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Flirtation, desire, and cut-glass biscuit barrels: Forms of expertise in *Antiques Road Trip*

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at the development of broadcast talk in those reality TV genres associated with shopping and negotiation, focusing on Antiques Road Trip. In a context in which reality TV has become associated with judgement and rancour, we are concerned with the balance between expertise and ordinariness, and exploring the place of conversational and interactional styles we have come to associate with "sociability" and the maintenance of "face", both in terms of pleasure and spectacle and providing a tactical basis for on-screen negotiation. We argue that these performances differ from conventional discourses of expertise as arbiters of specialist insight and market value, and offer new performances of expertise, based on a tactical mix of professional capital and sociability.

1. Introduction: shopping and negotiation

Antiques Road Trip is just one of many antiques-based television shows that have become a feature of television schedules for over 30 years in the UK and elsewhere. However, with the exception of the long-running BBC production *Antiques Roadshow* and its US version (Bonner, 2003; Clouse, 2008; Hall, 1999), they have received relatively little academic attention. The proliferation and longevity of such programmes may be linked to the long-term popularity of antiques, and certainly with the more recent rise of "thrift shopping" as a marker of cultural capital (DeLong et al., 2005). From interior-design-led antique shops to car boot sales, what has emerged is a second hand goods sector that spans a price range from the negligible to the extravagant. At the higher end of this price range, the commodities available for purchase carry a "provenance" that combines monetary value with the prestige of scarcity, whilst the lower end seeks out hidden nuggets and curiosities from amongst discarded junk and bric-a-brac, often at modest cost. All told, this produces a small-scale mercantile sector that places an emphasis on consumer creativity and participation, in which some shoppers will search for goods that have an aesthetic, practical or collectable value to themselves, while others seek to make a profit by re-selling hitherto undervalued goods for a higher price.

Programming based around antiques shopping is therefore positioned to draw upon what Turner (2010) and Thornborrow (2015) identify as a new prominence in public and popular engagement in broadcasting. As Postrel (2003: 9) puts it, the activities surrounding antiques shopping forego a "one best way" attitude for a more fluid and disjointed shopping aesthetic, where the pleasures in identifying an item and securing a deal outweighs the prestige and ritual of the corporate retail setting (Miller, 1998: 58). In keeping with the imperatives of reality-based broadcasting, the cluttered intimacy of the antiques market produces an overtly personal shopping experience with extended interaction between seller and purchaser, including negotiation on price.

Of course, a programme with negotiation at its core has to remain attentive to the status of the exchanges that unfold as acceptable encounters, and Brown and Levinson (1987) theory of politeness helps us understand how competitive interactions are managed in broadcasting and elsewhere. Brown and Levinson (1978: 55) maintain "patterns of message construction… are part of the very stuff that social relationships are made of" and their analysis of this shows the "dimensions by which individuals manage to relate to others in particular ways". Specifically, Brown and Levinson suggest that all participants in an interaction have an interest in maintaining two types of face: the "positive face" desire

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to be liked and be socially compliant, and the "negative face" wish to avoid threat or imposition.

However, a great deal of the research into television discourse emphasises a widespread refusal to maintain face and exercise politeness. Palmer (2004) emphasises the role of reality television in highlighting misconduct and poor behaviour in order to aid in the "government" of the troublesome. Other authors have highlighted the decline of civility across media genres, ranging from the "spectacular incivility" of reality TV (Lorenzo-Dus, 2009: 97) to the broader rise of belligerence as entertainment and discursive mechanism (Higgins and Smith, 2017). In this article, in contrast with the rancorous tone of much television discourse, we will see the various ways in which expert contestants perform sociability and use such tactics as conversational flirtation to manage face, while negotiating price and calling upon specialist forms of know-how.

2. From evaluation to gameshow: the rise of *Antiques Road Trip*

Antiques have become a matter of popular interest, and this has been reflected in the development of dedicated television programmes. In a spectacle of instructive revelation, the long-running *Antiques Roadshow* (BBC, 1979-present) offers members of the public the chance to have their antique possessions assessed by specialists in front of the cameras. This educational drive has extended into merchandising, with BBC Books issuing a number of pocket guides in the mid-1990s. Over the programme's lifetime, the rhetoric of value has shifted from advice on replacement for home insurance to the likely yield at auction; appealing to an interest in the generation of profit also picked by programmes such as *Bargain Hunt* (BBC, 2000-present) and *Dickenson's Real Deal* (ITV, 2006).

In its own focus on monetary yield, *Antiques Road Trip* (BBC, 2010-present) is an extension of this family. In the programme, two experts (usually auctioneers or antique dealers in their own right) are given £200 apiece and a vintage sports car in which to travel, with instructions to drive around a specified area of Britain, purchasing antiques along the way. They then try to grow their respective kitties by submitting their goods to be sold at auction. Their end-of-week tallies are used to declare a "winner"; although in the ethos of public service broadcasting, the profits are given to the BBC charity Children in Need. As another concession to the programme's public service setting, the experts are also shown breaking off their journey to visit various museums to explore some facet of local history, usually associated with products that they might come across in the antique shops they visit en-route. There are also occasional *Celebrity Antiques Road Trip* series where a media personality is paired with one of the established experts.

Rather than members of the public featured in a more conventional gameshow, *Antiques Road Trip* therefore pits antiques specialists against one another in a contest around buying cheaply and then selling on. Each half-hour show devotes twenty minutes to the pursuit and purchase of goods and ten minutes to the auction, producing a main focus on the "shopping" aspect of the game. In Scannell's (1991) terms, this extended focus on the purchase of the goods provides the stage for a "doubly-articulated" performance, with the expert shoppers explaining to the overhearing audience the merits of the goods under consideration, followed by the usually protracted process of negotiating a price with the seller. Superficially, this seems to offer viewers the spectacle of negotiation, or at the very least a lesson in perceiving the ticket price on goods in antique shops as a mere starting point. This negotiability, with implied reduction in seller profit, is perhaps the main reason why such shows never visit charity shops, where such a reduction in seller profit would be morally questionable to say the least.

3. Forms of celebrity-expertise

By now, it will be clear that these different sorts of antique programme call upon various performances of expertise. In a study of the use of expert-academics in the media, Fenton et al. (1998) argue that experts are positioned as detached from the priorities and expressive worlds of ordinary people: often a target for the populist contempt of the audience and programme host. This contrasts quite markedly from the construction of expertise on programmes such as *Antiques Roadshow*. In a discussion of the US version, Hall (1999) emphasises the narrative suspension built upon the provenance and worth of the articles, defined and animated by the status-heavy, qualified assessors offering glimpses of their "domain of knowledge". In the UK form too, Bonner (2003: 190) describes a succession of micro detective stories with the expert as the hero sleuth; each tale setting out with the implied question "What is this object?", before culminating in the announcement of its monetary "worth". Across the format, Clouse (2008: 3) describes the mastery exhibited as a ritual of "dramatic tension" after which the truth of an object is "revealed".

While the ridiculed "boffins" described by Fenton et al. (1998) differ from the bardic respect accorded to *Antiques Roadshow* experts, there are nonetheless parallels in the discursive distance between expertise and ordinariness. In partial contrast to this formal expertise of assessment and evaluation, the performance of know-how in *Antiques Road Trip* accords more with the approachability that Langer (1981: 356) ascribes to the "television personality". In terms of performance, this is a characterisation that opts for familiarity over the exceptional, and prefers ordinariness over extraordinariness. While experts across antiques programmes present forms of expert-celebrity, such that they are individuals that combine professional standing with considerable and on-going media visibility, *Antiques Road Trip* produces a form of expert-celebrity around an "ideology of intimacy" (Nunn and Biressi, 2010), joining specialist credibility with a claim to the authentic and the ordinary, including performances of "unpredictability and spontaneity" (Enli, 2015: 73).

It is one thing to understand the status of expert discourse and performance in these programmes, but in order to see how this is sustained and managed across different types of interaction, it is worth drawing upon Goffman's notion of the "frame". For Goffman (1986) the frame amounts to the underlying, context-specific rules of an exchange in a given setting; be it the purchase of a newspaper, a job interview or a light-hearted exchange of insults. However, far from an "engrossable" frame in which the participants do not reflect on the terms of their involvement (Goffman, 1986: 346), this is a frame that foregrounds the skill of performance. As Goffman (1981) demonstrates in his work on radio talk, frames therefore offer an essential insight into the organisation of broadcast talk (Thornborrow, 2015). However, in the majority of broadcast discourse, the production of "fresh talk" – that is, talk which appears unrehearsed – requires what Goffman (1986) calls a "key" change (a shift in tone or stance, within the frame). Lorenzo-Dus (2009: 41) argues that fresh talk often offers a sideways glimpse of the "personal experience" of the speaker, aside from their professional function. Conversely, across our examples the production of fresh talk from accomplished experts is at the very centre of the frame.

However, talking over the images of the competing experts, the voiceover provides a parallel frame of expertise in *Antiques Road Trip*, providing additional contextual and historical intelligence. This is provided by former Sotheby's director and presenter of