

[Sonia Livingstone](#)

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**Watching talk: gender and engagement in the viewing of audience discussion programmes**

Sonia Livingstone

I felt really good because I'd spoken because in the past I've actually spoken to friends about it and they hadn't been in difficult situations and so they couldn't quite relate and strangely enough the audience was really really sympathetic and I felt more empathy with them than I had with friends who hadn't been through it. It felt really like the audience was on your side so it was actually a really nice feeling, you felt like you were being supported. (Woman participant in a studio discussion)

What is the significance of conversations held in public places? How can diverse, even conflicting, publics meet to resolve their arguments? Is open access programming a democratic opening up of elite broadcasting practices or just a new form of cheap entertainment? A nexus of these and similar questions are currently being addressed by debates across different disciplines concerned with the public sphere and the mass media. In this article, I present an audience-based analysis of one particular public place for conversation and argument, in order to examine how these broader questions relate to, and may be informed by, consideration of concrete examples from media audience reception research.

Specifically, I shall focus on the relations between gender and genre in audience responses to audience discussion programmes. The double use of 'audience' is not accidental here, for when audiences at home watch (and talk about) audiences in the television studio (who talk about everyday life outside the studio), our traditional categories of media analysis are challenged. Text (or author) and audience, public and private, expert and ordinary person, information and entertainment, critical and normative, subject and object -- all are problematized by a genre in which ordinary people are invited to participate in a television studio debate about topical issues. A focus on gender further problematizes these categories, for television genres are gendered (and, typically, research has focused on either news/current affairs or soap/romance, Corner, 1991), as are television audiences (e.g. Fiske, 1987). According to the traditional gender assumptions, in the mass media male producers and experts disseminate information to 'the ordinary housewife', while more broadly the public sphere follows masculine rules of discourse and women are relegated to the private sphere of domesticity and gossip.

While social and political theorists debate the fate, or future, of the public sphere -- in which rational, disinterested discussion to resolve public matters may be held, free from intervention by commerce or state (Habermas, 1989), media scholars are concerned to understand the specific role of the mass media in undermining, or providing some potential for, the public

sphere (Garnham, 1990), whether understood as a Habermasian (1989) or radical (Curran, 1991; Fraser, 1990; Mann 1990). In relation to audiences, one might ask what role individuals, as citizens and viewers, can play in a public sphere when public spaces are transformed, or indeed created, by the mass media?

The intervention of feminism in the public sphere debate has, by raising the issues of diverse, marginalized and excluded voices and of competing interests, proved central to analysis of the public sphere (Fraser, 1989; Phillips, 1991). This has resulted in a challenge both to the implied unity of 'the public', for people participate in multiple, overlapping publics, and also to the implicit claims to neutrality in the analyses of 'rational' and 'moral' discourse (Benhabib, 1992; Fraser, 1990). However we conceptualize the public sphere, a heavy burden is placed on 'rational dialogue'. Having said this, the forms of discourse valued by the public sphere, which have traditionally valorized patriarchal conceptions of rationality (abstract and logical rather than narrative, conversational, emotional and particular) can be challenged. Habermas's bourgeois public sphere aims for a social consensus in favour of the public good, to be achieved through disinterested, rational, critical discussion among the public. In contrast, alternative conceptions of a plural, radical or oppositional public sphere, influenced by feminist theory, aim for a negotiated compromise among diverse, interested publics through a discussion which attempts to *facilitate* the representation of the less powerful and *regulate* the discourse of the more powerful.

Curiously, despite theoretical work which connects the public sphere to both feminist theory and to the mass media it is the case that, as McLaughlin (1993: 600) notes, 'feminist work on the Habermasian public sphere gives the media scant attention'. It implicitly adopts a simple and outdated transmission model of the media, and ignores the ways in which the media now play an inextricable and constitutive role in modern public life. Yet the mass media have a particular role to play in relation to the feminist critique of the public sphere, for significantly they bring political issues and political processes into domestic spaces.

Consequently, the issues raised by a feminist re-analysis of the public sphere are crucial for our understanding of the present-day media (and vice versa), inviting us especially to look anew at the linking of gender and genre in terms of actual, everyday practices. In genres from the news to the talk show to the soap opera, we must question the media regulation of public access, participation, discourse and interest. In the context of the present paper, one might argue that television debates and discussions among ordinary people may contribute towards the potential for a plural, radical or oppositional public sphere which gives a more central role to women and women's voices, and in the process, reformulates more general conceptions of the role of the media in public discourse (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994a). Although empirical exploration of audience reception has not been without its critics (e.g. Seaman, 1992), media researchers (should) now hesitate to infer meanings and influences without recourse to this in some form, for showing the often surprising responses of actual audiences (Radway, 1984) and for challenging the unity of 'television' by identifying the complex relations between gender and genre (Curti, 1988).

### **Talk on television: the case of the audience discussion programme**

The television studio is focal for the media public sphere, for, as "the studio is the institutional

discursive space of radio and television" (Scannell, 1991: 2), it is a public space where, in the audience discussion programme, ordinary people meet together with experts of various kinds to discuss a social, political or personal issue. Often audience discussion programmes deal with 'trivial' issues in a light-hearted manner (although feminism leads us to rethink supposedly trivial chat). Often, however, the topics are serious, and the political, personal and moral dimensions of these topics may be addressed, albeit chaotically, within the terms of the debate. In programmes such as *Donahue* (ITV), *Oprah Winfrey* (Channel 4), *Kilroy* (BBC) and *The Time, The Place* (ITV), the discussions are fairly free-flowing and often heated. While clearly the host manages the discussion rather tightly, the programmes are nonetheless unique in allowing ordinary people to question and answer, challenge and support, tell personal stories and make political arguments.

In the space of any one programme, recorded live or *as live*, any or most of the studio audience (of between twenty-five and a hundred people) may have had their say, a say not always scripted in advance and not entirely controllable by the host. Access to the programmes may be restricted insofar as those who make 'bad television' may be excluded, but those who disagree with the consensus or make an idiosyncratic argument or speak for a marginalised group are *not* excluded. Everyone must talk in ordinary, personal, narrative discourse -- a constraint which causes the so-called experts considerable difficulties (Livingstone and Lunt, 1992, 1994a) but which actually favors the contribution of ordinary people.

Carpignano et al (1990) argue that a contemporary unease about public debate and public opinion may be seen in this genre, and, indeed, that the audience discussion programme might be seen as a form of (oppositional) public sphere. In these programmes:

The crisis of the bourgeois public sphere is fully visible and displayed in front of our eyes. The crisis of representational democracy is the crisis of the traditional institutions of the public sphere, the party, the union etc., and most importantly, the present mass refusal of politics. If we think about the reconstitution of a public sphere in terms of the revitalization of old political organisations...then the embryonic discursive practices of a talk show might appear interesting, but ultimately insignificant...but if we conceive of politics today as ...consolidated in the circulation of discursive practices rather than formal organisations, then a common place that formulates and propagates common senses and metaphors that govern our lives might be at the crossroads of a reconceptualization of collective practices. (Carpignano, et al, 1990: 54)

Similarly, Masciarotte (1991: 90) analyses *Oprah Winfrey* in terms of the feminist debate over women's voices and empowerment, claiming that 'talk shows afford women the political gesture of overcoming their alienation through talking about their particular experience as women in society'. These commentators see the genre as offering more opportunities than dangers for the audience, countering the undermining effect on the authentic self which critical theorists see as the effect of the mass media. The genre draws on the ways in which feminism has "redefined the relationship between the public and the private", transforming the political towards a reliance on "the circulation of discursive practices [rather] than on formal political agendas. In this sense, the talk show can be seen as a terrain of struggle of discursive practices" (Carpignano et al, 1990: 51-2). Masciarotte concurs: "Oprah Winfrey is not a simulated self, and so a fetish for the endless lack of consumer desire, but a tool or a device of identity that organizes new

antagonisms in the contemporary formations of democratic struggle" (Masciarotte, 1991: 84).

Access and public participation genres are growing in number, spreading into prime-time programmes as well more marginal slots in the schedule. The operation of the different interest groups who gain representation through these genres and the rules of engagement which regulate their interaction in a mass media public sphere have consequences for the public expression of women's experiences, for assumptions about rationality and for the gendering of social spaces (Benhabib, 1992) and social representations (Moscovici, 1984). Audience discussion programmes may be seen to act communicatively as a forum for the expression of multiple voices or subject positions, particularly because they confront members of powerful elites with the lived experience of ordinary people. Of course, they are flawed, and viewers are highly critical of the arguments offered by these programmes. Nonetheless, they express a diversity of views on issues of personal and political significance and sometimes they reach a compromise, as the oppositional public sphere model demands. Analysis of the audience discussion programme, then, allows a further exploration of the arguments concerning relations between the public sphere, the media and feminist theory, while analysis of audience response, participatory and/or critical, allows for the grounding of these arguments in the actual practices of everyday life.

### **Analysing the audience of audience discussion programmes**

#### *Sources of data concerning audience reception*

The empirical research reported in this article is based on a multi-method project on audience discussion programmes which consisted of twelve focus group discussions following viewing of an audience discussion programme, a series of individual in-depth interviews with viewers and programme participants, and a survey questionnaire from some 500 respondents from a diary panel. Each was considered in conjunction with textual analysis of a wide range of audience discussion programmes (see Livingstone and Lunt, 1994a for details). These diverse sources of audience reception data are analysed in relation to gender for the present paper<sup>i</sup>. Methodologically, the intention is for these different kinds of data to support one another, trading off considerations of sampling and interpretative validity to arrive at a multifaceted picture of audience reception for the genre.

#### *Who watches audience discussion programmes?*

I work fairly close to my house, and there are occasions when I work very late so I don't start very early in the morning, and it's nice to sit down with a cup of tea and watch something. (A male viewer)

The audience for these programmes is popularly represented as 'just housewives'. Yet the BBC daily activities survey (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994a) shows that some 40 percent of the British population is available to watch television at around 9 or 10 in the morning when most audience discussion programmes are shown (including part-time workers, shift-workers, the unemployed, housewives, students and retired people). While about 50 percent of women and 30 percent of men are at home and able to watch, very similar proportions of men and women are actually

watching television at this time. Consequently, while the morning home audience is more female than male, it contains a more substantial number of men and of working people than is popularly supposed. Audience discussion programmes typically achieve audiences of around one or two million per episode, with programme reach (the numbers who watch some but not all episodes each week or month) being much greater. Because more women are available to watch, there are generally almost twice as many female as male viewers, although similar proportions of men and women choose to watch these compared to other programmes.

#### *Audience motivations for watching audience discussion programmes*

Amongst our focus group participants, the expressed differences between viewers' and non-viewers' motivations for watching are marked, in their opinions of the topics, the host, the contribution of ordinary people, the arguments and the relevance of the discussions to themselves. However, the differences between men's and women's reasons for watching are minimal. Thus, women and men who watch audience discussion programmes say they find them -- both the topics and the contributions of the public -- interesting:

I am interested in some of the topics the programme discusses and in the answers and reactions of the public in the audience. (Woman)

I like this type of programme -- 'real' people often make for some of the most entertaining TV. They do and say things that 'normal' television disallows, for example becoming unexpectedly angry or making bizarre statements, and it's the element of reality that heightens the experience -- you can't script a studio audience. (Man)

In contrast, women and men who don't watch are highly critical of them, not usually for the topics discussed but for the *manner* in which they are discussed:

These talk shows generally irritate the hell out of me because they are facile, brief in argument (by necessity, I realize), generally uninformative: more bombast and undirected emotion than thought. (Woman)

Kilroy seems to evoke senseless replies from an audience about subjects in which I am not in the least bit interested. (Man)

#### *Audience evaluations of audience discussion programmes*

While the general appeal of this genre is not greater for women than men, further exploration of women and men's reception of the genre suggests different reasons for the genre's appeal, dependent upon differences in men and women's construction of the genre itself. Of a national panel of viewers (Livingstone et al., in prep.), those who had watched at least two episodes of *Kilroy* or *The Time The Place* in the previous fortnight (some 500 people) completed a questionnaire about audience discussion programmes as part of their regular weekly viewing diary. This showed that the more viewers enjoyed these programmes, the more they valued the aspects of the genre concerned with the oppositional or plural public sphere. Thus, programme 'fans' particularly value ordinary people having a say in public, including the opportunity to argue with experts. Fans want to discover what ordinary people are thinking and are themselves

stimulated to think by the programme discussions, finding these emotionally involving, relevant to their own lives, and of broader social influence.

Compared with men, women are more likely to consider that the genre offers a sphere in which they can participate, feeling involved and that the issues are relevant to their own lives. They are more likely than men to believe that the genre provides a fair and valuable debate within this sphere, and hence to disagree that the debates are too chaotic and biased. Men are more likely to consider experts more worth hearing than the laity while women especially emphasize the importance of giving a say to ordinary people. Also, women in particular consider that the debates are of *social* value, while men were more likely to consider them pointless in that they reached no clear conclusion and were considered to have little influence.

### *Critical response to audience discussion programmes*

In a broad survey, one can only ask fairly straightforward questions. In order to explore audience reception in more depth, we also held twelve focus group discussions following viewing of an episode of an audience discussion programme (on either poverty, doctor-patient communication, friendship or social class)<sup>ii</sup>. The point of the focus groups was to explore dimensions of programme reception and critical response, and so participants were steered away from extended discussion of the programme *topic* itself, and the discussion was loosely guided towards the consideration of the conduct and conventions of the programme and its genre<sup>iii</sup>. For the present paper, the discussions were analysed to compare reception by women and men<sup>iv</sup>.

The initial picture is that both men and women express similar interest in the genre. The 'top ten' concerns, as indexed by number of conversational turns devoted to each category of concern, are almost the same for women and men. Respondents spent most of their time talking about the nature of ordinary people, ordinary understanding, human nature, etc. They made frequent connections between the programme content and the respondents' own world. Both genders discussed their experience of and reactions to watching audience discussion programmes, and women especially were concerned about the effect (or absence of effect) that the programmes have on them in the context of their own viewing of such programmes. In Liebes and Katz's (1990) terms people make a primarily referential, rather than critical, reading of the genre, in which 'viewers relate to characters as real people and in turn relate these real people to their own real worlds' (p. 100).

However, respondents were also considerably interested in the interactional style of studio audience and of the host, commenting on their motivations, their management of their role, and issues of self-presentation. These concerns reflect a critical questioning of the communicative mode of address of the discussions: who, respondents are asking, is talking to whom and why? How should they position themselves in relation to these discussions? Are they spontaneous or manipulated?

There was substantial interest from men and women in the organization and scope of the argument and debate, noting omissions and inclusions, and discussing how such programmes are made and their constraints and limitations. Both men and women were relatively less concerned with discussing the *choice* of topic, the nature of the argument itself (with the exception of its breadth of coverage), the contributions of the experts and the likely home

audience.

However, when analysing the relative proportions of comments made about the different aspects of the programmes, some interesting differences between men and women emerged. Broadly, one could say that women were more concerned about the ways in which the programme operated as a communicative form in which ordinary people, including themselves, are involved, while men were more concerned about the communicative purpose *behind* the genre and about the nature of the genre itself.

Specifically, women talked more than men about the ways in which the studio audience were selected and what motivated them, a concern which we have previously discussed in terms of the representativeness of the studio audience (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994a): women wanted to know how certain 'ordinary people' come to be in the studio, who they represented, what they hoped to achieve, and who had been excluded. They are also particularly concerned about how these people are treated by the host once they are in the studio: does he or she give everyone a fair chance to speak, are people manipulated into expressing emotions or extreme opinions? The debate is seen as closely related to their own lives, and so the programme is discussed in the context of a discussion of women's own experiences of viewing and the likely *effects* upon them of viewing audience discussion programmes, and of the relations both between the issues discussed and issues in their own lives and between the studio audience and particular people they know.

In contrast, men were especially interested in the motivations of the host and in the motivations of the producers and the purposes for which the programmes are made, as well as a more technical concern with *how* the programmes are made.

Audience discussion programmes maintain a confused and confusing balance between allowing a chaotic collision of diverse voices and imposing consensual rules for public communication: not only do different programmes and different examples of the same programme vary in the rules for argumentation and debate followed, the audience also respond differently to these rules, some celebrating them while others regret their perceived absence. The studio audience personifies the conflict between formal and narrative logics, abstract and experiential knowledge, and principled and empathetic judgements.

#### *Positioning the self within audience discussions*

By analysing reception of this relatively ambiguous, fluid genre, the ways in which viewers actively position themselves more generally in relation to television texts can be seen. In order to explore further how men and women position themselves in relation to what are, often, highly moral issues, let us focus in on audience reception of a specific programme. First, however, we must examine the relation between the public sphere and morality, as morality itself is also highly gendered.

Gilligan (1993) has counterposed an ethical orientation of care and responsibility to that of justice and rights, arguing that, instead of being woolly and inconsistent, as it appeared when judged against traditional, formal moral reasoning, women's moral judgement tends to be more contextual, being immersed in the details of relationships and narratives. Women, she argued,



more readily empathise with the particular other, while men intellectualize to an inappropriate extent, denying the complex claims of interpersonal situational details. Benhabib (1992) suggests that the formal, philosophical, non-feminist definitions of the moral domain, of which men's judgements are a reflection, lead to a privatization of women's experience, excluding it from public view. The moral self, on this social contract view, is disembedded and disembodied, making moral decisions for humanity rather than for individuals, from the viewpoint of the 'generalized other' whose sociohistorical (and gendered) particularity is hidden behind a 'veil of ignorance'. While retaining an overarching framework of universalist principles, Benhabib reinstates (women's) 'everyday, interactional morality' into ethical theory, arguing that "neither the concreteness nor the otherness of the 'concrete other' can be known in the absence of the *voice of the other*" (Benhabib, 1992: 168).

When women viewers appear more tolerant of the lay arguments, the lack of conclusiveness or the emotional nature of the audience discussion programme, it is not that women fail to use higher, abstract principles to judge a debate but that their judgements are more concrete, contextual and relational. As in that other women's genre, the soap opera, the stories told of personal/political experience in the audience discussion programme express women's involvement in the lives of others, following the narratives, speculating about the relationships and drawing analogies with their own lives. The personal narratives in the programmes serve to *embed* the arguments, to ground the concrete individuality of the participants, to move away from their general humanity to their distinctive, often competing, individual claims. The fascination is that of the blow-by-blow account of relationships through which, Gilligan (1993) suggests, women negotiate their connectedness to each other and hence generate a contextualized, relational sense of self. Audience discussion programmes resist the restriction of such concerns to the private domain and publicize the heartfelt conversations of situated individuals.

In specifying the requirements of the public sphere, Habermas, like Kohlberg, the target of Gilligan's critique, draws on the neo-Kantian tradition which separates the personal from the moral, arguing that issues such as love, sex and divorce concern evaluative decisions over the good life rather than moral decisions over the just distribution of scarce resources, as are evident in issues such as poverty, equal opportunities or education. He argues that "the concrete ethical life of a naively habituated lifeworld is characterized by the fusion of moral and evaluative issues. Only in a rationalized lifeworld do moral issues become independent of issues of the good life" (Habermas, quoted in Benhabib, 1992, p.182). One might then argue that at best, audience discussion programmes are a mixed genre, dealing on occasion with the moral although most programmes concern the good life. More pessimistically, one might argue that this genre displays precisely a fusion of moral and evaluative issues, and hence cannot offer space for proper public sphere activities.

However, the appropriate response, I would argue, is not to attempt to deify this or any other media genre as a Habermasian rationalized lifeworld, but rather to challenge the *possibility of undoing* such a fusion of the evaluative and the moral, and particularly, to challenge the possibility of finding a public place in which citizens can meet together to address moral issues, as thus defined, *independent* of issues of the good life. Benhabib argues against the identification of morality with justice by developing Gilligan's position to suggest that the moral encompasses considerations of both justice (as in the distribution of scarce resources) and care (as in the rules

and conventions of interpersonal concern and responsibility): "for the democratic citizen and economic agent, the moral issues that touch her most deeply arise in the personal domain" (Benhabib, 1992: 185).

On this argument, most audience discussion programmes address moral issues, either centrally or peripherally. Audience discussion programmes discuss poverty, racism, and inequality; they also discuss divorce, single-parenthood and child abuse in ways which are both moral, in terms of addressing considerations of care and responsibility, and public, in terms of including public representatives (e.g. government ministers) and public issues (e.g. legal change, state provision of services, etc.). If we then move away from Habermas's idealized hope for (and disillusion concerning) the public sphere, towards a model based on plural and diverse publics in negotiation with each other, then the audience discussion programme may be reasonably understood as one of the media genres which provides -- on occasion, and with flaws -- a real public space for such negotiation. Here, as one of not so very many public places, women can speak, alternative conceptions of discursive rationality can be legitimated, and women's concerns, moral perspective, and experiences can be valorized.

How, then, shall we understand the gendered voices occupying this public discursive space? Gilligan (1993: xiii) argues that

men in speaking of themselves and their lives, or speaking more generally about human nature, often speak as if they were not living in connection with women, as if women were not in some sense part of themselves...[while] women come to speak of themselves as though they were selfless, as if they did not have a voice or did not experience desire.

The 'different' or marginalized voice, then resists these disconnections and dissociations, and speaks relationally, staying connected with concrete others, with lived responsibilities, with the self. One of her interviewees, a teenage girl, explains the necessity to 'lose' her voice; "no one would want to be with me, my voice would be too loud". Surely this is the voice publicized and celebrated by Oprah Winfrey? A voice unafraid to appear loud, embarrassing, intrusive or controversial, getting to 'the real issues', to people's emotions, arguably resists the consequences of loss of voice which, for Gilligan are "the privatization of women's experience [which] impedes the development of women's political voice and presence in the public world" (Gilligan, 1993: xxii). As Gilligan notes, "bringing the experiences of women and girls to full light, although in one sense perfectly straightforward, becomes a radical endeavor" (1993: xxiv) by challenging the patriarchal order which silences women. Winfrey herself assumes such an endeavour when she argues that her programme is about "empowering people, especially women" (interview in *The Guardian*, 20 July 1993).

In this connection, I want to examine the responses of actual viewers, from the focus group discussions, to one programme in which the dominant and the different voice clashed in public. This was an argument between doctors (mainly male) and patients (mainly female), including an acrimonious exchange between a male doctor and a female patient, in an episode of *Kilroy* (16 May 1989) examining the problems of doctor-patient communication.

As I noted earlier, while men more often express dissatisfaction with the form or rules of the discussion, women are more likely to take the perspective of the concrete other:

Man: I don't think it really is a form of debate, because there's no drawing together of conclusion or, one side of an argument and then the other side of an argument.

Woman: I could identify with some of the problems that those people were putting forward.

Women seem more tolerant of the absence of formal debating rules because, to them, it is more important to hear from diverse voices, however expressed. In the quotation below, a woman empathizes with the studio audience in order precisely to understand why it appears that women are disrupting the orderly debate format:

Woman: I think it was a bit heated. Most of the people who complained were the women, I noted, I don't know why that was. Maybe they are more sensitive when they go to the doctor whereas the man who goes to the doctor just goes, just to get it over and done with, and isn't going for that communication, whereas the women needs the communication more.

Similarly, there were a number of often quite lengthy attempts by women, but rarely if at all by men, to understand and empathize with the position being expressed, albeit unclearly, by the women -- as patients -- in the studio:

Woman: What was that woman complaining about? It wasn't clear, she started off by saying that she had had a bad relationship with her doctor, and it had now sorted itself out, it was entirely clear why, I think that it was partly because she thought the implication was that she felt always that she had been hurried, and not given a long time to say what was wrong with her. In fact when she said that they had got onto decent terms, and she had written and said that she wanted to come down and ask the following questions, she had in fact made quite a breakthrough herself without realising it. If she had given the person half a chance, to set aside some time. Because he had had time in his own time to read her letter, which of course was a much more satisfactory way of doing it, as it turned out from what she had to do.

Using the dominant voice of principles and instrumentality, a man then implies that women have unreasonable expectations, while men are direct and efficient at communication:

Man: I don't think that men have such high expectations, when you walk through that door, you know you state your case, I've been kicked in the balls, or what ever, you know you can go straight to the point, there is no high expectations about things.

Similarly, in the exchange below, a man suggests that the complaining (female) patients are ridiculous. A woman responds to this point by trying to see the complaint (in this case, having been struck off her doctor's list) from the point of view of the other, the patient, a point of view readily discredited as 'wrong' by a male respondent who has no hesitation in asserting the principle (obvious, as he sees it). The interaction continues when the man draws an analogy which illustrates his principle -- that of rights to services -- which a woman, despite his disagreement, considers inappropriate, for she distinguishes interpersonal relationships from

institutional transactions (as Gilligan's respondents would say, using contextual, rather than 'woolly', reasoning, 'it depends'):

Man: I thought at that point that the general medical association must be vetoing this. When they have their annual get together, dinner, they must have a big screen at the end of the hall, and laugh at some of these patients.

Woman: Well Kilroy tried to get going the idea that you ought to be told why you haven't - but you can just imagine, because if you were told the reasons you would probably never want to see that GP again in any case, so that --

Man: I would want to be told, if I have done something wrong. I should be told. It would appear that the lady who did something wrong, didn't tell 100% the truth, about leaving her bike outside, she didn't say for how many hours, or days, weeks or years. She didn't say whether it was in the doctor's front garden, you know....

Man: It's like banning somebody shopping in a certain shop. Now surely you should be told why, if I am going into Marks and Spencers, and they say "sorry, you can't come in here".

Woman: No, personality doesn't come into that, and it very much does in a relationship.

Man: Well I think it's the same.

In contrast with the man above accusing the woman complainant of lying, another women respondent assumes -- drawing on her own experience to help her -- that there is more to the story than we have heard, and that more contextual information would allow for a more balanced judgement:

Woman: But with this programme you didn't get information -- that Welsh lady didn't understand. She said, well maybe it was to do with the bike, but she said, I never went to him without good reason. There was some indication that over the two month period she had been there quite a lot. Now I don't know about you, but I don't go to my doctor more than once or twice a year, if that.

The interactions below return to the commonly felt dissatisfaction with the genre in terms of prioritizing breadth over depth of discussion. While for the first man, the discussion can be dismissed for its superficiality, for the woman who answers him, there is a real communicative problem to be resolved, concerning the breadth versus depth trade-off, which she sees as facing the host and the studio audience:

Man: That is one of the things that annoys me about this kind of programme, you just get interested in an area, and then the mike is taken away and you think, well they didn't even sort that out.

Woman: I think that that is the point, he had various topics in his mind that he had to cover.

When again, a woman acknowledges the difficulty of regulating a programme when there is a tension between hearing from many people and from a few people in depth, a man interrupts her to criticise a woman participant. He has no doubts about the legitimacy of his judgement, and a second man concurs, inviting ridicule of the woman. The woman viewer returns, without judgement or prejudice, to the communicative difficulties involved, this time for the doctor-patient relationship:

Woman: I think that maybe a few more people may have been able to speak, they didn't get a chance to, most of them did I agree. It is very difficult to bring a thing like that when it is not a debate, but a discussion, you have got to let people run on and that is the kind of programme they want --

Man: I disagree, I think that on Kilroy-Silk they had one person, that lady at the back, who had far too much to say.

Woman: Which one?

Man: The one who wants to have 20 minutes a time every time she sees the doctor.

Man: It went up to half an hour, did you notice? (General laughter)

Man: Oh I was getting a bit bored with her at the end, you know.

Woman: Well that just goes to show what the doctor has to deal with.

In discussing the possible contradiction between 'tender loving care' and the formality expected of the expert, a woman and man illustrate the different voices -- the one concrete, relational, and seeing both points of view ('it depends'), the other principled, impersonal, searching for a unifying consensus -- even though interestingly the *content* of their arguments is not dissimilar:

Woman: Well I thought that there was a lot to this and I thought that maybe why we give doctors this image, and we don't take it away from them, because in a sense we want them to have this image, when we are ill, and yet I know there are times when it is annoying, because I went for an eye test once, so therefore I wasn't ill, and the man said, put your right hand down, there's a good girl, and I was furious, because I wasn't ill, I was my normal self and I was irate by it. But in a sense another friend of mine said that she liked that to have someone pat me on the head and tell me I am a good girl or something, and when I thought of it like that, I must admit. That's why they have the image.

Man: One of my soap boxes is complementary medicine, where the emphasis is on a team effort by the doctor, the healer and the patient, and they both work together to get the patient better. And even the doctors may have problems they don't present themselves as being perfect and use say people expect this, but perhaps that is not the best attitude, maybe it is also useful to make the patient change, or do something.

The two voices can, however, also result in very different judgements of the genre. For example, the woman below is interested in the possibilities of exploring multiple perspectives in a conflict while the man such exploration is useless:

Woman: Maybe ask people, a doctor and his patient, who already know each other, and maybe interview them separately ... that would be more interesting, because then you would hear the two sides.

Man: It should have had an ending like, what we have to do is so and so... But we couldn't because we know all the arguments and all the answers already.

## Gender and genre

The contribution of empirical audience reception research to the analysis of a television genre, and hence the conclusions to be drawn from the present analysis, may be pulled together through an analogy with soap opera research. The soap opera has, in the last decade, undergone a critical reevaluation, led primarily by feminist critics concerned to re-examine the hidden values according to which women's culture or experience is devalued. This reevaluation has been supported by empirical audience research (Liebes and Katz, 1990; Livingstone, 1990). Allen (1985) argued that soap opera fans make more paradigmatic readings of the genre, focusing on the play of possibilities among characters involved in specific events, while non-fans, often including media critics, make syntagmatic readings, focusing on the generally repetitive sequencing of events and the absence of conclusions. Thus, while the former enjoy the play among what *might* have been, what happened before and what might yet happen, the latter simply see the genre as repeating the obvious and say, 'So what, nothing really happened.'

Gender is central to this argument, for not only are soap opera fans typically women while the non-fans and media critics are more often men, but one can argue that women, through connection with a 'different' or 'feminine' voice (Gilligan, 1993), are more interested in understanding events in terms of community, of relational connections, and of implications for others (all of which are central to the soap opera), than they are in seeing events in terms of the dominant voice, focusing on cause and effect, on abstract principles and on judgements of outcomes (features typical of 'masculine' genres such as cop shows).

The audience research presented here suggests parallels between analysis of reception of the soap opera and the audience discussion programme. In terms of the decision to view, and motivations for viewing, men and women viewers differ little, while fans and non-fans differ radically: of course, non-fans rarely view audience discussion programmes, but if they do watch, they make, predictably, a negative reading of the genre, judging it as chaotic and superficial. Analysis of audience evaluations and critical response among viewers reveals a more complex picture, one which depends upon the gender of the viewer and the gendering of voices, experiences and conventions which structure the genre. Just as soap fans perceive the openness in the genre by focusing on its paradigmatic dimensions, so those who enjoy audience discussion programmes are also more likely to perceive the genre as open. Specifically, audience discussion fans construe the genre more in terms of the oppositional or plural public sphere, valuing the conjunction of contributions from diverse, lay publics, seeing these debates as of

social value, and relishing the confrontation of elite experts and ordinary people. They are less concerned than non-fans about whether the debates are emotional, ill-expressed, include non-normative views or 'fail' to reach a consensual conclusion. Consequently, they are more *participatory*: these viewers engage with the openness in the genre more than do non-fans both in terms of responding to perceived invitations to offer thoughtful, valued and personally relevant contributions of their own and in terms of finding interest in the conjunction of alternative positions. In contrast, the non-fans draw more upon classic, bourgeois public sphere expectations of the *rules of debate*, the value of *expert* contributions, and the goal of *consensus* -- assumptions which make for a more closed reading of the genre and permit a more restricted, less diverse role for the viewer.

It is not coincidental that the oppositional or negotiated conception of the public sphere is more compatible with feminist theory and that women, more than men, are engaged with these kinds of participatory media discussions and debates. Maybe not surprisingly, given their relative exclusion from the expert professions, women viewers especially appreciate the opportunity to hear the voices and experiences of ordinary people talking about issues relevant to their everyday lives and, as they see it, to political concerns more broadly. In accordance with the negotiated public sphere, women valued hearing from diverse publics on these programmes even though the orderly achievement of a consensual conclusion was often lacking. In accordance with Gilligan's analysis of voice, women were more likely to understand the genre in terms of communicative relations among a set of people, including themselves, which require regulation to ensure fair and diverse representation, and which are embedded in the everyday lives of all participants. Conversely, in line with Gilligan's analysis of the dominant voice, which draws more on the principled morality discussed by Kohlberg, Habermas and others, men were more likely to be concerned about the formal constitution of the genre, its conformity to rules of argumentation and its abstract goals.

Both the viewers' gender and whether they are a programme fan affect their understanding of the genre and this in turn affects the position they negotiate in relation to public discussions, with consequences for their critical response, their participation and involvement, and their motivations for viewing. It is not simply that women are fans and men are not, nor is it that men who watch necessarily adopt a 'feminine reading' or a 'different voice' (although women who do not watch sound very like men who do not watch, judging the genre harshly on its perceived failure to offer a classic, Habermasian debate). Nonetheless the resonances between the viewers' everyday experiences and their gendered readings of the genre mean that a more positive construction of the genre is relatively more available to women, who consequently become viewers, than to men<sup>v</sup>.

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## Notes

- i. A textual analysis of audience discussion programmes in relation to gender, focusing on the host, studio participants, and discussion topics, is presented in Livingstone and Lunt (1994b).
- ii. The focus group sample was drawn from diverse occupational groupings and was fairly balanced in terms of age and sex of respondents. Viewing habits ranged between those who have rarely seen audience discussion programmes to those who watch several episodes each week.
- iii. The discussion was prompted by a set of questions such as 'why do you think people watch programmes like this?', 'how well did they cover the topic and did they miss anything out?', and 'do such programmes serve any useful purpose?'. Each focus group discussion was taped, transcribed and content analyzed according to fifty-one categories of critical response, covering comments about the respondents themselves, the studio audience, the host, the experts, the topic, the argument, the production, the genre and the public sphere.
- iv. These gender comparisons are based on the proportion of the women's conversational turns, compared with the proportion of the men's turns, coded in terms of one of the fifty-one categories. Thus the fact that the men spoke disproportionately often compared to women was taken into account.
- v. While the present analysis reveals the gendering of available positions and audience readings, this does not warrant a general polarization of viewers in terms of men versus women.