

ARTICLE

THEORY AND PRACTICE OF PARTICIPATION IN BBC'S QUESTION TIME



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DOI: 10.25200/BJR.v18n2.2022.1503

Received in: January 04th, 2022
Desk Reviewed: January 29th, 2022
Desk Review Editor: Débora Lapa Gadret
Revised on: April 25th, 2022
Revised on: May 10th, 2022
Approved on: April 01st, 2022

ABSTRACT – Connections between public service broadcasters and viewers can take place in a variety of contexts, including TV programs where practices of interaction and participation seek to ensure the fulfillment of public media duties. Our research developed an analysis of BBC's Question Time, a television show first broadcast in 1979 and still on. Our goal was to investigate theoretical and empirical aspects of audience participation in the program. Our methods were document and program analysis, and interviews with BBC journalists. The results include a wide view of how Question Time and the participation it provides have evolved. We argue that participation in the media may be a way of reinforcing public service broadcasting commitments with the health of democracy.

Key words: Participation. Public service broadcasting. Media accountability.

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TEORIA E PRÁTICA DA PARTICIPAÇÃO NO PROGRAMA QUESTION TIME DA BBC

RESUMO – As conexões entre emissoras de serviço público e telespectadores podem ocorrer em uma variedade de contextos, incluindo programas de TV onde as práticas de interação e participação procuram assegurar o cumprimento das obrigações da mídia pública. Nossa pesquisa desenvolveu uma análise do Question Time da BBC, programa transmitido pela primeira vez em 1979 e ainda em andamento. Nosso objetivo foi investigar aspectos teóricos e empíricos da participação do público no programa. Nossos métodos foram a análise de documentos e programas, e entrevistas com jornalistas da BBC. Os resultados incluem uma visão ampla sobre como o Question Time e a participação proporcionada através do programa evoluíram ao longo do tempo. Argumentamos que a participação na mídia pode ser uma forma de reforçar os compromissos do serviço público de radiodifusão com a saúde da democracia.

Palavras-chave: Participação. Serviço público de radiodifusão. Accountability de mídia.

TEORÍA Y PRÁCTICA DE LA PARTICIPACIÓN EN EL PROGRAMA QUESTION TIME DE LA BBC

RESUMEN – Las conexiones entre los servicios públicos de radiodifusión y los telespectadores pueden producirse en diversos contextos, incluidos los programas de televisión, donde las prácticas de interacción y participación buscan asegurar el cumplimiento de las obligaciones de los medios de comunicación pública. Nuestra investigación analizó el programa Question Time de la BBC, emitido por primera vez en 1979 y aún vigente en la actualidad. En particular, se abordaron los aspectos teóricos y empíricos de la participación del público en el programa. La metodología abarcó tanto el análisis de documentos y programas, como la realización de entrevistas con periodistas de la BBC. Los resultados proporcionan una visión amplia sobre cómo ha evolucionado Question Time y sus formas de participación, a lo largo del tiempo. Sostenemos que la participación en los medios de comunicación puede ser una manera de reforzar los compromisos de los servicios públicos de radiodifusión con la salud de la democracia.

Palabras clave: Participación. Servicio público de radiodifusión. Accountability.

1 Introduction

Since the first experiments, participation in the media has been a strategy that public broadcasting services (PBS) have adopted in an attempt to fulfill their commitment to maintaining the health of democracy. The creative formats and interaction techniques used in TV programs with audience participation (which are the focus of this paper) make use of emerging technologies, while at the same time preserving standards recognized as valuable, often supported by the professional knowledge of journalists. The United Kingdom, as a result of its pioneering and exemplary efforts in regulating PBS, has created audience participation formats that have become very

popular and have remained active for more than 40 years, yet they continue to be understudied.

The BBC has been at the heart of the UK public service broadcasting system since its inception in the 1920s. This paper presents the results of our study of the BBC's Question Time, a weekly debate program first broadcast in 1979. It is one of the most distinguished examples of public participation in the media. Our goal was to analyze the interaction and participation developed by Question Time, and by doing so, seek to broaden the understanding of what participation in the media means for democracy and for fulfilling PBS commitments. We investigated empirical aspects of the relationship between the studio audience and the public broadcaster encapsulated by the program.

The program is hosted by journalists who mediate a panel of politicians and guests from the world of media and politics, who hold opposing positions and must answer questions posed by members of the studio audience. Audience members are selected with the purpose of maintaining parity between political opinions and affiliations. Those interested in joining the studio audience must apply by phone or fill out an online form¹ which includes questions about their occupation, ethnic background, voting history (in last elections and Brexit), political engagement, and activism.

In 2021, Question Time ranked 108th in YouGov's "The Most Popular Contemporary TV Shows" ranking². Out of the total of 1.315 respondents, 86% said they knew the show, 38% said they liked it (46% of which were baby boomers), 21% said they disliked it, and 27% had no opinion. Its highest audience figures to date (8.3 million viewers, three times more viewers than usual) were recorded on October 22, 2009, when Nick Griffin, former leader of the far-right British National Party, appeared on the panel³ (in comparison, the most-watched news show in December 2021, BBC News at Six, had 5.1 million viewers⁴).

The debates are guided through pre-selected questions. The production team selects questions from the studio audience before the program starts. During the program, the host calls on the audience members to ask their questions, and the panel debates these questions, with the participation of the audience members. If a member of the studio audience wants to give his or her opinion, they must raise their hand. The host often asks the audience members whose questions were heard whether they were satisfied with the

panelist's answers. The camera usually focuses on the participants' facial expressions while they write questions, intervene in the debate, or listen to answers.

While our article focuses on a TV show that has a long and specific history in the UK, the results we present can be useful for any country that finds itself in the position of defending the legitimacy of its public service broadcasting, a challenge that is currently a global one, given the growth and monopolization trends spurred by commercial media operations, mostly in multiplatform and video on demand.

We first present a literature review on media participation (section 2), before moving on to describing the methodology of our study (section 3). This is followed by the results offering an analysis of the trajectory of public participation in the program Question Time, based on a qualitative analysis of documents, programs, and interviews we conducted with one of the program's former editors and former top-ranking journalists⁵ (section 4). Section 5 presents our concluding remarks.

2 Literature review

Participation in journalism can take on a variety of forms with different democratic possibilities. In Brazil, for example, Pereira Junior and Alves (2017) analyzed participation in a TV Globo news broadcast in the northeast of the country. Vizeu and Silva (2013) considered the co-producing role of the public in local TV news. Silva (2011) investigated public inclusion on the interview program *Roda Viva* (TV Cultura). A theoretical approach can be found in Matos and Nobre and Pereira Filho (2016).

All these studies focus on the internet's role in enhancing participation, but with limitations. However, interactive and participatory media were not invented by the internet. It may seem obvious, but it is important to highlight that interaction and participation were already tangible in printed media. The printing of books, posters, and newspapers changed the structures of technologies available for expression, allowed for the propagation of multiple ideas, and created a space for participation through the media (Carpentier et al., 2013).

In the 1920s, broadcasting technology led to more possibilities for participation, especially in the case of Western

European systems, which were created under public service remits. But it was in the post-war period that the possibility of participation through the media was combined with participation in the media. These years saw a rise in alternative, independent, and community media experiences. “All around the world, a heterogeneous galaxy of ‘independent’, ‘underground’, ‘alternative’, ‘community’, ‘citizens’, ‘participatory’ and ‘radical’ media flourished, [...]. What these communicational practices shared was access by the community and participation of the community” (Carpentier et al., 2013, p. 291).

Carpentier et al. (2013) separate mainstream from alternative media when it comes to participatory experiences. They argued that much of the alternative practices were sparse, and what survived of participation in mainstream media were formats controlled by organizational levels. However, this does not mean that television lacks the potential to promote participatory formats. “Television has a potential role in stimulating, organizing, disseminating, and reflecting on an inclusive and far-reaching democratic debate that should not be overlooked simply because it rarely happens or there are other promising spaces in which debate might happen” (Coleman, 2013, p. 25).

Participation can occur in traditional media formats on mainstream television, but it might be limited by the broadcaster, which in turn may correspond to editorial guidelines that public channels are expected to comply with, such as public service broadcasting requirements. Such requirements can be used as an excuse to avoid more challenging and ground-breaking participatory formats.

Coleman (2013) observes that the history of television is another reason for the limitations in its capacity to promote public debate. Initially, the BBC was forbidden by the UK government to address politically controversial issues. This restriction didn't prevent the broadcaster from testing political debate formats, but they excluded the public. Coleman (2013) lists two examples: *The Debate Continues* and *Conversations in the Train*, both published in 1931.

The Debate Continues was a series of discussions on political issues where the three main political parties were represented. In this case, the party leaders would decide which representatives would participate in the show. *Conversations in the Train* was originally designed to show ordinary people talking about shared

concerns but ended up using actors who read scripted conversations. Although these attempts tried to emulate political debate, they were not very democratic because the political discussions were held only by elites and dismissed public participation (Coleman, 2013).

However, a decisive move toward increasing participation in the media came not from television, but from radio: *Any Questions?*, broadcast on BBC's Radio 4 since 1948, is one of the earliest experiments with a panel of personalities from politics and media answering questions posed by the audience. It is considered the longest-running live discussion program in the UK. It became known for how it encouraged open debate: if a panel member appeared to lack information deemed important, he or she would "be challenged on it by the chairman or other panelists" (Daly, 2016, p. 278). What's more, the program uses a formula where panelists are selected to stir up the discussion. "*Any Questions?* usually includes some 'movers and shakers' – senior politicians with input into policymaking. The effect on the content is interesting: Some but not all topics result in more pressure on the most senior panellist", as Richardson puts it (2008, p. 389)

Coleman (2013) considers *The Last Debate*, from 1959, as the turning point for debate on television. Broadcasted by Granada TV, an ITV franchisee, the program invited politicians from the three main parties to debate with an audience of several hundred people. "A large part of the ninety-minute broadcast consisted of the three politicians being jeered at, shouted down, and heckled. It was vulgar; it was intoxicating; it was debate as carnival; it was noise minus signal" (p. 23).

The participatory format can hardly evolve without controversy. It seems risky to open the media for opponent voices that are not always familiar with rules and audiences, not to mention the producers' expectations. Although institutional, organizational, and editorial aspects may impose restrictions, a participatory process should grant real access to the public. When meeting the strategic or commercial interests of broadcasters becomes the reason for allowing participation, the whole process tends to get distorted. "This media-centred logic leads to a homogenization of the audience and a disconnection of their participatory activities from other societal fields and from the broad definition of the political, resulting in the articulation of media participation as non-political" (Carpentier, 2012, p. 171).

Another contribution to enhancing audience participation within mainstream media was Video Nation, according to Carpentier (2003). This was a series that the BBC started in 1992 to provide perspective on the everyday lives of people in the various nations that make up the United Kingdom. “The basic concept was to provide camcorders to a semi-representative selection of ‘the audience’, to train these (approximately) 50 people and ask them to film fragments of their daily life” (p. 425).

BBC’s Question Time, broadcast since 1979, created its own way of selecting the audience members that would participate and the politicians that would form the panel of guests. The first episode was broadcast on September 25th, and the presenter gave a rundown of the program and the role the audience members were expected to play.

Hello and here we are for the first of your weekly Question Time with an audience in the South London Theatre which has been specially converted for television. [...] The theater has been specially converted, not the audience. The audience are much the same people as they were when they come in, they’re once described in TV circles as real people to distinguish them from people who work in television. We don’t claim them to be a scientific cross-section of the British nation but they are a very good collection, a wide-ranging collection from a broad variety of groups and organizations, and institutions. And to answer their topical questions I gotta a pretty rich mixture of personalities here with me (BBC, 1979).

Even though some changes were made, especially to home audience interaction and the number of panelists, the dynamics of the debate have practically remained the same since 1979. Members of the public pose questions to a panel of politicians and members of the media, chosen to represent a wide and balanced approach to current affairs.

Seaton (2015) highlights that, among other programs, Question Time encapsulates the BBC’s concern to please the audience. Question Time would have helped the BBC to define ‘Britishness’ not as an imposition, but as a co-production: “in representing the national these programmes were pillars of the BBC’s part in the unwritten constitution, holding things to account and describing decencies” (p. 2).

This involves treating the audience as citizens, and not just consumers, a duty proposed by the UK broadcasting regulation. Livingstone et al. (2007, p. 615) suggest that “whereas once the good ‘citizen’ was defined in terms of active participation in public life, the merging of this term with ‘consumer’ constructs a different

meaning of civic life". This often happens when the barriers between the production and distribution of television and audio-visual content are blurred by digital media, and the public is offered more content and choice.

The question is whether the terms are being merged or if the notion of consumer is overtaking the notion of citizen, as embedded in the discourse of choice and empowerment. "The critical concern, in short, is whether the citizen has a voice in regulatory debates, or whether this voice being subordinated to the market. The two are clearly in tension" (Livingstone et al., 2007, p. 616).

When choosing to watch Question Time on the BBC iPlayer, a video-on-demand service, viewers can access or download the weekly panel at any time, where they can recognize themselves as a part of the political landscape. Their voice as an audience meets their voice as part of the public in a democratic setting. As the program travels throughout the United Kingdom, the different nations tend to be fairly represented. That means a wider sense of public service television, as in the Lotz (2018) remark, where the idea of a system of public service media exceeds public service broadcasting. While radio and television were defined by fixed schedules, digital media distribution strengthens the audience's freedom of choice, and, with that, comes more responsibility.

This demands an "exhaustive task of identifying the ways in which the affordances of internet-distributed video require the abandonment of the broadcast paradigm and creation of a paradigm of public service that embrace the opportunities and characteristics of internet distribution" (Lotz, 2018, p. 46). In this sense, despite its distinctive character as a live program, the very fact that Question Time is one of the dozens of other programs on the BBC iPlayer suggests that the program may help the BBC to renew itself as public service media.

Besides embodying convergence, public service media should operate based on a democratic view that embraces the purposes of remedying media market failures and strengthening political, social, civic, and cultural citizenship (Donders, 2021). The value of public service media is linked to a range of social benefits, according to academic literature reviewed by Neff and Pickard (2021, p. 2): "public media systems have been shown to enhance public knowledge of public affairs, reduce inequalities in news provision, and produce more diverse and critical news coverage than commercial news outlets". Their

relevance to democracy justifies supporting public media systems as a way to stand against commercial monopolies and deal with media and journalism credibility crises (Neff & Pickard, 2021).

A program format where members of the public participate in an orderly and planned way, posing questions to politicians and voicing their concerns about political processes lines up with the need to reinforce the public service media's duty, not only because plurality is one of the most important outcomes of on-air debates, but also because viewers can regularly acknowledge that average citizens' opinions matter and are out there for anyone to see.

It is also productive to look into the media capabilities to enrich citizenship, particularly public television. Coleman and Moss (2016, p. 6) assume that "one way to assess televised debates (...) is to ask which democratic capabilities they enable and which capabilities citizens are entitled to expect".

Five democratic capabilities that televised debates can enhance were summarized by Coleman et al. (2018): respecting a rational and independent decision-maker; evaluating political claims and making informed decisions; becoming able to participate in a debate as a democratic cultural event; communicating with and being recognized by political leaders; impacting the political world and being able to make a difference.

Drawing from Hesmondhalgh's (2018) approach to television and the value of culture, we argue that participation in Question Time becomes a way of boosting the capabilities and cultural functioning of citizens while going beyond meeting the subjective preferences of consumers. According to Hesmondhalgh (2018, pp. 152-153), "television's contribution to quality of life should be thought of in terms of what it enables people to do or to be", and "it moves beyond the idea that services should be provided on the basis of subjective consumer preferences, by fore fronting the need for public deliberation over which cultural functionings a society should enable, and how".

This is not to say that Question Time's format does not receive its share of criticism. Coleman (2013, pp. 24-25), for example, critiques its "dramaturgical ritual": "like a Greek Chorus, the audience in the studio vocalize the sighs, groans, and sulky laughter of the audience watching at home", and the consequences of that might be not so positive: "this is, in two senses, prosthetic democracy: the event as spectacle stands in for the vibrancy of a public sphere;

the studio audience ventriloquizes the exasperated sounds of the viewers at home”.

However, Coleman (2013, p. 25) confronts such criticism: “this critique of the televised spectacle implies that dramatizing strategies are necessarily reductive, degrading complexity for the sake of simple narrative and using precognitive symbolism as a substitute for rational argumentation”. That is not necessarily the case as he argues: “more recently, however, some media scholars have begun to argue that forms and genres of apparently nonrational political entertainment might perform a significant role in informing and stimulating citizens (...)”, so it is plausible to assume that “television, with its unique combination of dramatizing and informing techniques and genres, is well placed to provide an appropriate ‘civic mix’ between the highmindedness of rational political debate and the enchanting appeal of participatory democracy”, writes Coleman (2013, pp. 25-26).

Also, the very criticism the BBC has faced since its inception should not be dismissed when analyzing Question Time as it might help advance the mindset of elites and the powerful, as it has been repeatedly denounced by a large number of detractors (Mills, 2016). According to our results, which indicate that the program’s production team seeks to provide equal competing viewpoints in every episode, we consider participation in the media to be an additional resource to confront such criticism.

When considering the use of digital media to increase participation in Question Time, Anstead and O’Loughlin (2011, p. 441) discussed the emergence of the “viewertariat”, defined as “viewers who use online publishing platforms and social tools to interpret, publicly comment on, and debate a television broadcast while they are watching it”, during a Question Time episode in 2009. The authors concluded that the emergence of the “viewertariat” could be a form of informal institutionalization since these viewers used social media to express their collective identity and advocated for action against one of the panel members and his party.

To conclude this section, we highlight that Question Time’s attempt to foster participation in the media elicits answers to old questions that are increasingly concerning to broadcasters regarding the roles that public service media should play in the face of the escalating trends of disintegration of society. Donders (2021, p. 68) presents some of these concerns: “how to represent a growing

diversity in the population?” and “how to connect with people that do not per se relate to a domestic culture?”.

3 Methodology

Our methodology consisted of a qualitative analysis of documents, programs, and interviews. The analysis was guided by identifying changes in two main aspects of BBC’s Question Time: editorial aspects and format aspects. In terms of editorial aspects, we looked at changes to the topics addressed and how the topic of debate was defined. For aspects of format, we looked at changes to how the panel and the studio audience were selected and at the viewer and audience interactions and participation (table 1).

Table 1
Questions to data analysis

Qualitative analysis	Changes to editorial aspects	How and which topics are addressed in the discussion?
		How are the topics defined?
	Changes to format aspects	It is possible to indicate more relevant topics and special episodes?
		Are there any significant changes to the panel?
		Are there any significant changes to the studio audience?
		Which formats of studio audience and viewer participation are adopted during the period analyzed?

The documents were retrieved from the BBC Written Archives, in Reading, UK. They were reports of the Weekly Program Review Board from 1979 until 1980 and Audience Research Reports from 1979, 1993, 1994, and 1996. We analyzed the Weekly Program Review Board reports from 1979 to 1980 and the evaluation and opinions of the Board for the first year the program was broadcasted. The Audience Research Reports were selected and made available by the BBC Written Archives. The programs were collected from two databases: BFI (British Film Institute) Archive and BOB, an online archive of audio-visual material. A total of 26 Question Time episodes

from 1979 to 2019 were collected and analyzed. They were chosen based on their relevance to the research goals.

In August 2019, we conducted face-to-face semi-structured interviews in London with a former producer and editor of the program and with a former high-profile journalist. The interviews were guided by four topics:

- a) Interacting with the public: expectation and actions.
- b) Public broadcasting as a space for engagement and participation.
- c) Social responsibility, innovation, and establishing credible strategies for accountability and relationship with the public.
- d) The trajectory of accountability and relationship practices: changes in editorial aspects and the format of journalism, interviews, and debate programs.

The results in the next section are presented in an overarching approach that combines these four topics, including editorial and format aspects, in order to provide a coherent line of interpretation that meets our goal of analyzing how participation in the media has been secured as a duty of public service media.

We shall not disclose the interviewees' names in accordance with the research ethics commitment statement advised by the UK supervisor who hosted our study.

4 Results and discussion

Before the program, the studio audience is asked to write the questions that they want to be answered. One of the producers, the editor, and the presenter then read the questions and decide which ones should be used in the program. This process reveals an important editorial aspect of the program: the studio audience takes part in selecting the topic, but the final decision is made by journalists, who determine which questions are more appropriate:

Every member of the audience [...] was asked to submit two questions. All those questions come to me. What came to me, and then in consultation with the political producer. But basically, I would go through all of the questions and I would pile them up. And in its simplest terms, the theory is the question that gets the most questions, you know, is the one that

you would go with first, but it may also be the same topic as the week before, was dominated the program the week before, so you don't necessarily do it. But they submit these questions, we then pick eight, or the eight out of the 300 that have been submitted, which we think are going to work best for the panel, are going to get the biggest range of responses, are going to be good telly, get the audience engaged. (Former Editor, personal communication, August 19, 2019).

During the program, the presenter reads the previously selected questions by saying the name of the audience member who wrote them. The panelists then answer the questions and the debate ensues. The presenter decides when to change the topic and move on with the debate. Sometimes, even if the studio audience still wants to discuss a topic, the presenter informs them that they should move on to a different question. This dynamic allows for more questions to be taken, but it can also interrupt the debate on an issue before the studio audience is satisfied. In the interview, the former editor stated that the audience can influence whether to keep discussing a topic or move on to a new one, but we did not observe this in the programs we analyzed.

You have a situation, like when I was doing the Second Middle Gulf War. Every single week it dominated. In fact, there was one program we did, where there was one question. We never took another question. Just one, and that was a whole hour. So, I mean, that's because the audience had so much to say, every time we say "it's time to move on", they went "No, no, we've got more to say". The same issue applies to Brexit. (Former Editor, personal communication, August 19, 2019).

In the programs we analyzed, we observed topics that appeared in more than one episode or that kept the audience's interest for longer periods, such as foreign policy, economy, immigration, public health system, European Union, education, national issues (such as the Scottish representation and Northern-Ireland conflicts) and the UK political system and parties. These topics are often discussed as related issues.

However, despite its significant success, the program sometimes had trouble getting high-profile politicians to join the panel. In our interview, the former high-profile journalist said that one of the difficulties they faced over the years was the decline in the number of senior politicians who were willing to be on the program. He said politicians didn't see the program as an opportunity for exposing their ideas because they feared that they would get trapped by uncomfortable questions posed by the public. Nonetheless, the presence of senior politicians on the panel was a key aspect of the

show: the audience was expected not only to talk and debate, but mainly to confront politicians. Eventually, political leaders made a crude risk assessment and gave in:

[When] Thatcher just became Prime Minister [she] wouldn't allow any of her cabinet to go on to it. And Michael Heseltine, who I think at the time was environment secretary, eventually said to her "I'm going on because we cannot afford not to be on the show. It's getting nearly 6 million viewers each time". (Former Editor, personal communication, August 19, 2019).

Until 1998, the panel was made up of four people, after which the panel increased to five members. When the panel was formed by four people, three of them were usually politicians, and the other one was a specialist or a journalist. The fifth member was added as a non-political figure. The number can vary in special episodes.

Although it might seem like a minor decision, the switch to five people on the panel epitomizes the concern to maintain plurality as the very starting point of the debate:

We added the fifth panelist because we thought, if you have three politicians, you're basically going to say what the party line is, you need two people who can ridicule the politicians, if necessary, and it will also increase the range of other guests you can have on. (Former Editor, personal communication, August 19, 2019).

You'd have three politicians and one non-politician. And the trouble with that was that the three politicians speak the language of Westminster, of parliament, and the fourth person will be out on their own. And the creation of the fifth place was designed for the two people who weren't politicians, and then they could be a (...) group against the MPs [members of Parliament]. And I think it worked very well. (Former Top-Ranking Journalist, personal communication, August 21, 2019).

These statements show that the studio audience is formed with the goal of achieving a balance of political opinions in order to represent a cross-section sample of the British people or of the city where the episode is taking place, as this statement shows:

There are different levels of checks, with actually trying to balance the audience, and represent the country. Not in every single edition, but over the course of a year. So, if you go to a city like Liverpool, you are going to have a more left-wing audience than if you go to some rural part of the country where you're going to have a more conservative audience. And you need to reflect the places that you're in. You don't fake audience balance. (Former Editor, personal communication, August 19, 2019).

What's more, an audience research report from 1996 showed that the majority (74%) of audiences preferred a panel with a balance

between politicians and non-politicians (table 2). Adding the fifth member seems to be one way to achieve that preference.

At times, as in a special episode about the September 11th attacks in 2001, which was broadcast only two days after the attacks occurred, the producers did not have time to perform all the usual cross-checking with regards to audience selection. Furthermore, advertisements on BBC Radio London asked for audience members applications. According to the former editor we interviewed, the studio audience was unbalanced because of the lack of the usual procedure of vetting applications:

I had a pretty rough experience in 2001. We decided to do a Question Time Special on the 9/11 attacks. Two days after that happens, (...) and the BBC said yes, we want to go with this. We had 30 hours to put a program together. Instead of our usual vetting processes, we put an appeal on BBC Radio London for audience members. And we got swamped. The program was going to be out at its usual time. Then suddenly, on the day, the BBC moved it to nine o'clock live. And it got six and a half million or 7 million viewers, twice the audience it had for 20 years. But it was clear, to me, when I was looking through the questions, we had a big problem, the audience was unbalanced. Anti-American, anti-Israeli, pro-Middle East, pro-Palestine. On the panel, we had the American ambassador, who according to the newspapers was reduced to tears. It made me feel very awkward. Let's see, 32.000 complaints to the BBC, which at the time was the second-largest number ever. You rewatch that program now. That was predicted would happen. It was just a mistake. (Former Editor, personal communication, August 19, 2019).

Even still, the presenter strived to reach a balance. At one moment, he said: "I want to bring in a number of people now that think Britain should do and the degree to which you would like to see Britain supporting the American administration". But the starting point of the debate was not built according to the usual standards of studio audience selection due to the immediacy of the need to clarify what happened to the public, and it was not possible to effectively amend it after the show began.

In normal circumstances, people who are interested in joining the audience must apply by telephone or fill out a form on the program's website which includes their personal information and political preferences. Between 1979 and 1998, the telephone was the only way to apply. During the program, the presenter keeps encouraging the home audience to apply and instructs them on how to do so.

[The presenter] would say: "Next week we're in, you know, Paignton in Devon, the week after that we're in Leeds, if you'd like a partner program, ask questions, have your say, then contact us on this phone number or this email address to apply to be in the audience". And then you'll get something between 1.200 and 2.000 applications, and an audience research program company, contracted by Question Time, specialists in audience selection [...], called Full House, select from those 1.200 based

on age, gender, voting intention, party affiliation, and so on, and what subjects they want to talk about. [...] So, have these people been on before? If they have, how long ago? Cause we do let people back on, but not like, you know, not immediately, a year or two afterward. And how did their answers compare to previous times if they repeat, but mostly then new people and mostly, you know, you then select a balance of ages. [...] I mean, even if the audience is 50/50, men will always speak more than women, always, very odd. (Former Editor, personal communication, August 19, 2019).

The interview showed that, even in programs where the usual audience selection process was followed, there was no way to completely assure that the balance would effectively lead to a balanced debate. They also had to make sure that people would voice their opinions. To do that, the studio audience was warmed up before the program started as a way to prepare and instruct them about the program's format.

I used to talk to audiences before, I'd say, it's no good gain going away from here and saying, oh, nobody put our point of view, you must put your point of view. So, you have to nurture an audience. It's not enough just to get an audience, you actually have to explain the moments, teach them how this balance can be demonstrated in a one-hour television program. So that's the second thing, it's not enough just to get the people, you got to make sure that those voices are heard. (Former Top-Ranking Journalist, personal communication, August 21, 2019).

The efforts made to achieve a balanced debate can be related to public service broadcasting requirements. However, a statement from a member of the public in an Audience Research Report in 1994 suggested that the home audience did not care about balance and wanted "chaos and drama, (...) blood on the carpet, (...) eccentrics (...) and mad anthropologists", and not the "boring old party spokesman". (BBC, 1994).

The audience reacts to the panelist's answers by applauding, booing, or laughing. When a member of the audience wants to speak, he or she must raise their hand, nod their head in agreement or shake their head in disagreement, or even shout.

The way the debate flows in Question Time allows audience members to express whether they want to speak or not. The presenter moderates the debate and, when it gets heated, the rules have to be reinforced. There were some instances when the presenter had to remind the audience members that, even if they shout, if the microphone isn't close to them, they won't be heard. There were moments when audience members were given a microphone after shouting their opinion. Once, in 2017, the presenter had a member of the audience removed from the

studio after he kept shouting and interrupting the debate.

There have been attempts to increase participation, but these were ultimately unsuccessful. For example, in 1997, the producers attempted to do live polls with the studio audience. During the program, the presenter would raise a question about the topic under debate, and the audience could cast their vote on whether they agreed, disagreed, or were undecided. This attempt took place only once and then was abandoned. Our interviewee explains why:

That was too expensive. And it was putting too much weight on the audience. It was treating the audience as if it was a perfect representation of the voters, which it wasn't, and therefore we stopped doing that. I'm not in favor of that way of assessing. We occasionally say "hands up those of you who", you know, but on the whole, we didn't do that. (Former Top-Ranking Journalist, personal communication, August 21, 2019).

At the end of the 1990s, the BBC asked audiences if they would support telephone voting. Mixed responses lead to the broadcaster abandoning the idea (47% thought that it would be a very or fairly good idea, while 22% thought that it would be a very or fairly bad idea, and 30% didn't know) (BBC, 1996).

Also, one of our interviewees believed there should be limits to participation:

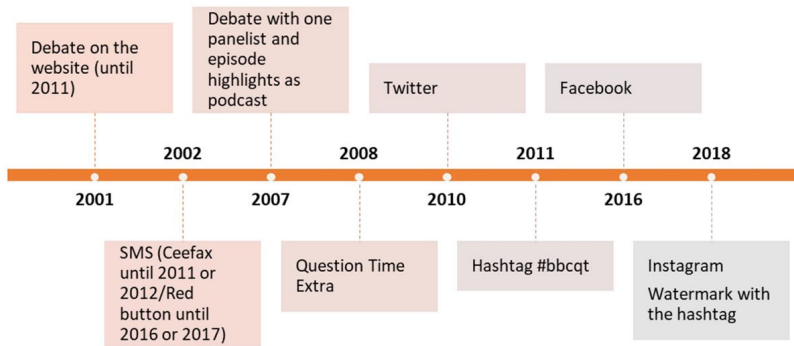
These ideas would come up from time to time. The BBC is always kind of looking for a better way of doing things. But [...] if you change the dynamic between the studio audience and the panel, you ruin the program. [...] And if you turn things into just you know "oh we got a telephone", it would be impossible. (Former Top-Ranking Journalist, personal communication, August 21, 2019).

In 2001, the BBC added a space on its website for the home audience to express opinions about what was being discussed on the programs. This resource was used until 2011. The home audience has been able to submit their comments via SMS since 2002. Up until 2012, these comments were selected by the editor and posted on Ceefax (a teletext information service accessed by the user through a TV remote control).

In 2008, the program Question Time Extra Time was launched. This is a radio program where the presenters discuss the latest Question Time programs and provide comments and opinions, and take questions from the home audience. Question Time has a presence on social media. In 2010, it launched its first presence on Twitter. In 2016, it launched a presence on Facebook. This trajectory of interaction with the home audience is summarized in figure 1.

Figure 1

Timeline of practices for interaction with the home audience in Question Time



All the input provided via these mechanisms is examined by the program producers, who often choose not to address social media comments during the course of a program.

The nice thing about it was you do have a certain amount of power. Because you know how it works. I mean, after you've been doing it for two or three years, you actually know viscerally what makes it work. When people come along you can say "no, I'll talk you through it. It won't work, that's not good, let's forget it. You want to do it, get somebody else". (Former Top-Ranking Journalist, personal communication, August 21, 2019).

The program's former editor agreed: the debate should progress in the studio, without outside interventions. He also revealed that the BBC exerts pressure on the production team to use the input from social media, but he decided not to do it. His statement confirms the editorial independence of Question Time:

We were under quite a lot of pressure to include the new technologies. But we decided correctly, in my view, that Question Time was all about the room it was taking place in. It was about the chemistry between the audience and the panel. And what we did do, from about 2002 or 2003 onward, was to put audience members comments on the screen, if you wanted to see them. So, you had to push the red button [an interactive resource available through the remote control in the UK which gives access to services and information]. And then you could see comments from text messaging, but that was it. We didn't take emails from outside the studio. It was all about the atmosphere in the room. And I'm sure that was the right decision. (Former Editor, personal communication, August 19, 2019).

This concern about separating the studio from any outside interventions suggests that the studio is considered the proper

place for debate, and contributions from outside the studio may compromise the relationship established between the presenter, the studio audience, and the panelists, as pointed out by our interviewees:

I think it's the second most popular program. In terms of the number of responses online, on Twitter, it's massive. Twitter gets tens of thousands of comments, each time the program goes out. You've got Radio Five Live, Question Time Extra zone. But again, you have to choose to follow it. (Former Editor, personal communication, August 19, 2019).

These statements suggest that the authority of journalists and editors shielded Question Time from pressures to increase home audience participation. They resisted these pressures because, over the years, the professional knowledge they acquired about how to run the program valued the primary role of the studio audience and how the debate was conducted in the studio. This properly represents the depth and plurality of public opinion according to the goal of the public broadcasting service.

Increasing the level of participation requires facilitating access to the studio. Our interviewee commented on this strategy:

In 2000 Question Time was still a studio-based program. It was basically done in London, Norwich, Birmingham, Glasgow, and Southampton. [...] Now, and we gradually change it over three or four years, almost all of the program has come from different parts of the country and still they go to new parts of the country. But when we first did it, this was the first time mostly we'd ever been outside. So, you get people who've been watching the program for 15 years to suddenly come and sit and take part. That was quite exciting. And it was big local news. (Former Editor, personal communication, August 19, 2019).

Our interviews highlight the presenter's role in keeping the balance. Question Time is designed to be a "flash of lightning" achieved through a balanced debate between panelists and an audience that is expected to give a fair picture representing the political landscape.

Question Time isn't a place for a sustained dialogue or argument between two people on the panel. It's designed like a flash of lightning, showing you the scenery. You get a vigorous argument, but it's not a place where you can debate for half an hour. (Former Top-Ranking Journalist, personal communication, August 21, 2019).

Overall, Question Time is a television program broadcast on a public broadcasting service, and so it must fulfill requirements to facilitate participation in the media. Our interviewees claimed that producing this program is part of the BBC's obligation as a public broadcaster.

Literature on the duties of the public broadcasting system is

extensive and an extended review is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, based on the selected pieces we reviewed, we are able to argue that media participation, particularly in the format developed by the BBC's Question Time, serves the prominent obligation to promote the health of democracy. This can be understood in terms of creating a sphere of debate that is capable of representing the different social sectors and opinions with relative equality, yet also remains open to them through specific editorial procedures, preserved by a sort of professional knowledge transmitted over time, to be observed rigorously (Carpentier et al., 2013; Neff & Pickard, 2021).

Culturally, this sphere should be perceived as a symbol of the expectation that democracy should be a space for informed debate, where rationality prevails through the healthy clash of ideas (Hesmondhalgh, 2018). Even after the advent of digital technology, which favors interactivity and participation in the media, in order to be effectively egalitarian, the program still requires moderating and mediating strategies that only experienced journalists can uphold in a controlled environment, such as a recording studio (Lotz, 2018). Those strategies may, in part, address the questions posed by Donders (2021) regarding the need to represent diversity and connect with people from different national cultures and backgrounds.

The best practices of participation in the media do not intuitively emerge from forms of access and interaction, but rather depend on the application of determined procedures, which evolve to meet the different challenges imposed by the formal political process itself (Carpentier, 2012). And, even if the typical dramaturgy of a studio debate that journalists strive to make attractive to diverse audiences may eventually lose its luster, it is not unreasonable to consider that such dramatization resources can serve to arouse the interest in politics while not necessarily misrepresenting it (Coleman, 2013). Above all, participation in the media must be thought of as a way to overcome the immediacy of the viewers' interests as consumers to consider them as citizens, in face of the need for education in democracy.

5 Concluding remarks

The goal of our study was to analyze the trajectory of practices for interaction and participation in the UK's public service broadcasting. We focused on the BBC's Question Time, providing a wide view of how debate and participation develop in one of the

most relevant programs on UK television.

Our data suggest that the program fulfills its mission as a public broadcasting service by providing (thanks to the editors' autonomy and the control they exercise over the quality of interventions) an open debate with the potential to develop democratic functions such as evaluating political claims and making informed decisions. Only an in-depth reception study could indicate whether this potential is in fact achieved, but we maintain that the editorial characteristics we identified are important indicators that make the program stand out in the television production landscape. It is an example of how the goal of public service can be well served in terms of maintaining democratic vitality.

Despite the use of technology to increase media participation, our results suggest that social media will not necessarily expand participation in the media. Question Time's format, which explores the meaning of public representation, depends on editorial independence to sustain its credibility over time. The large number of comments on social media suggests that it maintains its popularity in the digital setting, but that's about it. Politically-biased comments tend not to be taken into account by the producers. The dynamic established between the presenter, the studio audience, and the panel fulfills the mission of Question Time. Random external factors and interferences would disturb the coherence of the program's participatory process.

The long and successful life the program has enjoyed might be partly explained by two aspects that emerged from the interviews: the producers have autonomy to make decisions despite the BBC's pressures, and the program is seen as a public service broadcasting obligation in terms of providing participation in the media.

These factors indicate paths that could be followed in future analyses of Question Time, the BBC, and public service broadcasting. Since Question Time is still being broadcast, future analysis could be made about the format of the program and how it is adapting to changes in the media field. Our analysis showed that power relations exist between the BBC and the program's producers, and an analysis of these tensions might help toward understanding the evolving relations between the program's production and the BBC. What's more, since it is part of the public broadcasting system's obligations, studying Question Time at a moment when the public service broadcasting's legitimacy is being questioned will continue to be relevant.

NOTES

- 1 Retrieved from: www.bbc.co.uk/send/u39697902
- 2 Retrieved from: www.yougov.co.uk/topics/media/explore/tv_programme/Question_Time?content=surveys
- 3 Retrieved from: www.theguardian.com/media/2009/oct/23/bnp-question-time-ratings
- 4 Retrieved from: www.barb.co.uk/viewing-data/most-viewed-programmes/
- 5 This paper includes results of a doctoral thesis presented in the Postgraduate Program in Communication in the Faculty of Architecture, Arts, Communication and Design of São Paulo State University (Unesp).

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