Current-affairs talkshows: Public communication revitalized on television

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SUMMARY

Sharing the old concern of boosting the democratic use of television for public communication, this thesis is intended to explore the possibilities and limitations of current-affairs talkshow programming in television journalism, at a time when the free-market logic take command.

1. Background of the study

There are reasons for this focus. First and foremost is television itself. With its audio-visual specificities, television raises no barrier of literacy, therefore is probably the easiest medium with the strongest mass appeal among all media technologies. While this may suggest something positive for public communication, television’s position in the field of journalism has been quite dubious if compared with the print media. Along with structural control, performance regulations have been tight, in the name of the public interest, until the sea change in 1980s that loosened the old grip. Yet the sea change does not make the medium a readier utility for public communication. Instead, the global trend of the privatization and marketization of television systems that intensified in the late 1980s and the early 1990s has strengthened its use as a technology mainly for escapist entertainment. News information, the much believed headlight of democracy, tends to be downsized and “entertainized” amidst vehement multichannel competition.

Parallel to this tendency are the increasing blurring of previously distinct genres on television and a growing popularity of mixed programming. The possibilities of interactions between senders and receivers, through a combined use of television with other communication technologies, most notably the telephone, are also being realized. These newer developments rekindle expectations, albeit mingled with doubts, for the role of television in public communication, a role increasingly discussed as something significant in what is often summarized as “teledemocracy”. Among all available program-types, current-affairs participatory talkshow programming appears to mark a maximal use of the medium’s technological specificities of hybridity for television journalism. In particular, its practice of audience participation implies a “dilution” of organizational control as it brings with it contingent elements that are hard to be entirely controlled in programming. Such contingency can be reinforced, and organizational control further loosened, if the program is aired live.

This makes it a strong contrast to traditional television journalism, which for
decades has been reined within conventional generic and social boundaries. Emphasizing journalistic objectivity, conventional news programming ends up being criticized as lacking openness and relevance for ordinary audiences. In contrast, current-affairs participatory talkshow programming seems to promise openness and relevance by involving audiences in the co-construction of information. As audiences are assigned a salient position while the detached anchor becomes the hospitable host, the boundaries between information and entertainment, between senders and receivers, between spectators and performers are blurred.

Thus, the thesis explores the degree to which public communication on television can be revitalized through participatory talkshow journalism. The focus is upon the programming level where professional efforts can really count. This is of particular significance, since structural control by the state has become obsolete, and professional self-regulation is now increasingly depended upon, as so much claimed, when it comes to ensuring opinion diversity— the core of concerns for public communication. The research is done both theoretically, in Part 1, and empirically, in Part 2.

2. The Theoretical Endeavor: Positioning Participatory Talkshows in Television Journalism

Part 1 argues, albeit with great caution, for the democratic significance of participatory talkshow journalism in the historical use of television for public communication. Part 2 examines how far such democratic significance can still hold in Taiwan, a society where participatory discussion programming on current-affairs has not been possible until recent years, following the proliferation of television channels and the reluctant loosening of state control of television. With these two parts together, the thesis intends to pinpoint participatory talkshow journalism as a unique form of television journalism with its new possibilities and limitations that come along with its market-based operations.

Intended to serve the purpose of examining the theoretical possibilities of talkshow journalism, Part 1 includes four chapters with the first two dedicated to television technology and its use, while the last two to the genre of participatory talkshows. In Chapter 2, television is treated first as a distribution technology and then as a cultural environment with its technological specificities in the light of participatory democracy, especially what has been envisioned so vividly by the term “electronic town meeting”. It is argued that, unlike the print media, television tends to be expressive and encourage a wide, if not deep, participation. Chapter 3 examines how television has been applied to the field of
journalism—a field established along the trajectory of modernity highly concerned with cultural legitimacy and its strict separation between the public and the private, the fictional and the non-fictional, information and entertainment. Television’s ever-hybridizing nature is reconsidered as something that can promise discursive openness, which is a quality long neglected in traditional television journalism.

Chapter 4 proceeds to establish the rather broad and ambiguous “genre” of the talkshow as a perfect embodiment of television hybridity in its ever-ingesting, ever-projecting, and self-referential movements. Deeming the impulse to engage as inherent in all communication behaviors, the chapter links participatory talkshows with other historical practices of audience participation, which demonstrate the interplay between the market and liberal democracy. The strength of participatory talkshow programming is made obvious in the dual role it seems to play in public communication through its inclusive practice of audience participation. The first is the role as a public talkspace which envisions an electronic community full of neighborly chats and/or town-meeting discussion. The second is the role of a yet-to-be-legitimized journalistic practice in great contrast to the traditional one with its different aesthetics, so as to help non-participant audiences make sense of life/reality in its heterogeneous authenticity.

Chapter 5 resumes the theme of the ambivalent interplay between the market and liberal democracy by drawing on examples from the U.S. It investigates how, due to ever-intensified market competitions, the same industrial needs to engage audiences that led to the emergence of participatory talkshow journalism somehow exploit the “genre”, to the degree of debasing television journalism by making it more talk-oriented than coverage-oriented. Instead of getting more involved and concerned in public affairs, audiences are in fact more estranged from the public discourse with even more cynicism and voyeurism. The simplicity of make-do in the practice of audience participation turns out to be cancelled out by the complexities behind the industrial imperative of risk minimization and profit maximization.

3. The Empirical Study:

2100: All People Open Talk

To grasp further the ambivalent nature of market-based participatory talkshow journalism for public communication, Part 2 examines 2100: All People Open Talk, the first ever current-affairs talkshow in Taiwan and so far the most long lasting of it kind. Taiwan presents an interesting case because it has been undergoing its social-political transition in terms of liberal democracy, hence newly awakened to experience the charm of participatory
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talkshow journalism. The focus on 2100 is mainly due to its being claimed, by its critics as well as supporters, to be the most successful, in terms of audience reach and advertising revenue, with a fare very public by nature. Furthermore, 2100 is aired live in prime time as a strip program for weekday evenings (Monday-Friday), and highly hybridized with various practices of audience participation, by a new entrant in the television industry. In other words, it best represents the audacity of media entrepreneur operating in a society of awakening civil forces while armed with a smart recognition of television hybridity.

Essentially a background introduction for the emergence of 2100: All People Open Talk, Chapter 6 describes how it takes some economical, social and political conditions to have participatory current-affairs talkshows emerge on television. 2100’s emergence is seen as indicating that in Taiwan, competing politics has taken some shape, that privatization and marketization of television have come to a mature stage against the background of channel proliferation.

The empirical study of 2100 that follows is intended to probe whether 2100 makes information open and relevant to the concerns of its audiences through engaging them in its participatory talk format. By differentiating the two notions, openness and relevance, respectively as sender-oriented and receiver-oriented, the study examines how 2100 plays its dual role of participatory talkshows in public communication as a public talkspace and as a journalistic practice. Thus, it is necessarily both content based and reception based.

With a collection of program episodes that covers two periods of election campaign time and three periods of normal day fare, the study explores the sender-specific quality of openness by specifying three dimensions in 2100, i.e., the diversity dimension, the rhetoric dimension, and the participatory dimension. The diversity dimension focuses on the range of issue coverage and guest presentations, while the rhetoric dimension on issue-framing and the host’s mediation. With these two dimensions, 2100 as a public talkspace is examined as a professional construct for audience participation. Based on an understanding of this “constructedness”, the participatory dimension focuses on how lay talkers contribute to the public discourse characterized by rhetoric and diversity-related emphases.

Through the content study, 2100 is found to be a “discursive situation” where current affairs are packed in a way more intended to engage than to persuade. It marks a milestone in Taiwan television to facilitate both the extra-parliamentary town-meeting and neighborhood chatroom. Its constraints for openness, however, comes from its ambition for wide participation with much limited time, its abiding by the conventional news values, its lack of guest diversity and interactions for both the elite guests and the lay talkers.
Backed with a questionnaire-based phone survey processed by a professional poll center in Taipei, the thesis forwards to explore relevance as a receiver-oriented quality in 2100 by asking whether the program makes news information relevant to the concerns and interests of its viewers. The phone survey drew samples from the adult population of Metropolitan Taipei over the age of eighteen. A total of 1804 telephone call attempts were made, among which 633 attempts were successful, leading to a sample of 633 respondents. The questionnaire used tries to grasp viewers’ concerns and interests by specifying two aspects: viewers’ viewing habits and their satisfaction. Viewing habits are treated as a matter of frequencies and preferences related to demographic features such as gender, age, profession, and education. Viewer’s satisfactions concern 2100 as an information source and its practices of audience participation. For the former, it is related to the choice of issues, coverage in election/non-election periods, the host’s performance, and the most preferred discussion atmosphere, the juxtaposition approach. For the latter, it is about the viewers’ satisfaction with the performance of lay talkers, their being representative or not, and the availability of opportunities to participate as experienced by themselves.

The audience study shows that the viewers give 2100 much more credit as an information source than as a participatory program. But few of them agree to decrease the time allotted for lay participants. They agree that issues treated by 2100 are significant, that the juxtaposition of competing views helps their understanding of the issues. Yet they feel “hot” issues are over-treated, and tend to view the program “randomly”, mostly when issues are interesting to them, and mostly in areas 2100 is more adept with (i.e. political issues and campaign coverage). While appealing to both men and women, it tends to treat issues that concern men more than women. In summary, 2100 is yet to make itself an informational source capable of offering what would truly engage audiences to the degree of making them view the program more regularly. With its claimed public-forum image, it tends to ignore the unexpressed and uncaptured concerns and interests of its audiences. This is reflected in the less socially recognized viewing and talking priorities of our female respondents.

4. The Conclusion of the Thesis

With the empirical study that discovers 2100 more a media phenomenon than a public utility in Taiwan society, the thesis finds something worthy to be learned from 2100. Functioning quite like a public festival of current-affairs discussion, 2100 demonstrates that the rhetorical and playful aspects in communication action, long neglected in traditional thinking, deserve to be treated by the right medium in the right format so as to favor public
communication today. Technically it is now no problem at all to combine different media technologies for more interactive public communication. Even driven by the mundane intention to “conquer” as big as possible a chunk of audience share, 2100 is impressive by the flexibility it shows in practicing audience participation without resorting to control techniques. By combining television with other information technologies, such as telephone, facsimile, computers, 2100 is inspiring in the various ways it has tried so far to bring television close to ordinary people, allowing them the choice of participation methods, while dedicated mainly to “public affairs” as traditionally defined.

With 2100’s strength being recognized, the news values 2100 tightly follows as well as the hazard of talkshow programming are held as responsible for constraining 2100 from opening up the public discourse for lay participants. In particular, news values oriented to big-guy and big-place politics, deemed as the well-tried largest common denominators in news informational programming, serve well the purpose of engaging audiences as much as possible. As these are often news values shared by its competitors, 2100 contributes to creating a media phenomenon too heated by its news values while generally unrelated to the micro life/reality of ordinary people.

While acknowledging the values of participatory talkshow journalism, the thesis suggests a narrowing down of the scale of participation to more specific issues and targeting smaller communities. A market-based program normally tends to enlarge as much as possible the scale of participation, to the degree that the focus is not upon participation, but upon the illusion of participation-heat it can create. The thesis hints that something more than programming efforts are needed, if information is to be open and relevant for audiences.