

When the audience changes a journalist

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The subject of this essay is the relationship between television journalists and their audience, focusing on the feedback given by the viewers and their participation in transforming journalistic practices in TV programs' production.

I have been working as a TV journalist and news editor in a private independent production company for ten years. I have been facing changes in journalism practices since the years when the audience used to write letters, traditionally mailed to our TV production, suggesting the topics journalists should cover. The internet, new technology and social media changed this practice in recent years, giving the audience numerous opportunities to participate in the production of journalistic stories. Therefore the journalists and news editors were given the opportunity to communicate directly with the audience, to share ideas and experiences and to use the audience as sources of information. The TV production I have been working for used to maintain such communication through its website, and an email address which has been written on the screen of every TV program we produce. Viewers suggest the topics of their interest or comment on what they have been watching. It led us to some very interesting TV stories and gave us the opportunity to seek beyond mainstream news.

In the past three months I have witnessed a true transformation of my own journalistic practice in a TV program production. A new TV program, produced in a form of a studio debate with guests discussing actual economic and social topics, has been structured in a manner to be opened for the audience before the filming process starts. It means the audience has the chance to discuss on Twitter and Facebook pages of our TV program about the topic, seven days prior to filming in the studio, in order to ask questions and provide information on what might be interesting for them to hear and see in a broadcast. A number of questions viewers have asked were directly answered in a studio debate and changed the structure of the TV program; this was in the participation of the audience via social media, website or including an email address, which was important for the TV crew to

understand the potentials of human interest stories, and the audience feedback in the topics they have asked for. This practice changed my own point of view as a journalist at the beginning of a career ten years ago. I was taught by more experienced editors that, considering the sources of information, among traditional sources as newspapers, news archives and face-to-face contacts, I needed to maintain regular communication with two most important people in a city: a bartender and a taxi driver. I was taught they were up to date with all news a journalist should seek for. Ten years later I gather information from the audience through social media, listening to their suggestions and covering the stories they bring up as interesting or important. In this process, a journalist is enriched with fresh information gained from the audience and follows a specific story. He or she keeps up with professional standards and therefore acts like a “middleman” between the audience and the officials, on both sides, trying to provide an objective approach to a topic.

My journalistic experience completely changed last month, after the broadcast of two TV studio debates dealing with the situation in Serbian culture and higher education. A teacher from a high-school in the city of Kragujevac, one hundred kilometres distant from the capital, called my editors and said they watched those two episodes in an extra-curriculum class. Therefore he wanted to bring his pupils to the studio and provide them with the opportunity to discuss the topics with the journalistic team, to find out more and show them what media literacy actually was. Several days after that, fifty pupils from that high-school came to our studio, along with their professors, and they had a chance to ask questions not only about the process of the filming, but also about the core of the journalistic job. They were interested in the sources of information we use, the selection of guests, the filming TV reports on the field, my preparation for the interviews, etc. On the other hand, pupils had their own opinion on the media, the sources of information they used and discussed the actual situation in the traditional educational process. Their participation in the structure of our TV debates transformed the given concept of the program and we agreed to film their own school debate in a classroom. The concept of this TV program would present pupils watching two TV debates about culture and education and those programs would be the cause of a latter pupils’ debate, which should be developed in a classroom, pointing out pupils’ attitudes towards those themes and their interaction with the media. Having this in mind, we are trying to raise the debate about media literacy, a term which is still being misunderstood among the Serbian public. Not only students’ interaction with the media brought us to discuss this concept, but also enriched us as journalists to think more about public debates and all possible platforms that could bring the citizens’ participation into account, when we are doing our job. Media literacy is here connected both to citizens’ as media consumers and as media producers, which is of a great significance for performing.

TV journalism works according to professional standards. Audience participation in the media production and distribution does not mean treating the audience as members of the public sitting in a studio, applauding and nodding. Participating in a form of a wider public debate would be also publically presented through media outlets, just as important

as they are perceived as sources of information, in every professional media. So, those two roles of the audience as consumers of media products, who are inspired to take further action in decision-making processes or in bringing the debate into their local communities, and as producers of information who share the news with the media professionals, enriching the structure of their stories, should be the core of every serious media outlet's strategy. This strategy has not been fully recognised in the Serbian media landscape because the media in Serbia are occupied with financial constraints, shutting down due to the economic crisis and somewhat conservative belief that journalism should only be performed by professional journalists. I believe there is huge potential "on the other side", among the audience, that will certainly be recognised as a trigger to start developing the media products that will allow greater participation of the audience, as well as thinking in advance about the effects of every journalistic story. The best of them will bring up wider public debate on current issues in society and it will present the essence of what political theorists call "deliberative democracy." In the end, the decisions made by the state officials, the government and other public institutions will be more accountable only if there is wider citizens' participation in the decision-making process. The role of the media here is the most important, since they are acting as controllers of the government and as a bridge between the state and the citizens. As much as journalists take the audience into account when making just a simple story, the chances to perform journalism in a democratic manner will be higher. That is exactly what I have been teaching students of TV journalism at the Faculty of Political Sciences, since they are the journalists of the future who will have to maintain such a practice of communicating with the audience, if they want to create stories and programs which will serve as a platform for wider public debates in the democratic society they live and work in.

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