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Inviting Audience Tele-participation: The Spanish Case

1. Introduction

This paper presents some general results of an ongoing research on audience participation *formulae* offered by Spanish mainstream television broadcasters. It focuses on invitations to participate based on computer, phone, mobile or set-top box to strengthen viewer loyalty and tries to examine the Spanish broadcasters' 'invitational strategies' (Ross, 2008). Ross (2008:4) defines these processes of interaction with the shows "beyond the moment of viewing and 'outside' of the TV show itself" as "tele-participation". More precisely, this article looks at the "overt invitations" to tele-participation, as Ross calls them, which include propositions to vote through SMS or set-top box, phone-in calls, opinions received through email, comments on journalists blogs, fan forums, photos and videos sent or online surveys, among others. These overt invitations are understood as processes offered to —at least give the impression to— take part actively or interact with the program or its contents, not just the access to information related to it¹.

In essence, the public has somehow been encouraged to participate in -general-media products for more than a century (Griffen-Foley, 2004). In the case of television, although it consolidated itself as a one-direction, top-down medium since its first days, already in the 1950's the first invitations —even though rudimentary— where developed in Europe and the USA (Prado *et al.*, 2006a). Also, "ordinary people" started to appear on screen in documentary films and other television shows. Nevertheless, these participatory experiences were constrained and limited (Hibberd *et al.*, 2000) and following Prado *et al.*,

¹ For example, if we look at the official website of a television series, the access to photos of the actors during the shoot of an episode does not count as audience participation, since viewers do not take part in the production of this content. On the other hand, if audience is invited to ask questions to the actors in an online interview, there is an overt invitation to participate, although it might not influence the production process.

(2006a:6) we could consider them as a “series of engagements to audience activity with a symbolic degree of interactivity”². It wasn’t until the 70’s that more advanced experiences of audience participation were offered, with the success of quiz shows and the development of new systems of interactive television (Carey, 1997). Most of these new systems, however, did not succeed due to diverse reasons (economic failure, little acceptance, etc.). In more recent years, the meta-process of digitalization, the appearance of Internet and the phenomenon of media convergence have given a new push to the relationship between producers, text and audience. For Johnson (2007:63), this might represent a new shift, since “audiences are not just cultivated as fans, but also *invited in*, asked to participate in both the world of the television text and the processes of its production”. In accordance with this idea, Cortés (1999) brings to the table the concept of neotelevision (Eco, 1986). As opposed to paleotelevision, which was based on a hierarchical model of relationship between producers and audience, the shift towards the age of neotelevision meant that broadcasters started to care more about the connection with their audiences. To Cortés (1999:41), “neotelevision gives the audience the possibility not only to watch, but also to participate”. Now, television producers have the opportunity to broaden their *repertoire* of “invitational strategies” (Ross, 2008), by creating websites dedicated to fans, giving them the opportunity to comment shows through SMS or deciding a contest winner with phone calls, among other possibilities enabled by new ICTs. At this point it is important to reflect on the concept of participation itself. There is growing academic interest in the relationship between participation and the media (Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2007; Carpentier, 2001; Carpentier & De Cleen, 2008; Deuze, 2006; Hibbert *et al.*, 2000; Jenkins, 2006; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; Ytreberg, 2004), and without entering the debate created around the notion of participation, we must be aware that it is a complex concept that has been used and described in a great diversity of ways. In this case, we are dealing with mediated participation in mainstream television, with all the consequences that mainstream television entails —top-down structure, large-scale,

² Translation from Spanish by the author. Other Spanish authors that may appear in this paper will be translated as well.

economic ambitions, power imbalances, etc. As Carpentier (2008: 243) points out, “when focusing more explicitly on the media’s role in facilitating participation, the analysis becomes more complicated (..)”. However, this text follows the assumption of Andrejevic (2004: 152) that “the invitation to viewers is not to seize control but rather to participate in the rationalization of their own viewing experience”. The relationship between content, producers and audience gets more complex year after year, specially because of the emergence of new technologies. Be that as it may, the fact that television broadcasters do give —possibly— the opportunity to their audiences to actively take part in the programs and interact with them, does not cover up the circumstance that the real power remains with the producers.

Another concept that has been widely discussed and still gives raise to many theoretical discussions is that of interactivity. Similarly to the notion of participation, interactivity is not a unanimous or univocal term. In that regard, this text will follow Prado *et al.* (2006b: 435), whose research tries to “reduce the polysemy that the term has come to have in order to make it operative”. Their typology of interactive television puts forward the ideas of technological interactivity, “which implies the existence of a return path, and situational interactivity, which is characterized by the existence of mutual action and can exist whether or not there is a return path” (Prado *et al.*, 2006b: 435). Later on, this paper will explain more precisely how the work of Prado *et al.* has been applied in order to identify the interactive television services in the Spanish television market.

2. Objectives and Methodology

This paper aims to put some light on the way that television channels deal with audience mediated participation in a time when convergence, digitalization, cross-mediality and new technologies seem to put citizen under the spotlight. Before proclaiming the revolutionary potential of these participatory processes, it is necessary to take a look at the real world today and analyze how media are assimilating this transition. The first objective of this communication is to identify the invitations to mediatedly participate in programs offered by Spanish national broadcasters and find trends behind their management and promotion.

Taking into account that this is part of a broader research and the limited space available, we will focus on general aspects that can give us interesting insights of the current situation of this topic. Following variables are going to be considered: ownership of the broadcaster (public vs. commercial), program genre (information; fiction; infoshow; show; game; children&youth; sport; others), broadcast of the participatory processes (yes vs. no) and the presence of a direct economic benefit for the broadcaster related with the participation process (yes vs. no).

Research Questions

More precisely, this communication will try to answer these research questions:

RQ1: What strategies of mediated audience participation can be detected in the Spanish television market and how do broadcasters present them to the public?

RQ2: How do factors such as program genre or economic benefit influence the channel's invitational strategies?

Sample

In order to get an illustrative understanding of the Spanish case, it was necessary to include in the sample the channels that broadcast free-to-air on a nationwide level and offer general interest programming. The most relevant channels are TVE, La 2, Antena 3, Telecinco, Cuatro and La Sexta³. The first two are public and the rest are commercial broadcasters. Analog television switch-off is planned in Spain for April 2010, so there interactive television applications through DTT set-top boxes has also been checked in order to find out the state of the art of the interactive applications available a few months away from the digital television era.

A methodology consisting of three phases was followed. First, the six broadcasters were observed from January 2009 to May 2009. During this observation process, examples of audience participation were registered and a database was created. This

³ In May 2009, their audience supposed 66,9% of the whole Spanish television (including regional and thematic channels) and they are the six channels of general interest programming with most audience rates in Spanish DTT. *Source: vertele.com / formulatv.com*

gave the first inputs to understand the context of the Spanish television and its *repertoire* regarding audience participation. In order to gather more precise quantitative data, a one week sample was selected from May 18th to May 24th, 2009 (second phase). A schedule was set up in order not to miss any program. Some broadcasters like RTVE or La Sexta offer a free video on demand service in their webpages, so full programs could be watched online if needed. In those cases, the interactive applications related to the programs were checked the following day that the production was broadcasted. Data was obtained on the one hand by testing the programs' websites and on the other by checking interactive services through a MHP capable set-top box during the broadcast. All the programs broadcasted during that week were watched at least once and information was analyzed, checking it with the database created during the first phase of the research. Then, a second database, which included only the programs of that week, was built and focus was shed on the items concerning this paper. Finally, results were analyzed taking into account the axes defined in the objectives.

This methodology is thought to allow comparative analysis on a macro level between the different broadcasters and give the opportunity to make further research on the continuously transforming area of television.

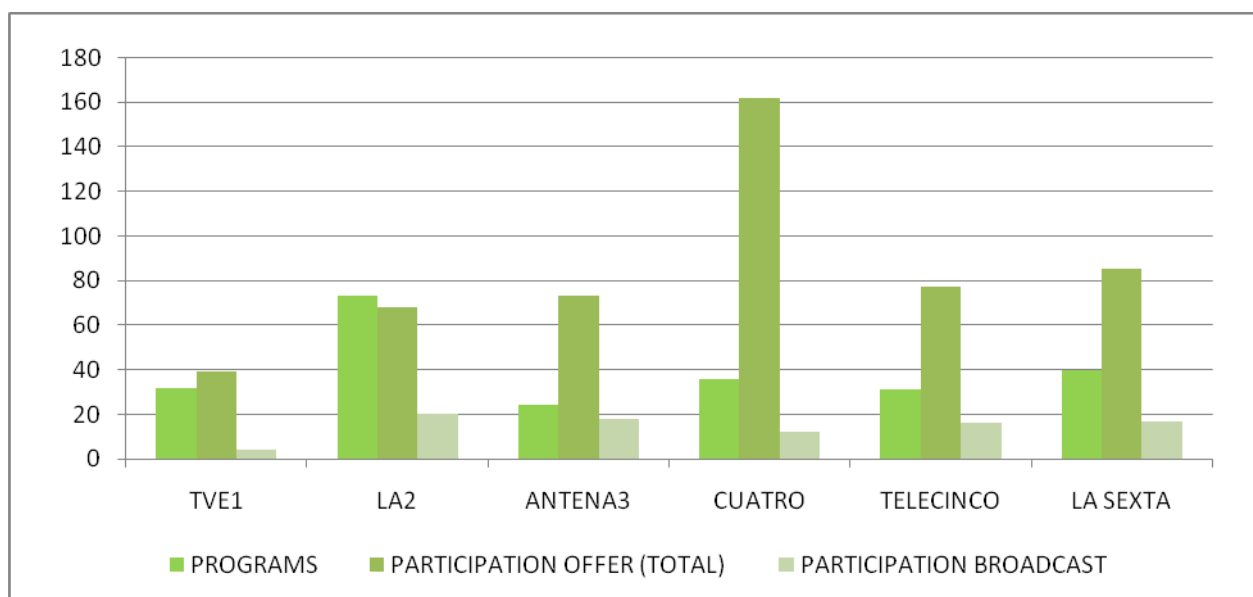
3. Results

Figure 1 gives a first insight of the relationship of programs broadcast and the participation offer detected in each channel. Still in a very "macro" level, this chart considers every different program and every different participatory process as a unit.

Although we can observe some significant variations from one channel to another, the general trend detected is that commercial broadcasters provide significantly higher ratio of overt invitations to participate per program aired than the public ones (TVE1, La 2). However, there is no big difference among them when it comes to include audience participation *in* the programs' broadcast. RTVE (public body that broadcasts TVE1 and La 2) develops a two-way strategy. La 2 is the channel that includes more audience participation in its productions and TVE1 the one with the least. Therefore RTVE seems to

divide its participation strategies by channelling its efforts on the second channel (La 2) and usually leaving audience mediated participation *outside* TVE1 broadcasting. Commercial broadcasters demonstrate a similar attitude between them, being Cuatro an exceptional case. The channel owned by PRISA shows two totally different faces. On the one side it is clearly the channel that offers more overt invitations to its audiences. Its new website is built following the strategy stated in the company's 2008 annual report: promotion of audience participation, extension of the dialogue with the audience and technological innovation for a more complete multimedia experience (Cuatro, 2008). As a result, the web gives the opportunity to the audience to rate the quality of every program, almost any video or image (from one to five stars), comment news, blogs, forums, surveys, etc. The structure of the webpage remains the same in almost every program of Cuatro, so the word *participa* (participate) appears in the majority of programs broadcasted. This of course increases the number of participatory possibilities, although one could ask if processes like evaluating the program do not respond more to a market research for the company than to an effective participation tool.

Figure 1. Relationship between programs, participation offer and audience participation broadcast

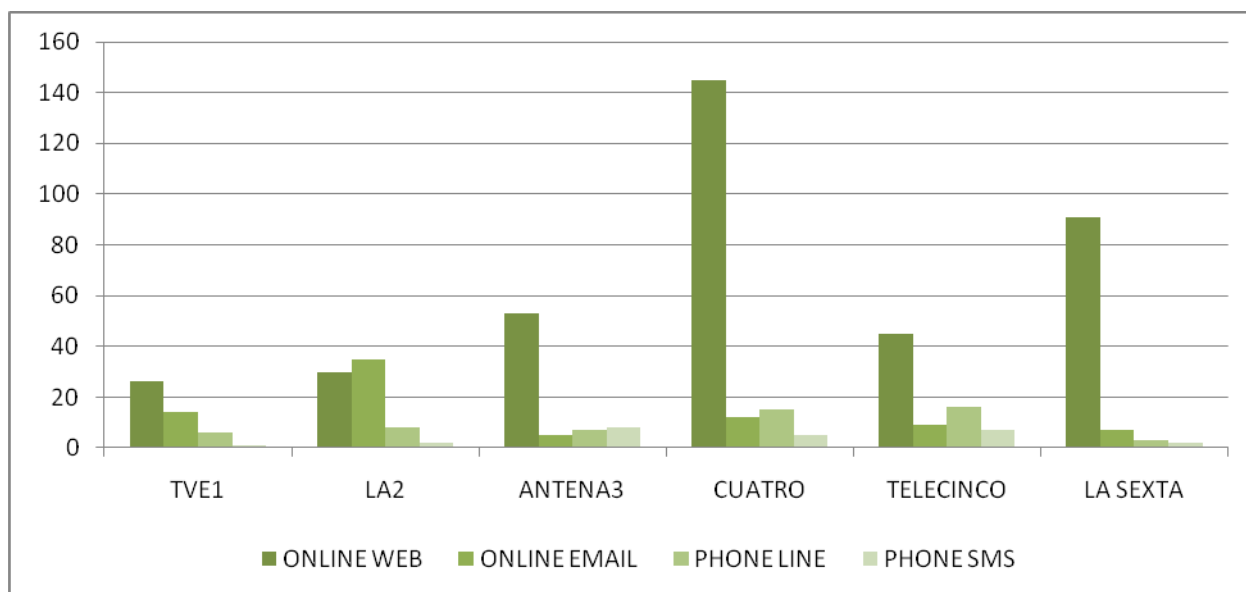


Source: Author's research.

On the other side, Cuatro is the commercial channel that broadcasts least tele-participation. This reveals that, although Cuatro in particular –and all the channels in general– is broadening its interaction offer to the audience, this effort does not have a similar reflection on the television contents itself.

Cuatro is not the only channel that has based on its website the biggest part of its overt invitational strategies. Figure 2 illustrates the considerable differences between each one of the ways that the participatory processes are offered. The general tendency observed is that overt invitations occur through the Internet, and more precisely through web-based applications and services. The development of blogs, forums or “facebook-style” communities within the broadcasters’ websites (Gente5 in Telecinco, Comunidad La Sexta, soy.cuatro in Cuatro) has helped to that manifest dominance of the Internet as a platform for invitational strategies⁴.

Figure 2. Systems on which participation is based on.



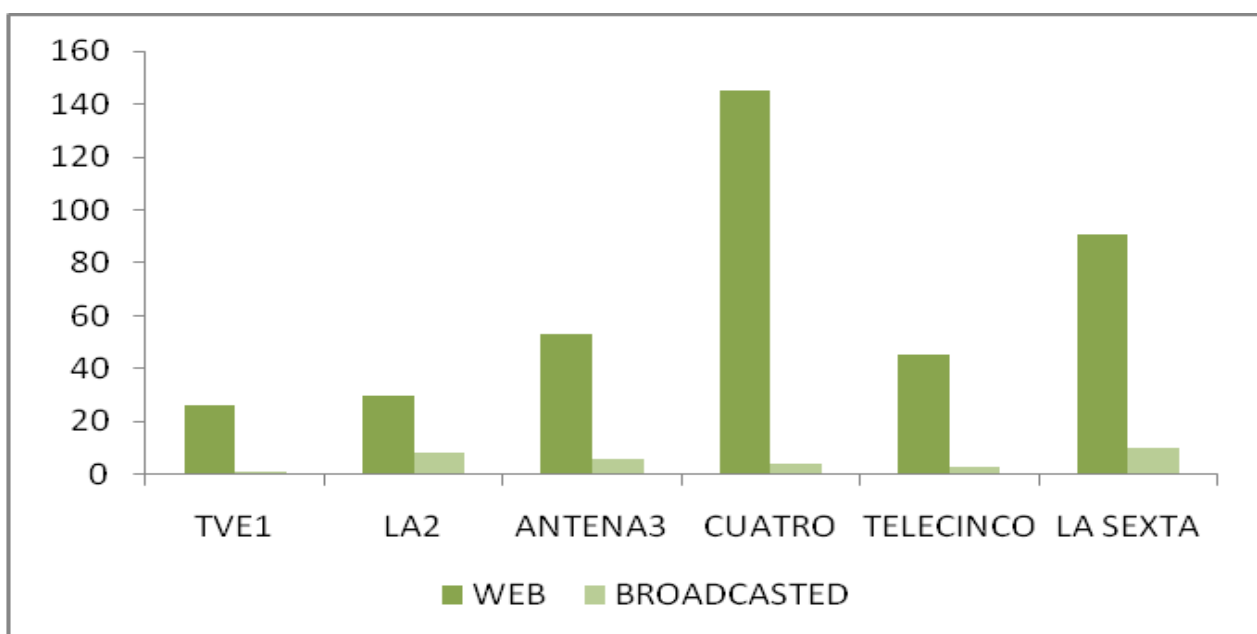
Source: Author's research.

This second figure confirms diversity in the broadcasters strategy of tele-participation. As stated before, most of the participatory possibilities detected are mediated through the web. Television content goes “beyond the box” (Ross, 2008) where it meets

⁴ A detailed and recent description of the forums and blogs in the Spanish broadcasters’ webs can be found in Meso and Palomo (2009).

the audience —again— and broadcasters' are adopting the tools offered by the web 2.0 and including them in their own sites (Jiménez Iglesias and Solís, 2008; Tous and Díaz Noci, 2009). The channels' annual reports explain how the promotion of audience participation through their webs is part of their strategies of innovation and growth (Telecinco, 2007, Antena 3, 2007; Cuatro, 2008). However, the —vast— majority of participatory processes of the audience that begin in the web, die in the web as well. This suggests that —in terms of audience participation—the Spanish television industry is making efforts to gain presence on the Internet, but without the aim that these participations promoted online have an influence in the television broadcast.

Figure 3. Participation offer based on the websites and participation broadcasted.



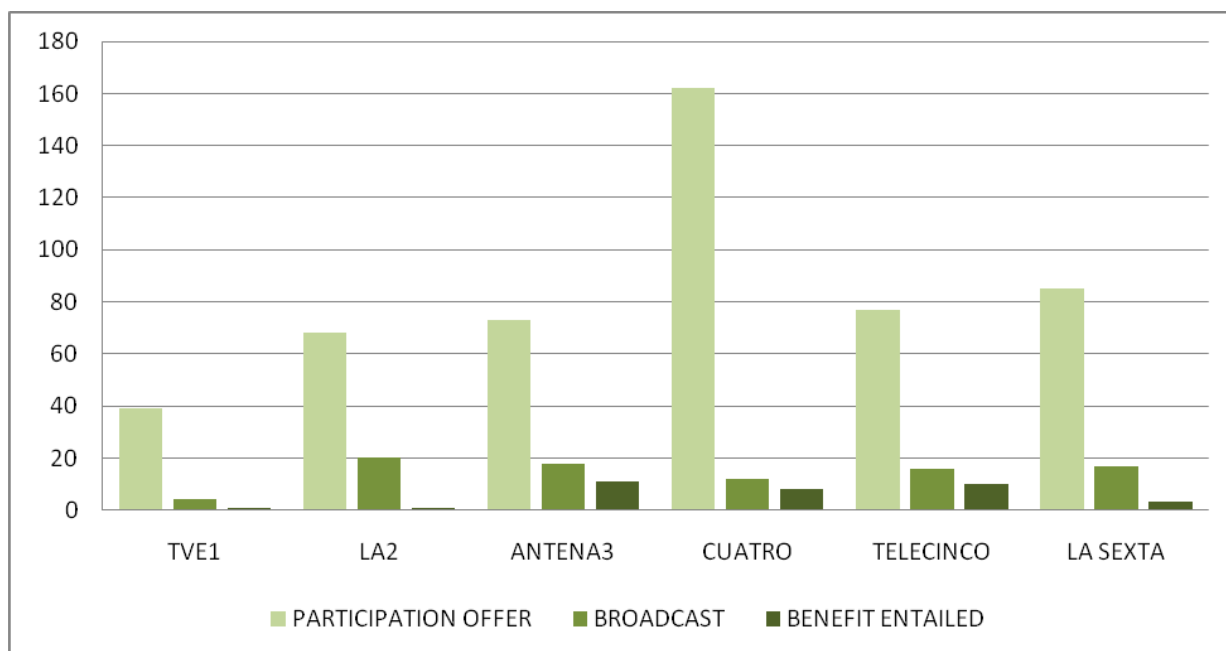
Source: Author's research.

Which participatory processes are more prone to be broadcasted, then? The economic factor could be conclusive, at least in the case of commercial channels. Participation through SMS can be regarded as an example. All the SMS-based participatory processes detected led to a direct economic benefit for the broadcaster and

80% of them were broadcasted.⁵ If we look at the invitations to participate *via* phone-in, similar results can be observed.

Phone-ins also advance some ideas on the attitude of the broadcasters towards audience participation. While the phone-ins offered by the private broadcasters generally involve direct economic benefit, in the case of public broadcasters it is more common to happen through a local landline number (generally from Madrid or Barcelona), which is cheaper for the participant and does not result in a profit for the broadcaster. Even if the objective of the participation is the same (for example, a health consultation in a morning magazine), public broadcasters facilitate a free number and commercial broadcasters usually use a premium number that brings money in.

Figure 4. Participation offer, participation broadcasted and participation processes that involve direct profit for the broadcasters



Source: Author's research.

Both, phone-ins and especially SMS, are more “balanced” in the sense that the proportion of participatory processes broadcasted -although very briefly- is higher than in

⁵ That does not mean that they broadcast the majority of the SMS received; it means that, generally, when programs invite viewers to participate through SMS, they will most probably broadcast some of the messages received.

the Internet-based participations. As Andrejevic (2004: 153) puts it “the fact that they have to pay [...] for the privilege is reminiscent of the way in which purchasers of “mass-customized” products are charged extra for the luxury of incorporating their input into the production process”. The *luxury* for the audience in this case should be that their messages sent via SMS can decide the winner of *Survivor* or their comments appear on screen for 10 seconds. We should note at this point, that SMS-based participation is clearly more usual in commercial broadcasters (except for LaSexta). Figure 4 confirms the hypothesis. The majority of audience tele-participation broadcasted by Cuatro, Antena 3 and Telecinco, had an economic benefit for the channels incorporated.

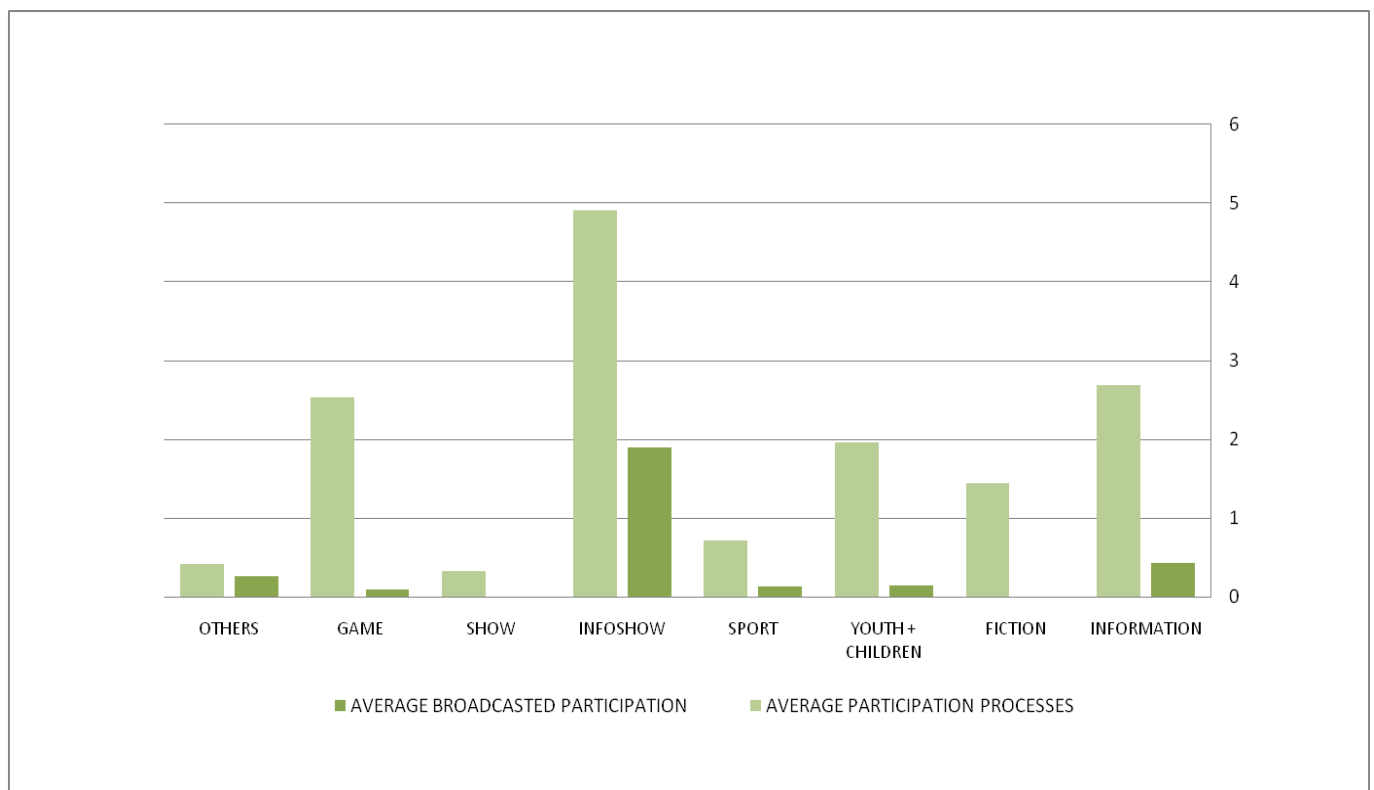
There is another platform that has been tested, but is missing in Figure 2, which is the Digital Terrestrial Television (DTT set-top box). This research sought examples of what Prado *et al.* (2006b:435) call Interactive Audiovisual Programs (IAP), whose “essential condition (...) is that the actions performed by viewers configure an individual or collective scripting, or put another way, what they do should have an effect on the configuration of the product they are watching”. Following their typology, this was the only type of applications that considered an effect on the broadcast linked to audience participation. However, the sample registered no IAP in any of the channels. There were two applications in Cuatro that displayed messages sent through SMS to the programs *Las Mañanas de Cuatro* and *NBA en acción*, but none of the applications found permitted any kind of audience participation through the set-top box. This is not surprising, if we pay attention to recent research developed on that matter (Franquet *et al.*, 2008, Franquet *et al.*, 2008b), where some reasons to the failure of interactive services like IAPs are stated. One of the most evident is that “European operators that decide to develop interactive applications mainly do so by cable or satellite, which are more consolidated systems, with a greater number of viewers and better technological capacity for interactivity than what is offered by DTT” (Franquet *et al.*, 2008b:7). Also, IAP applications are based in special technological standards such as MHP (Multimedia Home Platform), and set-top boxes that support it are difficult to find in the Spanish market. This, together with other factors,

represents a great obstacle in the development of interactive applications based on DTT (Franquet *et al.*, 2008b).

Participation and television macro-genres

A second question arises when observing the participatory strategies of the mainstream broadcasters: Do they focus their invitational strategies on every television genre in a same level or does the content of the program play an important role when deciding where to open windows to audience participation?

Figure 5. Average participation offers per program, regarding its macro-genre and average participation offers broadcasted.



Source: Author's research.

If we classify data looking at the programs' genre, figures can demonstrate where (or in which programs) participation is most promoted. This research follows the

classification of Euromonitor⁶, which on its first level of analysis distinguishes the following macro-genres: Information, Fiction, Youth, Children, Sport, Infoshow, Show, Game and Others/Diverse (Prado *et al.*, 2007). During the one-week sample analyzed, information and fiction productions, followed by infoshows⁷, were the most broadcasted programs in the Spanish television schedules. The television macro-genre that offered more invitations to participate per program aired was —with remarkable difference— the infoshow. Information programs and games were together with infoshows the genres with a higher number of invitations per broadcast, although there were different *modi operandi* identified from one channel to the other. Fiction, on the other hand, does not offer a big variety of overt invitations, but audience participation is somehow promoted in five of the six channels. The potential fan cultures of some of these productions have been studied in depth (Jenkins, 1992; Ross, 2008) and there is a breeding ground to encourage audience participation. Broadcasters, of course, see an opportunity there and try to attract the audience to their “corporate” websites, competing with “unofficial” webpages created by fans. Despite that, fiction rarely introduces audience participation during its broadcast. The most advanced experience detected in the Spanish case this year was Antena 3’s “Watch&Chat 3.0”. The first episode of the fifth season of the teen series *El Internado* was broadcasted simultaneously on three DTT channels owned by Antena 3. One for the episode only, another for the episode with information about the production process and a third channel dedicated to the episode with live comments from the fans, sent by SMS and through the Internet. The experience did not have much success and Antena 3 decided to cancel the simultaneous broadcast the following week. This might be a way to broaden the possibilities of audience participation and to bring participatory processes closer to genres

⁶ EUROMONITOR is a permanent observatory of television in Europe. It has been in operation since 1989 and was set up by a group of European researchers (Paolo Baldi, Ian Connell, Claus Dieter Rath and Emili Prado) at the request of the VQPT service of the RAI. Until 1995, its headquarters were in Geneva. In 1995, it relocated to the Autonomous University of Barcelona where it has been managed by Emili Prado. The team at the headquarters includes the lecturers Matilde Delgado, Núria García and Gemma Larrègola as researchers. The observatory undertakes regular reports for the main television operators in Europe and North America, scientific publications and academic seminars, programming workshops with the industry and advises the regulatory authorities.

⁷ Prado describes the infoshow as “a macrogenre resulting from the hybridations between formats of the information macrogenre and others from fiction macrogenre and the rest of entertainment macrogenres like game or show” (2003:183)

that have a demonstrated fan potential, but the failure of these trials does not forecast an optimistic future for it.

Another interesting item to follow in future research would be that of live broadcasts vs. registered programs and the influence of this variable on the invitational strategies of television broadcasters. Until then, we must stay in this macro-perspective, which gives us the opportunity to point out some general conclusions.

Cuatro, for instance, seems to follow a corporate strategy that starts in its website promoting audience participation. La Sexta, Telecinco and Antena 3 have a similar repeated patterns of participation strategies in their websites. Others, like the public broadcasters give the impression to delegate this task to each program producer individually. Yet, this is an interpretation of what these macro-results bring to light. An in-depth analysis of the production routines of each channel would help to analyze this issue with more clearness, but as a starting point, this data gives some good insights on the way that broadcasters are dealing right now with audience participation in Spain.

4. Conclusions

This research coincides with Ross, that “tele-participation occurs more regularly and on a more widespread basis than we might suspect, largely because the industry has been working to promote and manage this trend” (2008: 27). Obviously, the Spanish case demonstrates that the television industry cares about building bridges with their audience in different ways, being the Internet the most developed. However, data shows that mainstream television broadcasting, at least in Spain, is still characterized by a high level of impermeability to audience participation.

From a macro perspective, this paper has given the first steps to understand the actual situation of invitations to tele-participation in the Spanish mainstream television industry. The research that has been introduced represents a first step towards a more exhaustive studium and gives some interesting key points to take into consideration. Observation reveals that the mainstream broadcasters’ —mediated— participation strategies are based on three main *systems*: the Internet (web-based applications and

email), the telephone, and SMS. Interactive television services through DTT are not available and have to face an unclear future.

Reflecting on the quantitative data gathered, it has been observed that commercial broadcasters have developed more invitations to tele-participation than the public ones. This point can be illusory, since channels like Cuatro have included in their websites applications that enable the visitor's participation, but can be identified more as market-research tools than participation processes. In fact, when looking at audience mediated participation that has been broadcasted, all the channels show a similar tendency. This means that a great part of the invitations to participate (especially the ones based on the web) do not lead to a broadcast tele-participation. The public broadcasting body (RTVE) gives the impression of basing its participatory strategies on the second channel (La 2), while TVE1 remains in the background.

The tele-participations that do indeed appear on screen usually respond to two variables: program genre and economic benefit. Infoshows, with reality television on top of it, have proven to be the programs that present the audience as the main character of the production (Andrejevic, 2004; Ross, 2008). Accordingly, broadcasters set up around them range of invitations to tele-participate which makes info-show the macro-genre with the most promoted audience participation in every broadcaster. Also, it is the macro-genre that screens more tele-participations. Other macro-genres have a more limited offer and do not air audience participation in similar levels as infoshows. One circumstance is that there is a lack of new participatory experiences in Spain. Most of the websites and programs analyzed do not make a practical and effective use of the interactive potential of the existing technologies. A good example is Internet, where we have to agree with Tous and Díaz Noci when they explain that broadcasters' webpages "operate more as a shopwindow (...) than as creators of a decided space of debate and virtual participation" (2009: 1089). Also, we have to keep in mind that "the participatory potential of media technologies remains dependent on the way that they are used. In practice, this means that web 2.0 technologies can perfectly be used in a top-down non-participatory

ways". (Carpentier, 2007: 112). The Spanish commercial broadcasters' websites are a good example of that, since most of their efforts of making the relationship with the audience more intense through web-based technologies, can be described, following Casseti and Odin (cited in Tous and Díaz Noci, 2009), as a "pretense of interactivity".

The second variable that has been analyzed and that gives some interesting results is that of the economic benefit that tele-participation represents for the broadcaster. The majority of screened audience participation in Antena 3, Telecinco and Cuatro involved an economic profit for the channel. Public broadcasters, on the other hand, facilitate more "free" participation, mainly through email, which seems to be the successor of traditional letters. But, even when it comes to processes that could give the broadcaster a benefit (e.g. phone-ins), public broadcasters prefer not to make a direct economic profit out of it. Further research could deepen in the debate of public service broadcasting, taking into account this aspect.

In the Spanish market, invitational strategies lie somewhere between audience participation, promotion of the broadcaster and a market research for the producers. Further research might deepen in the individual cases and the detailed processes, but if we look at the topic from a general perspective, data shows that the participatory potential of Internet, the revolution of blogs, the user as a producer or the participatory journalism, still have little impact on television broadcasting. The great part of audience tele-participation does not find a place in television screens and yet stays "outside" the television screens, be that around a water cooler or in an Internet forum.

However, we cannot ignore the potential of technologies, the development of new audiovisual contents and the audience as an active member of some production processes. Audience participation in mainstream television remains a very interesting research topic and future investigations could take into account many other factors that influence audience participation: a more in depth analysis of genres, live vs. registered programs, direct vs. indirect participation, relevance on the television contents, target

audience of each genre in comparison to the invitational strategies, own production vs. external production, etc.

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