

Political TV talks – the ideal journalistic genre for audience participation?

The Internet and social media services in particular provide new means for audience participation in cross-media journalism. Especially political TV talk shows as debate oriented formats of journalism seem predestined for the integration of audience feedback, opinions, or user-generated content. However, this genre has rarely been analysed with regard to new forms of audience participation. This paper presents findings from a multi-method case study carried out at a popular German political TV talk that runs weekly on a public-service station and additionally offers a website where users can discuss the current topic in a forum. Specifically, we compare journalists and audience members of this particular journalistic outlet with respect to their practices as well as their attitudes and expectations regarding the role of journalism and audience participation.

To this end, we apply a heuristic model based on inclusion theory: We distinguish between *inclusion performances* on the journalists' side (i.e., offered participatory features – e.g., discussion forums, social media profiles – and newsroom routines of participation management) and on the audience side (i.e., different practices of using these features). On both sides, *inclusion expectations* frame these performances and are (re-)produced or changed by them.

Performances and expectations are measured via online-surveys among the journalists of the TV talk (n=10) and the users of its website (n=354) as well as in-depth interviews with seven journalists representing different newsroom roles (e.g., editor-in-chief, community manager) and seven audience members with different activity levels (e.g., TV-only user, regular user of the discussion forum).

The data draws a detailed picture of audience participation in the context of the TV talk. Most importantly, the findings on *performances* show that the journalists offer rather few participatory features (e.g., contact form and discussion forum on the website) and that the work-flow of managing audience participation is accustomed to the weekly production rhythm (before/during/after the live broadcast) to identify audience contributions that can be used in the TV show (e.g., as a representation of public opinion) or as an evaluation of its quality.

This is due to the *expectations* that these features are regarded as mandatory by the audience (whom they do not want to disappoint or lose) and at the same time can be handled with the limited newsroom resources. Also, the journalists expect it to be their main obligation to pick up relevant societal debates and represent them through a balanced discussion between the talk show guests (not to enable audience participation). Accordingly, they regard the TV show as their “core product”, while the website and participatory features are seen as “accompanying offers”.

On the audience side, the most popular *performances* are taking part in polls (31%), writing audience mail (27%) and commenting in the discussion forum (19%).

These practices are framed by the *expectations* that the guest cast is biased and elite-focused and the talk-show (host) should be more critical and dig deeper. Accordingly, the main motivations for using audience mail or the forum are to add a topic or aspect and state one's opinion. However, users also expect it to be the journalists' (and not the audience's) role to select topics, guests, questions etc. for the TV talk. Also, they expect that audience contributions do not add substantially to the discussion or make public information more democratic.

Altogether, the journalists limit audience inclusion in the TV talk to rather functional aspects, so that the political talk does not fully exploit the genre's potential to integrate audience members in public debates or even exhaustively present their opinions. However, – apart from occasional critique as well as wishes and attempts to add further opinions/perspectives – this is also what the audience expects of the TV talk.