



Participative Chinese audiences – A case study of the reality show ‘Switching Spaces’



Kuo Huang

Centre for International Communication Studies, China International Publishing Group, Beijing, China

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Switching Spaces
Reality show
Chinese audience
Audience participation

ABSTRACT

This paper studies how Chinese audiences participate in reality shows – more specifically, in the show *Switching Spaces* – and how they manifest that participation. A map of patterns and degrees of audience participation is drawn from cross-analysis of variables such as age, gender, educational background, occupation, place of residence, viewing environment and habit, and media literacy. The study finds that audience members are discursive by nature and that self-reflection on participation is closely related to media literacy. It also finds that audience participation can be behavioural and/or mental, and the degree of participative involvement cannot be judged merely on the audience members' actions, but also on their expectations, gratifications and self-reflection.

© 2013 Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research. Published by Elsevier GmbH. All rights reserved.

The rapid development of media technologies sets up a converged media platform which facilitates an interactive, participatory and community culture. The world-wide popularity of reality TV shows is a feature of such a culture. This paper investigates the participation of members of a Chinese audience in a reality TV programme and identifies audience participation as a form of informal role enactment.

Despite being the largest sample in the world, Chinese audiences have not been studied either extensively or intensively. The first Chinese audience studies were conducted back in 1982 yet they still remain at the stage of drawing on fragments of western theories and methodologies. Audience members are presented as ratings and objects in reports, and their voices remain inaudible and ignored. This study aims to help Chinese audiences stand up and be counted rather than be mere objects of market research.

This is a case study of the audience of a reality show broadcast on CCTV-2 called *Switching Spaces*. The programme has cultivated a stable, loyal and reciprocal audience community over the eight years it has been broadcast. This study surveyed 294 audience members in Beijing and Shanghai and then interviewed (in-depth) 18 representative audience members, 7 media experts and 1 programme director.

1. Description of the programme *Switching Spaces*

Switching Spaces, a decorating/redecorating television programme, launched on CCTV-2 on 3 April 2005, is currently aired

on Saturdays at 18:30; it is then repeated on Thursdays at 16:53 and Sundays at 14:05 on CCTV-2, and at 17:55 on CCTV-1.¹ This 1-h life style programme, with reality show characteristics, shows how two couples redecorate one room in each other's houses in 48 h. Each couple is offered the services of a professional interior designer/decorator, a team of workers, a budget of 10,000 RMB for material,² and a bonus of 8000 RMB for household electrical appliances.³ In 2005, *Switching Spaces* was awarded the accolade of China's "top lifestyle programme" by *New Weekly*: "Being the first decorating reality show in mainland China, it avoids unimaginative imitation and Sinicization, but enriches the programme with Chinese features, such as 'treasure case', 'material hunting' and 'junk transformation'. It was the fastest growing programme in 2005."⁴ (Sina, 2006).

Switching Spaces emerged as a response to China's economic and cultural transformation and the changing audience demands it engendered (Guan, 2006, p. 85). A socialist market economy began operating in China in the 1990s, boosting a leasehold market for residential property. Since most properties are leased in fairly basic conditions, the demand for housing drives the craze for home decoration among Chinese leasehold homeowners (Zhang, 2009, p. 180). *Switching Spaces* meets this demand. The programme, which focuses on topical aspects of people's lifestyles in contemporary

¹ The official website is <http://jingji.cntv.cn/program/jiaohuankongjian/01/index.shtml>.

² It used to be 8000 RMB.

³ A bonus to cover the cost of household electrical appliances the homeowners want to purchase.

⁴ Translation by author.

E-mail address: mishuangkuo@yahoo.com

China, has adopted a reality TV format to communicate with its audience (Li, 2008, p. 5) and provides audience members with references from the experience of their peers, based on the former's expectations and perceptions.

Switching Spaces is a modified clone of the American programme *Trading Spaces*,⁵ which is in turn a modified clone of the British programme *Changing Rooms*.⁶ The Chinese format maintains the same features as its foreign counterparts, but some differences have been introduced to adapt it to the values of the local audience, cultural traditions and China's media regulations.

- (1) The programme portrays team work, harmonious relationships, true love and an ideal life as opposed to emotional conflict, contradictory opinions and the seamy side of personalities and lives. It aims to "help the audience rediscover the happiness of home decoration, and to get along with one another harmoniously, with shared understandings" (interview with IB-02-M⁷, 8 June 2009), to be consistent with Chinese media policy.
- (2) It emphasizes mission accomplishment rather than participants "doing it themselves". Most of the work is done by the workers⁸ although whenever possible this is not screened. Participants only perform jobs that require very little skill and simple tasks such as pasting (Zhang, 2010a), sewing (Zhang, 2010b) and painting (Zhang, 2010c).
- (3) It promotes frugality and environmental friendliness. In the section on "junk transformation", the participants help the designers to recycle castoffs into useful objects such as paper baskets (Zhang, 2010a), wind-bells (Zhang, 2010b) and statues (Zhang, 2010c).
- (4) The programme aims to be an "information and education provider" by offering "knowledge of, and ideas for, home decoration" to its audience (interview with IB-02-M). The section on the "diagnosis of spaces" identifies problem areas in the houses that require redecoration, "material hunting" examines the texture, utility and price of decorating materials, and "the decorating climate station" introduces top designers' classical works and discusses their merits.
- (5) The programme is filmed according to story lines rather than faithfully recording what happens during the process to "... guarantee [the] spectacular" (interview with IB-02-M). The participants' stories, based on "behind the scenes" events, are added to the programme (Xu & Guo, 2008, p. 37). Most episodes end with an emotional finale replete either with joy or, for the less successful, with tears.

Switching Spaces offers its audiences a "collection of services, entertainment, participation, exhibitions, emotions and dramas" (Li, 2008, p. 7). It follows two parallel narratives – feasibility and feelings – to facilitate "the process and suspense in the programme, and [the] demands and emotions of the audiences" (Zhang, 2010d, p. 73). *Switching Spaces* defines itself as the designer and decorator of a home rather than simply a house. "Love among family, spouse and friends" (Xu, 2008, p. 48) is emphasized to turn "a place of residence" into "an accommodation of love, happiness, and

harmony", in accordance with the core values of Confucian culture (Zhu, 2008, p. 246). The Master of Ceremonies (MC), Wang Xiaoqian, who was formerly a hostess of *Service for You*, impresses the audiences with her "relaxing, vivacious, natural and intimate" hosting style (Zhao, 2006, p. 23), which are ideally suited to the role of "moderator, narrator and facilitator" of the programme (Zhang, 2010d, pp. 72–73).

- (1) *Switching Spaces* provides channels through which audience members can participate. The programme is not filmed in a studio so no studio audience is involved. The personalities participating in the programme are the hostess, two couples of home owners, two interior designers, two teams of workers,⁹ a reporter,¹⁰ and a recommended designer.

By the end of September 2013, *Switching Spaces* had aired around 430 episodes, providing participation opportunities for over 2000 audience members and approximately 1000 interior designers. Routine applications to take part in the show must be sent by email which limits the number of applicants to those who have access to the Internet. Although the programme organizes competitive elections in different regions, in addition to the routine application (Zhang, 2010d, p. 74), the cities involved are either "political, economic, ... cultural centres of a province, ... places of historical interest" (Wu, 2007, p.48) or sites of current affairs (Zhang, 2009a). Most of the participants who also represent "the target audience of the programme" (Wu, 2007, p. 48) are young "social elites and urban professionals" (Wu, 2007, p. 49); only occasionally are rural dwellers (Zhang, 2010e) and middle-aged audiences (Zhang, 2009b) recruited in order to "balance the picture" for the purposes of "[a] harmonious society" (interview with IB-02-M).

Switching Spaces has a stable audience rating of more than 0.3% on average (Zhang, 2010d, p. 72) and cultivates a community of loyal audience members. Audience members keep searching earlier episodes for references or call the programme to contact their favourite designers (Zhu, 2008, p. 246). Some audience members, who emulate the programmes' redecoration methods, may redecorate their houses several times (Deng, 2008, p. 37; Zhu, 2008; p. 246). *Switching Spaces* offers audience members opportunities to take part in the programme in their social roles (e.g., designers and house owners). Seduced by images of a "handsome prize and instant fame" (Wu, 2007, p. 49), most audience members see the reality show as a programme that "balances and solves the contradictions embedded in Chinese socio-cultural structures" (Wu, 2010, p. 85) through "dreams coming true—changing one's life in 48 h with limited funds and by oneself" (Wu, 2010, p. 85). While the programme minimizes competition and elimination, it popularizes happy and harmonious living starting from a pleasant dwelling space crafted using one's own hands, which further contributes to the type of social harmony advocated by the government (Wu, 2007, p. 49).

2. Audience demographics

Switching Spaces targets "all audience members who are planning to decorate, who are decorating, or who have already decorated their homes; who embrace life and love family" (interview with IB-02-M). This specifically includes "... urban females" (Zhang, 2010d, p. 73), "... well-educated, young and middle-aged decorating information seekers" (Xu, 2008, p. 47) and "the rising metropolitan elites in Chinese society who are financially

⁵ Aired from 2000 to 2008 on TLC cable channels and on Discovery Home in America. The programme was hosted by Alex McLeod in 2000 and by Paige Davis thereafter. Available at <http://tlc.discovery.com/tv/trading-spaces/>.

⁶ Aired from 1996 to 2004 on BBC in the United Kingdom and originally hosted by Carol Smillie. Available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/homes/tv_and_radio/cr_index.shtml.

⁷ IB-02-M refers to media practitioner interview respondent No.01 in Beijing. IB – interview respondent in Beijing, 02 – the second respondent, M – media practitioner.

⁸ The workers and designers are offered to both couples: this is shown on the screen as one of the rules of the show.

⁹ The workers are not shown as identifiable participants.

¹⁰ Her role is to report and highlight the work of recommended interior designers in "the decorating climate station" section.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/141257>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/141257>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)