

Keeping the public in their place: audience participation in lifestyle television programming



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ABSTRACT. The participation of members of the public in the mass media has been studied discursively at the level of live broadcasting, notably in talk radio and talk shows on television. In this article I examine the construction of public identities in 'lifestyle' television programming, specifically property shows, in which members of the public appear either as potential home buyers ('house-hunters') or as home owners looking to maximize the value of their properties ('vendors'). In a selected episode of the Channel 5 show *Hot Property*, I explore the way in which these identities are managed within the text, through an eclectic analysis both of broad sociocultural discourses and of the verbal and physical interaction between the host and the public participants. It is sometimes argued that media exposure can be empowering for the general public, but in a tightly edited production such as this, subject positions are created for participants that may be less than flattering.

KEY WORDS: *consumerism, identity, life narratives, media, public, subject positions, television, video*

Introduction

DISCOURSE RESEARCH AND AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION MEDIA

Research on audience participation media in the social sciences has concentrated mainly on talk radio (Hutchby, 1996; Thornborrow, 2001) and television talk shows (Gamson, 1998; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). These genres have proved attractive to conversation analysts because they provide researchers with a corpus of apparently unscripted, 'naturally occurring' talk. Structural analysis of this kind of talk has identified the devices through which the public are invited to participate and work up an entitlement to contribute to media debates. For example, callers to talk radio typically begin their contribution by constructing a local identity that legitimizes their contribution (e.g. 'I'm a nurse', or 'I'm a diabetic') (Thornborrow, 2001).

However, there are now many genres of broadcasting in which members of the public make a significant contribution. Quiz shows and other game shows featuring public participants have been among the most popular television shows in the last half-century (Giles, in preparation). Other shows, such as *Candid Camera*, have often featured members of the public under ethically dubious conditions, as well as 'docusoaps' in which public activities are packaged as continuous drama. More recently, the broad genre of 'lifestyle' programming has brought together ordinary and 'expert' public participants in various activities based in the domestic sphere from fashion and shopping to interior decorating and gardening. In these types of audience participation media, public contribution is legitimized through clearly defined roles in the programme (as a contestant, for example). At the same time, it is possible for members of the public to acquire celebrity status through their contributions to such programming. In the 1990s, for instance, Maureen Rees became a national celebrity in the UK after appearing in BBC's *Driving School*, a series following the fortunes of learner drivers (Giles, 2000).

What does it mean to belong to the category of persons that we recognize as the 'general public'? As Livingstone and Lunt (1994) point out in their discussion of television talk shows, a GP might appear on the show *Kilroy* either as an expert contributor, speaking from a professional standpoint, or as a lay contributor, speaking as an ordinary member of the studio audience. This is consistent with Habermas' (1989: 3) concept of the public sphere as 'constituted in discussion'. A given media text creates positions for participants – in the case of a talk show, host, guests and audience – whose contributions are framed by their status in that text. Following Saussure and Derrida, identity emerges as a result of difference; ordinary people – 'public' participants – are defined by their absence of status; they are not celebrities or media personalities, and are not assigned expert status through a particular identity (as a GP, or psychologist, or whatever).

In this article I wish to explore the processes through which public identities are constructed in the context of lifestyle television programming, by studying the interaction – both verbal and physical – between the host and the participants, as well the broad cultural discourses that inhabit these media texts.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION AND AUTHENTICITY

Livingstone and Lunt (1994) argue that public participation in the media is potentially subversive, because giving voice to ordinary citizens in largely open debates with 'experts' presents a 'challenge' to the established order, albeit within the confines of a partly scripted talk show such as *Kilroy*. At the same time, media companies continue to produce programmes featuring the public because they are cheap to make and popular with audiences.

Key to the popularity of audience participation media is the belief that the participants *are* ordinary members of the public, behaving naturally, rather than actors following a script. At a psychological level, this enhances the 'parasocial interaction' that takes place, through which the audience comes to 'know' the human figures appearing on the screen (Giles, in press; Horton and Wohl, 1956).

When a member of the public appears on television, *identification* is an important component of this interaction; the ordinary viewer is invited to recognize themselves on screen, if only as a member of the same discursive category. For this recognition to take place, the viewer needs to believe in the credibility of the public participants. Without this credibility, the appeal of such shows may vanish, as happened to US quiz shows in the 1950s following charges of 'rigging'.

The credibility of public participants in the media is accomplished through the construction of authenticated talk (Montgomery, 2001; Scannell, 2001; Thornborrow, 2001). Montgomery (2001) identifies three criteria that define talk as authentic. First, talk should be spontaneous and natural (i.e. not scripted). Second, it should represent accurately the experiences of the speaker. Third, it should represent the 'core self' of the speaker (i.e. not acting). However, authenticity is not restricted to ordinary participants in the media; as Tolson (2001) demonstrates, it is an essential requirement of celebrity too. Here it is necessary for celebrities to affirm their status as ordinary people in order to provide a gloss for their *extraordinary* activities.

EMOTIONAL DISPLAY AND ANALYTICAL ISSUES

Without underestimating the importance of talk, it is necessary to examine additional aspects of performance in audience participation media, particularly with regard to television. First, authenticity is constructed through the narrative structure of the text and the conventions of media discourse. For example, Moseley (2000) has suggested that the defining moment of 'makeover' television shows is the moment of revelation. In a show like the BBC's *Style Challenge*, a member of the public is transformed in appearance through the contribution of various experts from fashion and hairdressing. The participant is given no feedback on the experts' work until the final moment in the show, where, announced by a drum-roll, a mirror is produced in which the participant comes face to face with their new self.

This moment of revelation is an opportunity for participants to display a 'natural' response that acts to authenticate their status as members of the public. These reactions are typically accompanied by demonstrations of emotion which are unusual in the British, and which are uncomfortable for some viewers. Lusted (1998) describes the distancing effect that such displays may have on white middle-class intellectuals (particularly males), leading them to define the moments in terms of 'taste', and regarding such displays as sentimental. On British television in general, recent years have seen a change in producers' treatment of emotional display; where overt performances were once regarded as private moments, unfit for the camera, now they are commonplace in news programming as well as in entertainment.

An analysis of such media texts cannot ignore the programming relevance of such displays. The decision to focus on participants' emotional reaction, often in close-up, is taken at production level and therefore constitutes meaningful data that need to be recorded and discussed as part of a discursive analysis. For these

reasons, no analysis of televised material can stop at the level of talk. Given its visual nature, it is essential to record non-verbal behaviour, such as posture and gaze, along with the rhetorical use of film by the producer, which contribute to the workings of the text.

PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT

A critical issue in any discussion of audience participation media concerns the degree to which the public is empowered by the opportunity to participate. Media scholars have been quick to dispel claims of 'voyeurism' levelled at the genre, particularly in relation to talk shows (Gamson, 1998; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994), but also to lifestyle programming (Lusted, 1998; Moseley, 2000). Some authors have, indeed, argued that certain media genres actively empower the public by offering them a voice. Scannell (1996), drawing on Heidegger, argues that public participation in live radio broadcasting 'frees' participants through mass recognition of their life-worlds and the dissemination of the private self.

It is true that there has never been a shortage of public applicants for the chance to display themselves in the mass media, and for some, the experiences have been surprisingly positive (Priest, 1995). However, this is clearly not always the case; as with academic experts, producers may exploit their public participants for the benefit of 'good television', especially where shows are pre-recorded and tightly edited. In these instances, participants have little or no control over the gloss that is placed on their performance in the show, or on their presentation of self. In the case of lifestyle programming, public participants are often selected to provide the producer with entertaining material that may be far from flattering for the persons involved. As Livingstone and Lunt (1994) point out, even a live show such as *Kilroy* is ultimately a vehicle for the host's media persona, with plenty of structural opportunities for him to save face if challenged. Where material is edited and narrated, the public voice is almost entirely at the mercy of the producer.

LIFESTYLE PROGRAMMING AND PROPERTY TELEVISION SHOWS

The media material on which I focus here concerns a sub-genre of lifestyle television programming that became increasingly popular in the UK during the 1990s. Property shows share many characteristics with other lifestyle shows, particularly those described by Moseley (2000) as 'makeover television'. This term is applied to shows in which members of the public are beneficiaries of some expert advice or treatment, such as the BBC's *Ground Force*, in which a team of gardening experts visit a home and transform its back garden.

In the 1990s, the UK experienced a dramatic surge in the value of private domestic property. At the same time there has been a corresponding expansion of the do-it-yourself (DIY) industry, in which amateur builders and decorators spend millions of pounds each year on basic materials at superstores throughout the country. The property market and the DIY industry enjoy something of a symbiotic relationship in that homeowners seek to maximize the potential profit from property sales by making structural and decorative improvements. These

developments have been reflected in recent years by a rapid growth in lifestyle programming about home improvement, and property buying and selling.

Typically, these shows consist of members of the public either improving their homes in order to sell them (e.g. *Property Ladder*, *House Doctor*), or exploring potential homes owned by other members of the public and attempting to buy them at the lowest price (*Location, Location, Location* and *All the Right Moves*). Recently the format has been tweaked slightly to produce a hybrid of game show and property show (*Hot Property*). Although the shows are initially aired on terrestrial British television (usually BBC and Channels 4 and 5), they are subsequently sold to cable and satellite channels such as UK Style, which recycle them on a day-to-day basis.

I have chosen to focus on this sub-genre of lifestyle programming for a number of reasons. First, it represents the most explicit link in British television to date between the appearance of the general public as participants in media production and their role as participants in the market. Game and quiz shows place the public in artificial settings (e.g. the television studio) where they engage in contrived activities (such as a quiz) with exceptional rewards on offer (e.g. cars, holidays, huge cash prizes). Property shows, by contrast, deal with participants in naturalistic settings (their own homes or potential homes) and engaging in ostensibly naturalistic activities. If a couple are participants in a house-hunting show, we need to believe they are genuinely interested in buying a new home and not actors playing at being a house-hunting couple.

Property shows (and lifestyle shows in general) are also interesting because they are concerned much of the time with aesthetic judgements ('a universal notion of taste' – Moseley, 2000: 302), and in these matters, public participation is not always equivocal. Makeover participants are occasionally offended by the transformation of their private space. Others may feel forced into gracious acceptance of the experts' performance; in many cases, participants are ruthlessly mocked for their stylistic blunders. Much of the time, lifestyle programming is more about educating the audience in judgements of taste than disseminating skills and knowledge.

In the analyses that follow, I explore a number of related themes that find their discursive expression in the text of a specific episode of a property show. These concern the portrayal of public participants in this text through host-participant interaction, which is best understood in relation to discourses of aesthetic taste, gender, and the privileging of an idealized life narrative.

Method

MATERIALS

The data discussed in this article are taken from a corpus of recordings made from British television during the autumn of 2001. The programmes include:

Hot Property (Channel 5, October and November)

All the Right Moves (Channel 4)

Location, Location, Location (Channel 4, October)

Property Ladder (Channel 4, October)

House Doctor (UK Style, October)

I have, however, concentrated on one specific episode of *Hot Property* in order to illustrate some of the important issues raised in the introduction. *Hot Property* is, at the time of writing, the most recent property show to be introduced on British television, and differs slightly from most other shows in that it is effectively a game show in which participants have the opportunity to win a selected property by guessing its market value. It occupies a 30-minute slot at 20.30 on a Monday evening and is presented by Alice Beer, an established media personality who has hosted a number of other consumer/lifestyle shows such as *Watchdog* and *Holiday* (both BBC).

The show follows a regular format. Each week, contestants (typically, a young heterosexual couple looking to buy a property) are shown three properties in their chosen geographical area. They are then asked to select their favourite, and, on the basis of their knowledge of the local housing market, to guess its market value. If they guess the correct price, within a thousand pounds each way, they win the property. The contestants do not visit any of the properties; instead, Alice Beer is shown round each property by its current owner, and the contestants watch the film of the viewing on video.¹

This particular show was chosen for analysis because of the range of subject positions available for participants in the text. Alice Beer is the only media personality involved, and her role is central to the programme. She acts as anchor (introducing the viewers by addressing the camera at various points in the show), narrator (describing the properties briefly), and host (interacting with all the participants). The participants fall into three categories:

- *House-hunters*. In this episode, these are Catherine and George, a young married couple.
- *Vendors*. Alice Beer is shown round each property by its current owner (occasionally, by an estate agent). In this episode, Patrick, Ruth and Frank separately show her round their Newcastle flats.
- *Experts*. Two experts are regularly called upon by Alice Beer to discuss factors affecting the value of the properties. In this episode we only see Joanna Haydon-Knowles, an estate agent, whose expert status is warranted by the brief display of a banner featuring her name and the words 'former estate agent of the year'.²

Because this is a tightly structured media text, rather than a 'live' studio-based production like a talk show, the positions occupied by the participants are somewhat different to those identified in talk radio, for instance (Thornborrow, 2001). Participants in *Hot Property* do not need to work up an entitlement through talk to contribute to the production of media content, because they are obliged to do so from their position in the text as house-hunter or vendor.

TRANSCRIPTION

The videotape of this particular episode was prepared for analysis according to the conventions of conversation analysis following Jefferson (1984).³ In addition to verbal material, visual information was recorded. A number of conversation analysts have devised conventions for recording non-verbal information, and these were considered at the outset of the study. For example, Goodwin (1981) outlines a system for transcribing speakers' eye gaze and related movement, whereas Duranti (1997) lists a number of different approaches involving the use of drawings and advanced symbol systems.

Goodwin's system is best suited to video recordings of dyadic or small group social interaction (such as a focus group discussion or counselling session), but is not really appropriate for the vast amount and diversity of visual information contained in a media production. In terms of transcription, there seemed little option but to make parenthetical descriptions in the transcript each time a new camera shot⁴ is used. For the purposes of publication, Duranti (1997) recommends the use of digitized frames from videotape as supplementary analytical material. Here, I have used a number of frame grabs, copied using a video-editing software package, as illustrative material to study specific exchanges in the text.

Non-verbal behaviour by participants in the text, such as hand gestures, head turns, and other body movements, are marked in the transcript using a convention from Beattie and Shovelton's (2000) study of iconic hand gestures in speech. In their study, gestures are transcribed in much the same way as overlapping speech in the Jefferson system, except the overlap is denoted by double square brackets (as distinct from single square brackets). For example:

C: house (.).hh which is quite (.) [[contemporary design]]
[*expansive gesture with hands*]

ANALYTIC TECHNIQUES

In this article I have taken an analytic approach that draws on the respective strengths of conversation analysis and Foucauldian discourse analysis. Integrated analyses of this kind are becoming increasingly popular because of the need for a rigorous, systematic methodology that avoids the limitations imposed by a pure conversation analysis (CA) approach (notably CA's requirement that the analyst only invokes context when participants orient to it; Abell and Stokoe, 2001; Billig, 1999; Stokoe and Smithson, 2001; Wetherell, 1998). Guidelines for this more eclectic form of discourse analysis are also starting to appear in methods textbooks (Coyle, 2000; Giles, 2002).

The eclectic approach is especially important for analysing televisual (and other media) material because of its sensitivity both to linguistic aspects of the text, such as the use of rhetorical devices and turn construction, and to the influence of broader sociocultural discourses. The way I have integrated these approaches in this analysis is to identify broad discourses through initial viewings

of the material, and then to examine the action orientation of the discourse by focusing on specific portions of transcript.

Broad discursive analysis

I shall begin this analysis by discussing some broad discursive themes that recur through the text before conducting a close reading on some selected extracts to illustrate the way these themes work in the context of the show.

GENDER, RELATIONSHIPS AND PROPERTY OWNERSHIP

An overwhelming theme throughout the entire corpus of data from which this particular text is selected is the close association between home ownership and intimate relationships. Owning a home is an integral thread of a conventional idealized life narrative, coinciding with the establishment of (heterosexual) union. The vast majority of house-hunters in these series are heterosexual, typically married, young couples embarking on their first transaction in the property market. They are always the first public participants to appear in each show, and are the participants with whom the viewers are invited to identify.

The identity construction of the house-hunters in each series is typically accomplished by them narrating their relationship history. In the selected episode of *Hot Property*, Catherine and George open the show (following Alice Beer's introductory speech) by describing the circumstances under which they met, their marriage and their current domestic situation. This segment of film is very typical of other episodes of *Hot Property* and other property shows. Its rhetorical force is essentially what Sacks (1992: 216) refers to as '[doing] being ordinary'. It sets the participants up as 'normal' members of the public at a recognizable stage in a conventional – and idealized – life narrative. Thus, property ownership and house-hunting are cast as typical activities in this narrative.

ADDING VALUE 1: SALES PITCH

Inevitably, much of the talk in television property shows concerns market economics, and, more locally, how to increase the value of existing properties. This discourse creates space for the 'experts' who are invited to evaluate properties featured in the series. Typically, the host interviews the expert in the property itself, with or without the vendors present, and the expert offers ideas for increasing value. Occasionally, the host themselves offers advice, as in the show *Property Ladder*:

Extract 1: Presenter of *Property Ladder* (voiceover)

- 1 the bathroom suite's old and crumbling (.) the bath's damaged and it needs re-
- 2 tiling so I think they should just gut the lot and instead put in a cheap white suite
- 3 and install a powershower (.) I find that renters love them especially the
- 4 professionals

This kind of talk is not confined to series whose aim is to increase value for

existing properties, because there are no property series in which value is irrelevant. Even in shows that are entirely buyer-focused, features of the property are discussed in relation to the asking price. Often these features include external aspects of the property, such as the street, or the surrounding area. This talk is often the occasion for unconcealed snobbery.

Extract 2: Alice Beer, host, and Joanna, 'expert' estate agent

- 5 J: it could be that
 (A & J again on platform)
 6 otherwise your car might be broken into (.)
 (shot of industrial chimney)
 7 and you've got an incinerator nearby (.)
 (shot of quite smart looking Georgian – or mock Georgian? – style houses)
 8 and you've got local authority flats close by
 9 A: Would all those things put you off?
 (A & J again on platform)
 10 J: I::t might put me off

This section of talk is prompted by Joanna's unease about the location of one of the properties that Catherine and George have been invited to bid for, specifically the fact that there is 'secure parking'. Joanna begins by querying the need for security, and follows this up with two seemingly unrelated features of the location, both reinforced (if somewhat enigmatically) by the director's choice of visual accompaniment. Of course we are invited to read the phrase 'local authority flats' (line 8) as a negative feature, and the accumulation of these features is enough to cast doubt as the suitability of the property for a respectable couple like Catherine and George.⁵

ADDING VALUE 2: TASTE

There is another discourse operating under the general theme of increasing property value, which permeates all talk in property shows and most lifestyle shows on television, and that is the discourse of taste. As Bourdieu (1984: 57) has observed, expressions of aesthetic taste are used as 'opportunities to experience or assert one's position in social space', often with as much vehemence as the kind of class bigotry discussed in the previous section. The decoration of domestic space is an emphatic expression of social status, defended all the more vehemently because, unlike taste in music and art, taste in interior décor is much more subtle and elusive, and not so closely associated with formal education.

Like fashion style in clothing, interior décor taste is forever in a state of flux, and discernment is a matter of familiarity with current trends as much as the accumulation of cultural knowledge. Social class is never far off, but where taste in décor and style departs completely from artistic taste is in its association with gender. Traditionally, consumer choice has been associated with women rather than men, certainly with regard to 'the world of taste and elegance that we might call the world of fashion' (Gibson, 2000: 355). Men are expected to provide the means, women to use their taste and discretion in making the choice (Craik,

1994). In this episode of *Hot Property*, and on frequent occasions throughout the corpus, male participants in particular are accused of poor aesthetic taste.

Unlike the explicit social snobbery discussed earlier, which impinges directly upon property value, the relationship between taste and value is much more elusive. The series *House Doctor*, for example, is predicated upon the assumption that vendors can effect huge increases in the value of their properties simply by repainting a few rooms, changing the curtains, and moving a few bits of furniture around. Indeed, the resident 'expert' in the series is celebrated simply for her intuitive ability to identify the necessary modifications, earning her the status of 'style guru'. Ostensibly, décor is utterly irrelevant to property transactions, where buyers are concerned with raw materials and not cosmetic display. Nevertheless, it is part of lifestyle television's *raison d'être* to privilege style over substance, and to celebrate superficiality, and it could be argued that this dimension is a necessary part of the symbiotic relationship between the property market and the DIY and soft furnishings trades.

Close analysis of the text

This part of the analysis falls into two sections. The first is necessary to make sense of the second, in which I shall attempt to demonstrate how Alice Beer, the host of *Hot Property*, skilfully manages the interaction to drive home a point about poor taste. This analysis refers to two sets of scenes in the selected episode. In the first, Alice is shown around a flat by Patrick, its owner (and, from what can be gleaned from the data, its single male occupant). It becomes clear early on in this extract that Alice has chosen to seize on Patrick's apparent lack of taste in decorating his property, and she continually orients to this theme throughout their interaction. Following this scene there is a short exchange between Alice and the house-hunters Catherine and George, during which they evaluate Patrick's flat. There is then another scene inside Patrick's flat in which Joanna, the estate agent 'expert' delivers her verdict on the sale potential of the property.

In the second set of scenes, Alice visits a flat owned by a young couple with a baby; the female member of the couple, Ruth, escorts her around. Alice's interaction with Ruth is quite different from that with Patrick (and Frank, the owner of a third flat which I have not discussed in this article). Again this is followed by a short discussion with Catherine and George, and a further scene in Ruth's flat with Joanna.

The property-based scenes are tightly edited, with rapid interchange of camera angles. However, the dialogue gives the impression of being spontaneous and recorded in real time, suggesting that there are several cameras positioned around the flat recording simultaneously. It seems likely that this production is geared towards providing an authentic interaction between host and vendor, to minimize the degree of rehearsed sales pitch by the latter. The interaction between host and expert also aims at naturalism, although it may be significant that Joanna, unlike the vendors, holds a couple of cue cards in her hand, and at

one point, a slightly clumsy edit catches her looking up from her cards while stumbling over her turn. The brief scenes with Catherine and George are mostly spontaneous, though another clumsy edit reveals that a portion of their discussion has been deleted.

THE RELEVANCE OF COLOUR

In the first extract that I shall discuss, Patrick has just greeted Alice at the door of his flat and led her upstairs to the living room. The producer has previewed the room for us by including a panoramic visual sweep of the room, revealing pale lime walls, a dark green leather sofa and not-quite-matching wall-to-wall carpet, with an Oriental-style rug lain over.

Extract 3: Patrick's flat

- 18 P: This is the (.) living ↑room
 19 A: And what a lovely colour it i::s [[Patrick what colour >is this<]]
 [A adopts stiff posture and shifts gaze from left to right]
 (brief shots of framed picture, then TV in corner)
 20 on the (.) colour chart hh↑hh↑hh
 21 P: I think it's my brother's choice so I'm quite happy to blame him=
 (...)
 (A takes sudden stride to right of screen; after a moment P. follows her)
 22 A: Good lord what's going on in this room [Patrick]
 23 P: [ah the]
 (cut away into kitchen; A and P. advancing from living room. Kitchen has
 bright orange painted walls and bright green plastic washing-up bowl)
 24 ↑kitchen (2.0)
 25 A: ↑Guessed that love
 26 P: ha
 (shot of small window at far end of kitchen; orange paint very much in evidence)
 27 A: it's quite ↑a ↑colour (1.0)

The talk in this extract, and accompanying visual editing, is oriented around *colour*, perhaps the fundamental element of decorative taste. Colour is of paramount importance because of our almost visceral response to it, as with aesthetic taste in general, where 'each taste feels itself to be natural' (Bourdieu, 1984: 56). Revulsion to colour is, almost literally, like receiving a bad taste in the mouth.

On entering Patrick's flat (though we might assume, as host, Alice has been briefed about this) our attention as viewers is immediately focused on the lime green walls of the living room (lines 19–21). Alice's remark, 'what a lovely colour it i::s' (line 19), might initially appear complimentary, except that Alice's arch posture and eye gaze convey an air of irony, complementing the elongated vowel in 'i::s'. She follows this by evoking a canon of aesthetic taste as support for her judgement, 'the (.) colour chart' (line 20), though ironically the colour chart is not a canon as such, as taste resides in a *combination* of colours. Patrick clearly orients to the implied taste judgement by producing a disclaimer, 'it's my brother's choice' (line 21). The colour theme is returned to, implicitly in line 22 ('what's going on' as a reference to the colour scheme), then explicitly in line 27.

In between, selected camera angles are used to bring out the orange-ness of the paint and the jarring effect of bright green kitchen items.

The colour theme persists through the remaining scenes under discussion, structuring the subsequent interactions and the viewer's overall impression of Patrick's flat. Towards the end of Alice's tour of the flat, a further comment is made about Patrick's bathroom.

Extract 4: Patrick's bathroom

(P. leads A into bathroom, which is painted the same colour as the kitchen)

28 P: Littlest room yeah

29 A *(gazes at ceiling)*: O::h ho and yet another assault on my senses (1.0)
(shot of bath, toilet, and various towels or rags hanging on rails beneath window)

In the next scene, where Alice discusses Patrick's flat with Catherine and George, the talk is engineered by Alice to focus on colour as the salient issue.

Extract 5: Alice discusses Patrick's flat with Catherine and George

30 A: We::ll=

31 C:=hee *(turns and grins at G; he grins at her)*

32 A: = that was <°hot property number [one°>]=

33 G: [Yeah]

34 A: =you can paint (.)

35 G: Yeah (.) [yeah °I think we'd have to°]

36 A: [you can paint (.) (to C): What] did you think

37 C: [true (.) yeah (.) think we'd have to]

(1.0; slightly jerky edit)

(close-up of couple; C. turns to G)

38 C: It's got potential=

39 G:=think it was [okay]

40 C: [could definitely] do something with it [couldn't we] (.) I think

41 G: [without a doubt]

(G & C both look towards A)

42 C: it was just the scary colours that (.) [put us off more] than [anything]

43 G: [ha ha]

44 A: [I ↑know] (.) Well

45 here's what Joanna has to say about hot property number one

In this scene, Alice is seated on one end of a settee, while Catherine and George are seated very close to each other at the opposite end. There is much mutual gazing between the couple; in line 31, and between lines 37 and 38, Catherine turns her head right round to talk to George. Their only comment about décor is made towards Alice in line 42, which provides the cue for her to move on and introduce the next scene. This is an accomplishment that Alice has been working towards since the opening line ('We::ll') which she follows up by twice emphasizing 'You can paint' (lines 34 and 36). Catherine and George are more positive about the property in lines 38–41. But notice how Alice has not contributed a single positive remark, so the entire evaluation hinges on the irrelevant (from a valuation perspective) feature of wall colour.

Even when the estate agent enters the frame, Alice steers her towards the colour issue.

Extract 6: Alice and Joanna in Patrick's flat

46 J: Eh (.) you could do (1.0) a little to it (.) and make it seem a lot better

47 A: Mm well (.)

(shot of alcove revealing bright orange walls and ceiling)

48 bit of paint for a start

49 J: Bit of paint (.)

(close-up of tea tray with pale green teapot, bright lime green kettle behind;
another hi-fi on the right, with cups on top of it)

Alice's cue in this instance is Joanna's suggestion that, with minimal redecoration, the property has a lot of potential appeal to a buyer. Her choice of the word 'seem' (line 46) indicates that she is discussing cosmetic improvement rather than anything that should directly affect the value of the flat. At this point Alice raises the issue of paint, and her comment is reinforced by the producer's shot selection, reinforcing the inappropriateness of the orange colour. Following Joanna's casual assent (line 49), the producer responds by selecting another visual reinforcement, this time picking out two green items that clash both with each other and the wall colour. From a buyers' perspective, this is more irrelevant detail – even if they bought the flat and kept the orange paint, the kitchen equipment would disappear – but contributes another layer of visual rhetoric to Alice's continuing theme.

In the next flat shown to Catherine and George, colour is much less salient, though two remarks serve to emphasize a fundamental difference between Alice's interaction with Patrick and her interaction with Ruth, owner of the second flat. Following a short scene in the living room, Ruth leads Alice into her kitchen, which is again painted orange, but this time the shade is slightly darker than Patrick's.

Extract 7: Ruth's kitchen

(R enters first, followed by A. Again the walls are painted orange, but a slightly darker shade than Patrick's kitchen. A moves across R and rests hand on sink unit)

50 A: Love↑ly (.)↑terracotta I think we call this don't we

51 R: Yeah (.) (rubs groin) It's just a bog standard kitchen really

(camera pans round kitchen units and white goods)

52 >Cookers and washing machines and< fridge [freezers]

53 A: [yep]

(shot of small table with contemporary iron frame chairs in front of sash window; again, orange colour scheme very much in evidence)

54 A: ↑Not very big is it

Alice's response is in stark contrast to her comments in Patrick's flat, though again she invokes the canon of the colour chart to support her taste judgement. This time, her use of the word *lovely* (line 50) is heard as unironic, perhaps because of the pitch rise on the second syllable and the fact that its impact is not compromised by any playful gesturing. Again she refers indirectly to 'the colour

chart' by suggesting a (classic) colour category that validates her choice of paint. However, when the kitchen is presented from a lighter camera angle (lines 53–4) the orange colour appears as bright as in Patrick's flat, and certainly not 'terra-cotta'. However, the objects that are picked out against the colour are more contemporary in design, and in more muted colour shades.

THE RELEVANCE OF GENDER?

There has been much debate recently in *Discourse & Society* about when it is appropriate for discourse analysts to consider the question of gender in talk (Stokoe and Smithson, 2001). Analysts from a pure conversation analysis perspective (e.g. Schegloff, 1997) argue that, in order to invoke social or cultural contexts in an analysis, the analyst must reveal ways in which speakers orient to a particular category (such as gender) in their interaction, whereas those from a critical perspective (e.g. Billig, 1999) argue against the idea that the analyst can ever ignore contextual information. The latter point is clearly more valid in relation to visual material, where gender is impossible to ignore.

How relevant is participant gender to the nature of the interaction in these extracts? I would argue that it is essential for a full analysis of the ideological work being done, because of the gender differences that are supposed to underpin notions of taste and aesthetic sensitivity. Patrick, as a male, living by himself, is not expected to possess these attributes, and so what Alice (and, through the producer's framing, inevitably, the viewer) sees as stylistic shortcomings are easily explained in terms of gender. For instance, in extract 3, when challenged over the lime green wall paint, Patrick responds by saying:

P: I think it's my brother's choice so I'm quite happy to blame him=

Here, Patrick is content to defend the wall colour by passing aesthetic responsibility to another male (along with the comment 'I think', this counts as double stake inoculation). Shortly afterwards, Alice criticizes the Oriental-style rug laid over the living room carpet.

Extract 8: Patrick's floor coverings

(shot of imitation Oriental rug with A and P standing on it, lower legs and footwear visible)

55 A: Spectacularly dodg::y [carpets] inherited from some granny I suspect=

56 P: [hhh]

(shot of edge of rug, revealing clash with mottled dark green pattern on floor carpet)

57 =it's a brand new carpet Alice it's lovely

This time, an older female is blamed for the lapse in taste, although it might seem consistent with Patrick's apparent lack of discernment that he is happy to recycle hand-me-downs from past generations. Interestingly, Patrick does not attempt to pass the buck and instead defends his choice of floor covering, resigned at this point to his subject position in the interaction.

When Ruth's tastes are criticized in the following set of scenes, Alice makes no attempt to personalize the lapses in taste in the same way.

Extract 9: Ruth's living room

- 58 R: it was a show flat=
 (back to A & R)
 59 A: =Actually it feels a bit show flatty *(points to curtains)*
 60 R: Yeah the curtains
 (shot of ornate pelmet)
 61 ha ha
 62 A: a bit hideous
 (A & R again)
 63 R: We we got some new ones that (.) we're moving out now just to upstairs
 64 A: Oh you're going upstairs are=

The 'hideous' curtains in this extract are explained not as Ruth's poor judgement but as a legacy of the flat's short history (as a purpose-built flat in a converted warehouse). In fact it is Ruth who draws attention verbally to the curtains; Alice's comment is almost an aside (compared with the vehemence of her comments about Patrick's décor), and Ruth's disclaimer is practically unnecessary, especially as Alice orients to her subsequent comment (a turn sequence quite different from those between Alice and Patrick).

Extract 10: Ruth's wardrobes

- (turns and points at wardrobe in corner; R. follows)*
 65 A: =what have you been doing to your wardrobes woman
 (close up of wardrobe doors in distressed grey)
 66 R: Bit of (.) paint
 (A & R again)
 67 A: Ooh you got bored one day obviously=

Ruth does not escape entirely from criticism about colour, and, perhaps surprised by an accusation of poor taste (having experienced a fairly easy ride up to this point), fails to defend the colour choice. Alice, however, offers a helpful disclaimer; the grey doors cannot be the result of poor judgement, so they must be the result a failed experiment conducted out of boredom.

Perhaps these contrasts simply reflect differences between the two interactions, and that gender is not relevant at all. I can only offer the gender distinction as an analyst's hunch, based on familiarity with broader discourses relating to gender, style and visual aesthetics. However, it is a theme that recurs throughout lifestyle programming, with men being positioned as, at best, dependent on women for taste, and at worst, incapable of making aesthetic judgements.

INTERACTIONAL FEATURES OF TALK AND NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

In this final section, I examine, through the use both of conversational turn exchange and supplementary visual information, how Alice as host engineers the structure of her interaction with Patrick and Ruth. It is clear, from a close reading of the interaction, that the freedom of public participants in this form of programming is highly restricted, and the degree to which the participant is granted

'voice' is entirely dependent on the subject positions created for them in the host's preferred conversational structure.

Extract 11: Patrick the handyman

- (shot of bare walls and ceiling)
- 68 A: =Nice high ceilings
(shot into living room from hallway of P. placing hand on wall, A with her back to camera in between)
- 69 P: ss a stud wall I put this in since I've moved in
(P. removes hand from wall and opens palm; A looks up at ceiling)
- 70 when when I moved in it was [[all one room]]
[hand sweeping side to side]
(A's gaze follows P's hand side to side, then reaches out, touches wall and looks at ceiling)
- 71 A: O:↑::h I see (.) love?ly big room this would [make]
- 72 P: [it was] yeah
(from hallway, camera pans from living room into adjoining room)
- 73 <bu- I p- > I put this in cos basically now I I got a two bedrooms
(shot of imitation Oriental rug with A and P standing on it, lower legs and footwear visible)
- 74 A: Spectacularly dodg::y [carpets] inherited from some granny I suspect=

Two features of this extract are worth examining. First of all, Patrick, reeling from Alice's earlier attack on his living room décor, attempts to claw back some credibility as a competent DIY performer. However, Alice fails repeatedly to orient to Patrick's preferred interactive structure, both physically and verbally. While some of this can be seen in the verbal transcript itself, a full analysis needs to consider the visual information available.

Let us first examine the interaction from line 69 onwards, where Alice's interest has switched from the wall colour to the structural features of Patrick's living room. I have illustrated the physical aspects of the interaction using screen grabs at three specific moments indicated in the transcript above the point in the speech at which they occur, corresponding to Figures 1a–c.



FIGURE 1a. 'I put this in': Patrick draws Alice's attention to the stud wall



FIGURE 1b. 'when I moved in...': Alice seems more interested in the wall than in Patrick's account of his DIY exploits



FIGURE 1c. 'this was all one room': Patrick's iconic gesture may have communicative intent, but Alice continues to display more interest in the stud wall

1a

P: ss a stud wall I put this in since I've moved in
(A looks up at ceiling; P. removes hand from wall and opens palm)

1b

1c

when when I moved in it was [[all one room]]
[hand sweeping side to side]

Patrick begins by drawing Alice's attention to the wall, claiming responsibility for inserting a 'stud wall'. At this point in the interaction, Alice focuses her gaze on Patrick, who indicates the wall by placing his hand on it (Figure 1a). Instead of orienting to Patrick's 'handyman' identity by admiring his work, Alice turns away from him and looks up at the ceiling. Patrick then attempts to recapture her attention by describing the previous layout, using a sweeping iconic gesture to

indicate the size of the old room (Figure 1b), but this is not immediately successful (Figure 1c).

Once Alice becomes fully aware of the situation ('O:↑::h I see'), she responds by suggesting that the full-length room might actually be preferable (line 72). Patrick attempts to redirect the focus on to his handiwork by explaining (line 74) that he inserted the stud wall so that he could divide the living room into two separate rooms, a modification that is often seen as adding value to a property. The producer illustrates this with a camera shot that pulls away from the doorway to reveal the second room on the other side of the stud wall, but in the next shot, the focus returns to the décor.

This sequence is indicative of the interaction between Alice and Patrick throughout, whereby Alice as host dictates the pace, and orientation, of their exchanges. This interactional pattern is determined to some extent by the requirements of the filming process (as, for example, with talk shows, we might expect the host to lead the dance), but participants do have the opportunity to assert some control (by contrast, in extract 9, Alice twice allows Ruth to dictate the turn design of their talk).

Below are two more examples in which Alice overrides Patrick's preferred structure by failing to orientate to his turn design. In Figures 2a–e, we see the interaction after extract 11, in which Alice has criticized Patrick's carpet. In Figure 2a, Patrick defends his choice of floor covering with some humour, but Alice is clearly more interested in finding more targets to attack. As the action unfolds in Figures 2b–d, we witness Patrick surrendering his ground to the TV host, who strides briskly in the direction of the orange kitchen. In Figure 2b he appears mildly amused by Alice's sudden exhortation, but as she moves away in Figures 2c and 2d, his expression becomes more serious, and by Figure 2e Alice is now so clearly in control that he has little option but to follow her stride.



FIGURE 2a. *'It's a brand new carpet Alice it's lovely'*

FIGURE 2b. *'Good lord...'*



FIGURE 2c. *'...what's going on...'*



FIGURE 2d. *'...in this room'*



FIGURE 2e. *Patrick admits defeat and follows Alice into the kitchen*

2a

P: it's a brand new carpet Alice it's lovely
(*A takes sudden stride to right of screen; P. follows her*)

2b 2c 2d 2e

A: Good lord what's going on in this room

The second example brings us back to the stud wall that Patrick proudly demonstrated in Figure 1. This exchange occurs slightly later in the scene, after a relatively lengthy sequence in the kitchen. Patrick leads the way, this time, into the bedroom – the ‘second room’ that he has created through building the stud wall. However, it is not Patrick but Alice who calls attention to the fact that this is the other side of Patrick’s wall; in fact, Patrick has to turn in mid-stride to orient to her turn (Figures 3a–b).



FIGURE 3a. *‘and this is the...’*

FIGURE 3b. ‘...other side of that=’

Extract 12: The other side of the stud wall

- 75 A: The ma::ster [bedroom=
 76 P: [<The master bedroom yeah>]
 (*A turns in stride to touch wall; P. echoes stance*)
- 3a 3b**
- 77 A: =and this is the] other side of that=
3c
- 78 P: = of that stud wall=
 (*P. dwells on wall, while A turns briskly and heads for fireplace on right of screen*)
- 3d 3e 3f**
- 79 A: = wall so this is the (.) [[second half]] of that
 [*criss-cross hand gesture*]

Now Patrick's attention is consumed by the stud wall, he spots another opportunity to show off his craftsmanship, and so in Figure 3c/line 78, he moves to the wall, reaches out and touches it, while repairing Alice's utterance. Alice manages this other-repair skilfully and overrides Patrick by providing her own self-repair (line 79). As she does so, she gains further ground by ignoring Patrick's attempt to focus attention back on his stud wall and instead turns to face the window (Figures 3d and e). Even at Figure 3e, Patrick is still admiring his wall, but Alice is long gone, and at Figure 3f he once again yields ground to Alice; his hand is still resting on the wall but he has started to turn his body towards her.

Near the end of the scene, Patrick has another opportunity to display his competence as a DIY enthusiast, as they enter the bathroom.

Extract 13: Patrick's shower

- 80 A: hh a::h it's a fabulous si::ze (.)
 (*shot of P's arm sliding back glazed door to reveal shower cubicle*)
 81 P: sh- shower unit here



FIGURE 3c. '*=of that stud wall=*'

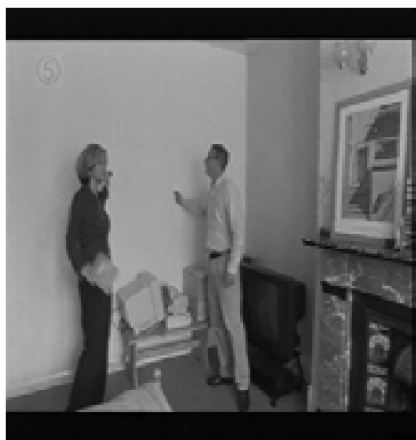


FIGURE 3d. '*=wall so...*'



FIGURE 3e. '*...this is the (.)*'



FIGURE 3f. 'second half of that'

82 A: That's [useful]

83 P: [I put that] in
(A and P in doorway again)
(1.0)

84 A: I can say darling you've got lovely proportions in this flat

Patrick draws Alice's attention to the shower unit in line 81 and is quick to add (line 83) that this is another example of his own work, interrupting Alice's turn to do so. However, Alice again refuses to orient to Patrick's handyman identity, and after a short pause returns to her earlier topic of spaciousness.

Conclusion

The data in this article enable us to examine the contribution of 'ordinary people' to media production, in this instance, lifestyle television programming. Their participation in these series is clearly less empowering than their participation in live broadcasting, such as talk radio or television talk shows. Subject positions are created by the structure of the text, which is true to some extent of live broadcasting, but in pre-recorded and tightly edited shows such as *Hot Property*, the impression management of public participants is at the mercy of the host, editors and producers. In the extracts discussed from a single episode of *Hot Property* I have shown how salient issues such as aesthetic taste can be used to frame public participants in different ways, some of which are disempowering for participants.

In the more general context of consumer culture, these apparently mundane interactions serve to circulate discourses about preferred lifestyles, aesthetic tastes and cultural activity. Taste is such an important attribute of modern personhood that it can serve as category membership. Patrick's identity as a man of poor taste is established in the opening turns of his interaction with Alice, and this identity is maintained throughout the scene in which he shows Alice round

his property. In the following scenes, Alice uses Patrick's colour scheme to try and dissuade the house-hunters (Catherine and George) from selecting Patrick's flat, and makes it salient for the 'expert' in her evaluation of the property. Alice's interaction with Ruth, meanwhile, is quite different. Ruth is given much more room for impression management than Patrick, and her lapses in aesthetic taste are excused by Alice, who blames them on situational explanations.

These contrasts can perhaps be explained if we consider the two vendors in relation to the house-hunters, and, by implication, the viewers who are invited to identify with the house-hunters. Catherine and George are a newly wed couple who clearly share more in common with Ruth (married, with child) than with Patrick (ostensibly single). As a piece of lifestyle programming, *Hot Property* is doing more than educating the audience about the mysteries of the property market. It is selling an idealized life narrative in which buying a first home is an important milestone (so important, in fact, that the thought of it reduces one of the house-hunters to tears at one point in the show, material that will provide the data for a separate analysis).

In relation to the existing literature on the construction of public identity, these findings echo those of Thornborrow (2001), who, in a study of callers to talk radio, argued that public participants need to warrant voice through building a locally specific identity in the discourse of the show. In *Hot Property* and other lifestyle programmes much of this work is accomplished by the subject positions created by the text. However, not all public participants are empowered by these positions. They still need to work up an entitlement to participate on an equal footing to the host and to other participants, and, such is the nature of lifestyle programming, that entitlement may be related to notions of aesthetic taste.

It is tempting to treat audience participation media as mindless entertainment, but I hope the data in this article will convince the serious scholar otherwise. Such media productions provide a rich source of archival material for studying the creation of cultural identities at this point in history, and the operation of discursive practices in the mass media.

NOTES

1. This is a somewhat unusual practice for a TV property show, although the format allows the producer to maximize the amount of detail that can be displayed and discussed for each property, and to fit in the other features in the 30-minute slot (minus ads).
2. The other regular expert is a chartered surveyor, who does not feature in the episode under analysis.
3. One or more colons indicate the extension of the previous sound, e.g. O::h. Laughter is marked by hh; the number of hh is a rough marker of the duration of laughter. Extended square brackets ([]) mark overlap between speakers. Numbers in parentheses indicate pauses of one second or more, e.g. (1.0) to the nearest second; pauses of less than one second's duration are indicated as (.). An equals sign (=) indicates the absence of any discernible gap between speaker turns. Upward and downward arrows indicate notable changes in speaker pitch. Underlined speech indicates emphasis or stress placed on any part of a word.

4. In Iedema's (2001: 189) six-level classification of tele-film analysis, a shot is defined as uncut camera action where, 'if the camera's position changes this may be due to panning, tracking, zooming, and so on, but not editing cuts'.
5. It is worth considering why blatant class bigotry goes unchecked, uncommented on, in property shows (and in property talk elsewhere). It is perhaps most likely that the candour is warranted by the ruthlessness of market economics, that speakers see no point in concealing prejudice when prejudice effectively drives the market.

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