

# Television Performance as Interaction

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Face-to-face communication is usually considered as a fundamental form of communication. Therefore, all other forms of communication are often compared to it. Consequently, one-way direction and absence of a negotiable dimension, or in other words, lack of interactivity, have been seen to be characteristic for television communication. Interactivity is also said to be one of the most remarkable differences between the new communication technology and the traditional media (e.g. Rogers 1986). Traditionally television is, thus, considered as a noninteractive medium.

Currently, however, the notion of interactive television has been gaining attention. Normally, this notion refers to a combination of a computer and a television. Still, certain programs of traditional television are also called interactive. In these programs, a viewer is able to interact with a presenter, or participate in the program by telephone. The interactive programs have been reported to increase rapidly in Finnish television (Eerikäinen 1994, Hietala 1994) and they were also common in the US during the presidential election (Diamond, McKay & Silverman 1993, Newhagen 1994). Additionally, the television companies all over the world seem to believe in the capacity of the interactive programs to attract viewers, as new programs are being developed and their number increased. However, there is also evidence for the view that the interactive forms do not necessarily please the audience (Barwise & Ehrenberg 1988: 84, Isotalus & Pörhölä 1994, Jääsaari & Savinen 1995).

Poster (1994) has argued that, despite the telephone call-ins, television communication is still unidirectional, and thus, basically a monologue. Also Eerikäinen (1994) has criticized Finnish interactive programs for not being genuine conversations with viewers, as they follow a preplan, and the viewers have to adapt to the rules. Eerikäinen (1994) sees the present interactive forms of televi-

sion as an opportunity of feedback or participation rather than as actual interaction. He also questions whether the interaction, in this case, indicates the media-relationship, or the relationship between persons. This relates to the fact that interaction can be considered from three different perspectives: interaction between persons, interaction between a text and a person and interaction between a machine and a person (e.g. Jensen 1997).

Evidently, there seem to be different viewpoints about what is interactive and what is not, and, furthermore where the television may be located on this dimension. However, it is fully possible to consider television from the perspective of interactivity. The aim of this paper is to develop a model to illustrate the interaction between a television presenter and a viewer. Therefore, the first and the most essential question is to try to define interaction.

## What is Interaction?

Interaction is a widely used term and it is also used in the definitions of communication, although it clearly is an underdefined concept. There have been attempts to define interactivity by means of prototypical examples, by criteria which should be fulfilled in interaction or by describing it as a continuum in which case it is seen as a property which may be found to a varying degree (Jensen 1997). Rafaeli (1988) is one of the scholars who has tried to analyse the concept. According to him, in full interactivity the communication roles need to be interchangeable: role assignment and turn-taking are to be nonautomatic or nearly so. Interactivity also requires that the communicants respond to each other and there are two forms of responding. The first one is a regular response which means a reaction to previous messages. The other is a response which, itself, acknowledges the prior responses. In full interaction, the regular response alone is not

adequate, because it is also needed to be able to react not only to the previous message but also to the messages before it. Thus, according to him, there are three levels of interactivity: two-way (noninteractive) communication, reactive (or quasi-interactive) communication, and fully interactive communication. In reactive communication, later messages refer to earlier ones, but the full interactivity differs from reaction in the incorporation of reference to the content, nature, form, or just to the presence of earlier reference.

Also Thompson (1994) has distinguished three types of interaction. The first type is face-to-face communication which takes place in a context of co-presence. In face-to-face communication, the flow of information occurs in a two-way manner and communication roles alternate. The participants also commonly employ a multiplicity of symbolic cues in face-to-face communication. The second type is mediated interaction which involves the use of a technical medium, such as telephone. In mediated communication, the participants are usually remote in space, in time or in both, and therefore they must always consider how much contextual information should be included in the communication. The third type is described as mediated quasi-interaction, and it usually occurs in mass communication media. It is oriented towards an indefinite range of potential recipients and it is monological in character, in the sense that the flow of communication is predominantly unidirectional. However, mediated quasi-interaction creates a particular social situation in which individuals are linked together in a process of communication and symbolic exchange. Furthermore, bonds of friendship, affection or loyalty can be formed by recipients.

In both definitions, interactivity is seen as a multi-level phenomenon which has different forms. This principle seems to be common in other definitions of interactivity as well (see e.g. Hansen, Jankowski & Etienne 1996, Jensen 1997). Thus, interactivity can not be seen as a dichotomy but, rather, as a continuum. Additionally, both definitions seem to consider interpersonal communication as the ideal form of interactivity. On one hand, Rafaeli's definition seems to be more useful, because it is theoretical and considers features of interactivity. It could, thus, be enforced to the analysis of all forms of communication. On the other hand, however, his definition is also quite vague and difficult to apply. In contrast, Thompson's levels are easy to understand, but he is satisfied in classifying forms of communication only and does not analyse features of interaction. There-

fore, all forms of interaction do not fit perfectly to his categories. However, it is typical for most attempts of definition that they result in classifications only.

In terms of these definitions, television communication cannot be considered fully interactive. Rather, it can be seen as mediated quasi-interaction. As the genuine interactivity is thus impossible in the television communication, television only tries to simulate interaction. On the whole, it is typical for the mass media to try to simulate interpersonal communication and to personalize their communication (Beniger 1987). The interactive programs and the telephone call-ins are thus one means of simulating interaction, and one of the most important elements in this simulation is the television performance of presenters.

### **Simulated Interaction of Presenters**

Already at an early stage it was understood in radio that talk should be addressed to a listener. This insight was also adopted to the television and it has modified broadcast talk to a great degree (Scannell 1995). Nowadays, the television presenter aims at creating an illusion of interpersonal communication for the viewer by simulating interaction. During the last few years, simulated interaction has been observed to increase in television (e.g. Camauër 1994, Hjarvard 1994, Isotalus 1996) and there have been increasing attempts to analyse its forms. The most typical form of simulation is to look into the camera and address the viewers directly. In German quiz shows, for example, a presenter has been observed to speak directly to the viewers 12% of the broadcasting time. This happens normally at the beginning or in the end of the program, or, when the situation changes (Woisin 1989:145-146). These addresses have also been called parainteractive lines (Rasmussen 1988) and, in the fictive programs, as 'breaking the fourth wall' (Auter 1992, Auter & Davis 1991). Moreover, simulated interaction can be both verbal or nonverbal (e.g. Terrenoire 1987) and it may be characteristic for the presenters or the programs that aim at increasing the intimacy (e.g. Hjarvard 1994, Mårtensson 1989). Consequently, simulated interaction has been discussed under different names, and it has been considered from several different perspectives.

In his study, Isotalus (1996) analysed the television performance of 190 Finnish presenters. The research focussed on analysing the forms of interaction simulation. First, the analysis demonstrated

that television presenters simulate interaction by such means as eye-contact, directing their gaze into the camera. Nearly all presenters looked into the camera at least once during the program, and over a half looked more into the camera than somewhere else. Presenters also used gestures and facial expressions that aimed at giving the impression that they could see the viewers in front of them. Simulated interaction also occurred when presenters greeted their viewers, used personal pronouns to address them, or mentioned their viewers by name. A presenter might also remind the viewers that they could contact the presenter by phoning him or sending him a postcard, or a telefax. Sometimes the presenters behaved as if there had been no screen at all between themselves and the viewers. A presenter could, for example, try to trick the viewers into believing that he or she is actually in the same room with them, and, consequently, able to see and hear them, respond to them, and know what they are doing. Presenters also often told the viewers when to expect their next program and, in this manner, reminded them of the continuity of their relationship. Additionally, an intimate communication style may increase the impression of the immediacy of the presenter.

Ultimately, interaction simulation appears to be a multi-level phenomenon. The simulation of interaction can also be observed in the interaction between on-screen presenters, or between the host of the show and his or her guest. Presenter may increase the immediacy of the other person by using his or her nickname or by employing other means of increasing the intimacy between oneself and another presenter. Also, the host and the guest may try to talk as if the viewer were a third party in their conversation (see Morse 1985). Simulation of interaction can also be seen in terms of a process. The intimacy or informality of the presenter may increase during the program. For example, results of Isotalus (1996) showed that the presenters typically greeted their viewers rather formally at the beginning of a program, while the closing remarks were frequently more informal.

In what is one of the most noteworthy analyses of simulated interaction, Mancini (1988) has studied the utterances that are used to presuppose and control the interpretations of the viewer. In contrast, Isotalus considered simulated interaction as an imitation of face-to-face communication. Some of the forms of simulated interaction mentioned above were also observed in previous studies (Camauër 1994, Haag 1993, Mancini 1988, Morse 1985, Montgomery 1986, Scannell 1991, Terrenoi-

re 1987, Véron 1983), but most studies have not systematically analysed the features of simulation, or have not considered them from the point of view of both verbal and nonverbal communication.

Simulated interaction is primarily used to increase the attractivity of the program and to give an impression of a presenter's immediacy. However, it may be argued that the presenters do not necessarily simulate interaction intentionally, although they may gaze into the camera, or greet their viewers. Rather, these features may be mere conventions or behaviours according to the norms of television performance. Therefore, these features simulate interaction despite the actual goals of the presenter. Nevertheless, the presenters seem to succeed in their simulation quite well, because the viewers have been observed to respond to them (Levy 1979, Nelson 1989) and, even, to establish a relationship with them.

### **Parasocial Interaction**

Although a viewer is unable to talk with a presenter, he or she may establish a relationship with him/her. A viewer may form an attitude to a presenter on a similar basis as to any other people, and this attitude may include some features of real social relationships. This one-sided and imaginary social relationship that the television viewers establish with a given presenter is called a parasocial relationship.

By parasocial relationship a positive affective relationship between a receiver and a media personality is indicated. It is not a new concept. It was first used in 1956 by Horton and Wohl (1986) and it is still widely used in a roughly similar sense. Parasocial relationship has been referred to as an illusion of a face-to-face relationship (Horton & Wohl 1986), as an illusion of an interpersonal relationship (Watson & Hill 1984), as media simulated interpersonal communication (Cathcart & Gumpert 1983), as pseudo-interaction (Hansen 1988), as an imaginary social relationship (Alperstein 1991), as having a quasi-friend (Koenig & Lessan 1985), and as pseudo-friendship (Perse 1990).

In the research, the question of how a parasocial relationship differs from just liking a television personality has not been discussed much. Normally, it has been studied as an attitude towards a favourite performer. However, Isotalus and Valo (1995) have criticized this view, because having a favourite performer is not a proof of the existence of a parasocial relationship. They argue that in order to be understood as parasocial, a relationship

has to involve such features as getting to know the performer better with time. Also, it must be a positive and an affective bond. However, a parasocial relationship seems to be both a common and a normal reaction to television viewing and it does not seem to be more typical for any special group of viewers (Grant, Guthrie & Ball-Rokeach 1991, Isotalus & Valo 1995, Perse & Rubin 1989).

It is also reasonable to hypothesize that there could be cultural differences in parasocial relationships, but the concept itself is American, as are most of the earlier studies, and the research methods (Isotalus 1995). Therefore, Isotalus and Valo (1995) devised a new questionnaire to study the characteristics of Finnish parasocial relationships. They found five dimensions which describe the parasocial relationship of Finns. The first was called an 'imagined friendship', which indicates that the viewer considers the performer to be similar to himself or his friends. The viewer may also imagine that he might become a good friend with the performer if they only would meet someday. 'Seeking companionship' refers to the second dimension, and it indicates that the viewers readily spend their time watching this performer's program, and look forward to seeing the program. The third dimension is labelled as 'empathy towards the performer'. The fourth one is called as 'reality of the relationship'. This means that the viewer does not think of the performer only when watching the program and that he would go to see the performer if he would happen to visit the neighbourhood. In addition, the fifth dimension, or 'the competence of a performer', appears important to the receivers. However, competence is not actually included in a parasocial relationship – as it is an evaluative dimension, not affective. It correlated poorly with the other dimensions. Further, it was found in the study that the viewers' relationship with the performers in various program types does not differ much. In all, the results suggested that parasocial relationships are quite common among Finnish viewers and that the characteristics of the Finnish parasocial relationship parallel those described in earlier studies. The dimensions also resemble the features which have been reported to be characteristic for friendship in general.

Furthermore, earlier research has primarily focused on television. A parasocial relationship, however, may equally well develop towards a radio performer. Isotalus and Valo (1995) also compared parasocial relationships in radio context to those in television context. The results showed that the parasocial relationship with television performers

is significantly stronger than with radio performers. Television seems to emphasize the performer and person variables, which explains the stronger parasocial relationships.

Parasocial relationship and simulated interaction are related with each other. Often, also the term 'parasocial interaction' is used, which frequently seems to be used approximately in the sense of simulated interaction. Finally, simulated interaction is considered to have a positive influence on the development of parasocial relationship (Auter & Moore 1993, Grant, Guthrie & Ball-Rokeach 1991, Horton & Wohl (1956) 1986, Wulff 1996).

The concept of parasocial relationship has been criticized in various respects (see Isotalus 1995, Isotalus & Valo 1995, Wulff 1996). Thus, it is problematic indeed that the concept includes such assumptions that have not yet been properly discussed or empirically tested. However, the concept has been proved a functional instrument in the analysis of the viewers' affective bond with media personalities and it has also introduced new dimensions of the viewers' reception process.

### **Interpersonal Communication: A Starting Point for Interaction Model**

Often, television communication has been compared to interpersonal communication. It has also been argued that it resembles interpersonal communication more than other modes of communication. Scannell (1991), for example, has argued that the norms of public speaking are not applied in television but, instead, those of ordinary, informal conversation. In addition, many North American scholars emphasize the fact that television talk resembles interpersonal communication more than it does public speaking (e.g. Hellweg, Pfau & Brydon 1992, Pfau 1990). Therefore, the communication style that is borrowed from interpersonal situations is also considered to be the most appropriate in television context.

Probably, television performance is seen to resemble interpersonal communication because non-verbal communication plays an important role in both. Television is able to efficiently convey the nonverbal messages of the performer, especially his/her facial expressions, which have a great influence on the communicative relationship and relational messages. Television also creates an intimate visual contact between a performer and a viewer.

The television performance of a Finnish television presenter may not be, however, as similar to interpersonal communication as, for example, that

of his/her English or American colleagues. Clearly, most Finnish television presenters seem to adhere to the Finnish tradition of public speaking. The features of this tradition include message-orientation, influence of the written communication style, a tendency to address large audiences, and the use of formal and elaborate language. However, a more intimate communication style and simulated interaction are rapidly increasing in Finnish television. The tradition of public speaking derives from Finnish communication culture as a whole, but also, from the programming policy of Finnish television which can be characterized as informative. On one hand, the tradition of informative programming policy may have fostered a style of public speaking, while, on the other hand, the aim to entertain and the competition between channels may have encouraged an intimate communication style. (Isotalus 1996.)

As television communication and interpersonal communication have many similarities, it is interesting to consider the communication between a presenter and a viewer in the framework of the interpersonal communication theories. First, interpersonal communication theories may be used to describe the relationship between the presenter and the viewer. Two central interpersonal communication theories, viz. the uncertainty reduction theory and the personal construct theory, have both been employed in the analysis of the parasocial relationship (Perse & Rubin 1989). It has been found that both theories also can be applied to the analysis of communication in television context. According to the uncertainty reduction theory, a relationship is expected to develop when an individual increases his or her ability to predict the other's behaviour. In a mediated context, however, only passive strategies can be used to reduce uncertainty, because the viewers are able only to observe. Perse and Rubin (1989) also indicated that people tend to apply their interpersonal construct systems in forming impressions of television performers. Both in mediated and interpersonal contexts, impressions were found to be based on the same construct domain.

Also, the theory of relational communication has been used in television research. According to this theory, in addition to its content, communication also always includes information about the nature of the communicators' relationship. Relational communication may be either verbal or nonverbal in character, but the nonverbal element has a particularly an important role as regards the relationship. As television conveys the nonverbal cues extremely well, the concept of relational communica-

tion could prove useful in the analysis of television communication. Relational communication has been observed to be especially important in the television performance of politicians (Pfau, Diedrich, Larson & Van Winkle 1993, Pfau & Kang 1991). Furthermore, Pfau (1990) has pointed out that relational communication is more important in television than in radio, print, or public speaking.

Also, the theories of self-disclosure, social penetration, and immediacy could be applied in television context to describe the relationship between a presenter and a viewer. Additionally, the expectancy-violation theory could explain how viewers react if a presenter follows or violates the norms of performance. The relation between the performance and the content of his speech could be considered in the framework of the balance theories, and, furthermore, attribution theory could explain the viewers' interpretations of the performers' behaviour. (See Isotalus 1996.)

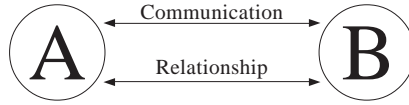
The use of these theories indicates that many can be applied to the television context indeed. The theories which explain evaluative responses, impression formation, and the development of relationships were the most suitable for the given context. However, some theories of interpersonal communication are only partly adequate and some do not seem to be suitable at all in describing the television context.

The attempts to apply the interpersonal communication theories thus show that the perception, interpretation and evaluation of the television performers' communication is similar manner to that of the persons involved in interpersonal communication. Therefore, interpersonal communication is a good starting point for developing a model of television performance as interaction. On the basis of interpersonal communication theories, communication and relationship thus seem to be central components in describing interaction. Both refer to a two-way character of interpersonal communication: there exists full interaction between the communicators and both communicators have a relationship with or an attitude towards each other. In Figure 1 (next page), the reciprocity of communication and relationship in interpersonal communication is illustrated.

### Developing a Model

In television, communication is unidirectional: from performer to viewer as no immediate feedback is normally possible. But as talk is always directed to the viewers, they are inevitably the other

**Figure 1. Illustration of Interpersonal Communication**



participants of communication. The presenters try to create an illusion of face-to-face communication with viewers by simulating interaction. Also, the interpersonal relationships are one-way directed in television, but in this case, the direction is from the viewer to the performer. The performer is not able to establish a relationship with his or her viewers, because a presenter cannot see them in person and he or she does not know the individuals who are watching the program. A viewer, however, may conjure up an illusion of a social relationship with the performer. This one-sided relationship that the television viewers establish with a given presenter is termed a parasocial relationship. Of course, the viewers do not always have a positive relationship with a presenter, and neither do they have as strong a relationship that it could be called parasocial. However, a viewer necessarily has a relation or an attitude towards a presenter and in this sense the situation resembles interpersonal communication. Additionally, the presenters often talk as if they would know that the viewers have relationship with them.

The television screen keeps apart the viewer and the presenter, who are usually also remote in time and space. However, the presenters often try to behave as if they would share the time and the location with their viewers. In other words, they try to simulate the experience of shared time and space. In Figure 2, the television communication is described in terms of communication and relationship.

In television interviews, the modes of interaction are more complex. The interaction and rela-

tionship between presenter and viewer can be seen as presented above in Figure 2. Interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee resembles that in other face-to-face contexts. Although the interviewee speaks to the interviewer, simultaneously he or she also speaks, indirectly, to the viewer. Sometimes the interviewee may also address the viewers directly, but this is rare, at least on Finnish television. It is not exceptional either that the viewer may develop a parasocial relationship also with the interviewee. Morse (1985) has also shown that it is typical for the host and the guest of a television show to sit in front of the viewer and at times the viewer is included in the group by a look from the host. Therefore, the viewers are included in the same group as the host and the guest, and defined as a “we” group. Television interview is illustrated in Figure 3.

The interaction model can also be made more complex by considering the presence of the studio audience. One important function of the studio audience is to simulate interaction with the viewers (Loshitzky 1991, Mancini 1988, Peck 1995). A studio audience could also be called a pseudo-audience, because it represents a home audience at the studio. Because the studio audience has a genuine opportunity to communicate with the host, this may give a feeling of interactivity to the home audience as well. The home audience may feel that they are really witnessing what is happening in the studio. In addition, a live audience may help in creating the illusion of the viewers being performers as well, and this gives the home audience a chance to

**Figure 2. Communication and Relationship in Television (P = presenter, V = viewer)**

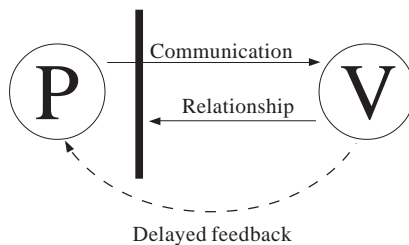
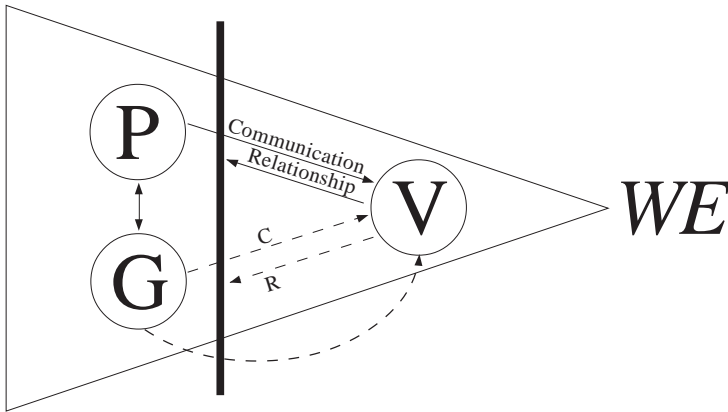


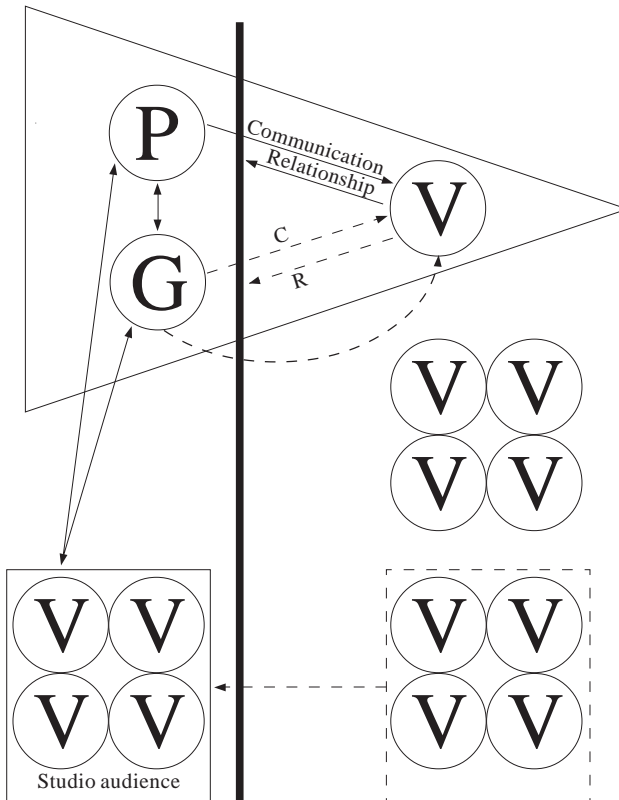
Figure 3. The Illustration of Television Interview (P = presenter, V = viewer, G = guest)



identify with them. By watching television, the viewer has also a possibility to sense that he or she is a member of a community of viewers. Thus the viewer has a possibility to share experiences with

other viewers. In this manner, a viewer is connected to other viewers and to the world outside. The Figure 4 shows the influence of the studio audience.

Figure 4. Interaction Model with a Studio Audience (P = presenter, V = viewer, G = guest)



## Conclusions

In this paper, interaction between a viewer and a television presenter has been described and a model has been developed to illustrate it. The purpose of the model is to clarify the features of the interaction. However, a model like this is unable to describe all the aspects involved in the situation, and is always, by necessity, simplified. It may, however, help to clarify the main features of a communication situation and their interrelationship. It may also concretize the issue of to what extent it is possible to consider television performance as interaction. Moreover, it can serve as a starting point of further analysis. In the analysis of new communication technology, for example, similar models could be developed to illustrate the modes and level of interactivity in different media.

The paper shows that it is possible to consider television performance as interaction and to find several perspectives for its analysis. The model describes television performance as interaction between the persons involved, not between the medium and a recipient. It can also be argued that it is better to consider the interactivity as a negotiable dimension between persons rather than between a person and a technological device. However, television performance could be seen as a talk to a viewer or to the viewers. As the results of Isotalus (1996) show, the presenters seem to talk to the

viewers in plural – at least in Finnish culture. The presenters seem to address a group of people who are watching television at home in their living room. In comparison, American scholars argue that television presenters usually speak to one person rather than to a mass of people. Additionally, Taylor and Mullan (1986) reported that the viewers do not feel that a presenter is looking them when looking into a camera. Instead, Terrenoire (1987) indicated that the sharpness of eye-contact affects how focused the viewers experience the address to be. Consequently, it would be interesting to study the experienced interaction. Furthermore, the camera shooting could be studied from the perspective of interaction, because it also has a strong effect on how the performer is seen by the viewers.

The application of interpersonal communication theories to television context demonstrated that it is not sensible to divide the communication categorically into interpersonal and mass communication, because, theoretically, they have several common features. Thus, interpersonal communication theories may give new instruments to analyse also the features of mediated communication. However, it must be noted that television performance is never identical to interpersonal communication. Despite similarities, television performance is a unique mode of communication and, therefore, the concept of televisual performance is justified.

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