

Televised populism: popular news formats and the viewers' negotiation of politics

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Over the last couple of decades, under the influence of deregulation, news journalism in Denmark – as indeed in many other European countries – has become more audience-oriented, as the competition for viewers, listeners and readers has intensified. This development has been particularly evident in the realm of electronic media, not least television, which has until the 1980s been characterised in many countries by the monopoly of one or two publicly controlled channels.

Under such conditions, audiences who wanted to watch television had little choice and had to accept the public-education philosophy underlying broadcast policy in these countries, however much they may have resented news that was difficult to understand, because it presupposed a viewer with a considerable amount of educational capital. Because of this situation in the realm of television, the movement towards tabloidization which took place in the print journalism more than a century ago, has only reached television, with a vengeance some would say, since the 1980s, when deregulation and technological innovation paved the way for channel competition both across and within national borders.

Studies of the development of news journalism in Denmark since the 1960 (notably Hjarvard 1999) have pointed to an increased audience-orientation of news communication, characterised by the following elements, in random order:

- increased *personalization* of the news, in politics manifesting itself as a focus on political personalities rather than political substance and vision.
- increased *trivialization* (by some called ‘dumbing down’) of the news, as ‘soft’ news becomes a staple of many primetime news programs.
- increased ‘*celebritization*’ of the news, as the above developments erase the boundaries between agents from the different public realms, creating one sphere of public visibility for politicians, actors, musicians, sports stars, etc.

- increased presence of a '*journalism of the everyday*', as the reporting of political decisions has often adopted the perspective of 'the ordinary person' in order to assess the implications of new legislation. This so-called 'journalism of consequences' has often been claimed to lead to an:
- increased *populism* of political coverage, as the news increasingly pits 'the people' against 'the politicians' or 'the system', separated by a gulf of mutual mistrust.
- increased *acceleration* of delivery and visual effects, as seen in the 'soundbite' mania and the dynamic camera and editing techniques.
- increased *conversationalization* of the oral presentation of news, with adoption of the popular idiom in monological formats, and informal conversational styles in interview and debate formats.

Based on this kind of diagnosis of the drift of television's news discourses there has been widespread concern among researchers in political communication, who have generalized the discursive developments into a general verdict on the health of the public sphere and democracy as such:

"It is meaningful to speak about a public sphere that does exist today, but by any standard of evaluation it is in a dismal state. (...) While popularization can and has been in many cases a positive development, bringing more people into the public sphere, by most accounts today popularization is degenerating into trivialization and sensationalism. The ideals of journalism are increasingly subordinated to the imperatives of the market. (...) What we are faced with is a serious erosion of civic engagement. We have a crisis of civic culture and citizenship, which can be linked to a more pervasive cultural malaise."
(Dahlgren, 2001)

Dissenting – and more optimistic - voices have also been heard, which have emphasized the democratically enabling consequences of tabloidization (Street 2000; van Zoonen 1998, 2003), but these voices have clearly remained in a marginal position in the overall picture.

New television genres of the everyday

While tabloidization has, for better or for worse, characterized the development of mainstream television news journalism, they have also manifested themselves in the

emergence of new documentary and current affairs genres, such as phone-in programs, public debate programs, reality TV, docusoaps, etc.

This paper focuses on one such program, the Danish current affairs program *19Direkte*, a ‘journalism of the everyday’ program broadcast daily from 7 to 7.30 pm on the public service channel DR1 (Danish Broadcasting Corporation). This particular program has aroused a considerable amount of public debate in the national newspapers, among intellectuals who see it as a worst-case example within the current affairs genre of pandering to the popular taste, while they have also drawn parallels to similar excesses taking place within other popular genres.

As one example of the elite critique of *19Direkte* and its popular bedfellows, which epitomizes the intellectuals’ opposition against the above tendencies, I shall dwell at some length on a newspaper column written by cultural critic Anita Bay Bundegaard, then debate editor of the broadsheet newspaper *Politiken* (a centre-left newspaper, corresponding in some ways to *The Guardian* in the UK). In her article Bundegaard takes the general position that “the media are filling us with the opinions of ordinary people, and are thereby deserting their obligation to maintain the quality of public debate and to make us wiser” (Bundegaard, 2000).

More specifically on *19Direkte* and on the related (now defunct) program *Point of View*, she takes the position that in such programs “ordinary people are performing for other ordinary people on the other side of the screen. Not because they know something, or because they are committed to something, or because they have a story to tell. Their only qualification is that they are ordinary and that they have an opinion” (ibid.).

Her motivation for entering the debate is a deep-rooted concern about the state of our democracy, as she asks the rhetorical question,

“Isn’t this just democratic? Because isn’t it the core of democracy that everyone has a right to be heard, to express their opinion, and to influence those whom they have elected to govern the country? Aren’t the media simply carrying out a much-needed democratisation of our society?” (ibid.)

As she proceeds to answer this question herself, she adopts a more cynical view, as she ascribes the media’s predilection for ordinary people to “less noble motives”, i.e. they are simply “busy legitimating their own activities by co-opting innocent people. (...) And ordinary people are both cheap and willing”. What they are really after, she says, is higher viewing figures, thereby demonstrating their ability to appeal to large audiences, as a

justification for the licence fees they receive or as bait for the advertisers that some of them need to appeal to.

The real effect on the public, democratic debate, she believes, is detrimental, because when we watch these programs “we are looking at our own mirror-images and becoming more and more narcissistic. We begin to suffer from the delusion that other people won’t really be able to tell us anything that we haven’t already formed an incontrovertible opinion about, even if we have formed our opinions without knowing the least thing about the matter at hand.”

In other words, she is concerned about a fundamental de-qualification of the public debate: “There is nothing wrong with the opinions of ordinary people. But the difference between lay and expert opinions is that experts have to know what they are talking about, while lay people need only have an opinion.” So if ordinary, unqualified views come to dominate the public debate, the foundation of political decision-making will become impoverished.

As a related concern, the proliferation of unqualified opinions may lead to an upsurge in political populism, as the media’s megaphoning of the popular voice may often “embarrass politicians” in positions of power, who are made to appear as the uncaring and incompetent culprits of social problems large and small.

For a Dane it is hard *not* to see Bundegaard’s assessment of these populist programs in the context of last year’s general election in Denmark. It has been widely argued that one important factor behind the defeat of the centre/left government was the media’s promotion of the kind of ‘unqualified populist’ sentiment that Bundegaard found in these TV programs. Certainly the political parties that won the election and formed the new rightwing coalition government can be seen to have exploited a resentment against the ‘know-better’ attitudes of the previous government, and to have leaned heavily on a rhetoric of giving voice to ordinary people. The most succinct statement of this anti-expert populism was expressed by the new Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen two months after the election, in his first televised New Year Address to the Danish people:

“We want to put people in front of the system. Individuals must have greater freedom to shape their own lives. We want to abolish rigid systems, patronising attitudes and regimentation of public opinion. We believe that people are able to choose for themselves. We don’t need experts and judges of taste to decide on our behalf. In recent years a jungle of official councils and institutions have emerged. Many of them have developed into state-authorised judges of taste who make pronouncements about what is good and right in different areas. There are tendencies to a tyranny of experts

that is threatening the free, public debate. The population shall not accept moralising verdicts from so-called experts who believe they know better. Experts can fulfil a function by communicating factual knowledge. But when we have to make personal choices, then we are all experts. The government will therefore abolish superfluous councils and institutions.

(Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen's New Year's Day speech, transcribed from television)

Hearing such explicit attacks on expert knowledge and intellectual opinion-makers more generally, it is clear that the discursive formats used by television *must* be evaluated in close relation to the processes of the political system as a whole, such as election campaigns. Some believe that the populist thrust of television and other media is one of the main causal factors behind the swing to the right in recent years (Mazzoneli et al. 2003).

However, in order to determine whether the causal view of the media's possible influence on a nation's political sentiment during the process of a general election is true or not, one would obviously need to do large-scale analyses of media coverage of the election, as well as reception studies of this coverage.

In this paper I shall do a lot less. My empirical analysis merely reports merely from a small-scale reception study of the current affairs program *19Direkte*, in which we explored how audiences make sense of the 'ordinary opinions' and the possible 'populism' of this particular program.¹

The everyday as news: the case of *19Direkte*

General program features

The hybrid news/current affairs program *19Direkte* was first broadcast in May 1999, as "a news program to open up a dialogue with the viewers and with room for stories that are a bit different" (Danmarks Radio Program Accounts 1999:24). The explicit purpose of launching the program, in the words of news director Lisbeth Knudsen, Danish Broadcasting Corporation, was to contribute to the democratic empowerment of citizens with little education. *19Direkte* was intended to address the large group of 'information weak' citizens whose low level of education makes it difficult for them to follow news that is presented at a high level of abstraction, people who are so to speak 'unhinged' from the democratic debates of the mainstream media (Knudsen 2000).

Also called ‘news at eye level’ about what is going on in society, the noble purpose of the program is thus akin to that underlying the general move towards ‘public journalism’ in many countries. The program is case-oriented, with a handful of fairly long stories, it features few of the experts that proliferate in other news programs, and focuses on the everyday concerns of ordinary people. The program quickly reached a viewing figure of 450,000 viewers, or a 30 per cent share of the audience in its 7-7.30 pm time-slot.

Structurally, each 25-minute program shows six or seven stories, one of which is the main story positioned both with a segment at the beginning of the program and supplemented with a phone-in studio component at the middle of the program. *19Direkte* is thus a fairly slow-paced news program that dwells on a small number of stories, which is each given in-depth coverage. Unlike traditional news programs, *19Direkte* gives a clear preference to people from everyday life, who are always the focus of a story.

19Direkte's populist discourse

Because it takes its point of departure in the everyday concerns and problems of people in everyday life, *19Direkte* often sides with the ordinary man or woman against those who may be held responsible for the problems that the program helps illuminate. The reception study below will consider the viewers' response both to the program's everyday perspective as such, and to the populist tendency of some of its characteristic stories. In order to do the latter, I shall present in some detail one story that may be said to unmistakably encapsulate the populist tendency. This particular story was the one shown to the focus groups in order to elicit their perceptions and reflections on televisual populism.

The story deals with the conditions of elderly people whose need for regular care makes it necessary for them to live in an institution for old people. The gist of the story is that because of an inadequate social care system, run by unresponsive politicians who introduce economic cutbacks, old people in institutions are not receiving decent care, however much the staff make an effort to deliver satisfactory services to the inhabitants. Now a grassroots group of relatives have produced a report on the miserable conditions, which they have given to the Health Minister, as inspiration to put things right. The structure and content of the story is presented in the box:

A populist story: Negligence in old people's homes (*19Direkte* January 2001)

1. Studio introduction. The program host: a grassroots organization of relatives have published a report about the maltreatment of old people in institutions.
2. Reportage from an institution: Flemming is visiting his 84-year-old mother Marie: “It is 13 days since she had a bath!” – “It’s a disgrace that our old people are being treated like this!” The home’s manager disputes the criticism, but Flemming gets the last word: “My mother is not so senile that she doesn’t know when she’s had a bath!”
3. Press meeting: The relatives’ group present their report to the public and the health minister, Henrik Dam Kristensen.
4. Interviews with the group’ spokeswoman and the health minister.
5. Studio: Viewers are invited to “phone in and say what you think to the responsible minister.”

(Other stories)

6. Studio: Guests are two representatives of the relatives’ group and the health minister. The host repeats the invitation to phone in and talk to the minister (not to the relatives’ representatives).
A caller, Doris Jørgensen: “Now I have worked as a health worker in old people’s homes for forty years, and I sit here thinking things are getting worse and worse (...). And those politicians, they talk and talk, and nothing happens, they promise they’ll build new institutions, but what do they do? They close some instead! (...) And Dam Kristensen’s old mother, if she had been in an institution, or if he ends up in one himself one day, then I’m sure he won’t be treated like that. But apart from that, he has the money to pay for better treatment, unlike a lot of other people.”
Health minister Henrik Dam Kristensen tries to break out of the position as villain of the story by denying the accusations, and by generalizing the matter as problems “we all” must help solve.
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As the story outline shows, the populist intent of the story is unmistakable: A social problem experienced by ordinary people is blamed on the minister, politicians, and ‘the system’ in general. In their discourse analysis of the story, Kruse & Lange conclude that even though the minister tries to break the spell of populism, he fails: “The positioning by *19Direkte* of Henrik Dam Kristensen as personally responsible is so strong that he cannot break it. Everything he says only confirms the interpretation that he is guilty” (Kruse & Lange 2001:76).

The viewers’ experience of 19Direkte

The reception study was conducted as a focus group study with seven groups, differently composed in terms of age, education, and gender. Some of the groups met twice, in order to discuss different aspects of the politics/media/everyday life nexus. Two of the groups were network groups each consisting of two married couples whom we talked to in the home of one of the families. The other five were traditional focus groups consisting of 3-6 individuals, who

did not know one another before they became involved in our project. These groups met in a meeting room in a traditional restaurant deemed to deliver a friendly atmosphere for the interview.

The interviews focused on the participants' media use in everyday life: How they keep informed about things that matter to them in everyday life, at the local, national and global level. The first half of each meeting focused on general habits and preferences of media use across all media, the second half concentrated on a number of informative TV genres including news formats, current affairs programs (*19Direkte* being one of them), debate programs, etc., short excerpts of which were shown to informants. The total duration of the interview was two hours.

In this paper I compare the ways in which people with short and long educational backgrounds experienced this program. First, I will provide a summary with a few quotations of the way those with high education position themselves in relation to the program. Secondly, the informants with relatively short educational backgrounds will be analysed, by concentrating on one of these groups, in order to explore in depth the nature of the negotiations taking place in connection with a program like *19Direkte*.

The group consisted of three men and three women in their 40s and 50s, with short educational backgrounds, all living in the same provincial town. Their demographic profile matches that of the core audience for *19Direkte*. They are typical of the four groups with little education.

The program experience of those with long education

The educated groups distance themselves from this kind of tabloid news program. They rarely watch them, and they categorise them as programs not made for them, but for “Mr and Mrs Denmark”, a derogatory term for ordinary people, i.e. people with no taste and low intellectual capability.

The essence of their distaste from such programs, and those who watch them, has to do with the lack of factual orientation and the abundance of populist, emotional appeal:

Mia: With those kinds of stories it becomes an extremely superficial program. If the callers had called in before the program, and the programmers could have selected some of them – I do realize that then it won't be a program for all Danes, but it would become a much more factual program.

Jakob: It all depends on what they want to achieve with the program. If it's a program aiming to give the Danes a chance to let off steam, then it's a fine program. But if they want to illuminate a problem, then this will not happen simply because five different people call in and say "This is a disgrace!" It very rarely happens that people call in in order to disagree with the host – the host goes "This is a disgrace, isn't it?" and then people call in and say "Yes, this is a disgrace!".. I think this is a recipe for indifferent entertainment, not for news.

In one of the other groups it becomes even clearer that the educated groups have a condescending attitude to these programs – they see them as a zoo of popular excesses, a curiosity shop that you can point your fingers at, while celebrating your own intellectual superiority:

Mads: It's such a clownish program. I like the tempo, but I don't like the way they bring out a bomb at the beginning and then keep it warm all the way. Somehow there is something wonderfully amateurish about people calling in, and it's very entertaining when people make a fool of themselves in front of the whole nation and say outrageous things. That's where the entertainment value lies for me.

Inge: It has to do with the fact that everybody can just call in, I don't know how much of a 'gate' they operate so they can sort people – but they don't dig very deep, do they.

Mads: For instance they don't discuss how come we're treating our old parents this way? It's as if they won't touch that. It's really too easy to just blame the politicians, maybe the children should accept greater responsibility there, that's a quite different angle!

Below we'll see how, in the short-education groups, *19Direkte* is used as a serious source of citizens' debate. In the high-education groups the program is rejected as superficial entertainment, and further it is seen as a block on real insights into the social and historical causes behind the way old people are treated by a system based on economic rationality:

Vivi: It's clear that if you want to reform care for the elderly, then you have to ask whether this is a challenge for the public health care system, or whether the family should assume greater responsibility. Only the families don't have the time, because they give priority to sports and the like instead of looking after your old Mum.

Mads: Those programs only scratch the surface, nothing more.

Claus: And the problem is: when they drag the minister into the studio, then they pretend that "We are the press and we are being society's watchdog!", and then it's very problematic if they only scratch the surface. They need an entirely different approach!

Mads: I think such programs undermine the politicians' desire to think ahead more than 6 months, to be visionary, to plan for the long term. They are like a boxer trying to defend himself against the journalist's incessant bombardment, with no time to plan their own strategy. This is not a forum for discussing longterm policies.

19Direkte then, is not a program for the educated groups: It is too superficial, too focused to single issues, and its approach is based on indignation rather than complex analysis.

This program thus provides an excellent illustration of Bourdieu's analysis of how elite taste cultures maintain a sharp distinction between their own legitimate taste and the inferior taste of others. It is striking that one of the metaphors used by the educated groups to describe the program is that of the 'agony column', a low-taste genre from women's magazines, whereas the metaphor used in one of the less educated groups is that of 'letter to the editor', i.e. a respectable genre functioning in the service of democratic debate.

The program experience of those with short education

The following analysis of the low-education group's verbalized experiences of *19Direkte* is more detailed and follows the structure of the multidimensional model for interpreting audience discourses laid out in Schröder (2000). This model, which was developed as a more elaborated alternative to the Hall/Morley encoding/decoding model (Hall 1973, Morley 1980), proposes that there are (at least) five relevant dimensions that one should analyse in order to understand audience discourses about media experiences: Motivation, Comprehension, Construction, Position, and Action. The analysis below mixes the group's experiences of the program as such and their experiences of the particular story (shown on video) about negligence in old people's homes described above.

As regards **MOTIVATION**, *19Direkte* is brought into the conversation spontaneously by one of the informants, whose motivation for watching it is supported by several other participants:

Poul: Many times I stay on channel 1 <after watching the 6.30 news> because I like the program that follows at seven on channel 1, then you don't have to watch all that foreign stuff, I don't care much for that really, in fact I don't give a damn about what happens out there, well that's rubbish of course, but I do prefer domestic affairs, and they <*19Direkte*> do present some really interesting stories. They have some good journalists doing that program.

(...)

Inge-Lise: They dig deep into some areas. The fact that people can phone in and voice their opinions doesn't really interest me, I don't change my opinion anyway, but it's the kind of subjects they deal with that is interesting. (...) I sometimes sit there in front of the screen and say aloud what I think, if there's something that I get mad about or something, you see.

At one point the conversation touches on a story about a 16-year-old Turkish immigrant girl who is about to be forced to marry a young man to be imported for her from Turkey. Several participants agree that it had a strong emotional appeal to them. It is thus clear that this group has a clear motivation to watch the kind of program that *19Direkte* offers them on a daily basis: They often make a deliberate choice to watch it, and the journalistic treatment of the stories often results in viewer involvement and sometimes parasocial interaction with the people and events portrayed on screen.

The dimension of **COMPREHENSION** has to do with how people understand the program or story: what viewers experience the program to be about. What people remember is especially some of the stories that have received depth coverage on the program. Several participants had got agitated about a story about grandparents who were not allowed by the authorities to take care of their grandchildren who lost their parents:

Inge-Lise: There were these poor grandparents who were not allowed to look after their grandchild, and the authorities had absolutely to decide what was best for them. They must go to a foster family now, isn't that right? (*Poul*: Yes.) That kind of thing makes me really mad. (...) But it's really no use for me to call in and tell them off, because that would just be like hitting a pillow, and they <the grandparents> already tried that, didn't they?

The program may thus serve as an **illuminator of the social problems** that ordinary people experience in everyday life, and their feeling of impotence when they are up against system representatives, who abide by the rules without considering from a perspective of human decency what is really at stake in a given case.

In other cases the illumination of a social problem may lead not to impotence but to **personal empowerment**, as victims, who share their story with the audience, may attract support and inspiration about how to resist oppression, and who may then serve also as support and inspiration to other viewers in the same situation:

Tom: I think the story about that young girl, (...) she dared to stand forward and, well already as a 16-year-old her father had decided that she was to marry her cousin from Turkey or something, (...) and she doesn't want to marry him, because first of all *he* lives in Turkey and she lives in Denmark, doesn't she? And that meant that her parents wouldn't have anything to do with her – well, she has started to see her mother again, hasn't she?

Inge-Lise: She could die from that. What a sad story.

Tom: Yes, but I thought it was so powerful that she dared to stand forward and...

Poul: Yes, and it was also very powerful with all those who phoned in. They were all immigrant girls her age who had been through the same thing. That was really... I just sat there thinking, well there's something to think about here. And it is so powerful that

they all call in, isn't it, and they all support her, not one of them was negative. That was great.

This group does not raise the question of giving a voice to 'ordinary people' versus 'experts', one of the founding ideas of *19Direkte*, as an issue, and when the subject is brought up by the interviewers they comply in discussing it, but without investing a lot of discursive energy in it:

Lis: Well, sometimes one does feel that experts are talking about things on a very theoretical level, won't you say, (...) they use all these fine words, and nothing happens, and you hardly understand. Then I liked that woman who called in much better.

When we played the taped New Year Speech by the new Prime Minister, in which experts are attacked, one participant, who obviously has personal experiences with supercilious controllers who check on industrial safety where he works, lashes out against the rule of experts, who interfere with the smallest detail in the organization of work:

Søren: We have a lot of experts around! (...) It's just too much! I would like to show you some of the papers that we receive from all sorts of government offices. It just creates a lot of unnecessary work for us – and some entertainment too. (...) That's one of the reasons why we lost the old government, isn't it, now some of those measures will be ditched, which is a good thing.

As we try to turn the debate to the question of experts in the media by asking if there is any need for experts at all, one participant offers a very balanced 'politically correct' view:

Inge-Lise: Well, there is <a need for experts>, in some cases. But with respect to ordinary occurrences in everyday life I suppose it's a good thing to ask those who have experienced it. And then we could also listen to an expert, but then it should be possible to contradict him if his theory doesn't agree with reality. And there should be enough time in order to do that.

Moving on to the dimension of **CONSTRUCTION**, the issue is the extent to which people are critically aware of the social construction of reality through television discourses, of the generic conventions and rules of the different program formats. 'Construction' can thus be regarded as a continuum from, on the one hand, experiencing a news program as a transparent window on the world, with unquestionable truth value, to experiencing it as just one partial version of a complex social reality on the other.

The group's critical awareness of the construction of *19Direkte* is evident in the very first comment about story credibility, made by a participant about the video sequence with the

‘negligence’ story: “Well, it could well be true. It could be like that”, implying that this might also not be the case. It is also to be seen in the way participants talk about the allocation of speaking time to guests in the studio. Towards the end of the ‘negligence’ story, the host tries to cut off the minister’s reply by saying that “We don’t have a lot of time left now”:

Søren: Well, when you invite people into the studio, then you must give them a chance to defend themselves, don’t you think. I mean, every time they try to say something you cannot chop them off by saying ‘Sorry, we don’t have any more time’ (laughs a little). They often do that (*Poul:* Yes), it’s a good little trick they know.

(...)

Tom: He doesn’t get a chance to say anything at all.

(...)

Inge-Lise: They should take that up in a morning TV program where they have more time to go into depth with it.

The frequent insidiousness of journalistic production values becomes the explicit theme of a narrative sequence told by Poul:

Poul: I have a different angle on that. My mother-in-law lives in an old people’s home in Frederiksberg. A damn good home. Then some journalists call the manager and say, ‘Could we come and do an interview with you. And we’d like some of those nasty examples’. But we don’t have any of those, he said. (...) But the journalist only wanted something negative, you see.

Interviewer: You mean the media lose interest when there’s no scandal around?

Poul: ‘I need a story for here and now. A really dirty one, you see.’ That’s what he came for, but they couldn’t assist him with that. And the staff liked working there too.

In other words, this group see a *19Direkte* story as merely one possible version of the social reality out there, and they bring to bear their own experiences of similar matters in order to arrive at a more complete picture of the situation.

The **POSITION** dimension has to do with whether the viewers accept or reject the portrait of social reality offered by the program, whether they see it as ‘true’ or not. The reception analysis of this group’s experience of *19Direkte* makes it plausible to say that we have to do with one principal and several supplementary positions, or discursive articulations, by audiences of this program.

Led by Anni, who works in an old people’s home herself, the bleak picture of the disgraceful state of everyday life in institutions offered by the program is taken over by the group as possibly true. Also the populist allocation of responsibility for the depressing situation agrees with the program discourse:

Anni: It is just so terrible. It could well be true. It could be like that. It is just so depressing because those who live in such a place they cannot protest or anything, and the relatives don't have the resources to help, and we <the staff> cannot do anything about it. (...)

Interviewer: Who is responsible for the problems?

Anni: Well (laughs a little) the politicians are, aren't they? (...)

Inge-Lise: The politicians are. (...) It's the usual thing with politicians. They talk according to their intellect, and their intellect isn't too bright (*Anni*: Right) (*Poul*: Right). (...)

Anni: I just don't know how we are going to ever reach the politicians.

Interviewer: Don't you think such a program helps?

Poul: No.

Søren: Yes it does.

Tom: Yes.

Anni: Yes, it certainly does, and such a report <i.e. the one published by the relatives> does too.

While remaining on the note of despondency about the whole situation, the convivial atmosphere in the group also leads momentarily to the adoption of black humour, as Inge-Lise proposes a radical solution to the problem:

Inge-Lise: We need new legislation: People over sixty, or sixty-two will be shot. For that's what they really think (*Poul* laughs a little). Then they don't have to worry about this problem. And then we'll have enough apartments, and enough jobs and everything.

But then, as the group continues to discuss the program and the world of care for old people over the next 15 minutes, a much more heterogeneous picture starts to emerge through what we might call 'dialogical osmosis', which ultimately has the effect of complexifying the issue considerably and rendering the situation depicted by the program somewhat less disgraceful.

In pursuing this complexification process we are also merging our analysis of the POSITION dimension into the dimension of **ACTION**, as the focus group discussion comes to echo the way in which viewers 'apply' their immediate program readings and reflections in various interactive contexts of everyday life ('action' deals with what viewers *do* with the program in everyday life). At this point, with only minimal prompting by the moderator, the group interaction comes over long passages to resemble the conversations people have with each other in family, neighbourhood, and workplace situations.

First, Anni herself reports from a visit to Australia where she worked at an old people's home for a number of weeks. There she had to look after 18 old people all by herself, and – perhaps echoing the caller's claim in the program - she also saw how the wealthy paid in order to get better care. Another – worse – alternative is brought in by Søren who reports on his experience as a repair worker of the conditions of miserable old people in Copenhagen who are still living in their apartments:

Anni: That <Australia> was worse. (...) I was there for six weeks, then I couldn't take any more, neither physically or psychologically. (...) Where I work now I've been for five years or something, and it's definitely better (laughs a little).

Søren: I have been in many apartments in inner Copenhagen, and that can be quite an experience. (...) Sometimes you find piles of garbage that has been lying around on the kitchen floor for weeks. You just cannot imagine how dirty and repulsive it is. And talking about a bath a week, I imagine there are people living there who haven't had a bath for five years. And the stench is indescribable.

As already mentioned, Poul contributes to the picture of old people care in Denmark by reporting (without referring to, but perhaps echoing the minister's claim in the program that better institutions do exist) from an apparently model institution where his mother-in-law lives; Anni feels defensive about the place where she works and tries, unsuccessfully, to undermine his story:

Poul: I have a different angle on that. My mother-in-law lives in an old people's home in Frederiksberg. A damn good home. Its manager knows how to do things within his budget. They go on trips abroad and to Skagen. (...) So there are more rosy stories around. That's my point.

Anni: But the old people there can't be so destitute then?

Poul: Sure they are (...).

Anni: But how can they travel?

Poul: They just do it, they just do.

Lis: I seem to have heard something about that on radio or television. (...) (addressing Anni) But don't they have meetings where they can compare the standards (...), couldn't they highlight some of the places where things are going well so others could learn from it.

The group's negotiations also bring in the perspective that instead of blaming politicians or the system, the relatives should perhaps consider making a contribution themselves to the care of their old people, since care is also about human relations and love, not just the professionalized provision of nutrition and hygiene. This angle was among the most

prominent in the focus groups interviews by Kruse & Lange (2001) about the same episode of *19Direkte*.

So the viewers in this group end up with a quite nuanced picture of old people's institutions in Denmark (which may be seen as negotiating or opposing the picture offered by *19Direkte*). They are also critical of certain aspects of the formal organization of the program, especially those to do with the host's management of the turn-taking involving the minister. They realize that the program is strongly partisan:

Inge-Lise: They take the side of the old people, against the system.

Søren: That's obvious. Every time he (the health minister) tries to say something, he is chopped off. He's only in the program because they need someone to shoot at, you know, and if a man isn't any better at defending himself he gets stabbed (laughs a little).

'Populist' TV programs and the health of the public sphere

Finally the question is what role *19Direkte*, as experienced and read by viewers, is likely to play in the formation of political discourses in Denmark: Is it likely to have a progressive or regressive influence on the current state of democracy?

I hope to have shown, through the combined analysis of program and audience discourses, that the program does to a large extent serve the purpose intended by the broadcaster producing it. As mentioned above, in launching *19Direkte* DR news director Lisbeth Knudsen was driven by the ambition to bring out "a news program to open up a dialogue with the viewers and room for stories that are a bit different". She hoped to produce a news/current affairs program that would appeal to the large group of 'information weak' citizens whose low level of education makes it difficult for them to follow news that is presented at a high level of abstraction, people who are so to speak 'unhinged' from the democratic debates of the mainstream media (Knudsen 2000).

First, it is evident that *19Direkte* in no way contributes to the democratic empowerment of those with long education and more intellectual tastes. Their experience of the program merely leads to an indifferent shrug, if not to outright scorn for such emotional and superficial coverage of public issues.

However, we see a completely different picture when we look at viewers with short education. For these citizens *19Direkte* is a program that promotes democratic empowerment, by being a resource for knowledge and interaction in their everyday lives, promoting their ability to discuss urgent social issues.

Is *19Direkte* a populist program then? After having done a discourse analysis of the program discourse, I concluded above that it is. But then the program itself is nothing but one discourse fed into the multi-faceted and fluctuating discourses of everyday life (i. e. what I called ‘dialogical osmosis’ above). In our study we put this program into the hands of 4 groups of people like these six middle-aged citizens, all regular viewers, who can only be characterized as ordinary Danes, with ordinary capabilities and talents, and with ordinary educational backgrounds. In the verbal interaction of this group - however ‘populist’ *19Direkte* can be said to be in itself – the *program’s* articulation of the social issue at hand becomes but one voice among many equally legitimate voices, drawn from mediated and everyday experiences, that together make up an enlightened, democratic negotiation of public opinion.

So, if the negotiation of mediated meaning from this particular news story is anything to go by, the viewers do not become ‘populists’ from watching it. In their dialogical rendering of this story, they do not become a group of people standing simple-mindedly united against an unresponsive political system and incompetent politicians. They complexify the issue by engaging jointly – the same way people do in everyday life – in the exchange of a range of mediated and personally experienced perspectives on the issue that are alternative to that offered by the program. They see and hear a mediated version of a corner of social reality on TV, they weigh the pros and cons through dialogue. This is what democracy is all about.

We may take this discussion one step further and ask whether the notion of ‘populism’, in the sense of an illegitimate, unenlightened political stance, and with implications of masses misled by charismatic politicians, is at all a helpful one when analysing political opinion and behaviour in an educated liberal democracy like ours? Is ‘populism’ rather a derogatory label used by leftwing politicians and intellectuals in order to discredit political views that differ from their own as being less qualified, less legitimate, less democratically sound? Should we not rather consider ‘populist’ and ‘democratic’ as synonyms, since etymologically they both have to do with a political system where *rule by the people* is the foundation of social power?

Therefore, isn’t ‘populism’ fundamentally democratic, even if people’s negotiation of politics leads them to vote for a rightwing, even a far rightwing party?

Pursuing the critical perspective on mediated populism, we might ask whether short-educated citizens, influenced by a mediated opinion climate favouring rightwing politics, might not, after first having complexified issues in everyday dialogical osmosis with fellow

citizens, still end up re-simplifying the issue in 'populist' fashion when they stand in the voting booth?

Possibly. But in an enlightened democratic society, where even those with the least educational resources cannot be considered unqualified citizens, the only democratically respectful answer to this concern must be that, even in this case, the 'populist' vote they cast should be acknowledged to be a fundamentally 'democratic' one.

If we, as critical intellectuals, disapprove of far rightwing votes, we should perhaps not blame a particular program format, nor the media as such, but rather the politicians whose policies have impinged on people's everyday lives in such a manner as to make a 'populist' solution appear as the only way out.

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Notes

¹ The reception study of *19Direkte* belongs to the larger framework of the 'mediatized politics' project that I have done with my colleague Louise Phillips), the purpose of which is to explore the mediatization of political discourses in Denmark. The study aims to gain insight into the ways in which 'the political' is constituted in contemporary Denmark in the interplay between parliamentary political discourses, subpolitical discourses, media discourses, and interpersonal discourses between citizens in everyday life (Schrøder & Phillips 1999, Phillips and Schrøder 2004).

In order to explore the mediatized universe of politics, the project applies an interdisciplinary framework of discourse analysis, combining critical discourse analysis and discursive psychology, in order to investigate the verbal and visual aspects of the *media coverage* of a particular policy field (we have chosen the field of transport), and the *citizens' discourses* about this policy field among different social groups, which we have studied through focus groups. This comparative investigation of political discourses forms one of the two main fieldwork-based studies of the research project, the other study being a reception analysis of people's views about particular forms of media, and in particular, television genres, as sources of information about what is going on in society. The study of *19Direkte* comes out of this reception-oriented part of the larger research project.