“What have you done?” Accounting for Covid-19 lockdown breaches on talk radio

Marina N. Cantarutti*, Rosina Márquez Reiter

School of Languages and Applied Linguistics, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA – Milton, Keynes, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Accounts
Accountability
Phone-in radio
Moral personhood
Lockdown
Covid19

ABSTRACT

The establishment of social distancing guidance during the first months of the Covid19 pandemic in the UK made behaviour in public spaces open to scrutiny, as observed in reports of lockdown (non)compliance in different types of media. This paper analyses a collection of 13 calls to BBC phone-ins where people publicly admit to breaking the lockdown. It offers an interactional analysis of the discursive practices with which callers account for their breach and build their moral personas while orienting to the accountability concerns that arise in their interaction with hosts, guest experts, and the participating audience on-air. Callers’ accounts were found to be extended objects combining different action components with which they present their licences to breach, list their harm-mitigating strategies, and construct their decisions as informed and common-sensical in the light of the moral dilemmas and disruption that the lockdown introduced to their ordinary lives.

1. Introduction

Covid-19 social distancing guidance and the powers given to the police to enforce it brought about a shift in expected norms of behaviour in public spaces (Bauman, 2013) as from March 2020 in the UK. As a result, previously taken-for-granted activities such as exercising, shopping, or meeting with others became regulated and restricted. Everyday behaviour became open to public scrutiny, as observed by numerous citizen reports of lockdown non-compliance across media, including radio – which saw a listenership increase of 15% during this period 1.

As a public forum of “civic news talk” (Hutchby, 2001:482), phone-in radio provides an ideal ground for examining reports and accounts for lockdown (non-)compliance. In this setting, the host, expert guests, and callers -who are often selected by their “salacious or controversial character” (Hutchby, 2001: 481)- interact with one another and with the audience, who may also get airtime via their read-aloud texts or social media posts (Fitzgerald & Housley, 2002). In sharing their views, personal experiences, or requests for advice (e.g. Ferencik, 2007; Fitzgerald, 1999; Hutchby, 1991, 1992; Thornborrow, 2001; Thornborrow and Fitzgerald, 2002), participants discuss the relevance and effect of current events and policy on their everyday lives, turning “news” into “issues” in the public sphere (Hutchby, 2005).

This paper examines phone-in radio interactions between members of the public, hosts, and invited experts during the first UK lockdown (March – June 2020) 2, where they discuss what constitutes (non)adherence to government guidelines, with special attention to those set for England. The calls analysed form part of a corpus of BBC phone-in shows on coronavirus collected for a wider project on morality in times of pandemic 3. In these calls, participants admit to having flouted the guidelines, and publicly account for their actions (e.g. Antaki, 1994; Garfinkel, 1967; Scott and Lyman, 1968). As the unprecedented demands of a pandemic and the attempt to regulate behaviour leave gaps in the continuously-updated guidance, the rules are treated as open to interpretation. This makes accounting for potential breaches a morally-loaded activity where evaluations of “right” and “wrong” become relevant and worthy of study.

We focus on how callers formulate what they consider legitimate reasons for the breach in response to the phone-in’s promo and the
contingencies arising in talk, that is, on how callers build their accounts and how their breaches and the actions within the accounts themselves become accountable in the here-and-now of talk radio. We demonstrate that in this context accounts are constructed as extended objects (Ekberg et al., 2021; cfr. “storied accounts”, Antaki, 1994; Orbuch, 1997), comprising action components where “licenses to breach” are combined with justifications that argue for a minimisation of the impact of the breach, and explanations through which the reasonableness of the decision is made plain to others. We claim that through the formulation of their extended reflexive accounts on air, participants build their public moral personas (Márquez Reiter, 2021) that is, they display their ability to make moral decisions, distinguish right from wrong, and make reasonable and considerate choices based on this understanding.

Radio phone-in participants are therefore seen as morally-invested stakeholders who through their interaction define, evaluate, and negotiate the transforming nature of what is considered acceptable behaviour in public spaces during the pandemic (Márquez Reiter, 2021) as they assess each other’s actions as (in)appropriate in the light of the guidelines and their understanding of what counts as common sense. By analyzing the way accounts for breaching are performed, and how the different stakeholders respond to them on-air, the study offers further insights into the changing facets of the discursive construction of morality in times of pandemic.

2. On accounts and accounting

Accounting is a pervasive action in everyday interaction. Accounts have been described with reference to two major orders of interaction (Firth, 1995; Heritage, 1988) concerned with “relevance rules” for reasoning and conduct (Robinson, 2016). One level pertains to the creation of intelligibility of the actions being carried out in the here-and-now of interaction and speakers’ display of responsibility for the moral contingencies that are oriented to and invoked through those actions (Garfinkel, 1967). The other, to the level of explanation for actions that may occur outside talk but which require justification therein to assess behaviours that contravene some normativity. Because of their orientation to rules and normativity, accounts often involve moral assessments of right or wrong, given that morality - “a set of shared values that help to explain given sociocultural practices” (Márquez Reiter, 2022: 20) - is a ubiquitous dimension of the evaluation of any natural fact of life (Goffman, 1983; Márquez Reiter, 2022:21).

A large portion of current work on accounts refers to the second order and draws on the work of Scott and Lyman (1968), who define an account as a “linguistic device employed whenever an action is subjected to valuative inquiry (…) a statement made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior” (p.46). In view of this, accounts are “seconds” in that they respond to something treated as a transgression. They have thus also been characterized as exonerative explanations (Antaki, 1994) for a particular negative event that involves presenting its cause, arguing for the existence of a valid warrant for it, or treating the negative happening as a “puzzle” that requires making things “plain” (p. 3). Accounts are therefore located as part of a cycle of “offence, restitution, and acceptance” (Antaki, 1994:49) used to restore order in some way. While they do not fully repair the trouble, speakers deploy accounts to attempt to acquitted themselves from blame. Accounts can, as a result, be seen as “packages of attributions” (Harvey, Orbuch & Weber, 1992) of causality, responsibility and blame (Orbuch, 1997:464).

These attributions can be managed differently when accounting for a transgression. According to Scott and Lyman (1968) accounts can consist of excuses and justifications. Excuses involve disclaiming, mitigating or relieving responsibility for the conduct questioned, whereas justifications imply admittance of responsibility while denying the negative features associated to the transgression by asserting the positives and the permissibility of the act. Based on Sykes & Matza’s (1957) early description of how speakers neutralise accusations of deviant behaviour through blame deflection and denial of injury or responsibility, Scott and Lyman detail “techniques” for their two account types. Excuses can incorporate denials of intent, volition and/or agency, or appeals to mitigating circumstances (see also Hunter, Semin, & Manstead, 1984). On the other hand, justifications may be conducted through a declared need to uphold self-fulfilment needs or values, an appeal to a principle of retribution, or a claim to acting under the command of a higher authority. Moreover, justifiers may argue how their gained benefits outweigh any potential harm, or they may simply claim there has been a misrepresentation of the negative effects of the transgression.

Our study mainly concentrates on the second order, drawing on accounts as extended (Ekberg et al., 2021) or “storied” (Antaki, 1994; Orbuch, 1997) objects, “big packages” (Sacks, 1992) that interlace public and private experiences for the explanation and moral assessment of behaviour in the here-and-now of interaction. We focus on the kinds of account action components deployed by the participants and how they are combined as they build their public moral personas in response to the contingencies of the here-and-now of their talk on-air. We show how these orders work in the light of external-contextual as well as internal-interactional normative expectations in the context of a pandemic.

3. Data and methods

This study offers an interactional analysis of accounting practices. It draws on insights from interactional pragmatics (Márquez Reiter and Haugh, 2019) and micro-analytic tools from conversation analysis (e.g., Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974) to identify common discursive practices in the way accounts for lockdown breaches are constructed by phone-in radio callers, and the treatment of these by the host, the participating audience, and the expert guests. Calls were analysed turn-by-turn in terms of the social actions carried out through them. Recurrent linguistic and interactional patterns that we describe below as “action components” were identified in both the callers’ own extended turns and were also analysed based on the subsequent orientation to these by hosts and expert guests. Data are transcribed following Jefferson (2004).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Show</th>
<th>Broadcast date</th>
<th>Topic / URL</th>
<th>Host / Expert guests</th>
<th>Relevant calls</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BBCLive 5 Your Call (60 mins)</td>
<td>April 5th</td>
<td>“Is the UK lockdown working?” <a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p088sdv0">https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p088sdv0</a></td>
<td>Rachel Burden (health psychologist)</td>
<td>3/21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>May 6th</td>
<td>“Are people following lockdown rules?” <a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p086chwm">https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p086chwm</a></td>
<td>Nicky Campbell</td>
<td>7/14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As part of a wider a project on morality in times of pandemic⁶, seven BBC phone-in radio programmes broadcast during the first Covid lockdown in England were collected. Of these, three programmes themed around lockdown-breaking were identified (see Table 1), one of which specifically primed for (Goodwin & Loyd, 2020) accounts as the central kind of contribution expected by callers (see promo below). Our collection for this study thus comprises 13 calls where callers explicitly admit to having broken the rules and account for their behaviour (see Excerpt 1)⁵.

4. Extended accounts for breaching as morally-relevant objects in times of pandemic

The radio programmes selected invited callers to disclose a (potential) breach to Covid-19 restrictions on-air and provide a reason for it, hence offering a platform to exercise public accountability. Thus, from the start, callers are engaged in moral acts (Butler, 2005) as they are primed to reflexively and publicly assess their own behaviour against a norm while being subject to external endorsement or negative judgement. The design of the callers’ accounts and how they are made accountable through it on-air reveal what moral orders are being invoked in the assessment of guideline-breaching conduct and its invoked reasons.

Our analysis below first shows that accounts can be complex extended objects combining different kinds of action components which in turn become accountable objects in the here-and-now. It reveals that accounts function as “integrated wholes” (Antaki 1994:113) where excuses, justifications (Scott & Lyman 1968) and reasoned explanations (Antaki, 1994) are interwoven with fuzzy boundaries between them. According to Antaki (1994), the use of extended accounts is motivated by the possibility that the “truth, appropriateness or plausibility” of an event can be in question (p. 134) and needs to be counteracted. This resonates with the practice of “defensive detailing” (Jefferson, 1985) by which participants construct a case with extensive forms of evidence to support their claim that they have not engaged in a particular transgression. In the case of our callers, as self-professed potential breachers, there are two things that could be challenged by the host, expert, or audience: the existence of a valid warrant for a lockdown breach and, relatedly, the callers’ own displayed moral personas in accounting for it. We will demonstrate how callers orient to these social risks by drawing on a number of resources in the formulation of their case and engaging in reflexive storytelling around the impact of lockdown in their lives. They voice the problematic decisions they have taken from their standpoint as well as from their understanding of the perspectives of others. Callers also manage their accountability in the here-and-now by orienting to the potential evaluation of the audience, the host, and the guest expert as “judges”. They take a third-person perspective (Keane, 2017) i.e., a perspective that “stages you, the speaker, as split between the person who performed the misdeed and an observer who reports it” (p. 129) and create interactional slots for the validation of their actions.

We here detail how these matters are oriented to by participants through their carefully-crafted accounts that incorporate a range of common action components: i) a description of the breach; ii) a disclosure of personal circumstances presented as a licence to breach, indexing different levels of agency⁶ over breaching; iii) justifications that argue for their minimisation of harm to self and others and downplay any potentially attributable negative effects of their rule-breaking, including the listing of risk-mitigating measures taken and wellbeing benefits gained by breaching; and iii) explanations constructed as moral dilemmas being addressed through common sense and careful deliberation. These elements are combined and may be foregrounded or backgrounded by callers, and are oriented to differently by other participants in the programme: some account components are treated as morally dubious, while others are routinely left uncontested.

We examine how extended accounts and their action components are used by callers to construct their moral personhood (Marquez Reiter, 2021) as responsible and reasonable members of society as they seek public validation for their reasons to breach on-air. Section 4.1 introduces and illustrates each of the action components of our extended accounts and their linguistic formulation with short extracts representative of the collection, and Section 4.5 offers two full examples where the accounts as integrated wholes can be appreciated as well as how their producers are made accountable by other participants on-air.

4.1. Action components of accounts for lockdown breaches

4.1.1. Describing the breach

One of the key components of extended accounts in our collection is the (potential) breach, the reason for having to present an account in the first place. Callers self-present as potential breachers at different points in the call and do so with varied levels of specificity which orient to the projected judgements around the legitimacy of their behaviour. The activity making up the transgression is presented as habitual (n = 10/13 calls), or as a one-off (n = 3/13). Habitual breaches are formulated in the simple present tense as a list of ordinary and unobtrusive actions whose routineness is further contextualised with matching rise or mid-level intonation contours. This design orients to the everydayness of now-restricted actions to highlight their presumed harmlessness, as in the case of Guy who admits to having his girlfriend visiting him in Excerpt 2 below.

One-off breaches are introduced as a single event or as a sequence of short, albeit different, breaches, one leading onto the next. For example, Lewis (see Excerpt 3 below) discusses how he first had his two children over at his home for a birthday (lines 1–2) and then visited one of them

1 Guy: she comes and stops at my place twice a week, (.) hhh stops
2 over the night, and then goes back to my mate,

Excerpt 2. Guy in Sheffield.

---

⁵ Ethics clearance received by HREC on 19/01/2021. Phone-in radio clips are used adhering to fair use copyright policy.

⁶ Drawing on Laidlaw (2010) we understand agency as “responsibility for particular happenings or states of affairs, and these may include states of affairs that they have rather limited capacity to influence.”(p. 163).
at their mother’s house (lines 14–15).

When presenting their breaches, callers routinely display their third-person perspective awareness of the relevance of an upcoming moral assessment of their actions on-air. Those whose causes for breaching involve medical conditions tend to disclose their breacher status early in the call, and explicitly reflect on their behaviour by categorising it explicitly as e.g. “breaking” the rules. This is the case with John (see Excerpt 4), a caller who suffers from severe anxiety and self-identifies as a breacher from the beginning of his call (lines 5–6; see also extract 12).

Callers whose reasons may be externally considered to be less legitimate normally build their case in more elaborate ways before describing their transgressive behaviour, and do not normally assess it explicitly as a form of misconduct. They may introduce an accusation of wrongdoing directed to them via other voices in their telling but distance themselves from them. They often keep to their denial of wrongdoing (line 12) even when the host may have framed them as breachers from the very opening of the call, as in Guy’s case below (Excerpt 5; lines 10–14), where the host self-repairs his opening question (lines 1–3), reflecting on the tension between keeping his impartial host role (lines 1–3) and upholding his own verdict (cfr. extract 13).

4.1.2. Presenting a licence to breach

Callers introduce their personal circumstances as background to their accounts but, in some cases, also as a licence to breach. Callers formulate these as delicate self-disclosures in ways that discursively reduce their responsibility as transgressors and hence their sanctionability, and make it plain that their cause for breaching is legitimate, which is supported by the way hosts and expert guests address their case (see Excerpt 12). Licences to breach in our collection involve chronic and diagnosed medical conditions around physical and psychological disorders (3/13 cases). These are invoked by callers to present the breach as unavoidable or last resort and their situations as exceptional (Márquez Reiter, 2021), claiming that their ability to exercise their agency fully in following the guidelines has been impacted by a physical or mental (and irrevocable) condition. Notwithstanding this, these callers take great care to present themselves as considerate to others, listing the kinds of harm-mitigating strategies they take when breaching. For example, John (caller in Excerpt 4 above) discloses his diagnosed mental health condition early in the call after his admission of lockdown breaching, including technical details that clarify what his condition entails (cfr. extract 6 below, lines 1–2) and why it was not possible to stay at home. In line with other callers, John does not treat his condition

Excerpt 3. Lewis in Sheffield.


Excerpt 5. Guy in Sheffield.

as self-explanatory, and declares having considered other remedies before resorting to the breach (lines 3–7).

4.1.3. Declaring minimisation of harm and maximisation of benefit

Whereas diagnosed medical excuses to breach are a feature of a limited number of calls, almost every caller in our corpus displays efforts to pre-empt or counter any potential accusations of harm to themselves or others by presenting themselves as morally discerning, considerate, and reasonable members of their community. Callers display knowledge of the guidelines while discursively diminishing the negative implications of their actions and rhetorically underestimating potential hazards that may be associated to their breach. They argue their actions are not harmful and seek sympathy in showing how the benefits of having

Excerpt 7. Ellie in Wiltshire.

as ordinary and unobtrusive as seen below, downplaying the


5

as a self-evident truth in the light

Excerpt 10. Lewis in Sheffield.

of the guidelines while discursively diminishing the negative implications of their actions and rhetorically underestimating potential hazards that may be associated to their breach. They argue their actions are not harmful and seek sympathy in showing how the benefits of having

Excerpt 8. Lewis in Sheffield.

minimisation of harm and maximisation of benefit

the transgression (8/13 calls): Callers foreground, generally towards the end of the call, the positive outcomes resulting from breaching. These are presented as forms of emotional wellbeing, self-fulfilment or self-maintenance (Scott & Lyman, 1968). For instance, Derek, a caller with a prosthetic leg, explains in Excerpt 9 below how driving to a nearby lake every morning helps his mental health (see also Excerpt 12).

4.1.4. Displaying reasonability and common sense

Finally, apart from licences to breach and forms of minimisation of harm, extended accounts for breaching may also incorporate explanations by which callers make plain the moral dilemmas that result from a clash between government restrictions and their personal circumstances. Callers report how they resolved these drawing common sense conclusions, treating “common sense” as a self-evident truth in the light of their circumstances as a self-evident truth in the light of their circumstances vis-a-vis the guidelines. They demonstrate how their actions are applications of their own practical wisdom, here understood as:

“a comprehensive moral capacity which combines practical knowledge of the good with sound judgement about what, in a particular situation, would constitute an appropriate expression of this good”. (Hammersley, 1993:171).

In this respect, the action strategy employed by callers involves detailing a process of deliberation (11/13 calls) that reveals practical knowledge and sound judgement. Callers present a reflection on the carefulness of their reasoning with verbs of cognition, listing the step-wise decisions made, showing how they considered the (gaps in the) guidelines, studied the situation, and acted logically. A case in point is Lewis (as seen in Excerpts 3 and 8 above and in Excerpt 10 below), a father whose children live in two separate properties.

These dilemmas are also used to expose inconsistent or inadequate aspects of the guidelines. For instance, the caller known as “Scott in Belfast” foregrounds the problems that the guidelines pose on individuals and frames his own reflexive account as one where common sense sanitisations of emotional wellbeing, self-fulfilment or self-maintenance (Scott & Lyman, 1968). For instance, Derek, a caller with a prosthetic leg, explains in Excerpt 9 below how driving to a nearby lake every morning helps his mental health (see also Excerpt 12).

Finally, apart from licences to breach and forms of minimisation of harm, extended accounts for breaching may also incorporate explanations by which callers make plain the moral dilemmas that result from a clash between government restrictions and their personal circumstances. Callers report how they resolved these drawing common sense conclusions, treating “common sense” as a self-evident truth in the light of their circumstances vis-a-vis the guidelines. They demonstrate how their actions are applications of their own practical wisdom, here understood as:

In this respect, the action strategy employed by callers involves detailing a process of deliberation (11/13 calls) that reveals practical knowledge and sound judgement. Callers present a reflection on the carefulness of their reasoning with verbs of cognition, listing the step-wise decisions made, showing how they considered the (gaps in the) guidelines, studied the situation, and acted logically. A case in point is Lewis (as seen in Excerpts 3 and 8 above and in Excerpt 10 below), a father whose children live in two separate properties.

These dilemmas are also used to expose inconsistent or inadequate aspects of the guidelines. For instance, the caller known as “Scott in Belfast” foregrounds the problems that the guidelines pose on individuals and frames his own reflexive account as one where common sense reasonings prevail in a context where people must resort to do-it-yourself forms of justification (Excerpt 11; lines 5–6). Scott presents himself as a reasonable member of society by acknowledging the need
for the rules (lines 2) and discusses his status as a worker still hotdesking at a bank (lines 7–10). He describes how he uses a letter provided by his employer to go out to work and be around people as his logical warrant to also go out to walk a dog that resides in another property (lines 15–17) and interact with just one other person (lines 16–17) with whom they share this moral responsibility (line 18) of taking care of the dog.

We have thus seen how callers also build their moral personas through explanations around common sense and logicality as a means of pre-empting any accusations of inconsiderate or reckless wrongdoing on-air, and to appeal to the struggles that other members of the public may experience given the guidelines’ opacity. They describe their activities with rich detail, in an incremental and cumulative fashion, disclosing their personal conditions and detailing their internal processes of deliberation, while creating spaces for validation of their reported actions.

4.2. The accountability of accounts on-air: Accounts as public objects of scrutiny

Having introduced the individual components of callers’ accounts for breaching, our next examples will show how these are combined together and how they contribute to the callers’ constructed moral personas as they recount and evaluate the actions that led to the breach. We will also show how callers seek validation for their actions and how they become accountable for both their breach and for their accounts on-air, subject to different forms of moral judgement within the expectations of the different roles in the phone-in organisation.

Our next caller, Derek in Nottingham (see Márquez Reiter, 2021, for a reduced analysis) admits to having broken the lockdown by driving to a place by the river to have his coffee inside his car. He discloses his licence: having a prosthetic leg that limits the kind of physical exercise he would be allowed to do under the guidance. Derek’s account begins first with a confession of regular lockdown breaching, mitigated with "I think" and “technically” (Excerpt 12.1; line 2). In setting the guidelines

Excerpt 12.1. Derek in Nottingham.

1 DEREK: .h Erm:: but >what I †Actually phoned up about was.< was .hh I †actually = I think †technically I break the law.
2 .h Erm: I’m in an †unfortunate position. = I’ve got a prosthetic leg.
3 (0.5)
4 So (0.2) any walking, .h er any "distance = i-it’s"
5 completely out of the question.
6 So exercise for me, = is very limited.
7 RACHEL: "Mmm."

Excerpt 12.2. Derek in Nottingham.
as reference, he positions himself as knowledgeable of the rules and aware of his transgression while creating, through the mitigation, a slot for validation or correction. This is followed by a self-disclosure (lines 4–5) of his condition that sets him apart from other members of the public, prefaced with an assessment (“unfortunate”, line 4). This disclosure receives no uptake, and Derek incrementally adds two explanations framed as “so-prefaced” formulations (Bolden, 2009) that present logical conclusions stemming from his condition, as if his constraints to follow the rules were not self-explanatory (lines 7–9). This receives a minimal response from the host.

By providing a temporal framework (line 12) that marks this as a regular routine activity, Derek moves on to formulate his breach as a list of ordinary and unobtrusive activities happening in succession, orienting to the everydayness of behaviours that are now restricted by the guidelines. Derek then offers a logical formulation conceding that while his own form of exercise may not be what the guidelines specify (lines 17–18) it is an arrangement that is compatible with his own condition (see Excerpt 12.2).

This logical formulation (lines 17–18) makes relevant an assessment, as it incorporates a reading of the guidelines that could be potentially problematic. However, it is again responded to with a minimal response and silence (lines 19–20). Derek thus follows this by a pursuit of a display of understanding and agreement (lines 21–22). After disclosing his condition and associated restrictions, Derek continues by foregrounding the mental health benefits of his driving to the river (line 21), and describes how possible damage to himself or others was mitigated (lines 22–23).

The last element of Derek’s extended turn ties back to the beginning of his confessional call. He reformulates his initially mitigated admission of transgression (“I think”, line 2 > “I suppose”, line 24), which he upscales with an accented “am” (line 24). Derek had so far disclosed his licence to breach with reference to a set of government guidelines which do not seem to consider situations like his. By discursively reducing his agency by showing himself unable to abide by the law to the letter, while still declaring due exercise of care and consideration towards others, Derek constructs his case as worthy of validation (see Excerpt 12.3).

As stated earlier on, in this paper we set out to discuss participants’ composition of accounts, but also, of how callers are made accountable in the here-and-now of radio airtime. Derek’s account up to this point in the call had been met with limited uptake from the host. At this slot, the host responds by first uttering a response cry (Goffman, 1978) followed by a clarifying “I mean” (Maynard, 2013) with which she registers Derek’s dilemma and prefaces her orientation to an inaccuracy in terminology: at the time there wasn’t a “law”, but only a set of guidelines. She thus upholds her radio-host role in providing accurate information and confirms Derek’s supposition of this being a breach by using his mitigated “technically” (line 27) followed with a modal that hedges the assertion of transgression (line 28) while acknowledging the reasonability of Derek’s described activity. Despite this public admission and display of sympathy with Derek’s situation, the host recruits the behavioural psychologist for a professional endorsement, adding objectivity to her stance. The question to the expert is formulated in a way that pre-empts the possibility of disagreement (“who would want to deny Derek that?”, line 29) treating any potential condemnation of Derek’s action as unreasonable and validating his licence to breach as self-evident. The expert expresses a form of strong agreement (line 31) and further supports this point by recycling Derek’s idea of “mental exercise” into an expanded turn on mental wellbeing concerns during lockdown.

The host and the expert guest have thus endorsed Derek’s excuse, treating his behaviour as reasonably unquestionable. This is in keeping with other two calls in the corpus where diagnosed and chronic medical conditions go unchallenged by hosts, experts, or the texting/tweeting audience quoted on-air, and are received with markers of sympathy. However, the indisputability of medical conditions for breaching is strategically invoked by other callers who refer to the potential mental health hazards of the government restrictions as a motivation to engage in the breach. In these cases where callers may not present a legitimate diagnosed medical licence to breach, while hosts may not take up the caller’s mental health concerns, they may contest other features of the accounts, in particular, those that relate to the mitigating efforts described by the callers.

Mike from Teddington, our final caller, is a case in point. The host displays an orientation to this call as problematic from the start by revealing “Mike” to be a pseudonym (Excerpt 13.1; line 1). Mike reciprocates the host’s greeting and the start of his call is met with a
MIKE: .hh Well I I ↑hope. it’s a ↓common sense question ↑too. I I’m a very keen tennis player, (0.2)
probly ↑probably even an addict. and er . .h you know
I miss my tennis desperately and, .h we have a little
tennis WhatsApp ↑group, and I’d asked a couple of
people (0.5) if they’d be interested in playing a
discreet ↑game. ↓and . .h actually people (0.2) one or two replied privately,
. .h We knew of a court. = that no one uses, that
doesn’t have a lock, . .h


NICKY: And what about the ball.

MIKE: ↓so what we do is we we just- .

NICKY: ↓[TOUCHING ↑TOUCHING the ball.]

MIKE: We disinfect the balls. -after the game, (0.5) erm:
and er and ↑yeah. ↑we go home and ↑wash our hands
in the regular way:. so . .h we feel. we’re doing a
common sense thing. and we hope you can ↑confirm
that.

Excerpt 13.3. Mike in Teddington.

Mike eventually offers a description of his breach as the result of an elaborate list of steps, involving how he recruited fellow players (lines 20–23) and organised a tennis game. The formulation of the reported actions reveals some sneakiness on his part (“discreet”, “responded privately”, “a court that no one uses that doesn’t have a lock”), an attempt at making sure these actions were not made overly public. As seen in prior cases, the breach is formulated as unobtrusive, harmless, and “ordinary” with matching rise-to-mid intonation contours (lines 20–26).

Mike shows awareness of social distancing guidelines (lines 20–23) and pre-empts accusations of causing harm in saying that his fellow players and himself were not affecting each other nor anyone else (lines 24–26) and listing in extensive “defensive detail” (Jefferson, 1985) the measures taken. Each element of the list is separated with a pause that opens a slot for an acknowledgement, which is not received. Mike finishes this part of the call by expressing an affective reaction of relief (lines 27–28), highlighting the personal benefit of having incurred in this activity. This makes him particularly vulnerable to criticism, especially as he makes transition relevant at this very point, a place where validation could have come and where instead there is a long gap.

After this long silence, the host does not question the adjacent description of the positive feelings as a result of breaching the guidelines but takes up an earlier element in the call (Excerpt 13.3; line 30). The host’s behaviour here is in-keeping with the “routine scepticism” (Hutchby, 1992) that hosts may imbue to their radio persona as they examine callers’ claims of knowledge or experience for their accuracy and authenticity, often in pursuit of controversial views or inconsistencies. In fact, part of the query (line 41) is repaired with higher pitch and volume, prosodic forms of turn competition (Local & French, 1986) for overlapping talk. In this case, the “You say X, but what about Y” (Hutchby, 1992) format is used to cast doubt on the legitimacy of Mike’s account and the thoroughness he confidently professes for the harm-mitigating measures.

In response to this challenge, Mike offers a new list of careful measures as justification, formatted with the same display of routineness as prior elements, and includes these to his argumentative claim of this being common sense behaviour (line 37). Furthermore, this new list is presented in the simple present, casting some doubt as to whether this was just a one-off. However, this is not taken up by the host.

Mike’s assessment of reasonability and request for confirmation of this common-sense reading of his behaviour is minimally responded to.
by the host who presents markers of dispreference (a long silence, a click and a gap, line 39) before a minimal “yeah”. This is followed by a self-selection by the Chief Constable as invited expert who responds by describing the difficulties of lockdown enforcement while not committing to Mike’s case (lines 40–41; rest not shown). After unsuccessful pursuits by the host of a response from the Chief Constable on this case, the host eventually formulates his own mitigated moral assessment from his own affective perspective (Excerpt 13.4; lines 80–83), saying Mike’s tennis playing makes him “a little bit... slightly uncomfortable” (lines 82–83) and recruits the views of the audience (line 82). Later in the show, the host will report widespread disapproval from the participating audience (Excerpt 13.5; lines 169–172) in alignment with his own expressed discomfort earlier.

In this section, we have demonstrated how callers reflexively recruit and combine different action components to build their accounts, publicly displaying their awareness of the guidelines while recounting their morally agentive decisions to breach the lockdown in the light of their personal circumstances. We have shown how accusations of wrongdoing are pre-empted by callers by laying out processes of deliberation and common sense reasonings around their breaches, framed as ordinary and harmless activities. Callers foreground their considerateness in making sure risks were mitigated and harm was prevented. By interweaving in an extensive and detailed way a set of complex actions that include explanations, justifications, and excuses, participants invoke a wide array of actions to build their moral personas on-air for validation and judgement as considerable and reasonable, and thus engage in a public exercise in accountability.

5. Concluding remarks

Our study has focused on the development of public accounts for breaching Covid 19 guidelines on phone-in radio during a time of shifting and often unclear government guidelines. We discuss the accounts in action, including how past or habitual breaches are accounted for, and how the callers, in turn, are made accountable on-air by hosts, guest experts, as well as by involving the texting or tweeting audience.

We expand prior descriptions of accounts as “extended” by showing in detail how accounts are complex “integrated wholes” of interwoven action components, namely: medical conditions as licences to breach, declarations of risk-averting measures to minimise harm, discussion of personal benefits of incurring in the breach, and explanations of the processes of deliberation and common-sense assessment engaged in. Unlike prior more taxonomical work on accounts that examined small chunks of text or attempted to discriminate between excuses vs. justifications, our study of extended accounts shows how its action components can be porous and blend into each other.

We demonstrate that these action components and their formulation are used by callers to present themselves as moral personas who are knowledgeable of the rules and take a reflective approach on them and their own behaviour and act upon it. They display their consideration for others, report their assessment of the risks and draw logical conclusions from aspects of the guidelines which are treated as unclear, inconsistent or inadequate. While these action components are constitutive of most calls, the accounts differ in how breachers combine them to construct their lack of compliance of the guidelines, their agency in taking the decision to breach in a particular way, and their degree of admission to wrongdoing.

Moreover, we show how callers create interactional opportunities for validation and judgement on-air, making their accounts accountable public objects of scrutiny. Some account components are valued as having more weight and legitimacy than others by the callers but also by the host and guest experts, who normally do not question action components that refer to social values enshrined by law (e.g. disability, mental health). On the other hand, implications of harmlessness are more often challenged with subtle forms of scepticism, with hosts questioning the purported safety of mitigation measures listed by callers and callers’ understanding of common sense.

Our analysis has offered an action-based perspective on accounts that contributes to the relatively few studies which have treated accounts for (mis)conduct as extended objects. It has shown how callers are made accountable for the very act of publicly accounting for a breach, revealing a small but important aspect of the changing and negotiable face of the morality of everyday ordinary behaviours in unprecedented times of pandemic in the UK. Our study has provided a description of the actions that members of the public treat as morally relevant, sensible, and responsible in accounting for behaviour contravening government guidelines and as such, our findings can inform future analyses of lockdown breaching accounts in new contexts, including, for example, those recently offered by high-ranking government officials in the UK.

6. Funding acknowledgement

This output is part of the project “The discursive construction of morality. Public understandings of Covid-19 breaches and compliance across media”, funded by the PVC-RES Coronavirus Research Funds 2020 at the Open University, UK.

“What have you done?”: Accounting for Covid-19 lockdown breaches on talk radio.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

References
