

# Deconstruction of the hosting function behind the phenomenon of “de-hosting” reality TV shows

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**Abstract:** The article re-examines the functional hosting in reality TV shows from the perspective of “the program’s spatial framework”, and explores the multiple forms of hosting function derived from this change by means of media technology. The audience-oriented hosting function is based on the audience’s emotional identity, and the “self-interaction” is accomplished through the host’s “leading but not launching”. In this way, we explore how reality TV shows achieve “successful communication” in a communication field where “hosts are absent”.

**Key words:** Reality TV shows; Hosting function; Programing

## 1. Regulation: Hosting, tending to be implicit

In 1952, Don Hewitt, the producer of CBS’s 60 Minutes, introduced the term “anchor”, which is considered to be a prototype of a program host. The term is derived from the athlete running the last in a relay race, extending to an excellent news host who can coordinate and connect multiple aspects of news and have “sprinting power” for news. In Dictionary of Radio and Television, Zhao and Wang (1999) described that a TV host is a person who appears as an individual, represents a group perception, navigates the program process with audible language as its backbone or main line, directly addresses the audience, and communicates on an equal footing. Yu (2004) described the host as a person “who appears as an individual, represents the group perception, operates and grasps the process of the program with audible language and form, and directly carries out mass communication in broadcasting”. Lu (2013) defined a host as “in broadcasting field, a mass communicator who appears as a real person, dominates the program through conversational language, and communicates directly with the audience on an equal footing”. Despite the long time span and the very different backgrounds of the scholars, it is easy to summarize the common characteristics of its definition, that is, a host is the controllers and propellers of the program process, the distributors of information, and with audible and silent language, communication is audience-oriented.

Rewinding the history of Chinese TV variety shows, it is easy to see that whether it is the quiz-type programs that went wild on TV in the 1980s, or Zhengda Variety Show and Happy Camp that were popular in the 1990s, the host, as one of the core elements of the program, has always been active on the screen. However, with the popularity of reality shows such as *Where are we going? Dad, I am a Singer* and *Back to field*, the “absence of hosts” has brought new thoughts to TV variety shows. This phenomenon has been called “de-hosting” by many scholars. It is firstly manifested in the “title” change of the host. For example, Li Rui was called the “village chief” in *Where are we going? Dad*, same with Zhang Guoli as the “actor recommender” in *I am the Actor*. Secondly, it is shown in the “identity” transformation, which is related to the general environment of the continuous verticalization and segmentation of variety shows’ content. On the one hand, this part of the hosts have a “voice” in the professional field outside the program. On the other hand, the development of media technology allows the dismantled “host function” to be presented in all aspects of the program with “absent presence”.

According to Qiao (2019), most reality shows are combined in the following way: “reality show plus theme (food/travel/beautiful scenery/other) plus characters (celebrities/non-celebrity)”. Other elements are planned integrally for the theme of the program. For example, in *Running Man*, the show seems to eliminate the host. But with a closer look, it is seen that whether it is the task distribution, the rule announcement or the finishing touch to the show’s iconic moments, the show completes an “absent presence” of a host. In this absence with technical means, it is driven by the setting of characters - “captain”, “villain”, “task card” and the “exaggerated characters”, giving the audience a sense of drama. Obviously, the dismantling and reconstruction of hosting function is the result when the market economy entering the stage of product surplus and the communication ecology entering the stage of new media emerging. The subversion of the relationship between audience and communicator makes the audience no longer accept the simple and raw content. The “metaphor” of culture and ideas and the intuitive “pleasure” brought by drama are more likely to reach the connection between the two sides.

## 2. Deconstruction: a comprehensive awakening of consciousness from communication means to communication strategies

### 2.1 “Entertainment-oriented”: background for the booming of reality shows.

Beijing TV, the predecessor of CCTV, first aired TV programs in 1985, including news, documentaries, and TV shows of scientific education, dance and poetry reading. It can be said that television was born in China with two functions: publicity and entertainment. After Hunan TV aired *Happy Camp* in 1997, the frenzy of entertainment swept the country. Researchers generally believe that this is a sign of the marketization beginning of the television industry, but with the injection of capital, entertainment intensified until 2011, when the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) issued a document entitled “SARFT will strengthen the management of TV

programs on satellite channels” (also known as the “Entertainment Restriction”), which brought the off-track TV entertainment industry back on track.

The increasingly entertaining TV industry is also inseparable from the rapid development of the Internet and new media video platforms, manifested in the product-oriented operation of TV programs that rely on advertising for revenue, and the top priority for advertising investors is ratings. The concept of operation is taken from economics, and it is developed under the growth of commodity economy, the strengthening of market forces and the fierce product competition. On the one hand, after experiencing the “enterprise management of public institutions” in the late 1870s, China’s media gradually began to explore the market-oriented operation of television programs, and also began to transform from an “audience mindset” to a “user mindset”. On the other hand, the rapid development of self-media has impacted the speed advantage of TV in capturing major news, and for the sake of market competition TV has to allocate more energy to entertainment programs to regain users’ attention. As a result, variety shows have turned their attention to more specific and professional content dimensions, resulting in programs like *Super Vocal*, *I am a Singer*, *I am the Actor* that often use celebrities in that professional field as the hosts of such programs.

From the perspective of “user mindset”, the reasons for using celebrities in the industry as hosts are clear. First, the high level of professionals in the industry makes their words in the program “authoritative”, which not only increases the preciseness of the program, but also brings fan effect, which can guarantee the ratings. Second, this can increase fault tolerance the program. Because these professionals are not hosts by training, the audience is often more tolerant of their hosting mistakes. Third, these hosts’ social connections in the industry allow them to quickly mingle with guests, inducing a buzz that traditional hosts cannot bring.

## 2.2 “Theatricality”: an inherent means of reality show programming

The discussion of “theatricality” began in dramaturgy. In the book *Drama Introduction*, Gu (2014) combined the categories of stage and text to conclude that drama is “an art of ‘presence presentation’, and its theatricality exists precisely in the dialectical relationship of ‘setting’, ‘mind’ and ‘action’”. With the continuous improvement of audience’ aesthetic sense, the entertainment value brought by “theatricality” has overflowed beyond drama itself and has brought inestimable artistic value to industries such as television and new media. The “theatricality” of reality shows is actually a way to fill the “absence of the host” with new means, so that the programs have the expression means and core elements of drama, thus achieving the viewing coherence.

The core elements of drama include dramatic conflict, stage directions and dramatic language. Dramatic conflict is expressed in reality shows as the tasks, stage directions as the interpretation of rules, and dramatic language as the exchange and communication between the hosts and guests in the program. Through the refinement of dramatic elements, we can see the innovative presentation of the host in the dramatized reality shows. Take the reality show *New Life of Drama* produced by iQIYI as an example, Huang Lei, as the “Development Committee Director”, together with “Art Committee Director” Lai Shengchuan and “Production Director” Qiao Shan, assembles eight theater professionals to start a reality show that integrates life, creation and performance. In this kind of program, identity setting is the first step to form the “theatrical space” of the program. When the characters appear in a space or on camera at the same time, a “field” is created in the form of drama, and then the show will form a “conflict” by reading or creating difficulties, and then all the “characters” work together to advance the “plot” to the “climax”, thus completing the dramatic effect of the program

In addition, the “theatricality” of variety shows is also manifested in the care for the reality of “people”. As a product of artistic processing, TV shows are more or less mixed with sublimation by their creators based on social issues, such as the promotion of the concept of drama in *New Life of Drama* and the relief of modern fast-paced life in *Back to the field*. The “theatricality” is also expressed here by the focus on people, life, family, work, society and other aspects. So far, the “theatricality” of reality shows is based on life, but free from the general life stream model through the “conflict” and “suspense”. So that viewers can find snippets of real life in the program, constantly refining themselves and forming new insights.

## 3. Conclusion

The development of variety shows is a process of connection between the audience and the communicator. It is an important basis for the change of audience psychology during the product-oriented communication of the programs. Reality TV shows use “theatricality” to integrate the hosting function with the program’s effect, and have made great achievements in the battlefield of competing for attention. The audience-oriented hosting function is the building of a spiritual bridge based on the audience’s emotional identity, and helps the audience complete “self-interaction” while watching the program through the technique of “leading but not launching”.

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