

A Talk Show in Hungary and the Question of "proper distance"

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**Abstract:** In his article "A Talk Show in Hungary and the Question of 'proper distance'" Lajos Császai discusses the phenomenon of the talk show in its specific post-communist Hungarian context. During the past few years, Hungarian commercial television programs have been the target of frequent ideological attacks. At the same time, they have become increasingly popular among audiences. In my study I focus on the "Mónika" talk show, one of the most popular programs. Analyzing this new media phenomenon, I attempt to combine the political-economic and the socio-cultural perspectives of tabloid media, which are often opposed to each other. I ask how viewers in a post-communist society acquire new skills to manage the multiple challenges of commercial media and to learn to create what Silverstone calls "the proper distance."

## Lajos Császai

### A Talk Show in Hungary and the Question of "proper distance"

The relationship between the fall of communism and the media is one of the most densely researched subjects in contemporary Hungary. There is, however, surprisingly little work done on the socio-cultural dimensions of the regime change. This is not to say that the subject has not been publicly debated in countless articles and editorial pieces. The problem is that such discussions have analyzed the changes exclusively within the existing frames of Hungarian socio-political events and have ignored the changing role of the media within an international context. Just as importantly, they have failed to provide a critical self-examination of the ideological role that Hungarian intellectuals themselves played in the media. It is for this reason that the analysis of the regime change has not progressed beyond an elitist and moralizing critique of commercial television and has tended to focus on the repudiation of the "shocking programs" of commercial television.

Nothing is further from my intention than the neoliberal celebration of commercial media. At the same time, however, it is equally unrealistic to praise an idealized public media that has always been dominated by the perspective of the unitary nation-state. Instead of such dichotomized approaches, it is more productive to see the economic, political and cultural expansion of commercial television as part of a global process, which has everywhere transformed the national forms of television. A brief background of the contemporary Hungarian scene is in order at this point. After the fall of communism, the Hungarian intelligentsia advocated the democratization of the media, by which they meant its liberation from political control. The model they had in mind was the BBC, based on objective reporting and service to a canonical high culture above political parties. At that point, it did not occur to anyone that in the context of an emerging Hungarian capitalist society, the ideal of a public media emancipated from all political and economic pressures was of necessity a naïve fantasy. What in fact happened after the fall of communism was the outbreak of bitter political battles around the national media, whose control neither the right nor the left parties wished to relinquish. The prolonged media war, which characterized the 1990s, continues to an extent to this day. The structure of media politics did not change substantially from the communist past, with the media remaining subject to powerful state intervention and the political and cultural elites remaining strongly intertwined with each other; the only difference was the pluralization of media politics (see Price). It is in the context of this unresolved political situation that the new media law of 1995 came into existence, which permitted multinationally owned commercial television stations to function in Hungary. Within a few years, the commercial television stations became extremely popular, with viewer numbers exceeding drastically those of the state supported television stations, which represented the national cultural canon. It is noteworthy that in 2004 the two commercial channels' audience ratings were five times greater than those of the three state supported channels combined ("[Nézettségi <http://adattar.ortt.hu/agb/nezettseg/200904>](http://adattar.ortt.hu/agb/nezettseg/200904)"). The commercial stations avoided taking an open political stance, not wishing to alienate audiences. In the final analysis, however, they ended up augmenting, rather than decreasing, the struggles raging around the media. As a result of the impact of commercial programs, there opened up a second front in the media wars; parallel with the existing political conflicts there came into existence a culture war waged around questions of morals and taste. For the commercial media replaced political information with economic utility and the dominance of the cultural canon with popular entertainment. This new model posed a fundamental challenge to the ways the political and intellectual elite had previously conceived the role of the media.

In late-modernity, intellectuals have had to confront a previously unknown challenge in all areas of society, including the media. The resulting conflict of roles has been described by Zygmunt Bauman as the difference between the functions of the "legislator" and the "interpreter." In the realm of the media, these choices could be translated in the following way: intellectuals either hold on to their previous positions of power and, protecting their traditional role as ideological legislators, oppose the tabloid media in the name of the "ideology of mass culture"; or, alternately, intellectuals seek new roles for themselves, which attempt to give expression and interpret the contradictory transformations taking place within the media. The possible responses to these options have been limited significantly in the case of the Hungarian media by the continuing ideological role of the Hungarian nation-state in the

control of both the public and the commercial media. Studying commercial television and taking its social and cultural functions seriously is almost impossible in an environment where all participants in the Hungarian intellectual public sphere stigmatize commercial television. The extraordinary popularity of tabloid television has been condemned for the following ideological considerations: 1) the drive for profit has subordinated public information to entertainment, 2) the emphasis on the private realm has erased the distinction between the private and the public, and finally 3) the subsequent tabloidization threatens the transmission of the national political cultural canon. The problem with these accusations is that none of them can be exclusively associated with the emergence of the commercial media. The process of tabloidization already appeared before the establishment of commercial television; what is more, it now penetrates virtually all the programs of even public television, from the news to political talk shows. The attackers, furthermore, see it as a sign of national decline and fail to take into account those global economic changes that have everywhere transformed the earlier forms of television. Nor do they talk about the generic innovations in entertainment that the new forms of the media have brought into existence. For these reasons, the role of the legislative intellectual, who creates an ideological confrontation between public and commercial television, does not make much sense. An up-to-date and pragmatic media politics would need to take into account not only the differences, but also the similarities and complementarities, between commercial and public television.

T. Havens demonstrated convincingly in a study about the Hungarian media that commercial and public television are dependent equally on the purchase of Hollywood films and foreign licenses (<<http://web.mit.edu/cms/mit3/papers/havens.pdf>>). Only by screening such popular productions are they able to increase audiences, which in turn attracts commercials and profits to the station. Since commercial television has more capital at its disposal, it is able to purchase more successful shows and thus gain a larger profit. The state supported budget of public television is smaller by contrast and for this reason it is able to purchase fewer blockbuster films and generates a smaller income as well. The real difference between them, continues the writer, is to be found in the way they spend their profits. Commercial television cannot count on outside support and therefore turns a part of its profits to experimental new programs. The state-supported channels, by contrast, use a part of their profits from blockbuster films to purchase culturally prestigious, but less popular programs, such as documentaries and art movies. These practices have resulted in a peculiar division of labor in Hungarian television, whereby the commercial channels excel in the generation of innovative popular programming, while the public channels specialize in the transmission of the national and high cultural canon. Aside from how they spend their profits and who owns the media, concludes Havens, what is characteristic of television channels throughout the world is the inevitable connection between local independence and global dependence. Ideologically based legislative critics of the media tend to overlook, however, not only existing economic connections, but also social contexts. In particular, they fail to take into consideration the connections between people's everyday lives and their use of the media. To put it differently, the question that they do not raise is whether their anxieties about commercial television truly reflect the sentiments of wide sections of the population, or whether they are an inherent part of the ideology of the national cultural elite. To address these issues, I present the preliminary data of a larger empirical study, in which I examine the reception of the "Mónika" talk show, introduced by the commercial station RTL Klub. I wanted to know how people interpret and deal with a talk show in everyday life. I am particularly interested to find out to what extent they conform to the explanations of the traditional intellectual elite, and to what extent they differ from it.

"Mónika," launched in the spring of 2001, is among the most successful programs in contemporary Hungary. Its audience increased from 5% to 20% since its inception and for years it has topped in popularity other commercial and public programs shown in the same time slot. From its inception, Mónika was attacked by the national cultural elite. It was judged banal, because it dealt with the everyday problems of ordinary people in an informal way; that is, it tried to address people at the most general level. However, I could argue that the program was dismissed because of its greatest merit: its cultural democracy. If we glance back to the critiques that appeared in newspapers and on the internet, we are astonished at the fury that the program evoked among observers. The title of one of the first reactions is typical: "Mónika, or the Stupid Nation" ("Mónika, avagy a buta ország"): "I can hardly wait for Mónika," wrote sarcastically the author of this article, "which provides a forum for mothers with three children who have successfully kept their figures" (Fáy 1; unless indicated other-

wise, all translations are mine). This statement is not just the condescending voice of the patriarchal critic, it covers the self-interest of the traditional intellectual elite. After all, if the popular programs of commercial television – the diets of mothers with three children, for example – require neither legitimization nor explanation by legislative intellectuals, then the tabloid programming of the media will threaten at its roots their cultural leadership and social prestige.

The problem is by no means uniquely Hungarian; the commercial transformation of the media has provoked similar debates throughout the world, for example Jostein Gripsrud writes wittily of the elitist opposition to the screening of *Dallas* on Norwegian commercial television in the mid-1990s. Wan Yi, too, gave voice to the dilemma that Chinese intellectuals faced: "In what way can the ideals of Chinese intellectuals be genuinely workable when popular culture seems to expand indefinitely and when the elite culture promoted by intellectuals is no longer relevant? Will it have the consequence of moving the intellectuals from a position of being cultural leaders or cultural defenders towards a more marginal position – even out of the 'popular sphere'?" (Wang 292). This quote shows what is at stake in these debate: the monopoly of the ideological control of culture by the legislative intellectuals. I think that the radical transformation of contemporary media requires that the media scholar change as well. He/she needs to ask whether it is possible to protect jealously the legislative intellectual's traditional role, or whether it is preferable, as Bauman suggested, to find new roles as interpreters and analysts of the political, economic, social, and cultural transformations taking place. In this study, I chose intentionally the latter path and propose to be the intellectual "interpreter" of the social and cultural reception of the Mónika talk show.

Having received a grant to study tabloid media in Hungary, I approached a public opinion research firm to conduct a representative national survey of 1500 individuals about their viewing habits of the Mónika talk show in 2004. The result showed that roughly half the population watched the Mónika Show at least once a week. Among the viewers, groups such as women, rural people, and the elderly outnumbered by one and a half men, urbanites, and the young. These differences, however, tells me that it would be foolhardy to follow the stereotypes and call the Mónika show a specifically woman's program, since 40% of the viewers are men. On the contrary, the figures indicate that the program is able to speak to many different kinds of people at the same time and, even if not completely, to transcend the statistical boundaries of gender, age and place of residence. If there were no sharp differences in the socio-economic factors of the viewers, so much sharper was the polarization in their educational level. According to the survey, those with the least education were almost four times more likely to watch Mónika than those with higher schooling. This fact only confirmed my suspicion that those with higher educational degrees, who speak about the show in public, do not watch it regularly; while those who watch it, the rest of the society, do not speak about it in public. The statistical results reinforced the dual goals behind this cultural sociological study of the Mónika show. On the one hand, it showed the need to better understand the reasons for the sharp repudiation of the talk show by the ideologically oriented intellectual elite; on the other, it showed an equal need to better understand why the actions of the majority of the population differed so radically from those with higher schooling. In other words, we need to understand why intellectuals detest the talk show so much and what on earth is so appealing about it to those who still watch it?

The themes of the talk show are virtually inexhaustible in their variety. After viewing thirty programs of the show, I will venture, even at the expense of a certain amount of simplification, to typify them. It is possible to divide the episodes of the Mónika show into seven large, partially overlapping categories. The first is organized around the problem of marginal groups and tolerance, illustrated by discussions about the social position of the Roma, of gays and lesbians, and of the economically disadvantaged. Another group clusters around questions of mental health, such as alcoholism, suicide or everyday attitudes to panic attacks. Themes connected with sexuality make up the third group, while programs about school and child-rearing are a fourth. The dramatization of moral questions such as lying, selfishness, altruism, and forgiveness belong to a fifth group. Nostalgia for far away places and stories about inexplicable miracles constitute the sixth group. Finally, the last and the most numerous theme has to do with the problems of family life and marriage. In order to better understand people's attitudes to the Mónika show, I picked out for special consideration one among the many episodes. I screened the program about panic illnesses, entitled "Help, Panic!" for seven focus groups made up of roughly fifty-three individuals, and afterwards had conversations with the participants. I chose this

particular program precisely because it did not provoke strong emotions or ideological reactions and did not necessarily polarize the audience.

Since the conversations focused on a social question deemed acceptable to many, the judgment of the program made possible the expression of many different viewer positions. According to the script of the program, the conflict that was enacted on the show was between those who considered the panic attack merely a fictive illness that does not need to be taken seriously; and those who thought of them as a serious individual and social problem that has not yet received sufficient attention. Methodologically my choice proved to be correct, for the program did, in fact, provoked many different kinds of opinions and considerations. It also became apparent that the viewing of a single episode was sufficient to provide a broader picture of the reception of the talk show, since the participants did not restrict their observations to the jointly-viewed episode, but often included in their references other episodes of the Mónika show. In the focus group conversations I carried out a non representative qualitative research, to better understand the complexity and the intensity of the process of reception (see Gray). Based on the opinions expressed in the conversations, I created a profile of each respondent and clustered them into different groups. In other words, my decision on how to interpret and code the participants was not based on their answers to a particular question; but rather, on a cumulative evaluation of the opinions they had expressed during the conversation: their "cultural repertoires" (see Hermes). I relied on David Morley's method in this task, who maintained that the media researcher needs to study the point of intersection between personal opinions expressed in an interview and collective judgments articulated in ideological debates. The conversations in the focus groups made evident that the population's reactions to the talk show is far more nuanced and complex than one would expect if one looked at ideological debates alone. On the basis of the responses, I distinguished between five different kinds of attitudes or receptive types, which I called "elitist," "moralist," "ironist," "information-seeker," and "identifier." There were a few cases where it was difficult to decide which group a particular response belonged to; for example, if it had the features of both "elitist" and "ironist" responses.

The above typologies fail to follow earlier typologies worked out by researchers in audience reception studies. My self-conscious goal was to generate empirical categories that were based entirely on the material I myself collected. At the same time, however, it is also undeniable that the classical studies of media scholarship implicitly influenced my own work. Naturally it is impossible to provide a complete list, since one or more of the above types appear in most empirical audience studies. The category I referred to as "elitist," for example, is related to what Ian Ang describes as "the ideology of mass culture"; but further parallels can be found between my "ironists" and "identifiers" and what Ang designates as "ironists" and "Dallas fans." The type of the "ironist" also plays an important role in Julie Manga's typology. Moreover, the type of the "information-seeker" is closely related to what James Lull characterized in his own reception study as the category of "social learning." Finally, the type of the "moralist" is similar in attitude to what Pertti Alasuutari described as the regulative dimension of popular reception.

According to the typologies I established, intellectual discourses, both in the press and in private conversation, are unambiguously characterized by an "elitist" condemnation of the talk show. The view of the "elitist" is that the themes raised in the talk show are for the most part interesting and important, but the talk show is not the appropriate forum for discussing them. One of the participants, Méri, presented the following argument: "For me, this [the Mónika show] is the subject of tabloids. I read neither the *Blick* nor other daily tabloids. In other words, it is as if I were reading a tabloid. I don't waste my time with such programs, my time is too valuable for that ... I watch serious films. Something that makes sense. I understand that there are such problems, but I don't want to spend my valuable time with them" (all translations from the Hungarian are mine). Subject Timea expressed the following view: "Generally, the consideration of such topics is ridiculous to start with, to discuss it in some kind of show ... in other words, this is by definition a more serious and deeper subject that does not belong there. Even if it belongs there and it is there, this is all that one can expect; that people approach it on the level of a water-cooler discussion." She continued: "Furthermore, what I really wanted to say is that anyone that goes there and agrees to participate, isn't my kind of person ... Anyone who is capable of going to what I consider such a mediocre place, to put it mildly, to such a poor quality program." Finally, she concluded: "Then there is the audience. Who claps when they hear

something atrocious. They show the signs for them to clap. They hire paid clappers. Just the signs are degrading to the audience, the very fact that they write it down." While these arguments are well known and frequently heard in debates about the talk show, to my surprise, I was able to identify only a few "elitist" responses, which means that this constituted the smallest group. The explanation for such low occurrence lies in the fact that "elitist" arguments were rarely used in themselves, but generally occurred within some broader meta-narrative (such as "moralist," "ironist," or "information-seeker") where they occupied a subordinate role. So what do these interviews tell us about the ideological nature of the perspectives of legislative intellectuals? These "elitist" critics were fundamentally correct when they identified the trivial themes and everyday sensibility as the central organizing principle of Mónika as well as of the talk show in general. But they condemned these shows in the name of ideals such as public life, the cultural canon, aesthetic forms, and objectivity. In their opinion, the problems of everyday life can only be correctly interpreted once they had been cleansed of their singularity and contingency and transformed — with the aid of cultural knowledge unique to the legislative intellectuals — into abstract and analytic categories. They repudiate the very idea that the talk show should concentrate on such amorphous and often contradictory topics as family relations, private life, subjectivity, and the emotions; and also that the program should present these themes in ways that diverged from high cultural approaches.

The problem with this legislative intellectual perspective is its oversimplification and its denial of a basic fact, namely that everyone encounters the everyday problems of family life, taboos, moral problems, and all the "trivial" questions discussed on talk shows, in a complex and contradictory form. But this perspective also fails to take into account the fact intellectual knowledge does not have a monopoly in solving these problems; that everyday intelligence and insight has at its disposal many reflexive means that help orient people through the labyrinths of everyday life. One of the most exciting tendencies of the past few decades has been the discovery of everyday life in social theory (see Lefebvre). Michel de Certeau has described the tactics of oppressed groups in everyday life, who, in spite of an undoubtedly oppressive political, economic and institutional world, find perceptive, quick-witted, and clever forms to reach their goals. Agnes Heller uses the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, that is, the practical wisdom of everyday life, to interpret the successful operation of common sense in ordinary life. This concept embodies not only cognitive, but also emotional, aesthetic and moral wisdom. But other social theorists have also remarked on the parallel operation of different, equally valuable, cognitive styles in the realm of everyday life. Pierre Bourdieu labels symbolic violence the attempt to colonize people's common sense in the name of intellectual knowledge (on Bourdieu, see Gardiner). It now becomes evident why ideologically informed legislative intellectual discourses in the public forums cannot offer a reliable picture of the wide-range of social reactions to the talk show; why their knowledge can only repeat the normative expectations of the existing cultural canon. The affirmation of intellectual superiority ultimately expresses a kind of "one-sidedness," which remains blind to other forms of knowledge and incapable of understanding the cultural logic of the population's everyday actions. For this reason, Bauman's other intellectual type, "the interpreter," is needed to make sense of these unnoticed everyday strategies of coping with life. Unlike the "legislator," the "interpreter" does not try to homogenize the contradictory social expressions of everyday life, but rather listens to the polyphonic voices of the viewers.

After this theoretical detour, I look at what such an interpretative intellectual perspective would look like. It is time to get acquainted with the other types of audience reactions that show the reception of the rest of the viewers to the Mónika show. What I am interested in is the great variety of reactions — practical wisdom, emotional shock, uninhibited laughter, reflexive contemplation, hesitating ambivalence — which generally get left out of the legislative intellectual discourse about talk shows: "Popular audiences," write Denise Bielby and William Bielby, "do not defer to the judgment of elite critical authority, but that implies neither a direct, unmediated, and under distanced experience of the cultural form nor an inability to respond critically and analytically ... Critical authority in popular genres ... resides among those audience members who choose to invest in acquiring expertise about the genre's conventions, codes, and stylistic forms, and knowledge about the organization of production and its business context" (311).

The most common type was represented by those "ironists" who regarded the talk show as "entertainment" (frolic, circus, fooling-around, spectacle). Subject Gergely put it this way: "In truth, the

theme never really grabs me, not what is. When I watch it, I just watch it to amuse myself, because it is a carnival" and Andrea claimed that "Many times I watch it just to have a good laugh. Because, as far as I am concerned, the way these unfortunate, primitive women talk, they really know how to put on a show. Because I am either dumbfounded or I laugh. It is not always necessary to figure out whether they are really this way, poor things. Of course there are some who really are." Marika's opinion was: "Well, I watch the program most often among all the others. I am not crazy about it either. There are simply so many idiotic people sitting there, I simply laugh myself to death that they can bring together such a collection of morons. Sometimes there are some acceptable topics, but most of the time it is always who cheated on whom, or how many people a teenager slept with. This is what's actually discussed almost all the time. It's a joke and anyways, I generally get home exactly when it starts. And then I have a big laugh at what kind of people make a fool of themselves on television." She concluded her thoughts with this remark: "What you have to look for in the Mónika show is not that it has some kind of documentary value, just that it should be entertaining."

One can assume that the "ironists," in contrast with the "elitists," used a completely different interpretative repertoire to code what they saw. They placed the talkshow within the world of carnivals, cabarets and comedies, considering it a contemporary, televised form of humorous clowning. I want to mention another opinion at this point, which I placed in the category of "ironists", though it emphasized not so much the entertainment, as the ironically distanced sociable aspects of the Mónika show. Subject György represented this position: "The program is ultimately a substitute for the neighbors getting together in front of their doorsteps. Anyone who wants to get information here, or to find solutions for their illnesses, is barking up the wrong tree. People used to sit in front of their door, gossiped, sized each other up, peeked into each other's homes. So the point is not for me to learn about panic attacks here, even on the level of general information. People have discussions with each other. In their own style. They talk to each other as in a tavern. There is neither a clear beginning nor an end. They simply exchange views. Without any goal. They have no specific purpose, such as the exchange of concrete information, it is simply a part of human life." The notion of "irony" is thus a repertoire for everyday life that brings together the most varied aspects of the same phenomenon. I placed people in this group who interpreted entertainment as a generic category, such as a specific form of programming; but also those who used it in the psychological sense, as a form of relaxation and regeneration; but finally those also who defined entertainment in a social sense, as a collective activity to strengthen existing communal ties among people.

The second largest group after the "ironists" was made up of those who pointed to some practical motivation, such as the gaining of new information or orientation, as the most important reason for watching the talk show. I called them the "information-seeker" type. László expressed this point of view: "I am fairly choosy. I usually watch the news, sports and one or two shows ... I usually watch the Mónika show, because for the most part it is about people. And about human problems. And precisely for this reason, precisely because of this, it generally interests me ... In the final analysis my opinion is that everybody can solve their own problems themselves. You have to confront it. And if it doesn't work any other way, you have to force it, as they said it here, she went up to the first floor, and then to the second." Among the informative themes frequently mentioned as of particular interest were the ones having to do with the family and with health, and within this last category, with psychological and para-psychological problems. Ilona claimed: "I also watched programs with similar kinds of themes. The one about scientology, I also saw. Anything that can provide something a little new in some kind of perspective, is able to expand my store of ideas, many people are curious about such themes of general interest." And Ica said: "Well, if it is like this one, about panic disorders, I will watch it to the end, because this interests me. If for no other reason, because I learn from it. If I get into a similar situation, where can I turn, what kind of help is available to me? Then yes, I will sit through it." Csaba had this to say: "What I generally like is something that I can learn from." This search for practical information, which had a lot in common with self-help groups, encompassed the different possibilities of everyday knowledge. What was considered useful information could equally refer to personal or social matters, to technical skills or human affairs.

The next type consisted of "moralist" narratives, although these were relatively few in number. The "moralist" position represented the strictest and most intransigent attitude of all the types, including that of the "elitists." According to the "moralists" the very themes that the talk show deals with



are inappropriate for public discussion and belong exclusively to the private sphere. The moralists were particularly outraged at the public appearance of minorities, especially of the Roma and homosexuals. The repertoire of the "moralist" expressed a desire for purifying everyday life, since it is based on a rejection of almost every difference, be it sexuality, ethnic or other kinds of minorities, or "dirty" language. If there was anything that linked the different moralizing opinions it was the repudiation of all types of actions that might be construed as infringing on social conventions, order, and rules. The answers made apparent that those with a moralizing attitude were particularly threatened by the talk show, with its search for new rules of social interaction, its open acknowledgment and collective discussion of taboos.

I called the final type as "identifiers" because their characteristic relationship to the program was to identify emotionally either with the participants, with Mónika, or with the talk show itself. Another way to put it is that this type of viewer approached the continuing episodes of the Mónika show as a specific kind of "life history," which allowed them to identify partially or completely either with certain participants or with the program as a whole. Public opinion generally regards this type of viewer, even in comparison with the other types, as simple-minded and synonymous with indiscriminating identification. This stereotypical image is well illustrated by subject Rozália who identified with Mónika: "Actually, I am always satisfied with Mónika. She is very nice. She leads the program well. I wouldn't like it, for instance, if someone else lead it." It would be a mistake, however, to oversimplify the "identifier" type and to restrict its meaning to such answers. In fact, the type embodies a much more complex attitude. Empathy was not an uncritical identification that suspended all prejudices; rather, it was the result of a critical selection that had nothing to do with cheap sentimentalism. As these examples suggest, identification is not restricted to empathy alone, but also encompasses selection, critical attitude, and social and individual experience. For this reason, it can also be regarded as a cultural repertoire for understanding everyday life events just like the earlier types.

Based on the reactions of the focus groups, the relationship between social backgrounds and cultural repertoires appears to be quite tenuous. There were "identifier" types among the college-educated group, just as there were "moralists" among the lower-educated group, and there were equal numbers of men and women in the "ironist" group. This suggests that the determining factor in defining people's cultural repertoires to the talk show depended partly on their place in the social structure, and partly on their individual reactions to the show's transgressions of society's moral, intellectual and institutional order. In spite of all their reservations and individual differences, it can be argued that the viewers of Mónika established their subject positions toward the show, not exclusively according to socio-economic factors, but on the basis of their individual taste, sentiments and ways of life as well. The talk show not only allowed, but even required, that the viewers stake out their own subject positions in accordance with their everyday, practical wisdom. This could be done in countless ways: they could manifest intellectual outrage; they could reaffirm the moral order; they could identify with the victims; or they could simply enjoy and laugh at the carnivalesque transgression of social conventions.

These empirical findings provide a very different portrait of the talk show from that of the public discourses of legislative intellectuals. Rather than being a kind of distortion of social reality or a manifestation of cultural decadence, the talk show appears as the novel and contradictory product of late-modernity, where societies no longer possess eternally fixed values but are constantly forced to thematize and test them (see Illouz). They are highly entertaining morality tales that, even while bringing profit for the producers, play an indispensable socializing role in people's everyday lives. Mónika, the program host, represents the social norms of the audience, but is also an understanding listener of the often different opinions expressed by her guests. She thus plays a mediating role between the audience and the guests. I think the Mónika show is popular, because its characteristic generic formulae make possible many different subject positions for the viewers, who are able to accept or repudiate not only the different actors, but Mónika herself, the themes presented, the audience, or finally the program itself. For this reason, it can be argued that the talk show is a public forum where questions previously considered private are publicly discussed. In the process of these "divulgences" the boundaries between private and public life are transgressed, and then, through the creation of different subject positions, redrawn again (see Carpignano, Andersen, Aranowitz, Difazio; Livingstone and Lunt).

We have now reached the point where we can begin to understand in an even more complex way the passionate opposition that such programs generate among many viewers and critics. Talk show guests present in a public forum personal problems that had previously been considered private. With this, they bring into question the division of the private and the public realms as some kind of objectively-given fact and advocate that the personal reinterpretation of social norms is available to everyone. Furthermore, the talk show differs from other programs in that its approach to problems does not conform to the expectations of legislative intellectuals and the cultural canon and its discussions are not dominated by official figures and experts. Its style is defined by informality and the everyday patterns used by people to confidentially discuss problems among themselves. In other words, it refers to everyday experience and common sense, rather than to high cultural expertise. Talk shows are further controversial, because they never exhaust the content of their themes, and they never provide unambiguous moral solutions. As one of the participants, Gábor, tellingly put it: "These are informal conversations without any obligations that take place in the virtual doorsteps of television." This inconclusiveness is particularly striking in the final remarks with which the Mónika Show always ends. The summary of the "Help, Panic!" program, for instance, states: "Thank you very much for having come. The lesson of this program was that every problem can be overcome if we want to do it. What is most important is that we should not feel embarrassed to ask for help, for we all struggle with some kind of problem." Characteristically, this conclusion, or the lack of it, cannot be regarded as a summation of the content of the conversations that had taken place in the show. Instead, it is formulaic in character, which emphasizes civil society's two most important principles, individual autonomy and collective solidarity, without, however, providing detailed or obligatory rules for its implementation. She leaves the choice up to the audience.

It is noteworthy that the generic formula of the talkshow constantly interrupts and diverts the natural course of the conversation. Mónika, for instance, often unexpectedly and incomprehensibly puts an end to a conversation precisely when it begins to touch on important questions, or when, she intentionally breaks in before a commercial at the most interesting part. These interruptions remind the audience that, in the final analysis, this morality tale is framed by the logic of an inexpensive commercial entertainment, which should not be taken overly seriously. To put it more precisely, the talk show requires of its viewers a constant oscillation between two incompatible positions, which are based on partial acceptance and distrust at the same time. It is also important to keep in mind that the talk show demands different skills and offers different rewards from the older genres of television. While the older genres presented a dominant social or ideological position, which the viewer could either accept, repudiate, or form a compromise with; the new television genres are embedded in everyday life and cannot be exclusively judged on ideological grounds. Just as important as the value orientation of a particular program are other qualities, such as their ability to entertain or to provide useful information (see Lembo).

In conclusion, in countries where the talk show and, in a broader sense, commercial television has an established tradition, the population has had time to accustom itself gradually to the generic characteristics and the changed social meanings of the new media. The creation of the proper distance does not happen from one day to the next. In Hungary and the other post-socialist countries, however, the almost simultaneous appearance of the talk show and other tabloid genres found, not only the general audience, but also the critics, unprepared. Audiences socialized to the paternalistic programs of the public channels and critics motivated by traditional ideological agendas simply lacked the necessary skills to decode the social and cultural implications of tabloid television. The former state-owned public television had functioned as a stage for high cultural values, where the sacred rituals of the community could be enacted in the political public sphere. By contrast, the new commercial television was oriented to the entertaining depiction of the profane events of individual private life and even the news came to be discussed from the perspective of the subjective experience of individuals. The situation was further complicated by the fact that in these countries the privatization of the media, the deregulation of programming, and the tabloidization of contents corresponded to the social and cultural chaos created by the fall of communism. It is hardly surprising that the tabloidization of the media created a culture shock and moral panic that effected all segments of the Hungarian population, who were faced with the challenge of acquiring new competence in recognizing the codes and meanings of the tabloid media. At the same time, the Hungarian reception of the Mónika show also proved that,

even as the legislative intellectuals restricted themselves to the heroic defense of the national cultural canon, the population integrated the commercial media into their everyday lives with amazing rapidity and effectiveness. The question that these studies raise is: Shouldn't the media scholars follow in the footsteps of the audience and switch from the role of the heroic legislator to the more modest mission of the interpreter? Should they not analyze the function and meanings of the popular media in everyday life including how the viewers create "proper distance" from it?

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