are slips—accidental and isolated cases that occur through a momentary lack of self-monitoring. The notion that some words or actions “slip out” is addressed by Goffman, who looked specifically at such moments in his work on radio broadcast talk in *Forms of Talk* (1981). Within a discussion of blunders and bloopers made by DJs in live radio broadcasts, Goffman distinguished between *slips* and *gaffes*. Slips, as Goffman (1981) describes them, are “*knows better*” faults, which include

...breaches of the canons of “proper” grammar, pronunciation, and word usage that the speaker himself [sic] would ordinarily avoid automatically (. . .) slips are to be seen as a consequence of confused production, accident, carelessness, and one-time mufflings— not as ignorance of official standards or underlying incompetence. (Goffman 1981: 209)

Gaffes, on the other hand, are examples of what Goffman described as “*doesn’t know better*” faults, that is:

unintended and unknowing breaches in “manners” or some norm of “good” conduct (. . .) A very special ignorance is inadvertently displayed, namely, ignorance of what one would have to know about the rights and biography of one’s coparticipants in order to conduct oneself with moral sensibility in regard to them. (Goffman 1981: 210–211)

Goffman’s classification of these errors was thus based on what the speaker was understood to know or not know about canonical standards of conduct and/or about the co-participants—in this case, the radio listeners. However, as Goffman’s work was based on radio monologues rather than interaction, there is a degree of speculation as to what the speaker knows or intends in relation to the production of the fault. While the DJs did work to repair, or remedy, the error, in many cases such remedying was minimal and did not reveal the status of the blunder as a “*knows better*” or “*doesn’t know better*” fault.

In this paper we examine swearing in broadcast interviews which, through their dialogic nature, allow an examination of how both the speaker and/or co-present party (i.e., the host or interviewer) treat the incidence of swearing as either a “*knows better*” or “*doesn’t know better*” fault. We examine, then, how the use of swear words is *interactionally* produced as either a slip or a gaffe through the production, accounting, and repair of an expletive. From this we
demonstrate how the matter of what the speaker/interviewee “knows” in relation to the codes of conduct and their co-participants is a resource for repair that is used by members in the instance and aftermath of a swear on live television.

Goffman (1981: 212–213) proposed that speaker responses to speech faults consist of two parts: “‘reaction’ (in the form of exhibited embarrassment, chagrin, consternation, and the like, externalised as notification or flagging) and ‘remedy’ (in the form of some corrective effort, both substantive and ritualistic).” In two-party interaction, the reaction and remedy may be distributed between participants. In the collection of interviews examined in this paper, speakers and/or listeners treat expletives as problems of speaking, which Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks (1977) treat as a case for repair. The repairs treat the expletives as something that should not be said in this context and as such, the reaction (initiation of repair) and remedy (the repair and subsequent apologies) clearly invoke the relevance of the situation the speakers are in.

The relevance of a context for the production and treatment of expletives is alluded to in Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff’s (1987: 160) discussion of intimacy, where they suggest that “frankness, rudeness, crudeness, profanity, obscenity, etc., are indices of relaxed, unguarded, spontaneous; i.e. intimate interaction.” The use of such language demonstrates a speaker’s understanding or treatment of an interaction as an informal and intimate one, and can also be used to initiate a move into intimacy. From this perspective, swearing both reflects and creates the locally relevant identities and relationship of the parties to an interaction. Swearing in the institutional and public context of a broadcast interview is clearly not as easily used as resource or signifier of members’ relationships, and this is particularly the case when participants are bound by institutionalized rules against swearing. Nevertheless our data show that the local context, identities, and relationships of the members become foregrounded when an interviewee or discussant swears on live television. We suggest that this is, in part, because the live television contexts we examine are focused on the relationships between parties and rely on a sense of informality and openness on behalf of the interviewee or discussant.

Two of the main trends that have emerged in respect to broadcast interviews are both characterized through informality. Fairclough (1994) observed the increasing conversationalization of news discourse, which has evolved into a more informal studio environment and interactional style of presentation (Montgomery 2008). The celebrity chat show format also employs an informal style of interview (Tolson 2001, 2006) in which the audience experience is often set up to be like listening in on a chat between two friends as ratified overhearsers (Heritage 1985; Hutchby 2006). This informal style of interviewing is seen to provide a level of genuineness (Fairclough 1994; Tolson 2001),
where this achieved informality works to hide the institutional mediation (Grusin 2010) of the interview and promote the broadcast talk as authentic chat. However, despite the air of informality that characterizes some broadcast interactions, the interaction remains bounded as an institutional encounter that is subject to organizational rules (Clayman and Heritage 2002). Most of the time, this organizational framework runs beneath the surface of the interaction as a generative, sense-making apparatus that is only made visible when explicitly oriented to by the participants, as occurs when some breach is noted by the members. For example, interviewees can treat an interviewer’s questioning as so hostile or rude that it warrants a premature termination of the interview achieved by walking out (Llewellyn and Butler 2011). In this paper we demonstrate how instances of swearing in live broadcast interviews are treated as breaches of the organizational apparatus of the setting, and thus reveal the achieved authenticity and informality of these live broadcasts (Lundell 2009; Scannell 2001; Tolson 2006).

2. Data and analysis

Our data are drawn from live interviews and discussions where guests and interviewees utter an expletive. Data were collected from excerpts of broadcasts posted on the video-sharing website YouTube and were transcribed using Jeffersonian conventions (Jefferson 2004). Ethnomethodological conversation analytic techniques were used to examine the sequential and categorical organization of the excerpts with a focus on how expletives were treated as slips or gaffes (Goffman 1981). The analysis examines how participants orient to the institutional context in which their swearing occurs and how swearing reveals the limits of the artifice of informality of broadcast talk.

2.1. Gaffes

The first two examples involve celebrities swearing in relatively informal interview contexts in which interviewees are encouraged to be authentic in the sense of revealing their “true selves” to the viewing audience. In each case, the swearing is treated by participants as a gaffe in that there is a displayed misunderstanding about the “rights and biography of one’s co-participants in order to conduct oneself with moral sensibility in regard to them” (Goffman 1981: 211), that is, that the viewing audience are live. The matter of whether the speakers “know better” or not is an achieved status, integrally related to displayed understandings of the context.
Example (1) is from a red carpet interview with the actor Helen Mirren. Sky News UK interviewer (IR) Matt Smith introduces Mirren to the audience and then announces to Mirren, “we’re live on sky news” (lines 1 and 2).

(1) Helen Mirren, Sky News
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ULpRnDrGjQ
1   IR:   Ah: and here is Helen Mirren who plays
2   the lead role ↑we’re live on sky news↓;
3   Mirren: ↑Hi there,
4   IR:   (But also) [please don’t ] swear. But you=
5   Mirren:   [How are you.]
6   IR:   =don’t swear do [you.
7   Mirren:   [People don’t swear?
8   IR:   Fucking [never
9   IR:   [*↑No:::::* (holds paper over
10  Mirren’s mouth))
11  IR:   hih heh You onc:e you onc:e swore in one
12  of my lives you’ve done it again. [Hah hah
13  Mirren:   [↑Is it
14  IR:   live? .HH ((open mouth))
15  IR:   Yeh We were in the (camp) [(--------)
16  Mirren:   [I do apologise.
17  IR:   To the aud[jence. I w- that was a joke =
18  IR:   [(--)-
19  Mirren:   =I take it back, that was an appalling thing
20  to do. I do apologise.

An informal chatty frame for the interview is established with Mirren’s response to the introduction with a greeting “hi there”, “how are you” (lines 3 and 5). The interviewer adds a request for Mirren to not swear, followed by what we later learn is a pointed question “but you don’t swear do you?” (lines 4 and 6). Mirren displays a mishearing with her repeat, “people don’t swear?” followed by the emphatically delivered response “fucking never”. With her ironic response Mirren displays an understanding of this as an informal and jokey context.

The interviewer responds immediately with a high pitched “no:::” and moves his papers in front of Mirren’s face (Figure 1). This vocal and embodied response cry targets the swear as problematic and Mirren turns to the camera (Figure 2) with eyebrows raised and her hand over her mouth, displaying an understanding of the problem with her response being related to the viewing audience.
The interviewer continues with an account of a previous live interview in which Mirren had sworn, and a reproach (“you’ve done it again”)—which offers both Mirren and the audience some context for his initial question “but you don’t swear do you?”. With her clarification request, “is it live?” (Figure 3), Mirren attends to the context in which she has sworn—on live television. Her open mouth embodies a shocked reaction. The display of surprise and clarification request operate as accounts for swearing—Mirren did not “know” the broadcast was live. Thus it is not the swearing but the understanding of the context that reveals the cause of the problem.

In Goffman’s terms, Mirren treats her swear as a gaffe—an “unintended and unknowing breach in ‘manners’ or some norm of good conduct,” that is ex-
plained in terms of “ignorance of what one would have to know about the rights and biography of one’s coparticipants in order to conduct oneself with moral sensibility in regard to them” (1981: 210–211). Mirren displays her ignorance with respect to the liveness of the audience—a misunderstanding about who would hear her swearing (rather than a bleeped word). The implication is that Mirren would not have sworn if she had been aware that her audience were watching live. While the interviewer’s reaction involves chastising and censoring Mirren, Mirren’s reaction is an “exhibited chagrin” (Goffman 1981), with her apology serving as a ritualistic remedy.

As the interviewer begins to recount a further story about her past swearing, Mirren returns her gaze to the camera and delivers an apology explicitly addressed to the audience (lines 16 and 17; Figure 4). She accounts for her swearing as being a joke, attempts a retraction (“I take it back”), and assesses her action as “appalling”. At line 20 Mirren returns her gaze to the interviewer and apologizes directly to him.

Through her direct gaze to the camera and explicit apology “to the audience” (line 17), Mirren orients to the viewers as ratified participants (Hutchby 2006). While with his account of Mirren’s past swearing in one of “(his) lives” (lines 11 and 12) the interviewer treats Mirren’s gaffe as impacting on him personally, Mirren attends primarily to the overhearing audience as the potentially offended party and only apologizes to the interviewer after the apology to the audience. As suggested by Schegloff (2005: 452), the complainability of an action is contingent upon the “identity of the agents and the recipients of the conduct.” While the interviewer can be seen to be complaining by his response

Figure 3. “Is it live?” (lines 13 and 14)
cry and by blocking Mirren’s mouth, Mirren orients initially to the audience as the recipients and as the ones who determine the complainability of her conduct.

In sum, Mirren’s swear resulted in a marked reaction by the IR, which was treated as a repair initiator. Mirren sought for an account for the IR’s reaction, which was then incorporated in her repair (the retraction) and remedy (the apology). With her apology, Mirren “embodies a claim to have offended someone” (Robinson 2004: 305) and acknowledges personal responsibility for having done so. Through this displayed noticing and the following repair work, Mirren shows her understanding of having breached a norm—that one does not swear on live broadcasts. Mirren produces her swearing as a gaffe in that she suggests she did not “know better” (i.e., know that her audience were watching live) at the moment of the swear. Yet, the red carpet context, and indeed the announcement of the interviewer that they are live (line 2), provide conditions under which Mirren might be strongly expected to “know better” from the outset. Both swearing and liveness have been made relevant and Mirren’s swear appears to be both deliberate and knowing. However, rather than assume what Mirren actually does or does not know about the context, or what her intention was in swearing, our focus is instead on how she herself accounts for swearing. By seeking confirmation as to whether the interview was live, Mirren uses not knowing as an account and through this accomplishes a treatment of the swear as a gaffe rather than an accidental slip.

The achieved status of a swear as a gaffe is also evident in the next example in which the interviewee, Joan Rivers, swears emphatically for dramatic effect. Like the Mirren example, the use of an expletive is oriented to as a breach and accountable by virtue of the liveness of the interview.
(2) Joan Rivers, *Loose Women*

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eOpquHD4HJQ

1 Host: >↑Is that- is that so-< is that a part
2 of your life that you enjoy doing that
3 kind of meeting and greeting the
4 celebrities on the red carpet? <‘cos it’s a-
5 Rivers: [When they’re nice.
6 Host: Yeah.
7 (0.5)
8 Rivers: And we know what we’re saying.
9 Host: Yeah.
10 Rivers: .h You get someone like Russell Crowe, and
11 you wanna say to the camera .h He is a piece
12 of- get ready to bleep this .h FUCKIN’ shit.
13 .hh [↑HE IS JUST-
14 All: [↑OH::::::: ((laughter and applause))
15 Host: We must a- hih we ↑do apologise.
16 Rivers: ↑I said get ready tih
17 bleep.
18 ??: (Oh no we ‘aven’t got a bleeper)
19 Host: We ↑haven’t got a bleeper.
20 ??: (( ))
21 ??: (( ))
22 Panelist: ( )
23 Aud: [(( laughter and applause ))
24 Host: [We do apologise.
25 Rivers: ↑No wait
26 Host: We’re sorry about [that we do apologise= 
27 Rivers: Wait- hih heh hih hih hih
28 Host: =for that. Joan wasn’t aware that we were:
29 absolutely live. And we do [apologise.
30 Rivers: [And we’ve gotta
31 a:dd .h <alle:gedly>. Cos he’ll [see hih
32 Aud: [((laughter))
33 Host: ‘Cos he’s gonna see-
34 Rivers: Wouldn’t that be funny
35 Panelist: ↑Not to mention the mother that’s saying to her
36 four year old now now ↑these words [a:re
37 Host: [old [words [a:re
38 Rivers: These words, .h are words that ↑Mummy now has
39 to wear a big vest.
40 Aud/Pan: [((laughter and applause))
In answering the host, Rivers seeks out the camera to deliver the punch line, in an enactment of what she “wants to say to the camera” (line 11, i.e., the “audience”) with people like “Russell Crowe”. She is heard to be about to do a confession by revealing what she would like to say, but usually cannot because of broadcast and interpersonal constraints. After beginning her hypothetical reported speech with “you are a piece of” she cuts this off to deliver a warning, “get ready to bleep this”, (Figure 5) before she completes her imagined insult to Crowe with “fucking shit” (lines 11 and 12). There is loud laughter from the live audience, and from the panel members who have shocked expressions, with some putting their hands over their mouths (Figure 6).

Figure 5. “Get ready to bleep this” (line 12)

Figure 6. Panel members react
Rivers’s warning suggests her understanding of the context and that swearing may be potentially inappropriate, but also that the technological ability to bleep gives her some license to swear. After the strong reactions from the panel and audience Rivers looks around with an open mouth and nods. At this point, there is potentially some ambiguity as to the reason for the panel’s reaction—which may be a response to the extremity of the negative assessment of Crowe, rather than the use of the expletive.

Over the roar of the audience which displays their appreciation (Montgomery 2000), the host apologizes (line 15) with an institutional “we” (Watson 1986), positioning the broadcaster as author of the swearing and demonstrating the broadcaster’s responsibility for Rivers’s actions. The host appears to deliver the apology to camera, but as a wide shot camera angle is used, the apology is not clearly seen by the home audience. In overlap with this apology, Rivers justifies her swearing by saying that she “said get ready to bleep” (lines 16 and 17), which challenges the treatment of her swear as complainable. A number of panel members then respond in overlap to clarify they “don’t have a bleeper”, which sparks a further burst of laughter, and leads one panel member to put her hands over her face (Figure 7). There is then a tight shot on the main host (Figure 8) who looks composed and camera-ready when delivering the second, and then a third and fourth apology (line 26), followed by an account around Rivers’s lack of understanding about the fact that they are “absolutely live”, and then a fifth and final apology (line 29). This emphatic series of apologies is directed straight to the viewers at home, and as earlier, is authored by the institutional we—the broadcasters.
Rivers’s swear, like Mirren’s, is produced and treated as a gaffe. The swearing occurred because of some displayed (mis)understanding about the context of the interview and recipients of the expletive—the panel members and live audience, but not the audience at home. Rivers’s justification for swearing (in that she had flagged a “bleep-able” prior to its delivery) demonstrates her orientation to the context, with the subsequent management of the expletive displaying a misunderstanding that accounts for the breach of norms.

So, Rivers’s account for swearing suggests she “doesn’t know better” in that she was not aware that her co-participants (i.e., the home audience) were watching live-to-air and would hear her swearing rather than a bleep. Rivers’s justification denies responsibility for having caused offence. An apology is delivered to the audience by the host, on behalf of the broadcasters themselves, through which the host takes responsibility for the offensive conduct as well as minimizing Rivers’s culpability. So whereas Mirren’s swearing was dealt with through a process of other-initiated self-repair and self-remedy, Rivers’s swearing was not repaired in terms of a retraction and was remedied by the host. Through both the panel’s reactions and the host’s apology, Rivers’s conduct is treated as breaching the norms that organize the live interview and as such reveals these norms as operational. In this instance, it is the host who emphasizes Rivers as “not knowing” and produces the swearing as a gaffe that would not have happened had Rivers been aware of the liveness of the interview. Again, the specifics of why a speaker actually swore, and what they were or were not aware of are not accessible to us—but we can see how characterizing the use of an expletive as a gaffe rather than a slip is something that participants actively accomplish.
2.2. Slips

Compared to gaffes, slips are instances where the speaker displays that they do in fact “know better” and that the expletive was accidental. The potential to treat their swearing as accidental, whether or not they did actually “know better,” can be used as a resource by interviewees. The next extract exemplifies this: after swearing by the interviewee (Keaton) is made noticeable by the interviewer’s (Sawyer) physical reaction, Keaton attempts to remedy the problem quickly and carry on with the interview as normal. In doing so, she treats the swear as an accident, rather than the result of ignorance about the context.

(3) Diane Keaton, Good Morning America
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Onlu5CZNfDw&feature=PlayList&p=8166C01D843585D1&playnext=1&playnext_from=PL&index=9

1 Keaton: . . . I’d like to have lips like that.
2 Aud: (laughter)
3 Keaton: ↑Then I wouldn’t have worked on my
4 fucking personality. >Or my-< (0.3)
5 my ‘scuse me (0.8) [my personali-
6 Sawyer: [hih heh hah .hhh
7 Keaton: If I had [lips like (yours) I’d be [better off.
8 Sawyer: [Also a cri:me. [SAI↑so a
9 cri:me$. [ihh hih heh heh hah hah=
10 Keaton: [My life’d be better. I’d be married?
11 Sawyer: =.[h h h h h h h h h h h h [(I was gonna sa---
12 Keaton: [(I’ve got these thin) [little skinny lips.
13 Keaton: What am I gonna do?=
14 Sawyer: =My mother’s gonna work on your personality
15 (and) [Soap in your mouth$ is what she’s=
16 Keaton: [hih heh hah hah hah hah
17 Sawyer: =going to(H) do(HH)$
18 Keaton: ↑(soap in your mouth) >I know< excuse me
19 I °shouldn’t say anything like that°
20 (Sawyer): (In the morning).

Like Mirren and Rivers, Keaton swears for dramatic effect—at the point of a punch line or joke. Sawyer’s reaction is markedly emphatic. Her jaw drops as she pulls away from Keaton and falls onto the arm of the sofa with her hand over her mouth (Figure 9).

Upon seeing Sawyer’s reaction Keaton begins to repair her turn, demonstrating recognition of the use of “fucking” as problematic. She projects an
alternative phrasing (“or my”, line 4) but cuts this off to insert an apologetic “scuse me” (line 5), before doing a deletion repair by repeating the phrase without the swear word. Keaton then immediately continues with her turn, making further jokes about her lips while Sawyer continues to laugh. In this way, Keaton pushes on past the swearing and continues with the interview, thereby minimizing the potential disruptiveness of her language. However, Sawyer uses Keaton’s rhetorical question about her lips at line 13 (“what am I going to do?”) as an opportunity to mention Keaton’s language, by using an idiomatic reference to Sawyer’s mother “washing (her) mouth out with soap” as a reproach. Initially Keaton treats this as a joke, before acknowledging the moral impropriety of her language (“I know”), delivering a further minimal apology (“excuse me”) and then a self-reproach (“I shouldn’t say anything like that”, lines 18 and 19).

There are no direct apologies to the live or studio audience, and neither is there any accounting work done by Keaton. While Keaton’s apology, repair, and acknowledgement that she “shouldn’t say things like that” attend to the swearing as inappropriate, the context is not explicitly invoked. There are no displays of misunderstandings about the recipients of the expletive or of the institutional context of the broadcast. In this sense, Keaton’s swearing is treated as a slip rather than a gaffe—as it is a “knows better” fault (Goffman 1981) and is described as such (lines 18 and 19). It is “a consequence of accident, carelessness—not as ignorance of official standards or underlying incompetence” (Goffman 1981: 209). However, the status of the expletive as a slip is only evident in the management of the swearing by both parties. Keaton only
begins her repair after Sawyer’s pointed noticing flags the need for remedial work. Sawyer’s reaction is critical in making relevant the matter of whether or not Keaton should “know better.”

While the interactional context is not explicitly oriented in this case, both Keaton and Sawyer attribute the expletive to a personal shortcoming, suggesting carelessness. Despite no party halting the proceedings in order to directly apologize to the audience, and Keaton’s attempt to push through and continue with the story, Sawyer orients to and maintains the relevance of the swearing in a way which disrupts the progressivity of the interview. The next example also shows how a slip disrupts the progressivity of a live televised discussion.

Example (4) involves financial journalist/commentator Charlie Gasparino swearing during a discussion on CNBC Power Lunch. The use of the swear word follows a sarcastic comment from commentator Donnie Deutsch regarding giving bonuses to Wall Street executives. Whereas in the previous example Keaton appeared to only initiate repair following Sawyer’s embodied reaction, here Gasparino both initiates and carries out the repair of his turn, displaying his own noticing of having breached a norm.

(4) Charlie Gasparino, CNBC—Power Lunch
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8yzOjyeuoD0

1  CG: These guys did some’ing that was so:
2    s:toopi. [.hh
3  DD: [So let’s bo:nus ‘em.
4 (0.8)
5  CG: [Let’s n↑o:↑ bonus ‘em.=
6  Host: [hhhh
7  DD: =B↑o:nus ‘em. [They did rea:llly good-  ]
8  CG: [↑That’s not even ↑by the] way
9  DD: O:bb[iously.
10  CG:  [↑(That’s not eve) .hh [
11  Host: [He’s- (.)
12    [ he’s - he’s so that play]ing devil’s [a:dvocate
13  CG:  [↑Bo- y’know bo-] [You know ↑here’s
14    the thing. [The bo:nus:] the bo:nus: question,=
15  Host: [I gotta go  ]
16  CG: =(0.5) w-sh we shouldn’t be TA:lkin a|bout it.
17  DD: [Exactly.
18  CG:  It’s a s:too:p[idd fuck >op< (0.2) it’s a [stoopid=
19  DD:  [It- it- it’s a-    [insane.
20  CG:  = debate.
21  DD: W↑o:w, Did he-?
22 (0.5)
In lines 1–15 Gasparino responds to Deutsch’s sarcasm in a po-faced manner (Drew 1987), using it to escalate the delivery of his position. After getting agreement from Deutsch that they “shouldn’t even be talking about it” (line 16), Gasparino continues and is on his way to characterizing it as a “stupid fucking debate”. However, Gasparino’s expletive is cut off before it is fully said (dropping the projected “ing” at the end of “fuck”). He produces a compressed version of “oops” (“op”) before repeating his turn with the swear word removed—a deletion repair similar to Keaton’s in Excerpt (3). In this case, the repair is not prompted by the reaction of others, which only happens after Gasparino has produced a modified version of his turn (line 21). By cutting the
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expletive off mid-course Gasparino attempts to drive through (Goffman 1981) and minimize attention to the swear word. In doing so he treats it as a slip, as something inappropriate but accidental.

Deutsch responds with an emphatic “wow” as response cry (Goffman 1981) and turns to the other participants in the studio, asking “did he?” (line 21), without formulating the action done. Deutsch’s confirmation-seeking question orients perhaps to Gasparino’s covering up work. Gasparino then delivers an apology, which serves as an acknowledgement that he “did” (swear), recognition of this as a complainable, and remedy for his swearing. Notably, this remedy is not done until after the expletive was noticed by others.

Figure 10. “You’re agreeing we’re leaving it there” (line 24)

Figure 11. Panel members laugh
In overlap with Gasparino’s apology, the host attempts to close the discussion altogether, saying “we’re leaving it there” (Figure 10). She focuses on the apparent agreement between the correspondents, albeit with a smile and in line 32 with laughter, while offering a gentle reproach with the address term “Charlie”. The other panel members also laugh (Figure 11). Gasparino repeatedly apologizes, and offers the self-deprecation “you can’t put me on the show” (lines 33 and 34). Through this Gasparino posits the problem as a personal deficiency that is part of his own biography (cf. Goffman 1981), similar to Keaton’s self-blame in Extract (3). Gasparino displays an understanding that swearing is wrong and that it is inappropriate to swear in this public context, but that he cannot help it and therefore should not be invited to speak in such public contexts.

Gasparino’s apologies are directed to the host and other panel members rather than the audience. The host does not topicalize the use of the expletive, which contrasts with the Rivers example where the host positioned herself and the broadcasters as authors by delivering an apology to the audience. However at line 43, another panel member says “hello youtube”, in recognition of this being the sort of “blooper” that ends up on the video-sharing site. There is then an orientation to the possible future viewing audience, in contrast to the direct-to-audience apologies in Extracts (1) and (2). Here, liveness is not treated as the problem per se, but the consequence of that liveness (i.e., that Gasparino’s swear cannot be deleted) becomes relevant. The discussion is then brought to an end, but it is clear that Gasparino’s expletive disrupted the intended progression toward this closing and delayed it due to the reactions of the members and Gasparino’s multiple apologies.

Across all cases discussed so far, the identities of the participants—the audience, hosts, and/or the swearer themselves—are made relevant. In the case of gaffes, the relationship between members was highlighted (in particular that between interviewee/broadcaster and audience), whereas in slips the personal qualities (or deficiencies) of the swearer were drawn on in accounting for the instance of the swear. Although swearing is consistently treated as a breach, the notion that swearing invokes a sense of intimacy between members is also apparent across all cases. Instances of swearing were produced as part of confessional, personal, or “emotionally charged” talk. Keaton’s and Gasparino’s accounts for their slips were used to do further intimate talk in that they revealed personal flaws.

In the final example, the institutional identity of the swearer as prime minister is made relevant as part of the treatment of the swear as a breach. The disjuncture between the category membership of the speaker and the action of swearing is used as a resource for establishing a sense of intimacy. The extract is taken from an interview with the then Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on the Sunday Night show during the 2008–2009 global financial crisis. The
studio audience was largely composed of people made redundant after a large clothing manufacturer closed down and relocated abroad. The extract is taken from a response to an interviewer’s question regarding the government’s stimulus package.

(5) Kevin Rudd, *Sunday Night*
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8JPGfSNryzw

1 Rudd: . . . You either sit back as government, (0.7) and
2 do nothing; (0.3) and just wait for the
3 free market to fix it all up,hhh Or you step
4 in, (0.3) and try and fill the breach (0.3) for
5 a temporary period. And that means temporary
6 borrowings.
7 IR1: . hh Mister-
8 Rudd: . . . So I need< to say on that (0.3) people
9 have to understand ↑ that, because
10 there’s going to be the usual political
11 shitstorm . sorry s-politica(h)l
12 [.hh po(h)litica(h)]l [political storm=
13 IR1: [HHH Whoops
14 IR2: [↑Prime Mi:nister!
15 Rudd: =over that. [So: ((turn to audience, hand up))
16 (IR2): hihi hihi hihi
17 Aud: [((laughter))
18 IR1: $[hhh Um Mister Fox um while a-
19 [hihi hihi
20 IR2: [hihi heh heh
21 Audience: ((Claps and cheers)) (4.9 seconds)
22 IR1: Right just u- on the subject of that storm Mister
23 Fox [um what are the three top points
24 Rudd: [uh huh huh huh [huh huh .
25 IR2: [huh huh huh huh
26 IR1: =[ that you think we need uh to- ]to get us-
27 Rudd: [I’m in real strife Lindsay dig me out] huh huh
28 IR1: =to get us through this right now.

Rudd has hearably brought a turn to completion at the end of line 6, when interviewer 1 begins to launch a new question. However, Rudd then extends his turn and continues by describing the reactions to the stimulus package and associated borrowing as leading to a “political shitstorm” (lines 10 and 11). Immediately after “shitstorm”, Rudd apologizes with a smile (Figure 12) and eventually manages a deletion repair, with his initial attempts at repeating “political” punctuated by laughter particles, before bringing his turn to completion.
Rudd thus displays his recognition of having made some breach, and his laughter, quick noticing, and self-repair indicate a treatment of this as a slip. The swearing is managed as a “knows better” fault (Goffman 1981), caused by carelessness rather than a lack of understanding about the context and co-participants. Interviewer 1 participates in this framing of the swearing as a slip, with her response “whoops” and grimacing expression delivered to the camera (Figure 13) orienting to the swear as both accidental and inappropriate.

Interviewer 2 (line 14) then turns to the studio audience to deliver a mock re-proach with the address term “Prime Minister!” (Figure 14). In doing so, he
makes relevant the disjuncture between the categorial membership of Rudd as prime minister and the action of swearing. The audience begins to laugh, perhaps in orientation to the interviewer’s selection of them through gaze. The camera turns to the audience, and then back to Rudd who abandons his projected continuation (with “so” at line 15) and looks toward the audience with a smile and raised hand while mouthing something indiscernible to them (Figure 15).

Interviewer 1 makes moves to progress the interview by bringing another (remote) guest—Lindsay Fox—into the interview (line 18). Her voice is smiley throughout and she ends up abandoning her turn when she begins to laugh, and is joined by the other interviewer in doing so. The audience applauds, and
continues to do so for nearly five seconds before IR1 successfully brings “Mister Fox” into the interview.

Similar to earlier examples, Rudd’s swearing disrupts the progressivity of the interview. However, it is treated as a humorous incident rather than an offensive one. Whereas in previous examples the audience were ratified through apologies which treated the swearing as complainable and potentially offensive to viewers, in this case the engagement of the audience is focused around the entertainment value of the prime minister swearing. While IR2’s mock re-proach may be seen as an orientation to Rudd’s swearing as complainable, it does not do an apology and is used primarily to invite the audience to respond.

After IR1 re-initiates the entry of Mr. Fox into the interview, Rudd self-selects to address Fox, “I’m in real strife Lindsay dig me out” and in doing so, positions himself as someone in trouble, which highlights rather than minimizes the fact that he swore. Indeed, Rudd makes this appeal in competition with IR1 for the floor, thereby extending the relevance of his swearing rather than attending to the IR’s moves to progress the interview.

While Rudd’s swearing ends up disrupting the progressivity of the interview, the reactions build affiliation between Rudd and the audience. As Eriksson (2009) suggests, audience laughter in political discussion programs can be treated as a resource by which the audience is seen as giving support for a politician’s ideas or position, and can momentarily relax the formality of the event. In these moments, Eriksson (2009: 917) suggests laughter allows the personal to be glimpsed and a common ground to be created. The commonality and affiliation in this example hinges on the informal space created between the audience and the prime minister—through the use of a swear word, through the physical orientation to the live audience, and through the smiling apology. Rudd presents himself—and is treated as—an ordinary person who swears in spite of his membership as prime minister. He maintains this sense of ordinariness by using Mr. Fox’s first name and the Australian colloquialisms “strife” and “dig me out”.

3. Discussion

Drawing on Goffman (1981), we have discussed how distinctions between swearing as a case of “knowing better” slips or “not knowing better” gaffes are interactionally produced and made relevant. The incidence of swearing and subsequent response to and management of the expletive, made relevant the context of the interaction as a live media broadcast. In some cases there was an explicit orientation to the context through apologies to the audience (Extracts [1] and [2]) or talk about being on the show (Extract [3]), while in other instances these orientations were more implicit. The repairs, displays of shock,
laughter, and reproaches by self and others that followed a case of swearing demonstrated the relevance of the interactional context via an orientation to the norms that govern conduct in these environments.

The interactional management of swearing reveals the practicalities of recipient design issues—people produce their talk with an orientation to the specifics of the person that they are addressing. Expletives themselves are not problematic—it is the context in which they are used (including who the recipient and listeners are) that shapes how they are treated. In the case of media interviews, recipiency is more complicated than it is in standard multi-party talk, as talk is designed for the overhearing audience. Extracts (1) and (2) (Mirren and Rivers) demonstrate the relevance of the audience to what goes on in the interview. In Hutchby’s (2006: 14) terms, the audience are ratified as “distributed participants.” When an interviewee swears, the rights and biographies (Goffman 1981) of the live audience, which typically remain opaque in interviews, are directly invoked. In Extracts (1) and (2) the laughable aspects of the swearing demonstrate an indiscretion that lends itself to the gossipy informal status achieved in these formats. While the audience is apologized to as a possible upset recipient, there is also a sense that the audience is treated to a glimpse into the “real” backstage behavior of the celebrity.

Among these examples, the audience was explicitly oriented to in cases that were produced as gaffes rather than slips. With gaffes the interviewee is treated as not taking into account their recipients and the swearing is treated as a complainable for the viewing audience. There was little orientation to the recipients in the case of slips, whereby the speakers self-initiated repair on their expletive and attempted to drive on through the turn. In each case, the speaker of the slip performed a same-turn deletion repair, suggesting an orientation to the speaker, rather than the recipients, as problematic. Although it is the composition of the recipients (i.e., the live viewing audience) and relationship between them and the speaker that make the speaker’s slip problematic (i.e., swearing might go unnoticed and unrepaired in conversations the speaker has with intimates), this is not what is attended to in the talk subsequent to the swearing. In each case of a slip, the interviewee was reproached—Keaton was advised to wash her mouth out with soap, whereas Gasparino and Rudd were addressed in a tone that intimated misbehavior. In each case, the interviewee oriented to the slip as a personal matter. There were no externally provided accounts such as a lack of understanding about the context and instead the interviewee accounted for themselves and attended to their own responsibility for their conduct.

Across all the cases there was an orientation to swearing as offensive and complainable conduct. Whether or not an action is treated as offensive is contextually bound, and in these examples the context of the interview and identities of the participants are invoked as part of the management of the swearing. As Schegloff suggests, “the complainability of some form of conduct can be
contingent on the identity of the agents and the recipients of the conduct—identities often grounded in category memberships” (Schegloff 2005: 452; see also Stokoe 2009; Stokoe and Edwards 2007). In the case of gaffes, the contingency of the situated relevance of memberships within audience/broadcaster/interviewee categories was used in treating swearing as complainable conduct. With slips, it is by virtue of the members’ participation within the interview that the incidence of swearing is problematic, but it is more about *who the speakers are* rather than *what they are doing* that is made relevant. In the Keaton and Gasparino examples, institutional category memberships were not explicitly invoked as the basis for the complainability of the conduct, and personal rather than categorical accounts were provided. By contrast, in the Rudd example, there was interplay between the personal and categorical. The broadcast context was not explicitly invoked as an account for complainability, and there was a greater focus on the identity of the speaker rather than their relationship with the audience (at least on the surface). But, in contrast with other examples, Rudd’s membership as prime minister was highlighted as the relevant grounds on which to make sense of and assess his swearing. It is through these orientations to context and membership that accountability is managed, revealing the locally relevant and constructed interactional order.

The disruption caused by participants’ orientations to the swearing was not merely sequential in that the interview itself was put on hold to manage repair and accountability, but also disruptive in terms of the participation framework of the interview. Swearing could lead to direct addresses to the viewing audience, making the interactional context and its distributed participants salient. Media interviews and discussions typically carry on without orientations to the overhearing audience, despite these events being designed throughout for this audience (Heritage 1985). The matter of “who-we-are-and-what-we-are-doing” typically carries on as an underlying and unstated organizationally relevant categorization device. When an instance of swearing leads to an explicit invocation of the context, it brings this otherwise implicit device into sharp relief and demonstrates the omnipresence of the live media interview device. All action within this bounded encounter can be, and is, understood by reference to this device.

In these moments, the veil of informality and chattiness that characterizes the interviews is revealed as something of a facade. Swearing opens a tear in the fabric of the encounter and reveals the institutional framework that binds the interaction together and to which all conduct is accountable. Swearing is treated as back-stage conduct that inadvertently and inappropriately slips onto the front stage (Goffman 1959). The act could be seen to undermine the illusion of “back staged-ness” that the informal interview presents. While inviting and promoting an honest presentation of self, the aftermath of a brief expletive shows us that there are still boundaries around what sort of self can be pre-
presented in this unremittingly front-stage context (Goffman 1959). However, the boundary between front-stage and back-stage self is blurred and tested in these moments. These glimpses of extreme back-stage behavior in a front-stage event provide a sense of playfulness, which may account for the attraction they hold for audience members at the time, and, in the age of YouTube, for months and years to come.¹

Appendix: transcription conventions

Based on Jefferson (2004).

[ ] Square brackets show the beginning and end of overlapping speech.
= No break or gap between or within turns
: Sound before colon is stretched.
(0.2) Length of silence to nearest tenth of a second
(.) Micropause (less than 0.2 seconds)
↑↓ A shift into very high or low pitch
. Falling, final intonation
, Slightly rising, continuing intonation
? Rising or questioning intonation
. Slightly rising intonation
> < Talk between arrows is speeded up.
< > Talk between arrows is slowed down.
_ Underlining indicates stress/emphasis.
CAPS Marked increase in volume
° ° Quiet voice relative to surrounding talk
* Croaky voice
bu- A dash shows a word is cut-off.
! A very animated tone
$ “Smiley” voice
.hhh In-breath
hhh Outbreath
(h) Plosiveness within a word
heh hih Represents laughter particles
(---) Represents untranscribable words
(guess) Words in brackets show transcriber’s best guess.
(( ))) Words in double brackets are transcriber’s comments or descriptions of nonverbal action.

Notes

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1. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this point and their eloquent discussion of the ludic possibilities of swearing in interviews.

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