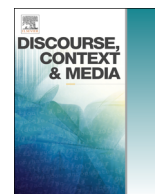




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Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Discourse, Context and Media

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/dcm

Citizens as experts in a Greek political audience discussion program



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ARTICLE INFO

Available online 30 April 2016

Keywords:

Broadcast talk
 Citizen participation
 Audience discussion programs
 Rhetorical strategies

ABSTRACT

This article sets out to explore the type of discourses produced by participating citizens in a Greek political audience discussion program, capitalizing on different aspects of the economic crisis that has afflicted Greece since 2010. Departing from the dichotomy between abstract, expert talk and the ordinary discourse of personal experience postulated in the 1990s, and the subsequent transformations of 'ordinariness' in current broadcast output, this paper examines the situated performances of citizens in a concrete political broadcast format at a particular moment in time. This moment is characterized by economic crisis, as the overarching societal condition which legitimizes ordinary expertise by endowing citizens with increased conversational rights, compared to what is typical of citizen participation in political panel discussions with an audience in other European contexts, and the entitlement to engage in authoritative forms of talk. By drawing on discourse analysis and conversation analysis of sequences of TV talk, the analysis unveils the rhetorical strategies, as well as the evidential devices and forms of knowledge projected in citizen talk. Finally, the article calls attention to the implications of these forms of discursive participation for empowering the role of citizens in political communication, public dialog and democratic debate.

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1. Introduction

Since the early 1990s, the audience or 'ordinary people' have been given a regular place in the studio as active participants in audience discussion programs. Participatory or 'access' media genres challenged the traditional divide between program and audience, expert and laity (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994: 36; Fairclough, 1995). In early 21st century, additional non-fiction broadcast formats, such as the reality show, became established television genres. The conventions of these programs are centered around the discursive performance of 'ordinary' or 'real' people, and increasingly blur the distinction between the private and the public (Montgomery and Thornborrow, 2010). Accordingly, the increasing use of vox pops in both news and media event broadcasting; the advent of the 'citizen reporter' and of 'user-generated material' in news broadcasts, all point to the growing orientation towards a rhetoric of authenticity, sincerity and personalization across different forms of broadcast communication (ibid).

In the audience discussion program, hosts may conduct some kind of public inquiry into a topical issue, enlisting the help of concerned lay people and relevant experts. The inquiry is an effective way of demanding accountability from representatives of established power about their actions and policy decisions, examining the validity of complaints so as to attribute blame where it is due (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994: 135–136). This form of public inquiry into political, social and economic issues of concern to Greek citizens is at the heart of 'STON ENIKO', the political panel discussion with a studio audience examined in this article.

In the next sections, I discuss the conceptual evolution of the notion of 'ordinariness' as regards the participation of non-elite participants in the media and media programming, and examine the discourse of citizens – members of the studio audience in 'STON ENIKO'. Through discourse analysis of citizens' contributions, informed by conversation analysis of interactional sequences among citizens, the host, and the panel of politicians, the analysis will uncover the rhetorical and argumentative strategies deployed by citizens, as well as the evidential devices and forms of knowledge projected in citizen talk.

The article aims to explore the implications of these forms of discursive participation for empowering the role of citizens, and,

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thus, inform the discussion on the democratic potential of citizens' contribution to current political programming.

2. 'Ordinary people' on television: an overview

For Livingstone and Lunt (1994), audience discussion programs effectively defy formal expertize through the "mediated legitimation of ordinary experience" (:101). This is because the lay person lays claim to an alternative – albeit revalorized – epistemology, discarding conceptions of the ordinary person as incompetent or ignorant. In contrast to what Habermas (1987, 1990) designates as the legitimation crisis of modernity, namely an increasing separation of expertize from ordinary (common sense) knowledge, Livingstone and Lunt (1994: 102) argue that audience discussion programs celebrate ordinary epistemology by questioning the deference traditionally due to experts through their separation from the life-world and their incorporation into the system, and asserting instead the worth of the common man.

Accordingly, audience discussions challenge traditional rules of rhetoric and argumentation. While mini-speeches and expert lectures are dominant forms of expert talk in the genre, story-telling is a key rhetorical form for lay speakers (see also Lorenzo Dus, 2009). Stories of personal experience provide evidence that ground claims, while experts develop arguments mainly through descriptive or expository discourse (by providing warrants, qualifiers and rebuttals). In addition, experts' modality choices and the linguistic packaging of their statements contribute to the enactment of their authority and superior knowledge on screen (see Patrona, 2005). Finally, stories of personal experience are the discursive means through which experts are held accountable to the laity.

By tracing the historical development of the forms of engagement of ordinary people with the media, Joanna Thornborrow has written extensively on the use of stories as interactional resources for ordinary people "having their say" in talk show discourse (Thornborrow, 1997, 2001, 2002, 2015). On the whole, 'ordinary people' is a practical way of labeling participants who are not media professionals (e.g. journalists), politicians or, generally, public figures. Thornborrow, however, stresses the need to critically re-conceptualize the concept of 'ordinary' in the light of the 'authoring' role played by the media in the construction of ordinary identities and the various practices of pre-planning and semi-scripting ordinary interactions on screen. Thus, the very notion of ordinariness has been questioned in the light of media practices that help shape identities of the common person so as to fit with media agendas and production aims.

Overall, the talk show genre has been viewed as a context for public participation and debate, a locus for the expression and exploration of emotions (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994), and also for the expression of voices that are otherwise excluded from the media (Gamson, 1998). Scholars have argued that talk shows empower ordinary people by allowing them to be heard. At the same time, this benefit is constrained by the fact that they are often ridiculed and thereby exploited while they are speaking (ibid). The democratizing potential of this semi-institutional type of discourse has been questioned in the light of (socio-culturally specific) patterns of asymmetric conversational control in the discursive positioning of lay participants (see Hamo (2006) about Israeli prime-time talk shows). Also, ordinary participants have been found to have different discursive styles, and

these styles are related to differential status and power (Simon-Vandenberg, 2004). Discursive variation has been documented even among storytellers (ibid).

Other TV formats structured around citizen participation are the 'citizen interview', a structured question-answer scheme taking place in a studio, where members of the public question politicians on various topics (Sanz Sabido, 2013; Lorenzo-Dus, 2011). New media technologies have increasingly allowed for the online participation of citizens in broadcasts (interactivity via digital platforms, (Macdonald, 2007; Thornborrow, 2015)). An example of this type of engagement is the 'multiplatform election campaign interview', including broadcast questions by citizens addressed directly to politicians, and citizens asking questions to politicians in an online chat (Ekström and Eriksson, 2013). These formats fall within a model of mediatized democracy seeking to engage the public in the political process (Sanz Sabido, 2013: 96).

On their part, audience members may be shown to display knowledge in an intellectually competent, well-prepared manner; for instance, by using prefatory statements that provide contextual information for their questions. Some of them even indicate during their initial turns that they had prepared themselves before these mediated performances by studying specialized material (laws, news articles, etc.) (Sanz Sabido, 2013: 97–98). Citizens engage in different forms of situated expertize, such as opinion-giving and argument in political panel discussions and debates, such as BBC's *Question Time* (Thornborrow, 2015), while other citizen-interviewers introduce questions by referring to their life experiences (Sanz Sabido, 2013: 99). Finally, citizens may hold politicians to account by "performing adversarialness" (ibid: 99). Similarly, Lorenzo-Dus (2011: 217) has found a "complex combination of expert and lay discourses" in citizens' performance as interviewers.

Overall, there has been considerable debate regarding citizen participation in the broadcast and online media, in what has been described as a crisis of political communication (Blumler and Coleman, 2010). Skeptics assert that the democratic potential of interactive media is partly unexploited (Domingo et al., 2008), as journalists still control the agendas and the various activity forms (Cottle, 2002), while the public is overwhelmingly spoken for but is rarely witnessed to have a voice of its own (Coleman and Karen, 2010: 122). A further criticism is that citizen voices and politicians often fail to "connect constructively with one another". People voices are often integrated within traditional journalistic discourses, while citizens and politicians rarely speak directly to each other (Ekström and Eriksson, 2013: 184).

Despite the acknowledged constraints imposed on citizens' performance in these mediated formats, Sanz Sabido (2013) recognizes their democratic value as a space where citizens have direct access to political discourse, and can engage in face-to-face conversation with politicians. However, participatory or access media do not entail more powerful positions for citizens (Ekström and Eriksson, 2013). An example of institutional control in 'citizen interview' programs is journalists' orientation towards the 'one-question-per-turn' norm for citizen contributions (Lorenzo-Dus, 2011). This is because these media formats are not designed for the participants but for the general audience, and are intended to display a strong connection, not so much between ordinary citizens and politics, but, rather, between journalism and public opinion (Ekström and Eriksson, 2013: 201–202).

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