

Inside Interventional Television

Media rituals in the age of participation



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Inside Interventional Television
Media rituals in the age of participation

Televisie, transformatie en de mythe van participatie: een etnografische analyse

Thesis

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Balázs Boross
born in Budapest, Hungary

Doctoral Committee:

Promotors

Prof. dr. S.L. Reijnders

Prof. dr. M.S.S.E. Janssen

Other members

Prof. dr. H. Van den Bulck

Prof. dr. M. Kavka

Prof. dr. E.A. van Zoonen

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1 General Introduction

1.1 Research aims

As this dissertation is in large part about people sharing personal stories and intimate moments of their lives, let me begin in style. I was a few months into my PhD trajectory when, while randomly switching TV channels, I chanced upon the broadcast of a new reality programme. The scene was set in an ordinary school and I caught the moment in which one of the fifteen-year-olds stood up in the classroom, faced his peers and announced that he was 'homosexual'. I still remember the ambiguity of my experience as a viewer: I admired the kid's courage while feeling sorry for his visible anxiety. I was slightly uncomfortable with the overall awkwardness of the incident and got a little ashamed of my voyeuristic excitement at witnessing the aftermath of this disclosure. Then I became at once fascinated with the overly positive reaction of the class and suspicious about the possibility that the celebratory gestures were provoked and staged by the filming crew. By the end I was wondering: What is it that makes someone decide to come out this way? And what happens after the cameras are gone?

Fast-forward one and a half years, to the first interview I'm giving about doing research with reality TV participants. The journalist builds rapport: he is curious, open and empathetic, and I am doing my best to deliver an alluring yet nuanced story. Still, the piece I receive a few days later reads somewhat sensationalist: the emphasis on my personal motives seems to overshadow my professional considerations. I propose changes, but the editor finds my requests to go beyond the scope of fact checking and publishes the interview as it is. While causing me some frustration and annoyance, this experience contains a valuable lesson about the importance of routine and procedural knowledge when one is talking through the media: without these tools, novices probably have little control over how they come across.

Time passes again; we are in 2018 now. The first day of the spring marks an important, yet underacknowledged moment in TV history: BenDeLaCreme, the front-running queen and most probable winner of *RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars 3*, eliminates herself from the show in the semi-finals, thereby not only breaking the ritualistic logic

of the format but also questioning what constitutes commonsense behaviour for a participant in competition-based reality programmes. The next day, on Facebook, she explains her gesture as a statement about the need to stop accepting the rules dictated by ‘authority figures’. ‘Our culture has embraced bloodlust, and for some, reality TV has become our coliseum’, DeLaCreme writes. ‘The creators set up impossible situations for us to navigate without any of the support systems of the real world. [...] They don’t do it because they are monsters, they do it because they are under the impression that’s what you, the viewer, demands. Is that what you demand?’ – she asks.¹ I am left wondering how her disruptive performance will impact the rest of the season and the remaining contestants and what reactions it will elicit from ‘authority figures’ and from the audience.

Accidental and unconnected as these three encounters appear to be, they shaped my research, since they triangulate quite precisely the problems that this dissertation attempts to tackle. My ambiguous feelings towards Niek’s televised coming out motivated my enquiry into the representation and experience of coming out in the programme *Uit de Kast* [*Out of the Closet*], a show that will take centre stage in two of the following chapters. The adventure with how (not) to talk to the press prompted me to study structural differences in the experience of participating in the disability dating show *The Undateables*, and thus to ask under what conditions ordinary people can exert the sort of power that influences their mediated representations. Finally, DeLaCreme’s self-elimination (which turned out to be less scandalous and more quickly forgotten than I anticipated) led me to explore how ‘authority figures’ – in this case, production crews – actually try to steer non-media professionals into universes created for them. And underlying all these steps and enquiries is a simple question, which is nevertheless difficult to answer. What does participating in the media mean to ‘ordinary’ people today?

The starting point of this enquiry is the observation that, while *participation* has become a key concept in media and cultural studies in the past decades, the predominant scholarly focus on the game-changing potential of new media

¹ BenDeLaCreme (2018), on Facebook [Fan page]. Retrieved 11 October, 2020, from <https://www.facebook.com/bendelacreme/posts/dear-drag-race-fans-not-the-real-fans-im-not-jasmine-masters-but-ive-still-got-s/822482421272294>.

technologies for democratic renewal, power sharing and social inclusion has created a situation in which the cultural significance and role of ‘traditional’ media in participatory processes remain structurally underestimated (see Carpentier, 2009; Schäfer, 2011). This is particularly striking in view of the rise of reality television, a type of cultural production that, from the end of the twentieth century on, has played a central role in turning ordinary people into media content, changing both the global production ecology of the TV industry and the ways in which we think about TV culture today (Ouellette, 2014; Hill, 2005). Syvertsen’s (2001: 319) argument that television ‘increasingly is becoming “something to do” rather than just something to watch’ might come across as an exaggeration, yet her claim appears less far-fetched in the light of the average figures around casting,² the sheer number of websites, blogs and online instruction videos for prospective participants,³ and the proliferation of offline workshops and crash courses for preparing the most resolute candidates to beat auditions.⁴ At the same time, reality television has triggered moral panics since its inception: it was frequently dismissed as cheap, voyeuristic, exploitative and sensational (Hill, 2005: 7) and also presumed to affect negatively the well-being of its participants. Public discussions about what reality television does to people become particularly intense when tragic incidents hit the headlines; and they are often followed by legislative efforts to regulate the producers’ treatment of their ‘contributors’.⁵

Nevertheless, the question of what participating in reality television does to people has seldom been put under academic scrutiny; and the same can be said about the complementary and equally important question of what people actually *do* with reality TV participation (which, as we will see, makes a better fit with the paradigmatic

² Ouellette and Hay (2008), for instance, reported a weekly average of 15,000 applicants who wanted to participate in the makeover programme *Home Edition* in 2006. This number aligns with the anecdotal evidence from producers of ‘interventional’ formats whom I interviewed in the past years.

³ See <https://www.auditionsfree.com/acting-articles/how-to-audition-for-reality-tv-show/>; <http://www.howzzdat.com/how-to-participate-reality-tv-shows/>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjFw3UIA3Hs> (last accessed 31 July 2019).

⁴ See for instance *New York Reality TV School* (<https://newyorkrealitytvschool.com>).

⁵ A recent example is the death of Mike Thalassitis, star of the popular UK programme *Love Island*. At the time of writing, this event prompted the Digital Culture, Media and Sport Committee to set up of the ‘Reality TV Inquiry’ of the House of Commons (<https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/digital-culture-media-and-sport-committee/inquiries/parliament-2017/realitytv>, last accessed 31 July 2019).

outlook of the forthcoming studies). Early academic debates in the nineties focused primarily on the defining characteristics of the genre; this concentration of interest was followed by extension into a diverse set of topics, for instance how the reality TV phenomenon challenges existing notions of private and public, how it changes the political economy of media production, how reality television itself represents certain groups of people, and how different audiences become affected by, read and appropriate particular programmes.⁶ Even though this rich corpus of research pays ample attention to the functions of reality television for the participants, relatively few studies have undertaken talking to them directly (e.g. Turner, 2014: 314; but see Andrejevic, 2004; Kuppens and Mast, 2012; Shuffeldt and Gale, 2007; Syvertsen, 2001). Likewise, the twin questions of how production teams turn ordinary self-performances into televisual self-performances and what real possibilities participants have to exercise control over this process have long been asked and have generated debates, yet little empirical work has been done on the actual encounters between media producers and media participants (Kjus, 2009). This kind of work should address reality TV production and participation as a cultural practice and as a *social process* (see Couldry, 2004; Mayer et al. 2009; Mayer, 2011).

Employing a multi-actor case study design and an ethnographic-interpretative approach, the present dissertation sets out to scrutinize precisely this process by exploring the connections – and the eventual discrepancies – between the ways in which TV participation is motivated and experienced by *participants*, streamlined by *production workers* and represented by *media texts* as an ‘extraordinary’ experience (or one meaningful in some other ways). I will carry out this exploration by looking at a prominent type of contemporary programming, which I describe as ‘interventional television’. It consists of programmes that centre on improving the participants’ (or candidates’) social life by addressing the ‘root cause’ of their problems (e.g. hoarding, difficulties with losing weight, finding a partner, or living with the burden of a secret) and document these people’s progression as they overcome their struggle, moving from a time ‘before’ to a time ‘after’. I will start with the Dutch coming-out reality show *Uit de Kast* (2010–14), then turn to UK Channel 4’s disability dating show *The*

⁶ For a wider picture, see Oullette (2014).

Undateables (2012–), and finally deal with a variety of formats based on the same premise of guiding, transforming and thereby emancipating the participants. The core questions running through all these studies can be put in this overarching form: *How do ordinary people explain, justify, and then experience their participation in interventional programmes; how do productions and media texts construct, use and maintain these people's desire to participate; and what do such motivations, experiences and practices tell us about the role and significance of television in contemporary media culture?*

The theoretical considerations that underlie this overarching question, as well as the rationale for the research design and for the choice of the material that constitutes the corpus of this dissertation will be properly elaborated upon in the coming pages; but let me anticipate some of this here by expanding a little on the notion of televisual intervention and on the slightly awkward phrase 'type of contemporary programming' by which I described it – instead of calling it simply a particular subgenre of reality television, for example. No doubt the programmes discussed in the following chapters can be legitimately placed under pre-established generic conventions, such as makeover or lifestyle shows (Lewis, 2008; Sender, 2012) or, following another route, welfare or charity television (Ouellette and Hay, 2008). Such categorizations, however, may risk overlooking a more general logic underlying our cases, a logic that cuts across subject matters, themes and reality subgenres: it is, so goes our argument, contemporary television's emerging mandate to demand that individual subjects desire, and hence submit to, a transformation with normative ends. Implicit here is the idea that this submission is a *necessary path to social justice* (cf. Weber, 2014: 383–4). Typically, the candidates of televisual interventions are representatives of stigmatized and vulnerable social groups, and their transformative 'journey' has high existential stakes: the outcome of their endeavour both determines their future navigation of the social world and reflects this social world that they are trying to navigate. This manner of connecting the spectacle of self-improvement to a rhetoric of emancipation and integration largely contributes to the quintessential hybridity of such programmes; and this feature is then further reinforced through the combination of exploratory, observational, participatory and performative

documentary techniques with the narrative and aesthetic conventions of gamedocs and docu-soaps (Bonner, 2013; Nichols, 2001). It is often up for debate among producers, participants and audiences whether particular shows of this type should be labelled 'reality series', 'factual entertainment' or 'documentaries'.⁷

This hybridity makes interventional television particularly interesting to study. No matter how mainstream they may be today, such programmes are, after all, borderline cases; they offer a productive vantage point from which the readings, often dichotomous, of what the shows themselves ultimately do (e.g. public service or exploitative entertainment) can be further problematized and qualified. At the same time, as these binary readings highlight, interventional programmes are particularly resistant to critiquing via textual analysis.⁸ We need decentred techniques (Couldry, 2012), such as the collection of narratives from both participants and producers, if we want to grasp the cultural significance of TV participation as a contemporary mediated practice.

Still, the close reading of discrete media texts can serve as a valuable starting point for an enquiry into the cultural significance of this phenomenon, since it reveals how *claims* about the promise that televisual interventions make a difference in the social world are themselves constructed and naturalized through media representations and discourses. By combining textual analysis with a decentred exploration of participatory experiences, for example accounts of how people perceive themselves to be part of or excluded from (mediated) domains of 'importance', I will ultimately question how the symbolic and institutional-material dimensions of televisual power are (re)produced in today's thoroughly heterogenous media world.

⁷ This question is also reflected in the public branding of particular programmes; see the casting call of Channel 4's *The Undateables*, where the show is referred to as 'an acclaimed documentary' (<https://www.channel4.com/4viewers/take-part/undateables>, last accessed 25 October 2019). The matter of categorization features prominently in the identity work of production members interviewed by me throughout the years, who defined specific genres in strikingly loose language in order to place their work at the 'documentary' end of the spectrum. Participants were similarly eager to defend the status of shows as documentaries, arguing that 'nothing was directed', 'everything on the TV happened for real', and 'nothing was done against [their] will' (*Uit de Kast* participants).

⁸ See for instance Richardson's (2018) illuminating analysis of how, in the case of *The Undateables*, the very same sequences can be read *both* as ironic attacks against prejudices and as revivals of archaic conventions of freak shows.

Addressing this issue is particularly timely, if we consider both popular assumptions about ‘the death of television’ and ongoing scholarly discussions about the future of ‘traditional’ media. It has already been pointed out that technological fragmentation does not necessarily imply that the place of television as audiences’ principal media focus is shifting (Couldry, 2009); nor does it challenge, more generally, the persuasiveness of television as a collective medium (Kjus, 2009). Similarly, assumptions about the *fundamental* – that is, not infrastructural – transformation of the system of media, including what is fundamental in audiences’ sense of ‘being with the media’, are increasingly questioned (Curran, 2017; Shimpach, 2020). Nevertheless the role that participatory processes play in sustaining claims about and perceptions of television’s social centrality is yet to be explored.

In the following pages I am taking a somewhat slower pace in order to discuss the theoretical underpinnings of my argument so far. The entry point for making connections between matters of participation, transformation, and power will be the notion of *ritual*, informed by various conceptualizations from the field of anthropology, communication science and media studies. The presentation of this framework will be preceded by an outline of the main debates on ordinary people’s mediated visibility. This discussion will proceed in line with our inherently temporal-processual approach to participation: it will involve consideration of what happens both before and after taking part in TV productions. The presentation of the framework will then be followed by a methodological account of the research on which this dissertation is based.

1.2 Ordinary people and the media: core debates

Ordinary citizens – the ‘common person’ – have been featuring on television since the earliest days of the medium, yet the boom of reality programming in the first decade of the twenty-first century took this presence to a new level: not only did it result in an unprecedented visibility of ‘ordinary’ people in the media, it also established a fascination with different versions of ordinariness as one of the defining characteristics of today’s TV culture. Media and cultural studies scholars have

approached this ‘demotic turn’ (Turner, 2010) in various ways. Mark Andrejevic (2004, 2014), for instance, describes the burgeoning reality TV trend as a technology-driven return to a premodern form of communal monitoring, imagined and romanticized, and at the same time as a televisual manifestation of the participatory ethos of the emergent digital culture. Others have looked more specifically at how TV industries are reinventing themselves in order to better contain their audiences in the new, interactive zeitgeist of our culture (e.g. Deuze, 2007; Roscoe, 2004) or, starting at the other end, have tried to understand how audiences engage with the increasing participatory scope of reality programmes (e.g. Ouellette and Hay, 2008; Van Zoonen, 2005).⁹ Despite the thematic and theoretical divergence of these works, they typically revolve around three key issues: access to self-representation and how productions create boundaries in this regard; the effects of participation on the participants; and, lastly, the presumed effects of participatory programs on audiences. These issues also dictate the evaluation of television as a participatory space. I will briefly review them here one by one.

1.2.1 Getting access: a democratization of the cultural production?

The first of the three key issue I have delimited concerns the extent to which the abundance of ordinary people in the ecology of reality television also involves a shift towards a more inclusive and democratic representational politics in ‘traditional’ media. The popular assumption that being on a reality show is within anyone’s reach – that appearing on a programme of this sort is something that anyone can do – reflects quite accurately the core promise of reality television: to create an opportunity for real people to participate in a realm from which they have been previously excluded, and thus to blur the conventional boundaries that separate the sphere of cultural production from the daily lives of viewers (Andrejevic, 2004: 6–7; 2014: 41–4). This promise forms a particularly relevant aspect of discourses about the increased cultural visibility of marginalized groups and identities on television. The tendency for such groups to acquire visibility is real and unquestionable; nevertheless, when it comes to

⁹ See Kjus (2009) for a more extensive review of such top-down and bottom-up approaches.

evaluating the possibilities and limitations of self-representation through reality participation, it has produced ambivalent readings (Carpentier, 2009; Ellis, 2016; Gamson, 2014; Müller et al. 2012).

Discussion along this cluster of themes appears to revolve around two main points: *access* and *control*. Reality television seems to have become a welcoming environment for previously stigmatized groups: it's enough to consider the prominent role of LGBTQ cast members in today's lifestyle programming, for instance (Gamson, 2014: 228). Yet Turner warns us not to equate greater visibility with greater inclusivity: access to self-representation, he argues, is far from being universal, and the use of casting protocols necessarily implies that some candidates are considered to make more desirable participants than others (2014: 311). Similarly, in his nuanced historical analysis of 'gay emancipation' on television, Gamson (2014) convincingly demonstrates the intricate relations between market pressures and how contemporary reality programmes nurture an apolitical, assimilationist and highly consumerist version of 'gay identity'.¹⁰

The argument that a broader demographic of reality participants is not intrinsically democratic is further supported by a common scepticism regarding the real possibilities for participants to influence their representation in the process of production (Carpentier, 2011; Hill, 2005). In this respect, it is often posited that appearing as oneself on television is a very compromised form of self-representation, because the conditions are simply not of one's own making (Gamson, 2014: 230). Whether this is indeed the case will be a subject of empirical investigation in the forthcoming chapters. Here I will limit myself to observing that the actual agency of participants in scripting their stories or in adjusting their voice to the conventions of the genre is often overshadowed when an asymmetry in power relations between producers and cast members is taken for granted and proclaimed. But the consequences of the power dynamics of reality TV productions will feature heavily in discussions of another aspect of the debate, namely whether participation serves the

¹⁰ Gamson (2014) evaluates this development rather ambivalently, especially in comparison with the 'trashy' talk show culture of the nineties, which he considers to be a platform for more transgressive and diverse articulations of lower-class LGBT voices and experiences.

interest of the participants themselves. This is my second key issue, and I turn to it now.

1.2.2 Turning people into media content: exploitation versus empowerment

Ordinary people seldom appear on television just for the sake of offering some insight into their everyday lives. There is something in it for them, too: reality programmes largely capitalize on the promise of transformative experiences, which will help participants either to cope better with their current conditions or to leave them behind, building new lives for themselves in the future. With respect to this transformative potential, reality TV participation is frequently linked to discourses of emancipation and empowerment (cf. Carpentier, 2009) – not least because, in mediated contexts, the very category of ‘ordinary people’ is often constructed so as to incorporate connotations of misfortune or disadvantage (Grindstaff, 2009: 76).¹¹

A common criticism of reality television is directed at how this promise of transformation – the ‘fantasy of empowerment’, as Annette Hill (2004: 120) puts it – disguises unfair labour practices (Ross, 2014): participants are lured to donate their work to a commercial enterprise.¹² As Ouellette and Hay (2008: 3–4) point out, the paternalistic role taken up by interventional programmes in the process of facilitating the self-actualization of their participants is somewhat paradoxical by definition, given the neoliberal ideology of private self-care and self-empowerment that the programmes ultimately promote. That this kind of project takes place within a space dominated by the logic of commerce further complicates matters and compromises its emancipatory claims: rather than liberate, these programmes ‘enfreak’ their subjects, the candidates for the proposed transformation, making them into sites

¹¹ In this sense, ‘ordinariness’ does not necessarily or exclusively indicate lack of professional expertise or of celebrity credentials; it is rather associated with experiencing some inherent problem or temporary crisis (Grindstaff, 2009). This equation between ordinariness and misfortune is most explicitly present in charity or make-over programmes, but is also recognizable in the more hidden interventional logic of talent shows, where judges are always ready to highlight the everyday hardships of contestants and these, in turn, often make their case in terms of ‘essential selves’ instead of focusing on their talent (Ellis, 2016: 91; Turner, 2010: 3).

¹² Some of my research subjects nevertheless pointed out that this is not always the case; furthermore, the question of what counts as compensation in the attention economy of the media will be problematized in later chapters.

where existing societal standards, norms and values are measured and reinforced. Or so goes a very widespread argument (cf. Dovey, 1998; Richardson, 2017; Sender, 2012).

An often implicit, but arguably consequential assumption of these readings is that entertaining, which is an inbuilt purpose of reality TV shows, and the high stakes that in principle motivate participants in their performances are hardly reconcilable:¹³ the pressure to achieve and maintain high ratings prompts the construction of digestible narratives, which ultimately jeopardize the serious nature of participants' undertaking (cf. Carpentier, 2011). At the same time, while scholars are typically careful when they envisage reality productions from the perspective of participants' interests, accounts of how *viewers* appropriate reality texts are generally more optimistic.

1.2.3 *Watching you, watching me: the societal value of reality television*

As Laura Grindstaff points out, the 'nice' days of *Donahue*-like programmes, in which 'well-heeled, middle-class guests debated whether white families should adopt black children', were long gone by the turn of the millennium: the talk-show culture of the late 1990s was already dominated by Jerry Springer and titles such as *Mom, Stop Prostituting Me!* (Grindstaff, 2009: 73). Around the beginning of the decade 2000–10, however, new and more extensive transformations started taking place in the TV industry: channels previously branded as educational or scientific (e.g. TLC, the Learning Channel), just like historically slow-moving nature programming (e.g. Animal Planet), gradually turned away from feature-length documentaries and redeveloped series based on the unusual, the dramatic and the spectacular (Ouellette, 2014). That these developments were strongly influenced by the conventions of the reality TV trend¹⁴ emergent at the time is quite clear now; yet the matter of how the

¹³ A notable exception to this kind of reading is Kjus' (2009) discussion of the historical compatibility of entertainment and social engagement on television. Kjus uses examples from a variety of genres, from daytime talk shows to docusoaps. These examples include Anderson's (1978) description of how early gameshows preferred to cast contestants who would spend the prize money on worthy causes in order to signify television's social involvement and purposefulness.

¹⁴ Especially its preoccupation with the drama that results from interactions and intersections between 'the extraordinary' and 'the ordinary'.

ubiquity of these conventions in today's televisual landscape has rewritten or outweighed the educative and civic functions of television remains controversial.¹⁵

Not surprisingly, audience scholars have been on the frontline of reality television's defence against the popular 'dumbing down' discourse, arguing that media texts are polysemic and reception active (Duits and van Zoonen, 2011). These tenets, long established by Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School, have been complemented by notions more specifically related to reality television's deployment of ordinary people. In this respect, several authors emphasize the practical and social learning opportunities inherently encoded in the entertainment framework of reality television, pointing towards the richness of stories about appropriate and inappropriate behaviour (Hill, 2005). Furthermore, the immediacy of these stories is seen to function as both a window and a mirror for the viewer (Bignell, 2014): by promising revelatory insight into the lives of others, reality programmes invite audiences to test out their own notions of the real, the ordinary, and the intimate against the representations that these notions receive in the programmes (Murray and Ouellette, 2004).

In consequence, it is commonly acknowledged that reality television does have possible pedagogic functions; yet the politics of the pedagogies around which certain formats are built is less frequently addressed (see Turner, 2010). Critical readings focused on pedagogical content predominantly situate the educational aspects of reality television in the context of neoliberal governance (e.g. Lunt, 2014), describing how reality programmes – explicit interventions, in particular makeover shows, lifestyle advice and charity shows – act as a visible instrument of self-help and self-actualization for today's citizens, whose most pressing obligation to society is to empower themselves privately (Ouellette and Hay, 2008). Within this framework, the way in which reality television teaches audiences how to be good citizens is often clearly normative and conservative (Lewis, 2009). In this it resembles earlier, more clear-cut examples of public service programming (cf. Ang, 1991). Yet what makes reality television distinctive is how it bases its normalizing power on a logic of mutual

¹⁵ Such concerns about the decline of traditional public service were particularly salient when public broadcasters such as the BBC started developing popular reality programmes of their own (see Born, 2011; Ouellette, 2014).

surveillance, which works for participants and for audiences alike: living up to societal standards requires both watching those around us and allowing ourselves to be watched (Sender, 2012).

Putting aside whether the arguments presented here are compatible with the 'complex texts–active audiences' paradigm, questions of educational value remain important to this investigation, especially since, as we have seen, the pro-social role of interventional programmes is increasingly claimed by media commentaries and texts themselves. In the next chapters I will examine how such claims are being constructed and come to play a role in production processes, and how the ethos of public service shapes the motives, attitudes and evaluations of participatory experiences.

1.2.4 Moving forward: media participation in a new empirical and conceptual framework

Arguments regarding ordinary people's mediated participation and its implications for democratic self-representation, emancipation and social learning get easily polarized. This dissertation offers two ways of generating fresh and more nuanced input into these debates. First, it will employ critical, empirical case studies to ask what participation entails, within the framework of the cultural practice of media production as well as within the much larger context of neoliberal economies, where activity is often equated with 'interaction' and participation with 'empowerment' (Kjus, 2009: 294). Secondly, my analysis will be situated in a ritual approach. As Carpentier et al. (2019) argue about the contemporary crisis of the concept of participation, discussions of participatory practices are all too often articulated through commonsense vocabularies or based on restraining definitions of participation, treated either as a form of social interaction or as a modality of partaking in decision-making processes.¹⁶ In contrast, the notion of ritual, precisely because of the inherent multivocality of the actions and interests it refers to, will offer a holistic and multilayered interpretative framework. Once defined with accuracy, it will enable

¹⁶ As far as my analytical purposes are concerned, the former approach, which is predominantly sociological, is too broad, while the latter, which is a political studies approach, is too narrow.

us to tackle the facets of participatory processes that become activated through specific contexts and interactions – for example contestation, integration, education, or simply *jouissance* (Glynos and Howarth, 2007, quoted in Carpentier et al. 2019). In addition, ritual theory allows us to make connections between the peculiarities of the process through which interventional television creates mediated subjectivities and those large questions – let’s call them the ontology of mediation – that media analysis ultimately strives to answer but often loses sight of: how the media are involved in engineering social relationships and how this work becomes constitutive of social collectivities and identities. In the next pages we dive deeper into how a ritual framework can pave the way towards such answers.

1.3 A ritual approach to interventional television

1.3.1 Media and rituals: a choice of definition

As Ronald Grimes rightly points out in his book *Rite out of Place*, if ritual and media were once regarded as labels of separate cultural domains – the former reserved for religious activities in the sphere of the sacred, the latter for processes of information transfer – things have radically changed in the past decades (Grimes, 2006: 3–4). There is a growing awareness of similarities between what rituals and media do: both generate realities that are surprising, special, and outside everyday routines, yet both penetrate deeply into everyday life (Hughes-Freeland, 2006). As a result of this awareness, theories of ritual have been applied in a variety of media contexts, for example to journalistic practices (Tuchman, 1978), media events (Dayan and Katz, 1992), mediatized mourning (Sumiala, 2013), or celebrity encounters (Reijnders et al., 2014).

This development is largely indebted to the emergence of media anthropology – itself a transdisciplinary field that grew out of the anthropology of modern societies on the one hand and the cultural turn in media studies on the other (Rothenbuhler and Coman, 2005: 1). However, the juxtaposition of media and ritual has long been characterized by a great deal of eclecticism and incommensurability. This is understandable, given the conjunction between the diversity of the intellectual

traditions in which specific instances of media analysis are situated¹⁷ and the notoriously problematic task of defining ritual¹⁸ or reaching any consensus as to its nature. These issues are frequently echoed by scholars who are concerned about the possible loss of this term's conceptual utility.¹⁹ But my point is that such concerns indicate precisely the importance of the notion of ritual: one cannot easily dismiss it out of hand, especially when aiming to explain how it is that the media are fundamentally involved in both the symbolic construction and the practical coordination of our social reality. With such ambitions, the way forward is probably to subscribe to a somewhat constricted, yet internally coherent understanding of ritual, which – as Clifford Geertz argues in the case of the similarly problematic notion of 'culture' – has a definable argument to make (Geertz, 1973: 5).

Accordingly, my understanding of the concept of ritual takes its starting point in a formal definition provided by Eric Rothenbuhler (1998: 27), according to which ritual is the “voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically affect or participate in the serious life.” This definition has, in my view, the advantage of moving the theoretical discussions on media and ritual forward, away from where they had somewhat halted around, 2005;²⁰ and it can achieve this because it has the potential to do justice to, and reconcile, two views of what rituals 'do' that have been traditionally set in opposition to each other. One sees them as a form of expression and affirmation (Carey, 1989; Dayan and Katz, 1992; Durkheim, 1995 [1912]), the other as a form of domination designed to mask unequal power relations (Bloch, 1989; Couldry, 2003). But, for Rothenbuhler, rituals are expressive of social relations (and thereby able to invoke and affirm collective sentiments) and at the same time

¹⁷ According to Hughes-Freeland's (2006), for example, many different strands of media analysis use ritual theory. Some examples are structural-functional accounts that focus on social integration and collectivism), neo-Weberian approaches preoccupied with modernity and re-traditionalization, post-Foucauldian agendas that prioritize socially diffused power relations, and methodological particularism interested in situated ethnographic analysis.

¹⁸ According to Snoek (2006), defining rituals is particularly difficult, as there is hardly any characteristic that really occurs in all the phenomena that scholars incline to call 'rituals'. One can add the related problem of classifying rituals (annual, life-cycle, civil, rebellion, imitative, sacrificial, etc.), as single typologies often lack coherence (see Barfield, 2001).

¹⁹ See for instance Goody's (1961) classic outburst against the term 'ritual' (1961), or Rothenbuhler and Coman's (2005) discussion of this concept in media anthropology.

²⁰ The climax of the theoretical debates is undoubtedly the heated Cottle vs Couldry–Rothenbuhler correspondence on 'mediatized rituals' in the pages of *Media, Culture & Society* (2006–8).

play a quintessential role in maintaining social order (so that the exercise of particular forms of authoritative coordination is inherent in them). In other words, rituals place participants into certain kinds of order and incorporate assumptions about the value and meaning of that order (see Hillis, 2009: 11). In this respect, ‘serious life’ in Rothenbuhler’s definition is a phenomenological category: while its substance is socio-historically situated, the concept refers to the enduring and ubiquitous recognition that certain ideas, activities and symbols are more important than others and, in consequence, deserve to be set aside and protected (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 24).

The definition I quoted can already serve as an entry point if we want to establish an analogical connection between the concept of ritual and televisual interventions: after all, participants in TV programmes *voluntarily* sign up to *perform* for a public; they follow certain procedures and conform to particular norms of ‘acting’ for the camera (hence their behaviour must be *appropriately patterned*); and they do these things having particular agendas and making assumptions about the value of their endeavour (namely how their participation affects ‘serious life’). In order to make this analogy analytically useful, one must take two further steps. First, one must find ways to explain how ritual and TV programmes absorb or ‘incorporate’ participants into particular forms of hegemony; secondly, one must try to understand the source and nature of the authority that enables this process – or, to give it some Foucauldian flavour, one must ask how and why the power of rituals and of TV participation becomes productive (see Foucault, 1980). As we shall see, each theoretical step is based on a different notion of ritual; thus each one offers a different perspective on the ritualistic workings of interventional television. With respect to the first step, I will argue that ritual is essentially *processual* and *transformative* – that is, it involves a temporal and teleological progression, treated in a structured way). As for the second step, I will draw on Nick Couldry’s work on the *ritual power* of media (e.g. Couldry, 2000, 2003, 2012). I will connect these two steps with the help of Bourdieu’s (1991) understanding of rituals as *rites of institution*.

In the end, this framework will show how interventional television simultaneously reinforces a sense of integration and creates hidden exclusions, separating between those who can and those who cannot be part of this ritual. Further,

it will show how perceptions and claims that the media constitute a prestigious, extraordinary world (naturalized both textually and through actions embedded in production processes) sustain such exclusions and push individual participants towards the desired social order. This somewhat complicated and circular process that underlies the work of what I call the *rite of media participation* will be explained step by step in the forthcoming sections.

1.3.2 From rite of passage to rite of institution

The idea that rituals are essentially transformative has emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, primarily under the influence of Victor Turner. Rather than merely confirming the status quo or garnering social consensus (such activities are described by Turner as ‘ceremonies’), rituals in this conception have been regarded as deeply subversive and creative: they are performances of transition and change or, more evocatively, instruments of *becoming*. Turner built his theory on Van Gennep’s classic notion of rites of passage – initiation rituals that separate individuals from their previous social status and integrate them into a new one (see Van Gennep, 1909; Turner, 1977) – and emphasizes the importance of the liminal phase of this process. In Turner’s view, it is the out-of-the-ordinary, betwixt-and-between space of rituals that enables the work of transformation (cf. Grimes, 2000: 121).

Thus rites of passage manage transitions – from childhood to adulthood, from being unmarried to being married, or from being alive to being (considered) dead – and the structural logic of such transitions is not difficult to recognize in TV programmes where closeted and insecure teenagers are made into proud young adults, where people experiencing social isolation on account of their disabilities become successful daters, or where overweight participants turn into healthy and attractive individuals. Yet these shows do more than transform and thereby normalize, integrate or emancipate²¹ *individual* contestants – and the same can be said of rites of

²¹ Specifying the outcome of this process is deliberately left open at this point. This is meant on the one hand to preclude the tendency to essentialize what the interventions by definition do with the participants and on the other hand to make room for scepticism about comparable claims made by productions themselves, when framing the value and legitimacy of their intervention.

passage: they are at the same time involved, although less obviously, in producing, reaffirming and cementing *difference* among (presumed) social collectives. The recognition of this side effect of rituals has led Bourdieu (1991) to propose the replacement of the term ‘rites of passage’ with the term ‘rites of institution’. He found the latter more apt to capture a salient feature: rites not only separate those who have taken part in them from those who are yet to do so – differentiating, for instance, uncircumcised boys from circumcised men – but also create a deeper, lasting and more important division, namely between those who can participate at all and those who cannot – in this case, between males and females. Through this hidden division, the rite consecrates or *institutes* the differential treatment of men and women, therefore sanctioning and sanctifying an established order (1991: 117–19).

Bourdieu’s analysis reminds us that rites, while directing our attention to the integrative end of a transformation, also naturalize the components of *privilege* and *exclusion* involved in participating in this process. Let us turn now to TV participation and look at it through this new lens – Bourdieu’s concept and the new layer of differentiation it introduces. Examining how the personal agenda of individual participants articulates a set of concerns within the history of selfhood (Lewis, 2009; Sender, 2012) is of course important, but represents only one part of the picture – a detail, as it were. The notion of rites of institution allows us to go beyond, to the wider picture. We can now try to discover how those individual participants represent collectives and the mechanisms through which their representation contributes to, limits, or creates myths about the participatory inclusiveness of the TV shows in question.

But the moral, ideological and sociopolitical implications of how collective identities are inscribed into individual self-performances are often obscured by the media texts themselves, precisely because the stakes around which interventional programmes are centred are typically framed as personal problems²² and narrated from the perspective of the ‘norm’. In this respect, rites of institution operate as acts of communication (Bourdieu, 1991: 121), both for the public and for the participants.

²² Bannink and Wentink (2015) reach a similar conclusion in their analysis of the discourse of emancipation in *Uit de Kast* – a research carried out independently around the same time as mine.

Viewers are generally encouraged to read the text from the position of a mainstream 'us', whence, if all is well, they develop an affective relation with the 'not-yet-us' subjects of the transformation. As for participants, the communicative significance of rites is even more peculiar at their end. In Bourdieu's argument, ritual actions *signify* to the performer 'what his identity is, but in a way that both expresses it to him and imposes it on him by expressing it in front of everyone [...] and thus informing him in an authoritative manner of what he is and what he must be' (1991: 121).

Thus the public expression of identity (the performative act) and the imposition of that identity on the performer (the effect of the performative act) occur simultaneously. The two are, in consequence, complementary sides of the same signifying process. If we accept this modelling of ritual transformation,²³ a question follows immediately about the 'authoritative manner' in which a new self comes into being. How is it constructed and sustained within the context of televisual interventions? In the next section I will argue that this authority lies in the 'social fact' of mediation (Durkheim, 2014 [1895]) – a situation that makes *media themselves the agent of transformation*.²⁴ This position takes me to the notion of media ritual as it was put forward by Nick Couldry in his theorization of media power.

1.3.3 From rites of institution to rites of (media) participation

Wherefrom does the power *to* transform and the power *over* the terms of participation come, and how does this work? In my argument so far, rituals, regardless of their explicit ideologies, create and express particular kinds of order and regularity through *separation*. For Turner, this separation is primarily temporal and affects the subject of transformation, while for Bourdieu it is about dividing the social world into those who

²³ Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity – which explains how we *become* gendered through the way we act – rests on a comparable logic (cf. Butler, 1990). In both cases we can recognize the influence of Foucault's theory of governmentality (see e.g. Foucault, 1991), where norms of expression and self-definition play an essential role in (re)producing power structures; in fact, as means of discipline and regulation, they are more effective than explicit forms of control (see Couldry, 2004: 58).

²⁴ This agency, as will become clear in the following chapters, is based on actual institutional processes and practices as well as on *assumptions* about the media taken collectively, as an institution in society at large.

partake in the ritual process and those who are excluded from it. For Couldry, the idea of separation stems from the Durkheimian concept of *social categories* – taxonomies that structure the core of our understandings of the social world, for instance the distinction between a realm of the ‘sacred’ and one of the ‘profane’ – and explains how the symbolic significance of media representations is constructed and reproduced throughout social space (see e.g. Couldry, 2003, 2006, 2009).²⁵ Looked at in this light, media rituals are based on a distinction between the media world and the non-media world and postulate the existence of a natural and hierarchical opposition between these two realms—‘hierarchical’ because what is ‘in the media’ is commonly and often automatically considered to be more important, more actual, more extraordinary, more glamorous, and so on than things, events and people in the everyday world. According to Couldry, this asymmetry is in large part maintained through the symbolic and physical *boundaries* set around the production of media, because these boundaries promote an unequal distribution of power among social actors as to the process of representing – and thereby constructing – social reality.²⁶ In this reasoning, representations become ‘powerful’, since they are assumed to give access to the very heart of a society: the media open the door to society’s imagined generative centre, the part that explains its functioning and values. This assumption, labelled by Couldry ‘the myth of the mediated centre’, prompts the public to listen and is frequently mobilized in a particular kind of rhetoric, through which the media uphold a sense that what they have to say is important. Moreover, this myth is seen to be both the catalyst and the consequence of what Couldry calls ‘media rituals’.

In Couldry’s usage, this term covers a wide array of media-related phenomena such as celebrity meet-and-greets, studio tours, ‘pilgrimages’ to filming locations, or situations in which ordinary people become involved in processes of media production, as in reality TV shows (the type under study here). A common attribute of these very diverse situations is that they all exemplify ‘extraordinary’ moments: the

²⁵ In what follows I summarize Couldry’s main points on the basis of his treatment of media and ritual power over the years. Hence I will not cite here any sources; the discussion will remain general. I leave the proper engagement with Couldry’s individual works and specific arguments for the forthcoming chapters.

²⁶ Here Couldry builds directly on Bourdieu’s understanding of symbolic power as the power ‘to act on reality by acting on its representation’ (Bourdieu, 1991: 119).

separation between the two words described a little earlier is temporarily suspended or is enacted in such a way as to seem natural under ordinary circumstances. As a result, the power inequalities inscribed into the division remain unnoticed or are taken for granted.

This idea of media ritual is a useful starting point for my inquiry, and it is so in many respects. To begin with, it directs our attention to the ways in which the premise of participating in the media world and of adhering to its rules and norms gets juxtaposed with the promise of successful transformations; this issue will be picked up in Chapter 3, where I look into how media texts reinforce this juxtaposition, and in Chapter 4, where I analyse how this assumption is internalized, acted upon and enacted by participants. In Chapter 5 I move away from Couldry's preoccupation with how media power is confirmed and reproduced in ritualized forms, turning instead to questions of *appropriation* and *contestation* of the symbolic authority of televisual interventions. This will allow me to identify and problematize the conditions in which media rituals are indeed an efficient context for the participants' personal or political projects; and I will also consider instances when the ritual efficiency of media participation fails. Finally, whereas the 'extraordinariness' of TV participation was once to a large extent constructed through restricted access to the media world, Chapter 6 shows how boundaries around this 'mythical centre' are shifting in today's era of technological and market-based fragmentation.²⁷ I will explore how, when (re)making media rituals in the age of new media, TV productions negotiate gatekeeping strategies and contemporary ideals of participatory inclusiveness, the latter being probably the most pervasive and most contested of the claims that underlie the interactive cultures of reality television and new media (see Andrejevic, 2004). In each chapter, this idea of participatory inclusiveness – or the myth of participation, as I will often refer to it – will receive special attention; and, in order to capture the modalities of mobilizing this myth and of using it for sociocultural, industrial-economic or political ends, I will look into how the televisual transformations under our scrutiny are represented, experienced and interpreted by different actors as rites of passage – or rites of institution.

²⁷ On the matter of whether this is indeed a real threat, see Couldry (2009).

At a certain point, the steps I just outlined necessitate a paradigmatic departure from Couldry's analysis of media power. This in turn requires combining his decentred approach with an ethnographic epistemology in which relations to discrete media texts, processes of meaning making, and questions of agency and change play a key role. Couldry (2000, 2003) has often called into question the usefulness of ethnography when it comes to grasping the working of media power; and questions of meaning are undoubtedly less relevant to enquiries that are primarily concerned with how power is *formally* enacted and reproduced, *even if contested* by the actors involved. Yet, in order to understand how and under what conditions this power becomes coercive or productive (Markham, 2017), and thus to nuance the 'empowerment versus exploitation' debate mentioned earlier, it is essential to understand how, for whom (Kjus, 2009), and why reality television works as a site of self-actualization. To this end, one needs to adopt an approach that is sensitive to the various modalities of motivating, experiencing, and rationalizing participation – and to how it is authored and taken under control. Wolcott (1999, cited by Bird, 2003: 8) describes such an approach as an 'ethnographic way of seeing'. The question of how it can be implemented in practice and what challenges it poses is the subject of the following chapter, where the design and the methods of my case studies are described and reflected upon.

2 Four studies into television production and participation

2.1 Project evolution and design

As Nigel Barley asserts in his witty, semi-autoethnographic *The Innocent Anthropologist*, most research starts off with a vague apprehension of interest in a certain area of study; those are indeed rare who know what their thesis is about before they have written it (Barley, 1983: 11–12). Although slightly far-stretched (which is in the nature of satire), Barley's characterization quite adequately captures the fluid, sometimes arbitrary, and often messy character of inductive and qualitative research; and the present work does not try to pretend to be an exception. Rather, my project adopted from the outset a deliberately flexible design, which allowed the insights of one case to determine the direction and focus of the next one, thereby enabling me, the researcher, to keep bringing into conversation, throughout my endeavour, always new and different intellectual and disciplinary traditions: anthropology and media anthropology, queer and disability studies, sociology, cultural studies of media industries, TV studies.

The 'vague interest' that sparked this research was about the role of mediation in constructing new cultural practices; a textual analysis of the Dutch TV programme *Uit de 'Kast* [*Out of the Closet*] served as my entry point for this enquiry. While exploring how the ambiguous process of coming out is transformed into a structured, attainable and culturally meaningful performance within a televisual narrative, I also realized how frequently the programme's indispensable role in making a success of the participants' coming out is thematized within this narrative. Consequently, in my next chapter (which presents the second part of this first study), I employed a series of in-depth interviews with the protagonists in order to understand how taking part in the same programme facilitated their self-disclosure.

If *Uit de Kast*, the first case I studied, probed into the implications of media participation for the process of coming out, the next one aimed at questioning the role of televisual interventions in mitigating something that is less straightforward than a speech act. The interview study with participants of the disability dating show *The*

Undateables set out to explore the power of media in creating romantic relationships against the headwind of social prejudice. Yet it soon turned out that romantic aspirations are often not even on the participants' agenda; hence my attention turned to structural differences in their motivations, participatory attitudes and experiences and to ways in which these differences relate to agency, voice and the politics of (self)-representation.

The *Undateables* study also highlighted the complex and often ambivalent dynamics of participant–producer interactions. Consequently, after running a test with two *Undateables* production members, I concluded the empirical part of the project by interviewing crew members of a variety of other programmes, for instance *The Biggest Loser*, *Extreme Makeover*, *Hoarders*, *First Dates*, and *Obsessive Compulsive Cleaners*. My aim was to grasp how production members' assumptions, tactics, values and constraints govern the interactions from which the transformative experiences and stories are supposed to emerge.

In terms of methods, the project was based on seemingly straightforward techniques: textual analysis in the style of Dilthey's hermeneutics; and in-depth interviews.²⁸ Yet the challenges associated with getting interview subjects on board from a population that is infamously difficult to access made the research process anything but conventional: the project was built on getting insights – both factual and experiential – from semi-anonymous and already interviewed (if not overinterviewed) reality show participants, and from producers who were often too interested in sustaining the mythical aura around their profession, or afraid of repercussions in case they leaked details about 'how the sausage is made', as one of them put it. Being able to identify respondents from this particular pool, reach out to them, obtain their consent or agreement to participate, and make them open up to me was a recurrent 'high-risk, high-gain' game throughout the project, and accomplishing these tasks required persistence and creativity, as well as a good deal of stepping outside my comfort zone by being assertive, for example (not easy for a person who considered himself an introvert). How was it all done?

²⁸ Relevant details will be given in the forthcoming chapters.

2.2 Getting inside: accessing and interviewing media participants and producers

Identifying and locating the ‘real’ persons behind the cast of *Uit de Kast* and *The Undateables*²⁹ started with a search for all kind of visual and narrative clues in the episodes: hints about their professions or hobbies, their places of residence, the schools and sport clubs they supposedly attended, and so on. This was typically followed by an extensive web and social media search, which made use of sometimes systematic, but more often endless random combinations of keywords from the clue hunts and the first names that were already available. Once last names were identified, further attempts were made to find email contacts, but in the end most interviewees were contacted through Facebook. Nevertheless, getting responses with this strategy became increasingly difficult over time, as Facebook frequently changed the rules on how someone can be approached from outside the space of existing contacts: messages of this kind were received in the regular inbox to begin with, but later on they would go to a separate folder without notifying the addressee. The system could be tricked for a limited time by paying a few Euros to the platform, so the message would land directly into the main inbox. But this option soon disappeared: addressees would receive a generic notification instead, and it was up to them to open and read the message or not. If, for whatever reason, the addressee did not react at this point, the system blocked any follow-ups; a last-resort option in this situation was to create a new Facebook profile and make one final, desperate attempt to get the interview call through.

To cut a long story short, every recruitment took painfully long, even by slow academic standards: often weeks passed between two small victories of getting someone on board.³⁰ During these periods of uncertainty, the initial contact message was meticulously rephrased (a more informal tone sometimes helped) and

²⁹ This move was necessary because, for privacy reasons, productions do not normally give out the contact details of participants; it was easier to identify crew members via IMDB (the Internet Movie Data Base) and professional networking sites. The recruitment strategies and methods used for production workers are discussed in greater detail in the final empirical chapter.

³⁰ The same applies to research I carried out with the producers, where the challenge came not so much from the limitations of the platform for communication as from frequent rejections of interview requests and from general unresponsiveness to my call.

compensation was offered. At a guess, I would say that this helped a lot, even if respondents often seemed surprised when the gift card was sent to them after the interview. Later on the interviews provided some (second-order) clues as to why individual respondents decided to partake in the study: some had seen it as an opportunity for venting anonymously, others wanted to relive an experience, others considered academic research an appealing forum for intellectual reflection, and still others perceived the interview situation as a confessional space. Nevertheless, such clues did not necessarily help to make the next recruitment any smoother or more predictable.³¹ The ice typically broke after about four completed interviews, as this number already allowed some modest snowball effect. But even then, every single participant and crew member whom I managed to recruit was treated as a rare treasure, regardless of how close the study was to data saturation.

Rare treasures must be handled with great care and, in consequence, the pressure for me to make the most out of my interviews was exceptionally high, given the unpredictable influx of informants. A strategy that worked was making use of a flexible, yet elaborate interview guide and being prepared to maintain a fine balance between empathy and artfulness, so that by the end both parties may get what they wanted from the interview situation. This required that sometimes I go along with the communication style of the respondent, sometimes I go against it; that sometimes I assure the informant of my agreement and support, sometimes I ask critical questions – directly, hypothetically, or in third person; that sometimes I plunge *in medias res* with my questions, sometimes I make lengthy detours before shooting them. The relations between a situated experience and its interpretations are often intricate, as they are affected by a multitude of temporal, societal and interpersonal factors. Bearing this in mind, the tactic I just described also helped me to avoid the trap of

³¹ This is probably also due to the fact that such motivations are not necessarily exclusive. Subjects were often explicitly asked about their reasons for taking part in the study, but what they communicated about it had much to do with the ‘presentation of the self’ (Goffman, 1956) and with the perceived power dynamics of the interaction – major factors that operate in any interview situation.

subscribing to a naïve vision of relativism in my effort to give the respondents a voice, while managing to make this effort valid.³²

The recruitment process and the interviews later on revealed general uncertainty, among cast and crew members alike, as to whether they would break (informal) non-disclosure agreements or (implicit) cultural taboos by sharing behind-the-scenes stories. For this reason, interviewees sometimes felt the need to contact their programme manager beforehand and ask permission to talk about their experience,³³ and crew members would repeatedly obtain reassurances that their anonymity will be respected and that the information they provided during our conversations will not be used 'off the record'. Accordingly, even though some of the research participants insisted that they 'wouldn't mind' appearing in the study under their real names, the standard procedure I adopted in the presentation of all data is to use pseudonyms³⁴ and to omit any contextual information that might reveal the respondents' identity to those familiar with the shows. This explains why demographic details are sometimes deliberately vague throughout my story.

Next to the relatively straightforward issue of anonymity, a less clear-cut and, in retrospect, a probably self-generated dilemma was my treatment of the informants as a 'vulnerable population'. This problem was particularly acute in the case of the *Undateables* participants. Does their involvement in the study, my recruitment call,

³² In this respect, my position is close to what Geertz (1984) describes as *anti anti-relativism*: the validity of ethnographic analysis does not require the researcher to 'go native' (or 'be native' in the first place), nor does it necessitate the essentialization of the informants' narratives without any critical distance. Rather, the endeavour to understand what the informants' experiences mean to the informants themselves depends more on the researcher's ability to enter into meaningful dialogue and to employ an interpretative imagination that is sensitive to how potential meanings are linked to the micro, mezo and macro realities in which they are produced. At the same time, it happened during the project that a perceived similarity in subject position between interviewer and interviewee, including a sense of shared background or identity, was helpful in that it made individual respondents to 'open up' more quickly.

³³ With one exception (when the production team contacted me to find out more about the nature of my research and to express 'displeasure' on the grounds that I had not informed its members about the project before I 'started contacting contributors on Facebook', which they considered impolite), 'approval' from productions in such instances was surprisingly easily granted. As a crew member later explained, not all shows work with formal confidentiality agreements, and production teams are way more concerned about leaking out storylines of ongoing broadcasts than about participants' retrospective evaluation of production practices.

³⁴ One exception is the usage of the story of Theo in Chapter 4: for him, letting his real voice heard in the study was particularly important (and remained so after he read drafts of the paper), and I felt that his contribution indeed deserved that I do justice to his desire.

or the interview guide require any *special* ethical review? This was one horn of the dilemma. But then, doesn't this very question reflect an ableist bias that throws suspicion on my endeavour to problematize the often criticized vulnerability discourse constructed by the programme itself, making it slightly hypocritical at best? This was the other horn. So then, were my initial awkwardness and the extra carefulness with which I conducted these interviews just symptoms of othering, or were they a natural response to difference and an inevitable step towards giving it due recognition? I was in favour of interpreting my doubts as a 'natural response' and, after much reflection, I decided not to exaggerate the ethical dimension of interviewing subjects with disabilities at the expense of treating them as normal, consenting adults endowed with agency. Consultations with methodological experts, discussions with peers, and some extra rounds of readings from literature by disability activists scholars constituted an invaluable input in this direction.³⁵

As for figures, a total of 36 respondents participated in the entire project, either face to face or via Skype. Their participation generated some 54 hours of recorded interview data, which were subsequently transcribed, anonymized and manually processed through open and thematic coding. This material, together with over 40 hours of footage of the programmes, forms the basis of the interpretative analysis presented in the forthcoming chapters, which, together, explore the phenomenological, hermeneutic and discursive layers of TV participation as a sociocultural practice today (on these layers, see Holstein and Gubrium, 1999; Kvale and Brinkman, 2009).³⁶ One should bear in mind, however, that such an analysis is by definition incomplete – as Geertz (1973) put it, the more deeply it goes, the less complete it will be – and that its implications are inextricably linked to the representative strategies and capabilities of the interpreter (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). In the present case, the pragmatic, ethical, or even poetic choices involved in writing up the results and giving them the present form often revealed that academic

³⁵ My special gratitude goes to the late Dr. Tony Hak, for helpful conversations and the advice in this regard.

³⁶ As is customary with article-based dissertations, material already published in journals is reproduced with the same stylistic conventions (e.g. italics and quotation marks). But the endnotes have become footnotes, the in-text citations have been standardized, and the references have been merged and consolidated into one single list at the end of the dissertation.

constructs are not too distant from the constructs made by media producers:³⁷ portraying participatory and production processes required a constant selection of voices, as well as negotiations between theoretical priorities and what the informants wanted to communicate about their experience. One way to cope with this challenge (probably the only way, so far as my 'personal epistemology' is concerned) was to make these negotiations and competing narratives visible where they were relevant, without worrying too much about the fact that complicated and even contradictory stories undermine certain ideals of academic purity. For this reason, I ultimately opted for what is called 'thick descriptions': rather than turning away from the existential dilemmas of life for the sake of some 'empyrean realm of de-emotionalized forms' (Geertz, 1973: 30), I aimed at using the power of scientific imagination to plunge right into those dilemmas. Whether I achieved this aim and my imagination as a researcher has entered in a meaningful dialogue with the lives of my respondents is to be determined by you, the reader.

³⁷ See further reflections on this in the conclusion to the chapter on *The Undateables*.



3 Coming out with the media: the ritualization of self-disclosure in the Dutch television programme *Uit de Kast* ³⁸

Summary

Using the media to disclose one's sexual identity has become an increasingly salient practice in recent years. Yet little is known about the reasons for the emergence of this form of self-disclosure. Based on an analysis of the Dutch television programme *Uit de Kast* ('Out of the Closet'), this chapter relates the rise of mediated coming out practices to the ritualizing power of the media: I argue that media plays a quintessential role in transforming the socially unscripted act of coming out into a patterned, culturally meaningful performance. The analysis reveals that the ritual work of the programme is embedded in the way 1) the generic format of the show structures the self-disclosures, 2) the authority of the media is deployed to channel the coming out process, and 3) the programme, while controlling diversity, reinforces dominant societal values and ideologies. The case not only highlights how unprecedented ritual forms come to flourish in the current era of 'participatory' media culture, but also demonstrates how ritualization supports and naturalizes the claim that media is an effective agent to intervene and create order in everyday, ordinary lives.

3.1 Introduction

In a sport pub in the Dutch town Tilburg, five young men are having beers after their game. They are not alone: there are cameras present, shooting a youth programme – allegedly – about soccer and friendship.

³⁸ Originally published in *European Journal of Cultural Studies* (2015, vol. 18, issue 3). An earlier version of this chapter received Best Paper Award of the annual conference of the Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association (MeCCSA), Bournemouth, UK, 2014.

'Boys, I have to tell you something' – announces one of the guys, Daan, but his best friend interrupts him: *'I am gay, hahaha,'* and starts clapping. Daan decides to disregard his friend's remark and continues with his prepared speech until the final words: *'I am into boys'*.

'Serious?' – asks the friend, Tinus, still with a smile on his face – *'Then I can't talk with you anymore.'*

The others, recognizing the seriousness of the situation, neglect their friend's response, and gradually reassure Daan about their unchanged friendship.

'But...is this real? I thought this is fake... like Candid Camera' – at this point, Tinus finally understands what is really going on and bursts into tears.

Triggered by the unexpected confession of his mate, and by the late realization of the 'reality' of a situation with which Tinus was otherwise familiar from the media, this dramatic moment was captured in the second season of the Dutch television programme *Uit de Kast* ('Out of the Closet'). The programme, nominated for an International Emmy Award in the category of 'Kids factual' in 2012, was launched by the public broadcasting company KRO in 2010 and finished its third season in 2013. Each of the 18 episodes centres around one protagonist who comes out 'live' to their immediate environment (family, friends and peers) with the assistance of the popular presenter *Arie Boomsma*. Depending on the social circumstances of the candidates, the episodes vary in the degree of awkward, cathartic and confrontational moments, but the dual mission of the show is quite explicit: *helping* the youngsters through a critical moment of their lives, and *showing* the difficulties people still face when it comes to coming out in contemporary Dutch society.

Although the longest running televised format so far, *Uit de Kast* is not an exceptional phenomenon: using the media to disclose one's sexual identity has become an increasingly salient practice in recent decades. Today we can witness the proliferation of examples of mediated coming out in various media platforms: such confessions are constantly being performed, narrated and reflected on in talk shows and the tabloid press, and on reality TV as well as online discussion forums, social media and video streaming sites. This growing production of and attention to public,

mediated examples of coming out suggest that this form of self-disclosure has gone through a wider 'socialization' in the current age: coming out has been transformed from something merely intimate to something representational – a modern-day ritual that takes place in and through the media.

While coming out as a process has been discussed extensively in the academic literature in relation to individual identity development³⁹, the practice of coming out in mediated contexts has received less attention. Furthermore, the little work that has been done on mediated coming out primarily focused on isolated examples of celebrity coming out practices (e.g. Dow, 2001), fictional representations (e.g. Herman, 2005) or coming out narratives (e.g. Alexander and Losh, 2010). To date, still little is known about the role of the media in actual instances of coming out performed by 'ordinary people'. On a general level, mediated coming out seems to embody the very ethos of interactivity and the underlying notion that media participation is a natural and effective outlet for creative and democratic self-expression (cf. Andrejevic, 2004; Jenkins, 2006; van Dijck, 2009). Yet, the question remains: how is the power of media participation reinforced and justified in the case of mediated coming out? What do the media offer to those exposing their personal struggles to a wider public?

Building on the work of Nick Couldry on media rituals (2003), we propose that the growing appeal to mediated performances is to a large extent derived from the process of ritualization, made possible by the symbolic power of the media. More in particular, we assert that the perceived authority of the media to represent and change social reality plays a pivotal role in transforming socially unscripted and therefore ambiguous actions into patterned, culturally meaningful and legitimate practices. The aim of this chapter is to scrutinize this transformative process, as it is explicitly presented and implicitly operates in the telling example of *Uit de Kast*. The core question of this chapter – how does the ritualization of coming out work in *Uit de Kast* and what is the role of the media in this? – is addressed through an in-depth textual analysis of the three seasons of the programme, looking specifically at how the format of the show imposes a ritual structure on the self-disclosures, how publicity motivates

³⁹ For an overview and critical reflection on this perspective see for example Herdt, 1992; Herman, 2005; Orne, 2011.

and supports the confessions, and more generally, how the framing of coming out enables the programme to speak to and about wider societal values.

The success⁴⁰ of *Uit de Kast* is evidenced also by its recently started international career: the programme was adopted by VTM, the largest commercial channel in Belgium and has also been sold to the German RTL2. Looking at this trend, and considering that *Uit de Kast* is not a unique programme in the Dutch television landscape addressing the ‘serious’ dimensions of the human condition⁴¹, one cannot easily dismiss the show as another outrageous reality programme building on the voyeuristic pleasure of gazing (Sumiala, 2011) or on the exploitation of those undergoing this spectacle (Andrejevic, 2004). In turn, we assert that investigating the ritual dimensions of the programme may open up more substantial questions about contemporary forms of media-related social behaviour. Situating the programme within the genre already raises some difficulties, given the production context (public service broadcasting explicitly embracing the mission of ‘quality programming’), the lack of commercial character, the educational dimension (the project of opening up people’s eyes to a relevant societal issue), and the ways these are brought together with the ethos of ‘liveness’, ‘reality’ and the exploitation of the possibilities of surveillance entertainment. While the programme, as we shall see, maintains connections with various genres – e.g. make-over realities and confessional television – it seems that this hybridity makes the *Uit de Kast* format especially powerful in claiming not only that it provides direct access to unscripted interactions and experiences of ‘ordinary people’, but also that media are effective means for changing one’s every-day, unmediated life.

While exploring how the programme (appears to) achieve this effect, our analysis will show how such claims are derived from the process of ritualization, by which coming out becomes constructed as ritual *practice*. Ultimately, we will demonstrate the increasing significance of media as agents in the construction of

⁴⁰ The first episode attracted more than 750,000 viewers and continued to produce high viewing figures for such a youth programme in the Netherlands (data received via *Stichting Kijkonderzoek*).

⁴¹ For example, the programme *Over mijn lijk* (‘Over my dead body’), following young people with terminal illness, or the anti-bullying programme *Over de streep*, designed to break down stereotypes and promote mutual respect among high-school students who participate in a ‘Challenge Day’.

unprecedented forms of contemporary ritual practices, arguing that such rituals – either serving to create a wider sense of commonality, aiming at social control, or functioning to tame societal conflicts –, have the capacity to manifest pressures towards order and valued ideals in society (Rothenbuhler, 1998).

The following sections will present this emerging ritualization of coming out practices in and via *Uit de Kast*, by analyzing the format of the program, the transformational work of the media frame, and the ritual significance of the show beyond the life of the protagonists. Before elaborating on our findings, we first briefly summarize the core theoretical considerations and methods that govern our analysis.

3.2 Theoretical framework

As already mentioned in the introductory chapter, research into the ritual dimensions of media culture has a long tradition within media studies: works addressing the ritual characteristics of the production, the consumption and the content of specific media formats and genres (e.g. Liebes and Curran, 1998; Rothenbuhler and Coman, 2005; Reijnders et al., 2007) have already shown how mediation contributes to the interpretation, legitimization and the structural re-organization of existing ceremonial events and activities. However, the more complex role media may play in *ritualizing* – and thereby ordering – otherwise unscripted social acts and events by displacing them into a ritual frame has received less attention (Coman, 2005: 48; cf. Couldry 2003). We assert that mediated coming out is an especially telling phenomenon to understand this process: our study builds on the premise that coming out within *Uit de Kast* is not simply a media presentation of a rite – as is the case with the media representation or public broadcasting of, for instance, royal wedding ceremonies, funerals or national commemorations, which are the most obvious and the most extensively discussed types of media(ted) rituals (cf. Dyan and Katz, 1992; Rothenbuhler, 1998; Mihelj, 2008). While in these instances mediation primarily functions as an amplifier of a pre-existing ritual event, in the case of mediated coming out we presume that it is precisely the media frame which allows examples of coming out to fully function as rituals, and more specifically, as rites of passage for the

participants and the audience of the program alike. In supporting this premise, we will first show what problems arise with conceptualizing coming out as ritual practice when the media is not involved. Following this, we will examine how the media may work as an effective agent of ritualization.

3.2.1 *Coming out as a ritual?*

As a folk idiom, 'coming out' refers to many psycho-cultural processes and social events, but most commonly associated with the single act of declaring one's identity as gay to a person assumed to be straight (Herdt, 1992). In this respect, coming out is a transformative act, which effects both the individuals performing the self-disclosure and their social relationships. Accordingly, coming out not only implies both crisis and opportunity, but also takes place in a 'betwixt and between' stage that apparently divides the life course into 'before' and 'after'. These basic features certainly evoke analogies with *rites of passage*, the transition rituals negotiating turning points from one life stage to another.

Yet, conceptualizing coming out as a rite of passage is not unproblematic. As Grimes argues (2000), not every passage is a rite of passage, as far as we *undergo* passages but we *enact* rites. Rites of passage normally occur at a culturally determined time period, and the enactments follow certain pre-scripted patterns. In turn, coming out, in the traditional, non-media sense of the word, is commonly understood not as a single event, but rather as a protracted process (Drushel, 2010) that is 'characterized by unpredictability, starts, stops, backtracking, and denial' (Gonsiorek and Rudolph, 1991: 164-165). Given these attributes, it is not surprising that most of the coming out research predominantly focuses on other aspects, such as the psychological dimension (cf. Orne 2011).

Nevertheless, coming out can, in some instances, take the ritual form of a rite of passage, given the right social context. Rituals, although generally associated with rigid structures, stability and tradition, are in fact constantly and consciously (re)invented, sometimes with the prerequisite of reconstituting the community as well (Grimes, 2000: 124). A plastic example of this could be the announcement we have

encountered on the website of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver about the inclusion of ‘coming out ceremonies’ in their services⁴². Similarly, in his ethnographic research into the *Horizon* coming out support group in Chicago (1992), Gilbert Herdt convincingly argues that the youngsters joining the group go through the ‘classical’, formative and symbolic stages of a rite of passage, constructed and prescribed by the group leaders to the ‘novices’, before they get ready to integrate into the gay community and the wider society as gay individuals. In Herdt’s description, the ‘ritual separation’ of the in-group activities from everyday life, the ‘threshold symbolism’ within the secret world of the community, and the emerging *communitas* that temporarily suspends the existing ethnic, class and gender differences of the members in the special space and time of the weekly meetings bring together all the patterns of a full-fledged liminal phase (cf. Turner, 1977) that enables ritual to do the work of transformation.

As the above examples illustrate, the ritualization of coming out requires some sort of institutional authority that normalizes the act of self-disclosure. Accordingly, if rites of passage proceed through the stages of separation from the community (or from the normal run of things), the transition into an *especially formative time and space* and the reincorporation back into the community (Grimes, 2006: 6), it seems that the media frame can provide a powerful, liminal context through which coming out becomes perceived and experienced as a rite of passage. To explain the ritual power of the media in this transformational process, Nick Couldry’s work on media rituals serves as a fruitful starting point.

3.2.2 Media rituals

Defined as ‘formalised actions organised around key media-related categories and boundaries’ (2003:29), the concept of media ritual is used by Couldry to grasp how the symbolic authority of the media is being constructed, maintained and naturalized in contemporary media-saturated societies. In line with Couldry’s argumentation, this process can most clearly be captured in those ‘special’ situations when the boundaries

⁴² <http://www.vancouverunitarians.ca/cms/site/pid/304>, accessed on 20 May 2013.

between the otherwise separated realms of the media and non-media world are temporarily suspended: one can think, for example, of meet-and-greets with celebrities, film studio tours, or situations when ‘ordinary people’ act on television (cf. Reijnders et al., 2013). According to Couldry, such transgressive instances, because of their ‘extraordinariness’, actually naturalize and confirm the symbolic superiority of the media world, and thereby maintain the sense that the media are the primary access point to our shared social reality – this is what Couldry terms more generally the ‘myth of the mediated centre’.

Since the coming out within *Uit de Kast* exemplifies ‘ordinary people’ becoming part of or active shapers of the media production process, we can argue that such disclosures on a phenomenological level can be interpreted as media rituals. The programme not only offers an opportunity for ‘ordinary’ people to perform an ‘extraordinary’ mission while appearing and acting on the screen, but the diverse sample of participants⁴³ also suggests that the intention of the producers was to address the widest social space possible, reproducing the above-mentioned myth. However, while Couldry’s explanation of how the authority of media institutions and the claim to their social centrality being reproduced in media-related practices may provide a general argumentation about why the notion of media participation is so powerful, little is known about how media authority actually operates, being deployed and appropriated by the actors to generate order in their practices (Couldry, 2006: 24) – in our case, coming out.

Our interest lies especially in this process of ordering: how does the show dramatize and pattern the act of coming out and how is the authority of the media deployed in this process? In this respect, the concept of ‘ritualization’ is handled here as a prism to grasp the process of *becoming*: to investigate how mediation contributes

⁴³ The majority of the protagonists are male (13 out of 18), with an age between 15 and 27, but they differ remarkably in their social profile: there are candidates with divorced parents, high-school and university students, youngsters from the countryside and from different religious denominations, athletes, and young adults with disabilities. Furthermore, explicit efforts were made by the production to redress the ‘gender balance’ of the show, as it is reflected in the recruiting advertisements after the second season, specifically targeting female candidates (see for example: <http://www.damespraatjes.nl/2012/arie-boomsma-zoekt-vrouwen-voor-kros-uit-de-kast>, accessed on 24 June 2014). As a result, the majority of the participants of the last season were females.

to the standardization and the patterning of the ambiguous act of coming out by constructing a recurring, authoritative context with normative effects on those involved (Sumiala, 2013: 25). At the same time, we anticipate that the ritual efficiency and the authority of the media frame can not come into being in a cultural vacuum, but are tightly interwoven with wider, culturally determined power configurations, norms and ideologies (cf. Reijnders, 2010). Elaborating on these connections and how they are dramatized or implicitly reproduced in the media text may not only help us to capture how the 'myth of the mediated centre' is actually being constructed, but may also provide links to a broader conception of ritualization, understanding it as a process of framing certain activities in ways that become perceived as 'both intrinsically different from other acts and privileged in their significance and ramifications' (Bell, 2009: 219).

3.3 Methods

Following similar works on the ritual dimensions of television programmes (e.g. Reijnders et al., 2007), this chapter investigates the ritualizing role of the media in *Uit de Kast* through an interpretative, formal-thematic analysis of the three seasons of the programme (cf. Kuppens and Mast, 2012). Although we acknowledge that ritualization may not be limited to the level of representation, our aim was to capture how the format of the programme channels the practice of coming out as well as what meanings of these structured actions are articulated throughout the content (e.g. how the role of media is justified in the show). The core data consisted of the 18 episodes (each of them approximately half an hour, with a total viewing time of nine hours) gathered on the programme's website⁴⁴. The website not only allowed repeated viewing of single episodes, but also provided extra insights into 'behind the scenes' videos and access to related discussion forums and comments on the episodes from the audience.

We first looked at the micro-structure of the program, i.e. at single episodes, focusing on the patterns of talk and action, the dynamics of interactions in the coming

⁴⁴ <http://uitdekast.kro.nl>, last accessed on 2 December 2013.

out process and on the visible experiences and emotions of the participants. Furthermore, attention was paid to the explicit references to the 'ritual character' of the coming out and to the thematization of and reflections on the mediated feature of the self-disclosure by the actors involved. Finally, the analysis looked at the 'macro-structure', i.e. the programme as a whole, aiming to capture the underlying structure repeated throughout the episodes, the recurring themes and how the format changed through the seasons.

Our analysis identified three major factors as the basis of the ritualization of coming out: the ritual power of the programme lies in the way 1) the generic format of the show reinforces the notion that coming out is a structured performance, fitting into a unidirectional process of *becoming*; 2) the authority of the media is deployed and temporarily suspended in the episodes; and 3) the programme reinforces certain societal values and ideologies while channelling and controlling diversity. We will elaborate on these findings in detail in the subsequent sections, starting with the generic ritual features of the programme.

3.4 The generic format: structure and explicit ritualization

During all three seasons, the format of the episodes follows a standard and more or less simple dramaturgy, divided into three phases: the immediate preparation of the protagonist for the coming out, the actual act of self-disclosure and, finally, the presentation of the consequences of the act, reflected in the reaction of the environment. This generic structure, however, becomes sequential in several episodes, since in most cases the candidates go through at least two challenges, coming out in different realms – generally to their families and separately to their peer groups.

Beyond the obvious purpose of introducing the candidates, the first, 'preliminal' phase also serves to capture the stakes of the forthcoming disclosure. In this stage, the protagonists talk about the history of their struggles and their fears about the consequences – generally, losing their family or their friends – of their coming out. These talks not only take place in the 'out of ordinary' space created by the camera presence, but the 'ritual separation' is often also spatial: the presenter Arie

Boomsma meets several candidates *'in the biggest secret'*, far from their homes. During these discussions, the presenter tries to calm down the remarkably nervous candidates, while doing his best to maintain the suspense and highlight the risks of the forthcoming act in the case of more optimistic candidates, or when the participants get more confident after taking the first – normally 'easier' – challenge: *'What will you do if you get negative reactions?' 'Yesterday it went OK. But now the situation will be more tough, right?'*

In the meantime, the important people around the candidates are interviewed. In order not to spoil the surprise factor of the actual coming out – or, as it is narrated in the episodes, *'in order to get honest reactions'* – there is always a 'cover story' employed to conceal the real reason of the filming, varying according to the individual circumstances of the protagonist: the shooting is said to be about religious youth, about sport and friendship, or about student life. These interviews normally address how the parents or the closest friends see the protagonists, yet the underlying aim is to figure out the attitudes regarding homosexuality and whether the environment suspects anything about the 'secret' of the candidates.

After setting the stage this way, it is time for the candidates to enter the central, 'liminal' stage of their endeavour. If the candidate seems to be confident enough, Arie stays 'behind the scenes'. However, even such protagonists lose their courage in the last moment – in these cases the youngster leaves the scene for a while and draws strength from the encouraging words of Arie: *'Just go and tell. Say: guys, I have to tell you something... and go!'* Due to such instructions, and because the candidate is forced to practice the phrasing of the disclosure in advance (Arie always asks beforehand: *'How are you going to do it?'*), the actual coming out speeches are remarkably short, sometimes no more than a few sentences. Accordingly, more emphasis is placed on the presentation of the direct reactions of the environment and on how all the parties 'digest' the announcement. When the reactions are positive, Arie immediately takes the lead to discuss how the disclosure was experienced by the confessors and the witnesses. In cases when the reception of the disclosure is more ambivalent, Arie follows up the processing of the news a few days after the coming out. In any case, the end of each episode portrays Arie's final visit to the protagonist, taking place a couple

of weeks after the disclosure: in these scenes the viewer learns about the 'postliminal' events and the changes the environment and the youngsters have gone through.

It is remarkable that the candidates normally take the second (and sometimes third) challenge more easily, even if the order of the coming out proceeds from the 'lightest' situations to those where the stakes are the highest for the youngsters. This may be imputable to the above generic structure, which provides certain keys to the participants about the 'proper conduct' of their subsequent disclosures. This proper conduct, as reflected in the format of the programme, entails certain inner preparation, including a preliminary weighing of the risk-benefit factors of the forthcoming act, contextualizing them by looking back on the previous struggles and the life situation in which the urge to come out has emerged. Furthermore, the candidate needs to find the right moment for a *simple* act of disclosure. The single episodes also suggest a step by step approach in terms of the *order* of the challenges the candidate intends to take.

The format of the programme thus provides a specific structure to the coming out practices. Besides this structure, there are also some other features that explicitly contribute to the dramatization of the process and thereby reinforce its ritual flavour. This ritualization can be captured for example in certain patterns of parlance: many protagonists motivate their coming out with the desire to '*become a full person*'. Others explicitly refer to their coming out as the last '*limen*' that they need to cross. Arie as narrator generally refers to the challenge that the candidates take as an '*assignment*' or '*mission*' to be completed, and to the consecutive disclosures as (theatrical) '*acts*'. It is also not infrequent that the timing of the coming out is connected to another important event, rite or significant moment in the protagonist's life: graduation, forthcoming world trip, the start of the freshman year or the last game of the season; this way, the latter event strengthens the passage-like nature of the former as well.

More generally, the explicit ritualization of the coming out can be most clearly captured in the representation of the protagonists' lives before and after the disclosure. Most of these depictions emphasize the *integrative* power of the ritual act, as it is manifested in the contrast between the struggles before the 'big step' and the

situation that comes into being with the *reincorporation* of the protagonist into society. The boy who sometimes walks to the gay bar in his hometown but never dares to go in finally makes his entrance in the last scene. The youngster who wanted to have a relationship appears with his first partner at the follow-up meeting with Arie. The student who had been bullied in school before leaves the schoolyard hand in hand with his boyfriend at the end of his episode.

The above contrasts already suggest that coming out in the programme generally turns out positively, even if some members of the environment need some time for reconciliation. As the following sections will show, the camera presence plays an essential role in securing this outcome of the disclosures. The examination of the authoritative power of the media frame will also direct our attention towards more subtle mechanisms through which mediation transforms the crisis periods of coming out into the less ambiguous process of rite of passage.

3.5 'I just can't do it alone': media authority and ritual transformation

The previous paragraphs showed how the structure of the episodes and certain explicit patterns of ritualization channel the protracted process of coming out into a single event (or a relatively simple sequence of events), providing a sense of viable choreography for the otherwise unscripted conduct of the self-disclosure. Still, the intriguing question remains: why do people actually choose to come out on the programme, what do the motivations and the explanations of the participants tell us about the conception of the media as an effective ritual agent, and how are such conceptions reflected in the outcomes of the self-disclosures? In short: how does the mediated way of conducting coming out operate, and how is it represented as a *regulative* and *natural* means of ritual transformation?

3.5.1 Motivations and justifications

The candidates generally give clear and more or less standard answers in the episodes about their motivations for coming out, framing them as a combination of moral obligation (*'If I plan to live with my parents for long, I really need to tell them'*, *'I don't*

want to live a double life anymore', 'I am tired of lying') and a key to achieving self-fulfilment ('I want to be accepted as I am' 'I want to be myself'). But what about the reasoning behind coming out in the presence of a film crew?

The explanations for this, given either to Arie and the viewers or to the environment during the coming out situations, seem diverse at first glance, yet they show some meaningful commonalities. Candidates like Theo, Thijs and Frans explicitly acknowledge that they wanted to create a 'no way back' situation, given their previous failures to 'find the right moment' to come out. Others justify their choice by arguing that they did not dare to take this risky step without support: as Carlijn puts it, 'the challenge was too high without the camera'. Most typically, the youngsters simply admit that they just 'couldn't do it alone'.

Underlying the above explanations, three patterns maintaining and legitimizing the ritualizing power of the media frame can be identified. First, in situations where the camera serves to prevent the candidate from backtracking, the media appears as the ultimate authoritative *force* for the protagonists to undergo the forthcoming challenge, without changing their minds at the critical moment. In this respect, conducting the coming out with the camera embodies an interesting combination of voluntariness and compulsion, bringing to mind the distinction between the *liminal* and *liminoid* features of transformational rituals. Although rituals intrinsically contain the element of voluntariness – since the actors have to *accept* the ritual rules dictated by social compulsion (cf. Rothenbulher, 1998), ritual theorists normally distinguish classical rites of passage from their contemporary incarnations. Traditional liminal rituals, like tribal initiations or the first communion in religious communities, inevitably apply to every individual in a certain life stage due to societal pressure, while participation in modern liminoid rituals is based on voluntary deliberation. Although the candidates, of course, voluntarily sign up to participate, and therefore their entire journey can be regarded as liminoid, the reasoning of many participants about creating a 'no way back' situation reinforces the liminal characteristics of the central phase of their passage, in which the media presence embodies the 'societal pressure' underlying classical rites of passage.

Second, it is noticeable that several justifications include the expectation that the media presence will provide a protective context in which the stakes and risks associated with 'ordinary' coming out will be reduced. While unmediated coming out is undoubtedly an 'extraordinary' act, its specialness obtains by its very real and unpredictable consequences. When participants refer to the normal conduct of coming out as a challenge that they could not have risen to alone, their reasoning also implies that the mere presence of the camera is able to transform the everyday setting of coming out into an out-of-the-ordinary liminal space in which, due to its formality, the structural norms and constraints of everyday life do not apply.

Third, all the explanations emphasizing the inability of the participants to come out *alone* point towards a more general discursive reproduction of the notion of the 'mediated centre' (Couldry, 2003). In fact, the very idea that the media can assist in these coming out situations evokes the myth of media's social centrality. When one starts wondering why these youngsters seek support outside their 'real' environment to resolve their crises, the most productive question that should be posed is how the media operates in order to reinforce the claim that it offers the best alternative. To this question, the above myth appears to give a valid answer: in the choice of coming out with the camera, exactly the naturalization of this claim is reflected: the media is there to *stand for* the candidates, suggesting with its mere presence a wider societal support behind the participants' back in their endeavours.

3.5.2 Transformational work

In the 'follow up', normally shot a few weeks after the coming out scenes, the majority of the candidates appear as newly-born 'initiates': they are relieved, they are more free and open and they are about to start their 'real' lives. These changes are apparently due to the internal process the participants have gone through as well as to the sometimes gradual, but more often immediate acceptance by their environment. However, it is striking how strongly the former process is emphasized in the cases where the environment reacts unexpectedly well to the coming out. For example, when Manon tells her friends that she is lesbian, their reactions are absolutely

positive: *'It is very good that you have told this... but you don't need the programme for that! For us, nothing will change at all.'* *'But for me, you have to understand, this is really an issue'* – replies Manon.

Emphasizing that nothing has changed with the coming out is not exceptional in the programme. Not only do the majority of the reactions include this affirmation, but also several coming out speeches, either by expressing the hope that the relationship will remain the same or by arguing that the protagonist is still the same person. The articulation of the lack of any change seemingly works against the ritualization of the coming out process, at least if we follow those Turnerian theorists who argue that rituals are *inherently* subversive and transformative, and thereby distinct from *ceremonies*, events functioning as the agents of bonding and the guardians of the status quo (cf. Grimes, 2000: 121-125). This contradiction is, however, superficial: in fact, certain transformations always occur, without exception. As the example of Manon suggests, in instances when the environment apparently does not change, it is the candidate who is actually transformed.

Moreover, despite the recurring rhetoric of 'nothing will change', the majority of the episodes present an immediate metamorphosis in the attitudes of the community around the candidates. Telling examples of this immediate transformation are the depictions of 'tough' peer groups before and right after the coming out of their mates. Prior to the disclosure, the youngsters tell offensive jokes, express their aversion to homosexuality, or deny the possibility of having gays in their sports team. These youngsters normally also get interviewed after the coming out, and while facing the camera, they generally modify their previous standpoints (*'I said before that there are no gays in our teams, but now I can tell that I actually thought so'*), come up with an explanation for their former behaviour (*'we sometimes make jokes, but they are just jokes'*), or simply ignore their previous views and engage in a somewhat gawky, but 'politically correct' and appreciating talk about the difficulties of coming out. The regulative power of the camera presence is not only reflected in these directly provoked instances, but also in the immediate situations of coming out, especially when the coming out takes place in front of a larger public: these situations without exception end up with the only possible public reaction learned as

appropriate after someone makes an announcement in the presence of cameras: clapping.

Without a doubt, these explicit, immediate transformations carry a certain utopian flavour: one may wonder about the permanent effects of the regulative power of the media in the case of the 15-year-old Niek, who had constantly been bullied and was now being celebrated without reservations by his classmates in front of the camera. Yet utopianism is by no means alien from rituals, as far as they rather operate as the symbolic dramatizations of the *ought to*, the manifestations of how society should ideally work, than the representation of the societal order as it is (Rothenbuhler, 1998). This subjunctive mode of media-related rituals has been discussed earlier (see Cottle, 2006; cf. Sumiala, 2013: 9). In our case, however, the world of 'as if' created by the programme not only normalizes coming out (presenting its 'ordinariness' through the affirmative reactions and the standardization of the act by repetition), but also naturalizes the idea that the self-disclosure, if you do it with the camera, becomes a more or less safe endeavour. Still, the public nature of coming out in the programme is not always unproblematic, and as the following section will show, the contestation of publicity has certain consequences both for the authoritative operation of the media and for the functioning of the *Uit de Kast* coming out as a rite of passage.

3.5.3 With or without camera? Media authority challenged and restored

We have seen in the previous sections how the motivations and the reactions to coming out justify the presence of the camera at the self-disclosures and, consequently, how the utilization of the media frame is represented as a powerful means for ritual transformation. However, the involvement of the media does not always remain un-problematized. In fact, those episodes in which publicity is not at all addressed from the minority, and sometimes the camera presence becomes not only the facilitator, but the main source of the drama.

Such drama already emerges in the second episode, when Theo comes out during family dinner. While the confession is immediately followed by reassuring

reactions from his siblings, his parents remain remarkably silent for many minutes. Then his father quietly remarks: *'I find this terrible'*. In response, the rest of his family starts defending Theo – *'He was suffering'* – but their father interrupts them: *'This is the situation, OK. But I did not expect my otherwise honest son to do it this way'* – and turns a bit hesitantly to the camera – *'I can say this, can't I?'* To save the situation, Arie intervenes: *'Why did you decide to do it this way?'* In his defence, Theo not only admits that he had tried everything before to come out but never succeeded, but also argues that he found it important *for others* to see how difficult a task this is.

The conflict between the perceived private nature of the subject matter and the camera presence also recurs later on. For instance, the father of Carlijn refuses to react in front of the camera and therefore the crew stops shooting. As Carlijn admits a few days later in her video diary, her father found the situation very unpleasant and he still can't accept his daughter needing the cameras to come out as lesbian⁴⁵.

It seems that these situations, while questioning the legitimacy of the camera presence, also undermine the regulative power of the media, and thereby work against the ritualization of the self-disclosures. Yet this deconstruction of authority is quite consistent with the liminal 'betwixt and between' phase of transformational rituals – in which ordinary hierarchies and moral codes are typically suspended and transgressed – *as long as* this suspension is *temporal*. In this respect, the authoritative position of the media follows a similar trajectory in each 'problematic' episode, through its temporal suspension until its ultimate restoration. Without exception, those taking part in the 'conspiracy' finally gain absolution so that coming out in the programme becomes justified by the end of each episode. Theo's father, who initially gets upset about the camera presence (but note, he continues to cooperate with the media at the critical moment as well: *'I can say this, can't I?'*), at the end modifies his standpoint: *'Everyone who watches this will realize that being gay is not a matter of choice, and this will make coming out easier for others'* – pointing towards a common

⁴⁵ Due to such conflicts, using the camera at the actual act of coming out becomes more and more optional during the course of the programme. Still, while this option presumably reflects the aim of the production team to avoid open confrontations, it is striking how the rhetoric which originally explained the employment of a 'cover story' (*'In order to get honest reactions...'*) becomes altered for the justification of the lack of a camera in such 'optional' situations: *'In order to avoid fake reactions'*.

good, which goes beyond the personal interests, expectations and circumstances. This sacrifice for a greater good is also reflected in all those cases when the environment finally gives consent to the airing of the episode – like the parents of Corné, hoping that *'it will reach more religious people'*. In other instances, it is the presentation of the positive developments in the life of the actors involved through which the authority of the media is finally reinstated.

The above examples show how the media operates as a powerful ritual agent even in situations when the camera presence is explicitly problematized, especially when publicity is legitimized by wider societal purposes. However, it is important to note that there are certain contexts in which this agency fails to work. This becomes clear from the episode of Robert who is followed by the production to his homeland, the Antillean island of Bonaire, where the coming out turns dramatically wrong. After the confession – made in a mixture of Dutch, Spanish and Papiamentu – Arie is unable to control the hysterical reaction of the mother. *'What do you want us to do?'* – he asks Robert in his puzzlement, while the mother is still crying aloud in the background: *'No, I am going to die, tell them to leave!'* *'I will try to talk to her again, and calm her down'* – Robert says, taking the lead to save the situation that has got out of hand. The support aimed to be given by the media became impossible here, because the programme makers could not take up any authoritative position in the given cultural realm. Although the parents finally consented to the broadcast, the disclosure was not followed by any real catharsis, resolution, or reconciliation; Robert's case became one of those few where, besides presenting a *passage*, the ritual working of the media failed to transpose the coming out to a fully developed rite of passage.

And it is not only Robert's story where the re-integrative phase of the passage becomes impaired. In two other episodes, Corné and Derk-Anne get into a 'stalemate' coming out to their religious families. Although the parents empathize with their sons' struggles and accept their homosexual *feelings*, they stubbornly refuse the idea of 'translating' such feelings into 'practice'. In his follow-up meeting, Arie asks Derk Anne about his feelings. *'I am not really relieved... it feels double-sided.'* *'I understand... you want to belong to the community, but on the other hand, they can't tell you what to*

do.’ [The boy starts crying at this point, and Arie continues:] ‘*The big question is: how to get further? What will tomorrow bring? Or the day after tomorrow?*’

These examples demonstrate that the deployment of media authority can only serve ritual transformation when it meets certain cultural prerequisites. Still, although the above instances fail to work as rites of passage, they can be considered important constituents of the ritual operation of the programme as a whole, as far as they contribute to the reproduction of the values and dominant ideologies for which the show appears to stand. This issue leads us to some final thoughts relating to the wider social space in which the programme is able to function as media ritual, addressing the ritual significance of *Uit de Kast* beyond the lives of those directly participating in the show.

3.6 Media coming out and the wider social space: the politics of ritualization

3.6.1 The affirmation of ‘our’ values

As mentioned in the introduction, the explicit purpose of the programme was twofold: helping young people struggling with their coming out, and showing in various contexts what these struggles entail. With this mission, the programme clearly embraces the notions of diversity and emancipation, two tropes that have become central to the national self-imagination and to the Dutch discourses on citizenship in the past forty years (cf. Mepschen et al., 2010). It is also easy to notice that the participants’ individualistic explanations for their urge to come out (becoming themselves, achieving autonomy and self-fulfilment) are strongly anchored in this discourse of liberation. Looking at these aims of both the producers and the protagonists, it can be proposed that the basic tension on which the show capitalizes is the confrontation of the ‘ideal’ with the ‘real’: if rituals transmit collective messages to ‘ourselves’ (Leach, 1976: 45, cited by Baumann, 1992: 98), the difficulties with and ultimately the success or the failure of coming out on *Uit de Kast* testify to and communicate the extent to which these ideals have been achieved in Dutch society at large.

In this respect, the positive outcomes in the majority of the episodes seem to directly affirm these values. In cases when the youngsters encounter negative reactions, however, the social centrality of the values of tolerance, self-realization and inclusion are displayed in a different manner: by constructing hierarchical oppositions, in which the media and the protagonists always stand on the 'right' side. The stories of Robert, Corné and Derk-Anne bring this dialectic most sharply to the fore: the endeavours of the programme makers and the candidates in these instances are hindered by the environment, which is framed as 'traditional' or 'provincial', and serving in this way as the antithesis of the values for which the show stands. Such contrasts emerge, for example, by the juxtaposition of the vivid image of Amsterdam (where Arie first meets Corné) and the picture of the candidate's grey village, where the only sound to be heard is the church bell, and all the villagers wear Sunday clothes. When the 'otherness' of the 'problematic' environments is visually less palpable, it is constructed by the narration: *'He lives in a community where TV and pop music are barely accepted'*. *'In her village in Zeeland, it is not usual to speak openly about homosexuality'*. *'To this union the students are coming from different denominations, but they have one thing in common: they are all fanatically religious'*. These oppositions recur several times in different forms, connecting the issue of coming out to wider contrasts between progress and backwardness, city life and the countryside, individualism and rigid communal structures, religiosity and homosexuality⁴⁶. In doing so, coming out becomes the field of a symbolic battleground, where 'an imagined modern self' is framed 'against an imagined traditional other' (Mepschen et al., 2010: 970).

This process of 'othering' the environment to reinforce the dominant ideologies of inclusion and tolerance seems to be controversial; nevertheless, it underlines Baumann's assertion that rituals in plural societies necessarily implicate 'Others', and may be 'as much concerned with a message to, or about, 'Others' as with what Leach called "collective messages to ourselves"' (Baumann, 1992: 113). This concern of *Uit de*

⁴⁶ Without a doubt, the sharpest contrasts are portrayed when it comes to the conflict between religiosity and homosexuality. In this respect, the commonly known Catholic orientation of the broadcaster may serve as the basis of the legitimacy and the authenticity of the programme to critically address the issue.

Kast is expressed most directly by including a documentary as a final episode to the program, titled *Niet Uit de Kast* ('Not Out of the Closet'), addressing the reasons why the producers could not find any Muslim participants for the show. However, while embracing the notion of emancipation, the program also reproduces an even more implicit mechanism of 'othering', emerging through the portraying of the protagonists against the categorical referent of 'other gays'.

3.6.2 Diversification and homogenization: the production of 'homonormativity'

This implicit process of 'othering' is most apparent in those episodes which also happened to receive the largest number of positive comments on the programme's website⁴⁷, and where coming out as gay seems to be the least expected by the environment. Not only do the behaviour and appearance of these participants refute stereotypical images of gay effeminacy and flamboyance, but also the depiction of their daily activities: they listen to hardcore music, are successful athletes or huge paintball fans. More generally, all the youngsters selected for participation appear as 'guy – or girl – next door', with whom it is easy to sympathize. 'They could be you' – tells the depiction of this ordinariness, yet this depiction is *not* about the ordinariness of diversity – however you look like or act – but the reinforcement of the idea that these participants fit well into the (straight) societal order. This way, while the selection of the candidates in terms of social circumstances communicates the ideal of diversity, the characterization of the protagonists as gays actually reflects a wider assimilative strategy, frequently described as the development of 'homonormativity'⁴⁸ (Mepschen et al., 2010).

This normalization is clearly articulated in several episodes. For instance, Daan, one of the most popular participants, makes the following remark at some point

⁴⁷ Based on a brief content analysis of a total of 513 entries.

⁴⁸ This normalization refers, on the one hand, to how the popular representation of gay identities 'has changed from a deviant other to the mirror image of the ideal heterosexual' (Mepschen et al., 2010: 970). On the other hand, 'homonormativity' refers to a more general development of the normalization of gay identities, which, as argued by Mepschen and others, has resulted in the Netherlands in a depoliticized, domesticized and consumption-based character of gay identities that 'no longer threaten but replicate and underscore heteronormative assumptions and structures' (Mepschen et al., 2010: 970).

during his coming out: ‘Not all gays are sissies, like those standing on the pride boats and dance⁴⁹... it occurs everywhere, like in a football team.’ – although his statement aims to be inclusive (pointing out that homosexuality is all around us), the distinction between the ‘sissies’ and him also implies a divisive stance towards ‘other gays’ in society at large.

Without doubt, this principle of ‘gays are just like us’ becomes problematic when critically addressing the recognition of difference in the depiction of the candidates (cf. Dhaenens 2012). Our point is, however, not to moralize about how the programme reproduces heteronormative structures, but to emphasize that such homogenization is essential for the ritual efficiency of the show, as far as the broader audience is concerned. Ritualization not only presupposes the maintenance of the sense that the staged performance speaks to ‘all of us’, but it also requires the reinforcement of a sense of communality with the participants and with the stakes dramatized throughout their ritual transformation. Ritualization, in this sense, is achieved by the programme through the simultaneous, yet reversed processes of diversification and uniformization: the diversity of the participants in terms of their circumstances reinforces the claim that the programme provides access to our shared social reality, while controlling the articulations of gay identities serves as the basis of identification with the participants for the imagined viewer. In this respect, framing the protagonists as ‘ordinary’ while following their endeavours plays an important role in channelling, socializing and normalizing ‘gayness’ in Dutch society; fulfilling this role may be considered one of the main functions of representing coming out in *Uit de Kast* as a rite of passage.

3.7 Conclusion

In order to explain the increasing appeal to mediated coming out practices, this chapter investigated the ritualizing role of the media in the popular television programme *Uit de Kast*. Our analysis identified three major factors as the basis of the ritual power of the show. First, we showed how the programme creates a standardized,

⁴⁹ Referring here to the annual gay pride in Amsterdam, taking place on the canals of the city.

recurring structure to the acts, evoking analogies with the classical phases of rites of passage. Second, we demonstrated how media authority is deployed – or ultimately restored – in the episodes to present the media frame as an effective means of securing positive outcomes to the self-disclosures. Third, the analysis revealed how the authoritative operation of the programme is fed by the reinforcement of the dominant national values of tolerance and diversity, with the simultaneous process of channelling and normalizing the articulation of gayness. As we argued, these factors jointly contribute to the transformation of the ambiguous process of coming out into a legitimate ritual performance.

While this emergence of the coming out ritual offers a clear example of how media orders – and constructs – social practices, it also has to be noted that ritualization occurs in many forms and contexts in contemporary television culture. Several formats and genres utilize or build on ritualistic formulas (cf. Westerfelhaus and Lacroix, 2006) to present events, interactions and passages, and *Uit de Kast* shows similarities with many of them. For example, the ‘before and after’ structure of the programme, imposed on the process of coming out, follows the typical script of make-over reality shows. Similarly, the very act of disclosing deep, intimate secrets is not only common in trash talk shows, but also relates the hybrid format of *Uit de Kast* to the general tradition of ‘confessional’ television (see Aslama and Pantti, 2006). At the same time, what makes *Uit de Kast* less typical within the spectrum of ‘reality rituals’ is the staging of the *stakes* embedded in the action of coming out. As we have seen, not only are the *individual* and the *social* ultimately interwoven in these stakes, but – contrary to the stakes of more playful reality formats – they also embody the deepest existential concern that the protagonists as social beings may probably face: the disruption of their most important relations. The constant emphasis on these stakes throughout the programme undoubtedly contributes to the construction of coming out as a ritual of ‘serious life’ (cf. Rothenbuhler, 1998: 23-27). This ‘seriousness’ of the coming out ritual, as we have discussed, is also linked to the more general societal values which are tested, sometimes challenged, but ultimately always affirmed in the episodes – in this respect, the self-disclosure within *Uit de Kast* also departs from the monologist, ‘first-person’ tradition of confessional media rituals (cf. Aslama and

Pantti, 2006). Moreover, since confession normally presupposes a 'sin' to be confessed, and coming out is presented by the programme rather as a passage through which one 'naturally' has to go through, the 'confession' in *Uit de Kast* is actually made by the environment: the reaction of the people around the protagonist to the disclosure testifies the extent to which they conform to the valued tradition of openness and tolerance.

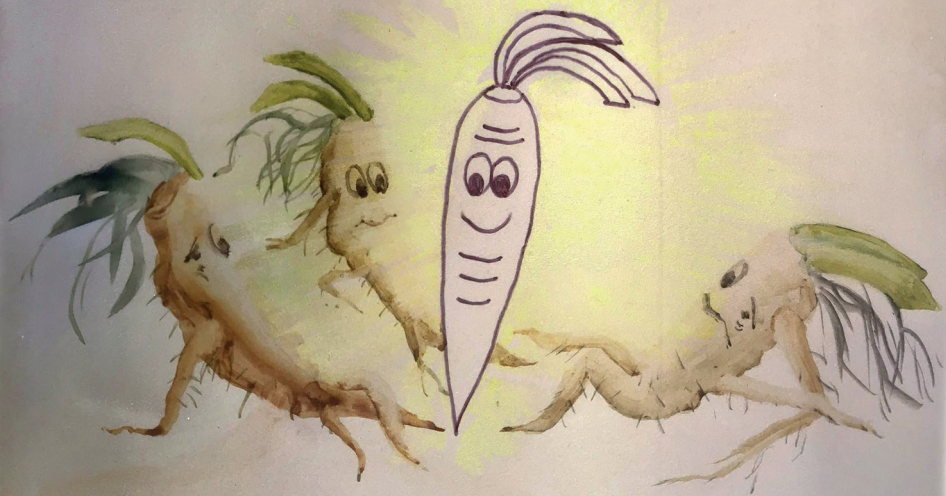
However, while our analysis underlines the quintessential role of media in the construction of new forms of ritual life, one cannot lose sight of the fact that the self-disclosures, as presented in the programme, are staged performances. Accordingly, although our 'thick description' tends to confirm that coming out within *Uit de Kast* is certainly not the media presentation of a rite (i.e. of a pre-existing ritual act), at this point we can confidently state only that it is a presentation as a rite. Even if media texts as symbolic constructs may be the most central spaces for producing, shaping and maintaining the sense of order (Sumiala, 2013: 3) in contemporary mediated societies, their analysis can speak first and foremost about these mechanisms of *mediation*, rather than providing incontestable statements about the *mediated*. In this sense, an analysis of mediated coming out focusing exclusively on the media text clearly has the limitations of grasping the dimension of ritual experience of those, who at various levels (as protagonists, as their environment, as production members, or as Dutch, straight or gay audiences), directly or indirectly participate in this media ritual. If ritual presupposes participation, and participation is articulated through performance, conceiving mediated coming out as ritual practice requires one to address a variety of questions, including: what constitutes on and off stage, and the time and the space of the ritual? How can we locate the actors and the audience in this space? What scripts dictate the performance? (Grimes, 2006: 13; cf. Sumiala, 2013: 8). This case study aimed to be a first step by exploring the on-stage features of the coming out performances and the media script dictating their actualization.

What the 'close reading' of the programme brought to the fore is, first, that *Uit de Kast* clearly deploys the 'myth of the mediated centre' (Couldry, 2003): the show not only builds on the notion that media is our access point to the *social* and its core values (by the claim of speaking for 'us': for the youth, for gays, for their relatives, for

the Dutch), but by employing this myth, it also creates a public space in which the otherwise socially unscripted life-crisis situation turns into an ordered and culturally meaningful practice, implying also that the media frame – and the appropriation of its authority – is an effective, and probably the ultimate means of changing one's unmediated, everyday life.

Of course, the very idea that media indeed can help to organize and positively influence 'ordinary' lives is not unique to the claims of this particular programme. Rather, *Uit de Kast* exemplifies the wider naturalization of this notion in the current era of interactive, participatory media culture. The rapid transformation of our media-oriented behaviour in the past decades has generated important debates concerning the broader consequences of this ethos of participation, polarized around the questions of empowerment (e.g. Jenkins, 2006) and exploitation (cf. Andrejevic, 2004; van Dijck, 2009). We assert that the concept of ritual can offer a fresh input into these debates, by delivering culturally contextualized accounts of the intricate relationship between agency the regulative power of media.

In so doing, it seems especially important to revisit the concept of media ritual, developed by Couldry more than a decade ago. Couldry's work primarily located media power in the restricted access to the 'media world' (2003). While the ritual boundaries of the media appear to be dismantled in this era, a new, more refined myth seems to have succeeded the old one: the 'myth of participation'. At least, the ritualization of coming out within *Uit de Kast* not only suggests that this myth plays an increasingly prominent role in the construction of contemporary media rituals, but also underlines the timeliness of questioning the values and the experiences attached to media participation, beyond their discursive construction by media institutions and media texts. In this sense, this chapter has served for us as a point of departure towards this direction.



4 'These cameras are here for a reason' – media coming out, symbolic power and the value of 'participation': behind the scenes of *Uit de Kast* ⁵⁰

Summary

This chapter continues to explore the connections between coming out as a mediatized practice and the popularity of televisual interventions by analysing some real-life behind-the-scenes narratives from *Uit de Kast* participants. While the choice of coming out in front of the cameras is often received controversially both by the public and the protagonists' immediate environment, youngsters keep applying to participate in the programme. To understand the continuous appeal of this form of self-disclosure, in-depth interviews were conducted with ten participants from different seasons about their motivations, experiences and evaluations of taking part in the show. By following their journey into the world of media production, this chapter highlights the implications of media participation for the process of coming out, as related to questions of empowerment, visibility and agency, and ultimately, to the perceived symbolic value of (participating in) broadcast media in the new media age.

4.1 Introduction

"My father saw that I was really nervous, so he broke the silence: 'So Theo, what are your plans for your trip around the world?' But I wished he hadn't asked that: there will be too much emphasis on the story of the travelling, and getting out of the lie will be even harder. So I looked at the directors.

There were many people around: two cameramen, two audio people, two directors, and the presenter, Arie. Our dining room was crowded. I looked at the directors and they were looking like 'you have to do it yourself'. Then one of the

⁵⁰ Originally published in *Media, Culture & Society* (2017, vol. 39, issue 2)

directors realized that my mom was still in the kitchen. So she ran into the kitchen to get my mom. I hadn't even noticed. I was that nervous.

She took her place and she was like 'I am on television, so I put up a smile'. And I was already saying the words 'I am into guys'. And I never saw my mom like that, but... her smile was like frozen. And then my father was looking at the cameras, and he was like 'fuck, what the hell is happening'. Then he looked at my mom who was still smiling. He thought she was part of it, that she knew it. He got really angry and disappointed."

This quote refers to a critical moment of the shooting of an episode of *Uit de Kast*, the popular Dutch television programme in which 'ordinary' youngsters come out 'live' to their unsuspecting friends and relatives, narrated by the protagonist Theo during an almost three hour long conversation, as part of a series of ten interviews with participants about their experiences of taking part in the show. Although Theo was an early candidate – his episode was aired in the first season, and the programme recently entered into its fourth year – the recollection of his memories was unexpectedly vivid and intense.

As demonstrated not only by the ubiquity of live coming out videos on the internet⁵¹, but also by the continuous success of this televised format, using the media to disclose one's sexual identity has become a booming phenomenon in recent years. *Uit de Kast*, this hybrid of educational, documentary public service programming and surveillance entertainment, appears to have no shortage of candidates: the show, originally produced by the Dutch public broadcaster KRO, was later taken over by the Belgian commercial channel VTM. This ongoing appeal to the practice of media(ted) coming out raises a simple but intriguing question: why do young people, one after another, choose to come out in front of the cameras, even if this decision may, as the above quote demonstrates, also backfire? And why do parents finally give consent to broadcasting these tense, contradictory moments?

⁵¹ The most eye-catching example of this trend is the constant production of coming out clips on YouTube, some of them with over ten million views. See for instance <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L3KoCJ8usPU>, accessed on 19 April 2015.

This mediated confessional practice, at least on the textual level of *Uit de Kast*, is legitimized and justified in various ways. As argued in the previous chapter (see also Boross and Reijnders, 2015), this legitimacy is largely based on structuring, presenting and narrating the self-disclosure as a patterned and culturally meaningful performance – a contemporary *rite of passage*. It also appears that due to the guiding and mediating assistance of the presenter, the endeavour ultimately brings the parties closer to each other: by the closing scenes of the episodes, both the protagonists and the attitudes of their environment are transformed. As can be suggested, this reinforcement of the programme’s indispensable role in governing the coming out process not only serves to (re)affirm wider claims about media’s authority to represent and change social reality, but also naturalizes what we have previously called the *myth of participation*: the pervasive assumption, increasingly nourished and maintained by media institutions, that media participation is a particularly effective means to create order in everyday, ordinary lives (Boross and Reijnders, 2015).

This chapter offers a look behind the scenes – and beyond the screen. Departing from the *representation* of coming out as a mediated ritual practice towards the examination of how this media ritual is actually *experienced* by the participants, we ask how the perceived symbolic power of media is appropriated, challenged or reproduced throughout the participants’ simultaneous journey into the world of media *production*, out of the closet – and back to ‘ordinary’ life. In doing so, we aim, on the one hand, to capture how assumptions about media as a privileged and particularly efficient site of managing the social world is constructed, internalized and acted out in the off-screen realm of media production. On the other hand, we ask what values are actually attached to participation by those from whom the action is originated. By taking such an ethnographic perspective, we hope not only to deliver a contextualized account of the relationship between agency and the regulative power of the media, but also to further enhance our understanding of the complex ways media practice *anchors* other social practices (cf. Couldry, 2012; Hobart, 2010; Swidler, 2001) – in our case, to grasp what the implications of acting for television are for the process of coming out.

To unpack these issues, the following sections will trace the subtle mechanisms through which the participants' journey from complete secrecy to media publicity is experienced and carried out. We will demonstrate that this process is primarily based on the interplay of two – seemingly conflicting – yet in the end complementary desires: on the one hand, the longing for absorbing oneself in a higher (media) logic and, on the other hand, gaining the ability to utilize the power of the media for one's own agency and interests. By presenting and analysing 1) the candidates' narratives about their expectations and motivations for joining the programme, 2) their experiences of being part of the production, and 3) the afterlife of their disclosure, we shall also highlight how the particularities of media coming out are linked to more general questions of the production of 'ordinariness', notions of authenticity and empowerment, and ultimately, to the perceived symbolic value of (participating in) broadcast media in the new media age. But before turning our attention to the candidates' journey, we briefly summarize the core theoretical considerations and methods that informed our analysis.

4.2 Media participation as ritual practice

The past decades have witnessed an increasing visibility of 'ordinary' people in the media, partly through the proliferation of – often controversial – formats based on 'true' experiences and emotions of non-professional participants. The reality trend, with all its incarnations, has resulted in important debates concerning the broader consequences of the 'demotic turn' (Turner, 2010) and its ethos of participation, revolving around questions of empowerment, the democratization of media production, exploitation and ethics (cf. Andrejevic, 2004; Couldry, 2012; Dovey, 1998; Schafer, 2011).

Still, while there is a strong tradition of addressing the role of participants in the political economy of the industry (cf. Curnutt, 2011), empirical research into the actual experiences of taking part in media productions is relatively scarce. Apart from

some insightful case studies⁵², critical evaluations of reality programmes are predominantly based on the analysis of media representations (cf. Boross and Reijnders, 2015). Such formats are, however, multi-layered and open to opposing readings (Turner, 2010: 51). Consequently, only focusing on the media text when addressing the motives and values of contemporary mediated performances and their effects on the participants themselves is debateable (Syvertsen, 2001).

By focusing on the participants' perspective in this study, we follow a decentred, practice-oriented approach (Couldry, 2012; Morley, 2009), asking what people *do* with media participation and under what conditions, what the regularities are and how agency is constructed and negotiated. In doing so, we aim to move beyond the claims of media institutions and texts about their significance in maintaining social life, and capture, in turn, how such claims are reflected in the assumptions and embedded in the actions of ordinary actors while engaging in media related practices.

As an entry point to these questions, we build on the Couldrian concept of 'media ritual' (2003), and more broadly, on Catherine Bell's account of the ritual construction of power (1992). Being critical of functionalist readings of rituals as means of social integration, these works mainly focus on how ritual practices – either outside or within mediated contexts – gain their distinctiveness by constructing certain types of hierarchical relations. In this sense, the concept of media ritual for Nick Couldry primarily serves to tackle how the perception of media institutions as centres of value production, and their symbolic authority based on the privilege to define and construct reality are formally acted out and naturalized through ordinary people's 'extraordinary' interactions with the 'media world', for example, when encountering celebrities or becoming part of a media production. However, while this perspective may provide a general framework to understand how the social position of media is reaffirmed in such instances, whether consciously or unconsciously, little is known about how media authority is appropriated by ordinary participants as a

⁵² See for example Grindstaff's work on daytime talk shows (1997), Syvertsen's study of television dating games (2001), Shufeldt & Gale's ethnographic research into home makeover reality shows (2007) and more recently, Kuppens & Mast's multi-actor analysis of intercultural reality programmes (2012).

strategy of dealing with specific circumstances – in our case, to order and manage the act of coming out.

Our interest lies especially in this ordering work: by approaching media participation as ritual practice, and understanding ritual practice first and foremost as a redemptive strategy that offers a sense of control over the order of things and thereby the ability to affect this order (Bell, 1992: 208), we ultimately aim to capture what *difference* the involvement of the media makes for the experience and the execution of the coming out, and how the power dynamics underlying the participation reinforce, organize and manage the protagonists' self-disclosure and its anticipated consequences. In this respect, we presume that the candidates' mediated performance is not simply a matter of displacing the otherwise unscripted and ambiguous act of coming out from an everyday context into the extraordinary frame of media production, but results from a more complex process of *ritualization*, involving the formalization and the control of the participants' behaviour, structuring the space and time of their actions, and introducing symbolic meanings to particular acts beyond the immediate situation (Coman, 2005; Couldry, 2012)⁵³. Such 'basic operations' of ritualization will be traced by taking a processual approach (Coman, 2005) to the participants' experience of taking part in the production: by following their journey from the moment of their application up to the point of their self-disclosure and beyond, we shall reveal how the practice of coming out *with* the media becomes a distinct "way of acting", perceived as being "both intrinsically different from other acts and privileged in their significance and ramifications" (Bell, 1992: 219).

4.3 Interviewing the *Uit de Kast* participants

To understand this process, in-depth interviews were conducted with ten Dutch and Flemish participants from all seasons of the show. By the end of the data collection, a total of twenty-one episodes had been aired in the Netherlands and in Belgium and

⁵³ For a more detailed discussion of the limitations of the concept of 'ritual' when considering unmediated instances of coming out, and how its application for mediated contexts relate to other accounts of the role of ritual in the construction of media culture, see the previous chapter as well as Boross and Reijnders, 2015.

our pool of respondents was a good reflection of the overall composition of *Uit de Kast* participants in terms of age, gender, nationality and social background⁵⁴. The interviews lasted from one to three hours, focusing predominantly on the motivations, experiences and the evaluations of participating in the production, but aimed at locating the journey within an as detailed life narrative as possible.

Nevertheless, getting at that point was not without difficulties, beginning with the acute problem of *accessing* media participants (cf. Ortner, 2010). Assuming that the production would act as a ‘gatekeeper’ (Syvertsen, 2001), the recruitment started by identifying and soliciting the participants via Facebook, but this method in the first round resulted in only two responses; it took approximately six months to reach additional candidates, based on the personal recommendations of previous interviewees. The initial reluctance was later explained either by the lack of trust, or by the aim of ‘moving on’. Still, those who ultimately agreed to join the study explicitly aimed at recording or communicating something about their participation (e.g. *“people shouldn’t judge based on what they see, they didn’t see the whole process”*).

An additional challenge was to handle and unpack the ‘canned’ answers of these often already ‘over-interviewed’ subjects (Driessens, 2015). It turned out rather soon that the candidates were quite used to critical questions about the whys and wherefores of their participation. The prevalence of three claims was especially striking: the candidates recurrently emphasized that they did not use the programme for fame, they were not forced to do anything against their will, and finally, that nothing was ‘made up’ for the screen. With the progress of the interviews, however, it became apparent that these narratives are not simply the means of retrospective justification: these convictions also took a significant, meaning generating role in experiencing the participation in the production as a ritual process. We shall return to these issues at certain points of the ‘thick description’ of the participants’ journey, starting now by elaborating on the initial motivations for joining the programme.

⁵⁴ The majority of the interviewees are higher educated and male (8 out of the 10), aged between 18 and 30, living in different regions of the Netherlands and Belgium, including candidates from different religious denominations and different ethnic backgrounds. Although not requested by the respondents, the quotes have been anonymized in most cases to protect the identity of those participating in the study.

4.4 Expectations about joining the programme

“If you are still in the closet but thinking about coming out, sign up online” – directs the presenter Arie Boomsma the prospective candidates to the programme’s website at the end of the episodes. Here one can also encounter short promotional clips in which former protagonists testify to the benefits of joining. ‘Manon didn’t stand alone in her coming out’, ‘Kjeld can be much more himself’, ‘Kelian now lives his life as he always wanted’ – announce the titles of these videos, reinforcing the premise on which the single episodes more implicitly rely: irrespective of the temporary hardships of the endeavour, the programme is able to secure a positive outcome to the self-disclosure and the participation ultimately contributes to the candidates’ personal growth.

However, while several respondents underline that former protagonists were *“inspiring”* (typically because they were *“normal people”* with whom they could identify), the claim that the participation worked out well for *others* is generally not seen as a guarantee when it comes to one’s own coming out: the motivations to use the programme are generally based less on the success of previous participants, but articulated more in light of the candidates’ own previous failures in attempting to come out.

In this respect, the interviews reveal that the initial expectations about joining the programme commonly entail the idea that the media involvement will give a ‘push’ to complete the mission without backtracking. This line of reasoning, as highlighted earlier, also recurs in several episodes (cf. Boross and Reijnders, 2015). However, while the ‘push’ in the media text is generally equated with the supportive guidance of the presenter, the aspirant candidates primarily conceive of it as a temporal pressure that would ultimately prevent them from procrastinating: *“There is never a good moment, so I thought if I use the programme, I have to do it, I have no choice. If it is filmed, I cannot say ‘no, let’s do it tomorrow”* – so runs the typical argumentation. In addition, many candidates anticipate that the camera presence will provide protection in the actual moment of the disclosure: *“I thought: Ok, the cameras are there so my dad won’t hit me and my mum won’t bitch slap me”* – explains an early applicant how he pondered over his chances.

These – at this point rather short-term – considerations imply a common presumption that taking part in a media production has disciplinary effects on those being involved – and therefore, the surveillance logic of the “work of being watched” (Andrejevic, 2004) can be employed and exploited for one’s own benefit as well: the camera presence is anticipated to regulate the candidates’ behavior (pressing them to finally come out and free themselves of the burden of their secret), as well as to mitigate the possible negative reactions of the environment (they will be on television and, therefore, similar to Theo’s mother, they have to ‘put up a smile’).

Nevertheless, the application is typically not preceded by long deliberation: the candidates often question if they are *special* enough to be on television, and simply do not expect to be selected for participation. “*I said: let’s do it, they won’t choose me anyway*” – recalls an interviewee. “*I never thought that they would actually reply. I thought I was just a farmer guy. Not really interesting*” – supposed another participant. Consequently, the positive reply from the production is often received with mixed feelings: “*Then I started worrying: shit, what did I do. I knew they wouldn’t come immediately with cameras, but still felt that damn, now I have to tell my story*” – summarizes a respondent the commonly reported first reaction. “*I got quite anxious, but also felt happy that they wanted to use me, and that they wanted to help me. But honesty, I had no idea how I would be able to do it*” – admits another candidate.

The above examples show that as soon as the utilization of the programme turns from a theoretical possibility into a realistic prospect, the applicants generally become insecure about what they have signed up for. Still, in spite of their initial doubts, the candidates continue their journey without cancelling their participation⁵⁵, even when the stakes are getting higher. What keeps them moving during the process of the production? In the following sections we look into what factors actually ‘push’ the candidates towards performing the disclosure and what experiences of taking part ultimately contribute to their determination to ‘tell their story’.

⁵⁵ This option is left open during the course of the journey: contractual agreements do not bind the candidates in this respect. Some candidates explain this by the assertion that the entire process was based on trust, while others with the initial lack thereof: “*If I had needed to sign anything, then I wouldn’t have participated. I was all alone and I didn’t have the opportunity to talk to anyone about my rights*”.

4.5 Submission to the imperatives of media production

Being a 'participant' of a television programme is not something that ordinary people instantly *do* when getting into a media production. Rather, as argued by Ytreberg (2004), participation can be seen as a trajectory from the initial contact until the actual performance, which prepares non-media professionals to conform to the requirements of the format and the order of production. In the case of *Uit de Kast*, this 'process of formatting' (ibid) lasts several weeks, sometimes even months. However, the candidates generally perceive this period as going by very fast, leaving little room for hesitation. During the preparatory phase, the candidates are kept rather busy with the very down-to-earth, logistical aspects of the shooting: they need to find suitable dates, and have to come up with a realistic 'cover story' that fits with their life circumstances, while also concealing the real reason for filming. Both tasks require a considerable amount of effort from the participants: "*I wanted to do it in the sports club and with my friends separately, but if they post something on Facebook or Twitter after one part is done, there is a chance that the other group will also read it. Then I had to think when to go to my parents...*" – describes an interviewee the challenges of the planning. Furthermore, the cover story must convince the environment that there is, again, something *extraordinary* in the candidate worthy to show on TV, without immediate associations to the programme⁵⁶. Composing such pretexts demands discretion and some creativity; the lack thereof may endanger the entire mission, as shown by the following situation: '*I told to my friends that the filming is about math students, but one of them became suspicious: 'Aha, mathematics. What's so important about mathematics? And why should they choose you if there are thousands of people studying mathematics?' She already thought what was going to happen, so she didn't show up that night. Later she said she didn't want to ruin it for me.'*

The preoccupation with such challenges delivers a certain alienating, yet at the same time 'therapeutic' effect, as long as the logistical pressures of the production constantly distract the candidates from the existential stakes of their forthcoming

⁵⁶ Due to the same considerations, the presenter does not appear on the scene until after the actual disclosure from the second season on.

performance. As one of them admits: *“I was busier thinking ‘what’s next, what’s next’, than worrying about what my parents would think”*. This neutralization generally culminates with the actual arrival of the production team for the shooting of the first, ‘introductory’ scenes. This is the moment when many candidates realize that quite a few people have been mobilized *“only for them”*, and that being at the centre of the production demands a quick acquirement of the rules of performing for television.

During the ‘warming up’ shots the candidates have to learn how to *“act normal”* in the presence of the camera. Mastering the competencies of media participation furthermore requires compliance with the technical necessities of the shooting, which becomes especially crucial in the actual moment of the coming out. *“You have to ignore the cameras, but you also have to wait for the sign when you already have enough to show. Because if you just say ‘Hi, I have to tell you something, I am gay’, they just have three minutes of filming”* – asserts a candidate, testifying also to the ‘expertise’ the participants often and enthusiastically claim to have gained about what is *“part of television making”*.

Nevertheless, the fascination and the preoccupation with the formal, ‘behind the scenes’ imperatives of media production is but one aspect that pushes the candidates further and further. The interviews reveal that the cooperation with the crew in delivering enough filming material and the desire to perform the task ‘professionally’ have an affective dimension as well. When talking about their journey, the candidates without exception emphasize the strong emotional connection that developed with the crew during the process. The respondents constantly emphasize that the production members *“didn’t just do their jobs”*, but showed support and empathy all the time, even after the shooting was done: *“They didn’t simply walk away but stayed with us for hours. My parents also appreciated that it was not like that they made the shot and then they leave. They were showing to my parents that they understand and know how hard it is now, and support them as human beings”* – a candidate attests to the attentiveness of the crew, with some defensive overtones.

Whether or not the development of such an affective bond is part of the production’s strategy to maintain ‘ordinary’ participants’ commitment to the process (cf. Syvertsen, 2001; Grindstaff, 2009), many candidates indeed feel that the emotional

support given by the staff should be reciprocated. As a result, by the actual time of the disclosure the coming out often becomes seen also like a *personal obligation* towards the production team: “*They put everything into me, so I couldn’t disappoint them by not saying it*” – argues a respondent. “*I didn’t want to let down all the people working for the programme. They have nothing if I don’t come out*” – demonstrates another account how coming out becomes perceived as a duty dictated by the sense of comradeship with the crew members.

This development already indicates that the motives for coming out with the programme become gradually reorganized during the production process: while the act of joining *Uit de Kast* is about *seeking help* in taking the life changing step, the actual act of the disclosure is also facilitated by the desire to please the crew and comply with the imperatives of television making. An overall shift in the priorities is especially perceptible in those rare instances when the parents become suspicious about the real reason of the filming: “*My mom asked me two weeks before the camera came: did you apply to Uit de Kast?*” – recalls a participant – “*So I had to lie to her: no, please no. Why do you even think of that? It was really hard, but she finally believed me*”.

One may wonder: why does this candidate, instead of making the confession at this point, continue with the production, even if the involvement of the cameras would not even be necessary anymore? While the desire not to let the crew down may play a role in this persistence, other developments during the process also contribute to the candidates’ resolution to complete the mission *with* the media. The interviews reveal that aside from the push given by the logistical and interpersonal pressures, the journey also entails the participants’ gradual discovery of their own agency, as well as a growing sense of empowerment concerning their own ability and chance to *represent* and *change* social reality. In the following sections we elaborate on what factors add to these developments and what role they play in the construction of the candidates’ coming out experience, as well as the perceived value of their participation.

4.6 From submission to symbolic empowerment

Previous research indicates that getting into a television production is not necessarily a liberating affair. For instance, Shufeldt and Gale's study with home makeover TV cast members (2007) reveals that participants often realize that they have ultimately no real control over the events involved in the process, and consequently, their agency is felt to be diminished while taking part. The narratives of *Uit de Kast* candidates, in turn, bear witness to a reverse experience: what starts as a voluntary submission to the authority of media production, evolves into a strong sense of playing an active and important role in shaping the programme. In this respect, three common and interrelated developments shape the participants' experiences, which not only reinforce the notion that the candidates stand *behind* the cameras as much as performing *in front of* them, but also play a substantial role in performing their coming out.

4.6.1 Refiguration of the 'ordinary' self

Partly to reflect on allegations of appearing on screen for fame, the participants often emphasize that in spite of having been on television, they remained the same 'ordinary' persons. Still, other layers of their accounts imply that the candidates, with the advance of the production, discover 'extraordinary' factors in themselves that are worth showing on TV.

One of the remarkable developments in this respect is the emerging certainty that the supply of *suitable* applicants is not as ample as the ongoing popularity of the programme suggests. "*They [the production] had a lot of fake people, a lot of gay people who were already out of the closet but applied just to be on TV. The crew told me. They had many fake people, while it was hard to find real people*" – asserts a Flemish candidate, framing himself this way not only against self-appointed celebrities, but also justifying his uniqueness with the scarcity of authentic – i.e. genuine – candidates like him. An increased sense of self-esteem is furthermore reinforced by the realization of the value of 'ordinariness' for the purposes of the programme, as long as it speaks for, or gives voice to a specific group within gay youth. Compare for example, how the Dutch candidate, who formerly considered himself 'uninteresting', becomes aware of his

representative significance and revises his thoughts with the advance of the production: *“In the beginning I was like: I’m only a farmer guy. But when they were telling me that they wanted to show that homosexuality is everywhere in the country, in every age group, every ethnic background, I started thinking: maybe it’s very hard to find a farmer guy. So I really felt I might do this, to show to people: I come from a farm and I am gay. But that feeling grew with the process. I just signed up on a whim and without the idea that I would be selected to be part of it.”*

Notions of exceptionality not only emerge in relation to such personal attributes and circumstances, but also recur in the participants’ evaluations of the unique features of their journey *vis-à-vis* other protagonists. Although all the episodes follow the same ritualized structure, the respondents commonly assert that their episode is somehow *different* from the rest, and maintain that they carried out their coming out ‘in their own way’: *“By telling it in the sports club as well, I was the only one who did it three times. Most of them did it only twice”* – underlines an interviewee. *“Nobody did it in front of such a large public”* – emphasizes another participant. This preoccupation with the distinctiveness of one’s own coming out is often also manifested in the inclination to highlight the success of the end product: *“The producers said that my episode had almost one million viewers... while others only had 300,000”* – remarks another interviewee, who otherwise also cautiously communicates that gaining popularity by no means motivated him before or during his participation.

The emphasis on the lack of such motivations, however, does not necessarily contradict the prevalence of the above claims. Rather, the constant differentiation between one’s own episode and the rest can be seen as a means of validating the candidates’ actual choices, actions and their overall role in the production process. This urge becomes especially clear in the light of another development during the participation: an increasing sense of being the actual owner of the episode and a co-creator of the programme.

4.6.2 Emerging sense of (co-)authorship

Contrary to their initial expectations about simply ‘going with the flow’ of the production, the candidates, as we have seen, have a share in designing the conditions of their coming out at an early stage, reinforcing the notion of being an active agent in the production process. *“I felt like I became part of it. Instead of them telling me what to do, they were asking me what I wanted to do and how”* – explains an interviewee how his freedom to make choices made him feel responsible for the production as a whole.

Making decisions, however, is not confined to the purely logistical aspects of the shooting, but also concerns more substantial questions of representation. In this respect, the participants often realize that certain arrangements also provide them an opportunity to frame themselves in a particular way: *“I could make up an activity, and paintballing was something tough. And it was something I wanted to show: I am not a pussy. I might be gay, but I’m still a normal guy”*. With this involvement in staging their performances, the participants commonly start conceiving themselves as the primary authors of their episodes. *“I was basically the director”* – asserts a respondent – *“it was really in my hands.”* *“I was actually the one giving them instructions... if they could film things or not, if they can use it or not”* – attests to another participant’s strong sense of having control over the representation of his coming out.

Sometimes, nonetheless, certain fractures do emerge between the vision of the crew and the participants, and the treatment of such instances shows a definite shift in the perception of the power relations underlying the production process. *“I told them that I don’t mind telling my story on television, but it has to be my story and not their story. Fortunately we were quite on the same path. Sometimes we weren’t, but then I knew I was in control, because I could blow off everything. (...) I want to do it there, on that date. If you don’t agree, then I’ll do it without a television programme”* – asserts a candidate. Note here again how the emerging confidence overwrites the initial reasoning about participating in the show as the ultimate and only option for coming out: if you do not play according to my rules, I will reveal my secret alone, without the involvement of the media. This demand also suggests that the support potentially given by the programme becomes of secondary importance to the candidate compared to the infrastructure it provides to tell his ‘own story’.

The 'stories' of the protagonists indeed vary to a certain degree, yet their core message, and more importantly, the drive to tell them is constructed and facilitated by the same principle. This leads us to a third common development during the production process, entailing the gradual internalization of the values for which the programme more generally stands, and the subsequent realization of the public benefits of performing the disclosure in front of the cameras. In the following section we will look into how these factors ultimately turn the coming out from a personal endeavour into a societal mission.

4.6.3 Embracing the 'social': the reinterpretation of coming out as an emancipatory project

As previously mentioned, orchestrating the coming out as a mediated performance often becomes seen as a means of self-authentication. However, the participants' desire to prove something about themselves through the public display of their coming out is just one side of the story. While the journey generally starts with individualistic considerations, it typically ends with a clear vision of the societal importance of the disclosure.

In this respect, the core 'message' the candidates most commonly want to convey is that *"being gay is not a choice"*, often linking this tenet to the hardships resulting from their particular circumstances. *"I wanted also to show the girl side (...) that it is also hard for girls to tell it to friends and to feel accepted"* – points out a female candidate. *"I wanted to show how my religion conflicts with homosexuality"* – relates another respondent the 'born this way' principle to the challenges of negotiating with his intersecting identities.

With all their essentialism, the above claims not only demonstrate the espousal of the programme's mission to promote visibility, acceptance and tolerance, but also correspond with the candidates' evolving conviction that their coming out will help *others* who are going through the same struggle. For many participants, the pursuit of the greater common good also overwrites the initial motive for joining: *"I figured: no matter what the outcome is for me, I will make a difference, maybe in someone else's life"* – concludes a participant, interpreting his disclosure ultimately as an altruistic

act. Furthermore, this reconsideration of coming out as a social sacrifice often also serves to transcend the moral dilemmas incurred by dragging parents into the production without their previous consent: *“I felt bad because of the lie, and I knew that going there with the cameras is like attacking them. But I felt responsible for doing this. I thought it sends a message to Dutch civilization, or how do you call that... society”* – argues a respondent.

This justification also recurs in other candidates’ retrospective evaluations: *“Yes, it is something private. But I think the whole cast can inspire people. Still now, I get reactions like I came out of the closet because of you”*– maintains a Flemish respondent. Still, while these transcendent motives may play a role in facilitating the coming out, and the audience reactions might justify the public performance, these aspects matter little when the shooting finally ends. The ‘awakening’, both in a figurative and a literal sense, is commonly described as a challenging experience: *“The crew stayed long at night. And waking up next day, knowing that my family is outside... I simply didn’t know how to open up the door of my room”* – recalls a participant. What happens after the cameras and the crew are not there anymore to provide support? Before concluding, we briefly look into the candidates’ journey back to their ordinary life, by highlighting some aspects of the afterlife of their disclosure.

4.7 Beyond participation

The ordering work of (media) rituals does not end when they are completed (Couldry, 2012: 77), but continues to exert its power even beyond the actors’ mediated performances. Following the shooting, most participants feel pressured to keep on coming out to all the people who matter in their wider environment: *“I did not want them to see it on TV before I told them. I also didn’t want to be always busy with guessing who knows and who doesn’t after it is aired”* – hence the typical argument. *“I was still trying to postpone it as much as possible, but finally I told my wider family a few days before it was actually shown on TV”* –another account demonstrates the organizing role of the forthcoming publicity by setting the time for the candidates’ subsequent, face-to-face self-disclosures.

Getting on air, however, is not always self-evident: parental consent is often hard to obtain. After the crew is gone, the candidates are commonly faced with reprehension. *“My dad was mad. Not because I am gay, that is not an issue. But because of the cameras. He said that I could have just simply told him. It’s not a problem, so why the camera”* – recalls a respondent, and the father’s reaction is relatively mild here. The choice of using the programme triggers a variety of emotional responses from the parents: feeling betrayed, not being trusted, and last but not least, guilt. The reconciliation work is often lengthy and traumatic, sometimes involving weeks of crying and fights about the forthcoming broadcast. In the light of these developments, the value of participation sometimes becomes questioned by the participants: *“When I was making the programme, I didn’t realize what I was doing. It just felt right. But after it was shot, I became insecure about it. I didn’t want things to blow up, I just wanted to be someone normal, and I wanted to show that I am normal. But when you do it this way, you don’t make it more normal. Just saying it is more normal than making a programme out of it”* – concludes a female candidate.

In the end, however, the parents most of the time agree to the broadcast. Paradoxically enough, it is often the end product that brings the reconciliation forth: *“I realized that my parents didn’t have a clue. So I called KRO that I want a DVD with all the movie fragments of me until then. Because then I can show them what the idea behind the programme was. (...) And then they saw me talking about my homosexuality and how I lived it. And then they thought we should do it”* – a candidate recalls how the recordings demonstrating his many years of struggle ultimately convinced his parents to take part.

The episodes are sometimes already available on the internet before actually shown on TV, but many candidates wait to watch them *together* with their friends and families; this has an additional, symbolic significance for the ultimate closure. *“They all came to my place. They felt it was a good episode. But mostly they were just like ‘oh, is my hair really like that?’ And I was doing the same. And my dad was joking all the time: oh, that’s a nice man, who is it? Oh, that’s me”* – describes a candidate how the sometimes opposing stances towards the entire process become mitigated by the

shared reaction to 'being broadcasted', underlined by the playful enactment of the extraordinariness of appearing on the screen as 'ordinary' people.

Thus, the endeavor commonly turns out well, and the encouraging reactions from the audience also seem to justify the candidates' choice – at least on the surface. For some respondents, the overall evaluation of the journey remains somewhat ambiguous, even years after the actual disclosure. For instance, near the end of our conversation, Theo ponders about the difficulties grasping the real nature of his parents' agency concerning their consent to the broadcast, a question which he was left alone to deal with: *"They said to me: okay, we'll do the program, because we think it's a nice episode. But up till now I'm still not sure if this was the real reason... they might have cancelled it if it was not their son. But I never asked them. It's not like we can't talk about it anymore, but I don't want to talk about it because then my parents start crying again, and I really don't like that. Sometimes I feel bad about my decision, but then I tell myself that if they didn't want to join in, they had the possibility. But then I think: no, they didn't have the possibility, because they needed to support their son. Do you understand? If you ask me now if I would do it again, I do think so. And I hope if you ask me in ten years I would say the same. I hope so. But I can't see into the future."*

4.8 Conclusion

In this chapter we addressed how coming out as a mediated practice is experienced by the protagonists of *Uit de Kast*, and what assumptions about media participation motivate them before and during their taking part in the production. As we demonstrated, the cameras are indeed 'there for a reason', yet the reasons given by the respondents are substantially different at the beginning and the end of the process. In their attempt to carry out their coming out without backtracking, the candidates choose to perform their disclosure within a formal, obligatory procedure, and therefore, voluntarily submit themselves to the rules and logics of media production. However, this instrumental, self-regulative aspect of the participation generally becomes complemented – and sometimes superseded – by an increasing sense of empowerment: the candidates' discovery of their representative significance, the

perception of their role as co-creators of the show, and the internalization of the societal mission of the programme while socializing into the world of media production all add to this emerging sense of control over the process, which, as we have seen, not only reinforces the candidates' "will to act" (Bell, 1992: 89), but sometimes even overwrites the initial purpose of joining: the individualistic enterprise of coming out turns into an emancipatory project.

If ritualization works on the basis of marking certain actions as extraordinary and elevating them from their immediate contexts, while also offering a sense of empowerment for those that appear to be controlled by this process (Bell, 1992: 207), the above transformation seems to be essential to the ritual operation of participating in the production of *Uit de Kast*. Of course, there is the question to what extent the participants' privileged role in 'telling their story' and the societal values embedded in these ritual confessions are reinforced by the crew as a strategy of 'manufacturing consent' (Cottle, 2006). Still, according to the experiences of the respondents, the notion of being in charge, and the perceived symbolic power implied by being actually the one who stands behind the camera is a substantial aspect of the journey. After all, this is the 'push' given by the programme: you have to do the coming out, because the means of constructing and changing social reality is now in your hands.

In this respect, using the programme as a social strategy goes through a remarkable metamorphosis as the candidates' participation in the production proceeds. While the original promise of *Uit de Kast* is to help the candidates through a critical phase of their lives, which involves deep existential fears about the disruption of their immediate social worlds, the participation in many cases ends up harming these primary relationships – exactly because of the involvement of the media. As they start considering themselves potential agents of helping *others* by showing the challenges they face, the candidates often consciously take this risk as a sacrifice for a 'transcendent', greater common good. In this sense, the 'myth of participation' that organizes the motives and experiences of the candidates throughout their journey is ultimately based on the notion of social responsibility, emancipation, and the idea that 'ordinary people' can change the world through taking part.

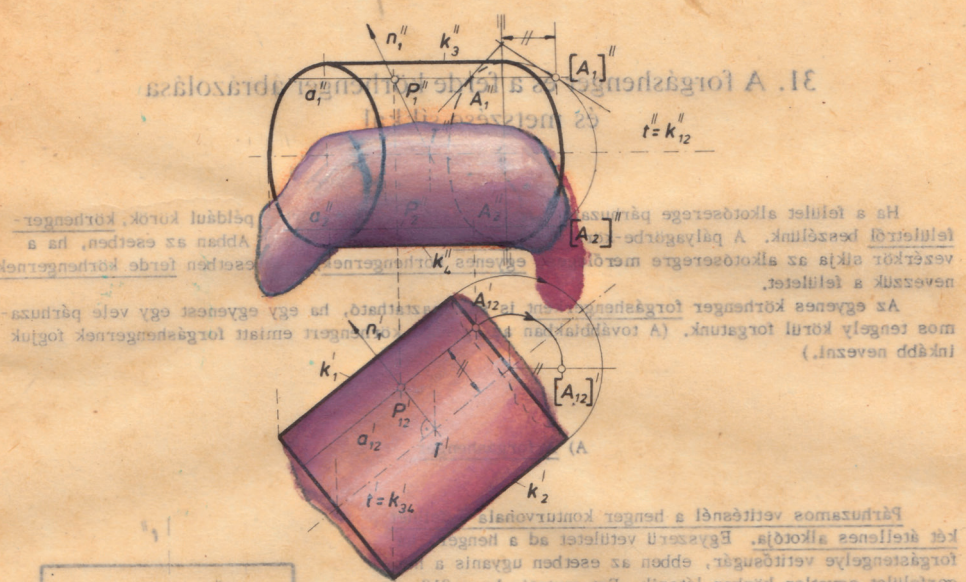
Although one may assume that it is the domain of social media where this myth is most prominently acted out and naturalized, it is striking how intensively television, still as a dominant medium (Schäfer, 2011), has been involved in maintaining and pushing it forward in ritualized forms. Similarly to *Uit de Kast*, recent programmes like the Dutch *Over mijn lijk* ('Over my Dead Body'), which follows young people with a terminal illness, the anti-bullying reality *Over de streep* ('Challenge Day'), or UK Channel 4's *The Undateables* – the subject of the next chapter – address and confront the audience with existential and socially pressing issues, while also suggesting a gradual integration of 'social media logic' and its premise to provide voice to ordinary people into the existing mass media logic of (public) broadcasting (van Dijck and Poell, 2015).

While the evaluation of these developments can proceed further along different routes, the concept of ritual may continue to remain an important point of orientation. Over a decade ago, Couldry explained the ordering work of media rituals based on the restricted access and the uneven distribution of symbolic power (2003). Accordingly, the advent of web 2.0 has given way to debates and uncertainties about how the emergence of (seemingly) less restricted and more democratic forms of participatory practices will affect, refigure or challenge the symbolic power of central media (Couldry, 2003; Andrejevic, 2004; Müller 2009). While there are all the reasons to be cautious about interpreting such dynamics either in an utopian or a dystopian fashion (Müller, 2009), ethnographically oriented analyses of the mechanisms through which participatory spaces are formatted and mediated practices are formalized can signal certain tendencies of how media rituals are being (re)made under the current transformations of media culture. In this respect, the idea that emancipation and the improvement of the social world can be achieved through participating in productions like *Uit de Kast* appears to work as an effective strategy of (re)confirming the ritual power of central media and reinforcing their privileged position against the dispersed and often casual practices taking place on more grassroots platforms. At least, the motives, assumptions and experiences of our interviewees concerning their journey suggest that (central) media rituals involving 'ordinary' participants are becoming increasingly expressive to human needs for the

power of ordering social life, defining its core values, and at the same time, to symbolically mark, recognize and designate someone's place in the world.

A 213. ábrán olyan újabb helyzetben ábrázoltuk a forgáshengert, amikor a t tengelye horizontális egyenes. Ebben az esetben a k_1 és k_2 első képhatáralkotó-pár a második képen a k_3 és k_4 második képhatáralkotó-pár pedig az első képen fedőegyenes a t tengellyel ($k_1' = k_2' = t'$).

Az ábrán a két képpillázat már nem rajzoljuk meg. A szerkesztés folytatása a 179. ábrán történik.



213. ábra

A 213. ábrán a felület P_1 pontját az első képen vettük fel előbb, és a ponton átmenő a a_1 alkotó segítségével nyerjük P_1'' -t. Ehhez az alkotó A_1 talppontját a henger alapkörével együtt az előlmező síkjával párhuzamos helyzetbe forgattuk. A P_1 és P_2 pont második képe a lehetséges $[A_1]$ és $[A_2]$ elforgatott pontokon átmenő a_1'' és a_2'' alkotóm van, így a felület P_1'' -hoz most is két második kép, P_1'' és P_2'' tartozik.

Az ábrán a P_1 -n átmenő n_1 normális az első képen a vetületben is merőleges lesz a horizontális helyzetű. A normális első képének t' vel való T' metszéspontját rendezve, t'' -re, és összekötve P_1'' -vel, kapjuk n_1'' -t is.

A 214. ábrán a forgáshenger t tengelye általános helyzetű egyenes. Itt azt mutatjuk be, hogy a képhatáralkotók másik képét hogyan lehet megszerkeszteni.

Az ábrán előbb a tengely egyik K pontján át a tengelyre merőleges sík h és v fővonalát vetjük fel. Ez a sík kört metsz ki a hengerből, melynek mindkét képe ellipszis.

A 179. ábrán, a kör ábrázolásánál láttuk már, hogy a kör ellipszis képeinek nagytengely-végpontjai egyszerűen szerkeszthetők. (Lásd az ábrát.) Ennek megfelelően a 214. ábrán A_1 és B_1 az első, A_2 és B_2 pedig a második körkép nagytengelyének a végpontjai, ezek szükségképpen képhatáralkotóra esnek ($A_1 \rightarrow k_1$, $B_1 \rightarrow k_2$, $A_2 \rightarrow k_3$ és $B_2 \rightarrow k_4$). Mivel az $A_1 B_1$ szakasz horizontális, az $A_2 B_2$ szakasz pedig vertikális, a szakaszok másik képe a rendezővonalra merőleges. Ismerve A_1'' és B_1'' -t, valamint A_2'' -t és B_2'' -t, a képhatáralkotók hiányzó képe a tengelyiránnyal párhuzamosan felvehető.

5 Dating the media: participation, voice and ritual logic in the disability dating show *The Undateables* ⁵⁷

Summary

Interventional television formats centring around the ritual transformation of ‘ordinary people’ are not only followed by sizeable audiences worldwide but also attract large numbers of aspiring candidates. While the benefits and consequences of participating in such shows have long been debated within academia and beyond, research into actual experiences of participating in such television productions remains scarce. Based on in-depth interviews with participants of the disability dating show *The Undateables*, this chapter focusses on how contributors deal with their position in the production and how their experiences reflect the emancipatory claims of the programme. By presenting the production process through the story and from the perspective of three participants, different modes of participation will be discussed, revealing how instances of submission, appropriation and contestation of the production logic are linked to ideals of representation, notions about empowerment and voice and to strategies of negotiating normalcy and difference.

“*Stories matter. Many stories matter*”

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009): The danger of a single story

5.1 Introduction

“Due to such a huge interest we are sadly not able to get back to everyone. (...) We are looking for a mix of men and women, from different places, with a variety of

⁵⁷ Originally published in *Television & New Media* (2019, vol. 20, issue 7)

disabilities or conditions, to make the series balanced and fair”, announces the official Facebook page of Channel 4’s *The Undateables* (2012–) in response to the large number of disappointed comments from those applying but never hearing back from the production. The programme and its international adaptations have been matching disabled people with potential partners for six seasons at time of writing, and the appeal of participating in this televised social experience has not diminished over the years. The above post also suggests that the key to the programme’s success lies in the makers’ professed strong commitment to a diverse representation of the romantic aspirations (and ultimately: the “dateability”) of people living with disability.

Borrowing at times from conventions of participatory and reflexive documentary, *The Undateables* as a reality show first and foremost draws on the dramaturgy of life interventions. Originally produced by Betty TV for the British public service broadcaster, the series consists of sixty-minute episodes, each following three protagonists as they enter the world of dating with the help of an agency that specializes in finding partners for singles with physical, sensory, developmental or other impairments (Vertoont, 2017). The episodes combine voice-over narration, fly-on-the-wall shots and interviews to present the participants’ daily life, their meeting with the agency representative, the moment of receiving the profile of an interested person, and the progression of the date from preparation to reflecting on the experience. Some of the participants are followed as they move forward with their relationship, or are sent on a second date with a new partner. From season two, episodes also revisit how some previous candidates are doing and how the show changed their lives.

Despite the proliferation of disability representations in today’s popular culture⁵⁸, disabled people rarely appear in media texts as multidimensional subjects with their own stories. Consequently, *The Undateables*’ exceptional focus on intimate relationships carries the potential of enhancing social learning about the daily experiences of people living with disabilities (Vertoont, 2017), forcing the viewers to reconsider their own politics of the normative (Richardson, 2018: 332). Nevertheless,

⁵⁸ For an overview of the historical changes in disability representation, see for example Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick, 2017; Ellis, 2016.

the educative and emancipatory claims of the programme have been debated since the first episode was aired. While popular commentaries in the mainstream press have often praised the show for its sensitive and respectful approach to the subject as well as its balance between entertainment and depth (e.g. Newall, 2016; Pilgrim, 2015), others – e.g. disability activists – have repeatedly condemned the programme for its patronizing tone, for reinforcing common stereotypes and for exaggerating the protagonists’ struggles to conform to the limiting and normative dating behaviour prescribed by the format (e.g. Caulfield, 2012; cf. Vertoont, 2017: 12). The long-standing debate about how disability should best be portrayed in the media (cf. Ellis, 2016; Müller et al., 2012) has, in the case of *The Undateables*, been inflamed by strong opinions concerning the participants’ presumed (lack of) agency and the extent to which they have been empowered or exploited by and throughout the production process⁵⁹.

With this polarized debate in the background, we have conducted a series of in-depth interviews with British and Dutch participants about their motivations, experiences and evaluations of participating in the show, complemented by additional interviews with two production members of the original series about the casting process, format development and challenges involved in working with this particular group of participants. As part of our research into the ritual significance of mediated participatory practices, our aim has been to move beyond the predominantly text-based approaches to audience participation in interventional television (cf. Weber, 2014), and to “test” the alleged transformative and civic functions of “do-good TV” (Ouellette, 2010) against the experiences of those involved in the show. How does the programme do justice to, help or shape the participants in their project? Who benefits from participating, on what terms and how? How do the participants conform to, or negotiate the formulistic template on which the episodes are repeatedly based? And how do they relate to their representations not only as individuals, but also as *instances of a (presumed) collective* (Kelty, 2017)?

⁵⁹ *The Undateables*’ openness to such oppositional interpretations is well illustrated by Richardson’s analysis, as it demonstrates how the very same sequences can be read *both* as ironic attacks against prejudices and as revivals of archaic conventions of freak shows – concluding that this duality makes the show exceptionally problematic to critique via textual analysis (Richardson, 2018).

The interviews⁶⁰ revealed that the participants, while seemingly participating in the same process and telling rather similar stories in the end, are actually going through quite different trajectories. Over the course of the study it became clear that such differences depended less on the national production contexts or the actual seasons in which the participants appeared, but related more to the participants' initial expectations, the message they wanted to convey and to their understanding of – and acting upon – their roles as “contributors” in making the show. This chapter attempts to unpack the intricate relations between these factors and how they lead to structured differences in the experience of dating (with) the media, by presenting thick descriptions of the production process through the testimonies and from the perspective of three participants. These participants, each with different conditions, personalities and agendas, have appeared in different seasons of *The Undateables* and their participation also concluded differently – yet their trajectories can be considered typical in terms of the similarities they share with others interviewed for this project.

Questioning from different angles how *The Undateables* participants go through the stages of production serves two main purposes. Just as media texts are multi-layered and open to opposing readings, so are participatory processes and practices. Placing different testimonies side by side in this regard allows us, on the one hand, to shift our attention from the ultimately moot question of whether audience participation is empowering or exploitative – as rightly proposed by Kjus (2009: 295), it is probably both – towards the more interesting issue of “how it all works and for whom” (*idem*). On the other hand, the different points of emphasis in the three participants' accounts (the negotiation of “normalcy” in the first, the possibility of taking ownership and control in the second, and conflicts over the definition of the “real” in the third) invite us to tie together aspects and theoretical implications of

⁶⁰ Data collection took place between March and July 2016. Recruitment started with identifying and contacting participants in the British and the Dutch versions of the show via social media (n= 33). After several follow ups resulting in four positive responses, the project continued with snowball sampling. Ultimately we conducted a total of eleven, approximately 90 minute interviews (including five British, four Dutch participants and two crew members from the British version). Although Dutch production members refused to participate in this study, the sample provided a good reflection of the 'Undateables population' in terms of demographics and the seasons in which the participants appeared, and potential differences between the two production contexts were taken into consideration when analysing the participants' responses (and will be indicated where relevant).

“media participation” that would have been hidden when solely focussing on the common patterns of the trajectories.

The stories of Cathy, Matt and Annabel⁶¹ will be (re-)told below, relating them to each other and to the experiences of other participants. Occasionally, the narratives will be juxtaposed to insights from the crew members – not as a means of validating the testimonies, but to further nuance the power relations involved in the production process (Mayer, 2016). At some points during the analysis, the textual features of the show will also be evoked, serving to capture the interplay and tensions between the representation of the dating process, the “pro-social” message the series intends to convey, and the lived experiences of the participants. But before proceeding to the accounts, and to further clarify these choices, a brief elaboration on the core theoretical considerations underlying our approach is needed, especially when it comes to how we look at the relation between the media text and the participants’ work of “being watched” (Andrejevic, 2004) behind (and beyond) the scenes. Our starting point for this is conceptualizing “ordinary” people’s televisual representations as *ritualized* texts, and television participation as *ritual practice*.

5.2 The ritual logic of text and practice

When analysing the different ways participants deal with their position in the production process, we follow a “de-centred” approach that focuses on actual participatory practices rather than on their media representation (Couldry, 2012; Morley, 2009), but also takes the social consequences of discrete media texts into account. While our primary focus lies on production as a *social process* that “take[s] real individuals and submit[s] them to surveillance, analysis and selective display as means to entertainment and enhanced audience participation” (Couldry, 2004: 72), we examine this process in relation to the logic of representation and its ideological implications (cf. Müller, 2009), expecting that the two realms mutually shape each other. In particular, we intend to explore how and to what extent the transformative

² To safeguard the anonymity of the respondents, pseudonyms are used throughout this chapter. The crew members quoted are referred to as ‘producers’.

power of television participation, as *reinforced* by the ritualization of the media text (Chapter 3, cf. Boross and Reijnders, 2015) is translated into the *ordering logic* of the production process and reflected in the attitudes and actions of the participants involved (Chapter 4, cf. Boross and Reijnders, 2017; Couldry, 2003).

With “ritualization” we refer here to those organizing principles of the media text that construct and justify the programme’s authority to “transform lives”. Such elements involve but are not limited to the “before and after” logic of the intervention, the enactment of norms associated with dating, and the questioning of *la condition humaine* against the challenges implied by the “dis/ability divide” (Goodley, 2014) when it comes to the “universal quest” for love. Given such structural and semantic features, signing up to participate in *The Undateables* is presented as something more than an opportunity to receive structure and guidance – and thereby templates for self-empowerment (cf. Ouellette and Hay, 2008). Rather, it is framed as a patterned and regulated means to symbolically effect and to participate in the “serious life” (cf. Rothenbuhler, 1998: 27): contrary to “lighter” versions of dating shows, where participation is often motivated and experienced as leisure activity (Syvertsen, 2001), here the programme offers the protagonists relief from the undefined, ambivalent and liminal status of being both disabled and single (Murphy et al., 1988). The show then sets out to incorporate the participants into society as full (dateable) citizens, *provided* that they, in line with the defining message of such ritualized television formats, also make efforts to “overcome the odds” (Ellis, 2016), or at least tame the obstacles associated with their conditions.

Our interest lies in how this textual process of “normalization in action” (Gray, 2009: 160) is related to and manifested in the process of television *production* and in the power dynamics it involves. How does the production become the regulator of social action and how do the participants conform to, adjust to, or contest the above ritual logic? The previous chapters on mediated self-disclosure showed that the perception of television productions as formal, authoritative and extraordinary settings can facilitate the participants’ “will to act” (Bell, 1992: 83) and their commitment to perform according to scripts dictated by the crew, *as long as* these scripts involve both a *clear* promise of transformation and a “transcendent”, societal

message articulated through the performances. But what happens to this generic process when the “societal message” is ambivalent, the transformative benefit of participation is not taken for granted, or when the participants have different takes on the “natural” authority of the production to arrange and portray their lives?

The three accounts presented here exemplify different participatory attitudes and strategies in this regard: Cathy’s trajectory is characterized by *submission* to the rules of the production in the process of negotiating her dateability, Matt’s story shows how *playing along* with the production logic can involve tactics of influencing and appropriating this logic for one’s own interest, and Annabel’s story highlights the conflicts arising from *contesting* the transformative claims of the show and the way she is intended to be represented in order to support such claims. In the following, we will survey the whys and wherefores, as well as the consequences of these differences for the *Undateables* experience in particular, and for a more nuanced understanding of the social functions of participating in reality genres in general, beginning with the story of Cathy.

5.3 Submission to media logic: Cathy’s story

5.3.1 *Getting on the show*

Cathy was approached by members of *The Undateables*’ production team asking her to participate in a new programme about disability and dating. Introvert that she is, she felt this was an opportunity to connect with someone outside of her immediate social circles: “I had boyfriends before, but never really dates. And I thought: the crew would be like my wingmen. So even if the date was going to go wrong, you know that there is someone looking out for you”.

Considering the production as a “safe environment” also surfaces in other recollections: participants often expressed their distrust of online dating (“people might have bad intentions”), or recalled how such attempts had been unsuccessful from the outset: “When people see the pictures, they ignore me. So I hoped that the programme would find me a match”, stated by another participant, Bart.

Participation, however, is never framed solely as a strategic means of changing one's private life; this prospect is, in virtually all accounts, juxtaposed to a greater societal purpose. As Cathy argues: "I also wanted to open up other people's eyes. To educate people in society. Yes, I'm disabled but I still live a very normal life. People don't expect disabled people to date or have those feelings or opportunities really". For others, showing how they live normal lives is also driven by the desire to challenge common perceptions of disability as a "personal medical tragedy" (cf. Vertoont, 2017). "I liked that the programme also showed the positive things in life. There are many things I like to do and my disability does not affect this", another participant, Jasper explains, suggesting that the light-hearted tone of the show can also inspire people to apply.

At the same time, Cathy's claim that going on the show challenges societal expectations involves a certain circular logic. The show, in her reasoning, simultaneously serves as an outlet for *proving* the "dateability" of the candidates and catalyzing their *becoming* "dateable". This latter, transformative potential of joining the show is often referred to by both participants and production members as "the magic of television". "Maybe we're just capable of achieving something that online dating can't. We can reach people in these amazing ways, or encourage contributors to push a bit their limitation", one of the producers explains. However, as Cathy's story shows, performing magic takes time.

5.3.2 Being in the production

"First we did some test shots and then they introduced me to the matchmaker. Then it was all about waiting for a matching profile", Cathy recalls, indicating that the dating agency was strongly involved in the matching process.

This is, however, not always the case. While the agency is one of the "format points", the production also tries other ways to recruit potential dates. "People don't really use dating agencies anymore, they'd rather go on Tinder", one of the producers admits. Still, the production keeps the format. "They don't want to come across like this is a TV-arranged date, they just want to make it more authentic. Less contrived.

But not everybody does go through an agency”, a participant from the later seasons explains how outsourcing all the matching to “experts”, at least on the screen, authorizes the interventional credibility of the programme.

Finding a good match might be challenging for many reasons – including, as the above producer maintains, that some participants have “unrealistic expectations, just as *we all* have with dates”. And what the candidates ultimately “get” can also work against their project of self-normalization. This is what happens with Cathy, as shown by her disappointment when finally receiving a profile: “He lived like a good four hours away from me. And it was still another disabled person. It looked like they said ‘you are disabled so you have to date another disabled person’. Whereas I wasn’t brought up like that”. In her account, this matching is experienced as a reinforcement of existing categorizations she wanted to break free from.

Just like Cathy, candidates generally move forward with their “match”, even if *normally* (that is, either “ideally” or in “real life”) they would not go out with them. This is commonly explained by the imperative of “being open” – so frequently recited by the narrator of the show. However, while this mantra can be read as the signification of a universal truism challenging the “us/”them” binary (i.e. people in general need to make compromises in the world of dating, cf. Richardson, 2018), for candidates like Cathy the above imperative apparently implies the opposite: *they* need to lower their expectations. Others explain their accepting attitude by the fact that they have already invested much time and energy in being part of the production. Dutch participant Martijn even goes on a second date with someone he felt uncomfortable with the first time. “Maybe they were towards the end of filming and it was going to take too long to line up another date. Or they needed more time with this contributor in the programme”, one of the producers recounts some possible reasons for the Dutch production sending the participant with a mild learning disability on a second date. “It is just for the broadcast”, Martijn agrees after some persuasion, testifying that the “bigger picture” often keeps candidates committed to participating, even if it does not seem to be in line with their original expectations.

Accepting one’s fate and going with the flow of the production, however, is not simply a symptom of blind submission, but is often related to the participants’

uncertainty about the options they have for negotiating their idea(l)s. In such accounts, the lack of experience with dating *and* filming are often intertwined. “Looking back, I wouldn’t have gone on a blind date. But I hadn’t really done online dating before. Otherwise I would have said no to certain things”, Cathy asserts, exemplifying that participants without a dating routine seldom question how things are set up by the programme. Relying on what they presume to be the logic of the production sometimes prevents participants from moving forward – or moving on – at their own pace. Jasper, for example, waits for weeks to figure out if his date liked him: “I heard nothing for a month and only a few days before the show was on TV did they say that she didn’t want another date with me. Yeah. I thought they wanted to show a second date on TV as well, so I expected them to take the initiative.”

At the same time, production imperatives can also be perceived as a pragmatic reason for not getting a second date after being unsuccessful with the first one: “They were obviously on a really tight schedule so they weren’t able to find another date. I would have liked that though”, explains Andrew, highlighting that while some of the participants return to the show in later episodes, his career as an (un)dateable ends at this point. So does Cathy’s.

5.3.3 The afterlife of participation and Cathy’s final reflection

For Cathy, the option of follow up didn’t really come up. “I think that’s because we didn’t end up going on a second date. Obviously they want to highlight the good stories, which is fine”, she asserts. This equation of “good story” with “happy ending”, and the related assumption that if your date is unsuccessful, you are not worthy to participate anymore, is articulated by many participants as an axiom. “They cannot show everybody again, that’s logical, and they need to give the people a good feeling about the programme”, explains Jasper with some resignation as to why he was not invited to take part in a revisit episode.

This reasoning is, in fact, quite in line with the producers’ considerations. “Big series are not recommissioned unless they fit the American model... sort of we need happy ending. Not that the audience is gonna leave if the contributors don’t get

Cinderella at the end. The audience is not that stupid and superficial. But the more complex the story, the more it costs: it takes more time and effort to make it, which the production company doesn't want to hear", one of the producers asserts. An inevitable consequence of these commercial considerations is the emergence of the recurring format. As the other producer explains, "once you get in series two, you follow a model that works. Like practising the date with your mom. That genuinely came about in the first series. But then the subsequent series have looked back like all right, the fake date with the mum. We need to do that." Due to this repetition, however, Cathy loses interest in following the show: "It is all the same kind of story now. I'm lucky I was in the first series, so it was pretty much my story."

Similar to Cathy, the participants are generally positive about how they come across in their episode. "It was a quite complete picture of my life except that I also play chess but it is not really interesting for television, I think", Jasper summarizes. For some, getting on air also involves the promise that publicity would increase their eligibility, even if their date on the show was a failure. Cathy's reflection shows a slight disappointment in this respect: "It was mainly women who reacted, saying that the show was great. But there weren't any men, which I thought was quite funny". So does Bart's, who becomes rather disillusioned about the entire experience: "You learn that you can date, because you have done it on TV. But then you always get excuses. They like me because they know me from TV. But the moment we meet in real life, they get scared."

The ending of Cathy's story – and the trajectory of other participants we have encountered so far – is certainly not an example of the "American model" described above by the producer. Trusting in the "magic of TV", these participants go through a process that actually confirms that they are less dateable than others. And although they positively relate to their "mediated self", the project *to frame* themselves in a way that challenges societal assumptions is often seen to fail in the end. But not all the stories are the same: some participants manage to benefit from and make the most out of their experience. While taking part in the same process, their participation

signals different patterns, complexities and contradictions. One of the “winning it all” participants is the UK audience’s favorite, Matt.

5.4 Appropriating media logic: Matt’s story

5.4.1 *Getting on the show*

Matt gets on the programme through a charity contacted by the production. “They get thousands of people applying, but this is a personality based show and they are picky with who they choose. So they rather go and find the contributors themselves”, he explains, exemplifying that “talent scouting” remains an important casting strategy for the production, irrespective of the volume of applications after the success of the first season. “And there is me, just coming out of film school, needing relevant contacts with a mainstream broadcaster. So this is a good starting point, I thought”, he continues, revealing that connecting with the industry is more alluring to him than the prospect of benefiting from a date.

In this respect, Matt is one of those participants who are, to varying degrees, sceptical about the core business of the show. “I know that I can date. And I don’t think it’s ideal to meet somebody you’ve never met before and then have that filmed as well”, Wendy, another popular participant explains, motivating her participation with her love of being around cameras.

At the same time, Matt and Wendy are also driven, so they say, by a missionary goal. For Matt, it is less about educating society at large, and more about helping others with the same condition. “I didn’t like how they represented us in the first season. They didn’t make people watching it feel like they could go out and get a date just because they saw this guy doing it. And as a person with background in TV, I know how to make sure things go down the right way”, Matt claims. This suggests that even if dating is more or less a pretext in his personal project, he still expects that people with the same disability will be encouraged to put themselves out on the dating market, *provided* that the condition is represented *properly*.

This frequently reported striving for “proper representation”, consequent to the dissatisfaction with *how* or *by whom* a specific condition in previous episodes had been portrayed, carries a striking combination of individualization and essentialization: it rejects a single depiction of a specific condition, while maintaining that certain individuals are more suitable to inspire or represent *others*. Wendy’s intention to raise awareness by bringing nuance into the portrayal of her condition also relates to this pattern: “Many think that people with dwarfism are the same, but we’re not. So I wanted to tell my story.”

Given the format and the voiceover running through the episodes, the question remains to what extent this aspiration to diversify the public perception of different conditions can lead to success (cf. Cathy: “they are all the same kind of stories”). Still, Matt is quite confident that his story will come across the right way, given his knowledge about television making. His savviness also shines through his recollection of the details of the production process.

5.4.2 *Being in the production*

“We would first start filming mid-October, and finish in December. A lot of the time it was following Matt around, so we can cut together a montage”, Matt describes the first steps of the filming, revealing – as can be recognized also by the plural form – how consciously he *plays along*. While often highlighting his awareness of lacking real “creative control” in the process, he also admits the enjoyment of helping the crew with finding shots for “putting together Matt with a condition”.

Playing along also involves Matt’s realization that his story cannot run without some representation of jeopardy. “When we got to the actual dating, it was all in my head”, he recalls. “They want the date to be awkward. This is factual entertainment, not a documentary. Big difference”. And while excitement about his date does not trigger any symptoms of his condition, he successfully delivers some shaking, pleasing the crew at the moment of the “money shot” (Grindstaff, 2002) as well as conforming to the requirements of the genre: “It was cold so it looked like I was nervous. And I was very underweight then as well. So there wasn’t too much of a worry about not

ticking their boxes.” Matt also recognizes that he has to reinforce the positive vibe of the programme: “there was this sense to go ‘yes, she’s a lovely lady’, just to be light on camera.”

Matt’s cooperation and his carefree reflection on the experience pay off: due to the success of his episode, he returns in the following season for a new date. “I didn’t want *Channel 4* to forget my face. And I knew how to make the show even better. I told them how to cast my date. Don’t match me with someone just because we like the same music. Find somebody that has the same goals, dreams, and aspirations”, Matt recalls how he took control over the matching protocol in order to increase the chances of making the date more successful – and the show less contrived. Ironically enough, Matt’s project becomes *more* than successful: with the new date he meets the love of his life. They are followed on two dates, and their evolving relationship is followed up by the programme every year. “We also had a secret date, in between recordings”, Matt reveals. “I knew they wanted to film everything, but we really needed time away from the camera”.

This episode of dodging the crew again shows Matt’s skill in playing along with the production while also setting boundaries in order to turn participation to his benefit. This duality of engagement and critical distance also comes to the fore in his final reflection on the programme.

5.4.3 The afterlife of participation and Matt’s final reflection

“Channel 4 is quite fuzzy cutesy, that is the kind of stuff they make. You get girls, middle-aged moms who find us cute and adorable. Then you’ve got those who want to watch simple people failing. And then there is another demographic who is so angry about the title that they have to watch it. That narrows down to their success”, Matt explains the popularity of the programme, and the ironic tone underlines his scepticism about the educative potential of the show in which Cathy initially believed. Wendy likewise calls into question whether the media text is able to destabilize the dis/able dichotomy simply by claiming that searching for love is a universal – and

universally challenging – quest (Richardson, 2018): “At the end of the day it’s a group of people with disabilities telling their stories about how difficult dating is”.

“I never had too many problems with my segments”, Matt concludes. “But the semiotics of filmmaking is tricky. Others might not be able to pick up on all the details. When we were not on the same page, I could stop them and say ‘don’t even bother filming, because you are not going to get any useful footage out of it’”, he recalls. “And in the end, I think I benefited from *The Undateables* more than anybody else. Not only do I work within the industry, I’m actually happily married”.

Matt gets what he wants: his savviness and assertiveness enable him to build reciprocity into the producer-participant relationship at critical moments of the process. However, as our final story will show, not everyone who wants to exercise agency and take a share in authoring the production manages to do so. By scrutinizing the conflicts experienced by a candidate in the Dutch version of the show, we will be looking at the whys and wherefores of some contradictions of participation that could not be reconciled.

5.5 Contesting media logic: Annabel’s story

5.5.1 *Getting on the show*

“I was interested in working in television, so I actually went into this more like a self-promotion thing than finding that prince charming. That would be a lovely bonus in the process, but I knew that I was very picky”, Annabel admits. For her, the idea of a media career relates to the positive memory of taking part in another production – a game doc which remains a recurring reference point when talking about her *Undateables* experience. “It was a travel show where I was just one of the contestants” – she stresses that her disability was not in focus at that time.

In this respect, Annabel has some doubts about *The Undateables*, more specifically, about “being shown together” with people with learning disabilities. This, in her view, would risk the questioning of her own intellectual capacities as well: “When you are in a wheelchair, people tend to think that there is something wrong with you mentally as well”. Similar concerns about the homogenous perception of all the participants frequently return in different accounts. “Society likes to put disabilities in one big basket and go ‘they are disabled, and we treat them all the same’”, argues Matt, pointing out the problem with the conflation of different disabilities into the same identification (Richardson, 2018: 336). Yet it appears that this seemingly diversifying claim also implicates another hierarchical (and again, essentializing) distinction for several participants: we are not different from “normal” people in general, but different from another group of disabled people.

This boundary work is not only manifested in some respondents’ concerns regarding textual representation, but also in the interaction with the production members during the filming. “I sometimes had to remind the crew that they don’t have to talk to me like I’ve got a learning disability”, admits for instance Matt. However, while he takes such instances relatively easy (“I wouldn’t throw anyone under the bus”), for Annabel the way she feels she is treated and conceptualized as a disabled person becomes a core constituent of the social experience of the production process.

5.5.2 Being in the production

“In the travel show I learned that they don’t have to tell me exactly what they are going to do. But with *The Undateables* I never knew what was going to happen next. Until the very last minute I didn’t know that they scheduled a date for me”, Annabel recalls her overall sense of being kept in the dark, and this is not unique to her experience. However, other participants usually reacted permissively to this *modus operandi* of the production. “They already know what they want. They don’t turn up at your door with a blank piece of paper not knowing what they’re going to do”, Andrew asserts, apparently having no problem relying on a script according to which he would be

portrayed. The rules of dating are seldom questioned either: they are rather seen as an inevitable part of television making. “We are not allowed to correspond until the date. If there is an introduction before, it won’t be real on camera. They want natural reactions”, Wendy explains the almost ontological necessity of going on a blind date, even if, under ordinary circumstances, this would not be her “first choice”. In her reading, “realness” is associated with the element of surprise and “naturalism” with the artificial situation of the blind date, plausibly illustrating how complying with the ritual norms of reality TV presumes, as Couldry argues (2004), a “higher reality” attributed to the media.

Similarly to Annabel, Bart gets informed about a match and sent on a date the same day. However, while being annoyed at not having the chance to “prepare normally”, he attributes this procedure to the above-mentioned logic of surveillance entertainment. Annabel, in turn, conceives this arrangement as a reflection of the crew’s patronizing behaviour. “They were afraid that people would cancel on me and then I would feel disappointed”, she asserts. “I can imagine doing that to someone with Down but I was like ‘guys, I’m thirty!’ I understand that you can get cold feet when you sign up for something like this. Just be honest and don’t treat me like a little kid!”

As the production moves forward, the uneasiness with the presumed misperception of her capabilities results in constant struggles with the crew over what kind of story is to be told – and the climax of the clashes becomes the filming of the date. “Between shots I asked my date: how did you come to the show? And he said: well, they made a Tinder profile for you and then I responded. And I was like ‘excuse me?’ At that moment the director came in and said: you should not talk about this right now. I was done at that point. I’m more than able to put myself on Tinder. But I don’t like Tinder. It should be my choice. The next day I sent an angry email to them that I’m withdrawing from the show.”

While the deal breaker for Annabel is the questionable method for recruiting her date, other factors also contribute to her quitting, all boiling down to her growing dissatisfaction with both the banality and the inauthenticity of the story she has become part of. While being disappointed about how “lame” the date overall was, she

also feels that her behaviour had constantly been policed by the crew up to that point. “I can be a little sarcastic, but whenever I made comments they would reach out and say: Annabel, you can’t do that. It makes you look really bad. Well, that’s me. if they want to portray me, why do they say that?”

Other participants were also confronted with the fabricated nature of certain aspects of the performances requested from them; however, instances of censorship – including what they would *normally* do and how they would *normally* act – are generally accepted in the name of “what looks good on TV”. “My ADD affects me more than my dwarfism, but they wanted to film something physical here” - Wendy admits, slightly underplaying in this way her initial aspiration to tell *her* story. Next to (re)framing the participants’ condition as an obstacle in their love life, participants are sometimes also asked to be positive and optimistic when reflecting on their dating experience. “First I said that it’s not a match, but [the producers said] it is not a good line in the whole programme. So I rephrased to sound more positive”, a Dutch participant recalls how he had to conform to the intended light-hearted tone of the programme – and what Matt has intuitively called “being light on the camera”.

In fact, Annabel also intends to be “light” on the camera, but she performs her easygoingness through the articulations of her low expectations. “I’m pretty happy the way that I am right now, so if you can’t find a match it’s also fine by me”, she recurrently stresses to the producers. Yet this attitude not only diminishes the stakes around which the program is built, but also calls into question the interventional power of the show. In this respect, the conflicts between Annabel and the production are largely based on the incompatibility of what she wants to convey about her “genuine self” and what is expected from her as a mediator of the show’s “universal message”, namely the ideal state of *not* being single; the former apparently deconstructs the latter.

5.5.3 The afterlife of participation and Annabel’s final reflection

After the failed date Annabel does not return for the follow-up interviews. Nevertheless, her episode is broadcast: she had previously consented to the use

of already recorded footage. “In the end I was pleasantly surprised. And I am really proud of my quotes, they are pretty damn Annabel” – she shows enthusiasm for the first time when talking about her segments. Still, while the end product does not mirror her negative experiences behind the scenes, Annabel retrospectively admits that *The Undateables* was probably not the best programme to “date” with. “Maybe it’s my fault because I went in with a certain feeling”, she ponders. “With the travel documentary, they kept telling me: ‘oh you are so cool’ and I thought *The Undateables* would be the same. But they were looking for someone who is hopelessly devoted to finding love, and that’s not me. A friend of mine is participating in the upcoming season. She’s really insecure and feels like this is a once in a lifetime opportunity. They are filming with a new crew now. I am hoping they will be good to her.”

In 2014 there was a rumour circulating in Dutch news media that one of the Dutch *Undateables* participants had been sent on a date with a professional actor. Although the production refuted the accusations, Annabel’s reporting on the fake Tinder profile suggests that the recruitment strategies of the Dutch adaptation have not always been entirely transparent. While the lack of such accounts in the original version again underlines the importance of not treating the productions as one undifferentiated whole, our interest, at least in the context of this case study, lies less in the ethical implications of production practices than in the reasons why Annabel’s participation became so difficult relative to other (Dutch) participants’ experiences.

Contrary to those applying with romantic hopes, Annabel intended to use the show as a springboard to her future career in the media – just like Matt. However, while Matt knew what it took to meet his goal, Annabel was not willing – or able – to play according to the rules of the game. Rather, she kept expecting *validation* from her participation: she wanted to be recognized as a unique individual (just like in the travel show), to have her personal take on the subject matter acknowledged and accurately portrayed (as it should be in a documentary), and overall, to have her account of her abilities (apparently so central to her identity) listened to and valued.

It seems that Annabel picked the wrong show for such aspirations. Still, one wonders why her voice was so ineffective in the production process, considering that participating in this dating show is seemingly being designed and destined not only to make matches, but also to tell stories. This leads us to our conclusion and a more general discussion of the possibilities and the obstacles of the participant's voice being heard in *The Undateables* and beyond.

5.6 Conclusion

On some level, The Undateables was meant to be an easy watch. It repeats things every time. And that's also why there is that narration over that is criticized for being quite patronizing. (...) In terms of how that takes away from the contributor's voice... I suppose in some respects it does. But that is where the talent of a good filmmaker comes into play. Where you tell someone's story through the sequences you film with them in a way that you get to see this whole personality come through in a very simple way. It's kind of deconstructing a person and putting them back together.

(Producer, *The Undateables*)

The procedure followed for writing this chapter is not that different from the “deconstructive method” described by the producer: we “cast” participants whose motivations and experiences are distinct yet typical to our pool of respondents, and highlighted episodes of their journey by retelling (“editing”) parts of their testimonies. Yet the constructs resulted from the seemingly similar method intended to serve a different end: we aimed at complicating the story of what it means to be a television participant, as well as to capture how and to what extent different experiences in this regard – commonly overlooked by theoretizations based on textual approaches to reality television participation – reflect the transformative potential of the programme.

Consequently, we have followed three routes into and through the production of *The Undateables*. As we have seen, participants got on board with different agendas, each resulting in quite different trajectories. Cathy's story showed that those applying without prior dating experience and in the hope of finding a match are likely to be disappointed in the end: the participation ultimately reinforces their difference (also

vis-à-vis less introverted and more popular participants), suggesting that they are indeed less “dateable” than others. Matt’s story testified that the more you understand the role you are expected to perform as a participant, the more you can influence the production to serve your own interests (cf. also Syvertsen, 2001: 335). Finally, Annabel’s story revealed how conflicted the participation becomes when the genre and the terms of negotiating the participant’s reality versus the “higher reality of the media” (Couldry, 2004) are read differently by the parties involved.

Despite the differences resulting from the participants’ level of savviness or their actual take on dating, all stories share the element of motivating participation with the purpose of conveying an educative or inspiring message about the disability experience. This is typically articulated through the positioning of the self as *essentially* similar and/or different from other (groups of) people. For Cathy, the mediated performance of dating serves as evidence and a lesson for society that she is not different from the non-disabled. For Matt, the societal drive is a combination of encouraging others to go on dates and underlining the diversity of people living with the same condition. In Annabel’s case, participation can be read as a series of attempts to demonstrate her normalcy through distancing herself from people with learning disabilities.

Nevertheless, the desire to (self)emancipate through taking part in the programme is not without contradictions. In order to be recognized *as equals*, the participants enter into a process in which they ultimately take on a variety of *subjugated* positions: they adhere to staged scenarios and conceal parts of their stories to conform to normative dating scripts and the production’s vision about what looks good on TV, including their portrayal as being dependent on an agency to get a date and thus risking the reproduction of a victimized image of people living with disabilities. In this respect, the “extraordinary” dating situations presented in the programme indeed reinforce the resemblance to those *liminoid* rituals where the transgression of social boundaries ultimately serves the reinforcement of the *status quo* outside of the temporal and authorized setting of the performances (cf. Boross and Reijnders, 2015). As a result, the educative impact of the show is commonly called

into question even by those participants who fully embraced it at the beginning of their trajectory.

A more general explanation of why the show is experienced as failing at this premise lies in the apparent tension between the production's effort to showcase its power to *order* social reality (i.e. successfully dealing with the participants' socially liminoid status of being single and disabled, cf. Murphy et al., 1988) and the fact that this ordering work is to be accomplished not only on a largely unpredictable terrain, but also amidst a variety of mundane pressures of the production process. Consequently, the makers' investment in the participants' story increasingly turns into reliance on and repetition of format points, derived from previously successful moments. Returning to the interplay between text and practice discussed in our framework, it is this above process where the ritual logic of media *production* and *representation* converge: the more the actions and the self-presentations of the participants are organized by format points, the more universalizing - nevertheless normative and predictable the terms on which the programme speaks about dating and disability become.

If we assert that the "transcendent" promise of "do good television" is the refiguration of how particular groups of people are rendered to be socially legible to others (Marvin, 2013), the question the above process ultimately brings us to is whether emancipation can be achieved by moulding distinct voices into a single story. As the testimonies of the participants suggest, *The Undateables* in this respect remains more the story of normalization than the naturalization of difference (i.e. making difference seem natural): a story being recurrently told through the strategic selection of situations, characters and reactions that are presumed to be in line with audience expectations, while leaving certain personalities, accounts and choices unheard.

Considering recent trends in reality programming where the promise of individual transformation has increasingly been tied to rhetorics of social justice (Weber, 2014), the selective logic outlined above exemplifies the production of what one could call the *myth of participation*, referring to how principles of participatory inclusiveness and diversity are increasingly utilized by traditional media institutions to reinforce their perception as privileged sites of value production (Couldry, 2003),

while at the same time, continuing to restrict access to those who are unable (or unwilling) to conform to normative and limiting scripts (cf. author forthcoming).

Nevertheless, the programme makers seem to be aware of the above tensions between normalization and the valuation of difference; this also explains why “diversity”, as seen in our introduction, becomes the key trope in justifying why applicants must be turned down by the production. It is a question for further research how and whether this tension can be resolved at all when “ordinary people” become the representatives of a collective in the media, and what kind of interplay between dispositions, logistics and other factors of the production processes result in participatory practices that are, not infrequently, implemented in ways that “turn out to be inconsistent with their purpose” (Kelty, 2017). In our view, this means moving beyond mere economic explanations and striving for complex stories and holistic accounts of participant - production member interactions (Mayer, 2016), exploring further how the possibilities of doing justice to participation (and participants) are constructed, interpreted and negotiated vis-à-vis the educational and entertainment value of television making.



6 Televisual transformations: the making of (media) citizens in interventional television productions

Summary

While interventional programmes often give rise of speculations about how they treat their contributors, little is known about the actual production practices and their ideological aspects, which lie behind the construction of these complex and often contradictory media texts. On the basis of 15 in-depth interviews with below-the-line and above-the-line crew members of a variety of popular shows, this chapter examines the common steps in the production process and explores how ordinary people are turned into subjects of emancipation and spectacular transformations. What kind of ideals, tactics and constraints characterize this process? How do producers organize the participation of non-media professionals, and how is this activity shaped by the dynamics of participant–producer interactions? By analysing the procedures for arriving at predictable transformations, I ultimately address the topic of how particular discursive and organizational mechanisms support or hinder morally viable compromises in situations where personal or professional standpoints and the imperative of ‘selling strong performances’ come into conflict.

6.1 Introduction

“This show is about loving your stuff, right? Caring about something that no one else cares about. And not being able to let things go. Everyone can relate to this. And of course it is shocking... the people that we go into to help are in extreme crisis. But there are 18 million hoarders in this country, so everyone knows a person with that problem. We made people more aware of this condition, and those in need can also realize that they are not alone.”

(Juliet, executive producer *Hoarders*)

Telling an extreme yet relatable story; exposing a societal problem while also helping the participants through their crisis – according to executive producer Juliet⁶², these are the key ingredients of the popularity of the longest running television programme she had been working on. This recipe, without a doubt, is not unique to this format about obsessive compulsive disorder: as the examples of *Uit de Kast* and *The Undateables* have shown, it is also applicable to a broad spectrum of programmes that link particular emancipatory agendas to the transformative journey of their participants, and combine the educational, ‘do-good’ conventions of public service broadcasting with surveillance entertainment. In the previous chapters we have explored how this duality is manifested and reconciled in the ritualization of media texts, how the production process of such formats can function as a ritual experience for the participants, and how different participatory strategies and attitudes towards the ritual logic of such shows can facilitate or compromise the participants’ personal agendas and emancipatory ideals.

In this chapter we turn our attention to the *production practices* and considerations that lie behind the construction of these complex and often contradictory participatory experiences and media texts. Based on fifteen in-depth interviews with below-the-line and above-the-line crew members of a variety of popular interventional formats⁶³, we address how ordinary people are transformed (or attempted to be transformed) into both ‘television participants’ and ‘empowered citizens’ by those working on these productions. How do industry workers see the benefits and the possible downsides of participating in the programmes they create and how do they act upon these aspects? What kind of tactics do they employ to make ordinary people perform according to their vision? What are the producers’ ideals in respect to ‘good’ storytelling and how do they negotiate the potential tensions between commercial viability and the public service value of their work? And more broadly: how do television producers position their ideas, ideals and practices in response to perceived industrial and socio-cultural changes?

⁶² The respondents’ names have been replaced by pseudonyms throughout this chapter.

⁶³ For the sake of simplicity, the research population as a whole will mostly be referred to as ‘producers’ in this chapter. Individual respondents’ actual role in the production hierarchy will nevertheless be made explicit where contextually or analytically relevant.

Addressing these issues from a holistic perspective and through the voices of television makers serves multiple purposes in the context of this work. Although the off-screen, behind-the-scenes world of media production has long been mythologized, fictionalized and branded for public consumption, studies focusing on the lived experiences of television workers remain scarce (Mayer et al., 2009: 2). As a result, little is known even about the basic procedures for selecting, creating or rejecting content in this particular realm of symbolic cultural production (Mayer, 2014: 58; cf. also Peterson and Anand, 2004). Furthermore, apart from a few exceptions (see e.g. Teurlings, 2004; Kjus, 2009; Sanders, 2012; te Walvaart et al., 2018), scholarly insights into the world of television making deal not so much with the social dimensions of producer-participant interactions as with the power dynamics and hierarchies *within* the occupational communities of production workers (cf. Caldwell, 2008; Mayer, 2014; Wei, 2016), and how these are affected by neoliberal industrial structures and ideologies (Ross, 2014). By looking into the role of participants in the production process, as experienced and conceptualized by the producers, we not only aim to nuance popular readings of reality television⁶⁴ production as an exploitative and morally tainted work (Wei, 2016), but also to arrive at a more complex understanding of the mechanisms through which the participatory scope of these shows either reconfigure or reproduce the social hierarchies and inequalities that they claim to challenge.

6.1.1 Research question and approach

In order to explore the ways ordinary people are made into subjects of emancipation and spectacular transformations in televisual interventions, this chapter examines the common steps in the production process as they are described, valued and motivated by crew members of different ‘do-good’ reality TV productions. In doing so, we address the following overarching questions: *how do producers organize the participation of non-media professionals in interventional television production, and what kind of ideals, tactics and constraints characterize this process?* While seemingly straightforward, the

⁶⁴ More on terminological questions in the methods section.

second part of this inquiry needs some elaboration, as it also helps to clarify the general theoretical outlook of this study.

With *ideals*, we refer to what Caldwell terms ‘industrial self-theorizing’ (2008), and more specifically, the producers’ personal and professional stances towards what it takes to make ‘good television’ with ordinary people; with *tactics*, we refer to the routinized industrial practices that conventionally guide the production of televisual interventions; and with *constraints*, we aim to capture the links and discrepancies between tactics and ideals, as well as the ways such links and discrepancies are experienced and explained by production members. While this separation of ideals – tactics – constraints is provisional and somewhat artificial (for the reason that these aspects presumably intertwine not only with each other but also with other factors such as public discourses and organizational ideals), it serves a number of analytical and theoretical purposes here.

First, discerning routinized, strategic actions from personal takes on these actions allows us to treat our interview material both as factual details coming from ‘experts’ and as biased interpretations of involved actors. The distinction between ideals, tactics and constraints thereby not only sensitizes one to distinguish between the two types of data at relevant points of the analysis, but also to make connections between the ideological, practical and the experiential dimensions of the production process.

Second, these dimensions provide possibilities to relate our findings back to the conceptual framework of the previous chapters, where the notion of ritual has been more centrally deployed. Ideals, in this respect, can be considered the ‘transcendent’ motives, values and understandings of the social world and the role of the ‘television maker’ in it, and as such, they correspond with the set of dispositions that has previously been discussed as the *symbolic-mythical dimension* of ritual actions and processes. Tactics, considering the authorized and authoritative practices that conventionally govern the producer-participant interaction (to put it simply: the things to be done in order to make the participant act in a certain way), correspond with the sequential, formalized component of ritual conduct. Finally, the notion of ‘constraints’, as employed in this chapter, relates back to the commonly acknowledged

tensions between ritual structure and agency: considering ritual agency the ‘ability to transform the world’ (Sax, 2006: 474), this aspect addresses how and to what extent the structures and structuring mechanisms influencing the conduct of television making contribute to achieving the ‘transcendent’ promises of the programmes, and how much space the actors have to negotiate their own ideals in this process⁶⁵.

Finally, emphasizing the above aspects aims to signify our attempt to occupy a middle ground position between approaches that, even unintentionally, risk victimizing either the participants or the production members in systems and processes of television making. Such a tendency is present, for instance, in Teurlings’ otherwise fascinating actor network analysis of dating shows, where crew members are predominantly treated as *strategic* players on a field characterized by fundamentally asymmetrical power relations, and where the ultimate goal of every action is tactical and motivated by selling strong identity performances to audiences (2004). On the other end, cultural studies of media industries tend to focus on the structural *constraints* and pressures faced by production workers in their daily work – see for instance Meier’s illuminating study of casters (2014). Without denying the significance of identifying disempowering and exploitative aspects of production practices, our triangular focus on ideals, tactics and constraints might provide a more comprehensive vantage point to grasp the dynamics of participant-producer interactions in different stages of television production.

In line with the above considerations, our discussion will proceed as follows. First, we will present accounts of the routines and challenges associated with *casting*, highlighting how decisions in this phase of the production are negotiated against different notions of, and expectations from the ‘ideal participant’. Next, we will turn our attention to the actual shooting process and discuss how crew members conceptualize the *transformative power* of acting in front of the camera, and what measures they take in order to facilitate this transformative experience on the one hand, and *mitigate the participants’ self-performance* towards particular scripts on the other. Finally, we will be looking at considerations underlying the development of

⁶⁵ Note that the links sketched above mainly serve to point out the analogies between the scope of inquiry of this chapter and the previous ones. We will return to a more explicit discussion of the ritual dimensions of the production process in the General Conclusion.

these scripts and how the *stories* finalized in the editing rooms are seen to be given justice to the participants' voices, self-conceptions and life narratives.

It is to be noted, however, that if studying television participation revolves, to a large part, around questions of *access* – the conditions under which the symbolic as well as the material boundaries between ‘ordinary’ and ‘media worlds’ are negotiated, transgressed and reconfirmed (cf. Couldry, 2003) – so does the very possibilities for researching this subject at all: gaining direct and authentic insights about what is going on behind the scenes is commonly conceived to be notoriously difficult. Therefore, it is worthwhile spending some words on the methodological choices and lessons learned in the course of this study.

6.1.2 Sampling strategy, access and conversing from 'behind the scenes'

Recruiting potential respondents started with creating an inventory of over sixty serialized television programmes that center around the lives, stories, and life turning moments of ‘ordinary’ people.⁶⁶ The corpus in mind was deliberately broad: although primarily focusing on internationally circulating interventional formats, programmes with a broad spectrum of participant populations, thematic focus and genre conventions were included, ranging from more observational style docu-soaps through makeover shows to competition based blockbusters and gamedocs on the other end of reality programming. The decision to cut across sub-genres not only aimed to acknowledge the quintessential hybridity of what is labeled as ‘reality television’ today⁶⁷, but also to identify patterns and dilemmas of the encounters

⁶⁶ Thanks goes to Ruoxi Cui-Olsson for her invaluable assistance in the recruitment process.

⁶⁷ As Bignell argues, an important consequence of this hybridity is that the “boundaries between observational documentary with social purpose and factual entertainment based around character have become blurred to the extent that the same programme can be perceived in very different ways” (2014: 108). The validity of this claim has been confirmed several times in the interview situations: while respondents commonly attempted to distance themselves from makers of ‘*modern freak shows*’ and emphasized their integrity even when working on rather similar formats as the ones they criticized, the categorizations of concrete programmes largely depended on the respondents’ role in the production hierarchy, their personal commitment to the given job, the prestige they attached to calling themselves ‘documentary makers’ (or not), and the labels they individually developed over the years. For instance, director Jim equates documentary with ‘*social experiment*’ and reality television with programmes that deliberately ‘*make you look bad*’. Executive producer Juliet associates reality television with ‘*manufacturing situations*’ and relates documentary to how demanding the work is,

between crew members and participants beyond the peculiarities of particular formats.

Based on this inventory, crew members from the different programmes were identified and contacted (n=252) via databases like *IMDB*, networking sites for television freelancers and professionals like the UK's *Talent Manager* or the US focused *StaffMeUp*, general social media platforms (*LinkedIn*, *Facebook*) and occasionally via information found on the websites of production companies, networks and channels. To cover different aspects of the production process, we approached both below-the-line and above-the-line crew members, including production assistants, casters, camera operators, directors, script developers and editors, series producers and executive producers of particular shows. The combination of freelance-based work conditions of television professionals with the set hierarchy of production roles proved to be advantageous in this respect: it often occurred that the same person had been working on a variety of programmes in different positions, including other shows that were part of the original corpus as well. This allowed the respondents to reflect on different experiences as well as to enrich the data by getting different perspectives on the very same shows.

The initial contacts were handled by a research assistant and the solicitation letters in all cases were personalized, suggesting that the addressees were *selected to be invited* to participate in the study *by the principle investigator* based on their résumés and potentially interesting insights. This protocol aimed at constructing certain authority, weight and appeal to the request, following some earlier and unsuccessful attempts where the solicitation was based on a more humble, 'I am writing a paper and I would appreciate your help' approach. Respondents were furthermore offered anonymity and a gift certificate as a compensation for their time and effort. In the end, a total of fifteen producers from the UK, US, The Netherlands and Canada were recruited – including *Uit de Kast* and *Undateables* crew members – with a more or less proportional distribution of respondents in terms of production role, age, gender, national background and programmes they had been predominantly

comparing this way the production of *Hoarders* to 'war journalism'. This definitional diversity also justified the choice for being inclusive with the corpus.

working on⁶⁸. Interviews lasted an hour and a half on average (most of the time longer than anticipated), and were conducted either via Skype or – in the case of Dutch participants – in person.

The low response rate did not come as a surprise, and was later also thematized in the interviews, partly to discuss aspects of access and partly to get an idea about the motivations of those who finally agreed to take part. A common thread, especially in the case of below-the-line workers⁶⁹, in explaining why crew members are generally reluctant to disclose details of their work is the lack of clarity about what one is allowed to say *at all* without asking permission from superiors. This is generally related to the assertion that those at the top of the production ladder do not want to reveal how the sausage is made: 'It would just kill a bit of that magic. There is so much magic that you don't want people to question. And that's important, not breaking that suspension of disbelief – casting assistant Stanley argues, attaching an almost ontological necessity to sustain the mystery that prevents the audience from questioning the transformative power of television. Others are more down to earth in this respect: *'They don't really care about what we are talking about – cameraman Chris maintains, they just care about the storylines, and they are worried about that kind of thing getting out. So my initial response when I saw your email was, yes, somebody does need to get to the bottom of this. Because it's something so pervasive in our society right now, it's huge. And people have been programmed since they've been kids now, with this type of television experience. Who knows what it does to people.'*

One of the anticipated constraints of 'getting to the bottom' of what television participation 'does to people' was what Caldwell calls the 'inverse credibility law', referring to his experience that 'the higher one travels up the industrial food chain for insights, the more suspect and spin-driven the personal disclosures tend to become' (2008: 3). In order to move beyond habitually employed corporate scripts and to go beneath discursive constructions of the 'ethical producer' (Wei, 2016) in the interview situations, embedding the topics of our interest in broader and personal life histories

⁶⁸ For an indicative overview, see the Appendix.

⁶⁹ Remarkably, higher level crew members often altogether denied the above issue of inaccessibility, claiming industrial openness for dialogue with 'outsiders' based on the fact that they also responded to our call.

and experiences of the respondents proved to be a good strategy. Accordingly, relatively large parts of the interviews were spent asking the producers about childhood memories about television, their path to the industry and future ambitions. Other topics that were helpful in establishing rapport were talking about the interviewees' (lack of) interest in working on fiction and discussing utopian and dystopian scripts of the future of television and media practices – these mind games commonly triggered enthusiastic and philosophical conversations, and returning to our narrow topic from these side routes often enriched, as well as re-coloring the picture provided earlier⁷⁰.

That said, the interviews show a detectable duality with respect to the subjects' willingness to share the contradictions of their work and the efforts they recurrently made to highlight their personal and professional integrity. There is not much to do about this – this is a notorious problem of virtually all interview studies – except for being aware of the bias and being attentive to the earlier described discursive-ideological, practical and experiential dimensions of the production process, paying close attention to how certain issues (re)appear, being problematized or handled in these realms. With these words of caution, we will now proceed to our findings, starting with the first moment of interaction between productions and participants: the casting.

6.2 Casting the 'ideal' participant

In his study on dating shows, Teurlings (2004: 141) identifies two managerial problems when it comes to the selection of candidates: finding *enough* participants (termed as 'selection-as-inclusion'), and eliminating *unsuitable* candidates ('selection-as-exclusion'). As our interviewees often highlighted, these problems are quite inseparable in the actual process of casting. Even in cases of large volumes of

⁷⁰ [Working on this show] is not very satisfying; I do find a lot of it to be fairly banal and just run of the mill, and not very significant. I didn't get into this business to just make junk food' – admitted for instance a respondent at the end of our talk, exemplifying the frequent move from the initial 'how inspiring it is what we do' angle.

applications⁷¹, it is difficult to find and pick participants who indeed ‘play the ball’. At the same time, potential candidates commonly undergo several rounds of call backs, test shots, psychological screening and sometimes group interviews. As a result, those who finally appear on the screen are, as most interviewees insisted, not just ‘off the street’:

“These people have been vetted and scrutinized to determine how they come across on camera. If you were to just do a random sampling of the people off the street, you would end up with a terrible show, it just wouldn’t work.”

(Wim, director of photography)

‘Ordinary’ people, in other words, must meet a variety of criteria to ensure that their performance will be ‘broadcast friendly’. Most importantly, the ideal participant has to be *authentic*, and at the same time, *conform* to the personality traits and abilities preferred by the format and the programme’s politics of representation.

Authenticity, at least in the context in which it was recurrently used by the respondents, first and foremost refers to the idea that the candidates’ motivations have an impact on how they will come across on the screen, and consequently, how the programme as a whole will be received by the audience. “Those who are obsessed with getting on television will not seem very genuine at the end” – Canadian script writer and producer Jim claims, suggesting that the pure desire to be on television cannot be the candidates’ main drive to participate – even if it is precisely this desire which is reinforced by the programmes: they ultimately showcase how the ‘higher reality of media’ (cf. Couldry, 2004) provides an experience that enables people to transform their lives. ‘Authentic’ participants are not only lacking celebrity aspirations, but their participation is altruistic – ensured also by not providing them financial compensation⁷². While candidates should indeed be in need (so they can be

⁷¹ Some of programmes on which the respondents have worked receive over ten thousand applications per series, and here we are talking about interventional and observational formats, not even about competition based blockbusters such as *The Voice*, *America’s Got Talent* or *Survivor*.

⁷² According to BBC producer Jodie, “if you financially compensate the participant, it is not a *true documentary* anymore” [author emphasis]. Note how the lack of financial transaction between participant and production is linked to notions of ethical, quality programme making here, and how

'fixed' by the programme), they are equally expected to strive for self-improvement and being motivated in telling their story to help and educate others as well.⁷³

Besides the 'right' motivations, authenticity is also commonly equated with natural self-presentation and performance. As maintained by several respondents, casting authentic characters has, in this respect, become increasingly difficult, due to the general "reality savviness" of the audience. As Wim explains,

"Reality TV has been around for so long, we are now casting people who've grown up almost exclusively with this kind of programming experience. They know the rhythms and how the world of reality television plays out. So it's getting tougher to get truly unique characters, that don't automatically fall into those patterns that are so prominent in most reality shows. Like patterns of behavior and talking... like I need to act even more outlandishly than I would normally to draw attention to myself."

Ideal candidates are thus free from 'reality TV patterns', but this does not mean that producers do not seek the potential of (interpersonal) drama when selecting participants: "We want people to get into conflicts, we want to see something instigated, we want to see it resolved in the ending" – casting director Christine insists. The 'drama', however, should be based less on the candidates' performance of an exaggerated self (which will become 'outlandish') but controlled and facilitated by the crew: "If you put enough personalities in a room, there's gonna be conflict" – casting assistant Stanley admits how drama is, often routinely ensured.

Searching for 'rough diamonds' does not mean that the personal qualities required from future participants are lacking patterns, either. While the key criterion, as unanimously emphasized, appears to be the candidates' ability to narrate their

this interpretation diverges from academic discussions where the 'free labor' practices of the reality television economy are often juxtaposed to questions of fairness and exploitation (cf. Andrejevic, 2004). In this respect, Ross rightly proposes that what counts as 'fair' is highly contextual, especially in the deregulated sectors of creative industry and in times when the generational norms and conceptualizations of 'compensation' are rapidly shifting (2014). We will return to this question and to the issue of the (a)symmetry of the trade-off between participant and producer in more detail in the General Conclusion.

⁷³ Note how this set of criteria corresponds with participants' discourse on 'good participation' as discussed in the previous chapters, where sharing personal problems was ultimately framed as community service (cf. Mayer, 2014: 69).

experience, the respondents also agree that ideal participants are open, energetic and talkative⁷⁴, even in instances when the core business of the program is to help and educate rather than entertain:

“Audiences respond more to bigger personalities, to people who are more energetic, just like in life. You not only see who’s got a need, but you also see who is not gonna just sit back and be super quiet. This is a TV show, and it has got to be interesting. We are not here just as a clinic.”

(Stanley, casting assistant)

Finally, the producers strive to present *extraordinary* transformations, both satisfying presumed audience needs (just like the above consideration of including ‘big personalities’) and legitimizing the televisual framework of the intervention this way. As Stanley exemplifies: “no one wants to see someone who is going from slightly overweight to be less than slightly overweight; the whole point of the show is that people really turn their lives around”.

There might be people out there meeting all the above criteria, but it is often challenging to turn them into actual ‘participants’, especially when producing new shows. As casting director Christine highlights, the lack of familiarity with the program and finding cast members in real life who fit in the constructed reality of the program are particularly persistent difficulties of first series:

“Nobody knows the format, who the host is, you don’t have any celebrity backing it, the network won’t even admit they are making the show, and you are the first person cold

⁷⁴ This general preference for extroverted participants is consistent with Andrejevic’s findings in relation to reality show contestants (2004). However, based on our previous chapters it is worthwhile considering how the desired personality traits are linked, whether implicitly or not, to the politics of representation of particular programmes. Accordingly, the popularity and the privilegization of ‘high energy’ participants in *The Undateables* may be read as serving the normalization of the candidates (e.g. reinforcing the idea that life can be fully embraced in spite of living with disability) – or as a means of making the programme consumable as ‘inspiration porn’ (Ellis, 2016). *Uit de Kast*, in turn, may be seen as a counter-example. When discussing the programme’s strategies of ‘gay representation’, we highlighted the dominance of quiet, humble, introspective protagonists. As suggested, this serves the assimilation of gay identifications in the mainstream – at the expense of more extroverted, non-conventional or flamboyant articulations of gay identities.

calling the contestants. And when there is a type of person or type of story that we want, we have to find them. Once I had to cast mothers and daughters who are pregnant at the same time... It's a lot of work and the worst thing is when you come to work and your email inbox is empty."

While more established formats are self sufficient in the sense that they attract candidates without having to search for them, the casting process is characterized by a great deal of uncertainty also in cases of popular programmes. Applicants often change their minds, even if they show up for open castings themselves. "If you are standing in the line for an hour or two, out there with 15,000 people, nothing seems real at that moment. But in call-backs, people start getting nervous, not calling us back, because all of a sudden it feels real, they realize they are about to be on TV", Stanley describes how the abstract desire of getting on the screen is naturalized and facilitated when being part of a 'likeminded' crowd, and how it becomes questioned when the prospect of participating in the show starts feeling 'real'.

Surprising as it may seem, at first glance, the most common concern about television participation for candidates is social media and online interactivity. As explained by a caster,

"They [candidates ultimately backing out] didn't mind being on TV, as far as what that meant in 1992, but they didn't wanna be on TV in 2017 where everyone on the internet can go and weigh in on everything you've done. They wanted the help, but they didn't want to become a public person."

In this interpretation, the fact that the audience not only surveils one's actions but also has the opportunity to *talk back*, appears as a threat to television participants, and contrasted with easier times when the more restricted para-social relationship with the audience prevented the participant from being commented upon. Crew members for sure perceive online interactivity as a risk, underlined also by the common reasoning that the primary purpose of psychological screening of the cast is to see if they are able to handle this type of publicity – and not, shall we say, their preparedness for the emotional labor (Ross, 2014: 34) involved in the actual production

process. In the next section, we turn to this process and how the labor of 'being watched' (Andrejevic, 2014) is streamlined by the programme makers.

6.3 Producing 'extraordinary' performances

If the whole point of participating in interventional shows, as emphasized by respondents in the previous section, is to turn lives around, the intriguing question that follows is how the 'turning points' – confessing deep secrets, breaking with vicious routines, taking on challenging situations – are triggered by the productions and why such turning points – the very material of the emotional climax or 'money shot' (Grindstaff, 2002) of the programmes – can be achieved at all. "The premise is that you'd force yourself into a position you are uncomfortable with, and help yourself through that" – Cynthia, production assistant on the *Obsessive Compulsive Cleaners* franchise asserts, highlighting the disciplinary force of the production environment. But how does this environment serve as a catalyst and what are the limits of its transformative power?

Responses to these questions commonly entail a combination of general assumptions regarding how 'media power' works (let us call these *meta-explanations*) and assertions regarding the importance of micromanagement, in which the tactics of forming the participant-crew relationship play the most significant role (let us call these *interaction strategies*).

As to the meta-explanations, interviewees generally subscribe to the idea that being part of television is an extraordinary enough experience to facilitate out-of-the-ordinary performances⁷⁵. According to executive producer Jim,

"It takes you outside of yourself. Because television is bigger, it's a bigger experience, and I think what happens is when people put themselves out there to do that, because it's such a unique experience and situation, their perception changes and they become more open-minded."

⁷⁵ Note how this idea naturalizes assumptions regarding the 'higher reality of the media', as extensively discussed by Couldy (2004).

Others link the possibility of making participants perform in ways they would not in their everyday lives more specifically to the 'epistemology' of surveillance. "As soon as you observe something, you change it" – director and cameraman Francis claims, suggesting that the camera is not there to 'document' (or neutrally register) reality but to construct and change reality; it is precisely this mechanism where the transformative power of television participation lies. That surveillance transforms its object – in our case: induces behavioral changes in the participants – is often considered by the respondents a therapeutic effect of acting for television, corresponding with Andrejevic's study where being watched all the time, as claimed by *Big Brother* participants, intensifies one's experiences and thereby facilitates self-growth and self-knowledge (2004: 145). When elaborating on such empowering effects of surveillance, *monitoring* is often equated by our respondents with *listening*, and linked prominently to the participants' desire to be heard:

"Having cameras pointing at you boosts your confidence: you feel stronger when you are being listened to. We say to people 'I see you', and that's what most people, participants in any programme, normally do not have. They are not used to being seen."

(Angelica, director Uit de Kast)

Remarkably, while the interviewees attribute such a metaphysical power to the presence of the cameras, they commonly argue that this power works only with the right interaction strategy, i.e. when the people *behind* the camera remain invisible, and interact with the cast as little as possible. "We should be ghosts" – cameraman Wim states, describing the conditioning of the participants to accept this principle as a Pavlovian process:

"First week they are uncomfortable and try to talk to us. Eventually somewhere in the second week, they start to get bored with that, especially if they are being ignored. If the crew isn't engaging with them, then they are not getting any reward for trying to talk to them, they will then just put their attention to their task or on whoever else is in the

room, hopefully the other cast members. We want them to relate to one another, not us.”

Other roles within the production team, however, require different strategies: producers often emphasize the emotional investment and the importance of personal bonding with the participants in order to make them do what they want to see on the screen. Although not necessarily conceived as un-genuine, this investment is often described as manipulative. As producer-director Angelica maintains,

“I am even conscious about touching people at the right moment. But that’s the work we have, we try to convince people to say and do things. And to trust in us. But I also feel that they have to be able to trust us.”

In Angelica’s argumentation, ‘manipulation’ serves a purpose, but it does not mean that it is exploitative, as long as the trust built up with the cast is not compromised in the end. Furthermore, as underlined by others, employing fine-tuned tactics (such as touching people at the right moment) is quintessential to create a sense of authorship, enhancing in that way the participants’ commitment to the project. “No one wants to be a fish in a fish bowl“ – Shawn argues why indirect guidance is more efficient than giving clear-cut instructions. Jim adds that crew members “are not dealing with actors who have been trained to take direction”, highlighting the importance of making participants feel that they are the primary owners of their actions. “You’re telling them: we’re going to do this with you, while in fact we already planned the whole day” – Angelica points out who makes the actual decisions in the process, even if participants (as shown by the *Uit de Kast* study) often experience it otherwise.

Despite these strategies, production members commonly emphasize the fragility of the cast – crew relationships and the challenge of maintaining a fine balance between the end goal (i.e. creating a ‘good story’) and the participants’ personal needs and reasons for going through the process. In this respect, ‘out-of-

balance' situations are frequently imputed to the power relations of the production hierarchy⁷⁶:

"Those higher up in the team aren't talking to the contributors on a regular basis. They don't know them and care about them on the level that we do. That's why always the bosses come up with the ridiculous dreams and scenarios that we have to try to fulfill."

(Bianca, production assistant, *The Undateables*)

Although such narratives are common, complaining about unrealistic scenarios rarely involves moral reflections or questioning the chain of command. "I am well compensated for the work I do, and it's a job, we are telling a story" – cameraman Chris claims. "But you have to treat the talents well. If you are always just pushing them in the worst way, they will stop responding to you, they won't open up anymore" – he adds, framing responsible and ethical conduct as a pragmatic prerequisite to delivering a good job⁷⁷.

While ethical questions are seldom articulated in relation to the actual treatment of the participants in the production process⁷⁸, respondents commonly highlight the challenges of portraying the participants 'fairly'. As illustrated by the quote below, the choices in this regard also requiring a great deal of pragmatism:

⁷⁶ Below-the-line crew members typically point to the producers in this respect, while producers commonly refer to the pressures coming from other stakeholders of the industry at large (commissioning channel, competing programmes, target audiences).

⁷⁷ This fear of 'losing' the participants surfaces in several interviews, especially when talking about 'difficult' contributors. "The worst is that you can't talk back at all" – producer Sarah complains, implying that participants have more power in their hands than they probably assume. Compare this also with the *Undateables* case, which precisely showed that those participants become the most successful who recognize the producer-participant relation's transactional reciprocity. "And usually the most difficult ones are the best on TV" – Sarah adds, deriving this tendency from the already discussed preference for 'big personalities' when it comes to casting.

⁷⁸ "We have such tight production protocols, also in terms of what we can offer or say or do, that it's a fairly well-oiled machine" – executive producer Juliet argues, while allowing that ethical conduct is not universally given: "Television is like everything else you consume. Every network has a different agenda and the participants need to do their research and select carefully where they are going to put themselves". This reasoning, however, also captures a core paradox of the neoliberal logic of interventional television: the starting point of the formats is the contestation of the participants' agency for self-care or improvement (after all, that is why the televisual transformation is needed), while insisting on the participants' responsibility to be literate enough to select the right show (which will then train them in citizen self-responsibility).

“I had a feeling that, okay we can't show this [i.e. a compromising footage about a participant]. But then the channel insists, even if it was going to destroy that person. Then you use them, but try to make some balance. If they say something really stupid, people will love it. Then you know that the following day you'll have 100,000 extra viewers. But if you continuously make them look stupid, people won't bond with them, won't identify with them and they will stop watching eventually.”

(Robin, director *The triplets*)

At the same time, footage manipulation does not necessarily serve a negative or scandalous end – even if it aims at increasing viewing figures. According to BBC producer Jodie, the opposite – editing people ‘nice’ – is more common:

“People often think that we make participants out to look worse, while most of the time, we try to make them look better. Because if you are not a very nice person, people aren't gonna want to watch you, and they are not gonna care about whether you succeeded in this journey you are taking in this programme.”

Considering a journey a ‘success’, however, largely depends on the vantage point from which the impact of the extraordinary performances are evaluated; in this respect, the transformational potential of television participation is often discussed – and problematized – by the interviewees with respect to different yet interfering realms. First of all, it is commonly emphasized that one cannot control what happens *outside of the actual production*, even if aftercare is involved. Once leaving behind the corporate scripts from which respondents often initially talk, many of them raise concerns regarding the long-term effects of participation, revealing certain ontological tensions at the core of their business. According to Jim,

“Underlying causes are more persistent than what production companies can do. Even with aftercare, you can't change people's lives. Intervention even can make things worse: you'd have this extra attention, then it is gone and you are alone again. I've always wondered if being on television is good for your soul or not, I don't know.”

Concerns regarding the temporality of the attention given to participants are also raised by BBC producer Susanne: “We come into their lives, open them up, take what we want and leave, and suddenly they are on their own again” – she ponders about the exploitative aspects of her job. Cameraman Chris goes even further in questioning the help provided to the participants and the public service element of the programmes which is often highlighted by producers:

“It [The Hoarders] is supposed to be a public service, but it’s a freak show. It’s about ‘how could a person be like this’. There’s the therapy, but there’s not really therapy, it’s just treating the symptoms: let’s just clean this up for the sake of television, so that we can get a beginning, a middle and an end. Now perhaps they are more damaged because we separated them from the only comfort they’ve had, which was their stuff. In a greater context, there is this pervasive use of people to get a story, but I mean the bigger question is: is the content worth it?”⁷⁹

In spite of the attention given and strategies discussed before, it also occurs that participants fail to perform or overcome their issues *within the process of production*; paradoxically, such failures are often imputed to the participants’ ‘blind trust’ in television’s ritual power to transform people:

“Participants sometimes see television as a miracle maker; they are like: I’m in this programme so I will lose weight, but they seriously get disappointed when they realize that they also have to work for it themselves. They don’t see that those being in the show on previous episodes had been followed for a year. They only see the 40 minutes: you start like this, and you end up like that”

(Angelica, producer and director Uit de Kast)

⁷⁹ Comparing this quote with the one provided by the executive producer at the beginning of our Introduction to this chapter well exemplifies that even crew members of the same show can read the shows they create rather differently: the executive producer explains the popularity of the show with universal relatability, while for Chris the core message, as he puts it, is “be cautious, there are weird people out there”; for the former, the programme connects, for the latter, it reinforces social distance.

In this interpretation, the naivety of unsuccessful candidates is linked to the pervasiveness of the assumption that television will fix you no matter what; yet this assumption is precisely reinforced by the representational logic and the editing of the series. In this logic, striving for a 'happy ending', just as we have seen in the *Undateables* case, plays a pivotal role. As Angelica continues,

"It is often not at all a success story once the camera is gone. If we followed them up a year later, you would see that half of the families stopped working out. Maybe they're not even together anymore. But on TV it has to be successful because otherwise why start season two with different families. So you censor to sort of keep the hope alive."

In the following section we will look deeper into the considerations and mechanisms behind the creation of such televisual representations, as well as how the final cuts, according to the producers, give voice to the participants, or reflect their stories.

6.4 Creating ritualized texts

Success stories, as underlined by Angelica at the end of the previous section, are important ingredients of institutional self-legitimization and reproduction: they authorize the interventions and maintain what we have earlier called the 'transformational credibility' of the programmes. Delivering positive messages, however, while also fulfilling the audience's presumed appetite for drama and extraordinariness (remember: "no one wants to see someone who is going from slightly overweight to be less than slightly overweight") is only sustainable if the productions employ certain established strategies to textualize the otherwise messy realities of the participants' 'journey'.

In this respect, the development and the serialization of interventional programmes are often described with ambivalence, interpreting the process as a gradual move from a 'true' documentarist endeavor – the very *ideal* when it comes to professional self-identification and thinking about storytelling – to the mechanical

reproduction of scripted formats. Those working on early episodes often look back with nostalgia, and perceive the ‘formatization’ of subsequent series as a compromise of quality and value. In such recollections, the ‘early days’ are described as a state of bliss, where the effort of helping the participants goes hand in hand with collective creativity and professional excitement about the unpredictability of the outcome. In these readings, serialization results in increased hierarchical control over the content in order to safeguard profitability:

“I was there at the very early stages. It was lots of experimenting, we really didn’t know if it was going to work. And there was a purity to it: we were really focused on these people’s condition and helping them improve and make changes. Then it became all about attracting an audience, and also obviously to sell ads. If you go through the seasons progressively, the amount of time allocated to selling product, what we call integrations, just has gone up and up and up”

(Wim, director of photography, *Biggest Loser*)

“Series one is a complete anarchy and collective effort. Later it gets painted by numbers and the real controller is the series and the executive producer”

(Francis, director *The Undateables*)

Formatization is, however, explained only partly by risk aversion. Repeating the ‘same story’ over again is also imputed to freelance labor conditions, and the fact that individual crew members with creative control are often commissioned for a few episodes only. “If the same person were filming all the births, you wouldn’t see the same story twice” – BBC producer Jodie exemplifies the problem of staff fluctuation with the series *Teen Mom*. “But without continuity, every director goes down to the basics: the girl comes in, she’s very young, she’s very vulnerable, and she has a baby”. At the same time, Jodie allows that repetition *does* create a sense of continuity on the reception side: “The audience wants to know what they are gonna be watching. The whole point of a documentary is supposed to be surprising, taking on a different route. But there is the comfort when you are familiar with what you are getting into” – she

maintains, denoting a positive habitual function to consuming predictable storylines⁸⁰.

It is easy to realize how the quest for replicating previously successful moments also necessitates the active construction of situations and cast interactions – such as the ‘fake date with the mom’ in the *Undateables* case – even when the production shoots on the ‘observational’ end of the reality spectrum. Yet ‘scripting’ is also explained by the need to expedite the flow of events or by the frequent realization that the everyday reality of the participants is more banal or tedious than originally expected. “We realized that triggers are needed, otherwise it is going to be bad TV. So it shifted within a week from ‘let it happen’ to invent all the episodes ourselves” – director Robin recalls how the shooting of a pilot made him depart from a ‘documentarist’ perspective. Cameraman Richard further illustrates the unsustainability of ‘pure’ observational techniques by his recent work on a docu-soup, focusing on the ‘everyday life’ of police officers:

“When we first started out on the show, we attempted to do it real, but it would take too long for something to happen. You may spend weeks following them giving people traffic tickets, well, that’s not exciting television, it’s only exciting when they pull their guns out, that’s where the drama lies.”

Often, balancing between actual circumstances and delivering an improved, more exciting version of reality is further complicated by the commissioner’s requirements or expectations about the ideal show – and apparently, working for commercial channels or public service broadcasters does not make much difference in this respect. “The channel wants helicopters, at least three times per series. But you can’t guarantee who’s gonna come in from an accident that way” – producer Jodie complains. “(...) Then [for the public broadcaster] you have to tick the diversity box even when you are shooting in an area which is 99 % white.”

⁸⁰ Note the genre-work underlying the label ‘documentary’ when the respondent talks about an actual format. This again underlines the hybridity of the programmes discussed in this study as well as the importance of professional self-identification in the interviewees’ labeling practices over ‘essential’ characteristics of certain (sub)genres or particular programmes.

Considering that the motive for television participation is typically linked, by participants and producers alike, to the desire to be listened to, a question that logically follows from the above production pressures and strategies is the relation between the participants' story and the producers' story: how do the participants' voice or personal life narratives fit into the often pre-established formats? Remarkably, this dilemma is seldom raised by the respondents: many of them rather straightforwardly claim that the 'participant's story' is not 'out there', *not a preliminary given*, but constructed through participating in the production process, and ultimately authored by the crew. According to producer and scriptwriter Jim, it is precisely the construction of a meaningful story and attaching it to a participant's life where the ritual and reciprocal function of participating in scripted television lies. As he elaborates,

"We all want our lives to be a novel, but our real life doesn't have a story, it doesn't have an arc. Mostly our lives are just a bunch of random circumstances that come together, right? We want someone to give meaning to that, and I think that's what television does. It takes an ordinary person and surrounds them with a team of authors who say what the story of this person's life is. And in television we are seeking greater themes and universal truth, so our version of those people's lives frames them in a context that makes it feel like their lives have more meaning."

Jim's theorization also explains why participants in the previous chapters are most of the time satisfied with the end result: their life got a storyline. As Jodie explains, the creation of this storyline first and foremost means selections in practice: script development is primarily about finding a pattern to tell a story out of random situations and utterances. According to Jim, the story will be recognized and appropriated by the participants as their own story, as long as the producers "pick pieces [from the participant's life] that will fit the stories we are trying to make", and somewhat cynically he adds: "you know the old saying that facts are like apples on the tree, there are many apples but you pick the ones you want. From an hour long interview what two minutes are you going to use?"

The construction of a televised version of one's everyday reality, in this reasoning, requires *distance* – contrarily to the often intimate interpersonal strategies employed in the actual process of the shooting. In Jim's work routine, the rule of thumb is not letting the directors (or anyone working with the participants 'on the ground') into the edit suite: "They're too close to them [i.e. to the participants] to be editing in post-production. It's all about maintaining that sense of distance. If you haven't met that person, then you have a little more freedom to play with their words."

Jim sees the power of television precisely in such procedures of 'distant creation'; 'reality', in this view, is something observed from a perspective. To underline this argument, he contrasts television participation with online DIY productions, such as grassroots content creation on YouTube:

"For YouTube you can create tiny little formats, and people might come back because they just like your personality. But there is no story, there is no artist, there is no growth, and there is no perspective when you are doing it yourself. It's impossible to see the journey of your own life."

Similarly to Jim, many respondents emphasize the value of televisual storytelling *vis-à-vis* content that is produced and consumed within the new media ecology. "You can watch a thousand cat videos and it's great, but it's like eating cup noodle: it'll fill you up for five minutes, but it won't satisfy you", producer Susanne argues, implying that it is solid storytelling that ultimately gratifies the audience. Such articulations, however, demonstrate a far-reaching duality. On the one hand, 'cat videos' (to stick to Susanne's synecdoche) are seen as the epitome of emergent forms of online media against which the *continuing value* of the shows the respondents create is positioned. On the other hand, such products are perceived as a *general threat* to established forms of storytelling – based on the assumption that the ubiquity of 'cat videos' inevitably changes audience habits and needs. In the next, concluding section of this chapter, we briefly expand on this duality, putting the previously discussed ideals, strategies and constraints of producing interventional television in a more general

perspective, at the same time paving the way towards the General Conclusion of this dissertation.

6.5 Conclusion: televisual interventions in a new media world

“The world of television that I inhabit now is not the world I grew up with. Things have changed massively. The channels are in a desperate race for the viewers, and there is a huge amount of trash out there. And it is exploitative trash”

– BBC producer Susanne contemplates near the end of our conversation. Her slightly alienated, Adornoian outlook on the current state of affairs in the industry is not atypical, quite the contrary: the interviewees of this study have generally painted a pessimistic picture when reflecting on the changing conditions and conduct of today’s television production.

Next to the earlier mentioned ‘formatization’ and format copying (diminishing, according to many, the space for creativity), the most common trope prevailing in such discourses is *acceleration*. As Susanne points out, “once we filmed single episodes for several months. Now things like *The Undateables* just take a week to film. It’s brilliant: it is cheap, quick, easily reproducible, so it fills a lot of air time. And it gets viewers.” Likewise, producer Jodie recounts how a format she had been working on for years was gradually modified to reach its current form: “We used to shoot more observationally, the scenes were opened up. Now it’s fast paced, everything is cut against music, and the scenes are so short because all they need is a look or a word”.

While this speeding is commonly perceived as a restraint on in-depth storytelling, it is also interpreted as a ‘natural’ reaction to the professed transformation of audience habits amidst the increasing mediatization of everyday life. “Cell phones and social media lead us to need more stimulation faster and that translates into television. Like okay, we’ve got one thing going on, we need to get the next thing happening” – Chris explains with some disillusion. “You have to make scenes shorter because people lose interest, and because on a different channel they can watch

shorter, choppiest sequences, and that keeps them more alert. People have got too many mobile phones, haven't they?" – Jodie argues similarly. Others connect the logic of 'narrative speeding' with the constant need for producing interactive audiences. "Shows are built more around person-to-person conflicts now" – Stanley highlights. "They are pushing more of that, wanting to see people argue with people, because it helps the show moving faster. And there has to be a moment in every couple of minutes that people are tweeting about". Such strategies of audience maximization are, however, often seen as an obstacle in making an 'impact' in the end: "Today everything is catered to your interests. If something is felt too long, you just switch. You only get what you like, what your friends like, so you cannot expand your horizon. TV used to be about looking out, and now it's about looking in" – Angelica contrasts an ideal(ized) past with a present where effortless, on-demand programme consumption, instead of facilitating, ultimately hinders social learning.

With all its deterministic and dystopian patterns, this *new media world discourse* is not entirely unexpected, even if, at first sight, it contradicts the frequent and seemingly confident claims regarding the educative power of televisual interventions in which the respondents have been concretely involved. Rather, this discrepancy can be read as a signification of the tensions resulting from the constant pressures to negotiate – or disregard – different conceptualizations of audiences (i.e. public *versus* market⁸¹) and participants (i.e. commodities *versus* subjects of emancipation) in a production process that is set out to transform non-media professionals not only into television participants, but also into empowered citizens. It is precisely this tension that has been brought to the fore while exploring the ideals and realities of how programme makers streamline the participation of 'ordinary' people in different stages of interventional television production.

Beginning with the respondents' characterizations of the 'ideal participant', we have seen that casters need to consider a variety of production demands: they have to identify candidates who are, on the one hand, socially engaged and eager to 'improve' themselves, and on the other hand, entertaining and articulate enough to keep the audience interested in watching them. Furthermore, productions need participants

⁸¹ Cf. Ang 1991

who are willing to share intimate and challenging aspects of their lives without being intimidated by online audience reactions, and also carry the potential of making extraordinary achievements under surveillance and within structured, disciplinary settings. We have then seen that crew members, in their effort to capture 'life changing' moments, must interact with the cast consistently and according to strategies designated by their particular roles (e.g. being 'ghosts', or touching the participant in the 'right moment'), while they also have to accept that the real impact of the interventions is, at the least, *uncertain* beyond the controlled environment of the productions. Finally, we have encountered how *scripting* the participants' actions on the ground and in the editing room must serve the creation of routinely reproducible yet subversive textual universes, where complying with formulaistic procedures implies a general promise of redemption, and in which individual participants can still recognize the 'authentic' story of their own lives.

As the interviews revealed, working on the above steps towards *predictable transformations* (probably the very cultural function of ritualized formats – if not of most human ritual activities) is not free from personal and professional compromises. While this underlines that the intentions of programme makers are more complex and complicated than provoking and selling strong performances (cf. Teurlings, 2004), it is striking how conveniently the tactics towards these ends, even if *contested* at times, are ultimately *reproduced* in practice (cf. "it is a fairly well-oiled machine"). The mechanisms that might explain how this reproduction becomes naturalized – leaving little room (or need) for agency and resistance – appear to be both discursive-projective and organizational in nature. As we have seen, when production practices become conflicted with one's personal values or professional standards, the responsibility for the outcome is often delegated either to the participants (who should have done their research beforehand), to those higher up in the production hierarchy (after all, this is their vision and their commission), and ultimately, to the above described forces of the 'new media world' (and the ways they shape the conventions of television making today). This projective mechanism appears to be further reinforced by certain aspects of the organizational logic of the productions as well: conditions such as freelancing and the taken for granted separation of roles and

work processes, irrespective of how convincingly they are supported by principles of rationality and productivity, ultimately obscure the oversight of how particular agents and routines contribute to the moral integrity – or play a role in hiding the immorality – of ‘television capitalism’ (cf. Teurlings, 2004).

This story of how moral deliberation becomes subjugated to organizational rationality and procedural action in hierarchical structures is hardly new – think, for instance, of Bauman’s seminal sociology on *Modernity and Holocaust* where this causality is meticulously described as an inherent mechanism of bureaucratic systems of modernity (1989). Yet within the context of our work, the moral implications of participating in the ritual ecology of interventional television – either as ‘contributor’, producer or public – have remained somewhat hidden between the lines. Still, if we acknowledge that ritualization is first and foremost an ordering process that necessitates the exercise of power (as we did at multiple points of the previous chapters), we also have to accept that such implications are there and need to be addressed in order to comprehend more fully what (participating in) these programmes ultimately says about our society. Therefore, it seems to be necessary to find the appropriate way to approach these questions critically and – with Turner’s words – without entering the ‘murky territory of media effects research and moralizing censorship’ (2014: 317). It is going to be the task of the General Conclusion to reflect on this issue in more detail.

7 General conclusion

There is a sense here, hard though it is both to articulate and to acknowledge, that contrary to what is often argued – that in the global reach of modern media we confront the world in its Otherness as never before, and that in that confrontation we can be seen and shown to care (the rise of the environmental movement is a case in point) – the media are in a structural sense amoral. Amoral, not immoral. The distance they create and mask as closeness, the connections that they make, while keeping us apart, their vulnerability to dissemblance (from the faking of documentary images to the disguise of identity in Internet communication) reduces [sic] the visibility, the vividness, of the Other.

Roger Silverstone (1999: 134)

This dissertation focused on television productions as participatory spaces for ordinary people. In the past decades, television has become something not only to watch but, increasingly, also to do: every day around the world, candidates in large numbers apply to be part of programmes that offer their participants self-improvement, conflict management, relationship advice, or life-changing experiences that promise to be ‘extraordinary’ in other ways. Nevertheless, such programmes are often received controversially: they are praised for their educative potential on the one hand but criticized for being fake, voyeuristic or harmful to their participants on the other. Despite these debates, research into what actually happens behind and beyond the screen is scarce and, in consequence, little is known about how and why ordinary people lend their lives to these programmes. What drives them to participate, and how do they perform in front of a crew and an imagined public? How do they relate to their mediated representations? What roles do media texts and production crews play in the process of participation? And, more generally, how do such participatory practices reinforce or challenge notions of televisual power in today’s thoroughly heterogeneous media world?

To address these questions empirically, I presented four case studies of popular interventional formats and explored, from different angles, the transformative, emancipatory and integrative promises and outcomes of these shows. By employing a combination of textual analysis and in-depth interviews, I set out to answer questions about how participants get motivated to participate and experience participation, how producers and representations construct, use and maintain this desire to participate, and what such motivations, experiences and practices tell us about the role and significance of televisual interventions in contemporary media culture.

This enquiry was unpacked in a few distinct steps. I started by analysing how representations ‘talk’ about the value of media participation; and I did this through the example of *Uit de Kast* (Chapter 3), which was followed by a close scrutiny of what participants said about their experiences within that programme (Chapter 4). The next point I dealt with how participatory experiences related to the participants’ ideas about their representations, how the two categories – experiences and ideas – shape each other, and how this relationship might explain structural differences in individual trajectories of participation. Here I focused on *The Undateables* (Chapter 5). Finally, with my last case I moved to the other side of the camera and investigated how crew members involved in the production of shows of different interventional formats think about their work and the challenges it involves (Chapter 6).

Throughout this research, the aim of my enquiry was to deliver holistic and empirically informed arguments, capable of introducing nuance into the often polarized debates on what participation in reality television ‘does’ to people; I also wanted to shift attention rather towards *what the participants do* with the possibilities of televisual visibility. Moreover, I aimed to contribute to current theoretical discussions of how the symbolic and ritual power of television is (re)made and exercised in today’s mediatized culture. As I will argue in this concluding chapter, such issues are not part of a rearguard action of lamenting the downfall of a once dominant medium. Quite the opposite: I intend to claim that the persuasiveness of television as a collective medium is invigorated through stories and practices of televisual interventions. In the final two sections that follow I review the main findings

of the studies presented in the previous chapters and attempt to conclude with some more general, cross-case reflections and possible avenues for further research.

7.1 Case-specific findings

The first study, dedicated to *Uit de Kast* (Chapter 3), investigated how coming out is construed as a profound ritual transition for the show's young gay participants. The textual analysis focused primarily on the structural characteristics of the episodes, special attention being paid to those narrative elements that reflect on, justify or problematize the fact that the performances depicted in the programme were intended for public consumption. This enquiry revealed how the ambiguous process of coming out, which, in unmediated instances, typically lacks clear cultural scripts to follow, is turned into a standard tale of secretiveness, difficulty, admission, and moving on, and how the clear boundaries between these stages are repetitively deployed in order to build a normative performance of homosexuality (see Duguay, 2017). Furthermore, these narratives of coming out appeared to cement media's broader symbolic power: even in those instances where the reaction of the protagonists' social environment is framed as incompatible with mainstream societal values, the intervention and the support provided by the programme is showcased as an efficient means of ordering the participants' lives: coming out, once mediated, becomes a relatively safe process with a predictable outcome.⁸²

My findings also indicated that the show, while officially aiming to promote acceptance of LGBT people, ultimately hinders its own emancipatory goals – and this for several reasons. First, the programme privileges a particular type of self-performance – that of easily relatable protagonists, whose revelation comes as a surprise because their behaviour does not deviate from generic heteronormative ideals of masculinity or femininity. Second, it presents coming out as a personal rather than a sociopolitical problem; and, third, by focusing on subjective experiences and on the

⁸² Reflecting on this study, Lovelock (2016) rightly points out that this ritualization of the coming out is located not only in the fact of mediation but also in how certain aesthetic tropes of reality television, such as the shaky camera effect produced by the handheld shot or sequences that look like group therapy, are used throughout the programme.

drama that results from disclosure, the programme makes room for homophobia and naturalizes its voice (see also Bannink and Wentik, 2015).

Considering this representational pattern, it is remarkable how central, if not crucial, the motif of emancipation becomes in the off-screen narratives of the participants – a topic that was further explored in Chapter 4. I have identified, namely, a common trajectory along which the motives of candidates developed during the production process: they all shifted from seeking help for themselves to attempting to help others; and eventually this change in motivation pushed the candidates towards a successful performance of their mediatized self-disclosure. Initial expectations, as we have seen, typically entailed a heavy reliance on the disciplinary power of surveillance: the presence of the camera crew would pressure both the participant to perform and the public to react appropriately to a given ‘revelation’. However, just as a strong sense of co-authorship emerged during production, so too the instrumentalist view of how to use the programme faded and made room for an altruistic view: regardless of the outcome of the personal project, public disclosure would help and inspire those who watched the show. Importantly, this was a recurring theme in the interviewees’ narrative. This sacrificial stance not only postulated that coming out was a moral obligation towards the producers and society at large, but also seemed to absolve the participant of the morally ambiguous choice of exposing to the public private family and friendship dynamics at the critical moment of self-disclosure, without having obtained real consent.

In my next study I immersed myself in the mediatized dating life of people who appeared on the show *The Undateables* and, at the end of it, I came up with three typical trajectories – submission, negotiation and contestation – as examples of reacting to the participatory promise and representational logic of the show (Chapter 5). In participants’ recollections of these trajectories, the notion of a ‘greater common good’, so central to *Uit de Kast*’s participants, loomed large here too, albeit it took a different form: the intention to challenge misconceptions about people who live with disabilities was frequently highlighted as the reason for joining the programme – next to getting a successful date out of it. However, the interviews also revealed that, for several participants, the core business of the show – coaching and documenting the

steps of finding a romantic relationship – served only as a pretext; their true desire was to gain visibility in the media. Having considered a diverse set of motivations for participation, we saw that those who indeed counted on the interventional power of the programme or wanted to go against normative or ‘viewer-friendly’ visions of how people with disabilities should date often got disappointed in the end, while those who understood and played along with the commercial logic of the show had more of a chance to negotiate their self-representation successfully. Yet, regardless of how participants aimed to capitalize on their visibility and what compromises they made, the overall trajectory led them to question the potential of this ritual format to mediate their experience and educate the public about it in ways that affected substantially how they were seen beyond and after their performance in an extraordinary media space. The *Undateables* participants ultimately read their adventure as essentially ephemeral.

As my last study showed, ephemerality, which I found in media participation and in media representation alike, is a condition that constantly defines, guides and constrains the work practices of TV producers (Chapter 6). The ‘as if’ worlds they create promise a permanent status change – to cast it in the language of Rothenbuhler’s phenomenology of the ritual communication, it is a chance to participate in ‘serious life’ – for those who are invited or inveigled to populate these alluring worlds. Yet the makers have little control over developments outside the spatiotemporal confines of their specific productions. Moreover, what happens in the production and in the editing room afterwards is primarily dictated by the pressure of keeping audience attention alive: the ways in which ‘ideal’ participants are cast, certain voices are favoured over others or, more generally, essential ingredients of social sensitivity such as subtlety and nuance are measured against the principle of accessibility are all governed by the threat, real or imagined, that the viewer can switch channels or go online at any time. This kind of substitutability of content is what ultimately expresses and reinforces the structural amorality of the media, according to Silverstone (1999: 134): “If we do not like one thing, we can turn to another. If we do not like one thing it will disappear soon anyway. Off the screens, slipping over the edge of the world, like an omelet out of its pan.”

All these cases brought to the fore one common feature: the dichotomies that predominantly structure the evaluations of interventional programmes – access versus exclusion, empowerment versus exploitation, public service versus mean commercialism – can provide only partial and limited understandings of what television participation means today. This is because, as we have seen, such dichotomies often coexist in the production process. The programmes offer opportunities for (self)-emancipation, but they do this by coupling personal narratives with normative – and, as such, not that inclusive – stories about social worth and value. Even when participants have doubts or misgivings about the soundness of their choice to give their own face to these stories (remember Theo), or when they feel humiliated by certain production practices (remember Anabelle), ultimately they play along with the production, justifying this compliance either with vague ideas about social utility or with some retrospective satisfaction about how they personally came across on the screen. Finally, production workers employ a variety of tactics designed to both fulfil the imperative of creating spectacular transformations and accommodate participants’ needs; but, as soon as these interests become difficult to meet or reconcile, they typically lose sight of where the power to bring changes to their practices is located: Is it in the hands of the participant? With those higher up in the production structure? Or maybe with the audience?

Whether or not these ambiguities and contradictions are inevitable in the cultural praxis of media production is a question that I should leave open for now. All I suggest here is that they are, to a large extent, attributable to the ritual significance of television in the contemporary media landscape and, more specifically, to the ways in which this significance is maintained by popular discourses and assumptions about the power of participation. The next section will address this issue in greater detail.

7.2 Cross-case reflections

What do these findings say about the ritual working of today’s televisual interventions and the symbolic value of participating in television in general? To begin with, while the traditional boundaries that separate the performers from their audiences seem to

be crossed more routinely and naturally than ever in today's mediatized culture, granting access and being allowed to appear on the screen remain two significant and extraordinary experiences: in fact, being chosen to participate in a programme on this medium of the few addressing the many is frequently contrasted, both by participants and by producers, with the DIY citizenship of digital platforms. By comparison with the 'connected but alone' logic that my informants collectively and unanimously attribute to online self-performances (and cf. also Turkle, 2011), being part of a television production is a tangible social encounter where one is surrounded by a team, and that team safeguards the process of transformation and self-representation. At one end, this process requires participants to let their individual selves dissolve in the liminal structure created by the production: they must leave behind their everyday mindset and routines and follow a choreography sanctified by the presence of authority figures (experts, hosts, producers), by the prospect of personal gains and improvements, and by the 'transcendent', educative–inspirational value of their transformation. At the other end, participants are expected to use actively their own real lives, in a kind of narrative arc often established by the production team and meant to spice up the crucial moments of their transformation. This personal story both authenticates the interventional mission of the programme and makes the highly formulaic and repetitious actions on which the format is based feel relatable.

This alliance between *prescriptive form* and *personal voice* appears to be an essential ingredient in the creation of commodifiable televisual interventions; yet the ultimate compatibility between the two remains an open question. And, when producers and participants navigate between the two, how much can this do justice to the pro-social claims of these shows? I aimed to signal this cluster of questions when I introduced the deliberately open term "myth of participation" at various stages of my argument, especially when probing into participatory inclusiveness and the transformational promise of interventional programmes. Can the notion designated by this term be concretized still further at this stage? Can it take an even more specific form in the conclusion of my discussion?

In my view, the myth of participation is best described as a set of intertwining assumptions, generated by a variety of actors across the social space of media and

anchored in the notion of the social centrality of the media in ways that effectively sustain the symbolic significance of traditional media in today's heterogeneous media world. If the Couldrian term 'myth of the mediated centre' relates to the idea that the media point out to us what *the core norms and values* of society are, the myth of participation upholds and authenticates these norms and values by showing that ordinary people actually desire to internalize them as they undergo mediatized ritual transformations. The producers' visions of the nature of these transformations require first and foremost compliance from the participants; and, as my findings suggest, such compliance derives to a large extent from another layer of the myth, namely the assumption that media participation empowers individuals and entitles them to act as *agents of social change*. In turn, this assumption conveys an interesting mixture of collectivism and individualism: while they are in the production, participants often conceive of themselves, their circumstances and their stories as unique and special. This is partly because they are, by default, beneficiaries of a 'rite of institution' that singled them out as participants, and partly because the attention they receive as protagonists reinforces the indispensable role they play in the production process and in the articulation of those collective values the programmes allegedly stand for.

Different kinds and ideas of participation are identifiable here: participation as a means of *integration* into a particular social order; participation as a means of advocating *social change*; and participation as a means of giving voice to *difference*. But one can see how easily these kinds, and the assumptions made about them, would come into conflict in situations where the equation between emancipation and assimilation – probably the ultimate myth on which televisual interventions are based – is in jeopardy. Both the *Uit de Kast* study and the *Undateables* study offered evidence that, when the modes of giving account of oneself deviate from the norm, difference comes to be penalized; thus 'misbehaving' parents of gay protagonists and introvert, cynical or unsuccessful daters soon disappear from the screen. In this sense, as long as integration is at stake, the rituals staged in the programmes might reinforce, both in participants and in those rooting for them, the sense of a Turnerian becoming, however ephemeral this experience may be. Yet in the end the creative energy and the subversive characteristics that Turner attributes to ritual processes and that the

programmes themselves often claim, in words of their own, can always be called into question; in this respect, televisual interventions are better regarded as building blocks of the ceremonial edifice of contemporary media culture. They are spaces that garner social consensus and reinforce the status quo.

The large topics that this dissertation project ultimately arrived at – possibilities and limitations of integration, voice, emancipation and social change, achieved through rites of (media) participation and within their space – are relevant far beyond the context of interventional television, of course, and can be followed along a variety of lines. If we posit that emancipation is historically and culturally situated, the matter of how, in different media systems, various representational traditions define and treat emancipation – what counts as a desirable subject and why the process matters – seems to be particularly worthy of further investigation. Another task that this investigation opens for the future is to ask how the voices of media participants are heard and listened to, not by gatekeepers and production teams, but by those audiences whose desires, interests and ways of engagement appear to be increasingly difficult for production crews to grasp, within our digital lifeworld and amid algorithmic, data-driven programming principles – as was suggested in Chapter 6. And, finally, a third avenue for fruitful research that I wish to list here is that of disruptive contexts of (organized) media participation and disruptive participatory practices. Disruption is interesting because it has the potential to disclose dynamics and possibilities of media power, be they coercive or subversive, that typically remain hidden in contexts where participation is directed towards integrative ends.

In such enquires and beyond them, the ritual-based approach to media participation employed in this dissertation appears to serve as a productive multi-actor and multilevel framework. Using it in this capacity, I looked simultaneously at the process that structures status change for individuals or group(s) of participants, at the ways in which narratives about this status change consecrate difference in other social realms or among other social actors, and at how the mediatized domain of participation generates the power that ultimately sets all these processes off. This combination of analytical perspectives from rites of passage, rites of institution and media ritual helped me to highlight the intricate modalities in which the symbolic

significance of mediatized interactions is institutionally defined and personally experienced; and, what is more, it gave me insights into how the participants I studied in this research understood themselves as individuals and as social subjects in today's mediatized world and acted in conformity with this understanding. If we keep listening, collecting, and retelling these stories, they may come to shape the format that future producers will give these participatory spaces and the narrative styles that future participants will invent for these stories of participation.

On a Sunday evening in June 2020 (around the time of writing this chapter), I am randomly switching TV channels, not knowing that for the next hour I will be glued to a broadcast on TLC (The Learning Channel). Somewhere between *Extreme Makeover* and *Little People, Big World*, Oprah is leading a talk show under the headline *Where Do We Go from Here?*. What would have felt odd and confusing a few months ago now feels fairly natural: the screen is split, and the guests are interacting via Zoom. We are amid COVID-19, isolated in our homes, and, as part of the new normal, social distancing has become a practice in television production, too.

Alone but connected, the guests – black activists, artists and academics – are discussing the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd and systematic racism in the United States. They share visions of a new social contract, as well as personal experiences that not only attempt to explain white privilege but also problematize colour blindness and the sedation of the Black Lives Matter agenda with seemingly enlightened yet basically ignorant populist reactions under the slogan 'all lives matter'.

To me, this media event, albeit volatile as a result of the incidental convergence of the conditions that occasioned it, makes palpable an alternative image of the subversive potential of television: a world where accessible storytelling aims to challenge rather than to satisfy us at some superficial, skin-deep level; a world where the voice of those whose vocation is to formulate such stories isn't discredited under the banner of 'anti-elitism'; and, most importantly, a world where the idea that the moral responsibility to care should not be defined by social proximity is natural – in

inverse proportion with the mediatized transformations that ordinary people undergo today in order to earn the favour of being cared about. No doubt making such a media world real would take a new social contract, and this in turn would require collective action from people such as media producers and academics, whose individual agency is routinely bonded by the institutional structures in which they operate. Until that happens, we can still enquire into the viability of subversive premises when they come to the surface – in various cultures of media production and reception, but also in other domains of social life.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Interview Guides

Topic list: *Uit de Kast* participants

General	<p>Media participation before? Ever thought of participating in television?</p> <p>How did you hear about the programme?</p> <p>Was this your very first coming out? If not: compare (also with later instances of coming out)</p>
Before participation	<p>Application to the programme - when, how and why did you decide to participate? Why then?</p> <p>Role of previous episodes</p> <p>Did you discuss with anyone your plan? Doubts?</p> <p>Feelings when accepted to be part of the programme?</p> <p>Preparation for the coming out and for participating in the programme</p>
In the production	<p>How did the shooting look like? What were your expectations about the shooting and what was different?</p> <p>Coping with camera presence</p> <p>Instructions/advice given, anything that wasn't accepted? Anything you would have done differently?</p> <p>Reaction of friends / family on your participation before, during and after</p>
Afterlife	<p>Watching the episode for the first time</p> <p>Comparing the episodes: differences, similarities?</p> <p>How did the programme change your life? What was expected or not expected? Would you do anything differently?</p> <p>Would you do it again?</p>

Topic list: *The Undateables* participants

Before participation	<p>How did you get into contact with the show?</p> <p>Online dating, dating agency before? What were your experiences?</p> <p>Why this point of time? What was the trigger?</p> <p>What did you think were the benefits of participating?</p> <p>Any dilemmas about joining the show?</p>
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	<p>Is everyone suitable to participate?</p> <p>Why were you suitable/selected? What do you think is important in your life to show?</p>
In the production	<p>Can you describe your participation step by step?</p> <p>How was your date picked?</p> <p>How did you prepare for the dating?</p> <p>How did the actual date look like?</p> <p>Most interesting or challenging aspects of the shooting process?</p> <p>What have you learned about television making?</p> <p>What have you learned about dating?</p>
Afterlife	<p>Happy with the episode?</p> <p>Life before and after participation</p> <p>Comments on the critiques of the show</p>

Topic list: production study

Warm-up	<p>How did you end up in television production?</p> <p>Current position? Career goals? Why?</p> <p>Favorite, most rewarding production ever worked?</p>
Working with 'ordinary' people	<p>Why do they participate?</p> <p>How can the camera act as a catalyst?</p> <p>The 'ideal' contributor</p> <p>How can you make sure the participant cooperates during the entire process?</p> <p>Dealing with difficult / disappointed participants</p> <p>Times when your role in the production got into conflict with personal ideals?</p>
TV participation today	<p>How did television change due to new media?</p> <p>How do new media change the themes, the subjects or the formats, or the messages? Or the participant's motivations?</p> <p>What role such programmes play today? What makes them special in the media landscape?</p> <p>Why are these programmes still around / more popular than ever (?)</p> <p>What does the audience want?</p>
Closing	<p>Why is it so difficult for getting insights into what is going on behind the scenes? For public / or for academics?</p> <p>If you had the chance to work on any current or past production, which one would that be?</p>

Appendix 2 – Overview of Respondents

Case studies on participants (Chapter 4 & 5)*	
<i>Uit de Kast</i>	<i>The Undateables</i>
'Bram' (male, Dutch participant)	'Andrew' (male, UK participant)
'Jesse' (male, Flemish participant)	'Annabel' (female, Dutch participant)
'Levi' (male, Flemish participant)	'Bart' (male, Dutch participant)
'Ricardo' (male, Flemish participant)	'Cathy' (female, UK participant)
'Ruben' (male, Dutch participant)	'Jasper' (male, Dutch participant)
'Sophie' (female, Dutch participant)	'Martijn' (male, Dutch participant)
'Tess' (female, Dutch participant)	'Matt' (male, UK participant)
Theo (male, Dutch participant)	'Sarah' (female, UK participant)
'Tim' (male, Dutch participant)	'Producer' (female, UK production)
'Thijs' (male, Dutch participant)	'Producer' (male, UK production)
	'Wendy' (female, UK participant)

* To fully protect the anonymity of the participants, more specific demographic details are omitted in this overview (see more on this in the Methods chapter)

Production study (Chapter 6)		
<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Production role (indicative) **</i>	<i>Programme (indicative) **</i>
Stanley	casting assistant, casting associate, content producer	<i>The Biggest Loser, Best Ink, Big Brother</i>
Juliet	executive / series producer	<i>Hoarders</i>
Sarah	field producer	<i>It Takes a Church, Extreme Makeover</i>
Jim	writer, editor, producer	<i>First Dates, Border Security, Million Dollar Neighborhood</i>

Wim	camera operator, director	<i>The Biggest Loser, Beauty and the Geek, The Real Housewives, Amazing Race, America`s Next Top Model</i>
Christine	casting director, casting associate	<i>Extreme Wight Loss, Amazing Race, Survivor, Masterchef, My Teen is Pregnant and So Am I</i>
Richard	director of photography	<i>Hoarders, Sell This House</i>
Chris	camera operator	<i>Teen Mom, Real Housewives, 90 Day Fiancé</i>
Susanne	executive / series producer, director	<i>High School Moms, Hospital, 24 Hours in A&E</i>
Robin	director	<i>Triplets</i>
Jodie	producer / director	<i>Hoarders, First Date, Airport, Employable Me</i>
Cynthia	Researcher	<i>Obsessive Compulsive Cleaners</i>
Francis	camera operator, director	<i>The Undateables, Famous, Rich and Homeless</i>
Bianca	production assistant	<i>The Undateables</i>
Angelica	director / producer	<i>Uit de Kast, Family Island</i>

** As described in the corresponding chapter, production roles often vary, and the portfolio of the respondents is often more extensive than the productions listed here

Summary

This dissertation focuses on television productions as participatory spaces for ordinary people. In the past decades, television has become something not only to watch but, increasingly, also to do: every day around the world, candidates in large numbers apply to be part of programmes that offer their participants self-improvement, conflict management, relationship advice, or life-changing experiences that promise to be ‘extraordinary’ in other ways. Nevertheless, such programmes are often received controversially: they are praised for their educative potential on the one hand but criticized for being fake, voyeuristic or harmful to their participants on the other. Despite these debates, research into what actually happens behind and beyond the screen is scarce and, in consequence, little is known about how and why ordinary people lend their lives to these programmes. What drives them to participate, and how do they perform in front of a crew and an imagined public? How do they relate to their mediated representations? What roles do media texts and production crews play in the process of participation? And, more generally, how do such participatory practices reinforce or challenge notions of televisual power in today’s thoroughly heterogenous media world?

To address these questions empirically, this dissertation employs a multi-actor case study design and an ethnographic-interpretative approach. Based on the combination of textual analysis and in-depth interviews with television producers and participants, I am looking at a prominent type of contemporary programming, which I describe as *interventional television*. It consists of programmes that centre on improving the participants’ (or candidates’) social life by addressing the ‘root cause’ of their problems (e.g. hoarding, difficulties with losing weight, finding a partner, or living with the burden of a secret) and document these people’s progression as they overcome their struggle, moving from a time ‘before’ to a time ‘after’. I start with the Dutch coming-out reality show *Uit de Kast* (2010–14), then turn to UK Channel 4’s disability dating show *The Undateables* (2012–), and finally deal with a variety of formats to explore TV participation as it is motivated and experienced by *participants*, streamlined by *production workers* and represented by *media texts*. In so doing my

aim is to deliver holistic and empirically informed arguments, capable of introducing nuance into the often polarized debates on what participation in reality television 'does' to people; I also want to shift attention rather towards *what the participants do* with the possibilities of televisual visibility. Moreover, I aim to contribute to current theoretical discussions of how the symbolic power of television is (re)made and exercised in today's mediatized culture.

The entry point for analyzing TV participation in this dissertation is the notion of *ritual*, informed by various conceptualizations from the field of anthropology, communication science and media studies. More in particular, I am combining the Turnerian notion of *rites of passage*, Bourdieou's understanding of rituals as *rites of institution* and Nick Couldry's concept of *media ritual* to theorize how TV programmes absorb or 'incorporate' participants into particular forms of hegemony and to understand the source and nature of the authority that enables this process. In the end, this framework will show how interventional television simultaneously reinforces a sense of integration and creates hidden exclusions, separating between those who can and those who cannot be part of this ritual. Further, it will show how perceptions and claims that the media constitute a prestigious, extraordinary world (naturalized both textually and through actions embedded in production processes) sustain such exclusions and push individual participants towards a desired social order. Different aspects of this somewhat complicated and circular process that underlies the work of what I call the *rite of media participation* are picked up by the empirical chapters.

First, I am looking into the ways in which the premise of participating in the media world and of adhering to its rules and norms gets juxtaposed with the promise of successful transformations. This is done in Chapter 3 by analyzing the representation of coming out in the Dutch television programme *Uit de Kast*, investigating how the self-disclosure is constructed as a profound ritual transition for the show's young, gay participants. This enquiry reveals how the ambiguous process of coming out, which, in unmediated instances, typically lacks clear cultural scripts to follow, is turned into a standard tale of secretiveness, difficulty, admission, and moving on, and how the clear boundaries between these stages are repetitively

deployed in order to build a normative performance of homosexuality. Furthermore, these narratives of coming out appear to cement media's broader symbolic power: even in those instances where the reaction of the protagonists' social environment is framed as incompatible with mainstream societal values, the intervention and the support provided by the programme is showcased as an efficient means of ordering the participants' lives: coming out, once mediated, becomes a relatively safe process with a predictable outcome.

Chapter 4 continues to explore the connections between coming out as a mediatized practice and the popularity of televisual interventions by analyzing how the above-mentioned assumption is internalized, acted upon and enacted by *Uit de Kast* participants. This interview study identifies a common trajectory along which the motives of candidates developed during the production process: they all shift from seeking help for themselves to attempting to help others; and eventually this change in motivation push the candidates towards a successful performance of their mediatized self-disclosure. Initial expectations typically entailed a heavy reliance on the disciplinary power of surveillance: the presence of the camera crew would pressure both the participant to perform and the public to react appropriately to a given 'revelation'. However, just as a strong sense of co-authorship emerges during production, so too the instrumentalist view of how to use the programme fades and makes room for an altruistic view: regardless of the outcome of the personal project, public disclosure would help and inspire those who watched the show. This sacrificial stance not only postulates that coming out is a moral obligation towards the producers and society at large, but also seems to absolve the participant of the morally ambiguous choice of exposing to the public private family and friendship dynamics at the critical moment of self-disclosure, without having obtained real consent.

If my first study probed into the implications of media participation for the process of coming out, the second aimed at questioning the role of televisual interventions in mitigating something that is less straightforward than a speech act. The interview study of *The Undateables* (Chapter 5) sets out to explore the power of media in creating romantic relationships against the headwind of social prejudice. Here I present three trajectories – submission, negotiation and contestation – as

examples of reacting to the participatory promise and representational logic of the show. In participants' recollections of these trajectories, the notion of a 'greater common good', so central to *Uit de Kast*'s participants, looms large too, albeit it takes a different form: the intention to challenge misconceptions about people who live with disabilities is frequently highlighted as the reason for joining the programme – next to getting a successful date out of it. However, the interviews also reveal that, for several participants, the core business of the show – coaching and documenting the steps of finding a romantic relationship – serves only as a pretext; their true desire is to gain visibility in the media. Considering a diverse set of motivations for participation in this chapter, we see that those who indeed count on the interventional power of the programme or want to go against normative or 'viewer-friendly' visions of how people with disabilities should date often get disappointed in the end, while those who understand and play along with the commercial logic of the show have more of a chance to negotiate their self-representation successfully.

Following from the complex and often ambivalent dynamics of participant-producer interactions revealed in the previous two cases, the final empirical chapter examines the common steps taken by programme makers in the production process and explores how ordinary people are turned into subjects of emancipation and spectacular transformations. What kind of ideals, tactics and constraints characterize this process? On the basis of in-depth interviews with below-the-line and above-the-line crew members of a variety of popular shows, for instance *The Biggest Loser*, *Extreme Makeover*, *Hoarders*, *First Dates*, and *Obsessive Compulsive Cleaners*, this study discusses a set of paradoxes that underlies the fact that makers have little control over developments outside the spatiotemporal confines of their specific productions. Moreover, what happens in the production and in the editing room afterwards is primarily dictated by the pressure of keeping audience attention alive: the ways in which 'ideal' participants are cast, certain voices are favoured over others or, more generally, essential ingredients of social sensitivity such as subtlety and nuance are measured against the principle of accessibility are all governed by the threat, real or imagined, that the viewer can switch channels or go online at any time. By analysing the narratives of production members, I ultimately address the topic of how particular

discursive and organizational mechanisms support or hinder morally viable compromises in situations where personal or professional standpoints and the imperative of 'selling strong performances' come into conflict.

As I highlight in the General Conclusion, all these cases bring to the fore one common feature: the dichotomies that predominantly structure the evaluations of interventional programmes – access versus exclusion, empowerment versus exploitation, public service versus mean commercialism – can provide only partial and limited understandings of what television participation means today. This is because such dichotomies often coexist in the production process. At the same time, my findings also suggest that granting access and being allowed to appear on the screen remain two significant and extraordinary experiences, even if the traditional boundaries that separate the performers from their audiences seem to be crossed more routinely and naturally than ever in today's mediatised culture. This significance of television participation is largely generated by what I describe in the dissertation as the *myth of participation*: a set of intertwining assumptions, generated by a variety of actors across the social space and anchored in the notion of the social centrality of the media – the Couldrian 'myth of the mediated centre'. This myth, I suggest, relies on an interesting mixture of collectivism and individualism, forcing both producers and participants to navigate between prescriptive form and personal voice: it implies that ordinary people actually desire to internalize the norms and values presented in the media while also reinforces the idea that individuals singled out to participate can act as affective agents of social change – precisely because their circumstances and stories are unique and special.

Different kinds and ideas of participation are identifiable here: participation as a means of *integration* into a particular social order; participation as a means of advocating *social change*; and participation as a means of giving voice to *difference*. But one can see how easily these kinds, and the assumptions made about them, would come into conflict in situations where the equation between emancipation and assimilation – probably the ultimate myth on which televisual interventions are based – is in jeopardy. Both the *Uit de Kast* study and the *Undateables* study offered evidence that, when the modes of giving account of oneself deviate from the norm, difference

comes to be penalized; thus 'misbehaving' parents of gay protagonists and introvert, cynical or unsuccessful daters soon disappear from the screen. In this sense, as long as integration is at stake, the rituals staged in the programmes might reinforce, both in participants and in those rooting for them, the sense of a Turnerian becoming, however ephemeral this experience may be. Yet in the end the creative energy and the subversive characteristics that Turner attributes to ritual processes and that the programmes themselves often claim, in words of their own, can be called into question; in this respect, televisual interventions are better regarded as building blocks of the ceremonial edifice of contemporary media culture: spaces that garner social consensus and safeguard status quo.

Samenvatting

Deze dissertatie richt zich op televisieproducties waarin ‘gewone’ mensen figureren. De afgelopen decennia heeft televisie zich ontwikkeld van iets waar men naar *kijkt*, tot iets wat men *doet*: dagelijks nemen mensen van over de gehele wereld in groten getale deel aan programma’s die een bijzondere ervaring beloven, zij het in de vorm van persoonlijke ontwikkeling, conflictmanagement of relatieadvies. Zulke programma’s zijn doorgaans controversieel: enerzijds worden zij geprezen om hun educatief potentieel, anderzijds worden zij bekritiseerd als nep, voyeuristisch of zelfs schadelijk voor hun deelnemers. Ondanks deze uitgesproken standpunten is empirisch onderzoek naar wat er werkelijk achter de schermen gebeurt schaars, waardoor er weinig bekend is over hoe en waarom ‘gewone’ mensen zichzelf opgeven voor deze programma’s. Wat drijft mensen om te participeren in zulke tv-programma’s en hoe verhouden zij zich tot de televisiecrew en het (denkbeeldige) publiek? En meer in het algemeen, wat kunnen deze productiepraktijken ons leren over de rol en betekenis van televisie in de hedendaagse mediawereld?

Om deze vragen te beantwoorden, is een uitvoerig etnografisch onderzoek uitgevoerd onder tientallen televisieproducenten en deelnemers in diverse landen in Europa. Ik heb specifiek gekeken naar een prominent en hedendaags type programma dat ik definieer als “interventionele televisie”: tv-programma’s die draaien om de verbetering van het leven van de kandidaat door het vinden en verhelpen van een probleem (zoals obsessief compulsief gedrag; problemen met afvallen; het vinden van een partner) en het vastleggen van de vooruitgang die de deelnemer maakt in het overwinnen van zijn of haar problemen, van “voor” tot “na”. Het empirisch onderzoek richtte zich op de Nederlandse comingout-realityshow *Uit de Kast* (2010-2014), vervolgens op de Engelse datingshow voor mensen met een beperking *The Undateables* (2012-) en uiteindelijk op een combinatie van verschillende formats waarin de ‘transformatie’ van deelnemers centraal staat. Hierbij werden steeds drie dimensies onderzocht: 1) de *motivatie* en *ervaring* van de deelnemers, 2) de wijze waarop productiewerkers een bepaalde ervaring *ensceneren* en 3) de uiteindelijke *representatie* van deze ervaringen in de media. Dit vergelijkend-empirisch onderzoek

maakte het mogelijk om een tot een meer genuanceerd beeld te komen van de rol en betekenis van “interventionele televisie”.

Het theoretisch raamwerk van deze dissertatie leunt sterk op het begrip ‘ritueel’, zoals dat gehanteerd wordt binnen de antropologie, communicatiewetenschappen en mediastudies. Ik combineer daarbij in het bijzonder Turners idee van de *rite de passage*, Bourdieu’s begrip van rituelen als *rites van institutie*, en Couldry’s concept van *media ritueel* om te theoretiseren hoe televisieprogramma’s deelnemers integreren in bepaalde vormen van sociale hegemonie en om de bron en aard van de symbolische autoriteit van de media te begrijpen die deze integratie uiteindelijk mogelijk maakt. Interventionele televisie proclameert het idee van integratie, maar creëert tegelijkertijd bepaalde nieuwe uitsluitingen, alleen al door bepaalde deelnemers wél en andere niet toe te laten tot dit ritueel. De televisie wordt hierbij neergezet als een “mediator”: zij helpt de participanten in hun transformatie naar een beter leven. Maar het feit dat de televisie de macht heeft om deze transformatie te verwezenlijken draagt uiteindelijk ook bij aan de symbolische autoriteit van televisie als medium.

Na de uiteenzetting van het theoretisch raamwerk volgen vier empirische hoofdstukken. Hoofdstuk 3 richt zich op het Nederlandse televisieprogramma *Uit de Kast*. Onderzocht wordt hoe in dit programma de “zelfonthulling” van jonge, homoseksuele deelnemers aan de show wordt gerepresenteerd. Dit onderzoek laat zien hoe het ambigue proces van uit de kast komen, dat in niet-gemedieerde gevallen doorgaans geen duidelijk script heeft om te volgen, wordt omgezet in een standaardverhaal over geheimzinnigheid, openbaring en acceptatie, en hoe de grenzen tussen deze fasen worden ingezet om een normatieve opvatting over “de goede homo” neer te zetten. Het uit de kast komen wordt niet alleen gepresenteerd als een relatief veilig proces met een voorspelbare uitkomst, maar ook als normatief beter dan “in de kast blijven”.

Hoofdstuk 4 zoomt nader in op het perspectief van de deelnemers. Onderzocht wordt hoe het bovengenoemde standaardverhaal wordt geïnternaliseerd, opgevolgd en uitgevoerd door deelnemers van *Uit de Kast*. Uit interviews met diverse deelnemers blijkt dat er een min of meer standaardtraject is dat elke deelnemer doorloopt.

Aanvankelijk melden deelnemers zich bij het programma om diverse redenen, variërend van de wens om op televisie te komen tot het daadwerkelijk hulp vragen bij het “uit de kast komen”. Op het moment dat de camera’s beginnen te draaien (en het ritueel van start gaat) ontstaat er een sterke afhankelijkheid. De aanwezigheid van een cameracrew oefent volgens deelnemers een zekere disciplinaire macht uit. Zelfs al worden er geen instructies gegeven, dan nog ervaren deelnemers de druk om een bepaalde show neer te zetten en de “openbaring” als homoseksueel op een bepaalde manier vorm te geven. Tegelijkertijd oefent de camera ook druk uit op overige aanwezigen: de familie of vrienden die aanwezig zijn bij het “uit de kast komen” gedragen zich stevast volgens het script en accepteren de homoseksualiteit van de hoofdpersoon volgens het boekje. Deelnemers zijn zich bewust van de dwingende macht die uitgaat van de aanwezige camera’s en gebruiken deze ook instrumenteel als middel om hun familie en vrienden mee te laten bewegen. Maar deze instrumentele benadering wordt door veel deelnemers uiteindelijk ingeruild voor een meer altruïstische benadering, waarbij hun publieke bekendmaking mogelijk ook homoseksuele kijkers zou kunnen helpen en inspireren om ook uit de kast te komen. Deze “zelfopoffering” veronderstelt niet alleen dat uit de kast komen een morele verplichting is jegens zowel de tv-producenten als de samenleving, maar spreekt de deelnemer ook vrij van de moreel dubbelzinnige keuze om de privé-dynamiek tussen familie en vrienden bloot te leggen op het kritieke moment van zelfonthulling.

Hoofdstuk 5 richt zich op *The Undateables*, een dating show waarin mensen met een beperking worden gestimuleerd om voor het oog van de camera romantische relaties te ontwikkelen. Voor dit onderzoek heb ik tientallen voormalige deelnemers geïnterviewd met de vraag hoe zij zelf terugkijken op hun deelname en in hoeverre zij zich kunnen vinden in de boodschap van het programma. Uit deze interviews blijkt dat de houding van de deelnemers op drie manieren getypeerd kan worden: 1) onderwerping aan het format, 2) onderhandeling met de tv-producenten en 3) een uitgesproken kritische houding, waarbij de deelname als zeer negatief wordt beoordeeld. Het emancipatoire ideaal dat bij het programma *Uit de Kast*- zo duidelijk aanwezig was, ziet men ook terug bij de deelnemers aan van *The Undateables*: zij willen vooroordelen over mensen die leven met een beperking wegnemen en laten

zien dat mensen met een beperking ook romantische gevoelens hebben en relaties kunnen ontwikkelen. De interviews tonen echter ook dat voor sommige deelnemers de kernzaak van het programma – namelijk het coachen en documenteren van de stappen die nodig zijn om een romantische relatie te vinden en onderhouden – slechts als bijzaak dient; voor hen gaat het vooral om op televisie te komen en aldus een zekere bekendheid te verwerven. Bovendien toont deze studie ook dat degenen die inderdaad vertrouwen op de interventionele macht van het programma of ingaan tegen de normatieve en “kijkersvriendelijke” boodschap vaak teleurgesteld raken, terwijl degenen die de commerciële logica van het programma begrijpen en onderhandelen met het productieteam juist uitgesproken positief terugkijken op hun deelname.

Terwijl de vorige hoofdstukken zich richten op deelnemers, wordt in hoofdstuk 6 de aandacht verschoven naar de programmamakers. Op basis van interviews met crewleden van verschillende programma's (waaronder *The Biggest Loser*, *Extreme Makeover*, *Hoarders*, *First Dates*, *Obsessive Compulsive Cleaners*), onderzoek ik wat voor soort idealen, tactieken en beperkingen karakteristiek zijn voor het productieproces van deze programma's. Uit de interviews blijkt ten eerste dat de programmamakers ervaren weinig controle te hebben over hun producties. In de meeste gevallen ligt er reeds een bepaald format klaar dat nadrukkelijke regels heeft over de vormgeving en opzet van het programma. Wat er in de productie- en montagekamer gebeurt, wordt merendeels voorgeschreven door de druk om de aandacht van het publiek te behouden. Veel keuzes in de vormgeving van het programma en de wijze waarop wordt omgegaan met de deelnemers wordt overheerst door de reële of denkbeeldige angst dat de kijker op elk moment van kanaal kan wisselen of online kan gaan. Door de verhalen van productieleden te analyseren, behandel ik uiteindelijk de vraag hoe bepaalde discursieve en organisatorische mechanismes steun of juist belemmering bieden voor het behalen van een balans tussen enerzijds persoonlijke of professionele standpunten en anderzijds de noodzaak om "goede tv" te produceren.

In de Conclusie breng ik de resultaten uit de verschillende casestudies samen, om tot een generieker beeld te komen van de rol en betekenis van “interventionele

televisie”. Zoals in de inleiding werd besproken, zijn de meningen over deze vorm van televisie vaak sterk verdeeld. Journalisten en wetenschappers spreken over toegang *versus* uitsluiting, empowerment *versus* uitbuiting, publieke dienst *versus* commerciële pulp – Wat mijn onderzoek aantoont, is dat deze extreme stellingnames slechts een beperkte uitleg kunnen geven van wat er werkelijk gebeurt op de productievloer. Door goed te luisteren naar zowel deelnemers als productiemedewerkers is duidelijk geworden dat beide groepen in de praktijk constant bepaalde afwegingen moeten maken en dat hun handelingen voor een groot deel voorgeschreven zijn, maar dat dit een bepaalde vorm van ‘agency’ ook niet uitsluit. Tegelijkertijd toont mijn onderzoek aan dat het de mogelijkheid om op televisie te komen op veel mensen nog steeds een bijna magische aantrekkingskracht uitoefent. Ook in een tijdperk waarin mensen door sociale en nieuwe media bijna constant ‘online’ zijn, wordt het op televisie verschijnen als een totaal andere en meer bijzondere categorie beschouwd. Ik spreek in dat verband over *mythe van participatie*: het idee dat de media het mogelijk maken om deel te nemen aan een samenleving. Deze mythe berust op een interessante combinatie van collectivisme en individualisme, waarbij het individu gedwongen wordt om te navigeren tussen enerzijds de voorgeschreven vorm en anderzijds de verwachting om een persoonlijke, “unieke” stem te laten horen. In het geval van “interventionele televisie” versterkt deze mythe het idee dat de individuen die verkozen zijn om het spektakel van transformatie te ondergaan, uiteindelijk een belangrijke rol spelen bij sociale veranderingen.

In de praktijk is deze participatie aan duidelijke regels gebonden en overheerst het ‘collectivisme’. Zowel de casus van *Uit de Kast* als van *The Undateables* toont aan dat deelnemers (en hun familie en vriendenkring die ook op televisie verschijnen) een zekere speelruimte hebben, maar wanneer hun optreden te ver afwijkt van de norm, dan wordt hun overschrijding genadeloos afgestraft: ouders van homoseksuele deelnemers die de verkeerde reactie tonen worden neergezet als homofob. Introverte ‘daters’ die weigeren om “mee te doen” en die hun eigen stem laten horen verdwijnen snel van het scherm. De creatieve energie en subversieve kenmerken die Turner toeschrijft aan rituele processen kunnen in het geval van mediarietuelen in twijfel worden getrokken. De televisieinterventies die ik heb onderzocht en beschreven in

mijn proefschrift laten zich misschien nog het beste karakteriseren als een ceremonieel platform in het centrum van de hedendaagse mediacultuur – een ode aan de “mythe van participatie”: kijk, klik en doe mee!

Portfolio

Publications related to the PhD project

This dissertation

- 2019 Boross, B. & Reijnders, S.L. (2018). Dating the Media: Participation, Voice, and Ritual Logic in the Disability Dating Show The Undateables. *Television & New Media*, 20(7): 720-738.
- 2017 Boross, B. & Reijnders, S.L. (2017). 'These cameras are here for a reason'-media coming out, symbolic power and the value of 'participation'. Behind the scenes of the Dutch reality programme *Uit de Kast*. *Media Culture & Society*, 39(2): 185-201.
- 2015 Boross, B. & Reijnders, S.L. (2015). Coming out with the media: the ritualization of self-disclosure in the Dutch television program *Uit de Kast*. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 18(03): 245-264.

Other peer reviewed publications

- 2019 Schiavone, R., Reijnders, S. & Boross, B. (2019) Losing an imagined friend: Deriving meaning from fictional death in popular culture. *Participations: International Journal of Audience Research*, Vol. 16(2).
- 2014 Reijnders, S., Spijkers, M., Roeland, J. & Boross, B. (2014). Close encounters: ritualizing proximity in the Age of Celebrity. An ethnographic analysis of meet-and-greets with Dutch singer Marco Borsato. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 17(2): 149-169.

Awards and Grants

- 2017 ESHCC Research Incentive Grant for grant project development
- 2017 Conference Travel Grant, awarded by the Dan Department of Communication, Tel Aviv University, Israel
- 2016 DAME: Dean's Award for Interdisciplinary Excellence, Erasmus University Rotterdam
- 2016 Finalist for Graduate School Award for PhD Excellence, Erasmus University Rotterdam

- 2014 Best Paper Award: Media and the Margins, Annual conference of the Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association (MeCCSA), Bournemouth University, United Kingdom
- 2012 5-year individual research grant '*PhD in the Humanities*', Dutch Science Foundation (NWO)

Invited talks

- 2015 *Ritual theory in media research: perspectives and methodological challenges*. 25th Anniversary Conference, Department of Cultural Anthropology, ELTE University: Budapest, Hungary, 27 November
- 2015 *Media coming out, symbolic power and the value of 'participation'*. Centre for Television in Transition, Utrecht University, the Netherlands, 2 March

Conference presentations

- 2017 *Prosocial television and the myth of participation*. The future of old media conference, Tel Aviv University, Israel, 19-20 April
- 2016 *Television culture and the myth of participation: re-making media rituals*. European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) biennial conference, panel Media Anthropology's Legacies and Concerns, Milan, 20-23 July
- 2015 *'These cameras are here for a reason': media coming out, symbolic power and the value of participation. Behind the scenes of the Dutch television programme Uit de Kast*, International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), Popular Culture working group, section 'Screened Imaginaries', Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada
- 2015 *Media coming out, symbolic power and the value of 'participation'. Behind the scenes of the Dutch reality programme Uit de Kast*, IHECS Youth, media and diversities conference, 2 April, session 'Diversity, between visibility and invisibility', Brussels, Belgium
- 2015 *A media ritual in the making: behind the scenes of the coming out reality programme Uit de Kast*, Etmaal, 2 February, 'Television Productions session', University of Antwerp, Belgium
- 2014 *Coming out with the media: the ritualization of self-disclosure in the Dutch television programme Uit de Kast*, Etmaal van de Communicatiewetenschap on 3 February in Wageningen, the Netherlands
- 2014 *Coming out with the media: the ritualization of self-disclosure in the Dutch television programme Uit de Kast*, Annual conference of the Media,

Communication and Cultural Studies Association, 8-10 January,
Bournemouth University, UK

2013 *Media rituals: Mediated coming out*, Conference 'Locating imagination:
Media, tourism, rituals', Rotterdam, 17-18 October

Academic service and membership

2016 - 2017 *Chair*, ERMeCC PhD Club

2015 - 2017 *PhD Board Member*, Erasmus Research Centre for Media, Communication
and Culture (ERMeCC), Erasmus University Rotterdam

2015 - 2016 *Vice-Chair*, ERMeCC PhD Club

2014 - 2017 Member of Program Committee Arts and Culture Studies, Erasmus University
Rotterdam

2014 - 2020 *PhD Representative*, Steering Committee of Popular Communication Division,
Netherlands – Flanders Communication Association (NeFCA)

2013 Conference Organizing Committee, Locating Imagination: Media, Tourism,
Rituals, Rotterdam

2012 - PhD member of Netherlands School of Communication Research (NEScOR),
Research School for Media Studies (RMeS) and Erasmus Graduate School of
the Humanities, Social and Behavioral Sciences

*Reviewer for European Journal of Cultural Studies, Media Culture & Society,
Journal of Homosexuality, annual Etmaal – 24 Hours of Communication
Science conference*

Courses taught

2019 - Media Aesthetics (BA-1 course Bachelor Media and Culture, University of
Amsterdam)

Analysing Digital Culture (BA-1 course Bachelor Media and Information,
University of Amsterdam)

Advanced Topics: Television Audiences (BA-2 course Bachelor Media and
Culture, University of Amsterdam)

Case Studies Television and Cross-Media (MA course Master's in Television
and Cross-Media Culture, University of Amsterdam)

Philosophy for the Humanities (BA-2 course Bachelor Media and Culture, University of Amsterdam)

Media Research (BA-1 course Bachelor Media and Culture, University of Amsterdam)

Current Themes: Media and Sexuality (BA-1 course Bachelor Media and Culture, University of Amsterdam)

2014 - 2019 *Audience Studies: Current Perspectives* (BA-3 elective course International Bachelor Arts and Culture Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam)

Academic Skills (BA-1 course International Bachelor Arts and Culture Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam)

History of Arts and Culture (BA-1 course International Bachelor Arts and Culture Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam)

Bachelor Thesis Class: Media and the Margins, Erasmus University Rotterdam

Bachelor Thesis Class: Participatory Cultures and Cultures of Participation, Erasmus University Rotterdam

Supervision of bachelor and master thesis research

Courses and workshops followed during the PhD trajectory

Academic / Methodological

- | | |
|------|---|
| 2016 | Deans Interdisciplinary Masterclass, Erasmus Graduate School |
| 2014 | Dean`s Interdisciplinary Masterclass, Erasmus Graduate School |
| 2014 | Masterclass ‘Participation and Voice in Everyday Culture’ with Prof. Nick Couldry, University of Utrecht (15 May) |
| 2014 | Qualitative Research Methods, Erasmus Graduate School |
| 2013 | Work in progress meeting with external project advisors Prof. Matt Hills and Dr. Johanna Sumiala, Rotterdam, 18 Oct |
| 2013 | Summer School ‘Audiences and Users’, Erasmus University Rotterdam |
| 2013 | Workshop ‘Contemporary Celebrity Culture’ with Dr. James Bennett, University of Antwerp, Belgium (31 Jan) |

Didactic

- 2015 - 2016 University Teaching Qualification track, Erasmus University Rotterdam
- 2014 Assessment criteria, DeLoeff Training
- 2013 Basic Didactics, RISBO Research-Training-Consultancy, Erasmus University Rotterdam

About the author

Balázs Boross is senior lecturer Television and Cross-media culture at the Department of Media Studies, University of Amsterdam and PhD candidate at the Erasmus Research Centre for Media, Communication and Culture, Erasmus University Rotterdam. He holds master's degrees in Hungarian Language and Literature (*cum laude*, Eötvös Loránd University Budapest), in Cultural Anthropology (*summa cum laude*, Eötvös Loránd University Budapest), and in Sociology and Social Anthropology of Non-Western Societies, with the specialization of Gender, Sexuality and Society (*cum laude*, University of Amsterdam).

In 2012, Balázs started his PhD project with a research grant from the Netherlands Organization of Scientific Research (NWO), dividing his time as a researcher and a lecturer while working at the Department of Arts and Culture in Rotterdam. During his PhD trajectory under the supervision of prof. dr. Stijn Reijnders, Balázs presented his research at several international conferences – among others at IAMCR, EASA and MECCSA, where he was recipient of Best Paper Award – and published in highly ranked, international peer-reviewed journals such as *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Media Culture & Society* and *Television and New Media*.

This dissertation focuses on television productions as participatory spaces for ordinary people. In the past decades, television has become something not only to watch but, increasingly, also to do: every day around the world, candidates in large numbers apply to be part of programmes that offer their participants self-improvement, conflict management, relationship advice, or life-changing experiences that promise to be 'extraordinary' in other ways. Nevertheless, such programmes are often received controversially: they are praised for their educative potential on the one hand but criticized for being fake, voyeuristic or harmful to their participants on the other. Despite these debates, research into what happens behind and beyond the screen is scarce and, in consequence, little is known about how and why ordinary people lend their lives to these programmes. What drives them to participate, and how do they perform in front of a crew and an imagined public? How do they relate to their mediated representations? What roles do media texts and production crews play in the process of participation? And, more generally, how do such participatory practices reinforce or challenge notions of televisual power in today's thoroughly heterogenous media world?