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STUDIO DISCUSSIONS

Introduction

AUDIENCE DISCUSSION PROGRAMMES can be understood as part of social space, as places where people congregate for public discussion, even as a 'forum'. What kind of space is the audience discussion programme and what are its social implications for participants and for public discussion more broadly? Any space has an internal set of rules, roles and procedures and is constituted through the particular accomplishments of the actors. Furthermore, social spaces are also embedded in, and so constitutive of, the wider community. Their boundaries may vary in permeability over space and time: some spaces are genuinely public and offer open access to anyone, others are closed to all but a few. Some spaces are heavily rule-governed and restrict opportunities according to criteria of status or power, while others are more open to negotiation and flexibility. The constitution of a particular space, with particular rules of access and opportunity, also affects the meanings of other spaces.

Different societies may be characterized by the presence or absence of certain kinds of spaces, with implications for the understanding of citizenship, or the public, in these different societies. For the bourgeois public sphere, the space must offer equal access and equal opportunities to participants, and to the extent that it does not, it has been refeudalized: according to Habermas (1989) there is no space for the development and expression of critical consensus in contemporary society.

In this chapter, we consider audience discussion programmes as social space. For participants, we ask what kind of experience it is to appear on television. For viewers, we explore the idea of watching television as parasocial interaction – viewing 'as if' it were face-to-face interaction with the characteristics of primary social experience, asking whether the viewer is involved in the constitution of the audience discussion programme as an imaginary community and possibly as a public sphere. But, however far one takes these arguments, audience discussion programmes remain mediated spaces, subject to institutional control and management by the mass media.

Audience discussion programmes as conversation

At the centre of audience discussion programmes are conversations between ordinary people and representatives of established power. The public sphere depends on these conversations being genuine rather than manipulated, with rights of access and opportunity being institutionally protected rather than undermined, and resulting in critical rather than false consensus. Interestingly, both face-to-face conversation and television can be unfavourably compared with print media in that their speed and intimacy prioritizes trust and credibility over critical thought (Petty and Cacioppo, 1981; Pfau, 1990).

How can we analyse the conversations that occur on television? Schudson (1978) outlines five criteria for the American conversation ideal: continuous feedback between two people in a face-to-face setting; multichannel communication (hear, see, touch); spontaneous (and thus unique) utterances; each person is both sender and receiver of messages; norms of conversation are egalitarian (both follow same rules). Avery and McCain (1982) argue that these criteria are not met by 'conversation' on the mass media, even in talk shows and call-ins. Callers may be cut off and humiliated, they avoid calling shows where they disagree with the host's perspective, they lack visual information, and so forth.

However, while participation programmes fall short of these conversational ideals, so too, frequently do face-to-face conversations. There is a danger of idealizing everyday conversation and comparing that idealization to the realities of mass-communicated communication. In everyday conversation, feedback is not continuous but problematic, subject to misinterpretation, especially when more than two people are involved. A telephone conversation, which lacks both touch and vision, is generally regarded as real conversation, while television discussions provide both sound and vision. While on one level, all interactions are spontaneous and unique, conversations are highly rule governed, frequently repetitive, and commonly used to repeat handed-down or unoriginal ideas (i.e. common sense).

In many conversations, the rules of sender and receiver may be unbalanced – it's hard to be the sender when talking to a 'gossip'. More subtly, textual theories of communication challenge the roles of sender and receiver, for senders take into account the anticipated responses of receivers, even on television, and receivers may make creative and diverse interpretations of messages sent. In practice, interpersonal and mass communication interact: the receiver of a television message may be the sender in the living room who then alters the interpretations of other receivers who may then in turn shout back at the television or turn it off. Finally, the ideal that sender and receiver should be bound by the same interactional rules – who can interrupt, or make jokes, or disagree – does not occur in many face-to-face conversations. Conversations where participants are differentiated by gender, generation, status, or power, all place different demands on the participants, who speak with different voices reflecting a variety of subject positions.

The experience of appearing on audience discussion programmes

Let us begin our analysis of audience discussion programmes as social space by exploring the experience of ordinary people on these programmes. People are sometimes confused about the experience of appearing on television; after all there are few cultural representations with which to frame their experience. Not all participants are naive and overwhelmed:

> I've done quite a lot of public speaking of one description or another so I think I managed to get the point across. I don't think I made very good studio audience material because I talk too fast, but I think I made the point that I wanted to make.
>
> (Tony, studio audience)

Tony is aware of the skills required, but is mainly concerned with making his point in public. Although 'British people are becoming less and less nervous about what they say on television' (John Stapleton, host of *The Time, The Place*, speaking on TV Weekly, ITV, 19 November 1992), some still experience difficulties:

> I chickened out really. It was towards the end of the show when I bubbled up enough to think "yeah, I ought to say something, this is ridiculous," but it was literally within the last

> five minutes of the show and I put my hand up to speak as he was coming down but I deliberately didn't look at him so he didn't pick me which was a bit stupid so I chickened out basically. I was too scared basically, the sweat was pouring out of me.
>
> (James, studio audience)

Some studio audience members appear on the programmes not intending to speak: 'I automatically assumed that I wouldn't be speaking, so I didn't really think about the topic at all' (Ruth). Others try to find a way into the discussion and may not manage what the experts also acknowledge to be the difficult task of timing one's intervention, catching the host's eye, getting a microphone, speaking to the point, not being cut off or interrupted, and so forth. The lay participants are given some encouragement and instructions about the rules before the programme:

> Mike Scott said 'we like a lively debate, please don't be too polite, it makes good television if people are actually a bit rude and forget their British reserve and actually just push in, talk on top of each other, so please don't be typically Brits, don't be reserved, if you feel strongly then please speak up'.
>
> (Alice, studio audience)

> Kilroy said 'just relax, and just say what you want,' and he said he apologized in advance that if he pushed anyone by trying to get round the studio don't take it personally, 'if I try to sit down beside you and shove the microphone across you don't get offended'. He said 'if you've got a point to make just say it and hopefully I'll hear you and come running round,' and he said 'just speak freely and try to join in as much as you want'.
>
> (Margaret, studio audience)

> The floor manager had said about carrying on the conversation, making sure that we didn't trip him over, making sure that we didn't shout over anybody else, put our hands up and were nice and polite about the way we carried out the discussion. I think he said something about swearing, that we shouldn't swear too much because the audience wouldn't like it. He was trying to portray the idea that he was facilitating a discussion amongst the audience and that he wanted us to address points to each other rather than to him.
>
> (Martin, studio audience)

We asked people what they gained from participating in a studio audience discussion. They differed in whether they felt the interaction to be genuine:

> I think if I hadn't already known a number of 'media people' I would have learnt something about what media is about and how artificial the whole thing is but I knew that these shows are rigged and I knew the way the audiences were set out and this sort of thing so I think personally I didn't learn very much.
>
> (Tony, studio audience)

> I'm glad I had a chance to say it, because even if it doesn't make any difference to the litter problem at least I've vented my spleen and I feel I've done something, I've got my anger and frustration out on television and who knows it might do some good in the long term.
>
> (Alice, studio audience)

Margaret did not go with a particular aim in mind, rather she was just making up the numbers but things still worked out in such a way that she made a contribution:

> It just happened it was really apt with my particular situation at the time, and I had a lot to get off my chest in a way. And so, it just happened at the beginning they were talking about marriage, and I didn't feel quite that what I had to say would be relevant, and then it just happened that there was an opportunity where what I had to say was fitting and part of it.

For Margaret it was not a matter of changing the world but of gaining social support for herself, which she felt to be successful. For some, the occasion was too nerve-racking for any contribution.

> Every time I went to say something or . . . I didn't even muster up enough courage because every time I went to say something my heart would have gone bump, bump . . . I started getting very nervous, so I didn't actually, I felt 'oh no, it's too much stress to actually say something,' because I was very aware that I was on camera.
>
> (Ruth, studio audience)

Participation is clearly an emotional experience:

> I leant forward and just made a comment because he was sitting right next to him and it couldn't be avoided and then he came and sort of sat round next to me and we had this conversation for maybe three or four interchanges and I just felt really angry, I was almost shaking with anger from what he'd said because he was talking about morals and ethics and young people and being incredibly patronising and didn't know what he was talking about and he obviously wanted to be sensational so I can remember sitting there and thinking 'how can I look threatening?' so I sat there and went '. . .', like that.
>
> (Martin, studio audience)

For James, *Donahue*'s topic of toyboys was experienced through his feelings about his parents' divorce:

> I have personally had my family break up over, not over a toyboy as it goes, but over affairs and things like that which I wasn't too happy about. But then if somebody had come along and said 'do you think people should be able to work at a marriage they can't stand and live together in a hostile environment for even longer?' I'd obviously turn round and say 'no, it's silly,' the idea of making two people who can't stand each other live together is absurd, guaranteed to lead to violence and animosity so it was that sort of outlook which I didn't have at that time and nobody on that panel really offered that, otherwise I would have perhaps thought about it a bit more after the show, it was all sort of running round the bedroom having a good laugh sort of thing and that we should all live with people and have a good time.

Self-disclosure on television

Nonviewers of discussion programmes are often concerned with the invasion of privacy which may result from expressing personal revelations and emotions in a public place. However, viewers were unconcerned: they felt all topics were legitimate, and focused more on the value of personal expression for the public sphere and for heightening the sense of involvement and authenticity. Viewers are more concerned that studio audience participants were representative, so that valid conclusions could be drawn from their contributions. Nonviewers interpret the programmes as offering isolated accounts of personal experience in the context of a chaotic chorus. For viewers, the programme is experienced as an integrated whole so that from the retelling of a series of personal stories, significant results may emerge – the construction of public opinion, the expression of the repressed or culturally invisible, the valorization of lay experience, etc.

The issue of public self-disclosure is complex. One can distinguish between revealing consensually defined 'personal' facts or taboos about oneself (concerning sex, relationships, illness, money) from revealing facts which, for whatever idiosyncratic reason, are emotionally difficult to say. The difficulties – and the thrills – audiences may experience on hearing self-disclosure by others may result either from hearing taboo issues aired in public, which even though readily volunteered by the speaker may be difficult for the hearer, or from hearing facts which the speaker finds emotionally difficult to express. Self-disclosure may thus arouse emotions in the hearer or may make the hearer bear witness to emotions in the speaker.

Reflections on participation

Reflecting on their participation after appearing on television, studio audience members differed in whether they felt the conversation to have been genuine. For some, the end of the programme was by no means the end of the experience:

> So we went back in the lift down to the reception area and they had orange, wine, peanuts, light stuff. But people were talking about it. Because by the end of the programme, more people were wanting to join in. In fact the whole programme came to life, so people were still on a bit of a high and still wanted to talk about it, and pick up on some of the comments they'd heard other people make. And so I heard a couple of people say 'ah, you've gone through a bit, I went through a similar thing' or, you know, I made a couple of comments to people like 'that's really good the comment you made'. It wasn't as though the programme finished therefore the discussion finished – it continued.
>
> (Margaret, studio audience)

Others felt that the constraints of the genre prevented spontaneous interaction:

> I felt that we were placed there a few minutes before, we hadn't really had time to settle in to the surroundings, to even discuss or talk to people beforehand. I felt as though I knew no-one there. And so it wasn't like a real discussion, because no ice was broken, so to speak. Even the way it's set out you have the seats facing cameras, every one is facing forward. To talk to someone you have to look over the other side of the audience, it's not like any other situation we're usually in really. Whenever we're discussing something you're sitting opposite someone and you're in a much more informal situation.
>
> (Ruth, studio audience)

> It felt very artificial to me, I don't usually have conversations with someone sitting in front of me with their back to me. Apart from anything else it gives you a very strange, peculiar kind of experience.
>
> (Martin, studio audience)

As 'we didn't have any introduction to anyone' and 'we'd had very little information about what they wanted us to do' (Martin, studio audience), participants were playing by unknown rules. Nonetheless, this meant that both experts and lay people entered the discussion without advance planning of their contribution beyond possibly a general sense of the main point(s), resulting in a sense of involvement in a real conversation where their contribution emerges spontaneously out of the discussion:

> You had more of a sense of real conversation, real interchange and I thought therefore that it was probably serving an educational function . . . There was no barracking, there was a sense of a real attempt at arguing with each other. I thought Kilroy induced that quite deliberately and also quite successfully so in a sense he switched the conversation around but he'd try on the whole to keep things going, he got people to make points that were germane to what was under discussion so it was very much more like putting business structure into what could actually have been a bar room brawl but actually became a bar room conversation. Not totally dissimilar to the sort of conversations that do from time to time take place in bars, but with more structure and slightly more discipline. Very much less artificial than from having politicians talking and I thought that politicians actually began to behave slightly differently in that atmosphere.
>
> (Expert 5, academic in government)

Participants do not always stay involved: 'after that I felt "oh right, great, I've had my say" and I switch off then, I thought "right, let everybody else get on with it" ' (Martin, studio audience), but of course this can also be true for face-to-face interaction.

This level of spontaneity attests to the informal character of the audience discussion programme as social situation. It is a place where people go to become involved in a personal conversation in a public space, where self-disclosure and argument intertwine in a tournament that privileges a private voice for a brief time. Corner identifies the 'radical revelatory' consequences of the documentary, where viewers are 'put in touch with one another by revealing infrastructural relations of interdependence' (Corner, 1986: x). To the extent that a conversation is generated in the studio, this radical revelatory aspect is surely all the more powerful in the audience discussion programme, where ordinary people are put in touch with each other in a direct, immediate and spontaneous manner.

Parasocial interaction

In parasocial interaction (Horton and Wohl, 1956), the audience has the experience of face-to-face communication when watching television. This 'intimacy at a distance' is such that people count television characters, especially television personas such as talk show hosts, amongst their friends and family: '*Oprah* viewers, for example, feel quite comfortable greeting their favorite host with comments on her current hairstyle, clothing or weight' (Cerulo *et al.* 1992: 120). The informal, ritualized and interactive style of talk show hosts encourages this – a conversational style of speech, a direct gaze at the camera, giving the audience an apparent role in an 'interaction' (M. Levy, 1982). The audience know what to expect, they have a role to play, and as

neighbourhood ties are reduced, 'parasocial' interactions become an increasing source of intimate bonds:

> The para-social relationship develops over time and is based in part on a history of shared experiences . . . the daily 'visit' of the newscaster is valued by the viewer, perhaps because the news persona, like a friend, brings gossip.
>
> (Ibid: 180)

The rapid technological changes in electronic media (fax, car-phone, cable and satellite television) challenge us to characterize primary social relationships in terms of their functions for the individual rather than their institutional forms, in part an artefact of particular technological forms. Primary social groups must be defined not only in terms of their psychological functions but also in terms of social space and social relations. Recent institutional and technological changes in the mass media may, it is argued, enable them to play a more positive role in constituting social relations rather than being a mass of isolated individuals:

> Technological and cultural developments in the structure of the mass media – developments fully implemented during the 1980s – have drastically changed the nature of a mass communication. These changes have enabled the mass media to become a new source of primary group affiliations . . . that provide social members with a sense of identity and purpose, strong and enduring emotional bonds, and a source of immediate social control.
>
> (Cerulo *et al.* 1992: 109)

Audience discussion programmes may substitute for coffee mornings, chats with friends or gossip and, 'with regular viewing, combined with the call-in capability of such shows, the common interests and opinions of both host and audience members become crystallized. As a result, people become identified on the basis of their talk-show affiliations' (ibid.: 115–16).

Imaginary places

There is a sense in which the social world is transformed as social relations are removed from public occasions and institutions and placed in the private living rooms of viewers. The informal organization of the social world is transformed from a 'real' to an 'imagined' community (Anderson, 1991) and community involvement changes from public participation to private consumption. In *No Sense of Place*, Meyrowitz (1985) suggests that 'the evolution of media has decreased the significance of physical presence in the experience of people and events' (ibid: vii). Mass communication collapses space and time such that we can witness events which are distant from us or which would previously have taken time to communicate and the traditional barriers and spaces of social life – both public and domestic – have been penetrated by the broadcast media: 'The family home is now a less bounded and unique environment because of family members' access and accessibility to other places and other people through radio, television, and telephone' (Meyrowitz, 1985: viii).

The decoupling of space and time in modern mediated communication (Giddens, 1985) also detaches psychological experiences from specific contexts and locations, breaking down traditional social structures and relations. Social space is no longer constituted through physical settings but rather through imaginary communities which mix physical and mediated situations

and, consequently, mix interpersonal and mass mediated communication. While traditional social structures were enshrined in different communicative contexts for people from alternative social groups, generations and genders, this mapping of the social onto different locales has been blurred particularly by the broadcast media.

For example, Meyrowitz draws on Goffman's (1981) concern with overhearing by multiple audiences to note that adopting mass mediated forms of communication disturbs our ability to communicate strategically to different audiences. Children have access to 'adult' conversation, men may listen to women's issues discussed on 'women's programmes', politicians cannot say one thing to one constituency and something else to another. In the audience discussion programme, a media event occurs which would not have occurred in any other space-time dimension and so the space created is unlike any other. It is inconceivable that the meetings we see daily on audience discussion programmes would have occurred spontaneously during the course of unmediated social interaction.

Following Alexander's (1990) analysis of the role of inconsistencies in social progress, we suggest that one consequence of these new media events (Dayan *et al.*, 1985) is that the media do not establish shared meanings so much as make visible inconsistencies in meaning across particular locations or material conditions. For example, through accounts of ordinary people's experiences, audience discussion programmes express inconsistencies in current social arrangements, showing how existing institutional categories fail to accommodate lay concerns. The expression of such inconsistencies is part of the dialectic relationship between institutionally encoded meanings and everyday experience – representing not the legitimation crisis but a moment in the unfolding relationship between theory and practice.

Social space

The physical limits of the human body place a set of spatial and temporal constraints on the social construction of place and on the social actions possible within it (Giddens, 1985; Hägerstrand, 1967).

> Time-geography is concerned with the infrastructural constraints that shape the routines of day-to-day life, and shares with structuration theory an emphasis upon the significance of the practical character of daily activities, in circumstances where individuals are co-present with one another, for the constitution of social conduct.
>
> (Giddens, 1985: 269)

Hägerstrand shows how the trajectories of individual actors over different time periods intersect in 'time-space maps'. Thus in audience discussion programmes we see that the participants are each on very different paths and they have to influence the joint accomplishment of the social occasion as best they can to fit in with their plans. Consistent with notions of the oppositional public sphere (Fraser, 1990), participants with different life projects negotiate the relationship between their interests and those of others. Whatever the outcome, participants then return to their own life projects (Giddens, 1985, 1991).

The studio discussion has characteristics both of proximate forms of communication, based on all members being co-present in the same locale and engaged in traditional face-to-face communication, and of new, distanced forms of communication across locales through the transmission of the discussion to a mass audience. The space is defined by the relations established between different categories of participant – home and studio audience, expert and laity, host and guest. Giddens appropriates Goffman's (1959) distinction between front and back (or public and

private), together with that of disclosure and enclosure (the covering up or open display of information), to analyse the boundaries used to organize social spaces.

In audience discussion programmes, the space is partly organized so as to manage and integrate the disclosure of personal experience and official analysis, getting people together who in the unmediated playing out of social life would never talk to each other. In what other public space could a mother living in bed-and-breakfast accommodation talk to a member of government? Where else could a patient with a grievance discuss it with a representative of the British Medical Association?

The programmes are ostensibly constructed as the 'front', 'where the action is', the place where the laity can publicly express grievances and bring officials to account, where interest groups can contest the definition of social problems, and where official bodies can publicly display the positive aspects of their organizations. This management of disclosure controls public and official access to information and expression. By such outrageous juxtaposition of representatives of established power and the laity the media offer themselves as both a forum for contemporary society and as an implicit critique of existing social arrangements.

However, as in any television programme, the view presented to the viewer hides the mechanisms of production. The viewer gets a partial view of the space in which the discussion takes place. The 'front' that the viewer sees disguises the 'back' which contains all the means of production of the image. Here the front/back distinction maps onto the space as perceived by the viewer and the space as part of the media institution, limiting what is disclosed to the viewer. Disclosure/enclosure is also mediated through time: there are various activities before and after filming, some of which take place in ante-rooms and some of which take place 'off camera': switching on the cameras transforms the space into a public sphere visible to all.

The space created by this genre is also constituted through its relations with other genres and other spaces. In the audience discussion programme, we have a bounded region of access. As ordinary people and representatives of established power demand access, the media make available a backwater, a trivial and unimportant realm of television. People can now be said to have a say in the production of television but that say is strictly bounded and therefore contained from spreading and polluting the rest of the broadcast media. Thus the managed show of participation is partly achieved by locating participation in a particular region of television. The programmes are liminal spaces through which citizens pass, form temporary coalitions and then return to their social identities.

Analysing the space created by the programmes requires us to consider these programmes both as regions of television and as constituting a locale of their own with regional division within the programme. Multiple comparisons of front/back and disclosure/enclosure are possible when analysing occasions that have 'traditional' authenticity in terms of the product (a conversation, a critical discussion) but which are constructed and disseminated in a very 'modern' way (with distributed and shifting locales, with communication at a distance).

Thus the programmes are both locale and region, front and back, private and public, disclosing and enclosing, communicated through co-presence and through distance. They exemplify what Harvey (1989) terms 'time-space compression', a central characteristic of the organization of social space in postmodern or late-capitalist society. Just as the problems of mass production (Fordism) and Keynesian economics demanded the speeding up of turnover time and a relaxation of economic regulation, so too is the media under similar pressure. Audience discussion programmes suit this change: they are cheap to produce and respond quickly to changes in current affairs. They represent the postmodern version of public debate, claiming the advantages of broader participation and relevance but vulnerable to the criticisms of being fleeting and superficial. [. . .]

Any attempt to explicate unambiguously the political and social functions of the genre of audience discussion programmes must be doomed. [. . .] We have emphasized the multiple levels of influence in the production, accomplishment and transmission of audience discussion programmes and in their relation to social structure. [. . .] We have examined the audience discussion in terms of social space, arguing that the relations between studio space and the living room or between front and back are complex, as are the rules which organize interactions within and across these spaces.

[. . .]

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