

Past, future and change: Contemporary analysis of evolving media scapes



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Quality Discourses: Community Media Articulations of Democratic and Negotiated Quality

Nico Carpentier

1. INTRODUCTION

Quality is a pervasive notion that can be found in a wide variety of societal domains. Within the cultural domain, its intrinsic articulation with aesthetics, beauty, civilisation and culture as such has produced a Gordian knot that is virtually impossible to untie. But at the same time the quality concept, however complex and multi-layered it might be, unavoidably incorporates and invigorates processes of distinction, hierarchisation and judgement. Without stepping into the trap of the nihilist forms of cultural relativism, this text seeks to investigate the possibilities that exist to open up the quality concept to more political-democratic perspectives, which on the one hand show its potential for an articulation of quality within a democratic framework, but which also allow for the deconstruction of the quality concept's rigidity.

In this text, quality will be defined as a discourse, in line with Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory. Their theoretical model provides a toolbox that can be used to analyse the articulation of the quality discourses within the dynamics of fixity and fluidity, emphasising the contingent while allowing sufficient space for its (temporary) fixation. Especially relevant here is the theoretical starting point of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory (DT), namely the idea that all social phenomena and objects obtain their meaning(s) through discourse, which is defined as "*a structure in which meaning is constantly negotiated and constructed*" (Laclau 1988: 254). The concept of discourse is also described as a structured entity, which is the result of articulation (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 105), which in turn is viewed as "*any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice.*"

If we want to understand quality as a discourse, it is important to emphasise that discourses are not defined as stable and fixed. A discourse is never safe from elements alien to that discourse, and rearticulations are always possible. At the same time, discourses have to be partially fixed, since the abundance of meaning would otherwise make any meaning impossible: “*a discourse incapable of generating any fixity of meaning is the discourse of the psychotic*” (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 112). Moreover, hegemonic processes, as part of discursive struggles, will also intervene in attempts to fix meanings.

The first part of this text will focus on two quality discourses that can be considered hegemonic and universalised: the aesthetic and the professional quality discourse. The second part of this text uses a small group of interviews with community media producers in Austria and Switzerland to argue that, through the participatory cultures of these radio stations, other (alternative) quality discourses can be observed and theorised. The producers first of all deploy a democratic quality discourse and a rearticulated (deprofessionalised) professional quality discourse, but they also use a discourse on quality which can be termed negotiated quality. The interviews with the radio producers show that the universalised quality discourses can be deconstructed without destroying the notion of quality, opening up the way for rethinking it.

2. TWO HEGEMONIC QUALITY DISCOURSES

The rigidities of quality discourses can best be exemplified by returning to the 19th century (and older) discourses on culture, where quality was equated with culture. If, for instance, we regard Matthew Arnold’s famous description of culture, in his 1875 preface of *Culture and Anarchy*, we can see the process of fixation, combined with the hope of salvation, at work:

The whole scope of the essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know on all matters which concern us most, the best which has been thought and said in the world; and through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically ... (Arnold, 2004: 2).

Arnold’s emphasis on the “*total perfection*” and “*the best which has been thought and said in the world*” are examples of this 19th-century chain of equivalence, where aesthetics, excellence, civilisation and culture became

articulated as an inseparable whole. As has been extensively argued, this chain of equivalence played a key role in supporting the hegemonisation of a bourgeois taste culture, through which class (and gender) politics was waged. High culture and aesthetics – supported by the establishment of a cultural canon and the dialectics of inclusion and exclusion – manifested themselves as distinguishing features to legitimise social difference. To use Bourdieu's (1984: 491, original emphasis) words: *"What is at stake in aesthetic discourse, and in the attempted imposition of a definition of the genuinely human, is nothing less than the monopoly of humanity."* Part of this hegemonisation process was the normalisation of quality as an internal-inherent characteristic, covering up the workings of the canon and the external-institutional attribution of quality as a labelling practice.

Although the great divide (Huyssen 1986) between high and low culture, articulated with (the absence of) quality, has disintegrated, the aesthetic quality discourse has not disappeared. On the contrary, as, for instance, the debate on quality TV shows, the aesthetic quality discourse has broadened its scope and now spans many different cultural artefacts. One example is Sarah Cardwell's definition of quality TV (2007: 26), referring to *"certain textual characteristics of content, structure, theme and tone."* Especially focusing on American quality TV, these programmes tend to *"exhibit high production values, naturalistic performance styles, recognised and esteemed actors, a sense of visual style created through careful, even innovative, camera-work and editing, and a sense of aural style created through the judicious use of appropriate, even original music"* (Cardwell, 2007: 26).

Both the discussion on aesthetic quality and the quality TV debate lead us to another – evenly hegemonic – quality discourse, which focuses more on craftsmanship and the skills of the producer of the cultural artefacts. Within this discourse, the quality of the artefact is derived from the qualities of its producer. This discourse overlaps with the aesthetic quality discourse, given the link between the artist-producer and the cultural artefact through access to cultural codes, but at the same time this overlap is only partial. This brings us to the difficult relationship between arts and craft, as thematised, for instance, by Robin George Collingwood. Collingwood (1968: 18) accepts that an artist (like a poet) is *"a kind of skilled producer; he produces for consumers; and the effect of his skill is to bring about in them certain states of mind."* At the same time he resists what he considers the reduction of the artist to the craftsman, through the *"technical theory of art"*, which he considers a *"vulgar error, as anybody can see who looks at it with a critical eye"* (1968: 19). Despite these differences, the craftsman, often embedded in a

profession, is still able to generate quality. As McQuail (2008: 53) argues, the notion of the profession combines the possession of a core skill, which requires a high level of education and training in a number of sub-skills (including technical skills), with a set of other characteristics, including the ethic of service towards clients and society, autonomy, detachment and (potentially) the idea of vocation or calling. These characteristics (at least partially) distinguish the profession from the occupation, protect the profession from being (totally) colonised by the economical system, emphasise its (additional) societal relevance and status, and provide guarantees for the production of quality outcomes. But these outcomes are (as Collingwood (1968) has argued) general and skill-based. This distinguishes aesthetic quality from what I will call here professional quality. The mastery of the means aimed at the generation of professional quality has no individualised ends (like producing aesthetic ecstasy), but is based on the general qualities of the producer, which, in turn, become embedded in the cultural artefacts.

3. QUALITY DISCOURSES IN COMMUNITY MEDIA

Despite the hegemonic position of aesthetic and professional quality discourses, alternative quality discourses do exist. One example that is relevant in the context of this chapter is the more political-democratic articulation of quality. This quality discourse, termed democratic quality, emphasises the importance of participatory-democratic processes (and outcomes) as a criterion for quality, focusing more on the (participatory nature of the) production process. Here, a cultural artefact and its production process have democratic quality when they are supportive of democratic and participatory values, not limiting the control of production and distribution to particular societal elites. In earlier work (Carpentier 2007, 2011), I have argued that the democratic quality discourse, within a communicational context, has four key components. First, at the informational level, democratic quality refers to the comprehensibility and accessibility of information, and its empowering and mobilising capacities. At the level of the representation of the social, democratic quality is located at the orientation towards a pluriform social, avoiding the privileging of specific elites, while at the level of the representation of the political, democratic quality is based on the orientation towards decentralised decision-making, dialogue, debate and deliberation. Finally, at the level of the participatory, democratic quality can be found in more maximalist participatory processes, where a multitude of societal groups can be involved in production processes and can take equalised power positions.

Although the concept of democratic quality already includes a less stable articulation of quality, through its focus on representational and participatory processes as part of the definition of quality, we can take this discussion one step further and place more emphasis on the unstable and negotiated character of quality. Negotiated quality refers to the establishment of quality as a dialogical-participatory process, where all actors involved, including audience members, get to contribute to defining quality. This rearticulation is grounded in research on quality definition negotiations at Swiss and Austrian community radio stations, more specifically through an analysis of interviews with community radio producers and administrators at Radio LoRa, Radio Orange, Radio Fro and RadioFabrik¹. Obviously, this is a small selection of people, working in community radio stations in only two European countries. As the focus of this text is not on discovering the complexity of quality discourses in community media in general, but on showing and (then) theoretising the presence concept of 'negotiated quality', this does not pose structural methodological problems.

This analysis will attempt to show the rearticulation of the quality discourse, where participatory culture and openness - which are characteristic of community media organisations (Berrigan, 1979, Girard, 1992; Jankowski et al. 1992; Rodríguez, 2001; Carpentier et al., 2003; Howley, 2005; Bailey et al. 2007) - result in an unfixed and contestable discourse of (media) quality. This focus on community media does not, of course, imply that the quality concept is completely fixed in mainstream media configurations (or elsewhere), but I would like to argue that the participatory nature of community media creates a specific context in which more rigid (often professional-based) quality discourses are transformed into a negotiated quality discourse.

In the interviews, the radio producers all emphasise the participatory nature and alternative character of their radio stations (albeit in varying degrees), which positions them as the third sector. As Anu Poeyskoe (Radio Orange) briefly formulates it: "*you have the jukebox on the one side, and you have this upper-class radio on the other side.*" The mixture of participation and alternativity also feeds the rejection of traditional quality discourses. To quote Anu Poeyskoe (Radio Orange) again: "*Nobody wants to have a defini-*

1 Interviews with: Nicole Niedermüller (13/08/2008, Radio LoRa, Zurich); Adriane Borger (14/08/2008, Radio LoRa, Zurich); Simon Schaufelberger (14/08/2008, Radio LoRa, Zurich); Thomas Kreiseder (7/09/2008, Radio Fro, Linz); Alf Altendorf (5/12/2008, RadioFabrik, Salzburg); joint interview with Gerhard Kettler and Pawel Kaminski (3/04/2009, Radio Orange, Wien); Anu Poeyskoe (3/04/2009, Radio Orange, Wien).

tion of good programming that has some sort of universal meaning, because that is a really subjective definition." A similar position can be found with Nicole Niedermüller (Radio LoRa), when talking about quality management:

This is the kind of discussion I can get really angry about. Because I think that the question is: "Who is defining quality?" And I often see male, white heterosexual people with university degrees, telling a migrant woman about quality.

The rejection of power imbalances that are seen as an intrinsic part of the traditional quality discourses, together with the participatory and alternative nature of these community media, leads to the deployment of three major alternative discourses on quality, all to be discussed below.

3.1. DISCOURSES ON DEMOCRATIC QUALITY

Nicole Niedermüller's reference to migrant women quoted above immediately foregrounds the importance of the (self-)representational dimension of democratic quality. The quality that community media have to offer builds on providing access to and facilitating participation for a wide range of societal subgroups, including misrecognised and sometimes even stigmatised groups in society. Through these logics of self-representation and participation, ordinary people are offered the opportunity to have their voices heard, to talk about their daily lives, to express their knowledge and narrate their everyday experiences, a process which is articulated as a quality component. One illustration is Anu Poeyskoe's (Radio Orange) description of one of the main questions Radio Orange tried to answer in its start-up phase: *"How to bring people, daily things and their opinions, how to bring them into a radio programme? What is good material for radio?"*

This notion of self-representation as (democratic) quality is not merely limited to the process of providing access and participation, but also includes the outcome of the process. The community radio producers define their non-mainstream and alternative content – produced through the logics of self-representation and participation – as part of their quality. These articulations of quality are grounded in the importance of producing alternative representations, which complement and sometimes contradict the representations generated by the mainstream media. The circulation of alternative discourses, formats and genres is seen as an important contribution to a more pluralist-democratic society.

The articulation of non-mainstream content as quality is also supported by a rules-bound approach, which distinguishes community radio from access radio (like the German *Offener Kanal* concept). Anu Poeyskoe's (Radio Orange) summarises the community radio content rules system as "*the famous anti-anti-anti,*" which implies that community media are anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-fascist and anti-violence (although some variation is again possible). The producers interviewed all confirm the importance of this rule-bound protection of their non-mainstream identity, and (when asked) often tell of incidents when these rules were violated, in some cases leading to the cancellation of specific radio programmes, which is very rare within the field of community radio.

One final articulation of democratic quality is grounded in the structural participation and horizontal decision-making of the community radio organisation, which are deemed crucial to the democratic functioning of these media organisations, although their implementation gives rise to a wide range of challenges. These difficulties can also be found at the level of the relationships between producers (who are often volunteers) and staff members (who are sometimes paid). Here, one of the major difficulties relates to involving the radio producers in the democratic functioning of the community radio organisation. This again affects the definition of democratic quality, which is illustrated by the Radio Fro interview. In this interview, a lack of quality is defined as "*narrow-mindedness.*" Thomas Kreiseder (Radio Fro) continues by describing this (fictitious) radio producer's detached position: "*I'm coming in and I'm doing my stuff and I'm not interested in what others are doing.*" In contrast, quality in community media is also seen as contributing to the "*generation of more open systems, more open groups or communities of shared interests.*"

3.2. RE-ARTICULATING THE PROFESSIONAL QUALITY DISCOURSE

Apart from the discourse of democratic quality, the community radio producers that were interviewed also refer to the professional quality discourse. But at the same time, they also rearticulate it, as the entire ideology of community media is built on the concept of providing access and participation to non-professionals.

Some reference is made to the skills related to using the radio format (with the appreciation for "*voices electrifying you*" (Pawel Kaminiski – Radio Orange)) and radio's dialogical nature. But particularly the journalistic skills and the skills needed to use the technology itself are emphasised. Anu

Poeyskoe (Radio Orange) summarises the problem of the lack of technical skills as follows: *“High-quality content is of no use if I can’t understand it.”* But at the same time this quote illustrates how careful the interviewees are to avoid using the quality discourse as a *condition sine qua non* to judge a programme. On the contrary, technical quality is deemed important, but acquiring these skills is articulated as a learning process, which might take years. In some cases, when radio producers might actually never learn some of these skills, this should still not be problematised: *“Like using the telephone [during a live broadcast] is really difficult for a lot of people because they sometimes do, well they receive one telephone call every two weeks, so they slightly forget how to do this”* (Simon Schaufelberger - Radio LoRa). All interviewees strongly emphasise that these technical (and journalistic) skills should not be imposed or enforced, but that radio producers should receive informal or formal training.

Again, the participatory-emancipatory community media ideology can be seen as the main explanatory component for this approach. This also explains why the lack of technical and journalistic skills is not seen as problematic, in contrast to more mainstream environments where the lack of technological mastery would be defined as a *“sacrilege”* (Anu Poeyskoe - Radio Orange) and the professionalised environments would require the utmost respect for journalistic procedures. These nuanced approaches towards technical and journalistic quality are also grounded in the rearticulation of professional quality. One recurring argumentation is the importance of the non-professional nature of the radio producers, which refers not only to their position as volunteers, but also to their embeddedness in alternative production cultures.

The rearticulation of professional quality is based on a combination of authenticity, commitment, empathy and subjectivity. As Simon Schaufelberger (Radio LoRa) puts it: *“There is quality in this radio station in lots of different respects. And especially in the personal commitment of people doing shows. I think this is the highest quality for a radio station like [LoRa].”* These producers’ characteristics are contrasted against media professionals, who become articulated as objective but inauthentic, and who have little to communicate. It is in this debate that technological quality is also mentioned, but again in a model which is antagonistic towards mainstream media.

3.3. A PARTICIPATORY DEFINITION OF QUALITY: NEGOTIATED QUALITY

A third major discourse on quality within community media can be termed negotiated quality. The participatory nature of community media makes it possible to destabilise the traditional (universalised and professionalised) discourses of quality. Through their resistance to the power imbalances which are embedded in the quality discourse (where professional media are seen to produce quality content and amateur media are discursively excluded from the quality signifier), community media not only foreground alternative models of quality (see above), but also submit the definition of quality to their participatory processes. By opening up the definition of quality to their participatory cultures, they unfix and destabilise quality, showing its constructed nature.

One major discursive strategy is the rejection of the one-quality concept. In contrast, a more relativist definition is used, emphasising the diversity of quality. An illustration here is Adriane Borger's (Radio LoRa) position:

I think we need the whole variety of approaches and ways of doing a programme. And of course you can, every individual programme, you can look at it and see if it's good or not, but first you have to see what good means in this case. This can mean very different things.

Quality, then, becomes an agonistic (Mouffe, 2005) confrontation between these different positions on quality. Within the participatory tradition of community media, this almost unavoidably implies the organisation of dialogical processes to determine quality. Apart from discussions amongst (paid) staff members and in formal decision-making structures, the radio producers are also involved in this dialogical process, mainly through what the interviewees call the feedback mechanism. Here, staff members or more experienced producers provide feedback to other producers, if time and resources allow. Apart from the more informal feedback system, most of the community radio stations have included more workshop-based forms of learning, where the quality dialogues can take place in a more organised way. Finally, in some cases even listeners participate in the quality dialogues, albeit in less organised ways.

4. CONCLUSION

It seems that, despite its long and problematic history, the quality discourse has remained active within the cultural field. Even its discursive

oppressive role as protector of the bourgeois cultural project has not discredited it sufficiently to make it disappear. At the same time, rearticulating the quality discourse so that it leaves its problematic past behind has also turned out to be surprisingly difficult. In this chapter, I have first tried to describe the existing hegemonic quality discourses, not without showing the complexity and inherent instability of these discourses. Even this initial discussion of quality discourses shows that stopping the sliding of the signifier is virtually impossible.

What has been termed democratic quality allows for a relatively novel approach towards quality, articulating specific types of information and representation, combined with more deepened forms of participation, as quality aspects of (improving) the functioning of (mainstream) media. Not surprisingly, in the community media interviews as well, these democratic quality concepts feature prominently. But the small set of community media interviews also shows how, within these media organisations, the sacral quality discourse becomes deconstructed, by showing its problematic past and universalist claims, while at the same time deploying it by embedding it in the participatory tradition of community media. Negotiated quality thus becomes a transversal concept, which potentially affects all of the quality discourses previously discussed, positioning quality itself in a participatory-democratic debate. Of course, at the same time, one should be prudent. Both democratic and negotiated quality remain, just like any other discourse which is embedded in a democratic-participatory logic, vulnerable to shifts in the (informal) power balances, requiring permanent attention and care to protect the power equilibriums that feed them.

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