# Small talk makes a big difference:

# recent developments in interactive, SMS-based television

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# Abstract

In recent years the international convergence between broadcasting and new media has included more and more formats combining television and mobile, personalized media, in the form of SMS and MMS messaging on mobile phones. The article discusses key features of SMS-based television. It has a particular focus on the shift from one-way broadcast communication toward two-way interactivity, and on new forms of user participation through SMS-based television's interactive design interfaces. The article presents a multimodal analysis of design in SMS-based television formats, a discourse analysis of their roles and interactions, and a typology of their degrees of interactivity. It also draws on interviews with industry decision-makers and on relevant statistics. The article develops a conceptual interest, introducing some neologisms to account for the original textual features of SMS-based television. Its designs are analysed using a concept of "zones", while its roles and interactions are seen as linking these zones by means of "axes". In closing it is suggested that SMS-based television presents us with interactivity as a realized, albeit mundane, fact rather than as a future promise.

# Key words

Television, text messaging, interactivity, design, multimodality, interaction

# Authors' note

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# Introduction

"Interactivity" has gone from being a buzzword for the future to being a main strategy of todays broadcasting industries. It is the common denominator in a set of developments toward convergence between broadcast and new media that are currently happening on an international scale. Researchers have extensively studied two such main developments: the digitalisation of television (e.g. Colombo 2004, Levy 1998, Lowe and Hujanen 2003, Papathanassopoulos 2002, Steemers 1998) and broadcasting's move towards a coordinated Internet presence, often including web-based television (e.g. Caldwell 2002, Henten and Tadayoni 2002, Seiter 2000, Siapera 2004). Recently some researcher attention is also beginning to focus around a third tendency: Television becomes more interactive through the use of telephony as a return channel, particularly with the rapid spread of SMS and MMS messaging on mobile phones (Bjørner and Christensen 2003, Sádaba 2004, Sihvonen 2003).[2] The broadcasting industry is becoming actively engaged in developing formats with interactive components fuelled by the use of SMS and MMS as return channels.[3] The international audience has encountered this tendency via formats such as *Idol* and *Big Brother*. "Reality" television puts voting on contestants centre stage, and this voting has been done by SMS to varying degrees from country to country. Also a number of channels now bring so-called jukebox television, such as MTV's *Re:action,* to an international audience. Here viewers vote via their mobile phones on the music videos to be screened.

In SMS-based television formats we see television introducing what it has lacked almost since its inception: continuous and near instantaneous interactivity. In earlier

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[2] These tendencies do not necessarily exclude each other. For instance some SMS-based television formats feature an Internet presence in addition to its television and telephony features.

[3] All mobile phones currently on the international markets can send written messages to other mobile phones, or to computers fitted with the requisite software. The SMS (Short Message Service) is restricted to 160 characters per message. Longer text messages may be sent by MMS (Multi Media Service), a system which also can transmit tightly compressed images or sound. So far, MMS messaging is used only in some SMS-based television formats, for sending small images.

times, feedback devices such as letters to the broadcaster played a role not least because of this lack of continuity and real-time connection. Radio phone-ins overcame that particular obstacle and became established as a staple ingredient of magazine programming. A tradition of non-professional participation thus exists within broadcasting, and has been spreading from older genres such as debates and game shows into the current varieties of "reality" programming (cf. Livingstone and Lunt 1994, McNair et al 2003, Syvertsen 2004, Winocur 2003, Ytreberg 2004). SMS-based television builds on this tendency, further expanding broadcasting's capacity for accommodating non-professional participation through interactivity.

This article explores and discusses key features of SMS-based television. It focuses particularly on the shift from one-way broadcast communication toward two-way interactivity, and on new forms of user participation through SMS-based television's interactive design interfaces. The article's main empirical reference point is Norwegian broadcasting, a leader in SMS-based television development. However this is very much an international trend, and the article draws on comparisons with international developments and formats. Since the object of analysis is in a developmental stage and largely unexplored, the article's aim is to provide a provisional overview through a set of analytic probes. It is based on a comprehensive set of text-analytic approaches; a multimodal analysis of design in SMS-based television formats, a microsociological analysis of their roles and interactions and a typology of their degrees of interactivity. It also draws on interviews with industry decision-makers and on relevant statistics. The article develops a conceptual interest, introducing some neologisms to account for the original textual features of SMS-based television. Its designs are analysed using a concept of "zones", while its roles and interactions are seen as linking these zones by means of "axes". In closing it is suggested that SMS-based television presents us with interactivity as a realized, albeit mundane, fact rather than as a future promise.

## The mobile phone in current television development

Any discussion of the spread of SMS-based television would have to take revenue into account. The spread of this type of convergent television is intimately linked with

the fact that text messaging can generate income for broadcasters more readily than for instance the Internet can. The key condition for the establishment of SMS-based television, then, is the increasing use of mobile phones as a personal communication medium. Eurostat Information Society Statistics for 2002 show that 25 out of 31 European states had a mobile penetration higher than 50% of the inhabitants, 12 states more than 80%.[4] All Nordic countries are in the latter category, which may be connected to the fact that prices are significantly lower than in other OECD countries. A 2004 report from Statistics Norway shows that 91% of the Norwegian population have a mobile phone subscription, and that 99% between ages 16-24 own one. In other words, a portable, digital and near-instant return channel is already implemented to an advanced degree. Broadcasters have been very aware of this, and of the fact that mobile phones have turned into the perhaps most personal of today's communication devices. As studies of television viewing have shown, television's remote control has traditionally been "dad's thing" (Lull 1982, Morley 1986). Mobile phone use, on the other hand, is strongly personalized, and suggests a one-to-one relation between user and provider.

SMS was initially introduced in the early 1990s to provide cellular network operators with a possibility for sending text messages to their customers. Few, if any, had foreseen that mobile phone users would use SMS for sending messages to each other, since the user interface initially made writing these messages cumbersome and slow. Within a few years text, however, messaging grew rapidly, and new user interfaces made texting easier. Statistics show that use is now becoming extremely widespread in certain markets. Even though Norway is a small market, with a population of 4.5 million, a total of approximately 3,14 billion SMS messages were sent in 2003.[5] 8 % of the total number of these SMS messages was sent to various commercial providers offering everything from ring tones to SMS chats on television.

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[4] Eurostat Information Society Statistics Pocketbook 2003, p. 40.
[5] Statistics Norway, Yearbook 2004:515. In 2003 47 % of the Norwegian population sent private SMS messages on an average day (2,8 messages on average). Unsurprisingly, young people are the more heavy users; 83% of teenagers between 16-19 sent an SMS, amounting to 9,5 messages on average per day (Norsk Mediebarometer 2003, p. 68, report published by Statistics Norway). There was a 28% increase in the use of SMS from 2003 to 2004. In the same periode the use of SMS sent to commercial providers increased with a total of 160%.

European television networks started tapping into this market by using SMS as an interactive channel from the late 1990s. Within a few years this practice has grown rapidly, and is currently spreading around the world in a variety of formats. Europe seems to be leading the way, and in early adopters such as Finland and Norway, SMS-based television features simultaneously on several channels, currently dominating day parts such as the night and early morning. Recently MTV struck a deal with mobile phone operators Virgin to provide a proprietary SMS component in the USA, and there are signs that SMS-based television has also been spreading in Asia. In 2003, for instance, a new SMS-based television show featuring mobile messages introduced by Hub TV in Singapore logged 140.000 SMS and MMS messages during its first six days of transmission, according to CNETAsia.[6]

Norway is an example that also licence-financed public service broadcasters are latching on to these developments; SMS-based television constitutes approximately one third of the channel NRK2's programming hours. For a relatively successful and offensively minded public service broadcaster such as NRK, SMS-based television presents a strategic opportunity to experiment with possible interactive solutions for the coming digital age. It is also being legitimized with reference to ideals of providing viewers with new ways of participating in public debate. For instance, NRK2's commissioning editor Oddvar Bull Tuhus maintains that "personally I take a great interest in (SMS-TV) chats as an interesting service for those many who wish to speak in public and state their views, but who cannot or will not write letters to the newspapers. [...] (SMS-TV chats) can serve a function that at best builds democracy by encouraging a lot more people to express themselves in the public sphere than just experts or the particularly eloquent."[7]

For both commercial and public service broadcasters, SMS-based television offers the attraction of revenue combined with the opportunity to engage in a closer and more continuous contact with audiences. Hence existing SMS-based television formats are

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[6] Cnet Asia, "TV channel gets warm MMS response", Cnet, http://asia.cnet.com/newstech/communications/0,39001141,39114740,00.htm (accessed June 9, 2004). However a systematic account of developments on other continents lie beyond the purview of this article.
[7] Interview with Oddvar Bull Tuhus, commissioning editor NRK2, available at the "Participation and Play in converging media" web site "Invervju med Oddvar Bull Tuhus", http://www.media.uio.no/prosjekter/pap/forskning/interv_5.html

pervasively shaped by the need to constantly generate participation and revenue through messaging. But even though this motive is relatively straightforward, the matter of how to design interactivity in television is not a matter of minor adjustment. A closer look at the basics of designing SMS-based television shows that quite basic elements of televisual communication are being re-thought in this process.

## Basics of SMS-based television design

Established forms of audience participation in broadcasting genres like game shows and political debates have been handled simply by putting participants on air or in front of the camera. Hence there is no real precedent in television for designing interactive user interfaces. The distinctive features of SMS-based television design seem to have been developed as a result of the shift from conceiving of the public as a receiving audience toward conceiving of it as a composite of users who engage the interface for purposes of messaging. "Toward" here means that SMS-based television is not quite one-way communication, nor two-way, interactive communication; its distinguishing feature lies in combining the two. The basic challenge in SMS-based television design is making the two cooperate legibly. Screen space and representational conventions have to be found for the representation of text messages. They then have to be linked to other spaces and conventions more familiar from television design.

Consider first screen shots from SMS-based jukebox programs that include a chat.

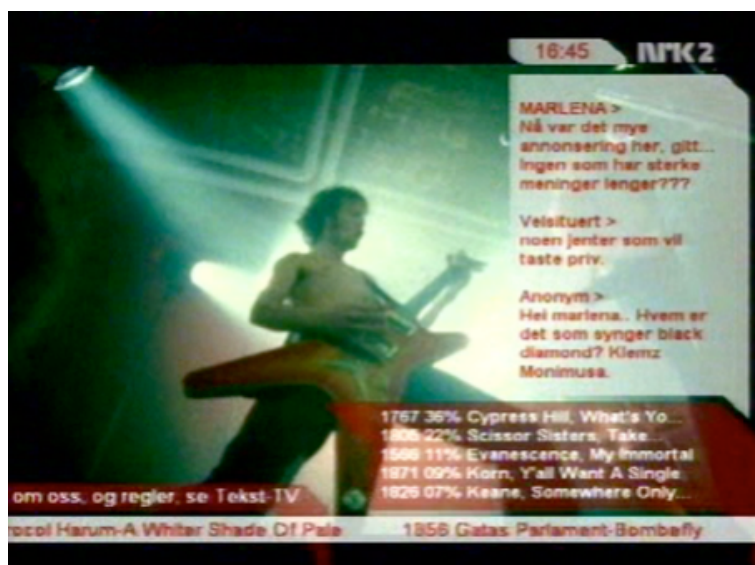**Figure 1:** *Re:action*, MTV Europe.



**Figure 2:** *Svisj show,* NRK 2, Norway.

**Figure 3:** *Blender,* NRK 2, Norway.

What are striking in these and other shows with chat features is the presence of both textual and graphic information. In some cases this is organized in a fairly complex way, such as in the *Blender* and *Svisj* examples. They feature a vertical "scroll", two differently paced horizontal chat "crawls", and a fairly stable top-list of upcoming items, in addition to a video or host(s) addressing the viewer in the upper left-hand corner. This may be seen in relation to the general trend in television toward including graphical and written information, especially since the late 1980s, as described by Caldwell (1995) and Ytreberg (2000), among others. The main difference, of course, is that most of the graphic information in SMS-based television such as the above is generated by the viewers, not the production personnel. Clearly there is an impetus for providing this participation with its own representational spaces. As a result of this, SMS-based television design tends to involve several, partially independent spaces that may be termed "zones". And SMS-based television design may suitably be described as a complex form of multimodal design.[8]

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[8] The analysis is informed by works on multi-modal discourse and design (e.g., Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, van Leeuwen 1999, Hodge and Tripp 1986, Hodge and Kress 1988)  as well as audio-visual analyses by Maasø (1995, 2002).

## Zones

The "zoning" of SMS-based television varies from format to format. An explanation of this form of multimodal design requires some degree of detail. Figure 4 outlines the basic design of the Norwegian format *Mess TV*, as a starting-point for analysis.[9]
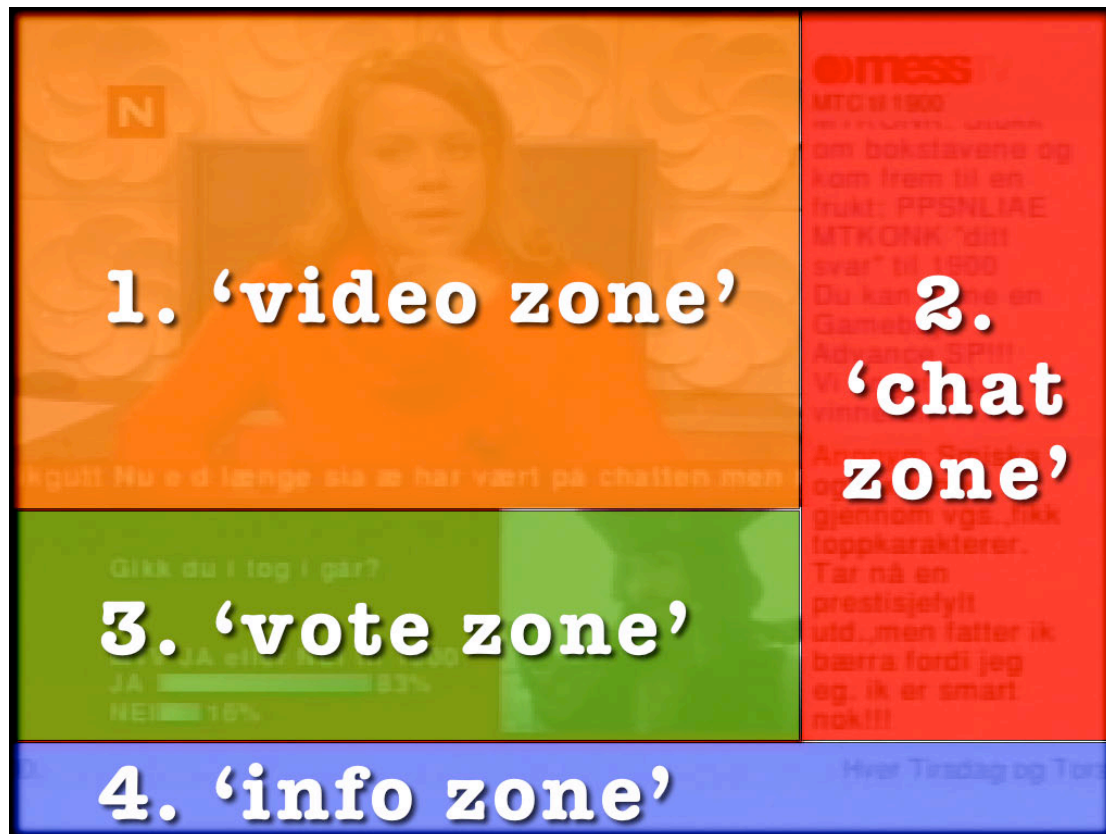


**Figure 4**: Communicative "zones" in SMS-based television.

In figure 4, the screen is divided into four major zones, designed to accommodate different kinds of discourse and interaction. Video and host zone 1 is the space most resembling traditional broadcasting. It looks almost like a shrunken version of an ordinary television image, and viewers new to SMS-based television will immediately understand what is going on. As a rule all sound emanates from this zone, most commonly music from a music video, or the talk from a host. Furthermore, it is the only zone not solely based on a textual or written mode of communication, but rather

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[9] *Mess TV*'s basic design is of a type probably most common in the Nordic countries, and so its generalizability is limited. Figure 4 should be regarded as an ideal-typical representation of *Mess TV*'s design, not of SMS-based television design in general, strictly speaking. Also, other SMS-based programs far outperform *Mess TV* in public attention, voting and revenue (such as the international song contest format *Idol)*. *Mess TV* may nevertheless be said to "push the interactive envelope" in similar ways that *Big Brother* did with "reality" programming. It is a complex and hence information-rich case that seems to include most common forms of "zoning".

on verbal and audiovisual competence. In addition to broadcast talk and music, some formats send short segments from previous programs, or feature "greatest hits" from the archives of television channels.

Chat zone 2 may be regarded as the visual "hot spot" of SMS-based television. This is where the host most frequently directs his or her attention, and the zone where the majority of the audience communicate with the host or with other viewers/users through text messages. Although voting zone 3 also contains user-generated content (though votes or MMS images etc.), this zone does not seem to appeal to quite the same ongoing communicative experience as the chat zone does. However, zone 3 may well be the most interesting zone as far as channel revenue is concerned. First of all, messages in this zone are often more highly prized than in the chat zone; this is the case for the high-prized 'slow crawl' immediately below the host in *Mess TV* and for MMS images, which are screened here at a price often 2-3 times higher than SMS messages. More importantly, this zone can funnel a much higher number of messages, since a vote, for instance, is just a binary yes/no. It needs no individual screen-time in order to be read, the way a chat message does. Ideally, thousands of simultaneous messages may go into one visual or aural event taking place, such as a graph moving, or a new music video voted to play in video zone 1.

The fourth and last zone, perhaps also the least important one, may be termed the info zone. This consists of one or two (sometimes three) horizontal crawls, displaying various automated text information, and generated solely by the television channel or moderator. [10] Here one finds information about pricing and promotion for a wealth of different kinds of interactive SMS services with appropriate codes, numbers and prices, for instance how to get your own signature ("nick"), how to get a personalized horoscope, or how to participate in weekly contests.

## Axes

While many conventional television programs may be watched in a glance-like way, where the viewer is primarily oriented by the sound track and looks at the screen

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[10] The latter term is adopted from the Internet, where a moderator censors incoming chats on a web site, or approves a message sent to an e-mail list. In industry parlance, the moderators of SMS-based television are sometimes called "TJs" ("text jockeys").

when needed (see research overview in Maasø 2002), following an SMS-based television format with a chat feature is often a rather complex matter. Here one must pay a fairly focused and sustained visual attention to the chat zone if one is to keep track of the ongoing chat, which can change rapidly. Yet, both the host and moderator play important roles in interpreting individual messages, as well as in focusing attention on selected aspects or topics, as will be explored further below.



**Figure 5:** Host visually and aurally connecting zones **1** and **2** in *Mess TV*, TVNorge, Norway.



**Figure 6:** Host visually and aurally connecting zones **1** and **3** in *Mess TV*.

Figures 5 and 6 illustrate some of the axes of attention, as displayed by a host in *Mess TV* during a fairly typical morning show. Much could be said about the production values and the framing of the single frontal camera covering the host (or hosts) in *Mess TV* in a medium close-up shot throughout the program. However, we would rather point the attention to the glances and gestures of the host. Interestingly, the host does not primarily look directly into the camera (and hence at the viewer), as in traditional television. Instead she splits her time between gestures and looks directed at chat zone 2, camera looks within zone 1, and looks at the moderator off screen to the left. A chat-based show might, of course, have displayed the chat messages on a teleprompter, having the host read the messages while at the same time looking directly into the camera. This would have meant making use of the preferred mode of address in television news and other non-fiction genres, and would have hidden the work of reading that the host does, thus presenting an illusion of immediacy. But in an SMS-based television program, immediacy can also be produced when the host connects in real time with SMS messagers - by reading their messages, and by bodily directing themselves to that job. By doing this the host achieves the same thing that a direct camera look achieves in other genres: She creates a direct communicative bond between host and user, and by proxy an indirect communicative relationship with the program's wider audience. A similar effect is created by the occasional off-screen look at the moderator. Here too the moderator becomes the viewer by proxy. The rapport is if anything even more immediate, since the two are co-present with each other, while the relation between host and text messager is mediated through the multimodal interface.

Whereas the axis between zone 1 and 2 may be regarded as the central one in *Mess TV* as far as generating interesting content goes, other axes are also important in this and other formats. For instance, text messages from the moderator (easily distinguished from other text messagers by a blue text colour), often direct attention from the chat zone to vote and competition zone 3, in order to encourage voting. Similarly, the moderator frequently refers to information in zone 4. Hence, both host and moderator may simultaneously connect three or four of the communicative zones, through verbal discourse, gestural information (cf. figure 5 and 6) and text messages in the chat zone. In such cases, one might perhaps speak of multiple points of

synchronization, to adapt a term by Michel Chion. And similarly to particular salient audio-visual synch points in film and television (cf. Chion 1994, Maasø 1995), such multiple points of synchronization may 'pull together' to provide a more unified set of discourses. The axes of SMS-based television thus seem to function as a means of unifying the disparate components of one-way and two-way communication. As will be more explored below, they also facilitate a distinct set of mediated roles and interactions.

# Basics of roles and interactions in SMS-based television

Figure 7 outlines basic roles and interactions of SMS-based television, on the background of its characteristic combinations of broadcasting and interactive media, one-way and two-way communication. It is not intended to describe any one format, but presents an ideal type of roles and role relations.
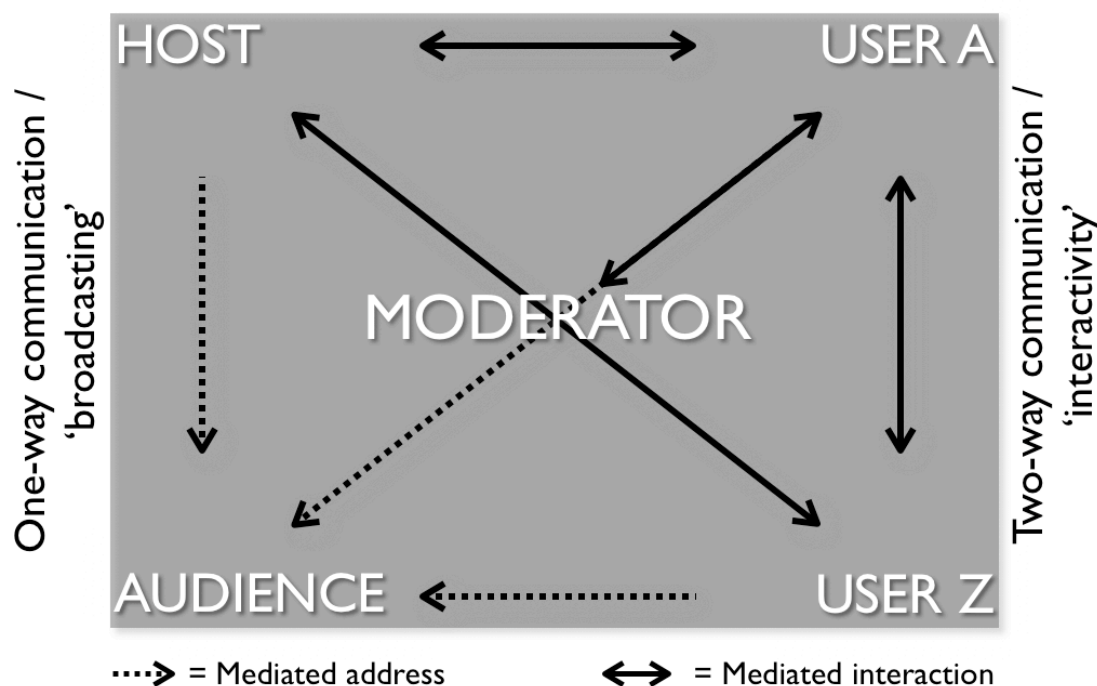


**Figure 7:** Patterns of interaction in SMS-based television.

The moderator is a new professional role in television production, developed specifically for programs offering text messaging interfaces. As indicated in figure 7, the functions of the moderator are quite central to SMS-based television. The

moderator is the key processor of text messages, both triggering text messages through different forms of appeal and censoring them before screening. The moderator communicates directly with the audience on the chat by answering messagers' questions, by providing practical information on how to use the interactive services, and by directing attention towards ongoing votes. In some formats the moderator also functions as an assistant, a "sidekick" and conversation partner to the host. In sum, the role of the moderator is essential to the program, performing functions that in conventional television production are done by co-hosts, producers, scripts and floor managers. The other qualitatively new role in SMS-based television is of course that of the user of the interactive interface. In figure 7 users A and Z, who are individualized, in contrast to the collective role category of "audience", symbolize these. Developers of these formats clearly encourage this process of individualisation, even if disclosures of personal identity seem to be prevented in most formats. Instead, individualisation is achieved by encouraging the use of "nicks" and through the formats' often informal and colloquial modes of expression and interaction.

Figure 7 is also designed to highlight the complex web of communicative relationships that characterize SMS-based television. Complexity in interaction is not in itself new to television. In studio-based non-fiction programs with a studio audience, for instance, the host usually has to combine interpersonal interactions with guests and the studio audience on one hand, and mediated address to the home audience on the other. However, SMS-based television increases this complexity, and not just because the roles of user and moderator have been added. There is the use of axes connecting zones, which is a novel and unfamiliar form of mediated communication, so to speak in search of appropriate conventions. There is also the intermingling of mediated address *to* others and mediated interaction *with* them, which can become quite complex. For instance SMS messagers can choose or shift between interacting with the host, interacting with other users and addressing the audience.

# Hosting and interaction in *Mess TV*[11]

Norwegian media have commented on the seeming incompetence of *Mess TV*'s hosts, whose training is very limited.[12] However the interaction with SMS messagers requires communicative competencies that are different from the ones needed in hosting a non-interactive program. Among these skills is the ability to improvise and adjust according to the incoming SMS messages. This means paying close attention to the ongoing chat and being flexible towards comments and suggestions by the chat participants. It is important for the host to possess agile social skills, quickly picking up on and interpreting the meaning of messages, contextualising messages within the larger chat flow, thus making them relevant for the audience. In this context, the ability to project an everyday, ordinary persona with little trace of professionalism is an obvious asset, since it lowers the threshold for non-professional participation. At the same time the host might be compared to a chairperson or master of ceremonies, filling gaps between incoming messages, providing bridges and summing up the chat for newcomers.

Furthermore the hosts need to be tough-skinned, in the sense that they will not be emotionally affected by comments on their physical appearance, personality or behaviour. Where SMS-based chat programs feature intimate, flirtatious and sexually charged conversations on the chat, such comments are commonplace. A lot of attention is given to the looks and appearance of *Mess TV*'s hosts (named Therese and Madde in the case below):[13]

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[11] The following two chapters report on a discourse analysis of interactions between hosts and the users/audience and the moderator and the user/audience in *Mess TV*, broadcast on the commercial channel TVNorge (Enli 2002, Fairclough 1992, Fairclough 1995, Scannell 1996, Tolson 1996).

[12] "All the hosts on Mess TV are young people with limited experience" ("Nekter å oppgi programlederens navn"), VG Nett, http://www.vg.no/pub/vgart.hbs?artid=67912 (accessed June 3, 2004).

[13] All transcriptions in this article keep as close as possible to the original form of the SMS text, including unorthodox spelling, grammar, abbreviations, and the like. This practice is also preserved in the English translation.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Lada3:** | Hi Therese, You are sweet and pretty. |
| **_Lynx** | Madde, you are one of the most gorgeous girls I have ever seen. Do not get involved with anyone before I have met you. Please, dear you … |
| **Anonymous:** | Hi, Madde is the sweetest girl I have seen in a looong time… can you please give us a sweet smile.) ?? |

*Mess TV*, TVNorge (Norway), February 20, 2004

Intimate messages receive quite different kinds of response from the hosts, depending partly on how sexually loaded they are. Compliments like "you are pretty and sweet" might be commented on with appreciation, smiles and responses like "Thank you, you are so nice to me", while direct questions about going on a date or more overtly sexual text messages are often ignored or just briefly responded to. The production team behind *Mess TV* are very aware that sexuality seems to be an effective means of engaging the audiences and increasing the number of incoming messages on the chat. The hosts thus have to walk a fine line between the flirtatiousness required by the format and their own needs for limiting self-exposure.

Part of the skill required for all kinds of television hosts is knowing how to build relationships with the public. In the case of conventional broadcasting, Paddy Scannell (1996) has written about broadcasting's "for-everyone-as-someone structures"; the host must address herself to a collective audience – but must do this in an individualized manner. The hosts in *Mess TV* must address themselves to the audience in this way, but they must also interact with the SMS messagers on an individual-to-individual basis. The ability to convey individual experience and establish personal relations may thus be regarded as the greatest asset of an interactive host. This may be illustrated by examples from messages shown on the chat scroll at nighttime, which was directed to one of the hosts (Therese):

| | |
|---|---|
| **Anonymous:** | Hi Therese. I've had a great night on the town. You are pretty and cool. Give us a nice night greetings. Tore |

*Mess TV*, February 20, 2004

This message is read aloud by the host Therese, who responds by saying: "Hi Tore. I hope you'll have a good night's sleep. Sweet dreams to you", followed by a couple of blown kisses.

In certain cases some of the more regular SMS chatters will expect the hosts to recognize their real names, or other personal information about them, as in this exchange:

**Tess_fan:** Do you remember my name?

**Therese:** No, I'm sorry. I don't remember. … or maybe… now I remember, is your name
(host**)** Jannicke? There are so many different people using Tess for a nick, but I think I know who you are.

*Mess TV*, February 20, 2004.

*Mess TV* has a significant number of regular users, and one of the hosts has described the way interactions unfold between the program and its SMS messagers as "a separate world".[14] In a sense, then, one might see the interactions between hosts and SMS chatters in *Mess TV* as constituting a mediated community over time.

## Moderating and interaction in *Mess TV*

The relationship between the SMS messager and the moderator is one of inequality of power, to a more direct degree than that between messager and host, since censorship is involved. In the absence of both a traditional producer and editor, the moderators of *Mess TV* are handed a great deal of responsibility.[15] This conflation of roles and functions is not only true for the SMS component of the format but reflects the general low-budget nature of these kinds of productions, where staff is kept at a minimum. The moderator, then, decides whose voices are to be heard. Guidelines are partly a matter of generated experience, partly of tacit knowledge. Also these guidelines will have to be interpreted in an often hectic production process, and in the context of live broadcasting. Hence the moderators have to rely extensively on their commonsense understanding of what is inappropriate. In *Mess TV* the moderator's decisions are partly related to a set of defined guidelines for what to accept on the chat and what to stop from being aired. In addition to inappropriate language, all insulting of named persons is supposed to be deleted. This includes harsh insults to

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[14] Interview with Therese Fjellgård, *Mess TV* moderator and host, April 23, 2004.
[15] Interview with Eivind Landsverk, head of programming at TVNorge, March 18, 2004.

the hosts, and such insults in fact add up to a considerable share of the censored messages, especially during nighttime programming.[16]

Still it seems that through programs like *Mess TV* the role of moderator and the practice of moderating is becoming established, and that users will routinely defer to the idea that this "policing" makes for a better atmosphere on the chat. Now the sifting of participants is of course nothing new to broadcasting; what is interesting about the moderator is perhaps more the way that sifting now has a face, so to speak, an allotted role in the program. It then becomes interesting to note cases where users react by to being censored by voicing their dissent on the chat, hence challenging the moderator's role practice. What is displayed in these cases is the moderator's degree of willingness to allow debate over the ongoing moderating activity, since of course also SMS messages expressing criticism will have to pass through the moderator's hands:

| | |
|---|---|
| **Anonymous:** | Now this really upsets me. Is the word "butt" bad language? You have allowed the word "shit" 1000 times during Mess TV airings. Who will refund all my censored SMS'es today? |
| **Line:** (host**)** | When you are stupid enough to push the limits, you will be censored. But today's moderator is actually not particularly strict. He allows a lot of messages that others would stop from being aired. |

*Mess TV*, November 17, 2003

The reaction from the host illustrates how moderating allows considerable individual leeway, if not inconsistency. Also, this shows how the hosts has to defend the concept of paid interactivity both in relation to the individual SMS-sender and the audience as a whole.

The complexities inherent in the moderator's role stem in large part from having both to censor text messages and to trigger them by encouraging the audience to become interactive users. The latter is done by various forms of direct and indirect appeal to the audience, attempting to turn them into participating SMS messagers. It is also

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[16] Other defined guidelines for the moderators include not relaying a participant's full name, address, telephone number or private Web page. The same applies to overt racist remarks and insulting statements concerning the Norwegian royal family (interview, Therese Fjellgård).

done by encouraging much the same type of individualized and informal modes of interaction that hosts do. Again the moderator has the added option of not engaging messengers in a certain mode of conversation, but also by shutting out those who might work against that mood. According to the first producer of *Mess TV*, the goal is to achieve a mostly superficial, light and positive mood on the chat, and this will influence on the moderator's decisions.[17] Issues connected to death and sickness has for instance mostly been kept out of the chat. However this will vary from program to program, due to differences between the personalities of the hosts, the practices of the moderators and the interplay between the two. It also varies between day parts; there is a considerably lower threshold in *Mess TV* for messages in nighttime than in daytime.[18]

Such inconsistencies may of course be taken as another symptom of a lack of professionalism. But this variance is itself not random. To some degree it follows what Erving Goffman (1966) has called the "looseness" of everyday interaction, where participants are relatively free to veer jointly between different degrees of informality and intimacy. Generally a great deal of humorous distancing, insinuation, polite deference and inattention is involved in this type of talk. Thus what gives a pleasurable, informal feel to conversation is just the kind of inconsistency that makes ethical and professional guidelines hard to impose. The case of the moderator, then, may illustrate the general point that new mediated roles are there because they do new communicating jobs, whose qualifications may run counter to established professional codes.

## Messagers' influence on programming

Figure 7 above places the phenomenon of SMS-based television mid-way between traditional broadcasting and full interactivity. However there is considerable range in just how different SMS-based television formats place themselves along this continuum, and this range deserves closer examination. In discussions of

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[17] Interview with Einar Røhnebæk, the first and former *Mess TV* producer, March 22, 2004.
[18] Interview with Roy Tjomsland, *Mess TV* producer, February 16, 2004.

"interactivity", one important dimension is what Brenda Laurel calls "significance"; that is, how much the user's choices influence what happens in the given medium of representation. Indeed, according to her the whole issue of interactivity boils down to one basic dividing line: "... you either feel yourself to be participating in the ongoing action of the representation or you don't." (Laurel 1993: 20-1) This seems to be a key issue in the assessment of SMS-based television also. In line with this, the following typology places SMS-based programming along an influence continuum, from "limited" through "partial" to "dominant" influence.[19]

## Limited influence: messagers as programming shufflers

The so-called jukebox format may currently be the most widespread form of text messaging television internationally. Through the music video channel MTV's European programming (e.g. *MTV Access*, *Top ten at ten*, *Re:action*) it reaches an international audience. It is also found throughout the Nordic and south-west European regions. This type of programming features some design version of the main zones outlined above, although as a rule SMS messages are shown one by one rather than in a chat scroll. In jukebox formats such as *Re:action* the moving image consists of music videos, occasionally interspersed with promos and advertising (cf. figure 1). A vote allows the SMS messagers to text their music video preferences. Their influence over the programming, then, amounts to shuffling a menu of videos that is relatively tightly pre-packaged by the broadcaster's music rotation system.

As long as the SMS messages are featured on the screen, there is of course a theoretical possibility for the SMS messagers to add a new dimension to the program. This they do among other things by initiating contact with each other or with the program's moderator. In this way conversations often arise between messager and

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[19] Programs analysed for the purposes of this typologization include one episode each of the Norwegian political debate programs *Standpunkt* (NRK1) and *Tabloid* (TV2); the youth and music video programs *Sone 2* (TV2) and *Blender* (NRK2); the music video jukebox programs *Svisj Show* (NRK2) and *Mp3TV* (NRK2). Also included was the juke box format *Svisj* (NRK2) and *Mess TV* (TV Norge). The latter two both cover most of the channel's night and morning time. Here, a period of three hours from the program's beginning was selected for analysis. The sample was made in March 2004, with a view to avoiding exceptional cases. Examples of other Nordic, Baltic and European programming are drawn on throughout as supplements to the typology.

moderator, but in MTV's formats these SMS exchanges are extremely brief. There is no way for the messagers to interact with each other onscreen, and the goings-on in the video zone are unconnected with the SMS messagers. Such is also the design for instance of Italian channel 7's sports program *Il processo del lunedi*, Spanish Antena 3's *Asi es la vida*, France Television 3's discussion/talk show format *On ne peut pas plaire a tout le monde,* BBC's discussion format *Asylum Day* and Norwegian TV2s discussion format *Tabloid*.

## Partial influence: messagers as programming contributors

This category includes formats that allow the SMS messagers some measure of direct and formative input into the program's overall action of representation. To a large extent this involves establishing an axis of interaction between the chat and video zones. In the design of Norwegian SMS-based formats a left/right split between the video and chat zones is relatively common. In the chat zone the messages are projected after each other, in a way reminiscent of how a conversation is rendered in prose. And "a conversation" is precisely the effect that is produced; here the SMS messagers can engage in a mediated interaction with each other and with the moderator. In formats such as *Svisj* (figure 2) and *Blender* (figure 3) one finds the axes and forms of interaction described for *Mess TV* above. The settings referred to tend to be private and informal (everyday happenings, partying, flirting) and the conversations in line with this. Issues do get debated, but in these two formats they tend to involve for instance opinions on popular music and sports figures rather than on politics – at least not in the conventional sense of that term.

There are also forms of programming that allow SMS messagers a significant measure of influence without the use of separate chat zones. The political debating program *Standpunkt* runs in prime time on Norway's most popular channel NRK1. Its debates are led by two hosts, one of whom has the role of summarising and relaying verbally to the studio's public figures SMS messages on the night's given topic. The viewers cannot access the SMS messager's own formulation, or any other indications of the messagers' own framing of the communicative situation. Thus a comprehensive and tight formatting procedure seems to be in effect vis-à-vis the participants (cf. Thornborrow and Fitzgerald 2002, Ytreberg 2004). Nevertheless the SMS'ers do have

a regular and significant say in what questions get asked to the debaters through this host-as-relayer.

## Dominant influence: messagers as programming providers

In certain formats the influence of SMS messages goes further, to the point where it becomes the dominant feature of the programming. In Norway the main example is *Mess TV*, where the ongoings of the video zone are almost entirely generated from the SMS messages in the chat zone. Formats that dispense with the video zone and with hosts altogether can be found on Finnish and Estonian television. Some of these formats look much like televised versions of Internet chat rooms (*EMT Nightchat* and *Telejazz SMS-chat* in Estonia and *Millaisia*, *Mikämikä* and *4deitti* in Finland, cf. figure 8). There are also several examples of SMS-based multi-player TV games, where users are now players, sending messages to control the movements of their avatars in the television game (e.g. certain of Finnish MTV3's formats, cf. figure 9). The differences that remain from chat or game sites on the Internet seem to be due to the need for generating revenue from SMS and MMS messages. There is the text-based information zone, which introduces votes and explains the practicalities of messaging. And there are the SMS moderators, with their double mandate of censoring messages and generating them for the sake of broadcaster revenue.
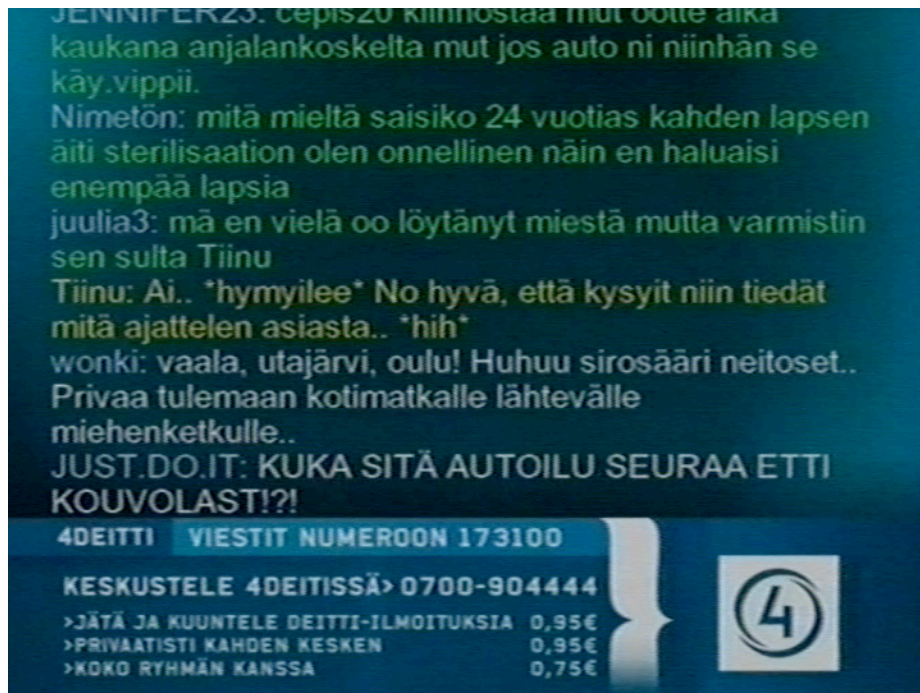
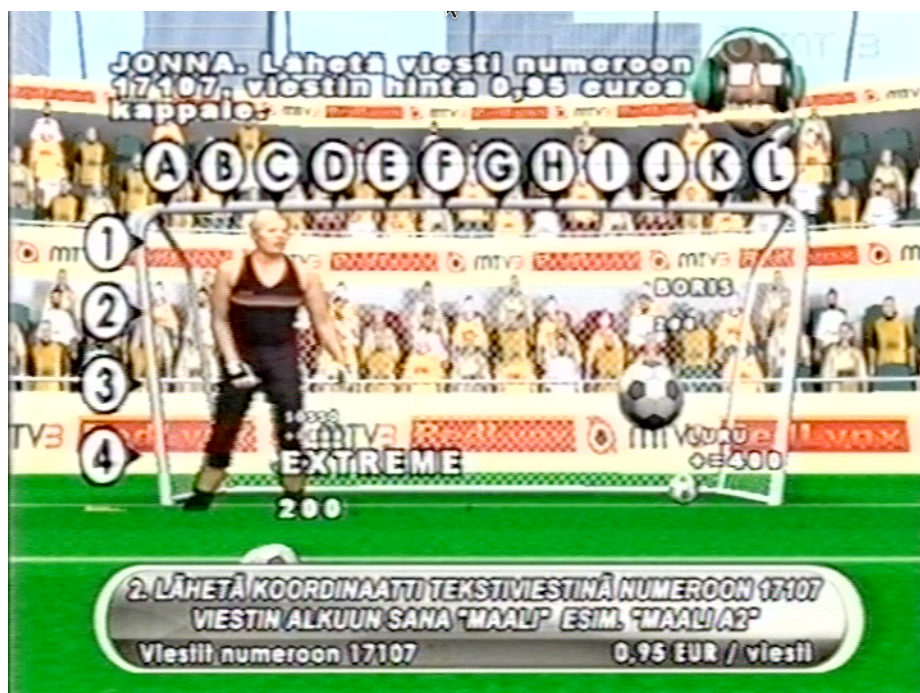**Figure 8:** The night time SMS chat *4deitti*, 4 nelonen, Finland.



**Figure 9:** SMS-based football game on MTV3, Finland.

In these formats, all is focused on the SMS or MMS contribution; without it, no programming. Indeed these formats take us to the limits of what one usually means by "television". Not only are traditional program units lacking, except for commercial breaks in some cases, but also the segmentation and the modes of address that are characteristic of contemporary television, at least as outlined within Anglo-American television theory (e.g.Williams 1975, Ellis 1982). Instead is a continuous, live stream of broadcast interaction in written text mode, where the sequence of the program follows the ebbs and flows of colloquial conversation for hours on end.

## Conclusion: small talk makes a big difference

A closer look at SMS-based television, then, shows that considerable range has developed, both in terms of the degree of messager influence and for instance along an axis of information versus entertainment. However the banal aspects of SMS-based television are easier to spot, and public commentators have been quick to pounce on them. A majority of the formats are forms of entertainment, production values tend to be low, professionalism in presentation often seems to be lacking, and the interactive conversations strike many as being banal and speculative. This article has not tried to join in debates around the various SMS-based television formats' quality or moral fibre. However it does argue that SMS-based television introduces a number of significant, even quite basic, changes to broadcast communication. They are worth summing up by way of conclusion. Fundamentally, SMS-based television involves a shift from conceiving of the public as a collective audience toward conceiving of it as a composite of individual SMS and MMS users. For the television industry this means a new source of revenue, and the economic logic in these industries consequently tends to shifts from a focus on the size and composition of the audience toward a focus more on making individuals turn into messaging users. Because of this shift in focus, television's designs now have to accommodate both two-way and one-way communication. As a result they become more complex, working with several zones to accommodate both traditional viewing and messaging. To still make the format

cohere, designs accommodate axes of interaction and a complex network of mediated interactions and modes of address.

The development of SMS-based television presents an interesting alternative intake to debates about the meanings of convergence. It has been surrounded by few of the hopes connected with interactivity in the new digital media. Hence SMS-based television has not been made to carry the double weight of promise and disappointment characterized by discussions of these new media. Here the broadcasting industry has made interactivity become everyday mundane reality, for better or worse. However it does present a real case of convergence, as mobile and personalized SMS and MMS messaging has been incorporated into the everyday stream of television. SMS-based television has developed a considerable range in terms of the formats on offer, from the light entertainment of juke box chats to the high-prestige journalism of a format such as NRK1's *Standpunkt*. And it involves the reconfiguration of television's designs, roles and interactions on a significant scale. Perhaps after all this is the kind of major impact convergence was thought to have. One just did not imagine it was going to happen in order to facilitate small talk on television screens.

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