CNN Talkback Live: As good as it gets?

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The ideal of a popular gathering of citizens to participate in journalistic endeavours has been rarely realised. Many of the regular media programs that actually do employ a "talk" format with audience participation are primarily concerned with topics so sleazy that it is embarrassing to speak of them as journalism. This article describes a television talk show, CNN Talkback Live, in Atlanta where the ideals of trying to introduce genuinely people oriented journalism are bound by organisational and journalistic constraints.

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While popular journalism may be aimed at niche audiences, or elites, most practitioners of journalism see their profession as an active and engaging institution of society. The fact that journalism is so often perceived as a totally top-down process that targets mass audiences with the informational equivalent of bullets (a view first enunciated by the Frankfurt School, in their mass society theory) suggests that this high aspiration has not always been met in practice.

The most genuinely popular model that one could conceive for mass-audience journalism would involve active participation by the very mass audience it reaches, ensuring that views of the community at large are aired fairly and in depth. There would presumably be a certain level of mediation by journalists and presenters, yet one could imagine an audience-driven arena of discussion that would in some ways resurrect some of the ideals of the Enlightenment.

Despite the fact that participatory journalism of this form is mostly seen as a recent concept, audiences have been sending feedback to the media for a long time. Writing letters to the editor was commonplace before the electronic media appeared, but even that is diminished in its impact when compared to actual journalistic copy. It is published much later than the material
that has presumably prompted the reader to write, and is segregated in a section of the publication that usually places it well away from lead stories. What is needed is not only an immediacy in sending feedback, but an attribution of significance. In practice, this suggests that the electronic media, operating in a live format, offer the best opportunities for this sort of practice.

So far, the ideal of a popular gathering of citizens to participate in journalistic endeavours has indeed been rarely realised. Many of the regular media programs that actually do employ a "talk" format with audience participation are primarily concerned with topics so sleazy that it is embarrassing to speak of them as journalism. Across the USA, both television and talkback radio hosts sensationalise their programs with extreme political views and obnoxious guests. Similar shock formats are not unknown in Australia and other countries.

CNN TalkBack Live is one regular television program in the USA that has arguably gone further towards this ideal goal than any of its contemporaries. Surprisingly, it has attracted relatively little attention outside of its homeland. It is an ambitious experiment to involve not only the Cable News Network's own audience but any willing participant. The producers have approached a difficult task with flair, performing as well as one could reasonably expect any media group operating within the same parameters. However, in the process of going as far as the operational constraints will allow, TalkBack Live has also exposed the inherent limitations of trying to introduce genuinely popular journalism. Even this boldly pioneering news company can still find itself bound by organisational and journalistic constraints.

Visitors to the headquarters of CNN in Atlanta, USA, find themselves in an environment quite different from a traditional television facility. The headquarters consists of a complex of buildings that enclose a vast central atrium, reminiscent of a shopping mall. Private citizens are free to simply walk in and visit the various bars, food outlets and CNN-related souvenir shops that cluster around the ground floor.

Elsewhere in the complex, CNN staff go about their business behind glass walls that leave much of the organisation's operations open to public scrutiny. Like a true replication of a public space, the ground floor also features a roughly circular arena that serves as the staging point for this daily forum for analysing the news that emphasises feedback from the general public.

CNN staff pace the floor of the complex in the hours before the broadcast, handing out free tickets and urging passing...
members of the general public to join the live studio audience. The arena gradually fills with people, most of whom are Americans, although the odd foreign visitor is not turned away.

Promotions for the upcoming show are given in five-second previews on CNN's US network (the show does not appear on CNN International). The audience is prepared by a warm-up man who drills the roughly 150 people on the art of clapping on time. At 3:00pm local time, the anchorperson fronts the camera and the show begins.

Despite the ability of the general public to participate in the program, either in person, by telephone or across the Internet, CNN TalkBack Live is still a carefully planned exercise in top-down journalism. Each program focuses on two specific issues that are not only dictated by the producers, but drawn from topics currently in circulation in the conventional mass media.

On a generally calm day in February 1998, the producers have selected two long-duration issues for dissection: the El Nino weather phenomenon, and the recently brokered UN weapons inspection agreement with Iraq. These topics are specified in advance of the broadcast, both in advertisements and in the briefing of the studio audience.

Much of the talk will come from the audience, but the program is bolstered by input from the anchorperson and a bevy of primary sources who will serve as a sounding board for questions. In the given program, CNN has arranged a live link to a correspondent in the Middle East to provide commentary on the Iraqi issue, invited a climatologist into the studio to discuss El Nino, and provided other reporters and stock footage to further enhance the broadcast.

The audience is seated at least half an hour before the program goes to air, and with good reason. Like any other element of the editorial process, they must be screened and examined. The process begins with a security search no less thorough than those conducted in airports. Once the metal detectors are cleared, names are taken, along with places of origin. This allows audience members to be identified by the anchorperson with monikers such as "Morris from Australia", written in black pen on large badges worn by the audience.

The briefing of the visitors in the art of being a television audience is friendly and informal, consisting of instructions such as not sending cheerio calls to home if the cameras point in your area. Much of the routine is reminiscent of the preparations used for game-show audiences, but the process quickly progresses to a deeper level.

The warm-up person explains the topics to be discussed, giving an overview of the issues and inviting the audience to
volunteer for questions. Hands go up, and questions are duly noted by the broadcast crew for later reference. Producers in a control room removed from the atrium presumably screen the audience for people who will not come across well in the broadcast, or who have nothing worthwhile to say. Wireless links to in-ear headsets leave much of the organisational discourse concealed from the casual observer.

The audience is also generally polled about its feelings on divisive issues. In this case, the heavily polarised question of the day is: Can Saddam Hussein be trusted? Murmuring amongst the audience suggest that this sampling of the American public is deeply suspicious of the Iraqi leader. One audience member disagrees, urging the world to give the agreement a chance to work. The very existence of a dissenting view is manna to a journalistic study, and it is little wonder that this individual receives a disproportionate level of attention by the warm-up man. Will anyone else support this view? Despite the urging of our warm-up man, it seems no other visitor will.

By the time the countdown to airtime begins, the production crew of TalkBack Live are on familiar ground. The program that follows will come across as a largely impromptu exercise, but the editorial controllers are free to nominate the issues for discussion, the “expert witnesses” called upon, and can also select audience members, their questions and opinions at will.

The broadcast begins with a nomination of the topics with the precision of a print headline. Background footage of storms rolls, and we are into our roughly 20 minute presentation on El Nino. Our anchorperson stages a brief interview with the climatologist before opening the floor to questions. The names of people who have been rehearsed in the warm-up session are called out while a microphone is thrust in their face. No questions are taken from people who have not been previewed. The session manages to take around five questions from the studio audience, along with others from people calling on telephones and sending comments across the Internet. A program break ensues, and TalkBack Live returns for a discussion of Iraq.

The second half of the program repeats the format precisely. We are given live reports, along with an in-studio reporter to field questions from the audience. Our rehearsed questions are aired, making sure that at least one challenge to what is clearly a strongly anti-Iraqi stance across mainstream America is broadcast. As with El Nino, audience questions are not only filtered, but not even presented in a truly interactive sense. A question is asked, a
response is given, and the anchorperson moves on to the next person. No attempt to even simulate a truly interactive, multifaceted discourse is provided.

Comments from viewers outside of the studio are periodically flashed as subtitled bites of text across the bottom of the screen, and the results of a simplistic yes/no poll conducted across the Internet is presented in a bar graph. The online viewers, it seems, don't trust Saddam any more than the live audience. The show concludes and the audience is free to leave.

Inviting any person at all to speak freely on live television, with an audience of millions is a hazardous exercise. It would be unfair to accuse CNN of setting out with a deceptive agenda, but the mechanics of TalkBack Live place the cable network in an invidious position. To their credit TalkBack Live requires nothing more than a weapons search for participants. However the limitations of the time slot and the need to incorporate as many as six speakers - audience and talent - into a single story requires high precision timing. At least in this regard one can forgive the program for failing to expand discussions to the degree that a thorough coverage would demand.

The style of the program also provides insight into the function of the media as agenda setters for public discussion. TalkBack Live is intended for mass consumption, and as such it requires that both the topic of discussion and the level of that discussion be accessible to a mass audience. Given the nature of modern society, this essentially dictates that topics must be drawn from the common experience of the mass media to have any familiarity: the alternative is to draw upon subjects that are either too banal for serious discussion or are based on sleaze and scandal. Plenty of shows have demonstrated the latter.

The fact that very few members of the general public are experts on climate modelling also restricts the depth of the coverage. Interestingly, it was apparent that the audience itself has a strong amount of influence in agenda setting during the show. Despite the best attempts of the warm-up crew to provoke a more balanced discussion of Iraq, the audience made it clear that they were generally against such an idea. After sufficient whispers and murmuring, further attempts to solicit dissent from this view were abandoned.

In theory, one could try for a limited amount of truly interactive discourse with perhaps two or three carefully chosen members of the audience, but the outcome of such a discussion would be difficult to predict. Scheduling such a discourse to fit
in with the rigid precision of broadcast breaks is essentially impossible, unless people are forced to read a script.

However, the program could also be viewed as a stronger attack on traditional journalism than even the free-discourse model. This is TalkBack, not Talk, and the journalists and experts who appear for questioning are subjected to an inverse model of the "bullet" theory of journalism. The audience will ask the questions. The special guests are required to answer. The format not only empowers the audience as inquisitors, but removes the need from them to explain themselves to the journalists. Instead of consensus, we have retaliation.

One can dissect the individual limitations of TalkBack Live, yet all of these are manifestations of one principal issue: this is television and little changed in either technology or application for more than forty years.

Another informative lesson from TalkBack Live comes not from the television broadcast, but the genuinely participatory discussions that CNN hosts on its Web site at cnn.com. Here, free of the bounds of time and scheduling, CNN allows Net users to speak their mind and respond to each other's comments with a minimal level of mediation. Such discussions take place in an asynchronous format. Although some comments from these forums are broadcast as text grabs on TalkBack Live, the show supplies only a minor sampling of what is often passionate and well-informed commentary. Yet the lack of structure can also produce repetition and tedium. Comments can easily be ill-informed or outright lies. Each medium has its limitations and trade-offs.

With two very active and interlinked journalistic experiments running from the same news organisation, media scholars should pay attention to a phenomenon that is often discussed in theory, but not so frequently manifested in practice. As this article has demonstrated, criticism of TalkBack Live is easy and not without justification, but if we are not satisfied with the result, we must wonder how such an exercise could be improved under realistic circumstances. Running parallel to such an inquiry is possibly the most pressing question of all: in a global media environment that has generally failed to produce an equivalent product, is TalkBack Live truly as good as it gets?

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