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Overcoming discursive prohibitions in participatory media: A case study on talk about homosexuality in Tanzania



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ABSTRACT

Novel genres of participatory media often criticized as info- or edutainment are regularly used in developing countries for pursuing liberal ideologies. Conversation and discourse analysis applied to unedited footage of such genre from East Africa reveals how its format and organization introduce participants and audience to the political role of active citizens. A detailed analysis of a selected episode on homosexuality—a crime and a subject of legal censorship in the region—investigates how televised media may contribute to changing discursive norms. By strategically shifting footing and generating a vivid televisual conflict, the hosts open up a discursive space that allows for the transgression of discursive prohibitions without jeopardizing the legal status of the show.

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1. Introduction

Media genres with high public participation that aim at informing, educating, and entertaining their audience are often criticized as pseudo-democratic *infotainment*, that is, a hybrid of information and entertainment (Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Thussu, 2007). These formats—varying from interviews, to talk shows, to reality television—however, are regularly selected by development organizations as a tool for liberalization in target societies (Thompson, 2013; Thussu, 2007). Wood (2001, p. 66), for example, points out the democratic potential of these genres, but acknowledges that studies on how these forms of talk are produced and stage-managed are scarce. This paper investigates an instance of such hybrid televised media format—that educates the audience while simultaneously instigating a highly oppositional, and thus entertaining discussion—called *Minibuzz*, from East Africa.

Broadcasting discourse has been a major focus of conversation analysis studies as a type of institutional talk (S. E. Clayman, 2004; S. Clayman and Heritage, 2002; Drew and Heritage, 1992; Heritage and Clayman, 2010; Hutchby, 2005; Ilie, 2001; Montgomery, 2007; Myers, 2004; Thornborrow, 2015; Tolson, 2001, 2006). The goal of analyzing institutional talk is to reveal interactional practices with which specific institutional contexts are constructed and managed, and with which the 'institutional imperatives originating from outside of interaction are evidenced and made real and enforceable to participants' (Heritage, 2005, p. 109). From this perspective, participants of news interviews, for example, enact specific institutional roles through a turn-taking system where one party, the interviewer, has the right to ask questions, while the other party, the interviewee, is expected to answer the questions. Clayman and Heritage (2002) note that the interviewer is not in the position of absolute institutional power, but is rather constrained by the professional journalistic norms of *neutrality* and *adversarialness*. These norms ensure that the produced content is relevant to the overheard and overlooked audience.

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The extent that broadcasting interactions conform to these norms also depends on media genres that vary significantly from traditional news interviews to panel discussions, from talk shows to reality programs. In an overview of historical development of the broadcasting genres the US context, Clayman (2004) points to the tendency of transitioning from a narrative type of news delivery to a more interaction-centered news production. Technological advances that allow broadcasting in settings beyond a traditional studio can account for such transformations in the format; another explanation may be the increasing demands for participatory democracy. Hutchby (2011), for example, analyzes the trend for journalists' non-neutral behavior when interviewing high-ranked politicians. A journalist in this context is expected to pose argumentative questions so as to pursue accountability from the respondent. In so doing, the journalist acts as a representative of the general public, its 'socio-political advocate' (Hutchby, 2011, p. 349). Blivitch (2009) suggests that in the US context non-neutrality and even impoliteness became characteristic of news interviews as a strategically used identity practice and a stance taking device. A news interview genre of panel interviews where more than one participant has the chance to voice her opinion is particularly characterized by the pursuit of conflict (Clayman, 2004; Clayman and Heritage, 2002). While the interviewer has means for retaining the role of a formally neutral mediator, the conflict instigation succeeds through the selection of a relevant next speaker and turn design.

Beyond the news interview genre, the professional imperative for the objective mediation yields to the demands of televisuality (Wood, 2001, p. 66). Studies on daytime talk shows (e.g. Hutchby, 2001; Myers, 2001; Thornborrow, 2007, 2015; Tolson, 2006; Wood, 2001) and call-in radio programs (e.g. Hutchby, 1996) point out that a host—a counterpart of the interviewer in the news interview genre—seeks to construct and maintain a lively conflict among the participants. In addition to managing the floor, the host may also be actively engaged in co-constructing conflict by reformulating and at times strategically 'misformulating' (Wood, 2001, pp. 78–81) contributions made by participants.

Building on this research, this paper investigates a novel media format in East Africa, particularly represented by *Minibuzz*—a televised show that combines the genre characteristics of news interview and talk show. In the following sections I demonstrate how hosts position participants, recruited from ordinary passengers, in the role of experts and introduce giving opinion as a nation-building practice. By so doing, show hosts are able to strategically shift footing, that is, the affiliation with a particular real or hypothetical speaker (Goffman, 1979; M. H. Goodwin, 1990), and instigate an entertaining conflict among the participants. Ultimately, the skillful organization of participation frameworks (Goffman, 1974; C. Goodwin and Goodwin, 2004) allows the hosts and the participants to address topics normally sanctioned by local discursive norms and legal censorship.

2. *Minibuzz* format and the data¹

*Minibuzz*² is a popular East African televised opinion program launched by the non-governmental organization *Made in Africa TV* to 'catalyse change'.³ The program is conceptualized as a public space providing 'voice for voiceless'—where ordinary citizens can express their opinion to be heard by the general audience and national political leaders. Since 2010, television crews in Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania board a mobile studio to collect public opinions about most pressing political, economical and societal issues.⁴ A 2014 assessment study found that 26% of the population have watched the show in order to access relevant information on par with news programs (Twaweza, 2014). As of 2016, the *Minibuzz* webpage proudly states that the show viewership has been increasing and that "[e]very dollar invested in the *Minibuzz* program returns an average 30.7 dollars of social value." (Made in Africa TV, 2015), which suggests that *Minibuzz* is an important informational resource for local communities beyond mere entertainment.

The footage for each episode is recorded in the morning and then edited into a 30-min video for the evening broadcast on the same day. In the process of editing, most of the hosts' utterances are cut out creating the impression that participants had open access to the floor and eagerly volunteered to speak. The hosts' role in eliciting passengers' engagement is, however, crucial. Based on the analysis of unedited footage of *Minibuzz* from Tanzania, I will show how the hosts construct contextually situated identity roles for bus passengers that entitle them to active participation framed as their contribution to nation building. I will turn then to an episode on homosexual rights and discuss how this participation framework allows the hosts navigating talk around taboo topics. Since homosexuality, including the promotion of homosexuality, is a crime in Tanzania, as in many other African countries (Library of Congress, 2014), the *Minibuzz* hosts face tangible risks when pursuing their goal of opening up a discursive space for discussing homosexuality. Although the vision of homosexuality as a physical abnormality, societal ill, and crime dominates the discussion on *Minibuzz*, I will argue that by carefully managing participants' contributions and actively instigating conflict, the hosts create a discursive space that satisfies the televisual

¹ I conducted participant observation of *Minibuzz* during my field work in Tanzania in 2012–2013. The access to randomly selected unedited recordings, as well as to the recordings with my participation, was granted to me by the talk show producers for the purpose of research; edited episodes aired on by the national broadcasting companies are available for public viewing on *Youtube*.

² Initially, in Kenya and Uganda, the program was called *Matatu*, and in Tanzania – *Daladala*. These are the local terms to refer to the most ubiquitous means of public transportation in East Africa, that is, a *Toyota* minibus. In 2012, in order to unify the format of the program, the title was changed to *Minibuzz*.

³ The mission statement is available at <http://www.madeinafrica.tv/impact/> (last accessed 1st December, 2014).

⁴ In each country, the program is recorded in the national language, that is, in Swahili in Tanzania and Kenya, and in Luganda in Uganda. The code-switching with English, which is the official language in these three countries, occurs on the regular basis, but is particularly common in the Kenyan program.

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