Deploying Identity for Democratic Ends on *Jan Publiek* – A Flemish Television Talk Show

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ABSTRACT If public self-expression is a crucial feature of democracy, how might it work on the democratic – or at least, mass – medium par excellence, television? Television talk shows often allow 'ordinary' participants the opportunity to express themselves, i.e. deploy identities, feelings and opinions, presumably to further their own ends. This article uses speech act theory and Bakhtinian genre theory to analyze the talk on *Jan Publiek*, a Flemish talk show. This close reading helps to determine how two of the 20 'ordinary' participants co-created shifting and even contradictory identities with other participants, the host, the producers, the conventions of television talk shows and larger discourses such as those of gender and class. In these two cases, the participants seem mostly to fail in employing the medium of *Jan Publiek* to achieve their stated aims. The authors claim that while discourses may never be completely transparent, their means of functioning can still be better understood. All participants of television – producers, actors, viewers, media scholars – can benefit from the kind of media literacy to which this article contributes.

KEY WORDS Bakhtinian genre theory ◆ class ◆ democratic expression ◆ Flemish television ◆ gender and identity formation ◆ media literacy ◆ speech act theory ◆ television talk shows

Recent critical analyses of television talk shows differ considerably in their assessments of whether such shows contribute to, or detract from, the expansion of democratic discourse. Livingston and Lunt (1994) weigh in on the positive; Peck (1994) and Carpentier (2001), who see unjust

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ideologies at work, conclude in the negative; Dixon (2001) is equivocal. While acknowledging talk shows' role in circulating dominant discourses, both Kevin Glynn (2000), in *Tabloid Culture*, and Jane Shattuck (1997), in *The Talking Cure*, observe discourses multiplicitous and contradictory, within which, they assert, are sometimes spaces for those outside the centers of power to speak, or to have their interests represented in ways that might not only mimic dominant discourses. We, too, share this modest belief in the democratic potential of certain television talk shows, and find even more encouragement in a talk show aired in Belgium, *Jan Publiek*. In order to trace the complicated relationship between democratic expression and identity formation, we believe that the talk on television talk shows should be examined more closely, to see how language builds in dialogical and performative fashion (drawing from Bakhtin, 1986, and Austin, 1975, respectively). As language is performed, so are identities (Bucholtz, 1999). Our claim is that the producers, host and panelists of *Jan Publiek* work dialogically to produce identities from which and through which they can launch their personal and political plans.

Identity formation and democracy can be seen to come together in Young's notion of 'self-development': 'Just social institutions provide conditions in socially recognized settings, and enable [citizens] to play and communicate with others or express their feelings and perspectives on social life in contexts where others can listen' (Young, 2000: 31–2). In such play, provisional identities can be formed and made use of to further one's own political interests. Two problems present themselves: the identities are unstable and co-created: individuals do not have complete control over them; television as a medium (expressed in this case through the format of the talk show) has its own 'rules' and further affects the abilities of individual performers to shape their identities and achieve their political (and other) aims. Through close analysis of the two cases presented in this article, we expect to show how two 'ordinary people' managed their identities on a talk show that was created to afford its participants the kind of 'self-development' to which Young alludes.

Despite the equity aims of the Belgian social welfare state, the public television station that produced the show and the host who created it, we note that some panelists on *Jan Publiek* were able to speak more than others, on average, throughout the 16 episodes of the first season. We would like to examine how this happened. To this end, we have identified one panelist who spoke more, on average, than her colleagues and one who spoke less. Employing the terms of identity politics initially, we can say the first of these is a 48-year-old middle-class woman (Betty), the second, a 49-year-old working-class man (Damien), both Caucasian, both native Flemish. The two panelists' contributions are contrastive yet, in the end, perhaps similar in effect. Betty at first appears to be masterful in her creation of a speech genre that seems fully to express her views, bridging

her interests with those of the show. Damien, however, relies upon genres better suited to bar life, refusing or neglecting to alter them for mass public consumption via *Jan Publiek*. But however much control Betty appears to have over her 'message' and her identity, we sense some discord between her views and those of the show, including its host and audience. By the end of his time on *Jan Publiek*, Damien was estranged from host and audience: his rebellious identity carried forth his working-class interests and simultaneously brought them to ruin.

We identify the characteristic speech acts and speech genres used by each panelist to intervene in the talk, since these are the primary means by which panelists can act on a talk show. For Austin (1975), an utterance is a performance comprised of at least two parts: it is a locutionary act (roughly speaking, it has semantic content: 'I am Betty' tells us something about Betty) with illocutionary force (e.g. the force of announcing an identity: making that identity happen) and often with perlocutionary effects on their hearers. One of those effects is the responsive utterance of the listener: this is Bakhtin's territory. For Bakhtin, the utterance is a speech genre, dialogic in nature. Thus, while Austin brings our attention to the action that is language, Bakhtin continually reminds us that language comes from somewhere and heads toward something. Each utterance/speech genre is at the outset in dialogue with previously uttered genres – even an individual word is 'shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents' (Bakhtin, 1981: 276) that arise from all the former uses of that word, whether known or unknown to the speaker. As well, the speaker always anticipates reception, choosing words and genres with response in mind. Thus, any individual genre will be virtually vibrating with an interanimating set of meanings that are grounded in history and social relations.

In this article, we observe how each speech act or speech genre calls forth more speech acts by other panelists and/or the host. Identities are thereby enacted, set into dialogic relation, altered, multiplied, renounced, and so on. This occurs, we assert, even though panelists rarely take consecutive turns, most talk on *Jan Publiek* being mediated by the host. Indirectly and by degrees, panelists realize some few of their original intentions, as revealed in interviews with producers and researchers. It should not surprise us if some panelists seem 'freer' than others, given the social inequities to which everyone is subject, yet our task is to trace out the connections each speaker makes with pre-existing speech genres, including those whose world views, or ideologemes (Bakhtin, 1981) bespeak the dominating forces of our times. Dominating ideologies notwithstanding, *Jan Publiek* suggests to us that it is still possible to be surprised.

JAN PUBLIEK IN THE CONTEXT OF FLEMISH TELEVISION

Belgium is comprised of three linguistic and sociopolitical communities, Flemish, French and German, each with its own locally regulated broadcast system. The largest is the 6-million strong Dutch-speaking population in Flanders. The Flemish media consists of one public broadcast organization, the VRT, with two television channels; one private broadcast company, VTM, with two channels and several regional television companies. In total, most Flemish households receive more than 30 television channels (from MTV and CNN to Dutch, French, German, British, Spanish public and commercial networks). Being government funded, VRT – which broadcasts *Jan Publiek* – is required to render certain democratic services to the public, including providing reliable news, educational programming and 'healthy entertainment for all sections of the population' (VRT, 1997).

In developing *Jan Publiek* for broadcast on VRT, the producer, Jan Van Rompaey, who had had more than two decades' experience in hosting television and radio talk shows, heeded the findings of a study by the Commission of Affirmative Action of the VRT, which had concluded that women were underrepresented in most Jan Van Rompaey talk show broadcasts (Michielsens, 1991). The title of *Jan Publiek*, or Joe Public, is hardly gender-neutral, but otherwise *Jan Publiek* producers strove to represent women and men equally on the program, and they had other democratic aims as well. Broadcast from January 1997 to May 1999, Jan Van Rompaey carved a new path with the discussion program *Jan Publiek*: the new program format offered opportunities for a panel of ordinary people, always the same men and women, to share their opinions and feelings with each other (this article examines only the first season, however). The host (simultaneously his own producer) together with his director created the program format of *Jan Publiek*, drawn in part from talk shows from the Netherlands, France and Britain. Although the host distanced himself from shows such as *Jerry Springer*, in an interview with Spee and Carpentier, Jan Van Rompaey voiced his admiration for the American and European trend of featuring ordinary people on television talk shows.

The panel of the show consisted of 10 men and 10 women, who discussed a wide range of topics during 16 consecutive emissions, broadcast live in prime time for about one-and-a-half to two hours per episode. The selection for the panel began in June 1997, when the production team of *Jan Publiek* launched a national call (via television, radio and newspapers) for candidates to participate in a panel of 'ordinary people'. The candidates had to fill in a motivation form and a short curriculum vita, and they were subjected to a discussion test in front of the production team. The final 20 panel members were selected out of 220 candidates.

Beforehand, the research center of the VRT had created an ideal profile of the panel of 20 ordinary people, based upon sociodemographic criteria and communication skills (VRT-studiedienst, 1997). They determined that the ideal panel should consist of 10 men and 10 women, people from different age groups (three above 55 years old, seven between 35 and 54, eight between 18 and 34 and two between 15 and 17), with a diverse occupational and educational background (students, one unemployed person, two housewives, workers, retired persons, self-employed people, employees, a businessman). Communication skills such as speaking clearly, having clear-cut opinions and wishing to express them, and being spontaneous and telegenic were mentioned as important selection criteria. The ideal profile stated that two-thirds of the panel should be just ordinary people ('with whom the audience at home can identify'). The other third of the panel could be described as more strident personalities (e.g. a more philosophical character, a liberated woman, a real businessman), with more unusual or headstrong opinions.

In an interview, the host of the program argued that the gender balance in the panel was a logical decision:

> We had argued that we have to have 10 men and 10 women. Everybody agreed on that, eh, although of course you could – if you are looking for quality in all possible directions – then you probably have to drop [this criterion], but we did not. We were convinced the need for gender parity – 10 men and 10 women – was self-evident. (Interview with the host, Jan Van Rompaey, done by Sonja Spee and Nico Carpentier, December 1999; in Spee, 2003: 453)

Other sociodemographic criteria are evident in the final choice of the panelists: two women from a non-Flemish ethnic origin, three youngsters (21 years old and younger, two female, one male), two older people (older than 70, one man and one woman), two gay men, as well as politically right- and left-wing people. In the Flemish press this panel was referred to as 'Little Flanders', alluding to its representational nature.

ORDINARY TALK ON TELEVISION

That the producers of *Jan Publiek* should attempt a live television talk show featuring ordinary citizens who have no special training, indeed, have never appeared before on television, is audacious and laudatory. Even though *Jan Publiek* was partly created through the democratic Enlightenment principle of equal access for all, still the 'rules' of television production – largely a commercial enterprise in Europe and the USA – require something more populist than democratic. For instance, television is generally expected to entertain. So, if our Flemish citizen is going to

speak her or his mind on issues of the day, including some of high civic import, it will be under the auspices of spectacle, sound-bite, and, audience empathy. Considering all this, the careful control host and production team try to maintain is understandable. The producers must keep the show moving, must keep the talk as compelling as possible, and yet contribute in some constructive way to the rational, democratic policies of the Flemish government, as the VRT charter explicitly states. Given these conditions, we see *Jan Publiek* (and other shows of its type) as striking experiments in the democratic use of mass media.

Jan Publiek depends heavily on the actions of the experienced host. The host is the one with the most interventions: he gives permission to speak to the panel members and he asks the questions; by doing so he leads the discussion. He introduces the topic and the subtopics and interviews the guests. Turn-taking occurs mainly through the host, as in typical classroom discourse (Cazden, 1988), but Van Rompaey is perhaps more concerned than most teachers to allow everyone a chance to speak. As in other popular talk shows, for example, *Oprah Winfrey* (Peck, 1994; Rapping, 1987; Shattuck, 1997), Jan Van Rompaey, often employs a therapeutic discourse, designed to draw from the participants their feelings on issues of civic moment. Thus (formerly) private and public discourses are both called for. Although it is hardly the case that anything goes on *Jan Publiek*, our analysis shows that a remarkable variety of public/private spheres are called upon in the articulation of individual utterances.

NOT EVERYONE LOVES COMRADE BETTY

During the 16 emissions of the first season of *Jan Publiek*, the panelist Betty spoke frequently, more than her counterparts. She was always poised, assertive and well spoken in offering her views, which, we academic authors must say, comported well with ours. We identify with her, admire her, and feel she speaks for us. She is – and we pronounce it through our own speech act – The People's Advocate. She had already during the selection process made it clear to the program makers that she supported the women's movement, that she was a member of the Socialist Party and a trade unionist. She indicated to the producers that she wanted to express her own personal and political opinions in public. A schoolteacher with the city of Antwerp, known for its leftist educational policies, Betty often identifies herself in this way on the show.

She requests the floor frequently, gets it more often than her fellow panelists, and holds it by virtue of her excellent speech-making skill. Betty brings to *Jan Publiek* a town hall idiom, and her speech genre most typically is that of an impromptu political speech. In the episode on 'Migrant Riots', Betty gets the floor after a highly animated discussion between two

panel members who were trading heated comments back and forth. The opening speech act is an announcement of her identity:

> *Betty:* Well, I'm a teacher in vocational training and we organize training practice, and it's not the first time that the place for teaching practice is canceled the minute they hear there are immigrants youths involved.
>
> *Van Rompaey:* Some kind of discrimination . . .
>
> *Betty:* And what concerns me the most with the young people here, they're in Belgium now and here they'll stay. In a couple of years they will be one of the foundations of our society and if we don't do anything to make that foundation as solid as possible, the system will collapse and we, Belgian people, are cooperating in this. And I think that's terrible [*some members of the studio audience clap*]. (13 November 1997)

Both at the outset and at the end, Betty's speech blends in with the personal discourses required on *Jan Publiek*. We see Betty's allegiance to the personal as feminist and democratic, something perhaps akin to the way personal discourses were used in second wave feminist consciousness-raising. This, we believe, is why she continually introduces herself from her personal and political positionality. This language shares a family relation with the chatty and therapeutic discourses on television talk shows – indeed, Rapping (1987) argues that talk shows and the self-help industry coopt second wave consciousness-raising. So, in a number of ways, Betty fits into the talk on *Jan Publiek*, employing some form of personal language, even though she sometimes side-steps Van Rompaey's invitations to provide the merely personal. She speaks as Citizen Advocate, as well, a potential incarnation of Jan Publiek. Additionally, she meets sound-bite standards by staying almost fiercely on topic, making a clear point, doing it quickly, moving from specific personal experience to generalization, then to a rousing call to action. Betty clearly has a talent for speaking under the unusually tight restrictions of television talk, and especially, talk on *Jan Publiek*, which elevates the principle of equal access for its 20 regular panelists and guest experts above esthetics, drama, or indeed, intellectual substance. That Betty succeeds in having her say is in many ways remarkable.

Jan Publiek may be a middle-class institution, as we earlier asserted, created in part out of Enlightenment principles, but we sense a strong populist undertow. Betty is our hero, but probably not *Jan Publiek*'s – its host, panelists, audience. One identity for Betty is surely that of Socialist-Feminist Teacher: to us, Comrade Betty. But to employ either locution is not to assure its perlocutionary effect on the entire audience. The *Jan Publiek* website makes dialogic rejoinder to Betty's own announcements of identity, replete with wry commentary: 'Betty works as a schoolteacher (which we could have told).' And frequently enough, when Betty begins a speech by positioning herself, the host interrupts with 'Yes, we know, go

on, go on.' Both of these jibes seem good-natured, but it is apparent that an irritant is present.

While we emphasize Betty's political affiliations, we think that *Jan Publiek* probably emphasizes her identity as schoolteacher. We believe they may experience her not as a comrade who delivers brilliant, mini-, political speeches, but as one who lecturers others from on high – but not very high (she is, after all, a woman). Hence their dialogic rejoinder to her announcement of identity: 'There she goes again, that Mouthy Schoolteacher'. When we reflect upon how Betty creates her 'character' on the show, we see that she concentrates on the speech-making, rather than more intimately addressing her fellow panelists (or the audience at home) with jokes and asides. She is, in fact, someone with the 'strident personality' that the producers of *Jan Publiek* were looking for, the 'type' of liberated woman, philosophical orator, and so forth. But they were careful to choose just one.

DAMIEN: BITTER MAN, GADFLY, JERK?

We begin simply by identifying Damien as a working-class man. He never announces any identity, but he does see himself in an oppositional relation to the whole of *Jan Publiek*. He says in an interview that his objective on the show is to 'step on tender toes'. If Damien is engaging in something akin to the activity of Bakhtin's carnival world, deploying an identity as The Deflater of Official Discourse, the problem is that he isn't in that world, he's on *Jan Publiek*, and he's not part of a crowd, he's alone; his mission looks to us to be quite complex and dubious. Nonetheless, we think Damien succeeds occasionally in calling attention to the Polite Society side of *Jan Publiek*. Ultimately, though, it appears that Damien himself was unsatisfied with his performance on the show, and we think we can see why. By the end of the season he had to accept an identity he did not want – 'a bitter man' – forged in part by the dynamic interplay between him and the other players on the show.

We can see Damien flouting the rules of polite society during an episode on prostitution (20 November 1997), featuring a woman advocate for prostitutes' rights. *Jan Publiek* host and panelists comport themselves carefully, treating the guest with the middle-class respect due her as Citizen Activist. There are no embarrassing moments (and no other male panelists speak) until Damien cuts through with an off-color joke. Prostitutes could charge a value-added tax to their services because, he avers, 'a man goes in smaller than he comes out'. The prostitute quips in reply: 'No, that's wrong: the man comes out smaller.' The illocutionary force of her speech act – I win – produces the effect that she implies (Damien *is* now 'smaller'). Obviously, both guest and panelist

know the favorite speech genre of the working-class bar: competitive, put-down jokes not unlike the 'signifying' genres Labov (1972) and Smitherman (1977) see in African American street talk. Also similar to signifying, such language works through human types (The Mother, The Whore, The Stupid Guy), many of which sharply etch lines of sex, gender (The Fag is certainly a type), race, ethnicity (Polish jokes) and so on. Such direct but playful confrontation would create solidarity in a bar (no doubt signaling exclusion, as well), but on *Jan Publiek* works against Damien, marking him as vulgar, rude, and – of course – sexist. Offending people may have been what Damien originally had in mind in joining *Jan Publiek*, yet we're fairly certain that he doesn't want to be the butt of his own joke. And the stakes turn out to be much higher than at the bar among friends.

As might be expected, Damien's speech acts do not unite him with other panelists. Another panelist, Rudi, does criticize him for making fun of dieting, but otherwise the panelists tend to ignore him. Sometimes his aims are so difficult to comprehend that others simply cannot respond. An example comes from one emission called 'The Law is the Law' (23 October 1997), where the host riddles the panelists: 'In an American prison, where smoking is forbidden, a condemned man uttered his last wish which was to smoke one cigarette. What would you do, if you were the governor?'

> *Damien:* I would not give it to him.
>
> *Van Rompaey:* Why not?
>
> *Damien:* Bad for his health.
>
> *Van Rompaey:* Ha ha . . . okay, but besides that. It would have been a matter of no concern if he were still healthy or not.
>
> *Damien:* If necessary two
>
> *Van Rompaey:* if necessary two. Err … Astrid? (23 October 1997)

Damien seems to understand the riddle as a parody of legal hairsplitting. His speech act, 'bad for his health', is a complicated rejoinder, providing the punchline for the joke, whose illocutionary force is: How ridiculous of you to pose this question! Even given a second chance, Damien continues to collide with the host, employing a final rejoinder that falls flat ('if necessary two'), leaving Van Rompaey perplexed. Damien's eccentric speech acts impair Van Rompaey in his identity as host, surely a rather stressful position, as imagined by him and the producers. This is probably one of the reasons Damien is called upon less often than many other panelists.

Indeed, during one episode, Van Rompaey makes Damien's large family ('14 children' – and so many girls!) the object of a joke, transforming Damien's identity into a kind of exotic creature, whose feelings must

be evoked via the same therapeutic discourse that the host both relishes and satirizes:

> *Van Rompaey:* Has it traumatized you?
>
> *Damien*: No, not traumatized. What I've missed is a brother, but hey, it was the way it was.
>
> *Van Rompaey:* Yes.
>
> *Damien:* I've had to be satisfied with 13 sisters.
>
> *Van Rompaey:* Yes.
>
> *Damien:* But 13 beauties, and they still are. (2 October 1997)

If the host's use of therapeutic discourse is ironical ('Has it traumatized you?'), the shell-shocked Damien can only react, rather than play freely. He seems to try to resituate Van Rompaey as a gallant man when he pronounces his sisters to be '13 beauties.' His fairy tale language (Propp, 1968), however, just seems peculiar when juxtaposed to Van Rompaey's language of therapy and television talk show confession, where women's identities are highly differentiated and concepts like 'beauty' are critiqued, even if not to the extent that many feminists might desire. The contrasts in language use bring to mind Bernstein's (1975) terminology of the restricted and elaborated codes (used for working- and middle-class speakers, respectively). Perhaps Damien cannot be blamed for not speaking the middle-class code. But we doubt that he calculated the potential costs of his choice, if indeed it was a choice.

During the last segment of the show, the host quotes audience members' description of Damien as 'a bitter man; he seems to be a bitter man', right to his face. On this occasion, Damien has no verbal come-back, only a tight defensive smile. The host asks, point-blank, 'Are you a bitter man?' Damien agrees to this enforced identity, but the host presses on: the speech genre by now is clearly prosecutorial. Damien has to say twice after that, 'No more questions', as though releasing himself from the witness stand. In a later interview, he said that he felt surrounded by 'the five cameras' of the *Jan Publiek* studio. Maybe the cameras – perhaps symbolizing the wider experience of the television program – magnified the loneliness of the man who carried out his oppositional project alone. We could imagine a different trajectory for Damien's narrative, with a host more relaxed and able to allow for working-class playfulness. The objective of much bar-room talk is really rather democratic, and ought to be of some use in the public sphere.

CONCLUSION

Nancy Fraser explains in a general way why it is that public spheres which are nominally democratic actually are not:

> Historians . . . have shown that discursive interaction within official bourgeois public spheres has consistently been governed by protocols of style and decorum that were also markers of status inequality. These protocols functioned *informally* to marginalize women, plebeians, and members of subordinate racialized groups, preventing them from participating as peers *even after their formal incorporation*. (Fraser, 1995: 289)

It appears to us that public discourse, as seen on *Jan Publiek*, is changing; it is also very mixed in terms of class, gender, modes of communication, and so on. *Jan Publiek* is both a bourgeois and a populist institution; it stands for good taste on public television and the Enlightenment principle of open public debate, but it also endeavors to be appealing, even entertaining, to a mass audience. An evening talk show hosted by a man, one might think *Jan Publiek* to be masculine; however, it also employs discussion topics (e.g. dieting) and discourses (therapeutic, confessional) that are typically gendered feminine. Betty's speech-making in the public sphere – itself partaking of masculine and feminine – is both welcomed and criticized. Damien's traditional masculine bar-room language, which might have garnered populist appeal, somehow does not.

In neither Betty nor Damien's case will it suffice to reference discourse in a general way. Instead, we must see these actors in specific dialogue with others. It is particularly telling that neither Betty nor Damien interact with their panelist colleagues, although some other panelists do hail each other. Betty did receive more speaking time than Damien, but both are somewhat isolated. The speech genres they use and the identities they forge do not harmonize with the social world imagined by *Jan Publiek*. On this show, panelists make their offerings in a light-hearted way, joking in harmony with the host and/or other panelists, speaking concisely and intelligibly, addressing oneself to the audience in a friendly if not intimate fashion (through confession, etc.). Probably unintentionally, Damien creates a 'bitter' identity: he deals roughly with feminine topics like dieting and engages crudely with a guest, and finally, locks horns with the host, who for various reasons, including the fact that a live television show is in progress, cannot afford to have his masculine and masterly position threatened. Damien's preferred speech act, the joke, does work on *Jan Publiek*, as the host demonstrates, but only when employed lightly. Meanwhile, Betty, thoroughly middle-class, well-behaved and well-educated, threatens the populist underpinnings of the show, deliberately rooted in feminine therapeutic discourses which she does not interpret as

femin*ist*. She avoids making comments on her personal life, creating an identity of invulnerability. Her chosen speech genre is the political speech, which places the speaker in a hierarchical positioning (knowledgeable speech-maker to unknowledgeable audience), and although Betty alters the form to meet sound-bite requirements, she either doesn't have time or doesn't make time to create the ethos necessary to have her authoritative positioning acceptable. Our guess is that she would have to do so by artfully employing the primary discourses of the television talk show: chat, therapy, confession. Such a ploy would be helpful in creating a place for her political passion (including abstract principles like justice) for on *Jan Publiek*, passions are 'personal'. To a mass audience, Betty's identity is that of a bossy woman; Damien's a rude jerk. As a result, both Betty and Damien are criticized by the host, other panelists, and/or the audience.

We began our project by thinking that democratic institutions must offer venues for 'self-development' in Young's (2000) terms. It may be that that very 'self' is in a sense already constituted by the media in a way far deeper than imagined by the producers of *Jan Publiek*. Nico Carpentier suggests as much in his criticism of *Jan Publiek*: the panelists are 'subjected to . . . repressive powers. . . . Although the production team tries to grant access and promote equality, they fail to question the power relations which encircle the media system itself' (Carpentier, 2001: 229–30). But to say that the discourses always and only precede the speech acts ignores the co-creation in which the producers, panelists and audience partake. Furthermore, Carpentier presumes that 'full participation' could exist outside the 'repressive powers'. Might these 'repressive powers' include prevalent assumptions about democracy itself? Where, for example, is the place for talent, merit and knowledge in a democracy ruled by populist values – that is, on most television programming? Where is the place for abstract principles like justice or toleration of difference? Because therapeutic discourse might be an example of what Young calls 'narrative,' (people telling 'their' stories), is it democratic (Young, 2000: 76–8)? Probably for some people, some of the time.

We suggest further study of the media toward the goal of media literacy for all those participating in television programs like *Jan Publiek*. We ourselves will continue to contribute to this work, for we intend to publish another study that shows how two other panelists on *Jan Publiek* succeeded better in achieving their aims. It does seem to be possible to learn from the media about how to employ it better. We remain guardedly optimistic that a show like *Jan Publiek* could engage consciously in reflective and dialogic talk both on and off the air (before and after the show) such that its participants could learn to see what works, and how, and why. Going one step further and sharing this process with the audience – including interactive participation – would be even better. We again commend the producers of the show for their – what now appear to be –

utopian goals. Perhaps democracy is always bound to fail; perhaps its very imperfection is a cause for hope, for fascism is indeed more efficient. We can take heart if all involved – scholars, policy-makers, television producers, 'ordinary' participants, and even the audience – are moved to reflect carefully upon the talk show's social and linguistic processes, processes to which all contribute, but which are never fully transparent, and not finally controlled by anyone. And therefore, we argue, open to change.

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