



## 'It's quite simple, really': Shifting forms of expertise in TV documentaries



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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, I analyse how expertise is discursively negotiated in TV documentary programmes. While previous research has explored the relationship between the 'lay' and the 'expert' dimensions in various public participation programmes, this paper focuses on a TV programme format that is based on the cooperative interaction between professionals who differ in the extent of their knowledge and experience. The paper notes that while expertise is unevenly distributed between the voiceover, the presenter and the expert, these parties complement each other in explaining complex phenomena for the benefit of the audience. Using data from the documentary series *How Britain Worked*, I argue that as long as the presenter possesses some technical expertise, he may be positioned as a semi-expert between the true expert and the lay audience, even when he simultaneously acts in other contexts as a novice acquiring the specialized expertise needed for his quest. Thus, rather than demonstrating his own knowledge and skills, the presenter mediates expertise for the benefit of the audience. The mediating role is attested by the presenter's frequent shifts of footing in and out of the conversational interaction with the true expert, who may end up assuming a background role of expert support.

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### 1. Introduction

The discursive construction and negotiation of expertise in media broadcasts has attracted considerable attention among discourse analysts. Much of this interest has been motivated by the aim to understand the performance of 'ordinary' people, particularly in the area of public participation broadcasting (Scannell, 1991; Bonner, 2003; Thornborrow, 2015). It has been shown that the concepts of 'ordinary', 'lay', and 'expert' are not static since media discourse participants may be involved in various forms of constructing and performing their identities. As Livingstone and Lunt note, "Many who are called experts resist the label and many 'ordinary' people claim specific domains of expertise" (2002: 100). The categories of 'lay' and 'expert' viewpoints are interactionally constituted (Hutchby, 2006: 52), with 'ordinary expertise' being a valuable asset that is aligned with relevant and authentic experience. The lay viewpoint allows individuals to narrativize their own experience (Livingstone and Lunt, 2002; Thornborrow, 1997) and have it accepted as a valid conversational contribution, even though the 'lay' and 'expert' perspectives give rise to quite different accounts (Hutchby, 2006; cf. Heffer, 2005). The role of the expert may then include, for instance, defining what is 'normal' for

the 'ordinary' participants (and, by extension, the audience; cf. Wood, 2007).

So far, there has been little research on the construction and discursive management of expertise in documentaries, possibly on account of the generally cooperative, non-belligerent and non-confrontational nature of such programmes. However, the transfer and mediation of knowledge and expertise have a central role in the design of these broadcast formats on account of their informational function and educational purpose. In TV documentary programmes, the negotiation of expertise has some specific characteristics arising, in general, from the unequal distribution of expertise between the main discourse participants, i.e. the presenter, the experts, the voiceover, and the audience. In documentaries, expertise is typically co-constructed jointly and is not subject to confrontational negotiation as in some kinds of belligerent broadcast programmes (cf. Higgins et al., 2011; Eriksson, 2014; Camauer, 2016) and talk shows (cf. Tolson, 2001).

This paper investigates the shifts of expertise between the presenter, the expert and the voiceover. It argues that while the performance of expertise oscillates between these three voices, the role of the presenter is central in that he is involved in diverse forms of negotiating expertise for the benefit of the audience. The analysis is based on the Channel 4 historical documentary series *How Britain Worked*, which shows how the presenter actively participates in the reconstruction of historical artefacts from the period of the Industrial Revolution. In this series, the presenter (a

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lorry mechanic by profession) has expert knowledge in his own technical field; yet, he is positioned as a lay individual with respect to the specific knowledge and skills called for in his quest, i.e. the reconstruction of historical machinery. The lack of expertise aligns the presenter with the lay audience of the programme, who may vicariously identify with him while he is being guided by skilled professionals in the acquisition of the technical expertise needed for his task. Apart from the presenter, who serves as an intermediary between the programme producers and the experts in the programme on the one hand and the public audiences on the other (Bonner, 2011), there is another important role involved in the process of knowledge mediation to the audience: the voice-over. Relying on script rather than personal expertise, the voice-over is the ultimate source of expert information and commentary that complements the acquisition of expertise by the interacting participants.

The goal of this paper is to describe the dynamics of the negotiation of expertise between these participants, with a view to how the voiceover frames the interactions of the participants, and how the show's presenter draws on the experts (in terms of their knowledge of terminology and processes) in order to mediate complex technical expertise to the audience.

## 2. Data and methodology

The data analysed in the article come from the documentary series *How Britain Worked*, a Channel 4 programme produced and broadcast in 2012. The six-part series is presented by Guy Martin, a British lorry mechanic and motorcycle racer, who gets involved in several reconstruction projects that bring back to life some major 19th century engineering achievements across the UK. In that sense, the programme is a genre hybrid, combining a historical documentary and a personal quest programme. Its educational function is thus enriched with a strong experiential component, since the presenter physically performs diverse tasks requiring historical industrial skills and expertise.

The analysis is based on a five-minute segment from the opening episode of the documentary. It involves Guy Martin participating in the reconstruction of a Victorian steam engine. The analysed data consist of a chronological sequence of several independent scenes that show Martin interacting with professional mechanics. The participants in these scenes not only need to coordinate their actions but are engaged in the mediation of expert knowledge necessary for the successful completion of the tasks. This segment is representative of the diverse ways in which expertise is mediated in the whole series. The continuous nature of this segment shows how the different strategies are condensed and how the presentation of expertise dynamically changes shot after shot.

The approach to the data is grounded in the qualitative methodological tools of linguistically-oriented discourse analysis. The analysis draws on conversation analysis (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984; Sacks, 1992; Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998) and the pragmatics of small-scale speech situations (Verschueren, 1999; Cap, 2011). These two perspectives complement each other in their aims to deal with the dialogic organization of talk produced by interlocutors, i.e. the participants in the TV documentary in this particular case. At the same time, the paper relates to the tradition of media discourse research emphasizing the double articulation characteristic of broadcast talk (Scannell, 1991; Tolson, 2006; Marriott, 2007) and telecinematic discourse (Dyner, 2011). This involves the organization of the speech event on two levels: the level of the participants within the broadcast programme and the level of the absent audience, with the latter positioned as the 'overhearing audience' (Montgomery, 2007; Bubel, 2008; O'Keefe,

2006) or 'distributed recipients' (Hutchby, 2006: 167). The discourse participants negotiate their positions between the two frames (Fetzer, 2006), adjusting their momentary interactional arrangements (Goodwin, 2007) by means of reorienting from one frame to another through shifts of 'footing' (Goffman, 1981; Clayman, 1992; Chovanec, 2016).

As I argue in the next section, this structure of the media event is crucial to the understanding of how expertise is handled in documentary broadcasts. Expertise is not only negotiated and performed in the communicative encounters between on-screen participants but also mediated to the ultimate recipients on the level of the programme's reception format. Arguably, these shifts between the different forms of expertise presentation and the corresponding changes of footing contribute towards making the documentary series appealing to the audience.

## 3. Discursive mechanisms for the mediation of expertise

In documentary programmes, 'expert' discourse is constructed in several ways. The most relevant forms include the presentation of terminology, the negotiation of the precision of terminology and the explanation of complex technical processes. Because of the 'experiential' nature of *How Britain Worked*, these forms of expertise combine with the shifting status of the main protagonist, who oscillates between various degrees of 'layness' and 'expertness'. The gradual shift between the two epistemological positions, realized through learning and the acquisition of expertise, is a key factor that contributes to the successful reception of the programme by the audience, who can vicariously identify with the main protagonist.

### 3.1. Presenting expertise

One of the areas of expert knowledge involves the mastery of the technical vocabulary of one's field. However, because of the knowledge gap existing between experts appearing in documentary programmes and the lay broadcast audiences, these programmes often have a strong metalinguistic component. This means that one of the crucial roles of the expert is to name and explain diverse phenomena. In this way, expert knowledge can be mediated to the audience in an intelligible and meaningful manner.

The presentation of technical terminology can come from three sources. The simplest form is the introduction of terms by the main protagonist, whether or not this person acts as the sole presenter. This format occurs, among other, in case of speakers who are generally acknowledged as experts in their field. A classic example of this format is found in the nature documentaries featuring the British naturalist David Attenborough.

A discursively more interesting situation occurs when a presenter draws on the expertise of some other individual, particularly where the other speaker has a better claim to expert knowledge. The structuring of the interaction as a dialogic encounter then enables expertise to be demonstrated and mediated in the form of negotiation between the presenter and the expert. The presenter may variously position himself/herself as a layperson or an expert, sometimes strategically using his/her knowledge (or the lack of it) in order to draw on the knowledge resources of some other expert (see Sections 3.2 and 3.3 below).

At the same time, however, expert knowledge – including terminology – is also mediated by means of voiceover, i.e. the monologic sound track superimposed upon the dialogic interactions within the programme at a later stage by the production crew. In this sense, the voiceover has a 'personality' in the programme (Bonner, 2011). While expertise is unevenly distributed between the presenters, the expert and the voiceover, all three

voices co-participate in the mediation of expert knowledge to the lay audience. Let us consider the joint accomplishment of expertness in the area of terminology in the following series of extracts.

The role of the voiceover in mediating expertise is illustrated in **Extract 1**. The transcript captures the interaction between Guy Martin and an unnamed technician following the cleaning of the engine with a water hose:

**Extract 1.** [GM and boy walking away from camera towards the engine; 5.46–6.09]<sup>1</sup>

|    |      |   |
|----|------|---|
| 1  | GM:  | (unintelligible) But we've got a plan what do we do now?  |
| 2  |      |   |
| 3  | Boy: | We'll see if you washed it out properly now.  |
| 4  |      |   |
| 5  | GM:  | Right. (cut)  |
| 6  | Boy: | All right.  |
| 7  | VO:  | It was the responsibility of the boiler-smith then to check inside the loco for corrosion.                          |
| 8  |      |   |
| 9  |      |   |
| 10 | Boy: | If you can (.) manipulate your mirror (.) you should be able to tell me if there's any blockages down there at all. |
| 11 |      |   |
| 12 |      |   |
| 13 | GM:  | I:::':d say yes e:hm how they were put in. (unintelligible)   |
| 14 |      |   |
| 15 | VO:  | But not everything can be observed through an inspection hole (.) with a paraffin flame.                            |
| 16 |      |   |
| 17 |      |   |

In line 1, Guy Martin reveals his apparent lack of expert knowledge about the standard procedure of railway engine maintenance. He addresses his unnamed companion with a question about the next step to be taken (*What's the plan now?*). In line 3, the boy outlines the action (*We'll see if you washed it out properly now*). He does so, however, by way of evaluating the adequacy of Martin's previous action, when he assisted in the cleaning of the engine. While the evaluation is to be carried out by both of them (cf. the inclusive pronoun *we* in *we'll see*), it will actually require the recourse to the boy's expertise in order to assess whether the presenter had cleaned the engine properly. Although the utterance could have been formulated in an impersonal way as the next step in the procedure (e.g. *\*...see if it is clean*), it is framed as a personally oriented utterance (*...if you washed it out...*). This is followed by an explicit evaluative adverb (*...properly*). In this way, Martin is positioned by the boy as a non-expert and novice – a lay person performing the action for the first time. Martin acknowledges the shared evaluation of his previous performance by means of the backchannel token *Right* in line 5. This closes the brief exchange between them.

In line 6, another scene begins. The boy's utterance (*All right*) is formally latched to Martin's acknowledgement token in line 5, though it already belongs to the new scene. The utterance introduces the demonstration of how the engine is inspected – it is accompanied by a brief shot of a burning stick. However, the expert is not given any chance to explain the technicalities at this point. Instead, the voice track switches into voiceover. In lines 7–9, the voiceover introduces the semi-technical word *boiler-smith* in reference to the role that Martin is to perform during the inspection. It also uses the colloquial word *loco*, a shortened version of the technical word 'locomotive', which substitutes for the more common word 'engine'. The crucial point is that the

voiceover substitutes for any explanation between the participants, leading to a momentary disconnection between the verbal and the visual tracks.

In lines 10–13, the mechanic instructs Martin on how to perform the check, thus conveying expert information to him (*If you can manipulate the mirror, you should be able to tell me...*). While the utterance serves to coordinate Martin's activities so that the two men can jointly perform the check of the engine, thereby assessing how efficient Martin had been in cleaning it, it also provides information to the audience. The switch from the voiceover in lines 7–9 to the mechanic's explanation in lines 10–12 is accompanied by a shift of footing: the adjustment of the participation role of the audience from that of the addressee to the overhearer.

Acting according to the expert's instructions, Martin reports his findings in line 13. The prolongation of the vowel sound in the personal pronoun 'I' at the beginning of his utterance (I:::':d say) indicates his hesitance about the outcome. These words actually function as a hedge prefacing the post-positioned affirmative answer 'yes'. The hedge serves as a modality marker, revealing Martin's uncertainty about (a) whether the engine had been cleaned properly and (b) whether he is able to adequately assess its state. The inability to give a definite, modally unhedged answer stands as a clear indication of his non-expert status. It is at this point that the voiceover interferes again, as if supporting Martin's indecision. Passing an external comment on the scene, the voiceover makes a generalized statement that can, once again, be read as the voice of the ultimate expert (*But not everything can be observed through an inspection hole with a paraffin flame*).

Two conclusions about the role of the voiceover can be drawn from the extract. First, the voiceover acts as a kind of 'omniscient narrator': it can provide the authoritative account of the phenomena covered in the programme. The supreme expertise associated with the externally added voiceover can substitute, complement or even contradict any of the claims made by the individuals featured in the documentary. The second role of the voiceover concerns its function to mediate terminology to the audience. Speaking from the superordinate position within the structure of the programme's format, the voiceover can provide technical terms for objects and processes that the participants in the programme are involved with. Thus, it adds a metalinguistic level by explicitly naming phenomena that are handled matter-of-factly by the participants (cf. the terms *inspection hole* and *paraffin flame* in line 16 above). In this sense, the voiceover can overlay the expert talk within the programme with another level of expertise, explicating and naming objects and processes for the benefit of the 'overhearing' audience.

### 3.2. Negotiating expertise

Expertise has an important discursive dimension. As mentioned above, a clear sign of expertise consists in the knowledge of the terminology of a particular domain and the ability to use the terms correctly. **Extract 2** illustrates how terminology issues are negotiated between the presenter and the expert. This process has two dimensions. On the one hand, terminology negotiation reveals the presenter's non-expert status. On the other, it can be seen as being performed for the audience since it is frequently accompanied by shifts of footing, as is the case in the extract.

**Extract 2.** [Martin talking to camera, boy located down inside the engine hatch; 6.10–6.35]

|   |      |   |
|---|------|---|
| 1 | GM:  | I have been there. I have been in the fire- |
| 2 |      | box. Oh we call it the firebox, monkey?     |
| 3 | Boy: | It is the firebox, yes.                     |

<sup>1</sup> GM=Guy Martin; VO=voiceover; Boy=mechanic, i.e. the professional with the status of the expert.

- 4 GM: That's my man, Monkey. He knows the score.  
 5 Boy: He he he  
 6 GM: And I'm gonna go in there and we... what do we  
 7 call it, it's not an inspection hammer,  
 8 what do we call it  
 9 Boy: It's a stay testing hammer.  
 10 GM: A stay testing hammer. (1.0) (Boy nodding)  
 11 So I'm gonna go in in a firebox and let me  
 12 take the stay testing hammer and then what  
 13 Boy: (unintelligible)  
 14 GM: I'm gonna do WHAT?  
 15 Boy: Bash'er on the stays.  
 16 GM: Bash'er on the stays he he he it's quite  
 17 simple really he he he  
 18 Boy: (unintelligible)  
 19 GM: [...Monkey will show me the way she's gonna  
 20 be a bit cozy in there!]

The central issue in the extract concerns terminology negotiation and the corresponding shifts of footing between the participants and the audience. In line 1, Guy Martin talks to a non-present participant, facing sideways away from the camera. His talk is evidently addressed to a production crew member who has neither voice nor face in the documentary. In his utterance, Martin claims first-hand experience (*I have been there.*). Pronounced in a very agitated manner, the utterance is somewhat indeterminate as far as its illocutionary force: it could be read as an act of either informing the non-present participant or expressing pride (possibly even bragging) about one's experience. The utterance is repeated for special emphasis, with the repetition specifying the location, since the vague deictic adverb *there* becomes replaced with the expression *firebox* (*I have been in the firebox.*).

At this point, however, there is a shift of footing. Martin glances downwards, addressing the boy who is peeking out of the firebox hatch. Martin's utterance checks whether the technical expression used by him previously is correct (*Oh, we call it the firebox...?*).<sup>2</sup> While the question is added almost as an afterthought, it appears to have two functions. First, it could be used as a ploy merely to reframe the situation strategically in order to get some verbal involvement from Martin's expert companion. On its face, however, the utterance also confirms the presenter's non-expert status because he seeks confirmation from the other – presumably more experienced – interlocutor. While the utterance adjusts the participation framework, positioning the audience in the overhearer role, it helps the presenter convey a piece of technical knowledge that he has acquired shortly before and may not be quite certain about yet. By confirming that the term is really the correct one (*It is the firebox, yes*), the boy articulates his position of an expert able to provide guidance on the proper technical procedure as well as terminology (as is attested further in the programme).

The short verbal interaction between Martin and the boy includes two other cases of terminology negotiation. The first one occurs in lines 6–8, where the presenter starts to describe the procedure to be followed next. However, he is unable to finish the explanation due to lack of proper words (*And I'm gonna go in there and we...*). At this point, Martin performs yet another shift of footing, reorienting from the audience to the boy and asking him to specify the exact missing term (*...what do we call it...*).

Evidently, the expert's metalinguistic knowledge is needed once again, though Martin relies on it differently than in the immediately preceding exchange. In this case, he offers a name for the tool he is shown holding in his hand. He does that by making a negative statement (*...it's not an inspection hammer...*). The negative polarity and the falling intonation of the utterance indicate that Martin is quite aware that he is not even attempting a guess – he is merely approximating the name of the instrument. The illocutionary force of the utterance is one of a request for information rather than confirmation, as in the previous example. Adding urgency to his request, Martin goes on to repeat it once again, making the request explicit (*...what do we call it?*).

The whole utterance found in lines 6–8 can be interpreted in several ways. Arguably, Martin openly acknowledges that he either: (a) genuinely does not know or (b) does not remember. After all, he is most likely following a script and repeating information he had heard only shortly before (cf. the tool he is wielding in his hand at the moment). However, he could also (c) be staging or performing his ignorance (i.e. 'doing being ordinary') in order to tease out an aspect of expertise from the expert and get him involved in a dialogic interaction performed for the benefit of the audience.

Responding to Martin's request, the boy provides the expected answer in line 9 (*It's a stay testing hammer.*). Martin then repeats the utterance word-by-word (*A stay testing hammer.*) in what is a form of echoic repetition commonly found in learning situations, particularly those with a metalinguistic focus. In this example, the only alteration is a marked change in pronunciation: Martin shifts the boy's non-standard pronunciation of *stay* ([staiə]) into a more standard form ([stiə]), almost as if he was mediating it for his own understanding. While doing this, he not only puts a stress on the adjective, thereby contrasting the non-standard and the standard vowel sounds, but he also pronounces the rest of the phrase in a very clear manner, carefully articulating the words *testing* and *hammer*. This attention to pronunciation is most likely motivated by his role of a presenter who feels responsible for mediating the expertise from the expert to the audience. The repetition of the word with its modified pronunciation is particularly interesting in light of Martin's own heavy use of strong regional accent throughout the programme, owing to which his speech is sometimes almost unintelligible. The regional and social connotations of Martin's accent make him an 'ordinary' individual, aligning him with the blue-collar workers featured in the programme rather than with the voiceover that speaks in standard English.

The third instance of terminology negotiation that reveals Martin's non-expert status appears in lines 12–17. At this point, Martin pauses for a while to gather his thoughts and then resumes with the description of the technical procedure. However, his utterance consists of little more than a mere repetition of the two technical expressions *firebox* and *stay testing hammer* that Martin has just verified and learned from the expert in the immediately preceding turns. Almost instantly, he yields the floor to the expert again, prompting him to describe the next step of the procedure with the blunt phrase *and then what* (*So I'm gonna go in the firebox and let me take the stay testing hammer and then what*). Since the boy blurts out the answer in an unintelligible way, Martin repeats the request (*I'm gonna do WHAT?*). The very emphatic intonation, bordering on the expression of disbelief, may be read as either Martin's failure to understand or an attempt to add liveliness to the interaction and, thus, focus the audience's attention on what is to follow.

Once again, Martin echoes the expert's utterance through exact repetition (*Bash'er on the stays*), at which point he performs another change of footing. He raises his head from the boy towards the camera and glances at members of the production crew who are present in the scene but not shown on the camera. By

<sup>2</sup> The expert remains unnamed throughout the extract, being referred to as 'Monkey'. While this label may be Martin's attempt to claim common ground with a fellow mechanic, the denial of any name or credentials also defocuses from the boy's role of the expert in this situation. After all, the specification of rank, name and status in broadcast programmes typically legitimize an expert's standing (cf. Thornborrow, 2001).

addressing them with his evaluative rejoinder (...it's quite simple, really), Martin creates a momentary role for them within the participation framework. While the phrase is uttered with mild amusement and followed with a chuckle, it is also complemented with a short utterance that refers to the boy in the third person (*monkey will show me the way*). This is clear evidence of the reorientation of Martin's talk away from the expert since he is momentarily talking 'about' him rather than 'with' him.

This realignment is significant with respect to how expertise is handled in the programme. While Martin obtains new information from the expert in their mutual dialogic interaction, he uses this freshly acquired expertise to mediate it to other recipients. This involves the production crew as well as the audience, whose expert status differs from Martin's – he is, after all, an experienced mechanic. It is from this perspective that he evaluates the procedure as 'simple' for the other participants (cf. *it's quite simple, really*). However, the reorientation of the talk away from the expert is only very brief since both the presenter and the boy start laughing at the same time, affirming their joint understanding of the step to be taken as a potential source of amusement.

Throughout this extract, Martin is not only being very spontaneous but he is also performing his patent lack of expertise. At the same time, his reference to the expert with the somewhat patronizing and derogatory label 'monkey' affirms the hierarchy of roles within the programme: Martin shows himself to be the main protagonist who is, in fact, in charge of how the entire situation is discursively managed. Though lacking in expertise, he is not lacking in leadership: he is in control of the extraction of expertise from the expert and its conscious mediation to the audience, as attested by his shifts of footing that explicitly take the audience into account as the ultimate recipients of Martin's performance.

### 3.3. Shifting expertise

As shown above, the presenter in *How Britain Worked* is in an ambivalent position in terms of the 'lay' v. 'expert' dimension. His lack of familiarity with the historical procedures and the proper technical terminology define his role of a lay individual who needs to rely on the expertise of others. However, the presenter's position is not fixed. It shifts from that of a layman relying on the guidance of an expert to that of an individual acquiring and eventually imparting expert knowledge himself. Within this process, the role of the expert becomes limited to that of a mere bystander who is monitoring and only occasionally confirming the presenter's account.

As the previous two extracts have illustrated, Guy Martin is a novice who is guided by the true experts. [Extract 3](#) is a further illustration of this status, showing how Martin's physical movement needs to be coordinated by the expert in order to enable the two of them to perform an inspection of the firebox:

#### **Extract 3.** [Martin climbing into the firebox hatch; 6.36–6.55]

|   |      |   |
|---|------|---|
| 1 | GM:  | Feet first (.)                              |
| 2 | Boy: | Feet first (.) it's not too much of a drop. |
| 3 |      | (1.0)                                       |
| 4 | GM:  | Yeah?                                       |
| 5 | Boy: | That's it (.) Keep going and you should be  |
| 6 |      | able to slide yourself in.                  |
| 7 |      | Keep to it.                                 |
| 8 | GM:  | All right, god, I: (1.0) There's room in    |
| 9 |      | there, man (2.0)                            |

The extract opens with Guy Martin making a brief descriptive comment on how to climb through the narrow hatch into the firebox (*Feet first*), probably on the basis of having observed the boy climb inside shortly before or being told to do so (not shown

on the camera). Martin's initial utterance is ambiguous with respect to its precise footing: it may be intended both for the audience as a form of 'running commentary' that describes what Martin is currently doing, as well as oriented to the boy (who is already inside the firebox) as a way of checking the right procedure. In either case, the presenter demonstrates that his momentary expertise has an ambivalent status: he knows the basic procedure, yet needs the expert to guide him.

The boy simply echoes Martin's initial utterance: his repetition of the phrase confirms the correctness of the procedure and marks the beginning of a brief sequence in which he gives instructions to Martin. Within the same turn, the boy provides some additional information about the depth of space beyond the hatch (*it's not too much of a drop*). This piece of knowledge reflects the imbalance of expertise between the two participants at this point: the boy supplies information that he believes is relevant for Martin to successfully climb inside. Martin's brief comment in the opening line, then, serves as an implicit prompt through which the expert – acting cooperatively – is subtly invited to share a piece of his expertise. In this way, the presenter's status gradually changes through the process of acquiring experience from the expert (see also [Section 3.5](#)).

In line 4, Martin checks with the boy to make sure that he is following the procedure correctly (*Yeah?*), which receives a positive confirmation from the boy (*That's it*) as well as elicits further instructions about climbing inside (*You should be able to slide yourself in*). Martin's physical movement is thus fully coordinated by the expert, who monitors and offers encouragement to the novice throughout the procedure (*Keep to it*). Martin's emotional reaction after the completion of the task, which is devoid of any propositional content (*All right, god, I:*), indicates that this is a new experience to him, though he might be well performing his evaluation (and thus staging his novice status) for the benefit of the TV audience. The positive evaluation is continued in Martin's final informative statement (*There's room in there, man*). Significantly, the utterance already introduces an external perspective to the location (cf. the choice of the adverb 'there' rather than 'here'). In this way, Martin realigns himself with the point of view of the production crew behind the camera and, ultimately, the audience.

All in all, Martin's talk in this extract epitomizes the subjective, experience-based reactions of a layman who is finding out how things work for the first time (cf. [Hutchby 2006: 52](#); [Heffer 2005](#)). Though the presenter's reactions may, at least partly, be staged for the camera, they allow the audience to identify with the presenter and, thus, vicariously experience how expertise is gradually transferred from the expert.

### 3.4. Mediating expertise

With the next cut, however, the entire situation changes dramatically. The next scene shows Martin in the darkness of the firebox, holding a lamp. He launches into a long monologue, giving a fairly large amount of technical information and, essentially, taking over the role of the expert from his companion. The expert's involvement in this segment is very minimal, being limited to several brief tokens of little more than merely confirming the description provided by Martin, cf. [Extract 4](#):

#### **Extract 4.** [Martin inside the dark firebox; 6.56–8.30]

|   |     |   |
|---|-----|---|
| 1 | GM: | I don't know if many are thinking 'ow (1.5) |
| 2 |     | you know 'ow a steam locomotive works. And  |
| 3 |     | I suppose there is (.) no better way to     |
| 4 |     | explain it than them ehm being (.) in a     |
| 5 |     | steam locomotive firebox. It's not the      |
| 6 |     | biggest o' places he he he is it, Monkey?   |

- 7 Boy: No but= (laughter)  
 8 GM: =(laughter) but there is no better place  
 9 to explain it. So, yeah, it's eas, fai::  
 10 rly, e:hm e:hm I don't know if it's simple.  
 11 It's it's e:hm, it's what it is. Look.  
 12 There you see the floor, ehm, that's for the  
 13 coal (.) with the blazing fire on it, crea-  
 14 tin' loads and loads and loads o' heat. All  
 15 right, a massive fire but it (.) it's a  
 16 massive fire, I'll tell you what, takes  
 17 three four hours to get going...  
 18 Boy: Yeah...  
 19 GM: ... that's how much 'eat we need we won't (GM  
 20 shaking head) do it in tea break, we do  
 21 wan' a massive amounts of heat. And ehm,  
 22 this creates a lot of heat, the heat  
 23 deflects off here, off this brick wall  
 24 'ere, you see. Firebricks are those, Mon-  
 25 key. What do you call it, Monkey?  
 26 Boy: Eeehm, it's brick arch.  
 27 GM: Brick a::rch. So the heat then is deflec-  
 28 ted back into these tubes (.) you see these  
 29 tubes here? So what's happening here. On  
 30 the other side of the tubes we've got  
 31 water. Right? The heat from the fire is  
 32 going down the centre of these tubes it's  
 33 getting drawn down there from the chimney.  
 34 Heat into water. Water turns into steam  
 35 goes to the pistons, powers the train. You  
 36 see, quite (.) sort of simple. Sort of  
 37 simple. The first lot of steam trains only  
 38 'ad but the one tube but then they learned  
 39 to get a more efficient steam train we wan-  
 40 ted more tubes. And that's what you got  
 41 'ere, look. You can see that, mostly, I  
 42 'aven't counted them, Monkey, there must  
 43 be a hundred tubes in, Monkey.  
 44 Boy: They're a couple of 'undred...  
 45 GM: [Yeah...  
 46 Boy: [Yeah...  
 47 GM: Yeah, a couple of 'undred tubes maybe.  
 48 More heater tubes is obviously more sur-  
 49 face area to pass the heat from the fire to  
 50 the water. As simple as that.

The construction of expertise in this extract is related to a noticeable change of footing. The previous dialogic interaction between Martin and the boy is replaced with Martin talking directly to the camera. Within this participation arrangement, he assumes the role of a knowledgeable presenter – an expert imparting technical information directly to the audience.

The new role distribution, with Martin acting in the role of the expert and the true expert being backgrounded, is not immediately obvious from the start of the scene. In the first turn, Martin defines the occasion as one in which some technical expertise will be conveyed to the audience (... *no better way to explain it...*). At this point, it is not clear who will be giving the explanation. However, the set-up of the scene is such that we can only see Martin, with the boy remaining hidden in the darkness. While Martin addresses the boy at the end of his turn, adjusting the footing momentarily, he does not actually yield the floor to him. Instead, Martin merely asks for a confirmation of his own personal observation that is based on his immediate experience of the physical space (*It's not the biggest o' places he he is it, Monkey?*). This utterance appears to have two functions. First, it

acknowledges the continued physical co-presence of the boy – he is shown to have some participation status within the communicative frame and, thus, his expertise can be drawn on in case of need. Second, the utterance also serves to indicate the modified status of the two participants: Martin has the expert confirming quite a banal observation rather than asking him to provide any sophisticated technical explanation.

However, the boy's reaction in line 7 (*No, but...*) indicates that while he concurs with Martin's opinion, he is ready to elaborate by providing some counter argument or further explanation. This is implied by the adversative conjunction 'but'. While the boy evidently tries to claim the next turn, Martin does not give him the opportunity to take the floor. Instead, he effectively silences the boy with his laughter, taking up the conjunction 'but' from the boy's confirmation and instantly following it with a repetition of what Martin had said shortly before (*but there is no better place to explain it*). Since the boy is denied the chance to give his opinion, Martin's utterance in line 8 essentially functions as a put-down of his conversational partner, though presented in a convivial mood of jocularity and friendship. The boy does not contest the loss of the floor and remains silent, as well as invisible to the camera.

Martin continues with the discourse marker *so* (line 9), indicating that the floor belongs to him and that he is about to start the explanation. However, what follows is a rather extensive stretch of hesitation, indicating that he is searching for the best way of mediating the technical expertise about the firebox (*So, yeah, it's eas, fai::rly, e:hm e:hm I don't know if it's simple. It's it's e:hm, it's what it is*). The utterance contains multiple hesitation markers and false starts, as well as a self-correction. This piece of apparently very spontaneous talk is significant in that it reveals how Martin himself is coming to terms with the complexity of the technical process and its mediation to the audience. This is attested by his initial formulation of the simplicity of the process (*it's eas, fai::rly*) that he quickly abandons in favour of conceding its complexity (*I don't know if it's simple*). While Martin's expertise is most likely locally obtained, with him repeating – for the audience – the process that he has learned shortly before from the expert, the extract shows him momentarily disconcerted about how to best mediate the expertise for the lay audience. The spontaneity present in Martin's speech at this point makes him more authentic (cf. Tolson, 2010), helping him to overcome the likely scripted nature of this scene.

Martin starts the explanation, i.e. the transfer of expertise from him to the audience, by using the imperative of the verb 'look' and continues by appealing to the visual perception of the camera crew and the recipients (*Look. There you see the floor, ehm*). In this way, he explicitly aligns himself to the audience, positioning the boy in the role of a bystander.

In the rest of the scene, Martin provides the explanation of how the firebox works. The expert gets involved three times, once of his own accord and twice as a result of being asked by the presenter to supply precise information. While all three interventions affirm the status of the expert as someone who possesses (or is supposed to possess) full technical expertise, they also indicate that Martin's status relates to the mediation rather than the possession of expert knowledge.

The first intervention in the presenter's monologue comes at a point when Martin specifies the length of time it takes for the engine to heat up. He does so in an approximate manner (cf. lines 16–17: *I'll tell you what, it takes three or four hours to get going...*). The boy acknowledges the correctness of this information with the brief affirmative response token *Yeah* in line 18. However this is little more than a backchannel response coming at a moment when Martin momentarily slows down his speech a little, pondering the information. While the change in Martin's tempo does not constitute a transition-relevant point, it at least

provides the space for the other interlocutor's backchannel acknowledgement.

The second intervention is related to the proper use of terminology. When describing the operation of the brick wall, Martin does not recall the precise technical term for one of the crucial parts of the firebox. He thus momentarily interrupts his explanation and addresses the mechanic with a simple metalinguistic question in line 25 (*What do you call it, Monkey?*). Without expecting this question, the expert is somewhat put on the spot, as indicated by his brief hesitation before supplying the missing term (*Eeehm, brick arch*). The answer is echoed by the presenter, who repeats the term in line 27 without including it in his subsequent explanation. (This situation is analogous to that with the 'stay testing hammer' in [Extract 2](#) above.) While it is possible that Martin's question in line 25 is meant either to reactivate the active participant status or even humorously test the knowledge of this silent participant, it is more plausible to assume that the real expert is used here by the presenter as a point of recourse, i.e. to help with some technical aspects should the presenter have any problems mediating the expertise to the audience.

The boy's third, and final, intervention into Martin's monologic description comes when the presenter makes another approximation, guessing the number of tubes used for heating the water. In his utterance in lines 41–43, Martin changes the footing again, reorienting his talk from the audience to the mechanic in order to draw on his expertise and obtain either a confirmation or a specification from him (*You can see that, mostly, I 'aven't counted them, Monkey, there must be a hundred tubes in, Monkey*). The expert takes up the prompt and concurs by giving an approximate number, using the phrase 'a couple of' (*They're a couple of 'undred...*). Martin instantly acknowledges the response (*Yeah*), which overlaps with the boy's response token. Similar to other instances of terminology negotiation identified above, Martin uses echoing to repeat the phrase, though this time he adds yet another approximator in the form of the modal adverb 'maybe' (*Yeah, a couple of hundred tubes maybe*, line 47). After providing the final piece of technical information, Martin wraps up the whole scene in an utterance that retrospectively evaluates the whole process (*As simple as that*).

The personal evaluation of the process in terms of its simplicity/complexity reflects Martin's orientation to the demands of the mediation of expertise for the benefit of the audience. This is attested by the initial assessment of the complexity of the description to follow (cf. lines 9–10: *it's eas, fai::rly, e:hm e:hm I don't know if it's simple*), the middle sequence in which Martin reflects on his success to verbalize the process (cf. lines 35–37: *You see, quite (.) sort of simple. Sort of simple.*), and finally the closing utterance that evaluates the successful mediation of expertise and terminates the entire explanation sequence (cf. line 50: *As simple as that*).

### 3.5. Acquiring expertise

The last issue to be discussed concerns the presentation of expertise in learning contexts. This involves situations where the expert teaches the main protagonist to perform specific physical tasks that require certain professional skills and expertise. While the focus of the interaction is on the apprenticeship experience of a novice learning a trade, this transfer of knowledge and skills is performed for the benefit of the audience. Rather than being told and tutored, the audience observes how the knowledge status of the novice gradually changes under the guidance of an experienced expert. This process, however, is complemented with the narrative function of the voiceover that contextualizes the learning environment by providing the audience with an additional textual level of expertise. This phenomenon is illustrated in [Extract 5](#).

**Extract 5.** [Martin and boy inspecting rivets in the firebox; 8.30–9.14]

- 
- |    |      |  |
|----|------|--|
| 1  | VO:  | 5164's inspection continues with an        |
| 2  |      | important check for broken rivets (sound   |
| 3  |      | and image of hammering appears) steam      |
| 4  |      | pressure of two hundred pounds per square  |
| 5  |      | inch turns any weak spot into a potential  |
| 6  |      | explosion.                                 |
| 7  | Boy: | All right. You hear the difference?        |
| 8  |      | (hammering on the rivet)                   |
| 9  | GM:  | Yeah. (2.0)                                |
| 10 | Boy: | That's the broken one. (hammering on the   |
| 11 |      | rivet) (1.5)                               |
| 12 | GM:  | The last one.                              |
| 13 | Boy: | [Yeah]                                     |
| 14 | GM:  | [Yeah]                                     |
| 15 | Boy: | It's got a more [dull tone [to it.         |
| 16 | GM:  | [Yeah [yeah so that's broken.              |
| 17 | Boy: | Yeah. You're allowed two broken stays in a |
| 18 |      | box.                                       |
| 19 | GM:  | All right, all right.                      |
| 20 | Boy: | So if you've got any more than two(.) dead |
| 21 |      | engine(.) you fail it and replace the      |
| 22 |      | stays. (GM hammering on rivets)            |
| 23 | VO:  | Five problem rivets were found. (.) They   |
| 24 |      | may be small (.) but if they're not        |
| 25 |      | replaced, 5164 will never be allowed (.)   |
| 26 |      | to move again.                             |
- 

Structurally, the entire learning experience (lines 7–22) is enclosed within voiceover that frames the interaction, providing additional background information and explanation of the importance of the procedure. In the opening section of the extract, the voiceover identifies the scene as a search for 'broken rivets' and explains the reason for the inspection. However, the voiceover plays a metalingual role as well, helping the audience to understand the content of the interaction. This is because the voiceover uses semi-technical vocabulary (*rivets*; lines 2 and 23). The expert, by contrast, prefers the technically more correct expression *stays* (line 17), which refers to the structural elements inside boilers and other pressure vessels used in order to contain internal pressure. The role of the voiceover in the segment is thus to mediate the technical terminology to the audience, who may be expected to be familiar with the semi-technical concept of 'rivets' rather than the much more specific '(boiler) stays'. The meaning of the technical term, once it is used by the expert in line 17, becomes clear thanks to the situational context (the physical inspection shown on the screen) as well as the preceding verbal context (with the hyperonym 'rivet' being used by the voiceover a few lines before).

The actual teaching and learning experience in the extract starts with the expert physically demonstrating his expertise. He is shown hammering on the rivets (lines 8–11), guiding the novice to use his perceptual skills to identify the problematic parts by sound (*'You hear the difference?'*). Martin acknowledges his status of a recipient of this form of mediated expertise by providing repeated backchannel noises and confirmations (*'Yeah'* in 9, 14 and 16). The latching of these reactions with the boy's explanations indicates Martin's cooperativeness (cf. lines 15–16).

Throughout this scene, Martin's communication consists only of brief response tokens and confirmations; the only time he takes over the floor to produce a more complete utterance is to indicate his understanding (*All right, all right'* in line 19). He pronounces the two phrases with a very prominent rise-fall intonation contour,

which underlines his enthusiasm to learn from the expertise and experience of the other interlocutor.

The entire scene ends with the image of Martin hammering on rivets himself, while the voiceover provides a summarizing commentary (*Five problem rivets were found*). The final image of Martin performing the inspection is almost symbolic: it marks his transition from an ordinary lay person, who starts off as a passive recipient of expert knowledge provided by someone else, to an individual who not only learns the specialist knowledge but is also able to re-apply it actively and successfully. This is a motif that recurs throughout the documentary series.

Finally, with a change of scene and a readjustment of the interactional footing, Martin is shown talking to the camera and reflecting on his learning experience (Extract 6).

**Extract 6.** [Martin talking to the camera in front of the steam engine; 9.15–9.37]

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1 GM: Lots o' learning. (0.5) That's all that's  
 2 in it, really. I think the old aside about  
 3 dogs is right, innit. You cannot teach an  
 4 old (.) I'm not even that old, am I? I'm not  
 5 thirty yet, but I'm struggling to take all  
 6 this information on so we'll give it we'll  
 7 give it maybe a pint or two tonight, I don't  
 8 know, we'll just give it a bit more oppor-  
 9 tunity to sink in. We 'ave 'ad a lot of  
 10 learning today, but we're all right we're  
 11 not here for a day, you know, but we're all  
 12 right.

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In this frank testimonial, Martin expresses an indirect appreciation for the high level of expertise involved in the design of steam engines. Though a skilled mechanic by profession, he airs some doubt about the manageability of the amount of expert knowledge and skills that he has encountered. He moves from an unfinished general statement (*'You cannot teach an old'* in line 3) to a personal reflection (*'I'm not thirty yet, but I'm struggling to take all this information on'* in lines 4–6). Eventually, he extends the idea of learning to the production crew (who are the immediate addressees of his talk within the basic interactional frame), possibly also including the audience within the inclusive plural pronoun *'we'* (*'We've 'ad a lot of learning today, but we're all right, we're not here for a day or two, you know, but we're all right'* in lines 9–12). With the final phrase *'but we're all right'*, repeated twice, he ends on an optimistic note, indicating that the transfer of expertise will ultimately be successful.

In a sense, the extract epitomizes the essence of the entire documentary programme. The design of the series revolves around the presenter Guy Martin's apprenticeship experience. Martin is positioned as a novice, i.e. a lay participant, who learns the technical skills of the past under the mentoring of more experienced professionals. From this point of view, the programme not only mediates the expertise of others but also documents the process of the gradual transfer and acquisition of expertise by lay participants. Thus, it captures the transformation affecting the show's main protagonist and presenter, whose knowledge and experience status change in most of the scenes that he is shown to be actively participating in.

However, the relationship between Martin and the experts is not unproblematic. Being the central protagonist of the programme, his role also consists in the direct mediation of knowledge to the audience. However, since his knowledge and skills are not always based on personal experience, he needs to resort to having the experts confirm his account or provide terminological specification when describing complex technical processes. The presenter is, thus, a semi-expert: despite his own professional

experience, his expertise is positioned between the lay audience, the experts, and the omniscient voiceover that adds yet another level of expertise to the entire participation framework of the programme.

#### 4. Conclusion

The findings of my analysis have several implications for our understanding of the role of expertise in documentary programmes. These concern the distribution of expertise between various parties; the dynamic oscillation of expertise in the case of the presenter; and the different strategies through which expertise is performed and mediated.

First of all, expertise needs to be acknowledged as a graded phenomenon. It is distributed unevenly: different parties hold different levels of expertise. Thus, the 'omniscient' voiceover, as an external narrator, provides authoritative information in a separate communicative level of the programme. This type of expertise has a global presence in documentaries: it functions as a unifying structural element that connects the individual scenes and provides 'pedagogic' commentary. By contrast, experts are crucial in documentary programmes since they constitute repositories of ultimate expert knowledge that can be drawn on locally, i.e. in relation to specific points and issues. Documentary programmes typically rely on the expertise of several experts as the focus of the programme shifts from one topic or area to another. The third party is the presenter, who typically possesses substantial expertise but qualifies as a semi-expert. This allows the presenter to interact with the true experts in their own specialist domains. Following the script of the programme, the presenter coaches the experts to share their expertise in diverse ways. The final party is the audience, which – by default – consists of lay participants for whose benefit expertise is mediated throughout the programme. The assumed level of the audience's knowledge is present only indirectly. It is taken into account by the production team since the programme's script can be seen as a form of conscious audience design (e.g., reflecting the age of the target audience). The production's consideration of the audience then inevitably affects the extent of explanations provided by the more knowledgeable parties – the presenter, the experts, and ultimately the voiceover.

The second, and most important, general observation is that the distribution of expertise is not fixed. While some of the voices in the programme (the voiceover and the experts) may be considered to display a relatively 'static' level of expertise, the situation is much more complex and dynamic with the presenter. The presenter oscillates between 'lay' and 'expert' status. He is caught in the double bind of performing expertise for the benefit of the audience, as well as performing layness towards the expert in order to facilitate the demonstration and transfer of the expert's knowledge. In this manner, some formats of documentary programmes – such as the series analysed in this article – provide an opportunity for the lay audience to identify with the presenter's role. This identification is strengthened whenever the presenter is involved in situations requiring him to learn new skills. Arguably, this also helps to overcome the overly didactic role that many documentary programmes have, and provides for a much more enjoyable viewing experience. As the entire process of expertise presentation is grounded within the double articulation of broadcast talk, the reorientations involved in the different kinds of expertise presentation are accompanied by frequent shifts of footing, with talk being reoriented from dialogue between the on-screen participants to direct address of the audience and vice versa.

The third finding, as revealed and documented by the analysis, concerns the discursive strategies of constructing, presenting and



mediating expertise. Expert knowledge may be merely presented, such as when the programme presenter prompts the expert to elaborate or when the voiceover complements the interaction between the presenter and the expert with additional commentary. Expertise can also be dynamically co-constructed in a dialogue between the presenter and the expert, e.g. through terminology negotiation. This is linked to the gradually shifting level of the presenter's expertise, which at this stage typically needs the support of the expert. Another strategy for the presentation of expertise occurs when the documentary programme shows the presenter in the process of acquisition of expertise and skills, with the learning performed under the explicit guidance of the expert. The final possibility involves the mediation of expertise by the presenter. In this case, the presenter's commentary is essentially monologic, though being subject to the background monitoring and occasional approval by the expert, who is otherwise involved only very minimally.

All in all, it is evident that the role of expertise in TV documentaries is far from simple. The presentation of expertise is carried out by multiple parties, either in the form of explanatory monologue or through joint dialogic accomplishment. Of particular interest appears to be the role of the presenter, who actively performs his pre-scripted role of the host while shifting between different levels of expertise that are enacted with varying degrees of scriptedness and spontaneity. Further research promises to cast more light on the detailed operation of the shifting levels of expertise between the different participants.

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