

Abstract

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The thesis examines the evolution and development of the public debate programme genre in Swedish television over the course of 40 years. The purpose of the study is twofold. First, its aim is to describe the changes in the public debate genre from 1956 to 1996, and to explain why these changes have taken place. Second, using the public debate genre as an example, some general conclusions about the nature of the mediated public sphere in late modern society are drawn.

The study is a genre study, based on a notion of genre as an historical process. Consequently, the media texts must be analyzed in relation to the social context in which they were created. The social context in which the public debate genre exists is broken down into three levels of analysis: *the societal context*, *the media-structural context* and *the organizational context*. The media texts of the genre and the changes in the genre are analyzed in relation to these three levels of context.

The analysis of the genre is concerned with changes in certain characteristic genre elements. These genre elements are *subjects*, *actors* and *forms of communication*. The analysis is mainly qualitative, but debate subjects as well as debate participants are subjected to a quantitative analysis. The main questions asked in the qualitative analyses concern the textual levels of *representations*, *roles* and *relations*. *Representations* concern the way in which subjects and participants are framed, presented and represented. *Roles* concern the ways in which different actors, and/or categories of actors, are presented, and which functions they fulfil in both the single episodes and the genre as a whole. *Relations* concern how the actors, both within a category and between different categories of actors, relate to each other and how roles are defined in relation to other actors.

The main result of the study is that three distinct periods in the development of the public debate genre has been observed: *the courteous public debate* (1956-67), *the critical public debate* (1968-83) and *the populist public debate* (1984-96). During the first period, 1956-67, the public debate genre was characterized by a basic unity of form as well as content. The debates were formal and courteous, and the public debate programmes could be likened to televised parliamentary debates. Studio audiences and lay participants in public debate programmes were used sparingly or not at all.

During the latter half of the 1960s and the early years of the 1970s, numerous changes took place within the genre, marking a new period named the critical public debate. The general public started to appear in the public debate programmes, both as lay participants and as studio audience. Programme hosts started adopting a more critical stance towards political, economical and academic elites. New forms of public debate programmes started to appear, and debates were now combined and mixed with other types of content within the same programmes.

The last period, 1984-1996, has been named the populist public debate. During this period, certain genre elements became more common, namely elements that could be used to attract and keep audience attention, for example choice of subjects were clear-cut conflicts were possible and choice of participants from the spheres of culture, media and entertainment (rather than from the political or economic sphere), and a certain amount of staging and preparation of the debates and the participants in order to make sure that attention-getting conflicts would take place.

Keywords: Public debate; Public debate programmes; Public sphere; Genre; Television history