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Tele-Democracy: Albanian Talk Shows and New Media

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Abstract

When Phil Donahue first aired *The Phil Donahue Show* in Dayton, Ohio, in 1967, he made the studio audience a full participant by putting them in direct dialogue with guest experts or celebrities. Critics evaluated this as a revolution in television talk, which has variously been called participatory television.¹

Today, nearly half a century later, history recurs. Social networks create opportunities for talk show programs to have an interactive communication with a much wider audience, even international.²

Thanks to the social media tele-democracy takes a full dimension!

But, how do talk shows in Albania exploit these new platforms? What is the opinion of the TV hosts on them? What is the studio audience involvement and what are the social networks used for? - These are some of the questions that will be given an answer in this paper.

The research is based on interviews and a survey with 31 talk show TV hosts in Albania; archived talk show programs and contemporary authors on communication and new media.

Key words: *Talk show; social networks; new media; interactivity; audience; tele-democracy*

Talk shows in Albania, programs without public

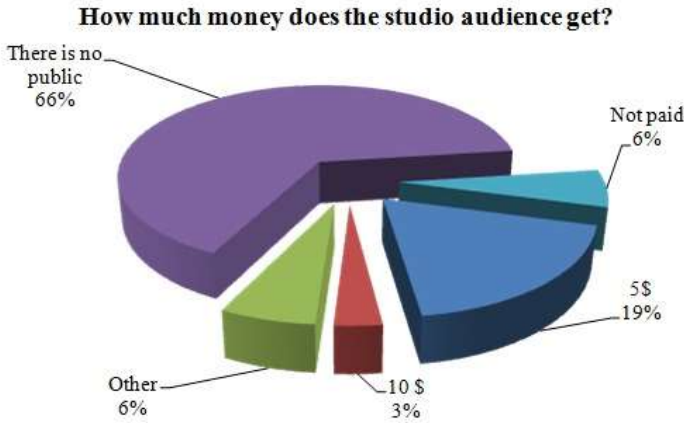
66% of television talk shows in Albania have no public at all. Meanwhile, in other TV programs the public is considered as a décor.

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¹ Bernard M. Timberg, *Television Talk: A history of the TV talk show*, University of Texas Press, 2002, p. 70

² Eric Scherer, *Do we still need journalists?*, Tiranë: Papirus, 2012, p. 41

They participate in these shows because of the fee, nearly 5\$ per show.³



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From 31 TV hosts, authors and producers who took part in the survey, 20 of them said that they don't have an audience in their shows. Among them, none of the morning shows has public in the studio.

Summary table ⁵							
No	Programs broadcast time	How much money does the studio audience get?					
		5\$	10\$	15\$	Other	There is no public	Not paid
1	Morning talk shows	-	-	-	-	5	-
2	Audience-participating talk shows	1	1	-	2	2	1
3	Late night talk shows	5	-	-	-	13	1
	Total programs	6	1	-	2	20	2

³ A survey with 31 TV hosts, editor in chief and producers, December 2013- August 2014

⁴ The graph is realized by the author of the paper

⁵ The table is realized by the author of the paper

Three of the Ora News TV hosts: Ilva Tare of the *Tonight* show, Mustafa Nano of *Jame Vy* and Jonida Shehu of *Natën Vonë* show, confirm that they had public in their shows, but the TV producers removed it due to economic reasons.⁶ They say that the studio audience members were paid 5\$ per show.⁷ The *ByPass* show editor in chief, Gentian Dervishi, asserts that he wished his show was broadcast live. According to him, this would have helped the host to be more interactive with the viewers. But, this is impossible because of the TV financial situation.⁸

Meantime, eight of the interviewees answered that they have public. Among them, *Opinion's* host, Blendi Fevziu, admits that the spectators are not paid at all. They come from private universities, but this has nothing to do with marketing. Asked of the interactive communication with the public, Fevziu says that this depends on the topics. Arbër Kadia, former host of *Vizioni i Pasdites* show, on Vizion Plus TV and Sonila Pepa, the *Talk Show* producer on *E Diell* TV program on Top Channel says that they have public, but they aren't aware of their fees. Regarding their participation, they answered that this happens rarely.

Six TV hosts or 19% of them declares that they don't select the public, only pay them. *Top Show* host, Alban Dudushi says that he encourage the audience participation. The *Zonë e lirë* host Arian Çani declares that he refuses to have an interactive communication with the studio audience because it is not an active public. While *A show* host, Adi Krasta, highlights that his audience is composed of local residents that he considers with a low profile. According to Krasta they get 5\$ per show.

Top Story TV host, Sokol Balla, declares that he considers the public opinion very important. He asks them in advance and determines the right moment when the question needs to be done. Meantime, the *E diela shqiptare* TV host, Ardit Gjebrea, declares that the studio audience has one of the most important roles during the show. He mentions Tana, a public member that is considered as a co-host of his show.

⁶ A survey with 31 TV hosts, Ilva Tare, Mustafa Nano, Jonida Shehu

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Interview with *ByPass* show's editor in chief, Gentian Dervishi, 06.12.2013

According to Gjebrea, the viewers identify themselves with the spectator in the studio. The *E diela shqiptare* show has the highest payment for the public. One of the members gets nearly 10 \$ per show.⁹

The vertical communication of the TV hosts in social media

The public absence at most of the talk shows in Albania that comes mainly for the media economic crisis,¹⁰ can be replaced by the new media. With Facebook, Twitter, YouTube you can have a real time interactive communication, without any costs.

During our survey from December-August 2014, from 31 TV hosts, authors and producers, 27 of them use the social media Facebook, the *Top Story* host Sokol Balla uses Twitter, while three other interviewees, *Fiks Fare* vice director, Denisa Haxhijaj, *Jame Vu* host Mustafa Nano and *A show* host Adi Krasta didn't use any of the social networks.¹¹ Later, Krasta created a Facebook page, although he believes that these are "anti-democratic networks".¹²

Whereas 87% of the talk show hosts use the social media a three months monitoring period showed that interactive communication with the friends and followers is very poor. Even in the social networks, we have a vertical communication.¹³ Though, we must admit that some talk shows, such as *Opinion*, *Top Story*, *Oktapod*, *Tonight*, etc., refer to the public comments in their Facebook status provoking lots of discussions.

According to the same survey, it turns out that nearly 1/3 of the TV hosts, authors and producers use the new media to measure the audience. Six of them use Facebook as the main method for the

⁹ Interview with *E diela shqiptare's* host Ardit Gjebrea 26.02.2014

¹⁰ Elvin Luku, "Foreign talk shows adopted in Albanian TV", *Albanological Studies VII: Cultural diversity in the media*, Tirana University, Faculty of History and Philology, Department of Journalism and Communication, Tiranë 2014, pp. 73-74

¹¹ A survey with 31 TV hosts, editor in chief and producers

¹² Interview with *A show* host Adi Krasta, 06.03.2014

¹³ Talk show's social network profile monitoring, April - June 2014

audience level, meantime four others use these networks, despite they get this data from audience professional companies.¹⁴

Meanwhile, even though the mobile is now the first screen in the world, and it's taking time away from the TV,¹⁵ no talk show program in Albania has its own application (App). They are integrated into the television's applications. There we can find archived videos, archived topics, but you cannot follow the program live streaming.¹⁶

Tele-democracy or Telecracy?

Taking into consideration the public absence in talk show programs in Albania, the host approach on them just as decor and their vertical communication in the social media, the question raised is: Can we still talk about tele-democracy?

The current situation is far away the participatory television, talk back television or tele-democracy which was launched by Donahue and his team in the daytime talk show *The Phil Donahue Show*, where he made the studio audience a full participant by putting them in direct dialogue with guest experts or celebrities.¹⁷

But we have a larger problem than just vertical communication. We can prove that in Albanian talk shows the public sphere has returned to publicity.¹⁸

Top Show, the Top Channel's TV program, as in many talk shows, realizes sponsored topics. This means that any organization who wants to promote a cause, project or topic, can buy the television airtime. According to the TV host Alban Dudushi, the organization

¹⁴ A survey with 31 TV hosts, editor in chief and producers

¹⁵ Stuart Dredge, "Tv industries faces it's "ketchup" moment: Mobile is now the first screen", *The Guardian*, April 13, 2015, accessed April 25, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/apr/13/tv-industry-ketchup-moment-mobile-first-screen>

¹⁶ Monitoring mobile application on national and private TV, 05.04.2015

¹⁷ B. M. Timberg, *op.cit.*, p.24

¹⁸ Elvin Luku, "A Look at the Public Sphere in Talk Show Programs in Albania", *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol 4, No 10, MCSER Publishing, Rome-Italy, October 2013, p.577

sends only one or two guests. The others are chosen by the reporters. In the end the organization marks the TV show as its own activity.¹⁹

The cost of 15 minutes of airtime in Vizion Plus TV, during the morning talk show *7pa5*, hosted by Nolian Lole and Pranvera Borakaj, is 1200 euro, without VAT. According to the preliminary agreement conditions, the TV itself decides the time of broadcast, from 06:55 – 08:30 AM, meanwhile the client determines the day of broadcast, brings video shots and even questions to be asked.²⁰

In the daytime audience-participating talk show in Vizion Plus TV, *Vizioni i Pasdites*, hosted by Anila Çela, the client can buy 30-60 minutes of airtime. The official fee program for 60 minutes is 3000 euro and 2000 euro for 30 minutes. In both cases the price is without VAT.²¹ In case of an agreement with this show, the client defines the day of broadcast, the topics, questions to be asked and the number of guests. The client must notify the TV staff at least one week in advance.²²

By the semantic analysis, the subject interested in airtime TV is named “customer”. In this sense, we are dealing with business logic, where the discussion or dialogue in the talk show is just publicity addressed to an audience that is considered simply as a consumer. The media provides as public interest a product that is entirely for commercial purpose. As French professor Bernard Stiegler claims that the alleged tele-democracy turns to be, neither more nor less, than telecracy. The latter destroys public opinion, turning it into passive audience.²³

This is one side of telecracy in Albanian talk shows. On the other hand, it appears to be the malfunctioning of the market and the links between media and politics. The data from the above-mentioned survey shows that only 16% of the TV hosts gets the audience measurements statistics. They use alternative tools, such as: social

¹⁹ Interview with *Top Show* host Alban Dudushi, 27.03.2014

²⁰ Talk show presence 2014, Marketing Department, *Vizion Plus*

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Bernard Stiegler, *La Telecratie Contre La Democratie*, Flammarion, Paris, 2006, p.27

networks, phone calls and sms to get some feedback from the audience. At the same time, 42% of the current talk shows do not have a sponsor. They are funded by the TV budget because the advertising market doesn't function.²⁴

Faced with this situation, in order to generate revenues, the media owners abandon citizens to connect with government.²⁵ They provide television airtime for propaganda, including even the talk shows, and in exchange they get state advertisements or other favors for their businesses.

To illustrate we can mention that from June 2012 - December 2013, the Government of that time spent a budget of 780 thousand euros. Of these, 730 thousand euros went to companies related to the owner of the national television Klan, Alexander Frangaj, known for his strong ties with the government. While the other national television Top Channel has received only 9.94 thousand euros.²⁶

This unequal division of the state budget to advertising is accompanied by a nearly 10-year boycott, of the opposition leader, later prime minister to two terms Sali Berisha, at the Top Channel TV. He refused invitations, even from Sokol Balla, the *Top Story* host, one of the two main political talk shows in Albania.²⁷ At that time, the Prime Minister Sali Berisha and his ministers made frequent interviews for *Opinion* talk show, in Klan television.

There is also a third reason linked to the vertical communication of talk shows and television system as a vicious circle. As we have mentioned, 66% of this show have no public at all. Meantime, only

²⁴ Elvin Luku, "Foreign talk shows adopted in Albanian TV" ... p. 74

²⁵ Elvin Luku, "Talk show is the hosts face", *European Journalism Observatory*, June 28, 2013, accessed June 13, 2015 <http://al.ejo-online.eu/1479/gazetaria-e-medias/talk-show-eshte-fytyra-e-moderatorit>

²⁶ Besar Likmeta, "Big advertisers subvert Albanian media freedom", *BalkanInsight*, 20.12. 2013, accessed June 13, 2015 <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/big-advertisers-subvert-albanian-media-freedom-1>

²⁷ Jakin Marena, "Berisha in Top Channel after 10 years, today on *Top Story*", *Shqiptarja.com*, 20.06. 2013, accessed June 13, 2015 <http://shqiptarja.com/m/home/berisha-kthet-pas-10-vitesh-ne-top-channel-sot-ne-top-story-163190.html>

19% of other Albanian talk shows have occasionally interactive communication with the studio audience and the virtual one.

Otherwise, if we consider the communication system in television as a vicious circle, it turns out that the media imposes political news to the public opinion and the audience consumes what television offers. Then, through the audience measurements, the media concludes that the public shows interest in political issues discussed on talk shows, which are a product of the media itself.²⁸

At this moment, talk show programs enter a vicious circle, where they analyze the public opinion, but, in fact, they are analyzing themselves. Meanwhile the public, out and in the studio, stands as a spectator of this media spectacle that is far away from the concept of tele-democracy.

Conclusions

Talk shows in Albania are programs without public. 66% of the shows have no studio audience. Meanwhile, only 19% of other shows have occasionally interactive communication with the studio audience and the virtual one;

87% of talk show hosts use social media. But even in this new media the communication turned out to be vertical;

1/3 of TV hosts and talk show producers in Albania use social media to measure the audience.

None of the talk shows in Albania has a dedicated mobile application, despite the fact that smartphone is now the first screen in the world.

Talk shows in Albania develop the telecracy concept. The public sphere in these programs has turned into publicity, where:

A subject buys television airtime to promote his product, considering the public simply as a consumer;

Due to malfunctioning of revenue market in Albania, the TV owners strengthen ties with the government in exchange for financial benefits;

²⁸ Artan Fuga, *Mass communication in society*, Tiranë: Papirus, 2014, p.148

Talk show hosts have a vertical communication and they function according to vicious circle television system.

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