This is a repository copy of *Reality TV as a trigger of everyday political talk in the net-based public sphere*.

Reality TV as a Trigger of Everyday Political Talk in the Net-Based Public Sphere

Todd Graham and Auli Harju

ABSTRACT

It is news journalism, which is commonly considered the practice that reports on the political and invites us to act as citizens. However, there are other media genres, forms and content that may provoke the citizen in us. They not only provide talking points but also facilitate communicative spaces whereby active audiences transform into deliberating publics by bridging their knowledge, identities and experiences to society through everyday, informal, political talk. The internet provides a public space whereby this everyday life politicization can occur bottom-up. We address this process of politicization in the context of political talk and discuss the boundaries between private and public by examining how it emerges in forums dedicated to British popular reality TV programmes. We pay particular attention to the shift from non-political talk to the lifestyle-based political issues and the more conventional political topics that arise, and explore the triggers of such talk.

Keywords: Political Talk; Public Sphere; Popular Culture; Life Politics; Citizenship

Introduction

There has been much debate concerning the internet's ability to extend the public sphere (see e.g. Dahlgren, 2005; Witschge, 2004). Much of it has focused on the potential of the internet in cultivating a public sphere where free, equal and open communication, deliberation and exchange of information among citizens can flourish. The internet is supposedly about bottom-up public communication and deliberation. Its ability to enhance the public sphere lies in the many-to-many modes of communication and networks of distribution offered by an increasing and diverse number of social media, thus turning viewers and readers into users, producers and participants.[1] This vibrant upsurge of participatory values and practices has led some commentators to suggest the emergence of a new digital media culture (Deuze, 2006; Jenkins, 2006). Consequently, there has been a rise in the number of net-based public sphere research projects, which utilize public sphere ideals as a means of evaluating online communicative spaces (see e.g. Dahlberg, 2001; Jensen, 2003; Strandberg, 2008; Wright and Street, 2007).

Net-based public sphere researchers have studied these spaces numerous ways. However, most have focused on politically oriented social media or those communicative spaces dedicated to the so-called 'hard' news and have neglected a variety of other genres. One genre is the range of entertainment-based communicative spaces tied to reality TV, such as Big Brother and Wife Swap. In such spaces, along with other forums tied to popular forms of entertainment, many of the conversations have a political dimension (Van Zoonen, 2005). Moreover, recent research suggests that these spaces host a variety of political discussions dealing with everything from health and the body to politicians and government (Coleman, 2007; Van Zoonen, 2007, Van Zoonen et al., 2007).[2] Thus, they are important because, like politically oriented communicative spaces, they too contribute to the web of informal conversations that constitutes the public sphere, and as such, should not be overlooked.[3]

These spaces become more important when we consider the notion of a shift in politics. Political communications today is going through a time of decentralization. Due to complex economic, political and social changes stirred on largely by globalization, new relationships and uncertainties between people in their role as citizens, audiences and consumers on the one hand and traditional structures and institutions on the other have brought about a new domain of politics; what some have called life politics (Giddens, 1991) or lifestyle politics (Bennett, 1998). Individuals here increasingly organize social and political meaning around their lifestyle values and the personal narratives that express them. With regard to everyday political conversations in the net-based public sphere, this means that we not only need to reconsider where to look, but also reconsider what we are looking for. That is, a porous approach to the 'political' in political talk is required, one that also allows for a more lifestyle-based approach to politics.

Consequently, net-based public sphere research has only provided us with a partial picture of the online discursive landscape. The aim of this article then is to move beyond politically oriented and 'hard' news related communicative spaces by examining those dedicated to reality TV. The purpose is to examine how political talk emerges in these spaces and to investigate the topics and issues of such talk. Thus, we present the following two research questions: What are the triggers of political talk in discussion forums tied to reality TV, and what are the topics and issues of such talk within these spaces?

Everyday Political Talk and the Public Sphere

Net-based public sphere researcher has drawn heavily from the deliberative model of democracy. Some deliberative democratic theorists have looked to move deliberation beyond the venues of institutional politics into the realm of the public sphere thereby placing political talk among citizens at the centre of the theory (see e.g. Dryzek, 2000; Fearson, 1998; Mansbridge, 1999). Deliberative democracy involves public deliberation not only as a means of producing public

reasoning oriented towards the common good and collective decision-making within formal and semi-formal settings, but also as a process of producing public reasoning and achieving mutual understanding within the more informal communicative spaces of the public sphere. Unlike for example deliberation within public decision-making assemblies, everyday political talk in the public sphere is not typically oriented towards decision-making or direct political action, but rather it is usually expressive and talk for talk sake (Mansbridge, 1999: 212), representing the practical communicative form of what Habermas (1984: 327) calls communicative action.

However, everyday political talk is not meaningless because it does not typically lead to direct political action. On the contrary, it is through ongoing participation in everyday talk whereby citizens become aware and informed, try to understand others, test old and new ideas, and express, develop and transform their preferences and opinions. That is, it is through such talk whereby citizens achieve mutual understanding about the self and each other. It is the web these informal conversations over time that prepares citizens and the political system at large for political action. Consequently, everyday political talk and those spaces that provoke and foster such talk here become crucial to maintaining an active and effective citizenry specifically and the public sphere in general. We argue that those communicative spaces dedicated to popular forms of entertainment like reality TV programmes are indeed providing such spaces and facilitating such talk and thus play an important role in contributing to the web of informal conversations that constitutes the public sphere.

Everyday Political Talk as a Civic Practice

By <u>political</u> talk, we are referring to a public-spirited way of talking whereby citizens make connections from their individual and personal experiences, issues and so forth to society (see also Eliasoph, 1998: 14–5). As the notion of life politics (Giddens, 1991) suggests, citizens are involved with societal issues not only from the viewpoints of their role as citizens, or as a

member of a class or as other relatively stable reference groups, but increasingly they enter public life from diverse positions in which their complex and changing identities and interests play a crucial role. Defined narrowly 'the political' consists of political action, e.g. party politics and the functioning of governing bodies. However, the broader definition of the political, i.e. the functioning of the civil society and citizens, possibly in connection to non-political issues, enables an understanding of how people create new meanings for social action. We consider this meaning making as citizenship put into practice (see also Hermes and Dahlgren, 2006).

Couldry (2006: 323) calls for research on the 'feel' of citizenship in the era of globalization and on the practices that link private action to the public sphere. We suggest that discussing politics in the non-political forums of the internet can be one of those practices. Social media create alternative spaces where the politicization of everyday life issues can happen and in which people are entering from their various everyday roles to discuss issues of common concern.

Without the existing feel of citizenship, it is difficult to see how people would get interested in political issues or become active citizens in society. The avenue that social media provides for political talk may strengthen people's orientation to issues of shared concern, their public connection, as Couldry calls it. It should be noted that nowadays the public connection mainly focuses on mediated versions of the public world (Couldry, 2006: 327-8). For instance, when it comes to television programmes, it is the news that is considered the genre around which publics form and hence are participating in the democratic process. Madianou (2005) criticizes that television news audiences are viewed from a normative perspective, which often leads to ways of seeing these publics as failing as citizens. She stresses that people's engagement with the news is a more complex process, connected for instance to both the public and private, the rational and affective. There is an intimate dimension of news consumption, and we suggest that there is also a political dimension of entertainment. Street (1997) argues that popular culture and political thoughts and actions cannot be treated as separate entities. Instead, popular culture should be understood as part of politics since people live through culture, and cultural values

operate in politics, as well as popular culture becomes a political activity through its uses (Street, 1997: 4-7).

The transformation from audiences to publics does not happen only inside the genre of television news or news in general but also in other genres related to television programmes. A documentary and a reality television show can both, despite their differences, provoke the citizen in us and make us participate in public discussion. Moreover, this participation is also relevant because political talk increases our civic competence, adds to our knowledge and skills needed for democratic action.

Methods

For the purpose of this study, two discussion forums devoted to fans of the reality television series Celebrity Big Brother and Wife Swap were selected. The Celebrity Big Brother forum is hosted by bbfans.com, which is a website ran by and dedicated to fans of Big Brother UK.[4] The website offers a variety of forums on Big Brother, Big Brother spin-offs, reality TV and on other entertainment media. Moreover, the forums are lively communicative spaces; they maintain thousands of participants, which have contributed hundreds of thousands of postings. The Celebrity Big Brother series features a number of celebrities living in the Big Brother house, who try to avoid eviction by the public with the aim of winning a cash prize to be donated to the their nominated charity. The 2006 series consisted of 11 housemates initially, for example: Dennis Rodman the basketball star, Jodie Marsh the glamour model, Michael Barrymore the comedian, Pete Burns the singer/songwriter and Chantelle Houghton the non-celebrity. What makes Celebrity Big Brother 2006 interesting is that one of the housemates was the British MP, George Galloway.[5] Thus, Celebrity Big Brother was selected because it offered a unique communicative space; a non-politically oriented forum influenced by a political personality.

The Wife Swap forum is hosted by Channel 4's online fan community, which is usually teaming with participants and discussions.[6] These communicative spaces offer a variety of forums where fans can discuss together their favourite or not so favourite programmes. According to the site, it is supposed to provide a space where fans can 'chat about Wife Swap'. The premise behind the show is that in each episode two families swap wives for two weeks and take over the role of the other. Thus, it was selected because it represents a non-politically oriented forum tied to reality TV.

The selection of the data was based on the broadcasting premier dates of the particular series. For Big Brother, threads were taken from a one-month period. The initial sample contained 345 threads consisting of 6803 postings. For Wife Swap, they were taken from a three-month period. The initial sample contained 79 threads consisting of 892 postings.

Identifying Political Talk

Politics today in the public sphere has become more pervasive, and as such, any concept of what is political must be capable of capturing an increasing number of issues and concerns. So, how do we identify within a text a political discussion? Graham's (2008) criteria, which were developed to identify political talk within non-politically oriented discussion forums, were adopted. The criteria were selected because they allow a research to capture both the conventional and the more lifestyle-based political issues that arise. Thus, all those threads, which contained a posting where (1) a participant made a connection from a particular experience, interest, issue or topic in general to society, which (2) stimulated reflection and a response by at least one other participant, were coded as political threads.

Identifying the Triggers of Political Talk

In order to address the research questions, an examination aimed at identifying the topics and triggers of political talk was conducted. As discussed above, the initial postings, which began a political discussion, were identified. Consequently, a closer reading of the postings leading up to political talk was made possible and thus carried out. However, prior to the analysis (also during), additional measures were taken to improve it. In particular, both Celebrity Big Brother and Wife Swap episodes, and links to third-party sources within postings, were consulted when applicable as a means of providing more context to the discussions in question.

In order to conduct the examination, a content analysis employing Mayring's (2000) procedures for carrying out the development of inductive coding categories was utilized. Since an initial reading of the political threads had already been conducted, a set of tentative triggers was initially developed. After which, three additional rounds of reading and working through the selected material were carried out. During this time, triggers were modified, combined, removed and new ones created via feedback loops. Additionally, several patterns were identified in relation to the triggers. That said, after the third round, a set of main triggers were deduced.

The Topics and Triggers of Political Talk

Political talk was no stranger to the Big Brother forum. Thirty-eight threads containing 1479 postings, representing 22% of the initial sample, were engaged in or around political talk. What were the political topics of these discussions? This question was addressed by categorizing the political conversations, which consisted of 1176 postings, into broad topics based on the issues discussed within the various coherent lines of discussion.[7] As Table 1 shows, there were 13 topics identified. The dominant topic of discussion was George Galloway's Politics, which represented more than a third of the political discussions.

It seems that George Galloway's presence in the Big Brother house got participants talking politics as Mary's posting from one of these discussions reveals:[8]

Mary: Personal issues aside.... who is watching atm? He's just stated his motives for appearing on the show are to highlight the issues surrounding iraq, etc... Whatever someones personal views, the right to raise and debate an issue are central to British democracy..even if the BB forum is one in which its raised. If any act gets people up thinking, talking and acting then is a great political move. It beats the apathy that aflicts these islands as it is

In this thread, participants engaged in a heated debate on Galloway's motives for appearing on the show and on whether a sitting MP should be allowed to participate on a reality TV series. These discussions were often lively; many participants and opinions contributed to these debates. However, the political discussions on Galloway were not always confined to these particular issues. Occasionally, the discussions branched off into debates on MPs and parliament in general. Moreover, participants here frequently discussed Galloway's politics, e.g. his political arguments, his relationship with Iraq and the Muslim world and his character, behaviour and performance as an MP.

In addition to Galloway, participants engaged in discussions on a variety of issues. As Table 1 indicates, many of them fell outside the realm of conventional politics. Approximately 42% of these discussions dealt with issues on bullying, sexuality and gender, animal rights, health and the body and even on the role of reality TV in society. In other words, Big Brother discussions frequently centred on issues that were more individualized and lifestyle oriented, more personal; when discussing these topics, participants would bring their life experiences and choices to the debate via narratives and storytelling.

Table 1 Big Brother's political topics

Topics	Examples	# of postings	% of postings
George Galloway's Politics	Galloway's relationship with Iraq; his personality, character, & performance as an MP	436	37
Bullying and Codes of Conduct	Bullying; moral codes of conduct	248	21
Animal Rights	Animal rights; fur trade; conservationism; endangered species	95	8
The Judicial/Legal System	Rights of the accused; innocent until proven guilty	73	6
Health & the Body	Skinny celebrities/models–bad role models; smoking; drugs and today's youth	56	5
Gender, Sexuality, & Discrimination	Sexism; sexuality; sexuality and prejudices/discrimination	55	5
Immigration, Multiculturalism & Racism	Sharia law; Muslims in the UK; immigration and racism	50	4
The Media	Media's failure & the Iraq war; media censorship	40	3
Parliamentary Politics	MPs attendance/track records; democratic reform; politicians and today's youth; characteristics of a leader	38	3
Reality TV and Society	Big Brother's impact on British youth; Big Brother as a political platform	30	3
The Iraq War & Foreign Policy	Iraq War; Saddam's regime; UK/US Foreign policy; terrorism	27	2
Political Philosophy	The class system; capitalism vs. communism	18	2
Education	Education: British versus the EU	10	1
Total		1,176	100

What were the triggers of political talk? Political talk emerged 42 separate times. There were two instances when it emerged immediately. In both cases, politics itself was the trigger. Participants here began a thread with the intent of talking politics. In particular, discussions on the Iraq War and the job performances of British MPs emerged. Consequently, these discussions seemed to have little to do with Big Brother and more to do with talking politics for the sake of political talk.[9]

In the remaining 40 instances, there were four triggers identified. The most common trigger was <u>behaviour</u>, the behaviour of the Big Brother housemates. On 17 occasions, the bullying and sexual behaviour of Burns, Barrymore, Galloway, Marsh and/or Rodman triggered a political discussion. The discussions that followed dealt with issues such as the meaning of bullying, its role among and affect on British youth, and moral codes of conduct or lack thereof in British society.

The second most common trigger was <u>statements and discussions</u>. On nine occasions, a statement by or discussion among Big Brother housemates triggered a political discussion. Unlike the trigger above, where political talk initially surfaced in the forum itself, the political discussions that emerged here tended to be an overflow of the statements and discussions taking place in the Big Brother house. These discussions dealt with topics such as animal rights, immigration, the Iraq War, Galloway's politics, racism and even a discussion on communism emerged.

The third most common trigger was <u>lifestyle, image and identity</u>. On eight occasions, the lifestyle, image and/or identity of a Big Brother housemate ignited a political debate. In terms of lifestyles, for example, a political discussion was sparked when participants discussed Marsh's lifestyle choice of being a vegetarian. In return, a discussion on animal rights ignited. Political discussions were also triggered by the images and identities put forth by Rodman and Burns. For example, Rodman's 'bad boy' image sparked a discussion on individuality, which developed into a discussion on the qualities of a good political leader. Burns' overt sexuality and flamboyant style, for example, ignited political discussions on sexuality and discrimination. Finally, given the

presence of three band members and two models, discussions on images associated with the 'rock-star' (sex and drugs) and the 'model' (drugs and anorexia) sparked political debates on health and the body, drugs and British youth, and sexism.

The final trigger was <u>debates in the media</u>. On six occasions, forum participants posted articles from the Guardian, the BBC, the Sun and the Daily Mirror, which in turn ignited political debates. In particular, most of the articles were editorial commentary on issues surrounding Big Brother housemates Galloway, Barrymore and Burns. Commentary on Galloway's decision to and motives for appearing in the Big Brother house and past and present criminal and legal proceedings surrounding Barrymore were the primary triggers.[10] In return, political debates on Galloway's politics, the rights of the accused and even the fur trade emerged. Furthermore, these discussions were usually a spill over from the political debates already taking place in the media.

In Wife Swap, political talk represented a substantial portion of the debates. In particular, nine threads containing 288 postings, representing 32% of the initial sample, were coded as political threads. What were the political topics of these debates? The actual coherent political discussions, consisting of 233 postings, were categorized into broad topics based on the issues discussed.[11] As Table 2 indicates, there were four topics identified. The dominant topic of discussion was <u>the welfare state</u>, which consisted of 105 posting, representing 45% of political talk. Discussions here focused mostly on whether or not there should be welfare reform in the UK and on the morality of the welfare system. Though the discussions seemed to represent conventional political issues, the discussions themselves were often driven by the life experiences of forum participants. Participants would bring their knowledge and life lessons to these debates, which dealt with, for example, losing a job, being on welfare, providing care for a loved one and difficulties with the National Healthcare Service (NHS). In other words, these debates were often alive with narratives and storytelling.

The welfare state was not the only political topic discussed. However, unlike Big Brother, Wife Swap participants did not engage in debates on an array of diverse topics. On the contrary,

in addition to the welfare state, a majority of the issues discussed dealt with parenting and the family. More than half of the discussions centred on issues that were more individualized and lifestyle oriented as opposed to conventional ones.

Table 2 Wife Swap's political topics

Topics	Examples	# of postings	% of postings
The Welfare State	Welfare benefits and fraud; NHS; welfare reform; morality of the welfare system; cutting taxes	105	45
Parenting	The perfect mother; the single mother; good versus bad parenting; British youth lack discipline, manners, and respect; child obesity; bullying	83	36
Immigrant Families	Wife Swap as an educational resource for introducing 'the other'; immigrant families in Britain	23	10
Family Values	What are family values; the role-model family; family planning; contraception	22	9
Total		233	100

Parenting was another popular topic. It tended to foster discussions that were more personal as Elizabeth's posting illustrates:

Elizabeth: i know that i am not a 'perfect mother' sh*t i mean both of my son have been suspended more then once and they sometimes can be badly behaved but i do try my hardest with them i mean i am on my own and at the end of the day they respect me and i do try to respect most of the decisions they make. Although the bad behaviour has not come from the way they were bought up its just the crowds they've made friends with. I'm proud of almost all the decisions i've made for them they are disaplines but when your 5

13

foot 3 and both your sons are 6 foot or just under it can be hard keeping them in the house and off girl. Kids will be Kids and different people have different ways of dealling with them.

In this thread, participants were discussing parenting and the life of the single mother in the UK. Like Elizabeth, during the course of these political debates, participants often brought their life lessons and stories to the discussions.

Second, in addition to being personal, the discussions here were often more authoritative as Mary's posting below demonstrates:

Mary: The English parents gave far too much leeway to their children and were too arrogant to see that they were not perfect parents. After seeing their 13-year old last night you realise why British young people are so out of control - it all stems from their upbringing. The girl had such a foul mouth and was allowed to come and go as she wished with no guidance or barriers whatsoever, and this is the example the younger ones will copy. This is unacceptable. When they watch the program the parents will be so ashamed unless they are still in denial. Keeping some of the routine and chores introduced by the Pakistani wife will do the English children a world of good as I should know. These children were treated more like friends and equals instead of parents and children. I am telling you, if they don't take action now to reign in the 13-year old then they will have serious problems very soon.

In this thread, the participants were discussing and contrasting the parenting practices – good vs. bad parenting – of an English and Pakistani family from an episode of Wife Swap. In these types of discussions, it seems that because participants were speaking as parents, bringing their knowledge and lessons to the debate, at times, they assumed the role of 'an expert', speaking with

an authoritative voice when criticizing the parenting practices of others. What is interesting here is that this type of communicative practice was usually directed towards the families appearing on the TV series.[12] However, when forum participants shared their parenting experiences, as they often did, they were rarely confronted with this type of reaction but rather fellow participants tended to use supportive communicative practices.

Political discussions emerged 10 separate times within Wife Swap. There were three triggers of political talk identified. The most common trigger was parenting behaviours and practices. On five occasions, the parenting behaviours and practices of at least one of the families triggered a political discussion. The discussions that followed dealt with issues such as good versus bad parenting, single mothers in the UK, the lack of parenting today, child obesity and even bullying.

The second most common trigger of political talk was family lifestyles and values. On three occasions, the lifestyles and values of the families appearing on the series triggered political discussions, which tended to challenge traditional notions as Maude's posting below illustrates:

Maude: I think it's bad that she didn't clean etc because she worked. But not just because she is 'a wife and a mother'. Women are allowed to have a life nowadays even if they've got kids and a husband. I just can't stand people who think women should do everything for their families with then end result that they all have a life because she's taking care of it all at home - but she has no life outside of them - they are her life because she has nothing else. And then when their kids leave home what do they do? Or when their husband leaves them for someone not so good at housework but with nicer legs?

In this thread, the two wives appearing on the series caused a stir among forum participants. The apparent contrasting lifestyles and values – one the 'perfect housewife' and the other representing

the opposite – ignited a discussion on (challenging) traditional family values. Discussions on the morality of welfare and family planning/contraception also surfaced.

Similar to Big Brother, the final trigger was <u>debates in the media</u>. On two occasions, participants posted articles from the Sun and the Daily Mail, which in turn sparked political discussions. The two articles in question were editorial commentary on a former Wife Swap family, which was convicted of welfare benefits fraud. In return, political discussions on welfare and the NHS materialized. Moreover, unlike the two triggers above, these discussions were a runoff from the political debates that were already taking place in the media.

Discussion

From Big Brother to Wife Swap, the analyses revealed that political talk was a common ingredient within these spaces suggesting that it has no boundaries, particularly the political talk crucial to the public sphere. Though participants came to discuss reality TV, during the course of those discussions, the 'political' was triggered thus creating spaces whereby active audiences transformed into deliberating publics by bridging their knowledge, identities and experiences to society. The issues, behaviours, statements, discussions, lifestyles and images of these series triggered political discussions among forum participants. Moreover, the 'political' in political talk was not always based in a conventional notion of politics, but rather, it was often driven by participants' lifestyles and the personal narratives that express them.

In Big Brother, though conventional political issues represented a bulk of political talk, which was partly due to the presence of George Galloway, more than a third of the topics touched upon a lifestyle-oriented form of politics, which dealt with issues concerning bullying and codes of conduct, animal rights, health and the body, and gender and sexuality. One noticeable trend here was the emergence of narratives and storytelling. It seems that when discussing these topics, participants would bring their life experiences to the debate. However, in

Wife Swap, a majority of the topics discussed were lifestyle-based political issues. Even when conventional political issue were discussed, the discussions themselves were often driven by the life experiences of forum participants, which is consistent with Van Zoonen (2007) and Van Zoonen's et al. (2007) research on online entertainment-based forums. The use of life experiences and stories (along with third-person accounts) became commonplace as these topics touched upon a more personal side. Given this personal nature, participants began to speak as experts. Topics on parenting and family allowed a parent to utilize his or her experiences from a position of authority, given that they indeed were experts on parenting. In some ways, these topics tended to empower some of the participants, providing them an authoritative voice in these debates.

Overall, the triggers were similar between both Big Brother and Wife Swap, suggesting that triggers of political talk might not vary greatly across the diverse range of communicative spaces devoted to reality TV. The most common trigger in both forums was behaviours. Here behaviours triggered discussions that centred on morality in the descriptive sense, i.e. on codes of conduct. Forum participants held authoritative positions on what was right and wrong, and when Big Brother housemates or Wife Swap family members broke these codes, e.g. by bullying, by displaying promiscuous sexual behaviour or by displaying bad parenting practices, they questioned, challenged and debated these behaviours. It seems that reality TV, its format in particular, is conducive to this type of trigger. From Big Brother to Wife Swap, reality television centres on, in some ways, the breaking of or rather the challenging of codes of conduct. Is this not one of the attractive qualities of the series? The anger that stirred up among forum participants when Pete Burns bullied Chantelle or the disgust and contempt that forum participants expressed after watching Jodie Marsh flaunt her body. Indeed, it seems that reality television forums are the place to look, if one is looking for debates on codes of conduct.

The second common trigger was lifestyles. The lifestyles trigger was more than particular lifestyle choices of consumption, entertainment and/or dress. The individual attitudes, values or worldviews of Big Brother housemates ignited various political discussions as well. Finally, the

lifestyles trigger was not always about a particular image put across by one of the housemates or participating family members voluntarily. In some cases, the images and lifestyles associated with a particular profession ignited a political discussion. Again, reality television formats seem to be conducive to these types of discussions because producers tend to select diverse contestants, which tend to hold diverging lifestyles, as a means of producing a 'lively' series. It is the contestation of these conflicting lifestyle choices, which take place between housemates in the series, between housemates and forum participants, and among forums participants themselves, which triggers political talk.

The final common trigger was debates in the media. Fans of reality TV seem to want to know what is going on with the celebrities involved in their series. In both forums, participants on occasions posted articles from British newspapers on the personalities appearing in the series. Unlike the above two triggers where, for the most part, the political discussions emerged in the forums themselves, in these cases, the debates represented an overflow from the media. Moreover, the findings here suggest that celebrity news does more than just entertain citizens. On these occasions, it provoked political talk, thus playing a role in extending the public sphere.

Conclusion

In some ways, reality television formats are about publicizing the private. The findings seem to show that the same is true for political talk that emerges among its audiences. The discussions that surfaced in these spaces are an important object for research not only because they contribute to the web of informal conversations that constitute the public, but because they also offer us insight into what matters to everyday citizens. They tap into a public sphere that is driven by citizens' everyday life knowledge, identities and experiences and offer us insight into when the personal becomes political. Consequently, these communicative spaces or the spaces devoted to popular culture in general are important because they help us better understand the ways citizenry

is intertwined with aspects and practices of everyday life, the moments when the feel of citizenship emerges.

Reality television forums are also an important object for research since they address us simultaneously as participants of debate, as users of social media, as audiences of television programmes, and as citizens with our everyday experiences. The entertaining and the political elements are both present at the same time in people's lives, which shows in the political discussion of Big Brother and Wife Swap. Moreover, though access to personal information of the participants was not available for this study, such forums potentially offer a unique opportunity to study political talk from a group of citizens, which probably differs from those citizens that participate in the communicative spaces dedicated to conventional politics. As Coleman's (2003) research suggests, they tend to be younger, female and engaged less in traditional politics. By investigating such spaces, we may gain a better understanding of what they think and feel is important for society. More importantly, the findings here also suggest that these citizens <u>are</u> engaging in acts of citizenship. They reached a public-spirited way of talking by referring to the common good or emphasizing the importance of the issues for society. In these discussions, they stepped into the role of a citizen by finding this connection.

Some net-based public sphere researchers have claimed that diversity of opinions online usually occurs between forums rather than within forums (Sunstein, 2002), thus fragmenting the public sphere. However, what the fragmentation debate has neglected is that political talk is not exclusively reserved for politically oriented spaces as the findings above suggest. Participants of these spaces are not there to talk politics; therefore, when political talk emerges, the chances are for greater diversity of opinions and arguments. Thus, fragmentation theory makes little sense once we move beyond the politically oriented communicative landscape. It is beyond such spaces where we are more likely to find political debates grounded in diversity.

Net-based public sphere researchers, in addition to being more inclusive about the communicative spaces they select, also need to be more inclusive about what they are looking for

regarding the 'political' in everyday political talk. The public sphere is the place where new issues and concerns about society emerge and should be allowed to emerge, an arena where the political is evolving and changing over time, though usually not very quickly. A restrictive notion of political talk in some ways goes against the ideals and purpose of the public sphere in the first place. Furthermore, as discussed above, given that political communications is going through a time of decentralization, a porous notion of political talk within the public sphere seems to be imperative, particularly if we are interested tapping into people's everyday issues and concerns.

Finally, in addition to the topics and triggers of political talk, future research should focus on how people <u>talk</u> politics within and between the various genres of politically and non-politically oriented social media. The discussions in Big Brother and Wife Swap seemed to foster a communicative environment and disposition among participants that centred on understanding the other as opposed to winning the debate. These types of forums might offer insight into developing future online deliberative initiatives oriented towards mutual understanding. Moreover, by exploring political talk outside the realm of traditional politics, we may not only gain a better understand how people talk politics, but we may also gain a better understanding of the linkages people make between their everyday lives and society.

Notes

[1] Popular culture and television have also been studied from the viewpoint of participation (see Jenkins, 1992, 2003). However, our focus is on online communicative spaces.

[2] See Coleman (2003, 2006) for extensive work on Big Brother audiences, which tries to understand their contrasting experiences of participating in the sphere of reality TV versus that of formal politics.

[3] There are other views on the role of reality TV for democracy (see e.g. Ouellette & Hay, 2008). However, we are interested in reality TV (its style, form and content) to the extent that it

provokes and fosters political talk among its audiences, the reaction to these programmes. That is, our focus is on the communicative spaces that emerge in their wake and not on the inherent nature of the programmes themselves.

[4] The data was retrieved in March 2006 at: http://www.bbfans.co.uk/viewforum.php?f=27

[5] George Galloway, a former Labour MP, is currently a member of RESPECT.

[6] The data was retrieved in November 2005 at:

http://community.channel4.com/groupee/forums/a/cfrm/f/31060416

[7] There were 303 non-political and/or incoherent postings, which were not included.

[8] All participant names have been replaced with inventive ones.

[9] Galloway's presence may have had something to do with these discussions, though, in both cases, he was not mentioned.

[10] This refers to the controversy surrounding Stuart Lubbock who was found dead in Barrymore's pool.

[11] Fifty-five postings were non-political and/or incoherent, which were not included.

[12] There were forum participants claiming to be from the series. This could not be verified.

References

Bennett, W. Lance (1998) 'The Uncivic Culture: Communication, Identity, and the Rise of Lifestyle Politics'. P.S: Political Science and Politics 31(4): 741-61.

Couldry, Nick (2006) 'Culture and Citizenship: The Missing Link?'. European Journal of Cultural Studies 9(3): 321-39.

Coleman, Stephen (2003) A Tale of Two Houses: The House of Commons, the Big Brother House and the People at Home. London: Hansard Society.

Coleman, Stephen (2006) 'How the Other Half Votes: Big Brother Viewers and the 2005 General Election'. International Journal of Cultural Studies 9(4): 457-79.

Coleman, Stephen (2007) 'From big brother to Big Brother: Two Faces of Interactive Engagement.', pp. 21-39 in P. Dahlgren (ed) Young Citizens and New Media: Learning for Democratic Participation. New York: Routledge.

Dahlberg, Lincoln (2001) 'Extending the Public Sphere through Cyberspace: The Case of Minnesota E-Democracy'. First Monday: Peer-Reviewed Journal on the Internet 6(3).

Dahlgren, Peter (2005) 'The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation'. Political Communication 22(2): 147-62.

Deuze, Mark (2006) 'Participation, Remediation, Bricolage: Considering Principal Components of a Digital Culture'. The Information Society 22(2): 63-75.

Dryzek, John S. (2000) Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Eliasoph, Nina (1998) Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fearson, James D. (1998) 'Deliberation as Discussion' pp. 44-68 in J. Elster (ed) Deliberative Democracy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Giddens, Anthony (1991) Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in the Late Modern Age. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Graham, Todd (2008) 'Needles in a Haystack: A New Approach for Identifying and Assessing Political Talk in Nonpolitical Discussion Forums'. Javnost - The Public 15(2): 17-36.

Habermas, Jürgen (1984) The Theory of Communicative Action. Vol. 1, Reason and the Rationalization of Society. Boston: Beacon Press.

Hermes, Joke and Peter Dahlgren (2006) 'Cultural Studies and Citizenship'. European Journal of Cultural Studies 9(3): 259-65.

Jensen, Jakob L. (2003) 'Public spheres on the internet: Anarchic or government-sponsored - A comparison'. Scandinavian Political Studies 26(4): 349-74.

Jenkins, Henry (1992) Textual Poachers. Television Fans and Participatory Culture. New York:

Routledge.

Jenkins, Henry (2003) 'Quentin Tarantino's Star Wars? Digital Cinema, Media Convergence and Participatory Culture', pp. 281-314 in T. Thorburn and H. Jenkins (eds) Rethinking Media Change. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Jenkins, Henry (2006) Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide. New York: New York University Press.

Madianou, Mirca (2005) 'The Elusive Public of Television News', pp. 99-114 in S. Livingstone (ed) Audiences and Publics: When Cultural Engagement Matters for the Public Sphere. Bristol: Intellect.

Mansbridge, Jane (1999) 'Everyday Talk in the Deliberative System', pp. 211-39 in S. Macedo (ed) Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mayring, Philipp (2000) 'Qualitative Content Analysis'. Forum: Qualitative Social Research 1(2).

Ouellette Laurie and James Hay (2008) Better Living Through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Strandberg, Kim (2008) 'Public Deliberation Goes On-line? An Analysis of Citizens' Political Discussions on the Internet Prior to the Finnish Parliamentary Elections in 2007'. Javnost - The Public 15(1): 71-90.

Street, John (1997) Politics & Popular Culture. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Sunstein, Cass R. (2002) Republic.com. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Van Zoonen, Liesbet (2005) Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Van Zoonen, Liesbet (2007) 'Audience Reactions to Hollywood Politics'. Media, Culture & Society 29(4): 531-47

Van Zoonen, Liesbet, et al. (2007) 'Dr. Phil Meets the Candidates: How Family Life and Personal

Experience Produce Political Discussions'. Critical Studies in Media Communication 24(4): 322-38.

Witschge, Tamara (2004) 'Online Deliberation: Possibilities of the Internet for Deliberative Democracy', pp. 109-22 in P. Shane (ed) Democracy Online: The Prospects for Democratic Renewal Through the Internet. New York: Routledge.

Wright, Scott and John Street (2007) 'Democracy, Deliberation and Design: The Case of Online Discussion Forums'. New Media & Society 9(5): 849-69.