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Participation in Spanish PSB: personalized or socialized?

An analytical study of new forms of citizen participation at Spanish Public Service Broadcasting

INTRODUCTION

Many articles and studies reproduced all around the academic world have spoken on the subject of the new opportunities that digital technologies give to citizen participation. From theoretical analysis to empirical quantitative research, Participation in digital television has been cited as “revolutionary” (Dagnino, 2004; Castells, 2006), a “new kind of marketing” (Stansbury, 2004; Fernández, 2006), an “historic” step in media History (Yankelovich, 1991; Putnam, 2003), and even a “dangerous” menace to society (Moreno, 2006). Despite all these personal denominations, European PSBers kept developing new forms of *communicative relations* between mass media and the audience (Ytreberg, 2004; Enli, 2008), including most of the times new technologies and multiple platforms.

Spanish PSB is not an exception to this rule. Since the reform and later transformation into a corporation in 2006, CRTVE –from now on, TVE- experienced many changes inside their policies, being one of the majors the implication of the channel with Audience Participation inside its programming (Director General of TVE, Javier Pons, 2006).

The Spanish reality nowadays, then, is pretty much similar to what is happening in most Western European PSBers: dozens of programs and news emissions are full of people' s comments and opinions, in the form of SMS, Toll Free calls, social nets, quiz shows, Emails, online comments, video on demand, YouTube pages, Customer Services and chats, among others (Ribeiro, 2010). The communication relationship between the audience and TVE, thus, is today more than ever varied and consistent.

However, as well as others European PSBers, Spanish Television experiences one particular syndrome, pretty much related to modern societies and digital multichannel environments: the efficiency of these participations. We might ask: “Are the participants really making a difference when they individually comment a topic?”; “How much importance gives the viewers to one particular opinion given in a debate program?”; and finally, “Sending a SMS on air modify traditional television structures, such as schedules, or value chains, or even the topic of the programs?” The answers, as it might be presumed already, remain unclear.

For that reason, this short paper aims to participate in the debate within an implicit intention to clarify some points from the Spanish experience and reality. To do that, we are going to contrast two relevant sociological cases present in today' s Spanish TV: individual/personal vs. plural/organized Participation.

To do this, we are going to analyze qualitatively the different implications over time that personal Emails, Twitters, TV callings and online comments have *in opposition to* newer popular TV manifestations such as participation of specific social organizations.

To argument this, we will use two recent examples developed by Spanish PSB: an informative program based in questions made by ordinary people to important political figures (*Tengo una pregunta para Ud.*- “I have got a question for you”) and a

program written, directed and presented by people with mental difficulties (*Nosotros también*- “We too”).

The aim of the paper, finally, is to analyze the impact these citizen participations have on three key players in modern multimedia contexts: audiences, television and society, shedding light at the end on what may be the best form to improve pluralism and democracy through (and in) public television.

THE TWO CASES of TVE

Tengo una pregunta para Ud.´ idea –from now on, *I have*- was born in France in 2007, with the name of *J'ai une question à vous poser*. As well as the Spanish model, the programme was broadcasted at nights by national television, TF1, with a regularity of four-five emissions per year. Its rating, in both cases, reached an average share of 30,3%, competing usually with imported fictions from the private competitors. Due to this relatively success in national French television, Spanish PSB- TVE- decided to import the show, targeting at the same time new corporation´ s priorities: audience participation and rating. The experience was a complete success. Almost 16 million people watched the first three emissions, having an average of 6 millions at the end of the first season.

The line of the show was pretty much the same as the French case: politicians and political leaders were the regular guests, with a debating audience divided in two groups: those who were watching the programme at their houses –“classic” style- and the ones who were participating during the show –“new” style-. This second group had, principally, the task to formulate “serious” questions to the guests, most of the times in just one occasion. Their selection in every programme was organized by a private company, TNS Demoscopia, contracted by the channel, whose main job was to choose ‘*average representatives of contemporary Spanish society*’ (Eva Aranda, co-director of TNS, 2009). In others words, regular workers, students and elderly people whose connections to any political party were null, and therefore without ideological bias within their personal history.

The object of the programme, aired during the nights with a frequency of an emission every four months, was in a few words to *'make the audience more active in the programming of their public television, as well as inform to society what they wanted to know directly, without any kind of filters'* (co-producer, Fatjó-Vilas, 2007), as well as improving explicitly traditional type of participation, such as SMS, classic debate programmes or Toll Free Calls. *I Have*, thus, was a TV platform where “common people” with “common doubts” had their particular space and time, without any kind of censorship –at least formally speaking-, or ideological manipulation.

Another programme, *Nosotros También- We Too-*, also at TVE and born during the same year, was the other initiative of Spanish PSB audience participation strategy. Released during the process of re-organization of TVE known as the Legal Reform of Public Radio and TV- Law 17/2006-(Azurmendi, 2007) the programme was the first one in Spanish TV history made for and by persons with mental difficulties.

Aired twice a month, the programme was a sort of informational type of genre, addressing interviews and special documentaries among others formats. Its thematic varied from regular information about this social group's daily lives to analytical debates and interviews.

For the production *We Too* counted with financial help of three organizations associated to these social groups, as well as technical support from the channel in determinate cases (i.e: cameras, sound, script, etc...). However, as director general of TVE at that moment Javier Pons has said, *'the programme was written, directed and presented by them, from the sound to the make up, camera and lights'* (Pons, 2007).

The objective of *We Too* was, accorded to their creators, to show to the people what *'they were capable of, like going to the supermarket, maintaining a house or cooking'* (Juan Antonio Sacaluga, director of *We Too*). Respecting the format of the show and its target, scriptwriter Ana Molano affirms: *'We believe that society does not know really how to behave with persons with mental difficulties, so the best we can do is to let them explain by themselves what they are able to do'* (Molano, 2007). In a country where racism and discrimination are still very high, *We Too* represented according to TVE direction *'an original form of making TV participate in social life, and vice versa'* (TVE institutional webpage, 2007).

TVE' s *I Have* and *We Too* represented, then, two distinctive ways to improve citizen participation in Spanish PSB. Along with regular participation modes, such as online short-duration citizen reports, SMS during the shows, quizzes programmes and institutional Facebook' s, Spanish public television made a step a bit forward and included people' s ideas, doubts and –specially- *acts* inside their programming. However, the differences between them are far from been just a few: per example, Is it exactly the same to let the audience ask what they want to influent figures –the case of French/Spanish *I Have*- to place *physically* particular interests accorded to their own rules –*We Too*-? The levels and intensities, as it might be presumed, are different. For that reason, before analyzing both cases profoundly, we need to explain the existing kinds of participation in actual Spanish public TV, in order to locate the cases and their particularities properly.

PARTICIPATIONS: TYPES AND EFFECTS

As many authors and scholars have already stated, there are many ways of participating in contemporary television (Chitty, 2007; Murdock, 2004; Digital Strategy Group, 2002). Thanks to Internet and mobile phones, the possibilities of citizen participation are almost infinite: chats, social nets, SMS, video on demand, streaming TV, callings, emails, etc... In schematic categories, the most important factors among these forms are:

- Interactivity
- Multimedia content
- User access
- Immediacy
- Hypertext

PSBers around Europe have been developing several forms to achieve most of them, using in the majority of the cases the Web and DTTV (Medina & Ojer, 2009). However, the majority remain always in the sphere of “contribution” to something

already planned, with the only exception of a few user-generated contents, like citizen reports and personal short-films. The rest, unfortunately, still inhabits specified spaces strictly designed for the audience, where participation is varied and constant, but poorly influent massively and un-coordinated in general terms (Casullo, 2008).

What we have in present multimedia environment, thus, is a multiple and variable media context in which citizen participation counts on several forms to give voice to their opinions, but always in platforms already designed by someone else, usually traditional media actors and companies (Wolton, 2006).

It is necessary, then, to determinate the levels of participation these new digital tools are actually giving to the audience, in order to clarify what kind of possibilities we might be omitting during the process (Lowe, 2008). For instance, and following Wiio's theory' three levels of services inside PSBers (Wiio, 2004), we categorize present citizen participation as follows:

Low	Changing volume, channels, colour...
Medium	Video on demand, Toll Free Calls...
High	SMS, Facebook, web 2.0, chats...
Complete	User-generated content

As it can be seen, all the categories except the first and the last one represent pretty much what Nissen has called "Personalized services" (Nissen, 2006), that is, services adapted for interactivity with the user. The *Low* category is attached to traditional linear programme services, like traditional determined options in which the user has limited opportunities to vary. In the case of a *Complete* citizen participation, the ultimate reason of this paper, production of contents depends strictly on audience creativity, elections and ideas. Like the mentioned example given for this category, the generation of contents will be completely determinate by audience participation, including its forms and formats. This sort of participation attaches graphically to the two mentioned programmes at Spanish public television, *I Have* and *We Too*.

COMPLETE PARTICIPATION in *I HAVE* and *WE TOO*

Even though the similarities between these two programs are numerous, both types of citizen participation remain different. As we have mentioned before, the object of this paper was not only to mention the distinctive sorts of modern participation but also their respective effects caused, in television, its audience and finally in society. For that reason, we now analyze how *Complete* citizen participation, that is, user-generated contents, affects those three key actors in contemporary television.

In the case of *I Have*, complete participation is obtained as we said thanks to active collaboration of the audience during the program, whose questions to the guests produce almost completely the whole emission (Lorenzo Milá, mediator of *I Have*, 2007). For that reason, *I Have* is considered much more active than chatting or emailing, since the *raison d' être* of the programme depend on their questions and presence. *I Have* without the audience would not be broadcasted. However, if we analyze the type of participation this audience has during the show, we would realise that non-shared positions are reproduce; in fact, the *leit motiv* of their participations is actually the differences among them, their distinctive ideas and interests. Qualitatively, this sort of participation is similar to what we denominate *High* participation, with the only –big- exception that the programme entirely depends on the audience.

In contrast to this, *We Too* presents a completely new landscape. *Complete* participation is gained due to their high presence during the entire value chain, from scriptwriting to interviewing. Secondly, citizen participation is designed by the audience itself, with no filtrations –the classical mediator, for instance- or platform' limitations interfering during the process. Finally, and perhaps one of the biggest differences between the two mentioned programmes, the messages and interests showed during the programme are shared and delivered purposely, using the TV as a medium, literally.

Can we say, then, that both programmes are strictly the same? Probably no. What exactly defines each of them, strategically, is the purpose they search: we cannot say *I Have* (as well as the vast list of *High* citizen participation like emails, chats, Twitter and so on) precisely have a “clear target”; indeed, we cannot even affirm there is actually one. The motives they hide behind their participations are as numerous as the

number of participants, that is why Livingstone 's term to refer modern citizen participation fits exactly right: modern user participation is *individualistic* active participation (Livingstone, 2009).

In the opposite side, *We Too* type of participation does look for a common target, and is precisely this desired object the ultimate motive of the programme.

Of course, the object of the paper is not to value which one is more laudable, or praiseworthy, but instead analyzing the *level of influence each one of them has over the three mentioned key actors: society, audience and television itself*. The way to do that accordingly is analyzing how these cases affect television' s traditional structures, like *property rights* and *ownership*. To do that, two different history phases made by the creators of the programmes are going to be analyzed, in order to find out what differences made possible such distinctive endings.

1° PHASE: CO-PARTNERSHIP and COLLABORATION: PATH LINES

Many authors defend PSBers should extend to online media; in others words, to convert into a Public Service Media –PSM- (Steeemers, 2003; Moe, 2008; Trappel, 2008). Within their reasons, increasing public service contents and creating a stronger partnership with civil society are some of the most cited (Iosifidis, 2010; Galik, 2006; Dubini & Raviola, 2005). However, enlarging the possibilities of citizen participation does not mean strictly audience co- partnership (Lowe, 2008; Tracey, 2004). This term enters in the scene only if property rights are re-valued, or at least altered. If those structures remain untouched, citizen participation is not fully achieved, and therefore it would not be co-partnership, but simple *collaboration*.

Following the categories we mentioned at the beginning of the paper, this “alteration” inside property rights fits only in the last category. Just User-generated contents make possible “user-generated property”, even though the medium (television, internet, radio) does not belong to them; what replace that is a sort of “renting” a TV space –time, which is the maximum audiences would apply for, obviously, since otherwise television would be another thing but a television company system.

In our cases, only *We Too* did broke those rights. “Renting” a TVE space-time schedule, producers and directors of the programme locate their discourse in the way they designed, organizing the emission as their wish. Of course some restrictions were considered before the broadcast, like thematic and technical’s matters, but once the programme was on air the freedom of movement was explicitly evident.

I Have did not go so far. The mediator and the direction, just to mention some examples, were in hands of TVE, as well as the selection of the active audience participating in the show. Even though citizen participation was the “key” of the programme, still its predeterminations were fully organized by the channel: timing, number of questions, etc.

One of the main reasons for this division resided in the *path line* in which these two programmes were born. According to TVE institutional webpage, *I Have* was born as an idea inside TVE, who decided to buy the format from French TF1. This fact alters considerably the process of production, since all relevant tasks remain strictly under TVE control, the –only- principal actor. In opposition to that, *We Too* was born as an offer from *outside* the channel, particularly three social organizations. Accords and pacts, then, were discussed by two principal actors, TVE and the organizations.

As we introduced at the beginning of the paper, *We Too* producers entered at TVE with a pioneer programme about people with mental difficulties, social group that they represent all along the country. As institutions that seek to protect certain values and behaviours, they chose public television as the medium to show them to society, knowing the powerful influence media has in modern societies (Habermas, 1978; Bauman, 2009). TVE accepted the risk, conscious of its new role as a PSM. In contrast to what happened to *I Have*, these specified groups were involved inside the negotiations *before* broadcasting the show, that is, during the pre-production of the programme. As it might be presumed, the relations of power concluded then differently, since the *ownership* of the programme was mutually shared.

Interestingly, the form chosen to reach fully *co-partnership* between PSBers and the audience in the Spanish context was getting inside TVE from *outside*, “altering” consequently all property rights. Obviously, the entrance depended entirely on the PSB,

who had finally the last decision, but once accepted the conditions were considerably different, as we have seen in the comparison.

2° PHASE: PARTICIPATION: INDIVIDUALIZED and SOCIALIZED

Despite of these relevant facts, what it is most important for our theses is *how* this situation was possible, in order to clarify the contexts that made possible *Complete* citizen participation. To reach that mission, we need to go even more into the history of both programmes, to answer finally why only one of them is considered fully participated.

If look broadly the contexts narrated so far, a paradigmatic situation raises. Next graphic is intended to resolve this situation:

Participation(category)	Tools	Organization	Effect
High	SMS, Twitter, emails...	Low	Short-term
Complete	User-generated/ <i>I have</i>	Medium	Medium-term
Complete	User-generated/ <i>We too</i>	High	Strategic

The ambiguous situation shown in the graphic is a dichotomy reflected also in society, between two set of forces pretty much cited in recent socio-economic articles: individualized citizens (in media, fragmentation of the audience) and concentration of

production (large multimedia groups). While the number of participating options increases every year, the amount of producers reduces throughout fusions and joints. To confront this landscape, media lobbies multiply, as the best form to intervene in political agendas where big conglomerates play key roles (Gallego, 2009; Subirats, 2008). In media pretty much the same scene is repeated: large private companies use to joint strategies together in order to influence political realities, despite their strong competition in the market (Quirós Fernández, 2006).

Reproducing a parallelism of this private initiatives, and following Zahariadis' "Multiple streams" theory (Zahariadis, 1995), the Spanish case fits this argumentation in public policy terms: *plural organized groups control more efficiently their programmes and projects than individualized citizen participation, as well as their messages and targets* (Botella, 2010). As commercial channels joint enterprises have shown in many opportunities (per example, in the European Commission when applying the Amsterdam Treaty, or during the process of liberalization in the 1980s), in an individualized society coordinated groups work better (Forster, 2009).

The example of *We Too*, despite of the fact of not getting exactly same sharing records as *I Have*, represents a graphic case of this organized –or as we prefer to call it, *socialized-* effort to achieve a target. In contrast to what happened to *I Have*, its "messages" last more time in TVE schedule, affecting PSB citizen participation from then. Respected to the **audience**, the second key player, the level of co-partnership achieved has served as an example for other channels, not only in Spain, but also overseas ¹. Finally, and perhaps the most important factor, Spanish **society** also lived a whole new process by itself: a brand new dialogue between media and society was born, with apparently no commercial interests around. What is more, another canal for participation sums up to the already extensive number of digital mediums, with the important difference that this time, surprisingly, they control the message *and* the medium. This represent, as might be presumed, the last phase of the path, its final destination.

¹ In Argentina, per example, different organizations have presented TV own projects to broadcast in public national channels Canal 7 and Canal Encuentro. See, for instance, Independent Musicians Union DTTV project, called *Sonar TV*. (see Bibliography).

CONCLUSIONS

Spanish programmes *I Have* and *We Too* are examples of what kind of new citizen participations national PSB is offering to its audience. As we have mentioned thru the paper, both represent *Complete* audience participation, since the two of them include user-generated content among its productions, the highest category in the list.

However, in order to reach fully integrated co-partnership between PSBers and the audience, we mentioned the necessity of altering traditional property rights, untouched in most personalized services (1° Phase). In this point, as we saw, the two cases differentiate due to one particular fact: whereas French-Spanish format *I Have* has no common interests coordination, and therefore less power of intervention in the processes of pre/post production, educational programme *We Too* reflects an organized project under the supervision of specified social groups, letting the negotiations of the emission pretty much in their own hands (2° Phase).

Respected to the effects caused inside the three key actors named at the beginning of the paper, both programs differ again due to this organizational aspects: while *I Have* reaches a barely short medium-term strategy, plural project *We Too* wins a regular schedule, letting its message work as a time-process (Last Phase).

To conclude, some valuable conclusions can be mentioned from the study:

1. *Complete* Participation is only achieved when user' s control affects property rights.
2. Only organized user-generated contents represent strategically specific messages and interests.
3. Socialized *Complete* participation affects not just to PSBers, but also audiences and society.

The study of *how* these practices were designed and *what* caused at the end, at last, sheds light on something much more important than just the number of formats to

participate in modern television: the ways to get the most out of them, and reach satisfactory our final destination.

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