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THE VOICE BELGIUM: TEASING, INTERACTIVITY AND FAN PRODUCTION

Television viewers benefit more and more from internet technologies to interact, comment, share, etc. The media attempt to adapt to this new relationship with their audiences. Sabine Van Der Putten, in charge of internet and networks at RTBF (Belgian francophone public radio and television), and Marie-Paule Lemmens, in charge of special projects at RTBF, were willing to share their experiences as part of the internet team for the television talent show The Voice Belgique (second season under way, first broadcast of the ‘blind auditions’ on 22 January 2013).

I.: What is your role in The Voice Belgique?

M.-P. L.: The website covers what has been broadcast on television. But it is more than that: visitors will find all information, performances, bonuses, etc. It is like a bible for the programme’s fans. The programme is broadcast live on the internet. At the same time, we are in our offices updating the website. As soon as performers are selected, we create their personalised websites with videos, links to their Facebook pages, etc. The performers create their own relationships with fans, as they take over the management of their Facebook pages. The website also enables chatting. On the evening of the programme, our RTBF collaborators who are specialised in social networks keep an eye on Twitter while we update the website.

S. V. D. P.: Our strategy is to use social networks for teasing. We post links to the website on Facebook and Twitter so that people visit it. It is a question of audience and its monetisation. Without it the website could not exist.

I.: Would you say that social media have modified the relationship between television and the public?

S. V. D. P.: The production team for the television programme does not really have a relationship with the public and therefore expects us to provide it with information regarding the reactions of television viewers. During our weekly ‘Voice Committee’ meetings to coordinate all of the professions involved in The Voice Belgique, the television team always asks us about qualitative feedback. This is quite new. In the past we were not really concerned about what people thought. We must not forget that the sponsors have invested in the programme and therefore expect positive feedback on the internet, from a quantitative point of view as well.

I.: Does this mean that the internet and television are equals?

S. V. D. P.: The vast majority of people watch television more than they use the internet. A ‘second screen’ is an advantage. However, the only second screen we have for the moment is the ability to chat while the programme is being broadcast. We would like this to be more developed, for example, with information about the performers available online as they appear on television. But this is not yet possible.
THE PUBLIC’S PARTICIPATION IN TELEVISED POLITICAL PROGRAMMES (1):
‘AN OBVIOUS FACT AND A CHANCE’

Johanne Montay is a well-known journalist at RTBF (Belgian francophone public radio and television). She has been political editor-in-chief for several years and has presented many political programmes. In this interview, she shares her enthusiastic vision of the public’s participation in televised political debates.

Interviewers (I.): What do you think of the public’s participation in political programmes on television?

Johanne Montay (J. M.): It is an obvious fact that the public should participate. Participation is natural since it exists in the public sphere. It is also a chance, as it allows a relationship of equality to be established between journalists and citizens. We should not be afraid of the public because we are part of it too. Journalists are not placed on pedestals and do not live in ivory towers. They must listen to citizens and society, especially because they are also citizens and members of society. Their status is not that of revered masters but of accessible teachers. A horizontal relationship rather than a relationship of authority is created between the public and journalists.

M.-P. L.: The relationships between the internet and the television production team are not always simple. Television has been around for years and the team knows how to make things work. When the internet team began to interfere in the programme, tensions arose. It should also be pointed out that the performers are extremely busy with the television production team and are under its wing, and it is therefore very difficult for us to have any contact with them. However, the different media all work towards the same goal: to attract a younger audience and create a new relationship with our public.

I.: The Voice Belgique is also heard on radio. What is the role of radio in terms of interaction with the public?

M.-P. L.: For now, there is a review of the programme the following day on the radio and there are regional radio programmes which invite performers from the regions. During ‘duels’ and live performances, the programme is broadcast simultaneously on the radio. There is an exclusive warm-up on the internet, aimed at generating comments or questions on Facebook and Twitter. During the joint internet and radio debriefing, the coaches answer the audience’s questions.

I.: On the website, there is a Tweet Zapping created by a fan. Is this a common phenomenon?

M.-P. L.: Tweet Zapping was created by a tweeter. A fan of media and The Voice Belgique in particular suggested this project to me. His first draft was quite cruel so we revised it with him. We also have a very fun and dynamic Web Zapping. All of this provides an objective view. There have been other initiatives on behalf of fans of the programme such as Live Drawing, which consists in sketching the performers and a word game: tweeters are presented with five unrelated words which they must try to use in their tweets. Live Drawing is not ready to go public, but we’re working on it. All of these initiatives are volunteer and spontaneous. They are based on the good relationship between the internet team and the public. It is a quid pro quo relationship: we shine the spotlight on the creators of these projects and we receive good ideas for attracting new fans to the website.

M.-P. L.: It is sometimes difficult to follow or channel these proposals. There are people who are extremely sure of their positions and who really want to give advice about what we should do. We are open to all ideas but cannot say ‘yes’ to everything. There are good ideas and bad ideas, and in the end somebody has to choose.

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I.: Are there risks involved in getting the public to participate in political programmes?

J. M.: Participation is not a risk, as a good report must always be based on specifics before moving on to generalities. A special report is therefore interesting if it opens the debate and allows the journalist to explain a general situation. The danger to be avoided is therefore that of remaining limited to a particular situation or being dictated by emotions. The journalist must keep his or her editorial freedom while listening to the needs of the public.

At the same time, participation must be prepared meticulously. On television, there is no room for slip-ups or a loss of control. The themes dealt with and the questions asked must therefore be discussed beforehand. One may feel that this limits participation, yet this is precisely what makes it possible in media.

I.: How are citizens selected and prepared?

J. M.: The people who respond to our calls are very motivated citizens who may be classified as 'middle-class bohemians'. When people take this step, we can expect high quality participation. These accounts are beneficial in terms of adding to the debate and - let's be honest - of company image. There is also another selection criterion: the candidates must demonstrate that they are able to express themselves clearly in a reasoned and non-militant manner. They must be comfortable in front of a camera, know the subject, be able to speak about it clearly and fairly, not make outrageous remarks, etc. Furthermore, we look for a diversity of socioprofessional categories in order to best represent the population.

I.: Are participative programmes more successful in terms of audience?

J. M.: No, not at all. Participative debates have not always been successful. Participation does not determine an audience: instead it is determined by the rhythm of the programme and the competition it faces.

I.: Do new technologies change things in terms of participation?

J. M.: This has an enormous impact on the way we work. Programmes from two years ago already appear prehistoric to us, as the ways of sending messages have changed. We still used emails and text messages, and text messages were shown at the bottom of the television screen without being answered by politicians. Today things are totally different. Text messages are destined to disappear and emails are already a thing of the past. People expect true interactivity. Twitter offers a lot of potential but its use is still very limited, mainly to the enlightened elite. We must remain vigilant because certain approaches appear to be too complicated for the public. At one time, people were asked to film their reactions using a webcam and to send us their videos. This was considered to be too complicated even though all laptops come with these devices.

I.: What does the future hold for participative programmes?

J. M.: For the moment, the future of television participation seems to lie with Twitter. It allows immediate interaction between journalists, politicians and citizens. The programme of the future will have a screen divided into two parts: one which shows the televised debate being broadcast and the other which shows the discussions and reactions in real time via Twitter. The goal is therefore to integrate the two discussions to make the debate as constructive as possible. It would therefore be necessary to have journalists do some fact checking regarding the themes of the debates, post links, verify figures, etc. This creates an unprecedented dimension in terms of citizens’ taking charge of the political debate. We must always seek more flexibility on behalf of journalists during a programme so that they are able to adapt what is being said according to the public’s reactions.

Another approach which may appeal to people over the next few years is a system for shared decision making between the public and the producers. Citizens would be asked to give their opinion beforehand, i.e. while the programme is being prepared, and therefore on the choice of themes to be discussed.
THE PUBLIC’S PARTICIPATION IN TELEVISED POLITICAL PROGRAMMES (2):
HIGH AMBITIONS WITH UNCONVINCING RESULTS

Thomas Gadisseux is a political journalist at RTBF, Belgian francophone public radio and television. With a colleague, he presents the television programme Mise au point every Sunday, which includes a debate on a subject in the news that week, as well as the political programme Revu et corrigé. He is part of the political unit at RTBF and therefore also covers subjects for the television news as well as being very active during the elections.

Interviewers (I.): What is your idea of participation in televised political programmes?

Thomas Gadisseux (T. G.): Participation can be useful in a programme but is not essential. Everything depends on the concept of the programme. On the one hand, we can have people give personal accounts, have them participate and put them face to face with experts. On the other hand, we can explain different points of view in the studio without public participation. The two concepts are interesting but very different. We must therefore choose. We also have to bear in mind that the active participation of citizens does not make the political debate, just as we may be closest to citizens by meeting their expectations without having them participate directly. These are two distinct parameters.

I.: Are there risks involved in having the public participate in political programmes?

T. G.: The risk is to go round in circles. When people react to what has just been said, it is difficult to move ahead in the debate and often the discussion stays at the same point. And let’s be honest: true interactivity between someone who sends a text message and the politician who should answer it is impossible. The political guests do not have the time to answer everyone’s questions or do not understand the question in the same way as the citizen. A true interaction is therefore illusory. It is also ridiculous to make people believe that the few citizens speaking in the studio represent the population as a whole. The media are not democratic and are not equivalent to the elections.

It is true that we are a public service and that we belong to the public. This question always comes back: must the media meet the public’s demands, even if they are not pertinent? I feel that we are a cog in the wheel between the public and politicians. It is difficult to bring them closer simply through short messages sent from a distance. It is easier to create a relationship when citizens are present in the studio. We did this during the municipal elections in October 2012: we transmitted the remarks made by citizens by adding the prism of information and we confronted the politicians with them.

I.: According to you, is it therefore not possible to combine a television debate and public participation?

T. G.: What is interesting in the second concept mentioned earlier is that a parallel discussion via social networks is totally possible. It is not because the reactions are not broadcast that an interesting discussion cannot take place via a parallel channel. Television and computers are two different media which exist in parallel: we can’t do both at the same time. I think, for example, that Facebook does not need to be broadcast. It is a social network which exists on its own and does not need to be broadcast on television. There are therefore two debates: the one on television and the one on Facebook or Twitter. It remains that journalists may of course add to the debate which takes place on the internet. But I am not saying that participation is useless or utopian. It is possible and interesting, but we must be honest from the beginning by stating the objectives of the programme and by establishing a well-defined framework. Everything depends on the concept chosen. And when the second concept is chosen, participation allows an end to the hegemony of the media which considered themselves as being above the ignorant people. Today, participation allows the media to remain close to public opinion and to focus on questions asked by the people (without the derogatory meaning which was attached to this term a few decades ago).

I.: Is that how you would define the main contribution of participation?

T. G.: The participation of citizens forces politicians to take risks. Citizens are not formatted by television and do not abide by the same codes as journalists, thus putting
politicians in danger, as surprises cannot be excluded. This is why participation is important. It puts politicians in danger but also forces journalists to educate more and to be more dynamic, less institutional and more pragmatic.

I.: Have the mechanisms of television participation changed a lot in recent years?

T.G.: They have of course changed a lot with social networks, but we must not be too hasty. On the radio, the means used most for participation is still the telephone. We are not yet in an era in which people watch television and communicate via social networks at the same time. The proof is that the number of tweets is not proportional to the number of viewers of a programme.

I.: What is the main challenge faced by televised political programmes?

T. G.: I think that people have become more demanding and more particular than in the past. They no longer watch only one medium but instead watch several and gather information in order to form their own opinion. It is therefore important for us to be interesting and to allow the time for television viewers to consider the challenges, and to avoid ongoing aggressive questions and answers.
new museums are really riding this wave, and consequently it was necessary to favour the design in order to compete. At the same time, the desire was to opt for avant-gardism by using these new media throughout the exhibit in order to win over the public. It would have been possible to be even more innovative if the opening had taken place on the date which was planned initially, but the inauguration had to be postponed because the team was not ready. As regards visitors who are not familiar with technology, the staff are ready to make up for this.

Q: Has there been an attempt to make visitors the actors in their visit and to make them participate in an interactive way?

R: The big challenge was to make sure that visitors would not be bored. It is true that with a subject as complex as the functioning of the European Parliament, it was necessary to find a way to make this visitors’ centre more appealing. That is how the idea to get them to participate emerged, and to get them to live an experience when they come to the Parlamentarium - to live their experience. This is why, for example, it is impossible to predict the length of a visit because it depends on the way visitors experience their visit. If visitors get really involved, the length of the visit will be longer than if they are less interested in the subject. In order to make it easier to participate, an interactive system was therefore created and visitors are able to move along with the help of an iPod. The use of jargon which is too ‘parliamentary’ has also been avoided in order to reduce the feeling of division between citizens and the Parliament. Several projects concerning the development of educational activities aimed more at schools and children are also under way. This is still lacking in this centre. Role playing is already very popular with schools and more projects will be developed in this area.

Q: During our visit, we were surprised at the lack of information concerning the means available to citizens to participate in the elaboration of the EU. It is clear that visitors are very active during their visit, but what has been implemented to show them that they may also participate on a larger scale, i.e. in the process of development of the EU?

R: It is true that in this regard, the means implemented are not yet very developed. The educational programme will soon be created, which is something which must be improved. Organised role playing is not well done in this respect and must be changed in order to show participants the concrete ways in which they may participate in the elaboration of the EU. However, it is already possible for visitors to vote in one of the corridors in the Parlamentarium, which gives them an idea of the mechanisms of participation available to European citizens. In particular, there are questions about immigration, and they can vote and see how many people have voted and what they have voted. As regards waste, for example, many countries have declared that they do not feel concerned. Since the opening, certain problems have therefore appeared. Due to a lack of budget and time, certain sub-projects have not been developed as they should have been, for example for the educational part of the project. However, there are no major changes planned for the next four or five years. Some of the information will have to be translated into all of the languages, otherwise if a member of parliament comes and the brochures are not translated into his or her language, he or she won’t stay for the visit.

Q: Do you think that the Parlamentarium is the right means to improve the knowledge of citizens with respect to the EU and to make up for a certain lack of information, and even for Euroscepticism?

R: This exhibit is probably not the remedy for Euroscepticism but it does allow the public to be well informed. We were victims of criticism accusing us of propaganda because we were supposedly attempting to increase the feeling of belonging to the EU through this exhibit. But this is unfounded, as our aim is above all to inform people.

Q: Do you think there is a direct link between information and more participation in the EU?

R: Yes, I hope so! It is unfortunate that, while the Parlamentarium could be a good means for European members of parliament to increase their visibility and therefore perhaps increase the level of participation in European elections, many of them are only starting to be interested in it.
ACTION THEATRE: THE COLLECTIVE ECHO OF ISOLATED WORDS

For several years now, initiatives such as action theatre have been increasingly called to ‘create’ participation through culture. The authorities in charge of social affairs may encourage these activities and thus appear to grant special power to culture, superior to that of the traditional means of public policies. How do young people from disadvantaged social environments make use of mechanisms of cultural participation? Action theatre allows us to question the power of culture as an ‘instrument’ of social participation.

Paul Biot was one of the initiators of the action theatre movement in Belgium, which he led until 2011. He is consulted regularly by the public authorities, and today is a member of the board of directors of Culture & démocratie1 and was even an advisor for the European Union.

Straight away, he questions the notion of participation, as he feels that ‘to participate means nothing in itself’. He insists on the collective dimension of the term. We cannot participate alone in a project, as this is always done with others. He points out that ‘participation exists only if there is something to do’. We must therefore ask what to participate in or rather ‘what should we do together?’ Finally, it is necessary to know why we participate and to set objectives at the outset.

What is action theatre? What ideas is the project based on? What is its strength? The movement emerged after May 1968, ‘with the will to give a voice to everyone’. This means giving a voice to those who are spoken about more than they are listened to. It is speaking to be heard. How does action theatre achieve this? Theatre is above all a dialogue. Dialogue presupposes that one is not alone. Even an actor alone on stage is in a dialogue with the public ‘who agree to invent the situation’. This is why ‘theatre does not make its public, but the public makes theatre’. Paul Biot goes even further: even silence is part of a dialogue, with ‘the problem being to know how to manage [it], so that people are able to fill it with their lives and feelings’. This is the distinctive feature and strength of this art: everybody participates in it. Action theatre is a collective creation in the broad sense, a living art in which ‘the words of one refer to the words of another, shaking up what I have, coming back and allowing me to go beyond preconceived ideas’. This is what is asked of young participants in action theatre, ‘to work on what each person brings to another’.

This covers the meaning of the word ‘theatre’ in ‘action theatre’. Now we must understand the term ‘action’. As mentioned above, to participate is to know what to do together and for what objective(s). It is therefore acting collectively and giving meaning to our acts. The meaning may be entirely personal - ‘creating a way to think about the issues of tomorrow and position oneself with respect to the world’ - and even very concrete: ‘leading a certain action with a group in order to be seen differently.’ The usefulness of action theatre is to provide lines of thought to question the present and to ‘understand the mechanisms behind things’. Actors share these thoughts with their audience and this is how the action persists beyond the theatrical moment.

Let us now discuss the practice of action theatre. The project naturally addresses ‘those who perhaps have the least chance to be able to express themselves’, but it is not exclusively intended for disadvantaged groups. Young disadvantaged people ‘are perhaps more daring [than adults], have less to lose, and are still at a point where they do not want to be calmed or collapse too quickly’.

‘Action theatre only has value if the project belongs to people from start to finish.’ This is the unfailing principle which gives meaning to the initiative and which makes it different from traditional theatre. This involves a will, regardless of its intensity and nature. Action theatre therefore encourages participation in its most authentic form. This particular postulate may conflict with institutional definitions (with predefined purposes) of participation. Paul Biot tells us about the case of a workshop requested by a local authority (CPAS) for a group of unemployed people. By imposing its objective to motivate the group, CPAS caused the project to fail due to an absence of motivation. It was necessary for the leader to ignore the instructions in order for the workshop to come to life.

1 ASBL working towards combating ‘the cultural deficit of our democratic society, and the democratic deficit which characterises our cultural life’.
Hence the necessity to allow young people to take charge of their entire project in the smallest detail, with the leader simply playing the role of revealer. It is thanks to this autonomous process that action theatre is able to help: ‘When confronted with isolation, you may find a group. With respect to the destruction you feel surrounds you, you say to yourself: but no, I do exist. According to an African proverb, “you can be alone, but you cannot exist alone.”’ To exist means to be in the gaze of others: ‘This time, people participate in your desire to express yourself and be heard. And this is how dialogue increases confidence.’ This is the main aim of action theatre: to allow participants to develop confidence in themselves, in order not to accept an uncomfortable situation and to become aware of the scope of possibilities available to them.

Action theatre is not performed by actors but by people who reveal their true selves on stage. Everyone has something theatrical in them: ‘There is a whole human science, unsuspected abilities and a wealth of inventiveness which everyone has but which in certain very difficult situations - and this is where the notion of disadvantaged comes into play - are discovered more easily.’

In conclusion, Paul Biot speaks to us of the fundamental dimension of confidence: ‘Self-confidence is above all confidence in others. And confidence comes by doing things together.’

CROWDFUNDING: GETTING THE PUBLIC TO PARTICIPATE IN THE PRODUCTION OF AN ALBUM

While the music industry is faced with a crisis due to illegal and free music downloads on the internet, participative financing websites have been created whose distinctive feature is to restructure cultural participation, both for artists - who now have access to alternative platforms in order to become known and to seek financing - and for consumers, who now have the possibility to finance artistic projects, as well as to participate in their elaboration, although in a limited manner.

This interview with Florence de Launoit (co-founder of AKAMUSIC, the first Belgian virtual platform for participative financing dedicated to music) shows how the participation of fans in the creation of an album generates new enthusiasm and allows these websites to survive despite the crisis.

Q: What are the motivations of people who finance artists?

R: Everything depends on the profile of the producer. On the one hand there are those who are contacted by the people around them, who already know the person and his or her music, and who wish to help out of kindness and expect nothing in return. These people then create a snowball effect towards other people. On the other hand, there are those who may call the ‘unearthers’, who have very different motivations. There
are producers who are on the lookout and wish to find hidden gems, and therefore rely on feelings. Some of them are ‘initiators’, i.e. they get involved in a project from the beginning because they like it. There are also ‘followers’ who get involved in a project at the end because they do not want to wait months for something to happen. Finally, there is another category of financers: those who base themselves on speculation rather than on taste. They finance a project as though they were buying shares in the stock market, and consequently are disappointed when it is not as profitable as they would have liked.

Q: In your opinion, what do producers get out of it?

R: I think that they find it fun to participate in a project because music has always made people dream. It interests them and they are curious to know how things work behind the scenes in a project. Of course, artists may keep their producers up to date if they are well organised. Many artists do this. It is usually a two-way exchange, which is what makes it fun. A lot of people do it to find out how a music project takes place.

Q: How do the interactions between funders and artists function in general? Which channels do artists use to communicate with funders in order to make their projects known?

R: There is an email system on the website which allows artists to communicate with producers at all times regarding the progress of their project, album covers, concerts, etc. A regular connection is therefore established between the two stakeholders in the crowdfunding system, who are almost always present in social media - such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter - which are essential nowadays for communication and for making oneself known. As regards the perspective of making oneself known in order to attract financing, word of mouth plays a major role: artists first contact people in their immediate circle. If they give concerts they talk about it, and this creates an undeniable snowball effect. Several people visit the website because they have been contacted beforehand by people in their immediate circle - and possibly from wider social circles. They therefore finance out of kindness towards the person they wish to support. But we must not forget the financers whom we could qualify as ‘unearthers’, who visit the website not because they have been invited by people they know, but simply because they are passionate about music: they have visited the homepage of the website to see which artists have been the most active, and thus most likely to receive financing.

Q: Do you feel that participative financing has a future?

R: Participative financing has a future in almost all domains because this method of financing gives momentum to many people who would not have obtained financing through traditional channels. But I think people should be aware that it is patronage. It should not be done with an aim to receive a return on investment like traders or bankers.
These interviews were carried out by students in their third year of a bachelor’s programme in information and communication, political science and sociology and anthropology at Saint-Louis University, Brussels, in the framework of a multidisciplinary research workshop under the supervision of Marie Dufrasne and Geoffroy Patriarche. The English translation was provided by Jane Corrigan with the support of Saint-Louis University, Brussels.