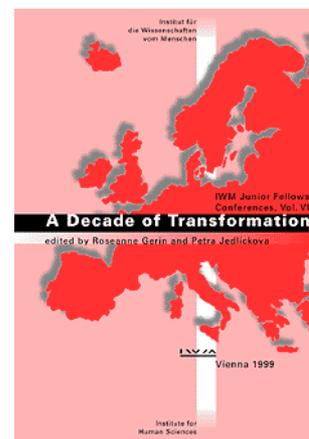


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"The Personal Is Political" – Are Daytime Talk Shows Feminist?

Karin Wetschanow

Daytime television talk shows are often said to be "pro-women-orientated" or "feminist" because of their strong orientation towards women. With respect to this "from-women-for-women" argument, I will argue that the genre in question is not to be conceived as feminist. I then will turn to the claim that daytime talk shows are political because of their alleged democratic structure. They "give voice" to formerly "speechless" groups and challenge the dominant position of experts in the media by talking about personal experiences of "ordinary people" (lays) publicly. Since "the personal is political" has been the motto of the second women's movement, the question arises whether daytime talk shows are feminist with regard to the fulfillment of this claim. To answer this question properly, a discussion of the notions of "political," "private" and "public" will be necessary.

The Genre

Talk shows are one of the predominant forms of television entertainment - at least in Germany. In speaking about talk shows we can refer to a whole range of television and radio offerings: game shows like "*Traumhochzeit*," health-oriented talk

shows such as "*Gesundheit!*," "relationship shows" like "*Herzblatt*" and political discussion groups like "*Der heiße Stuhl*" are subsumed under this notion. The constitutive element of all these different forms of talk shows is their strong orientation towards a combination of entertainment and information, called "emotainment." Another characteristic is that they are fast and easy and, therefore, cheap to produce. Since personalization is one of the main strategies of talk shows, the focus is more and more on programs where people "like you and me" talk about "their experiences." Relying on ordinary peoples' stories provides the producers with an inexhaustible fund of stories and (inexpensive) actors.

The subgenre of issue-oriented daytime talk shows differs from other types of talk shows by the following basic characteristics:

- Daytime talk shows air from Monday to Friday at the same time around noon or in the afternoon.
- The host's name (first name or surname) is the name of the talk show.
- The host functions as the anchorperson, as the front-face who represents the emotional point of reference and owns moral authority.
- Talk shows aired on daytime television are distinct from the ones aired during prime time in respect to their mono-thematic and, therefore, "issue-orientated" basic structure: each single episode focuses on a specific subject.
- The topics discussed emerge from the private and intimate spheres and are taken mainly from the field of absolute interest like love, death and sex.¹
- Within the stories presented, a strong stress is placed on the "human-interest component." Even actual social problems are illustrated by intimate and affecting stories.
- Guests are non-prominent people "like you and me" who talk about "their experiences" and tell "their stories."
- Daytime talk shows belong to the audience-participation programs. The studio viewers who are allowed to "act" (i.e., ask questions, shout at and challenge guests) create the live character of these talk shows.

All the above-mentioned features primarily serve the purpose of entertaining people by affecting them, of entertaining the audience via emotions. In that, they belong to the genre of "emotainment," or according to Gary Bente and Bettina Fromm, to the genres of affect-television, and are characterized by the following four key features: (1) They follow the principle of personalization in that the indi-

¹ For a table of topics within the German daytime talk shows, see Bente and Fromm (1997: 94-97).

vidual comes before the general picture. The experience of a single person is the main interest of emotainment genres, and a single person (the host) functions as the central and constant "human element" within the talk shows: (2) Affect-television programs try to create authenticity by relying on "true" people, "true" stories and "true" emotions. Call-in activities, questions asked by the audience or the entrance of unexpected visitors complete the production of the authentic and live character: (3) Affect-television attempts to evoke the impression of intimacy. Issues formerly ascribed to the private sphere are now discussed in public in order to create more intimate television; (4) The genres in question uphold the principle of emotionalizing. The emotional aspect of the "personal stories" is of foremost importance, whereas facts are subordinated to experiences and feelings.²

One key strategy to attain the goal of affecting people is to produce the illusion of listening to "stories." Stories are a typical genre of private discourse and are told spontaneously within everyday conversation.³ By adopting elements of private discourse in public discourse, an impression of intimacy and familiarity is evoked. No other genre entertains better. Daytime talk shows, therefore, strongly draw upon oral forms of communication.

Daytime talk shows as "feminine" genre

Daytime talk shows are discussed as "feminine" genre for several reasons: Jane Schattuc defines daytime television talk shows as a genre "devoted to the public debate of everyday issues by women."⁴ With regard to the situation in the U.S., she claims that "the new genre has ended the near-fifty-year reign of soap operas as the most popular daytime 'dramatic' form. More important, talk had become the most watched for-women TV genre...More than fifteen million people were tuning in daily to watch Oprah Winfrey and her female studio audience debate personal issues."⁵ The typical talk show viewer is conceptualized as a woman: "The industrial-production process of talk shows conceives of the talk show viewer as a woman who is a mother, a homemaker, and consumer of emotion-filled narratives about

² *Ibid.* p. 20.

³ For the basic structure of storytelling in everyday communication, see Ehlich (1980) and Labov (1972).

⁴ Shattuc (1997: 1).

⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 1-2.

socially current domestic issues."⁶ In "*Talkshows sind was Wunderbares*," a pamphlet-like critique of German daytime talk shows, Méier, dedicates a whole chapter to the "feminism" of these shows. He criticizes: "All over the country everyone talks. And by now both the host and the guests as well are women. That has to do with the fact that only women are sitting at home watching television."⁷ Equating "feminism" with "women's stuff," the author uses the term "feminism" in a pejorative way.

Like soap operas, a genre explicitly created in order to attract a female audience, daytime talk shows are orientated towards the key features of melodrama. The clearly defined social types typical for melodrama often frame the different roles of the guests invited: the victim, the victimizer and the hero. The human-interest component is central to the manner in which issues are enlightened within the talk shows. Talking about all the little things of everyday life without any aim, just for the joy of talk, talk shows have features in common with gossip⁸ which Mary Ellen Brown characterizes as "feminine discourse."⁹ Stories about problems of everyday life are told emotionally by "ordinary" people in order to affect the audience. For centuries, the emotional sphere and the private sphere have been conceptualized as "natural" female domains - and they still are.

Interpreting daytime talk shows as a genre based on the allegedly traditional female genres and types of conversation, which focus on issues taken from the traditionally female realm of private sphere, and dealing with them from a presupposed traditionally female point of view of emotion can hardly be interpreted as "feminist." Reproducing stereotypes of "the female" on the levels of form and content in order to reach a female audience is not a suitable measure to empower women – at least as long as these stereotypical features remain within an androcentric scheme of evaluation. The recurrent labeling of daytime talk shows as "trivial" or "trashy" makes it obvious that a potentially possible and complete reevaluation of "female" matters as socially relevant ones has not taken place. Daytime talk shows still attract much of the same criticism as did the figure of the gossip in women's oral culture.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 78.

⁷ Méier (1997: 64).

⁸ For the characteristics and functions of "gossip," see Bergmann (1987), Brown (1990), Dumont Du Voitel (1994), Keppler (1994), Klaus (1998: 101-103) and Tannen (1993).

⁹ Brown (1990: 183).

In order to think about gossip in relative terms, it is worth taking a closer look at the function of gossip in male-dominated societies. Gossip, as Waltraud Dumont du Voitel states, is not a "natural" female phenomenon but can serve as an escape from subordination, and has a causal relationship to hierarchical structures.¹⁰ Gossip serves as a source of power because it contributes to the flow of information, brings about solidarity and serves as the basis of prevention. Gossip and chat are socially accepted ways of control for women in androcentric societies. Social control and influence can be exerted via this form of communication. The "adoption" of the powerful form of gossip by the male-dominated system of mass media tames it and deprives it of its power since the socially powerful form of communication is shown within the mass media as pure "trivial entertainment," as meaningless "blabla"¹¹ without any other function than to pass the time.

The fact that women represent the majority of the hosts, guests and members of the studio audience contributes to an increasing number of women visible in the media public. But has this quantitative rise changed anything within the way women participate in the public? Are we given any reason to think of these women as being accepted as rationally thinking human beings, as citizens contributing to a democratic and political process by their appearing in the public?¹² But, on the other hand, it is argued that a daytime talk-show subculture with its own moral values has emerged. Women speak publicly about their experiences and are - and this is the crucial point - valued for their experiences: confessing publicly has become a sign of power.

Daytime talk shows as "women's public"

In her analysis of the meaning of women in mass media, Elisabeth Klaus distinguishes between "women's public" (*Frauenöffentlichkeit*) and "feminist public" (*Feministische Öffentlichkeit*). She describes "the public" (*Öffentlichkeit*) in terms of interactive exchange and not in terms of topographic metaphors. The "public" is a process of communication where "reality" is socially constructed and negotiated through the thematization, generalization and evaluation of experiences. Within

¹⁰ Dumont Du Voitel (1994: 324).

¹¹ E.g., the Austrian children's program "Konfetti-TV" (aired on ORF1) features a parody of the German daytime talk show "Arabella" called "Arablbla."

¹² Brückner (1994: 19-57) points out in her article that women's appearance in the public is mostly interpreted as an appearance of a "woman" and not of a "human being."

this process rules and norms of living together are worked out. Different publics (*Öffentlichkeiten*) are constituted on the basis of common experiences and are identifiable by their specific forums and forms of discussion.¹³

Taking a closer look at her description of the basic characteristics of the so-called "women's public," one is reminded of the basic features of daytime television talk shows: Women's publics entail all forums and forms of communication where women participate in social communication processes in the absence of men and where women's experiences gain independent relevance. The spontaneous constitution of this women's public takes place outside of institutions traditionally defined as "public." Gender relations are not discussed consciously within these publics and, thus, they cannot be changed fundamentally by them. Women's public often functions as an outlet in the sense that everyday experiences partially validate what contributes to the endurance of women's lives. Participating in women's forms and forums of communication does not necessarily lead to an enlargement of their social perspectives of acting. The constitutive elements of the women's public, next to the one of gender, are ones of shared experiences and shared fields of action. The construction of social reality takes place from this perspective and builds the orientation of women's public as regards content. These publics are characterized by direct communication and oral ways of discourse.¹⁴

Compared with these characteristics daytime talk shows seem to be nothing else but the effort to medially reproduce such a "women's public." Grounded on the orally told stories of everyday experiences, they reconstruct the social reality from the perspective of women. The exchange of personal experiences serves as a vent, as a forum where experiences out of the norm can be adjusted, where discontinuities within the personal biography can be normalized and where life can be made bearable. These spontaneously built women's publics seem to serve as patterns for genres dedicated to the production of authentic and intimate "meetings" on television.

"Feminist public," as a specific form of women's public, differs from the women's public in that it reflects gender relationships by definition. The observation of gender relations and the conviction of the suppression of women in society built the framework within which reality is constructed.¹⁵ The starting point of this consciously built alternative and political public is nevertheless the everyday experiences of women: sexuality, family, private relationships, body and the home are

¹³ Klaus (1998: 99).

¹⁴ *Ibid.* chapter 3.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 110.

issues brought into discussion. It is the explicitly defined aim of feminist public to transform these discussions into a "socially relevant public," or in other words, to show that "the personal is political." Feminist public finds its specific form in the women's movement. Klaus points out that the claim of the second women's movement for personally-oriented reports, the claim for being more related to lay experiences in the media, has been taken into account in the media within the last decades. This development is rather ambivalent. On the one hand, it is important for the women's movement to evoke mass-medial resonance, to introduce its matters to a socially relevant communication process. On the other hand, doing so subordinates feminist issues to specific mass-media concepts of decision-making and acting. Hence, issues discussed by the feminist movement are taken out of the context of political interpretation and are brought to the public deprived of their feminist contexts of discussion. At the same time a broad public resonance of feminist matters leads to a popularization and to a political neutralization of the matters in discussion.

After analyzing daytime talk shows within the framework of women's public and feminist public, the question as to whether this genre is to be conceived as feminist can be answered with a definite "no." Considering that talk shows are not an invention of the women's movement, but rather market-oriented creations of producers, it becomes clear that women's public serves simply as a "boat" for TV stations to reach the dry land of the female audience. The significance of women's publics for television market share and for their importance for marketing strategies is well known by public-relations experts. Specific marketing strategies, such as the famous Tupperware parties, have been designed to draw upon women's networks using them as "marketplaces." The importation of feminist matters into the genre of daytime talk shows can be compared to the one described by Ann Farrell concerning women's magazines: "While this proliferation of magazines with a feminist, or at least pro-woman, stance indicates the power of patriarchal capitalism to turn oppositional strands into a market channel, it also clearly indicates the potential power of readers to make the marketplace answerable to them."¹⁶ Deprived of their feminist emancipatory context, the content and form of women's public and feminist public are transformed into the market-orientated and male-dominated system of mass media. Features of "oral discourse" and "oral culture" are taken as blueprints for the concepts of communication within daytime talk shows. Neither do daytime talk shows represent a consciously alternative political public built by

¹⁶ Cited in Klaus (1998: 114).

women, nor do they consciously reflect on gender relationships as a constitutive element of male-dominated society. The assumption that the typical daytime talk show viewer is a "mother and homemaker," by now has been empirically proved to be false, at least for the German situation.¹⁷ Likewise, a great deal of hosts are men. Thus, daytime talk shows are not to be conceived as "feminist" in the narrow sense that they represent a feminist or women's public.

On the contrary, it is often claimed that these shows represent democratic means in the sense that they offer "ordinary people" a forum where they can "have their say." If this is right, then we have to ask if daytime talks are to be interpreted as "feminist" in a broader sense, that is in the way that they offer a forum where the personal is discussed publicly. The connection to the motto of the second women's movement is obvious. But discussing private issues in public does not necessarily mean that socially relevant aspects of private matters are negotiated. To be able to answer the question of whether talk shows have political and democratic elements, we have to define the term "political."

Daytime talk shows as "politics by other means"

Defenders of daytime talk shows argue that these shows offer a forum for "ordinary people" to speak out. "Talk shows embrace everyday common sense against elite expertise, privileging 'the storied life over the expert guest,' emphasizing 'ordinary' experiences, and the 'authentic' voice of the everyday people, or street smarts of the working class.' They provide 'a space in which ordinary experiences' are collected together as grounding for decision."¹⁸ Since private persons nowadays appear on television and talk about their families, their sexual lives and other personal experiences, private acts have become issues of one of the most popular TV genres. Issues formerly ascribed to the private and intimate spheres, therefore, are presented as somehow socially relevant. The civil rights movements, and especially the women's movement, are often mentioned as the ideological roots of this process. "Drawing on 'the personal is political' charge of feminism, talk shows move personal lives to the forefront of public discussion. Their popularity, [Paulo] Carpignano and others argue, is a symptom of 'a transformation in the nature of the political,' and 'the

¹⁷ Although there is a quantitative predominance of female recipients of daytime talk shows, the share of the market of male recipients is enormous. See Bente and Fromm (1997: 108-109).

¹⁸ Gamson (1998: 16).

means of expression of these new areas of political struggle are quite different from those of formal politics.' Talk shows, such arguments suggest, are 'politics by other means.'¹⁹ Sonja Livingstone and Peter Lunt point out that daytime talk shows have contributed to moving away from the Habermasian view of media as the domain of a political elite towards a model of negotiation of diverse publics. They argue that participation programs have challenged the role of experts as the only authority accepted by legitimizing lays as experts.²⁰

Looking at the actual television program, the politicization of the private is obvious - as long as politicization means bringing "private" issues to the public. Following this interpretation of daytime talk shows as promoters of the transformation of "the political" and, therefore, of the boundaries between the private and the public spheres, the question arises as to whether the genre of daytime talk shows is to be conceived as "feminist" since the central motto of the second women's movement was "the personal is political." Jane Shattuc brings the popular interpretation of this claim to the point: "In particular, feminism, through its slogan 'the personal is political,' had pried open what was previously off-limits for social debate; private life. No longer was politics something to be carried on in Congress or through the electoral system. It was about what happened in the everyday experience of Americans."²¹ If the feminist movement changed the political agenda, if feminism shifted the boundaries between the public and private spheres, and if something like a "politicization of the private" can be detected, then daytime talk shows should be defined as "feminist" in the sense of being a product of this transformation as well as a promoter of it.

The personal is political

But what does the phrase "the personal is political" actually mean? "Personal" and "political" are somehow considered not to be the same - otherwise the assertion would not make sense. To the nominalized adjective "the personal," an adjective which is considered to mean nearly the opposite of what the noun phrase refers is attributed. What follows logically is that the sentence states that the difference assumed is not given, that the one is included in the other. What the sentence then means is that issues that seem to belong to the private sphere are not correctly

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p.16.

²⁰ Livingstone and Lunt (1994).

²¹ Shattuc (1997: 2).

described by the attribute "personal," but should be conceived as "political." The assertion "the personal is not political" then would no longer be true. The fact that the sentence is given in a positive description and not in the form of a negation leads to the interpretation of the sentence as a demand or as a guideline for future conceptions of the personal. One should be aware of the fact that the motto of the second women's movement avoids a linguistic form of equation (i.e., "The personal is the political") and, thus, avoids identification. The personal is not identical to the political, although the adjective "political" could be ascribed to "the personal." This means that "the personal" must be interpreted as politically and socially relevant and not as devoid of any political means. This short linguistic analysis is an important hint in arguing against the suspicion that feminism has asked for the fusion of the personal with the political - or the private with the public.

Carol Gould in her analysis of the motto states that the slogan is rather vague and gives rise to four possible interpretations. First, she argues, this phrase implies that general political ideas should not only be formulated abstractly, but also be manifested in concrete personal relationships. Second, she asserts that this dictum claims that "the personal" is "political" in the sense that personal relationships support political institutions. Male dominance in private life supports similar forms of dominance in the political and economical realms. The third possible interpretation she detects is that the influence could work in the opposite manner in that forms of dominance typical for the political and economical realm affect personal lives and everyday forms of interpersonal relationships. Besides these three different ways of interpreting the personal as being in one or the other political as well, Gould refers to the interpretation of the motto as a model for the future: "Therefore it is necessary to eliminate the difference between the public and the private realm and to ground society and state on personal relationships of equality and reciprocity. Following this opinion, the good society is totally dependent on the installation of harmonic personal relations between individuals."²² Gould agrees with the first three interpretations, saying that they clarify the manner in which the personal is to be understood as being political. Stressing her conviction that any complete democracy is based within the public sphere on the reciprocity within the personal relationships of the private sphere, she does not agree with the opinion that the public realm should be constructed simply as the conglomeration of personal relationships. She explicitly disagrees with the idea of the fusion of the personal and the public spheres. Gould argues that the separation of the private and the public is

²² Gould (1989: 74).

necessary in order to preserve the private sphere of individuals as well as their freedom to create personal relationships independently of intervention from official institutions or the state.²³

I claim there is a fifth interpretation that the personal is the actual political. Taken as a motto for the future, this would mean that it asks for a substitution of the political by the personal, and not for the fusion of the two realms. The political has to be somehow replaced by the personal. The "privatization of the political" would follow logically from this claim. It is no accident then that Kurt Imhof speaks about the "impressive declaration of the private as the actual political within the 68-movement"²⁴ in his introduction to the collection of the published papers of a media symposium called "The publication of the private – The privatization of the public." The misinterpretation of the slogan "the personal is political" is the necessary presupposition for ascribing the media process of privatizing the political to the civil rights movement, and especially to the women's movement. Reading the original slogan of the second women's movement properly, no claim for this direction of changing the political agenda can be found. The politicization of "depoliticized" matters of the private sphere was the central demand of feminists. The question that arises then is whether it is already "political" if traditional private matters are brought before the public. Does there exist something like a "non-political" representation of private matters in public? What is it that makes something "political," and how are "the public" and "political" related?

What does "political" mean?

The notions "the political" and "political" are widely discussed, and a number of different interpretations have been given. I will rely on Nancy Fraser's definition for the following reasons: Her theory represents a critical feminist modification of the Habermasian discourse model.²⁵ Thus, her considerations are sensitive to gender in the description of the process of democratization in modern societies while at the same time recognizing the importance of women's movement. Fraser distinguishes between "political" in the institutional sense and "political" in the discursive sense. In the institutional sense, a matter is deemed "political" if it is handled directly in the institutions of the official governmental system. In the discursive sense, some-

²³ *Ibid.* p.74.

²⁴ Imhof (1998: 20).

²⁵ Fraser (1989: 113-144).

thing is taken to be "political" if it is "contested across a range of different discursive arenas and among a range of different publics."²⁶ Matters understood as "political" in the first sense she calls "official political," while the latter she labels "discursive-political" or "politicized." A "politicized" matter "contrasts both with what is not contested in public at all and with what is contested only in relatively specialized, enclaved and/or segmented publics. These two senses are not unrelated. In democratic theory, if not always in practice, a matter "does not usually become subject to legitimate state intervention until it has been debated across a wide range of discourse publics."²⁷

Following these definitions of the two most important interpretations in the present contexts, two more questions arise. First, the notion "politicized" is referring to the process of transformation from being "non-political" into becoming "political." This gives grounds for the assumption that some issues are essentially or intrinsically "political" while others are not - otherwise it would not have any meaning to choose this notion of a process. Fraser herself answers this question, asserting that the assignment to the one or the other field is not *a priori* given but is culturally and historically formed. The boundaries between what is political and what is not are not fixed - not even for one society in a specific period. "On the contrary, this boundary may itself be an object of conflict."²⁸ The second question concerns the notion of "public." Obviously, the process of becoming "politicized" - the transformation from being "non-political" into being "political" - has to do with a change of spheres in that matters which have not yet been contested in "the public" enter into "different publics" or "discourse publics." In order to answer the question of whether or not daytime talk shows have a political function, it must be clarified if the change of spheres within which a matter is discussed suffice for "politicizing" it.

Fraser conceptualizes "publicity" as a plurality of distinct discourse publics and the relations among them. She explicitly denies the concept of "publicity" as the simple opposite of discursive "privacy." The different publics are distinguished along a number of different axes, such as ideology or stratification principles like gender and class. They also can be distinguished along the criterion of relative power. We then can differentiate between leading, authoritative publics (strong publics) and counter-hegemonic publics (weak publics). The former have a great

²⁶ *Ibid.* p.166.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p.166.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p.167.

influence on defining what is "political" in the discursive sense, that is to say they are able to politicize an issue by thematizing it and maintaining the discussions. Counter-hegemonic publics generally lack this power. Thus, the process of politicizing an issue is normally far slower if initiated by counter-hegemonic publics. Using Elisabeth Klaus's notion, "women's public" and "feminist public" would represent a counter-hegemonic, weak public distinguished with respect to gender. Television daytime talk shows as programs of mass media could be imagined as strong public, able to easily influence the "politicization" of matters.

Fraser describes the process of "politicization" as follows: some matters "break out" of the zones of discursive privacy or enclaved publics and become the focus of generalized contestation. In consequence, "taken-for-granted-interpretations" are called into question and "in-order-to-relations" become subject to dispute. In any case, family and official economies are the principal depoliticizing enclaves from which needs must escape in order to become "political" in the discursive sense in male-dominated, capitalist societies. "Thus, the emergence of needs talk as a political idiom in these societies is the other side of the increased permeability of domestic and official economic institutions, their growing inability fully to depoliticize certain matters."²⁹ These "runaway needs," as Fraser calls them, remain nevertheless embedded in the "in-order-to-relations" of the domestic or the economic institutions from which they have "broken out." Thus, alternative interpretations of these needs are often handicapped by the underlying assumption of existing separate spheres. These matters now in question enter "the social,"³⁰ enter "an arena of conflict among rival interpretations of needs embedded in rival chains of in-order-to-relations."³¹ Fraser conceives "the social" as "a switch point for the meeting of heterogeneous contestants associated with a wide range of different discourse publics."³² "The social" is the place where politicized "runaway needs" are translated into claims for government provision; rival need interpretations become rival conceptions. If such contests are resolved, runaway needs may become objects of state intervention geared to crisis management. "These needs are thus markers of major social-structural shifts in the boundaries separating what are classified as 'political,' 'economic,' and 'domestic' or 'personal' spheres of life."³³

²⁹ *Ibid.* p.169.

³⁰ Here Fraser is following Hannah Arendt's notion of "*das Gesellschaftliche*" (Arendt, 1958).

³¹ *Ibid.* p.169.

³² *Ibid.* p.170.

³³ *Ibid.* p.171.

In daytime talk shows not only "matters" in the sense of meaningful topics of discussion "break out" of the realm of privacy, but they seem to take with them their specific forms of "negotiation" attributed to them within these enclaved publics. Structures of communication typical for traditionally "depoliticizing" spheres are transferred to the public of television-conversation. This means that the structuring of discourse within the discursive-political is orientated towards the structures of "non-political" discourse. This consideration leads directly to an aspect within Habermas's concept of public sphere³⁴ often criticized by feminist theorists: the concept of "citizenship."

Citizenship, in Habermas's view, crucially depends on the capacities for consent and speech. Feminist theorists like Nancy Fraser and Seyla Benhabib argue that this is a gendered conceptualization because of its implicit gender subtext: "As long as the citizen role is defined to encompass death-dealing soldiering but not life-fostering childrearing, as long as it is tied to male-dominated modes of dialogue, then it, too, will remain incapable of including women fully."³⁵ Gossip as *the* "feminine discourse," as the discourse of the subordinated, is conceived neither as a "male" nor as "dominant" mode of dialogue. Besides the devaluation of "female discourse" as trivial, trashy and chatty, the meaningfulness of women's utterances in general has been denied for centuries – and still is: "Consider also that even outside of marriage the legal test of rape often boils down to whether a 'reasonable man' would have assumed that the woman had consented. Consider what that means when both popular and legal opinion widely holds that when a woman says no she means yes. It means, says Carol Pateman, that 'women find their speech...persistently and systematically invalidated in the crucial matter of consent, a matter that is fundamental to democracy. [But] if women's words about consent are consistently reinterpreted, how can they participate in the debate among citizens?'"³⁶

Here, the question is whether daytime talk shows, especially *because* of their imitation of "women's public" in content and form, are excluded from being "political." This interpretation will come to fruition if the concept of democracy is strongly related to the ideal dialogue based on rational argumentation. This concept denies in its character the possibility of social change through other means than rationally led argumentation of the elite's discourse. A "politicization" of the personal then would not be possible but rather lead to a "depoliticization" of the

³⁴ See Habermas (1990).

³⁵ Fraser (1989: 128-129).

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 126.

political because of the return of private matters to the public. With respect to the feminist character of daytime talk shows, the question becomes whether these programs are a reasonable forum for bringing private matters to the public or if they constitute a forum of "depoliticization" because of their characteristic forms of communication. Does the claim for the permeability of the boundaries between the private and the social spheres dominant *ad absurdum* within this genre? This is exactly the area of conflict where the social phenomenon of daytime talk shows and all other mass media dealing with personalization and intimization is discussed. On the one hand, these genres are interpreted as places where the negotiation of "run-away needs" takes place. On the other hand, they are criticized as the pure caricature of this process. In the first sense, daytime talk shows have to be interpreted as an institution of the "social" to which matters "broken out" from the private sphere "run to" and within which these matters become "politicized" or "discursive-political." The fact that a lot of issues discussed within talk shows have become matters of official political discussion and in some cases have led to institutional consequences gives rise to such an interpretation. But looking closer at the issue, one sees that this was the case with matters such as the legalization of homosexual partnerships, violence within marriage and abortion.³⁷ In all these cases, discussing the matters in question in the public of daytime talk shows was based on or accompanied by a conscious struggle for recognition by several counter-hegemonic publics. This observation leads me to the assumption that the existence of a conscious political context and of a specific intentional claim might be necessary to make "the personal political" within the genre of daytime talk shows. The context of interpretation has to be served together with the private matters and personal experiences brought before the public within these shows. If the matters lack a contextual embedding of interpretation, the stories are very likely to become the pure representation and illustration of "the life." Represented as "giving an example," or "showing a case," they are very likely *not* to enter the process of discussion and, in consequence, *not* to become "discursive-political." The politicization hoped for would then degenerate into nothing else but a caricature of the process intended. "Instead of an emancipatory, participatory and democratic [public] through the form of talk shows and life-help-programs (*Lebenshilfesendungen*), an illusionary and manipulative public has come over us, [a form] which is just appropriating the

³⁷ Keppler (1998: 158).

biographies of their listeners and participants in order to expropriate them of their individuality."³⁸

I think that in order to understand what is happening in daytime talk shows it is necessary to distinguish between the character of the "product" and the possible receptions and interpretations of this "product." The main tension of all television products is the one between entertaining and informing – both sides are detectable in every single genre of television. In which sense and to what extent a program is interpreted as being more entertaining or more informing not only are due to the specific form and content of the program itself, but also depend on the socio-historical context in which the program is embedded. The depiction of personal experiences of women within the genre of daytime talk shows is not intrinsically political or feminist. As this television genre has become successful in a society of changing values and moral orientations, it is not to be conceived as "non-political" at all. I also assume that it is important to take care of the fact that official political matters and "private" matters are presented to the public within the daytime talk shows in exactly the same way. On the one hand, this similarity of representation leads to an increasing recognition of personal matters; on the other hand, it leads to a loss of value of political matters. Nevertheless, stories told in audience-participation programs are always embedded within the public nature of these talk shows and within the context of public. As such, they are always "mediated." What we see and hear is never "the personal" or "the private," but always remains the production and dramatized representation of it. The voices we hear, the everyday experiences we listen to, the everyday forms of communication used, are always directed and framed by the mass media.

Conclusion

Referring to the questions formulated in the beginning of this paper, the genre of daytime talk shows clearly is not to be conceived as "feminist" in respect to the "from-women-for-women" argument. In view of the fact that matters of women's public are deprived of their context of the immediate place of shared experience and transferred to a television genre without the frame of a conscious feminist claim, talk shows are more likely to produce new forms and reproduce old forms of sexism than to contribute to a social change.

³⁸ Keppler (1998: 158).

The question of whether daytime talk shows are "feminist" in the sense that they are promoters of the transformation of the personal into politically relevant matters is not easy to answer. First, the answer depends on the interpretation of the motto "the personal is political" and, second, it depends on the definition of "the personal" and "political." If the slogan of the second women's movement and of the civil rights movement of the 1960s is interpreted in the sense that these movements claimed the personal as the actual political, then the realization of this claim itself would lead to the depoliticization of the political. Interpreting this slogan as a claim for setting the agenda for public debate and participation from another perspective, that is from a perspective which empowers women, daytime talk shows can be conceived as a possible means of democratization. Thus, democratization is understood within the framework of a discourse model of public space which differentiates between "officially political" and "discursive political" and which is "compatible both with the general social trends of our societies and with the emancipatory aspirations of new social movements, like the women's movement... However, in a society where reproduction is going public, practical discourse will mean first and foremost challenging, from the standpoint of their gender context and subtext, unexamined normative dualisms as those of justice and the good life, norms and values, interests and needs."³⁹ Interpreted within this feminist critical framework, daytime talk shows could be conceived as being "feminist" since they contribute to the change of the political agenda by providing a forum where formerly private matters are made accessible to debate and, in consequence, to the formation of a discursive will. Thus, the quality and form of daytime talk show discussions are of important interest. I argue that the simply entertainment-driven "representation" of formerly private matters in public does not necessarily lead to debate and discursive-will formation. But the presumably depoliticizing element of these shows is not imitated "female discourse" (gossip), but rather the decontextualized form of representation. Thus, the answer to the question of whether daytime talk shows are feminist cannot be answered with a definitive "yes" or definitive "no." The answer to such a question depends on the manner of representation, contextualization and reception of discussed matters. The fact that one cannot answer the question definitively means nothing more than that there is at least a chance for daytime talk shows to be or become a democratic, political and feminist forum for the negotiation of private, but nevertheless political, matters.

³⁹ Benhabib (1992: 94).

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