The role of audiences in television Leaders' Debates and political journalism.

Abstract
What is the point of studio audiences in high-profile political leaders' debate TV programmes, and what should they do? This chapter considers the first question using Coleman's Spectacle/Reflection distinction, and proposes that answering the second can be helped by distinguishing between Outcome and Process analyses of democracy. It ends by suggesting that these approaches can be a useful way of thinking about audiences and political journalism more generally, beyond debates and beyond TV.

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About the time of the Tory Leadership election in 2019, I was explaining to some of my journalism students how television debate programmes were made. They had picked up on a news story about how one studio audience member had previously been in another debate programme – a repeat studio audience guest (Rodger & Bloom, 2019) – and how another audience member had been unacceptably, to some of their tastes, right wing (Read, 2020). They asked, amongst other things: "How could they be in the audience twice? Who let them in? Surely someone checked?". And: "Isn't this evidence of the systemic right wing-bias in TV?".

Days before, I had been sitting in a TV production office working on one of the Tory Leadership debate programmes. (It is this sort of programme that I will be discussing in this chapter. I will call them "High-Profile Debate Programmes", or just "TV Debates" for brevity.) Next to my desk were two producers whose sole, rather soul-destroying job, was to research potential studio audience members' social media feeds, and flag up any indication of views or comments that might subsequently be picked up on. Soul-destroying, because despite their best efforts, something was likely to slip through. Almost inevitable, they felt, given the scrutiny that these programmes undergo, the ease by which people's political views can be ascertained in these social media days, and the – should I say it? – bad faith of some commentators.

The response of my students started me thinking about how little people outside the industry know about the production of studio audiences in high-profile television debates. At the least, there seems to be a need to explain the process by which these events are put together. There is some explanation, but perhaps it is not enough, not read, not believed, or not enough (Keeling, 2020). But, perhaps more importantly for present purposes, there are some interesting and fundamental questions that arise when one thinks about studio audiences in high profile political debate programmes. Two spring immediately to mind: Why are programmes made with studio audiences? And what are they – the audience - for, so what should they do? These questions are interesting because it seems that reasonable people discussing in good faith might disagree about the answers. They are also interesting

because attempts to answer them can cast light on more general questions about the status and function of audiences in political journalism.

Such questions about the nature, status and role of the studio audience in high-profile TV debate programmes do not seem to have been addressed before in the academic literature, at least not directly. This is a little curious. Such high-profile programmes now have an extensive history, as Presidential television debates in the US started over half a century ago, and in the UK we have had them for about a decade. That has led to a significant amount of critical attention, both scholarly and otherwise. Amongst other things, such attention has considered (to select a brief sample) whether they work, and what "do they work?" means (Blumler & Coleman, 2011); whether the US model is an appropriate one for non-presidential political systems (Anstead, 2016); what should be the rights of access to third-party and non-established political actors (R (on application of the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party) v. ITV Broadcasting Ltd, 2019); how the rise of different platforms has changed things, and whether Internet platforms will eclipse TV as TV eclipsed radio as a prime political medium (Schroeder, 2000, pp. 167, 200)? But I could not find much – though no doubt there is some – explicit discussion of the role and function of the studio audience.

The fact is, as I will show later, that reasonable people discussing in good faith can disagree about the role and status of studio audiences. That means their presence and function in these programmes is not a given. This is down to questions of power, production convenience, as well as principle. Audiences are not a given for political parties and political campaigners, because they pose a source of risk to the ability of political parties to control the dissemination of the message they wish to disseminate. In any political campaign, as Schroeder has observed (Schroeder, 2000, p. 96), high profile TV debates are one of the few places where eventualities cannot be controlled, and where their candidate is exposed. Live TV itself is a problem for any politician because is an environment they cannot control, and when there is a live TV audience who can respond to the candidate, there is one more risky variable. If a party's starting point is that it is sensible to reduce any risk, removing the studio audience is a sensible course of action.

Nor is the presence of a studio audience an obvious production choice for a broadcaster. Audiences are difficult to recruit, particularly if there are stringent requirements as to their levels of political engagement, their political affiliation, their gender, their ethnicity, their social class and – as is now the case – the acceptability of any statements individuals have previously made on social media. They are difficult to handle, from a production point of view, as they need to be held, fed and watered in a secure area; transported to the venue where the programme is taking place; and then taken care of afterwards, particularly if they attract the attention of the press pack. All of this is a logistical headache. They also are a source of reputational risk to the broadcaster, where their character, history or participation in the debate programme is picked over by commentators. It is much cheaper and easier to dispense with them.

Can academic analysis, based on principles, help us answer why these programmes are made with studio audiences, beyond questions of power and production? It can. A useful tool to employ is the dichotomy that Coleman has discerned in the scholarly critical analysis

of high-profile political debate programmes. This dichotomy is (though Coleman has argued, correctly in my view, that it is not really a dichotomy – a point to which I will return (Coleman, 2020)) between "spectacle" on the one hand, and "reflection" on the other. These ideas can provide answers to the question of why productions have studio audiences. Unsurprisingly, though, the different ideas provide different answers.

The Spectacle school of thought sees the presence of a studio audience in TV debates as an event which is designed to deliver drama and dazzle. It answers the question of "what is the point of the studio audience?" by pointing out that their presence draws attention to TV debates from the wider viewing audience – the electorate. It heightens the spectacle, because studio audiences are a source of jeopardy and risk to candidates. If this risk and jeopardy draws the electorate's attention to the candidates, it is a price the parties consider worth paying. Broadcasters are also interested in making a programme that many people will watch, and if a studio audience brings in this attention that is an attractant. If it also encourages the parties to deliver their content and their Candidates, all to the good. In the Faustian bargain between broadcasters and parties, studio audiences, for all the headaches that come with them, are the catalyst necessary for these programmes to succeed.

The Reflection school of thought sees TV debates as an opportunity for an increase in the flow of relevant political information. This information is necessary for the public to deliberate on, and this deliberation on high-quality political information is how they should arrive at a decision on how to vote. It answers the question of "what is the point of the studio audience?" by observing that their presence brings out more information, and more relevant information, at a time of crucial importance in a democracy. It assumes that both parties and broadcasters want to increase the flow of this information in a democracy. Moreover, the presence of the studio audience delivers the possibility of questions being asked of the candidates un-intermediated by the corrupting (not necessarily intentionally malign corruption, incidentally) influence of journalists, and media entities. Though the whole production, sitting as it does within the output of a media entity, remains a problem for some. It is a long way from Habermas' idealised London coffee houses (Habermas, 1992). A TV debate with an audience increases the possibility that critico-relective discussion in the public sphere can flourish.

Coleman, as I mentioned earlier, has observed that the Spectacle/Reflection dichotomy should not really be seen as a dichotomy. It is better to see them, he cogently argues, as related: Poles of a spectrum, rather than a binary choice. Both can operate *together* to explain what are the useful features of an audience in a TV debate. Debates can be important as a means of attracting attention – something the Spectacle theories emphasize – which then, in turn, enables information to flow between people – something the Reflection theorists emphasize. It can be seen that these explanations are not necessarily at odds.

Indeed, Spectacle itself can be important, in a way that it is myopic of Reflection theorists to overlook. As an example, Coleman discusses the importance of rhetoric in TV debates. Political rhetoric has been dismissed by some Reflection theorists as manipulative, and harmful to the flow of information: Mere Spectacle. But Coleman emphasizes how rhetoric can be important even to Reflection theorists. Skill in the use of rhetoric by a candidate is a

salient piece of information the electorate can take into account, as it is a quality a democratic population should look for, and perhaps be concerned about in a leader. It is, in other words, relevant political information on which it is important that the electorate can form a judgment. And rhetoric can also be an important and valuable means of disseminating information, particularly when the audience is not minded to pay attention, and is not *necessarily* manipulative. Reflection theorists, therefore, would be wrong to write off the use of rhetoric as mere Spectacle. More generally, they would be wrong to write off the importance of Spectacle itself, even by their own terms.

Coleman's views about Spectacle and Reflection are useful as critical tools for thinking about TV debates. The presence of the audience can be explained in Spectacle terms and/or in Reflection terms. But Coleman's framework can be usefully developed and amplified in a way that adds more nuance to understanding the place of the audience in such programmes, and in wider political journalism. Such development and amplification is useful, because it gives a different and novel perspective on the second question that I raised earlier about what the audience is *for.* What, in other words, they should actually *do* in one of these programmes? These practical questions about the use of the studio audience in TV debates can be addressed after Coleman's analytical categories are developed.

The source for this development can be derived from the field of constitutional law and theory. One of the questions considered in this field (as it is in other fields) is "why is democracy valuable?". Obviously, this is a huge area. This short chapter is not intended to be – nor can it be – a thorough analysis. But there are some basic relevant insights that can be drawn out. The core idea is that there is a two-fold distinction in answers to this question. One set of answers to the question can be called "Outcome Theories", and the other "Process Theories".

Outcome Theories are essentially the idea on that democracy is valuable because it leads to better outcomes. Some Reflection theories can be seen as a type of Outcome theory. This is where they emphasize that the flow of information, and critical-rational reflection on it by the population, is what makes democracy worthwhile because it leads to better political decisions. Better, in other words, outcomes. However, Outcome theories are broader than such Reflection theories, because they are not confined to considering the flow of information, and critical-rational decision making. They are not, in other words, confined to the importance of Reflection. Value can come from other outcomes. Other Outcome theories might cite the value of democracy in maximising the possible fairness in resolving disputes, for example. Information flow and critical-rational deliberation can, but need not, enter into the picture.

By contrast, Process Theories do not assert that the value of democracy lies in any improved outcomes it delivers. Rather, the value of democracy lies in the processes that reflect the values of democracy itself. These ideas can be derived from the work of Ronald Dworkin (Dworkin, 1999). He observed that a value in democracy can be derived from the *notion* of democracy. Democracy is, by definition, a system that treats individuals equally, he argues. And there is, in this treating autonomous individuals equally, a value. This is because equality of treatment, and respect for autonomy, are two qualities on which claims of value

can rest. Where (or because) a process in a democracy respects equal treatment of autonomous individual, it is valuable. This is a different conception to Outcome theories. Value for Process theories does not necessarily lie in the outcomes that democracy can bring about. The process is what is important, not the outcome, and in particular the process of treating people equally and respecting their autonomy. These theories, it can be seen, are rather far from the Reflection theories discussed above. For them, there is no need to derive value from any flow of information or capacity for, or exercise of, critical or rational thought. Nor any assertion that value for a democracy lies in it making better political decisions.

This is all rather abstract, and an example should help to demonstrate the difference in practice. A Reflection and Outcome theorist, James Fishkin has written, persuasively: "[i]If democracy is to mean anything, it is hard not to prefer deliberative forms of democracy to those in which the public is inattentive, ill-informed or manipulated" (Fishkin, 2015). This seems convincing. How could it be otherwise?

It can, if one builds into this situation some other facts. Consider, for example, a system of democracy consists now of attentive, well-informed and unmanipulated citizens, but achieved this by in the past violating or insulting the people's autonomy. Perhaps in the past, the State tricked, bribed or coerced them, or exploited divisions between groups of people, to bring about this state of affairs. What then? If one placed a higher value on the importance of Process arguments for democracy than on Outcome arguments, one might decline – logically and defensibly – to agree with Fishkin's conclusion. One might prefer a system that had recognized the autonomy of individuals, but at the cost of their being inattentive ill-informed or manipulated.

It will be pretty obvious that both Outcome and Process approaches have weaknesses. Process theories seem indefensibly ambivalent about getting right (logically coherent, wise, most likely to be successful) results. Outcome theories (or at least, some of them) seem regularly to have been rebutted, again and again, by history, where majorities in democracies have voted to endorse stupid decisions. (I am sure the reader can think of her own example of majoritarian folly.) And neither is likely to be a strong and exclusive claim to be the only source of value that can be found in a democracy. Moreover, there are also arguments that - as Coleman argued was the case with Spectacle/Reflection – these two theories are closer than they seem, and it might be better to see them as ends of a spectrum, not as binary alternatives. However, I do not wish to examine these questions here, but rather show how these concepts can be useful, in the ways I mentioned earlier. Namely, they can be practically useful in thinking about the existence of and use of studio audiences in high-profile TV debates, and useful as an analytical tool for theorists thinking about audiences and political journalism more generally.

How? I will demonstrate the former by considering some contentious areas relating to studio audiences in TV debates. First, the issue of the selection of the audience; second the issue of whether the questions the audience ask should be filtered by journalists for sense and relevance; third whether the audience should be permitted to react to the candidates in a debate. Each has in recent times been a contentious issue in UK Leaders' debates. I mention this not because of a desire to give priority and precedence to political

broadcasting in the UK, but as a demonstration of the practical relevance of these issues. And also because before the UK's 2010 Prime Ministerial Debate extensive rules were agreed between the parties and the broadcasters (BBC, 2009; BBC, 2010). They are useful to refer to because they set out in black and white the issues here being discussed.

Turning first to the selection of the audience, Rules one to 13 of the 2010 agreement set out in great detail how the audience should be selected for the 2010 programme. In summary, the audience was to be local; reflect the electorate in gender, age, ethnicity and social class, and age; be comprised of at least 80% of people who had a declared voting intention; support the parties in the following ratio – seven Conservative, seven Labour, five Liberal Democrat. Were these sorts of requirements appropriate?

An Outcome theorist would start by saying "yes", at least in as far as the requirement that the make up of the audience contains a spread of political opinion. This is because Outcome theories would hold that the point of the 2010 Prime Ministerial Debate – as other similar events - should be to maximize the flow of useful political information about the candidates. Requiring the audience to reflect a spread of political opinion can be defended on the grounds that it maximizes the chance of questions being posed in the debate that can elucidate relevant information about the Candidates' political positions. For example, left wing audience members can be expected to ask penetrating questions about right wing candidates, and vice versa. No one will be given an easy ride, and the inconsistencies in any candidates' position can be expected to be ventilated by the presence of people in the studio audience who do not share the candidates' positions.

By contrast, a Process theorist would start by saying "no". This is because a Process approach would hold that the important point of the 2010 Prime Ministerial Debate – and other similar events – should be treating the electorate as reflected in the studio audience equally, and respecting the autonomy of audience members. Arguments that audience selection is justified on the grounds that it maximizes the chance that relevant political information will flow are not important for a Process theorist. What is more important is that whoever wants to ask a question is able to do so. Indeed, a consistent position for a Process theorist would be that the members of the studio audience should be selected by random ballot, because equality and respect for autonomy are the cardinal values from this perspective.

Next to consider is the question of selecting the questions from the studio audience. Again the 2010 Prime Ministerial Debate rules provide us with some raw material to consider. The Rules on question selection are set out from numbers 14 to 35. In essence they mandate that the members of the audience can propose questions, and that these will be evaluated by a panel of journalists, and relevant ones selected to be asked. Is this appropriate?

"Yes", says the Outcome theorist. Why? Because, again, the cardinal virtue of a Leaders' Debate programme is the flow of information. This filtering process can cut out silly, misguided, inaccurate, overly partisan questions, or questions that are not pertinent or sub-standard for other reasons. Thus, the flow of relevant political information on which individuals can deliberate is ensured. But "no", says the Process theorist. Why? Because if the audience want to ask it, they should be able to ask it. Clearly not all can, because of the

time limitations of a programme. But that should be resolved in a way that emphasizes fairness and respect for autonomy, not by reference to the informational quality of the question.

This may seem, perhaps, a little abstruse, and a little unlikely that anyone would advance such a view. But an example can be found in the response of Carole Simpson, the American journalist who moderated the 1992 US Presidential Debate between George Bush Snr, Bill Clinton and Ross Perot in Richmond, Virginia, to challenges about the debate she oversaw. "I've had arguments with my colleagues", she said, as recorded by Schroeder, "who thought the public's questions were innocuous and inane, and I have just to yell back at them that this election is about the people and their questions. They're not the questions that we might ask, but this is what they want to know, and I don't think we should have any criticism of that" (Schroeder, 2000, p. 147).

My third example is whether the audience should be able to react to candidates in a debate. Once again, the rules of the UK's 2010 Prime Ministerial Debate frame the issue. Rule 40 covered the question of how the audience should react. It said: (BBC, 2010)

> In order to maximize the time available for viewers to hear the leaders discussing election issues with each other, the studio audience will be asked not to applaud during the debate. There will be opportunities to do so both at the beginning and at the end of each programme. (BBC, 2010)

This was a controversial rule. It was a move that benefitted the parties, by reducing the risk of the audience reacting badly to their candidate. It was, arguably, an attempt to exercise more control over a risky event. But it seemed to fetter the natural response of a studio audience, to react where they felt it appropriate to do so. What might Outcome and Process theories say about the appropriateness of the provision?

The starting point of an Outcome theory is that this rule is, at first sight, appropriate. Outcome theories would hold that the point of the 2010 Prime Ministerial Debate – as other similar events - should be to maximize the flow of useful political information about the candidates. The reactions of the audience to a candidate's answer to a question do not really count as useful political information, and so Rule 40, which curtails them, is a legitimate rule.

Process theories would take a different view. They would argue that the important point of the 2010 Prime Ministerial Debate is the equal treatment of the electorate, present in the studio audience, and the respect for their autonomy. Any rule that restricts the studio audience from reacting as they think appropriate to a claim by a candidate – which is what Rule 40 seeks to do – is a rule that is inappropriate. This is because such a rule does not give due respect for individual autonomy.

Before I turn to the wider applications of the Outcome/ Process distinction, a caveat is required. I must admit to the fact that my analysis is evidently not the end of the matter. There could be further arguments from an Outcome and Process point of view to each of the issues I raise. For example, on the last point, there is an argument similar in form to

Coleman's point about political rhetoric that can be advanced. An Outcome theorist could argue that the audience's reaction is a salient political fact, and on this ground Rule 40 could be challenged. As reaction can be a piece of relevant political information, it would be wrong to ban it. Conversely, a Process theorist might say that as long as the rule in question treats each studio member equally, and restricts the reactions of each of them equally, then it's uncontroversial.

This caveat does not undermine the point I am attempting to draw out here. That is because the point is that these can be useful tools which add a level of nuance and analysis to how one thinks about studio audiences. One can see them employed in negotiations in future between parties and broadcasters (or whichever platform in the future can provide a gateway to the attention of the electorate), as to what rules of engagement are appropriate.

Is the Outcome/Process distinction useful in considering audiences and political journalism more generally? It can be. This is because many arguments about the appropriate relationship between audience members and political journalism make reference to democratic values. Where they do, it is useful to actually consider more exactly what one considers to be valuable in a democracy. The Outcome/Process distinction is one way of answering this, and as such provides a reference point to evaluate the strength of the arguments being advanced.

A practical example will help make the point. Take the question of whether there should be rights of access by the audience, which would enable them to communicate on the platforms of institutional journalism. In the latter part of the twentieth century, this was a controversial issue in terms of rights of access to the airwaves and a right of reply to print pieces (Barron, 1966). Whilst these remain important issues, the subject is now additionally relevant in relation to rights of access to private social media platforms. How does the Outcome/Process distinction help understand the arguments here?

An Outcome theorist would analyse this question by saying that the existence of any right is dependent on the content of the information to be disseminated, coupled with the content of the information that has already been disseminated in the public sphere. If all the information worth considering is in the public sphere, in appropriate amounts and with appropriate amounts of attention, then there is not a strong case for a right of access. However, the situation would be different, conversely, if the institutions of the press were – consciously or unconsciously – warping the debate, or if a theorist - following the thought of Habermas and others– thought that there had been a structural transformation of the public sphere. A Process theorist, on the other hand, would approach this question by asking whether the lack of access is treating the audience equally and with respect to their autonomy. If there is evidence of unequal treatment, for example, or a lack of respect for an individual audience member's autonomy, then this can provide support for a right of access.

To return, finally, to my students' question about the repeat audience member. What does the Outcome/Process distinction add to the way one considers whether his return to the audience was appropriate? An Outcome theorist would not necessary be concerned about his repeat appearance if he was saying something new and informative, while a Process

theorist would be concerned that he was receiving unequal treatment. And, as for the issue of the right-wing audience member, I will leave detailed consideration of that for another time, as here the issues are somewhat complex. This may seem a cowardly way to end the chapter. But it is not – it just underlines the fact that I do not suggest that the Spectacle/Reflection and Outcome/Process distinctions provides help in understanding *all* audience-related issues.

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