

УДК 79.097:323.232](477)

Dariya Orlova

POLITICAL TV TALK SHOWS IN THE POST-ORANGE UKRAINE: A CASE OF AN EMERGING PUBLIC SPHERE? ¹

The article explores democratizing potential of the political TV talk shows on Ukrainian television. In particular, the study analyzes whether popular political talk show hosted by Savik Shuster on Ukrainian TV channels can be considered as a contemporary form of public sphere. Employing the concept of 'public sphere' initially developed by Jurgen Habermas, the paper aims at finding out to what extent the analyzed talk show satisfies normative criteria of 'public sphere' conceptions.

Keywords: political TV talk shows, democratization, public sphere, media in Ukraine.

The Orange Revolution, a symbolic name for a series of protests and political events that took place in Ukraine in the aftermath of the electoral fraud in late 2004, marked a turning point in the post-com-

munist history of Ukraine and the region. Even though initial enthusiasm about it was replaced by disappointment and skepticism over the political developments in the post-Orange Ukraine, some de-

¹ Результати цього дослідження було представлено на Міжнародній конференції «Україна в глобальному контексті» (fifth bi-annual Graduate Student Symposium "Ukraine in Global Context") в Торонто (Канада) 27–28 січня 2012 року.

mocratic achievements, namely media freedom, have been generally recognized [6].

Journalists' movement against censorship and eventual reshaping of relations between political actors, media owners, media managers and journalists [27] were prerequisites for emerging of a transformed media field in the country. While the nature of this presumed transformation is a matter of debates, it seems reasonable to assume that the developments following the Orange Revolution brought a different media context for the country. One particular aspect of the new media context constitutes a major focus of the article, that is – the appearance of new political television talk shows, their high popularity and social impact. Specifically, the article aims at finding out whether the new political talk shows that appeared on Ukrainian TV channels in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution, can be considered as forms of public sphere. Such interest in the discussed talk shows stems from a conceptual standpoint that regards contemporary mass media as embodiment of public sphere, which in its turn is believed to be a fundamental element of democracy [e. g. 1; 5; 14].

While there is a well-established tradition in western academia to consider and discuss the potential role of television and talk shows in particular as forms of the public sphere [1; 5; 18; 22], there is a lack of such scholarly research on Ukraine. At the same time, the numbers of the audience watching political talk shows on Ukrainian TV channels, as well as heated discussions on the role of these talk shows in public discourse illustrate social significance of the discussed talk shows. For that reason, the paper will focus its analysis on one particular case, the political talk show hosted by Savik Shuster on several Ukrainian TV channels, and will examine whether the analyzed talk show provides for an institutionalized form of public sphere (in Habermas's terms) and what are the implications for democratization processes.

Concept of 'Public Sphere' and Its Implications for Analysis of Television Talk Shows

Western academic tradition of media and communication studies has long been preoccupied with discussion of the relation between modern mass media and democracy. It has become conventional to believe that democracy cannot function properly without freedom of speech that is best secured via mass media. It is also common to view democracy itself conditional on the mass media [1]. Among the abundance of aspects discussed in relation to mass media and democracy, one is central in terms of this study, that is, consideration of mass media as contemporary forms of public sphere.

The concept of "public sphere" initially developed by Habermas [10] to explain the historically essential role of public sphere for emergence of de-

mocracy has been eventually widely referred to by media and communication scholars who extrapolated the concept to the mass media. Habermas's historical account focused on the rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere as benchmarks in the development of democracy as such. In his seminal study, he argued that activity in the cultural public sphere in Western Europe of the 17th century, which involved good mannered conversations about many kinds of small things among equals, in due course spilled over into the political sphere [15, p. 60]. Thus there emerged a forum for the discussion of political, economic and social issues, which laid the ground for informed and critical public opinion formation. Reasoned and critical discourse is a key and essential notion in Habermas's concept of public sphere [5, p. 8].

Habermas's initial conception brought about numerous interpretations of what can be considered a modern form of public sphere. As public communication has been increasingly relocated into the domain of mass media, perception of the mass media as the major embodiment of the public sphere has become mainstream [3, p. 33]. Particularly, television has been regarded the prime institution of the public sphere in modern society [5].

However, Habermas himself has been quite critical about the potential of the mass media to represent public sphere, and particularly to create conditions that would provide for public deliberation and opinion formation in an open way [15, p. 60]. Habermas's pessimism resulted from his "analysis of the way that public relations and commercialization have undermined the autonomy of the bourgeois public sphere", as Lunt and Stenner suggest [15, p. 60]. Habermas criticized the media for providing a pseudo-public sphere, a sphere of public relations foregrounding passive spectatorship rather than real active public debate [14, p. 10].

Yet, it is Habermas's [10] conception of the bourgeois public sphere that has been taken as a starting point for a number of following theorizations and empirical studies of the mass media and talk shows in particular. Most of such theorizations share a common premise viewing public communication and public sphere as means for fostering transparency and accountability in the decision-making process [7]. In such a framework, democracy is indispensably linked to the practices of public communication [1; 5; 8]. Since the scope of modern society does not allow direct participation of large numbers of citizens in a social dialogue, it is argued that the media have become a key setting for public communication and, ultimately, a public sphere in its own [5, p. 8]. Thus, it is generally accepted that the media play a growing role and shape political life to a large extent by providing a framework for political communication [14, p. 4].

However, many theorists question the capacity of the media to serve as a setting for critical and reasoned debates. Such concern goes back to Habermas's argument criticizing the media for promoting passive consumption instead of rational and critical discussion by the public, and offering convenience thinking [4]. Other concerns arise from presumptions grounded in media malaise approach, an umbrella term for theorizations of harmful effects media supposedly have on modern democracy, like that of inducing "political apathy, alienation, cynicism and a loss of social capital" [19, p. 577]. Another argument concerns decline in the critical capacities of public due to monopolization of knowledge in the hands of intermediaries [1, p. 11].

Debates about potential of the media to be a today public sphere have been focused, among other aspects, on the television talk shows of various kinds as they seem to offer a viable communication platform for critical discussion and thus – for informed public opinion formation. However, although the social significance of talk shows seems to be generally acknowledged [22, p. 3], there is no consensus among media and communications theorists as to whether the talk shows facilitate reasoned discussion by providing space for a new kind of public forum or what they offer is just "a travesty of real political debate with no 'real' consequences" [14, p. 1]. On the one hand, talk shows are admitted to offer a discursive space for interaction between ordinary people and institutional representatives thus carrying a democratic potential [24, p. 65]. On the other hand, it has become common to blame the talk shows for dumbing down the discourse and for causing degeneration of public debate. Concerns were raised about the rise of 'punditocracy', meaning that only a restricted circle of experts and opinion leaders are given a voice [23, p. 22]. It is frequently emphasized that the talk shows foreground showmanship rather than substantial discussion of the issues. In his analysis of the role the talk shows play in modern media culture, Munson [18, p. 17] argues that the talk show is "highly plastic, thrives on change, and can package any timely topic into product, spectacle, and performance – all in very short order".

Recent analysis of talk shows has been particularly focused on their entertaining aspect, which goes in line with a general trend of "infotainment" expansion and growing "spectacularization" of media content and formats. Mazzoleni and Schulz [16, p. 251] argue that the media have been increasingly driven by "media logic" which resulted in the "spectacularization" of political communication formats and of political discourse itself. The authors also note that mass media, while constructing the public sphere of information and opinion, control the terms of their exchange. Thus they decide who gets access

to the public, what kind of issues are ascribed principal importance etc. Moreover, as the media colonizes politics, in Meyer's terms [17, p. 50], political actors have to adapt to or even adopt the media's logic and rules [21, p. 3]. For instance, the language of politics embraces that of advertising, public relations, and show business, as noted by Mazzoleni and Schulz [16, p. 251]. This process, "whereby society to an increasing degree is submitted to, or becomes dependent on, the media and their logic" [11, p. 113], has been termed as mediatization. "Mediatization" has been recently widely conceptualized to explain the increasing role of the media in shaping and reshaping relations among all social institutions [13]. The notion of mediatization is also relevant for the present study and discussion, because we can witness that public sphere is not only mediated, but mediatized as well, that is, not only channeled but also shaped by the media. Therefore, there is an analytical need to consider the elements of mediatization as they are manifested in media-driven public sphere.

Application of 'Public Sphere' Concept for the Analysis of Savik Shuster's Political Talk Show

Review of the conceptual discussions around the issue of talk shows as forms of public sphere has established that despite a number of critical arguments that question the relevance of public sphere theory to the analysis of talk shows, media scholars still acknowledge that along with certain limitations, talk shows "nevertheless contribute to public participation, deliberation and public expression" [15, p. 61].

With this premise in mind, the study analyzes one particular instance of presumed public sphere – the case of Savik Shuster's political talk show that has been broadcasted on four different Ukrainian TV channels under different titles since September 2005 up to now. In terms of the format, program producers define it as a 'socio-political talk show'. Given that a talk show genre includes a variety of different forms of talk shows and many kinds of hybridized variations [18] and that there is no strict classification, the analyzed talk show can also be regarded as current affairs talk show [9]. The talk show is a Friday night discussion program. The major focus of the talk show is on politics and political issues. Like all talk shows, the analyzed case features groups of guests and involves audience participation [22]. The format of this talk show was borrowed from Russia, where Shuster hosted a similar program on the NTV television channel. The format provided for discussion of the hottest topic of the week with the guests of the program – famous politicians, officials, experts and opinion leaders. The audience in the studio, claimed by the program's

producers to represent a sample of the entire Ukraine according to sociological criteria, was equipped with a special navigation console supposed to be used as a system of voting. Participants from the audience had to press certain buttons in the course of the program to demonstrate whether they support what is being said or not. At the end of the program, some representatives of the audience had an opportunity to speak shortly. Thus, the format foresaw certain blending of political and expert discussion with some kind of vox pop.

The choice of the talk show for the analysis is explained by several factors. Appearance of Savik Shuster's talk show on Ukrainian television, initially entitled *Svoboda Slova* (translated as *Freedom of Speech*), concurred with the first serious turmoil in political life of Ukraine after the Orange Revolution, that is the resignation of the first Orange Cabinet of Ministers headed by Yuliya Tymoshenko. Political instability in the democratizing Ukraine happened to be a fruitful context for the new talk show. It quickly attracted large audience and eventually turned into one of the most watched programs on Ukrainian television. The format of the talk show was accepted with enthusiasm. From the very beginning of broadcast, observers noted that such new talk shows have significant capacity to become major discussion platforms in the country [33]. As many controversial issues were discussed and politicians openly confronted during live broadcast, the talk show seemed to contribute to the development of public sphere and democracy in Ukraine. Thus, the analyzed talk show received unequalled popularity among discussion programs with a focus on politics in Ukraine. On the peak of its popularity, the talk show attracted up to 50 % of the total TV audience in Ukraine [28]. The format, as well as the content of the talk show became regularly discussed, as can be tracked from the archive of the *Telekrytyka* online publication, a major resource of analytical and news materials about Ukrainian media. The discussed topics, lists of invited guests, manner of the host – have turned into matters of prolific discussions in media and presumably in mass discourse. The content of discussions on live talk show, frequently viewed as happenings on the “main political stage of the country” [37], have been transferred into other domains of discourse¹, contributing to the growing importance of the talk show in the public discourse.

Another illustration of the discussed talk show's significance concerns many “lives” of the talk show. After a prominent success on the ICTV television channel, in a year and a half, in summer 2007, Shuster announced about his transfer to the Inter television channel, one of a few nationwide leading TV

channels in Ukraine [30]. The new talk show was broadcasted under the title *Svoboda Savika Shustera* (transl. as *Savik Shuster's Freedom*), putting a larger emphasis on the individual of the host. The format of the talk show largely remained the same. The minor changes included: new decorations of the studio styled to remind interior of the British Parliament, the audience increased to 200 people, also claimed as representative of the whole country, and more active use of the technology measuring support of the audience. The vox pop part was removed; the new talk show introduced a cartoonist who was drawing cartoons of the speaking guests and demonstrated them either in the course of the talk show or at the end of the program. Given the general popularity of the TV channel, Shuster's talk show secured high rankings. The share of the audience achieved as much as 35 % [32]. At the same time, ICTV channel kept *Svoboda Slova* talk show, but its popularity significantly deteriorated [20].

The next year, in summer of 2008, Shuster left Inter TV Channel, created his own production studio and signed a 3-year contract with TRK Ukraine [36]. Along with the traditional Friday night political talk show that was renamed into *Shuster Live*, the studio produced daily political talk shows, hosted in turns by Shuster and other presenters. Again, the format of the Friday talk show has remained essentially the same, although the shift towards entertainment has become more vivid (musical performances at the end of the program have become common, the scope of invited guests expanded, now including winners of beauty contests, sportsmen etc.). The rankings of the show decreased, partly due to the lower general rankings of the TRK Ukraine, but remained quite high. For instance, the program from December 14, 2009 received its maximum share of the audience, almost 18 % [38].

At the end of 2010 it became known that the TRK Ukraine and Shuster Studio didn't prolong the contract and later Shuster announced that the talk show would be broadcasted on the First National Channel, a state-owned TV channel. The format has undergone some changes. Most importantly, the audience in the studio has no longer represented the entire nation; instead participants have been selected on the grounds of professional background, group interests, age etc. Generally the audience is composed of two of such groups, about 50 people in total. Among the invited audience were lawyers, pensioners, teachers, dentists and even bloggers. The rankings of the talk show on this TV channel are quite high, e. g., the recent programs had a share of 12–15 % of the audience [26; 29].

To conclude, the talk show has remained one of the leaders of TV programs that focus on politics since its launch in late 2005, although migration of the host and the format from channel to channel has

¹ Here I mean that statements of invited politicians, arguments in the studio were eventually reported as news in other media.

led to a growing competition between similar projects. Two out of three TV channels that broadcasted the discussed talk show kept the format on air even after Shuster left the channels. It is Shuster's talk show that is considered to be a pioneer among similar programs in Ukraine; it enjoyed huge success at the beginning and is still one of the leaders on Ukrainian television.

Peculiarities of the talk show's format are further discussed with more scrutiny in relation to criteria for the public sphere.

The analysis of the examined case, which foremost focuses on whether the format of the talk show provides a setting for the public sphere, is largely based on the criteria developed by Ferree et al. [7]. In their article on the four models of the public sphere in modern democracies, Ferree et al. [7] identify such theories of democracy as representative liberal, participatory liberal, discursive and constructionist. Accordingly, they outline how these theories see and integrate conception of the public sphere into their 'matrix' of democracy. The authors come up with developed criteria for a good democratic public discourse, from the perspectives of all four theories. While the approaches to certain criteria differ depending on the theoretical stance, there is more or less shared understanding of what the criteria are. Thus, Ferree et al. [7, p. 316] spot such questions that make a basis for the criteria: who participates in the public discourse; in what sort of the process; how ideas should be presented; and what is the outcome of relation between discourse and decision-making.

Accordingly, the study will follow the framework, apply it to the examined case and provide for commentaries from the perspectives of theories of democracy. Thus, the analysis will cover the following issues:

- who participates in the talk show as guests and as the audience;
- what is the content of the discourse on the talk show;
- how are issues discussed and what communication styles are employed;
- what is the outcome of the discussion.

The format of the analyzed talk show has undergone some changes since its launch back in 2005, as highlighted in the background section. These changes will be mentioned where relevant in the analysis. Yet, it should be noted that the general framework for the discussion offered by the talk show remained the same in the course of its presence on the Ukrainian television.

The first criterion for the analysis concerns participants of the talk show, in terms of both guests and the audience. Generally the talk show hosts around twelve to twenty guests, each or most of whom is given certain amount of time to speak at

the main microphone and express his/her opinion on the discussed matter. Along the line, all the guests discuss the issue while switching to the main microphone one by one, according to the host's invitation. During the broadcast on the TRK Ukraine TV channel the program lasted up to four hours and the number of guests increased respectively. The talk show features primarily politicians who are invited to discuss political issues. There are also experts, officials, and opinion leaders invited. Depending on the raised topic, the talk show may feature some civic activists, professionals from other spheres like education or health care. However, the guests of the talk show are predominantly politicians and they make up to three quarters or even more of the speakers on the talk show. Most of the invited politicians represent the 'political mainstream' of the country, i. e. the ruling party or the coalition and the opposition. At the same time, the talk show occasionally features politicians from relatively small parliamentary parties, former parliamentary parties, 'independent' politicians and non-parliamentary political parties, particularly those representing extremes of political spectrum. The choice of the guests on the talk show has been a recurrent matter for criticism. Particularly, some observers noted that the program features the same guests quite frequently [20; 40]; moreover, it has been suggested that the talk show invites the same people over and over again because of their showmanship and predisposition to make a spectacle instead of substantial discussion [35]. The talk show has been criticized for failing to provide more visibility to experts and journalists compared to politicians [25]. As argued by the observer, it is politicians who drive the format of the most of Ukrainian political talk shows, while experts and journalists are seen as secondary participants.

"Irrespective of how smart, professional, interesting, popular and rank-boosting an expert or journalist is, he will never be able to become a first-rate guest... And vice versa, it doesn't matter how odious, unpopular, roguish and ignorant a politician is, he is secured a seat at the head of the table" [25].

Judgmental as it is, the statement however illustrates one strand in public reaction to the principles guiding selection of guests and hierarchy of importance applied to guests.

Indeed, the analysis of invited participants for the talk show, demonstrates that the talk show is preoccupied with and opts for politicians mainly. Politicians are the chief guests regardless of the discussed topic, be it corruption, education, pensions, foreign affairs, etc. At the same time, there is a recent trend to invite more stakeholders from civil society and business, not only journalists and experts, as it was at the beginning of the program. Yet, the

number of civil society representatives is still very small in proportion to the rest of the invited guests; as is the amount of time given to them for expressing themselves.

Another facet of analysis in terms of participants of the public discourse exemplified by the examined talk show concerns the audience. The talk show producers emphasized the novelty of the format in that the talk show hosted an audience selected on the basis of the sociological criteria and thus represented a sample of the whole country. The audience, composed of 100–200 individuals (depending on the TV channel that broadcasted the program), has been prescribed a role of the general public that reacted to sayings of the guests by using a special navigation console. Thus, the audience has had to constantly indicate their attitude to guests' talk by pressing certain buttons first on the console, then – on the computer. Apart from that, the audience has been asked to vote some particular questions before the program, in the course of the program and at the end of the program, thus providing a sort of public opinion poll. This peculiarity of the format was noted as important and appealing due to the brought possibility to see how the audience reacts to each statement of guest participants. In his interview prior to the first program broadcasting, Shuster also stressed the progressive role of the format, arguing that audience's voting in the course of the program is sort of direct democracy tool,

“it (format) really shows how public opinion is changing in a live broadcast, how powerful the word is and how it can influence not only people who hear these words, but also how it governs reaction of politicians who say these words. So in this sense, it's a full interactive: a person goes out to the public and public evaluates this person in a live broadcast, in real time. In a sense, this is an exercise of direct democracy, if you want...” [31].

Producers of the talk show have been making a big emphasis on interactivity of the talk show, introducing some new options in the course of the talk show's presence on Ukrainian television.

At first, the format foresaw a vox pop part at the end of the program, when people from the audience were given about 30 seconds to summarize their impression of the discussion. Later this part was removed; the reception and feedback of the audience have been largely expressed through their voting of certain questions and levels of support to guests' sayings. The talk show, however, has been featuring different kinds of short TV bridges with smaller audiences from the streets, other towns, institutions etc. One of the minor changes in the format that was introduced when the talk show switched to the TRK Ukraine and has remained since that, was the new option for the public to send messages via email

with feedback on goings-on in the studio during live broadcast. Some of the messages have been read and discussed, which added another dimension for interactivity. Recently, the talk show producers announced about the plans to increase interactivity of the talk show ever more, by installing special equipment into the TV sets of the off-studio audience, which will allow them to vote and reflect their attitude to the guests' talk as if they are in the studio [39].

While the format of the analyzed talk show makes a big emphasis on tracking the reaction of the audience on the sayings and goings-on in the studio, the audience itself is largely silenced. The presence of the audience is thus peripheral in relation to the central role of the speakers – invited guests. The peripheral presence of the audience is also manifested in the spatial setting of the talk show, an important aspect for the analysis of talk shows' formats [3]. Thus, in the case of Savik Shuster's talk show, the audience is clearly demarcated from the guests. The audience in the studio is also not allowed to approach the guests during the breaks, as has been reported by one of the Ukrainian bloggers who took part in the program, where bloggers constituted one group of the audience ¹.

“The duty of the button-pressers (audience) was simple – to press two buttons. If they were seldom pressed, there was a message urging to “work”. All the rest was prohibited. It was prohibited to cross the special line, it was prohibited to approach the ‘guests’, it was prohibited to talk etc. Special overseers with radio sets secured that all these prohibitions weren't violated. They looked like impounders of cattle” ².

Thus, the talk show's format sets a framework where the role of the audience is basically limited to that of spectator who can only express support or disagreement with the speakers by means of electronic voting. Thus, the audience is not involved into discussion, discussion is put on the audience. Given the limitations set by the format, the audience can hardly directly confront the guests. Yet, there were some cases when people from the audience were given a voice, most prominent of which being the case with “children of war”, the term used to describe the generation born during and in the aftermath of the Second World War. The “children of war” were invited as one group of the audience for the talk show broadcasted on May 6, 2011. The topic for discussion concerned political and historical implications of the World War II, traditionally one of the hottest issues in Ukraine in terms of ideology. In the course of the fierce discussion, one of the members of the Party of Regions, a ruling party,

¹ See <http://gorbachevsky.livejournal.com/159321.html>.

² Ibid.

noted that those people in the audience are not true veterans of the war, moreover, that they are fake, thus implying that their attitude expressed through voting cannot represent that of real veterans and thus has less or no value at all. People in the audience were indignant at being called 'fake'; and eventually the host gave them an opportunity to express themselves verbally, which resulted in very sharp and critical responses in the face of the guests¹. The episode was widely acclaimed in the country (discussed on Facebook, in blogs)², particularly because it was virtually the first occasion when ordinary people, intimidated by politicians, could respond during live broadcast; and the response was extremely bitter and straightforward. This case, however, serves as an illustration of exception rather than a rule, because generally the framework of the discussed talk show does not allow for direct response from the audience.

To conclude, the talk show under investigation leans toward elite inclusion, with a particular interest in political elites. It also reserves primarily a passive role of a spectator for the audience in the studio, putting them out of the dialogue. According to the framework developed by Ferree et al. [7], such principles guiding the selection of participants are more consistent with the representative liberal theory's view of the public sphere. This theory values elite inclusion over stronger and more active versions of popular inclusion and favors expertise. However, the rest three theories analyzed in the work share the fundamental value of popular inclusion, that is inclusion of actors from the periphery as well, particularly civil society actors. Another important premise of the public sphere concept is that it "offers an opportunity for communication across social divisions" [15, p. 69]. Voices of those without power are to be placed on "an equal footing with the voices of established power". In this respect, the talk show fails to satisfy the requirement, although it has been modifying its format towards increasing diversity of invited actors. At the same time, the voices of the invited actors from the periphery remain largely unheard compared to those of politicians.

The next level of analysis concerns content of the public discourse. According to Ferree et al. [7], representative liberals favor the process that works as a free marketplace of ideas, stressing the positive role of pluralism of beliefs and opinions that should however be strengthened by arguments. Another significant notion shared by three other traditions to different extents is the notion of empowerment. Empowerment is seen as a result of public participation

that transforms individuals into engaged citizens [7]. With regard to such criteria, the analyzed talk show fails to provide either a free marketplace of ideas or empowerment of participating citizens, partly due to its focus on the political issues rather than on policies. The analysis of the topics selected as issues for discussion shows the preoccupation with matters related to political process and political developments in the country and outside (e. g., discussions of conflicts between political actors; frequent discussions of Ukraine-Russia relationship, particularly with respect to gas issues). Generally the topics are framed as rhetorical questions (for instance, "Will Ukrainians find a common language?", "Is there life after pension?", "Has the Cold War with Russia started?", "What Prime Minister can save Ukraine?" etc.). As a result, discourse of the talk show usually evolves around personal speculations and opinions of the invited guests about political developments in the country. It has also been noted that the participants (frequently represented by the same people) repeat the same messages over and over again [34], which makes their discourse way too predictable.

This brings up the next level of analysis, that is, the "how" question. How ideas should be presented and debated on the talk show, from the perspectives of public sphere conceptualizations within theories of democracy? Communication style of actors in public discourse is one of the major focuses of the mentioned theories. While the representative liberal tradition favors "a strong form of *civility* and *emotional detachment*" as the proper manner of communication [7, p. 318], the discursive tradition emphasizes mutual respect, dialogue and deliberativeness, the latter referring to "recognizing, incorporating, and rebutting the argument of others" [7, p. 306]. Since both civility and deliberativeness are accepted by all four theories (although with certain reservations), they will be employed as points of departure in the analysis of how actors communicate on the Savik Shuster's political talk show.

From the very outset, the talk show raised mainly hot political issues and invited actors from competing political elites, which resulted in high-pitched discussions, involving provocative questions to opponents and mutual accusations. In due course, such communication manner has jellied into a distinct trend – political actors have been increasingly practicing mutual intimidations, manipulative shift of discussion focus, avoidance of direct responses, juggling with facts and statements, flirtation with the audience. The manner of political actors to debate the issues on the talk show has been widely addressed by media critics in Ukraine. It has been noted that Ukrainian political actors are used to publicly settle accounts with each other and avoid true

¹ The episode is available on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=QR-8txQ_6Rw.

² See, for example, http://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=128545137222804&id=100000048894881; <http://blogs.pravda.com.ua/authors/okara/4dc5998b4d194/>.

discussion, which has all found manifestation in the political talk shows [34]. Critics also argue that the talk shows, including the analyzed one, “are frequently turning into shouting matches where mudslinging is the main weapon rather than powerful arguments” [20]. Apart from straightforward attacks on each other, guests of the talk show also employ less obvious techniques to impose their agenda. Although they are invited to discuss particular issues, they frequently neglect certain questions and switch the focus of discussion in the direction that is most favourable for them. As highlighted earlier, the way issues for discussion are framed in the talk show also contributes to high-handed way of communication about the issues.

Thus, it turns out that participation of most political actors in the talk show is guided by the need to secure constant publicity and show off rather than take part in a reasoned debate. Accordingly, most of the participants among political actors tend to impose their viewpoint, demeaning that of opponents. As a result, their discourse reminds anything but a reasoned dialogue.

Analysis of the communication style of invited guests, particularly politicians, shows that it largely does not meet criteria of civility and deliberativeness as essential principles guiding discussion. Although the host of the talk show makes some attempts to frame discussion as a dialogue, the discourse of the guests is not aimed at seeking common grounds by means of discussion.

This aspect is closely related to the fourth pattern of analysis, the one concerning the outcome of the discourse. While the representative liberal tradition makes an emphasis on closure, meaning that public discourse should result in decision-making, discursive theory values closure that stems from a consensus achieved via dialogue [7, p. 318]. The other traditions are concerned with “avoiding premature closure” that can impose decisions on the less powerful. As highlighted earlier, the analysis of communication style and content of discourse shows that political actors participating in the talk show are largely preoccupied with self-promoting and demeaning opponents rather than fostering dialogue. As a result, their discourse does not aim for consensus; instead it pursues the goal of rhetorical victory over the opponents. Nor does their discourse aim for closure, as the participants seem to be focusing on the process of debate rather than on achieving certain decision.

Conclusions

The proposed analysis of the Savik Shuster’s political talk show from the perspective of public sphere conceptualizations demonstrates that the talk show does not meet most of the criteria shared by some or all considered theories of democracy. The talk show offers quite limited coverage of actors from the periphery, favoring political elites. The setting of the talk show allows political actors who constitute the core of the invited guests to neglect principles of a reasoned dialogue. Consequently, their discourse does not intend for consensus or common decision, but rather revolves around their own posture.

The analyzed talk show has also been increasingly criticized by local media observers who argue that the talk show does not make any change in society because the discourse of participating political actors is predictable, hollow and not intended for a true dialogue. However, the explored talk show does offer a platform for discussion and a meeting point for citizens and elites, which in some cases can lead to open discussion of matters of concern. The talk show thus can offer some impulse for fostering public sphere although it alone can hardly be considered as such, because public sphere cannot be represented by one instance in a society that is still undergoing democratization. Instead, the democratization process would be strengthened by promotion of many public spheres, many platforms for reasoned dialogue across social divisions that would all create a critical discursive environment for democratic transformations.

It should also be noted that many of the criticisms of the analyzed talk show concern those issues that illustrate the wider process of mediatization of politics (for instance, showmanship instead of honest debate). Therefore, such media-driven effects on talk shows and presumed public sphere cannot be ignored in the analysis. At the same time, they present a big challenge for conceptualizing and studying the mediatized public sphere, particularly with regard to partial democracies like Ukraine, as most of the existing literature on mediatization concerns developed democracies [11]. In this respect, further research of audience perception of such talk shows that would encompass analysis of how mediatization effect on public discourse is conceived by the audience (both in the studio and off-studio) could have far-reaching implications for the study of mediatized public sphere in contemporary partial democracies.

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ПОЛІТИЧНІ ТЕЛЕВІЗІЙНІ ТОК-ШОУ В ПОСТПОМАРАНЧЕВІЙ УКРАЇНІ: ПРИКЛАД ПОЯВИ ПУБЛІЧНОЇ СФЕРИ?

У статті досліджено демократизаційний потенціал телевізійних політичних ток-шоу на українському телебаченні, проаналізовано, чи можна вважати популярне політичне ток-шоу Савіка Шустера сучасним втіленням публічної сфери. Використовуючи концепцію публічної сфери, розроблену Юргеном Габермасом, автор досліджує, якою мірою аналізоване ток-шоу задовольняє нормативні критерії концепту публічної сфери.

Ключові слова: політичні телевізійні ток-шоу, демократизація, публічна сфера, медіа в Україні.

Матеріал надійшов 09.08.2012