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The Road to Interactivity : The Influence of Media Convergence on Talent Show Programs

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Introduction

The romance between mass media and new technologies is leading to changes in television genres. Progressing digitalization has influence not only on the fragmentation of the television market due to viewers switching to Internet-based media, but also on participatory culture. The relationship between the broadcaster and the viewer is changing: new technologies allow the viewer to change from a passive receiver of television broadcasts to an active participant. Using digital tools such as the Internet or mobile technologies, viewers can engage with the content and interact by means of social media or dedicated applications. These changes are forcing broadcasters, producers, advertisers and sponsors to modify their behavior.

One of the television genres to have most widely taken advantage of the potential of such phenomena is the talent show. This genre has developed viewer participation with interaction by return communication using digital media. It has allowed viewers (at least superficially) to decide the fate of participants and interact with them, as well as to discuss and make contact with other fans in real time. It has also taken advantage of the effects of media convergence by creating multiscreen broadcasts.

In this article, I intend to analyze the evolution of the genre in Poland, from the paradigm of "old" mass media based on single-platform passive broadcast to engaging transmedia communication. Popular entertainment programs broadcast in Poland, based on a competition between singers, such as "Szansa na sukces", "Idol", "The Voice" or "X-Factor" will serve as examples. I will analyze what changes in the structure and formula of the programs act as determinants of multi-platform communication. Finally, I will investigate the ways audience participation is used to build drama, cohesion and a higher level of engagement on the part of the receivers.

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Transmedia Narration

The market for audio-visual media is subject to dynamic fragmentation as a result of the rising number of available television channels and their thematic profiling, as well as loss of viewers to the Internet (Ytenberg, 2009: 469). The growing tendency to receive content from a number of screens simultaneously (multiscreening trend) is also a factor. Research on new media conducted by IAB Polska (Kolenda, 2012: 15) shows that 48% of frequent Internet users watch television at the same time at least a couple of times a week. Moreover, media consumers (in the 18–44 age group) increasingly often receive content from even four screens simultaneously – television set, computer, tablet and mobile phone (Econsultancy Digital Marketers United, 2012: 14–15). The attention of viewers is therefore more distributed and "engagement" has become a key word in modern communication (Tenderich, 2013: 2). Television industry is moving slowly towards interactivity in a bid to keep the interest of viewers. The phenomenon of convergence forces broadcasters to modify the way content is constructed, both in terms of technology and concept (Jenkins, 2007: 23). Power over the received content is gradually transferred from the broadcaster to the viewers, who learn how to control the received content using technology (Jenkins, 2007: 23) and decide not only what and when they want to watch, but often to also influence the content.

In the hunt for the viewer's attention, television content is becoming

a transmedia narrative. In accordance with the theory developed by Henry Jenkins, this means that particular elements are disclosed on different media platforms and each medium has its own input into the presented content (Jenkins, 2007: 260). Disclosures of content occur on subsequent platforms, e.g. initially from a television show, through Web content, to mobile devices.

The processes of digitalization and convergence support the development of a participation culture (Jenkins, 2007) with receivers becoming more and more often co-creators of a media product, reaching a higher level of engagement. Content can achieve viral potential and spread in accordance with the wishes of participants of the Internet community. Examples of such activities include covers of songs, memes, parodies, etc.

The Pre-reality Show Era

"Szansa na sukces" was the first Polish program based on the idea of a competition between amateur singers. It made its début on TVP2 on 14th November 1993 and was broadcast for 19 years, until 29th April 2012. It was more an entertainment show than a typical talent show with its genre features. The program, conceived by Elżbieta Skrętkowska, was a purely Polish production, hosted by the journalist Wojciech Mann. The theme for each show consisted of the songs of one Polish artist, who not only acted as a special guest singing his or her song, but was first and foremost a member of the jury deciding the winner.

At the first stage the participants took part in auditions (later called castings) that were conducted in the headquarters of Telewizja Polska (TVP, Polish public broadcasting corporation), away from the cameras. Chosen singers participated in the recording of an episode. Episodes were recorded in a small studio with the jurors sitting on a sofa and the adjacent steps, while a performer sang on a small platform. In front of him or her was a screen displaying the lyrics. The host picked a song for the participant at random by pulling on a cord with a numbered cube. The artist read the title of the song hidden in an envelope (as of 2004 on a disk) marked with the same number. The participants sang karaoke, choosing background music with or without the melodic line. The jurors did not comment on the performance in an ongoing manner. After hearing all the contest songs they went to deliberate and announced the verdict, awarding the winner and exceptional performers. The prize for the episode was the opportunity to sing a part of the song together with the star of the episode, as well as the fact that the person progressed to the so-called final concert held at the end of each season in the Congress Hall of the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw. The final concert also included participants deemed exceptional. The prize in the final concert was an appearance at the Début Concert at the National Festival of Polish Song in Opole. Despite TVP introducing a phone-based voting system, the main winner was, until the end, chosen by jurors, with the viewers' choice of favorite being strictly complementary. It is therefore difficult to speak of true engagement of viewers in an interactive broadcast, but these were the first steps, followed by producers of other shows, who developed the possibility of real-time telephone voting.

In 2009 the program was finally given a website, where viewers could find program-related news and episodes made available as VOD. In 2011 the program's creators introduced, in cooperation with the entertainment-social platform iSing.pl, an Internet casting application (TVP, 2011). Interested singers could

submit an application to participate in the program by performing a song on the platform or uploading a file to YouTube. The jury evaluated songs that received at least five votes of support on Facebook. Despite the introduction of this multi-platform communication system, it was already nothing new or innovative in terms of formula at this stage on the Polish market ("Idol" made its début in 2002, "Fabryka Gwiazd" in 2008, "Must Be the Music. Tylko Muzyka" in 2011, "X-Factor" in 2011 – therefore the development of the Szansa na Sukces format can be seen more as a market necessity conforming to the expectations and habits of viewers than as innovative changes in the format's structure.) Over the years "Szansa na Sukces" had undergone minor changes – the logo, intro and stage design of the studio had been refreshed. The program's production values were limited, until the end it did not achieve the same lavish level of spectacle as viewers knew from programs produced on foreign licenses. It was devoid of drama, tears of participants or arguments among the jurors, who in its case were kept at a distance and almost invisible. Other media showed little interest in the events or in the program's participants until they achieved success in the music industry – in that case it was often mentioned that a particular performer began his or hers career thanks to this show (for example Justyna Steczkowska, Kasia Stankiewicz). The level of interactivity in the program remained negligible and was limited to final concerts. "Szansa na Sukces" resembled to a very limited degree its successors – the talent shows.

"Real" People, "Real" Tears

A talent show is a genre of (usually) televised entertainment that is derived from the reality show (prior to reality show, programs based on a talent show premise were present). Similarly to a reality show, it is based on the idea of "voyeurism" of participants (Godzic, 101–103), but in contrast to programs such as "Big Brother", the participants are not isolated from the outside world. Amateurs compete by presenting skills defined by the theme of the show. Viewers watch their preparations, struggles, rivalry and, most importantly, the emotions that accompany their successes and failures.

The popularity of the programs, similarly to "traditional" reality shows, is based to a large extent on people's interest and fascination with the presentation of "average" people and their "authentic" emotions on a television screen (Dovey, 2004). Viewers want to believe that real stars are born right in front of their eyes. They follow these modern fables, of a sort, which show a completely average person undergoing a great transformation, becoming more attractive, confident and a celebrity. In her article on talent shows Su Holmes (2004) asserts that the attractiveness of candidates from the point of view of "averageness" is often related to their social standing, with a perceived lower social class being a "guarantee of averageness". Holmes is relating to the "American dream" and stresses that "averageness" is the key to the creation of a myth of a person from the lower classes achieving spectacular success and moving to the privileged class. The public wants to participate in this process and, armed with technology, is given the power to decide who will rise to the top and become the star of the season. This makes talent shows into programs with a high level of participation and viewer engagement, and has led to their continued success for several years (with an interlude in the form of programs showing celebrities competing).

From Talent to Show

"Idol", broadcast by Polsat on a British license was the first talent show in Poland. In other countries it was known as "Pop Idol" or "American Idol". It combined a reality show, song contest and live spectacle, as well as interactive elements engaging viewers in front of their television sets. It ushered in a new era of television when it came to the Polish market in 2002.

The program's aim was to listen to a number of singers and select the most interesting candidates, both in terms of vocal skills and character. The search for a new idol consisted of four stages. The first was conducted in the form of castings in various parts of Poland. Candidates performed fragments of their chosen songs *a capella* in front of members of the jury, who at the same time commented and decided whether a particular person would pass to the next phase. At this stage, viewers were just as keen to spot outstanding talent, as they were to find people who stood out due to their non-standard appearance, behavior or clear lack of talent. Despite the fact that the program's structure assumed passive observation at this stage, the viewers engaged by creating their own content – videos they shared on YouTube that were compilations of their favorite moments from the casting stage.

Many years after the program's broadcast one might hazard an opinion that the true winners of the show emerged at this stage – the jurors. Some of them, initially completely unknown to a broader public, have become television personalities and gained a place in entertainment programs for many years.

When watching the first two stages of the program one could indeed feel that it was the jurors who were most important and that the entire spectacle centered on them. The participants were an excuse for them to talk, discuss and act nastily. They have also, to a great extent, become idols of the viewers, who created their own content based on the jurors' personae – they chose the best moments of episodes and edited them to make videos, created visual materials and the phrase "jestem na tak" ("I vote yes") started functioning among younger people. Kuba Wojewódzki, one of the first jurors, became the central character of the program. Thanks to his critical, ingenious statements and sharp retorts he quickly became the most colorful member of the jury. Participants feared his nasty remarks, while the viewers waited for them in anticipation. In a short time Wojewódzki gained widespread recognition, followed by elevation to the status of a star and television personality when he hosted his own show "Kuba Wojewódzki", first on Polsat and subsequently on TVN. Elżbieta Zapendowska, another juror from the first team, also gained popularity as a result of the program. After "Idol" she sat on the juries for other Polsat music programs: "Jak oni śpiewają" and "Must Be The Music. Tylko Muzyka". A similar mechanism can be observed in the case of other programs as well – it is thanks to talent shows that, for example, Agustin Egurrola or Michał Piróg (dancers and choreographers) gained wider recognition.

The second stage, the so-called 'theatre stage', consisted of hearings during which participants sang on a theatre stage in small groups. At this point the jurors made their decision after watching all the performances and following a discussion. Here the viewers had no possibility of direct interaction with the program; they were passive recipients of the content. At the third stage of the program, the relationship between the viewer and the participants changed (Holmes, 2004:153). This stage of the program was broadcast live and the jury took on a strictly advisory role, while the viewers took part in the process of elimination of subsequent participants and the choice of finalists.

During this stage the performers underwent a metamorphosis – they trained their singing with specialists, chose stage costumes with the help of stylists, changed their image under professional guidance and in the end sang on a small stage in the studio where their performances were commented upon by members of the jury. From this point on it was clear that they sang to the viewers (and cameras). Another new element was the, so-called, "green room" – a place where participants stayed before and after live performances, talked to the host, shared their emotions and were given a chance to observe their competitors sing on screens. The final of the program took the form of a show, a live musical rivalry – the participants performed with full visual effects and costumes, and their performances were often similar to those of professionals.

The live episodes featured elements aimed at encouraging the viewers to interact and take part in voting. The participants presented songs prepared earlier, on the basis of which the jurors gave their opinions. It was the viewers, however, who decided who would proceed. During the performances a bar was displayed at the bottom of the screen with a telephone number and text message that could be used to vote for one's favorite singer and therefore help him or her win. The host, participants and even the jury encouraged viewers to vote:

Jacek Cygan (juror): "We're telling people clearly that we want to see you in the final (…) I want to appeal to everybody typing these messages (…) vote for Paweł"
Maciej Rock (host): "Should they vote?"
Paweł Kowalczyk (participant):"You should vote, you have to vote, there's no other option".
Maciej Rock: "Vote for Paweł, you saw the number, if not we'll remind you in a moment".

Votes cast by text messages were counted in real-time and the episode's winner announced the same evening. Viewers had total control over the fate of the participants and their continued presence in the program. In each episode the viewers voted off one person and the season's winner – the person that lasted till the last episode and received the highest number of votes via text messages – won a publishing contract with a record company.

"Idol" developed (drawing upon experiences from "Big Brother", which made its début in Poland in 1999) not only a telephone voting system, but also a whole range of additional content on other media platforms. The program even got its own dedicated newspaper, in which more dedicated viewers could read interviews with the jurors, relive some of the most interesting moments from the show or get to know it better from the inside. "Idol" had a sizeable Internet platform, albeit (from today's perspective) one which was very simple, or even primitive, in its form. It did, however, contain a certain amount of additional information to supplement the program and entice the viewers to engage. The website made it possible to view parts of the program, listen to participants by means of uploaded audio files, learn more about the finalists or follow news related to the program. Elements were created that were aimed at building a community of fans and give viewers the tools needed to express their affiliation. Fans of the program could surround themselves with gadgets related to the show – wallpapers for their desktops, screen savers, puzzles. The platform also made it possible to send a virtual postcard with the program's visual identification, exchange opinions on a discussion board

and, lastly, chat. The users were able to exchange their observations about their favorite show, but also talk to the jurors and participants at specified times. The mobile phone space was also conquered – a fan could download the program's logo or ringtone with the show's theme. Very quickly the participants started to create their own content, which they shared with other Internet users, thereby growing a faithful fan base.

Extended Liveness

Multi-platform activities extend the 'liveness' of a program on many levels. As Espen Ytreberg states, on the first level viewers take part in the event in real time during the live broadcast of episodes. Viewers then participate in a text message vote (or using a website in the case of some formats) for their favorite performers or search for information about them online, taking part in another form of live participation:

> When an audience member becomes a Pop Idol website user, navigating through it for background information on contestants, this does not quite amount to being 'live' in the sense of experiencing the transmission of Pop Idol competition rituals simultaneously with others. In surfing, no others need be involved, at least not in terms of the surfer's experience. However, at the same time, surfers on the Pop Idol website will constantly encounter information and commentary on the competition that is unfolding live. So, if web surfing is not itself an experience of liveness, surfing on the website of a multi-platform reality format at least happens in the context of such an experience, and with reference to it.
> (Ytreberg, 2009: 478)

It is also worth noting that 'liveness' is also extended in two temporal dimensions. On the one hand, fans are engaged between the transmissions of episodes in the case of programs that are broadcast once a week. Chatting with jurors, searching for additional information, discussions within a discussion group regarding the result of the last episode, all these make the program live in the consciousness of recipients in between episodes. They also provoke discussions and cause the program to be a subject of talks within communities engaged in the reception of the format. On the other hand, additional platforms allow the program to continue to function while off-air between seasons. After the end of one season the viewers could track the lives of program winners on the website, learn more about the next season, any changes to the rules, dates for submissions, and the start of the new season.

Transmedia and Higher Forms of Participation

Subsequent generations of talent shows develop their formula on the basis of experiences of predecessors and proven mechanisms. Programs such as "The Voice

of Poland" (TVP2) or "X-Factor" (TVN), which appeared on the Polish market in 2011, can be perceived as modern representations of the genre. In their fundamental premise they are faithful to their predecessors, keeping among other things the concept of the dominating role of the jury, especially at the pre-selection stage, with the decision-making power shifting to the viewers when episodes become transmitted live (viewers decide on the eliminations and winners), or the idea of making ordinary people into stars and preserving reality elements. Such programs ceaselessly grow in their eventfulness and are increasingly becoming music shows interwoven with stories of people and sensational reactions from the jury. Episodes, even the casting, have a multimedia environment, while the finals make it seem as if the participants have come far and made their careers by standing on the stage of a television program, amid impressive decorations and in the spotlight. In some formats (such as "The Voice of Poland" and "X-Factor") the role of the jurors is broadened – they become closer to the participant, becoming their coaches and partners, lending credence to the apparent entry into "the great show business world" and discovery of its secrets.

The programs have developed a transmedia approach, encompassing a wide spectrum of media. The producers of "The Voice of Poland" prepared communication involving television, press, radio, the Internet and mobile phones. Television remains the main channel of communication, where an episode is transmitted, but it is combined with other channels, especially within the scope of live programs and online interaction. On the basis of media partnerships, the press featured articles with people involved in the show and publications devoted to episodes. Radio was added as a partner, preparing programs and broadcasting "extra" materials, conducting a contest among listeners, but also acting as part of the live show by means of interviews with participants during the broadcast. The engagement of listeners was also built by allowing them to choose from among 10 candidates, participants that were taking part in a "wild card" draw – a competition to enter one of the juror's teams thanks to votes from fans. Such cross-promotion on-air and over the airwaves maintained interest in the program on days when there were no premières, referred viewers do their radios, promoting the partner radio station and had the potential of growing the program's fan base from the new target group of radio listeners.

The growth in popularity of social media has led to each music program having its own dynamic social platforms – a channel on YouTube, a fanpage on Facebook with a couple of hundred thousand fans and sometimes an account on Twitter, somewhat less popular in Poland. Social media websites combined with the programs' websites are partially taking over the functions previously reserved for websites, becoming the place for dissemination of updates and sharing thoughts regarding the program. By allowing interaction with particular multimedia materials or news, directly on Facebook or on the show's website connected to it, they are partially taking over the functions of websites and supplanting online forums, which have disappeared from program websites. Users are happy to provide user-generated content relating to their favorite program and distribute it using social channels, increasing the outreach through new content.

Internet interactivity has also been employed in live programs. In season 1 of The Voice of Poland, viewers could ask program participants questions when they were in the "red room" (equivalent of the "green room" in "Idol") via Facebook. Questions and comments from Internet users were shown

on screens in the red room, while singers responded, entering into direct interaction with viewers in real-time.

The creators of the American edition of "X-Factor" have, in cooperation with Verizon, the program's sponsor, created an application that allowed the users to engage to a great extent via mobile devices. It allowed fans to not only judge the performances and interact with other users, but also receive additional content synchronized with the live program (JWT, 2012: 18). On the other screen viewers could see backstage during the program or display the lyrics of a song being performed, so that they could sing it together with the participants while sitting in front of the television set. In addition, users could receive prizes from the program's sponsor for activities performed in the application. By introducing elements of 'gameification', aimed at maintaining the interest of viewers, the producers and sponsors reached out to the recipient's loyalty.

The creators of reality show programs have succeeded in creating a system of concurrently operating platforms, generating transmedia content, to a certain extent independent of each other. A viewer who is not interested in receiving additional content can receive the televised content exclusively and still receive completely clear, intact content, which does not require clarification or any additions to be understandable.

Conclusion

Talent shows have evolved over the years from simple singing contests to transmedia, interactive spectacles. By taking advantage of a wide range of co-operating media platforms, the creators of television programs started to follow the attention of television viewers, which has been shifting to other communication channels. Tools obtained by means of media convergence have made it possible to not only "surround" the receiver with content, but also engage him or her on a number of levels, while still making it possible to choose received content. New media have given the "old" forms a chance to re-model set structures and discover the potential in content spreadability. The have also made it possible to reach a new group of viewers, maintain the attention of fans between episodes or season premières, therefore building loyalty and attachment.

New media have given receivers the possibility of being not only co-participants but, thanks to the possibility of voting and deciding on the fate of contestants, also co-creators of the format. By creating viral content, memes, as well as reproducing and redistributing content, they turn into, in a way, ambassadors of the program within the fan base. From the point of view of broadcasters they also become new broadcast platforms that allow new target groups to be reached, ones clustered around the aforementioned self-proclaimed ambassadors in social media.

The success in ratings and consequent commercial success of talent shows in their current shape can lead one to believe that televised communication will develop formats oriented towards transmedia narratives over many platforms. However, it does happen that a multi-platform approach is perceived as a novelty and used separately from any broader strategy, which can lead to content dispersion and chaos in communication. As a result, it can discourage viewers and cause them to turn their backs on such communication. It is therefore important for prepared content to have strong substantive foundations, not

only to be a way to boast about the broad spectrum of technologies and new media used in communication, but without any broader context.

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